

Ligonier Valley Writers Flash Fiction Contest

Honorable Mention

Undisturbed

by Barbara Parker of Radford, VA

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It was early fall, and I was going to visit my cousin Jack. He lived next to a dilapidated cemetery. His house was shaped like a crescent moon, making the graves visible from almost every window of the house.

As I approached the house, I saw that someone had cleaned the graves.

"Hey, Jack," I called.

"Sam," he said, smiling. His nose was crooked, and he was missing one of his front teeth.

"Dude, what happened to you?"

"I tripped and broke my nose. They set it, but it's still a little crooked."

"What about the tooth?"

He ran his tongue through the gap. "I'm getting that fixed next month."

"You getting a gold tooth?"

He laughed.

I sat in a lawn chair next to him, relaxing by the fire as the sun went down.

I saw fireflies. "Did you know fireflies blink to attract their mate? But this time of year, mating season is over. It's like last call for fireflies," I joked.

"The Japanese believed that fireflies are the souls of our dead loved ones."

"I hope none of them are Granny. She'd give us hell for drinking. I see someone cleaned up that cemetery."

"It was me. Every day I saw the graves, and it seemed sad."

"Well, Pop-pop always said respect the dead."

"That's where I busted up my face, tripped over a broken tombstone."

"Seriously? No good deed goes unpunished."

He smiled. He looks like a jack o'lantern, I thought. We sat in silence. But tonight, with the graves, the fireflies, and Jack's weird face, the silence felt uncomfortable.

"Sam," Jack said. "What's wrong with you?" The firelight illuminated his face.

"Nothing. Why would you say that?"

“Your knee is bouncing like crazy. You only do that when you’re nervous.”

I chuckled, hating how nervous it sounded. “I guess the graveyard got my imagination going wild.”

He laughed, reached over, and patted my knee. “Being out here with the graves makes a guy feel lonesome and nervous.” He stood up.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Wait for it,” Jack said. One by one, the windows lit up. There was a jack o’ lantern in each window.

“Little early for Halloween,” I said.

“Pop-pop used to say, an ugly face will scare the devil,” he said.

“The devil? Jack, you seeing the devil?” I was trying to joke, but I was getting scared.

“No, but I saw the dead.” He looked toward the graveyard.

“Granny said ghosts don’t live in the graveyard. They only come there if you come to visit,” I said.

“And I visited.” Jack turned to look at me. “I wanted to give them a nice resting place. But I disturbed them.”

My heart was beating loudly.

“They made me look like this.” He gestured toward his face. “And now I need the ugly faces to keep them away.”

“Jack, you’re talking crazy. It’s just an old cemetery. You’re letting your surroundings affect you. Why don’t we go into town? I saw the Green sisters last week. They’re both single again.”

“I said too much,” he said. “No good ever came from talking too much.” He sat down on the lawn chair. “I like you, Sam. I can always be quiet and comfortable with you.”

“We can do that again, Jack. We can sit by the fire and drink. We don’t have to talk.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you ran.”

“Ran from what?”

He gestured toward the cemetery. Lights appeared above the graves.

“Jack.” I started to laugh. It sounded hysterical. “This is a practical joke. Right?”

Jack stared at the graves.

“Seriously, Jack. Cut it out.”

“When I die, Sammy, don’t bury me in that graveyard.”

“We ain’t even 30. Why are you talking about burials?”

I took out my phone. No reception out here.

“Jack, come on. Why don’t we go and visit Brandon?” My voice was shaky, and I was shaking.

“You just have to make peace with it.”

“Peace with what?” I asked.

“They’re children, Sammy.”

I ran for the car and drove quickly past the cemetery. As soon as I got a cell signal, I called Brandon, Jack’s brother.

Brandon laughed. “He’s just messing with you. Go home and call him in the morning.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, cursing Jack.

In my apartment, I turned on all the lights and stayed awake most of the night. I couldn’t find any information about the cemetery online, so the next day I went to the Historical Society and asked questions.

“That’s the Barrett family cemetery. Scarlet fever got them; only Mr. Barrett and a niece survived. He built that strange house and then moved all the graves. He said he wanted to see his family from the windows of his house. The niece said the house wasn’t haunted until he disturbed the graves. She moved away.”

“What happened to Mr. Barrett?” I asked.

It took some time, but she found a newspaper article. She read it. “It says he died in a fire. Oh, my.” She put her hand over her heart. “Oh, my. The fire was caused by a jack o’ lantern that tipped over. Oh, my, that is peculiar.”

I ran out the door to my car and drove to Jack’s. When I saw the flames in the cemetery, I was terrified. Where was Jack? I found him sitting in front of his burning house on his lawn chair.

“Jack,” I said.

“Oh, Sam,” he said. “Have a seat.”

“Jack, what are you doing?”

He opened a beer. “Watching my house burn down. I’ll call the fire department when I’m sure it can’t be saved.”

“But Jack ...” I sat in a chair next to him. “Your house.”

“It’s all right, Sammy. You just have to make peace with it.”

“With what?”

“They want to be undisturbed.”

I nodded. We sat in silence and watched his house burn.