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By Richard Shifman

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“What a disaster,” Truman mumbled. He surveyed his massive living room, bathed in an eerie red glow from four spotlights on a track running down the high ceiling’s center. Dark green and brown bottles littered the place, clustered on tabletops, ledges, and counters like small herds of animals. A dark splotch stained one-half of one cushion of the beige sectional. A puddle of what might be vomit was splattered, wet and gross, between the living room carpet and kitchen tile. And the coup de grâce, Walt, in boxer shorts, lay prone beneath the glass coffee table, like some freakishly skinny, half-naked Snow White, but male with a buzzcut and a soul patch.

Preston, sitting beside Truman on the sectional, tilted back a green bottle, took a swig, and gulped. “Yo, it’s a wreck in here, Tru. Your dad’s gonna kill you.”

Truman shrugged. “He’s coming home Monday. I’ll steal the extra credit card in his drawer and call our maid service. They’ll come tomorrow and fix it.” He sniffed like ‘no big deal.’

“Tomorrow is today,” commented Sophie, hunched over on the far end of the sectional, ankles crossed and nose ring deep in her phone, long dark hair waterfalling around her face like Samara from *The Ring*.

Truman wished she would look up at him. “What do you mean, Soph?”

“It’s two thirty, Tru. So, it’s Sunday, now,” she said plainly, eyes glued to her phone.

“Oh. I see.” Truman rose and strolled to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking his backyard. His gaze traveled down to the twinkling lights at the bottom of the dark hill and then up to the night sky. Earlier in the evening, the Hunter’s Moon lit the violet sky like a crisp light-golden apple waiting to be plucked. Above his house now, a thick sheet of clouds hid the stars, darkening the heavens.

A noise rang out behind Truman. An old man’s scratchy voice, amplified like it was blaring through a loudspeaker, made him swing around. It was the television. “What are you doing. Turn that—”

Sophie was staring at Truman. Finally. Her lips shone with gloss, and her long, dark-brown, center-parted hair no longer obscured her face. Her eyelids hung a little lower than they had at the beginning of the night, bloodshot eyes no longer sparkling (like she said, it *was* two thirty in the morning). Still, she was looking at *him*. Finally. “I’m casting TikTok to your big screen. Okay, Tru?”

“Oh, uh, sure.” He cleared his throat. “Sure.”

On the wall screen, a somewhat past-middle-aged man wearing black-and-orange suspenders and a black T-shirt emblazoned with a white skeleton was chattering away. The man stood in a brown-grassed yard in front of a large circle of thirteen life-sized skeletons, some dressed in tattered Revolutionary War uniforms and some wearing wigs and old-fashioned, grubby gowns. The bony figures in shabby clothes were set up so it looked like they were dancing a waltz or some other old-timey dance. Several yards behind the circle of skeletons loomed a barn, doors wide.

The man on the screen, bald and white-bearded with a pot belly, plucked at his suspenders with his thumbs, and proclaimed in a raspy voice with a twang to it, “I’m George Madison, proprietor of the *Dancing Skeletons Farm*, and this year’s display is a doozy. We’ll be open today, Saturday, October twenty-eight through Wednesday, November one, the Day of the Dead. So, bring the kids, come on down to Riverbridge, New Jersey, and check out our *revolutionary* dancing skeletons.” The geezer hee-hawed at his own joke. “Get it? Revolutionary? Anyway, come on down.”

“Oh, my God. Dad joke. So cringe,” Sophie breathed, pecking at her phone. The video froze, and she rose and ambled toward the flat screen, almost sticking her nose against it as she pointed toward a dark structure in the background of the video. “That’s like, his little house back there, way behind the barn.” She randomly glared at Walt, motionless under the coffee table. “Wait. Is he dead?”

Preston nudged Walt’s ribs with his foot, and the teen beneath the glass murmured something but didn’t move. “He’s okay. Yo, *Dancing Skeletons Farm* is right off Route 202. I went there when I was little. That guy sets up everything in front of his ranch house. Every year it’s some new crazy skeleton display.”

Truman edged toward Sophie until he stood side-by-side with her in front of the flat screen. “I think I’ve seen that place. He’s like some rando who recreates scenes from the Civil War, back when the country started, right? But with skeletons.”

She glanced at him. “Not Civil War. Revolutionary War.”

“That’s what I said.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. So, what are *those*?” She pointed at the frozen video. “What are those two big nutcracker-type things standing on either side of the barn doors like they’re guarding it? Are those...scarecrows?”

Preston now stood on the other side of Sophie, the three teens all in a row, worshipping the glowing screen. “Snap a pic on your phone and zoom in on them. Yeah, that’s it.”

The figures grew blurry as Sophie zoomed in on them, but they were, indeed, scarecrows—maybe seven-feet-tall and dressed all in black, ear-to-ear zippered grins dancing upon their canvas faces, and large shiny buttons for eyes. Like beings from a Tim Burtonesque nightmare. “Ooh! Those things are friggin’ cool,” she muttered.

Truman blinked, glancing at her. “You want one?”

“Forget what *she* wants. *I* want them,” Preston claimed.

“I wasn’t talking to you, bruh. I was talking to Sophie. You want them?”

“I want to dance with them.” She giggled.

“Oh, yeah? Come on then.” Truman crossed the room and stepped through the open sliding-glass door and onto his back patio. His breath fogged the air beneath the lone, dim porch light as he waved his friends outside and to the patio’s edge. The three teens stood with their legs pressed against the knee wall, which separated them from the steep hillside, a pit of darkness. Truman pointed at the sparkling town’s lights spread out below. “So, the old man’s house,

Dancing Skeletons Farm, is right over there, just north of Wegner's Grocery Store. I bet it's all shut down, everyone asleep right now." He checked his phone. "It's almost a quarter to three. We can take your truck, Preston. They'll fit."

"Yes! I want to dance with the old guy's scarecrows," laughed Sophie, clapping her hands like 'goody, goody, goody.'

"But they're not ours." Walt's warbly, paper-thin voice squeaked from the open doorway behind them, and they turned at once. Walt, pale as a ghost, clutched his arms around his bare, bird chest, shivering. "It's not right. They're not ours."

Truman snorted. "Who cares? My dad says that in this world you take what you want and make it yours. So, they're really *our* scarecrows, Walt. As long as we *take* them, they're *ours*."

Walt's teeth chattered. "You do what you want, but I'm not going."

Sophie scoffed. "You'd have to find your clothes first."

"So, don't go, Walter." Preston bumped Walt's shoulder as he entered Truman's house. "Go back under the coffee table, Sleeping Beauty."

Truman and Sophie laughed at this, and they followed Preston into the house and out the front door. Sophie patted Walt's shoulder as she passed him. "There, there, little scarecrow," she chuckled.

The three of them were still laughing and whooping as Preston swung his pick-up truck out of Truman's long, winding driveway, peeled out on the hillside's gravel road, and roared down and away into the darkness.

Truman's front door slammed open, and the top of the scarecrow's canvas covered head poked through the frame, its shiny silver button eyes peeking in as if it was checking out the

place. Truman and Sophie came next, both of them hoisting the monstrosity like a rolled-up carpet, squeezing its overstuffed, black-clothed body through the doorway. Its gangly straw-filled arms and legs dangled limp, bumping on the foyer tiles. Behind them, Preston struggled by himself with the other scarecrow, looking like he was dancing with the creature as he dragged and wrestled it through the doorway.

Inside, their nervous laughter filled the living room. The shiny-faced laughter of those high on adrenaline and starlight. Excited, victorious, maniacal. Their laughs echoed off the living room walls, bubbled through the still-wide-open sliding-glass door, and tumbled down the pitch-black hill.

Preston hauled his scarecrow toward the sectional where Walt slept on his back, snoring. He jammed the thing's face, its metallic zippered lips, against his buddy's nose. "Hey, Walt," Preston bellowed in his best low, serial killer voice. "I'm here to dance with you, darling."

Walt woke with a start, eyes wide, mouth agape. The boy screamed and cursed, scrambling to the other end of the sofa. There, chest heaving, he blinked at Preston and his scarecrow, realizing he'd been fooled. "What the Hell, man?"

Truman and Sophie laughed at Walt while Preston lugged the scarecrow onto the couch, positioning it on its back in an imitation of Walt's sleeping pose. After this, Preston took a seat on the sofa draping the scarecrow's legs over his own knees. "There, now my boy's sleeping. He took your place, Walt."

"What the Hell, man?" Walt repeated, and Truman and Sophie, holding the other teetering scarecrow upright in the middle of the living room, broke into laughter again.

"Now, you can dance with the scarecrow, Soph." Truman, circled his arms around the figure's middle and leaned it her way. "Here you go."

“Why, thank you, sir.” She took the straw man’s black-gloved, straw-filled hands and pantomimed a peppy jazz dance, giggling as she bounced about. “We took you, crow man. You’re ours. Yay!”

The flat screen flickered on with a staticky crack, making their shoulders jump. George Madison stood in the middle of the frame, in front of the dancing skeletons just like before, his thumbs plucking the outsides of his suspenders. Except now he wasn’t grinning. The man’s mouth had settled into a flat line inside his white beard, and his steel-gray eyes drilled through the screen.

“Sophie, what are you doing? You casting to the tv again?” Truman dropped the scarecrow, and it thumped into a sitting position on the carpet, although Sophie kept hold of the straw man’s gloved hands, its arms extended straight above its head.

Her brows lowered. “That’s not my phone. Walt, is that you?”

Walt threw his palms up in surrender. “I’m in my boxers. Don’t even know where my phone is.”

“Preston?” Truman asked.

His friend shook his head. “Not me.”

“Ya’ can’t take a man’s property and expect to come away clean, kids.” George Madison stated, pointing at the screen. At them. Above the old man, the weak light of the late-afternoon sun strained through ochre-hued clouds. Behind the dancing skeletons, the scarecrows were absent from either side of the open barn doors. “Somebody stole our two scarecrows early this morning.” The man paused and shook his head.

Truman swallowed hard. “It’s four thirty in the morning. But...it’s light out in the video.” His eyes flitted toward the floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding-glass door. Thick night still blanketed the world.

“Maybe somebody stole them before, and this is an old vid,” Sophie suggested.

“To those who took what’s not theirs this morning, a *curse* upon you.” Madison’s voice rang like stone. “You’re eighteen, and ya’ ought to know better. You wanted to dance with my scarecrows? Okay, then we’ll dance.” Madison snapped his fingers, and the video turned off, the screen going dark.

Straw-filled hands tightened around Sophie’s fingers, and her shoulders lurched again. In her peripheral vision, something dark floated up from the floor. She gazed up in horror at two silver button eyes shining down on her, a gleaming zippered mouth stretched extra wide into a hideous grin. Her blood turned to ice, and she opened her mouth, but all that emerged was a croak.

The straw man’s grinning, toothless mouth opened, bits of straw poking out. Something dark crawled about inside its maw, and that thing, the size of a fist, sprung out and landed with a flutter on Sophie’s neck. A hairy, black spider. The creature sank its fangs into her tender flesh.

Finding her voice, she screamed as her body stiffened like clay hardening. She was unable to move, but very much alert, her vision fuzzy.

She wailed again in pain and fright.

More screaming rang out around her. Large, blurred figures shuffled about her frozen form, and closed-mouth, guttural laughs vibrated in her ears. Something lifted her under her arms from the floor, propping her upright and then yanking her by the hair across the carpet. Her limp

arms bumped and thumped on the living room carpet as something—somebody (some body?)—dragged her toward darkness.

The seven-foot-tall straw golems herked and jerked on the patio, swaying as if to some wild tune only they could hear. Each creature gripped a human hand, each slinging two bodies about like rag dolls. They swirled and twirled the four teens back and forth across the shadowy back porch. The teens' screams and moans, which had echoed off the uncaring slope of the inky-dark hill, had long turned to whimpers, barely audible, piteous cries of 'please, please, please.'

On the eastern horizon the sun peeked above fiery clouds. The straw creatures, sensing the day's approach, hopped over the knee wall. They dragged their bruised and beaten human prizes behind them, thumping and bumping as they cavorted down the hill and stole into the thicket and trees of the Riverbridge woods.

In the forest, no longer dancing. Now running. Hauling their drooping flesh-sack goodies like four big bags brimming with Halloween treats. Gold and crimson leaves crunch, crunch, crunched beneath their black scarecrow boots. Titters rang from their silver, zippered lips. Oversized, silver button eyes twinkled with glee. Rough grunts came from straw throats.

Inside the house—the disaster zone of the after-party—the flat screen flickered to life. George Madison's smiling face filled the screen before he backed away, doing that thing where he yanked his suspenders a few inches out from his T-shirt. "Well, that's it for *Dancing Skeletons Farm*, folks. I'll end this year's festivities with a little story. Once, a long time ago, oh, say, maybe a half hour ago, three kids took what wasn't theirs. And another boy let them. They wanted to dance with my giant scarecrows, so they got to dance with my giant scarecrows. Tell

the truth, it might have proven a little too much for ‘em. Legend has it, my strawmen took them into the woods, where they’re still dancin’. Or maybe, just maybe, you’ll see them young’uns dancin’ in my barn at next year’s display. ‘Cept I suppose them thievin’ kids’ll be dancin’ skeletons by then. If you head to the west edge of the Riverbridge forest and listen closely, you can still hear ‘em screamin’ and beggin’ for another chance.” George’s slippery grin stretched from ear to ear. “But they’re not gonna get another chance. All they’re gonna get is another *dance*. Anyhoo, curses are *forever*, kids. Remember that next time you look ta’ steal a man’s stuff.”

Pft. The screen went blank.

But George’s voice continued:

Listen.

Can you hear them kids screamin’ in the woods?

Not so fun and funny anymore, is it?

You wanna dance with some body?

Wanna take what’s not yours?

Well then.

Let’s dance, my skeleton friends.

Let’s dance.

End