

L a i r



HP Hanson

L A I R

AN EXTREMELY SHORT STORY BY

HP Hanson

...is a work of fiction. All events that take place are imaginary,
and all characters and places described are entirely fictitious,
not intended to represent any real places or actual people, living or dead,
especially as some of them are obviously quite dead. Or not.

* * * * *

Copyright © 2000, 2010 by Howard P. Hanson

All rights reserved.

L A I R

“**Here’s one** with a birth date in the middle sixteen hundreds. Hand me a new sheet of paper.” Marika was so focused on the weathered granite that she didn’t realize how she sounded, borderline rude.

To David’s consternation, she had been wandering all over the graves and poking at the headstones, brushing off leaves and lichens, instead of walking carefully and respectfully between them and staying on the paths, as he knew was appropriate. But rather than complain again, he just tore off a sheet of paper from the big tablet and handed it to her. She slipped a charcoal stick from her pocket and commenced to take a rubbing.

“This looks like the earliest one we’ve found yet.” Her glee was unmistakable.

As a historian of some repute, she was naturally excited at having come upon an apparently abandoned cemetery in such an out-of-the-way spot. She considered it good luck, but David was having reservations.

On their way to the airport to catch their flight home from a two-week honeymoon exploring quaint bed-and-breakfasts in rural New England, they had managed somehow to take a wrong turn, then a whole series of

wrong turns. Concentrating, as they had been, on how to get un-lost and find the main road again, they might have driven right by. But for some reason she had looked up from the map just in time to get a glimpse of the vine-covered, wrought-iron gate and the monuments beyond. Of course, they *had* to stop to look around, even it did mean that they might miss their return flight.

The indistinct characters began to take shape on the paper as Marika carefully applied the charcoal. She was squatting precisely in front of the headstone to do the work, and David just couldn't take it any more.

"I *wish* you wouldn't stand on top of people's graves like that." David's voice betrayed his nervousness. The day was fading, and he peered about into the gathering twilight. "It seems, well, impolite, somehow. Disrespectful. I mean, how would *you* like it?"

"What? Oh, don't be superstitious, David. I wouldn't care, silly. Neither do these folks. They've been dead for hundreds of years. The most recent date we've seen was something in the 1890's, on that crypt way back there by the entrance. And they've been getting older and older as we've come up here. That's why I'm so excited about finding this place. I'm certain these headstones will help with the genealogy I'm working on. Anyway, this is the last one."

Last one indeed. They had slowly worked their way up to the very back of the graveyard, to the top of the hill that was dominated by a twelve-foot tall, gothic monument to an unknown family. Marika was grumpy that the letters on this, the marker for obviously the most important family in the early history of the place, had weathered into oblivion, except for a curiously ornate capital “**D**” and the dates. At least, she complained, they could have spent some of their money on a smaller, better quality piece of stone instead of on the soft granite of this huge thing with all its curlicues.

After she reclaimed the hastily folded sheaf of headstone rubbings from David—and then spent an interminable time reviewing, re-ordering, and rolling them up—they turned back down the hill, their feet crunching in the autumn leaves on the ground. At least, David thought, we can stay on the paths now. Soon he noticed that the rustling was not only because of their walking—a cold wind had come up, and there was the pitter-patter of raindrops as well.

Where had that come from? A few minutes ago, it had been a warm, fall evening. And where was that gate, anyway? It looked to him as if braided strands of mist were wafting uphill from the river across the road, obscuring the cemetery entrance and their car below.

Increasingly nervous, David urged, “Come on, it’s starting to rain. I’ll run ahead and start the car to warm it up.”

He trotted off down the hill. As he passed the 1890’s crypt, he thought he noticed that the door was partly open. Surely, he thought, it hadn’t been open when they passed it earlier. Was it?

Suddenly a blast of wind and rain exploded uphill from the river, right into his face, and, with a tremendous clang and a snap, the entrance gate blew shut. David noticed that his legs seemed heavy somehow, as if he were trying to run through knee-deep molasses, and it only got worse as he struggled closer to the cemetery entrance. He glanced back, to see Marika taking shelter from the rain under the eaves of the crypt, peering into the gloom inside through the open door.

Finally, after what seemed a life-or-death ordeal, he reached the gate but found it locked. It had been unlocked earlier when they pulled it open, no question. How could such an old, unused pile of rust suddenly lock itself, anyway? He rattled the gate to no avail and then turned back uphill to report the unhappy news to Marika. Fortunately, his legs began working again, and the rain seemed to let up. Strange that walking uphill should be easier than running downhill, he thought.

“Well this is just great,” he said, when he reached the crypt. “The wind blew the gate shut, and it locked

itself. I'll go climb over and see if I can't get it open for you somehow. It opened from the outside before, so maybe there's some latch or something that can't be worked from here. Try to stay dry. Hey, don't you just love this fall weather?"

He started back down the hill, but he found that the rain and wind had intensified and that the molasses effect was much worse. He was already soaked and getting cold, so he decided to go back and wait out the worst of the storm. He turned back, only to find that Marika had disappeared into the crypt.

"Hey! Are you crazy? Don't go in there! That's ... that's private property." He felt rather foolish for such a lame admonition, and her reaction reinforced the feeling.

"Yeah, but it's *dry* private property, silly." A slight echo made her voice eerie. "Come in here out of the rain. I wish I had the flashlight from the car. It looks like this might be really interesting, if I could only read these inscriptions."

David pushed the door fully open, so there would be a little light, but it didn't help much. The door was ponderously heavy, but it opened smoothly, with no noise, as if recently oiled. The family name "Draeckel" chiseled into its exterior surface couldn't have meant anything to him, but he felt an uneasy sense of *deja vu*.

Marika was, at least, able to solve this for him. “Look at the ornamentation on this ‘D.’ I noticed it right away. It matches the one on that monstrosity at the top of the hill. Get in here out of the rain, will you?”

She was sitting on a large, dusty stone coffin, her feet dangling well off the floor. She patted the lid.

“Sit down here and keep me warm. This place is cold,” she teased.

And cold it was. The rain and wind outside had given David a chill, but it was what you’d expect from weather of the sort that had arisen. Inside the crypt, there was a deeper cold that seemed to start inside his bones and work outward toward his skin. It didn’t help his mood that he had run face-first into a thick cobweb after stooping to get through the low doorway. How, he wondered, had Marika not run into it? It didn’t help either that the ancient, musty odor of the place was tinged with a hint of putrescence.

“This place reminds me of eighteenth-century houses. Back then, people weren’t as tall as we are now, and doors and ceilings were lower.” Ever practical, Marika was oblivious to the sense of dread and foreboding that David felt. She hopped down to the floor. “Well, if you don’t want to come over here and snuggle, I’m going to explore a bit, now that my eyes have adjusted to the light.”

So had David's, although he couldn't tell where the light was coming from. The cemetery outside was visible through the door, but twilight was deepening and the light out there was failing. Inside, it seemed as if a soft, gray glow from the surfaces of the crypt and its contents was providing weak illumination. As he looked around, he became aware that the crypt's interior appeared to be much larger than the outside dimensions would suggest. Well, he hadn't really had that good a look at the outside, but it seemed bigger inside, somehow.

Marika was busy counting coffins and had nearly disappeared into the gloom.

Her voice came from the back of the room. "*Twelve.* David, I can't believe that there are so many people interred in here. There must be some real historical significance to this place. Oh, and look at this. There's a back door. Maybe I can get it open and we can get some fresh air."

Now, David hadn't really inspected the little building carefully, but he was certain that he would have seen a rear entrance, if one existed. After all, he had walked right by it, twice.

"*Wait!*" He had meant to yell, but it came out like a croak. The dust? He cleared his throat, but it didn't help.

Too late anyway. She was opening the door, and he was right. It wasn't a rear entrance but rather a door to another room. How big, he wondered, *is* this place?

“Hey, look!” She had disappeared into the back room, and her voice echoed even more. “Another, bigger coffin. Must be the family patriarch. Come look. David, where are you? Will you please come here?”

He, of course, was still standing by the entrance, not wanting to disturb things any more than they already had, not wanting to step too far away from the safety of the outside. She appeared out of the gloom and took his hand, pulling him toward the back room.

“Come look,” It sounded as if she was excited on more than a professional level. “This is really amazing. That big ‘**D**’ is inscribed on the lid of this big coffin, along with a bunch of stuff I can’t read. I want to come back here with a light.”

As they approached the door to the back room, David began to shiver uncontrollably.

She noticed. “David, you silly boy, you must have got a chill. Here, take my sweater.”

Just then the deep, slow scraping of stone on stone, accompanied by a low moan, echoed from the back room. David was overwhelmed by a surge of panic, and he bolted for the entrance. As he reached the door,

Marika screamed, and he turned to look. There was an explosion in his head, and everything went black.

The black turned to a sort of bluish fuzz, and he noticed that the fresh sheets had been washed in some kind of faintly scented fabric softener. He tried to move and got a flash of pain from his right arm in response. Also, his head throbbed with more pain than he would have thought possible. As the room came into focus, he heard Marika's voice nearby.

“Shhh, hold still, silly boy, you've got to rest. You forgot that we're taller than they are, and you hit your head on that low door. Hard. Somehow you also managed to break your arm. I'm sure glad that they were able to help me get you to the car. Now, don't fight the sedative, you need to sleep some more.”

As the fuzz thickened, David began to wonder what she meant by “they.” Also, what was she doing wearing a turtleneck? She *hated* turtlenecks ...

* * * * *