

Exquisite Corpse

The dead guy must have been raised in a barn, or was from some place like New York or Detroit, because he had zero sense of privacy. The first time I saw him, I pulled the curtains and there he was, hovering in front of my window like a lunatic. I very nearly soiled myself, expecting my usual view of the city, instead finding half-rotted body floating in front of my window, no teeth, forehead sunken in like a deflated basket ball, one eye socket empty, a glass eye in the other. I thought maybe someone had tied a zombie dummy to a rope and let it dangle from the top of my building, but no. The guy was flying.

When I looked into the green iris of his glass eye, sparkling in his sallow skin, I heard his voice in my head. He told me to tell his family he loved them.

"What family?" I said out loud to the dead guy.

He gave me an address and other pertinent information. It turned out the dead guy's name was Al. So I could prove that I'd really seen him, he told me a juicy bit (that I won't repeat here) about his honeymoon with his wife that nobody but him could possibly know. I wrote his family a detailed letter, explaining everything I'd seen and all that Al told me.

Days later, I got a letter back and the wife gushed on and on about how appreciative she was. I didn't write her back because, frankly, I'm not one who is comfortable with that kind of outpouring of emotion from strangers.

I just hoped the dead guy would leave me alone now that I'd helped him rest in peace or whatever.

No such luck.

One morning, creepy Al was back, hovering in front of my window like a zombie with bad short-term memory.

"I already did what you wanted."

He didn't say anything. But when I looked into his weird glass eye, his voice echoed in my head, telling me he had another task for me. He was a student, it seemed. And he died before he got a chance to turn in his master's thesis.

Somehow, the thesis appeared on my pillow. It wasn't that thick, only 40 pages or so. I read it in one sitting, it discussed the effects of totalitarian regimes on the works of Franz Kafka. Good luck getting that past your committee, I thought.

I'd never considered myself undead-friendly, but things were beginning to look that way. I brought the thesis to the school, sat down with his committee chair and told her the whole story. She thought I was a nut, of course. And honestly I was a little put off that Al hadn't given me any anecdotes to prove his existence this

time. The professor thumbed through the thesis, and said that it was, in fact, possible to award a master's degree to a dead man. However the margins of the thesis were .2 inches off and the titles weren't 12 point font, so these would of course have to be corrected before they could consider it for approval.

Too bad for Al, I thought.

When I started my car to drive home from the university, Al was there in my back seat. I pretended not to notice him, but the smell was truly nauseating. At last I looked him in the glass eye and he told me to fix the thesis so it would be accepted.

"What if I say no?" I said.

Al's eye started spinning wildly.

I kept my eyes on the road the rest of the way home. By the time I got into my neighborhood, the dead man had vanished.

I stuffed his manuscript in a drawer before I went to bed, more certain now that fixing it up would be a waste of my time.

That night, I awoke with a dry mouth and took a sip of water. Something rolled up the glass and knocked against my teeth. I turned on the light. In my half-empty glass of water was the glass eye, spiraling like a fin-less fish. It trained on me and moved with me as I backed out of the room, the dead man's voice screaming in my head to fix his thesis.

While washing my mouth out (since the eye was no doubt infested with all varieties of scum) the answer came to me. Al wasn't the problem. It was his damn eye that kept nagging me. Al could show up if he wanted, but if he didn't have a way to tell me to do things, he probably wouldn't bother coming around. It was the eye I had to destroy.

With gloved hands, I removed the eye from the glass of water and set it on the concrete in the garage. Just as I thwomped the hammer down, the eye seemed to move just enough to avoid getting crushed. So I locked the eye into a C clamp, then hit it with the hammer. That one impact shattered it to smithereens, and now all that remained was a pile of white dust.

I hoped that now life would go back to normal.

But Al still floated obsequiously outside my window in the mornings—every morning now. He always rode shotgun in my car, which drew quite a lot of attention, so much that people were probably beginning to think I was a necrophiliac.

When I went to bed one night and Al was laying there, his greasy head on my pillow, his hollow eye sockets oozing with some kind of fluid, his boots scattering dried clumps of dirt under my sheets, that was the last straw.

I hit him in the head with the butt of a flashlight. His skull sank in a little and sighed out a puff of air. I hit him square in

the face, on the shoulder, even in the groin, but nothing fazed him. It occurred to me that the man was dead, there was nothing I could do to kill him.

The bastard had me licked.

The next day I got to work on his crummy thesis. The hard copy he had was of course the only copy, so fixing the margins with a computer was out of the question. I would have to transcribe everything word for word into my computer. It took me all day to type 5 pages. Not because I type slowly, but his text was riddled with typos, misspellings, and gaps in logic. The only way to get rid of Al was getting this thesis approved, and the only way it would be approved is if I made some serious changes.

I reread the works of Kafka, even picked up a few books on totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the 1900's. The more I learned, the more inadequate Al's thesis seemed to me. If this was going to a thesis of any merit, it would have to be rewritten from the beginning.

From the library, I checked out anything that was remotely related to Franz Kafka, several dozen books. Once I'd read those, I went to a different library and checked out several dozen more books. I read so much I could have taught a class on the subject.

Al didn't bother me quite so often since he knew I was working on the task he'd set for me, but he came by from time to time. My stomach dropped whenever I saw him lurking behind my door, or hiding under my bed. "I'm working on it for god's sake!" I'd say, but that didn't keep him from lurking.

I spend most of my time in my study now, either working on the thesis or procrastinating by writing little stories like this one. I've been working on the thesis for seven years now, and some days it feels like I'll never finish. Al comes to my study sometimes. I can tell he's getting impatient by the way he stands too close to me. If he had eyes he'd be glaring at me, as to ask what's taking so long. You're not helping, I want to say. A decomposing body standing over you isn't exactly motivating.

The way I see it, if he didn't want someone who would improve his manuscript, he shouldn't have come to me in the first place.