

THE BLACK BAG

—Sarah Stansbery

NICKADEMUS IS AN HONEST MAN. Has a job like anyone else to sustain a good living. He loves his work and does it well. His work, however, involves handling corpses. But what many don't see is that morticians have a sense of humor and are very optimistic.

It was a Saturday afternoon when Nick received a phone call. He was sitting in his kitchen, next to his cabinets shaped like 18th century coffins. His wife, Carolyn, was enjoying a cup of tea while sitting at their mahogany, claw footed table. Each chair had a different face carved into it, all menacing and snarling. Her nose was buried deep in a book. When the phone rang, a sad melody sang out; a flute solo disrupting the silence.

"That's the dead ring," Carolyn said, giving her husband a meaningful glance, as she peered over her glasses, her expression serious.

"Well, darn," groaned Nick, "That means I can't say my slogan: '*You stab 'em, we slab 'em*.'" He reached for the replicated 1892 Victorian Phone, its black and silver veins glimmering in the streaks of sunlight sneaking in through a parted curtain. He couldn't help but admire its beauty. He held the earpiece up to his ear and suppressed a giggle as he answered, "Good afternoon, Boxed Home Funeral Services. This is Nickademus speaking. How may I assist?" After some uncontrollable sobbing on the other line, an elderly women's voice was heard. Nickademus listened respectfully, acknowledging her wishes, all the while thinking how pretty the light's reflection on the phone was, wishing it to look like that all the time. After the conversation, he hung up the phone with a sigh. He liked it better when his friend, Steve, called.

"So much for getting the weekend off, hun. Another client croaked on me and his wife wants the services on Monday."

"But I thought they weren't your cli-

ents until they croaked?" A smile played on her lips from the pun in her own joke. Nick smiled back, a small chuckle escaping his throat. He headed up the spiraled, cast iron staircase to their bedroom where he changed into his favorite suit - a deep sea blue with a silver necktie. As he kissed his wife good-bye and opened the front door, a wave of lush smells from Carolyn's flower garden washed over him, and entered their house, engulfing everything in the sweet scent of mums, bat face, and an organic wall of the rare blue rose. Being a competitive landscape designer, she made sure their yard was the best in their town, outdoing every flowerbed she'd see. Nickademus admired her work, though he felt she could do without the slight obsession. But he couldn't complain, after all, she put up with him and what he did for a living. He closed the door and headed to his car, a slight skip in his step.

The mortician's car was a silver 2010 hatchback sedan. He stopped a moment to admire the second best investment he ever made. He slid into the black leather seat, the scratch-free surface shaping perfectly to his form. He started the engine and a smooth purr rose from under the hood. He turned in his seat to look into the back, two gurneys staring back. He had to remove the back seats for them to fit. After all, his job required him

to pick up his work from hospitals and on special occasions, clients' homes. He headed down the street of his neighborhood and headed into town. Luckily, his destination was only a fifteen minute drive away.

After parking in the loading area of the town hospital, he saw the coroner waiting for him.

"Hey Steve, got a cold one for me?"

"Yep, he's inside," Steve replied, his face brightening up a little.

With a handshake, they both turned and entered the back door. The hallway was lean, only big enough for two full sized men to walk shoulder to shoulder.

"So, what's this one's story?" Nickademus asked.

"Bad heart, and from what I looked at, I'm not sure how he lived as long as he did," Steve remarked as they stopped in front of a white door, pulling his keys from his pocket. "Wonder why it took him so long to pass?" he wondered aloud.

"Must have *cold feet*..." Nickademus replied with a smile. Both men laughed, the sound echoing down the hall. They entered a small room that was well lit. There were no windows; only x-rays decorated the whitewashed, concrete walls. There were three stainless steel tables. Two had sinks attached at the head of them. The third one had wheels, and it was occupied. Nick picked up the slip that was

hanging from the foot of the corpse that was sticking out from under a white sheet.

"Mr. Butcher, age: 93, height: 5'6", weight: 132..."

"So, Nick, did you bring your tools or you need to borrow mine, but I'm gonna have to start charging you if you do use mine again."

"No thanks, Steve. I prefer to take my work home on the weekends." He pulled a lever near the left wheel of the table, releasing the brakes. He pushed the table towards the hall while Steve held the door for him. The wheels squeaked as they spun, the sound bouncing off the walls and beyond. As the two men approached the loading dock, Nickademus stopped and pulled out his keys, hitting the unlock button and then the rear hatch button. The hatch yawned open and one of the gurneys slid out part way like a lolling, black tongue. He wheeled the table over to the gurney and started putting the feet in first.

"Feet first? Wouldn't it be easier to put the head in first?" Steve said matter-of-fact-like.

"Maybe, but this makes it easier to get them back out since my drive-way is slanted," Nickademus replied with a shrug. "Besides, after the incident of dropping my fare ... I never want to do a reconstruction like that again."

"How you made it through school with your state of mind is

beyond me," Steve remarked, shaking his head from side to side.

"What can I say," Nickademus replied, "undertakers think inside the box." He handed the now empty table back to his friend and slid back into the driver's seat of his car.

As he headed back home, he slowed down so as not to jumble his passenger, knowing what could happen if he hit a bump just right. His dashboard began to beep, informing him he had a txt message. He tapped the plasma screen and a picture of his spouse lit up:

{Carolyn} ~Dinner?~

Dinner?! Nickademus half groaned. *Knowing her, she'll want me to go to the store,* he thought to himself. "She must think I'm a big spender or something," he stated out loud.

"You don't want anything do you?" He peered into the rear view mirror as he talked to the corpse, looking at the white sheet that covered a recognizable lump.

He pulled into a parking lot and parked in front of Kroger's. He got out of his car and shut the door. Mumbling to himself, "bread, cheese, lunch meat, ...and wine ... wine for later," he smiled at the thought. As he strolled up to the entrance, he passed a man in hand-me-down clothes. His padded vest, once red, now looked as though it has been acquainted with the ground many times. It reminded Nickademus of an old life pre-

server. The man was smoking. Nick gave him a nod and entered without a second thought. The man, however, was not on break.

As he watched Nickademus walk by in his blue suit, he thought the grin on Nick's face a bit strange. But he only had his sights on the car Nick came out of. He casually walked over to it, his worn sneakers sliding loosely on his feet. He peered into the passenger side window, whistling with delight. The doors weren't locked. He cautiously opened the door. Being new, the door didn't make a sound. The man now gawked at the dashboard: the built-in GPS, the LED radio with an attached CD player, and the well-polished chrome of it all. The look on his face resembled a twelve-year-old boy on Christmas. "If only I knew how to jump-start an engine..." he mumbled as he pulled out a screw driver from his grubby coat pocket.

He began to pick at the seams of the dash board, prying it apart, trying not to force it too much and break it. A large, black chunk of plastic broke free and landed in his lap. He looked it over and determined it not to be important. Wiping off any fingerprints, he tossed it into the back. It made a muffled thump as it bounced off the head of the cargo. The thief looked back, unable to see what he hit. "It's big," he thought, "might even be worth something ..." He pulled the adjustment lever on

the side of the seat and leaned the seat back, level with the floor. He released the handle, letting it click loudly back in place.

Without warning, Mr. Butcher sat up in his gurney and groaned. The white cloth fell from his torso and revealed a large Y-shaped suture across his chest and down his abdomen. His eyes bulging from his eye sockets, Mr. Butcher shrieked in absolute horror. The sound was deep at first, then, rising in pitch, grew longer and more forced, continuing even after his lungs were empty. The corpse of Mr. Butcher had fallen back on the gurney with a thump, its energy spent. All went silent.

Meanwhile, Nickademus wandered through the aisles of the store. He sighed as he walked from shelf to shelf, feeling like Pacman, looking for what he needed. "Why can't they put things where they're more convenient," he thought aloud. As he approached the counter, he noticed that the lady at the register looked like she needed a drink. Her hair was barley pulled back with a loose hair tie, her bangs covering half her face. She looked at him as if he were a bother, disturbing her evening. She eyed him in his suit as she rang up his groceries and placed them in a brown, paper bag. "What you suppose'ta be? You go'en to a funeral er something?" Her gum flopping was around in her mouth as she spoke. Nickademus smiled, "In two days

I will." He pulled out his wallet, noticing the odd look the cashier was giving him now. He pulled a business card from his wallet and handed it to her. "Take one, I find it nice to plan ahead." He then grabbed his bags and headed for the exit, the automatic doors sliding open for him.

As he walked out of the store, the paper bag in one arm, he started to whistle until he noticed the squad car parked next to his. Its red and blue lights flashing in the setting sunlight. He rushed over to the scene, hoping it wasn't anything serious. As he approached, the officer saw him and called out. "This your vehicle?"

Nickademus calmly replied, "Yes, was there an accident?" He looked over the officer's shoulder to look at his car, the thoughts of his insurance covering any damage calming him slightly. The officer pulled out a note pad and began to jot things down. Nick stood there, waiting for an answer. The officer studied his body language, noting his calmness and reaction to what he was about to say. "A man broke into your vehicle in an attempt to take your electronics. A civilian who was walking by heard a scream and called us to investigate."

Nickademus looked shocked, "What did he take? Did he break anything?"

The officer replied in a way that sounded like he'd rehearsed

it, "There is some damage to your dashboard, but the man stopped mid-thievery. I've tried talking to him, but he isn't saying much. Something about 'zombies' and 'the end of the world'." Nickademus peered over at the police cruiser, recognizing the man in the back, who was now rocking back and forth, a wild look in his eye much like that of a frightened deer. His lips moving but nothing legible coming out.

He thanked the officer and explained that he was insured. The officer, seeming reluctant to escort his new passenger, put away his notepad and tipped his hat. Nickademus handed him a business card. "Can you give this to him? I've always felt it was a good idea to plan ahead." As the officer drove away, Nick opened the back hatch. He straightened the corpse and recovered it, knowing almost too well what stopped the thief.

The first thing you learn in mortuary school is the neurological impulses of the brain. After death, signals are cut off, but can be completed with a simple bump or sound resulting in a last minute impulse. The click that emitted from the lever as the seat locked in place triggered such an impulse. These reactions can be unexpected. When triggered, a corpse can move, twitch, or even speak. That's why he bought a new car; so he could prank his wife when she needed a ride.