



Good Grief is a collection of short stories in the noir fiction genre. The characters populating the stories are ironic, mischievous, and weirdly idiosyncratic, a sure-fire recipe for dark humor and melancholia.

Good Grief

By Edward Fotheringill

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Good Grief



EDWARD
FOTHERINGILL

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The Crooked Tower

Rutland, Vermont 1969

The wind squealed through the cracked, caulked windows of the solitary cabin like feral cats crying in the night. The dawn light was pink, and as the pinkness glowed through the pitted glass windows, it captured within the incandescence of prism light a decaying corpse sprawled across a pine-planked floor.

One Week Later

Bill Bartlett, long-time *Rutland Police Chief*, hung up the phone and leaned back in his leather swivel chair. He was a big man with ruddy complexion and a wicked scar etched across the bridge of his nose. He winced as a lower molar sparked with pain. He glanced at Paul Barron, his *Deputy*: “That was Amy Sallone. She says Riley Marley never showed up at the closing on his farm. She said he’s not answerin’ the phone, either.”

Paul shrugged. “He never was one that could be depended upon.”

Bill leaned forward, the leather chair creaking ominously. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know...it’s just that Riley is kind of...you know, weird.”

Bill rose from his chair with determination. “Well, I’m goin’ out to the farm and see what the hell is goin’ on.”

Bill Bartlett drove the country road along *Otter Creek River*. The river sparkled in the mid-morning light like sequins floating on oil. When he parked in front of the cabin, crows were perched all over the snow-covered roof like mercenaries in black robes waiting for orders of a malicious nature. Bill sat in his car for some time staring at the crows, his heart pounding with dread.

“Amy, this is Chief Bartlett. I went out to the Marley farm... I’m sorry to inform you that Riley is dead.”

One Week Later

Agnes Darcy, real estate agent for *Darcy and Bellows*, stood before Riley Marley’s cabin as light snow flurries danced in the steely-gray light. She could see the barn nearby, the open spread of cow pasture, and in the distance a crooked tower at the foot of dense forest. Agnes surveyed the cabin and the barn, inside and out, and then walked a mile through two inches of snow to the base of the tower. The early afternoon sky was gray with cloud-cover and the sun was nothing but an aberrant silver blur behind shifting clouds. The heavy wooden door on the tower was unmovable – stuck in place by time, and bitter-cold, and rusted hinges.

Agnes hired a carpenter named Rob Long to unhinge the tower door, and after some effort, Rob dug the hinges out of the doorframe with a crowbar. Rob and Agnes dragged

the heavy door to the side and let it fall into the snow. Rob backed away a few steps, and quickly lit-up a *Camel* cigarette. He took a sustained drag on the fag and then spoke: "What is it you think this tower was used for?"

"Don't know," answered Agnes. "Let's go in and take a look." She took a flashlight out of her knapsack. "You got one of these in your toolbox?"

Rob smiled, his tobacco-stained teeth looking like a rusted zipper: "Sure do."

Inside the tower it was bone-chill cold, and the dark was palpable, as if the darkness were granular. Both Agnes and Rob had the sense that nothing good could happen in all that cold, and all that dark. The yellow glare of the flashlights swept through the darkness, damp stone walls buried in ancient shadows. They went on gingerly and then *stopped* abruptly. They stood at the edge of a dug-out pit, the yellow light from their flashlights dancing in the squalor of the hollow. Rob crouched down at the rim of the pit and leaned forward, his eyes squinting: "Fuck me. It looks like bones down there."

Alice caught her breath. "Looks like what?"

Rob stood up, his heart pounding. "I said there are *bones* down there."

One Day Later

Bill Bartlett and the *Rutland Forensic Analyst*, Marty Bloom, stood at the rim of the tower pit. Bright lights had

been installed around the pit, and there were definitely bones down there. Lots of them. Bartlett shook his head, his mouth crooked with perplexity: "You know, I hate to say this, but I got a bad feelin' right now."

Marty Bloom bit his lip: "What are you sayin'?"

"Damn. You know, Riley Marley had three wives. Word was they all left him 'cause of his drinkin' problem. One, two, three...they all left him. I'm now thinkin' maybe that ain't so. I'm thinkin' down there in that pit...."

Marty Bloom nodded. "Okay, we'll be real careful with the bones. I'm callin' in the team from *Burlington*. We'll figure this out."

One Week Later

Marty Bloom sat in the office of Bill Bartlett. Sleet was pelting the office window like clumps of wet sand. Marty sipped his coffee and gently placed the mug on the scratched desk-top of the *Chief of Police*: "I've got the forensic report here," mumbled Marty. "It says there were bones from seven bodies down there in the pit."

Bill pursed his lips. "Seven bodies?"

"Yeah. Three human females, two dogs, and two cats.

"Fuck me. His three wives were in that pit."

"Looks like it." Marty handed the forensics report to Bill and grabbed his coffee mug. He took a deep, satisfying quaff of the creamy-brown elixir.

"We need to get some DNA from the relatives of these women."

"I'd say so."

Bill looked out the blurred, frost-coated office window. "You think this fuckin' weather will ever clear?"

Marty shrugged. "It's Sunday mornin'. I'm goin' home and watch the *Patriots* game."

"They're just gonna lose again."

"I know." Marty got up from the straight-back chair with coffee mug in hand and walked through the office doorway into the police-station lobby. He eyed the big-breasted blonde sitting at her desk painting her fingernails. He placed the coffee mug in front of her. She looked up complacently.

"Good coffee, Charlotte."

"Why thank you, Marty." She leaned forward coquettishly, her bountiful cleavage languishing in her V-neck cotton sweater like ripe fruit waiting to be plucked. "I'm here to please, darlin'."

Marty felt a tingling in his loins as he walked out of the police station into the blustering cold.

Bill Bartlett tossed the forensic report into his in-basket. "That can wait," he chortled. He put his feet up on his desk and opened the funny page of the *Rutland Gazette*. He read for some time, his eyes glassed-over, chuckling

at the sophomoric humor like an idiot-child harbored within an adult body.

The Walker

René de Wahlens glanced across the terrace of the outdoor beer garden, the late afternoon sun squatting on the pastel rooftops of the ancient city of Bruges, the undulating breeze carrying the scent of mint and coriander. He drew deep on his pint of *Augustijn Monastery Beer*, the sweetness of heavy malt bringing him to a state of welcomed submission. At an adjacent table, an amorous couple spoke about the meaning of one's work, the meaning about what it is one does. René involuntarily rose from his chair and intervened on the couple's conversation. This overt act was out of character, for René was a renunciant at heart, a loner, a secular monk. "Excuse me," he said. "I have been eavesdropping on your conversation. I hope you will forgive me."

The man at the adjacent table was receptive and conciliatory. "Would you like to join us?"

"I would. Thank you." René transferred himself into the couple's presence, the young man and woman registering surprise and anticipation. The interloper sat down: "I am René de Wahlens and I am a *walker*."

The man at the table smiled cordially. "I am Rudiger, and this is my fiancé, Elise." Rudiger paused, his kind demeanor shining: "I am interested in why you find our conversation so inviting."

René nodded his head in servitude. “I am quite embarrassed, but I find your question about the meaning of what one *does* intriguing.”

“Why so? said Elise, her coral blues eyes flashing like shooting stars across a black sky.

René became quiet, a dog barked in the distance, a cool breeze chilled the air. “I am a *walker*. That’s what I do. I walk fourteen miles a day.”

Elise shrugged. “Fourteen miles? That’s extraordinary. Why do you walk so far, so long?”

René let out a deep breath. “I don’t know. I just do it. It’s become a compulsion.”

Rudiger furrowed his brow: “That *is* interesting. I’m a psychologist. These kinds of eccentricities fascinate me.”

René sipped his beer. “I do worry about it. I walk every day, even during inclement weather. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if I didn’t walk.” René finished his beer, slowly and gently placing the empty pint glass on the wooden table, as if to communicate that he was capable of completing an act with certitude and perfection.

“Freud would classify your affliction as an anxiety disorder playing itself out through the compulsive act of walking,” said Rudiger.

Elise bristled: “Please, don’t reduce our new friend to concepts of psychobabble. That’s not fair.”

"I'm sorry," said Rudiger. He acknowledged René: "My apologies. I was rude. Please forgive me."

René kindly nodded. "I take no offense. In fact, I would like to hear more about Freud's theory. The walking has become the dominating force in my life. I think that something catastrophic will happen if I take one day off. I know that's irrational, but that's the way I feel."

Elise got up from the table. "Well, if we're going to talk Freud, I think we need more alcohol. What can I get you René?"

"A pint of the *Augustijn* would be lovely, thank you."

Elise playfully sneered at Rudiger: "I know what you want." She headed off to the *Chalice Tavern*, a stone edifice lost under a canopy of pine trees.

"My fiancé loses patience with me when I attempt to analyze someone," said Rudiger. "She is probably right. Who am I to judge?"

"On the contrary, I welcome your insights. I feel imprisoned by the compulsion to walk."

Rudiger finished his martini and shook into his mouth the olive from the funnel-shaped glass vessel. "My first question to you is this: When did the walking begin?"

"I started walking after the death of a dear friend and colleague. He died about seven years ago. Upon his death, I retired from my medical practice. That's when the walking began."

Rudiger nodded and stroked his burley beard. "Freud believed that compulsive actions are a consequence of guilt. He would say that your compulsive walking keeps the guilt in abeyance. As you said, the walking protects you from some oncoming catastrophe."

René pursed his lips and bowed his head, his hands clasped together tightly as if in prayer. He looked up, his face a harrowing mask opening itself up to an act of repentance. The late summer dusk hovered over Bruges like some cosmic veil, arrows of humidity raining down, announcing the advent of early morning showers.

In a flourish, Elise, carrying a silver tray, brought to the table a pint of *Augustijn*, a martini, and a glass of *Chardonnay*. She noticed the grimacing face of René. "René, what has my dear fiancé said to disturb you?" She turned to Rudiger: "Honestly, Rudiger, can't you leave well enough alone?"

René held out his hands before him, palms up. "Elise, please do not fault Rudiger for my unrest. He actually has alerted me to something significant."

Rudiger drew hard on his martini and took the hand of Elise in an act of contrition.

"You see," said René, "I have committed a sin that I deeply regret. I am walking to keep this sin from engulfing me. If I keep moving, I feel like I can outrun it."

Rudiger leaned toward René with compassion: "You don't have to share this sin with us. It's really none of our business."

“No. I do need to confess. I would like to confess to both of you.”

Elise sat down next to Rudiger. They looked at each other, bewildered, and then cast their attention to the walker. Elise quickly raised a finger: “René, I don’t know what you are about to say to us, but I must tell you I am a police officer.”

René’s mouth contorted into a painful smile: “My sin involves death, but I did not kill anyone. As I mentioned to Rudiger, I was a physician. Some eight years ago, my dearest friend and colleague, Gustave, became gravely ill, and I was caring for him, monitoring his pain with injections of morphine, spending lots of time at his bedside. His last request was a simple one: He wanted to die holding his wife’s hand. He did not want to be alone when the darkness descended.” René’s hand shook as he lifted the pint of beer to his lips. He took a pull of the golden-brown libation and gently placed the glass on the table. “Well, now to the unpleasantness: My friend’s wife...her name is Gertrude...became understandably grief-stricken, as did I. Near the end, a room was prepared for me to spend evenings at their house. Gertrude and I would take turns sitting with Gustave, ‘round the clock. Consequently, Gertrude and I became...close. Our mutual love for Gustave and our mutual grief brought us together in a co-dependent way. One evening, Gertrude and I drank too much wine, and we went to bed together. Desperately looking for comfort, we poured out, as one, our love for Gustave, our grief, our hopelessness. After our sexual encounter, we went

to look in on Gustave. He was dead. We both fell to our knees and wept. We failed to honor his last wish.” René looked up into the purple night sky, a crescent pink moon hovering in the vastness of outer dark.

“Jesus,” said Rudiger. “I’m so sorry.”

Elise sat quietly, gripping her glass of *Chardonnay* tightly. A firefly landed on the surface of the wine, flagged its wings momentarily, and came to its final rest. She reflexively poured the wine into the grass.

René drank his pint straight down and stared into the glass as if looking for some answer in the empty receptacle. “I was fucking my dear friend’s wife when he died. That is *hard* to live with.”

“Stop walking,” whispered Rudiger. “It is no longer necessary.”

The next morning in the wet drizzle of Bruges, René de Wahlens could be seen walking, his black umbrella canopied over his head like a relentless weight to be carried for eternity.



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