

THE GRAVE DIGGER'S SECRET

by

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from the short story collection

Missives from an Outsider

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Jeremiah had been digging holes in cemetery plots for over twenty-eight years. On occasion, he had doubled as a pall-bearer when the deceased did not have enough relatives to carry him to his final resting place beneath the earth. He had heard enough scripture quoted to know most of the relevant passages from the Bible by memory. In fact, he had once found himself required to recite a few sentences when the priest called in sick at the funeral of an infamous underworld figure.

Above all, Jeremiah was a connoisseur of human behavior. This was his hobby and he observed with great interest the tear-streaked faces of mourners. He had classified them into five categories. There were the dramatic exhibitionists who sometimes went as far as fainting or clutching the tombstone when he dumped the first shovelfull into the hole; then there were your quiet ones, usually the most sincere, who walked around like zombies, tripping over the smaller tombs during the procession.

Then there were your cold fish who could barely hold back a yawn during the long ceremonies. But the lowest of all, the ones he placed at the bottom of the list, were those who fidgetted with impatience, anxious to get to the lawyer's office and pick the inheritance. Human tragedy seemed to go from one extreme to another, covering every twist and oddness in between. Jeremiah knew one thing for sure.

The stiff was the only one to get the best deal and the least susceptible of making a fool of himself dabbling in theatrics. There were times when Jeremiah himself felt a little shook up, especially when digging a tiny rut for a prematurely departed. On the whole, however, he firmly believed that being dead had more advantages than being alive.

He had developed a complex theological interpretation of homo sapiens' greatest fear. If all those tearful mourners could see how peaceful and carefree the corpse was, maybe they would come around to another way of looking at things. And if they could see how absolutely empty those costumed pile of bones were, maybe they would figure out that the occupant had vacated the premises long before the first downpayment on the coffin was mailed in. Jeremiah had concluded that people

loved to feel sorrowful, inconsolable, and woebegotten.

He dubbed it the "lamentation syndrome." They got a chance to get some real attention for awhile, and could discharge a good load of salt water as well. Friends got the opportunity to feel great pity and took the time to do a few good deeds like buying some flowers and promise the chagrined their undying support. What Jeremiah could not understand was why people were so shocked by the occurrence of Death. Immortality had long been proven impossible, at least on this particular plane, and the human body was programmed to deteriorate the day it was born.

More importantly, most people never once took the time to honestly improve themselves, other than cut down on bad habits when the doctor gave them a gloomy prediction, and wasted their seven or eight decades craving for egotistical desires unworthy of a four year old. So what was the big deal? How long did they think they could live on gorging themselves and arguing with their relatives?

The first body Jeremiah buried in his long career was that of his mother who, on her deathbed, told him she was seeing the light of a better world waiting for her. And his mother was no wild-eyed believer. If she said she had seen something, believe you me, she had seen it! When her soul slipped off to freedom, she exhaled her last breath with a glowing smile. From that day on, Jeremiah decided there was nothing depressing about stepping into the great beyond.

Of course, he couldn't hold anything against people to miss their loved ones, but even that had a smell of egoism to it. Shouldn't they rejoice that the dearly departed was going on to purer occupations? Some wailed out such statements as: "Oh, if only I could have told him/her how much I really loved them!" Jeremiah would reply under his breath: "Should have thought of that earlier, Jack."

He was often amazed as to how quickly eyes dried on the way out of the cemetery. But he came to understand that such a phenomenon was only natural. People went on living, just as they should. What he held against some of his live clients was the hypocrisy, the award-winning performances, the vulturism over whatever the immigrant to another world had left behind, and the waste of beautiful landscape. He marveled at those who returned faithfully each year and replaced the plastic flowers or talked to the tombstone. Didn't they realize that they were standing over a rotten, grisly clump of refuse? That was no place to look for the human soul!

One fine summer day, as he was preparing to mow the rolling hills which surrounded the cemetery, he spotted a silhouette kneeling over one of the smaller monuments to the dead. A rare twinge pricked his heart. The sobbing figure was that of a young girl, somewhere around the age of twelve. In spite of his natural preference for solitude and a predilection for non-interference which was a natural outgrowth of his particular occupation, Jeremiah wandered over to the weeping

child. He had no idea of what he might say or do, but something tugged at him, something which refused to go unheeded.

"Is that your father, child?" he asked softly, noticing the name and dates engraved on the stone.

The girl nodded without looking at him, as though one of the willow trees had asked the question.

"He wants you to know that he is alright and that his love keeps him close to you."

The words which burst from the old cynic's heart surprised the grave digger as much as they did the sad child. It seemed to him that an invisible ventriloquist had suddenly taken hold of his frame and used it for some mysterious purpose.

Large brown eyes glistening with tears aimed their melancholic gaze into Jeremiah's soul. He would have hurried away and buried the incident as objectively as he did his clients had he not spotted a dim rainbow of hope in that face of innocence.

"Are you sure?" the child asked in a fragile voice.

"Why, of course," he heard himself say.

"How do you know?" Jeremiah squirmed beneath the girl's serious look. It left no room for superficial answers.

He wished he had minded his own business and just gone off to mow the grass. But it was too late now.

"I've spent most of my life here, young lady. I've learned a thing or two about death."

Jeremiah was astonished. He wasn't quite sure who had said that. But he realized that he was right. He had learned something unintentionally, unbeknownst to himself. Like a growing flower, some deep insight had made its way through the darkness of his subconscious and, without any effort on his part, suddenly revealed itself in an unexpected blossom.

"This is not the resting place of human beings, my child. This is merely the warehouse of our outer garments. The person inside is not buried in the ground."

"Are you sure?" the girl questioned as a new light dawned across her features.

"I have never buried anything other than disguardred cloaks. And when I sit in this cemetery on quiet afternoons, I feel a strange happiness come over me because I know that this place is a...doorway. I'm not so much a grave digger as a gatekeeper."

Jeremiah was surprised to feel something wet slide down his rugged cheeks and wander through the maze of nubs which he never managed to get under control. He couldn't tell if this tear came from the beautiful joy he had generated in the girl's face or whether it was the discovery that, after all these years of thankless work, he had suddenly been promoted to a job which paid him in dignity and peace of mind.

The child gave him the only hug he had ever received in his adult life. She hurried away, virtually skipping through the cemetery, freed from the dread and despair of misunderstood death.

As for Jeremiah, he would go on digging graves, and looking appropriately solemn, and wearing dark suits as long as people found comfort in tears and morbid ceremonies. And when the time came for him to say goodbye, he would have the following words written on his tomb: DON'T LOOK FOR ME HERE, JACK!