

'X' Marks the Spot

It was cold, and in spite of the fact that it was only slightly after 6 P.M., it was already dark outside. The full December moon which rose early cast its rays over the pristine blanket of snow that covered the ground. There was a dusting of the icy substance which clung to the trees and an even smaller amount that had come to rest on the undergrowth beneath the trees' towering branches. The pillowy remains of a contrail left by a passing airplane were the only obstructions that the moonlight met on its way to the earth below. I could see the lights of the nearby town emanating through the pillars of wood off to the left.

I liked long walks on cold nights like this. It was a good way to clear my head of all of the bullshit that had gone on while I was stuck in my cramped little office during the course of the day. I always thought that once I got out of high school that people would act more mature; boy, was I wrong. It was the petty inconsequential crap that really grated on my nerves and drove me to find a way to release the pent up frustrations.

Working in the same place for the last three years had been great. I had made a lot of friends, and now that our company was really going places, we had drawn attention from some outside investors. Their money was necessary to launch our company to the "next level" as they called it. That was where we could really make some serious money, but at the same time, all of the fucking hoops we had to jump through to get their money almost made it not worth the effort. Several of my coworkers had already made that decision and jumped ship.

As I wandered the woods lost in my reverie of the solitude, the quietness, the void where no crap from work dared to venture, I tripped and fell flat on my face in the snow. I

cursed at my stupidity for not even watching where my next step would fall and regained my feet. As I looked down to see the branch that I had stumbled upon, all thought of my lousy day at work vanished from my mind. It wasn't a branch; it was an arm.

I grabbed my cell phone from the cheap plastic holster that kept it fastened to my side and tethered me to my job like a dog on an ethereal chain. I dialed the direct number to the local sheriff's office from memory. As my fingers quickly punched the buttons on the keypad, my breath quickened from a combination of the cold and a slight touch of asthma which was brought on by the sudden rush of adrenaline through my veins.

"Washington County Sheriff's Department. How can I help you?" came the bored sound of my friend Jeff's voice over the radio waves. He was one of the evening shift dispatchers at the department.

"Jeff, it's Rob," I told him through short quick breaths. "I just found a body!"

"Quit fuckin' around,"

"I'm dead serious," I gasped.

"Now I know you're just screwin' with me, or you wouldn't be making puns like that," he said. I could hear the sarcasm dripping from his voice.

"No really. I'm serious," I told him. "I'm out walkin' in the woods west of my house, and I just tripped over an arm!"

"Just the arm or the whole person?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I just tripped over it and fell on my nose in the snow. I'm not goin' diggin' to see if it's a whole body or just an arm!"

"Hang on."

I could hear Jeff key up the radio in the background and dispatch the deputy who was on duty toward my location. I waited patiently for him to come back to the phone because I knew he would also be entering a call log for this information as well as making sure that the audio recording of the call was saved to a file on their digital monitoring system. The long pause also gave me time to slow my breathing to a more normal pace.

“I’m back,” he finally said.

“I’m still out here freezin’ and lookin’ at a dead arm.”

The nonchalance in my voice spoke volumes to my friend about how unnerved I was feeling at the moment. It was not possible to turn on the television without seeing dead people scattered all over every channel, but the media sanitizes the emotion and the mind jarring impact of actually being placed in a situation where you are confronted by the stark reality of murder.

I looked closer at the appendage lying in the snow. It was a delicate arm and had to be from a young woman or a child. The fingers were spread out and covered in dirt and grime which must have been there for weeks. It had not been in the woods long enough for decay to have removed the flesh from the bones, but you could definitely see green undertones where the process had begun. A flannel shirt covered the arm to the wrist and the upper portion of the limb was buried in the snow.

The sounds of the approaching sirens drew my attention away from the body part, and I looked up to see a line of three police vehicles coming up the street near my house.

“Hey, Jeff.”

“Yeah?”

“You might want to tell them to go ahead and stop half way between my house and the Spellmans’, then head off into the woods west of there,” I advised. “It’ll be a shorter walk.”

“I’ll let ’em know,” he said.

As Jeff relayed the message, I could see the line of cars slow down and stop about three hundred yards away. Although there would have only been one deputy on duty, the two cops from the city police department would have come along on a call like this. I was expecting to see a state trooper coming along any time now as well.

“Tell them I’m about three hundred yards due west of them right now”

Again I could hear Jeff key up his radio and relay the information to the law enforcement officials who were now making their way toward me on foot. Beams of light played on the ground around them as they walked in my direction. Obviously one of them was bright enough to devise the plan of looking for my tracks in the snow to make me easier to find. The officer on the far left must have stumbled upon them first because the beams of light converged in his direction and then winked out. It did not take them long to reach the area where I had made my gruesome discovery.

I recognized the deputy right away, but I did not know the two city cops. “Hey, Jim,” I said.

He slightly nodded his head as he replied, “Robert. What in God’s name did you stumble on out here?”

Although he was still several feet away from me, the smell of garlic on his breath was very prominent. I had probably pulled the entire group away from their dinner at the

local pizza place. I pointed to the ground where the frozen body part protruded from the snow. “I was just out for a walk and tripped over that,” I explained.

Jim pulled his rechargeable flashlight from the duty belt at his waist and shone the high-powered beam of light on the arm. The other two officers, followed suit and began searching the ground in the area for any other signs of something out of the ordinary. Slowly the deputy began to approach the appendage. He knelt down in the powdery, white snow and began to brush aside the cold concealing ice crystals using the back of his glove to make sure that he did not disturb any potential evidence.

Satisfied that nothing else unusual was going to be found, the other two policemen began to approach the scene. I also drew closer so that I could see what would be revealed hidden in the snow. As Jim cleared the area where the arm should have been attached to a shoulder, I could see that the limb was not connected to the rest of the body. I shuddered to think of the pain that would have caused if it had been separated premortem.

Jim looked up to one of the city officers and asked, “Did you bring your camera with you, Shawn?”

The other officer silently nodded his acknowledgement and produced a slim digital camera from the utility pocket in the front of his heavy coat. He pointed the lens at the body part lying on the ground and took a few digital shots of the scene. The flash from the small camera illuminated the trees like a burst of lightning during a spring thundershower.

“It looks like there’s something else under the arm,” Shawn said as he carefully placed the camera back into his pocket.

“I noticed that too,” said Jim. “I wanted to make sure that we had record of where this arm was before I moved it to see what’s under there.”

“I don’t think there’s enough snow out here to cover an entire body unless it’s partially buried,” said the third officer, who had been looking around at the ground.

“True,” I said. “I noticed that too.”

Shawn gave me a haughty look and said, “Just let us do the law enforcement work, okay?”

An indignant wave of warm blood rushed to my face, but before I could put the ignorant officer in his place, Jim interjected on my behalf, “You might want to rethink your attitude there, Shawn. This is Robert Barrows,” the deputy explained as he threw a thumb in my direction, “Rob was a reserve with our department for a while, so he does know a thing or two about law enforcement.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, man,” Shawn apologized, looking a little lost after having been knocked off of his throne.

“No problem,” I said as the heat began to drain from my face.

All of our attention was quickly drawn back to the ground as Jim reached down to lift the arm from its resting place. He cradled one of his hands under that of the lifeless appendage and delicately pinched the flannel away from the flesh on the upper part of the limb. He tugged the arm up and away from the ground, the fabric had frozen to the earth in several places. Jim began to laugh as he looked at the arm which he held in his hands. Under the circumstances, it was an eerie sound and made my skin crawl.

“It’s just the arm off a mannequin,” he explained, snapping the tension like a broken guitar string, “just a stupid mannequin.”

The other two officers began to laugh as well, and I nervously joined in. “How long ago do you think it was killed?” Jim asked with a mock serious expression on his face.

The city cops nearly doubled over with laughter, and I began to laugh as well realizing how foolish I appeared to them. “What was under it?” I asked Jim as I tried to contain myself.

The deputy reached into the snow and pulled up the mannequin’s other arm which had been buried beneath the one that had caused me to end up sprawling on the ground only minutes before. I pointed at the spot on the ground which had been beneath the crossed arms, “Ooh, ‘X’ marks the spot!” I said, trying to be amusing and fit in like one of the guys. “Maybe we better start diggin’.”

Shawn brought his radio up to his mouth and pressed the button to transmit back to their department, “Lincoln P.D., this is 92-17. False alarm. All units 10-8. Over.”

“Clear,” came the fuzzy reply from the Lincoln city dispatcher.

The Lincoln city police officers turned to head back toward their cars still laughing, and Jim rose from his position in the snow with an arm dangling from each hand. The deputy turned to look at me with a big smile on his face, “Well, at least you made it an interesting night for me.”

“Believe me,” I said, “it wasn’t my intention to make it an interesting night for you.”

Jim and I began the trek back to the road so that he could return to his dinner, and I could go back home and relax for what was left of the evening.

“So, what’ve you been up to since you quit spendin’ your time hangin’ out at the Sheriff’s Department?” Jim asked.

“Not much other than workin’ way too much,” I said. “I started at the Shipman Corporation about three years ago and now I’m with the Bundy Group since they just recently bought controlling interest in our company; they’ve got me working in mergers and acquisitions.”

“That sounds fun,” he remarked.

“It’s a lot of careful planning, and then you have to move at just the right time,” I explained. “It’s a little like chess; there’s a lot of strategy involved in the process.”

Jim gave me a sideways look, “Yeah, sounds real fun.”

“It pays well, and I get to travel back and forth from here to the big city a lot,” I said. “Anything been goin’ on at the department other than the Sheriff’s latest affair?”

“Not much,” he replied through a muffled chuckle and shake of his head. “I think you know us a little bit too well.”

“I’ve spent too much time away. I don’t really know you guys that well anymore,” I told him. “Besides, there isn’t anybody at the department that knows me that well anymore either.”

“We all know you well enough to give you a hard time about findin’ a dead mannequin every time we see you,” he replied with a good-natured smile.

I looked over at the deputy with a knowing grin beginning to take a foothold on my lips, “I was afraid of that.”

We were rapidly approaching Jim’s car through the wooden pillars which began to thin out near the edge of the woods. The moonlight was still extremely bright even

through the vaulted branches over head. As we reached his cruiser, the deputy placed the arms on the hood of the car and opened the door. He leaned in and pressed the trunk release button which was mounted squarely in the center of the dashboard of the Crown Victoria. The rear deck gently popped up to the accompaniment of a mechanical clunking sound. The deputy picked up the arms, held them out toward me, and again assumed his mock serious look, “I need to get back to the department and file these into evidence a.s.a.p.”

I turned my head from side to side in disbelief, “I’m never going to live this down am I?”

“Probably not,” he said.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I told him, as he irreverently dropped the crossed arms into the back of his car.

“Try not to have too much fun the rest of the night,” Jim replied.

I smiled back at him, “I can’t promise you anything.”

The walk from the police car back to my front door was very short. I placed my key into the handle and turned the lock to allow myself entrance into the house. My nose was greeted by the smell of garlic from the pizza that I had gotten delivered prior to my walk. I strolled over to the table and placed my hand on the top of the box. It was still warm to the touch. The muffled sound of the television reached my frigid ears from the living room. The evening news was almost over. I could also make out the muffled screams of the missing girl who was the topic of the main story. The sound of the police sirens must have started her most recent bout of hysterics. She had disappeared from the campus of the university in the big city just a few days earlier.

I had noticed the grungy mildew covered arms of the mannequin in a dumpster near my office several months ago. Some deep, dark part of my mind resonated at the mere sight of the plastic appendages. I had thrown them into the trunk of my car in almost the same careless manner as that of the deputy who had just taken them back to the Sheriff's Department to throw them away. They had been lying in the woods since the day after I found them in the dumpster. I also knew intimately the tendency for local law enforcement officers to eat pizza every Tuesday night. When the unwitting pizza delivery boy had confirmed that they were all sitting down to eat for the evening, I knew it was time to act. The small woods were located conveniently near my home, and they were also very close to the local pizza place which was nestled out at the edge of town. The co-ed was unfortunate enough to have purchased the same sweatshirt that I had just bought the day before. She was just one of a whole sea of young women at the university near the corporate office in the big city. Our sweatshirt was the only thing that had singled her out.

I would be the laughing stock at the local police and sheriff's departments for a long while for having discovered a dead mannequin, but I had carefully planned that little ruse so that the local cops would never think to look at the small area of ground below where they had discovered the juxtaposed limbs. The rush of adrenaline and the nervous behavior had not been caused by the discovery of a corpse but by the fear that I might get caught in my little gambit before I had had the chance to enjoy it. It had been a necessary risk to setup the perfect burial place for the young woman's remains and any that would happen to follow. 'X' marks the spot!