

Grave Robber

By A.D. Cusanno

Acres and acres of headstones stretched across the hillsides, lantern light flickering across the crumbling, moss-coated faces as he strolled between them. He mumbled names and dates under his breath as he passed, taking time out of his search to pay brief respects to the countless bodies beneath his feet. He had left a silver coin at the entrance, a simple offering, but he wanted to be thorough.

Despite it being past midnight, the heat of late spring lingered and clung to his skin, sweat pooling at the nape of his neck and sticking strands of dark hair to his face. Every inch of him itched, warmth crawling with the legs of insects across his skin. The silence of the graveyard was a welcome respite after his trip into the city earlier that day, with its own countless bodies pressed tight against one another, shifting in a constant flowing sea, rather than tucked nicely beneath the earth, comfortably fitted in their individual boxes, no limbs wandering into another's personal space. He tugged at the collar of his already loose linen shirt and shifted the strap of his heavy bag to his other shoulder. Every touch felt far too snug when he was consumed with memories of that dense city.

Finally, he knelt, placing his lantern and bag beside a tombstone that was much larger than the others, much newer, with ornate patterns across its surface. However, no flowers lay in front of it, and the young man knew that nobody had visited this particular grave in many months. Already, lichen stretched up from the soil and held firm onto the stone. He couldn't afford much sympathy though. Not now, anyway. Maybe once his job was over, he'd say a few words in hopes the old man's spirit would finally know peace. He had strapped a shovel to his back before trekking here, and as he stood once more, he swung it from over his shoulder and plunged it into the earth.

His clothes hadn't exactly been clean when he first made his way to the graveyard, but as he descended into the ground, damp soil coated his shirt, his trousers, his gloves. He breathed deeply, relishing the smell of freshly turned dirt. Here, deep within the ground, surrounded by nobody who would bother him, his muscles relaxed and it took far more willpower than it should

have to continue focusing at the task at hand. Hours stretched on, until his shovel made a dull *clunk* as it collided with the lid of the old man's coffin. The young man scrambled, brushing away the last of the dirt until the entire lid was uncovered. In his digging, he had made sure to dig a slightly longer and wider opening than the length of the coffin, allowing him to perch on now densely packed soil beside it, rather than even attempting to haul it from its resting place. Using a hunting knife, he wedged the lid open, and was immediately hit with the putrid stink of death. Bile rapidly crawled up his throat and dizziness overwhelmed him for a moment, before he collected himself, forced it down, and leaned over the body.

The old man was dead, that was evident enough. The young man would have preferred to come here sooner to get the deed over with, before the stench had become so intense, but the winter had been brutal before being pushed aside by a rain-filled spring, and the ground had always been too frozen or too muddy to effectively dig. However, in the months that he had been buried, the young man was expecting him to be further along the decomposition process. Worms hadn't yet made a proper feast of the body, so much of him was still rather intact, aside from the sagging gray paper skin pulled taut across bones and lips curling back to reveal long, yellowing teeth. His hands, resting on his stomach, had also grown thin and rotten, nails appearing talon-like. A tarnished ring could be seen glinting faintly on his left hand. The young man lifted his knife and sliced through the chest of the dead old man.

It was a faint sound, but a horrid, squelching, peeling one nonetheless, and the odor grew more intense as the chest collapsed in. Even though a scarf didn't make sense to wear in this weather, he was grateful he had thought to wrap it around his neck before leaving home. He lifted the thick fabric across his lower face, dulling the tendrils of death that attempted to claw through his nostrils and throat. Using the blade, he pushed aside the remaining tissue until he found what he had come for: The old man's heart, still full of blood and red as the day he died.

He climbed up the wall of the pit, just enough to reach his bag and retrieve a jar. With as much speed and precision as any butcher, he carved out the heart and dropped it into the jar, before retreating entirely. Next from his bag, he pulled out scraps of fabric, small bundles of hay, strips of tree bark, and sprinkled them into the pit, covering as much of the corpse as he could.

Lifting his head to the sky, he whispered, “*Forgive me*,” before picking up his oil-filled lantern and hurling it into the pit.

The sun was well into its ascent by the time the young man reached home, the jar now safely tucked into his bag. Any shopkeepers or farmers he encountered on the hike back took one glance at his gore-smeared gloves and dirty shovel, and turned away. They knew his reasons. They knew why desperation hung on him like a cloak.

“Ignatio!” From the doorway of his home, another man’s voice rang out. “Ignatio! Is it done?”

Ignatio nodded, eyelids rapidly growing heavy as his adrenaline faded. But he couldn’t sleep. Not yet. Only part of the job was done after all. He was only vaguely aware of footsteps hurrying to him, of an arm grasping his and leading him to the old stone house. It was little more than a hut, really, and the pair had to stoop when passing through the threshold.

“Thank you, Cas,” Ignatio murmured as his friend lowered him into a chair by the fire.

“You might want to hold your gratitude,” Cas said as he took the jar from Ignatio’s bag. “This is going to smell *dreadful* when it chars.”

Ignatio groaned. “At least burn it outside, would you? I’m not having that thing stinking up my own home.”

“Really? You think I’d be so rude as to burn it in here? With both of you resting right next to it?” Cas gestured to a cot across the room, where a twitching bundle of blankets lay. Underneath it, Ignatio’s younger sister was still burning up from fever, blood pooling from her mouth with every shuddering cough.

“You burned the rest of the body, correct?” Cas asked.

“Of course. Couldn’t stick around after I started the fire though, the smell was unbearable. Flames were still going strong by the time I made it to the cemetery entrance though. Probably just bones now.”

“Good. I know you’re exhausted, but while I’m taking care of this, you’ll need to start preparing the soup.”

Ignatio nodded as Cas retreated from the hut and forced his stiff limbs to pull him from his seat. The routine was almost second nature to him as he gathered frozen bone broth from the ice box along with a modest collection of spices, herbs, and vegetables. Calloused hands, now free from the fraying filthy gloves, chopped and crushed and blended ingredients until the broth slowly came to a simmer. In the new dawn, the hut felt much cooler than usual, and the fire brought a welcome heat. An itch gathered at the back of Ignatio's throat, but he simply coughed it away. The peppers often irritated him.

Everything felt almost domestic, peaceful, aside from the growing stench of burning rotten meat from outside. Another fit of hacking, wet coughs made Ignatio's heart twist painfully in his chest, and he abandoned his station at the now boiling pot to crouch at his sister's side. She hadn't spoken in days, but her weak whimpers of pain communicated more than enough to Ignatio. Placing a hand on the top of her head, he pulled strands of matted brown hair from her face. Her eyes fluttered open for just a second, before closing tightly, and sobbing again.

"Is the sun too much, Lystra?" Ignatio was barely able to choke out the question. The itch was back in his throat and words were painful to get out. His vision blurred with tears as Lystra nodded. For a moment, he sat there, slowly working out tangles and wishing the deep pain in his chest would lift. He had to stay focused. Focused on Lystra, on healing her, on protecting the poor girl that was so much younger than himself and yet was the only family he had. After Lystra's breathing stabilized enough to ensure she was asleep again, Ignatio walked around the hut, closing every shutter and curtain until the only light was that of the fire.

A sliver of sunlight filtered in as Cas crept back inside with the jar, now filled with ash and charred chunks of meat from the dead man's heart. "Nasty business, this is," he whispered, and Ignatio could only bring himself to nod solemnly. Cas shook the contents of the jar into the soup, and the pair watched as it swirled and bubbled, tainting the pale broth into a deep gray. Sure enough, it smelled disgusting, but this was their final hope. No one in the village liked to resort to such methods, but it was all they had.

As Cas scooped the soup into a bowl, Ignatio returned to Lystra's side. He gently squeezed her shoulder until her eyes opened fully. Her eyes. Once hazel, they were now clouded

and damp from crying. Dull as if she were already dead. He helped her into a seated position against the pile of pillows, and taking the bowl of soup from Cas, lifted it to her lips.

It didn't go down easily. Lystra choked and sputtered against any dry bits of ash that floated into her mouth, and Ignatio felt his own stomach churn in solidarity as she slurped down the horrid excuse for a meal. But eventually, the bowl was empty, and Lystra slouched against the pillows.

Every inch of Ignatio ached. Ached with muscles sore from overexertion and ached with memories of a ghost who no longer haunted the cot in his home. Lystra had succumbed to her illness three days after he and Cas fed her the supposed cure. Miraculously, she hadn't vomited it back up like they expected her to, but that didn't matter in the end. For the first few days following her death, Ignatio hadn't felt much of anything at all. The sudden chill in the air trailed him, even though Cas claimed it was perfectly warm outside. Everything felt muffled. Cas' arm on his back, pulling him close after the funeral and leading him back home. The flavor of once comforting food turned to sand. Alcohol did little besides make him drowsy, so he gave up that too. Cas came by everyday to ensure Ignatio ate at least a couple full meals, to ensure he had some form of company besides what remained of the dead, but his soothing words turned sour in Ignatio's ears.

Then the aches came. They arrived before Cas could. They kicked down Ignatio's door, robbed him of what little comfort remained, and left him shivering and in pain on the floor. The chill was stronger than ever, and he shuddered every minute he wasn't covered with blankets and cloaks. His muscles spasmed, he couldn't move, and every bone was ablaze with the searing stabs of needles being pushed through his body. By the time Cas did arrive, he found Ignatio curled up and trembling on the floor. Ignatio's stomach purged any food he consumed, stinging bile only irritating his already sore throat further. The same fever that had taken Lystra had come for Ignatio as well.

Days passed in dreams and blurs. Occasionally he would open his eyes and find Cas humming softly to him or pouring water down his throat in a desperate attempt to make him

drink. Other times, he was surrounded by vivid horrors that, logically, he knew were just nightmares, but he couldn't stop the panic from seizing him and the screams from tearing out of his mouth. More than once, Cas had to wrestle him back into the bed after Ignatio flung himself from it in a blind terror. Most of the time, he was coughing. Or vomiting. Or watching blood trickle from his lips and into the palm of his hand.

“Make it end, Cas. Please.”

Tears poured down Cas' face endlessly these days. “I wish I could.”

Every smell was too strong, overwhelming and invading his tongue so he could taste it even though every bite of food was utterly flavorless now. Light stung, and just like Lystra before him, he cried for the curtains to be drawn and the door shut at all times. Sound was no longer the consistent, pleasant music of the town he'd lived in his whole life. It assaulted his ears with an intensity he'd never felt before, leaving his head ringing. An iron fist gripped his chest and squeezed until every breath of sweet air was hell. Even in sleep, there was no peace.

“If you loved me, you'd kill me already.”

“I wish I could.”

Ignatio lasted longer than Lystra had, but one day Cas awoke next to the cot and reached out for his friend's hand, only to find it cold and stiff. For a while, he sat there, clutching the hand of his lifeless friend, staring blankly at the cobweb-covered ceiling. He wanted to feel something, wanted to sob and scream and curse at the world for taking his best friend and the girl he had spent so long trying to heal. But nothing came. A wall, built from months of grief and fear, refused to let him feel. A distant part of him wondered if this is how Ignatio had felt after Lystra's death.

Ignatio had always been taller, heavier than Cas, but now he was so light that it took little effort to lift him. Stumbling through the door, he carried the body down the muddy backroads. Any wandering neighbors parted quickly as he hurried towards the temple at the edge of town. He was grateful for the overcast sky, he didn't think he could tolerate the sun right now. It had rained overnight. The ground was muddy, the air light and clean.

At the doors of the temple, two priestesses stood guard, clutching spears that crossed over the broad wooden doors, but upon seeing Cas' sunken face and wild eyes with Ignatio's limp form in his arms, they moved aside, and the doors opened behind them. There were six priestesses inside, positioned around the altar with embroidered coverings pulled over the lower halves of their faces and thin veils draped over their hair. A status symbol, markers of devotion. One of them, with purple floral patterns covering her veil and mask, approached first. "When did he die?"

"Sometime in the night."

"The same illness that took his sister?"

"Yes, they had the exact same symptoms."

The priestess nodded and helped Cas carry the body to the altar. The others quickly followed, pulling fabric over the cadaver, lighting candles, burning herbs in a small bowl in the back of the room. Everything was a practiced routine, one step after another, and for a moment, Cas could breathe, getting lost in the ritual.

Cas didn't protest when the priestesses suggested burying the body themselves. He didn't want to go to the cemetery. Didn't want to see the misplaced soil atop the grave of the body Ignatio had exhumed. Part of it was shame, a realization that they had destroyed a corpse for nothing, a reminder of their failure and crimes. Part of it was paranoia that the old man's body would crawl back out, angry and seeking a new heart, even though Cas knew that only happened in children's ghost stories.

Night had fallen by the time Cas walked home. He felt... Well, he couldn't quite tell. He felt hyper-aware of the world in a way he never had before, but his mind could not focus. Rather than returning to his own farmhouse, he walked right back to Ignatio and Lystra's hut. However, just beneath the sound of the creaking door, he caught another sound. A branch breaking. Craning his neck, he glimpsed a lean figure dart behind the treeline.

“Hello? Who’s there?”

No response. Cas bristled in irritation.

“If you’re looking to rob the dead, I promise you there’s nothing of value here!” He pushed open the door fully and locked it behind him. Scum. Couldn’t leave his dead friend alone for even a day. After quickly swapping out the sheets of the cot, he climbed in. He would wash everything more thoroughly in the morning. Sleep didn’t come easy. He tossed and turned for much of the night, and slowly the realization of his friend’s death hit him.

Three months, two dead, and he was left alone.

He sat up abruptly, sobs and convulsions wracking his body. A weight settled over him—not one of illness, but a dull gray cloud that pushed his thoughts to one thing. Ignatio. He couldn’t save him, couldn’t save his sister. Maybe he hadn’t tried to heal Lystra enough. Maybe if she had recovered, Ignatio would have had more strength, more will to heal himself. Maybe he didn’t try hard enough to save Ignatio. Maybe another heart wouldn’t have saved him, but surely something else would have. Instead, he just let him die. Cas should’ve killed him before the infection spread too far, put his friend out of his misery instead of letting him fester in sweat and blood and fear for months. His mind was filled with a single mantra: *All my fault. I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry*—

His head fell against the cool stone of the hut, and for one merciful moment, he was numb. The cloud still hung, tears still poured, but all thoughts fled and left him empty. Now, he felt adequately tired. Now, he could sleep. Moonlight streamed in and Cas realized he had forgotten to close the curtain. Turning to the window, he screamed.

A gaunt, ashen face surrounded by stringy black hair ducked below the frame. Without a second thought, Cas grabbed the long dagger he kept next to him, but by the time he ran outside and to the window where the person had been hiding, they were gone. He scanned the treeline. Dark. Too dark. Snatching up a spare lantern from the front step, he marched to the trees. Even with the mud, there were no footsteps, no broken branches, no indication of anyone having passed by. Everything was still.

Cas made it a few feet into the woods and was about to turn around when a glimpse of movement caught his eye. A shadow that had broken free from its brethren. He tried to quiet his ragged breaths but his heart was in his throat and clearly the person knew he was here anyway. Lifting the lantern, all air escaped his lungs and vanished into the stars above. It was a man, tall and stick thin, broad shoulders drooping down and swaying. His mouth hung agape in a twisted half-smile, and his eyes bore into Cas'. His familiar, deep brown eyes.

“*Ignatio?*” Cas muttered. But he blinked, and the figure was gone. “*Ignatio!*” Manic energy seized him and he bolted in the direction he had last seen his friend. Branches scraped his skin, stones sliced through his bare feet, blood was drawn, but Cas paid little mind.

“*Ignatio!*”

The path disappeared far behind as Cas pushed through brush and thistles. *Ignatio*. He had to find *Ignatio*. Occasionally, he heard the pounding of footsteps in front of him, the crack of sticks. Occasionally, he saw the brief flash of an arm or a leg or dark eyes peering at him when his lantern light passed over a particularly dense patch of foliage.

Ignatio. He had to find *Ignatio*.

Cas didn't notice the fallen tree until his ankle twisted and he fell hard against the cold earth. The lantern tumbled from his grasp and cracked upon the wood, sparks and embers flying into the trees above as flames rapidly covered the bark. Cas tried to stand but his leg seared with white hot pain. His ankle stuck out at an odd angle. Dry leaves high above him began to catch, and despite the heat emanating down at him, Cas felt cold. His breaths came fast and shallow, and his heart pounded like it was trying to break free from its cage to save itself. He rolled over, tried to crawl, but the pain shot up his spine and he collapsed, crying out. He didn't recognize his own voice, raspy and high as he screamed into the night, “*Ignatio!*”

From beyond the rapidly spreading flames, the gaunt figure appeared again. Its chest was an empty cavity, blood pouring lazily down his linen shirt. The wicked half-smile still twisting its face.

Luckily, the rain from the previous day had left the forest wet enough to prevent the fire from spreading too far. But it was still late by the time a search party left in search of Cas. A neighbor had gone to check on him after hearing some commotion the night before, but the hut and Cas' farmhouse had been empty. The flames cresting over the tops of distant trees told the neighbor everything they needed to know.

Cas' body was burned, blackened beyond recognition by the time he was found. Only the warped dagger and lantern frame next to the body indicated who it was. Ash floated through the air, scorch marks scarring the earth. An entire patch of woodland reduced to nothing but a reminder. The priestesses came soon after to collect the body, and everyone stood clear as they carried him from the woods. For a while, they all stood in the new clearing, staring at the burnt ground. *Why did he come out here? Did he start the fire himself? He must have, he brought the lantern. But why? I didn't even hear screaming. Did someone bring him out here? No one else is missing.*

The muffled rumors continued throughout the day, well into the night, and when the coffin of the burned man was finally lowered into the earth beside the graves of Lystra and Ignatio, they could only stare, confused and dazed.