

Because They Were Open

Jim Zeigler

It was the way their eyes rolled open that really bothered Jake. Other than that he could stomach it. He needed the money. Everytime he pried a lid open and started to roll a body out, the eyes always managed to flip open. For just a second he'd see white and then the body would smack face down into the damp dirt. The men were the worst. Dark suits blended into the night broken only by Jake's dull yellow lantern. Their bright white eyes flipped open and seemed to almost dance in the air before plunging into the damp soil.

He never got completely used to the eyes, but it got better. He learned to flip the coffin fast and nearly all the way over so the body would fall straight out instead of slowly rolling. Always, his first couple shovels of dirt landed right on the head.

With a thrust of his knee, Jake buried his spade neatly to the handle in the fresh ground. The tombstone read:

Eli Worthington

RIP

April 7, 1912-

November 3, 1990

The letters were deep black, darker than the sky that night and they sprang forth from the light gray granite. The soft earth, just dug this morning, gave easily and Jake was glad because this was his last job tonight. He quickly emptied the grave, carefully digging out the dirt around the base of the casket so as not to scratch it. The lid was really tight this time. The casket handle dug into Jake's hands as he tugged at it. In the cool air Jake could see his breath. He began to sweat. He could feel it beading on his forehead and streaking down his cheeks. He let it. He was intent on the coffin, his gaze fixed on the surface where he imagined the head must be. His feet slipped in the mud and he nearly gave up but then with a loud pop the lid flew up, carrying Jake's body forward and down to rest crossways on the open casket. His heaving chest hovered inches above the motionless body. He sucked a musty taste like urine into his lungs. For a moment nothing moved except his chest and then, as if waking from a bad dream and not knowing where he was, Jake sprang from the coffin. Leaning with his back against the grave wall, Jake peered down into the dim casket. Eli's eyes were already open. The mist stopped pouring from Jake's mouth as he stared into those blank eyes, so white against the body's face

and suit. Minutes passed and nothing moved until Jake began to feel lightheaded from not breathing and, with a deep breath, turned to the side as if not wanting to face the man in the coffin.

Gathering himself, Jake bent at the foot of the coffin to grasp both sides and with his well-practiced technique flipped it completely over. Removing the coffin, he couldn't help but stare at the back of the body. No longer perfectly arranged with folded hands and neat creases in the suit, the body sprawled in the mud. One leg bent out at an unnatural position. It certainly wouldn't have been uncomfortable had he been alive. Jake couldn't stop thinking about those eyes; wide open and pressed into the soft dirt. He stooped and pulled the leg straight, pressing the ankles together. Then, with the same deft movement used on the coffins, he righted the body. The eyes glowed even more brightly from the now dirty face, and Jake froze at the sight of the body staring up at him. His damp breath escaped his mouth in small burts of cloud that quickly dissipated. When a wrinkled brown leaf fell onto the coffin and scratched down its length, Jake sprang forward. He seized the coffin and flipped it from the grave raising a cloud of dirt which quickly resettled leaving a fine mist of brown over the body. Eli's jacket had been pulled low on his shoulders and only his fingers extended from the bottom of his sleeves. In the dirt the fingers looked like eight giant white slugs. Jake squinted down and began to pry at a finger with the tip of his spade. He held the very end of the handle to stand as far away as possible. To his horror he succeeded in tearing away a chunk of skin from Eli's last finger. A silvery liquid welled in the cut and flowed under the other fingers in a puddle of spittle. Drawing the spade up to his face he stared with fascination at the morsel of moist pink flesh which quivered at the tip of the shovel. With a glance to the body and then back to the flesh, Jack lifted the shovel high over his head like an axe and, with a cry, flung the shovel forward out of his grasp. With his eyes, he followed it end over end beyond the toppled casket until it disappeared in the dark and landed with a crash into some brush.

From his pocket, Jake produced a now-gray handkerchief and, kneeling next to the body, secured it to the damaged finger. After tightening the knot he remained kneeling with the hand resting lifeless in his own. It was ice and he shuddered at

the thought of being like this himself some day.

"Cold, eh? Yeah, I bet. Air's gettin' brisk 'is time a year. They oughta buried you in a coat. Not just a jacket," Jake said, pausing to let the words sink in. He wondered at the sound of his own voice and realized that he hadn't spoken since early morning when he'd agreed to retrieve coffins for Mr. Adams, the cemetery owner.

With a cough, Jake cleared his throat. He bowed his head, "Listen, I'm real sorry 'bout the finger. I just. Don't know what I was thinkin'. You know, I ain't spoke to no one since mornin'. Till you, that is, and you're dead. Nuts, huh? Talkin' ta dead people. What's wrong with you, Jake?" For a reply he looked up into Eli's eyes. He folded the arm over the body's stomach and leaned forward to peer closely into the dead man's face. Inches apart, his breath steamed all over Eli's face and Jake could see nothing. Even Eli's eyes fled behind the smokey cloud. He held his breath and the eyes seemed to jump out at him as the air cleared. On impulse he pressed two fingers to Eli's neck. Nothing. He held his fingers under the nose. Nothing. Jake released his breath slowly, making a thin stream of cloud as he sat back on the ground.

Clasping his hands together, Jake rested his knees against the inside of his elbows, pulling his legs up toward his body. He rocked back and forth as he looked at Eli.

"A man can go crazy talkin' inside his own head all day, you know." Jake stopped rocking and bent his head down to peer at the body in the dark.

The body didn't respond.

With a shrug, Jake continued, "That's right. It ain't natural, but I'm the only one works here on grounds. I won't let the weeds grow over ya. And nights, some nights after funerals, I stay late and dig you all up again. Then I take the coffin and put you back. Never miss 'em and Mr. Adams give me \$50. Cash. I guess he resells 'em. Ain't right I suppose, but if it weren't me it'd be somebody else. Fifty bucks, right?"

"How 'bout you? Married, Eli? Bet you had kids. All grown by now. Tomorrow. Same boat as me. You won't even get to talk to Mr. Adams. That's probably best. He ain't nice. I hear him making fun a families come here for funerals. Women crying and all, and he'll sit in his office watching 'em and laughing at what they're wearing." Jake shook his head from side to side slowly and looked down again into the dirt as if to think. With a cough he pursed his lips and let the spit drain from his mouth in a long lump that bubbled in a pile on the dirt too moist to absorb it. He stared at it and then scratched his heel in it until it mixed with the dirt and was gone. In the distance a bell tolled and Jake looked at the watch on his arm. He had to punch the

button three times before the light would show him the time, 12:15 a.m. He had to get home.

"Listen, Eli. I gotta be going but I'll tell you what. You don't tell Mr. Adams and I'll put ya back in your box. Deal?" He paused halfway to standing and listening. "O.K.? All right, be right back," he said. Jake leaped from the grave and dragged the coffin back. He lowered it sideways next to the body. Dropping into the hole, Jake laid Eli into the casket. He was light and Jake lifted him up and in comfortably.

Once the lid was on, Jake went searching for his shovel. It didn't take long. Thrust almost entirely into a bush, it took three good yanks to pull it from the branches. Twenty minutes later Jake was taking the long walk through town to his solitary trailer. "Can't believe I stayed so late talking to a dead guy," he muttered to himself, "I must be losing it. Eli Worthington, hmm?" Smiling, he shook his head and raised it as he walked a little faster, the gravel path through the woods next to his place already in sight down the road.

The outside light had burned out again, so he almost stumbled into the yard. He leaned his shovel against the wall, he always brought it home, and groped for the door handle.

Inside he dumped some ham and beans into a pan and headed to the shower. The water echoed loudly against the thin plastic floor. It was hard to regulate. Just when it was the right temperature a surge of heat would make him jump and turn his skin bright pink. The rubber floor decals to prevent slipping rested on the floor beside the toilet still in their package. A thin layer of dust muffled the shiny plastic and the stamp-sized price tag was beginning to yellow and curl at the edges. Wearing a faded red towel and still half-wet Jake sat down at the small table cluttered with newspapers and a couple of dirty coffee cups. He'd never been married and had lived here more years than he could remember. He thought about the speechless dead man. He couldn't eat. He flipped off the kitchen light, leaving the plate full on the table, and walked to the bed. Curling into a fetal position in the dark, Jake didn't close his eyes. He was afraid they wouldn't open. Afraid because he couldn't stop seeing Eli's eyes. Afraid that he'd lose his job for not taking the coffin; knowing he could never explain that he couldn't do it. Finally, Jake fell into a dark, dreamless sleep and didn't wake until morning.

He was relieved to find Mr. Adams absent the next day, although it meant he would be alone. As he pruned bushes and pulled weeds he tried not to look at Eli's grave but his eyes would drift over. He watched to see if anyone would come to visit him. No one did. In fact, no one came in all day. As soon as it got dark he got his shovel to head home. With

Mr. Adams gone and no new graves he no night work. Without thinking, he found his legs carrying him to Eli's grave. He stood for a few minutes and read the headstone over and over again. He didn't really begin to shovel—he just kind of let it slip into the dirt. He closed his hand over the end of the handle and rested his chin on his hand. His weight pushed the blade under the ground. He lifted the shovel slowly and set the dirt on the grass. Another shovel followed and another until he found himself lifting the lid before he really thought about what he was doing. Eli's eyes were still open and bright against his now quite dirty face.

"What am I doing? Hey, why am I talking to you again?" Jake asked Eli harshly. Standing over the body he shoved his hands into his coat pockets. "Anyway, might as well tell you. Mr. Adams was gone, so your box is safe another day. Can't promise nothin' tomorrow, though."

Jake sat down on the edge of the coffin. "God ya look cold," Jake exclaimed and pulled his scarf around his neck. He gently lifted Eli's head and slipped the scarf under it before tucking the ends into his suit vest.

Jake sat back and admired his handiwork.

"Yeah, that looks good on ya. It blends right into your suit being black and all. Why didn't ya put nothin' in your will 'bout being dressed warm for a fall or winter funeral?"

Jake stared up into the sky, "Stars sure are nice tonight, Eli. You're lucky ya got your eyes open. I'll sit a bit and look, but I ain't stayin' long. I'm hungry, and I gotta sleep tonight. Hardly slept at all last night. Empty stomach and all."

After a few minutes Jake stood to go. He looked down at Eli and felt compelled to touch him. He patted his cheek with his palm. Ice. Jake replaced the lid and quickly refilled the grave. The walk home seemed to take forever even with the benefit of the starry sky.

His trailer glowed in the starry night against the dark backdrop of trees. Opening the door he found he'd left the lamp on. It was the tall brass one with the small shade with frills like a short girl's bobbed 60's hair. He only turned it on when he sat in the cracked brown Lazy-boy recliner; the only chair in the room he ever used. The trailer had three rooms but he found himself only passing through the middle one (with the recliner in it) on his way between the kitchen and the bedroom. He strode past the chair into the kitchen. He reheated his ham and beans and ate so quickly it burned his throat, but he wouldn't wait for it to cool. He downed a beer, and unshowered, curled up in bed and dreamed he was at a party. Everyone else was dressed nicely but Jake wore his work clothes. In the morning Jake went to the closet and pulled out his single suit. It

was gray with a faint pinstripe. He even had a shirt and tie for it. He'd worn it to church in high school with his family. He hung it on the doorknob and sat on his bad to stare at it.

Nervously rubbing his calloused palms, he sat on the stool he'd brought to the grave. Eli's eyes were even brighter tonight with an additional layer of dirt that coated his body. From the satchel hung over his shoulder, Jake removed an apple.

"I brought you this," he announced, thrusting it forward with a laugh. "Just kidding, this is for me. I did bring you this, though," and he produced a thin green blanket from the bag. He spread it over Eli and pulled it up like he was tucking in a youngster. The blanket was a sickly green like the color of surgical scrubs and in the lamplight it seemed to glow faintly.

The cemetery was silent except for the crickets' nighttime chatter and the droning of Jake's voice floating up from the hole he shared with the dead man.

"Flower's for you," Jake explained as he snapped the stem and slipped the rose into Eli's lapel button. "Martha, three rows over, never'll miss it and now you look sharp. Almost too good for me." He sat and took a bite from the apple. The red flower looked dark, almost brown, next to the green blanket and under Eli's eyes.

"Eli, did you like to dance? Maybe that's why I never got me a woman. I hate dancin'. Just hate it. You look like you mighta done some dancin'. Or some church goin'. That's a nice suit you got on. Probably ain't done much dancin' recently, huh? Getting kind of up there. No offense, of course." Jake bobbed his head cheerily as he crunched into his apple. He'd resigned himself to Eli's silence. There were worse habits. "You know, I got a pretty nice suit, too. Tomorrow's Sunday, and I ain't had it on in a long time. Maybe I'll show it to you and we can talk about some times we could have. Maybe you can tell me about dancin'."

For a long time there was only the sound of the crickets and the occasional interruption of Jake's apple crunching noisily in his mouth. Then he finished it. He pitched the core toward the bush that caught his shovel but it fell with a thud into the grass. He wiped his wet hand on the green blanket and left it there resting on Eli's arm. Through the blanket he couldn't feel that Eli's skin had begun to get dry and papery. Under the dust, the skin of his face was grey and beginning to break into even more cracks than the old man had when alive.

"You know, Eli," Jake began as he squeezed the arm, "Mr. Adams wasn't happy. You were lucky. You didn't hear him down here, did ya? He was

yellin' at me. I told him I cracked your box so I left it.
He bought it. You ain't got nothin' to worry about. I
won't let 'em bother ya."

On the walk home Jake didn't talk to himself.
He didn't even mind the rain when it began to fall,

and as he turned onto the gravel path the only sound
was the sound of the rain smacking the tin roof of his
box-like home. In bed, he laid on his back and
stared up at the ceiling listening until he fell asleep.

Winter on the River

I go there, sometimes, to lose myself.
The river, with its breathy flow, calms me.
Nighttime is the best, in the cold of winter.
The only sound you hear is the gently hiss of snow being
absorbed into the water moving below me.
Sometimes it is me moving—not the river.
I travel the length without the scene changing.
I float above the water like the clouds do overhead,
being shaped and moved by the wind.
My anxieties flow away with the water,
and I go back to the world, refreshed.

But now that I am away, I long for it more than ever.
The soothing feeling I get from something only God could
have
created.
But I realize that, as with all of God's creations, I need
only to close my eyes,
and my memories take me back.

--Mickey Rogers