

A Grim Business

By

Anthony Lund

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"I do enjoy these light, airy chats," I said, leaning back, hearing the satisfactory click of my bones. "It is a shame I cannot do them more often."

"I would be inclined to agree," said the long-dead corpse of Abraham Lincoln. "It has been far too long since I stretched my legs and became embroiled in such a long, meandering conversation between friends of intellect. How long have we shot the breeze here today?"

"About seven minutes," I replied. "Tempers fidget or some such phrase."

"Tempus Fugit, my good man," said Bogart. "Time flies, and indeed it does. I remember that tune Sam played like it was just a few seconds ago."

"That is because it was just a few seconds ago," I interjected. "He has been playing it again and again the whole time we have been here."

"So why in the hell did he stop?" Bogart asked, looking around for the avid ivory tinkler.

"Because I shot him," Al Capone said from the other side of the table. "He was distracting me from more important matters."

"How can you shoot someone who's already dead?" Bogart asked.

"You would be surprised the things you can do with the dead," I said, sniffing at a glass of something sulphurous. "The boundaries, as they say, are limitless."

"I have heard they make great lovers."

All gathered turned as one to stare questioningly at the slender cadaver of Marilyn Monroe.

"Now, my dear," Lincoln said in a fatherly tone. "There may be limitless boundaries in the world of the dead, but we should still maintain a bit of decorum."

"I do agree, Abraham," I said. "I find it much better to allow the living to drag themselves through the debauchorous aspects of life. It keeps things so much cleaner on this side."

"Oh, you're just a bunch of old fuddy-duddies who don't know a good time when they see one," Marilyn countered, pouting her grey, flaky lips.

"Hey doll, less of the fuddy-duddy," Capone said. "Me and the boys over there know how to have a good time. Ain't that right boys?"

The focus moved to a group gathered on a separate table, an earthy aroma of hops and spirits creating a visible aura around them. The somewhat youthful representations of Oliver Reed, Richard Harris, Paul Newman and Steve McQueen were lost in the middle of a good poker game, alcohol on tap and mountains of chips between them.

"I said isn't that right boys?" Capone tried again, raising his voice while feeling a little bit of a prick.

"Hmm, yeah, right," came the unenthusiastic response from the hellraising quartet, before Reed slammed a hand onto the table and bellowed, "You cheating bastard!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Olly," Harris said, lifting his hands in a gesture of innocence.

"Give him a break," McQueen broke in, lowering Harris' hands for him. "The old boy hasn't won a hand all night. He has to try something."

"Try something?" Reed barked, standing and rocking the table, dislodging a handful of chips. "Try something? I'll fucking try something on your face you little—"

"Oh, I'm sure there won't be any need for such violence," Lincoln chirped up, ever the voice of reason. "You will agree I'm sure, Grim, that there are other methods to violence in order to resolve all issues."

"Of course there are," I said. "They just usually fail to be quite as effective."

"I expected someone of your quality to have a higher opinion than that."

"Abe," the tones of Bogart said, "Just remember who this guy is." He patted me on the shoulder as he talked. "This is the guy who comes to your death to take your soul away. Do you really think it makes a difference whether you died in your sleep or under the wheels of a car?"

"Well if anyone is foolish enough to sleep under a car," Lincoln said, stroking his chin, "then I would say they get what they deserve."

"How did you ever get to where you did?" Bogart commented. "And who's sorting out the drinks in this place? No pun intended but it's dead in here."

"What can I get you?" the rumbling tone of Thin Eric said from behind the bar.

"Bloody hell," Bogart said, catching his hat as it toppled from his head. "You shouldn't spring up on people like that. Could kill a guy with the shock."

"Sorry," the fat barman said, polishing a glass with his finger. "It's the living/dead divide. It can seem like I appear from nowhere when really I have just been standing there."

"Does it not get confusing?" Lincoln asked. "All this fraternising with the living and the dead? Don't you get mixed up every now and then?"

"Not usually. I'm good at keeping my customer's on the right side of the bar."

"And a very good job you do too," I said, tapping my fingers with a bony clatter. "Where is Fat Eric today?"

"He's speaking to the bank about a loan," Thin Eric said.

"A loan?"

"Yes, for the new pub."

I almost fell off my chair. Across the room the poker game, which had reached the highest possible pinnacle of impending violence, suddenly halted mid-hand. All eyes in the room turned in the direction of the fat barman who's thin brother was inexplicably enquiring about funds to finance a new establishment.

"What is the meaning of this?" Lincoln spluttered. "A new establishment? But what of The Dead Lion? Surely you cannot plan on closing down!"

"What?" Thin Eric asked in an octave that attracted canines from afar. "Of course we're not closing down. Just a bit of business expansion and all that corporate jazz."

"Oh," Lincoln said, stroking his chin. "Well that's all well and good then. Where is this new establishment going to be situated?"

"Next door," Thin Eric said, his tone adding 'of course' to the end of the sentence. "It's good business around here so we thought if we open another pub next door then we'll get double to trade."

Lincoln and I exchanged glances. I turned and received a similar look from Bogart, along with a shake of the head.

"What?" Thin Eric asked, looking at the faces in the room. "What's wrong?"

"How many times do you need to turn people away because you're full up?" I asked the perplexed barman turned would-be business tycoon.

"Never. We pride ourselves on that."

"So if you can fit all of us in here, then who is going to go next door?"

The silence became so heavy it could have dented the floor.

"I've got paying customers to see to on the other side," Thin Eric said shortly, flickering through the doorway between the living and dead.

"You do know that just fucked any hopes of more drinks tonight?" Oliver Reed bellowed from the poker table.

"Then I suppose we should make these do for tonight and retire at a sensible hour," Lincoln said.

"Perhaps it is time for me to be on my way," I commented, feeling the weight of the List in my robes. "It seems to be growing busy."

"A grim business, all this death," Bogart said. "I'm sure Sam knew a song that would be appropriate."

"Good for him, irritating bastard," Reed slurred after slamming his winning hand through the top of the table.

"Well that's bust it, hasn't it?" Newman said. "Time for us to call it a night too, I reckon."

"Probably best for you," McQueen said, laying a friendly hand on Newman's shoulder. "You'd be paying in body parts soon. Hasn't been your night."

"There's always next time. Besides, I think there is something more interesting than my lack of gambling savvy."

"What's that?" McQueen asked, scooping up the cards from the table.

"When did Eastwood croak?"

Eyes seemed to fall instinctively on me. "He hasn't," I provided instantly.

"Then why the hell is his standing over there?"

I turned to look over my shoulder, following the gaze of the others gathered in the flipside of The Dead Lion, to find the deep wrinkled, scowling face of Clint looking up and down the bar.

"Who the fuck do I need to kill to get a drink around here?" Clint grumbled. "I go for a piss and the place is dead when I come back."

"How can he be on this side if he's living?" Lincoln asked, close to my ear as though he might be overhead giving away a great secret of the universe.

"Beat's me," I replied rising to me feet and shouldering my scythe. "I'm fucked if I'm going to ask the mad bastard though. There are some people you just let go where they want, when they want."

I started to walk towards the door, when Eastwood turned to me.

"Hey you," he rasped. "Skeleton boy. Somebody die in here or something? If you're going to dress up for Halloween you can at least get a bit of party spirit going."

"I'm sure you are correct," I said. "I think the main party is through the other side of the bar though. We haven't really started in here yet."

"So that's why the service isn't worth shit. Wait til I find that punk barman. I'll kick his ass for him."

"You do that," I said. "Oh, and ho ho ho."

"Ho fucking ho?" Eastwood laughed. "Where have you been the last two thousand years?"

"Here and there," I replied. "Why?"

"Ask one of your buddies over there. I'm sure they'll enlighten you."

Eastwood walked along the bar and vanished back to the side of the living. I have often wondered how only the odd few manage to lose themselves through the doorway, and similarly give thanks that the door does not swing both ways. It is bad enough keeping the dead in check without allowing them to waltz in and out of the living world at random.

"So," Lincoln said, rising and straightening his suit, "ho ho ho? Grim, you have a lot still to learn."

"Don't worry about it, Abraham," I replied, opening the door and stepping out into the darkness. "I have all the time in the world."