

THERE IS very little peace for a man with a body buried in his backyard. Jason Getty had grown accustomed to the strangling night terrors, the randomly prickling palms, the bright, aching surges of adrenaline at the sight of Mrs. Truesdell's dog trotting across the lawn with some unidentifiable thing clamped in its jaws. It had been seventeen months since he'd sweated over the narrow trench he'd carved at the back border of his property; since he'd rolled the body out of the real world and into his dreams.

Strangely though, it wasn't recalling the muffled crunch of bone that plagued him, nor the memory of the cleaning afterward, hours of it, all the while marveling that his heart could pound *that* hard for *that* long. No. It was that first shovelful of dark dirt spraying across the white sheet at the bottom of the grave that came to him every time he closed his eyes to sleep. Was it deep enough? He didn't know—he wasn't a gravedigger. Then again, in his mind he wasn't a murderer either, but facts are facts.

No disaster can stay shiny and new forever. No worry has ever been invented that the mind cannot bully down

into mere background noise. For the first few days and weeks, Jason thought of nothing else. Every night, sometimes twice a night (and one fretful night, the first time it rained, it was six times), he slipped through the shadows to the margin of evergreen and poplar that marked the end of his acreage to check and recheck the integrity of his secret. To his eyes, the irregular rectangle of disturbed earth might as well have been bordered in neon. It was a gaudy exhibit to the barbaric instinct that lay curled at the core of every tamed human brain. Evolution had brought us out of the trees, then culture had neutered the beast, but even a eunuch can get angry.

To his right, his little rancher offered up a cozy nook that glowed and whirred with modern conveniences. To his left and just beyond the trees, the ground fell away to a cleared swath of municipal land dotted with linked pairs of electrical towers marching off into the civilized distance. But this middle ground called back to him over and over, whispering, chanting in time with his knocking heart, to keep him ever mindful of the one moment he'd lost millennia of breeding and found himself the puppet of a howling primal rage.

Jason didn't sleep. He didn't eat. He filed his reports and managed his client list robotically and correctly, without forgetting for more than a few seconds at a time that a body was moldering under several feet of topsoil and pine needles thirty yards from his back door.

Then one day, Dave from Accounting made a joke and Jason laughed. The sound of it rang sudden and carefree, natural as a lightning strike. His skin stung as a warning blazed through his blood. *You've killed someone, you idiot. You buried him out back. Don't forget!* But by that time, five

minutes had already gone by, and he found, as more days came and went, that the spell became a worry, became a niggle, became part of who he was.

The heater blew his own sour breath back in his face as he sped home from the first time he'd allowed himself a break. He'd blurted, "Yeah, sure," at the unexpected invitation to Friday's after-work beers. The glow of good cheer faded with the parting handshakes, and in its place needles of chills played at odds with the sweat running in all his creases. No amount of anxious accelerator stomping made the drive home take less than forever. He'd bypassed the house altogether and fled straight into the woods, knowing he'd find . . . what? Nothing. Just trees and wooded rustling-quiet and the distant, sibilant whisper of freeway traffic.

The ground kept its promise to lie still, and the pines and leafy trees were faithful to sift camouflage over the scene. Jason's thoughts by day took on an uncriminal rhythm, but the burial came back each night to play against the inside of his eyelids, only in more Technicolor than there had actually been on that moonlit October night.

The anniversary of the incident erased much of his progress. Jason imagined the universe contained just enough irony to disallow him the turning of that last calendar page; the one that would symbolically stretch the hundred-odd steps from the back deck to the body, as if day 366 were a magical meridian in time—his own personal New Year's Day. He marked it, survived it, and spent another winter hibernating in a cocoon of fading anxiety. The nightmares, however, they lingered.

That spring, the neglected upkeep of his house snagged his attention and gave rise to a new and improved brand of concern. The shrubs were overgrown and the small front

garden bristled with three seasons of vagabond weeds, but somehow the thought of wielding a shovel and hoe turned his spine to putty and made everything in the pantry vaguely nauseating. Three consecutive Saturdays had him bravely facing down the shed door and left him three consecutive Sundays in bed with a fever of uncertain origin.

If home is where the heart is, Jason had lived in his throat for a long time. As such, not a lot of maintenance had been required beyond crunching antacids to cool the pipes. His paranoia resurfaced with the surety that the neighbors, even as spread out as they were, would begin to wonder about the shaggy disarray of his lawn. The nagging cycle of peering over his shoulder and in between the curtains crested again.

In May, the riotous blooming of dandelions and sow thistle left him with little choice: do it yourself or hire out. Dearborn's Landscaping contracted for the lowest bid to aerate and seed the front lawn, prune the bushes, weed and edge the front and side mulch beds, and plant low-maintenance perennials all around the entry and up the driveway. Jason aimed to keep himself from yard work for as long as possible and didn't mind writing off the cost one little bit. A craggy foreman named Calvin brought two young men and an open-mesh trailer full of rusty gadgets for the two-day job of grooming away a year and a half of avoidance.

Jason hovered out front all that first morning: washing his car, chatting up Calvin, making a Broadway production of checking the mail—twice at that, and well before the postman had even made his rounds. By midday, he dared to breathe a little easier, completely convinced that none of them would go one step farther than they had to.

A bold line had been drawn at the edge of their contractual obligation, and obviously no one was headed out back for fear of finding anything more to do.

He made himself a sandwich and watched the workmen from the windows for a while before wandering off to the den. He enjoyed a dog show on television, one ear straining for any out-of-place thump or rustle from the men outside. Hearing no such thing and wrung out from all his chafing, Jason let his head fall back against the easy chair. Just for a moment. The late-afternoon sun slanting in through the window weighed like warm gold coins on his eyelids. He fought the drag of them, but the orange glow was so pretty, so cheerful. The recliner cradled him close while the ceiling fan shushed the thoughts from his head.

In his dream, a young man in Dearborn's coveralls knelt in the grass. He smiled and nodded up to Jason after having just slotted the trowels and handforks back into his toolbox, absently brushing his hands clean of their work. Jason yammered gibberish. He flailed and capered, willing to do a bare-naked anything to stall off the inevitable moment when the gardener would look down again to gather up his kit. The young man, his face familiar but somehow not quite recognizable, listened intently as Jason babbled, all the while wiping bloody dirt from his hands onto a corner of white sheet that poked up from a ragged rent in the ground.

Jason tipped the carafe fully upside down to fill the mug beyond common sense's recommended limit. Once he'd added the cream, he realized that no one outside a Zen-tranced surgeon was lifting it from the counter without

spilling, and no doubt burning, a sloppy mess all over hand and Formica alike.

“Crap,” he muttered, and leaned down to blow steam from the brimming cup. The doorbell startled his pursed upper lip into the scalding coffee, and one flinch later, the imagined mess materialized pretty much as he’d predicted, although it was his lip, not his hand, that stung. “Crap,” he said again. At least the spill had left the mug manageably full. He gave it half a turn against the dish towel and brought it with him to the door.

Calvin and crew had arrived shortly after eight, expecting to be done by lunchtime. The front yard was now trim and tidy, and the flower bed’s machined edges were well beyond what Jason could have managed on his own with the shovel, even if he had been able to bring himself to touch it.

He’d felt better just watching them unload the trays of flowers. The glow of the colors was contagious, and the sprays of healthy green radiated rightness. Respectability had to be a well-kept garden, and Jason’s mood went warm at the sight of it. The workers had been at it for nearly two hours, and Jason expected a blushing request for restroom privileges. What he got instead, at the front door, was an eyeful of an ashen-faced Calvin.

“Mr. Getty—” It was all Calvin could manage.

“Yes?” Jason’s mouth answered on autopilot while a roar rose up in his ears, a nearly mechanical hum, as his mind calculated what in his yard could make a suntanned gardener turn white and trembling.

“Mr. Getty, we’ve found something. We think you’d better come have a look.”

“All right, just let me get some shoes.” Jason stumbled as he turned, sloshing more coffee out of the cup onto his

pants and the floor. But what did it matter? The game was up. *Thank God, I can't do this.* No, you can play dumb. You can run. *Why did they go back there?* Why were you stupid enough to hire a landscaping crew, you worthless, spineless . . . *must think: What the hell am I going to say?*

Somewhere on the way from the closet to the front door, Jason's mind went blank. He stopped berating himself and gave up casting around for canned answers to the inevitable questions awaiting him in the backyard. He simply walked out the door, pulling it shut behind him. Calvin stood, twisting his red baseball cap in his calloused hands. Jason nodded to him and followed him off the front stoop, numbed straight through to the soles of his feet.

The four of them gathered in a cluster, standing closer than men who didn't know each other normally would, staring down into the rich black-brown of newly turned soil. Jason had a number of abandoned ambitions and had once dreamed of being a doctor. He had pored over medical encyclopedias, memorizing words that carried mystery and clout on their convoluted syllables: frontal, parietal, sphenoid, zygomatic—they flooded his mind as he looked at the ground and labeled what he saw, what the other men saw as forehead, crown, temple, and cheek. The skull's eye sockets were filled with peat, but there was no mistaking the contours and ridges. A human being, or part of one at least, had been unearthed on Jason Getty's property.

Four men stood, three in horror and revulsion and one in complete bewilderment. Jason had followed Calvin down the front steps like a man on his way to the gallows. Part of his mind noted, with a pang of regret as they passed, that the living-room windows needed washing. He had turned around the corner of the west wall, past the den window

with its closed blinds, his eyes glued to the label jutting up from the collar of Calvin's blue work shirt—itching to reach out, to tuck it in, and make things right. His musings led him to run up Calvin's heels, not having noticed that he'd stopped. Not having expected him to stop nearly so soon. They hadn't even cleared the back of the house.

The foreman and his crew had uncovered a body, but not the body that Jason had interred all those months ago at the back edge of the yard. That body remained tucked into the shade of the trees and was as far away as it could be and still have Jason Getty paying the taxes on its gritty resting place. This skull turned a baleful eye from the mulch bed at the side of the house, directly underneath Jason's bedroom window, and he had no idea who it was.