

THE NIGHTMARE TWENTIES



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For you, Dad

Chapter 1

The sun finally hid behind the horizon. The sky had been shimmering in shades of pink for a long time, gradually fading into a darker colour and finally becoming a strong, cold purple. Although the daylight was fading and there was still some time before the night began, thick clouds gave the impression that it was later than it really was. For most people and animals this spelt sleep and a well-earned rest.

For most of them.

A few – people as well as game – were just beginning their hunts.

Mighty, thick clouds covered a major part of the sky, and somewhere in the distance one could hear the bass grumbling of an incessantly upcoming storm. Which was accompanied by the waspish whirr of an old, used Ford truck driving unhurriedly along the roadside, gouging deep ruts in the gravel road. The faint yellow light coming from the headlights flooded the nearest landscape.

Boston was becoming desolated. The streets and alleys were being emptied, becoming a refuge for stray men and women, who were rushing home or often to illegal work. Automobiles were rare; an old truck, a model still remembering the Great War, was one of two machines in this area. The other one was a classic Model T, gliding in the opposite direction at low speed. When it passed, the puddles gently spouted with water.

Sitting behind the steering wheel of a truck, was a man who nervously tapped his fingers on the rim, while heavily inhaling a homemade cigarette – a roll-up. In the evening twilight it was hard to tell what he looked like. He certainly had a weather-beaten face, covered with a sparse, yet greyish stubble and an old frayed flat cap placed low on his forehead. A thick jumper was hitched up to his chin, protecting its wearer from the spring chill.

Alongside him, in the middle of the front couch seat, sat a much younger and thinner man with glasses, a thin moustache that was aimed to resemble Chaplin and his hair combed back. He was nervously clutching his cap in his hands, not wanting to give in to the stress and tension. Even though the light was dim, it was obvious that he was there because he had to be even if he did not feel very confident. His total opposite was the third man.

He, sleeping by the side window with his flat cap pulled down low on his face, was a stocky, heavysset gentleman in a work uniform, his hands were like loaves of bread, filthy with grease. His cheeks were covered with a five o'clock shadow. His hair was short and dark, at least that is how the single strands sticking out from under his cap looked like. He stank of sweat, fish and grease, and above all he was snoring.

The first drops of spring rain were falling on the windscreen of the truck.

Some of the residents of Boston, feeling the cold water on their faces, sped up their pace, trying to avoid the splashing water from the puddles. For those three men in the vehicle, the rain was a particularly bad sign. The driver smacked his lips, while chewing the roll-up and then pressed the accelerator. The automobile coughed once, then twice and began to speed up.

"Damn it, we will not make it in time before the storm. The ground will get soaked!"

"It will be easier to dig" muttered a sleepy man, dirty with grease. He moved and stretched. Either he had had a shallow sleep or sounds of the approaching storm had woken him up. The young man was silent, unsure if he wanted to take part in this conversation. Eventually he slipped his glasses off his nose to rub his eyes and gain some time.

"Easier my ass," bridled the driver. "Have you ever dug in wet soil? For starters mud is up to your ankles, and then it only gets worse!"

"I have, not only once. Why? Because I was ordered to. How come that Irish prick is still running the port..."

"What, Reilly ordered it? My God, I feel sorry for you."

"Anyway, we have this kid to do the dirty work, you found him yourself, Steve."

"Me? What about me?" the specky broke in, hastily slipping his glasses on. He looked at his older friends with a little fright, realising that the hardest and the worst job was intended for him.

"You, me, and Adrien," said the driver, ignoring the young man. "Digging in the mud will be a nightmare, but we don't do it for free. We share equally, one third."

"Well, for that much money you can live like a king. Not how it used to be, a lot of work for a few bucks. Young man, check who died recently, maybe we will come across a fresh one," the filthy worker, Adrien, reached under the seat and pulled out a slightly crumpled and torn newspaper. The specky muttered something under his breath, corrected his glasses and flipped through the *Boston Courier* looking for the latest obituaries.

The twilight – or rather the gloom, since the further away from downtown Boston the fewer streetlights – did not foster reading the tiny letters. The youngest of the three squinted and lifted the newspaper closer to his face. He spent a good few minutes doing this, meanwhile the truck slowed down and pulled over to the roadside, which was overgrown with towering poplars

and birches. As the engine stalled, the storm's ominous murmurs grew louder. The rain also began to fall more and more heavily.

"Hmm... Jessup Clayton Ostig, age sixty-five and Samantha Therese Erwin, age forty-two," the kid finally spoke up, tearing his face away from the newspaper. "Only those two were recently buried at Evergreen, Mr Collins" he added hastily, needlessly explaining himself to the worker.

"And probably half a dozen others, nameless, homeless and hopeless souls. We are all about those ones, kid," added Steve, the driver, chewing on a roll-up and looking out of the windows of the parked car. Satisfied with the emptiness and silence, he smiled.

"But the professor pays more for the fresh ones!" fully awoken Adrien exclaimed, correcting his flat cap, and reaching for the handle. He was the first one to get out of the truck and immediately headed to the rear, from where he pulled out a large jute sack and tossed it over his back with ease. The metal and wooden tools rattled.

"He pays, but we must be careful," the driver continued, slamming the door behind him. "No one will miss the homeless people. The soul has returned to God, but the body remains with us, remember these words, Bob," he adjusted his flat cap as he looked at the dark sky and the churning clouds, then spat hastily on the ground. Small puddles glistened in the faint light and their surface shimmered with more raindrops.

The young specky was the last one to leave the automobile. Reluctantly, as if with fear. He puffed into his hands to warm them up before the work, and reached inside the truck for a shovel, a crowbar, and a pickaxe. He grunted, trying to hold everything in his arms, but as soon as he took a few steps, the tools fell to the wet ground with a loud clatter.

"God damn it!" he cursed in a trembling voice. He bent down to collect the scattered equipment when a soft, yet jarring light flooded the nearest area. The specky glanced anxiously at the driver's weather-beaten face, who was raising the storm lamp. The man only shook his head, looking around. It was empty and quiet. The graveyard was surrounded by a not particularly high wall of fine brick and stone, overgrown with ivy and weeds with a huge wrought-iron gate.

However, there were no ornaments: no angels, crosses, nor saints – the reason for that was that the people buried here were of every faith and religion, but above all those who had no relatives and were lower on the social ladder. Of course, there were those from higher classes as well, but they were rare. Adrien stood in front of the gate for a while, considering whether he would manage to break the chain and the padlock.

Eventually, however, he spat over his shoulder and moved along the wall, heading towards a small hill. The brick wall was slightly lower there, but one had to watch out for roots, loose stones, and mud. Although the rain was easing up, one had to bear in mind that it could change quickly. The three robbers had to get to the graveyard as soon as possible.

Climbing up the slope was not easy, but it was not a great obstacle either; the most difficult was the sack. Reaching the wall, accompanied by cursing, wheezing, and spitting, took maybe a little over a quarter of an hour. It took another fifteen minutes to get over the wall and carry all the equipment.

"I'm getting too old for this," groaned the driver, falling to his knees as he was the last of the three to enter the graveyard. The older part of the necropolis had the largest number of tombs and crypts, dating back to the nineteenth century. And although most of them were in a deplorable condition – cracked walls, crumbled steps, damaged carvings, worn out inscriptions, rusty rims and so on – it was impossible not to get the impression that one was dealing with history.

Steve was the first and by far the most faithful of all to cross himself and say a short prayer. The others reluctantly repeated his gestures and gathered their equipment, continuing their way to the newer part where the poor and forgotten were buried. After walking several yards or so, the robbers felt more secure; no one could see them from the road. The watchman guarding the graveyard was probably sitting in his equipment room drinking to Volstead, only glancing at the storm clouds.

For criminals, this timing was perfect.

It was dark, a real downpour was about to begin. The broad old maples, firs and spruces muffled the glare of the storm lamp. The needles of these trees, lying on the ground in quite a thick layer, in combination with successive raindrops muted the steps of the men. When it thundered, it was obvious that no one would hear or see them.

Most of the alleys were not narrow, but they could not be called wide either. They were just wide enough to fit a horse-drawn cart to transport one coffin or more. It was enough to reach the main alley and follow the ruts and traces of hooves to reach the destination, but the mud was mercilessly sticking to the shoes, which was hindering the march.

"Come on, kid, let's get to work," Adrien said quietly, tossing the bag with the tools onto the wet ground, obviously avoiding the forming puddles. A moment later, he took some of the equipment from the specky, looking around the row of graves for a moment, he stuck the shovel into the ground.

"Not here, for God's sake," Steve corrected him, while he was taking off his flat cap and wiping his sweaty forehead down. "He died before Christmas; the bugs are already eating him up. This time the professor doesn't pay us for the eaten corpse. We dig there, the maid first, then the peasant," he pointed first at a simple plaque with the approximate date of death, and then to a mound of earth at the other end of the alley.

"How do you even know him? This professor?" Adrien mumbled something else under his breath, and a moment later they were all working quickly and efficiently, as if digging out coffins

and robbing bodies were perhaps not an everyday occurrence for them, but something, horrifyingly, common.

“Remember when we were working for Shaun in the winter?” replied Steve, shovelling the dirt quickly. “The one from Libby Murray, you know.”

“Yeah, I remember Libby. I still have that burning sensation in my groin.”

“Shaun mentioned a few times that some changes were coming; that God himself would come down for people like us and that there will be a lot of kale, and then he set me up for a meeting and that was that. It was alright,” he concluded, digging with the shovel, and wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“Alright...” Collins repeated, without stopping his work. It sounded sensible, that was the way things were done in the criminal business. Through connections. Through recommendations. The so-called word of mouth. The specky remained silent, as he listened to the conversation, his face looked paler and paler. This is not how he imagined his illegal job to look like.

Nearly half an hour later, the shovels hit the cheap pine boards. All three of them, sweaty and tired as hell, took a break; they were taking risks, but they got the job done quite efficiently and quickly. They turned their faces to sky letting the cold rain cleanse their skin of sweat and soil. Adrien reached into the jute sack and pulled out a milk bottle full of amber liquid.

“Go ahead, I know a nigger who trades moonshine, we can trust him,” he grabbed the bottle and took a big gulp to confirm these words.

He made a wry up his face and passed the bottle on. The young man reluctantly took the drink and swallowed a little, grimacing and choking. The alcohol was electrifyingly strong, bitter and oily, with a strange metallic aftertaste, but it served its purpose. The other two laughed out loud at the sight of the choking kid.

“Alright, that is it, let us get the dead gal out and get on with that unlucky guy while it is still bearable,” concluded the driver, wiping his mouth when it was his turn. He was also the first to get up and jump down, with a crowbar in one hand and a hammer in the other. Once more he crossed himself, took out a rosary from his pocket and ran his finger over the beads. Then he pocketed it and skilfully slid the flattened metal rod between the boards.

He tapped once and again with the hammer on the right end. The wood crackled. Then the forcefully pulled nails rattled, the lid caved in, some earth and mud slipped from the walls of the pit, as the rain was getting heavier – their brief pause had some disastrous effects.

The young man struggled with the wood on the other side, glancing every now and then at his experienced friend. The last of the three, on the other hand, was on the lookout, with a lamp in his hand, illuminating the hole in the ground for his companions. With eyesight accustomed to the darkness and not affected by the bright light, he could easily spot the watchman or other similar "entrepreneurs". He knew his way around it. He did not even pay

attention to the fact that the crackling of the wood and the noise of the landslide quickly stopped.

The sound of falling rain and the occasional murmurs of the thunder created an appropriately bleak background to this whole scene; you might think it was all taken out of the sick imagination of some pulp filmmaker. And this was not far from the truth.

“Holy Mary and Joseph...” whispered Steve, drawing Adrien's attention. The young man, panting heavily, stared absently at the open coffin, not believing his eyes. Inside, not counting, of course, sand and mud, laid a body; young, not yet bitten by the teeth of time, although a little blue and with sunken cheeks. The worker, disturbed by the behaviour of his companions, turned to the grave and leaned over it, shining his lamp. The box made of crooked pine boards did not look alarming at first glance.

The pregnant woman appeared to be the problem.

“What is it?” Adrien growled to the driver, climbing down into the pit. He did not mind the mud and stones; rather violently, he pushed the shocked young man away and crouched down, tearing off the few remaining planks. He saw that the grave contained a coffin with the body of a young, enceinte woman inside. The worker cursed under his breath, spat over his shoulder, and began muttering something inarticulate again.

As a prole toiling away at the port from day to night, he had a strong character and nerves of steel, but even he was disturbed by the sight of a pregnant woman lying in the grave. It was not the first and probably not the last time he was digging up and selling corpses, but it was the first time he witnessed such a case – he had stolen bodies of mothers, daughters, but he has never looked at the calm face of a woman in advanced pregnancy.

Her expanded belly hid the body of a child, who was ready to step into the world.

The little one's life ended before it began for good.

It was a real tragedy and probably the direct cause of Bob's sudden breakdown. Adrien glanced fleetingly at the paper-pale specky, who began crawling out of the pit in panic, smudging himself with mud and desperately grasping the ground with his hands. Another thunder rumbled, and lightning cut through the sky, illuminating the graveyard for one heartbeat with a ghostly white light.

“God!” cried out the young man, dropping to his knees and vomiting up the lousy contents of his stomach, majority of which was the alcohol. He rolled over onto his back, began coughing and trembling. This was his first time; he needed cash urgently, and there were not many options for making money at all.

He threw his glasses away and squeezed his eyelids tightly shut, allowing the cold rain to sober him up a little and calm him down. He struggled to keep himself from bursting out crying.

“Where'd you find that fella?” asked irritated Collins.

"I thought he'd do," replied the driver tartly, but it did not really work out for him. "I ain't getting any younger, I won't last long, and someone must take my place, you know that the competition doesn't sleep," he spat again and began to move the boards and the ground away so that he could get to the body. He took the woman carefully and almost tenderly under her arms, and then began to lift her up from the coffin.

The worker did not hesitate and after a moment he grabbed the legs of the dead gal, belaying his companion as he climbed up the wet wall of the pit, crawling out and dragging the body with him. No one wasted any time. They immediately got to work and began to backfill the hole.

"Kid! Move your ass and come here!"

"Jesus, give him a minute," Steve said furiously, leaning his hands on the shovel.

"I don't give a damn, I'm not going to do all the work myself!" replied the worker in an equally aggressive tone, throwing another portion of dirt into a freshly dug grave.

The specky laid still for a few frighteningly long moments. Only then did he awkwardly get on his knees and reached for his glasses. Still on his knees, he made the sign of the cross with his trembling hand and looked at the experienced robbers.

"I... I don't think I can... I didn't think... God, the stench and..." he repeated in a weak voice, as the tears mixed with the raindrops were running down his face. He lifted his head up and cast an apologetic glance until he finally caught sight of the dead woman's face. This was too much for him, he stood up and started speeding up his pace, and slipping on the mud, began to walk away.

"Hey, kid, come back!" cried the driver, sensing the worst.

"Fuck, who have you taken with us!" shouted Adrien, throwing away the shovel and starting to chase the panicked lad. Robbing graves of bodies was neither an easy nor a pleasant thing to do, but such panic was probably not expected by anyone. He quickly caught up with the man, slapped his face with an open palm and was about to do it again when the young man raised his hands in a hopeless, submissive gesture. Adrien froze, with his hand ready to strike.

"Please!"

"Please what!"

"I... I can't, really! Mr Collins, please!"

"Because of you, you stupid son of a bitch, we are wasting time and risking everything!"

"I'm sorry!"

"And I don't give a fuck about your apologies! You either take the shovel and work with us, or you get to the fucking car and wait for us, and if you run away somewhere, then remember that I'll find you and I know where the empty coffins are" he howled, tugging at the young specky before finally letting him go. The young man wobbled and fell to the mud, where he stayed for a moment paralyzed with fear.

Finally, he nodded his head and slowly moved back towards the dug-up grave. Adrien, annoyed and tired, went back to his friend and they finished their work in – nomen omen – deadly mood. A few minutes later it was all over. Had it not been for the trampled ground and the countless footprints imprinted in the wet sand and mud, nobody would probably have suspected that a grave had been dug up.

The robbers left the unlucky spot and, sighing heavily, they went back to work.

“Must there necessarily be a man and a woman? Can't they just be whichever bodies we dug up first? We're already screwed anyway,” Adrien mumbled quietly as he was the first to dig in.

“He's paying us for recently deceased man and woman,” the driver commented grimly, tossing away another shovel full of soil. He also secretly glanced towards the specky, who was on the verge of a breakdown. The threat made by the burly dock worker was an assurance, for grave robbing was not Adrien's only occupation. Steve knew this, but the young boy could only guess.

Finally, the shovel hit the boards of another coffin.

Once, twice. Third time.

And once more. The lid squeaked under the pressure of the metal shovel, finally letting go and collapsing inwards – there was no time to play with the crowbar, simple brute force was used. The robbers immediately reacted, knowing what could happen for both them and the body. Adrien even jumped back, because if he hadn't, the shovel could have hit the body and damaged it, and nobody wanted that. The professor was not paying for damaged goods, he was paying for fresh ones. In good condition, whole, suitable for research or whatever he was doing there.

The worker slammed his back against the muddy wall of the pit. Wet soil and mud slipped, which helped the young man to sober up and calm down. He was panting heavily, and his heart was rumbling in his chest like a factory machine. The specky immediately began to crawl out of the pit, not even bothering to look at the body.

“I need a drink,” burred Adrien, staring at the coffin and the smashed boards.

“Wise words,” confirmed the driver, rubbing his wet forehead. “Young man, make yourself useful and give me a bottle,” he shouted more loudly to the specky. The rain was coming down in waves now. It did not gain or lose strength; it was at most burdensome.

As they reached the coffin they took a short break. Alcohol helped in such situations – it suppressed fears and anxiety, anesthetized, and covered the body and soul with a pleasant blanket of indifference. Digging and transporting the body could be done by two men, though it would be a little more difficult. They could no longer count on the help of the youngest; if he touched the body, he would probably faint.

After a short while – they were not going to risk more than it was necessary – they returned to their work. They stripped the rest of the boards from the coffin, looked at the body of a grown, mature man with sideburns and they exchanged meaningful glances.

This was someone they would, in good conscience, get a pile of money for.

“A heavy bastard, I wouldn’t expect that!” groaned Adrien, laying the corpse on a large piece of tarp, without a doubt, stolen from the port. Steve, with the skill of an experienced gravedigger, wrapped the body and laid the rosary on the head of the dead for one moment, then he straightened up and pressed his hands against his back. It was late, the rain was falling steadily, but at least the storm had passed sideways. The distant thunder and lightning were encouraging.

That was the only positive thing about that cursed night.

“Are we going back already?” asked the specky quietly.

“We are going back, and if you say anything to anyone, you’ll end up in that grave” growled the worker, backfilling the grave quickly, carelessly. When the pile of soil took the right shape, he gasped and reached for the bodies. The corpse of a fat and elegantly dressed man, was thrown over his shoulder with great skill.

The corpse of the pregnant woman was assigned to the other two. The driver spat in his hands and lifted the tarp-wrapped body, waiting for the young boy to do the same. He cleared his throat, standing in the pouring spring rain, and it only took a moment for the specky to lift the dead man. With disgust painted on his pale face, he began to straggle towards the wall.

Author's note

If at least one person liked this text – it was worth writing it. Until next time.