



PUBLIC
DOMAIN

FRANCIS BASS

JUST
DIG

A
SHORT
STORY

Just Dig

Francis Bass



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Jarrold Martin woke up in darkness, and couldn't remember anything of his dream but the intrusive explosion at the end.

"Jay!" Yelling downstairs. Jarrold sat up and looked out the window by his bed. Neither moon was out tonight, but he could see a faint glow far off, dimming now, an orange smudge in the middle of a line of white dots. An asteroid, on the plot west of theirs. He lay back down and scrunched his eyes closed. He imagined the rich, organic smell of the greenhouses back on Varuna, the bright, verdant plant life. Where they'd grown up before they moved to Buld, surrounded by big vats of water and algae, where the air was heavy with oxygen. Then he heard his brother running around downstairs. "Jay! I think it's in our plot! Get down here!"

Jarrold shoved himself out of bed. He pulled on his coat and headed downstairs. Hard fluorescent glare smacked him in the face when he entered the living room. Daniel was filling a canteen at the faucet.

"I don't think it was in our lot, Daniel."

"Of course it was!" He filled a second one. "We're due one, big time."

"We're not due shit."

"By the law of averages—"

"It was on their side!"

"Looked like our side to me."

Jarrold recalled the orange smudge. It'd been on the Podras plot, certainly. For it to be on Jarrold and Daniel's side, it'd mean the wind had blown the flames west to make it look as though it were on the Podras plot, which was possible—but not probable.

Daniel was talking.

"Whoever's side it's on," Jarrold cut in, "I'll grab the stake-driver. I don't want those big dogs bullying us."

"I think they'll notice if we rearrange the borders."

"The handheld stake-driver, I mean."

"So we can rearrange the borders *slowly*. That'll be a real step up. They're still going to—"

"You know that's not why I bought that thing."

Daniel didn't respond. He knew. He capped off the second canteen. "Come on," he opened the door to the garage.

Jarrold followed him inside, and found the handheld stake-driver. A stake was already loaded in. He felt along the barrel, the safety was on.

The garage door rattled up, and cold air pushed in. “Hurry up!” Daniel yelled, clambering into the passenger seat of the scooper. He’d probably have taken off already, if Jarrod didn’t have the keys.

Jarrod put the stake-driver in the trunk of the scoop, atop a jumble of other bright yellow and black tools. He got into the cramped cabin of the boxy, gold-brown vehicle, next to his brother, and turned the key in the ignition. “I’m telling you, I think it’s on their side. Tracking will show that it landed on their side.” Jarrod eased up the throttle, and they rolled out of the garage.

“You don’t know that,” Daniel said. “I saw it.”

“Saw it coming down?”

“No, but I saw the fire. It was on our side.”

“I did too. It was west of the border.”

“Then what did I see?”

“What you wanted to.”

“Huh? I don’t do that.”

Jarrod looked around the barren expanse of dark brown, clayey dirt. He sucked in the thin, cold air, just barely terraformed to the livable threshold. It was a far cry from the glossy brochure Daniel had flapped at him five years ago, a romanticized mesa landscape with falling stars littering a dusky black sky. “Fortune favors the Bold,” it claimed. The inside was crawling with statistics about the going prices of palladium and cobalt, asteroids per plot per year, and the average profit made from a fall—all tuned to seem highly fortuitous.

Of course the average profit was much higher than the median, due to the very rare but incredibly lucrative “showers” that sometimes occurred—dozens of asteroids falling at once. The same was true for plots. The tracts of land owned by the ultra-rich were enormous, and jacked up that fall-per-plot average immensely. Not to mention, there was no way to know what kind of metals an asteroid possessed without expensive equipment, so asteroids were priced and sold based on size. The going rates of precious metals meant nothing if you were a small prospector. Jarrod suspected they always got the short end of the deal by ignorance of what their rock was really worth.

Jarrod didn’t push the point on Daniel though. It was a tired argument between them.

Soon they reached the west border and drove alongside the row of brightly lit stakes, bumping over the rock-studded soil. The orange glow was gone, but up ahead smoke rose, filled with the light of nearby stakes.

It billowed up east of the border. Jarrod's heart jumped, rattled in his chest.

"It's on our side," Daniel pointed, "I told you. We haven't had a fall in five months, I told you we had one coming."

"Had one coming," Jarrod chuckled.

The pillar of smoke got closer, and the stake on the edge of the crater became visible, jutting sideways out of the ground along the elevated rim. Jarrod pulled back the throttle, the grumbling engine quieted, and they edged up to the hole.

"Shit."

"Shit."

In the pools of light cast from the scoop's headlamps, the gnarled, glinting, silver rock sat directly on the border.

"So, we split it then. I guess it's better than nothing," Daniel said.

Jarrod pulled out his phone, a blockish piece of communication technology, about to dial Julia Podras. But he stopped, narrowed his eyes at the hunk of rock and ice and rare metals. It was such a great, big, chunky haul. He imagined that crisp, light red check with the CPA stamp gleaming on it. Probably three hundred thousand for the whole thing. Maybe three fifty.

"Screw that," he said.

"Jay, we can't just take it, they can see where the crater is. Just count our luck that we got half of it and—"

"I don't want to count luck, I want to make it. This scoop can pick up more than just asteroids," Jarrod said. He pushed forward the throttle, and the scooper rolled over the rim of the crater. Jarrod's head snapped forward as they pitched down into it. He jerked the joystick and turned the scooper east. He yanked down a lever and the big metal bucket of the vehicle lowered to the ground. The scoop jammed into the east slope of the crater, and he lifted the bucket up, then drove around to the other side and dumped the dirt on the west slope.

"This isn't going to work. We don't have time," Daniel said.

"Not if you don't help. Dig around in the trunk and find a shovel—you can move the rim and make sure everything looks natural."

"What happens when one of the Podrases comes to find it?"

"They've got a huge plot. They may not have even noticed it. Now come on. Do you want to wait another two, or four, or six months for another fall, or do you want to take what's ours to take?"

"I'm sore from fixing the scooper's engine yesterday, I don't want to

dig—”

“Then *you* drive the scoop.”

Jarrood stepped out of the scooper and went to look in the trunk. He lifted a shovel out of the clutter and trudged up and out of the crater to start moving the rim, one spade’s-full at a time, eastward.

Again and again he drove the shovel into the ground, carried the load, deposited it, and shoved the spade into the dirt again. He worked with the grumbling overtone of the engine soaking into his brain, with the flashes of headlamp light drying his eyes when the scoop faced him, and the darkness weighing on him when it didn’t. His arms and chest burned in his coat, and he threw it off onto the ground, and rolled up his long sleeves to let the biting cold touch his forearms. The skin of his hands rubbed and chafed against the black rubber handle. His back ached, his legs pounded against the ground with dead weight as he paced east to west to east to west to east. *A new scoop, he thought, that won’t keep breaking down. Warm water all the time. Farm-grown produce.*

His neck was stiff and knotted, but the crater was looking almost done. He turned from the new crater to walk back and get another load.

“Jay!” Daniel yelled.

“What!” Then he saw. Cresting the western slope, two pricks of light lanced into his eyes, from far away.

“They’re coming!”

“Well work faster!”

Jarrood frantically dashed back and forth across the crater, finding odd spots missing dirt, or with too much, until he tripped over a chunk of ejecta and slammed into the ground. He pushed himself up and saw the dark ridge ahead of him turn bright with light, as a scooper twice the size of theirs rumbled up to the crater.

“Hello down there, Martins,” the driver called to them. Jarrood brushed dirt off his chest and stood.

“Sorry,” Jarrood said. “Looks like this one is just barely on our side.”

“Does it?” Julia Podras stepped out of the vehicle. “Looks like it’s sitting right in the middle.”

“What are you—” Jarrood looked to the asteroid. Podras was right. “Daniel!”

Daniel had stopped the scooper and gotten out.

“What?”

“You didn’t move the fucking rock?”

“I ...”

“You bastards were going to try and trick me?” Podras asked. “Even if you had, the crater would’ve shown that ... actually, the crater looks more like it’s on ... never mind, let’s split this thing.” She went to the back of her scooper.

“Daniel,” Jarrod said, “why don’t you get our own *equipment*. From the trunk.”

“I don’t think that that would—”

“Then I’ll get it.”

“Jarrod,” Daniel clutched his arm, “no, we do not—”

“Well hopefully we don’t have to, but I’m getting it anyway.” Jarrod walked around to the back of the scooper and opened the trunk. He pulled out the stake-driver. As he came back cradling the big cylinder, Podras returned with a beam saw.

“Hey,” Podras said, “what the hell is—”

“Back up from our asteroid,” Jarrod said.

“*Your* asteroid?” Podras said, stopped ten feet west of the rock. “It’s right on the line.”

“The crater isn’t. And that’s all the proof that there’s going to be.”

“Listen you goddamn yokel, if I sue you, who do you think is going to win? Who do you think is going to have the money to do a thorough investigation of the land around this area, and find out where the asteroid hit? Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to take my rock.” She turned her back and walked up to her scooper.

“Don’t get in that thing,” Jarrod said. He aimed the glinting metal stake poking out of the barrel at her back and turned the safety off.

“Are you shitting me? You’ll kill me? Put that thing down,” she said. She put her foot on the steps up to the cabin. Jarrod squeezed the trigger, the stake-driver popped and the metal bolt impaled Julia Podras through the sternum. She coughed and fell over, her blood pouring out over the scooper. She wheezed wretchedly for a long time, then fell still and quiet.

“Jay you idiot,” Daniel said, “you maniac!”

“It’s ours! You think I was going to let her—”

“You think we’re going to get away with this? You think this scene isn’t going to look a little suspect?”

“We can bury her.”

“Can we bury her scoop?”

“We can do anything we have to,” Jarrod climbed into their scoop. “Get in her scooper. This’ll go faster.” Daniel climbed into Podras’s scooper, and started it up. Daniel carried away the asteroid, finally. As Jarrod

drove the scooper forward, pushed the scoop into the dirt, he felt the ground rumble. He looked east, and saw dozens of stars falling through the atmosphere, making little glows all over their plot. His phone started buzzing—bidders watching for showers, they'd be coming to the plot soon to propose deals.

“Jay,” Daniel said. “Look at—”

“Just dig!”

Afterword

The story of this story begins in a class in high school. In my junior year of high school I took a US History class taught by a coach (read: taught poorly.) One section of the class which was actually taught *well* was the industrial revolution, and I was fascinated by the concept of oil prospectors, and oil booms. The idea of buying large pieces of land, in the hopes of controlling and selling something underneath it, intrigued me—something about the random chance and feast-or-famine nature of it. I extrapolated the phenomenon to a space-age setting—instead of oil, they were prospecting for precious metals, and instead of hoping to find them underground, they were hoping to have them fall from the sky. I jotted down a note about it somewhere, but didn't instantly start working on it. At the time I was in the middle of writing a novel-length project, a project which I didn't finish until the first semester of senior year of high school.

And after all that time, the idea still interested me, and what's more, it was something I knew I could write without having to do tons of research or tons of outlining, something short and elegant. In fact, writing it was such a breeze, I wrote the first half of it while watching a football game (Florida State vs. Notre Dame, FSU won, go 'Noles.)

Once I started editing it, I had to switch around some of the traits and actions of Jarrod and Daniel. Originally, the character that wakes up at the beginning was called Daniel, and the character that talks about being “due one” was called Travis. And Travis essentially did everything, from talking about being lucky, to deciding to move the crater, to shooting Julia Podras. The dynamic seemed off to me, so I switched the characters around, as well as their names. Travis became the Daniel in the story you just read, and Daniel became Travis, and then Jarrod/“Jay”—because I wanted him to have “a cute nickname” that his brother could use (this quote coming from a note scrawled on the back of an early draft.)

Thus, “Just Dig.”

Francis Bass
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