



The Grave Rubbers

Van didn't believe in ghosts.

It's not that he was our group leader or anything, but let's face it. He was the oldest, and not *only* did he have a license — he had *wheels*. Being sixteen was close to godliness in our eyes. So maybe it was the hero worship, maybe it was his pimply face beaming up from the plastic government-issued card that made Van think he was now a “man” and too old for our games.

“How come?” I asked him. “How come you don't believe in them?” I glanced at Keith, whose slumped shoulders told me this conversation would prove futile. We were sitting on a bench, waiting for his Plymouth Voyager to get out of the shop. We would have followed Van anywhere just to steal a moment of his attention.

Van shrugged. “Why should I?”

That was a good comeback. I'd never thought about *why* I should believe—I'd just naturally fell into it. Kinda like religion—you don't really have a choice when you're thirteen years old. Maybe by the time you turn sixteen, you start questioning things like that. Maybe that was why...

“Don't you believe in God?” Keith's eyes were puppy-dog-wide and glassy.

Van pushed the hair from his eyes and gnawed at the giant wad of gum in his mouth. “Well, God's different.”

“Yeah, how?”

“You ever met Him?” Van shot back.

Keith looked at his shoes.

“Well, if you believe in God, then you have to believe in the Holy Ghost and all that, right?”

“But Van, it’s *the Bible*,” Keith emphasized, as if that should end the discussion.

“It’s all just stories,” he replied. “You guys are gonna have to realize one day that everything you read isn’t necessarily true.”

“But we *don’t*.” Keith looked at me. “Right?”

Van rolled his eyes and adjusted his baseball cap. “Seriously. You pussies would believe anything you saw on *Unsolved Mysteries*.”

“So why do you like going to the cemeteries, then?” I said, feeling my voice break the tension in the room. “If you don’t even believe in ghosts?”

Van shrugged and leaned back against the wall. “We’re not looking for ghosts, Sully, we’re looking for whichever poor bastard died first so we can rub crayon all over his name.”

“Yeah, but doesn’t running past all those dead people give you the creeps? Like, you don’t picture some zombie hand popping out and grabbing your ankle?”

Van snorted and punched me so hard, Keith went flying off the end of the bench. As his little brother ate gravel off the asphalt, Van sucked a bubble flat against his lips. He suddenly looked at me without that mocking glint in his eyes, and I stopped laughing.

“No, man. Running past all those graves makes me feel more *alive*.”

Grave rubbing was the name of our game. The sport of nerds. We accepted that. Not Van, he threatened us never to tell any-

one he was escorting his 12-year-old brother and friend across the county to find old cemeteries. It was a hobby Keith and I adopted after reading loads of ghost books, and then stumbling onto an online forum dedicated to grave rubbings. As our adolescent lives centered on scaring the bejesus out of each other, we naturally took to the thrill, focusing our hunts in reputedly haunted cemeteries. A year and a half and 300 grave rubbings later, we were obsessed.

Van didn't get swept away in our craze until he got his license six months ago. At first he refused to drive us anywhere. But then he and his little brother made a deal; if he agreed to take us to just *one* graveyard a month, Van wouldn't have to drop Keith off at school every morning. This was, of course, an inconvenience to Keith, but it made Van insanely happy and gave me someone to sit with on the bus.

I can't really say why he started driving us to cemeteries. Maybe it was our stories, or his sheer competitive spirit; either way, it only took that first night to hook him. By chance, Van beat us to the oldest grave that night, and his victory sealed our trio forever.

He became the stuff of legends. We were convinced someday there'd be movies made about him. He never hesitated to charge headlong into the darkest graveyard; was undeterred by the chiseled eyes of stone watching the fields of dead. We often admired him from behind wrought iron bars as he ventured into the most evil-looking mausoleums to secure a coveted grave rubbing. He insisted on being called *Van* because of the vehicle of choice, but he could've gone by *Indiana Jones* and we wouldn't have blinked, because it suited him.

Bravery escaped Keith and I due in part to our incessant diet of ghost books and scary movies. We liked to remind each other

of the kind of stories that crept into the catacombs of our imaginations and followed us to bed. I didn't sleep much during this period of my life.

Barely a night slipped by without my bedcovers lifted over my nose, my eyes trying not to concoct humanoid shapes out of shadows on my bedroom wall. It became an everyday thing to wake up with the armpits and back of my pajamas soaked in a soggy letter "T."

Scary stories never bothered me in the telling. Usually I'd sit goggle-eyed and leaning in, the first to laugh when the tale was finished. But they left an impression. Oh, yes. When it was time for bed, and the lamp snapped off, that's when the fear caught up with me.

There were memorable ones: the two-headed swamp monster who supposedly ascended from Rubio Woods, the green lady (with bloodshot eyes and hair crusted to her guacamole face) who was locked in the bathroom, the gangster (there were a number of them, always in a trench coat and hat) who stuck a gun in my face and drooled black slime after his burial at pond, and of course there were the creepy little kids with bloody hands and hollow eyes. And then there was the fateful time I saw Resurrection Mary pry through the crack around my bedroom door.

She pulled herself between the wood, bowing it with her long white fingers, and then she stepped to the foot of my bed in her mud-streaked ball gown. Earlier that night, I'd watched *Friday the 13th Part 2*, which had a ton of boob shots in it, and it must've carried over into my dreams because Mary was one *hot* dead chick. Once she was standing there, I wasn't afraid of her... I was mesmerized. I even sat up to get a better look, drawn by the ringlets of gold falling against her bare neck and collarbone. But the moment she turned her back to me, exposing a trail of dark

blood spoiling her ivory gown, my intense interest hit the brakes. I must have let out a shriek, because as soon as my eyes popped open, my dad and mom were at my door, their faces creased with worry, demanding to know what was the matter.

Much to my horror, my sheets had been kicked to the foot of the bed, leaving the tent in my pajama bottoms on full display. It took a split second for my parents to notice, divert their eyes, and make for the hall like they had a much more traumatizing matter to deal with outside my room. I have been unable to look my mother straight in the eye since, making family dinnertime extremely awkward.

Even so, after that embarrassing moment, I went to school with a private feeling of glee carrying me throughout the halls. I had had a night visit from the perfect woman. Sure, there was the tiny detail that she was both dead and imaginary, but it made my imagination soar. I pictured Res Mary in her white dress with her cascading hair in all sorts of suggestive positions; swooning over the teacher's desk, batting her lashes at me while I strained to compute long division, lounging in the windowsill in homeroom, the heat register billowing her skirt like a bloodstained Marilyn Monroe.

These random bursts of ecstasy had to end abruptly, as the tent began to appear in broad daylight—not just appearing, but *lingering*, staying pitched for entire periods of class. My attention was also diverted from my friends, who wouldn't stand for being ignored. It was damnable to deny fascination with a newly uncovered ghost story, especially one which happened to take place in our own hometown. A few days after Mary first sashayed her way into my bedroom, one such conversation arose with Keith in the school cafeteria.

“Sully! You're not gonna believe this! Did you know we have

an old abandoned cemetery right here in Lake Forest?!” Keith’s face was obstructed by his copy of *Chicagoland Spooks*, the cover replacing his round, infantile features with an illustration of a ghoul rising over the Water Tower.

“Really?”

Mary was currently coiling her body around a post in the lunchroom like one of those dancers in Dad’s special stash of movies. I had come across these once when rummaging around for a flashlight in my old man’s dresser drawer, but they mysteriously disappeared right after I found them. She had one arm suspended freely in the air, the neckline of her dress stretched dangerously below her bare collarbone and her milky, rounded—

“Hey, did you hear me?” Keith slapped his book down on the table and glared at me behind his glasses. He had just got them last week and was constantly fumbling them. He picked up the part resting on his left ear and smoothed back his mousey hair. “Sully, what’s your problem? You’ve been acting loopy the past two days.”

“Loopy is as loopy does...” I grinned.

“Shut up. You’re lame.” He looked down at the open pages again. “So *anyway*. We should go to this place. I’ll bet there are some really old gravestones here, maybe even some are two hundred years old!”

“You’re full of it. Chicago hasn’t even been here two hundred years, *brainiac*.”

“Good, now that I have your attention...”

“Okay, okay, sure. We’ll go Saturday. Is Van going to be around?” I turned my focus to Keith, attempting to banish the voluptuous Mary from the corner of my eye.

He was grinning, which seemed to make the freckles on his cheeks pop out in 3-D. “Yeah, he owes me one. He *has* to take

us.”

But when I got to Keith’s house Saturday morning, Van had flown the coop. It perturbed me that I had actually made the effort to arrive before noon, which counted as a major accomplishment for any kid my age. We decided to wait it out—Van had to come back to the house *sometime*, and when he did, we would be there, lying in wait; for once, he would be at our mercy. A day spent at a friend’s house was one surefire way to annoy the crap out of a couple of parents, and Keith and Van’s parents would demand he take us away from the house. It was the perfect plan. Besides, he hadn’t taken us to a cemetery all month, and our escort was past due according to the school bus clause.

After spending the day retelling cemetery stories, watching *Nightmare on Elm Street* for the fiftieth time, and playing a grudge match round of Monopoly (Keith’s parents, for some reason, didn’t allow him any video games, but let him watch horror movies that made him phobic of showers and telephones), Keith and I were prepared to pounce when Van finally pulled up in his blue Voyager.

“I just got home, nerds. Why don’t you go build sandcastles?” was his immediate response, his brown curly hair sagging over his brooding eyes.

Like a cuckoo clock, Van’s mom popped her head into the room. “Van, you’re driving them out. They’ve been waiting to go ALL-DAY-LONG. You wanted this responsibility, remember?”

Van’s mouth dropped open and his eyes bulged in protest. “Mom! That’s so unfair!”

She pointed to the door and Van turned to his brother with a murderous glare.

“But Van, we’ll go someplace really cool, I *promise!*” Keith’s

voice squeaked as he clutched his book to his chest, ready to shield off the gaze should he feel himself turning to stone. “Besides... we haven’t gone *all month*.”

He sighed and grumbled, “This better be good.” Throwing open the front door, he tromped out to the Voyager in his new Chuck Taylors while we gave each other silent high-fives.

“Old Lake Forest Cemetery, now an unkempt, weed-infested portion of land, broke ground with the burial of Arnold Dwayne Moffet. A wealthy trader and big game hunter, Moffet was renowned as “The Wolf Killer” for single-handedly wiping out the area’s population of gray wolves with his pack of wolfhounds. Even though the trade of wolf pelts had not yet caught fire (it wouldn’t be until the mid-1800s that the leg-hold trap would cause an explosion in demand), Moffet’s greatest joy was to accompany his huge dogs during their grisly hunting sprees. Moffet settled in Northern Illinois before the Town of Chicago was established in 1833. Ironically, the famous hunter suffered an untimely death due to the loyalty of his hounds, who fiercely guarded his bedside and kept his doctor from treating his pneumonia’—Holy shit, Sully! You’re not going to believe this!”

I turned in my seat, to ogle back at Keith. He rarely ever cursed, and I began to feel a little guilty for corrupting his innocence. Van had quickly passed his snarky language to me, and now Keith’s purity was crumbling under the pressure from the both of us.

“Moffet died in 1810! 1810! That’s over 200 years ago! Ha-ha! Suck that!”

Van also seemed disturbed, as if he was noticing for the first time his little brother had grown up right under his nose. “Keith, cut out the gangsta talk. Who do you think you are?”

I piped up, “Yeah, you think you’re Van or something?”

Van shot me a dirty look, which quickly broke into an approving smirk. Just that little slight in acknowledgement made something inside of me burst at the seams; it was the first time I felt truly cool.

“That’s gonna be mine, kids. You watch. I’ve got Moffet’s number.”

“Not if we beat you first, preppy.”

After an hour of two middle school kids trying to navigate one pissy 16-year-old driver in the semi-right direction, we stumbled upon the forest preserve where our graveyard awaited.

“Is it marked?” Van asked, his hands wrenched tightly around the steering wheel, no doubt imagining our necks between his fists.

“These things never say. Sometimes I think the writers aren’t even the ones who’ve been to these places.”

“So, let’s hear why it’s haunted, man.” *Man*. That was a word Keith did not get called often enough, as could be read from the huge grin subsequently spreading across his face.

“Well, it’s the usual... ghost lights, orbs, a disappearing house, eyes watching you from the woods, you know...” Keith’s shoulders sagged a bit. He was anticipating his brother’s next words.

Not one to disappoint, Van exclaimed, “Ghost lights and phantoms and orbs! *Oh my!* It’s like a ghost hunter’s greatest hits!”

“More than one cemetery can have ghost lights, *Randy.*”

“First of all, never call me ‘Randy.’ Second, how many times have we heard those stories? That’s all bullshit and you know it. They just needed to fill the other 100 pages after their good ideas ran out. Those books are written by hippies who smoke too much weed, and when the weed fries their brains, they start recycling

the same old stories over and over again.”

Keith and I looked at each other. It was becoming more and more clear that Van could be right about the books, though we would never admit it to him. Our last graveyard run had produced a third swamp creature story, though there were no swamps in the area, and that kind of made you question the credibility of those writers. The lack of original haunts and monsters was beginning to cramp the creep factor of our trips.

The only road in the forest preserve wound up a slightly inclined hillside, and took us past several ancient hiking trails and one big parking lot before sliding us back to the entrance.

“What the fuck, bitch?!”

Keith pleaded from the backseat, “Go back, we must have missed it.”

“No, there was no marker—we didn’t miss a sign—” Van was creeping the Voyager back down the tree-lined road to the highway.

“Come on, Van, let’s just go look one more time, *please!*”

“It wasn’t there! Did you see anything marking a graveyard?”

“No...”

“...just another made-up story. See, now they have to start making up places, too—”

It was then, as we were coasting down the pothole-ridden road, that I noticed a place in the trees that seemed to recede from the rest of the tree line. As we drove closer, the trees fell back further into a long gash, leading out of sight. Standing in the middle of the gap was Mary, in all her erotic glory. The failing sunlight lit up her thin dress in a heavenly glow, silhouetting the shape of her bare body. She looked straight at me and winked, then turned and strode through the shadowy indentation in the forest. As I watched her hips swing out of sight, I cried out, “Guys! Whoa,

stop the van!”

“What?” Van screeched to a stop, spraying gravel into the nearby grass.

“There’s a road back there!” My revelation became a craze. I pointed out the window, to the break in the trees just beyond the Voyager.

Van pulled in front of the indentation. He and Keith craned their necks and examined the path.

“Whoa, how did we miss that?”

“Damn, I never thought it would be out here...”

“Neither did I.”

Pulling the Voyager off the road, our leader cut the van between the trees. It just fit, like the path had been carved out especially for us. The path curved to the left and the gravelly road disappeared behind us. A roadblock sprung up immediately; erected ages ago, a rusty wire cable strung between two posts from either side. It looked as if it hadn’t been touched in thirty years.

Van parked. “Hold on.”

He opened his door and jumped out, walking to the back of the vehicle. We heard him open the back doors and rattle through the boxes back there before pulling out what he was looking for. The doors slammed shut.

I watched as he marched to the post with the padlock, carrying a gigantic pair of bolt cutters. The smell of exhaust from the idling van coiled around my guts.

“Van!” Keith squeaked behind me. We always spoke of evading the police (trespassing after sundown, you know), but we had never actually destroyed any property before. Besides grave rubbing, which was really only frowned upon by cemetery caretakers, we had kept relatively clean. This was a new low for us.

“We’re so dead!” Keith whispered. “If the cops come by, they’ll bust us for *real* this time!”

“When’s the last time you think this place has seen any cops? As long as we hide the van, no one will notice we’re here.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt guilt slap my face. I had never snapped at Keith like that before. All the same, he *was* acting like a baby.

Keith hesitated, watching Van return with a wide grin on his face before closing the bolt cutters back into his secret vault of delinquent toys. He hopped back in the driver’s seat.

He has to be loving every minute of this, I thought.

Van shifted into drive and sneered. “Let’s go, kittens.”

The Voyager ran over the cable and mashed it into the soggy earth. Rain had been drizzling off and on all day, and it created a haze in the thick undergrowth as the van pushed through overgrown weeds, saplings, and fallen branches. The trees grew thicker as the path wore on, and bony branches clawed and snapped loose on the Voyager like the fingers of an ancient witch fondling her soon-to-be victims.

I studied the surrounding woods. My mind conjured up dark figures dashing between the trees, running alongside the van and multiplying the deeper we drove. There was no telling what could be in that woods, nevermind the supernatural stories. What about backwoods yokels wielding machetes, or a serial killer trying to dump chopped-up remains of his victims?

My whole body jumped when Keith suddenly cried, “There it is!”

A clearing opened before us, a hiccup in the dense surrounding woods. My eyes shifted to the small gray stones poking out of the tangle of weeds. When the book said “unkempt,” it had not been exaggerating. It looked like a drawing out of *Scary Stories*

to Tell in the Dark.

The stones had no shadows back there—it was as if the light had been sucked out of the sky; it was like looking through a fogged-up bathroom mirror. The tangle of vines were the only features on the eroded angles standing at either side of the entrance. Broken crosses reached out of knee-high clumps of brush, their stone bases lost to time. Some headstones were engulfed in wreaths of foliage, barely able to peek above the weeds. Trees had grown up through graves, coiling like arthritic hands under pressure from the gloomy sky. I wondered if any of those trees had grown through skeletons on their way up—split open a ribcage, spilled out of a gaping jaw. My eyes searched the limbs overhead for skulls, femurs, or pearl necklaces.

Finding Moffet’s grave was not going to be a snap. I determined to try all the largest, grandest markers first, which as I soon discovered, was the popular decision among the three of us.

There was no fence separating the living from the dead. Van pulled the vehicle to a stop about ten feet from the closest headstone.

“Gentlemen! Choose your colors!” I held out a fistful of Crayolas between us.

Van slapped his brother’s hand in mid-reach and snatched up Red and Forest Green. Deflated, Keith pushed up his glasses and reached out to pick Blue-Violet and Red-Orange. I chose Steel Gray and Cerulean. I then turned to my backpack, pulling out a stack of blank paper and passing it around. When everyone was fully stocked and ready, we paused to glance at each other’s hungry expressions.

“Catch you later, pussies!” Van leapt from the Voyager while Keith and I tumbled out after him. Our sneakers lit onto crisp,

damp grass. Our laughter echoed between the graves and fell upon deaf trees. The sharp breeze sung against our damp T-shirts, and mud droplets splattered our jeans. Just steps away now, a field of headstones held their breath in anticipation. We went straight to it, running and stooping, peeling away the weeds to press paper flat against the pebbly grave markers. Smudges of color beaded up over the paper, revealing names of people we would never know. These were the last moments of our innocence.

Something darted near the edge of the clearing; I saw it out of the corner of my eye. Briefly, I wondered if Van was going to take to jumping out from behind trees to scare us, but as I looked to my left, I spotted him standing near a bush, his gaze scanning the outermost edge of the clearing. *Probably just a deer*, I thought. I dashed from headstone to headstone, filling up my blank sheets of paper with grainy impressions of names, dates, and designs. One grave I came across was actually a stack of logs chiseled from marble. I knelt in front of the large block of stone. “Man,” I gasped. “When I die, I want a cool headstone like this one.”

It was there, when I was bent over the log headstone, that I heard it—the rustle of the grass mashing underfoot in a quick, hurried burst. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a large, dark figure dash between two headstones to my left. My heart leapt to my throat and I swallowed hard. It was stooped over, whatever it was. Surely it was nothing. A coyote, maybe? A coyote wouldn’t attack a group of humans, would it?

On quivering legs I slowly raised my body to look over the graves nearby. Not a creature in sight. Just to be sure, I called over to Keith. “Hey, did you see a coyote run through here?”

“A what? I- I didn’t see anything... just a bunch of graves.” Keith gave me an unsettled look and took off his glasses to smooth back his hair.

“Probably just a stupid squirrel or something—,” I said quickly. I decided to move to a different part of the graveyard to escape the demons in my head. That was one huge fucking squirrel.

About that time, Van’s voice called out to us. It seemed distant and hollow, “Hey! There’re more graves back here!”

I looked around, but didn’t see Van. “Where are you?!” I yelled back.

“Back here, in the woods!”

Keith and I exchanged glances from across the graveyard and ran to join Van. *That’s* where Moffet was probably buried, and each of us knew that. I cursed under my breath as I figured Van had already found Moffet’s resting place. Inexplicably, Van had some kind of freaky radar which never failed to hone in on all the oldest headstones. We hated him for it, and the result was often an embarrassing struggle to take him down while either Keith or I would strain to rub the headstone first.

Keith made it to the woods before I could, his short stature dashing under low hanging tree limbs and avoiding the spider webs that smacked me in the face. By the time I caught up to the others, I felt like a wet hen. I hated spiders. Finding one skittering down my arm made me scream like a little girl, and I saw by the looks on Keith and Van’s faces they had heard.

The graves were scattered in a peculiar line leading out of the cemetery. It was like the woods were eating up the gravestones one by one, and we were in the belly. I looked at Van. “Find Moffet?”

“No, but I bet the old bastard is around here somewhere!”

I heard a snort behind me, and I expected to find Keith laughing. When I turned, he wasn’t paying any attention to us. He was crouching low, rubbing his Red-Orange crayon over a paper-faced headstone. I heard a different noise then. While staring at Keith,

who was intent on his grave rubbing, I heard a low whimper from behind me. I looked. Nothing was there, of course.

“Did you hear that noise?”

Keith looked up at me with that pale face. “You’re just trying to scare me, Sully.”

“Keith! I’m not kidding you!” I stared at him, a terror rising in me. “Did you hear it?”

Van came back from his lone jaunt in the woods, “This is as far back as it goes. Moffet’s grave must be up here somewhere. But what are these graves, then? Funny.” His shoe scuffed against one of the headstones, a puny block sticking up from the ground, no bigger than a box of Cheez-Its. As a matter of fact, all the headstones we’d seen trailing from the clearing were that size, and they were identical in shape with a different letter carved on top each. I was further creeped-out. Something about the place just felt *wrong*.

“What are you two gawking at?”

Another noise. Louder. Lingering. *What the hell?*

Panting. It was panting. And whimpering, almost groaning. Before I could utter a word, I heard the same sound multiply. Now it was coming from my left and my right. I looked at Keith, and he was frozen on the ground, huddled near the tiny headstone.

“What the fuck,” Van whispered.

Van heard it too. *Shit, now we are in trouble.*

The sound circled us, coming from all sides. Louder and louder, heavy and hollow. The panting reminded me of the stories I’d heard of cults chanting in hooded circles, sacrificing animals while fires raged. My heart felt like it would explode. The panting was deafening, a series of yelps, whimpers, and howls caught in my eardrums. The sun seemed to have dropped from the sky, the

darkness filling in what little patches of gray light remained.

That's when they came. I didn't see them at first. They looked like dark shadows stepping out of the trees. The panting grew louder, and I realized I wasn't hallucinating. They were huge dogs, bigger than wolves. Their fur hung like seaweed from scarecrow limbs. Wolfhounds the color of sod. They smelled like dead fish and rotten meat.

I couldn't move. The closer they came, the more I could make out, and I could not *move*. That's how I saw the slimy fragments dripping from the dogs. But it wasn't water, or even blood. My eyes adjusted to the blackness. It was worms. In the dark caverns where eyes should be, I could see them writhing and crawling. I couldn't take it anymore. I ran.

Van was already running. Keith was just beside me as we dashed as fast as our legs could carry us. The mud protested my every step, pulling on my sneakers like the ground had morphed into a bog. Branches swatted me in the face as I tore through the forest, groping for the clearing. Keith darted ahead. The hounds, the earth-colored hounds with worms for eyes, snapped at our heels. They should have been able to grab me, I was certain, but I was always just out of reach. I kept wondering if they were *playing* with us, like a cat with a mouse before it gets bored and finally rips off its victim's head.

Scared witless, I tore out of the forest and ran across the cemetery, following Keith. The cries of the hounds softened, and I stole a glance over my shoulder. Big mistake. I ran right into a headstone and flipped over, knocking out all my breath. I lay in shock for a moment, when a hand dove over the headstone. I was certain it was the hand of Death, but it yanked me to my feet and propelled me into running. Van had saved me at the last moment.

He dragged me all the way to the Voyager, my T-shirt sleeve gripped tightly in his left hand, his grave rubbings in his right hand. He hurled me forward just before we got to the van, where Keith was waiting for us. We slammed the doors behind us and locked them when we were safe inside. I screamed, "Step on it!!"

Van was about to oblige in that beat of utter silence that followed, but before he could turn the ignition, the vehicle began to rock back and forth. My face fell into the window, and my eyes searched the empty grass outside. The snarling, huffing noise that drowned my thoughts and rocked the vehicle was being created by thin air. Keith was screaming in shotgun while Van flopped like a rag doll. After a few seconds of chaos, the rocking stopped and the sounds were gone.

I'm not sure how long I sat in silence, unmoving from my position where I lay half-fallen on the floor. Van didn't move, either. Keith was still in his seat, but he was crying. My gaze floated from the floor, where the mess of spilled crayons and strewn blank paper stuck to my hands and feet. The hounds were gone. We were safe. We needed to leave.

"Van, let's get out of here," I pleaded. I couldn't help the tears from squeezing out of my eyes.

Keith began to wail.

"Hey, buddy, it's okay. It's over now," I said softly.

"No! *Noooooooooo...*" Keith sobbed.

"What?" I asked. I sat up and leaned between the front seats.

First I saw Keith's horrified face, his red, swollen puffy cheeks blistered with tears. He had lost his glasses. I turned to Van. There was no face, save for a bloody pulp. It had been literally ripped off, like he had been kissed by a bear. His body was covered with wet, red gashes. Van was dead. He was still clutching his grave rubbings in his right hand. On top was a sheet hastily

rubbed over in Red:

Arnold Dwayne Moffet

1753-1810

May he rest in the company of his angels.