

They're Coming!

A Halloween Short Story

by

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Once, a group of college students out for some Halloween fun decided to visit a cemetery for a glimpse of something that might scare them. They left mid-evening, packed tightly into three cars they drove up the canyon road to an old cemetery on the edge of town.

There were only a few clouds cluttering the sky and a hazy moon cast long shadows on the granite stones that dotted the landscape. A slight breeze tussled the old oak trees, swaying them gently as if to greet the young adventures as they drove up the hill to the entrance. It was dark, and there was a chill in the air —silently they exited the cars expecting something “really scary” to jump out but thankfully nothing did. There was a kind of electricity in the calm air as each of them exited slowly from the cars to survey the eerie quiet, ghostly place of dates and granite.

Names on the erected stones read like Epstein, Crawford, Dillian, Jamison, and Zboski. There were death dates that were only weeks away; other dates that spoke of a time no one remembered.

“Look here,” yelled Mark, breaking the silence that bound the group, “died 1899 when he was only 14 years old. How sad! And he might be here...AMONG US!”

Clay grabbed one of the girls who instantly screamed. Clay intended to make this venture frightening. It was his idea to come. He wanted a Halloween scare that everyone would remember, which seemed so easy surrounded by death and perhaps ghosts of the dead that lay beneath them – maybe even that of this 14-year old whose life was snuffed out at an early age.

Others in the group were not as playful. Something spoke of reverence, as perhaps they should not be here, walking among the tombs. You could expect some horseplay when good friends are together, but not tonight. Each filed slowly along, hands in pockets, eyes wide open, passing row upon row of stones marked with names some knew, but most that were long forgotten.

“Had enough?” quips Van Kirk, one of the attractive, young men who held two young ladies close by his side as they passed one tombstone after another.

The group nodded in agreement. This trip was a fun idea, but was turning out to be less entertaining than the kegs awaiting them at the Frat house.

“Let’s get going!” roared Clay, breaking the silence. Clay was the leader of the group — it was his Halloween party that brought them here tonight, so it was natural for others to assume that when he was ready to go, it was their cue to leave.

Clay loosened himself free from the clutches of one girl and ran like a mad man across the cemetery grounds back to the parking lot.

“First one back wins,” he yelled back to the group, paying no heed to roadways that twisted and turned throughout the graves. Clay took the shortest route back, straight across the cemetery, showing total disrespect for grounds upon which he trespassed.

Others followed quickly, since no one wanted to be left behind inside the cemetery. Over the ground they trampled, jumping the not-so-high granites, running in double circles around the tall ones, many of them playing “catch me if you can.” Clay was the first to reach the cars, since he was easily the most athletic of the bunch. But others were not far behind.

It was the game Clay made up as he ran wildly across the cemetery, yelling like a mad man, “they’re coming . . . look over there, the DEAD are coming to stop us. Hurry! We need to get out of here. . . FAST! Run! Run! Run!” Nobody really believed a word Clay said, but no one wanted to be left behind to find out. They all made record time running and dashing wildly from a place that did not want them.

Who were these dead that were left behind, trapped, unable to escape the cold hard earth that held them prisoner? Somehow, as they trampled

across the grounds, they all knew that someday they would be brought to a place, perhaps one just like this, to join those beneath the ground while careless youths danced and played upon their graves. No, the group was not wanted; they could all sense it silently as they ran wildly across the hallowed ground. The parking lot, so far away at first, came closer with each frantic step. It was a welcome site as they jumped from the higher ground of the cemetery onto the parking lot and bent over by their automobiles to recover from their insane madness.

One, two, three, four, five, and so on came the friends. Each gasping for air, they glanced behind at the frantic few who were still running.

“They’re coming closer,” taunted Clay, acting like a track coach, gesturing each person to run faster and faster. “They’re coming! HURRY! We need to get out of here!”

“Ah, shut up, Clay!” came one complaint. Many in the group didn’t appreciate the mad dash that Clay made moments ago. Startled like grazing animals on an African plain, sensing danger from the mist, making a mad dash back to the cars: this was not what they expected or desired when they agreed to make this cemetery trip.

Two other boys in the group suddenly jumped upon Clay to give him a taste of “let’s get scared.” They horsed around the parking lot, lifting, and wrestling as each tried to gain the advantage. When suddenly, unexpectedly, someone in the crowd asked a question that no one was prepared to hear:

“Has anyone seen Susan?” queried Patti, the most timid girl of the bunch. She had been opposed to this trip from the first moment Clay suggested it back at the dorm. Her worst fears were coming true as she frantically scanned the group and across the cemetery for her best friend.

“I can’t find Susan. Maybe she’s hurt,” she cried.

Clay and the others stopped jostling to look around for Susan. They looked up against the horizon, hoping to see her walking across the grounds.

But nothing. It was empty of any existence.

“Who was she with?” asks Cole, one of boys in the group. Susan was a good friend of Cole’s. Perhaps this was a concocted scare between the two of them.

But Cole wasn’t joking. He asked a second time, a third, and finally a fourth, demanding this time for an answer from anyone who saw Susan.

“She was next to Brock before we ran,” someone piped up. “SUSAN, SUSAN, COME OUT COME OUT WHEREEVER YOU ARE,” yelled another, hoping Susan would respond with sounds like, “I’m hurt,” “I’m over here,” or “I fooled you guys!” But there was no response, only the sound of wind in the trees.

“She’s probably hurt, or fallen down. Someone has to find her,” suggested another. Clay agreed. This is not like Susan to play a stunt like this. She was as mousy and scared as the other girls in the group. Clay glanced over at Patti, who was now crying softly as others gathered around to comfort her. Clay felt responsible if in his running dash Susan fell, twisted her ankle or worse, broke her leg.

“Who’s coming with me? We need to trace back and see if we can find her,” Clay looked down the line of his friends. Cole and Brock, Clay’s closest friends, agreed to join in the search. They need to move fast — she could be crying for help at this moment.

“Should we drive the car in?” asked Brock.

“No!” snapped Clay, somewhat irritated at the others who didn’t notice her fall. “We need to backtrack across the cemetery in case she fell while we were running. Let’s hurry!”

Clay motioned Brock and Cole into the cemetery and retraced the frantic steps they took moments ago. Back across the grounds . . . in reverse this time . . . past row-by-row names and dates that appeared as though . . .

we have been here before. Names like . . . never mind. What was important was finding Susan, which was becoming less promising as they strolled past row after row of granite and she was nowhere to be found.

They traced their steps back to the road in the middle of the cemetery where Clay began his frantic run. Nothing. Clay's face began to perspire as he thought, something happened. Either she is hurt, laying helplessly somewhere, or she had decided to exit by following the winding road to the parking lot. Clay did a 360-degree search. Nothing; not a trace or a sound.

"Hey, look at this, said Brock interrupting the search as he pointed to something on the ground along the edge of the road. Both Clay and Cole joined Brock some 30 feet away. As they neared, they noticed an old-looking tombstone angled slightly from the ground along the side of the road. It was the only stone standing by itself, like a shy kid afraid to join the others.

"Do you have a match?" Brock said while tugging at Cole's pants, gesturing for a match from the lone smoker in the group.

"We don't have time for this," snapped Clay. "Susan probably walked back a different way and is probably lost. She probably headed down this road. We need to find her before Patti goes insane. Come on, let's go!"

"No, wait a second," pleaded Brock, "I found this hat next to this stone." Brock lifts the hat high above his head to Clay who was standing behind his crouched body. Brock continues, "this is Susan's hat. I remember her wearing it when we got out of the car. It was laying here next to this stone. So I bent down to pick it up when I noticed something really strange on this stone. That's is why I need a match to see if it says what I think it says."

Brock tugs a second time at Cole's pants. Clay steps back as Cole reaches from inside his pocket for a book of matches. He tosses them to Brock. The first match failed to light, but the second match lit up brightly to begin a night of mystery and suspense:

Here lies Susan Aldrich

Born: June 14, 1982

Died: October 31, 2000

Brock moves the match closer to the inscription, “damn, that's today's date. Look at this!” Brock strikes a third match to illuminate the name Susan Aldrich. “That's her name. And that's her birth date. I remember it because it is the same day as Flag Day. I bought her a giant flag as a joke for her last birthday.”

Brock looks back at his companion as the match burns close to his fingers. He drops the match suddenly and then turns back to strike another, moving it closer to the bottom of the inscription.

“We had found her hat. Her name, birth date, and today's date were inscribed on a tombstone.” Brock pauses for a moment, and then stands up to confront Clay, “is this some kind of joke? Is she hiding somewhere, waiting to jump out and scare us?”

Cole nervously lit a cigarette. “Hell man, if she comes after me, I'll strangle her.”

“Quiet!” Clay demanded. “This isn't my joke — though I wish it were. I never spoke with anyone about what we were going to do tonight, certainly not Susan. And how could Susan, who I might add wouldn't spend one minute alone in this cemetery, let alone carve up a tombstone and bring it here, think to play this kind of prank on us? Can you lift it? Maybe it's a fake.”

Clay was hoping he was part of some joke, perhaps planned by Brock along with Susan. If only he could laugh this off and get back with the others finding Susan and the others snickering behind his back. That would be funny. If only . . .

Cole placed his cigarette in his mouth and bent down to lift the stone. It wouldn't budge. He kicked it. Nothing. The tombstone was imbedded

into the ground along an obscure road that not even Clay had planned to take before coming here tonight. The events were not adding up.

Clay began to analyze the situation like a teacher of logic. “Look,” he says methodically to his two friends, as he kneels down to the ground to use the dirt road as a drawing board. “No one knew, except maybe you two, that we were coming here tonight. And, no one, not even me, could have planned to come to this very spot.” Clay pounded his finger into the ground to emphasize the very spot to where they now stood bewildered.

Cole continued, “Everything we did tonight was unplanned. We could have taken that road over there,” Clay stood up and turned to face the opposite direction, “or that road over there.”

Brock and Cole strain their eyes to view the road Clay indicated. They couldn't see any roads. The only view they could muster was that of the rows upon rows of tombstones and old oak trees, wrestling in the wind as though chuckling at the surprises still in store for the group. “How could Susan, or anyone else for that matter, know exactly what we were doing tonight to pull a stunt like this?” Clay breaks the gaze of his two friends. He motioned them to the mysterious tomb stone, bending down to lift it, then returning as a failed weight lifter who couldn't budge the weight, “that means she had to lug this heavy stone from the car to here, pound it in the ground, and then get away before we came back to find her.”

Cole raised his eyebrows as he puffed his last smoke, tossing the cigarette butt on the ground, sighing, and then turning to Clay as if he was the Sherlock Holms for the evening. He retorts, “well then, Mr. Clay, it appears you are the guilty party. You led us to this spot, so it appears that you and Susan are in cahoots to put a scare in us. Now what? Are we to now return and play this charade with the others?”

Clay was not amused. This was not a game he concocted. Perhaps the joke was on him. Maybe Susan and Cole planted this tomb as a joke on Clay. Maybe everyone in the group was right now laughing at him as he stood bewildered, somewhat frightened, and unsure of what to do next. He didn't

respond to Cole's assertion. He stared at Cole as he walked slowly over to a big tombstone, leaned against it, pulled another cigarette from his pocket, and lit it up as though he was without a care in the world.

Clay turned to Brock, Cole's twin brother. "Do you think I made this up?" hoping that Brock could break the stalemate with reason.

Brock shrugged his shoulders, showing some amusement in Clay's question. Clay continues, "why don't you knock some sense in your brother over there? I tell you guys, I had nothing to do with this."

Clay grabbed Brock's arm and led him over to his brother. The three of them stood motionless, waiting for the guilty party to fess up. But no one said anything. Cole cocked his head back and puffed another smoke. He then desperately tried to exhale rings of smoke as a sign that he had nothing to tell.

Clay extended his arm, palm up, fist clenched. He then recites his points one at a time, clenching his fingers for each of his stated arguments.

"FACT!" he brings out the first finger, "no one knew that we were coming to this cemetery and also had no way of knowing that we would be exiting from this very spot.

"FACT!" the second finger came out, "this was the last place where Susan was seen." He continues, "FACT! Brock is holding Susan's hat that was found next to that stone over there," Clay relaxes his hand to point to the mystery tomb behind, but instantly returns with clenched fist and three fingers extended, "The very gravestone with Susan's name on it.

"FACT! The death date inscribed on the stone is today's date. FACT!" Clay extends all five fingers, pauses a minute to force Cole to look him in the eye, and then using all of the energy he can muster to convince them that he is telling the truth, "I had nothing, nothing, nothing I tell you, to do with this. Something strange is going on and I would appreciate it if you could help me figure it out."

Clay closed his fist tight, motioning it up and down like a fighter emphasizing his points, and then abruptly turned his back to his friends and began walking back the way they came. Cole and Brock were puzzled. Clay was a good friend of theirs. They grew up in the same neighborhood, attended the same schools, graduated from high school together, and decided as three to attend the same university. Sure, they could fight; silly fights as kids and teenagers, nasty drag-down fights, Clay and Cole ganging up on Brock, Brock and Cole ganging up on Clay. They were like brothers . . . all three. But this was the first time they had seen Clay as emotional as this. Not an angry emotion, but one of sheer panic, unadulterated fright. Something in his voice warned of real danger.

They quickly followed Clay as he trekked back along the dark road, in and out among tree after tree, back along the drainage ditch that hugged the road, hoping for a sign to explain Susan's disappearance. There was nothing, only the darkness that was fast descending upon them.

The gang of three didn't spend much time along the road. Their hope of finding Susan safe with the others motivated their brisk, hurried pace. But when they reached the others, something was definitely wrong. Patti and two other girls were now crying. It was evident that Susan was not with them.

Melannie rushed over to the three as they entered the parking lot from the road, "Did you find Susan?" she quickly demanded. Did you find her? Clay! Where is Susan? Is she hurt? Oh my God! What has happened to her?"

The look on Clay's face suggested that something was wrong. Melannie sensed it. She started to cry. Clay, somewhat surprised by the mood of the group, especially by the feeling that he may be somewhat responsible, snatched the hat Brock was holding and demanded that everyone identify its rightful owner.

"Was Susan wearing this hat tonight?" Clay asked insistently, somewhat irritated by everyone's stares. No one answered. Clay asked a second

time, “is this Susan’s hat?” Again no response. Clay sensed that something was wrong. Everyone remained silent like a classroom of naughty kids trying to keep a secret from the teacher.

Clay scanned the group looking for support; he looked for anyone who could make some sense on what is going on. “Where’s Phil?” Clay finally asked, hoping that question would help break the silence. But nobody answered. They only glanced at each other waiting for someone to speak first.

“Where’s Phil?” Clay asked a second time. Again silence. He turned to the boy nearest him, “Mark! Where is Phil? Damn it!” shouted Clay, now angry that nobody in the group was answering.

“Back off, man! We don’t know! I am not part of your game,” retorted Mark, miffed by Clay’s arrogant attitude.

“You don’t know? He was here when we left!” Clay answered right back, continuing to assert that he was still in charge.

Mark shuffled from foot to foot, looking for the words, any words. Mark answered hesitantly, unsure if he was being played as a fool by the others, “right after you guys left, we saw someone that looked liked Susan running across the cemetery some 40 or 50 yards that way.” Mark pointed in a direction that was opposite the direction Clay had taken to find Susan. He continued.

“We yelled to let her know that we were over here in the parking lot, but she kept running further away from us. So Phil and Van Kirk ran after her. In that direction.” Clay took a step forward, scouring the cemetery in search of any evidence of Mark’s story.

Clay noticed that Mark was not talking straight. He was slurring his speech a bit. Something strange had happened. Clay turned back to Mark, saying, “So they ran after her. That’s good! They found her. Then what?”

Mark took a deep breath, paused, and continued, “well, they ran after her, yelling for Susan to stop. She didn’t. So Phil and Van Kirk kept running further into the cemetery. They finally caught up and stopped her. We could see all three of them standing next to that big tree over there.”

Mark stood up and pointed to a towering oak tree some 70 yards deep inside the cemetery. Mark finished his story:

“So we stood here and watched. Maybe they were trying to comfort her, we don’t know. A cloud passed under the moon and it became really dark. We couldn’t see very well. But after the cloud passed, they were gone; they just disappeared. We called for them, but there was no answer. We thought that they had taken another path, but they haven’t come back, and no one dares to go after them.”

No one dares to go after them, thought Clay. That’s crazy. What is going on, he questioned within himself. The party started with seven men and nine women. Now one woman is missing along with two other men. Clay tried to regain his composure. Things were happening so fast that he couldn’t think. All eight women were huddled together, crying; four other men were standing idly waiting for Clay to take charge. Every one of them, including Clay, knew that something was terribly wrong.

“What the hell!” Clay finally retorts, desperately trying to regain control. He turns to face the entire group, which had finally huddled into one general area. “I want everyone to know that I have nothing to do with this. You guys may think that I do, but I don’t. And if anyone here wants to confess, now is the time.”

Clay waited for an answer. The only sounds were muffled cries and Brock lighting a cigarette. Actually, Clay noticed, Brock hadn’t said a word since he accused him of pulling this stunt.

Clay turned back towards the cemetery and walked over to the edge of the grounds. “Game’s over! You guys have scared us. PHIL, VAN KIRK, SUSAN,” Clay yelled back across the cemetery, “I’m scared; we’re all scared!

You certainly scared the HELL out of me. You can come back now. Let's go home and get drunk."

Nothing. Not one sound echoed back. Only shadows danced wickedly inside the abyss casting a warning that no one should penetrate the hallowed grounds. Silence ruled the group. No one said a word. Only the faint sounds of a jostling leaves, which stubbornly refused to let go of the trees to which they had clung for a season. Getting mighty drunk seemed like a good idea right now.

Clay stood at the edge of the cemetery, searching for three guilty pranksters who, at this very moment, might be making a sneak appearance from behind a bush or a tree or a large tomb or please, God, something. But nothing moved. Total silence. Total stillness. Total nothing.

After a minute that seemed like an eternity, Clay realized that the group behind him didn't have anything to do with this. There would have been a snicker by now, a 'Gotcha, sucker!' or something that would give the plot away. Nobody in this group could act this long without breaking down. The cries — they were too real now — suggested that something very serious was going on.

Clay didn't know what to do. He scoured the grounds again, hoping for anything that would turn this nightmare around. His biggest fear was that some deranged person was inside, so Clay needed to act quickly before anyone else mysteriously disappeared. With three friends missing and another nine looking to him for answers, he had to do something fast.

Clay turned back to his friends. "Phil, Van Kirk, and Susan are either missing or playing a joke. We need to go in there and find them. But I want everyone here to understand, and to hear me plainly, I had nothing to do with this. Either they do," pointing back across the cemetery, "someone here knows what is going on," pointing back at the group in front of him, "or someone else other than us is here tonight." Clay lowers his head but keeps his eyes fixed on his friends. He wanted to emphasize one more time that he was serious; it was either they or some other uninvited guest behind this

prank.

“What do you mean someone else?” Cole piped up. He was working on his fifth cigarette.

Clay regained his composure, “I’m saying, that maybe, just maybe, there could be some loner, psycho, whatever, taking our friends down.”

Two of the girls gasped, as though someone had slapped them hard on the back. Clay wished he didn’t have to make this comment. But he had to. He would be stupid to think they didn’t feel something like this was going on. He had to take control fast before the entire group panicked.

Clay stepped over to his car, where Brock was leaning. He looked Brock in the eye to assure him that everything was under control. He opened the trunk of his car, fumbled inside for a moment, and then withdrew two handguns, one slightly larger than the other. Clay strapped one gun to his waist, proceeded to pull his pants up to make sure the holster had a firm grip, and then returned to the group who stood in complete shock at the sight of Clay with the gun. Was he serious? It took a moment, but seeing him stand, legs slightly apart, a gun in each hand, the group knew that something really wicked was going on. Several more of the girls began to cry.

“Now hold it right there,” blurted Cole, puffing the last bit of tobacco before flipping the butt to the ground. “You are scaring the HELL out of everybody. There has got to be a simple explanation.”

Cole walked over to Clay, knowing that he will have to persuade everybody to calm down. Clay responded as he approached, “And what ‘simple explanation’ might that be, my friend?”

Cole didn’t have an answer. Susan’s hat, the tombstone with her name on it, the sudden disappearance of Phil and Van Kirk, the passing of time, nearly a hour now, with no sign of this being a prank or joke, gave credence to Clay’s sudden defensive action. Cole knew it. He only hoped for a different solution, which he now offered.

“Let’s go back into town and call the police. They can handle this.” This was Cole’s best calculated decision, which seemed to receive nods of approval from other members of the group. But that fleeting sense of hope was quickly shattered by the reality of the situation.

“And leave our friends here, alone, while we high-tail back to town,” retorts Clay. “If you want to go, GO! But, I am not leaving without Susan, Phil, or Van Kirk. If some of us leave now, who knows what that bastard will do.” Clay removed the gun from its holster. It was a shining black semiautomatic that Clay used in target practice. He was known as a good shooter who was always winning awards from the gun club back home. Given the situation, having Clay with the guns seemed to be the best option at the time.

“Then what is your plan?” conceded Cole, realizing that Clay was right. “Let’s go back in and see what we can find,” Clay begins. If we bring the police in and then find out it’s nothing but a big joke, we’ll never live it down. “Cole, Brock and I will go look for them one more time. The rest of you stay here. If we don’t find anything, then you can go back into town and get the police.”

Clay quickly instructed Cole to retrieve his flashlight from the back of his car. Clay was sure that something strange was going on, but he wanted to make sure that Susan and the others were not playing a joke before bringing in the police.

Cole returned with his flashlight as three of the girls crawled into the car. Clay grasped Mark’s arm and led him over to the edge of the cemetery grounds to leave him instructions for the group remaining behind.

“Mark, you said it was that big tree over there where you last saw them?” Mark nodded in agreement. “Are you sure it was Susan, or could it have been someone else?” Mark said it looked like Susan because she had long hair that fell half way down her back. But it was too far away and too dark, to identify exactly who it was.

“Listen, I have two handguns. They’re both loaded. I am going to

take this one and I want you to have the other.” Clays pulled out the second gun. It was a smaller version of the one attached to his waist, but it was nonetheless powerful enough to bring down any psycho they might encounter.

Clay was a bit hesitant to give up his gun because Mark had never shot one before, but he didn't really have a choice. Someone had to stay behind while he and the others investigated the disappearance of their friends. And since Mark was the most viable candidate at the moment, he needed some protection. Clay instructed Mark on using the piece. Mark was uncomfortable at first, but realizing that he was staying behind, it brought some comfort to him that he had some form of protection. Perhaps Clay was right and that some deranged person is lurking inside the cemetery. A loaded gun with six full chambers...

Clay handed the gun to Mark, who cautiously grabbed the handle to feel its weight and form. Clay left one last instruction, “Make sure you know who you are shooting at before you fire. I don't want to have a murder on our hands because Susan decides to jump out and say, ‘Got-cha.’”

Mark was not amused, but understood what Clay was saying. He stuffed the gun into his pants, wiped the sweat from the palm of his hand, and walked back to the cars to begin his role as sentry. The others in the group witnessed the hand-off of Clay's second piece. It brought little comfort.

Clay, Brock, and Cole went out into the cemetery towards the big oak tree where their friends were last seen. Cole beamed his flashlight deep into the graveyard, providing a trail of light as they inched themselves forward. After about 100 feet, Clay broke the silence by removing his gun from its holster.

“What we need to look for is any evidence that they disappeared. If someone grabbed them, I want to see if there is struggle, anything that suggests foul play. And then . . . what's wrong?” Clay stopped abruptly to notice that Brock suddenly halted in his tracks, allowing his two friends to walk a

few feet before him.

“You really believe there is some foul play going on?” Brock suddenly demands, “I thought this was some game you cooked up. Hey, I am not going in there if you believe some psycho is roaming these grounds. I’m getting the hell out of here.” Brock started to turn before Clay grabbed his arm to prevent him fleeing.

“Hold it . . . hold it,” gasped Clay as he struggled to keep Brock from breaking free, “why did you think I brought this?” Clay shoved his revolver into Brock’s face.

“I am going to kill the bastard behind this. Any questions?” Clay was somewhat surprised by Brock’s sudden reversal. What had to happen to convince everyone else that this is not a joke? Three people are missing, and everyone’s in danger. Can’t he see that? Why does he hang around guys who don’t think?

“Hey! I don’t want any part of this,” said Brock as he broke free of Clay’s grip. “If there is some psycho lurking behind that tree, I don’t want to make introductions, thank you. I will just head back and protect the women if you don’t mind.”

Brock started back. It wasn’t far. You could still see Mark standing guard next to the women and Stuart (who was not much braver than the women), cuddling close behind Mark. Clay and Cole didn’t persuade Brock otherwise. As long as they packed the firepower, it was probably better that the search party stayed at two. They had about another 40 yards to cover and time was running out.

The oak tree towered majestically over all the other trees around it. The moonlight was a bit stronger at this hour; Cole’s flashlight didn’t offer much help. But Cole flashed it wildly, like someone in a detective scene, hoping that the movement of light would scare away any psycho, if there were such a person. Clay grasped his gun like some Miami Vice Squad, ready for the moment to pull its trigger at anything that dared to threaten.

The two boys came closer with each step. From a distance, nothing seemed amiss. Plenty of towering granite stones and shrubs that scoured the ground and hid the many names sketched on the tombs. They stepped sheepishly along the grounds; eyes focused on the ground with an unbelievable fear that at any moment some hand was going to come out and grab their legs. Clay scurried ahead of Cole up the little hill that served as the base for the giant tree. Cole quickly followed.

The boys rested a second under the lazy branches before searching the area for clues. Nothing seemed amiss. The ground cracked as each boy stepped on the acorns scattered on the ground. Cole lit up another cigarette as he held his flashlight under his arm, its beam shining endlessly onto a shining object not far from Clay's feet.

"Look over there!" Clay barked, instructing Cole not to move the light. "Look! It's someone's school ring." Clay stepped over to the shiny object reflecting from Cole's flashlight, bending down on one knee to pick it up, and examining every detail to determine whom it belonged to.

"There must have been a struggle," Clay continues, realizing that the ring belonged to either Phil or Van Kirk. It was a high school ring from their graduating year.

Clay stood up and walked several yards around the perimeter of the tree looking for something that explained why the ring was there. Nothing else seemed out of the ordinary. Lots of tombstones and leaves, but something strange were going on. If this were a joke that Phil or Van Kirk had cooked up, why would they leave their class ring? He looked around again, on the ground, off to the distance, back to the ground again, and then fixed his eyes on Cole, who approached Clay for a moment, but suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, looking down, flashlight off.

Clays broke the silence. "What is it?" Cole beckoned him over.

"I noticed something very weird, look over here at the rows of tombstones," Cole flicked back on his flashlight to guide Clay, "notice that all of

the tombs over there and over there,” Cole moved his light in a full circle, “are laid out in neat rows, but over here,” Cole walked forward a few feet and shined his light on a lowly tomb about 40 feet next to another tree, “there is this single headstone that appears out of place.” Cole puffed another smoke, placed the cigarette between his lips to free his hands, one to point the flashlight to the tomb he was talking about, the other inviting Clay to follow closely behind.

They both walked to the tombstone, Clay reluctantly following, not wanting to be left alone. Cole walked around to the front of the stone and shined his light on it. Clay joined him and peered down at the inscription:

Phillip Joseph Wade

Born: November 4, 1981

Died: October 31, 2000

Cole lifted the beam of the flashlight in the air and flicked it off. “Good God! What in the hell is going on?” Both boys looked at each other, speechless. Nothing made sense. Or does it now? Something evil?

“What are you thinking?” asks Clay, who now feels his gun might not be of much use. “Is there a stone for Van Kirk?”

Cole flicked his flashlight on to search the surrounding perimeter. Any of the hundreds of stones could bear the name of a friend. Names upon names . . . Davis . . . Hazel . . . McGhee . . . Glauser . . . Jacobs . . . Stewart . . . Johnson . . . Milazi . . . Peterson . . . Zsrkovki . . . name after name after name. Cole searched among each row, nothing out the ordinary except for one stone that looked different than the others. Cole walked some yards over to the stone, peered down, and finally read with horror the inscription:

Joseph Van Kirk.

Born: February 29, 1980

Died: October 31, 2000

“Clay!” Cole shouted with fear. Clay walked hesitantly over to the

far right side of the tree that sheltered the rows of tombstones where Cole was standing. Peering down at the stone, it read just like Susan's and Phil's, all with death dates of October 31, 2000.

Cole spoke first, "the birth date is Van Kirk's. He's a February 29 baby. The only person I know that has that birthday.

Either someone was playing a sick joke on them or they were going completely insane. He felt like he was in a bad dream from which he couldn't awake. He motioned to Cole for one of his cigarettes.

Cole was reluctant at first, knowing very well that Clay disapproved of his bad habit. But after several promptings and finally, the cocked position of Clay's gun, Cole reached into his pocket and pulled one out. He then reached in his other pocket for the matches, which he accidentally dropped. He bent down to pick them up when he noticed something strange sticking outside of the ground. He moved his flashlight to get a better look.

"Oh God, look at this," Cole moved his light to part of a tennis shoe protruding out of the ground next to Van Kirk's tomb. "That's a brand new shoe. Look there, New Balance," Cole pointed to the engraved brand name inscription on the backside of the shoe. Cole continued, "It looks like Van Kirks shoe."

Van Kirk was the "Gap" kind of kid who always dressed in the latest fashions, and since it was in the ground next to a tomb that bore his name, it seemed only obvious that the ring found earlier and now the shoe indicated some kind of struggle had taken place. The questions of what kind of struggle, by whom and for what reason only magnified the anxiety felt by the two boys at the time. Clay bent down to touch the shoe, with a half-crumbled cigarette dangling in his mouth. "Hold this light," insisted Cole as he got on his knees and passed the light onto Clay. Clay respectfully obeyed, asking, "what are you going to do?" Cole stares Clay in the face. "I could use a shoe like this, dummy. This is a nice shoe that is just my size." Clay laughs for the first time since the discovery that Susan was missing. Perhaps Cole wanted to gather evidence in the event that they did have to call the police.

Clay took the light and shined it down as Cole proceeded to pull on the shoe from the ground that held it tightly.

It suddenly twitched . . . just a little. But it twitched enough to seriously scare Cole. He gasped, “damn! That shoe moved! Look!”

Clay shined the light directly on the shoe. The shoe twitched again, this time back and forth as though someone was struggling to free itself from the confines of the shoe. Cole was now yelling, “it's moving, damn-it! It's moving!”

“Let's get the hell out of here,” Clay springs to his feet to set in motion for another run. Cole jumps up instantly and faces Clay down.

“We're not leaving, you scared son-of-a-bitch. Van Kirk is alive and you and I are going to get him out. Do you understand?”

“Are you crazy? That can't be him, buried under six feet of dirt. If that is Van Kirk, whatever dragged him under is not going to GIVE HIM UP!” Clay shouted loudly, hoping that Cole and whatever devilish fiend awaited them would understand the fear and anger in Clay's voice. Clay commanded, “now let's get out of here before we are dragged under to join him!”

Cole spat on the ground in defiance. “Like hell! I'm not leaving our friends.” He returned to his prostrate position and pulled the shoe further out of the ground. It twitched further, signaling its approval to keep pulling. Cole responded by pulling harder and harder. Little by little the entire shoe appeared with foot and leg still inside.

Clay, totally surprised by his friend's persistent stupidity, reluctantly lent a hand as the two of them pulled and pulled. Inch by inch the ankle than the calf and then the knee seemed to break loose and appeared above the ground. The leg was moving wildly, frantically wrestling itself free from the dirt. Cole and Clay stopped a moment to catch their breath and to protect themselves from the frantic kicking, when suddenly, totally unexpectedly, the

whole leg and shoe were pulled quickly back under as though someone or something underground yanked him back from the mortal realm.

And he was gone. It happened so fast that both men barely knew what had happened. The sudden disappearance knocked both men down, like a sudden blast of wind, from which they back up before the ground swallowed them up too.

“You sons-of-bitches!” Cole was frantically yelling, clawing his way through the earth that was closing as fast as he could dig. “Sons-of-bitches! Sons-of-bitches!” Cole repeated this phrase over and over as he clawed and kicked the ground, which was closing up as though nothing had happened.

Clay interceded and tried to calm his friend. But Cole shoved him away. Clay again interceded. This time Cole punched Clay in the mouth.

“Let me be, you son-of-a-bitch,” reminding Clay that this crazy adventure was his idea. “They took my friend! They took MY FRIEND, DAMIT! I have to get him out, you son-of-a-bitch!”

Cole’s shock, then anger, was now evolving into an emotional panic. He returned to his frantic digging, leaving Clay stunned and bewildered, laying on his back, holding his jaw, not knowing what to do next. Cole was not being rational. Clay knew that something dark, something evil was happening to his friends. Their best course of action was to leave this place quickly and get help before the next victim was pulled under.

Clay leaned up, analyzing what he needed to do, when suddenly, a jolting terrifying sound- two shots were fired from the direction of the car. Cole stopped digging and looked up, first at Clay, and then in the direction of the parking lot. It was too far to see anything. Cole looked back at Clay, who sat motionless, jaw in hand. Not a word was said between them. They sat, quietly listening for any other sounds that might follow.

Through the stillness they could pick up faint sounds of yelling, like someone demanding something. The moon was tucked behind a cloud, so it

was hard to catch any sign of what was going on. Another shot rang out.

Cole jumped to his feet. “Let’s get back with the others,” he demanded, extending his hand in apology for knocking his friend down. Clay promptly responded, holding his jaw. Cole paid no attention.

“Let’s get back to the car and get the girls out of here,” snapped Cole, as though he was taking charge of this operation. Cole began to walk towards the lot, over the graves that stood directly between him and the cars. But Clay jumped in front of him, reasserting his authority.

“We better walk on the road, not on the graves,” he yelled. “Someone or something is grabbing our friends from underneath. The road might be safer.”

Cole looked a little agitated, but didn’t argue. He followed his friend over to the road 40 yards beyond the big oak tree. This route would take longer, but they both agreed that the road offered a safer route back than the alternative.

The two men ran down the middle of road, keeping themselves clear of the road side, not chancing a ghoul or dead corpse to grab them unexpectedly. They finally entered the parking lot, relieved at having made it back safely.

They stood for a moment, resting from their hard run, when they noticed that everyone was missing except for Mark, who was standing alone by the edge of the cemetery with the gun down at his side. Clay looked at Cole, who appeared as bewildered as he. You could see it in his eyes . . . “where is everybody?”

Cole walked over to the cars and peered inside. Perhaps everyone was crouched inside. As he approached, he noticed that passenger-side door on the car that housed the girls was opened. Cole peered inside; empty. He looked back at Clay and then started his walk over to Mark.

“What happened?” Clay asked, as he approached Mark from behind. “We heard three shots. And where is everybody?”

Mark didn’t acknowledge Clay at all. He stood motionless, staring into the abyss, whimpering. But Clay was in no mood for mothering. Something happened and Clay wanted answers . . . NOW.

Clay grabbed Mark and shook him hard, “tell me what happened, you yellow-belly-piece of . . . “

“Hold it!” Cole jumped in, “look over there, at the gigantic tomb. It wasn’t there earlier. It’s new.”

Clay removed his hands from Mark’s shoulder to look at the column that Cole was referring to. It was a large tomb, standing about seven feet higher than any of the tombs around it. On its top was a figurine, facing the parking lot, standing guard over the ground it lighted. Cole was correct. That tomb, so prominent, was not there before. It was only yards from the edge of the gully that separated the cemetery grounds from the parking lot. Its unique position blocked their view of the large oak tree where their friends disappeared earlier. He had a clear vision of the tree from that spot earlier. Now, the tree was hidden by this large, protruding monument.

Clay stood up quickly as Cole scurried over to the edge of the cemetery and then proceeded 10-15 yards into the cemetery. He flicked his light on a large granite monument and stood for a moment. He then walked around it to examine it more carefully. It had four sides.

Clay called out to Cole, questioning what he had found, but Cole didn’t respond. Cole walked around the tomb again, more slowly this time, and then returned to the front, with his back facing Clay. He dropped to his knees and began pounding the ground with his fists. Clay knew what had happened. He was reluctant to join his friend, but his moral obligations overpowered his fear as we walked slowly over to Cole. His worst fears were realized as he approached the tomb:

Here Lies Brock Davis
Birth: June 10, 1980
Died: October 31, 2000

Clay remembered meeting Brock and Cole for the first time when he and his mother moved to their neighborhood. Brock and Cole lived a few houses down and took Clay in, treating him like their brother. Clay spent many hours at their house, sometimes eating dinner, sometimes spending the night. And when the three boys graduated from high school, they decided to room together when they attended the University. And now here they are, one of them missing. Clay started to cry.

Cole remained crouched on his knees, sobbing uncontrollably. Clay picked up the light and examined the four faces of the gigantic tomb. Just as he expected. Names, birth dates, and death dates — all October 31, 2000 — were found for everyone else in the party. There was Virginia, Melanie, Karen, Stuart, Patti . . . poor Patti, Clay thought. She was the one who resisted coming here tonight when Clay first mentioned the idea back at the Frat house.

“It happened right here,” came a voice. It was Mark, who approached silently joined them by the large granite tomb. “It happened right here,” was his second remark, this time more audible.

Cole sprang to his feet and grabbed Mark by his neck, “what happened you son-of-a-bitch. What happened to my brother?” Cole shook Mark violently, but was unable to bring him down. Clay rushed over to free Mark from Cole’s clutches. Mark tried to tell his story, but he slurred so many words that nothing made sense. Something horrible happened that traumatized the young man.

Mark excused himself and went back to the cars. Clay again motioned Cole to join them. But we wouldn’t move. He was not going to leave his brother’s side.

“You stupid fool,” Clay reminded Cole, “let’s go over to the car, get in,

and get the hell out of here. Let's go!" Clay motioned Cole again. But Cole refused to move. He sat quietly on the ground, knees curled up with his arms tucked underneath, repeating the words over and over, "yellow bastards."

Clay reluctantly left Cole where he was and walked backed to question Mark again about what happened. Three shots were fired and now everyone is missing. Mark seemed dazed, almost motionless, as he approached. But Clay was persistent. He needed answers. He hounded Mark with one query after another.

"Three shots, Mark. Who were you firing at?" motioned Clay, "three shots, Mark. Three shots," Clay said over and over again until Mark woke from his subconscious stupor.

Mark tried to tell his story in little pieces that seemed all scrambled up. But Clay pieced together enough comments to get some story out of Mark on what really happened. It went like this:

Brock came back to the group after the guys left to investigate the strange disappearance of Phil and Van Kirk. He suggested that everyone get in the cars and drive into town, and that he would wait here for Clay and Cole to return. He continued that Clay was not playing a game and that something serious was going down.

The girls started to cry again. Even Stuart looked frightened, which convinced Brock and myself that nobody in the group was directly involved in what was going on. We helped the girls inside two cars. I was to drive one car, Stuart the other. But when we got in the car, neither engine would turn over. We then tried Clay's car. Same thing. Engine dead. Everyone panicked, including Brock.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Patti screamed. We looked over by the cemetery and there stood Phil, Van Kirk and Susan. They were motioning to us to come over to them. They were mentioning words like joke, prankster, having fun, and other crazy gestures all in a convincing way that brought some temporary relief to the tense atmosphere.

There they stood, strangely at first, motioning us again to come over. Brock approached first, but held his distance. He appeared suspicious, accusing them of scaring everyone and sabotaging our cars. They just chuckled and smiled, gesturing us to come over and join them in the fun.

The girls stepped out of the cars. Patti was the first to exit and ran quickly over to Susan. It was the first smile she bore since that first run that started this whole nightmare. She and Susan hugged each other. Such affection brought assurance to the other girls to join their friends on the cemetery lawn. Stuart also started to walk over. He gave a high-five to Philip and Van Kirk.

I remained by the car, relieved that our friends were back together. But strangely, from the corner of my eye, I noticed that Brock kept his distance. He stood at the very edge of the road, next to the small ravine the separated the road from the cemetery grounds. He was probably 30 some feet from the group, staring into Susan's face as she hugged each girl. I looked at Brock, then at Susan, then again at Brock. He stood motionless, staring Susan right in the eye, saying nothing but just staring, with an uncertain look.

I followed suit, standing, trying to determine what kept Brock spellbound. I looked at Susan's face as she talked freely among her friends. I walked over to Brock, standing a couple of feet behind, to catch a better glimpse. Susan hugged Patti one more time, embracing her tightly, with her eyes facing us. She stared into our eyes as she held Patti close to her. It was her eyes, something was wrong with her eyes. I realized then that it was not Susan.

I couldn't tell what it was, but apparently Brock saw the same thing. She stared us down intently, keeping Patti close in a tight embrace. Patti at first didn't mind, but as Patti tried to move back, Susan tightened her grip. Susan stared at us intently, knowing inside that her secret was not hidden from Brock and myself. She smiled at us, and then it became apparent that the person holding Patti was not Susan. The person had a sinister look that was unlike the Susan we knew. We wondered whether the other girls no-

ticed.

Brock finally shouted, “ Let her go, now!” He stepped forward, making a threatening gesture, but keeping his distance. I remained behind Brock with my eyes fixed on Susan (or whomever it was that held Patti). Brock demanded a second time let her go I said! But she stared us down sternly, tightening her grip even more, forcing the other girls to come to Patti’s assistance.

Stuart, who was talking to Phil and Van Kirk, turned to face Brock. He seemed startled by the commotion that was going on. As he walked closer to Susan, Phil grabbed Stuart by the arm and dragged him back. That is when it all happened. The person who resembled Susan slowly changed her face into a third, evil-looking person. She bit down on Patti’s shoulder to quiet her struggle, then lifted her off her feet and slowly descended into the cemetery ground below.

Stuart, who was snagged from helping Patti, yanked his arm from Phil’s grip. He fell to the ground. Phil jumped on Stuart’s back, wrestled him completely to the ground, looked up at us, and then like Susan, dragged Stuart down. It was shocking, as though the ground opened up and swallowed its victim in slow motion.

Brock was horrified. He quickly jumped in to help, but pulled back, not realizing what help he could provide against a power so unknown. The girls next to Patti screamed. But before they could react, the ground let loose some twenty hands that grabbed the girls by their ankles. All of them were dragged down into the ground. Some of the girls went quickly; feet first, then leg to waist, then completely gone. One girl fell to the ground. Another hand came up to grab her by the neck, pulling her head first into a hole that appeared from nowhere. Another girl broke loose and tried to reach the safety of the parking lot where Brock and I now stood. But Van Kirk stopped her instantly, lifting her off her feet as he descended below the ground. The girl kicked and screamed, frantically trying to free herself to no avail.

The screams prompted Brock to action. He sprang up to help free the girl

from her descent. A hand came out of the ground and grabbed Brock's ankle. He struggled to free himself. Then another hand, this one bloody and decayed, came out the other side and grabbed his other leg. I had to help. Realizing that he gave me a gun earlier, I took it out and fired two shots, hoping the shots would startle the hands the held Brock. But it was no use. Two more hands appeared and grabbed his legs and slowly, methodically, pulled him down to his waist. He was struggling to get free. But the hands kept a tight grip and kept pulling. Inch by inch, Brock was pulled under the ground.

I couldn't do anything to help him. I was afraid they would grab me. I kept my distance. All the others were gone, except for one whose one leg was still protruding above the ground. He kept kicking and struggling to set himself free, but slowly, he was pulled under just like the rest.

He then burst out yelling, saying crazy things that they were eating his legs. "Do something," he demanded. They were eating his legs. I couldn't move. I stayed fixed on the parking lot to prevent anything from grabbing me. Stuart, whose head was buried, except for the top of his crown, suddenly popped up out of the ground. His face had been eaten. Pieces of his flesh were dangling from his face. He cried for help, but what could I do? Suddenly, hands came out of the ground and buried his head completely.

Brock still struggled. Fighting hard. But he was slowly sinking into the ground, almost up to his chest. He kept yelling that they are eating me. He demanded that I shoot him to end his miserable hell. He kept yelling at me. Shoot me! Shoot me! Shoot me!

He broke free for a bit and used his arms to lift himself out to his waist. You could see that he was right. His whole abdomen was exposed. You could see his skeletal structure around his waist. Suddenly, more hands came out of the ground and began pulling him under. "Shoot me damn-it!" He continued. Shoot me! And so I fired the third shot. I don't think the shot came near him. He disappeared after that.

Clay wanted to hear no more. It was fast approaching midnight and

perhaps, with Halloween night ending at the stroke of 12, this nightmare would all come to an end. Clay was glad that Cole did not hear Mark's story, if it was true. Who knows? The whole night had been strange. Clay left Mark in the parking lot and returned to comfort Cole. He came up next to him, trying his best to make some sense of everything that had happened. But Cole sat crouched on his knees next to the large statue, staring, crying a little, and paying no attention to Clay's comforting words.

Clay stood silently, looking around him at the quiet scene that prevailed at the moment. It was hard to conceive of the scene Mark described. Clay started to feel some responsibility for the evening's events. None of this would have happened if they stayed home. But something motivated him to come tonight, something that had been happening for several weeks now. It started about a month ago when he had a dream about visiting a strange place like this to meet his father. It was a pleasant dream, since Clay never knew his father. But the dream always ended abruptly before he could actually meet his father. Clay couldn't put his finger on it but something about it seemed so real, and strange. But the exact dream had reoccurred many nights thereafter.

Clay was the only child living with his mother, who neither mentioned nor welcomed any conversation about his father. It was a taboo subject. The information Clay had about his father was that he had died many years ago and left them with a great deal of wealth.

Several weeks ago, when Clay returned home for a weekend break, he found his mother sitting quietly by the sun-drenched window. She had been drinking a little, displaying an unusually good mood that Clay seldom saw. His mother was a stoic person. Never one to laugh or make fun. She kept to herself mostly, surrounded only by a few close friends. She volunteered around the community, never staying too long in one job. Apparently Clay's father left an inheritance, so she said, that allowed them to live without any money worries.

As Clay sat down near his mother, striking up a conversation before returning to school, his mother began talking about her past. She spoke of

her family, whom Clay had never met, her nefarious mother and abusive father. She spoke of her sister, her only sibling, with whom she spoke by phone but never in person. It appeared she missed a lot of things, people, and memories at the moment. His mother then, surprisingly, and without any prompting from Clay, spoke of Clay's father. Clay leaned forward, not wanting to miss a single word. He wanted to take advantage of every word she spoke, knowing that it may be a very long time before she ever discussed his father again.

She spoke in short simple sentences, mostly about his physical appearance- his striking black hair, and his dark eyes but nothing personal about him that would suggest what kind of person he was. There was no mention of love or affection. No mention of how they met, their wedding, their brief lives together. Only that he died, before Clay was born, leaving her to raise him on her own.

"He was buried in the cemetery outside of town. Did you know that?" she said, finally inviting Clay into her conversation.

"No!" Clay quickly responded, "You never mention him when I ask. I would like to visit where he is buried, if that's o.k."

Clay respected his mother. He never did anything without first discussing his intentions and seeking her advice and permission. She was a good mother and she gave him just about everything he wanted. But she was also distant. What Clay wanted more than anything was for his mother to hold him tight, embracing him close, and showering him with love instead to toys and money. But she kept her distance. Perhaps, Clay thought through the years, that he reminded her of a man she did not love, a child that was part of him.

Clay repeated his question, hoping his mother would invite him to drive them both to the cemetery. But she sat motionless, staring out the window, sipping her glass of wine in the most bizarre way.

"Not right now, my dear," she finally quoted. "I will take you soon."

Clay knew not to press the issue. Clay was saddened by the conversation, not understanding why she kept the past deep inside her heart. It was his past too, and he always felt somewhat betrayed by her persistent refusal to share something so simple with him. But he didn't question or oppose. It was of no use; she could never be persuaded to change an opinion or answer. Perhaps he would remind her of the promise when the time is right.

The start of the new semester had brought about the beginning of the dreams about his father. They occurred each evening, the same dream where he would meet his father for the first time and then abruptly, the dream would fade away. One weekend Clay paid a visit to the cemetery where he now stood, hoping that some divine intervention would lead him to his father's crypt. But he didn't share his father's name — in fact, he didn't even know his father's name. He walked among the tombstones hoping that something unusual would point the way. But nothing. He sat one afternoon for a long time, wondering aloud if his father, just like in the dream, would suddenly appear. But nothing.

Then one night Clay had the exact dream again. Standing in the night, Clay's father came out of the mist, called him over, and then, like the dreams before, an abrupt end of the dream. As Clay stood there, listening to the sobs of his best friend, the scene surrounding him, the large granite stone, the view of the cemetery, the shadows from the trees, started to come back. This setting seemed exactly the same as that in his dream. It was all coming back: the dream, the spot where he stood, the large monument where Cole knelt. It was all here, everything from his dream. This is the place, the exact place, where Clay was to meet his father.

Clay stood silently, waiting for the scene to unfold, exactly as it had in the same reoccurring dream. As he stood silently, he knew that a leaf would fall in front of him. He waited patiently. Then on cue, just as he predicted, an oak leaf carried by the breeze from a distant tree landed exactly as he predicted. The next scene should be the voice of his father. .

Clay waited for the sound, but nothing happened. It was quiet, strangely quiet except for the rustle of leaves. "Now what," he thought. He

didn't know what his next move should be. Cole remained crouched at the tomb, refusing to move. And Mark . . . where was Mark?

Clay walked back to the parking lot to locate Mark. Perhaps he crawled inside one of the cars. Clay looked inside each car. Nothing. He tried to start each car, nothing again. Mark was correct about the cars.

"What now?" Clay wondered. Perhaps this whole nightmare has something to do with Halloween night. Clays checks his watch. Five past eleven. In a little under an hour, Halloween would change to November 1.

Clay's best hope, he decided, was to stay on safe ground and wait for the stroke of midnight and perhaps the breaking of the dawn. He was looking at some 50 minutes or more. But first, his friend Cole must be brought back to the safety of the parking lot.

Clay rushed over to Cole to drag him back to the safety of the parking lot. Everything happened while standing on the ground of the dead, so the parking lot made the most sense now given this disturbing chain of events. But Cole refused to move. His fate seemed determined by an inscription that kept his conscious bound. It read:

Hear lies Cole Davis
Birth: December 24, 1980
Died:

"Cole, don't let that bother you," Clay interjected, trying his best to make sense of this crazy evening, "it means nothing. Let's go back to the car and wait for the dawn. If anything should happen, then all of us will go down together."

But Cole refused to move. It seemed that his fate had been written. It was only a matter of time now. Clay continued his pleas, "this is nonsense. We will be safe on the parking lot. Inside our cars. Waiting for midnight. It's only 45 minutes away. C'mon, Cole. Don't do this. You, Mark, and me need to stick together just like always. Hurry, let's go!"

“Mark,” Cole finally whispered, breaking a long silence. “Mark who?” Cole states, pointing to the backside of the tomb. Clay walks around the back side of Cole and reads the inscription:

Hear lies Mark Jacob Garriott

Birth: April 3, 1981

Died: October 31, 2000

Clay looks back towards the parking lot where he left Mark. He was standing next to the car, shivering as though the night air suddenly dropped 20 degrees. Clay looks back up at the inscription wondering how his eyes can play such cruel tricks.

“Mark!” Clay runs to the automobile to see his friend, “Mark! what’s going on?” He approached slowly, taking every precaution. Mark looked up and smiled, but didn’t say anything.

Clay stopped in his tracks. Something strangely familiar was going on. Clay looked around. Everything seemed to be in its place. Clay listened. As on cue, the rustle of the leaves came as a whisper. And then, almost unexpectedly, a leaf floated down in front of him and landed between his feet. “This is it,” Clay thought, “this is the scene I have dreamt so many nights before. This is when I hear the voice of my father in all my dreams, I thought to myself.

“Clay,” came the voice, “it’s been a long time, but I have come back as I promised.”

Clay looked at Mark. He stood there, leaning against the car, arms folded, a smirk on his face. Clay shook his head a bit, hoping he would awake again from this hellish dream. But nothing. Everything seemed to come into play this time.

Clay faced Mark down, and then with an agitated voice, asked, “did you say something?” Clay hoped that Mark would come back with nonsense gab. But he only smiled and repeated what Clay heard before: “it’s been a

long time, but I have come back as I promised.”

Clay was about to jump on Mark for speaking such gibberish junk at a time like this. But something kept him spellbound. What did he mean by saying that it's been a long time, and that he had come back as he promised. Mark wasn't making any sense. Either he was delirious or mad. Clay couldn't count on him. Clay turned to go back and get Cole when Mark spoke again,

“It happened right here,” came the voice, “it happened right here, many years ago.”

Clay abruptly turned back to face Mark. Taking one-step forward, then freezing, he demanded further explanation on what Mark was saying.

“What in the hell do you mean, ‘it happened right here?’” Mark demanded. He still held the gun that he kept hidden in his pocket. Clay was tempted to use it right now. He was not in the mood to play games with a person who apparently wasn't with it.

“It happened right here, twenty years ago, when your Mother made a pact with me,” Mark continued, extending his arms outward, “give me riches,” she said, “and I will bear you a child.” The stranger smiled as though Clay should be happy about hearing him.

Clay backed off a little, keeping a good distance between him and the stranger. He continued, “I see that you look confused. I'm not Mark. I only took on his appearance so that you wouldn't run away. He's fine. He is with the rest of your friends. He had to be a ghost or monster or something like that, Clay concluded. How else could this hellish night be possible? Clay remained silent.

“All of your friends are a part of me now. Phil, Van Kirk, Brock, Melanie, even Susan,” the monster smirked as though something triumphant could be said of kidnapping and murder. “Would you like to talk to them? They will convince you of who I am.”

Clay remained still. What sense was there to argue? Either Mark has gone mad or Clay was hallucinating. "Hallucinations can happen, they act as an escape," Clay remembered from his psychology classes. This terrible ordeal definitely was worth escaping that's for sure. He brushed aside Mark's ridiculous comments, or whomever the person was, and decided to return to Cole. He began to walk away when Mark seemed to realize his intentions.

"He's not there. Cole is with me too," the person said.

Clay paid no attention and crossed the lot to the grounds where Cole was before. Each step, however, seemed to prove what the person was saying. Clay couldn't see Cole anywhere. Not in front of the monument, not around the back. He was nowhere in sight. The only evidence that Cole had been here moments ago was a faint whiff of a cigarette still burning in the grass, as though Cole dropped it abruptly because he had somewhere to go fast. Clay scanned the cemetery grounds, hoping to catch any sign. More than anything, he needed someone to lean on, to talk to, someone other than himself to ward off Mark. But no one was in sight. No one ... except himself and Mark, who remained leaned against the car back at the lot.

Clay remained motionless for what seemed a long time. He dropped his head toward the ground, and then cocked it back to view the sky. Back and forth many times over, thinking hard, very hard, on what he should do now. He didn't like being alone.

A breeze whipped past his face from the far side of the cemetery and jostled the few remaining leaves above Clay's head. He looked up and watched as a handful of leaves briefly drifted, half drunkenly down to the ground. A couple of leaves landed on the large monument, which Clay couldn't help but notice the once-before inscription of Cole's tomb. He read it again:

Hear lies Cole Davis

Birth Date: December 24, 1980

Died: October 31, 2000

Clay stared at the inscription. It was like the end of a story, telling him that his friend was gone for good. Like the others, he too had been taken.

Clay knelt down along the side of the tomb and stared at the inscription. The words moved out of focus and he recalled the many good times he had with Cole, Brock, Van Kirk, and all the others. It was just a few hours earlier that they all drove up this hill to have some Halloween fun ... all of them, together, laughing and making fun as they climbed out of the car to begin this journey only to have it end like this?

Clay snapped himself out of his reverberations, stood, and then in anger, stomped back to the car that he had questions that needed to be answered.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” Clay barked loud and clear, hoping the tone of his voice would awaken whatever was inside Mark. “You son-of-a bitch! Who in the hell do you think you are? Where are my friends, damn-it!”

Clay had enough of this game. Clay was determined to end this game now. If it meant murder, then so be it. Clay withdrew his gun from his pocket as he approached the stranger. He cocked the trigger. One word, Clay thought, just one word from this cowardly bastard and he would shoot, so help him God.

“Where are my friends, you son-of-a-bitch? So help me, I’ll shoot if you don’t answer,” Clay demanded, this time at the top of his voice. He was determined to express his outrage, both audibly by his angered demands, and visually with a gun pointed at Mark’s head.

Clay approached the stranger, gun extended, finger on the trigger, but stopped just in front of the stranger. He looked different this time. Not as sheepish looking face as Mark, but rather more rugged looking features . . . features, surprisingly, that resembled his friend Cole.

“Cole! Is that you?” Clay now lowered his gun, not wanting to appear the fool if this whole gig turned out to be some mind trick to scare him

after all. Clay was hoping at least, inside, that some big joke was being played. “Cole, talk to me damn-it! You are scaring the hell of me. Where’s Mark?”

“Inside,” Cole said, or was it someone who looked like Cole? “Do you want to talk to him?”

“Shut-up!” Clay interjected, “this isn’t funny. The game is over. I want everyone to come out so we can go home.” Clay shouted loud into the night, shattering the silence of the crisp cool air. “You have all won,” Clay turns to face the cemetery, “ I AM SCARED. SEE! SCARED. Now let’s get out of here,” Clay points to his chest signaling that the game is over. He was the fool. They were the triumphant victors. But as he looked beyond the tombs, and in every perimeter view around him, there wasn’t a sign of anyone coming out of secluded places. He turned to face Cole — at least he thought it was Cole.

“This is not a game,” the stranger said, now taking on the appearance of Brock . . . then Phil . . . then Susan . . . then Van Kirk . . . then everyone else that was with Clay earlier this evening. Melanie, Karen, Stuart, all of them. Finally, the stranger took on the appearance of a man unlike anyone Clay had seen. His features — deep eyes, pointed chin, rounded cheeks — all resembled the looks that Clay analyzed each morning while he combed his hair and washed, his face. Could it, as his dreams so vividly hinted each night, be that this man was his father? Clay shook his head to refocus his eyes. It had been a long night. He could be seeing things. But, a closer look revealed the resemblance that prompted Clay to seek answers.

“Who are you?” He finally remarked, no longer hiding behind some hope that this game would come to an end, “Why are you doing this to me?”

“I am your father,” the stranger quickly answered, “and I have come to take you home, as I promised.”

Clay only stared. What could he say. He did notice a resemblance that was sure. And his dreams foretold he would meet his father. But what did

he mean by, 'I have come to take you home.' Clay shook his head slightly, indicating that he needed further explanation. So the stranger continued, this time in a pleasant voice that was soothing to Clay's nerves.

"You need to understand something, my son," the stranger continued, "twenty years ago your mother made a promise to me. She would conceive me a son if I gave her worldly wealth and riches. She wanted it all, everything, even to the point of selling her soul. So she contacted me, right here at this cemetery."

The stranger leaned up from the car and walked a few yards toward the cemetery grounds. Pointing, with his palm and fingers extended, he turned to Clay, shaking his hand up and down to emphasize his arguments. He continued to tell a story that answered many of the questions Clay held in his heart about his mother, his mysterious father the dreams, everything about why he existed in a life that he had known for the past 20 years.

"She came here every night, at the stroke of midnight, kneeling in prayer, begging me to accept her offer," the stranger gestured that Clay join him by his side. But Clay didn't move. So the stranger took a few steps back to make sure he was looking directly in clay's eyes and assure him he was telling the truth.

"Finally, after many nights, I came to her. Right over there," the stranger pointed to a far-off tomb that was long and flat. "I said to her, 'I will make a pact with you, but it is not your soul that I desire — I have too many of those already — what I need more than anything else is a son just like me. Tall, strong, handsome. Someone who can rule with me in the world down under.'"

With both arms fully extended, like the wings of a butterfly, the stranger turned his head to face Clay, "So she agreed. But, I insisted that she raise my boy for 20 years. I didn't have a need for a young lad. I needed a man, a young man who could be trained to be like me. And now, it has been twenty years and I have come for you."

Clay remained silent as he listened. Whoever this man was, his speech seemed to put together the many puzzles that clouded Clay's life. Were these the answers to his home life, his mother's wealth, and the mystery surrounding his absent father? All of these questions seemed to be answered while standing in front of this stranger. Clay quickly thought about the many years of his life, the many questions he raised, and now, all of his friends who are missing. A sudden and complete sadness rested upon his very soul. His friends — especially Brock and Cole — were like family to him.

But as the stranger continued, rage quickly took over. Clay was incensed by his comment, which went like this,

"It's too bad you came up here with your friends. They didn't need to be involved. But they were. They would have joined us later in life, perhaps some of them a bit earlier than others. So I took them now. They are all here ... here I mean," the stranger walks a few feet and faces the cemetery beyond, with outstretched arms, "...here, my boy. Where you and I will rule."

Clay's dreams, the many unanswered, recurring dreams that he had these many weeks were coming back. It was like reliving his dream, exactly as he remembered it. Clay turned his head to look around. Everything was instantly familiar. The parking lot, the hill running up the mountain behind him, the cemetery that spanned in front of him a complete half circle. And now this stranger, this man who in his dreams resembled his father, stood before him. "What hell have I entered?" he wondered. In his dream, he simply would awake to escape. Now, he was forced to face it in reality.

"You and I," the stranger says softly, as he turns and faces Clay, eye to eye. "You and I, together. It has been twenty years. My wait is now over."

Twenty years. Clay thought. Twenty years for what? Clay was bewildered. "I'm only 19," he says in defiance, "I'm only 19. I won't be 20 years old until next summer. You've got the wrong boy, old man."

Clay tried desperately to turn this event around, anything to stop this hellish talk about selling one's soul, ruling the dead, taking his friends, com-

ing back for him.

Raising his voice with each repetition. He was getting angry. This encounter had gone on long enough. He was so agitated about the whole affair, disturbed enough that a violent rage spread into his whole being. He pulled his gun.

“I’m only 19!. I am not your son. And if you want to live, you better get the hell out of here before ... I swear, before I blow your head off. Get out of here!” Clay demanded, raising his gun face level with the stranger, finger on trigger.

The stranger remained motionless, peering down the barrel of loaded, cocked handgun. He seemed pleased, as though Clay had the correct instincts. Clay sensed his demeanor.

“Get out of here!” Clay continued. “Right now!” he barked at the top of his voice. “I swear, I will kill you.”

The two men stared each other down, one with a raised, loaded gun, the other with a smirking smile. Silence ruled the moment. Clay motioned his gun forward, repeating his demands that the stranger should leave. Silence ruled again.

Finally, with the jostle of the trees, and another rush sound of the wind coming down the hillside, the stranger backed away a few steps and motioned that he would obey Clay’s command. He turned sidewise, looks back at Clay, and smiles, “That’s good, my boy,” he moved his chin up and down to signal approval. “Twenty years. I’ll be back.”

The stranger smiled one last time, turns, and walked toward the cemetery. He proceeded on the ground and continued further on, deep inside until Clay couldn’t see him anymore. He finally disappeared out of sight.

Clay remained where he was, standing tall, arm stretched out, gun held firmly in his hand. He was not taking any chances. If he came back, for

any reason, he would shoot. Yes he would, as he watched with some satisfaction when the stranger grew fainter and fainter against the horizon.

Clay stood motionless for a long while. He turned his wrist to catch the time. It was half past two in the morning. Day light should come 2-3 hours, so he hoped. October 31 was over and perhaps this whole horrible night. Clay hoped that perhaps daylight would wake him from whatever held him in this dream. Clay looked at his watch again. Twenty minutes past the hour. This whole evening started around 9:00. Unbelievable; almost five hours of pure hell.

Clay backed up a few steps and leaned against the car. He was not going to let his gun down for anything. He wasn't tired, surprisingly. If needed, he could keep this position until the first light. He scanned the cemetery. Nothing. No sign of his friends or this stranger. "Preposterous," Clay thought. "Rule the dead with this man . . . this man who claims to be my father." Clay drew a smile, then a sad frown returned to his face as he recalled his friends. Something happened, but it was what that he couldn't answer. He would stand here and wait. "Eventually they will show up," he hoped. For now, he didn't want to think about it. He would think about it in the morning. He looked at his watch again. 2:40. Just three more hours.

* * * *

Three police cars came up the drive into the parking lot of the cemetery at 8 o'clock that morning. The curator of the grounds, an old gentleman who for the past 20 years had cared for the town's oldest cemetery, had called them. He greeted the police officers as they parked their cars one-by-one.

"What's wrong, George?" one officer asked as he stepped out of the car, "looks like you had some mischief here last night."

George nodded in agreement as he pointed to the clothes scattered all over the place, including some abandoned shoes and the three cars down at the other end of the parking lot.

“There wasn’t any damage,” he finally said; as a couple of officers reached down to examine two articles of clothing that lay on the ground. “I mean, they didn’t tip over any tombstones like some of those damn kids do. They probably had some orgy or the like, figurin’ on the way ‘dese clothes were all strung about. Certainly not my kind of place to have some hanky panky.”

Two of the officers smiled, somewhat embarrassed by the suggestion. George was never known for keeping his thoughts to himself.

One officer piped up, “well, why the sudden 911, George. You seemed somewhat panicked when I talked to you earlier.”

The curator turned to face his questioner, “it’s ‘cause what I found over there,” The curator pointed off in the far direction of the cemetery, over by the abandoned automobiles.

“Go on!” the officer demanded, motioning him to hurry with his story.

“Well, when I came up here this morning, I saw the three cars abandoned over there. I thought to myself, damn kids playing a Halloween trick, or maybe they were in those cars necking. So I went over there to see what was going on. Nobody in the cars. Nobody. They were all empty. So I thought, maybe, they’re running in the cemetery, causin’ trouble, like they usually do.”

Two of the officers left to inspect the cars. The other one stood with his arms folded, somewhat impatient with the long story.

“So I walked around to that fancy red car over there,” the curator pointed to a red sports car where one of the officers was looking inside for evidence. He continues, “And when I came around, I found this gun, loaded and cocked.”

The officer closest to the curator pulled a shiny, black handgun, fully loaded, and cocked from beside the car.

It was just lyin' there," the curator said. "Then when I looked up I caught a glimpse of something strange, over there on the cemetery grounds."

The officers looked in the direction the curator was pointing, but didn't notice anything unusual. The curator needed to explain himself further, and the lead officer prodded him on.

"Go on, George. Let's get to the issue at hand, here," the officer quipped.

"Come follow me," the curator demanded. "I will show you what I mean.

The curator motioned the officers forward as he lead the group to the other end of the parking lot, down a small hill, to a large monument.

All of the officers followed. The curator stopped in front of the monument, placed his hands on his hips, and then says triumphantly, as though he had just solved some great mystery, "someone erected this huge monument sometime yesterday after I left. This wasn't here yesterday. I know this cemetery better than I do my wife."

One officer bent down to the ground and picked up something small. "Shots were fired," he remarked, holding the spent casing up so that everyone could see. Another officer found a second casing. Then a third. Some crime was committed, and they now felt their time here was in earnest.

Several of the officers began scanning the grounds, investigating the abandoned cars, and looking for other evidence of what had transpired.

The lead officer examined the papers, and then looked at the monument, only looking back at the papers in his hands. The curator joined the lead officer standing next to the monument. They both stared silently without a word.

Suddenly, the curator stated, "do you see what I mean?" The officer

nodded. He looked down at the papers he grabbed from the car. It was the registration papers. It read:

Clay Sebastian Davidson
1456 Crawford Lane
Birth Date: July 12, 1981

He looked back up at the monument. He shook his head as though something didn't make sense. He stared again. It read:

Here lies: Clay Sebastian Davidson
Conceived: Halloween Night 1980
Died: Halloween Night 2000

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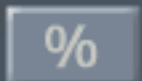
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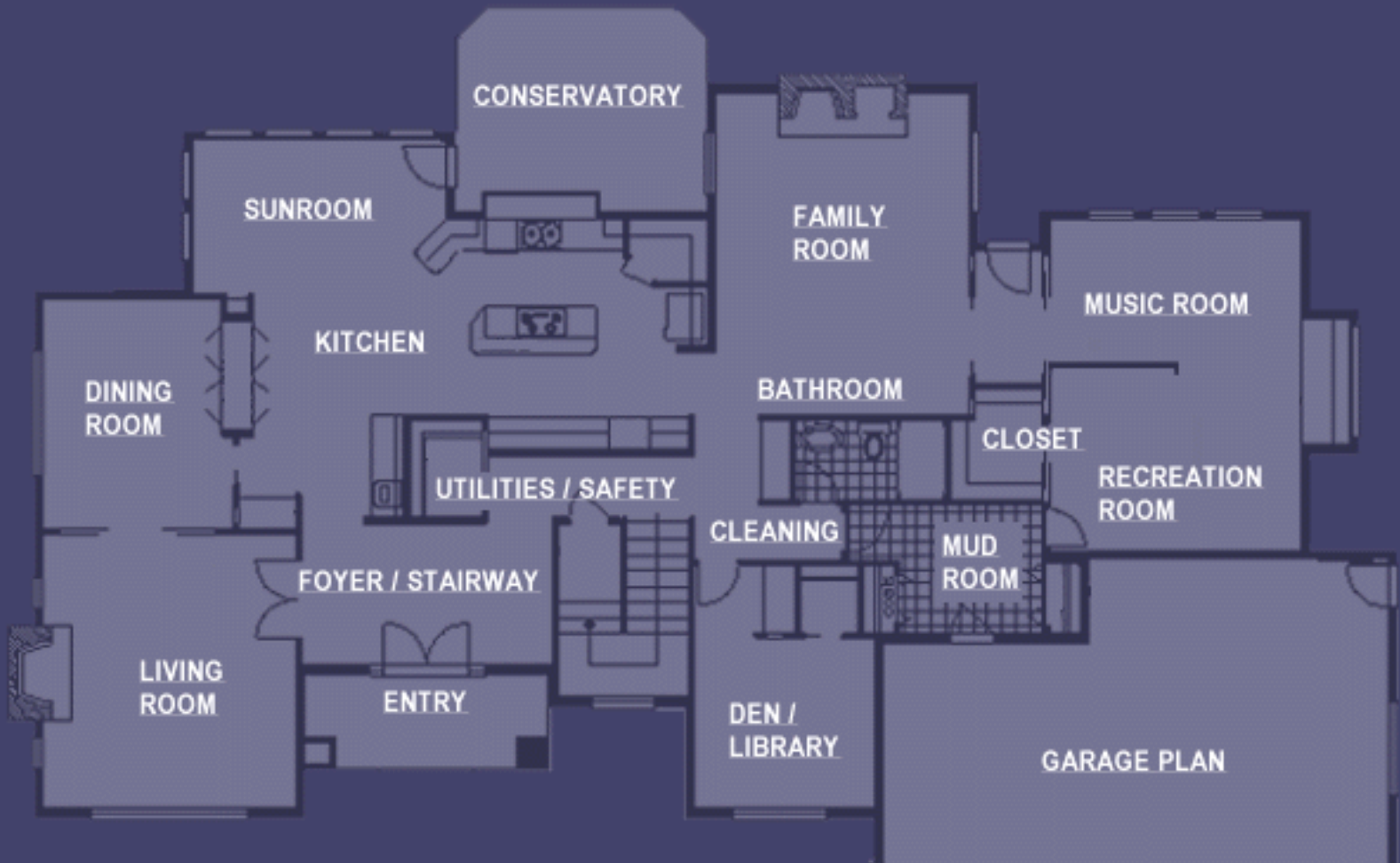


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