The Grave Digger

Sunshine VanBael
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol1992/iss1/24
The Grave Digger
by Sunshine VanBael

When nobody answered the door, she opened it and walked in. She stood at the threshold for a moment as her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room. The blackness fell around her, and she sensed that the whole house was empty, yet she held her breath as she moved quietly toward his room. It, too, was empty, but brighter because of the autumn sunlight pouring through the blinds. She stood in the center of the room, watching dust and lint float through the streams of sunlight. She focused on one thread as it journeyed through the thin streams of light. It floated slowly down from above her head, at times hiding in the shadows and at other times reflecting the golden light.

Her concentration was unbroken until a repetitive crunching sound fought its way into her senses. As her ears opened wider she noticed that the sound was coming from the backyard, so she moved to the window, cracking the blinds to peer out into the yard. She recognized his figure, and slowly backed away from the window.

He was digging again. The sound of his shovel slapping the dirt grew louder in her mind, and she closed her eyes as the rhythm pulsated with increasing intensity. After a moment, she opened her eyes again. She strode out of his room and into the yard. His back was to her, but as she stood at the edge of his shallow hole he felt her stare and turned around. He turned to her with a face that was devoid of emotion, a face that she was expecting. His eyes were remote, traveling through thoughts that almost no one could guess. His mouth formed a perfect line across his face, hinting at neither a smile or a frown. She laughed inwardly because she knew that he was actually bursting with emotion. She had worn that mask many times herself.

He nodded in greeting and turned back to his digging. She stared at his back for a minute and then began to slowly walk across the
yard. She watched the ground as she walked, and studied the holes that he had dug in the past. They had all been refilled, and the first one that she approached was still mounded with fresh dirt. Her foot sank into the black soil and left an impression as she walked across. As she walked along, each of the former holes was increasingly covered by choking weeds, grass, and dead leaves. She made her way down to the edge of the yard, where the first hole had been dug. She found it only because she knew it was there. Any other eye would have passed right over it, mistaking it for a normal, healthy piece of lawn.

She looked down at the spot and remembered. She thought about what was buried in that hole, as well as the others she had just walked over. Cold. She remembered how cold the holes had been when she had sat in them. She would sit and feel the cold seep through her clothes, through her skin, and into her bones. It seemed as if each hole had grown colder. She shivered as she thought about the new hole, the one that he was digging right now.

He looked up and saw her standing there, deep in thought. He stopped and watched her. His mind was also swarmed by bleak memories of other holes. Not just the holes he had dug, but the holes in which she had held the shovel. He remembered what had stopped her when she came so close. Fear. Finally, he had defeated his own fear, but he did not feel victorious. A bitter breeze suddenly whipped his breath away and he looked to the sky. The trees framed the sky with their bare branches, and he noticed that grey clouds were moving in, challenging the bright sun to a battle.

She stood with her eyes locked to the ground, still thinking about the new hole. She remembered how sick she had felt when she had first realized that she could do nothing to help him. The love she had for him became more real than ever, but it became false in its uselessness.

She looked up and saw him watching her. As she walked toward him, he returned to his digging. She waited until he was working on one end of the hole and then she dropped into the hole and sat down with her legs crossed.

"What are you going to bury?" she asked, knowing the answer.
He didn’t pause a moment in his shoveling as he answered, "Myself."

She believed him. She waited for the right moment to ask why, but he erupted before she could start her question.

"I hate my life, my school, my mother, my job." She mentally added "myself" to his list. It wasn’t a new list, yet he seemed to possess a new determination. She remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

"Too much pressure," he mumbled as he shoveled. "And she doesn’t love me like I love her," he added. She knew who he was talking about, and an image of the unworthy girl popped into her mind. She thought about how sensitive he was.

"I’m so damned hypersensitive," he exclaimed, just as she was thinking it.

"I love your sensitivity," she said quietly. Her compliment fell into the air, unnoticed. She hadn’t really expected him to hear it anyway. He kept digging and she watched silently for a while.

"Earlier," she started, "I was thinking about everything that is buried in this yard."

"Obviously not enough has been buried if I’m still at it," he added.

"All of the hatred, fear, confusion, pain, sorrow, and just emptiness that we’ve buried."

"Haven’t gone deep enough," he muttered as he dug.

She thought for a moment. "Deep enough," she said slowly, "maybe we haven’t gone deep enough into real life."

"That’s not what I meant," he said, leaning on his shovel, "I meant that we haven’t buried it deep enough. It keeps coming back. It’s time for me to bury it once and for all." He paused, and then added, "As for real life, I’ve been deep enough to know that I hate it."

As he dug she began to realize that something was different. This hole was strange, not like the others. It wasn’t quite as cold, and this surprised her. It also scared her. She did not know what had changed. She stared up at the sky, watching the clouds plan their attack. The sun seemed to be faltering; it knew that it wasn’t strong
enough to burn through the clouds.

The hole was deep now, almost up to his head. She could sense his tiring, but when she looked at his eyes she could see that he was still determined. She thought about what a risk it was to leave him here. The long period that always followed the grave digging, when he disappeared from her life, was always without meaning.

She stood up and climbed out of the hole. Turning her back to him, she began to walk away.

"Wait," she heard him say, "I want you here."

She slowly turned to face him, and answered shakily, "I know you do." She paused for a minute, and then explained, "I need to leave now. For myself."

Not wanting to see his reaction, she looked away. Once again, she began the long journey out of his yard and headed home.