

CME Roland

THE GOOD CEMETERY GUIDE

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Chapter one

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For Gaetano Emilio Mario Zuccarini

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The Kalk Bay in this book, though created out of the ether of a real town with a railway at the edge of the sea, is a town of fable.

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PART 1

THE BONE COLLECTOR

And we who have thought of joy

As *rising*, would feel the emotion

That almost amazes us

When a happy thing *falls*.

Rainer Maria Rilke, 'The Tenth Duino Elegy'

PROLOGUE

He considers the problem. Her eyes won't stay shut. She arrives with closed eyes but he sees that someone has taped them shut and when he removes the tape they flash open, startling him. Now she lies there with eyes staring up at the ceiling, green marbles with the light switched off inside. He leans over and shuts her eyes but they reopen. He closes them again. And again. Finally, he glues them shut.

He smooths back her hair, dips the cloth into the clean warm water, trusting the warmth, washes off the blood crusts, watching the swirling water turn red as he squeezes blood from the cloth.

He plucks a yellow marigold from its stem and lets it drift in the red tinted water. Perfect symmetry.

Telling is history. History is telling. More than memory.

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FIRST GLIMPSE

Anthony Loxton, five years old, lies in the pink satin comfort and luxury of the coffin with his arms at his sides breathing deeply in and out, with the near certain knowledge of what his father will say. 'I'll beat you black and blue,' he'll say, pointing to the thick brown scuffed leather belt that once belonged to his grandfather, if he ever finds out what Anthony Junior is doing now.

He hasn't tried to shut the lid, having seen his father struggle with the strange mechanics of getting the heavy lid to drop soundlessly and effortlessly. He has wondered quietly to himself if his father practised for years to make it look easy, because only he seems to see the beads of sweat that gather over the Funeral Director's top lip, the dazzling jewels of the trade.

The lid starts off raised in the air, as magnificently significant as the body raised on the cross that meets the gaze of the Sunday churchgoers as they converge on their faith walking in a straggling line up the aisle, the perfect craftsmanship displayed to the glory of God and community, challenging the dead body within to rise and walk on the waters of memory. Of course sometimes, but rarely, that was exactly what happened, his father had said once. Sometimes the dead came to life again and inevitably it was a most shocking event, particularly to the mortician who had laid him out not suspecting that he was working on a living corpse, and sometimes talking to a living corpse about all sorts of things that one might not want that living corpse to repeat once it stood up and walked off.

He lies there letting his body sink into the padded scented pink satin. Actually there are a lot of hard lumps that poke into him. He supposes Mrs Stutterheim won't notice. This is

the luxury-version casket ordered for Mrs Stutterheim's repose by Mr Stutterheim some months ago when it became clear that Mrs Stutterheim was well on the way to being a dead person due to her lungs having collapsed after she had smoked too many cigarettes. Anthony Loxton has a morbid fascination for his father's work. He loves to hear what people have to say to his father, and he waits for his father to reply in that shining hollow voice. Anthony Loxton shivers to hear his father talk, he has a way about him that Anthony thinks he might copy some day when he also has dead clients.

Anthony is only five, and he looks even younger. Because he is a thin shadowy child without life or fat, other people tend to ignore him. He wanders around the rooms of the Loxton Funeral Parlour waiting for the day to start, wondering who will ring the bell today and what new story of death he will hear, and how his father will listen with that way he has of putting his head on one side, as if he is some great extinct bird, with his huge round protruding eyes and the long thin neck reaching towards the grieving relative or family member with such genuine sympathy, the arms flapping in commiseration, preparing to fly off. He is so moved that Anthony sometimes prepares himself to hold onto him in case he rises off the ground. After he has listened carefully he speaks with such humility and eagerness to serve that the client never leaves without having signed all the forms.

To Anthony there is something musical about the movement of the forms, how they slide across the desk, back and forth, from hand to hand, the hushed conversation. His father explaining, waiting thoughtfully, his hands the raised roof of a temple, fingertips brought lightly together, index fingers touching his bottom lip, almost praying.

When it is all over he lets them out in stillness, moving his hand out to shake their hand, sometimes putting his second hand over the held hands, cupping them with compassion and reassurance, assuring them that their dead are in the very best hands. Anthony slips into the room after they have left, standing at his side just behind the bony raised shoulder, watching his father write in the bad light. Then, pleased that a deal has been struck, the

signature of the bereaved still new on the page, he might ruffle Anthony's dark hair with a quick nervous movement as if his fingers are momentarily lost and uncertain of their way. Sympathy has been expressed as one might expertly milk a teat, but then he has allowed himself to be truly moved as a bird might fly. This is a scene that he enacts on the outskirts of the corpse to be received, the corpse to come, the corpse that holds his total attention with its overwhelming urgent unrequited need to be prepared and buried and laid to rest with respect. Then exhausted, drained with his participation, he turns to find Anthony waiting for more answers than he either knows or is prepared to give.

'What does it feel like to be dead?' Anthony asks. His father looks immensely puzzled and ruffles Anthony's hair in that absent way that begs Anthony to let him remain entombed.

The gold-plated clasps that are especially large as requested by Mr Stutterheim on behalf of his wife Elsa Stutterheim glint sharp as a knife-thrower's knives catching the swimming rays of subdued artificial light that fill the room. The light from the knives splice and dice the room across and over and around him until he knows for sure that he must be dead because his head is spinning with fear and dread and it is very quiet, he can't hear a thing, not his father or his mother or the doorbell, or Tony talking to him as he usually does. But Tony doesn't like coffins. He doesn't have this morbid curiosity to be up close to the dead. He thinks that Anthony is a wimp and he says so.

Anthony is a wimp. Anthony is a wimp. Anthony is a wimp, wimp, wimp. And he does a comical little jig on the carpet. Anthony laughs, Tony always makes him laugh. He doesn't disagree with Tony but he can't help himself.

He knows that he is not quite dead yet because he can wiggle all his toes and fingers. He moves his arms and legs out slowly, stretching till he touches the padded sides with his fingertips and socked feet, spread-eagled in the centre of Mrs Stutterheim's final resting place. He feels like the last cherry-cream chocolate in an open chocolate box. *Delicious.*

Usually they just fit in, their shoulders squared in readiness touching the sides, their shoed feet pointing upward nicely boxed into the narrower longer end of the coffin that is specially shaped for feet. 'Snug as a bug in a rug,' his mother comments with forced graciousness and cheerfulness as she straightens the dead client out so that they look comfortably asleep, not skew or *krom*, so that they end up sleeping straighter than they ever did while they were still able to breathe in their dreams.

Sometimes he asks questions while she fusses around the bodies, lifting and shifting, huffing and puffing as she moves the stiff dead weight until she is satisfied with the correctness of the position.

'Why do they wear shoes, ma?' Anthony Loxton asks. 'Why do dead people sleep on their back, ma? I don't sleep on my back. Why can't he sleep on his side if it's more comfortable?'

'You're a funny child, Anthony, that's for sure. He's not sleeping. Dead men don't sleep. He's stone dead, that's what he is. I don't know why they lay the dead out on their backs. That's the way your father says to do it and that's the way I do it. He's the Funeral Director. Let the dead be. Things just are the way they are. It's just always been that way, you can't go changing things,' she says. This is a long speech for his mother.

He hangs around all the time, under everybody's feet, but nobody pays him much attention so he just goes on watching and asking.

At a certain point when he's convinced himself that he is in the perfect position to be dead, his socked feet nicely even and pointing to the ceiling, his head looking straight upwards into God's waiting arms, but actually at the damp patches of scrimping paint on the ceiling, he hears Tony.

God's also a wimp, says Tony quite distinctly.

Then he falls asleep.

He dreams that he is at the bottom of a long flight of narrow grey stone stairs that start off from a patch of shadowed grass, long thick grass that reaches up his knees just where his shorts start, there is no lawnmower man here, and the staircase goes upwards and upwards right into the clouds, and as he climbs there is no handrail but he feels quite safe, surrounded by a muggy Kalk Bay winter day with the seagulls screaming in the background as they circle the fishing harbour, staying within the realms of salty stinging life, and the grey mist from the sea rising from the ground so that he is enclosed in this padded world of mist, taking deep breaths of the tangy salt air, going ever higher, his legs now quite sore, Tony sitting on the ground. He refuses to come up.

There is no God. There is no heaven, says Tony. Only clouds. Why would I want to make a fool of myself?

As it turns out he never finds out what is up there because the cat jumps onto his stomach and wakes him up. Nobody knows where the cat comes from or where it is going, but meanwhile it lives with them and gets board and lodging for keeping the rats away. They've had cats before but they always disappear eventually. Somehow their lives are too sparse in the Loxton household. There is nothing left over for a living cat in the way of titbits and occasional expressions of affection.

Not enough oxygen in this place, smells of gloom and doom, I wouldn't stay either, says Tony.

Anthony is used to him, just ignores him. He knows that if the cat had been dead it would have got more attention. Somehow his mother and father are more comfortable with the dead than the living, it is just a matter of habit, although his mother always crosses herself three times before she starts working on a dead client.

I am in a boat on a black sea . . . He is suddenly wide awake. Someone has switched the lights off while he sleeps. And shut the door. They haven't seen him there. Nobody will miss him for ages. Nobody bothers about Anthony.

He wants to laugh because the cat is pumping his stomach with strong sharp claws and purring an outpouring of cat delight, ecstatic at having found a readymade warm body to share its space with, but Anthony knows he must not laugh. It is one of the earliest lessons that Anthony learns. One does not laugh around the dead. Everything to do with the dead is very serious, very sad, very tragic. 'Respect,' his father says in that empty hollow voice that comes home with him at night after the day's work is done. 'I will have respect in this house, there is no room for those without respect in this house.' Anthony understands from very young, maybe as young as the day he was born, that there is to be no laughter in the Loxton household. Only *respect*.

This is difficult, because he has Tony, and Tony is a-laugh-a-minute. He's never told anybody about Tony because there seems to be no point. They wouldn't understand and they would try to take Tony away, but even if he wanted to he can't make Tony go away. There's just the two of them, and Tony is his best friend. But Tony won't get in the coffin.

It's c-c-c-cold! The cat is warm but he is ice-cold in the dark room. He is out at sea with icy waters lapping and breaking against the boat side, starting with his feet and moving slowly up until he is icebound, his fingers frozen at his sides, his eyes wide open, just his stomach hot with the stubborn frenzied cat padding with its claws, the rumbling purr from its throat rising to a roar. He regrets leaving his shoes on the ground.

A lone fisherman caught in a sudden storm.

Monster curling waves running ahead of a black south-easter wind.

The foaming breakers strike, capsizing the boat. He swims in the icy churning waters as long as he can, swallowing water. The wild waves drum over him submerging him in the dark water. He tries to reach the bobbing boat keel, emerges again and again, but the waves push him away.

Finally, he slips away, down into the oily depths, and this time he does not emerge cork-like.

OK, fruity, what happens now? Tony interrupting again.

The next day he washes up onto the shoreline, and is found lying face down among the flotsam of seaweed and torn plastic bags and tangled fishing line that has risen with the tide. Little crabs run sideways up and down across his hands and feet, and seawater spills out of his mouth and ears. When they turn him over they stumble back in horror, and gasp, because his body is bloated and purple, and before they can run far enough all the trapped bile and gases escape with a violent whoosh. He smells very bad, worse than the smell of rotten fish. Of course his family is very sad, especially his mother. But his mother is grateful that she has a body to bury, not just a heap of rocks and a cross with nobody there. This fisherman has come home.

Aargh, I'm going to be sick! You're such a baby! Tony makes barf noises in the background. Anthony contemplates the iciness of the icy waters of drowning. He is used to Tony.

Once, at a viewing, he recognised the children of a drowned fisherman from the playground at the Bay Primary School watching them from behind the curtain as they stood respectfully next to their mother eyeing their dead father, his face a cracked mask of powder and mud, a squashed cherry on each cheek, his clamped mouth where small fish had poured out, wearing woollen gloves to meet his Maker. Anthony's mother doing her best in the circumstances. Because what the waves have taken away no man can restore.

He waits without breathing, limbs paralysed, knowing that something must happen next and slowly it does happen. He hears a muffled wild babbling that seems to enter the room through the walls and floor and ceiling, becoming louder and louder, until he is surrounded by all the dead fishermen that had ever been prepared in this room, and there is a terrible cacophony of raised voices arguing over the size of fish catches, the worst storms in memory, the names of fishermen who have died along the coast, fishing quotas, fishing regulations, and on and on it goes, the rough God-fearing voices, battering against the hatch

that is forever closed to them. He can't breathe any longer, he is rising to the surface kicking for his life but he can't get through the seaweed, and when he does break through Tony stuffs his head into the sand and there is no air left to breathe. He thinks of that old teddy bear that he stuffed down the toilet when Tony suggested it, listening to the plodding footsteps as they walk through the cemetery, the shoes scuffling over the gravel paths, the bump as his coffin is lowered into the hole, the clods of earth falling on top of the lid (*that's God shitting on you*, Tony sniggers from across the room), the ringing sounds of the spades as they work in harmonious fluid movements to hide his dead body away, decorated with cherries. In his mind's eye the huge tears of his mother (*crocodile tears*, Tony snorts, *don't be a twit*) plop like dead fish onto his coffin, and finally they leave him in peace, *pax vobis*, and walk away.

Anthony is trembling so hard that he can't get his frozen fingers to start working again, but eventually he manages to switch on the torch he has brought with him, flashing the light in a wide curved arch from corner to corner, sitting up straight in the coffin, brandishing the torch as if it were a flamethrower and the light from the torch a flare. The world of the dead recedes slowly, unwillingly. The no-longer-living hover beyond the pee-warm torchlight in their cold space. He is coated in a cold clammy sweat.

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When he walks into the kitchen later that night there is a covered plate on the table for him. He knows that on a Monday his mother attends the Anglican Ladies' Committee meeting, and his father attends the Anglican Parish Council meeting as a courtesy to their most important customer, the Anglican Church community of Kalk Bay. He imagines that if they came back and he'd completely disappeared, if he hadn't made up his mind that he would live, they probably wouldn't be too surprised to find him dead in one of their own coffins. Sometimes he thinks his own mother and father are ghosts or mirages or hallucinations that happen to be passing through his life.

Instead of being dead he sits down to a plate of soggy fish fingers and chips with a few shrunken peas that hover in the oil on the edge of the fish like satellite planets, as if the fish exerts some powerful magnetic force that cannot be avoided. *Do it. Do it*, says Tony. He lifts the chipped plate sideways letting the peas roll from side to side across the oily plate, the plate metamorphosing into a flying saucer on its way to Mars. He is the astronaut, making the sounds of the engine whizzing across space, building up to a crescendo as the spaceship hovers over the spaceship pad. *Throw it*, says Tony. *Throw it like a real flying saucer. Go on. You can always say you dropped it by mistake, she'll believe you.* He ignores Tony, letting the engines decelerate and gently landing without bumping or rolling. He is proud of his technique.

Once landed, he eats hungrily off the plate, forgetting the knife and fork, using his fingers as he's seen them do in the fish and chips shop, with that peculiarly elegant movement of the right hand fingers scooping out the freshly fried fish and soggy chips without messing a drop or spilling a chip. He scoops at the fish and then gathers his lips, not quite smacking, so showing enjoyment but containing it too.

It is Tony who first suggested that they try eating fish and chips with their hands too, and Anthony gave in quickly. There doesn't seem to be any possible harm in enjoying his food, but he knows that his father is fastidious about cleanliness, his hands washed one hundred times a day, and Anthony also is never to sit down without washing his hands, without using the strong soap that smells flat dark over clean, no fragrance, every single germ quite stone dead after rubbing his hands with the horse soap (his mother calls it that under her breath as she scrubs and mauls, *horse soap!*).

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So when he shuts his eyes the meaning of the day is wrapped in the scent of luxury hand-crafted beech wood under his skin. His fingers smell of cold greasy fish and chips lying dead on his chipped plate, in the bed, on the sheets, so he gets up and uses the horse soap. Then he

slips into sleep and dreams that he sits on the plate as big as the fish surrounded by oil and green cannon balls with craters floating aimlessly, seeking the shoreline, the cavernous boom of the sea in his ears as he is borne along.

