

The Groundskeeper

And Other Short Stories

by Matt Shea

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Dedication

These writings are dedicated to Frank and Vyerl Shea: alias mom and dad. They gave us that happy household on Ferdinand Street that had an open door policy for the entire neighborhood. It was their rule to always have enough food for everyone. Thanks for the great childhood!

Love,
Mathew Joseph

My Inspiration

My daughter, Laura is my only child. We have been through it all throughout her childhood. She rarely asked for anything. Instead, she would show me what she accomplished- and share it. When I retired in 2010, she bought a laptop and demanded that I pursue my dream of writing. When I would read her my early manuscripts, she would listen with pride and encouraged me. She gave me that push I needed to get started.

We made it, Laura!

Thanks,
Dad

Special Thanks

Renée Klause is a special friend that was with this project from stem to stern. She reviewed these stories and gave advice that helped shape things for the better. She also took my portraits and even shared her fantastic Golden Retriever, “Dolly”.

Thanks, Renée!
Matt

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Tales from the Factory

THE GROUNDSKEEPER

IT WAS ANOTHER GLORIOUS Monday morning. The Freewater Ecology plant was vacant from the weekend but alive with spirit. Beautifully landscaped shrubbery outlined peaceful green grass covered by morning dew. All was now being awakened by the spectacle of sunrise. The rich golden brown soil under the tall trees was exposed by the advancing rays. The parking lot was clean, bare, and quiet. All was not as good as it seemed though. This serenity was on the verge of extinction, unless a miracle could happen.

A lone car cautiously entered the lot, almost an hour before start time. This was Jeremy Coat's first day as a bonded contractor. The zealous tradesman arrived early to assure a perfect attendance underway. He was in awe of the tranquility that greeted him. This wonderment of God's nature was enhanced by the sounds of undisturbed wildlife. The peaceful setting before human intervention made time stand still. Every precious

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second of this well preserved haven was being savored. Suddenly, there was a startling tapping on the window. He was relieved to find a seemingly harmless old man. The tall, lanky posture with a friendly smile and soiled coveralls put Jeremy at ease. Upon opening the window, the stranger spoke.

"I bet you're that contractor we're expecting! My name is Carl Goodwin, and I've been the groundskeeper here for the past forty years. I was told we hired an ambitious young man to help us out. Since I'm always the first one here every morning, I thought I'd drop by to say hello and welcome you aboard!"

"Well thank you," exclaimed a polite youth. "My name is Jeremy Coats; did you create all this beauty I'm looking at?"

"No," said the warm senior; I only do my part to respect it. Someone else gets credit for creating it!" The driver could only smile in agreement with the God-fearing man. Then Carl extended his hand to shake Jeremy's and continued. "It's getting close to start time; soon, many cars will be here and then it will get noisy. I always felt that this was the best part of the day."

"I have to agree with you," responded the nineteen year old.

It was now twenty minutes before starting time. One by one, the vehicles showed up. In no time at all, the lot was full. "I better get in; I have to report to my supervisor," stated the enterprising youth. "I'm glad to have met you, Carl!"

The humble soul replied, "The feelings the same and have a good day!"

Jeremy knew where to go. He'd already met with the Plant Manager, John Bishop. The previous week, the two had agreed on a contracting bid that he submitted. The rest of the day would be spent moving tools and placing a metal garbage container outside for his projects.

The following morning, Jeremy arrived to work in the same fashion. The parking lot was desolate and peaceful. The sun was just casting its eloquent light on the paradise he'd discovered the day before. He couldn't believe that this Eden was always there.

A movement at the far end of the lot distracted his thoughts. He was relieved to see the smiling face of his new friend. The caring elder must have anticipated another visit. As he approached, steam could be seen rising from two cups of coffee. The prompt workingman got out of his car to meet the congenial old-timer. "Good morning, Carl," greeted Jeremy.

"Good morning," replied the contented man, "you seem to be earlier this time. Let's have some coffee; follow me!" Jeremy wasn't familiar with the grounds. He was led down a beautiful path to a quaint bench. The setting was private and secluded from the trail that led them there. It was cloaked by the surroundings of beautiful bushes and ferns.

"Hey, that's quite a mug you have there," exclaimed the jubilant teenager as he pointed to Carl's cup.

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"Why, thank you; my granddaughter made this for me. It was a Father's Day gift, since she calls me dad. That child never knew her real father." Then in victory, he held up the heirloom and chuckled, "Isn't it great!" The happy grandfather then changed subjects. It became apparent that he wanted to discuss an important issue with the new employee. "Do you know why you were awarded this contract?"

"Because I was willing to give the lowest bid," answered the young business man.

The patriarch looked directly at Jeremy with his steel blue eyes and said, "There is more to it than that."

"What do you mean?" asked the puzzled youth.

Carl then asked, "Why did you decide to be a contractor?"

"I wanted to be like my uncle," replied Jeremy. "He seems to have everything: a big house, two cars, a truck, boat and trailer. He makes a lot of money. Sometimes, he gets paid for not doing much. He knows how to bid on a job and always makes it look good when it's finished. I was taught how to make a good living with this trade."

A disappointed Carl looked down as he absorbed the answer from the young apprentice. He then injected his years of wisdom. "You need to look beyond money; sometimes it's all about contributing. This is a community that's struggling with hard times. Money is not all there is to life. We're all sacrificing. You were chosen because we could see your good character. You can help us "turn the tide;" life will reward you later."

Jeremy sat still for several minutes and remarked, "This is not my home; I am just a contractor."

The wise man asked, "What did John Bishop actually tell you to do?"

The fledgling concentrated on the question and answered, "Nothing; all he did was show me the many things that needed attention. I appreciated that; it's my decision what I will tackle."

Carl then pointed out, "Did you notice that he didn't mention how far you can go? He didn't even say how long you could take. He gave all of us the same option. The state might shut us down if things don't pick up. We are doing everything we can to think of to attract more contracts."

It was now close to seven o'clock, and Jeremy had to start work. "Thanks for the coffee," said a confused youth.

"You're always welcome and have a great day," replied the father figure.

Several days later, the morning was engulfed with rain as Jeremy arrived to work. Like "Old Faithful," his buddy was there once again to share coffee. Carl yelled out to Jeremy, "Get your coat on and follow me!"

With enthusiasm, Jeremy donned his jacket and followed the frisky old man. This time he was led down a different trail. Together, they ran through the drenching rain and soon took shelter in a gazebo. Like all of Carl's world, this was accompanied by beautiful plants and hanging flowers. The fragrance of fresh blossoms seemed to be a trademark for this happy man.

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"Wow," exclaimed Jeremy, "you cover all the bases!"

"I try," laughed the gentleman. The violent rain made a methodical sound as another morning was being shared. It seemed that these were the moments when the junior wanted to learn more about Carl.

"I have been meaning to ask you something," stated the pupil.

"Shoot," responded the professor.

"You mentioned cutbacks. Are you a victim of that?" asked Jeremy.

"We all are," answered Carl.

Jeremy reluctantly asked, "How many hours do you get to work a week?"

He looked at Jeremy and said, "As many as I want to."

The sapling continued to question, "How many hours do you get paid for?"

Carl Goodwin looked off in the distance responding, "It works out to be about thirty hours a week."

Like an inquisitive child, the young man asked, "Why do you do it?"

A long pause built up to his answer. With dignity, the proud man exclaimed, "Because I'm here!"

The novice contractor allowed that message to digest. After a few minutes passed, he was finished with his coffee. "I have to go now," said Jeremy.

"You have a good day," responded Carl.

Jeremy was consumed by the morning conversation. He realized he could still accomplish plenty with minimal expense - and still earn a fair income. His priority was directed to repairing easy projects: Leaking faucets, rewiring broken lights, and caulking windows.

Days later, the clear skies along with a wet environment made the grounds inviting for Jeremy. Again, there was the old man with the traditional coffee. Jeremy was like a puppy discovering his master's return.

"You've been the talk of the plant; everyone has noticed how hard you've been working," Exclaimed Carl as he handed him a hot cup of coffee.

"I'm glad you understand why I haven't been here; I've been starting earlier! I didn't want you to think that I had abandoned you," replied the reunited friend. Jeremy gazed at the good man and said, "I really look forward to seeing you."

The caring soul responded, "Hey that's my line!"

The youth continued with more questions. "Tell me Carl, why have you stayed here all these years?"

With pride, he looked toward the sky and replied, "My late mother was an original employee here seventy years ago. She was this building's first receptionist. In those days, this was a county building where families came for help. Eventually, it became the ecology department, with many additions added on. The current main entrance is part of that

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construction. If you inspect the “back” of this structure, the original entryway is still there. It was the best feature this campus had.

That main lobby has tall, majestic brass doors that led to a cobblestone road and gave access to where my mother worked. There is a fountain in the center where cars could drive around. It has benches surrounded by lovely wrought iron street lamps. Baskets were suspended from those polls, and they always had beautiful flowers in them. It was the best place in the county where we could play with other children.

Today, that lobby has been forgotten. The brass doors only serve as a barrier that hide the disgrace of what neglect has done. The years of growth prevents the doors from opening. What they would expose looks like an unclaimed dump. I do my best not to let that happen on this side."

Carl couldn't bear the thought of this tragedy. The depressed gray haired man walked away with his head hung low. Jeremy Coats had a different reaction; he now had a cause!

The aggressive laborer started his shift walking behind the plant to see its original entry. The old growth didn't allow him to get close. He could only view it from the trail leading to the gazebo. What he saw from the vantage point was thick brush that showed no signs of civilization. It appeared as undeveloped acreage that could serve as a refuge for wildlife. Going back through the new entrance, he eventually found his way to the old lobby.

The mammoth brass doors were testimony of the glory days. They were strong and mighty. It seemed like the dull sturdy barriers only needed to be freed from its unkempt environment. The lobby, however, was a disgrace. It had been abused as a makeshift storeroom for various items. Dried out buckets of paint, boxes of outdated county records, and rejected old furniture dominated the once proud room. This dumping ground buried the soul of the building and endless dust confirmed forgotten history. However, the room itself wasn't damaged.

The first task would be to remove the waste. The conscientious apprentice inspected every item before discard. Then, there came a discovery: a buried cardboard box in the corner of the room. Upon opening came the final inspiration needed to fuel his conquest. It contained the original wall hangings, plaques, and newspaper articles that inaugurated the opening of the grand building. Jeremy sat down and carefully examined the boxed contents. Everything was professionally framed and at one time displayed in the lobby.

Then he found the "Holy Grail!" Pictures of the original employees accompanied with the mayor and governor were found. The eight member staff was identified by name. The only female in the picture was a smiling woman by the name of "Clair Goodwin."

"This room will be restored to its original state," vowed a dedicated Jeremy Coats. The memorabilia would once again be hung on the walls of the old county building. They would be enshrined in the very room where that receptionist lived out her career!

The antique setting still held its charm: Beautiful oak window frames matched the molding on the ceiling and

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floors. The marble floor tiles only needed cleaning, not replacing. Sturdy Roman pillars supporting the ceilings only needed a fresh paint job and good lighting. This grand lobby of last century could be restored at a minimal cost.

The determined contractor then took his crow bar in an attempt to pry one of the doors open. Systematically, he kept relocating the leverage bar until he established a secure hold. With all of his might, he tried to open it. There was a loud groan from the frozen hinges as they resisted movement. He continued the effort by applying all his weight on the bar. The stubborn door budged two inches, with the movement disturbing many years of growth. The top of the door separated itself from old bird nests, decayed vines, and the buildup of dirt. This compost fell on the floor, engulfing the room with a cloud of dust. There was much work for one man, but the hours involved wouldn't matter.

The following day manifested the ritual between the two friends as they shared coffee in the picturesque setting. Jeremy was quiet on this morning. He was secure, now that he had direction. Carl asked him what was on his schedule that day. The reserved talent didn't tell him what he was actually doing and only acknowledged that he was swamped with work. They wished each other a good day and parted.

Carl noticed as Jeremy returned to his car and began to remove items. He was surprised to see that Jeremy had actually brought supplies from home. Upon seeing Carl, he stated, "It only takes up space at home, and I have a use for it here." He looked at the master and stated, "I like how you think."

"I like how you are thinking," responded Carl. The friends then wished each other a good day, shaking hands as they parted.

Plant wide, everyone noticed the intense work the new contractor was giving. Rumors traveled that he was actually renovating the old lobby. It was obvious to all that he was inspired by the most respected man in the county: Carl Goodwin. Like Carl, the handyman adopted the culture of working resourcefully, with profit not being an issue.

The next sunrise, Jeremy made his way to the familiar bench and sat next to his confidant. Coffee was shared as the beauty of Carl's world controlled the moment. The male bonding continued as he began to ask more questions. "Do others share this place as you and I do?"

"Yes," stated the compassionate man. "Everyone here seems to find their time for this seclusion. The break time here varies from each department and so does the lunch hour. Some stay here awhile after work; I even have those who visit here during the weekend. What I notice is the respect; nobody here would dare think of littering. If any litter is spotted, it's immediately picked up. There is no yelling around here either. Through time, this became a sanctuary for all of us."

Jeremy could only sit back and marvel at what the reverent man had created for everyone. "I want to start early today," said a motivated worker.

"I have done that many times myself," replied Carl. "Let's have another good day!" Jeremy nodded with a smile. The comrades shook hands and embarked for their chores.

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Jeremy was still working on the old lobby. The materials he had brought from home were enough to accomplish this task. The metal dumpster was almost full from the remnants that had collected through the years. Fresh paint had been applied to the walls and pillars. The wood was treated with polish and the windows were clean. The marble floors and main doors were buffed to their original color. Most importantly, the framed documented history was cleaned and displayed once again.

The old lobby was now looking like its first day in existence. It was clean, dusted, and regained its shine. The brass doors were the "Mount Everest" of the project; Jeremy knew that they functioned and didn't need replacing. It was just a matter of prying them open and facing the jungle that waited. He approached the metal barriers with determination. If he could open the first door completely, then the second would easily follow. With all of his strength committed to the task, he manipulated the door with the leverage bar. The groan from aging hinges battled the effort, but the tenacious contractor would not surrender. Eventually, the door gave way. There was something different this time; there was no fog of falling debris. Instead, brilliant rays of sunlight outlined the door. As he pushed, the Gothic metal wall opened, and Jeremy was stunned!

The cobblestone road was exposed! All of the tall grass, weeds, and blackberry bushes were removed. The famous fountain was no longer hidden in shame. Wrought iron flower baskets hung from the lamp posts. He was entering a world of yesterday!

Seated on a metal bench was Carl, holding two glasses.

"Do you think you can get this fountain running?" asked the groundskeeper.

With conviction, the contractor exclaimed, "I'll have it running in one day!"

"Well good," remarked the senior. "That would give me time to place the flowers I ordered in those baskets. It looks like you could use a break, care to join me?"

"I'd love to," answered a fatigued worker. He sat down with Carl as a cold drink was being handed to him. With mutual respect, they toasted one another on a job well done!

The aging soul spread out his arms, as if to hug the resurrected structure. "Do you see this?" asked the trembling old man. "It's what I had as a child!" A long moment passed as memories danced in his head. He then looked at his accomplice and asked, "Why did you do all of this?"

The young man looked at his mentor and proclaimed, "Because I'm here!"

Carl Goodwin could only smile at the prodigy in admiration. "I have some good news," he exclaimed. "The City Council dropped by today and liked what they saw. They have chosen this site for a Town Meeting. It's in recognition of the oldest county building being restored. They will be awarding state contracts and told us that we're first in line!"

Lemonade was the perfect drink for this hot afternoon. The men leaned back in admiration as a seventy year old life was being awakened. The landmark seemed to glisten in response as the air

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filled with an aura of gratitude and appreciation. A loving feeling could be felt drifting through the open door, as if to identify a child that used to play here.