

A suburban homeowner's shovel reveals a 250 year-old mystery buried in his backyard, an unearthing which is only a precursor of deeper upheavals of the mind and heart which will change his life in profound and terrifying ways.

The Unearthing of Mr. Diggins

By Dave Lauby

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A man in a dark coat is walking away from the viewer down a dirt path in a misty, wooded area. The path is flanked by large, reddish-brown rocks. In the foreground, a shovel is stuck upright in the ground. The overall atmosphere is dark and mysterious.

THE
UNEARTHING
of
MR. DIGGINS

DAVE LAUBY

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9

The paler-than-white face of the young man staring up at Travis was a joyless one, serious beyond his or even Travis' age. "So you think you know something?"

"Don't fuck with me Mr. Riggins," the sullen teenager said, flicking a spider off his leg without breaking eye contact with the adult man. "I saw you holding the skull."

Travis remembered he was still carrying the yard spinner, and dropped it off to the side. "Okay. So have you told anyone?"

The boy didn't smile, but came as close to a smile as a face like his could allow. "Don't you want to know who I am?"

"I know who you are. You're Keith's kid."

"No." Now the young man stood, twitching the stringy blonde hair out of his face and standing his straightest and tallest in an effort to show himself a man, an image compromised by the oversized shovel and the even more oversized sneakers. "That's not who I am. What's my name?"

Travis thought it best to not tell the young man the nicknames he'd thought up over the years for the seldom-seen youth next door he'd never met- Boy Radley, InvisiBilly, The Ghost of Crested Boulder. "I don't know your name. Sorry."

"See? You don't know me." The boy pierced the ground with the point of the shovel, and then leaned onto the upright handle. "It's Devon. But not Walters."

Travis looked nervously over at Keith's. "Not Walters. So are you... adopted?"

Devon's face tilted sarcastically. "Do you really think they'd let somebody like Keith adopt anybody?" Again, Travis hazarded a glance at the windows next door. "Don't worry about him. He won't know I'm here. When he came back from your house he ran straight downstairs to his train room to drink beer and pout. He'll stay there all night." As Travis wondered what a "train room" might be, Devon

stared thoughtfully at the bare earth beneath his feet, then continued. "Now that I'm here I could probably stay here all night too." With that, Devon sat on the bare spot, cross-legged, and after a nod from the boy that he should sit as well, Travis had no choice but to join him.

For many seconds, the only sound was the gurgle from the koi pond's fountain. "Do you want something to drink, I think my wife has like Diet Coke or- "

"I've lived here a lot longer than you Mr. Riggins."

Fuck me, he's gonna tell me his whole sad story. But Travis had to listen. Because Devon had seen the skull. "Yeah. Ten years or something, right?"

"Eleven." A blankness passed behind Devon's eyes, as if his vision had turned inward upon a barren landscape. "Since I was four. I played outside all the time. Not like now." Devon's eyes were focused out at the sidewalk, his head turning slowly along its concrete length. "Riding my tricycle. Up and down that sidewalk. Just up and down." He turned one grayish eye back toward Travis; the other remained hidden behind his blonde mop. "Can you imagine, me, some little kid riding a tricycle?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Devon glared poisonously. "Don't talk down to me. The counsellors do that. I see through it every time."

Travis swallowed and nodded. "Right. Sorry. Okay no. Can't imagine you pedaling your little Big Wheel up and down the sidewalk."

"Thank you." Dropping his head forward, Devon seemed to exhale something more than air, then straightened again. "But I did. That was when I was a lot younger. When the neighborhood was different."

"Look, Devon, is there a point to telling me about- "

"Do you wanna know whose bones we're sitting on or not?"

The first robin's song of oncoming evening trilled and bubbled somewhere nearby; the soil beneath Travis' legs seemed shallower now, incapable of bearing his weight. "You know who's buried here?"

"Yes." Devon pulled back the hair from his face with both hands, then returned them to gripping his shovel handle. "But first I gotta tell you about my best friend."

Travis lowered his voice to a whisper. "Holy shit Devon!" The young man was staring ahead as if into an imaginary campfire. "Are you telling me it's your best friend who's buried here?"

Devon spun on Travis and hissed angrily. "*Did I say that?*" Closing his eyes in frustration he shook his head, his hands now in fists, the long hair whipping across his face as he spoke. "Shit! Can one person just *one person* let me tell a story my way *just once* without making up their own ending before I get there?"

"Okay okay I'm sorry! Go ahead."

Devon sighed, then tossed a few blades of the sparse grass into the imaginary campfire. "Like I told you. Used to ride my trike all day up and down this sidewalk. Up to Iffy and back, that was before there were drug dealers in front of it. Store had gum and candy and stuff. Don't know what they have there now. Drugs I guess." Devon's gangly legs were uncrossed now, his feet flat on the ground where he sat, knees up, his arms wrapped around his bony shins. "But I was never there alone. Always with my friend. She rode everywhere with me."

Travis wished they were each holding a beer. "She?"

"Yes." Devon nodded slowly as if confirming his memory. "Same age as me. Went to kindergarten with me. First grade too. Second grade..." Here Devon's voice trailed off across the non-existent embers; seconds later, he was back. "And when we outgrew our trikes we rode our bikes. We were at each other's house all the time, playing with our action figures out in her yard, or my yard, or we'd bury them up to their necks in the sandbox at the church playground... we rode the bus together, sat by each other in school, got in trouble for the same things, we even... we wanted to do a sleep over, but Keith wouldn't have her in our house, and he wouldn't let

me stay over at her house, so instead we put up a tent in her front yard, one of her brothers helped us, you know, kinda like a big tarp over a clothesline thing." For a moment the image of Corey's tarp flooded in, but Devon's story pushed it out again. "And we made the tent into like our own little house in the pretend forest, I snuck a blanket and pillow from home, we had flashlights and snacks and our Yu-Gi-Oh cards and we pretended like we were, like, apart from everything, somewhere else. Somebody else." Now Devon turned his grim gray eyes straight at Travis. "And we were raising our baby."

"Devon I hope to hell you mean like a stuffed animal or something."

This time it was an actual smile, albeit a gloomy one. "We had a kitten. A stray she found. And so we called it our baby. We put an old sweater in a cardboard box and called it her bed. And we were a secret yard family." Devon seemed relaxed now, almost at peace. "And it was like the best summer ever." But just like that, the nascent smile retreated into its hiding place. "Until the kitten got run over by a car."

In his peripheral vision, Travis saw the first street light of the evening snap on down the block. "That's messed up Devon."

The young man nodded. "And so, we had a little funeral. And we buried it."

Travis' voice was a whisper once again as Travis tried to fill in the blanks. "Devon man, that's impossible, these here bones are definitely not kitten bones."

"*Did I say we buried the kitten here? Did I say that?*" Devon kicked at the shovel, knocking it into the imaginary coals. "I told you, let me tell the story without you trying to guess what's next! I know how to do it alright?!" Travis raised one hand in apology, and with the other zippered his lip. Devon continued. "So anyway. We buried it. In *her* yard. Right next to the tarp tent. Which believe it or not was okay because, see, our kitten was still right there at least. I mean yeah, it was squished and shit, but it was still there. We could see where it was that we put her so it wasn't so bad to deal with." Retrieving the

shovel, Devon laid the handle across his lap. "And then on the first day of second grade my friend wasn't at the bus stop."

Travis gave it a moment to settle before daring to advance the story. "So... so what was that then? Did her family move?"

Devon shook his head. "No. Nothing with her family changed. Except her mom who was kindof going crazy on account of her daughter being missing." This time it was Devon who sensed the awkward pause, and rushed ahead before a Travis remark could make it worse. "Just went missing. Gone. Was riding her bike with me on Saturday, didn't come to my house all day Sunday, missed the bus on Monday. Her mom, she was all crying and hollering and what-not, she called the cops, they were driving real slow all around the neighborhood shining their floodlights; her mom and her brothers all searching and calling out, asking me when I saw her last, cops asking me too. And then the week went on, and still she was gone, and every day I sat in class and I didn't even notice who was sitting next to me, because it wasn't her. And we never saw her again."

The catbirds had joined in with the robins' evening song by this time, the shadows of dusk fully overtaking the little bare spot. "Nobody ever found her?"

"No. For a few weeks I'd see police cars here and there, cruising around, then a couple of cops who didn't wear uniforms asking people some questions, but pretty soon, it was just kindof... over with. Her brothers, actually her half-brothers, they said they were gonna find whoever grabbed their sister, gonna kill his ass, blah blah, but there was nobody to find and kill. To this day I can't remember one thing about my whole second grade year. Like it didn't happen." Devon watched an imaginary cinder float off into the evening air. "And pretty soon I was old enough to figure out what 'being dead' was really all about, and that my friend was probably dead somewhere, and I kindof... started to get used to that. But what I couldn't get used to was- " Devon made sure Travis was paying attention before continuing. "- I mean, with the kitten, yeah, she was dead, but there she was, buried in that little hole with the rock we

marked it with. But I couldn't see where Monique was. I didn't have anything to, like, connect to. You know what I mean?"

"Her name was Monique?" Devon nodded. "I know what I want to ask next, but I don't want to jump your story."

Devon's eyes seemed to thank his older neighbor, and then the story continued. "I stopped riding my bike for good after Monique was gone. Wouldn't touch it. And when Keith tried to get rid of my old tricycle that I first rode with Monique when we were four I pitched a tantrum, said keep your hands off it, so he just left it there on the stoop. All these years." Travis glanced over at Keith's porch, one item of his junk heap now explained. "I kinda stopped wanting to do anything after that really. My mom, she thought I was like autistic and shit; she was like this old hippy who liked this guy Neil Young who she heard set up model trains for his kids who had cerebral palsy and so she set one up for me too, thinking maybe Keith and I could bond and shit by playing trains. But he didn't like playing with some fucking sad quiet kid and I knew he didn't wanna be around me, so I left the train alone like everything else, which is when he just started getting into the model train by himself. It became his place to go hide. I didn't care. It was better for everybody when he went off to hide."

It was late enough now that the hardware store would be closing; Travis wanted no interruptions from Alicia or anyone else before the story ended. "I think it's time to explain the shovel Devon."

The young man grimaced. "It is." For the first time while telling his story, Devon now stood, and began pacing back and forth across the bare spot, gesturing with the shovel now and then for emphasis. "So one day a couple of months ago I'm looking out the window, and it's like just about this time of day, and I see you Mr. Riggins. Right here. Kneeling down at the hole you dug. And I see you lift up a skull Mr. Riggins. And I could tell it wasn't grown-up size. It was a child's skull. That's when I knew."

"So you *are* saying that you think your friend is buried here."

"Yes. I'm saying it *now*. Wasn't it better that I told my whole story first before I came out and said it?"

Travis was used to always doing the driving; now he was learning how to be a passenger. "But how can you be sure it's her?"

"Oh I'm sure. You were holding Monique. I could feel it."

Travis thought back five years, recalling the state of neglected abandon in which he first saw his property before making his offer. "Was anyone living here at the time?"

"No. It was one of those dark empty houses that wasn't lived in and wasn't for sale. Until it was, and then you came." With the last crepuscular glow of the evening losing it grip, Devon scanned Travis' lush landscaping. "It didn't look like this back then. Just a gnarly shit dump. You know, like Keith's yard." Travis resisted laughing at Devon's one and only joke. "But now you got it so beautiful. It's like something out of a movie. And now that I know Monique is here- " the young man looked down on the bare spot, then up to Travis, "- it kindof feels good to know she's in this, like, special garden, with flowers all around her and a fountain and everything. It's like it was all put here just for her. Like somebody cared about her."

Here and there, the first lights of the evening pin-pricked the deepening dark. "So when all the skeletons were found in your yard... what did you think then?"

"That maybe I was wrong. That your bones and them were all a group. But then they proved they were the slaves' bones, and that there were only six and they found them all, so yours were something different and that made me even more sure." Devon shook his head bitterly. "Those slaves' bones... stupid Keith, thinking they were like the missing link or something, I learned on the internet that bones that old couldn't survive in this dirt. I just let him believe it though, you go asshole, just make a fool of yourself. Big fucking joke on him when they were "just niggers," right?"

Now Travis remembered where he had last seen Devon's feet, though not in the same shoes. "You were at the reinterment ceremony weren't you?"

Devon's pacing skidded to a stop. "It was weird. It was like they..." He closed his eyes for a moment, and then resumed. "So they were

here all along, right, this was where they lived, way before us, and we kinda moved in on top of them, uninvited. It was like all this time they let us live here, without complaining. So when the tree forced them up, it was like... like I owed them something, you know? Like I had to say goodbye to them and, you know- apologize." He breathed in the cool of the evening air, then looked back to Travis. "Now you know why I don't call myself a Walters."

It was dark enough to be called night now; the solar lights lining Travis' walking path had turned themselves on, providing just enough illumination for the two men to still see the main points of each other's faces. Then bright headlights outshone everything- it was Alicia's car turning into the driveway, pulling past Travis' truck and into the garage. No one sitting on the bare spot moved or made a sound as Alicia came out of the garage, followed by the clicking of the front door which let them know they were alone again. "Mrs. Riggins doesn't know about the bones. Does she?"

Travis laughed for the first time of the entire conversation. "You guessed right. She's not exactly an archaeology buff."

"But I know you are."

"Why's that?"

"Cause I see how you like hanging out with that lady archaeologist."

With Alicia's walk up the Riggins' porch the motion light had been triggered awake to greet her, but it was Devon's observation which made Travis feel illuminated. "Oh yeah. Linda Myers. Nice person."

"So anyway..." Devon repositioned his grip on the shovel handle. "...we have to tell the police you know. About the bones. It's, like, why I'm here and stuff."

"I know Devon." It was true. There was no hiding or avoiding anymore. What would happen to Travis' home and happiness was simply going to have to happen, koi pond and marriage be damned. "We'll call the county tomorrow."

"But: we dig her up right now." Devon jumped to his feet, his shovel ready.

"Let's let the police do that Devon."

"But I gotta see Monique again!" In the pale glow of the solar lights, Devon seemed smaller than before. "I've been waiting eight years."

Across the street, another motion light snapped into brightness over at the new neighbors' house, one which had been installed a lifetime ago by Corey. "The police really need to do the re-digging Devon, to handle it like a crime scene. But I promise you'll be here when they do." Now the light across the street outlined a silhouette, one which moved slowly up the sidewalk and neared the new neighbors' house. "We better call it a night Devon. Don't need any neighbors seein' us out here creepin' around in the dark with a shovel."

Devon gazed across the street at the advancing silhouette. "Oh it's nobody to worry about. Just Monique's mom."

Travis had bent over to pick up the spinner parts, but straightened up quickly once again. "Monique's mom?"

"Yeah." Across the street, the shuffling silhouette now came into clear outline against the glare of the motion light. "Miss Sheila. Monique's mom."

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Sitting at his desk at the real estate office the next morning, Travis felt better about himself than he had in a long while. True to his word to young Devon, he'd begun his day with a call to the Cobb County police department, where a desk cop had taken his report of human bones being found in his yard and listened to Travis' suggestion that perhaps they could be the remains of the missing Glavin girl from eight years earlier (as to why he'd reburied the bones, Travis would explain to the police that he didn't want them exposed to the elements so he reburied them for safe measure, a plausible story which would conveniently omit the problematic detail that the reburying occurred months rather than hours before his calling them in). It was a brief and businesslike phone call, more like reporting the

finding of a lost wallet than finding a human being; the officer's reaction over the phone had been non-existent, and when Travis gave Sheila's address as the home of the missing little girl, he wondered if it was his imagination when, after giving the officer the number 1413, he detected a dismissive sigh at the other end of the line. The call had ended with a weary "okay sir, we'll have someone follow up " in a tone which signified to Travis that the addendum "sooner or later" was to be tacitly understood.

Still he knew he had (finally) done the right thing, despite the officer's lack of forensic enthusiasm. As for the collateral damage which would certainly follow, both physical and interpersonal, Travis marveled at how less traumatic it all seemed in his mind today, now that he had no choice in preventing it, providing him yet another object lesson of how much easier on the emotions it was to fix a problem than to fixate upon it. Things would be replanted and repaired- no big deal. And as for Alicia, he was sure he'd exaggerated what her reaction was going to be. Yes, she'll be creeped out and pissed off- but no, she will not serve him divorce papers. Besides, these bones would be up and gone quickly, with none of the prolongation of the Walters Man event, since this was simply a one-off burial. But at this Travis tripped over a speed bump: *was* it just a one-off burial? How could he be sure? Devon's theory about the bones, despite his passionate certainty, was only that really, a theory. Perhaps the two properties, which generations ago had been all one under the Holman name, contained more slave remains than the smallpox victims. Was it not possible that the area had once been a version of the Slave Lot, where slaves had been buried for years before (and even after) the six found at Keith's, and lay scattered therefore all about and beneath the Riggins' property, the little girl under the bare spot being but one of those many? The thought of his horticultural heaven becoming pock-mocked with exploratory holes like his neighbor's perforated plot was nauseating; it would of course be within Travis' rights to refuse the DNR his permission to dig up the yard, but there would be the expectation, from both the historical

and the archaeological communities, for him to "do the right thing" and submit his half-acre to the shovels (and knowing Alicia's general disregard for Travis' gardenic Eden, he was sure she'd want the whole place dug up as well, for the peace of mind of knowing she wasn't sleeping above any below-ground sleepers). Insofar as the "archaeological community" was concerned, Travis was at least honest enough with himself to admit that it amounted to one person and one person only: Linda Myers. What would she think of him if he were to deny them/her access to the treasures the land held, simply for the sake of shrubbery? He had impressed her so with his well-calculated display of compassionate sensibilities as regarding human worth and honoring those humble souls who society discards, etc. etc., values which of course he really did believe in but, more importantly to his cause, were simpatico with hers- all the progress he'd made with her therefore (*progress, Travis? To where exactly?*) would come screeching to a halt upon her seeing him for the lawn-worshipper he really was. Yes, Travis' morning at the office had begun with good feelings- but as thoughts like these began to infiltrate his mind, the afternoon found him seriously wondering just how good he would still be feeling after shovels had been set to soil.

But as for shovels, no amount of trepidation on Travis' part could make him deny the shovel of his earnest new friend Devon. What an extraordinary encounter it had been the evening before, and what an extraordinary young man! How incongruous that such a sensitive and perceptive soul could have sprouted and bloomed in the infertile barrens of the Walters' gloomy greenhouse; a dark flower he was, but a bold one, a black orchid most rare. Replaying in his mind their sitting-on-the-bare-spot colloquy, Travis realized it represented not only the most engaging encounter he'd ever enjoyed with a neighbor these five years, but the *only* neighborly encounter which he could describe as engaging, period. This sullen and somber teenager, so cynical beyond his years about so many things, was anything but cynical concerning his devotion to his lost friend, a devotion as pure as platinum and just as solid; the sort of devotion, Travis admitted,

which he himself could not boast of ever holding for anyone. Leaving his house for work that morning, he had seen those devoted eyes peering out at him through a Walters window, eyes which he could no longer mistake for any other Walters eyes after having studied their contents so deeply the night before; eyes which watched and waited for the only news the boy cared to learn, the confirmation of what he believed to be the bones' identity. It was Travis' sincere wish as well that the bones might be proven to be hers and so end the mystery- in order to both fill the hole in Devon's heart and to prevent more holes from appearing in his pristine lawn.

It was later that same afternoon, upon returning to the office after his last showing of the day, when Travis' cell phone vibrated in his pocket.

"Hello dear."

"So did you think I wouldn't find out about her you sonofabitch?"

It was a somewhat less cordial greeting than Travis was accustomed to receiving from his wife.

"Excuse me?"

He could tell from the sound of her voice that Alicia was outdoors. *"This is one hell of a way for me to find out. How long have you been hiding her from me?"*

Linda! Alicia's found out about Linda! Panic washed through Travis as he added things up in a nanosecond. Somehow she must have met Linda at the house today; maybe thinking Travis was home, she came by, and was snagged by his wife before she could leave and then grilled with questions; knowing Linda, she was probably too guileless to lie about the texting and hanging together at the reinterment. He was doomed. "Her?", he pretended. Who's 'her'?"

"Just stop it asshole! Stop it!"

"Alicia, there's nothing funny going on with her, I can explain the whole- "

"Nothing funny!? I'll say it's not fucking funny!" Travis could almost hear the swigging of the chardonnay bottle glug-glugging down her throat. *"Well she's still here if you want to come see her*

before she's gone, far be it from me to get between the two of you." With that, the phone clicked dead; a minute later he was in his truck, speeding toward the reckoning which awaited him at home.

Upon turning the corner of his block, Travis felt the lining of his stomach curdle, for the very sight which for his entire drive was the one he most dreaded to see was the first which came into view: Linda's DNR van. So it was true. His dalliance had been found out. But as he neared, an even more gut-curdling sight took precedent over the first- two Cobb County police cars, and officers unrolling yellow "Crime Scene" tape. What crime of passion had his enraged wife committed? But no- standing nearby in the yard was Linda, not murdered in the least, and not far from her Alicia, clearly not disposed to committing any such murder. *The bones!* Well of course! Now it was stupidly obvious: the cops were here already for the bones. But all that explained was the police presence. It still didn't explain...

"So when were you going to tell me about her?" But it was Linda who was asking this time, not Alicia.

"Her. As in- ?"

"As in the girl you've been hiding from me."

Now Alicia came up as well. "Right. The missing little girl the cops told us about. *That you dug up in our front yard!*"

The sudden gear-shifting was making Travis dizzy. "Alicia, this is Linda Myers, as seen on TV. Linda, this is my wife Alicia."

But the two women had already taken care of such formalities and spoke amongst themselves. "Alicia, how long ago did you say he dug the hole?"

"Back in the spring, before the tree came down!"

"And he didn't tell you what was in it ever since?"

"*Ever since!*" The two women glared at him, shaking their heads in disgust. From across the yard, the cop who seemed to be in charge of the investigation was approaching. Travis quickly determined that a procedural briefing was in order.

"Okayfeelfreetobemadatme!llexplainsoonbutpleasedon'ttellthis coplhidthebones goddamntellmeyoudidn'talreadytellhimthat!- "

"Mr. Riggins?" It was one Chief Detective George McGill of the Cobb County Police Department, 6th Precinct. "First of all, wanna thank you for reporting what you found here in your yard. Must've been quite a shock."

"Oh believe me it was." *The bones were kindof surprising too.*

"Your wife and Miss Myers told us you buried the remains back up after you found 'em yesterday, really glad you did, what with the rain we got overnight. Might've compromised the evidence." Travis hazarded a glance at the women and tried to thank them with his eyes.

"Yes, well, I just thought it was the right thing to do." As both women shot him daggers, Travis kept it moving along. "It didn't seem ya'll were all that interested when I called it in this morning."

Detective McGill watched as two DNR shovelers carefully began their work (*well of course dummy, THAT'S why Linda's here, the cops called the DNR at the report of human remains, duh*), then turned back to Travis. "Oh you definitely got our attention with this one Mr. Riggins. This case goes back to 2012. Back then this investigation was our Number One priority, was for months really, we put everything we had into solving it but, well..." The detective sighed, but then regrouped. "Anyway, this could be huge."

"She was my best friend." Devon had silently crept up beside the group. Travis was grateful that the boy had not brought along his shovel.

"Well son" said McGill, "we can't be sure it's her yet, or even if it's a little girl, or a little boy. Miss Myers' people will be helping us with the identification. But if it is her..." A crowd of Crested Boulderisians had gathered out on the sidewalk and were craning their necks. "... this would be as big a break in a Cobb County cold case as we've had in ten years. But before we get too excited we'll need to deal with the obvious coincidence of this being found right next to the house where the slave remains were removed." The detective stared over at Keith's house and shook his head. "Glad we're over here for all this

and not over there. My guys tell me your neighbor's no treat to deal with." Devon nodded in confirmation.

"Detective McGill!" It was one of the DNR diggers.

"Well?" The two shovelers' nods confirmed grim findings; setting their shovels aside, they resumed working instead with small hand spades and brushes. The detective turned back to his audience. "Alright. Time to see what we have."

Alicia, for one, had seen enough. "Okay, don't need to see bones, I'm out of here." Alicia shook Linda's hand and exchanged with her a "nice to meet you," then narrowed her eyes on Travis. "We'll talk later." As Alicia went back indoors, McGill turned his attention to Devon.

"You were her best friend you say?"

"Yes." Devon stared at the archaeologists' brushes as they removed the dirt. "We rode tricycles together."

The detective smiled. "Small world isn't it? Well son, if it's your friend Brittany, we'll know soon enough."

McGill turned, but paused at the sound of Travis' voice behind him. "Brittany?"

The detective nodded. "Brittany. You know." Travis' face revealed that the name meant nothing to him. McGill was amazed. "Brittany Ketterson! The daughter of state senator Tom Ketterson, who disappeared from East Cobb in 2012? Biggest local story of the year." Devon's eyebrows raised in protest; a side-look from Travis checked him. "Believe me, when Dispatch told us you called this morning, every investigator in the office sat up straight in his chair. All of north Georgia was lookin' for her back in the day. And if we've found her now" said McGill, looking first into Devon's confused face and then into Travis', "we'll have you to thank Mr. Riggins." With a polite nod to Linda, Detective McGill returned to the dig site, just as the first television news teams rolled up on the curb and began setting up for interviews.

"Who the hell is Brittany!?" Devon's face was equal parts outrage and disgust.

“Devon, man, when I called I told them Monique not- “

“Who’s Monique?” Travis had nearly forgotten that Linda had remained.

“Linda, this is my neighbor, Devon Wal- Devon.”

“Her name is Monique not Brittany!”

When Travis was finally able to reduce Devon’s decibel level to one which didn’t attract the attention of blue uniforms and TV microphones, Travis began the task of damage control for both Linda and his upset young neighbor. He confessed to Linda that he had, in fact, found the bones in the spring; how the “shock” of the discovery had “made him not think clearly,” leading him to the foolish and short-sighted decision to rebury them (only temporarily he assured her, a complete falsehood but he assured her of it nonetheless), and how his conscience was stabbed by Devon’s story of his long-missing cycle-buddy (which was true, but the fact that he was finally doing the right thing now only because the boy had brought his own shovel and threatened to do it himself was a detail he shrewdly omitted). Sensing that his repentant line of bullshit was making a positive effect by softening Linda’s anger and pulling her sympathies back, Travis turned his mollifying skills toward Devon. Yes, it did seem that the primary interest of the police was this Ketterson cold case and not the Gavins one, but Travis assured him that no matter who the police thought or hoped they had in the grave, the scientific testing- and here he commended Linda to the boy for her team’s archaeological skills- would show the truth of the remains’ identity; and if that identity proved to be Monique, it would lead not only to his little friend receiving the dignity which she deserved in death but, perhaps, the long-denied justice for the crime committed against her in life. To Travis’ relief, his efforts on both fronts were successful: Devon’s anger was assuaged, and Linda’s affections were well on the way to being restored; just in time, as it turned out, for them to observe Linda’s colleagues and the forensic investigators snap photo after photo of the now fully-exposed skeleton, then lift it carefully and still intact (save for the separated skull, which, when brought up to the

light, Travis could feel his young friend yearning to hold in his own hands) and placed in the back of the DNR van.

“Where are they taking her Travis?”

“You mean, *if* it’s her.”

“*Where are they taking Monique?*”

“To the medical examiner’s office, Devon.” As Linda explained the procedures to him as they walked toward the DNR van, Travis noticed that the TV crews had picked her out in the crowd and were closing in. “And actually, my team won’t be doing the work. It’ll be forensic anthropologists who will be heading up the examination.”

“Forensic anthropologists.” Devon rolled the words about in his head for a moment and wasn’t sure if he liked them. “Will you be there too?”

Linda smiled down at the stringy blonde orchid. “I’ll be checking in every day.”

“Mizz Myers!” A microphone had found her; now it was joined by two more.

“Okay, hang on, lemme finish up here.” The reporters and camera people stepped back just a little; Linda turned back to Travis, her demeanor softer than the one which had greeted him a half hour earlier, to be sure, but still retaining some reservation. Devon turned away in some embarrassment, sensing that what was to follow was not meant for his ears. “It’s really great, your helping out Devon with this. It obviously means everything to him.”

“He still has the tricycle Linda.” Her brows creased, seeking more explanation. “That they used to ride together when they were four. He wouldn’t let his dad throw it out. He’s kept it, just like he’s kept her.” It was another strategically-delivered exhalation of sentiment, blown from his mouth like a warm breeze, wafting across the last remnant of permafrost on Linda’s face and melting it away. Her thaw was complete. The full springtime of Linda’s smile had returned.

As she started toward the interviewers, a hand pulled Linda back by the arm.

“Miss Linda?”

“Yes Devon?”

“Tell the forensic anth- what was it?”

“Anthropologists.”

“Anthropologists. Tell them that her name is Monique. Not Brittany.”

Linda’s head tilted sympathetically. “Devon, that’s not how they work. They’re scientists, they just give the remains a case number. They don’t use names.”

Devon’s eyes narrowed darkly. “Like at the Slave Lot?”

“Mizz Myers, could we get you for thirty seconds please?” Pulled into the media circle, Linda’s apologetic eyes remained on Devon as her mouth dutifully responded to the reporters’ questions. Meanwhile, the crowd on the sidewalk had grown to several dozen; from among the murmur and mumbles, one unmistakable voice rose with shrill clarity above the others.

“WHUD YOU DIG UP NOW WIT’ YO’ DIGGIN’ IN DAT YAHD MISTAH DIGGINS?”

Devon took an uneasy step or two toward his own house. “Gotta go.”

Travis’ Sheila-dar picked her out in the crowd, shuffling and side-stepping her way to the front row. “Why, what’s up?”

“Can’t stay. That’s Miss Sheila. She doesn’t like to see me.” Behind them, the doors of the DNR van slammed shut, its cargo now loaded.

“You mean, ever since- “

“Ever since.” As Sheila worked her way closer along the sidewalk, Devon moved sideways so that Travis’ body blocked her view of the boy. “Every time she saw me after Monique disappeared, she’d start into crying and moaning and remembering. So I hide from her, so that it doesn’t take her back to that place.”

“WHUD THEY FINE DOWN IN DAT HOLE MISTAH DIGGINS?”

“See ya.” Slinking off like a teenage ninja, Devon ran along the fence row, then slipped around it into his own yard. Four eyes peering through Walters curtains observed his approach, then disappeared

from the window as the slapping front screen door swallowed him into the house.

Sheila stood hollering in Travis' yard, oblivious to the various workers and authorities crisscrossing around her as they wrapped up their respective tasks. It was classic Sheila as always, standing in the way of others who had something useful to do; old habit told Travis to make her move along and get out of their way. But then it struck him: for the first time in all his history with Sheila, here was the first time when she more than anyone possessed the right to be standing here; more right, if Devon's theory about the bones was correct, to be standing in Travis' yard than even Travis himself. Depending on who'd been loaded into the DNR van, all these people should be getting the fuck out of the way of Sheila Gavins. A wave of compassion, one he couldn't fully suppress, surged up nauseously within him; a compassion which he resented bitterly for the complicating guilt it now caused him.

"You dig too gott damm much in yo' yahd Mistah Diggins. I done TOLL you dat a thousan' times!"

She had never told him that even one time of course, let alone a thousand times; whether she imagined she had done so or, like so many words which bubbled out of Sheila's mouth, they'd simply taken shape and rolled unchecked past her tongue without being truth-checked by her brain before proceeding. But it was a great relief to Travis *that* she'd said it, for it confirmed for him that Sheila was still out of touch with reality, and, if Sheila was still out of touch with reality, then he could continue to dismiss her as bat-shit crazy, compassion be damned. "It's very busy over here right now Sheila. Please get out of the way." Besides, he had more important matters which required his attention at the moment, like scanning across the hubbub to find Linda once again, to touch base with her and say his goodbyes.

"You need t' quit diggin' Mistah Diggins. Leave whass buried down in th' groun' buried down in th' groun'."

It was more of the same from Sheila, yet something about it twisted with the turn of a new hook; Travis turned back to look at her, but she was gone, in a sense; it was a Sheila somehow removed who remained, floating, or perhaps sinking, her murky eyes transfixed on a wakeful dream, out of time and apart from the here-and-now. "If it buried down undah then it buried an' gone, down wheah th' devil take it, an' when th' devil take he don' gib back, don' nevah gib back, the devil holds on an' won' leh go. The devil holds on an' won' leh go."

Now the red and blue lights of the squad cars came to life; the ignition of the DNR van started up as the reporters headed off toward their vehicles. Sheila remained, lost in the private nowhere her mind had wandered into. "Don' be diggin' up whut th' devil holds, devil holds on an' won' leh go. Th' devil won' leh go. Th' devil won' leh go." Still muttering, her feet began to move as if by sleepwalking, propelling her forward like a tottering wind-up robot; not aimlessly though, but inexorably toward her intended object, the now-vacated open grave.

"Sheila, wait!"

Rushing up to intercept her, Travis blocked her way, but the mumbling woman's feet continued toward their goal. "Th' devil won' leh go Mistah Diggins. The devil won' leh go." In his peripheral vision, Travis saw the DNR van moving even with him now, backing down the drive, and seated in the passenger side nearest him, Linda's face. But even nearer to him was Sheila's face, which pleaded for help he couldn't provide. "The devil won' leh me go Mistah Diggins. The devil won' leh me go. Tell the devil leh me go. Tell the devil leh me go."

"Come on Sheila." Taking her gently by the shoulders (but it truth, not gently; it was simply his loathing to make contact which rendered his approach tentative and thus made his touch appear gentle and compassionate, and from Linda's admiring viewpoint through the window, gentle and compassionate indeed), Travis turned Sheila away from the grave and back toward the sidewalk, and walked the gibbering woman across his lawn toward the assembled onlookers.

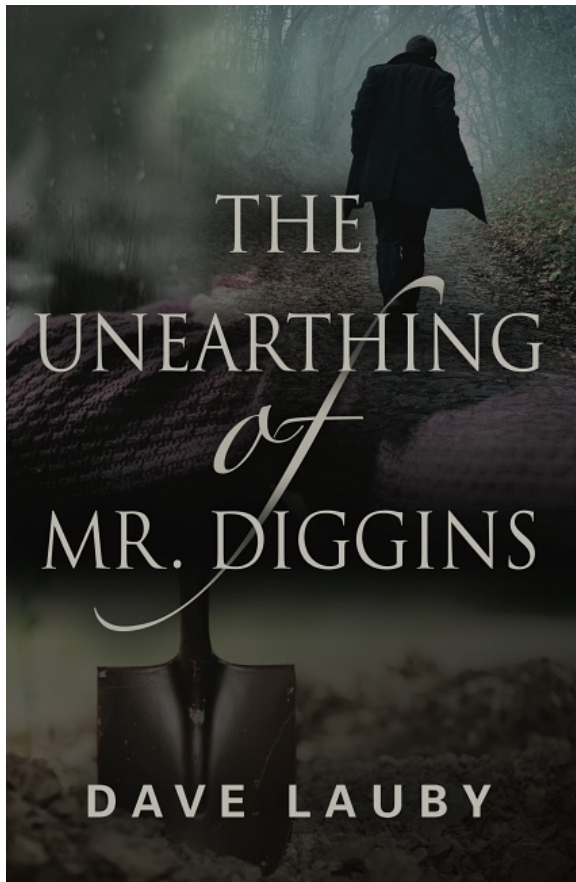
But when Travis left her with the group it did not envelope her as one of their own, but rather, split in two like the Red Sea, leaving Sheila to languish alone like an abandoned island between the divided waters.

“Tell the devil leh me go Mistah Diggins.”

“Sheila do you... do you want some water?”

“You dig too much Mistah Diggins. You dig too gott damm much.”

“I’ll get you some water.” Turning back toward the house, Travis noticed the DNR van was no longer beside him; looking down the driveway, there it was, leaving his gate and merging onto Crested Boulder. As it drove slowly away with police escort, he saw a smiling and reconquered Linda waving goodbye. Her conqueror waved back. Then, realizing he’d forgotten to take Sheila’s grimy water bottle to refill it, Travis turned to find her. But she was gone. The parted waters had closed back in. The island of sidewalk was no more. Meanwhile, behind his kitchen window, Alicia closed the blinds and turned away. She’d seen enough.



A suburban homeowner's shovel reveals a 250 year-old mystery buried in his backyard, an unearthing which is only a precursor of deeper upheavals of the mind and heart which will change his life in profound and terrifying ways.

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