

What Was He Writing?

A short story by Andy Poore

The man almost escaped my notice the first time. It wasn't as if I was unobservant, it's just that he was standing so still, I almost couldn't pick him out among the tombstones. But as I made my turn, I caught sight of his shirt and realized that he was alive.

The cemetery had a name, but nobody remembered what it was, and the old sign had faded long ago. It's very small – I doubt more than 35 graves occupy its space. The man was simply standing there, staring at one of the graves. His white hair gently waved in the breeze.

I shrugged and continued driving. A man standing by himself in a cemetery was cause for a second look, but nothing more. I paid it no more notice as I continued with the errands I had planned for the day.

However, a while later, as I retraced my steps toward home, I passed the little cemetery again, and to my great surprise, I found that the man was still standing in the same spot, staring at the same tombstone. Only this time, he wasn't standing completely still. He had a small pad of paper in one hand, and appeared to be writing something on it.

Again, a second glance and a shrug, and I kept driving. But the further I drove, the more the image of the man writing on his pad of paper came to me. Had he really spent over an hour standing there, looking at the same grave marker and writing?

Surely not. Of course, he probably was doing some sort of research, writing down the names and dates of birth and death for every grave. Or maybe some of the deceased were family...ancestors. Nothing unusual about that.

But somehow I couldn't shake it. I didn't lose any sleep over it, but the image of the white-haired man standing in a cemetery, writing something on a pad of paper, kept coming to me throughout the next few days. I knew it was ridiculous to dwell on it, but it was like some sort of post-hypnotic suggestion. I couldn't get away from it.

As my schedule turned out, I ran a similar errand about five days after I saw the man the first time, and was obliged to drive past the cemetery again. I almost laughed at my apprehension as I neared the rusted gates. Of course he wouldn't—

But he was. There, standing in front of the same grave marker, the white-haired man, writing on his pad of paper. And then he looked at me. Directly at me. I almost swerved off the road with shock. My hands were shaking as I managed to get back in my lane. There had to be some reasonable, logical explanation for this. And as for his look...well, of course, anyone might turn to look at a passing car.

I finished my errand quickly, and found myself with some spare time, and decided to once and for all satisfy my curiosity. I drove directly to the small cemetery and parked just inside the gate. To my utter astonishment, the man was not there. Still, I had to see what was so interesting about that one tombstone.

I slowly approached it, feeling an involuntary shiver run through me, despite the heat of early Summer. As I took the last few steps, my eyes strayed from the actual face of the tombstone to the small pad of paper sitting on top of it. It was his...the white-haired man's pad of paper.

My conscience chided me for even thinking of reading another man's personal thoughts, but my curiosity was too strong, and I reached out for it. I flipped back the cover...

My eyes widened, and I'm sure my mouth hung open in shock...I slowly turned the pages, taking in each page at a glance...I couldn't believe it! It wasn't possible! A sound startled me, and I dropped the pad and whirled around.

The white-haired man was standing all of a half-step away from me, smiling...it wasn't a friendly smile. I felt the pain in my chest...I knew I would feel it, but it was no less frightening. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as I sank to my knees. I slumped forward, my breath wheezing. Just at the edge of my vision, I saw that pad of paper as the wind started flipping its pages, and once again I saw them.

They were not pages of words, as I had at first expected, they were drawings. First, of me in my car, driving by. Then of me entering the cemetery. The next was me standing at the tombstone with a shadowy figure behind me. Then came me standing face-to-face with the white-haired man. Next was a close-up of the man's hand on the hilt of a knife protruding from my chest. The last image was me lying on the ground, staring at the pad of paper...mirroring what I was now doing...I saw my blood seeping along the grass, almost reaching the paper. He bent down and picked it up...slowly...ever so slowly...my vision faded...