

Excerpt from
**GHOUL
N'
THE CAPE**

by
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The Cape, Ghoul, and their travel companions Sissy and Jack find themselves in a coyboy graveyard, burying someone they just met. They decide to sleep on the ground, under a vast Utah sky...

They unrolled blankets near the grave.

They used sticks to prop more blankets for cover.

They wore their clothes to sleep.

And sleep did come, despite the growing wind, a tone so vibrant they imagined the individual strands of that wind, crossing the valley, spreading to the base of the mountains, then moving up, toward the peaks, before circling back through again.

They slept despite the distant yowls of coyotes, too. The rumble of rocks tumbling down the mountain sides at the hoofs of goats. The legs of nocturnal insects crossing the barren land.

And the sound of scratching, too, of bone fingers breaking that same land, reaching up into the darkness of the Utah night.

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Ghoul woke to the sound of dirt shifting, moving, breaking. It was unmistakable, immediately recognizable, a sound he (or anybody) wouldn't have known they knew until they heard it in the dark and their mind cried out: *that's dirt*.

He tried to shoot up to a sitting position but the blanket wrapped like a burrito held him down. So he rolled over twice, got the fabric loose, and got to his knees.

The others were sleeping, this he could hear, too. Their steady breathing mingled with the wind, forming a hypnotic background pad to the lead sound of the dirt.

Ghoul squinted into the dark, but he didn't have to strain much. About twenty feet from him was the color white, moving in the dark.

He thought of wolves, white wolves, mountain creatures having sniffed out four vulnerable living things gathered in a valley of the dead. He grunted a syllable, a half-attempt to wake the others, but in his heart he knew it wasn't an animal moving about the open space. It was bones.

To his left, another thirty feet away, the ground broke and Ghoul watched, wide-eyed, as a four-fingered hand shot up from the ground. In the moonlight Ghoul could see no thumb. But the skeleton didn't need it. The hand flattened to the dirt and, pressing down, brought up an entire body from below.

Another broke free behind him. Another ahead.

Ghoul crawled quietly to Sissy's side. He took her flashlight but waited before turning on the beam. A lot of movement out there. The clacking of dry bones. The breaking of earth.

He thought to stand up but stopped himself. Something more vulnerable about standing. Better to kneel here by his friends' sides. Stick close to Jack. Jack had killed before.

Ahead, ten? Twelve skeletons?

Then, the distant sound of music. Ghoul had no choice but to get up. Suddenly sitting still felt crazy. Like the world could fold up on him, swallow him like the Naught wanted so badly to do.

"My God," he said. Because he had to say something and there was nothing else to say.

Four skeletons sat upon unseen chairs, each with a cowboy hat upon their skulls. Their fingers held unseen cards and they played a round as other skeletons took their positions in front of an unseen bar. One stood facing them, taking invisible bottles from an invisible shelf.

"My God."

The music, Ghoul thought, must've been coming from the skeleton seated with its back to him, a black hat worn high on the skull. The thing's fingers moved fast over an impossible piano. But Ghoul could hear that impossible music.

It didn't sound good. Not meaning that Ghoul didn't like the song. He wouldn't have been able to say so either way. And not like the instrument was out of tune. No more so than the instruments of that era always seemed to be. But rather like, despite being able to see the player, the song came from very far away, from a place Ghoul wasn't supposed to have access to yet.

He shivered and held his leather coat tight to his small, misshapen body.

Turn on the light, he thought. But no, not yet.

One of the skeletons folded his hand of cards, removed his hat, and wiped a bony wrist across the forehead of its skull. Another drank shots at the bar. Two more sat at an unseen table and talked with their heads close together. Ghoul imagined them conspiring. He saw the way they watched the others. Then, beyond the scene, more broken ground as another skeleton pulled itself from the earth and entered the saloon by way of unseen swinging doors. The two close-talkers acknowledged

the newcomer as the newcomer crossed the room and stood beside the piano. His yellow hat was pulled low over the empty sockets of his skull.

The bartender poured drinks.

Some figures started to dance. Their bones clacked above the same dirt Ghoul stood upon, the same expanse that held his three dreaming companions.

The music got louder and Ghoul looked to see the piano player get up from the instrument, leaving it to play itself.

As the player stepped by the one with the yellow hat, it leaned its skull close and seemed to whisper something with no lips.

Another card player folded. Two more skeletons entered by way of the swinging doors.

Suddenly Ghoul wanted to know who these people were. He wanted to know their names, their birthdates, their life stories. How simple it all seemed, playing cards and making music, drinking and talking and dancing. How much easier it seemed to Ghoul then; here he'd been sleeping under the stars in a foreign world, traveling west west west, on the run. And here the dead cowboys were at play.

How did they die?

Ghoul wanted to know.

The song ended and another began, this one just as bouncy as the last. Back in Queens, Ghoul's mom had an album of saloon music. She'd played it once or twice on the record player. Mom and Dad pretended to have a duel in the living room. They stood back to back. They took ten paces each. They turned. They fired.

It was one of Ghoul's favorite memories, Mom and Dad killing one another in the living room. Before money got so tight that playacting felt foolish. Before Mom and Dad settled into the practical roles they would assume until death.

From the distant darkness of the plain, skeletons in dresses. They came in a herd, entered the saloon one by one, their skulls cocked back in what looked like laughter. Could Ghoul hear it?

Something erupted from the ground near Ghoul's feet. He leapt to the side. A skull there and two hands. Ten fingers prying itself from the dirt Ghoul stood upon seconds ago.

Ghoul turned on the light, shined it directly in the skeleton's empty eyes.

It didn't react, not in the way a man with eyes would. Rather, it turned its head toward the action. The women and men dancing, the music, the cards. Ghoul shined the light that way, too. Saw in much greater detail the cracks in the bones, the depth of the sockets. He saw, too, how unseen the invisible objects actually were; no sign of the chairs the white bones sat upon.

It looked like such a good life to Ghoul. So simple. Without the immediate news of the world at hand. Only *this* world, their world, and the dynamics therein. Why, a community like this ought to love one another like no other community ever had. They faced the seasons together. They ate the same foods. They heard the same music and rumors and stories and told the same stories of their own. They raised children in the same small world and dreamed of the rest of America from the same small beds. They took trains to see the country and returned home on those trains, too. They rode horses. They hunted. They traded goods. They built their own homes. They made their own whiskey. They dug their own graves.

Suddenly, to Ghoul, there was never a more comforting time in the history of America. When the land belonged to the men and women who tilled it.

Yet, the music changed, from a major key to a minor. There was a sudden heaviness in the air, a struggle Ghoul was not expecting.

A third player folded his hand and the fourth gathered the money he'd won. The first to fold reached out and placed his bony fingers on the pile. *Not so fast*, he seemed to say. Then both men were standing and the dancers shuffled to the saloon walls and the piano ceased playing.

"No," Ghoul said. "Don't die over a card game. You have everything you need already!"

The first to fold drew an unseen gun but the winner drew, too. The folder fell to the floor. Two men from the bar, skeletons in blue hats, came and removed the fallen man from the saloon. They tossed him out the swinging doors and Ghoul shivered as the bones sank back into the formerly impenetrable dirt.

He shined the light on the women along the wall. Even without eyes and lips, they looked scared.

What had become of their dancing and smiles? Where had it gone? And for what? For the pride of not being cheated...for the suspicion of their fellow man...

The killing felt so out of place to Ghoul it made him ill. It was one thing to see it on television; cowboys enter saloons and gunshots soon follow. It was another to see it played out in real life, in the (lack of) flesh, a breathing picture, a perfect moment devastated by death.

Why?

The word came to him fast and strong and he could feel the violence of an entire nation in the dirt he stood upon. As if, buried even beneath these now animated bones, there were only more bones, more proof of pride and suspicion of one's fellow man.

The skeleton in the yellow hat opened fire then and Ghoul ducked. The men in blue hats returned the fire. The women, too. Until every single skeleton in the saloon was firing at another, bones cracking and falling to bits upon the dirt. Full bodies sinking back into that dirt, one by one, as Ghoul wondered if this was how each had died.

Then...too soon...all gone. An era erased again. All of them back and buried. The music continued, he still heard it anyway, even after he turned off the flashlight and settled back on his blanket.

He didn't fall asleep. Instead, he stared up at the stars and made constellations of his own. Constellations that were every bit as valid as those that already had names. Someone called it the Big Dipper, dammit, why couldn't he? He saw Sorrow Cowgirl, yes, high in the interstellar sky, weeping skulls, flashes of bones and leather. Quick bursts of tears, too, as they fell from those eyes and shuffled down the face of a woman (a skull with long blond hair) who understood what Ghoul had come to understand: that there *were* perfect moments in time, in history, in his own life, and no game of cards could change that. What did pride or envy count if the people of the town were all buried in the same unmarked lot? Who played the hero and who played the villain when both slept forever beneath where the Cape and Jack slept now?

Sorrow Cowgirl cried and Ghoul cried with her. He wept like he hadn't in many years, as a history of violence felt so real, so present, so dumb.

"You had everything you'd ever need."