

## **THE GRAVE ORDEAL**

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Vincent Davenport found himself staring mindlessly at his computer screen, waiting for the perfect start of his new story to magically work its way into his mind. His arm lifted towards his face, slightly leaning upon it before letting out a soft sigh. Writing seemed much simpler years ago, he thought – before everything that could be imagined was already printed or displayed on some big screen. Agitation built up in his mind as he felt minutes pass by without any work to show. His fingers overruled his mind as he simply began to type.

“Beyond our blue sky and buried deep in the dark void where the stars glow lived the ancient beings,” he said aloud as his fingers clacked quickly at the keys. He stopped after saying this, curious if this moment of spontaneous action was in fact the perfect start he had been looking for. It wasn’t an original concept, but the mysteries beyond our world always found an audience.

Vincent couldn’t help but think back on his previous work when he was in his late teens. He wrote simple stories of far away worlds filled with fascinating creatures and daring adventures. His local paper always reserved a spot for his next grand tale, wowing both children and adults alike. It was a simpler time; the idea of a blue-skinned, one-eyed, sharp-toothed lizard monster was a scary concept in the mind of a child.

His dreams were the source of his work, and all that his young mind could remember he wrote down in a small journal that sat at his bedside table.

Countless pages were filled, always giving him a source of inspiration when the time came to start writing again. Back then the universe felt like an endless stream of possibility waiting to be written down and shared, everything imagined rolled right off the fingertips. Sadly, as his youth began to fade with time, so too did the innocence of his dreams.

As he grew older, Vincent found the reality of life starting to weigh down on his work. His stories slowly went from innocent and exciting adventures to scornful metaphors of the modern world. How had he become so different from the young inspired writer he was before? He assumed it likely began with the loss of his beloved Eleanor, the only woman he had ever given his heart to completely. Shortly after her death, his only daughter moved far away and barely keeping contact with him. He felt it all weigh heavily on his soul.

Vincent shook his head, refocusing back on the present time with the nearly empty Word program before him. He cursed himself for promising ten pages to the local editor, knowing full well that he was suffering from a horrible case of writer's block. He had a beginning, despite how vague and dark it appeared, he simply needed to continue on with it.

Each sentence that followed didn't feel good enough, and he began to think he had started a perfect story he could never live up to. Impatience and stress finally got the best of him as he quickly stood from his old wooden chair, separating himself from this currently impossible task at hand. He couldn't justify this procrastination without filling his time with something inspiring, heading to the door to start towards his favorite location in town.

Fresh air filled his lungs as he began the short walk towards his

destination. It only took a few blocks and passing under the I-20 interstate before arriving at the familiar white gate of the Forest Park Cemetery. A brief smile appeared upon his face as he entered his personal haven, following along one of the many winding paths and looking upon his favorite tombstones and statues. Although many would consider a cemetery a morbid place to call sanctuary, Vincent enjoyed the tranquil atmosphere as relaxing and inspiring to his drab state of mind.

As he began to walk down his favorite stretch of the cemetery he looked up at the large trees, admiring the colorful autumn leaves looming over the many tombstones. He stopped when he came near the small pond, watching as the small fish would pop at the water's top from time to time. He had often considered grabbing a rod and reel for this very spot, curious what kind of fish lived beneath the surface. After a moment he continued his walk, taking time to appreciate the unique designs of the gravestones, monuments, and various tombs he would pass.

More inspiring to him than anything else in this cemetery was the statues. Vincent felt a deep enjoyment in their craftsmanship, believing they showed a range of emotions more honest and expressive than many of the people he encountered in his life. He felt they watched over this place like guardians of the deceased, protecting their souls from ill-intended spirits.

As he continued walking he found his peace to be slightly disrupted. A group of older teenagers loudly talking and laughing as they passed by Vincent offset his tranquil mood. The teens seemed a bit aggressive in nature, shoving and cursing one another as they drew closer towards him on the path.

Passing them by he couldn't help but notice the stocky one out front,

seemingly the leader of this peculiar band, whose eyes followed Vincent with a cold and emotionless stare that seemed as wicked as the villains he had created for his stories. Vincent caught a glimpse of something oddly familiar in the young man's hand but couldn't quite make out what it was. After passing by, Vincent decided to put the thought of them out of his mind and continued his walk through the cemetery, coming closer to his most cherished spot.

Vincent never met the Barret family at any point in his life, yet their resting place inspired so much of his recent work. He knew exactly what to expect before he arrived, having visited this place almost every week for many years. Standing before the large monumental tombstone was his favorite statue; an elegant woman in a beautiful gown with hair that curled down to each side of her head. Grasping at a bouquet of lilies in her left hand and a broken off single lily in her right, her gown seemed to almost come alive with each fold accenting the shape of her body. The structure of her face reminded him of his Eleanor, her hair once worn in similar fashion.

To her right, engraved upon the stone, was a poem that coincidentally reminded him even more of her. "To live in the hearts of those we love is not to die." It was here that he felt the most inspired and at peace, for he felt connected once again to the long lost love he once had. Nearly every detail was already engraved in his mind, yet he continued to approach to look upon it once more, hoping to receive the peace of mind he desperately needed.

Finally standing there before her, he first looked upon her face expecting the same sweet and soft expression gazing downwards with peaceful eyes. Seeing her now, however, her face appeared bizarrely different

from what he had always remembered. It now displayed a deep and sorrowful appearance as her slightly tilted head looked over toward her left hand.

Vincent followed her gaze curiously due to this overwhelming change, now noticing the left hand once grasping upon the bouquet of lilies was completely broken away and missing.

It took him a moment to comprehend what he was witnessing when a sudden realization crossed his mind. That stocky young man, the leader of those delinquents, had grasped the same hand that was missing from this statue before him. It was in that moment that his age and limitations escaped him, as only fury filled his mind now.

He marched down the winding path towards the group in the distance, huddled around another statue. Vincent could only assume they intended harm upon another beautiful sculpture, and hastened his approach to stop them. They were unaware of him until he came charging right through the center of the group in order to get at the leader, the hand slightly jutting out of his right jacket pocket.

Vincent attempted to grasp at the hand, hoping he could simply take off with it before any trouble arose. The stocky teen was unwilling to part with his prize so easily, turning once he felt the tug on his coat and quickly retaliated with a sharp strike of his backhand to Vincent's face. It was then that Vincent was reminded of his age and limitations, fury quickly dissolving into panic as he fell straight onto his rear on the grass behind him.

Before he could gather his composure, the delinquent had a firm grasp at his shirt slightly above his chest, easily picking him up off the ground to face him. This young man was noticeably different from the cronies gathering

behind him. While they appeared to be nothing more than mischievous youths, this stocky young man appeared more hostile and dangerous. His voice was deep and menacing as he began to pull out the hand from his pocket, showing off the missing piece Vincent attempted to reclaim.

“What in the hell are you trying to pull, old man? You think you can just run up here and take my souvenir?” His cold and emotionless stare was now filled with anger and hate as he waited to hear what Vincent had to say.

“I-I only wanted to return the hand back to the statue.” Vincent’s voice wavered with fear as the reality of the situation quickly set in. Before he could say much more, he watched in horror as the boy reared his hand back, quickly striking at his face with the hard, cold statue’s hand across his temple. The stinging pain on his head followed with a slight ringing in his left ear and he slowly turned to face his attacker.

His eyes fixated past the vicious young man at the angelic statue they were gathered around, noticing it appeared to have turned completely to look directly at Vincent. With this, he began to think they must have knocked something loose in his head, possibly causing him to hallucinate from the painful strike. His thoughts were quickly scattered as the vicious young man jolted the scruff of his shirt, recalling Vincent’s attention.

“P-please. I’ll simply leave now. I-I won’t say a word to anyone,” Vincent pleaded as he felt the warm blood trickle down the side of his face. The boy seemingly showed no restraint as he once again reared his hand back and struck a bit higher upon Vincent’s face, who barely could keep consciousness after this strike. The other boys behind him began to show some panic and concern as one said aloud, “that’s enough, Brent, come on!”

Brent quickly turned his attention to the speaker, letting go of Vincent's shirt and causing him to fall to the ground. The others stepped back a bit and watched as the young man cowered while Brent moved towards him and grabbed the back of his head.

“Jake, you dumbass, the hell did you say my name for? Now this old bastard can turn us in if we let him go.” Brent quickly shoved Jake towards Vincent, pointing towards the old man as he barked his commands. “You three drag him to the pond. We can make it look like he fell in and hit his head. MOVE!”

When it looked like Jake was hesitating, Brent only had to take one intimidating step forward before Jake and the others quickly grabbed at Vincent, dragging him by his legs towards the pond. His eyes were fluttering as he was pulled past the familiar tombs and statues, slightly noticing the statue's gazes turned as if following him while moving closer and closer towards the water. Although his sight was mildly foggy, he could swear their expressions now displayed anger.

Vincent realized now that his time was running short as he faced a murderous end, like many of his own characters he had written. His eyes closed as he felt himself being pulled down near the water, a flash of his Eleanor's face appeared in his mind's eye, smiling to him one final time. He felt the back of his head lightly skimming the surface of the cold water before being lifted up by his shirt once more.

When his eyes opened he was once again face to face with Brent. His sadistic smile only caught Vincent's attention for a brief moment, but there behind him on the trail stood the same statue of the Barret family tomb.

Strangely, it had been moved from its grave site a bit away from the pond. Even stranger, to Vincent, it appeared as if it were slowly floating towards the boys. Still unnoticed by Brent, he said “your time is up, old man. Any last words?”

As the Barret statue seemingly drew closer, Vincent’s eyes widened as he witnessed more of the various cemetery statues closing in around the unaware teens. He could only assume he was going mad in his final moments, giving one last look towards the Barret statue and faintly smiling before saying “I will see you soon, Eleanor, my love.”

The remorseless young man did not hesitate even after this, quickly submerging Vincent’s head fully. This quickly set in a state of panic that caused him to gasp for air, breathing in the cold pond water as his body slightly struggled to stay alive. It felt like an eternity underwater before the strong grip of Brent abruptly released, buying him time to pull himself up.

Gasping and coughing when he arose, he was immediately met with the sound of agonizing screams. Barely able to make out the events occurring near him, it appeared as if gray and green silhouettes were viciously attacking the teenagers relentlessly. He heard Brent’s familiar voice pleading as he stumbled on the ground near Vincent, two gray figures grabbing at opposite ends of the young man, effortlessly tearing him apart as he bellowed an unbearable scream. Grasping as tightly as he could at the grass, Vincent used what strength he had left to pull himself ashore. He could only watch this scene momentarily with impaired vision before everything faded to darkness, finally losing consciousness.

Vincent awoke to the sounds of a heart monitor beeping at his side,



feeling a cool hand holding his own. Turning towards the figure, he was filled with confusion as he thought he was looking upon the face of his Eleanor.

When his consciousness began to settle and his eyes were no longer fogged, he realized now that it was not his wife but in fact his daughter, smiling with tears of joy at his awakening.

Skeptical of the story the hospital had given him regarding his accident, Vincent returned to the cemetery a few days after his recovery. They told him that he was alone in the cemetery, had likely taken a fall and hit his head on a rock near the pond, and was found that following morning by the groundskeepers. There was no mention of any teenagers when they found him and no evidence of any crimes committed. Each statue he passed on his investigation looked as they should, causing Vincent to wonder if everything he experienced was simply fabricated in his mind.

As he continued to walk down the path, he couldn't help but chuckle a bit and wondered if he simply imagined everything due to the stress of his unfinished story. With no sign of the troubled teens and the cemetery seemingly as it should have been, he decided to pay a visit to his beloved last statue before he could accept the truth of his supposed accident. As he came upon the Barret family plot, Vincent froze as he looked upon the statue. Not only was it lacking a left hand, but now the head that once looked down upon the grass of the plot turned up to face him and its eyes met his with a soft smile.