

Dwayne Hickenbottom and the War Boots of Doxxville.

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Being dead had its advantages. You didn't have to worry about what you ate or getting up at six in the morning to start a gruelling exercise program in fear of gaining a few extra pounds of fat around your midriff, that your partner would at one time or another affectionately refer to as *love handles*. In truth, a good 87.8% of the deceased are in the best shape of their lives. The afterlife had an excellent health programme.

The dead also had the advantage of not having to go out to work five days a week, eight hours a day. After all, that's what killed most of them off anyway.

Being dead definitely had its advantages, the two that Bones found particularly satisfying were the tax evasion benefits and the little blue badge he was awarded that gave him permission to park anywhere.

The kitchen was abnormally busy for this time of day. Four of his best staff had phoned in sick thirty-five minutes *after* they were meant to start work and a coach load of tourists from *Ahmahfot world of Stamma 7* had just pulled up outside.

'Gah!' protested Bones, he was not having a good day 'Donnie! Till four. Howie! Till six. Dave! Dave? Where the hell is Dave?'

Dave was nowhere to be seen. This wasn't totally out of the ordinary. He was a tall gangly fellow with a slight hunch and breath that could strip paint. Bones had only taken him on to improve his relationship with Dave's mother. They'd been together for a year now and Bones thought things were going quite well, other than Dave of course.

'Idiot boy' he mumbled to himself. Truth of the matter was though Dave's mother had only entered into a relationship with Bones in order to gain employment for her son. Nothing too taxing, just enough to get him out the house long enough so she could spend time alone with her real one true love, Herman. Bones of course, was simply unaware of this deception and was looking forward to one day settling down with her and starting a family of their own, with or without her idiot son.

'Dave!' he yelled again, hopefully for the last time.

'Sir' interrupted a voice in the most dull and depressing tones you could possibly imagine. Before spinning around Bones knew exactly what was about to happen. The slow monotonous 'Sir' meant that only one mind-numbing event was about to take place one of his staff was going to try to speak to him. How he hated these moments.

'Yes?' he smiled politely, or as politely as one without any lips can smile.

'There's a customer who would like to speak to you'

'Gah!'

Lumbering across the counter was one of the largest women that Bones had ever seen. That is to say he thought it was female. From where he stood it could have

been any number of the 17 known sexes in the universe. Either way, he was glad he placed the 'No shirt no service' sign in the window last month.

'I've been to no less than 42 fast food burger joints this week alone, and I've NEVER received such poor quality service as I have here' It snorted. 'My food is cold, my beverage is flat and my onion rings look as if they've been eaten once already! I want to know what you and your idiot zombie staff are going to do about it.'

This upset Bones. He knew the importance of customer service and the often-quoted myth that the customer was always right. He examined the rather soggy looking meal that the rather pungent smelling 'lady' had placed before him and nodded in agreement that it was in fact less than the multicoloured posters in the window promised it would be. Two very important thoughts crossed his mind at this point; the first being that there was no way that he was prepared to offer this creature its money back (the money itself meant nothing to Bones, as he never saw any of it for himself anyway. He only ran the restaurant as a favour to his Uncle Lucy, who was the sole owner of all fast food chains throughout the universe), the second was that despite hating each and every one of his staff, he was very protective of them. The customer had been correct in her summarization that they were all idiot zombies. All fast food employees, the universe over, fall into this category. Most of whom are bred in a small room in the lower regions of Hell especially for such a purpose, all the rest used to be in boy bands. Needless to say though, Bones took this very personally and took the only possible course of action.

He shot her.

Few things in this life come to mind as being less interesting than stationery. The very word is used to describe an object or person that's not moving, staying exactly where it is, not going in any direction at all. Not forward, nor back. Not moving, changing or evolving one inch. It seemingly enjoys its station in life and has no desire whatsoever to alter things in the slightest.

Dwayne's life was stationery. He'd been working in stationery for six years. It had started as a part time job to earn enough money to get through his degree course in advanced level something or other, but the job swallowed him up and spat him out as 'Stationery Supervisor'.

He sat frowning at his desk. He was not having a good day. Glancing over at his 'Star Trek' mug, he swore to himself as he realised that he was going to have to drink cold coffee for the third time that afternoon. Was it not enough that his milk and sugar had been stolen from under his nose when he took a bathroom break this morning? Now his black and unsweetened caffeine pick me up had to be ingested at a temperature that an Eskimo would put on an extra jacket for!

'TINK' Tinked Dwayne's alarm as his eyes flashed up to the security monitors for aisle three. Over the last week, somebody had been coming into the store and messing with Dwayne's stock. Whether it be mixing the blue biros in with the slightly darker blue biros or linking all the paperclips together (he despised that) somebody was messing with Dwayne Hickenbottom, and Dwayne Hickenbottom didn't like it one bit!

'Oooh Dwayne...' Teased one of the girls from the tills as he stormed by, making a beeline for aisle three.

'You're so sexy,' Teased another.

Dwayne wasn't particularly sexy, that is to say the girls on the tills didn't really think so, he is just over six foot tall with bad skin and still sports the side

parting that his mother brushed into his short black hair many years ago. He'd often thought about growing a beard, the small goatee variety that everyone seems to have these days, only hair never grew where it was supposed to for Dwayne. That said he did have unnaturally hairy toes.

If I were to sum up Dwayne's appearance in a nutshell, I'd say to think of *Clark Kent*, and then suck *Superman* right out of him.

Bones sat in the offices of his 'Uncle Lucy'. It wasn't the first time he'd been here, nor, he felt, would it be the last. He sat impatiently, admiring the folds in his long leather coat as it did its best to hide his feeble looking body. Dusting himself down, he stood up and walked around the waiting room that Debra, his uncle's secretary, had ushered him to. The same one he always got ushered to.

It was a small room, one way in, one way out. No windows. The table in the middle of the room boasted several hair care magazines and a book about fluffy ducks getting into all sorts of trouble on a farm. Neither of these topics interested Bones. Being a skeleton, he had little need for styling tips on blow drying or conditioning and he'd read the book about the ducks on his last visit.

The waiting room walls were decorated with photos of his uncle shaking hands with various people that he'd gone into business with at one time or another. Genghis Khan, Adolf Hitler and Bill Gates were among Bones' favourites. They'd all been so nice to him when he'd visited them in the past.

'You can come through now Bones' said Debra as she put her head into the room. Most people would have said 'Mr. Bones' or 'Sir' in this situation, but Debra was very familiar and friendly, Bones often thought she was flirting with him and would get very uptight and try to get away. It wasn't that he was uncomfortable around women, just he loved his girlfriend so much and he was afraid someone would see him and Debra together and get the wrong idea.

'Thank you Debra,' He replied as he readjusted his top hat so that it stood straight up again. 'I'll be right through.'

'You're through!' Screamed Dwayne, as he headed across the shop floor as fast as he could walk without actually running. He was undecided at first whether or not he should run, he would almost certainly make better time, but the 'Stationery Supervisor Handbook' stated very clearly the rules on running during work hours. 'I've got you now!' He continued as he sped by Moira the cleaning lady, who seemed to be on a permanent tea break.

'Bathroom is that way Mr. Hickenbottom,' she offered up helpfully, as that's what she assumed Dwayne must have been in such a rush for. At least that's what his walk suggested.

Dwayne was almost out of breath as he approached the corner of aisle three. Physical fitness was not one of his strong points. The last time he'd participated in a sporting event was at high school when Brian Higgins in the year above had used him as a javelin.

'Ha!' Dwayne screamed dramatically as he leapt around the corner to face his unseen nemesis.

'Ha!' came his reply in the form of an echo the entire aisle was empty.

'Should have run' muttered Dwayne as he began to clear up the paperclips, which had been spread about the floor to send him a rather personal message about his alleged sexual preference. It wasn't the message itself that got under Dwayne's collar, it was the fact that they'd joined up all the paperclips to do it.

Sighing heavily, he attempted to collect all of the paperclips from the floor and return them, unconnected, to their respective boxes. This was just another one of Dwayne's daily tasks that he despised. He'd even tried to grow his fingernails for this very thing; only no matter what he tried he ended up gnawing them off anyway, most of the time without noticing himself do it. Once he set up a video camera in his bedroom just to see if he did it in his sleep, he didn't, he consoled himself by thinking that, even if he had managed to grow his nails for this, with his luck they'd just break anyway. Probably snap off and fly up into his eye causing even more damage to his sight.

By the time he'd gotten back to his office, Dwayne had finally given up any hope of having a 'good day'. His fingers throbbled from carefully untangling 385 paperclips and checking and double-checking each one to make sure it was up to the standards that his prized 'Stationery Supervisor Handbook' demanded.

When he checked his watch, it was time to head home. Actually, it had been time to head home over forty-five minutes ago, but Dwayne was a responsible man. No paperclips were left tangled on his shift.

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