

CITY OF THE DEAD

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from *A Stonemason's Journal*

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The old cemetery stands just outside of town; crumbling walls and disheveled crypts lie scattered about under majestic palms and live oaks; they poke through the overgrowth of like the toothy grin of a old prizefighter.

Unkempt paths of white oyster shell meander aimlessly, revealing bends and dead-ends, swallowed by spooky hillocks harboring statuary, ruined angels with blighted faces pointing heavenwards reminding the faithful of their promised rewards. Mongrel dogs prowl these paths and wild cats scurry about.

In its day this was a proud necropolis of Victorian splendor dressed in the best marble and wrought iron. It was approached with decorum by stately black hearses drawn by horses, their black plumes swaying. These wheeled catafalques were elegantly appointed and often, like the coffins, glass enclosed, displaying the facial features of the deceased in the light of their last day above the earth. A procession of carriages of the finest craftsmanship followed bringing the bereaved and their dead together for the final parting.

Here lie the famous, the infamous and the forgotten; the great and the not-so-great; the wise and the foolish; Christian and Jew; slave and master; men and women, and children; so many children were interred there in small white coffins, their places marked by lambs. Their adult counterparts received well-carved tablets and columns in intricate detail.

In time, to the city of the dead they all came.

THE BRIGHT GULF COAST SUN

shines directly overhead. We are just outside the city of Mobile, Alabama, in its historic old Magnolia Cemetery. The air is perfumed and humid, laden with the stench of rotten vegetation. We are working here repairing the crypts that have collapsed and those that are about to.

I recall one crypt that we entered and knelt on stone slab from which a staircase descended into the darkness. Below us, the dead were all arranged like sleepers in a elegant stone Pullman car. Their coffins, nearly rotted away, were revealed in the beam of light thrown from our head-lamps; the bric-a-brac of the funerary hardware lay among their bones in an orderly scatter. Someone dislodged a small stone and it fell into the depths of the crypt, surprising us with the sound of a splash and the sight of a ripple spreading across our view. The crypt was half full of water, crystal-clear water, ten feet deep.

There are some 10,000 people accounted for here, but ground-penetrating radar indicates a possible 30,000 internments. This is not surprising. The French were here before the Americans, and before the French there were the Spanish, and before them were pirates and corsairs all fighting for a little place to "wet their beak" as Don Corleone was fond to say.

We kept running into bodies buried where they should not be; buried in roads, buried under walls, under walkways. By law we are supposed to notify the coroner to confirm the burial is not recent. This as a matter of formality, usually an occasion when the coroner, a less than savvy political appointee, jumps down into the hole

with us and politely asks "What do you think?"

When we assure him of the antiquity of the remains he stands and announces to those peering down that it is okay to proceed.

After one such occasion an old, black spinster lady stepped forward from the lingering crowd and informed us that, in the 19th century, a family's beloved servants and slaves were, by mutual desire, interned in this way on family plots, so that in death, as in life, they could all be together as family in the "big house".

SPRING EQUINOX

The air sparkles. The sky is the single facet of a blue diamond. The sun pulsates and warms the Gulf, its glare dispersed by the swaying palms into myriad beams that dance lightly over fallen white grave stones.

Two black gravediggers, visible only from the waist up, their sweat-laden backs glistening like wet ebony in the morning light, are at work in the graves. They labor in tandem and their faces reflect the steadfastness and resoluteness of their grim work. Pick and dig, and pick, and dig.

The muffled sound harmonizes with the songbird's serenade and fat worms dance in the moist earth. At about 5 feet they hit what they were looking for and call me over from the chain-fall I was working on. Through the light rimmed opening in the collapsed brick vaulting we were peering into a hole in the earth. "Have we got it?" I asked, and just then a white mist of dust and damp, fetid air was exhaled from the hole in a lazy updraft. That startles us. "It's all yours, Boss-man," I'm told and they quickly clamber from the mouth of the

grave.

The dead affect people in different ways. To some it is an unexplainable psychosis; to others, merely macabre. To these gentlemen it is a combination of superstition and fear. I respect that; after all, we have a long time ahead of being dead and this is no time to start the process early.

As the Boss-man, I check my rig and give a few more pulls to the chain fall, steadying the thousand pound stone monument the base of which is dangling dangerously halfway over the hole that we have just dug.

The lifting straps bite hard and the monument holds, but I could see that the terrain under the base is eroding away like sand in an hourglass. There isn't much time to work before the earth collapses and the stone, the chain-fall and Boss-man all topple into the hole. Maybe an hour, maybe only twenty minutes; we have to work and work fast. I need more help; grave diggers aren't masons.

A FEW DAYS AGO

I had a local bricklayer who was working with me, but the night before we started this work we were drinking dockside in a bayou saloon along the Dog river that was full of oil-drillers, shrimp fishermen and sweet drawling women in tight shorts who leaned over too far when they talked to you.

He was a taciturn man with the scars and tattoos of a war veteran and we having a second round when he told me, "I don't work tombs."

The announcement startled me. I felt abandoned; I couldn't do this job alone. I felt that I deserved to know why, but I did-

n't push him on the subject right away. A couple of shots of Jagermeister had a WD-40 like effect and loosened him up a little and he told me a grisly tale. Bars are trading posts of tales both tall and banal, but this one riveted my attention; so much so that I ceased to notice the view provided by the brunette bartender as she poured shots.

He was eight years old and he was playing in a graveyard late one afternoon and fell into a fresh cut grave that was half filled with water from a rain from the night before. His attempts at extricating himself were futile; the previous evening's rain had made the earth so slick that he slid back into the frigid October water with every effort to escape.

It was a dire situation. No one knew where he was. The graveyard was out of the way so no one could hear his shouts. It was late afternoon, nearly night and no one was likely to pass through the graveyard.

But he wasn't alone. Floating in the chest high water was the carcass of a dead white rabbit with frozen pink eyes that horrified him. Afraid to pick it up and throw it, the little boy pushed it away, but minutes later the dead bunny came floating back eyes open and staring at him.

Darkness fell and his cries for help were soon reduced to sobbing and whimpers. All night he spent largely submerged trying to keep his head above the dark frigid water. At times he became crazed with the fear that the sides were going to collapse in on him.

In the seemingly endless night he was sure he heard the voices of the dead talking to him, telling him to join them in sleep.

Then, looking me in the eye, he said that was tempting to do so, but it took every ounce of his young heart and mind not to succumb to that sleep.

The next day was the day of the funeral of the person in whose hole he was imprisoned. At nine a.m. the funeral party departed the church. A procession of mourners followed the black hearse with their lights on, slowing traffic to a stand still. The undertaker had sent his gravedigger crew ahead of the procession to make everything all right at the graveside. They found the boy there and pulled him out just as the hearse was arriving.

The funeral was delayed and an ambulance sent for. There was a lot of confusion when it arrived because to those just arriving at the rear of the procession it appeared that the ambulance was taking the body of the deceased away from the cemetery.



photo: Sheila Hagler

These mourners were baffled. What was happening? Had their loved one somehow revived?

The boy spent a week in the pediatric hospital for hypothermia and was held over for psychiatric observation, then released with an armful of stuffed animals -none of which were bunnies, by the way.

His story gripped me. Most guys would have spent the rest of their life in an asylum talking to walls, hearing the dead calling to him. He managed to survive, to become a brick craftsman, make an honest living and raise a family. He loved to lay brick, but not in graveyards.

As he spoke he was evaluating the sincerity of my attention. Victims who have suffered greatly need to feel support about what they have gone through. They have been pushed through the eye of the needle so to speak and their stories are a form of intimacy. Their candor is their bond with you, a gift not to be shared with just anybody, nor to be treated superficially. Their story is a symbol of their survival and deserving of respect. There are no high fives when you hear such things.

We stared at one another for awhile, then I quietly offered a toast a toast to the

living because the living are the recipients of second chances. The Jag tasted good. It rolled smoothly on the tongue and left it coated with pleasure.

We ordered another from the brunette with the bare midriff and the picturesque promontories, their attraction lost on us by now.

I told him that he wasn't alone in his feelings; that I understood from personal experience and his story brought back to me memories of my own brush with death. Talking about such things is difficult, but less so when you are with others who have been "there".

I was twenty years old and working as a driller in zinc mine a half-mile under the ground up near the border of Pennsylvania. We were working nights and this particular night was my birthday; I was going to be twenty-one.

We were working roof anchors on a vaulted ceiling that was fractured. On or about 3 o'clock in the morning (the exact time of my birth) our heavy drilling must have hit something that dislodged the whole roof puzzle and over 20 tons of rock came down on us.