

A grieving you man makes off with the body of his dead bride and imperils his father's presidential campaign.

Dirt: An American Campaign

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Again, the mysterious stranger grinned. He twisted on his stool to gain more intimate ground.

“I came to talk to you. You’re Billy Baylor, celebrated author and dedicated drinker. I need your help.”

Billy took a sip of his beer and stared toward the other end of the bar. He was intrigued but stoic. He’d sooner chew the glass before him and swallow it than reveal interest to this wisecracking stud in what looked like an Armani suit.

He turned to the grinning man beside him.

“What do you want, Tanqueray? You’re a little old to be working on a term paper.”

Still smirking, Thomas Cashman nodded.

“A man of little patience. I appreciate that. Let me get right to it. I work for some powerful people. One of them has run into a thorny situation over in Boblin and I was asked to help. The nature of this trouble is such that I am coming to you for assistance. Because of your particular area of expertise.”

Billy snorted with the beer halfway to his lips. “You mean drinking?”

“No. I mean the removal of a dead person from a grave. Inspired by love, of course.”

The rim of the glass was at his lips now, but Billy stopped. His entire framework of muscles seemed to stop working, including his heart. It was such an odd thing to hear in this place where nobody talked about his work.

“Tell me more,” he said with a voice that was a little coarser for the whiskey, “about the man with the purloined bride.”

“I will,” Cashman said. “Take a ride with me.”

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**DIRT: AN AMERICAN
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Mark LaFlamme

Ashes and Dust

The last words he said to his wife as she lay dying were: "I will never let you go."

And he meant it utterly.

That's why, just after 2 a.m. the morning of January 4, Calvin Cotton entered the tomb.

It was no task at all, really. A wrought iron gate guarded the tomb door but it was mostly adornment. There was no real menace in it. The gate was secured by a padlock dark with rust. The bolt cutters bit through the shackle on the first try and it snapped with a sharp sound, like a curse.

The doors of the iron gate creaked feebly as they swung, more like resign than horror movie protest. They folded open like hands imparting the message: *Go ahead and enter. What you are doing is sacrilege, my friend, but I am too tired and too cold to fight you.*

Good enough. That left him to face only one more door, this one constructed of wood four inches thick. It was sturdy yes, but it too was fastened only with a simple padlock. Perhaps a sexton had purchased it at a department store in the 1980's, making sure to pocket the receipt so he'd get reimbursed later. Six bucks, maybe, and it came with two keys. Six bucks and it was enough to separate the world of the living from the world of the dead. The two populations didn't mingle much, so why be extravagant?

These thoughts of locks. Ridiculous fancies that served no purpose; he quieted them at once. He gripped the bolt cutter in gloved hands and looked up at the tomb, a towering shadow over a carnival landscape of smaller ones. A century ago, it had been dug into a hillside in the Irish section of the cemetery. Its purpose was simple: it housed the winter dead until the ground was soft enough for burial. In here, the recently departed were like folks in a doctor's office, waiting for their turn to pass through that ominous door.

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Or something. More fancy. He stepped forward and gingerly eased the tool toward the lock. But the white light of the winter sky played pranks in the form of shadows. On the first bite, the bolt cutters snapped at one of those shadows and clamped down on empty air. Calvin frowned. He squinted, readjusted his position and tried again. This time, there was reassuring resistance between the piranha jaws of the cutter. He paused, flexed the muscles of his arms, squeezed. Metal ripped through metal, the lock jumped like a man who has been poked in the ass with a pin, and it was done. He plucked the rent lock away from the hasp and flung it away. It landed with a thud in a small patch of snow off in the darkness.

The dark door stood between Calvin and his bride. A month ago, a brain aneurysm had come between them. That wretched bubble near the base of her brain had won the fight. This bland black door would not.

He pulled it open and it swung out not with a creak but a groan; the groan of a very old soldier who has stood his post for generations but who has lost his zeal for the job.

Darkness inside the tomb was seamless. It was the kind of dark so heavy, a person expects it to provide physical resistance if he tries to wade into it. But no resistance was forthcoming and Calvin did not hesitate to confront it. He stepped into the vault and was only dimly aware of a fifteen degree drop in temperature and the stale smell of dead vegetation. He felt no fear or apprehension, only longing. Bethany was near, tantalizingly close. The emotion of that alone filled him up. There was room for nothing else.

He fumbled at his belt for the lantern he had fastened there. Just a simple Coleman with a pair of bulbs and battery power. Why, you could buy one just like it two aisles down from the spot where that penny pinching sexton had picked up the locks that had crumbled so obediently outside.

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He got the lantern free, twisted a knob and recoiled briefly against the onslaught of light. It was dazzling and bold. It didn't so much illuminate as wash everything in white.

Light battered darkness against the walls of the tomb where brick had been painted over dozens of times so that now it revealed its history in layers of latex. The blazing light slew darkness that tried to hide on the arched brick ceiling above. Darkness had no choice but to flee outside or hide in corners behind the caskets.

There were five of them, three on the lower platform of a wooden shelf, two above. Four dead here tonight, Calvin thought. And Bethany trapped among them.

"Darling," he whispered, but the closeness of the tomb and the immediacy of his love amplified it into an exclamation.

He lifted the lantern and chased a few more shadows from the foot of each casket. Each was covered with a white tarp bearing the Pennigrove Funeral Services logo. The names of the dead were scrawled perfunctorily on slips of paper taped to the end of each ornate box. Drouin 11/24. Barnabas 12/8. Galway 12/11. Bethany was on the upper shelf, like a girl at camp who had won a coin toss to get the top bunk. Cotton 12/17.

Hers was next to a box containing someone listed as Mattingly 01/04 and somehow, the observation of that second name dissolved all he had left by way of patience. Her name should not be listed with the dead who surrounded her. She should not be here at all.

A rescue mission. This is a rescue mission and you had better be about it.

He stepped back to set the lantern on the vacant shelves behind him and shadows leaned in new directions. He pulled gloves tighter around his wrists, a muscular man with large hands who expressed no uneasiness about the idea of wrestling a casket from a shelf above his head. A box of lies, is what it was. And this moment of liberation was one conceived of the very day of her passing.

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Not passing, he amended. Pausing.

Love and longing burned in his chest, as real and hot as acid reflux. He reached for the casket, ripping the tarp away with both hands like a man fighting cobwebs in a basement. The tarp whispered its rippling protest and then lay twisted in a corner, crackling and trying to regain its form.

He got his palms beneath the lower edge of the casket and pressed up. It lifted easily and he eased it away just a few inches. Cherry wood scraped on the more humble lumber beneath it. He lifted again and tugged the box a few inches more.

Icy wind swept in from the doorway like ghosts trying to halt this ghastly business but Calvin kept lifting and pulling, lifting and pulling. When more of the casket was off the platform than on, he repositioned himself so that one arm could reach the center of the long box. It would be heavy when it came down, but he would manage it. He did not want her jostled any more than necessary.

Don't fret, Bethany. This is the end of the horrible hoax.

And the thought of it fueled him. He eased the box away a bit more and it began to drop. It wanted to tilt to one side but he caught and righted it, using the wood frame of the shelf to ease its descent. The lower end of the casket tried to force its weight down upon him, to squash him like a beetle under the heel of a boot, but he held it up. Beneath the coat, muscles bulged. One finger – the one that held the wedding band – bent impossibly toward the back of his hand. The pain was bright and it seemed the finger would snap right off. He readjusted and it was better.

His face a rictus, he eased the lower half of the casket down until it was a foot from the floor. He let it drop and the thud of it from even that height was like a canon shot. Flakes of old paint fell from the ceiling like snow with a tinge of pink.

Panting, the muscles of his arms and legs on fire, he eased the top of the casket down, letting it scrape along the shelf to slow its fall. When it was down, he fell to his knees next to it. His lungs

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burned but he would be aware of that fury only later. This moment was consumed by the sweet imminence of the reunion.

He stood and retrieved the lantern, moving it closer to the casket, the final obstacle separating lovers. The shine had not departed the cherry wood coffin after three weeks in a deep freeze. Light danced merrily off the wood and Calvin blurrily remembered the sight of it in the church, surrounded by flowers and by mourners who sniffed and cried, accepting the appearance of death as truth.

He had never accepted it; had found the notion of her demise so incogitable, it had at one time been difficult not to snicker at those who grieved. A brain aneurysm? You believe a weak goddamn blood vessel could forever sever us?

But he had not laughed and had not cried. He had only waited and now here he was.

He reached into an inside pocket and produced a long metal tool that looked like the letter L. He flung the gloves away and let his hands roam over the side of the casket until they found a small bump next to the latch. Against the smooth cherry wood, the bump felt like a mountain. But it was not. It was only an ornamental button covering that which might make mourners uneasy given the context. It was a keyhole.

The letter L was his key. He used it to tap the ornamental cap away and then he fitted the long end into the aperture. It fit snugly and that was a comfort but no real surprise. He had studied the construction of this box the very day he purchased it. And only hours later, he had traveled to another city to find just the right tool with which to open it. It had been no feat at all. It was nothing more than a glorified Allen wrench and twisting it now, he was comforted (but not surprised) when the lock fasten slipped tenderly open.

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He dropped the L-shaped tool and it clanged against concrete. He pressed a cheek against the cool cherry wood while his fingers probed at the crevice between lid and body of the casket. Fingertips tore into the seal between them and then he was lifting the lid and it came up with such delicate ease, he felt it might float away.

The casket opened and cold air from within assailed him. But he felt no chill, only the warmth of recognition as his eyes beheld the recovered beauty of his wife.

Bethany's face seemed to greet him. The eyes were closed, eyelashes like soot upon her cheeks. The lips were parted just slightly, the cheekbones and chin prominent where they had not been before, a prank of shadows, perhaps. The red hair spilled like rivers around her face and over her shoulders. Hands once folded neatly across her bosom had fallen to her midsection. The hands looked gray and cold, but they were the small busy hands he remembered.

She was beautiful.

"Bethany," he said and the syllables broke apart somewhere between his throat and his lips.

He reached for her, scooped her up and carried her away.

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