

Epitaph

Buster Lane was a very slow man. So slow, in fact, that he often pretended to be dead and fooled people who knew better, especially his brothers Jake and Tate. Some might argue this repeated deception, measured in regard to his brothers, is not much to boast of. Some might say Jake and Tate Lane, themselves the blood relations of a man renowned for being slow, must therefore be slow too, in this case mentally, and so what then if old Buster could fool the old coots, ten, twenty, or who cares how many times? Let him fool me more than once. That's what the nay-sayers declared.

Buster heeded the challenge. Jake and Tate were his workshop, a safe place to refine his unusual skills. But also more, because the Lane family, the three pruning bachelors never once married and often witnessed to mix up their own names and sometimes also their false teeth, were not, contrary to rampant universal opinion, particularly dumb in the first place. The whole thing was an act, honed to a seamless perfection. So perfectly practiced and assimilated as to fool the actors themselves, which was also part of the act. It was this kind of showmanship that kept the town gullible.

Or else the unavoidable fact that for all the interest stirred by Buster on the occasion of his second, then third, then fourth and fifth funerals, a series of events so close in time and similar in ceremony that even a Podunk town like ours had to scratch its bald head and wonder suspiciously, still the fact was it didn't shake anyone's routine too deeply. The only exception, of course, being

the routines of the funeral director and the gravedigger, the latter of whom, gnarled shovel in hand, or I meant to say shovel in gnarled hand, burst into the weekly town hall meeting first thing Monday afternoon and announced his total refusal to bury Buster next week.

“I rid myself of him,” he declared, a strange remark since what better way to make good on it than bury him now? The swift economy of this solution was not lost on our Mayor, who, presiding over the assembly with the clear eyes of a wild turkey, stood up and slowly ruffled his feathers.

“Then bury him now,” he said categorically.

“Yes, I did,” the gravedigger answered. There was defiance to his words. Hearing them one immediately thought of the headstone he owned with the lone name “Otis” carved on it, and how the gravedigger, who never once answered to that name, refused to explain its appeal.

“What’s that now?” the Mayor clucked.

“I did bury him and I won’t bury him next week!”

“No,” said the Mayor, swirling a finger beside his own skull to indicate a man gone mad, “you won’t. I think you need a vacation, Otis.” But here, using that name, the Mayor went a bit too far.

“Otis?” the gravedigger barked. “Who you calling Otis? It’s Buster Lane I’m referring to. And I won’t bury him again.”

The Mayor asked those at the meeting for a spontaneous vote on the gravedigger’s grievance. The house decided unanimously that by no means was the gravedigger liable to bury Buster Lane again. In a strained effort at feeling,

the Mayor also told the gravedigger he was sure Buster Lane himself would have voted the same way, the poor devil.

The gravedigger stomped out of the room, huffing. He forced the doors open with his shovel. It was exactly five days later that we found out Buster Lane was laying in the cemetery in a casket and children were stuffing the pennies from his eyes into his nose and ears. We assumed the gravedigger never buried him in the first place. But the next morning, the day before the next cycle of our weekly meeting, Jake and Tate paid the gravedigger by tarring his driveway, an undeniable form of barter that contradicted our assumptions. We drove up to the lip of the fresh tar, stared at it uncomprehendingly, scratched our heads at the deep blackness of it, physically, metaphorically, symbolically, this last one because Death is traditionally black and in our minds Buster Lane was dead. Dead for the first time, as far as we knew.

Anyway, we asked the gravedigger what gives, how was it the remaining Lane boys were doing his driveway in exchange for a service not rendered, namely to bury their brother, now six days overdue. We smoked our pipes with a cool disdain, now and then kicking pebbles in the soft tar.

The gravedigger marched right up the middle of it. He pressed terrible smirches in the surface of it, his arms shifting powerfully at his side. When he arrived to face us directly, his new driveway was a shambles. But now that we could make it out clearly, the look on his face was not necessarily anger, or even the merest reflection of our collective disdain. It was the look of a man just

waking up from a nap, still too tired to know how he feels yet about the people who disturbed him for no good reason.

“What?” he asked, scratching his head. He was surprised to discover at this late moment that the ground beneath him was soft. Then twice as surprised it was not dirt, but asphalt. He repeated his question, this time about the ground, not about anything we may have asked as he approached.

He got a lot of mileage from that one little word. It was admirable. Older men prize economy of that sort. It saves energy and improves morale. It was hard to hold the gravedigger in contempt anymore. The combined details of his response inspired clemency.

“You didn’t do it,” the Minutes-taker said, also writing it down.

Again the gravedigger relied on that marvelous flexible word. You can see it in the minutes as proof! It appeared a dozen times more, in response to every next phrase we directed at the gravedigger, kind, apologetic, philosophical, in one case poetic and wistful, and finally blunt.

It was the Mayor himself who put in the concluding clarification, “We thought you shirked your job.”

“Never!” the gravedigger replied, examining his shoes, the soles of which were black and gooey. If anything, he had done it too well, and here were the burning footprints of marching directly through the Underworld. The most poetic remark went something like that. It seems I’m getting the order wrong because it came before the Mayor’s clarification.

Nor did the gravedigger say, "What?" when he heard it. Or "Never!" He was staring at his shoes. He said, "Lane boys ruined my best work boots. Now do you believe me about Buster?"

Yes, we did. We found him laying at the cemetery in the casket, not moving at all, not breathing, not twitching, not blinking. His eyes were open and they stared at a fixed spot up in the sky, but not focused on anything, more like he was seeing the stars hours before they appeared. The sky was blue, except to Buster Lane, who was actually so slow that for him it was still the night before. This is a hard discrepancy to explain. The best I can offer is a short paraphrase of Jake and Tate on the subject.

Buster is a slow man. He's so slow that we eat dinner when he sits down to breakfast, but we're all at the table. We might ask him how was your day, but he doesn't answer until dinner time, which for us is the next day's breakfast, and then he'll say something like, "Everything happens so fast" or "When did you two grow beards?" The answer to the second question is 35 years ago as a ritual when our mother passed away. For Buster that event occurred yesterday or the day before. It's hard to tell. No matter how often we wind up his watch it always stops running within four minutes of putting it on his wrist, no matter what time we might do that. But today Buster is dead.

Which brings us back to the graveyard. Oh, he was dead all right. Dead as a doornail. Isn't that the expression? Dead as dirt. Dead as Delilah. Deader than a duck in a row. It doesn't matter much if I'm getting these expressions

mixed up or wrong. In fact, it's more right, in my opinion, if I am, because we may not have known it, but Buster wasn't dead.

The barber stepped up and closed Buster's eyes. I promised not to tell anyone who reached into Buster's nose and pulled out the coins. You can read it in the minutes though. As well as who wiped the snot from them, who wanted to keep them, who pleaded Buster's case making reference to paying the ferryman, and lastly who replaced the coins to his eyes, now closed. It's a shame I can't tell you. I'll call him Otis instead.

But no one wanted the hot, grimy labor of digging another hole for old Buster, not even where his first ones had been, the earth still relatively soft and light there, least of all the gravedigger. In fact, he stuck strongly to his original words of five days ago: he would not bury Buster again. He meant it, staying home on his new driveway to prove it. Or because he was stuck. He was very fond of those boots and wouldn't leave them.

We said, "Let's draw straws," meaning the short one buries Buster, but the plan was rather unconvincing, and we decided it was best to come up with a better one in two days at the next council meeting. Until then let's send Buster home and let him rest in the shade.

Jake and Tate picked him up in their black-topping truck and we all laid his casket in the long, empty bed of it. It was odd to see a dead man in a car fit for covering the earth with black tar. The Mayor gave a parting farewell to the Lanes and once they left everyone smoked pipes.

That Monday who do you think crashed the council meeting? He was welcome to be there, of course, under any other circumstances. Everyone is. That's the how the town works. But that slow shuffle of his, the way his forward foot lingers over the same spot indefinitely, as if divining drops of water in the ground deep below. That horrible smile of his that blossoms so slowly you have to wonder after seeing it why he may have been happy in the first place, years ago. That terrible wave of his that may as well be goodbye because by the time it states itself the conversation is almost over. The fact that he stutters, as if his words aren't a thick enough molasses to begin with. Even so, he'd be welcome at the meeting. If only he wasn't dead.

"Buster!"

"What in God's name?"

"Oh, thank heavens."

"I'll be damned."

A great many more remarks of this sort broke from the blubbering lips of all those present at the meeting, some repeated several times, all stated far in advance of any timely rejoinder from the object of their surprise. Buster was still coming in the door when a deep silence finally settled over the room and the minutes' taker, after two trips to the water fountain and one to the restroom (and yes these were related as cause and effect), became so agitated and impatient that he broke his only pencil and threw the good half through a nearby window. The Mayor urged him to step outside and recover it, so the minutes' taker stood,

walked delicately around Buster, and disappeared through the free space in the doorframe.

We heard the minutes' taker muttering to himself as he crawled around on the grass outside the window. He did not sound pleased, not at all. It took him several minutes to find the pencil stub. More like ten actually. Unfortunately the minutes are completely blank on this subject so the exact figure is irretrievable. After it passed, the minutes' taker reappeared in the door behind Buster, a devilish twinkle in his eyes. No one wanted to stop him. No one registered a prohibitive glance in his direction, only complacency. The minutes' taker smiled at all of us and promptly pushed Buster clear into the room.

Buster Lane's body collided with the chunky Mahogany table that has been in the town longer than any of us. The sturdy legs released only the tiniest groan upon impact, unlike Buster's, which snapped audibly. His torso lurched forward onto the tabletop and crashed among our neat piles of newspapers, magazines, and former minutes, scattering everything, including a box of pencils and a cup of paper clips. Somehow Buster held one each of these items, a paper clip and a pencil, in his hands when we flipped him over and laid him down on the table to see if he was okay.

Hard to say really. He was completely unresponsive, just like at the graveyard two days earlier. His eyes were open, but staring up at the ceiling, fixed on nothing, seeing straight into outer space. His mouth hung open too, the lower jaw tilted out of alignment, the tip of the tongue stuck in the corner of the mouth, almost like Buster was about to insert a harmonica and play us a ditty,

covering unwanted holes with his tongue. They call this technique tonguing, I think, as opposed to pursing the lips. Only Buster never lifted his hands, which contained no harmonicas, only a paper clip and a pencil, hardly instruments at all in the traditional sense of those words.

No, sir, he just laid there, moving a bit slower now than he was when he came through the door. The minutes' taker was standing there now. After the push, he was surprised to see how quickly Buster's rebounding body flew across the room, a speed no one would have believed from it. And that disbelief stayed on the minutes' taker's face for a long time, frozen there, a mirror reflection of all our lingering surprise and dismay.

"Let's take him to the hospital," suggested the Mayor, picking some lint off the sleeve of his own coat.

"Might not be safe to move him, I reckon," spoke Ted Grayley, a farmer from outside the first hills.

Other voices chimed in that for all we knew there was nothing wrong with Buster at all, but rather he was taking his proper time to stand up, to react, to let us know he was okay. It would not be unlike him. In fact, anything speedier is what would have been unlike him. Slowly, as a group, for groups are often that much slower than the individuals who comprise them, we started to realize that no one could say whether Buster was hurt, was completely all right, or whether he was prone to resolve the matter any time soon. Not soon anyway. That was the second thing we could agree on.

We sat back down at the table, including the stunned minutes' taker, and proceeded with our meeting, entering the unexpected arrival of Buster Lane into the minutes with a time stamp of 3:13 PM as "Return of the Dead," and his collapse onto the table at 3:38 PM as "Return to the Dead," although that choice of header incited a long debate between us regarding its tastefulness, accuracy, and cleverness quotient, which seemed altogether too high. But mostly, I think, the debate raged among us, gobbling over an hour of meeting time, because we all secretly hoped, none of us voicing the hope, but all of us sustaining it together by voicing everything else, that Buster Lane would snap out of it and either actively settle our arguments or render them irrelevant. So men will dream when one of their own lies on the table between them like a Christmas goose, there for the argument about how long it's been cooked.

But Buster Lane never erased our misgivings, never settled our doubts. He just lay there on the table, not moving, not even to blink, not to breathe, not a snort or a sigh. The next day we came back and he was still there in that same position, his open hand hanging over the edge of the big Mahogany table with a pencil resting in his palm, a paper clip in the other. He was beginning to collect dust. You could see it swirl in the light streaming in from the high windows and follow it down as it swirled until it rested on Buster's belly, which rose into the sky like a new moon. In the bright sunlight Buster's skin and that moon dust were like the far ends of a spectrum around a middle phenomenon of static. It was a fine line of static that was between them.

Made us wonder is that maybe all this life is, a fine line of static, a soft hum rising out of the foundation, met halfway by a sizzle that seeps out of the sky, the two of them united as static, as chaos and movement where matter and spirit unite. It was a poetic notion and we practically murdered it putting it into the minutes, especially since the minutes' taker refused to use artistic line breaks, preferring adherence to the left and right margins, as was the custom. No one argued. There were bigger fish to fry that day.

It was clear we had to do something about Buster. We couldn't let him lay on that table all week. One day was enough. We had business to attend to. It was piling up.

We tried telling him he won. We all believed he was dead, we pretended. We told him it was okay to get up now and walk away a winner. The victory was his. We offered the olive branch.

Buster didn't get up. Another day went by.

Now grown men can only act out an insincere and theatrical surrender for so long, especially in the lion's den itself, which is how we lions had come to feel about our Town Hall. The third day after Buster's collapse we got on the horn to his brothers Jake and Tate to come cart him off, take him home, tuck him deeply into bed and read him a few stories, raise his feet, lower his head, put a hot water bottle under him, get him off the damned table! The suggestion list was very long, indicative of our mounting frustration. Jake and Tate responded as if they didn't know what we were talking about exactly.

They continued this ruse when they came to get Buster. That is, they played out its hypothetical evolution by concluding from several dubious pokes and prods at his body that Buster really was dead. They lifted his arms and let them drop. In the first instance the elbow smacked against the table and a light plinking sound was heard as a paper clip landed on the table. In the second case the pencil bounced on its own eraser and turned a small cartwheel along the floor until rolling to a stop.

“Yup, dead,” Jake pronounced, speaking to Tate.

Tate hitched his thumbs into the front straps of his overalls and took in the news. He frowned heavily.

“Boys, take him *home*,” the Mayor emphasized, correcting them, but not in so many words.

“What’ll he do *there*?” Tate spoke for the first time, almost as an echo. He was pulling the bib of his overalls far from his chest.

“Same nothing as ever,” the Mayor answered smugly.

“But he’s dead, boss,” Jake repeated. “Buster’s dead!” Jake broke into tears suddenly.

“Dead!” wailed his brother.

“Dead,” wrote the minutes’ taker.

“Dead,” the Mayor said.

“Dead.”

The word rebounded off the lips of everyone present. I don’t think it was ever spoken so often in direct succession in our little county, but each time with a

different shade of meaning. Old men like that sort of efficiency. We may have spoken the word one or two extra times apiece just to linger in the effect, which eventually canceled it out.

The minutes' taker scrawled along at a furious pace to keep track of it all. To make it clear enough on paper, he had to write the word every time, but also notate who said it. The speed of his writing hand on the table next to Buster's inert body was a statement in contrast, if not many other things besides. Were the minutes' taker inclined toward anything poetic, which unfortunately he isn't, those other things might be in the minutes. Things like life occurs on a backdrop of death and life isn't possible without that backdrop, and the backdrop adds the sense and context for the life. Things like flowing ink and flowing blood and the flowing itself as the essence of life.

But if you read those things in the minutes, you'd really wonder about us out here. I'm sure that's why, long ago, I was denied my request to be the minutes' taker and why I'm carving this whole unresolved story in the tiniest little letters I can onto a tall granite tombstone during the time it is taking for everyone in this town to decide if the body waiting for it is worthy of the earth yet? I hope when it is it don't mind the name "Otis". I was saving the stone for someone else, but the new shipment never came, came too slow, hasn't come. Frankly, it's moving at Buster's pace if it's moving at all.

Jake and Tate put Buster Lane's body in a wheelbarrow and rolled it into the graveyard, which was a second home for it by then. They laid it down in the shade at the base of a large Elm tree.

The debate goes on. The Mayor says if Buster's body isn't rotting like all dead bodies do, then Buster's dead body isn't a dead body after all, and Buster isn't dead.

"It's a hoax like the last times, and we aren't falling for it," says the Mayor, puffing out his chest at the remaining Lane boys, who don't bring it up in the first place, although they defend their position eagerly.

"Is too dead!" insists Jake.

Tate adds, "Only Buster was slow. You know he was slow! He rots as he lived, don't he? Slow!" Here Tate sometimes pulls one thick fist from the straps of his overalls and waves it defiantly in the air. The action does not quite demonstrate the point that slow is slow, so Tate generally returns the fist to the strap, which is a better example.

In the mean time, the real Otis died with no stone. We try to pretend he didn't actually exist for shame of not being able to bury him the way he paid for and hoped. It isn't easy and sometimes we mess it up. I may have messed up something big by carving it here, but now it's too late. The name is already on the front of the stone anyway, and you can't stuff the rock dust back into the letters, young or old. That last notion may be the strangest thing I've ever put on a man's stone. It is.

Otis, you're lucky you didn't get this one, after all, pal.