

Body Snatchers

A pair of serial grave robbers unearth unimaginable treasures and a potentially dark secret during a routine operation.

“You sure Pastor Daniels ain’t a real pastor?” Lenny grunted, driving the shovel deep into the soil. Despite the chilly air, sweat beaded on his bulging forehead as he swung the shovel, dumping the dirt along the edge of the grave.

Pasatequa Forest's towering trees cast moonlit shafts through their leaves and branches, enveloping us in silence, broken only by humming grasshoppers and Lenny's heavy breathing.

Lenny paused, resting the shovel on the ground, his expression downcast. Illuminated by my cigarette's orange glow, the corners of his pudgy lips turned down as he turned his beady eyes onto me.

“D’ya think God’ll be mad we’re robbing a man of the Lord, Benjie?”

“He ain’t a real pastor, I told’ya that. He bought the church at an auction twenty years ago,” I grumbled, pulling the cigarette from my mouth and exhaling smoke through my words. “And don’t call me Benjie, you know that pisses me off.”

“Sorry, Benjie. Sorry. It’s just ... he lives in a church, and all.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “Just ‘cause he live in a building of God don’t make him a man of God, alright? Now, keep digging.”

Lenny peered at me, as if to think for a moment. He was standing in the grave, about four feet deep at this point, while I sat on the edge. It infuriated me that he was still a few inches taller, and I straightened my spine in defiance, raising an eyebrow. He ducked his head and continued.

I first met Lenny four years ago, at a poorhouse on the other side of Pasatequa Forest. Lenny was (and is) an ugly brute of a man with an upturned, pig-like nose and cauliflower ears. He towered over people, especially scrawny guys like me, and spoke with this bellowing voice that commanded attention, until you heard the worthless blabber that he sputtered.

Despite his daftness, Lenny and I developed a nice operation over the past few years. Body snatching was a lucrative field; medical schools were desperate for bodies - “cadavers” was the fancy word that Dr. Knox used. I think that was supposed to make it more hoity-toity, but it was all the same. They needed bodies and didn’t have enough of a reliable supply to care about where they came from, so doctors extended money in one hand and used the other to shield their eyes.

The next strike of the shovel echoed a dull thud as the metal struck something solid. Lenny’s gaze met mine, a hungry gleam in his eyes. I flicked the cigarette from my hand, letting it smolder as it hit the ground and I stood up.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about!” I whooped, clapping my hands together. “I’ll grab the hook.”

Turning around, I walked a few paces into the dense thicket of trunks, towards where our tools were stashed. Before I got far, I heard the big lug say: “Hey, Benjie? Was Pastor Daniels’ missus one of those . . . uh, little ones?”

“What the hell are you –” But I stopped mid-question as my eyes landed on what Lenny had pulled out of the ground on his own.

It was not a coffin, as one comes to expect in this line of work. But instead, it was a hard-shell, leather guitar case, complete with gold metal clasps that gleamed in the dim moonlight.

"I don't think no woman's fittin' in there," Lenny announced, puzzled. I didn't reply as I approached the guitar case, kneeling down to get a closer look.

"Unless he chopped her up into teeny-tiny pieces," I snickered, and Lenny's eyes widened.

"Don't joke, Benjie. You think that's true?"

"Only one way to find out," I replied, and before the oaf could protest, I slid my fingers under the clasps and unlatched the case. Lenny craned his neck to see.

I don't have many memories of my Mama save for one that I cherished more than anything. It was a picture book that she would read to me at nighttime about pirates who sailed 'round the world, following weathered treasure maps to golden chests and magical waters.

That book was what popped into my mind when I saw the jewels. The entire case was filled to the brim with emeralds, pearls, rubies, stones that I didn't know the names of but glittered in the soft light. I plunged a hand in, feeling the rough edges scrape against my skin but I didn't care. It meant they were real.

"Well, Doc Knox ain't gonna take those," Lenny sighed, and I flicked my gaze up at him.

"Do you know how much these are worth?" I hissed. "Screw Knox!"

"We can't take them!" Lenny looked at me, genuinely shocked. "They ain't ours. Plus, where's the missus? Weren't she buried here yesterday?"

"I dunno, maybe we were beat here by other snatchers."

Lenny frowned, and an irritated jolt shot through me as he asked the first smart question he's thought of. "But why would they leave this behind? It don't make no sense, Benjie."

"I told'ya not to call me that!" I snapped, slapping him upside the head. He rubbed the spot tenderly, and I let out a sigh.

That little kid with the pirate book was screaming at me to take the treasure, live the rest of my days boozin' away on an island surrounding by gold.

But part of me knew Lenny had a point. Either the missus was really dead and someone had grabbed her already, but had left behind the real score.

Or maybe she was still alive, and she and Pastor Daniels were cookin' up a scheme. Fake your death, get the insurance, that sort of thing. But then why bury the gems? And where the hell does a pensioner who lives in a church on the outskirts of Pasatequa Forest even get a stash like this?

"Whatever we do with it, one thing's for sure." I looked up at Lenny. "Pastor Daniels sure as *hell* ain't a pastor."