

# A Shovel With My Name On It

Plots with Guns, September, 2003

One thing I know, it's the sound of a man digging a hole. I've done it enough times myself, believe me. I know the sound of the shovel hitting the ground, the thud of the dirt landing on the pile. Maybe the sudden scrape of metal against rock, then the long silence while the rock gets dug up by hand. Then the shovel again. It didn't matter what time of night it was, or how unlikely it might have been that my back neighbor would be digging a hole instead of sleeping. I knew what I was hearing.

It was after midnight. I was sitting on my deck with a cigarette, enjoying the coolness after a hot summer day, watching the clouds race across the moon. It was the kind of night where a sound carries a long way. I sat there for a long time listening to the man digging. And then I got curious. That's the kind of guy I am, like it or not.

I went to the back of my property and pushed my way through the sumac and the wild raspberry bushes. I took it slow, pulling off the prickly vines. I tried to be quiet. If this midnight digger was who I thought it was, I didn't want him to hear me coming.

It was Hank, all right. I saw him there in his backyard, standing in the hole. It came up to his waist, a lot of hard digging already done. Hank took another shovel-full of dirt and threw it high in the air. Wasted effort, I thought. He doesn't know how to dig a hole. And of course as I'm hiding there in the bushes, I knew that something wasn't right. There's no good, innocent reason to dig a hole in the middle of night. Especially not a hole as deep as Hank was apparently intent on digging.

I could have gone back to my house, minded my own business. But no, I was a little too nosy for my own good. Always had been. That plus the matter of the shovel itself. I was quite sure that it was mine, the same shovel Hank had borrowed back in May, and here it was August already. Best shovel I owned, too. I wanted it back.

"Evening, Hank," I said as I stepped out of the bushes.

Hank gave out a yell, had two or three heart attacks right there in the hole and called me every bad word he could think of. That took most of a minute because he knew every bad word there is and even made up a few new ones.

"Sorry to disturb you," I said, nice and smooth. "I'm just wondering what you're up to back here." I walked right up to the hole and looked it over like I was the county hole inspector. I could hear his dog barking, somewhere in his house.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he said. Hank was a big guy. It felt good to look down on him for once.

"Nice shovel you got there," I said.

“Yeah, well, I’m busy now, so-”

“In fact,” I said, “that shovel looks exactly like mine. You remember, Hank? The one you borrowed from me about four months ago?”

He looked at the label on the handle. “Well, what do you know. It’s your shovel, all right. I’ll give it back to you when I’m done. Now if you’ll excuse me, I got work to do.” He took a good rip with the shovel and threw the dirt at my feet.

“Kind of odd, isn’t it?” I said. “Digging a hole in the middle of the night?”

“Too hot during the day,” he said. He didn’t stop digging. Another load of dirt landed on my shoes.

“What’s the hole for, anyway?” I said, moving sideways. Now I was a moving target.

“Dog died,” he said. His next load of dirt landed a good yard behind me.

“I just heard your dog barking.”

“Not that dog,” he said. “Another dog.” He tried to lead me with his next load. It barely missed me.

“Didn’t know you had two dogs,” I said.

“It’s an old dog, okay?” He finally stopped digging. “He never comes outside. And now he’s dead and I’m gonna bury him. Soon as I’m done, I’ll give you your stupid shovel back, okay?”

“You don’t have to bring it back tonight,” I said. “Tomorrow’s fine.”

“I’ll give it back tonight. I wouldn’t want you to live another minute without your precious shovel.”

“I’m going to bed now,” I said. “I won’t need it until tomorrow.”

“No, as soon as I’m done I’ll leave it on your doorstep.”

“No need,” I said. “I’ll come get it tomorrow.”

He closed his eyes and held the shovel with both hands. He squeezed it so hard I could see the muscles in his arms quivering. “If you don’t get out of here right now...”

“I’m leaving, I’m leaving,” I said. “You don’t have to tell me twice. I just didn’t want you to have to go out of your way. You’ve had my shovel for four months, after all. What’s one more day?”

When I had made my way through the bushes back to my own property, I sat on my deck for a long time, listening to Hank digging. The business about the second dog, that bothered me. His German Shepherd, I saw that dog all the time. A second dog? Never.

I wanted to sneak back to watch him bury that dog. Or whatever it was. But I could hear him digging and digging for another full hour. I gave up and went to bed.

The next day, my shovel was right there on my doorstep. "Look at this," I said as I picked it up. The blade was all dinged up from the rocks he had hit. "That's the last time I ever loan that man anything."

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Of course it wasn't a dog he buried that night. It didn't take me long to figure that out. I'm not a complete idiot.

Hank has a wife named Joanie. During the day when Hank is gone, Joanie likes to sit outside in the backyard sunning herself. Every once in a while I'll take a peek through those bushes. Not every day, mind you. Just the sunny days. Sometimes she'd have men over during the day to keep her company. I'd recognize some of them from around town. One day I swear I saw three separate men come visit her. She had quite a busy calendar.

On the day after I saw Hank digging that hole, the sun was high and bright and I was sure Joanie would be out there in the backyard. But when I looked, she wasn't there. The next day was perfect again. But no Joanie. It didn't make any sense.

Like I said, I'm not a total idiot. After five sunny days and no sight of Joanie, I put it all together in my mind. That was no dead dog Hank was burying. It was his wife. He found out about all the other men, he killed her, and then he buried her in the middle of the night. I actually went over there and watched him dig the hole. No wonder he wanted me to leave so bad.

I thought about it all that day and night, wondering what to do. Should I call the sheriff? Are they just going to think I'm crazy? Then something else hit me. Hank knew that I knew that he was out digging that night. He was probably thinking about that right then, wherever he was hiding. I was sure he'd come back to kill me, too. "That does it," I said to myself. "I'm calling the sheriff."

That's how I ended up standing in Hank's yard the next day, with the sheriff and six of his deputies, watching a big backhoe digging up that hole.

"What night was that again?" the sheriff asked. He was standing next to me with his arms folded across his chest.

"Saturday night," I said.

“Six days ago?” he said. “You waited six days to call us?”

“How was I supposed to know?” I said. “Every time I don’t see a neighbor for a couple of days, I’m supposed to call you?”

“You saw the man digging a hole in the middle of the night,” he said. “That didn’t strike you as strange?”

“He said one of his dogs died.”

“I thought he only had one dog.”

“He said he had another dog.”

The sheriff shook his head. We watched the backhoe lifting great loads of dirt out of the hole. It was getting deep fast. “Did you see anything else that night?” the sheriff said.

Before I could answer him, one of the deputies signaled for the backhoe to stop. “I think I’ve got something!” he called to the sheriff. We watched him disappear into the hole. When he climbed back out, he was holding a woman’s shoe.

“Oh my God,” I said. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“Why don’t you go back in your house,” the sheriff said.

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “I don’t want to see this.”

I went back to my own house and sat at the kitchen table with a bottle of whiskey in front of me. I wondered what was going through Hank’s mind when he killed his wife. I wondered where he was at that moment, how far away he had gotten in six days. Little did I know just how ironic that thought would be. For at that very moment, the deputies were carefully removing Joanie’s body from the hole. Directly underneath her, they found yet another body.

It was Hank.

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“Let’s go over this one more time,” the sheriff said. He was sitting across from me at my kitchen table. “It was after midnight. You heard him digging.”

“Yes,” I said.

“You know, it’s kind of funny. We looked through his house, through his garage. We didn’t see a shovel anywhere.”

“He was using my shovel.”

“I see,” he said. “You didn’t mention that before.”

“I didn’t think that was important,” I said. I didn’t like where this conversation was going.

“How did it end up back here at your house?”

“Hank returned it after...”

I stopped.

“After he buried his wife and himself,” the sheriff said.

“No,” I said. “I guess he couldn’t have returned it.”

“Be kinda hard to do, I’m thinking.”

“I just assumed it was him,” I said. “I mean, it was on my doorstep the next morning, so...” I started to feel hot.

“You think I might take a look at this shovel of yours?”

“Of course,” I said. “It’s in the garage.” I could feel the sweat starting to run down my back.

“You have to admit,” the sheriff said. “This looks a little suspicious. Hank supposedly digging his own grave, with your shovel, and you being the only witness?”

“I don’t know what happened,” I said. “I just... Maybe I shouldn’t say anything else without a lawyer.”

“That might be wise,” he said. “You’re just digging yourself into a hole here, if you’ll excuse the reference.” He gave me a little smile.

“I bet he killed her,” I said. “And then one of her boyfriends came over and saw what had happened.” I tried to make myself breathe. Slow down. “Yeah, that’s it. And then the boyfriend killed Hank and threw him in the hole, too.”

“But Hank was on the bottom.”

“Hank hadn’t buried her yet,” I said. “The boyfriend threw them both in.”

“I’ve got to hand it to you,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “You’ve got quite an imagination.”

My head was spinning. I didn't know what to do. I should have kept my mouth shut. But before I could even think about what I was saying, it came out.

"I've seen you over there," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"During the day, when Hank is gone. I've seen you with Joanie."

The sheriff didn't say anything.

"It'll come out in court," I said. "Everyone will find out."

He got up from his chair and walked over the window above the sink. He looked out at my backyard.

"You have to believe me," I said. "I didn't do it. I didn't kill either of them."

"That's a big mistake," he finally said. He was still looking out the window. "Now I'm going to have to make up a little story."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's see," the sheriff said. "The suspect went for a weapon. A kitchen knife, let's say. I had to shoot him. How does that sound?"

"No," I said. "You can't be serious." I tried to move but I couldn't. I was frozen in my chair.

He already had his gun out when he turned to face me. "And to think I went out of my way to bring you back your shovel."