

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

By Pamela Dae

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Read this macabre little Alt bedtime story to the kiddies and neither you nor they will get any sleep. And yep, there are people out there like that. Just be sure your Toronto Blue Jays cap is buttoned down! EEEE-YUCK! factor aside, we love the unscrubbed voice with its dirty feet and street drawl and the way it nails down the narrative like a hammer blow. It's kinda Stephen King, kinda Twilight Zone, kinda totally original. You've been warned.*

Patrick picks her up from lab to take her for a short drive along the dark lanes twisting between the slave-laid stone fences guarding thoroughbreds. He reads aloud the farm names as they pass: *Calumet, Castleton, Spendthrift.*

"I worked at that one," he says, pointing to shadow trees and misted horse movement. Blood rims his fingertip from a bitten cuticle. He withdraws his hand, afraid she'll notice. "Groomed the horses -- walked em too. I could handle any a them horses. Still be there now but for that office manager. Bitch."

A sniff of sweet hay, horseshit, and dewy grass through his open window nearly breaks his heart. Maybe shouldn't've said that last. He checks her reaction but she's chill. He smiles. She doesn't interrupt like his mother does. Or his fifth grade teacher. Don't even get him started on that "career counselor" who looked at him like he was something stuck to her pointy high-heel.

When he brings her back that night, he leaves her with a smile.

The next time, they drive down Manchester Street where abandoned bourbon distilleries have transformed into craft beer breweries, ice cream parlors, and trendy restaurants. He idles the Pacer in front of the infamous graffiti scribbled across three-stories of abandoned brick: gas-mask, four hands gripping iron bars, slash of red tape reading 'Caution Do Not Feed'.

"That's something, huh?"

He thinks she might have shivered so he turns the car and swings down into the Recycling Center's football field-sized parking lot.

"I worked here til I got the job at the hospital." He chugs his car to the bay doors of the quonset hut headquarters. He lowers his seatback, then hers, craving comfort for his explanation. "Trucks pull in here, dump the trash, then the bulldozer shovels it onto the belts. Paper goes up first, then giant magnets pull out cans, and air puffs separate the plastic. Then glass falls out and gets crushed." He turns to admonish her with raised index finger. "One plastic bag'll stop the works."

He coughs importantly. "My buddy Ted and me, we picked bags for five damn years. Ted's got the best eyeballs in three states -- says he can grab a bag doing 40." She fairly shimmers in delight.

He revs the engine. "I bout got promoted to driving the dozer. But the one time I did some tightass woman unloading some New York news from her *Mercedes* claimed I hit her." He trills his voice with a fancy la-de-da, pleased with himself now.

That night, Patrick kisses her before he goes.

Patrick plans. He works 7 to 3 a.m., not easy but he likes the quiet after midnight. He arrives in the lab after his shift and he's pleased to find her waiting. He cuddles her walking to the car then drives through Mickey D's on the way to his apartment, shielding her with his jacket at the pick-up window so the glass-eyed zitty kid won't stare.

All is ready: he'd vacuumed the rug, tossed food-crusting paper plates, even swirled cleaner around the toilet before he left for work.

After bringing her in, he flips on the lamp. "So, this is it." Should've thrown out that dead fern. She doesn't seem to notice as he seats her on the straight wooden chair. "Comfortable?" He slides the McDonald's bag on the table between them and unwraps a burger, chomps it.

"I like you let me talk," he says. "Most people . . ." A fistful of fries swallows the sentence. "I got plans, y'know. I won't always be just some orderly. I'm gonna get certified, be a radiology tech. Maybe ultra sound."

He chews, waiting for approval but she remains still.

"Look how far I got already." His voice rises in speed and volume. "From picking through piles of other people's stinking trash to Pine-Soling the hospital."

He glances sidelong, appraising. "But you're right. It ain't normal to go on no date at 3 in the morning."

She remains impassive.

"Look," he says. Several fries fall to grease the rug when he stands. "I don't need this attitude. *I found you. I saved you.*"

Nothing. Absofreaking nada.

"And I can get rid of you."

He crumples the waxy paper of the bag, tosses it into the kitchen sink, free throw style, misses. "Fuck it."

Patrick carries her down the stairs and shoves her into the passenger seat. Frigid, disapproving cunt. The Pacer rumbles through the night, crossing flashing yellow signal lights on Nicholasville Road and the last college kids stumbling home.

He checks his Casio watch; 3:45 a.m. He turns on High, ignoring the silent basketball mecca. He whips right onto Jefferson and then left on Manchester. The gas-masked face rises from the wall. Caution. Do Not Feed.

A final turn into the recycling center where they find trash waiting in front of the open bay doors. At 4, his old crew starts up the belt. More trucks trundle in around 4:30, then the dozer pushes that heap up the belt. Paper sorted away before Ted and the hand-pickers eyeball it, then the glass rolls for crushing.

He hauls her out of the car. "I ain't gonna be disrespected."

Patrick holds her in one hand. Easy as that. She's just a glass jar with some dead brain floating inside that he found on a shelf, that's all, he tells himself. Still. "We coulda had something."

He shrugs off the hurt, hitches his Wrangler's by a belt loop. No way ole Ted's quick eyes would miss a brain in a jar. Patrick twists off the lid, dumps the mushy grey onto the top of the refuse pile and then digs around, shifting trash until she must be near the bottom. He tosses the glass jar and metal lid at the heap. The machines will take care of the rest -- crush the jar into a broken pile of glass cullet and leave her a stain on some worthless paper.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *There's a gigantic mask mural of the type as described across the street from the recycling center in my hometown of Lexington, Kentucky. The graffiti image is certainly nightmare-worthy. I believe art inspires art, and it certainly did in the case of 'Graveyard Shift'.*

My literary influences are the great Southern writers Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Donna Tartt and Harper Lee.

BIO: I am a federal criminal defense attorney who longs to be a writer and I'm working on my first to-be-published novel 'Rush' which centers around the opioid epidemic. I have been published in *Nowhere Magazine* and *AvantAppalachia*.