

Deathly Dark

by Sydney Barnes (grade 11)

Growing up in a cemetery was interesting. The Cromwell Cemetery has been in my family for generations, and currently, my father, mother, and I live in the house on the cemetery grounds. The cemetery is not large, and my father takes good care of it; I sometimes help him, but my main job is to lock both gates at sundown. The gates are on the south and north sides, so I must walk the length of the cemetery each night. Locking the gates has been my job since I was tall enough to reach them, and I usually enjoyed doing it, but that changed after the outbreak.

An outbreak took over the town of Alverton a few years back. It didn't affect my family much because we live outside town, but Alverton was hit hard. That year, many new occupants were added to the cemetery, and they were all put in the same section. The graveyard used to be lively; many families would come and have picnics with their loved ones. However, after the outbreak hit, it was as if the cemetery was forgotten. The cemetery changed after the outbreak; the nights seemed darker, and the air was always thick and cold. Closing the gates at sundown became a thing I dreaded, and a place I used to call home felt unfamiliar. There were many things I experienced that I couldn't explain, but the one that will stay with me forever is that deathly dark night.

It was a Tuesday night in mid-October, and I was finishing my homework after dinner. I looked out my window and saw the remaining glow of the sun peeking out from behind the trees. I knew I needed to close the gates soon, but I didn't want to go out that night, so I pretended not to realize it was close to sundown. That didn't work for long, though, because my father called up from the bottom of the stairs, "Jack, it's sundown." I sighed, closed my notebook, and started heading down the stairs. I got to the backdoor, took my coat from the hook, picked up the lantern from the floor, and went out the door. I looked at the sky and saw that there was no moon; the lack of light made the night seem even darker. I grabbed a match from the box in my pocket and lit the lantern, pushing away the darkness. I started heading towards the south gate; I always took the same well-worn path. As I walked, I noticed how the graveyard felt different. After the outbreak, the graveyard always felt empty and cold, but that night it felt unwelcoming. Once I got closer to the south gate, I heard a loud crack from behind me that pierced through the air. I whipped around and held the lantern before me but couldn't see anything. I stood there for a moment as my heart pounded inside my chest. The air around me started to get thicker, which made it hard to catch my breath. I decided I didn't want to be out there any longer, so I quickly made it the rest of the way to the south gate and locked it. I wished I could return home, but I still had to lock the north gate. I took a deep breath and headed down the path I came from, the darkness of night pushing against the light of my lantern with every step I took.

The north gate was on the other end of the cemetery, so I had to retrace my steps until I got to my house, then I kept going. A breeze started to pick up, and I watched as my lantern flame danced with it. The breeze was getting harsher, and a cold gust of wind would have blown out my flame if I hadn't protected it with my hand. The night was getting colder, and I hugged my coat closer to my chest.

Another gust of wind came, and the little bit of light I had was gone. The darkness consumed me, the wind whispering in my ear. I felt a pang of fear in my stomach. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my matchbox and grabbed one, but my shaky hands dropped it. I quickly grabbed another one, striking it against the rough side of the box, but the wind kept blowing it out. Panicking, I turned my body so it shielded the match from the wind. Striking my match again, I felt the warm glow of light. I quickly lit my lantern, afraid that it would blow out again, but the wind seemed to have died down. With my lantern lit again, I could see that the north gate was just a little further away. I thought about turning back, but I was determined not to let the night's mischief keep me from doing my job, so I continued. I got to the north gate and locked it. I felt relieved knowing my job was done and I could return home. I stood there for a moment and thought about how I used to not fear the cemetery and how it once was a place of remembrance. I recalled how many people used to come and spend time with their loved ones, but now the cemetery has become a place of grief. I wondered how the people in the ground felt about being forgotten as well.

With both gates locked, I started making my way back home. The path I take to get home goes right through the section where all the outbreak victims are buried. I usually tried to avoid that part of the cemetery, but it was the fastest way back home. As I got closer to where the bodies were buried, the air got thicker. I felt uneasy, unsure if I should keep going or turn around and go the long way. I was already halfway home, so I decided to keep going. I continued walking until I felt a sharp pain in the back of my leg. I cried out as I dropped to the ground with a hard thud, my lantern crashing down with me. Confusion filled my head. Somehow, my lantern didn't go out when it hit the ground, so when I looked down at my leg, I could see a gray hand with long fingernails latched onto my ankle. I screamed in horror. I kicked at the hand hard with my other foot. The hand's grasp got tighter, and I could feel my heart beating hard inside my chest. I screamed again while clawing at the hand with my own. My breathing became rapid, the cold air burning my lungs. I could see blood soaking through my jeans. The hand's grip got even tighter. My ankle ached as I yelled as loud as I could, praying someone would hear me. I grabbed at the earth beneath me, trying to crawl away. Fear and confusion fogged my mind, and I barely registered that the hand was no longer on my ankle. I looked up and saw my father holding a shovel. He dropped it and gently pulled me up by the arm. He asked if I was hurt, but I was only able to nod my head. I looked to where the hand was, and I saw it was severed from what it was attached to. I tried to put pressure on my bleeding leg, but it hurt too much. The shovel and lantern were forgotten as my father helped me limp back home. I looked up at my father, and he had a faraway look in his eyes. He mumbled something I could barely hear; he said, "My God, it happened again."

That night happened five months ago, and since then, we have moved and sold the cemetery to the town of Alverton. I don't know how much my mother knows about what happened that night; she never asked me about it. The morning after it happened, I had a bruise on my ankle, and at breakfast, my father said that I was not to go out in the cemetery at night and that once spring came, we were moving. There have been countless nights when I can't sleep because of what happened and what my father said that night. I have tried to ask him about it, but he never has an answer for me. The scratch on my leg healed up nicely but left a scar. The scar is the only thing that reminds me that it actually did happen and wasn't a dream. I do miss the cemetery. I miss what it used to be. Those final months before we moved, I would go out during the day and spend time with some of my favorite graves. I think they felt lonely, not having seen their families in years. From all my years of living in a cemetery, I would say that the dead do still feel emotions, and if they feel forgotten, it can turn into a deathly dark thing.