

Bella Hipworth stopped her car in the parking area of Needmore Cemetery. These days, she was driving the Buick Lucerne - it'd been a gift from Mason early on. She hadn't dressed like a Lucerne girl, though; in fact, she'd dressed herself like a lady of the evening, a cheap hooker, and she'd done up her makeup to match. Taking a moment longer than was strictly necessary, she checked it in the rearview mirror.

*Am I really going to do this?* she thought, before steeling herself. *Yes, I am. I want it that bad.*

Her therapist, Dr. Teytelbaum, was always pushing *mindfulness* under pressure, especially these days. So, with a confidence Bella didn't quite feel anymore, she strutted toward the first living thing she saw: the cemetery groundskeeper. He was a little old. But then, she was no spring chicken herself. Besides, at eighteen or forty, her figure had remained impeccable, and Bella, at least, had always known exactly how much her hips were worth - even if Mason goddamned Joyner never did.

*Oh well. That was his loss.*

Only it wasn't just *his*, was it? The prick sure had done her dirty-like-a-birdy. He knew exactly how to play her, too. Making her fall in love with him, taunting her with that pretty ring - so many stones! - promising that it could be hers if she would only be his good girl, prove that she wanted it bad enough. And then would come the wedding... only that never quite happened.

There he went, up and dying. Of what? Appendicitis! This man - a man who never so much as smoked a joint - lived a boring life and died of a boring disease. Damn him! Damn him for not giving her a story to tell. It was the least he could do, especially since he never bothered to fix his stupid will.

The groundskeeper went about his business. He was raking, moving leaves into piles while intermittent gusts of wind scattered them. He glanced up at Bella as she approached, as if grateful for the reprieve from his Sisyphean task. She saw his head move to give her body the old once-over, and as she got closer, she attempted to meet his eyes in a 'fuck me' stare. This failed, as one of his bulbs was bulging out to the left, while the other looked like it was trying to make a break for Albuquerque.

*Oh, gross, she thought, he's some kind of mutant - slow, a mental defective. Why get all dolled up? This one would help me for a wink.*

The groundskeeper tried to neaten the pile, but he wasn't the sort of man who would straighten pictures in strange hotel rooms, so the leaves stayed messy.

"Well, 'spose that's close enough for gov'ment work. Help ya, miss?"

"Do you dig the graves around here?"

"Oh, I do lots of things round here. Dig 'em graves. Fill 'em graves. Rake 'em graves. I do it all." His eyes might have flicked down to her belt as he said, "I do it all," but Bella ignored that. She had no plans to seduce this freak.

"I'm looking for Mason Joyner. I was his girlfriend. His ex-wife handled the arrangements." And then: "I wasn't invited to the funeral." Bad memories, but remember, *mindfulness*.

"Joyner," the groundskeeper said. One bulging eye rotated as the workman tried to think. It widened, almost popped out. "Ayuh, I remember now. The Joyner plot's just past that tree over there,

that great big bastard of an elm.” He pronounced ‘there’ and ‘bastard’ as ‘they-uh’ and ‘bastid.’ Bella had to remind herself that it wasn’t nice to laugh at cripples or country folk.

Still, he’d helped her, and probably had some digging equipment at his disposal. Maybe he’d even do the work, if she gave him a peek of flesh, and that would be that. It’d make this degenerate’s day.

“Can you take me there?”

The groundskeeper scoffed in a way that deflated any hope she might have had. He was gesturing at his leaves. “Lady, can’t ya see I’ve got piles? It’s there, I told ya!”

“Well, fine, dumdum! I was going to make it worth your while, but suit yourself. I hope your piles hurt when you take a dump!”

Bella walked off in the elm’s direction, only turning back to make a rude gesture. She was wiggling what her momma had given her, but couldn’t tell if he was watching or not. Oh well. His loss.

*And now comes the hard part. Great risks, great rewards.*

No stone yet, but the grave was where he’d said, in the shadow of the old elm. It looked ancient, gnarled, like it might be a thousand years old, or a million. Whatever sustained it did good work - probably not the groundskeeper - and Bella wondered if all the bodies around here made good fertilizer.

If she’d perhaps been a little less single-minded about her goal, things might not have played out the way they did. She might have noticed the sound of whispers, of laughter on the wind, and that might have been enough to abandon her plans. Perhaps not.

The fact is, she wanted it - wanted it bad - and the die had been cast days ago.

The roller of this particular bone had been Mrs. Claudia Joyner - Mason’s ex-wife, and sole beneficiary. Bella waited for the announcement, the obituary; none came. Another week, and she worked up the nerve to pay her lover’s ex-wife a visit. That went about as well as one might expect.

Claudia opened the door, clutching a knife in one hand and a half-butchered pepper in the other. At this sight, Bella knew that she’d made a mistake. Still, she knew that this door, once shut, would never open again, so she asked her questions there on the stoop.

“Oh, he left you nothing,” Claudia answered, not bothering to invite her in.

“But that ring... I thought... What about his will?”

“Mason’s will was very simple, dear. Here, I’ve got it memorized: ‘I leave all my worldly possessions to the love of my life, my beautiful wife, Claudia.’ That’s all he wrote.”

“But the *ring*. He promised me.”

“Mason made a lot of promises, didn’t he?”

Bella flushed.

"That was your fault! *You* could have been his good girl! But you were too busy with work, so he found me instead. Don't punish me because you didn't love him enough!" Then, capping her rage - *mindfulness* - she added, "Why do you even want the dumb thing?"

"I didn't," Claudia said, smiling. "That's why I let him keep it. It's in his coat pocket. I put it there myself the day of, so the workers couldn't steal it - although truth be told, those cemetery people were most accommodating. I asked for their cheapest plot and they gave, well, better than he deserved. Mr. Needmore seemed almost eager to fill it." Bella's face betrayed her. "Oh, there are no hard feelings anymore, dear! And you're certainly welcome to the ring - if you want it bad enough. Now, I've got a salad."

Claudia laughed as she slammed the door. The sound only faded as she moved deeper into the house, like a silhouette receding into shadow.

Bella understood. It would have been funny if it weren't happening to her.

She returned to the cemetery under the cover of night. There was no night watchman, no fence, and the great big elm blocked visibility from the road. Still, she dressed darkly, in sneakers and sneak-thief's clothes, the garb of the wrongdoer - not 'fuck me' clothes, but 'fuck you' clothes. The shovel she carried might have been a tool - or a weapon.

As she thrust it down beneath the great old elm, she found that the ground was soft, the digging easy.

After an hour of hard labor, she reached the concrete grave liner; this she pried open easily enough, despite her slight frame. Within lay the casket, and within that, the body of Mason Joyner, heartbreaker. And was there also a treasure? Oh, yes, there was.

Bella hadn't prepared herself for the smell. When she opened the casket - no mean feat, as her Keds kept slipping on the loose dirt - she understood why it was so foul. Mason's face looked like he'd been dipped in shit, though when she finished shuddering - *mindfulness* - she saw it was only a kind of grave algae.

She opened the jacket and reached inside, looking for the ring. How many pockets! She had to straddle him to get in them all, and that made her feel like screaming - but why should it? Hadn't she done this plenty of times before? Ah, the ring!

When she felt his arms close around her, she really did scream.

And when she realized they weren't arms, but *roots* - bark animated by some unseen force - she screamed to wake the dead. The trouble with grave-robbing is thus: when you get caught, you're done for. In the end, she joined with Mason at last, in the roots. It was what she'd always wanted, and bad.

There was very little mess.

The next morning, the groundskeeper showed up early to do his rounds. That harlot from the day before was up to no good - he was sure of it - and he intended to fix any problems she might have caused before Mr. Needmore's arrival.

The hole in the ground was... expected. It had happened before.

He looked at the tree - really looked at it - and saw it for what it was. Not just an elm, but a *witch* elm. Ancient whorls embedded in knotty bark suggested something living, something with fingerprints, and things with fingerprints were dangerous. They could grab you, or worse, fascinate. Once, he'd owned a pair of Amazing Hypno Glasses, ordered from an ad in the back of an old magazine - *Realize the Power*, it read. The lenses on those glasses looked just like those whorls.

The groundskeeper turned away.

"One of these days," he said, speaking to no one in particular, "I reckon someone's gonna figure out what's going on here, and then a group of us will have one great big bastard of a time cutting down this tree..."

A flash of movement, then something caught his eye.

There it was, something black poking out from the mulch around the tree. It looked like a hand, as if someone was in the tree trying to get out. Then, looking again, he saw it wasn't a hand, but a fungus - the one they called Dead Man's Fingers. He could see why. From his experience with the outdoors, he knew it fed on wood, ate trees from the inside out, killed 'em... but he had a feeling that wouldn't happen here. The word 'cahoots' came to mind.

On one stalk - the fourth from the left, in fact - was the shiniest thing: a ring, not plain like the one from that elf movie, but loaded with diamonds. It flashed and sparkled in the sun.

"One of these days..." the groundskeeper repeated, leaning to pick it up. "But not today. Hoo, doggy, you must want 'em bad." He put the ring in the breast pocket of his blue chambray work shirt and picked up his shovel. "I won't ask for what. But I'll let Mr. Needmore know it's ready to be filled again. And I'll get rid of that Buick, too. Might be good for a few shekels. Ayuh, that'll be alright, then. I'm a simple man. I see a hole, I fill it. I see leaves, I rake 'em."

He worked until there was only a brown patch of earth. Then, for good measure, he added one more clump on top. Above him, the wind through the trees sounded like the whispers of lovers, or the lamentations of the dead.