

Mortician

It is a cold winter night. No doubt, the coldest Annie has ever witnessed on the Welty Farm. The half-moon shines bright, illuminating the barefoot prints that have been sealed into the frozen slush. At least she has light when she needs it most. It'll be dawn soon. And by that time, any hopes of finishing her task will be in vain. Annie recollects how her Mama and Daddy had always told her that they would never leave the farm. "Not now, not never, even over my dead body," her Daddy would say. He would stay true to his word.

All these thoughts were going through ten year-old Annie's head as she dug as fast as she could into the hard earth. The rocks gave off sparks as the metal shovel clanked against them. These small bright lights amused her, and strengthened her in this consuming task. Another rough rectangle was shaped into the ground, and Annie began a third hole next to the two she had already dug.

She stopped to rest for half a minute. Annie knew, as she counted each second, that it was all the time she could afford. She no longer felt the sharp ice beneath her frozen bare feet, and her thin, worn trousers seemed to welcome the cold air rather than keep her warm. Everything was cold: the stinging wind against her face, the wet strands of hair against her back, the shovel's copper handle she leaned on as she rested. The only thoughts she could summon were of the cold. At exactly thirty seconds, she pushed these phantasms to the back of her head, and started her last and smallest hole. She would finish. Everything was moving along just fine.

Suddenly, a crack. Annie's greatest fear was confirmed as she pulled her shovel from the ground and observed the fresh split down the length of the wooden handle. She slammed the end into the earth again to get as many scoops out as she could before ditching the shovel altogether,

and wooden splinters flew everywhere. All that was left was a D-shaped handle and a triangular shovel end, dented all over from the hundreds of rocks Annie had dug up.

O what failure! Annie sagged against one of the surrounding headstones. Again, she felt the sting of the cold air as she sat dejected. She thought about how her Daddy used to tell her never to give up, never to leave a job undone. She cast a somber glance on that very thing. She just had to be with them.

As Annie tore her eyes away from the scattered pieces of shovel, she noticed a faint tinge of light on the horizon and sprang to her feet urgently. The glimmer in her misty eyes was determined as she walked quickly over to the still figures, both wrapped in mud-stained sheets. Annie tied the end of one with a fraying rope, and reverently pulled the heavy frame into the larger of the two holes she had completed. He fit perfectly. A sad, but not hopeless, tear fell from the young girl's exhausted face.

After removing the rope, she tied a firm knot around the end of the other lifeless form. This one was lighter, although Annie treated her with no less respect as she pulled the body into the smaller hole she had dug. As she untied the knot, Annie kissed the two feet that overlapped each other; she felt the cold skin surface consume the warmth in her lips entirely. Again, the tears came with quiet reverence. They flowed from her eyes, muddying her own face and falling onto the two feet, bathing them. With great love, Annie tried as best she could to wipe the feet with her own now frozen strands of hair. She then covered them with the loosened canvas.

With her hands, Annie slowly pushed the loose dirt over each corpse. Finding that some of it had frozen together, she gripped the metal end-piece of the shovel and separated the large chunks of earth into a rough powder. Above what had been two holes were now raised two

mounds, one a little larger than the other. Again Annie sat back against the headstone a few feet from her work. She breathed a sigh of satisfaction, even though she wasn't able to finish her third hole. Upon looking up, she saw the first piercing rays of sunlight on the horizon. They coursed through her veins and gave her renewal. Daddy would've been proud.

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That morning, two scraggly men hurried suspiciously past the Welty Family Cemetery carrying large shovels. They noticed a change in scenery and decided to investigate the two lumps of earth that had seemingly arisen out of no where. They certainly hadn't been there the evening before.

"They was just gone...both of 'm", remarked the first man, bewildered.

"No shit," replied the other. "I'm geddin' outta town. If anyone asks, you don't know me; and if you know any better, don't go spendin' all in one place o' else you get caught for m-...". The second man let out a shriek. Both men ran in terror, leaving their shovels behind and tripping over headstones as they went.

The sun shone bright, casting an ancestral legacy of small shadows behind the several headstones. Underneath one lay a young girl, pale-white and lifeless, with eyes half open, each catching a faint glimmer of light from the sky.