

DEAD BUT NOT GONE

It was Halloween. An old Ford Torino pulled into the timeworn cemetery by way of the decrepit Arsenal Road entrance, bumping and shuddering over the uneven hardpan. The cemetery's roadway wasn't all that bad, the car just didn't handle anything other than smooth pavement very well. It was an ancient graveyard, but the county caretakers did a decent job of keeping the one-lane roadway passable as it snaked its way through the two-acre site.

The Ford's headlights illuminated tombstones as the car crept by, The gravesites had a distinctly shabby look to them, but they hadn't been allowed to succumb completely to Father Time and Mother Nature. None had flowers or decorations of any kind placed by them from loving friends or relatives. There had not been any new interments in the old graveyard for many years, and most of the friends and relatives of the permanent residents in the Huron River Cemetery had succumbed to the same inevitable plight of age as those resting in the cold ground.

Jimmy glanced over at his new friend riding shotgun. "Hanging in there, Nick?" he asked, turning to him and grinning.

"I still don't know why you have to do this on Halloween, especially at night," was Nick's morose reply. "It's creepy."

"Just a little nostalgia, I guess," Jimmy replied. "Fond memories. Let's just say I miss my grandma and like to visit her occasionally."

"But why on Halloween?" he asked. "Besides, I thought we were going to a party," Nick grumbled as an afterthought.

Jimmy stared at his companion for several long seconds. He'd introduced himself to Nick at the Riverbend Bar, a shot-and-a-beer dive on the edge of town. He observed the man several

times in the past. He was a regular, and already three sheets to the wind on this occasion. A few more drinks enhanced and lubricated their budding friendship considerably.

A smile tweaked Jimmy's full lips. His latest friend was on the hefty side with a face that reminded one of the Pillsbury Doughboy. "Yes, we're still going to that Halloween party I told you about. I even have an extra vampire mask and cape in the trunk for you," he finally answered. "Another drink and we're off to see the ladies, with me as your suave, debonaire wingman while you're chasing the skirts. Humor me, this won't take long, just a 'highball' with Gram—"

"Highball?" Nick interrupted, his watery eyes questioning.

"Cocktail, booze, mixed drink. My grandma was German and a little old fashioned. Hell, she still called bars and lounges 'beer gardens.' As to why Halloween, I'll refresh your foggy memory..."

Jimmy paused as he slowed the car, getting his bearings among the gravestones. He picked up the thread of his own recollections. "My parents died in a car accident when I was three, and my grandmother ended up raising me. She taught me a lot. My grandfather died two years before my arrival, so was a non-factor. Gram was an avid follower of All Hallows Night—that's what it was called before it became Halloween. I have fond memories of the holidays at my Gram's while I was growing up."

Jimmy paused as he pulled his car to the side of the narrow drive, stopping near the back of the cemetery. "Here we are. Everybody out." He reached into the backseat, grabbed a flashlight, a bottle of vodka, and three Styrofoam cups, then exited the car.

Nick maneuvered his not inconsiderable bulk into the cool, early night air and—still mumbling to himself—followed Jimmy farther in among the graves. Most of the leaves of

autumn had abandoned the cemetery's trees and crunched underfoot, rustling dryly as they walked. They continued a short distance until Jimmy stopped in front of a four-foot-high gravestone. The glow from the flashlight illuminated the simple inscription.

“Vera Ziegler

Born 1898 Died 1996.”

The gravestone of Adolph Ziegler, Jimmy's grandfather, stood nearby. There were other, older tombstones, some larger some smaller, on nearby plots bearing the surname Ziegler—a regular little city of Ziegler's.

“Hi, Gram,” Jimmy greeted his grandmother's gravesite, smiling. He set the flashlight down on the headstone, lined up the three paper cups, and poured a liberal dose of spirits into each. He continued, “I'm ready to begin this year's Halloween festivities, and I'm here to share a highball with you to kick things off.”

Nick remained silent, staring, a little freaked and unsure of what to say.

Jimmy picked up two of the cups and handed one to Nick. He patted him on the back before toasting. “Here's to a successful Halloween, may they all continue to be full.” They each knocked off their vodka in one chug. The third cup remained untouched.

The liberal shot of vodka did little to pacify Nick's unease. He just wanted to go to the party.

Jimmy became lost in a reverie, contemplating. “I remember Gram sending me out in the neighborhood with the other kids. We would have dinner when I returned, but I couldn't have any of my candy collection until we ate. One year I was a ghost, sheet and all, another time a pistol-packing cowboy. Can't remember the others, but I do remember the homemade goodies she started me off with—a caramel popcorn ball and chocolate-covered apple. She passed them

out to all the kids instead of candy.” He frowned and shook his head. “Can’t do that nowadays with the crazies putting dangerous crap in anything that’s not wrapped. My favorite was the popcorn ball, stuck together with melted caramel. Reminded me of a snowball. I sure miss those.”

Nick was totally creeped out and a bit isolated with all the one-sided reminiscing. “Listen, Jimmy, I’m going to wait in the car while you finish up here,” he said and began walking back. “I just want to go to the party and meet some girls,” he added over his shoulder.

Jimmy didn’t answer; he was still standing and mumbling at the gravestone.

Before Nick stumbled ten feet Jimmy called out to him. “Wait, ol’ buddy. How about one more drink for the road?”

Nick was never one to turn down a free drink, creepy night or not. He hesitated. but turned back. The ambient light of the flashlight lit Jimmy and the gravestone eerily. “Okay, but then we need to head to the party and meet some girls,” he stated, attempting to firm up his words. His speech was becoming a little slurred.

Jimmy had again lined the three empty Styrofoam cups atop the headstone and splashed a liberal amount of vodka in each. “Drink up. It must be a special occasion; Gram usually only has one highball per Halloween.” His teeth flashed white in the dark as he grinned.

Nick managed a smile at the odd comment, but his thoughts kept returning to the upcoming party. “We’ve been here long enough. Let’s get going, Jimmy.” His stomach rumbled an added reminder. “I sure hope they have some munchies at this big bash of yours. I’m getting hungry.”

“Me, too,” Jimmy answered. He began rummaging in his jacket pockets and came out with two Saran wrapped popcorn balls. “Not to worry. Here, Gram came up with a couple of these to hold us till dinner.”

Mouth hanging open, Nick’s eyes morphed big and white. Either his new-found friend was drunk on his ass, or plain batshit crazy. First the vodka, now this? He dropped his cup, his eyes focusing on the Torino a short distance away, a dark specter among the muted gloom of the surrounding trees and scattered tombstones. He reconsidered. Maybe it would be better to walk. The cemetery seemed remote, but he thought he remembered a town not too far away, and he could catch a ride there. Regardless, he no longer wanted to get back into Jimmy’s car. He seemed to have lost interest in the party, anyway. He just wanted to go home.

Jimmy was still talking and looking at the gravestone fondly. “Back in the old days, Gram and I would have you over to our house for dinner, but now that she’s gone—

Time to split, vamoose, head for the hills, take a hike. Nick turned and headed back to the roadway, his feet shuffling through the dry leaves. A gust of wind caught him in the face, making his eyes water, chilled his sweaty brow, and sent a shiver through him. He picked up the pace. Almost as if searching for him, a gnarled, unexpected tree root appeared from among the leaves and caught at one of his shoes. He stumbled, arms flailing for unachievable balance. Gravity finally prevailed and he pitched forward. His head struck a nearby grave marker with an ominous thud. For Nick, the shadowy night went completely black, the party, forgotten.

Jimmy stood, staring at the prostrate body for several long seconds. “As I was saying, ol’ buddy, before you so rudely interrupted me, back in the old days, Gram and I would have you over to our house for dinner, but now that she’s gone, we must do things a little differently—an

oxymoronic ‘scheduled spontaneity’ you might say. Now, we’ll just have you here for our Halloween dinner,” he reflected, munching on his popcorn ball.

Finished with his Halloween appetizer, Jimmy picked up Nick’s discarded Styrofoam cup and Saran wrap and shoved it in his jacket pocket along with his own. He wanted to keep the area neat and tidy. Satisfied, he grabbed Nick’s inert body by the arms and dragged it behind the Ziegler family area and into the bordering tree line. He bent, pulled up his pant leg, and unsheathed a hidden carving knife from its scabbard. He’d had his popcorn ball, now it was time for the Ziegler family dinner.

Behind Jimmy, a gentle breeze continued to waft, blowing the remaining Styrofoam cup, now empty, from the gravestone onto the dead, rustling leaves nearby

Dead but not gone...