

## —ASHES OF THE DEAD

*by Kurt Dinan*

“Remember, kid, don’t ever touch the animal without gloves. Rabies’ll turn you into a retard, right quick,” Earl said dragging the tarp off the truck bed.

Charlie grabbed a corner and together they pulled the dead deer and mangled dog through the garage. In the back corner, beyond the orange construction cones and snow removal equipment, the incinerator sat. The machine was easily fifteen feet long, its lid blackened from years of use. At its base, a mess of soot and ash piled in drifts like dirty snow.

Earl dropped the tarp in front of the machine saying, “Ol’ Smokey’s been around longer than you, but she still burns like the devil’s inside her.”

While Charlie watched, Earl pulled a rusty lever on the side. The incinerator’s lid opened like a steel mouth. Earl took a shovel from the wall, and slid its blade under the dog’s back.

“Now, the last thing you want to do is drop the damn thing. A carcass hits concrete it’ll open up like a watermelon. Guts everywhere. And you know who has to clean that up? You, kid. Somebody’s always got to shovel the shit.”

Earl lifted the dog with watchmaker’s precision. The carcass balanced on the blade, its head and hindquarters hanging off the sides. It was a big dog, probably close to sixty pounds, with a tire track through its midsection and a blackened tongue drooping over broken teeth.

“You need help there, Earl?”

The man turned, agitated. “What are you, nineteen? I’ve been doing this thirty-six years. I may be retiring, but I ain’t no cripple.”

He slid the dog onto the metal grate and hit the release, slamming shut the lid. He pointed to a box controller connected to the incinerator by a thick black cord.

“When I give the word, hit that button.”

Earl walked to the other end and picked up an identical box. Charlie turned the controller over in his hand.

“Why are there two?”

“Won’t work unless both go at the same time. I suspect it’s to stop guys from burning up their wives.”

Earl nodded and together they pushed their buttons. A guttural moan came from inside the metal monster. Within seconds Charlie felt the heat pouring off it.

“Got any dogs, kid?”

“Yeah, a basset hound named Lucy. Dad and I’d take her hunting after the harvest. She howled for weeks after he died.”

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The thought of his father stung Charlie. Until now, he'd made it through the day without thinking of him.

"Well, do this job long enough your feelings toward animals change. Dogs especially. Mop up a hundred and you'll see." Earl peered through the glass, now glowing orange. "Life don't mean shit after awhile."

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Charlie's phone rang well past midnight three nights later. Disoriented, he mumbled a hello.

"Charlie, it's Earl."

He lay there holding the receiver, not saying anything, the name vaguely familiar in his haze.

"Dammit, Charlie, wake up!"

The sheer volume of the command bolted him upright in bed.

"Be out front in five minutes. There's work to do."

Charlie's brain cleared when his bare feet hit the cold floor. He dressed by moonlight, pulling on yesterday's clothes. After searching the room for his boots, he remembered the basement. He turned on the light and there they were, resting at the bottom of the steps and caked in mud from the previous day's rain.

Before taking the first step, Charlie hesitated. He'd been tired and not thinking clearly when he'd tossed the boots there. He was angry at himself for the mistake, and made a silent promise not to repeat the error.

The steps creaked as Charlie made his way down. When he reached the bottom, he tried to just retrieve his boots and leave, but his eyes still wandered to the nearby shelf. There the brass urn with his father's name engraved across the bottom sat among dusty boxes and old paint cans. He stood there aware more than ever of the house's emptiness.

Outside, the night air smelled of rain a day away. As he waited on the porch, Charlie tried not to think of his father, but his ghost was everywhere. He had passed away three months earlier after a stroke in the cornfield left him connected to machines. As the only remaining family member, an agonized Charlie had been the one to inform the doctors of his father's living will. The man died two hours later.

After the funeral, angry and feeling abandoned by the man who'd raised him and was the recipient of his intense devotion, Charlie had relegated the ashes to the basement where he hoped his grief would be forgotten.

The lights from the truck swept the front yard. Earl stuck his head out the window.

"Ellie's got an animal dying in her corn. Figure if I'm working, you sure as hell should be too. Get in."

The truck was backing out of the driveway before Charlie even had his door closed. They raced down empty roads, the windows down, Robert Earl Keen singing on the radio. Charlie settled into his seat and closed his eyes.

Before long, the truck wheels ground up Ellie's gravel driveway. Earl parked beside the detached garage and said, "You're gonna have to get used to this sort of thing. Someone has shit work to do, you'll get the call. Won't matter the time."

As they retrieved the wheelbarrow and pitchforks out of the back, the front door