

# **Graves**

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# Graves

*by Justin Cawthorne*

The first grave appeared four days ago.

Hardly anyone noticed it. I can't say I thought that much about it either.

Come to think of it, at first I thought it was quite funny. Harmless even. Now it's a different kind of funny: like someone who's funny in the head and takes a shotgun into a room full of people. I don't know if Aaron found it funny when he woke up that morning and found a gravestone sticking out of his garden.

Probably not.

It had been the same routine for both of us over the years. Every morning I'd walk by his house - clearing my head, getting my morning breather, whatever you like to call it. Aaron would be there in his garden, spending the brighter part of the day keeping nature in check. If it rained then the work went on hold, but I'd still see him sitting ruefully under the porch, biding his time until the weather turned in his favour. He might have been able to control his plants, flowers and anything else that grew out of the ground, but the skies were out of his hands. I think he always resented that.

Fortunately for Aaron the weather on that particular day was fine, some might even say it was perfect.

"Good day for it, Aaron," I called over to him.

He nodded, stopping momentarily to gaze up at the blue sky. "It is, indeed."

Most mornings I'd leave it at that and carry on walking, but something caught my eye. You see, nothing ever changed in Aaron's garden, just like the rest of the damn island it was constant. Anything new may as well have had a neon sign pointing down at it.

"What's that then?" I asked him. "A new feature?"

He turned around and followed my gaze, even though he knew exactly what I was talking about. In one of his flower beds, roughly halfway down the garden, was a grey slab of rock. It stuck out of the earth, nearly a metre high, leaning at a slight angle. The surface was smooth, not quite marble, but polished. It seemed to suck the light in...

Aaron drew a breath and turned back to me. I blinked, suddenly wondering how long we had been standing there. It was surely no more than a couple of seconds, but it felt like half the day had just gone by.

"To tell you the truth," Aaron began slowly, "I don't know. I suppose it's some sort of practical joke."

I frowned. Aaron had been on the island as long as I could remember. He was well known for two things: his garden and his sense of humour. Both were dark arts - he hardly ever talked about his garden, even though he spent most of his life tending to it, while his jokes were so dry it could sometimes take months to be sure whether he was cracking one or not.

"Is it..." I started.

"A gravestone?" he finished for me. "Yes, I think it is. Perhaps someone's making out I spend too much time in this garden."

I chuckled. For all I knew Aaron could have put it there himself. Stranger things had happened, although not that often. Whoever was responsible, at least it gave us something new to talk about for a few minutes.

"Want a hand? I'll grab a shovel."

Aaron shrugged "Ahh - that's all right, I just dig it out later."

"Oh, I didn't mean for digging it out - I was thinking about digging the next six feet - let's do the job properly."

Aaron's mouth curled, always a good sign that you'd caught him on the right side. "Ha - why don't you just come back in a few hours - I'll make sure there's room for you and all."

"Maybe I will," I laughed. "I could do with putting my feet up for a change."

Then his smile flattened. He gave the gravestone a sore look. "No. I'll get that thing out of here before I quit for the day, don't you worry about that."

"I won't, then," I agreed, as I carried on. "You enjoy your day."

I wouldn't have ever described Aaron as a friend, but he was perhaps the closest thing I had to one on the island. If nothing else he was the only one who seemed able to greet me openly and not preface it with the sort of look you'd spare for someone freshly released from prison. I hadn't spent a day in my life behind bars, but there was no doubt I'd been judged guilty as far as everyone else was concerned.

Perhaps this was why the grave started to bother me when I saw it again later. Aside from the brief thought that anyone who tampered with Aaron's garden was risking an early grave for themselves, I'd almost forgotten about the matter. By sundown I'd managed to kill off most of the day in town and was heading back home for a drink, or ten. As I would normally expect Aaron had long retreated indoors. And on a normal night I would have carried right on by his house, barely even giving it a first glance, let alone a second.

But this time I stopped. I suddenly needed to see if the gravestone was still there. For just a moment I thought Aaron had managed to shift it - then I spotted it, resting in the earth, leaning at a slight angle, smooth and dark, fading against the dusk. The grave disturbed me, there was a presence to it, something that drew me in like nothing else in his garden. I couldn't work out a single reason why Aaron would have left it there. Under the failing light it looked like nothing I'd want in my garden, or even anywhere near my house.

Then, for the second time that day I got the feeling that time had just stepped out of the room, that a few seconds had been cleanly sliced out of my day.

Had it moved closer?

This morning it had been a few metres away from the house. Now it sat in a different flower bed, resting almost directly under one of the main windows. Perhaps I was seeing

things. I couldn't admit to having given it a close look earlier, and the drifting shadows in the early evening could fool anyone's eyes. But there was no question about it: the gravestone had moved.

Looking back, that was the exact moment at which I finally decided something wasn't quite right. Though barely a dozen words a day might pass between me and Aaron I knew he took pride in beating Mother Nature at her own game. His garden never changed, he didn't allow it. Now it disturbed me that, after all this time, something had changed. That's probably why I went ahead and did something I'd never done before: I knocked on his door.

He was slow to answer. When he saw me he smiled faintly, but kept looking distractedly over my shoulder. He seemed unfocused. A moment later, I realised what was wrong with him. The man was drunk. I half-smiled: I did all my drinking alone, without the aid of mirrors, it had been a long time since I realised what drunk looked like. For all I knew this was how he spent every night - in some ways it would provide the perfect explanation for his morning habits, there was nothing like fresh air to clear the head, I should know. Still, it just didn't ring true. Aaron simply didn't have the appearance of a regular drinker.

"I was thinking I'd help you move that gravestone. Looks like you didn't have time earlier...?"

He ushered me in, locking the door behind us.

"Here..." he muttered, walking over to the table. Swiftly he poured out a fresh shot of single malt. Maybe it was meant for me, but before it could get that far he raised the glass to his lips and emptied down his own neck. Then he sat down.

"I tried," he said, his fingers drumming nervously on his glass. "I tried and it didn't move. I couldn't get it out."

"What do you mean?" I asked stupidly.

He stood up again and started moving to the window, the one nearest the grave stone, then stopped himself. "I left it till last. Thought I'd get everything else done first, then move the damn stone before I finished for the day. I tried just picking it up first. I couldn't move it. Then I took the shovel to it. I tell you, I could hardly break the soil."

Aaron paused briefly to pour himself another drink.

Then he carried on: "It's like the soil was solid concrete. I couldn't get the shovel in anywhere near it... tried prying it up. I even took a hammer to it."

"What happened?"

He looked at me. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The hammer didn't so much as leave a mark."

He walked over to the window and looked out. "I'm sure it's moved - it's closer. Don't you think it's closer?"

I shook my head weakly. "No, no of course not... I - I didn't really get a good look..."

Aaron sat back down again. "It's closer I tell you!" he barked in frustration.

I sat down with him. "Come on, it's a joke, got to be. Someone just put it in there last night. They'll probably come and take it out tonight - "

"How?! I couldn't even shift it!"

In truth I didn't know what to say, but I tried to come up with something to calm him down. "Alright, listen, I don't know why someone would put that thing in your garden. Maybe it's a joke, or maybe they've got a grudge. Why don't you just forget about it. If they've done it to piss you off then don't let them get to you. If they've done it to have a laugh then there's even less reason to be put out. Right?"

Aaron started nodding.

"Maybe.... maybe let's just have one more drink and call it a night. Tomorrow I'll come over and if that thing's still there then we'll shift it out together. What do you say?"

Aaron reached over and patted me on the shoulder, some of his poise returning. He poured a pair of shots and then capped the bottle. "I can be a stupid old man sometimes. Thank you," he said, and raised his glass.

"All the others..." he began. "After all this time all the others still see you as a turncoat. I don't get why you did it, but you're still a good neighbour. I'm glad to have you around here."

I stared down at my glass, a little embarrassed. "Thanks, Aaron, it's good to hear someone say that," I answered gratefully.

I finished my drink quickly. I wouldn't say I was in a hurry to get out, but I was starting to feel uncomfortable. I didn't want to stay there any longer than I had to, so I made my way to the door.

"I see you tomorrow then," I said, shaking his hand.

"Thanks," he repeated.

As I left I glanced nervously at the gravestone to the side. I had told Aaron that someone must have put it there deliberately. We lived in a small town on a small island. Like Aaron I knew almost everyone, and out of all those people I couldn't think of a single one who would have done such a thing.

The following morning I made my way to Aaron's house as promised. I wasn't surprised not to see him working away in his garden. He had hit the whisky pretty hard the night before, hard enough to keep any novice drinker in bed until well after midday. I guessed he was sleeping off a painful case of regret. Nevertheless, although I couldn't be completely sure, it seemed like it might have been the first morning Aaron hadn't been around to greet me on my early walk. Maybe I should have been more alarmed, but in some ways it was a refreshing change. Very little changed on our island -- in fact change was actively resisted -- so a break in the morning routine offered me the chance to see things with a slightly different perspective. I decided to let him sleep in.

It was only as I was about to walk by that I noticed: the grave had gone.

That explained it, I figured. Inspired by a bellyful of alcohol Aaron had gone for a renewed attack on the gravestone. Obviously he had succeeded and felt he deserved the

morning off. I wasn't about to argue with that. I went on my way and didn't give it another thought.

It was a quiet day at the office so I made my way back just a few hours later. There was a small crowd gathered outside Aaron's house. I began to feel sick. The sensation worsened when I saw an ambulance parked in the drive.

"What's going on?" I asked, not caring who the answer came from.

A handful of people turned to look at me. Some looked away immediately. Some made sure to shoot me a few daggers first. Just a couple kept their eyes on me, their focus narrowing with suspicion.

Gail Masters, our deputy chief constable, saw me and walked over. I hadn't been around when she was appointed, but I gather there was something of a storm about it. Chief Travis had gotten into his head that the local police force needed a shake-up, and Gail was it. That was the official word, anyway. The other story was that he had a thing for Gail. Nothing had ever come of that. Neither had anything ever come of Gail's attempts to change a few things around the island. She had long ago giving up trying and had settled for doing little else than following Travis' lead.

However, just occasionally I could still see the fire behind her eyes, as if she was simply waiting for her chance. I wondered if this would be it.

First, though, she had to do her job, and her line of questioning didn't put me any more at ease about whatever was going on. "Afternoon Greg - uh, sorry, Mr. Micheals - can you tell when was the last time you saw Aaron?" she asked.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" I countered.

"At this moment I can't tell you anything," she stonewalled me. "It would help if you could tell me when you last saw Aaron?"

I looked at her warily. "Last night."

"Okay," Gail nodded significantly. "Did you talk about anything?"

I gave her another a sharp look, but she didn't back down. "He was upset. Someone had stuck a gravestone in his garden, a practical joke I guess. He was having some trouble removing it."

Gail scanned over the garden quickly. "I don't see a gravestone."

"No. It was over by the window there," I pointed. "I suppose he must have shifted it after I left."

At that moment Chief Travis emerged from Aaron's house. He looked pale.

"Aaron's dead," he announced bluntly. There was no point being discreet about it - word would have flown across the island in a matter of hours anyway.

"Are you sure?" Gail asked stupidly. Few people died unexpectedly on the island, I could understand her shock.

"Yes - I'm sure."

Gail stepped over to Travis. As discreet as she tried to be I could still hear her when she asked Travis: "Don't you think we should call in the mainland on this one? If he's been murdered we - "

"We do our job," Travis cut her off. "This is our business, we don't need to call in anyone else. Now, does anyone here know anything or have you just been standing her picking dust off your uniform?"

I chose that moment to step forward. "What happened?" I asked.

Travis looked at me as if he preferred not to answer the question. Or maybe he was just looking at me to try and figure out if I was responsible. Eventually he simply said: "Murder."

Then it was my turn to ask the stupid question: "Are you sure?"

Travis sighed heavily. He looked up at the sky, then turned back to me. The look on his face told me everything. Whatever state Aaron was in, it wasn't anything he could have done to himself.

"I believe Mr Michaels here is the last person to have seen Aaron alive," Gail blurted out helpfully.

"Not the last person," I replied quickly. "He was still alive when I left him."

Gail looked abashed. "I'm sorry, Greg, I didn't mean - what I meant to say is Mr Michaels has some useful information. I gather someone was playing a trick on Aaron - perhaps it went wrong."

Travis perked up at the prospect of a lead. "What sort of trick?"

"Well," I began, "there was this gravestone that someone had planted in his garden - "

"A what?" came a voice from the crowd.

I looked around. A man walked over to us, a look of dread slowly spreading over his face. I recognised him as Evan West, he owned a small dry cleaning business. I'd used his services once or twice in the past few years, but Evan always took care to make sure I realised he was doing me a favour by taking my money, so I did all my cleaning at home these days. Right now he was looked too scared to even acknowledge it was me he was talking to.

"Did you say a gravestone?" he asked.

"Yes. It's not there now, but it was right - " I started to point, but Evan interrupted me.

"There was a g-gravestone right outside my door this morning. In the front garden," he stammered. "I swear it wasn't there last night..."

Travis nodded. "Relax, Evan. It sounds like a practical joke to me. I'm sure all this has nothing to do with gravestones."

Evan looked distraught. "But what if this - " he suddenly grabbed my arm. "You said there was a gravestone in Aaron's garden. Now he's dead. What if I'm next? What about my family..."

Gail stepped in. "Listen, Evan, if it'll make you feel better you can stay at my house tonight - there's plenty of room for your family. Just come over when you're ready."

"Do you mean that?" Evan look at her in wonder.

"Of course, just get whatever you need and come over when you're ready. Me and Dave would - we'd love to have you over."

Evan almost went to hug Gail, but stopped short and just shook her hand instead. "Thank you, I can't tell you - thank you."

And with that Evan hurried off. Travis shook his head, giving Gail a critical look. She shrugged. Then Travis moved over to me, talking in hushed tones.

"Listen, we need to clear this situation up quickly. It'd really help me out if you could come by the station in a while and tell me whatever you know."

I knew that Travis could have ordered me to the station, but he hadn't. He had a way of getting the best out of everyone just by making us all feel like we were mucking in. Even me.

"No problem, Chief," I replied. "I'll head on over right now."

The next morning I fancied there was a change in the atmosphere on the island. Perhaps it's just the benefit of hindsight, but I was already counting it as the third day. Maybe it was just waking up and realising that the first person I saw each day would no longer be Aaron working away in his garden.

Travis had given me every impression the day before that I was beyond suspicion, nodding and making notes as I spelled out the details of Aaron's battle with the grave stone. Once I had finished he escorted me to the door with the customary: "If we need anything else..." disclaimer, carefully adding: "I know you and Aaron were friendly - I'll be sure to let you know as soon as we get the bastard who did this."

I sat around for as long as I could that morning, taking my time over my coffee and eggs. I figured I'd wander into town eventually, but there was only one clear thought in my head: Evan.

Overnight the idea had been circling in my head that Aaron had been marked. After all, what were gravestones if not markers? Of course, it was possible that Aaron's murder had been nothing more than a horrible coincidence. I would have liked to believe that, but Travis told me that his men had searched Aaron's house and garden from top and bottom and hadn't found anything even closely resembling a gravestone. Travis may well have taken that to suggest I was lying, but it meant something very different to me: whoever had murdered Aaron had taken the stone with them. I was starting to believe that Aaron's murder and that gravestone were irrevocably linked, and now someone else on the island had been marked.

Neither Evan's nor Gail's home was on my usual route, so there was no way I could casually stroll past either without it seeming at least a little bit suspect. In the end I decided Travis could add me to his list if he wanted. I picked up the phone and dialled Gail's house.

There was no answer.

I searched my phone book and dialled Evan's number next. I didn't expect anyone to be there, and I was right.

I called Gail again. I figured, between Gail and her husband, and Evan and his wife and their two children, that there should be at least one person around to answer the phone.

No one answered.

Finally I called Travis.

"Chief Travis here," he answered, sounding just a little stressed.

"It's Greg Michaels - "

"Yeah, Greg, we've got nothing to tell you just yet."

"No, it's not that - I was trying to get hold of Evan, but there's no one answering at Gail's..."

"Bloody tart's late - had to make my own coffee, I'm sitting here answering the phones..." Then Travis broke off. "No answer, you say?"

"That's right. It occurred to me, this morning, to ask Evan if it was the same gravestone in his garden - you know, the same as the one I saw at Aaron's." It was true that the thought had only just occurred to me, in fact at that very moment, but it gave me a decent reason for trying to contact Evan.

Travis didn't say anything.

A moment later: "Hang on..."

Another minute later Travis came back on the line: "Listen, can you meet me, uh, can you meet me at Evan's? Let's go see if that gravestone is still there."

"Sure."

I got to Evan's house quickly, but only because I wasn't planning on stopping there for long. As I expected there was no one there, not even Travis.

As I also expected there was no gravestone either.

I took a few moments to study Evan's front garden. He hadn't mentioned where the gravestone had been, but there was a small patch below one of the windows that looked like it could have been freshly turned over. Across the entire garden that was the only sign I could find that anything might have been disturbed in the last day.

I then hurried over to Gail's house.

Immediately it was obvious that something was very, very wrong. I could see Travis standing with his back to the open front door of Gail's house. A small crowd had gathered on the porch. The mood was tense. Travis was trying single-handedly to keep the others at bay, but even as I was walking over I saw him retreat another couple of steps. Already something was starting to break down on the island, and it looked as though Travis could end up first in the firing line. Eventually one of the men managed to push past and storm his way through the doorway. He returned just seconds later, looking pale. At that point the fire seemed to go out of the crowd and everyone drew back. Travis slumped, all but collapsing on the front step.

I walked over to him. As I reached the house I glimpsed a terrible vision of death through the door. I immediately looked away, but knew I would never forget what I had seen - the inside of the house was savagely wrecked, someone's arm lay motionless in the hallway, there was dirt everywhere.

And blood. So much blood.

"Travis?" I asked.

He looked up and I could see he was broken. There wasn't much left of the man I'd spoken to yesterday. "All of them," he whispered. "They're all dead. Gail, Alan, Evan, the children... the children are dead."

I tried to say something sensible, but the only word that came out was: "What...?"

"Just like Aaron," Travis continued, then broke off. For a ghastly moment I thought he was chuckling, then I realised he was sobbing.

The man who had pushed his way into the house marched up to us. He was almost hysterical. "Gail opened her house to them, and look what happened. The police aren't safe. No one's safe. What are you going to do?"

He looked at me accusingly, perhaps thinking because I stood next to Travis I was his new deputy. I just shook my head, not knowing what to tell him. He continued to stare at me, wild-eyed. Having glimpsed what was inside I could understand how his senses might have left him. Among us only Travis knew if it was the same death that had visited Aaron, and if it was then any of us on the island could expect the same thing. After a few more moments the man simply wandered off, drawing most of the others away with him.

"Travis?" I looked down at the Chief. "Travis?!"

Eventually he gazed up. "I, uh, I need to phone the coroner..." he said, climbing wearily to his feet. He took a few steps to his car, then turned back to me.

"Will you stay.. stay here with me? Just for... just for a bit?"

I nodded. "Sure."

After a few quiet moments Travis said to me: "You realise what your biggest mistake was?"

I looked at him, wondering in a brief panic if he was about to try and pin the murders on me. "What?" I, uh, I'm not sure I follow..."

"You came back, that's what you did wrong," he replied, without a trace of accusation in his voice. "Everyone... they all forgave you for leaving in the first place, they forgot about you, but when you came back everyone had to deal with that. Everyone had to start wondering why you left, and then everyone had to start figuring out why you came back."

I shrugged. "Everyone could have just asked me."

"No one likes to ask the hard questions around here," Travis replied.

After that we waited together, silently, for the coroner to arrive. As soon as he turned up I excused myself. I didn't care to see anyone else's reaction to what was waiting inside Gail's house, but more importantly I was starting to see the writing on the wall. If I was right then I wanted to make sure I was prepared.

It was that same day that the range of emotions elicited by Aaron's death -- alarm, curiosity, denial -- turned to outright fear. Not many people had known Aaron, and not many people really cared about him. But everyone knew Gail. She was young - or had been. She might not have accrued the same level of respect as Travis, but she was still supposed to be one of our protectors. Now she was dead.

The fear was growing. It was spreading around the island faster than gossip, and it was quickly turning to anger. In that situation what else was there to do but call a town meeting? I still have no idea who called it - I know for sure it wasn't Travis. There was a murderer on the island, and no one wanted to be the next victim. I suppose everyone reasoned they'd all shout about it for a while, as if that would save them. No one had a clue what was happening, or why, but towards the end it looked as though without anyone else to point a finger at they might just settle for Travis's head instead.

"You didn't do anything for Gail - your own deputy and you didn't save her. How do you think you're going to protect the rest of us?!" It was the same man who had blundered into Gail's house that morning. It seemed as though he'd spent the day gathering his own force of deputies. By that point he had the might of well over half the people attending to back up his anger.

I'd recognised him by then. Bruce Mitchell. Some years back I'd designed his house. Just like every other house I designed it was based on the same tired set of prints. When I'd suggested something a little different for Bruce's house he looked at me as though I'd just asked for a free night with his daughter. No one ever wanted anything new. Work had become easy over the years. Mind-numbingly easy.

"You should all calm down and let the police handle this..." Travis countered weakly, but it was clear he was already beaten.

"We taking care of ourselves now!" came a voice from the crowd.

Realising he had won the fight Bruce didn't waste any time. He turned round to the others: "We're going to find this bastard and give him what he deserves. We'll search everywhere until we get him. He can't hide. We know this island - we live here - we'll get him!"

The crowd roared their assent.

"Wayne? Wayne?!" he summoned.

"I'm here," came Wayne's voice as he pushed through the crowd. I recognised him from some years back. We hadn't really talked in a long time. Wayne had his own friends, apparently Bruce was one of them. I can't say I missed either man's presence in my life.

"This is what we do - Wayne, you start at the dock and move east. We'll start on the east side and meet you halfway. If you find him... well, you know what to do."

Wayne nodded and his posse made their way out. Bruce started to lead the rest away, then he stopped and looked at me keenly. There was a vicious glint in his eye.

"You," he said. "You're gonna come with us."

I looked over at Travis, but his eyes were down. "I don't think so," I replied.

He walked over and leaned in till I could feel his breath on my cheek. He spoke as though his whispers were laced with strychnine: "You're gonna come with us. You've never really fitted in here since you came back. Everyone knows you were the last person to see Aaron alive, and there you were hanging around at Gail's house this morning as well. So, yeah, you're gonna come with us."

I'd seen a hint of what had happened to Gail and Evan and their families, and I knew that we might all end up the same way, but that moment was the first, maybe the only, time that I felt the same fear that was possessing the others. However, I was scared for a different reason. I didn't much like Bruce's chances of tracking down a murderer that night, and imagined he might decide to exercise his thirst for justice on me instead. Of course, running would just as surely seal my fate. I had no choice but to go.

Two hours later dusk was falling and our group had found nothing. Bruce had led us halfway around the island, his righteous energy just about keeping the rest of his followers moving. I'd considered making a break for it on more than one occasion, but it really hadn't been worth it. The fire was slowly going out of the search party. Sooner or later people would start drifting away by themselves, and I'd eventually go with them.

As agreed Wayne and the others were waiting for us at the halfway mark. Wayne was looking as weary as the rest of his group. The only person with any real energy left appeared to be Bruce. He was so fired up he was just about falling out of his skin.

"Find anything?" he asked.

Wayne shook his head. "No. What do you want to do now?"

Then things happened with a chilling suddenness. Bruce paused a moment in his indecision. And that was all the time it took for someone in Wayne's group to say: "We didn't see a gravestone - anyone out of you lot see a gravestone?"

"No the gravestone's at -" someone started to reply. Bruce shot a vicious glance at the speaker, but it was already too late.

Wayne frowned, almost piecing it all together. "What...?"

I helped him finish the puzzle. Condemn me if you like, for all the good it'll do now, but whichever side I was on that night it definitely wasn't Bruce's.

I looked straight at him. "It's at your's isn't it? The gravestone's at your house, that's why you've got everyone hunting all over the rest of the island - hoping no one would find it."

Wayne nodded to someone by his side, the man darted off in the direction of Bruce's house.

Bruce started to panic, imploring the others: "We've got to find them. You didn't see what they did to Gail. I'm not going back to be butchered in my own house. We've got to find them. I'm not going back!"

I saw the crowd slowly move away from Bruce and side up to Wayne instead. Bruce looked around pleadingly. For a moment his eyes even fell on me, as if I'd offer him any support. "You can all give up - I'm carrying on!"

He turned away, making as if to stride off. Wayne said: "Stop him" and seconds later two pairs of hands had stopped Bruce getting more than a few steps away.

Wayne spoke out, with new authority now. "You saw what happened to Guy and his family. That's not happening to anyone else here. You've been marked. No one else."

There was a general sound of agreement from the others. At that moment Wayne's sidekick came running breathlessly back. He was nodding: "Yeah, there's a grave right outside his house. Think he tried to cover it with his dustbin..."

"You thought we wouldn't find out?" demanded Wayne. "Thought someone else would bite your bullet too? No, you're going back now. Before anyone of us gets taken down with you."

Bruce scoured the crowd, searching for one friendly face, but even he knew it was futile. He slumped.

"Bring him," Wayne ordered, then he held up a hand. "Just a minute," he said, looking around.

"Bruce?" he asked. "Where's your wife?"

Now Bruce started struggling again. "No, please."

"Is she there? Is she at home?" asked Wayne.

"I know where she'll be," someone offered, quickly looking away when he caught the look of open-mouthed despair on Bruce's face that this act of betrayal produced.

"Get her," Wayne ordered. "Bring her back. Can't risk someone else getting marked on her account. I reckon we need the whole family at home."

Suddenly Bruce managed to make a run for it, but got no more than five feet before a dozen people wrestled him brutally to the ground.

Wayne walked over. "You're going back to your house," he ordered. "And you're gonna stay there. But when this bastard comes for you we'll get him. Maybe you'll be lucky and we'll get him before he gets you, but he'll come for you sooner or later and we'll all be there waiting. Don't you worry about that. Come on!"

I suppose I wish I could say I felt remorse as they dragged him, screaming, back to his own doorstep. In all honestly all I felt was relief that no one was looking at me anymore, and I didn't feel much of that. Now I was just another man in the mob. I didn't make any effort to help out, I just followed the rest of them to Bruce's house so I could see what happened next.

There was more screaming when we got there. It came from a woman I assumed was Bruce's wife. She was fighting. At least three men had hold of her, dragging her towards the house. A few other men were restraining an older woman, her mother I guessed. She was

struggling with every ounce of her strength to protect her daughter. It was one of the ugliest scenes I had ever witnessed.

Perhaps Wayne thought so too. "Be a man why don't you?" he implored Bruce. "You want everyone to see your wife screaming like that?"

Remarkably some of the dignity returned to Bruce's broken posture. He was trembling, but he just about managed to look Wayne in the eye and promised: "We'll be waiting. If they come for us, we'll be waiting for you."

Then he went over to his wife. After a few words they walked, arms tightly around each other, into the house. The woman's mother stayed by the front gate, obviously fighting an urge to run after them. As they entered the house, closing the door behind them, there was almost an audible sigh of release from those gathered outside. The tension dropped. A few people sat down.

At that moment my attention was drawn to the gravestone. It was sitting, as I expected it to be, close to one of the front windows of the house. An upturned bin lay a few feet away. As far as I could tell it was the same grave stone I'd seen in Aaron's garden. Probably the same one that had been outside Evan's house.

I was suddenly certain that whatever happened we wouldn't be able to save the two people inside that house. I wandered over to Wayne.

"So what's the plan now then?" I asked him.

"What?" he replied, caught unawares.

"Your plan. Are we watching in shifts? All staying here until something happens? Is anyone keeping watch? What's the plan?"

Wayne shrugged. Of course he hadn't thought this far. There was a reason he had been one of those following Bruce's lead, until tonight at least.

I directed his attention away from the house. A few of his people were already heading off. "If this is something we can stop then tonight's our best chance to do it," I pointed out. "But how are we going to manage that if your people won't even stand guard?"

"Hey!" Wayne shouted. Some of the stragglers stopped and turned back. A few kept going.

"Listen up," he began. "We've got to stay on watch. We've all got to stay here. If the bastard comes tonight we can stop him for good."

"Sod it, I'm not sticking around here!" came at least one reply, but most stood to listen to Wayne.

"What are we going to do?" someone asked. "Bait him?"

"We should lay a trap," suggested someone else.

"As if he's going to turn up with us all standing outside," claimed another voice.

Wayne was well out of his depth: "Uh, we'll, uh, we'll wait out of sight."

"Someone should stay near the house."

Wayne nodded: "Okay, yes, someone stay near the house."

"Yeah - whoever stays by the house will be the first to go! It won't be me!"

Wayne, flustered, looked at me. Then the darkness seemed to fall over all of us. Suddenly any decisions were taken out of our hands.

A scream came from inside the house. A man's scream. Shrill. Terrified. Barely even human. This was followed by an horrific staccato sound, pitched somewhere between a dry scream and a desperate clawing for breath. The mother broke her vigil by the front gate and ran shrieking to the house. She flung open the door and ran in. Almost immediately her own screams joined the chorus.

Wayne, open mouthed, actually took a step forward. He then stopped. No one, least of all me, wanted to go anywhere near that house. A few people ran in terror, hands clamped over their ears to block out the terrible sounds. Something was breaking inside the house. Glass smashing, wood splintering. There were other sounds that I didn't want to try and think about too closely: the sounds of people breaking. Absurdly that was the moment I noticed all the lights had gone out in the house. That was where the darkness had come from.

Someone inside found their voice. There was a final piercing shriek.

Then silence.

No one moved. No one stepped towards the house. No one tried to walk away. It seemed that no one even dared breathe. Then someone in the distance started crying and gradually the crowd came back to life. People looked nervously from one another, but no one dared go near the house.

And this is just about where my story ends. I was hoping to have a little longer, maybe long enough to figure out what's been going on, if there even is an explanation. I guess now I'll have to leave that up to the others, but I don't fancy anyone's chances much.

You see, there's a gravestone outside my house today.

It wasn't that much of a surprise, not if you work on the assumption that everyone on the island is going to be marked sooner or later. I'd hoped to be later, but what can you do? It didn't mean the bastard thing didn't stop me dead in my tracks the second I saw it. Just a plain gray slab of stone, that's all it was, with an inscription too worn to read. I knew what it meant, though, and the fear almost took me over. For a second I couldn't catch my breath. My head started to spin.

Then I pulled it all together and went for my walk.

Since it was the last walk I'd ever enjoy I made it last. When I eventually got home there was a group of people waiting for me. I didn't see Wayne among them.

"You here to make sure I don't go wandering off anywhere?" I asked.

"That's about it," one of them answered. I didn't know who he was and I didn't really care.

"Well I'm heading back in now. I don't expect you'll see me again." And with that I opened my door and went to enter my house for the last time.

Before I closed the door a thought occurred to me. I turned back to the group and, with a dazzling smile, said: "Enjoy the show".

And this is where I've been since then. Writing down the whole story so that maybe someone, somewhere might find out what happened here. Soon there's going to be none of us left. I don't really mind that. I don't mind being one of the first to go either. Nothing ever changes on this island. This place is dead in its heart. I tried to leave a decade or two ago. For a time I thought I could live a real life in the outside world. I was wrong about that and came back with my tail between my legs, came back to an island that hadn't really forgiven me for wanting to be different and didn't want me back anyway.

The place is dead. I've been as good as dead for the last ten years. I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be made official.

It's dark now. I think I can hear something moving.

I'm prepared. By that I don't mean I'm ready to go out like Evan, Gail and the others. No way. I mean that I visited the chemist the other day to pick up a few things. All things that are perfectly harmless taken on their own, but in the right mixture they should see me out a lot more easily than... well, easier than what I heard last night.

I've just taken enough sedative to bring down an elephant. I just hope it works quickly enough. If it doesn't I've got a knife to help me finish off the job. I'll try to keep writing as long as I can.

Now I can hear the noises. I wonder if this is what the others heard. Nothing happened outside Bruce's house last night. Whoever, or whatever, came for him was already inside. I think I know how. I can hear the noises coming from underneath.

I'm not going to look.

It's digging it's way in. It's coming up from the ground. I think I can hear something behind me now. I can hear the dirt. Dirt falling to the ground.

I'm not going to look.

Something behind me. Shadow on the screen in front of me. An arm. It's here.

No.

I'm not going to look.

I'm not going to