

## Episode One: "The Reopening of the Flauxaday Club"

The building wasn't hidden in any sense of the word. It stood, tall and weatherworn, nestled between an insurance agency and a towering bank office three times its size. Metal and modernity surrounded it, yet the stone face remained, unmoved.

It faced the Circle, one of the city centers, bustling with commuters and shoppers and the occasional tourist (more often than not during the summer or winter, to see the parades or twinkling lights, respectively). In the center stood a towering pillar, once dedicated to an important so-and-so, now ruled by pigeons. Atop it stood a bronze woman, arm outstretched, as if to say "Forward!" –though, to be honest, no one could quite remember what they should be moving forward to.

The building and the pillar dated back to around the same time, and, indeed, shared the same architect. She, like both stone structures, approached a 173rd birthday. No small feat, though neither were quite sure how to celebrate.

Every person who passed the building felt a funny sort of longing, a feeling strongest upon the first sighting of the building. After that, it faded to a strange little yearning. Like a reminder of a childhood neighbor, whose face and name had been swept away by time. The feeling, for most, tended to reside in the gut, somewhere adjacent to the navel.

Some who continued to feel it as they passed the building over and over again were sometimes compelled to enter. They always made some excuse for their curiosity, pretending to ask for directions or inquire the time. One went so far as to pretend to represent an architectural digest, and produced a fake business card.

But the Architect always knew. She could tell who succumbed to their curiosity, and who resolutely ignored it.

The Architect welcomed them all. Upon their entrance, she asked a simple question: "Do you believe?"

All were perplexed by the inquiry. "Believe in what?" was the most common reply. "Oh, I'm an atheist" was also common.

All misunderstood the question.

They were treated to a sad smile, and they were ushered, kindly but firmly, out the door. On the sidewalk, the door shut soundly at their back, they were left to wonder to themselves what the question meant.

Every once in a great while, someone, taken aback by the frustratingly vague nature of the question, would retort with varying levels of irreverence. At that, the Architect would pause and grit her teeth, and the offender was pushed out without any of the doorman's usual good graces.

After decades, the Architect grew tired. Every day, the curious were drawn to her. Every day, the question was asked. Every day, she was unsatisfied.

Finally, on the eve of her 173rd birthday, came an indignant reply that struck her as the most offensive one of all. For the last time.

“Do you believe?” she asked the newcomer.

“Do *you*?”

The Architect stood, without a moment’s pause. She rest her palms firmly on the desk.

“I have had quite enough,” she said matter-of-factly, and vanished in a puff of copper-colored smoke.

Or so went the story.

That story, by the way, is not the Architect’s. Well, not exactly.

This is the story of the REOPENING OF THE FLAUXADAY CLUB.

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Many years passed, and the Flauxaday Club remained silent.

No lights flickered in the windows. No curtains were drawn. The flag which once flew above the door remained limp, in spite of any strong wind that felt inclined to blow.

Atop the desk sat the Architect’s record book, gathering dust.

There it remained.

Until one day –what would have been the Architect’s 193rd birthday, twenty years to the day from her departure.

The record book flew open, sending a cloud of dust into the air. Its pages fluttered and fussed before finally settling on a name: Ronald Isaac Pender.

We go now to the Westside Graveyard, where Mr. Pender is buried. You’ll see whoever made his tombstone had a sort of morbid sense of humor, evident by their chosen inscription:

“RIP to R.I.P.”

Unless, of course, Mr. Pender himself had left instruction that that should be his final message to the world. Though that seems unlikely. Pender wasn’t the sort to have a morbid sense of humor, or indeed any sense of humor at all.

The circumstances of his death were quite sudden, and took everyone, Mr. Pender especially, by complete surprise. It’s likely, then, he had no hand in the inscribing of his tomb.

But the words on the stone's face and the matter of Mr. Pender's death were of no interest at all to those three figures currently digging up his casket.

"Murray, you see anything?" one called, their voice muffled by the handkerchief tied around their mouth.

"Shut up, keep diggin'," the man who currently calls himself 'Murray' replied. He was stationed on the edge of the newly re-dug grave. "If I sees anything, you'll be the first to know."

"Do you think we'll find it?" the third figure asked, heaving a shovelful of dirt over their shoulder.

"Didja hear me when I said 'shut up keep diggin'?" Murray snapped, eyes on a light in the window of the nearby church.

The bell in the church tower struck two o'clock. Murray was beginning to get very antsy.

"You reach the bastard yet? We're burning moonlight, here."

Two shovels struck wood.

"Hey, I think we've got something!"

Murray reached down and snatched a shovel from one of the figures. Leaping down into the grave, he drove the blade into the flat top of the casket, over and over again, until it splintered apart.

Throwing the shovel aside, he dropped to his knees and pulled the wood away. The two diggers exchanged a look, opting to stay back rather than intrude and risk losing a hand.

After a few moments of frenzied digging, Murray stopped. He stared down into the open casket.

"Boss?"

"It's not here," Murray muttered, mostly to himself. Though, as there were two other figures in the pit with him, he had no real privacy and the message was received by all in earshot. "Where the hell-it's not here."

"Boss?" They pulled the handkerchief from their mouth and wiped a hand across their forehead. "What's the matter?"

Murray didn't answer. His eyes darted back and forth, frantically searching. "The clues all pointed here, it's gotta be here, what about the-" He pulled a fragment of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Ronald Ian Pender," it read, "Westside Graveyard."

"I'm here, it's gotta be-" He reared back, rising to his feet, the paper tearing as he clenched his fist, "Where's my fucking money?!"

"Hey, boss-" one of the figures began.

Murray turned, pulling the gun from his belt. "Get the fuck out of here."

"But boss-"

"I paid you, didn't I?" Murray barely keeping his voice under control, "You got your fucking money, didn't you?"

"Yeah-"

"Then get-" Murray pulled himself out of the pit, "the fuck out of here."

The two figures exchanged another look, shrugged in unison, and, one by one, followed. The one with the handkerchief paused for a moment over the body, staring down into the casket. Quickly, they stooped to retrieve something from the body, shoving it into their pocket.

"Hey, shouldn't we, uh, cover him back up?" the other asked, dusting mud off their pants.

"Forget it." Murray, still clutching the gun in one white-knuckled fist and the crumpled paper in the other, didn't turn. "Forget this place, forget you ever saw me. We was never here."

Without another word, he strode purposefully toward the church, where a single light glowed in a window.

The two grave diggers walked the other direction, toward the street.

They made it out of the gate and a few steps down the street before a gunshot rang out from the church. Both turned to look.

The light still flickered in the window. A heavy silence resettled itself over the graves.

"Say, should we-?"

Handkerchief felt the bulging form in their jacket pocket. "You heard what he said, we was never here."

"Yeah, but, suppose he-"

"We was never here," Handkerchief insisted, "Besides, what if they start asking questions?"

The two parted ways at the next block. The other tipped their hat with a wary look back at the church, where the single light still flickered. Handkerchief watched them walk away, hands tucked in their pockets.

Once they were out of sight, Handkerchief turned and headed back into the graveyard.

Eyes darting between their work and the church, they quickly shoveled dirt back into Pender's grave. They tried to tell themselves it was out of the goodness of their heart, out of respect for the stiff, something heartwarming like that.

But their reasons were much more selfish. The weight in their pocket wasn't something they wanted the cops to discover was missing from the grave. If it got traced back to them, well, the cops'd think they were some kind of sicko. With a morbid collection, or something.

And everybody knows it's bad luck to keep a corpse uncovered.

The clock struck four o'clock, and the night watchman made his usual pass past the graveyard. The church's windows were black and empty, as they should be this time of night.

The night watchman stopped at the corner, reaching into his pocket to retrieve his flask. He took a long draught and gave a satisfied sigh as the warmth filled his stomach, fighting against the unusually chilly night air.

"Say, copper," a voice came from behind him, "can I have a swig?"

The officer turned with a start. The pale, ashen face of the man who'd called himself Murray stared out at him from between the iron fence posts.

"The hell are you doing in there at this time of night?" the officer snapped, "Graveyard's closed. Come pay your respects in the daylight."

"Fraid I can't do that, copper. Won't be around that long."

The night watchman took a few involuntary steps backward as Murray reached an ashen, dirt-covered hand through the fence. "Just a sip?" he asked.

The flask dropped from the night watchman's fingers as he stumbled away.

Murray watched him go, then turned his gaze to the fallen flask. He stretched and contorted, but it was just out of reach. "Damn."

He floated back across the graveyard to the church. "Wonder if that cabinet of sacramental wine is unlocked..." he mused, this time entirely to himself.

No one was around to eavesdrop on a ghoul, not at this time of night.

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Across town, Handkerchief was in need of a helping hand.

"Is this some kind of sick fucking joke?" Marsha, the locksmith, asked, her eyes on the cloth-wrapped bundle that'd been set on the desk in front of her.

“No,” Handkerchief said. “I need a locksmith. Murray mentioned you once or twice, figured you could help.”

“I’m a locksmith, sure. And, look, I’ve undone all sorts of locks. Locks on diaries for prying parents, locks on closets for prying spouses, locks on cars and windows and whatever. But I ain’t ever –and I mean ever– done a lock on a corpse.”

“It’s not a corpse,” Handkerchief pointed out, rather unnecessarily. “It’s just part of one.”

“You know what the fuck I meant,” Marsha said, pushing her chair back and standing, “Take your shit and get out. I don’t need cops poking around here because somebody’s seen you bringing a dead fucking body in here.” As Handkerchief began to speak, she amended her statement, “Or any part of a dead fucking body.”

“But aren’t you curious what’s in there?” Handkerchief nudged the locket, its chain looped around the dead man’s fist and secured with an ornate bronze lock. “Don’t you want to know?”

“If I want a mystery, I’ll read a book,” Marsha waved her hands in a shooing motion, “Now get out. And take your hand with you.”

“Murray sent me?”

“The hell he did.”

“I think he shot somebody, a priest.”

Marsha abruptly sat back down. “You think he shot a priest?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“We was in Westside Graveyard, digging up some stiff –this is his hand. I grabbed it after –well, anyway, there was a light on in the window of the church. Murray didn’t find what he was looking for, so he went off to the church. Then we heard a shot.”

“You weren’t with him?”

“He told us to scam.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.”

“What was he looking for?”

“Said something about money. It was a no questions asked, pay in advance sorta deal, so, you know, I didn’t ask.”

“But you didn’t see him shoot the priest?”

Handkerchief tilted their head. “We heard the shot.”

“Maybe it was somebody else. In the church, I mean.” Marsha seemed to be reassuring herself, “Murray was an idiot but he wouldn’t shoot a priest.”

Handkerchief blinked. “You and him...involved or something?”

“Me and Murray?” She recoiled, “Jesus, no –he owes me money, a *lot* of money. I’m wondering how in the hell I’m supposed to get it from the inner circle of hell where they send folks who pop priests.”

“Ah,” Handkerchief said. Their eyes flicked back to the shriveled hand on the desk between them. “So-”

“No.”

“Miss Marsha-”

“Don’t ‘Miss Marsha’ me, punk,” Marsha spat, “Far as I’m concerned, you and your little souvenir were never here. I’m not about to help somebody who mighta been an accomplice to murder –and of a priest! God knows I’ve got enough bad karma to last a dozen lifetimes.” She stood again. “Now really, get out.”

Handkerchief decided not to press their luck, and gingerly placed the hand back into their pocket. Marsha watched out the window as they walked down the fire escape and onto the street, pulling their jacket tighter around them. As soon as they were out of sight down the block and around the corner, Marsha flipped through her address book until she found the right number.

It rang just long enough to make her nervous before a raspy voice answered, “Hello?”

“This the Wellington Boarding House?”

“Yes’m.”

“I need to talk to Murray Smith, is he in?”

“No’m, not that I’ve seen.”

“He come back, you tell him Marsha called, yeah?”

“Yes’m.”

Marsha hung up the phone and sat back down, eyes glued to the spot where the hand had sat.

“What the fuck did you get yourself into, Murray?”

A sudden gust of wind outside rattled her window, sending the neon sign reading 'M. Guest, Locksmith' swinging wildly. The light overhead flickered and Marsha cast her eyes upwards. Hurriedly, she crossed herself.

"I wasn't with them," she said, to whomever might be listening, "I didn't kill nobody and I didn't dig up nobody, either. Whatever grievances you've got, they're with Murray, not with me."

The wind picked up, sending her sign slamming against the iron railing of the fire escape. Sparks flew into the dark alley below. Then, just as suddenly as it started, the wind died.

Marsha sat in silence for a moment, watching the neon sign slowly stop swinging. She reached for her jacket, and announced to the empty room:

"And another thing, I don't believe in ghosts."

It was mostly true. Mostly.