



WINTER BURIAL

JOHN ZDRAZIL

I had been trying for a couple of hours to make Dwayne's face and hands look right when my secretary knocked on the prep room door. "I turned the chapel lights off and locked the front door," she said, without stepping inside. "Are you all right?"

"Would you take a look, please?" She walked in and stood next to me, taking her time. "He looks gray," was what I said, but it was more than that.

She assured me he looked peaceful, like she always does when we get a difficult case. "And if he was here . . . I mean, if he was *here*, he'd tell you to quit fussing and call you names that I will not repeat. He'd say to take off those silly gloves and grab your ice fishing gear and head for the lake." She stood a moment longer beside me, then stepped out of the room, which suddenly felt colder. I was about to explain for the umpteenth time that I owned no ice fishing gear when it hit me again that Dwayne, a sheet covering him from the waist down, would never listen to that excuse again.

Reappearing in the doorway, she held my coat by the collar, like a cat,

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shaking it at me like Dwayne used to do and bellowing in his tone of voice, “There’s nothing more to be done here, Undertaker!” Her face held Dwayne’s let’s-get-you-out-of-here stare for a moment, then it softened to the look I’ve seen her give people wandering around the funeral home during visitations, looking for a Kleenex box or something to hold them up.

“Phones are transferred to the answering service. You really should go home . . .” She hung my coat on the open door. “Or somewhere.”

Dwayne’s right hand covered his left, his right thumb tucked in the crook between his left thumb and forefinger. *You and your clients both dress alike and hold your hands the same way*, he used to tease. *The only difference being that you’re vertical*. I covered his cold hands with a gloved one of mine; my heart had been imploding all day, chamber by chamber. I would bury him — his body — the day after next. I heard the back door open and shut, heard her try the knob.

I gingerly tried to close the left side of Dwayne’s lips, the remnant of a gap where an emergency room tube had been. It gave the impression that Death had set the hook and reeled him in. “You know I don’t have any ice fishing gear,” I sighed.



Ellen would be home late. She’s volunteering at the community theater this week, ushering, working concessions, cleaning up backstage after each performance. Since fall, she’s taken on a Brownie troop, signed up for a couple of Community Education classes, and I think she’s even helping an altar guild at another church, different than the one where we sit next to each other most Sundays. *Anything to keep busy*, I overheard her tell a friend on the phone, loudly enough so I could hear.

I’ve been working late as much as possible. Things at the funeral home have never been so close to being in compliance. Things at the house are orderly;

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neither of us is there much, and when we are, one of us is always keeping things tidy.



I pulled the sheet up to Dwayne's neck, went downstairs to the selection room and again ran a cloth over his casket. I drove the hearse through the C-store's car wash, picked up a mini-pizza and a pack of cheap cigars, then headed for the graveyard where Runeberg Lutheran used to stand.

I figured that Butch, my gravedigger, would be thawing the gravesite. The frost line has been murder this year, he's said. All this freezing and thawing and freezing and thawing has driven it a foot deeper than usual. Not like when the ground freezes once, hard, and snow insulates it. I suppose I could have gone out to Dwayne's fish house, which sat empty on the lake. But I figured it'd be better to stand around Butch's fire.



When I first started working in this town, five years before I bought the funeral home, almost every service from November until February ended at church. Then we'd drive the casket out to the small building in the back of one of the bigger cemeteries in the county, where we'd store it until burial in the spring. One April I buried twenty-five.

During arrangements these days, I gently push winter burials. It may cost an additional hundred dollars to have a winter grave dug, but it's better than driving past those rickety things they call mausoleums, thinking that the body of someone you love is in a place that's less secure or dignified than most people's garden sheds. The families sit in the funeral home's lounge, their loved one's body just yards away behind a locked door, a roomful of caskets one floor below. I want to tell them, *It's best just to get it over with.* What I say

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is *Peace of mind and Closure*.

I actually prayed that Dwayne's family would agree to winter burial. If they were hesitant, I would've offered to pay the extra myself. I couldn't endure the thought of abandoning Dwayne out there until the ground warmed. I even hate to leave his body alone in the funeral home overnight. I've slept on the chapel couch before, sometimes hoping Ellen would ask me the next morning where I'd been.

The irony is, I really hate standing out in the cold for committal services. But it's preferable to stashing good caskets in those little buildings, better than having to wonder what the ground's going to be like come spring. Our town cemetery is practically a slough: schedule burials too early in March, the graves fill with snowmelt. I've called the vault men when we're heading their way, so they can pull a pump out of the hole. I don't want any family to see a vault practically floating when we arrive. We've had to use dummy set-ups just off the graveyard road, so the family doesn't see the swimming pool they're committing their loved ones to. I tell them about *Soft ground around the grave* and *Cemetery liability*. With a winter burial, the ground is stable, at least.



I pulled onto the gravel leading to the graveyard, which sat on a hill surrounded in the summers by a faithful rotation of wheat, soybeans, and corn. Butch's fire illuminated the area, making it look like Runeberg Lutheran was burning for a fourth time. A full moon hung low, its yellow baby fat slowing its rise above the January earth. To thaw the ground, Butch hauls out scrap lumber and dry logs the night before he digs, then piles them and sets them on fire inside a three-foot high frame he's made out of roofing metal and a couple of old stock tanks. He'll stay out at a gravesite long enough for the wood to settle, for maximum ground coverage, then he'll stoke the fire again and cover it with another piece of metal. Before he goes to the shop the following morning, he'll

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stoke it again. The fire itself doesn't heat the ground, the coals do, he says. Dwayne and I used to join him on nights like tonight.

I drove through the cemetery gates — “18” in wrought-iron script on the left post, “73” on the right, the year of the first burial. The flames were jumping high enough for Butch to hide behind. Usually, just as I open the door, Butch yells, *Gerald!* — never pronouncing the G like a J — *How the hell are ya?* at a volume I always tell him could wake the dead, to which he hollers, *None that I've ever covered up!* It's the same volume his uncle used on the rare occasion I'd have to get on his case for not having a grave dug up to his normally high standards.

I inherited Butch's uncle and a half-dozen other gravediggers from the guy I bought out; Butch's uncle was the only dependable one. The rest were untrustworthy: They'd nick gravestones with their equipment or not heed the boundary flags cemetery sextons would plant for them. Three of them dug graves for specific church cemeteries because a long-suffering wife hoped that even superficial involvement with the church was better than nothing. Too many pastors and church councils overpaid those skill-less, unmotivated louses and didn't regret it enough to let them go.

The day I fired Fosston, the gravedigger at this very cemetery, a widow stepped forward to pull a flower from the casket spray. Despite the vault company's best efforts to cover for his drunken backhoe work, the edge nearly gave way. The vault man had to pull Fosston away from his bottle in order to get the lowering device ready before the church service ended. I made what apologies and offers I could to the rattled widow and her fuming children, hoping to stay out of court. I watched Fosston stumble out of the church kitchen door after finishing off the funeral lunch leftovers. After he'd filled in that grave, I told him what happened and assured him the vault company could back every word I'd said; I doubled his check and swore he'd never get a call from me again.

Butch didn't say anything until I was fireside. “How the hell are you holding