

LESTER'S SHIFT

1

Lester Paddock pierced the soil with the blade of the shovel he has used for what has slowly become *forever* to him. Up above, the sky shows signs of light beyond the darkness of a night sky just as the night watch of the moon will give way to the day watch of the sun, but not yet. This was and is that specific eerie time, the *within time* that is woven so perfectly together by powers beyond our beliefs and imagination. The sky was painted dark, yet light shined its luminescent beauty off into the distances of the east where a soft peace-instilled breeze blew warm summer air. To the west, darkness remained behind its bold and unmatched wave of blackness. Somewhere, the core of that storm was the end-all-be-all for whomever found themselves beneath it. And right smack in the middle of it all, under the yin-yang skies above, Lester dug. Digging graves was what he did, and what he does and nobody anywhere had dug more than he has. His job is repetitive work under the sky that looks like this every time his shovel hits the dirt.

2

There is just something about being at work that makes it feel like it has become our only form of life. Time is ongoing, thus, ever-changing. During the minutes of a work shift it can feel like we've lost ourselves into a purgatory of time that we're trapped in. Like the air we breathe each and every second of our life has been (and will be) within the confines of wherever we work. That's what it's always been like for Lester, even now. Once again he is out there in the land of souls that have passed on, digging, digging, and digging - grave after grave. His shift is unique, not many others have worked it before. But it's work, and work to him feels like it does to the rest of us, like it has become our home, our life. Although, for him, it has. Slaving away to

the graves much like a construction worker might feel that his entire life is carrying a tool belt and a hammer in hand or an athlete on the field yet again on a game day. It just always felt like their work has consumed them in every hour and minute of their everyday life, much like Lester feels that he is always digging a grave. Today is no different. Although whatever *day* it is for Lester is foreign. He digs the way he knows and always has. The day doesn't matter, the work does. Death comes to many, and many come to Lester.

3

Death demanded the arrival of Jim and Lisa Hutchings who had attended a funeral and were finally headed home after a long and emotional weekend that they spent away in a small and unremarkable Connecticut town called *Kristown*. The couple had left on a Thursday afternoon in a limo, and were supposed to stay until Monday morning in the Super 8 motel but an argument boiled and bubbled to the surface of the relationship and eventually popped. The fight separated the two and eventually a transportation car pulled up and sent them off together, for now.

For the second time in less than a year, Lisa had found out about Jim's infidelity. There wasn't anyway in heaven or hell, she was going to stay another night with her unfaithful husband. Once was more than enough and twice was simply unforgivable. The fight hit its breaking point and the two decided they would go their separate ways, officially. Though, it wasn't much their choice. After all, such things seem to decide themselves. Jim had the final say by the use of his actions, and eventually ended everything between them. How many times did Lisa tell him that "Actions speak louder than words". In the end, she was right, because his actions were final and said everything.

Although it was late, well past midnight, and the moon faded behind clouds as a fog drifted

across the roads they traveled- they drove off into the night in the silence of their transportation vehicle. The road they traveled became gloomier outside of it's windows, which certainly had something to do with the increasing thickness of the fog. Even the driver thought about speaking to break the silence that seemed to deafen the passengers. But he didn't. He drove the long, skinny, black car right into the heart of the increasing silence and fog - a combination that only death could appreciate.

Before Lisa had found out about Jim's cheating, the two had spent most of that first night in and out of each other's arms. In- while having sex in the cheap motel room that they were staying in while away. Out- in pretty much every second they had spent together outside of the sheets. Hardly the recipe for a successful marriage, old or young and anything in between. They fought most of the time that they were around each other and that late Thursday night was no different after Lisa's newfound discoveries about her husbands' secrets. Even though that curve catching purple dress she was wearing kept his anger at bay, he was still upset in general after his wife had found out he cheated again. Besides, every time he complimented her on the dress she told him he was blind and that it looked and felt like a giant garbage bag over her and that her body did nothing to fill it out. Typical girl, he thought. He was also mad at himself for failing his marriage again, but what could he do about it right now?

4

Digging kept your arms busy, but your mind still. Lester had always done a lot of thinking while digging up grave after grave. He often thought about the beginning, how he fell into this job and shift. His grandparents had owned a funeral home in Bristol, Connecticut for years and his parents took over the duties when they had passed on. By the time he was sixteen years old his parents had connections with all of the major local cemeteries, and even a couple

private ones that were unknown to the general public. The pay was good and the work was relatively easy on a young adolescent male. While the location of work wasn't ideal (graveyards), his father helped Lester overcome that mental barrier by telling him at a young age that his work was simply landscaping. Grass and dirt, and holes. Lots of holes. Deep ones too. Flowers accompanied all bodies, so in a way his father was right. He was a special kind of landscaper. And when his father originally explained his job this way, he immediately lost any negative thoughts he had about digging a grave. Besides, his father was right - he dug holes for a living, there wasn't anything creepy about a hole unless you were the one laying in it. As long as he was digging them he was okay because that meant he wasn't laying in one, which to anyone's calculations was a wicked fine thing.

He didn't always work this shift like he is now. Not back then, not those early years. This new shift of Lester's was something that he was given as a job later on sometime after his late sixties. He wasn't sure exactly when. If you do the same work for so long not even death can erase that fuzziness of a change in shift. *Death*, Jesus, he was around enough of the dead. He didn't mind it though, it was what he was use to and it only made sense for him to continue on with his craft of grave digging. Nobody anywhere knew the dirt better than Lester Paddock. Nobody. Somebody had to be the guy to send those who have passed on, on their way. Lester was and is that guy. And as he kept on digging and digging, he felt as if he'd *always* be that guy.

5

The driver kept each of his finger's tightly hugging the steering wheel, ignoring the condensation building up from a fog that was growing around the car like the ghost of some boa constrictor squeezing them tighter and tighter in its grip. The car carried on, slowly. The driver had a job to do, fog or not. Looking out of the window from the inside of the car made it seem

like the car wasn't even moving. The optical illusion was fuzzy, but certainly creepy. The fog had thickened to the point where nothing passed by on the side of the roads but a darkening grayness. There was absolutely no visibility. The car was in the snakes grip now, at its mercy, even if it was just a ghostly fog. Each tiny pore of moisture that made up the clouds stared into the vehicle at the couple, waiting patiently to swallow them whole, together or apart.

The car came to a stop and the driver looked into the windshield mirror at the couple in the back and shook his head for a second. He unclenched his fist from the wheel and began expanding and folding his fingers to rid the numbness. It didn't waver, so he adjusted his posture and gripped the wheel again and pressed the gas pedal. He had a job to do, didn't he?

The couple, just as they had always been outside of the sheets, were apart. Lisa Hutchings was directly behind the driver, and Jim Hutchings across from her as far away as possible. The car remained silent, which was a rare feat, considering how many fights the couple usually had while in the same car together. But then again, who could speak when a fog like that has its grip of death squeezing the life right out of the vehicle.

There was just something about trouble that seemed to bring out the worst in people, no matter how good or bad they may have been at heart. Bad air was bad air, and the couple couldn't ignore the amount of problems that had surfaced in bubble after bubble that Thursday night. Heat, after all, does rise. And as Jim exited the vehicle first he could feel that heat boil around him. His mistakes had slowly led him to this conclusion. He took off his own way in his own hot bubble into the fog leaving his wife behind in the cold car. He didn't look back.

Lisa couldn't watch as her husband disappeared into the dark cloud surrounding that car. She couldn't even muster a thought that could lead her too. Instead, her thoughts listened to something or someone tell her that she no longer had to endure the pain of being his husband. It

was all over now. He was gone and never once would she choose to be around that husband of hers again. Things would finally be set right, fairly. Each would get what they deserved. Right or wrong, fair is fair - and for Jim Hutchings this didn't bode well.

The silence of the moment scared Lisa and after a short while she too left the car and traveled off into the fog. Lisa felt a chill scurry its way throughout her body like a cat in an alley and her body shifted away from it like she was zapped with an iron. The fog blinded her as she drifted through it, listening for a faint sound that she heard into the distance. But what was it? She couldn't tell which way the sound had come from. Where was it coming from? Below her or above her? Straight ahead or behind her? The white fog had consumed her body completely and she was one with the fog for a moment. She didn't know if she was standing or sitting, or riding a cloud, literally. So she hung tight to the fog, listening to a sound that was coming closer and closer... and closer and closer.

6

Lester put the digging spade on the flesh of dirt and kicked down on the flat edges that topped the blade, slicing the ground a half of a foot down or so. Here he was doing his job, digging another grave under that sky, the only job he has ever known. In many ways he felt lucky to hold this position. While many people have passed on, not many have gotten to dig the grave and send souls away to everlasting eternity. Lester did, and has for a long time. The fog stuck around these parts like a web to a spider and gave the graveyard a cliché scary look that it didn't need. He wasn't scared though, he was comfortable. The sky above him was both dark and light still, and the air itself held no temperature. It appeared as if the moon's watch on night had just ended, and the sun's watch was almost ready to start, but not just yet. Those eerie late nights or early morning hours that had become life to Lester had after all this time, became known as

his shift.

The air was dry and the temperature didn't climb, something Lester was always thankful for. On his shift, even with his line of work, Lester never worked up a sweat. A few feet away, to the left of the hole he had just dug, he began digging up the next grave before a voice called out to him from behind.

“Sir? Hello?”

The fog dulled the shout to a whisper, but Lester heard it low and clear. Lester stuck his shovel into the hole of the grave he was currently working on and turned his body around to greet what sounded like a woman.

“Hello there Miss. Can I help you with something?”

In a trembling voice the lady spoke. “I don't really know, but I hope so. I haven't a clue where I am. My husband and I got into a brutal fight and decided to separate. We took a ride in a long black car and ended up going off into this thick fog, separately. I was lost in it and I heard the sound of a shovel. The sound drew nearer and nearer and that's when I found you.”

Lester rested his left hand on the top of the shovel he had stuck in the ground while listening to the woman speak. He sighed before responding confidently to relieve her sense of terror.

“I see, I see. So basically, what you're saying is that you are lost. Rest assured, you are certainly asking the right person. The name is Lester. I'm exactly the person you want to ask, the only one actually. You have two choices. You can head east or west.”

Lester pointed at the sky, showing the darker skies to the west, followed by the eastern skies that showed a light similar to that of an ensuing sunrise.

Lester took his hand off the top of the shovel and crossed his arm's while staring at the

woman. Something in his facial expression made the woman feel uneasy and slightly stupid.

She needed to get on her way and soon. Lester again pointed to the west and east, this time a little slower with finger sarcasm. The fog around them loosened its grip and she nodded. Her eyes caught the eastern sky and she responded without taking her eyes off of that brightening sky.

“I think I’ll be on my way now sir, thank you.”

“Good luck Lisa”

After wishing the woman luck Lester watched her body slowly disappear into the light of a distant fog while headed east. He shook his head, lifted the shovel from the soil and began digging the next grave. Shovel full after shovel full, dirt walls scraped down like a block of meat in a deli store, and another plot was open after Lester hit ground that he couldn’t dig any further. Another plot dug, *add it to the tally* he thought. If there were a hall of fame for grave digging, Lester would certainly be voted in. Or so he liked to think. Better yet, if there were a hall of fame for landscapers he’d certainly be the number one ranked hole-digger. Too many years had he worked, too many bodies has he seen sent away towards a forever...

Jim wafted away the fog in front of his face like cobwebs. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed since he left his wife behind, but he knew he was lost about as good as he could be. Luckily the sharp tune of metal greeting dirt, stone, and wood caught his attention from above him. The fog kept its cover and showed no signs of diminishing as Jim clawed his way through the air.

“Hello?”

Lester dug his shovel down into the moist dirt and left it there to rest while turning to greet the lost man and asked, “Jim isn’t it?” Jim backed away from Lester in shock that he knew

his name, almost falling back into the place he came from. Lester followed with a grin of his lips. “Easy there slick, your wife was just here some time ago, said she had lost her husband a little while back.”

“Oh, well that explains you knowing my name.”

Although Jim’s wife had failed to mention his name Lester nodded his head in agreement with the man anyway. He picked up his shovel to gesture he still had work to be done. Assuming again, Jim took notice to this and said, “I see you’ve got your hand’s full with work here, but could you help me find my way?”

With his usual answer Lester replied, “Of course, of course. There is only two ways to go from here: East or West. Yah see?” Lester pointed at the sky just as he had done for the man’s wife some time before that. Jim’s eyes followed Lester’s hand as it swayed from the light skies of the East to the dark skies of the West. Jim stared at each sky and direction for quite some time before looking at Lester.

“I get it. I understand.” Jim drifted off before erasing himself into the dark fog beneath the dark skies of the west where night appeared to still exist. Lester watched Jim waving his hand right through the hot cobwebs of fog as he made his trip West. Lester shook his head and muttered to himself, “Only get’s hotter from there slick.” He followed this with a sly wink towards Jim.

The East had gained a soul, and so too did the West.

Jim Hutchings was an unfaithful husband who took his wife’s life in a brutal fight that night, before ending his own. The couple was then carried (transported) from the long black vehicle, in fog, to transition to the after life where Lester Paddock dug up their graves. From there they entered a new world where they were to journey off to whichever forever awaited

them. Two *forever's*, the coveted East, or the dreaded West. Whichever forever you deserved, you got. For Jim, his forever started with the never-ending path to darkness into the fog, alone under the dark skies of the west. God only knows (literally) the pains he'd continuously journey through, forever.

The fog in front of Lester cleared and another grave appeared. He took the shovel in hand and began digging the grave up from the other side.

Lester couldn't help but wonder who would arise from this one. Just as Lester knew Lisa and Jim's name, he saw from this man's stone his name was Frank, but as a person who was he? Whatever he was on earth, he'd choose his way here after Lester finished digging Frank's grave up in the Land of Souls Passed On. Lester, in his own mind, hoped Frank would head East to the light. He never liked seeing anyone head West. How could he? Nobody would wish those skies on anyone if they knew what was beyond those skies. After work and after life we all will find our way under the split skies of darkness and light, and choose our way. A sky that looks as if the moon's shift had just ended, and the sun's watch is just about to start. Except here the moon and sun didn't exist and that sky didn't change. Here the souls came to accept their forever, here during Lester's shift.