

The Book of More Flesh

The background of the entire cover is a textured, red, fleshy surface. In the center, there is a black rectangular area containing a zombie. The zombie's head is tilted back, mouth wide open in a scream, showing sharp teeth. Its face is pale and decaying. Its torso is exposed, showing a ribcage and internal organs. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

The Decaying flesh of this man the
The virus seems capable of keeping
ough no detection of living

Are the plants just also
the beginning? Can they...

All Flesh Must Be Eaten™

Edited by
James Lowder

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Praise for Eden Studios' first collection
of original zombie fiction

THE BOOK OF ALL FLESH

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FICTION

The Book of All Flesh

The Book of More Flesh

The Book of Final Flesh

(APRIL 2003)

All Flesh Must Be Eaten

**The
Book of
More Flesh**

EDITED BY JAMES LOWDER

EDEN
STUDIOS INC

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION / 9

GOOBERS

Scott Edelman / 13

THE HUSKS

Paul Finch / 20

THE HOUNDS OF LOVE

Scott Nicholson / 34

FADING QUAYLE, DANCING QUAYLE

Charles Coleman Finlay / 54

TROUBLE

Mark McLaughlin / 64

NAKED SHALL I RETURN

Tom Piccirilli / 75

FALLING INTO NAUGHT

Douglas W. Clark / 89

SITTING WITH THE DEAD

Shane Stewart / 104

THE BLACK ROSE

Don D'Ammassa / 113

CHARLIE'S HOLE

Jesse Bullington / 127

THE DEAD KID

Darrell Schweitzer / 144

BRAINBURGERS AND BILE SHAKES: A LOVE STORY

Jim C. Hines / 158

ZOMB, INC.

J. Allen Thomas / 169

LIFE SENTENCE

David Dvorkin / 178

MARTIN'S INFERNO

Tyler Sigman / 196

MEMORY REMAINS

Steve Eller / 214

THE LITTLE DEATH OF MR. PHILLIPS

J. Robert King / 221

THE HYPHENATED SPIRIT

Scot Noel / 238

INHERITING RED

Alexander Marsh Freed / 255

GODDAMN REDNECK SURFER ZOMBIES

Michael J. Jasper / 270

NIGHT SHIFT

Rebecca Brock / 280

BRIGHT ANGELS

K. Z. Perry / 296

THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF MEAT

Claude Lalumière / 304

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES / 313

INTRODUCTION

They won't stay dead!

Well, I suppose I should have expected that. By their very nature, zombies specialize in relentlessness and resurrections. It should hardly be a revelation, then, that even in their fictional form, they can't be contained between the covers of a single anthology. And that's how this book came about: The living dead refused to recognize the final page of the final story in *The Book of All Flesh* as the end, as the boundary past which they could not shamble.

If a coffin lid and six feet of graveyard earth can't keep them down, what hope did a thin sheet of paper really stand?

When Eden Studios decided to greenlight *The Book of All Flesh* last year, we anticipated problems. There was an audience for the living dead, as Eden had discovered through the success of the *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* roleplaying game. However, several great fiction collections had already covered zombies: *The Mammoth Book of Zombies*, *The Ultimate Zombie*, and the two *Book of the Dead* anthologies, to name just the most noteworthy. So when we sent out that first call for submissions, we steeled ourselves for the possibility that the subject had been exhausted. Worst case, we'd get a few surprising takes on the living dead, but nowhere near enough to fill three hundred pages. More likely, we would receive a flood of enthusiastic, but not particularly inventive tales inspired by *Night of the Living Dead* and *Evil Dead II*. We hoped for the best, but were braced for either of those unhappy scenarios—ready to work with the writers to make their stories more challenging and original, or to send out a second call (and maybe a third) in order to gather enough worthwhile fiction for a collection. Such is the lot of the small press anthology.

What we did not expect was two hundred and fifty submissions, including more than enough inventive, entertaining tales to fill a book. The reviews of *The Book of All Flesh* have often expressed surprise at the variety of stories found therein. I'm pleased that this trait came through to most readers. Surprise was certainly something I felt when first making my way through the two copier paper boxes overstuffed with story submissions. A smart, funny jab at political correctness in the form of a morning show chat about the "Living Impaired"? A beautifully written zombie version of *Our Town*? Superheroes?

Clearly, the subject had not been exhausted.

And so here I am again, one year after penning the introduction for *The Book of All Flesh*, ready to unleash another shambling mob of original zombie tales upon the reading public. Like the submissions I read for the first volume, the stories sent to me for consideration for the present collection (this time approaching three hundred in number) proved remarkably varied in tone and style and approach to the subject of the living dead. But there are some interesting themes that echo through this collection.

The cinematic zombie looms large here, as it does over the entirety of the subject's literature. Lacking a single strong literary template—such as *Dracula* provides the modern vampire story—films have established the baseline of expectations about zombie fiction. This is so much the case that when the dead plague his city, the movie theater owner in the collection's lead-off story alters his film line-up to "all zombies, all the time." The movies so clearly dominate and define the subject that only they can offer a comprehensive guide to the apocalypse in progress. The writers represented in *The Book of More Flesh* also acknowledge the film zombie's dominance, but usually reference the cinematic tradition with the intent of subverting its expectations or highlighting its more ludicrous aspects. And there are plenty of those.

Children also play a central role in many of the works here. That's not uncommon; as a symbol of innocence, kids often get cast as The Thing That Must Be Saved in horror stories. They also make fine facades for evil, especially useful for bad seeds and demon spawn who want to go about their nasty work without garnering too much suspicion. But the children of Tom Piccirilli's "Naked Shall I Return" or Scott Nicholson's "The Hounds of Love" or Darrell Schweitzer's "The Dead Kid" are a lot more complicated than that. They connect the idea of the living dead with children in interesting ways, playing off the notion that both can be viewed as things we leave behind us when we die. They are both heirs to our sins, and their reality is shaped by things over which they have little control.

In my introduction to *The Book of All Flesh*, I wrote a bit about the purpose of the horror story—that an effective tale of terror should cause unease and remind us that terrible things can happen. Given the crises of the past year, that role seems just a bit less vital. How much do we really need to be reminded of the potential for horror in our lives when endless loops of the World Trade Center collapsing can be viewed on cable news networks twenty-four hours a day?

In an atmosphere of continuous terror alerts and open-ended wars against unnamed enemies, perhaps horror's role changes a bit. The terror tale need not remind us of the bad things, the unimaginable things, that can occur, but it can make us consider how we might maintain—or abandon—our humanity in the face of those horrific events.

Zombies prove to be quite malleable when utilized in this type of story. In their most familiar form—mindless brain-munchers motivated only by desire and appetite—they readily demonstrate those aspects of our make-up that we would be best to shun. But the living dead, in a story like K. Z. Perry's "Bright Angels," can also appear far more sympathetic to readers than the live people surrounding them. And the motivation of the undead protagonist in Steve Eller's "Memory Remains" stands out as far more noble than those that drive most of the anthology's living characters.

But if, like the projectionist stuck watching the non-stop zombie film marathon in Scott Edelman's "Goobers," you aren't quite convinced that the lessons to be imparted by the living dead are quite so profound, you can simply sit back and enjoy this as a collection of well-told tales. *The Book of More Flesh* is that, too.

✦ ✦ ✦

Thanks are due to all the writers who submitted works to be considered for both this volume and *The Book of All Flesh*. Reading the hundreds of stories they penned was never a chore, and their support for the books, even when their tales did not make a final line-up, has been refreshing and very much appreciated. Special thanks are due, as well, to George Vasilakos and Alex Jurkat of Eden Studios, for offering a writer-friendly contract and giving all these great stories a place to be published. The relentless zombie horde would have overwhelmed me long ago were it not for their equally relentless support.

—James Lowder
August 2002

GOOBERS

SCOTT EDELMAN

Willard woke to echoing screams. The sound didn't bother him at all.

He had gotten used to those screams over the past few months, so used to them, in fact, that by now, it had become something of a ritual for him. Wake to the sounds of fear, start up a new reel in the theater's projection booth, fall asleep a moment or two later, jolt awake whenever the audience freaked out at the scary parts . . . and then get ready to start another new reel. Lately, he'd been spending more time on the job sleeping than waking. Still, he hadn't missed a cue for changing a reel yet.

Chocolate. He smelled chocolate. When he touched his cheek, his fingers came away brown. He glanced down to the remnants of a box of Raisinets scattered across his desk, and realized that he'd fallen asleep face down, melting them into the desktop.

It wasn't the first time he'd stirred to find himself like that. Movies always went better with a snack, and that he sometimes ended up face down in them didn't change that fact.

When Dan, his boss, had first switched over to his all-zombie all-the-time line-up, Willard had occasionally peeked out to see what had made the audiences scream, but it was never anything worth his effort: just Caro syrup, food coloring, and pig entrails. He quickly became bored sick with the repetitive nature of these undead flicks, with corpses jumping out of closets, with brain munchers, with doubters who died and believers who, well, who seemed to die anyway.

Night of the Living Dead. The Incredible Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies. Voodoo Dawn. Willard thought them all ridiculous, thought Dan's whole theme idea ridiculous, and longed for the variety of the old days—but that's why he was only the projectionist and not the manager, for it looked as if his boss had guessed right, had made the right business decision.

Terrifying reports were coming out of the big cities every day, and so Dan had figured that, given the chance, customers might turn to the movies to soak up all they could about the coming plague, might choose to sift through the cinematic

past in search of survival tips. Dan had been right—ticket sales were through the roof.

Willard was stunned. What fiction could teach anyone at a time like this, he just couldn't see.

But he didn't complain, at least not out loud. The concept kept him employed, when so many other types of businesses were failing under the threat of an approaching apocalypse. People seemed to get something out of the unreal dead, and what's more, bought out the concession stand while they did so. Movies and candy went hand in hand, which meant that Willard's hand was guaranteed to go hand in hand with a weekly paycheck. Which was just fine with him, so when he muttered, he muttered quietly.

He found it hard to believe what was going on in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, all those big cities that had once seemed impossibly distant and now felt terribly close. Even with the news footage that confronted him each morning, it still seemed like—like a movie. And yet what the television showed him each day, though it mimicked what he spooled each night, that was real.

Graves splitting open. The dead returning with a new life. People being eaten alive, their shredded remnants rising to begin the cycle all over again. He used to envy those who lived in the metropolises. But no more.

The country was falling apart—or more precisely, being eaten alive—and no one knew exactly why.

The shouts from the theater were still going on, longer than seemed necessary, and not just in response to some tense, fleeting moment on the screen. They were continuous now, almost a living, breathing thing. Willard, who'd long since given up on the audience, slid his wheeled stool forward so he could peer through the small square window and into the crowd below.

In the flickering light, as sluggish zombies stalked humans upon the screen, Willard could see the same scene enacted in the bowels of the theater—only the walking dead below were not so sluggish as the ones above.

Two zombies toyed with an old woman, each holding an opposite arm as they played a ghoulish tug of war. Her arms grew shorter as they ate their way from knuckles, through wrists, then elbows. The higher they chewed, the more wildly she thrashed, until she could take no more, and fell to the worn carpeting, where Willard could not see her. One of the undead cradled a young boy in his arms, gnawing on his skull, seeking the soft treasure within. A large man, who inexplicably

refused to drop his tub of popcorn, moved wildly back and forth in the middle of a row, trapped as zombies approached him from either end. As they came within reach, he leaped forward toward the screen, hurdling over the line of seats, falling, grunting, getting up to leap again and again, until he got to the very front row, where he became lost in a waiting mob of hungry hands. Those not under immediate attack ran for the exits, but were washed back into the theater by waves of further zombies thrusting in from the doors.

Willard could not bear to watch, but he watched, horrified, anyway, and this time he lost track of time. The projector sputtered out without him remembering to cue the next reel, and suddenly, the fantasy world of the film was gone, and the huge white rectangle of the empty screen glowed bright within the theater. As the free end of the reel snapped repeatedly beside him, he could see the mayhem even more clearly. Willard could take no more, and so he killed the projector, which sent the theater into darkness. He slid to the floor, where he listened to the screams and crunching sounds in the darkness.

Eventually, the screaming stopped, but the crunching went on.

He became lost in his mind, only made aware of the outer world again by the sound of feet shuffling across the cracked linoleum outside the door of the locked projection room. After some prints had been stolen, Dan had reinforced the door, and this wasn't the first time Willard had found himself thankful for that. He hoped it wouldn't be the last. The lurker outside brought on an upswelling of panic. Willard needed to get out, but the sound at the door told him that there was nowhere to go. If the zombies could reach to the heart of the city to feed on the theater's customers, then the rest of downtown had to be in the same state. Though his gooseflesh tried to tell him otherwise, he was probably safest where he was.

And yet . . . even though he'd been snacking since the beginning of his shift, the knot at the pit of his stomach told him that he could not stay still for long. He scooped up the last of the Raisinets, but a handful of pellets, looking not so very different from rabbit droppings, would do little to feed his hunger. He was a man used to keeping his stomach full, but it wasn't only that. He knew that he had to get out of that room and get some more food or else he'd starve, and how stupid would that be? The projection room was barely larger than a coffin, and he normally couldn't wait to rush out of the cramped little booth at the end of each shift. He certainly couldn't bear the thought of spending eternity there.

He needed time to think, to plan where he could possibly go that would be safe. But first he needed some food. He wasn't the kind of man who could plot a course of action when hungry.

Willard listened to the darkness below, but could not tell whether the zombies were resting there silently after their gorging, or had gone on to other conquests, searching the theater for more victims.

Victims like him.

He needed to create a distraction, and he smiled, because luck had given him one of the greatest distractions ever invented. He started up the projector once more, hoping that the bellowing sounds of life from the theater's speakers would draw away the zombie at his door—as well as any others who wandered the halls in a dull imitation of hope—long enough for him to sneak down to the concession stand. He pressed an ear to the door, and could hear the shambling grow louder at first, as if a creature that knew nothing of scurrying was attempting to rush off, but then the sound dimmed. When the hallway seemed clear, Willard nervously opened the door.

There was little evidence of the zombie's passing. In fact, a smear of blood that stretched across the wall mixed so well with the theater's general dinginess that Willard, at first, did not notice it. Only when his hand slid across the stain and he realized that it was wet to the touch did he feel a true sense of fear, and almost bolted back to the room. But he knew that way held no promise of escape. He took the stairs down slowly, cursing each creak, glad he'd turned the movie's volume up as loud as possible.

He paused before the swinging double doors to the theater, searching for the courage that would let him peer within. He could not bring himself to raise his eyes to the small circular windows in either door, and so he pressed his eye to the thin crack between them. He could make out movement there, but could discern nothing of the details.

After what he had seen from above, he knew that it was probably better that way.

He retreated to what had once been a well-stocked candy counter, which was now an explosion of sugar and shattered glass. Colorful boxes spilled out onto the floor, their contents sprayed wide, apparently open not from being sampled, but from being stepped on. The floor seemed like something Jackson Pollack would have created, red blood overlaid with red ketchup, and then blended with mustard and dollops of relish. The hot dogs were tumbled down beside the vast stain,

having been knocked from the wire tree on which they'd spun. Many of them had bites snatched from them, but as far as Willard could tell, none had more than one; they had each been tasted and rejected.

Zombies didn't like their meat cooked.

Listening carefully for any sudden sounds from the theater, he stuffed his pockets with Goobers and Dots and Nestle's chocolate-covered pretzel bites. This wasn't the first time he had taken candy without paying for it. The difference was, though, that before it had only been Dan he had worried about catching him. But back then, he couldn't resist, couldn't bear to watch a movie without his mouth in motion. Most people were like that.

He gave the remnants of the hot dogs a last, long, hungry look, knowing that they were probably what would best sustain him through whatever was to come. But he couldn't bear the thought of eating them, not now, not without knowing for sure which had or had not been chomped on by a zombie, or even merely touched.

He suddenly remembered the freezer, and so he squeezed behind the counter, hoping that its stainless steel doors had proved too tough for the zombies to open with their thick fingers. Perhaps he could find some frozen hot dogs there that he'd be able to stomach.

Instead, he found Dan. Or what was left of Dan.

The man's eyelids were open, but there were no longer any eyes beneath them. His arms were bent and broken in positions arms and legs were not meant to go, and the way he'd been left made what remained of him look like the remnants of a fried chicken dinner—the clothing shredded off his skin, the skin clumsily shredded off his flesh, and in many places, the flesh shredded entirely off his bones.

Willard was able to suppress a scream, but he couldn't control his leaden feet, which caused him to stumble back and thud against a wall. He could hear a scrabbling movement swell within the theater in response, and his heart, which had seemed to stop, started up again. He ran back toward the only refuge he knew, taking the stairs three at a time until he was locked in the projection room again. Exhausted, he checked the lock four times, and then pulled his pockets inside out and emptied his candy onto his desk before the packages could melt into a sugary mess.

After he caught his breath, he nervously approached the window and peered out into the theater again. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, a darkness made less black by

Zombie Island Massacre flickering across the screen and by the strips of tiny lights that sparkled along the carpeting on either side of each aisle. Some zombies stumbled up and down those aisles, tripping over the scattered bones and bodies that remained from the feast. But others were actually perched in the worn padded seats. He could not see their faces—he was not even sure, due to the manner of their deaths, whether they even *had* faces, or whether he could have read their emotions there even if he'd seen them—but their body language, the way their shoulders tilted forward and their heads tilted back, he would swear that they seemed almost . . . expectant. They actually seemed to be looking at the screen. It seemed ridiculous to even think it, but they appeared to be watching the movie.

Willard, too, looked out at the screen, which showed a group of bloated zombies shambling along. He wondered if, just as humans had once come to the theater looking for information on what was going to happen to them if the undead truly came to life, for help with how they were going to behave in their new world, the zombies could be doing the same. Maybe they also felt a need—at least those for whom humanity was not so far behind—to figure out the strange society that was to come, and how to perform their parts in the ghastly play.

There was only one way Willard could learn whether this was true, whether the zombies were just sitting there, only looking at the screen by coincidence, or whether it was something more. Perhaps they were struggling to remember the act of going to a movie. . . .

He had to know. He was perhaps the only one in the world in such an odd situation as to be capable of knowing. And so, with a dedication he had never known when running the projector was just a job and the audience comprised only living customers, he spooled reel after reel, and watched. And waited.

He screened *White Zombie*, *Zombies on Broadway*, even the deliriously awful *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, running through all the films that Dan, in his wisdom, had stocked. Dan would never know what had happened, but Willard would not let his foresight go to waste.

A sugar high coursed through him as he watched the theater and its inhabitants. The changes there were slow and, at first, subtle ones. With each passing moment, more zombies came, shuffling down the aisles in apparently random motion. Some wandered off again, but others stayed, and sat,

until Willard finally noticed that the theater had become packed without him realizing it, with every seat taken. Those newcomers who arrived after that merely stood in the aisles rocking in place as they stared at the screen. They were hypnotized, seduced into submission by the same special effects that Willard had previously mocked. They seemed to make no distinction between the gore of *Dawn of the Dead* and the farce of *Dead Alive*. They were equally rapt by all. As he gobbled his way through his precious stockpile of candy, he tried to discern what they were looking for up there on the screen. He prayed that one zombie would turn to another so he could see their faces and decode what they were waiting for, but unlike humans in a theater, they seemed to have nothing to say to each other, and even though they were together, they were alone. All he could ever see was the back of their heads.

It was maddening. The movies were teaching them something, he knew it. He was teaching them, as he'd been teaching humans for years, but this time, he felt a need to see it happening. They were listening to his movies. He knew they would listen to him.

He unlocked the door to the projection room, and found the hallway deserted, as he knew it would be. The films had netted them all. Once downstairs, he moved slowly down a narrow side corridor that ran along the length of the theater and led him up on the stage behind the screen. He folded back an edge of the screen and peered through to the audience of the undead. Their faces were tilted up, and Willard felt as if they were looking at him rather than just the screen. He knew he could reach them, just knew that he could. He stepped around the screen and walked to the center of the stage. As the film flickered against his body, he began to speak.

"Listen to me," he said, but was allowed to get no further, for soon all that came from his lips were his own echoing screams, only this time, there was no one left for those screams to wake. And as dozens of zombies munched down on him, the film brightening the air around him and the actors above going through their ghoulish paces, one final thought went through Willard's mind:

He'd been right all along—whether zombie or human, it was still a universal truth that all movies went better with a snack.

THE HUSKS

PAUL FINCH

"You know," Annie said, "if we were in the States, this guy would have been gassed or electrocuted years ago."

The British cop nodded as he drove. "Which would be unfortunate, you must admit. Considering he's now coughing to these two extra murders."

Annie wasn't impressed. She glanced out of the window at the rolling flatlands of the Lincolnshire fen-country: low-lying fields with drab, skeletal hedgerows between them, hung with tatters of late autumn leaves. "He's playing a game. Surely you realize that?" She dug into her purse for her cigarettes, then offered one to the cop. He shook his head. "Filling out his life sentence with stuff like this: belated confessions once every ten or so years; bringing himself back into the public gaze; getting himself trips out into the country; putting the grieving parents through their misery all over again."

The cop, Brooker, simply shrugged. His eyes never left the winding, muddy lane ahead of them. "The grieving parents need closure. Otherwise I wouldn't even give him the time of day."

"And improving the crime figures doesn't have anything to do with it?"

He half-smiled at that; surprisingly, it wasn't unpleasant to see a smile on that gritty, haggard face. "Well . . . it does, I suppose. But, hey, I'm too long in the tooth to worry about statistics any more."

A moment of silence followed as he drove and Annie smoked. The narrow lane rolled endlessly on. Occasionally, its slick, unmade surface slipped like ice beneath the Volvo's spinning wheels. Behind them, the cavalcade of police vehicles was having similar problems, careering here and there, struggling to avoid the water-filled ditches to either side of the road.

"So tell me, Detective Brooker," Annie finally said, "you're what—National Crime Squad, did you say?"

He nodded.

"What's that, some kind of British version of the FBI?"

"Some kind," he replied, though in truth he didn't look nearly neat or clipped enough to belong to anything resembling

the Bureau; his sports jacket had seen better days, his shirt was crumpled, his tie hung in a loose knot. He might've been handsome once, but not any more . . . too grizzled, too unshaven, and way, way too tired. He was clearly into his forties; his mop of dark hair hadn't started graying yet, but it probably wouldn't be long.

"One of the jobs we've copped for at the moment is clearing up cases like this," he finally added. "Interviewing convicted murderers who are known or suspected to have killed more than once, and seeing if we can tie them in with any unsolveds. Since DNA profiling's come out, it's a lot easier than it used to be. Course, we still need their cooperation. We can't just drag them out of jail and beat the information from them."

"Mmm, pity," said Annie, drawing on her cigarette. "You're pretty soft on hoods in this country, considering you've got such a high crime rate."

He grunted. "Tell me about it."

"You favor the tougher approach, huh?"

Again, Brooker smiled. Again, it was far from unpleasant. "I have done, I'm sorry to say. In the past. But these days I prefer . . . well, guile."

Annie gazed ahead, through a plume of tobacco smoke. "Which is what we're doing today?"

He nodded, his smile slowly fading again.



Albert Stickman had never considered himself a serial killer.

For one thing, the phrase hadn't even existed when he'd been at liberty; at least, not over here in Britain. For another, there was something about the term that over the years had come to imply predatory premeditation. And that had never been the case with Albert. He was a rapist, without any doubt, and he was a rapist of little girls, which was pretty unsavory by any standards. But his attacks had been opportunist rather than pre-planned. When the mood had come upon him—which it did irregularly, but in overwhelming, irresistible fashion—he'd simply launched himself into it, and had hoped to be able to clear up the mess afterward. That was where the murder part had come in. Serial killers, as far as Albert understood, were supposed to enjoy the actual killing. To them, it was as big a part of the deed as the rape or buggery; it was an end in itself rather than a means to an end; it had a rapture all of its own. Not for him. He'd only killed his

victims to make sure they wouldn't talk. And when he'd done it, he'd done it as quickly and as painlessly as possible—heavy and repeated blows to the face and head with a large lump of rock. Of course, no one understood this. And if they did, it cut little ice with them. They still referred to him as “a deranged beast,” as “an animal,” as “a wicked, wicked man.” As “a serial killer.”

Well, let them.

He sat in the darkness of the prison transport as it bumped and ground its way along, and was strongly tempted to smile. He was elderly now—weak, shriveled, a faded shadow of the burly, self-sufficient journeyman who'd once trodden the roads of the UK, strong and able enough to turn his hand to any kind of manual work, cunning enough to take his pleasure with youngsters almost at will, when the need arose. But he still had the upper hand.

They needed his compliance, and that was the long and short of it. And how and when he gave it to them was entirely up to him. It had taken eight or nine lengthy interviews with Detective Sergeant Brooker and his cohorts to finally get Albert to confess to doing the Melbury kids, but the truth was that he'd decided to own up to it long before then. Dragging it all out had been part of the fun, part of the making-them-pay routine; and by “them,” he didn't just mean the coppers, but the whole judicial system, and the general public at large, that great, unwashed mass of plebs who didn't understand the first thing about him but still called for him to be hanged. Of course, that was thanks mainly to those hypocritical rabble-raising bastards in the press. And the so-called “families and friends” of the victims. All these years on, and that pathetic bunch of losers were still moping about it, still crying over the mantelpiece photographs. Self-centered, holier-than-thou parasites. Who were they trying to kid? Talk about milking a tragedy for all it was worth. Why couldn't they just knuckle down and get on with their lives? He'd had to, and his last twenty-six years had been a living hell.

Well . . . as he said, he still had the upper hand. He always would. Even now, when he was supposedly cooperating, he'd privately decided to make life hard for them. For instance, he'd given them the rough location where the bodies were buried, but had now come up with the line that he wasn't sure of the exact spot. And they believed him, the duffers! They actually believed you could rape and sodomize two little kiddies, and batter their heads in, and then not remember where the hole was that you put them in. What a hoot! They'd have

to dig up the whole of Hinkley Wood before they found anything, and all the while, he'd be watching from the sidelines and chuckling over his tea. And it got better. Apparently, they'd now brought some kind of psychic in to try and pinpoint the place, in case he couldn't find it himself. Talk about desperation measures.

Albert sat back, relaxed. The "serial killer" bit would be the next card he'd play; it was perfect. Let one of them, just one of them, tag him with that phrase—even in conversation, even in a casual, off-the-cuff remark—and he'd clam up so tight they wouldn't get so much as a sour, garlic-tainted breath out of him. He wouldn't say a single further word about this case, or any of the others he knew they were planning to put to him. Not a single word.

Not for several more years, at least. Then they could start the process all over again.

+ + +

"So how did you first link him to these other two missing kids?" Annie wondered.

Brooker shrugged as he drove. "Just a matter of compare and contrast. Andrea Kirk—the girl we know Stickman murdered—was buried by him in a small wood in 1976. She was only found after Stickman got arrested. Some quick-thinking beat-bobby connected him to the scruffy workman supposed to have picked her up outside her infant school. He got arrested and grilled; finally, he cracked and told them. Otherwise they might never have found her. When I was going through the case files recently, I started thinking—if they didn't find her body until they were told where she was, does that mean there could be others who were never found? The Melbury twins went missing six months before Andrea Kirk, from a school only eight miles away. I didn't have to be a genius to link the two together."

Annie stubbed her cigarette out and tossed it through the half-open window. "And when you finally put this to him in prison, he was ready to talk? Just like that?"

The cop gave it some thought. "Like you say, it probably gave him something to do. Plus, he's in the pedophile unit at Durnmoor. From what I hear, there's an ongoing competition in there—those who've done the most damage to kids get the highest status."

Annie considered this information for a moment, then gazed out again at the drear landscape. Many of the fields they passed were sorely neglected; they'd turned to swamps in

the heavy November rain, or were rank and overgrown, and now strewn with a litter of sodden yellow leaves. Pieces of old farm machinery sat rusty and mud-caked in the midst of them. Here and there, the forlorn outlines of scarecrows sagged on their frames; ragged, unconvincing things. Even the ever-skeptical crows couldn't be bothered to sit on them. In fact, birds, like most other forms of wildlife, were noticeably absent. An ashen sky overarched everything, but nothing flew through it; even the clouds were motionless—a great ominous mass of opaque gray, weighing down like concrete from above.

Annie wasn't sure how it happened, but the foreknowledge of child-murder always seemed to have this dour impact on a place. It didn't matter where she'd been—from the parched badlands of Arizona and New Mexico, to the densely treed foothills of the Rockies—working for everyone from sheriff's departments to state troopers to the FBI, the atmosphere always seemed the same. The silence, the stillness, the sense of gloom and desolation, the bleak, awful emptiness of a landscape eternally scarred by the secret knowledge of what it concealed. . . .

"I should tell you, I don't exactly relish this kind of work," she finally said, wondering how many quests for missing persons she'd actually been on, and realizing that she'd long ago lost count. "But it's a gift I seem to have. And, in a way, I'm flattered you came to see me."

The cop said nothing for a moment, then: "When I heard you were on a lecture tour over here, how could I resist? I mean, I'd already read your book."

She glanced sidelong at him. He didn't look the type to attach credence to anything even remotely paranormal; not just too cynical or citified, but perhaps too damaged, too burned by the realities of his job. Of course, one man's reality was another man's fevered nightmare, so you never really knew. In general terms, though, she didn't expect he'd been able to stage-manage her presence without running into opposition of some sort.

"And none of your colleagues have given you any grief?" she wondered. "Even back in the States, where I've got quite a rep, it's sometimes difficult to persuade officers of the law that I can do what I say."

Again, he seemed to think it through before replying. "I suppose it's a case of 'what harm can it do?' I don't like dead ends, Annie. And that's what we were coming to. It was tough enough getting Stickman to admit he murdered the Melbury twins, but if he can't find where he buried them, the whole

thing will have been for nothing. Even British bosses can see the logic in that. And like I say, it's not as if we had to fly you over the Atlantic."

She smiled. "Even so, I bet they're asking questions about you on the top floor."

He smiled too. "There's never a time when they aren't." Then he flipped her a wink. "They can't live with me, they can't live without me."

"A maverick, huh?" she replied. "I'm even more flattered. It doesn't stop me being dubious about your boy, though. I come from a small down in Idaho. I like to think I'm a modern woman, but where I grew up we've always believed in frontier justice. If this son of a bitch Stickman is never going to get out of prison anyway—what's that you call it over here?"

"The judge gave him a full-life tariff for the Andrea Kirk murder."

"Well if this SOB has already got a full-life tariff, he isn't going to get any punishment at all for these other two kids."

Brooker shrugged. "That's the law in the UK, I'm afraid."

"Then, Nick, the law in the UK sucks."

The detective pondered this but didn't reply. His expression was inscrutable. If he agreed with her, there was no sign of it. But neither was there any sign he disagreed.



It was ten minutes later when the procession of vehicles came to a slow halt next to a decayed, broken-down fence, and beyond that the outer fringes of Hinkley Wood.

Annie and Brooker climbed from the Volvo, then made their way round to the prison van at its rear. Like the police vehicles behind it, it was muddied up to its wheel-arches and spattered all over its armored, windowless bodywork. They waited in silence while the two prison officers helped Stickman out from the back. As Annie could clearly see, he was in his sixties now, and visibly frail. Beneath his heavy overcoat, the prison blues were loose and baggy on a wasted, wizened frame. His longish hair hung in a lank, white mop around a face so pinched and peevish it was almost a Scrooge caricature. Apparently Stickman had heart trouble these days. He also suffered from severe arthritis, which explained why they hadn't bothered with cuffs or leg chains. He wasn't going anywhere—especially not with fifty or so members of the local Tactical Support Group now climbing out of their vehicles; not to mention the dozen or so suits from the NCS, local CID officers, and a handful of dog handlers, whose animals

were already snarling and straining on the leash, just dying to sink their teeth into him . . . again. Add to that the camp-following press corps—who'd suspected something was afoot and had tagged along on the caravan's tail just for the hell of it—and, all in all, it was quite a crowd.

"You okay?" Brooker asked the convict, who'd promptly suffered a coughing fit when he'd come out into the fresh air, and then been forced to shield his eyes from the unaccustomed daylight.

Stickman didn't bother to reply. He wiped his mouth and straightened himself out. Then his eyes came to rest on Annie. He sneered in contempt. "Who's this—Gypsy Rosa-Lee? Couldn't half tell, either."

Annie chuckled. She knew that with her various strings of beads, flowing gray hair, and capacious checkerboard poncho, she was something of a walking cliché. Not that spindly, stooped, scrunch-faced Albert Stickman was any different.

"And I couldn't tell who you were . . . not much," she said, with a humorless grin.

The convict had no answer for that. Instead, he turned to Brooker. "Are we getting on with it, or what?"

The detective nodded and checked his watch. "It's just past twelve noon, which gives us about four hours of daylight. How long do you think you'll be?"

"How the bloody hell should I know?"

✦ ✦ ✦

Hinkley Wood wasn't actually much of a wood.

It stood like a small copse in the middle of muddy, cow-trampled meadowland. It couldn't have been more than two or three hundred yards across in any direction. But what it lacked in size, it made up for in content, for it was deeply tangled. A variety of trees grew inside it: ash, alder, willow, holly, hornbeam, and more, all, without exception, warped, stunted, and twisted together almost as though by some fiendish grand design. The thin fingers of their largely leafless branches were virtually interlaced, and the ground between them—the little bit of it visible from the outside—was thigh-deep in the wet, brown bracken of last summer's luxuriant, but now dead and rotting, undergrowth.

No one particularly wanted to go into it, and for a moment even Stickman held back, scanning the wood's shadowy inner places with weak, watery eyes.

"Everything alright?" Brooker finally asked him.

"Er . . . yeah," he replied. "Like I said, not sure exactly

whereabouts in there it was. I mean, we are talking nearly thirty years ago."

"Well, that's what we've got Annie Frazer for. She—"

"And I don't need no fucking weirdo witch, either!"

"She's hardly likely to do anything to you," the cop said.

Brooker knew that Stickman was afraid of being brutalized; that was one of the reasons the child-murderer had given for not wanting any company when he finally ventured in among the trees. He was convinced—or he said he was—that once he was away from the prying eyes of the press, who'd been kept well back on the road with the vehicles, he'd get beaten up. That was undoubtedly due to the fact that he'd been beaten when he'd first been arrested. Par for the course back in the rough and ready 1970s. The detective found it odd, though, that Stickman, who'd been clever and calculating throughout, thought they'd seriously try something like that now, when they were relying so much on his good will.

"Look," the convict advised him, as though he could tell what the cop was thinking, and was sick and fed-up with not being listened to, "and I've told you this all along: It's my way or the highway. We do this exactly the way I say, or it's all the way back to Durnmoor and not another fucking word out of me."

"No problem," said Brooker, stepping back and indicating the wood. "You want it, you've got it."

A second passed, then Stickman set off over the rugged pasture. The detective turned. Everybody else was watching from behind the fence, but Annie had come forward and set up her fold-away chair on a stony patch just beside the path. She was now seated comfortably on it, and watching Brooker with interest.

"He really likes calling the shots," she observed.

Brooker nodded darkly. Having to cow to the child-killer's every wish was clearly taking its toll. His brow had knotted; his lips were tight and cold. "I don't think you have to be a mind reader to work that out," he finally said.

"No," she said, after a moment. "No, I guess you don't. Anyway . . ."

She reached down beside her chair to a paper sack, from out of which she took a shiny red rainhat that had once belonged to Sarah Melbury, and a little cotton mitten, formerly the property of Sarah's twin sister, Meagan. Moments passed as she rolled and slipped the articles between her long, thin, nicotine-stained fingers. She wasn't looking at them, but her face was already a picture of intense concentration.

Brooker watched her for a second, then, sensing the sudden deafening silence, glanced around behind. All along the road there was a breathless anticipation, a unique stillness; every eye was fixed on him; facial expressions were variously uncertain, bewildered, fascinated, even amused. He wondered what they were thinking—his colleagues from the NCS, from the local fuzz. Probably that he was taking a big leap into the dark; that whatever the result, his credibility as an investigator was fucked; that his career was on the line big time.

Brooker wasn't too concerned, about what they thought, or about his career, for that matter.

If anything, the situation tickled him. It always made him giggle, the way law enforcement was, these days, riddled with people who considered it a route to the top. They all seemed to do it, from the high-flying divisional headquarters types, who'd got where they were by being politically correct, using all the latest buzz words and generally kissing every buttock they could; right down the scale to the eager-beaver recruits who'd bought the new line that the police was a service not a force, and a sure-fire way to build a worthy and lucrative career—instead of a thankless form of self-slavery, filled with unhappy men and women too busy chasing slags and skags to think about their next promotion board, and too worried about covering their backs to plan for their next exam. And then there were the other things—the odd things, the crazy things, the indescribably horrible, soul-destroying things, the things he'd seen and done in his twenty-five years that would defy any attempt to integrate them with a normal, healthy, happy lifetime's experience.

Yeah, this was some career. . . .

He turned back to the wood, where the lean, hobbling shape that was Albert Stickman had just started weaving its way in . . . that wood, where two innocent babies lay buried in the deep, black sod, their torn, broken husks defiled and pounded into muck and mold, lost for decades amid rank roots and mottled clumps of weed and fungus.

Yeah . . . like Nick Brooker could really care whether he fucked things up for himself.

✦ ✦ ✦

One of the real reasons Albert had said no coppers should go into the wood with him was because he didn't want them coming across some obvious piece of telltale evidence, like a stick of bone or something.

That was how the Moors Murderers' private little graveyard

had been discovered: some great dozy flatfoot, the brightest thing about him the buttons on his tunic, had noticed a single fragment of leg bone sticking up out of the ground. It was unlikely in this case, of course—this wasn't open, windy moorland—but you never knew. A lot of things changed in twenty-six years, and he hadn't buried the kids that deep.

As he pressed on between the gnarled, twisted trunks, however, it rapidly became apparent to Albert that even though he vividly remembered that day in 1976, there was no possibility he'd find the exact spot without help of some sort. So much had changed, it was almost like a different place. To begin with, as he recalled, the wood had been much smaller in those days; just a sparse clump of trees, with a small overgrown hide in the middle of it. He still remembered a dim patch of earth, masses of twigs interwoven above and around it, almost as though some child had constructed it as a secret den. Some child might have done just that, for all Albert knew, but there was no trace of it now.

Wherever he moved, branches snaked across his path and had to be snapped and bent, or forced out of his way. Thorns plucked at him; dead leaves hung in his face. The mossy boles of trees grew so tightly together that, thin as he was, he had to squeeze his way between them, smearing his hands and cheeks with a cold, greenish slime. There was a raw, pungent smell of decay in the air. Everything he saw was moist and dripping. His boots and socks were soon sodden as he waded knee deep through the fetid tangles of dead and dying brush. And it was getting dark, too, amazingly quickly. Albert glanced around. He hadn't expected there to be much light as it was—not on a dull November afternoon—and though a little sunlight penetrated the copse, a veil of dusky shadows had drawn sharply in around him. On all sides, the browns and yellows of the rank, autumnal woodland seemed to darken and deepen, to lose their outline, to meld together in a foggy purple-gray.

Albert pushed on regardless. Okay . . . he was unhappy about being here, but fear was one emotion that he couldn't possibly afford to show. The fact that he wouldn't be able to locate the graves didn't worry him overmuch; he could let the pigs do that, let them takes months and months doing it. But he had to at least make a show that he was looking. So he continued, opting to pick his way through the wood along a roughly circular path, hoping to come out again at the point where he'd gone in. And the wetter and more ragged he got in the process, the better. It would add authenticity to his claim that he'd searched high and low.

For several minutes more he delved through the endless thickets, ducking below branches, sliding around the leaning, mossy trunks. The ground continued to squish beneath his feet. Noisome drops of water fell onto his head. This was a hideous place, right enough. He knew what the newspapers would say when they finally got in to have a look for themselves—that he couldn't have chosen a worse locale to bring children to, that the young victims' agonizing deaths must have been made all the worse by their abhorrent surroundings. And it wouldn't make a jot of difference if he insisted that Hinkley Wood had not been like this in those days, or that he'd chosen it because it was out of the way, not because it was scary or Godforsaken. They made a point of never believing anything he said. In which case, perhaps he should just revel in it—in the notoriety it gave him, in the impression it reinforced that he truly was an evil monster.

Lambs slaughtered in wilderness Hell, he thought with a dark chuckle, perceiving the headline in his mind's eye. *Babes brought into heart of darkness*.

Then Albert heard something.

At first he thought it might be the wind, or a few dead leaves fluttering down from their withered stalks. Very quickly, though, as the sound persisted, he realized it wasn't that at all. He listened intently . . . to what at first was a faint but steady twitching of undergrowth, a rustling and rattling of bracken, punctuated by the occasional cracking and popping of twigs.

A sense of unease went through him. Someone else was moving about in the wood . . . and by the sounds of it, they weren't too far away. In fact, as the noises grew in volume, they clearly were getting closer. Albert glanced left and right, scanning the gloomy avenues around him. For the moment at least, nothing visible stirred. But what he heard was undeniable. What was more, now that it was nearer, it sounded stealthy, furtive, as if whoever it was, was creeping.

The convict felt the hair on his neck stiffen. Had one of the coppers come into the wood after him? No; that would've entailed crashing about, puffing and grunting, probably much swearing. Likewise, if it had been one of their dogs, he'd have heard it thrusting its way forcefully through, panting aloud, paws pattering. Again he turned, this time in a complete circle, but he couldn't see more than several yards in any direction. There wasn't even the vaguest glimpse of the distant meadows. Someone was approaching him, however; of that there was no doubt.

Albert tried to tell himself that it could be anyone. Perfectly

natural explanations abounded; a farm worker, a gamekeeper, some tramp perhaps. But in none of those cases was there an obvious explanation as to why this person should be creeping. For creeping they surely were. Either that, or they were light on their feet and small of stature. . . .

That thought was intolerable, and Albert tried to laugh at the foolishness of his own imagination, but it came out a dry croak. And that was when he heard the second set of sounds.

He swung around sharply. Another person, it seemed, was coming toward him. And though he couldn't tell from where, exactly, this second creeper was approaching, it was from a different direction than the first. All at once, the convict felt trapped. "What the fuck?" he said in a low, tremulous murmur.

He wasn't terrified as such. Not yet. But his heart was already going ten to the dozen, and an icy sweat had broken on his brow. He stared hard into the surrounding trees. Again, he saw nothing, yet still he heard them. Whoever they were, they were not large . . . for now that they were closer it sounded as if they were being clumsy rather than stealthy, approaching in a stumbling, puppetlike walk, hauling themselves awkwardly through the yielding brush, yet still not making a great deal of clamor.

Children, then. It was children, without doubt. And two of them. . . .

Albert felt an hysterical scream rising in his chest. And when a skeletal clump of hawthorn, about five or six yards to his left, began thrashing and swaying as something pushed its way through, that scream tore itself out of him with a pain so fierce it was like losing part of his anatomy. In a blind panic, the convict lurched off in the opposite direction. Fleeting, the piercing arthritic pains in his knees and ankles were as nothing to him. He blundered on, headlong. Twigs snagged at him, branches struck him glancing blows. But he felt nothing, he saw nothing . . . only something peripheral, something glimpsed, something spotted in a moment of madness from the corner of his disbelieving eye: fish-belly white, matted with leaves, caked all over with clods of earth. And the stench! Oh, dear God, the stench of it!

But that was behind him now. It didn't matter. It was all behind him. He laughed as he ran, dementedly, scrambling up and down over greasy roots, falling heavily but always getting back to his feet again, kicking his way through briars and blackberry, through tussocks of dying ferns, being scratched and torn. But still none of that mattered, because the worst part was behind him.

At least, he thought that.

Until he saw something else just ahead, just as he'd expected to break out into the fields. It stood there swaying, blocking his path, a ghastly silhouette on the fading daylight.

"Jesus!" he shouted, "oh Jesus Chrii—"

Wait, he thought desperately. It was small. It was only small. If he kept going, he could knock it to the ground, as he'd done before. As he'd done so often. He could smash it and pulverize it . . . but again that smell, thick and souplike and toxic beyond belief. It was like running into a wall, a wall of fetor, of putrescence, of vomit and corruption. Albert staggered backward and tried to go another way, but now his chest was hurting him. The pain came, over and over, as though some great invisible fist were clubbing him there.

"No," he squawked. "Nooo . . ."

Another strangled cry erupted from his tortured throat before his legs turned suddenly to pieces of rubber and gave out. He'd have pitched to the ground had it not been for the surrounding vegetation. Absurdly, though, Albert fought against it, grappling madly with the branches and twigs, which twisted around him and tied themselves in knots, holding him upright almost against his will.

In his frenzy, his lank white hair flopped wetly down over his eyes and obscured all his vision—and for that, perhaps, he should have been thankful, for those two *things* were still advancing, were almost upon him, in fact, limp and lolling in their clouds of stench. He knew it, he could sense them. But even they were suddenly of small concern, for now Albert felt the pain in his chest blossom through his entire body, constricting his throat, squeezing his lungs, shooting like fire to the tips of his toes and fingers.

The last thing he saw was a blazing, all-consuming light coming down over his screaming head . . . and it wasn't a celestial light.

✦ ✦ ✦

"Heart attack," the Tactical Support Group inspector told Brooker, as his men brought Stickman's body out of the wood on a stretcher. A green blanket had been thrown over it. To one side, a thin, rigidly clawed hand trailed on the ground.

Brooker said nothing. The TSG man, a tall military sort with a clipped mustache and petulant manner, wasn't too impressed. "Not surprising, really," he added. "At his age, doing all that work. What the bloody hell did he dig them up for when we were here?"

Brooker shrugged.

The TSG man shook his head. By his attitude, he clearly felt that the National Crime Squad—and Detective Sergeant Brooker, in particular—were somehow to blame for this inconvenient turn of events. “I’ve had three full teams on today . . . for nothing,” And he stamped irritably away.

Brooker waited a moment, then turned and looked at Annie. She was still in her chair, but now placing the missing children’s clothing back into the paper sack. A moment passed, then she sensed she was being watched and glanced up.

“Justice served, I think,” he said, strolling toward her.

She continued putting the items of clothing away. “I thought you didn’t believe in capital punishment?”

“Generally, I don’t, but let’s just say you’ve convinced me some cases are exceptions.”

“Glad it turned out okay for you, then,” she replied. And her eye caught something.

She looked past him toward the trees. Brooker turned and followed her gaze. Two pairs of TSG men were each bringing out a black PVC body bag. Pitifully, neither bag was more than four feet long or looked even remotely full; any one of the burly officers could easily have managed one without the help of his colleague. Only deference to the victims prevented this.

It was very much what Brooker had been expecting—in fact, it was what he’d been hoping for, but it didn’t bring much solace. Even the most hardened police officer rarely got used to sights like this.

Apparently, Annie Frazer felt the same way. She sighed and rubbed her furrowed brow. Brooker glanced down at her, and it suddenly struck him how pale and tired she looked. Which wasn’t, he supposed, too surprising.

“This telepathy takes it out of you, hey?” he said.

“No,” she replied, “not really.” She paused for a moment, as the two body bags were carried past. “But the telekinesis sure does.”

THE HOUNDS OF LOVE

SCOTT NICHOLSON

Dexter licked his lips. His stomach was shivery. October was brown and yellow and crackly and tasted like candy corn. He knelt by the hutch that Dad had built back before the restraining order was filed.

He touched the welt under his eye. The wound felt like a busted plum and stung where the flesh had split open. Mom had accidentally left her thumb sticking out of her fist when she hit him. She hadn't meant to do it. Usually, she was careful when she punched him.

But one good thing about Mom, she didn't hold a grudge for long. She'd turned on the television and opened a beer, and after the next commercial break had forgotten all about him. It was easy to sneak out the back door.

Dexter poked some fresh blades of grass through the silver squares of wire. The rabbit flashed its buck teeth and wrinkled its nose before clamping down on the grass and hopping to the back of the hutch. It crouched in the shadows and chewed with a sideways gnashing of its jaws. The black eyes stared straight ahead. They looked like doll's eyes, dead and cold and stupid.

Dexter's stomach was still puke-shivery. He opened the cage and snaked his hand inside. The rabbit hopped away and kept chewing. Dexter stroked the soft fur between the rabbit's eyes.

Gotta tell 'em that you love 'em.

He snatched the leathery ears and pulled the rabbit forward into the light. He held it that way for a moment, like a magician dangling a trick above a hat, as it spasmed and kicked its four white legs. This was October, after all, the month when anything could happen. Even stupid old magic, if you dressed like a dork in a wizard's cape for Halloween.

Dexter looked over his shoulder at the house. Mom was most likely passed out by now. After all, it was four o'clock in the afternoon. But Dexter had learned from his dad that it never hurt to be paranoid.

He tucked the rabbit under his windbreaker and crossed the backyard into the woods. When he reached the safety of the trees, he took the leash from his pocket. This was the

tricky part. With his tongue hanging out from concentration, he squeezed the rabbit between his knees.

He pressed harder until he heard something snap and the rabbit's back legs hung limp. He almost puked then, almost wept, but his first tear rolled across the split skin beneath his eye and he got angry again. "I'll teach you better than to love me," he whispered, his breath ragged.

It was the rabbit's fault. The dumb creature shouldn't have tried to love him. The rabbit was trying to get him, to play the trick on him, to make him care. Well, he wasn't going to belong to nothing or nobody.

Dexter used both hands to attach the leather collar. The collar had belonged to his little redbone hound. Uncle Clem had let Dexter have the pick of the litter. Dexter had chosen the one with the belly taut from milk, the one that wagged its thin rope of a tail whenever Dexter patted its head. Dexter had named it Turd Factory. Well, stupid old Turd Factory didn't need the collar anymore.

Dexter fastened the collar and let the rabbit drop to the ground. It rolled on its side and twitched its front legs. Sometimes they died too fast, sometimes before he even started. Dexter headed deeper into the woods, dragging the rabbit behind him by the leash. It was a hundred feet to the clearing where he liked to play. There, the sun broke through the tree limbs and a shallow creek spilled over the rocks. Dexter squinted at the scraps of the sky, his eye almost swollen shut now. The clearing smelled like autumn mud and rot, the magic odors of buried secrets.

Dexter tightened the leash around the rabbit's neck until its veins bulged. He put one hand under the soft white chest and felt the trip-hammering heart that was trying to pump blood through the tourniquet. The rabbit began kicking its front legs again, throwing leaves and dark forest dirt into the air.

This was the part Dexter hated—the fear that came to the animals sooner or later as he tortured them, that little frantic spark in the eyes. The desperation and submission as they gave all that they had. Stupid things, they made him sick, they made him want to throw up. It was all their fault.

Dexter opened the pocketknife and went to work. This one was a relief. The rabbit had started out scared and stayed scared, paid for loving him without a whimper. Dexter was blind from tears by the time he finished.

He buried the carcass between the roots of a big oak tree. Right next to old Turd Factory. Dexter washed his hands in the creek. It was almost dinnertime. He turned and walked back

through the clearing, past the depressions of soil where he had buried the other animals.

His own little pet cemetery. He had seen that movie. It had given him the creeps, but not badly enough to make him give up his hobby. Plus, by the time he was finished with them, no chunk was big enough to stand up by itself, much less walk.

Three cats were underground here, two of them compliments of dear old Grandma. She'd given him the rabbit as an Easter present. He'd swiped a rooster from a falling-down coop up the road, but he didn't think he'd be pulling any more of those jobs. The rooster had spurred him, plus the dumb bird had squawked and clucked loud enough to wake the dead. There was a box turtle buried somewhere around. But that had mostly been a mercy killing. Mom kept pouring beer into its water.

Same with the goldfish. He told her he'd flushed them down the toilet. Goldfish were boring, though. They didn't scream or whimper. They didn't make him want to throw up while they bled. They were too dumb to love.

Dexter giggled at the thought of a goldfish coming back from the dead and haunting him. He'd like to see that in a movie someday. *The Revenge of the Zombie Fish*. He wiped his eyes dry and headed down the trail to the house.

Mom was boiling some macaroni when he came in the back door. She wiped at her nose as she opened a can of cheese sauce. The sight of her moist fingers on the can opener killed Dexter's appetite. He sat down at the table and toyed with an empty milk carton.

She must have passed out in her clothes again. They were wrinkled and smelled like rancid lard. "Where you been, honey?" she asked.

"Out playing."

"Where?"

"Out," he said. "You know."

She slid a plate of steaming macaroni in front of him. Dexter could see dried egg yolk clinging to the edge of the plate. "How was school?"

"The usual."

"Hmm. What you going to be for Halloween?"

"I don't know. I'm getting too old for dress-up and make-believe."

"Whatever." She opened the refrigerator. It was empty except for a dozen cans of beer, a wilted stalk of celery, and something in a Tupperware dish that had a carpet of green stuff across the top.

Dexter watched as she cracked a beer. She was red. Her hands were red, her face was red, her eyes were red.

"You not hungry?" she asked.

"No. Maybe later."

"Well, you need to eat. You'll get me in trouble with Social Services again."

"To hell with them."

"Dexter! If your Grandma heard that kind of language . . ."

The old bag would probably slap me upside the head, he thought.

But the good thing about Grandma, she always felt guilty afterward. She would go out and buy something nice to make up for it. Like the pocketknife or the BB gun. Or a new pet.

He didn't mind if Grandma made his ears ring. At least with her, there was profit in it. With Mom or Dad, all he got was a scar to show for it. Maybe Grandma loved him most. He picked up his fork and scooted some noodles around.

"That's a good boy," Mom said. She bent and kissed him on top of the head. Her breath smelled like a casket full of molded grain. "Your eye's looking better. Swelling ought to be down by tomorrow. At least enough for you to go to school."

Dexter smiled weakly and shoved some macaroni in his mouth. He chewed until she left the room. The telephone rang. Mom must have finally had it reconnected.

"Hello?" he heard her say.

Dexter looked at her. He could tell by her crinkled forehead that Dad was on the other end, trying to worm his way back into the bed he'd paid for with the sweat of his god-damned brow, under the roof he'd laid with his own two motherfucking hands. And no snotty-eyed bitch had a right to keep him out of his own goddamned house and away from his only son. Now that it was getting toward winter—

"You know you're not supposed to be calling me," she said into the phone. She bit her lip as Dad responded with what was most likely a stream of cusswords.

That was the problem with Dad. No subtlety. If only he'd play it smooth and easy, pretending to care about her, he'd be back in no time. And after a few months of acting, family life could go back to the way it was before. Back to normal.

But the bastard couldn't control himself. Why couldn't he just shut up and pretend to love her? It was easy. Everybody else was doing it.

Riley Baldwin down the road said that was the secret. The word *love*.

"Gotta tell 'em that you love 'em," he always said, with all

the wisdom of an extra year and two more inches of height. "Works like magic."

Said love had gotten him a hand up under Tammy Lynn Goolsby's dress. Inside her panties, even. And Grandma said she loved Dexter. Of course, that was different, that kind of love gave you presents. Love got you what you wanted, if you used it right, even if it hurt sometimes.

"Don't you dare set foot near this place or I'll call the cops," Mom screeched into the phone. Her face turned from red to a bruised shade of purple.

She stuttered into the phone a couple of times and slammed the handset down, then drained the last half of her beer. As she went past him to get to the refrigerator, she didn't notice that Dexter hadn't eaten his dinner. He slipped away to his tiny, cluttered bedroom and closed the door. He stayed there until Mom had time to pass out again. He fell asleep listening to her snores and the racket of the television.

Nobody said a word about his black eye at school the next day. Riley was waiting for him when he got off the bus. Riley had skipped. Dexter wished he could, too, but he didn't want Mom to get another visit from the Social Services people, showing up in their squeaky shoes and perfume, and acting like they knew how to run a family they didn't belong to.

"Got my .22 hid in the woods," Riley said, showing the gaps in his teeth as he grinned. His eyes gleamed under the shade of his Caterpillar ball cap.

"Cool, dude. Let me get my BB gun."

Riley waited by the back door. Dexter dropped his books in a pool of gray grease on the dining room table, then got his gun out of his room. Mom wasn't around. Maybe she'd gotten one of her boyfriends to make a liquor run to the county line. A note was stuck to the refrigerator, in Mom's wobbly handwriting: *Stay out of trouble. Love you.*

Dexter joined Riley and they went into the woods. Riley retrieved his gun from where he had buried it under some leaves. He tapped his pocket and something rattled. "Got a half box of bullets."

"Killed anything with that yet?"

"Nope. But maybe I can get one of those striped-assed chipmunks."

"Them things are quick."

"Hey, a little blood sacrifice is all it takes."

"What do you mean?"

"Breaking it in right." Riley patted the barrel of the gun. "Making them pay for messing with me."

Riley led the way down the trail, through Dexter's pet cemetery and over the creek. Dexter followed in his buddy's footsteps, watching the tips of his own brown boots. October hung in scraps of yellow and brown on the trees. The shadows of the trees grew longer and thicker as the sun slipped down the sky.

Riley stopped after a few minutes of silent stalking. "What's up with your dad?" he asked.

"Not much. Same old."

"That must be a pain in the ass, seeing him every other weekend or so."

"Yeah. He ain't figured out the game."

"What game?"

"You know. Love. Like you said."

"Oh, yeah. Gotta tell 'em that you love 'em."

"If he played the game, we wouldn't have Social Services messing around all the time."

"Them sons of bitches are all alike. The cops, the truant officers, the principal. It don't matter what the fuck you do. They always get you anyway."

"I reckon so." Dexter's stomach was starting to hurt. He changed the subject. "What was it like, with Tammy Lynn?"

Riley's face stretched into a jack-o'-lantern leer and he thrust out his bony chest. "Hey, she'll let me do anything. All you got to do is love 'em. I know how to reach 'em down deep."

"Did she let you. . . ?"

Riley twiddled his fingers in the air, then held them to his nose and sniffed.

"What about the other stuff?" Dexter asked.

"That's next, buddy-row. As soon as I want it."

"Why don't you want to? I thought you said she'd do anything."

Riley's thick eyebrows lowered, shading the rage that glinted in his eyes. He turned and started back down the trail toward the creek. "Ain't no damned birds left to shoot. Your loud-assed yakking has scared them all away."

Dexter hurried after him. The edge of the sky was red and golden. The forest was darker now, and the moist evening air had softened the leaves under their feet. Mom would be waking up soon to start on her second drunk of the day.

They walked in silence, Riley hunched over with his rifle tilted toward the ground, Dexter trailing like a puppy that had been kicked by its master. It was nearly dark when they reached the clearing. Riley jumped over the creek and looked back. His eyes flashed, but his face was nothing but sharp shadows.

Dexter hurdled the creek, caving in a section of muddy bank and nearly sliding into the water. He grabbed a root with one hand and scrambled up on his elbows and knees, his belly on the rim of the bank. When he looked up, Riley was pointing the rifle at him. Dad had taught Dexter about gun safety, and the first rule, the main rule, was to never point a loaded gun at somebody. Even a dickwit like Riley ought to know that.

"You ever kill anybody?" Riley was wearing his jack-o'-lantern expression again, but this time the grin was full of jagged darkness.

"Kill anybody?" Dexter tried not to whimper. He didn't want Riley to know how scared he was.

"Blood sacrifice."

Riley was just crazy enough to kill him, to leave him out here leaking in the night, on the same ground where Dexter had carved up a dozen animals. Dexter tried to think of how Dad would handle this situation. "Quit screwing around, Riley."

"If I want to screw around, I'll do it with Tammy Lynn."

"I didn't mean nothing when I said that."

"I can get it any time I want it."

"Sure, sure," Dexter was talking too fast, but he couldn't stop the words. He focused on the tip of Riley's boot, the scuffed leather and the smear of grease. "You know how to tell 'em. You're the magic man."

Riley lowered the gun a little. "Damn straight."

It was almost as if Dexter were talking to the boot, he was close enough to kiss it. "Just gotta tell 'em that you love 'em, right?"

Riley laughed then, and cool sweat trickled down the back of Dexter's neck. Maybe Dexter wasn't going to die after all, here among the bones and rotten meat of his victims. The boot moved away and Dexter dared to look up. Riley was among the thicket of holly and laurel now, the gun pointed away, and Dexter scrambled to his feet.

He saw for the first time how creepy the clearing was, with the trees spreading knotty arms all around and the laurels crouched like big animals. The place was *alive*, hungry, holding its breath and waiting for the next kill.

"Tell you what," Riley said, growing taller in the twilight, a looming force. "Come here tomorrow after school. Be real quiet and watch from behind the bushes. I'll get her all the way."

Dexter nodded in the dark. Then he remembered. "But tomorrow's Halloween."

"What the hell else you got to do—go around begging for candy with the babies?"

He couldn't let Riley know he was scared. "No, it's just—"

"Better fucking be here," Riley said.

Dexter ran down the trail toward home, his stomach fluttering. He was half-scared and half-excited about what he was going to witness, what he dared not miss.

Mom was slumped over the kitchen table, a pile of empty beer cans around her chair. An overturned bottle leaked brown liquid into her lap. Dexter hurried to the bed before she woke up and asked for a good-night hug or else decided he needed a beating for something-or-other.

The next day after school, he went straight from the bus to the clearing. The sky was cloudy and heavy with dampness. He heard voices as he crawled on his hands and knees through the undergrowth. He looked through a gap in the branches. Riley sat on the ground, talking to Tammy Lynn, who was leaning against the big oak tree.

Tammy Lynn's blond hair was streaked with red dye. She already looked fourteen. Her chest stretched the fabric of her white sweater. Freckles littered her face. She had cheeks like a chipmunk's, puffed and sad.

Riley rubbed her knee beneath the hem of her dress. He glanced to his left at the bushes where Dexter was hiding. Dexter gulped. His stomach was puke-shivery.

"I love you," Riley said to Tammy Lynn.

She giggled. She wore lipstick, and her mouth was a thin red scar across her pale face. Riley leaned forward and kissed her.

He pulled his face away. She touched her lower lip where her lipstick had smeared. Riley's hand snaked farther under her dress. She clamped her legs closed.

"Don't, Riley," she whispered.

"Aw, come on, baby."

"I don't want to."

"Hey, I said I loved you. It's okay to do it if I love you."

"I'm scared."

Riley stopped rubbing her. He spoke so low that Dexter barely heard. "Pretend you're a princess and I'm a prince, and we're in a fairy tale. Don't you love me?"

Tammy Lynn lowered her eyes. Riley cupped her chin and tilted her face up. Her cheeks were pink from shame or fear.

"Don't you love me?" Riley repeated, and this time he was wearing his jack-o'-lantern face. Tammy Lynn nodded. Dexter's stomach felt as if he'd swallowed a handful of hot worms.

"If you love me, then you owe me," Riley said. She shook her head from side to side, her hair swaying against her shoulders.

Riley suddenly drove his hand deeper under her dress. Tammy Lynn gave a squeal of surprise and tried to twist away. Riley grabbed her sweater and pulled her toward the ground. Bits of bark clung to her back.

"No," she moaned, flailing at his hands as he wrestled her to the ground. One of her silver-polished nails raked across Riley's nose. He drew back his arm and slapped her. She cried out in pain.

Dexter hadn't counted on it being like this. He almost ran out from under the bushes to help her. But he thought of Riley and the gun. Dexter could barely breathe, his gut clenching like he was going to throw up, but he couldn't look away.

Riley pinned her down with one arm and unzipped his blue jeans, then covered her mouth as he pulled her dress up. Riley moved between her legs and Tammy Lynn screamed into his palm. They struggled for a few seconds more before Riley shoved away from her. He stood and fastened his pants. Tammy Lynn was crying.

"I told you I loved you," Riley said, as if he were disgusted at some cheap toy that had broken. Then he looked at the laurels and winked, but Dexter saw that his hands were shaking. Dexter hoped they couldn't see him. The shiver in his stomach turned into a drumroll of tiny ice punches.

Tammy Lynn was wailing now. Her dress was bunched around her waist, her panties twisted against her white thighs. Scraps of leaves stuck to her ankle socks. One of her shoes had fallen off.

"Works like magic," Riley said, too loudly, his voice a hoarse blend of triumph and fear. "I told you I loved you, didn't I?"

He kicked some loose leaves toward her and walked down the trail. He would want Dexter to follow so he could crow about the conquest. But Dexter's muscles were jelly. He couldn't take his eyes away from Tammy Lynn.

She sat up, her sobs less forceful now. She slowly pulled up her panties and pushed her dress hem down to her knees, moving like one of those movie zombies. She stared at her fingers as if some tiny treasure had been ripped out of her hands. Tears streamed down her face, and a strand of blood creased one side of her chin. Her lower lip was swollen.

She stood on her skinny legs, wobbling like a foal. Her dress hung unevenly. She looked around the clearing with

eyes that were too wide. Dexter shrank back under the laurels, afraid to be seen, afraid that he was supposed to help her and couldn't.

Blood ran down her legs, the bright red streaks of it vivid against her skin. Drops splattered onto the leaves between her feet. She looked down and saw the blood and made a choking sound in her throat. She waved her hands in the air for a moment, then ran into the woods, not down the trail but in the direction of the road that bordered one side of the forest. She'd forgotten her shoe.

Dexter lifted himself from the ground and stared at the dark drops of blood. Rain began to fall, slightly thicker than the mist. He parted the waxy laurel leaves and stepped into the clearing.

Blood. Blood sacrifice. On Halloween, when anything could happen. The clearing was alive again, the sky waiting and the trees watching, the ground hungry.

Dexter felt dizzy, as if his head was packed with soggy cotton. He knelt suddenly and vomited. When his stomach was empty, he leaned back and let the rain run down his face. That way, Riley wouldn't be able to tell that he had been crying.

He looked down at the shoe for a moment, then stumbled down the trail toward home. He expected Riley to be waiting by the porch, the sleeves rolled up on his denim jacket, arms folded. But Riley was gone. Dexter went in the house.

"Hey, honey," Mom said, not looking up as the screen door slammed. She was watching a rerun of "Highway to Heaven."

"Find your rabbit?" she asked.

"No."

"Dinner will be ready soon."

"I'm not hungry. I'm going to my room."

"You ain't going trick-or-treat?"

"I don't want to."

"You sick?" She glanced away from the television and looked at him suspiciously. The smell of old beer and the food scraps on the counter brought back Dexter's nausea.

"No. Just got some homework," he managed to lie through quivering lips.

"Homework, like hell. When you ever done homework? Your clothes are dirty. What have you been up to?"

"I fell at school. You know it was raining?"

"And me with laundry on the line," she said, as if it were the sky's fault, and there was nothing a body could do when the whole damned sky was against them. She looked back to the television, took two swallows of beer, and belched. He

wondered what she would give out if any trick-or-treaters dared come down their dangerous street and knock on the door.

On the television screen, Michael Landon was sticking his nose into somebody else's business again. Dexter looked at the actor's smug close-up for a moment, then tiptoed to his room. His thoughts suffocated him in the coffin of his bed.

Maybe he should have picked up Tammy Lynn's shoe. Then he could give it back to her, even if he couldn't give back the other things. Like in Cinderella, sort of. But then she would know. Besides, that was like fairy tale love, and Dexter didn't ever want to love anything as long as he lived.

Anyway, Riley had a gun. Dexter thought of Riley pointing the gun at him, that moment in the woods when he thought the tip of Riley's boot would be the last thing he ever saw. The boot, the shoe, the blood. He finally fell asleep to the sound of whatever movie Mom was using for a drinking buddy that night.

He dreamed of Tammy Lynn. She was splayed out beneath him in the clearing, the collar tight around her neck, the leash wrapped around his left fist. She was naked, but her features were formless, milky abstractions. He was holding his knife against her cheek. Her eyes were twin beggars, pools of scream, wet horror. He woke up sweating, his stomach shivery, his eyes moist. He'd wet the bed again.

Rain drummed off the roof. He thought of the blood, watered down and spreading now, soaking into the soil. Her blood sacrifice, the price she paid for love. He didn't get back to sleep.

He dressed just as the rain dwindled. By the time he went outside, the sun was fighting through a smudge of clouds. The air was as thick as syrup, and nobody stirred in the houses along the street. The whole world had a hangover.

Dexter went down the trail. He wasn't sure why. Maybe he wanted to relive the day before, the struggle, the tears, the drops of blood. Maybe he wanted to get the shoe.

Water fell off the green leaves overhead as he wound his way into the woods. His shirt was soaked by the time he reached the clearing. The forest was alive with dripping, flexing limbs, trees drinking and growing, the creek fat and muddy. A fungal, earthy stench hung in the air. He stepped into the clearing.

The ground was scarred with gashes of upturned soil. Brown holes. Empty. Where Dexter had buried the pets.

Blood sacrifice. Works like magic. Especially on Halloween.

Dexter tried to breathe. The shivering in his belly turned into a wooden knot.

Twigs snapped damply behind the stand of laurels where he had hid the day before.

No. Dead things didn't come back to life. That only happened in stupid movies.

Tammy Lynn's shoe was gone. No way would she come back here. It had to be Riley, playing a trick. But how did Riley know where he had buried the animals?

He heard a whimpering gargle that sounded like a cross between a cluck and a growl, maybe a broken meow. The laurels shimmered. Something was moving in there.

"Riley?" he whispered hoarsely.

The gargle.

"Come on out, dickwit," Dexter said, louder.

He saw a flash of fur, streaked and caked with dirt. He fled down the trail. His boots hardly touched the ground, were afraid to touch the ground, the ground that had been poisoned with blood magic. He thought he heard something following as he crossed into the yard, soft padding footfalls or slitherings in the brush, but his heart was hammering so hard in his ears that he couldn't be sure. He burst into the house and locked the door, then leaned with his back against it until he caught his breath.

Something thudded onto the porch, clattering along the wooden boards. Behind that sharp sound, a rattling like claws or thick toenails, came a dragging wet noise.

Clickety-click, sloosh. Clickety-click, sloosh.

It stopped just outside the door.

Dexter couldn't move.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Mom stood under the archway leading into the kitchen. Her face was pinched, eyes distended, skin splotched. Greasy blades of hair clung to her forehead.

Dexter gasped, swallowed. "The—"

She scowled at him, her fists clenched. He knew this had better be good. "—I was just out running."

"You're going to be the death of me, worrying me like that. Nothing but trouble." She rubbed her temples. Her smell filled the small room, sweetly pungent like a bushel of decaying fruit. Dexter put his ear to the door leading to the porch. The sounds were gone.

"What are you so pale for? You said you wasn't sick."

Dexter shrank away from her.

"Now get up off that floor. Lord knows, I got enough work

around here already without putting you in three changes of clothes ever goddamned day.”

Dexter slunk past her into the living room.

“Guess I’d better get that laundry in,” Mom said to no one in particular. Her hand gripped the doorknob, and Dexter wanted to shout, scream, slap her away. But of course he couldn’t. He could only watch with churning bowels as she opened the door and went outside. Dexter followed her as far as the screen door.

The porch was empty.

Of course it was. Monsters were for movies, or dumb stories. He was acting like a fourth grader. Stuff coming back from the dead? Horseshit, as Dad would say.

Still, he didn’t go outside the rest of the evening, even though the sky cleared. Mom was in a better mood after the first six-pack. Dexter watched cartoons, then played video games for a while. He tried not to listen for *clickety-sloosh*.

One of Mom’s boyfriends came over. It was the one with the raggedy mustache, the one who called Dexter “Little Man.” Mom and the man disappeared into her bedroom, then Dexter heard arguing and glass breaking. The boyfriend left after an hour or so. Mom didn’t come back out. Dexter went to bed without supper.

He lay there thinking about magic, about blood sacrifice. About the open graves in the pet cemetery that should have been filled with bones and decaying flesh and mossy fur and shaved whiskers and scales. He tried to erase his memory of the creature in the bushes, the thing that had followed him home. He couldn’t sleep, even though he was worn from tension.

His eyes kept traveling to the cold glass between his curtains. The streetlight threw shadows that striped the bed, swaying like live things. He tried to tell himself that it was only the trees getting blown by the wind. Nothing was going to get him, especially not all those animals he’d dismembered. No, those animals had loved him. They would never *hurt* him.

He’d almost calmed himself when he heard the soft click of paws on the windowsill. It was the sound the cats had made when they wanted to be let in. Dexter’s mom wanted them out of the house, because of the hairballs and the stains they left in the corners. But Dexter always let them in at night to curl on top of the blankets at his feet. At least for a week or so, until he got tired of them.

He didn’t have any cats now, so it couldn’t be a cat at the window. Dexter pulled the blankets up to his eyes. Something bumped against the glass, moist and dull, like a nose.

No no no not a nose.

He wrapped the pillow around his ears. The noise was replaced by a rapid thumping against the outside wall. Dexter hunched under the blankets and counted down from a hundred, the way he did when he was six and Dad had first told him about the monsters that lived in the closet.

One hundred (no monsters), ninety-nine (no monsters), ninety-eight (no monsters) . . .

After three times through, he no longer heard the clickings or thumpings. He fell asleep with the blankets twisted around him.

Dexter awoke not knowing where he was. He sat up quickly and looked out the window. Nothing but sky and Sunday sunshine.

Dad picked him up that afternoon. Dexter had to walk down to the corner to meet him. He kept a close eye on the woods, in case anything stirred in the leaves. He thought he heard a scratching sound, but by then he was close enough to get inside the truck.

Dad looked past Dexter to the house. "My own goddamned roof," he muttered under his breath.

"Hi, Dad."

"I suppose she filled you up with all kinds of horseshit about me." His hands were clenched into fists around the steering wheel. Dexter knew what those fists could do. There had to be a way out, a way to calm him. Riley's words came to Dexter out of the blue: *Gotta tell 'em that you love 'em.*

Yeah. Works like magic. He'd seen how that turned out. Got you what you wanted, but somebody had to pay.

"She didn't say nothing."

"Any men been around?"

"Nobody. Just us. We—I miss you."

Dad's fists relaxed and he mussed Dexter's hair. "I miss you, too, boy."

Dexter wanted to ask when Dad was moving back in, but didn't want him to get angry again. Better not to mention Mom, or home, or anything else.

"What say we go down to the dump? Got me a new Ruger to break in." Dexter managed a weak smile as Dad pulled the truck away from the curb.

They spent the day at the landfill, Dexter breaking glass bottles and Dad prowling in the trash for salvage, shooting rats when they showed their pointy faces. Dexter felt no joy when the rodents exploded into red rags. Dad was a good shot.

They ate fast food hamburgers on the way back in. It was almost dark when Dad dropped him off at the end of the street. Dexter hoped none of Mom's boyfriends were around. He opened the door to hop out, then hesitated, remembering the clickety-sloosh. He had managed to forget, to fool himself out under the clear sky, surrounded by filth and rusty metal and busted furniture. In the daytime, all the nightmares had dissolved into vapor.

Dexter looked toward the house with one hand still on the truck door. Dad must have figured he was reluctant to leave, that a son missed his father, and that no goddamned snotty-eyed bitch had a right to keep a father from his own flesh-and-blood. "It's okay. I'll see you again in a week or so," Dad said.

Dexter searched desperately for something to say, anything to put off that hundred-foot walk across the dark yard. "Dad?"

"What?"

"Do you love Mom?"

Dexter could see only Dad's silhouette against the background of distant streetlights. Crickets chirped in the woods. After a long moment, Dad relaxed and sighed. "Yeah. 'Course I do."

Dexter looked along the street, at the forest that seemed to creep up to the house's foundation. "You ever been scared?"

"We're all scared of something or other. Is something bothering you?"

Dexter shook his head, then realized Dad probably couldn't see him in the dark. "No," he said, then, "Do you believe in magic?"

Dad laughed, his throat thick with spittle. "What kind of horseshit has she been filling you up with?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

"The bitch."

"Guess I better go, Dad."

"Uh-huh."

"See you." He wanted to tell Dad that he loved him, but he was too scared.

"Say, whatever happened to that little puppy of yours?"

"Got runned over."

"Damn. I'll see Clem about getting you another."

"No, that's okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Bye now."

"Yeah."

Dexter stepped away from the truck and watched the tail lights shrink as Dad roared away. The people in the few neighboring houses were plastered to the television. Blue light flickered from their living room windows. The trees were like tall skeletons with too many bones.

Leaves skittered across the road, scratching at the asphalt. A dog barked a few streets over. At least, it sounded like a dog. A good old red-blooded, living and breathing turd factory. Never hurt nobody, most likely.

He walked into the scraggly yard, reluctant to leave the cone of the last streetlight. He thought about going up the street and cutting across the other end of the yard, but that way was scary, too. The autumn forest hovered on every side. The forest with its clickety-sloosh things.

He tried to whistle as he walked, but his throat was dry, as if he had swallowed a spiderweb. He thought about running, but that was no good. In every stupid movie where dead things come back, they always get you if you run.

So he took long, slow steps and kept his head bent forward, because he thought he could hear better that way. Halfway home. The lights were on in the kitchen, and he headed for the rectangle of light that stretched from the back door across the lawn.

He was twenty feet away from the safety of light when he heard it. *Clickety-sloosh*. But that wasn't all. The gargle was also mixed in, along with the tortured meow and the rustle of leaves. The noise was coming from behind a forsythia bush near the back steps. The thing was under the porch. In the place where Turd Factory had napped during sunny afternoons.

Dexter stopped.

Run for it? They always get you if you run. But, now that he thought about it, they always get you anyway. Especially if you were the bad guy. And Dexter was the bad guy. Maybe not as bad as Riley. But at least Riley knew about love, which probably protected him from bad things.

Yell for Mom? She was probably dead drunk on the couch. If she did step out on the porch, the thing would disappear. He was sure of that, because the thing was his and only his.

And if he yelled, he knew what would happen. Mom would turn on the porch light and see nothing, not even a stray hair, just a scooped-out dirt place behind the forsythia. And she'd say, "What the hell do you mean, waking up half the neighborhood because you heard something under the porch? They ain't nothing there."

And she'd probably slap him across the face. She'd wait until they were inside, so the neighbors wouldn't call Social Services. Maybe she'd use the buckle-end of the belt, if she was drinking liquor tonight instead of beer.

He took an uncertain step backward. Back to the curb, to the streetlights? Then what? You had to go home sometime. The thing gargled, a raspy mewling. It was waiting.

A monster that could disappear could do anything. Even if he ran to the road, the thing could clickety-sloosh out of the sewer grate, or pop out from behind one of the junk cars that skulked in the roadside weeds. The thing could drop from the limbs of that big red maple at the edge of the lawn. You can't fight blood magic when it builds a monster on Halloween.

He had a third choice. Walk right on up. Keep trying to whistle. Not scared at all. No-sirree. Zip-a-dee-doo-dah.

And that was really the only choice. The thing wasn't going away. Dexter stepped into the rectangle of light and pursed his lips. He was still trying to whistle as he put his foot on the bottom step. Monsters weren't real, were they?

The bush shook, shedding a few of its late yellow leaves. The gargle lengthened into a soughing purr. Dexter tried to keep his eyes on the door, the door that was splintered at the bottom where the puppy and cats had scratched to get inside. The door with its dented brass handle, the door with its duct-taped pane of glass, the door that opened onto the love and safety promised by the white light of home. The door became a blur, a shimmering wedge lost in his tears as the thing moved out from the shadows.

He closed his eyes and waited for the bite, the tearing of his blue jeans and shin meat, the rattle of tooth on bone. He stiffened in anticipation of cold claws to belly, hot saliva on rib cage, rough tongue to that soft place just underneath the chin.

Clickety-sloosh.

His heart skipped a beat and restarted. He was still alive. No pain yet. He tried to breathe. The air tasted like rusty meat.

Maybe it had disappeared. But he could hear it, panting through moist nostrils. Just beneath him. Close enough so that he could feel the wind of its mewling against his leg.

Savoring the kill? Just as Dexter had done, all those afternoons and Saturday mornings spent kneeling in the forest, with his pocket knife and his pets and his frightened, lonely tears? He knew that fear was the worst part, the part that made your belly all puke-shivery.

He had to show his fear. That was only fair. He owed them that much. And if he looked scared enough, maybe the thing would have mercy, just rip open that big vein in his neck so he could die fast. Then the thing could clickety-sloosh on back into the woods, drag its pieces to the grave and bury its own bones.

Dexter tried to open his eyes but couldn't. Still the thing mewled and gargled. Waiting was the worst part. You could hold your breath, pray, scream, run. They always get you anyway.

Still he waited.

He blinked. The world was nothing but streaks, a gash of light, a fuzz of gray that was the house, a bigger fuzz of black night. Something nudged against his kneecap. He looked down, his chest hot as a brick oven.

It hadn't disappeared.

Two eyes met his. One round and dark, without a white, hooded by an exotic flap of skin. The other eye was heavy-lidded, yellow and reptilian.

Behind the eyes, lumps of meat sloped into a forehead. Ragged pink where the pieces met, leaking a thin jelly. Part fur, part feather, part scale, part exposed bone. A raw rooster comb dangled behind one misshapen ear.

Beneath the crushed persimmon of a nose were whiskers and wide lips, the lips parted to show teeth of all kinds. Puppy teeth, kitty fangs, fishy nubs of cartilage, orange bits of beak like candy corn.

Hulking out behind the massive dripping head were more slabs of tenderloin, breast and wing, fin and shell. The horrible coalition rippled with maggots and rot and magic.

The lump of head nuzzled against his leg. The juice soaked through his jeans.

Oh God.

He wanted the end to come quickly now, because he had given the thing his fear and that was all he had. He had paid what he owed. But he knew in the dark hutch of his heart that the thing wasn't finished. He opened his eyes again.

The strange eyes stared up into his. Twin beggars.

You had to let them feed. On fear or whatever else they needed.

Again the thing nuzzled, mewling wetly. Behind the shape, something slithered rhythmically against the leaves.

A rope of gray and black and tan fur. A broken tail.

Wagging.

Wagging.

Waiting and wanting.

Forgiving.

Dexter wept without shame. When the thing nuzzled the third time, he reached down with a trembling hand and stroked between the putrid arching ears.

Riley's voice came to him, unbidden, as if from some burning bush or darkening cloud: "Gotta tell 'em that you love 'em."

Dexter knelt, trembling. The thing licked under the soft part of his chin. It didn't matter that the tongue was scaly and flecked with forest dirt. And cold, grave cold, long winter cold.

When you let them love you, you owe them something in return.

He hugged the beast, even as it shuddered toward him, *clickety-sloosh*, with chunks dribbling down. And still the tail whipped the ground, faster now, drumming out its affection.

Suddenly the yard exploded with light.

The back door opened. Mom stood on the porch, one hand on the light switch, the other holding her worn flannel robe closed across her chest. "What the hell's going on out here?"

Dexter looked up from where he was kneeling at the bottom of the steps. His arms were empty and dry.

"Don't just stand there with your jaw hanging down. You was supposed to be here an hour ago." Her voice went up a notch, both louder and higher. "Why, I've got a good mind to—"

She stopped herself, looking across the lawn at the houses down the street. Dexter glanced under the porch. He saw nothing in the thick shadows.

Mom continued, lower, with more menace. "I've got a good mind to take the belt to you."

Dexter stood and rubbed the dirt off his pants.

"Now get your ass in here, and don't make me have to tell you twice."

Dexter looked around quickly at the perimeter of forest, at the black thickets where the thing would hide until Mom was gone. He went up the steps and through the door, past her hot, drunken glare and stale breath. He shuffled straight to his room and closed the door. The beating would come or it wouldn't. It didn't matter.

That night, when he heard the scratching at the windowsill and the bump against the glass, he opened the window. The thing crawled inside and onto the bed. It had brought him a gift: Riley's bloody boot. When you loved something, it owed you in return. Maybe it had carried the other one to Tammy

Lynn's house, where it might have delivered her lost shoe on Halloween, the night of its birth. To thank her for the gift of blood.

The nightmare creature curled at Dexter's feet, licking at the boot. The thing's stench filled the room, bits of its rotted flesh staining the blankets. Dexter didn't sleep that night, listening to the mewling rasp of the creature's breathing, wondering where the mouth was, knowing that he'd found a friend for life.

And tomorrow, when he got off the bus, the thing would greet him. It would wait until the bus rolled out of sight, then drag itself from the woods and rub against his leg, begging to be stroked. It would lick his face and wait for his hug.

And together they would run deep between the trees, Dexter at one end of the leash, struggling to keep up while the thing clickety-slooshed about and buried its dripping nose in the dirt, first here, then there. Once in a while into the creek, to wet its dangling gills. Stopping only to gaze lovingly at its master, showing those teeth that had done something bad to Riley and could probably do it again.

Maybe if Dexter fed its hunger for affection, it wouldn't have a hunger for other things.

Dexter would give it what it needed. He would feed it all he had. Through autumn's fog and into the December snows, through long spring evenings and into summer's flies. A master and its pet.

You owe them that much.

That's just the way love is.

They always get you anyway.

FADING QUAYLE, DANCING QUAYLE

CHARLES COLEMAN FINLAY

The top circle in the traffic light looked pink, faint pink, like a single drop of blood in a cup full of water.

Andy Quayle heard a voice, his own, say, "Red."

His leg twitched, his foot hit the brake, and the minivan skidded to a stop. The bumper slammed into an old man crossing the street and he went down hard. Andy leaned over the dashboard to see what had happened.

The old man stood up, stared at Andy with dead white eyes, and shuffled off, his arm bent akimbo. A jagged sliver of bone poked through a fresh tear in his windbreaker's sleeve. The windbreaker was pale blue, the color of veins under skin.

"Navy," said Andy's voice.

He watched the pale blue coat bob across the street. The old man tripped over the curb and crashed to the ground. He tried to push himself up, but the broken arm kept folding in half.

Something crawled in the road beside the old man, a small creature that was mostly head, and the head mostly mouth, and the mouth an open, hungry, toothless maw.

"Baby," said Andy's voice.

His head swiveled. A baby seat was belted in the minivan behind him. His hand fumbled at the latch. The door swung open. He staggered over to the baby.

The baby sat up. It shoved an old bone into its mouth, sucking on it like a pacifier.

"Slurpy, slurpy," said Andy's voice.

He lifted the baby and turned around. The empty van rolled slowly down the road away from him. Andy tucked the baby under his arm and lurched after it.

"Brake," said Andy's voice, and his free hand popped up to slap his forehead.

The van rolled through a pool of pale green transmission fluid and punched into the side of an abandoned car, making a slight hiccup as its headlight shattered. A woman in T-shirt and jeans climbed out of the wreck's back seat, an arm bone clutched in her teeth, and ran away.

Andy slid the van door open and fastened the squirming baby into the car seat.

"Safety first," said Andy's voice. "Gootchey-goo."

"Gah!" said the baby, swinging the bone at him.

He took the driver's seat, backed up, and continued driving down the street, tires crunching over broken glass.

He passed a house, a house, a house, a church—no stop. Corner—turn. Store, store, bank, store—no stop. KFC. Meat. Meat—must eat!

His leg twitched. The van skidded to a stop. Andy smacked into the steering column.

He shook off the impact and looked more closely. Overturned tables straddled broken window frames. Empty paper buckets sprouted across the parking lot like mushrooms in the forest. The smell of old, cold grease hung in the air.

But no meat.

There was no more meat anywhere. Only hunger. Even his hunger faded, like washed-out colors, until it was hardly an itch worth scratching.

Andy heard his own voice sobbing.

The back of his hand rubbed at his eye sockets and ended up damp. His leg straightened and the van sped forward again.

Around a corner, he saw a school. He accelerated past the *One Way—Do Not Enter* sign, jumped the curb, and drove over the grass to park by the side doors.

"Work," said Andy's voice. "Late."

His hand switched off the ignition and tugged the emergency brake until it caught.

"Brake," said Andy's voice, and his head nodded.

He hopped out of the van and hurried over to the side door. The baby cried as Andy got close. Dull thuds emanated through the hollow core steel. With both hands he managed to depress the latch until it clicked.

The door swung open, spilling a mass of bodies in a moaning heap. Some stood up and began to wander away. Andy tripped over the rest to enter the building.

Andy wandered the halls. In the gym, a tall boy attempted to dribble a flat basketball. A very short man with a long beard stood at the front of one classroom, writing with a piece of chalk so small his nails scraped the word-covered blackboard in a steady, rhythmic screech. In the main office, a chubby woman hunched over the copier, flinching every time the machine whirled and the light flashed. Reams of loose paper carpeted the floor, all printed with the same thing. Her blank eyes fixed on Andy.

"You'll. Love. This. It's. Funny." she said, her pudgy fingers

thrusting out a fresh copy. "Top. Ten. Things. You. Can. Do. With. A. Brain."

He jerked away from her. The stench of burned coffee leaked out of the teachers' lounge and filled the hall. He walked on until he came to the cafeteria, where two boys threw paper wads at each other across the tables.

"Hey, stop that," said Andy's voice.

The kids looked at him. "Uh, uh," they said, but they stopped.

Andy saw the art room and went to it.

Construction paper covered the floor. Big sloppy swirls of acrylic paint decorated the cabinet doors and desktops. The throwing wheel whirled in one corner. The kiln switch read *on* but Andy didn't see it glowing.

He untaped the pedal on the wheel to stop its spinning. He tried to wash the brushes in the sink, but the bristles were stiff and ruined. Sweat poured off his head. The kiln switch read *on* so he unplugged it. Then he scooped paper into the trash can until it overflowed. An empty trash can sat in the cafeteria. His body turned to get it.

He saw a girl skulking around a corner at the end of the hallway. Young woman. Girl. Young woman. Girl. She wore go-go boots, and a velvet skirt, and a sheer blouse that clung to her slender frame. The colors were all gray, like ash.

"Black," said Andy's voice.

She wore so much patchouli that Andy's nose couldn't smell anything else. She carried a large, bulging purse over her shoulder and carried two flat cardboard boxes in her hands. She wobbled slightly under their weight.

Andy lurched forward. "Can I help you?" he heard his voice ask.

The girl shrieked and dropped the boxes, which fell smack on the ground. Andy bent to pick them up as she jumped backward, pulling an aerosol can and lighter from her purse. "Stay back!"

"Your hair looks nice," said Andy's voice. Something twitched at his nose, hiding behind the powerful patchouli. A hunger rumbled low in his belly.

"Are you for real? Aren't you a—?"

"Art teacher," said Andy's voice.

"Like, shit. It's so hard to tell anymore." Her shoulders sagged and she leaned against the wall. She thrust the can and lighter into her bag, and tilted her head at the boxes in Andy's hands. "You carry those. Wait here—I'll get a couple more."

Andy stood rooted to the spot. She returned from the cafeteria storeroom with three more cases.

"Extra's for you," she said, slipping it onto his pile. "I used to work in the school cafeteria, so I knew there'd be stuff here. We better get going before any of those zombies notice us. It's only three blocks away."

They walked out the exit and across the playground. When she stopped to shift the bag on her shoulder, Andy continued on. It was daylight, late afternoon, although it felt almost dark. Andy lifted his head to the sky. A car alarm blasted somewhere far away. A mourning dove cooed in a tree, just above the branch where a zombie squirrel gnawed on an empty walnut shell.

Someone screamed right behind him.

Andy pivoted. The boys from the cafeteria clutched at the girl. One held her arm, and she spun, pounding him on the head with a blackjack, using his body to block the second one's attack.

He set his cases on the ground and staggered toward them, grabbing the two boys by the hair and slamming their heads together. They made a hollow *clonk*, so he did it again. Then he grabbed their collars and pushed them toward the school building.

"Detention," said Andy's voice.

"Uh, uh," the boys mouthed in protest. But they went.

"Shit, shit, *shit*. You just saved my life, teach." She stood there, hands clutching her chest, head leaning forward. She looked at the ground, where the dropped boxes had split at the seams and cans rolled in different directions. "We can't carry these three blocks, not this way."

Andy's forefinger jumped out at the end of his arm, pointing toward the parking lot. "Minivan," said Andy's voice.

"Oh, good thinking!" Using a broken box like a basket, she gathered about half the cans. "Let's go. Before they come back."

He walked toward the van.

"Wait—aren't you going to get those boxes?"

Andy stopped, turned, saw that he'd walked past them. He picked them up and carried them over to the van. He pulled open the door and placed them on the seat beside the baby. Then he climbed into the driver's seat, turning the ignition.

The passenger door opened and she slid in next to him. "What an ugly kid," she said. Her eyes flicked back and forth from the baby to Andy. "Is it—?"

"Baby," said Andy's voice.

"Aw, I'm sorry, that must be so—whoa!"

Something bounced off the inside of the windshield and landed on her lap. She held it up near her chest. The buttons gaped open on her blouse, revealing the shy gray bra underneath. Beside it, her skin appeared almost translucent, like skim milk.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Breast," said Andy's voice. His eyes shifted back to the object in her hand. "Bone."

"Breastbone? Like, ewwww!" She threw it out the window and wiped her hands on her velvet skirt. "I'd guess you know all that stuff 'cause of art. Like, anatomy. We want to go that way—" She pointed.

Andy's leg straightened. The van leaped forward, crashed through the fence, hopped over the curb, and scraped bottom on the road. He veered around an abandoned school bus. One of the tires flapped flat on the road. The van listed sideways.

"That's cool, just keep driving," she said. "Like, you forget to think of the most basic stuff, y'know, running all the time. I could have driven a car over to the school."

She directed him to an old brick warehouse just off the main street. A display window in front framed a big screen TV with a video camera aimed at the sidewalk. A large crowd had collected. Most stood there watching themselves wave at the camera, though a few aimed remote controls at the picture, their thumbs rising and falling with a range of vigorous arm gestures.

"Just keep driving," she said, ducking and shoving his head down to the dashboard. "Just go past them. Down to the next alley, and tuuuuuurn—" she extended the *ur*-sound until they reached it "—here!"

He turned there, the metal hub of the wheel screeching as it ground to a stop under a dead neon sign. Other vehicles lined the alley—an SUV, a sedan, a convertible—among a scattering of human artifacts and remains.

"We're downstairs in the club," she said, jumping out. "I better go tell them you're coming. We kinda hate surprises."

Andy got out and waited. At the open end of the alley, a bald man with a beer belly and a beaked nose shoved a recliner down the street toward the big screen TV. He stopped and stared at Andy. Andy stared back. The door creaked open behind him. The bald man stared at something behind Andy. Andy turned.

She gestured at him to hurry.

"Come on," she said. "Bring the boxes."

Andy piled up all the boxes. He went through the propped

open door, put his foot out onto nothing, and tumbled down the steps. The door swung open at the bottom. Andy looked up.

An unshaven man in army fatigues, with skin the color of weak tea, stared down. He was covered in some cologne so strong Andy coughed. Behind it lurked the scent of something else, something almost familiar. The man pointed a shotgun at Andy's face.

"He's a zombie! He's a damn zombie!"

The girl slammed her hand against the barrel and the blast went wide of Andy's head. A can exploded and a shower of green beans fell on Andy.

"He's an art teacher, shithead. He, like, saved my life back at school."

Andy pushed himself upright and staggered past them both. Inside, lights spun and strobed. Music played, a driving techno drone with a bass beat so strong it vibrated up through the floor and into his bones. Something intense called to him. His body hurtled toward the parquet floor, legs pumping, arms swinging.

"Well, he sure dances like your average white boy," the man in the fatigues said.

"I think he's kinda funky," the girl said.

"Dance," said Andy's voice. His body throbbed and jerked, a half-beat out of synch with the music but struggling to catch up. Drops of sweat formed on his forehead. The back of his hand rubbed at his cheeks and ended up damp.

Pounding came from an inside door.

Andy looked up and saw that the girl and the man in fatigues had stacked all the canned food atop one of the tables. The man in fatigues aimed his gun at the door.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

"S'Earl," the reply came.

Fatigues unbolted the lock. "Come on in, Earl. We've got something to eat now besides stale peanuts and chips."

Two new people entered the room—a skinny guy with wild hair and glasses, followed by a harried-looking, motherly woman.

"Who the hell's that?" the skinny guy, Earl, asked.

"New boyfriend," Fatigues said, jerking his thumb at the girl.

"Asshole," the girl said. Earl snickered, and the girl said, "You're both assholes."

"Ohmygod!" the new woman cried. "I know him. That's Andy Quayle. He teaches—he taught—at the school with me."

Andy's hand shot into the air and waved. "Hi, Marsha," said Andy's voice.

"Er, hi, Andy," she said in return.

He continued to dance. Something inside him thirsted.

"He's just, y'know, in shock or something," the girl said. "I mean, my God. Like, who isn't? Y'know?"

"Well," Marsha said, staring at Andy. She shrugged, and dropped her voice. "He's not exactly the brightest bulb in the socket. I have no clue how he survived this long."

"Sweet potatoes and green beans!" Earl whined. "Gimme that can opener. Where's the real food? Where's the frozen meatloaf?"

"Meat's the problem," the girl yelled at him. "Meat means murder—from now on we're all vegan!"

The man in the fatigues rolled his eyes.

"Aw, the hell with it," Earl said, spooning the dull brown mass into his mouth. "There's two dozen out front in the trap. We just checked."

"Maybe it's a trap for us," Fatigues said, scowling. "If this is all caused by that Chinese mind collective, the way I think, then they'll—"

"You're nuts!" Earl swallowed and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "It's the silicon synapse transplants, the big brain bulk-up gone bad. I told you people, I warned everybody against it, because you can't get smart for nothing. At least the neural deterioration lets us overwhelm their senses, confuse them."

All of them but the girl glanced over at Andy.

Marsha waved her hands. "No, that can't be right. That just doesn't explain the feeding frenzies or the way it happened so fast or the zombie cats we've found—"

"That cat did nothing but purr," the girl said. "It was harmless, and there was *no* reason for you guys to burn it!"

Earl sneered, but Fatigues said, "It could have been contagious. Maybe that's the vector that introduced the plague!"

"There's no plague," Earl growled with his mouth full.

"Has to be," Marsha said. "It's some bio-warfare thing designed to provoke a simple stimulus-response reaction. Now that most of the brains are deprived of the original defining stimulus, they're rewiring themselves."

"Whoa," the girl said. "You go, science lady."

"Except for the fact that it doesn't affect those of us smart enough—" Earl looked sideways at the girl "—or dumb enough not to go for the brain bulk-up in the first place."

Fatigues snorted. "They could be alien parasites for all I care." He clutched a grenade on his belt. "They watch TV, we

blow them up, God sorts them out. As long as *that* works, I like it. I like it a lot."

The music played on the whole time they argued, *thump-thumpa-thump-thumpa-thump-thumpa-thump*. . . . Andy heard a faint, muffled, arrhythmic banging that threw off his dancing.

"So, like, is there any hope for a cure?" the girl asked.

"If it starts evolving," Marsha said, "maybe it'll break down into something where we can be safe. We already see some evidence of that, with the—"

Earl slammed his fist on the table. "You think you know everything, but you don't! There's no cure, not until all those stupid people are wiped out!"

"I say it'll be over when we make it over," Fatigues said, shaking his gun. "So the sooner we get to work the better."

"Whatever," the girl said. She slumped in her chair. "I just wish it would end so—"

The outside door buckled and banged open. A dozen zombies poured inside, heads turning from side to side. The last one through the door carried a remote control at arm's length in front of him. The bald, pot-bellied man in the lead pointed toward the girl.

"Burg-her. Eat burg-her."

"Uh, uh," said the other zombies. They surged forward.

"I don't like this!" Fatigues screamed, kicking tables over. "I don't like this at all!"

Marsha dove for the other door, unlatching it and dragging Fatigues behind her. His shotgun blasted, knocking a few zombies off-balance and slowing their assault. Earl, rising from the fallen table, went down in a tangle of arms as he tried to follow them. He screamed, stabbing his spoon at their faces. Fluid splattered into the air.

Andy danced.

A bottle with a flaming wick flew from behind the bar and shattered on the pile. One of the zombies instantly became a torch, sizzling and popping, filling the air with the thick stench of burned flesh as he spun in circles, arms in the air. The girl stood behind the bar. She threw another bottle, and another. Zombies pulled the door open to pursue Marsha and Fatigues, or flee the flames.

And the vibrations pounded up through the floor into his legs, so Andy danced.

Sprinklers blossomed water, extinguishing the fires in a spray of steam and smoke. Andy lifted his mouth and swallowed as he danced, but his thirst didn't go away. Over by

the bar, Baldy attacked the girl. She batted his hands away with the bottles, wicks hanging wet and limp in the necks.

Conduits sparked on the wall; the lights flickered and quit. The music shuddered, died.

"Aaaarggh!" screamed Andy's voice.

He jumped forward, picked up a chair, and smashed it into the last place he'd seen Baldy. He hit something hard—the impact shivered up through his shoulders—that fell with a *thump* onto the floor. Andy pounded it again and again, until the chair broke.

A hand gripped Andy's elbow and he spun.

"Come on!" the girl said.

She led him toward a light trickling in through the door. He followed her up the steps to the alley. Out in the sunlight, everything seemed blindingly bright. He squinted and looked at the long shadows. Even the little convertible had one. On the ground, in the shadow, beside pieces of a skull, he saw keys. His hand reached out to grab the ring.

"What're you doing?" the girl shouted. She waited halfway down the alley.

"Nice car," said Andy's voice.

He climbed into the driver's seat and shoved the keys into the slot. He looked over his shoulder as the girl tossed the baby into the little back seat. The baby sucked quietly on its yellowed thumb.

"Didn't want to forget your kid," the girl said, "y'know, even if—y'know, like . . ."

She climbed over the door into the passenger seat as the engine revved to life. Her hair was plastered to her head. Her clothes hung tight to her skin. The sprinklers had washed off the overpowering scent of patchouli and underneath the lingering odor he smelled something else. Sweat. Skin. Something danced in his belly, where that old and nearly forgotten hunger sat.

He shifted into gear, pulling out of the alley and driving down the street.

She reached into her purse and held a cigarette to her lips. It shook in her fingers. As she foraged through the bag, he punched the dashboard lighter in. When it popped out, he held it up for her. She sucked on the cigarette and exhaled a little puff of clove-scented smoke.

He noticed the dimple in her chin. The tip of his tongue would fit perfectly in that dimple. He leaned toward her.

"Uh, uh!"

"Hey! Keep your eyes on the road!"

Andy's head snapped upright. He steered the car back between the lines.

"You're looking a little stiff there, teach." She laughed, and took another drag on her cigarette. "Like, you saved my life. Twice. Thanks." When he didn't say anything, she said, "So where do we go now?"

Andy stared at her cheek. It blushed pink like the western sky above the highway. "Into the sunset."

"Sounds good to me." She exhaled a stream of smoke. "Let's do it."

He jerked the steering wheel to cut across the boulevard, accelerated through a yellow light, and zipped up the entrance ramp. In the rearview mirror, he saw Andy's mouth grinning like a happy man.

TROUBLE

MARK McLAUGHLIN

WILMA WEBSITE: Yeah, I was a Deathquaker. I suppose I still am, but I really can't call myself one, since Dandy Voorhees isn't around anymore.

The Deathquakers without Dandy? Unthinkable! That would be like the Youthquakers from the sixties without Andy Warhol. Everybody knows that Dandy modeled his every movement, every utterance, every moment of his existence after Andy Warhol. Andy was an artist and a genius, and so was Dandy. But Dandy gave everything a dark twist—a Goth sensibility—so he could take it one step beyond and call it his own.

Andy had a hangout called The Factory, with everything spray-painted silver. Dandy had The Funeral Parlor, with everything draped in black velvet. Andy had his paintings of Campbell's Soup cans and his Brillo box sculptures. Dandy did the same thing with formaldehyde bottles and clove cigarette packs. Andy looked like a pathetic corpse—and Dandy. . . ?

Like I said, he had to take everything one step beyond.

KOKO FANTASTIC: I was Dandy's first friend in this town without pity, make no mistake! I was actually at the bus station when he arrived. But I wasn't there to see Dandy. I didn't even know who he was. No one did.

No, I was arguing with my boyfriend at the time, whose name I will not even allow to cross my lips, because he was leaving town and he still owed me at least three or four thousand dollars. I was just yelling and yelling at him, telling him I was going to hunt him down like a dog, when out of the corner of my eye I saw this scrawny little white-haired man-child with sunglasses, and skin three shades whiter than an onion. He was wearing some kind of tattered black-velvet suit that was falling apart at the seams.

I looked at that little piece of ghost-meat and said, "Freak, what's your story?"

He just pointed behind me and said, "Gee! That guy's getting away."

I turned around and, sure enough, the bus was pulling away from the curb. I just sank to the ground and started

crying, and damned if that skinny-assed albino shrimp didn't sit himself down next to me and start crying, too.

"Oh, now don't you start," I said. "You're so skinny, you'll leak out all your water and turn to dust. Why are you crying, anyway? You don't know me."

"I can't help it," he said in that soft ghost-voice of this. "Gee, you're just so beautiful I can't stand to see you so sad. What's your name?"

I told him my name. My real name, that is. He shook his head. "That's all wrong for you. Your name should be Koko Fantastic. A beautiful lady should have a beautiful name."

Well now, of course I know I'm beautiful. But sadly, most folks don't appreciate that fact. They think a woman over three hundred pounds has just gotta be . . . shall we say, less than pleasing to the eye. I thought little ghosty-boy was really sweet—and very observant—so I told him he could stay at my place for a few weeks. I took that name he gave me, and it turned my life around. His stay turned from weeks into years, but that was no problem, because by then, he was a force to be reckoned with, and I was high and mighty among his Chosen Ones—the Deathquakers.

ARABELLA CREAM: He came to town with ten bucks and a suitcase full of homemade Goth clothes and a headful of dreams about Andy Warhol. I forget where he was from, but it was some little ditchwater burg in the Midwest. Kansas? Iowa? Nebraska? One of those really flat states.

I was managing the Saunders Gallery and living in a crummy apartment building about six blocks away—a real rat's nest filled with crazy artists. But it was close to work and I hate to drive, so it was fine for me at the time. Plus, I had a little act going on at the coffee house across the street—performance poetry every Wednesday night—so it was a really convenient location. My neighbor across the hall was this hugely fat Southern gal, a massage therapist who had these totally impossible dreams of being a great actress. Dandy was staying with her. She'd found him at the bus station and so I guess she'd sort of adopted him. Like a stray kitten.

He started going around to all the ad agencies, trying to do freelance work for them. Andy Warhol did that back at the beginning of his career, you know. And like Warhol, he was as pale as a ghost, with patchy white hair, and so eager, so sensitive, so . . . unearthly. I had a couple agency friends at the time, and we called him Andy Wannabe for a few weeks. Dandy was into the whole Goth thing, but I guess that made

sense. If Warhol were alive today, he'd be loving that whole lace-trimmed doom scene.

I saw Dandy pretty often, because after all, he lived right across the hall. We'd talk every now and then. He couldn't hold a real conversation: He'd either just mumble a few words or else ramble on about his latest obsession. He showed me his drawings and paintings and photos. He wanted to buy some silk-screening equipment so he could do pictures that way—just like Warhol.

Eventually I let him do a show at the Saunders Gallery—half out of pity and half because he really did have some talent. Eventually he started hanging out with a group of artist types and he became their leader. Amazing, really, when you consider how socially awkward he was. But he did have a knack for finding people who could help him reach the next stage—whatever that stage might be.

XAVIER Y. ZERBA: I met Dandy at the coffee shop across the street from where he used to live. Goth men are usually so chic in their own grim, counter-culture way, but Dandy just looked ghoulish. But still, he had some definite magnetism, and I found myself spending more and more time with him, listening to him go on and on about all kinds of nonsense. He was convinced that he was the reincarnation of Andy Warhol. He said that living and dying as Warhol had given him unbelievable insights, and that this time, he was going to tilt everything at just the right angle, so that his work would live forever.

Back when he was Warhol, he said, he'd touched upon the ultimate truth when he did his remakes of those old Dracula and Frankenstein movies. The truth that lurks beyond life. He just hadn't lingered long enough on those themes—not long enough to learn anything substantial.

You know, when you think about it, it really is odd that a pop-culture guru like Warhol would ever have remade a couple of creaky horror movies like that. The things Dandy said gave the whole situation a perfectly logical rationale. I found myself nodding whenever I listened to him.

His work started selling pretty well at the Saunders Gallery. I hitched him up with a few other opportunities in the city—I know everybody who's anybody. If I don't know them, they aren't worth knowing. I introduced him to politicians, newspaper columnists, club owners—even the S&M cult-freaks who run The Absinthe Martini. I was the one who introduced him to Taffy Belasco. Crazy rich girl with too much time on her hands. She had loads of old-money friends, all perfectly eager

to throw cash at somebody if Taffy deigned to give that person the nod. She funded quite a lot of Dandy's projects—his silk-screening projects, his art films. She even paid the rent at The Funeral Parlor, before Dandy started making money hand over fist.

TAFFY BELASCO: Dandy was simply, simply, simply divine. I wasn't attracted to him in any sort of physical way—but really, that's just as well. Sex would have ruined our relationship. We had something better than sex. We had rapport.

He was like my daddy, my brother, sometimes even my mother, all rolled up into one. People used to tell me, "Taffy, he's just using you for your money. He's sucking on you like a leech. Wake up and smell the coffee!" But I would just laugh. For a crazy little man who looked like death, he made me feel so alive! So I helped him out. I was the one who helped him set up The Funeral Parlor. He was living with Koko Fantastic, but I thought he needed some additional workspace. Her place was just so small—but then, maybe it just looked small in comparison to her. At The Funeral Parlor, Dandy finally had enough room to really launch some fantastic projects. A lot of his little movies were made there. I paid the bills early on, and in Dandy's defense, he did eventually pay me back. With interest, which is something leeches never do. Eventually I let him study the Crowley papers—though, looking back, I suppose that might have been a mistake.

WILMA WEBSITE: Dandy once told me, "I can't be around common people. They make me nauseous." So he picked his own family of uncommon folks—the Deathquakers. He was our pseudo-Daddy, and eventually Taffy became our pseudo-Mommy. And The Funeral Parlor was our spooky treehouse.

Dandy and Taffy, Taffy and Dandy—the society columns were all abuzz at the time. Who is this pale mystery man squiring everyone's favorite spoiled-little-rich-girl hither and yon? I first met Dandy through Taffy. I was designing her web site, and she introduced us at a party. He took one look at me and said, "Those cheekbones! I've just got to put you in one of my movies!" He'd started making art films. At that point, he'd only made two or three. One of those early ones was called *Fish*—they showed it at that party. It was just forty minutes of Koko Fantastic chopping up dead fish. Every now and then she'd stop to read their guts. I guess some people can read fish-guts. Sounds like pretty boring reading, though. There can't be much of a plot.

KOKO FANTASTIC: I was the star of Dandy's first movie, *Fish*. I didn't even have to act. I just read entrails for him, since he'd always been fascinated by the fact that I could do that—that anyone could do that. My mama taught me how to do it, and her mama taught her, and I suppose her mama taught her, on down the line, all the way back to Eve.

That puny rich girl he used to hang out with, that Taffy, she's related to Aleister Crowley. You know who that is? Weird old black-magic guy. Born 1875, died 1947. A member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He was Taffy's great-uncle or something like that. He designed a set of mystic tarot cards once. Whenever Taffy couldn't make up her mind, she'd break out those cards and do a reading. One of those cards showed a golden woman holding a giant snake—or maybe she was wrestling with it, I couldn't tell. And there was this big eye shining golden light onto that snake. Yeah, I remember that one. It was the Universe card.

Taffy used to let Dandy look at Crowley's old papers—she has a bunch of them tucked away in the library at her papa's mansion. I said to Dandy one day, "What do you want with that kind of magic? It's too evil. Too powerful. Don't look at that stuff any more."

He said, "Ask the fish guts if it's okay for me to look at Crowley's work. I'll do a film of the reading. Gee! It'll be marvelous! Just marvelous!"

Well, I've always wanted to be an actress, so I said, "Sure," even though I didn't think people would be too interested in watching me read fish entrails. But I did it, and I'll tell you this: The fish-guts never lie.

The guts told me that death would come walking, and that's just what happened.

ARABELLA CREAM: Dandy started making those art films of his, and before long, they were the talk of the town. Everybody wanted to be in a Dandy Voorhees movie, just like everybody wanted to buy a Dandy Voorhees painting or go to a Dandy Voorhees party. The whole city was all wrapped up in him.

After he'd been making those movies for about four or five years, I said to him one day, "Dandy, I've been good to you. Why don't you put me in one of your movies?"

He fixed his goofy stare on me and said, "Gee! What a great idea! How about this? We'll remake *Macbeth*, except we'll make it modern and interesting. You and Koko and Taffy can be the witches in the big cauldron scene. Xavier can be Macbeth. How about that?"

I had to bite my tongue to stop from laughing. Hmmm, apparently Shakespeare wasn't interesting, but Dandy was going to take care of that. Then he said, "You won't have to memorize any Shakespeare. Actors should never memorize anything. They should always put the lines in their own words. You know what might be fun? I'll see if we can work in the Chant of the All-Seeing Eye somehow."

I told him, "Never heard of it."

"No one has. But, gee! It's really exciting!" he said. "It's something Crowley picked up during his travels. He found the original inscription in the tomb of the Red Pharaoh. He was going to publish a whole book about it, but he only ever got around to writing a couple chapters—Taffy has them up at her house. Crowley realized you had to combine science and religion to attain the ultimate truth of the universe, and the Chant of the All-Seeing Eye was the way to do it. The chant reconfigures the brain so that it can see beyond good and evil. And the best part is, we'll be the first people since ancient times to use it, since Crowley never got around to publishing it."

Something seemed wrong with what Dandy was saying. "So you're saying this Crowley guy never used this chant thingy himself?"

Dandy nodded. "Yep."

"Even though he's the one who discovered it? Even though he was writing a book about it?"

He nodded again. "Yep."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

Dandy just shrugged. "Gee, why should it? Maybe he never got around to doing it. A lot of people are like that. They mean to do stuff, but then they just forget."

Dandy may have been an artistic genius, but, you know, that doesn't mean he was smart.

XAVIER Y. ZERBA: Dandy was going to make a movie called *The Legend of Macbeth and the All-Seeing Eye*, and he asked me to play the part of Macbeth. But as it turned out, I had to be out of town on the weekend he was starting production. He was disappointed that I wouldn't change my plans for him, so he said in a really bitchy voice, "Fine, I'll play Macbeth myself."

I was a little pissed off myself, since he was giving me so much attitude, so I said, "While you're at it, change the name. Your movies aren't long enough to have big titles like that."

"Well, gee! What should I change it to?" he whined.

"Use something from the show." I thought over what little

I knew about *Macbeth*, and finally suggested, “Well, there’s a line that says, ‘boil your oil, toil and trouble’—or something like that. Call it *Toil and Trouble*. Or maybe just *Trouble*.”

Dandy’s face lit up like a jack-o-lantern. “Gee! That’s a great title! Thanks, Xavier. I’ll call it *Trouble*.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You do that.”

TAFFY BELASCO: Well, you know I simply adored Dandy. But *Trouble* certainly lived up to its name. I wasn’t too happy with Dandy while he was making that picture. How was I to know it would be his last?

The problem was, Dandy got it into his head to play Macbeth himself, and he was terrible. I mean, he’d recruited some pretty far-out characters to play in some of his films, but he was about ten times worse than any of them. I tried to help. I told him: “Dandy, I’m sure Macbeth never used the word Gee.” But, of course, that advice went right over his head, since he wanted all the actors to say the lines however they pleased.

The sets were just hideous. Most of his movies had funky, kitschy sets—usually rooms in The Funeral Parlor, and sometimes steam-rooms, alleys, fire escapes painted purple, you name it. But for this one, he decided to build a cemetery out of cardboard, like in the movie *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. He built it in a big, smelly warehouse—the stink was awful, a nauseating combination of burned plastic and ammonia.

Plus, Dandy was the only person running the camera, which meant he had to rush in and out of the picture all the time, to change the angle whenever somebody moved too much. Ridiculous! He’d say, “It’ll get fixed in editing.” He kept talking about this chant he was going to do as part of the movie, but he said he’d be doing it last, when we weren’t around. He wouldn’t explain why.

He really dragged out the witch-and-cauldron scene—that probably takes up half of *Trouble*. I’ve never seen the whole thing, so I wouldn’t know. The other parts of the movie didn’t take that long to shoot, since the rest was just a super-abbreviated version of *Macbeth* with a few scenes of a homeless woman doing some sort of spastic go-go dance. He saw some weird old woman dancing outside of the warehouse, so he put her in the movie as Ophelia. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that Ophelia was from *Hamlet*.

So finally, when it came time for him to do the big chant scene, he just sent all of us home. Just like that. He told Arabella and me to take the homeless woman with us. He gave

us twenty bucks and asked us to buy her dinner somewhere. All the frustration I'd felt making that movie melted away as soon as Dandy asked us to do that. That was so sweet of him. So we bought that old lady a steak dinner at a nice little diner. And while she was eating, she said, "That guy, he's the gate. He's gonna open the gate." She said that about five times.

Finally Arabella said, "He's the gate *and* he's gonna open the gate? What does that mean? He's gonna open himself?"

The old woman nodded and said, "Exactly." As soon as she finished eating, she got up, said, "See ya!" and walked out of the restaurant. We never saw her again, which is probably just as well.

WILMA WEBSITE: Dandy died filming the chant scene of *Trouble*. And apparently he'd made some secret arrangements with some people. The camera and sets were gone, but the body was still in the warehouse. Two months later, the film premiered at a Goth art gallery called The Absinthe Martini.

The body had been discovered by some guy who'd been looking for old copper wire to sell. Dandy didn't have any ID on him—typical Dandy—but he had my business card in his pocket. I'd given it to him the day before, since my phone number had changed. So the copper-wire guy called me on a cell phone! I told him to call the police, too. Then I drove straight down to the warehouse. It wasn't that far—only twenty minutes away from my studio. I arrived ten minutes before the police. The copper-wire guy was gone by then.

The body had turned an awful shade of sky blue. I identified it as Dandy's, and answered a few questions about him for the police—and right in the middle of the questioning, the body scrambled to its feet in a jerky, puppetlike way, and Dandy croaked out, "Geel!" in a sad, dry, raspy voice. His eyes were shining with bright golden light. An officer stepped right up to him, and Dandy seized him by the throat and actually fired golden beams out of his eyes, burning two holes into the officer's face.

It was the damnedest thing.

Another officer started firing at him, so Dandy shot those golden beams at him, too—and burned two spots as big as quarters into the guy's throat. He ran over and started chewing on the second cop, who was very good looking. We're talking Brad Pitt good looking.

Then Dandy slowly turned to stare at me, and started licking his lips. Licking his pale blue lips with a dark blue tongue. So, of course, I turned and ran. I'm no idiot.

KOKO FANTASTIC: The Absinthe Martini is run by a weird little clique that's into S&M, so none of us Deathquakers ever went there, even though it was Goth. Xavier knew those folks, but even he never went to their place. No sirree. But I guess Dandy went there. They were the ones who ended up with *Trouble*, so I suppose he had some kind of thing with them. An agreement. An alliance. I don't know what you'd call—what they had. I'm sure they were the ones who took away the sets for the movie after Dandy died. They left the body because they knew what it was going to become.

Eventually the police figured out a way to load Dandy into a truck and take his zombie ass away. That's what he was, you know—a zombie. And not your garden variety, me-want-brains, *Dawn of the Dead*-style zombie. He was some kind of freaky primal thing, cooked up out of that damned Aleister Crowley magic.

Poor Dandy. Poor man-child.

Poor thing.

ARABELLA CREAM: That chant, that's what did it to him. But you know, I don't think it did what it was supposed to do. That Dandy—he never could stick to a script.

But evidently his rendition of the chant was caught on film. I can just see him, setting up the camera, getting everything ready, then running in front of it to do his bit. Mr. Do-It-Yourself. None of us Deathquakers went to the premiere of *Trouble*—we never went to The Absinthe Martini and, besides, we weren't invited. But it's just as well. The film turned everyone in the audience into zombies. Which leads me to wonder how the film was edited. . . ? Maybe different people took turns editing different parts. Maybe it was edited out of sequence. Or maybe zombies edited it. I don't know.

You know, I'm really sick of art. Running the Saunders Gallery was hard enough, having to deal with whiny diva artists. But having to contend with art film zombies—that's just too much. One of these days I'm just going to move to some small town, find me a hunky gas station attendant, and settle down to a quiet, fat, frumpy life with a few brats and a station wagon.

I'll even start using my original first name again—Darla.

XAVIER Y. ZERBA: You know, I was supposed to go to the premiere of *Trouble*. The gang at The Absinthe Martini even sent me an invitation. They were a strange little group. Pale, tattooed men who always wore leather. And that was management—you

should've seen the bartenders. All of them had names like Toad-Scar and Crow-Claw and Barbed-Wire Joe. They'd have been the first to admit that they loved stirring up—trouble! I guess that made the movie's title especially apropos.

I always told the other Deathquakers I never went to The Absinthe Martini, but yeah, sure I did . . . all the time. Just for fun. I took Dandy once, just for fun. I think he had more fun than I realized.

But I wasn't able to make it to the premiere because I was sick—stomach flu, puking and diarrhea all night. I've been pretty lucky. If I'd have played Macbeth in that movie, or gone to that premiere, I'd be a zombie now.

There were probably about a couple hundred people at the premiere—The Absinthe Martini can be standing room only on a good night. Now all those folks are zombies, roaming the streets day and night, blasting chunks out of people with their eye rays. I hear some of them have managed to turn other folks into zombies—not sure how, but I'm not sticking around to find out.

Luck only lasts for so long, so I'm getting out while the getting is good. I'll be on the first plane taking off tomorrow morning. I don't even care where it's going.

I've had a lot of fun in this city. Now I'll have fun in another city. Sans the living dead.

TAFFY BELASCO: Papa has connections, so this morning, I asked him to find out what the authorities are doing to Dandy's zombie. He made a few calls, pulled a few strings—Papa's wonderful that way. He found out that Dandy is being tested at some sort of institution. They've got him locked up in a concrete room, and they're running all sorts of tests on him—which isn't easy, since he can fire those eye beams. In fact, Papa's taking me to the institute next week. He said I can watch Dandy on a monitor. Dandy on TV, at long last! Yesterday he managed to turn one of the guards into a zombie. He recited that chant to him. So Papa said he'll have them turn down the sound on the monitor while we're watching Dandy.

The police are having a terrible time hunting down all those zombies. The horrid things don't care about bullets at all, and they can shoot that burning light out of their eyes. They're kind of like movie projectors, aren't they? They shoot out beams that make a lasting impression! It really was naughty of Dandy to use that Crowley chant to make so much mischief. So much trouble. *Trouble* begetting trouble. I wonder

if he really knew what he was doing? This whole affair stinks of an experiment gone wrong.

But you know what's the funny part of this whole mess? Well, of course, the zombies attack anyone who attacks them—that's human nature, even if the human in question is one of the living dead. But if they're left to their own devices, they'll only attack and eat good-looking people. It isn't what you gnaw, it's who you gnaw! Isn't that a stitch? The media has really picked up on that—especially since zombies have already attacked two health spas and a beauty salon. So ugly people and fatties have nothing to worry about. Ha, I guess that means Koko Fantastic is safe!

The other night, the Channel 17 Action News gal, Sharla Fontaine, was doing a report on the whole zombie scene from the street when suddenly one of those creatures rounded the corner—and marched right past her. Oh, but she was flabbergasted! She practically threw herself at it. Did everything but stick her head in its mouth. But that zombie just wasn't having any of that, thank you very much! It was delightful! But you know, I've always thought she should do something about those teeth of hers. And those crow's-feet! A little Botox wouldn't hurt.

It seems those awful creatures have a lot of Dandy in them. Not his sweet side, which I must admit was pretty puny most of the time, but certainly his discerning nature. So maybe the meek will inherit the Earth after all, if these zombies take over and the beautiful people are turned into fodder.

Of course I still have all the Crowley papers. I've checked, and the chant is still there. Dandy didn't steal it—he must have just copied it. I bet he screwed it up. He probably left out some words when he was writing it down. And knowing him, he probably added some lines and said “Gee!” too many times while reciting it for the movie.

I'm tempted, you know. I really am. Tempted to go into the library, dig out those papers again, and recite that chant perfectly. Perfectly. Perfectly.

Just to see what happens. Or rather, what's meant to happen.

But not today.

I'm sure there will come a day when—horror of horrors!—my beauty will start to fade. My curves will sag. My limbs will ache, and my eyes will bag.

Maybe then.

NAKED SHALL I RETURN

TOM PICCIRILLI

Decker found himself on campus without knowing how he'd gotten back from the hospital.

His hand hurt like hell and he wondered what they'd done to him—needles? Cauterization? Maybe not that bad. He hoped he still had his thumb. But wait, it really hadn't been about him at all, now had it? There was something else. He looked down to see himself clutching his fist so tightly that his fingers had turned a bluish-purple.

It took a solid thirty seconds and all his willpower to force his hand open again. Decker held a crushed ball of white tape.

That's right, he thought, my mother is dead.

The slow, forced rhythm of his mom's chest had become pure torture, her body mechanically heaving as if in continuous death throes, the machine in control. It had been a long battle, but they didn't know with what. Cancer? Poison? Infection? The four dripping IVs of antibiotics looped around the room, tangling together.

The heart monitor began to squeal as her pulse dipped below the line of no return. They had told Decker that would happen. The respirator continued with its hateful regularity, IVs still pouring a flood of worthless medications into her. The lights on the machinery flashed, an abrupt beeping growing louder. Her pulse staggered on for another moment, fighting for the last second of life. He would've screamed but was afraid that, if he opened his mouth, nothing but unstoppable laughter would've come out.

The screens flashed numbers that faltered and skipped, her heart finally giving up as she flatlined. The respirator continued to force her to breathe even after she was gone. They turned off the machines and left him in there alone to say his final goodbyes.

With only a slight hesitancy, Decker had leaned over the bed, smoothed his mother's matted graying hair aside, and kissed her brow, which was moist from the last of her sweat.

He murmured for a moment, saying words that had no meaning, before he realized she was dead but staring at him—blinking—trying to talk.

"Ma?"

She was unable to speak because the respirator was still sealed over her mouth. He removed the tape and drew out the tubes, and then, with an alarmingly clear and mellifluous voice, she told him something he did not want to know.

He didn't remember what it was, but realized it would come to him, eventually.

+ + +

The funeral was well attended.

She had been a beloved professor for twenty-five years and it looked like many of her students from the last two decades had shown up. So had the dean of science and most of the biology department. Decker's professors stared at him as he stood beside the casket; they touched his shoulder, muttered condolences. He tried to recognize their faces but was unable to differentiate one from another. These people barely held any specific identities now, and he couldn't decide if he enjoyed the change or not. They moved like water and shadow around him.

Someone grabbed his wrist, as if in a gesture of care or friendship, but Decker felt strong fingers pressing into his pulse. Checking his heart rate.

They're worried about me.

Perhaps it was true. But why?

+ + +

Music, light, and laughter spilled out of the house and into the street. His roommate, Herbie, was throwing another party. Herbie weighed in at about two hundred and twenty, mostly muscle with just a jiggle of beer belly—surfer's tan, beatnik goatee that had come back into vogue, blond hair just an inch out of a crewcut. He'd been a senior for three years, thanks to a carefully orchestrated and constantly shifting series of majors. The latest was Renaissance poetry but next semester he planned to switch to chemical engineering out of the appalling fear of actually graduating.

Herbie just didn't give a damn yet and probably never would. He used any occasion to get girls over, booze himself into oblivion, push the macho valve wide and hold it open. These kind of nights always ended in a couple of fights, some overturned furniture, and busted glass. Without even knowing why, Herbie liked to piss off campus security. The house was north of Main Street, officially off school property, but in reality they were only fifty yards from the Science Building and night classes were in session until ten. Herbie pushed because he knew—had always known—he could get away with it thanks to Decker. To Decker's mom.

Now that she was gone, though, nobody was sure exactly what might happen next. It didn't slow the party down any.

This might just lead to somewhere new. Decker walked in, grabbed a bottle of gin, and took three long gulps from it. The heat quickly worked down his throat and into his chest, until something inside felt like it had slid out between his ribs. Faces whirled by at high speed, horse teeth at all angles, people calling him by name, asking him question after question as they pawed at his neck, his arms.

Swarming, they carried him along. The hard ridge of his shoulder muscles tensed further. He felt buoyant, oblivious, and ephemeral, but worried just the same. A strengthening current ran through the house. Planting his feet, he fought against its increased pull. A girl with a high-voltage smile pressed her tits into him and he let out an absurd giggle before backing up the staircase, step by step, and heading toward his bedroom on the second floor.

Holding court, Herbie sat in the middle of the hall, surrounded by five freshman. He was talking animatedly and playing well to his audience. That kind of quicksilver chatter had a way of hypnotizing the kids. He kept feeding them alcohol, god of the minute, eyeing every girl and making his final choice on who he planned to hunt down into bed. This little redhead in the summer dress, her pale knees flashing as she sipped from her beer and answered a question he'd put to her. The current was even stronger up here and Decker had to lean back against the wall and brace himself. Herbie listened thoughtfully and made a comment that broke the rest of them up. You could almost pluck the energy out of the air. Herbie drew magic from the crowd.

Tracy, Herbie's last girlfriend, had already been kicked loose. Decker had liked her a lot—shy, with an embarrassed grin that always hit him in the right way, witty and just self-effacing enough to show you she had a lot of confidence. She'd only been around for a couple of months when Herbie had come, pretending to be humble, with his hand out. He needed money for an abortion; Decker had given him the three hundred bucks, then watched through the blinds as Tracy silently climbed into her Honda and pulled away from the curb into angry traffic. Decker hadn't seen her since, anywhere, but he thought about her more than he probably should have.

Sometimes it happened like that.

The redhead leaned forward and whispered, smiling drunkenly, flashing a pierced tongue, and Herbie bent toward her until their foreheads were touching. Plucking his chin, Herbie

cracked wise, which brought up a befuddled giggle from her pink throat.

Decker slid by without a word and let the drag sweep him into his room, flopped face down on his mattress.

The dead kid he'd been seeing the past few days peeked out from beneath the bed again: pale with intensely dark circles beneath his eyes and around those dry blue lips, coarse brown hair with a cowlick that would never flatten out. His nostrils were crusted, teeth almost a glowing green. One small hand appeared and the kid waved at Decker.

Decker waved back.

He laid on the bed and listened for some noise coming from under him—malicious titters, threats, hisses promising further horror—but the kid mostly kept quiet, murmuring to himself on occasion. Decker slept.

+ + +

In the morning, the little redhead made breakfast and cleaned the place up some. She seemed equally excited and mortified as she scurried around with rags and a sponge, bagging trash and hauling it to the curb. Decker introduced himself and she told him her name, which he couldn't hold onto. He asked her to repeat it, which she did, and again it slithered away even while he tried to grab hold.

Herbie read the sports section and paused in his meal to occasionally grunt at Decker or the girl. Her voice was so soft that Decker thought she wasn't responding until he looked up and saw her lips moving. When he was finished eating, she took his plate away and washed it, left everything in the drain board, waited for Herbie to kiss her goodbye—he didn't—and flitted out the door to class.

"Nice girl," Decker said.

Herbie had used up all his personality last night and wouldn't recover it for another day or two. "Yeah."

"What happened to the last one?"

"Which?"

"Tracy, I think. I don't know."

"You almost sound judgmental."

"Maybe I almost am."

That got a laugh from both of them. Herbie shrugged and cracked his neck, patted down his stomach and said, "Hell, no—not you. That's why this is the perfect set-up. You're the best roommate I've ever had. No gripes, no arguments, no fighting. We ever have a fight?"

"No."

"See? That's friendship in action. Impeccability." He yawned, went to the fridge, and took a pull from a bottle of beer. It made him gag but he went in for a second sip, then poured the rest down the sink. "Good thing she took out the garbage. I think we've got rats. They're bold, too. Last night one was scurrying around in my closet. You heard 'em yet?"

Decker told him, "I need to get to the lab."

+ + +

Warm noon winds swept down through the pines, washing the scents of car exhaust and ponderosa over him. He used his mother's keys and let himself through the locked biology department wing and into her lab. They'd cleared out her research, experiments, controls and trials, and cleaned the desk of her computer and notebooks. Decker wasn't worried; he'd find everything again.

Opening the blinds an inch, he looked out at people walking across the quad, all the jubilant activity and customary sounds tugging at him. Something remained missing. He still had trouble recognizing some faces. The dean—he thought it must be the dean—stood on the sidewalk so stately and imposing, an embodiment of such energy and force, that Decker couldn't even remember the man's name anymore.

The breach in his memories hinged on some trauma—perhaps the death of his mother, perhaps something else. Decker started to tremble wildly before the window, agitated but enraged, trying to ride out his frustrations as far removed as he could be. The planes and angles of the dean's features drifted even while Decker watched, until the man was faceless. It was so odd to see only a void left where the man's eyes should be, that black vortex drawing daylight itself into the depths, until Decker nearly began to hyperventilate.

He shut the blinds. Sometimes the dean would talk to him but Decker couldn't hear anything, only a humming that filled his mind and caused lapses. He'd ferret out the anguish later, when he had more time.

Why didn't they care that he still had the keys?

Jesus, his hand hurt. This time he didn't have to look, but simply loosened his grip on the ball of tape. Control could be learned. We all must adapt.

Scanning the room he saw that Professor Mason had been moved into Mom's lab. He'd set up a few trials and tests that appeared just nasty enough to be bio-warfare and used by the military—bogus assortments of Nerve, Blood, Blister, and Incapacitating agents, including cholinesterase inhibitors. The

schmuck didn't think far enough ahead to bother keeping any of the atropine and pralidoxime chloride antidotes on hand though. Bad fake out. So what were they really hiding?

Decker opened two vials and poured their contents into his palm: saline solution, plankton, some brine shrimp and simple agar, a waxy mix of protein and hydrocarbons. Made for a weak implication toward ecological attack, a cut-link in the food chain. Would some assembly of generals in D.C. buy Mason's treatise on manipulation of benign microorganisms genetically altered to produce toxins and pathogens?

Sure, why not?

Okay, Decker thought, let's start with him and see where it goes.

+ + +

Mason stood about 5' 4", a gnat of a septuagenarian whose high-pitched, whiny voice did a fair impression of incessant buzzing. Decker had taken Mason's algorithms for computational biology class in sophomore year. The class had focused on RH-mapping as a Hidden-Markov Model, programming algorithm for constructing phylogenetic trees from quartets, and clone intersection matrices and interval graphs. General study of the natural growth and spread of life.

The guy really didn't know much. Maybe he was merely a front for whatever was going on, a nonessential and expendable instrument.

When Mason walked into the office, clutching a cup of tea in his tiny white fist, Decker was seated at the desk. He sat with one heel on the edge of the bottom drawer, tilted back in the chair the same way his mother always did. Campus noises wafted in: bicycle wheels spinning, soft tramp of footsteps on the quad sidewalks, and girlish laughter rising on the breeze. He'd replaced the vials and sat as if inspecting them, thoughtful, inquisitive, somebody really putting all the pieces together.

Mason said, "You shouldn't be here."

"Why not?"

"It might be dangerous."

That was sort of a cute answer, with just a touch of threat to it, or perhaps a warning. "For who?"

"All of us. Any of us."

"Where are my mother's notes?"

"I don't know."

Professor Mason's lack of creativity had a certain genius to it—you just couldn't get a guy into a corner with answers like that. "Are you working with the dean on your latest project?"

"Project?" Mason said, sipping the tea, really rolling it around in his mouth. "The dean? No, not really."

It almost made Decker smile. The power of stupid. Except Mason wasn't actually stupid, he simply projected dull.

"What the hell are you people up to?"

"Ask your mother," Mason told him.

With a growl, Decker rose. He would've broken the bastard's jaw for the quip except, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make a fist.

✦ ✦ ✦

Signs and portents ruled everyone's lives. If you could understand the symbols you could figure out the larger picture, the sphere you had been placed into, the path you walked.

If you could understand the symbols.

Decker couldn't be sure how important any of this was to them. So far, it looked like not much. He had to make some sort of play and see if they were willing to try to stop him.

It took only a couple of minutes to come up with something natural enough that would still provide him with a chance to learn what he needed to know. While Herbie sat in front of the TV with a pizza box on his lap, watching a four million dollar a year runner get tagged out at third, Decker handed him a printed list and said, "Let's throw another party."

"Sure." Herbie picked a drying piece of pepperoni off his chest and perused the names. "The hell is this? Sending out invitations?" He flipped through the three pages. "You want to ask our professors? The dean? You've got the entire science faculty here."

"And graduate teaching assistants."

"Why?"

"I'm trying to prove a theory."

Herbie had considered a biology major once and realized the power a word like *theory* held over scientists. "What kind?"

"It's sort of involved."

"Military shit, right?"

Decker was genuinely surprised. "What makes you say that?"

"Maybe I'm just paranoid."

"Or not."

"I mean, who the hell knows what they make in there. The army relies on dweebs like Professor Mason to dream up ways to slaughter nations nobody's ever visited. Mason couldn't get laid in high school and he's still pissed about it, thinking up ways to kill all the chicks who laughed at his scrawny

chest. Nerve gas, toxins. I bet that fucker has a hand in it all, and plays with himself every time he gets a new batch of plutonium."

"You might be right."

But that was the end of the rant. Taking a bite out of another slice of pie, Herbie sort of deflated. "Hell, they'll never show up."

"It'll be nice if that's the case, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

Herbie gave Decker the slow once-over, squinting, the hinges of his jaw tightening as he ground up the cheese and sauce and swallowed hard. "You've gotten really weird lately, man."

"Invite the little redhead, too."

"Who?"

"The girl who made us breakfast a couple of days ago and took out the trash."

"Oh, her. Why?"

"Why not?"

"I never called her back." Perhaps it made him feel bad, a hint of chagrin crossing his face. "You actually gonna be around for this one?"

"Long enough to see who shows up," Decker said.

By now Herbie had started to like the idea, glancing through the oil-spotted pages again. "I wonder how rowdy these science fucks will get after a keg."

✦ ✦ ✦

The evening of the party Decker sat at the top of the stairs and made them all come to him.

One after another they ascended the steps and took his hand, thanking him for the invitation. They swelled around the living room and spoke to the other guests but not to each other. The dean, without eyes, brought bean dip. Carstairs had made a salad. Beyond them, the others offered their gifts and set them on the counters and tables around the apartment: Harrington, Devaul, Lowry, Wilson, Remford, Reece, Connelly. He knew the names and knew the faces, but wasn't certain he was matching them up correctly. It didn't matter, for his purposes they were only parts of one entity. Mason brought five pounds of shrimp and cocktail sauce in an ice-filled bucket.

With five beers in him, Herbie was in a playful mood, actually dancing a little and hugging just about everybody. He

eventually pounded up the steps and sat beside Decker so that they were wedged tightly between the banister and the wall. Ruminating aloud about his fears of possible graduation, Herbie sprang up and returned several times. He commented on the women he'd slept with and those that had so far avoided his charms.

But his voice changed harshly, as if he'd been speared in the guts, when he cried, "*Jesus.*"

"What?"

"That lady." Herbie jutted his goatee, indicating the front door. "I know that lady. She's a doctor—but—"

"Lisa McGivern," Decker said. "She teaches experimental microbial genetics and metabolic biochemistry."

"No, man, she's a doctor, I mean . . . I took Tracy to her. To have an abortion. She did the abortion, man."

Without reason, Decker began to tremble again, the anger coming on much too fast and strong. Somehow, he understood that she was connected to the symbols that defined who he was. God damn it, his hand hurt. The tape. What did the tape mean?

"What are you saying?" Decker asked.

"What do you mean what am I saying? At the clinic, in town. It was her. She did the operation."

The rest of the night sped into a black blur of motion. Herbie ate most of the shrimp, threw up, and passed out at around midnight. After six shots of Jack Daniels, the redhead had come out of her shell. She took off her top and ran through the halls with nipples thick enough to break somebody's rib. A friend finally got her under control and put her to bed in Herbie's room while he dry heaved on the kitchen floor.

Decker sat up there and stared down, and they watched him from below, silently.



Curtains billowing, almost swaying around the room, like the skirt of his mother when he was a child. She walked him around the yard because he was too sick to play with the other children. Nauseous, fingers always quivering, the lethargy and infirmity so hard to overcome.

A couple of hours before dawn, the dead kid tugged at Decker's ankle. By the spatters of moonlight Decker watched the boy crouching at the foot of the bed, now pulling lightly at the sheets. Another figure hunkered there, as well—a dead little girl, maybe three or four years old at most. Her blond hair lay silver threaded in the dimness, but he could see she was

smiling. She crept forward, bent over him, and placed her cheek against his knee. The iciness of it was searing but also comforting, like the cold compresses his mother once used to swab away his fevers.

"Hello," Decker said.

"Hi," she answered.

"Who are you?"

A sweet smile, showing that she had all her teeth. "I'm your sister."

"I don't have a sister."

"Uh huh," she sang. "Yeah you do, lots. Yuh huh, and lots of brothers, too."

The dead boy let out a soft chuckle of acknowledgment.

"Take me home with you," Decker said.

"This is our home. You're our home."

"Show me where you were before you came here to stay under my bed."

She cocked her head at him and pursed her lips, thinking it over. She laid her cheek against his leg again and nodded. "Okay."

My brothers and sisters.

They each stood and took one of his hands and led him into the corridor and down the stairs. They walked past Herbie, still unconscious and curled next to the oven. The boy bent and stroked Herbie's hair, and whispered in his ear.

Decker remembered what his mother had said to him, after she was already lying there, dead, in the hospital bed: *Take care of your brothers and sisters.*

✦ ✦ ✦

They walked across the street to the science building. Every door of the biology department was open now, even the ones that Decker had previously needed his mother's keys to unlock. So he was expected. Good. Maybe it would make things easier for once. They swept farther and farther into the bowels of the building, until at last he didn't recognize his surroundings anymore. He'd spent six years of his life here and had stood inside this place a thousand times before, but only at this moment did he understand how ignorant he'd always been.

Of biology.

Of his own mother.

The kids soon ushered him into a factory of rotting flesh.

The machinery around them beeped and pinged and hummed, more alive than any of the expecting women in their

beds, readied to give birth. His professors walked up and down the aisles with mechanical efficiency, wearing light blue scrubs and rubber-soled slippers. Their faces switched from one body to another, the ebony whirlpools of their empty eye sockets still pulling at him. No one spoke and Decker knew why—the ward was a tomb.

He counted fifty pregnant corpses before he gave up, unable to handle the overwhelming image before him. His knees weakened and he nearly toppled over. Dead women with lifeless gazes, mouths drooping a little, some of them chuckling softly. Decker turned to see blackening wrists strapped to the rails of hospital beds, most of the corpses with their legs spread and affixed in gleaming stirrups. The same kind of tangled IVs that had coiled around his own dying mother encompassed the ward like webbing.

No respirators this time. No respirators because they didn't breathe. Maybe that's why he'd held onto the tape for so long, because it proved his mother had once been alive, before this current phase of responsibility and permanence.

She was there along with the rest of them, with distended belly wobbling, roiling, and stewing, stuffed full. She stared blindly at him and he stared blindly back. He'd always believed life to be a bloody proceeding—red and wet and sanguine, loud, full of laughter and weeping. But they'd washed the bloated women down, cleaned the fetuses—rendering them cold, naked, and fresh—then replaced them with ease into the surgically widened birth canals. His teachers were busily re-implanting the fetuses taken by Lisa McGivern at the abortion clinic.

And what the dead boy—Decker's brother—had said to Herbie when they walked by him curled up and passed out next to the oven—yes, now it came into focus and made sense. The kid had said, "*Daddy.*"

If you could understand the symbols, you could figure out the larger picture, the sphere you had been placed into, the path you walked.

If you could understand the symbols.

So the boy had eventually come home after Herbie and Tracy had gone for the abortion. He knew his home. He knew his father.

Mason zipped up beside Decker and stood there almost buzzing, carrying files and notes that he thrust forward. He quivered with impatience and expectation. "We're going to die as a race—"

"Shut the fuck up."

“—but this ensures that we’ll live on even after we’re extinct. As a neoteric species.”

Decker couldn’t help himself. His vision grew too bright at the edges and he swooned for a moment, had to hold himself up by reaching out and grabbing onto one of the bed railings. A corpse woman tugged at her bonds and her fingers fluttered against his own, but he didn’t draw away. Both of them had the same bluish-purple tint to their skin. “You crazy bastard.”

“It was your mother’s idea.”

“I don’t believe that,” Decker said, but of course he realized it was true. “This isn’t—” He couldn’t even say the word.

“This is the highest form of science. She developed the serum. The entire process you see, actually, including much of the technology whereby the dead could live on in this capacity. She saw the potential and extrapolated the full usage of terminations. The walking dead, this new breed, will carry on when the earth is uninhabitable for the rest of us.”

“Terminations?”

Buzzing louder, an insanely trapped insect battering wings against Decker’s chest, Mason asked, almost begging now, “Don’t you understand? Don’t you? The world is becoming increasingly toxic to us. The impurities, contamination, pollution, radiation, and poisons are annihilating us. We can’t survive much longer under such virulent conditions. Recent pathogens include streptococcus S23F, a newly discovered naturally occurring strain of—”

“Pneumonia,” Decker said. “Resistant to at least six of the most commonly used antibiotics.”

“Yes. And the flourishing awareness of new biological epidemics and pestilence prompted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to publish *The Journal of Emerging Infectious Diseases*. Ingenuously occurring biological hazards that threaten humanity are increasing and growing more varied every day. Our latest projections have us completely dying out within the next six decades.”

Algorithms for computational biology. Decker took his mother’s files and checked the pages, running some quick statistics. Mason still didn’t know shit. Mom had worked in a frenzy for a reason. She gave them thirty-five years, tops, before mankind died out.

“My mother—”

“She—they—can only perform in this capacity for six months or so after primary expiration, before final stage organ failure and total cessation of body functions.”

So what was his mom now—merely necrotic tissue? “What

of the flora, the fauna? What happens when every other living creature dies off?"

"That's all superfluous. The new breed can survive consume, ingest, and subsist solely on themselves."

Decker tried to think it through. Humans were heterotrophs, their diet included organic molecules of carbohydrates, proteins, nucleic acids, vitamins, minerals, and other macro- and micronutrients. His mother's serum was heavy on polymers of monomer sub-units: starch, proteins, triglycerides, amino acids, nucleotides.

She had been making humans more nourishing and digestible to themselves.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Decker groaned, clutching his belly, fighting not to hunch over and fall to his knees. "You're creating a vacuous biosphere that devours itself."

"Out of necessity. No food chain, just . . . food."

Not birth at all. No. No. Parasitic symbiosis. "And the gestation period for the . . . the new breed?"

The words brought a sorrowful smile to Mason's lips. "Very brief. Twenty-two, twenty-three days."

"The same as rats," Decker said.

The machinery continued to bleat while the women panted. Mason looked at him with pity, compassion, and condolence until his gaze was so heavy on Decker that he nearly buckled. Mason took Decker's pulse, and not finding any said, "You were the prototype, our exemplar specimen. She was healthy when she was re-implanted back then, injecting herself with only small doses of the serum. It's not nearly as efficient as when the host is already exanimate." And grinning now, his little insectoid face humming with glee, he added, "It took you four months to come fully to term. Your brother and sister rats don't fight this existence the way you did. They're eager for it."

+ + +

And so he sat at his mother's side again.

Control could be learned. We all must adapt.

Signs and portents ruled everyone's deaths. If you could understand the symbols, you could figure out the larger picture, the necro-sphere you had been placed into, the dark path you stumbled upon.

Her hands clenched spasmodically, reaching for something to hold, and he placed the ball of tape into her right palm and folded her fingers over until she crushed it in her fist.

The other dead kids—his younger brother and sister—and

all the many others now moving from all the shadowy corners of the room, giggling, climbed up and sat on his lap and gathered around him, and together they waited for the demise and birth of a new world emerging.

FALLING INTO NAUGHT

DOUGLAS W. CLARK

After a final check of the snares, Darius “Mac” McKenzie retreated to the center of the clearing and began belting out “John Henry,” or at least as much of it as he remembered. He knew he couldn’t carry a tune, but what he lacked in ability he made up for in volume. While he sang, he held his sawed-off shotgun ready, just in case. Soon, he was rewarded by the sound of something crashing through the kudzu-choked maple and oak of the Carolina forest.

The disheveled figure of a lurch in ragged clothes burst into the clearing and blundered toward Mac. It shambled with a lurch’s characteristic gait, arms outstretched, and teeth clacking. Mac had the shotgun halfway to his shoulder before one of the snares caught the creature up short, a loop of rope taut around its ankle. The lurch continued mindlessly trying to get at Mac, unaware of the impediment. Dirt caked the maggot-infested features of what might once have been a youngish man, although age and even sex were hard to determine given the creature’s state of decay. Mac lowered the gun. Rage toward the thing boiled up in him, but he forced his emotions down and edged close to the lurch, wrinkling his nose against the smell. He flipped a noose over its head and shoulders, jerked the rope down to the creature’s waist, and pulled the noose tight, pinning the thing’s arms to its sides. Several more quick loops with the rope around the lurch’s midsection and legs ensured that it wouldn’t be able to escape. Then Mac duct-taped the creature’s mouth shut as protection against its potentially deadly bite.

The hog-tied lurch was ready to be loaded into the pick-up. Instead, however, Mac straddled the thing’s midsection, hate rising up inside him. He saw in the lurch’s face an exaggeration of Anne’s features when she, like so many other dead, had risen from their graves and spread like a pestilence among the living. She, too, had returned with faltering steps and jaws snapping, but having been more recently dead, she’d still retained the appearance of the woman he remembered, the loving wife and caring mother. Mac, keeping the kitchen table between them, had tried to reason with her, unwilling to believe she was no longer human. Then four-year-old Brian

had entered the room and, with an excited shout, had run toward his mother. Mac called to him, but it was too late. Before Mac could rescue the boy, the thing that had been Anne took several bites out of his legs and arms.

In the end, Mac had been forced to decapitate Anne to stop her rampage. The next day, he had done the same to Brian, who during the night had become one of the hungry dead as well.

Now, Mac kneeled over the supine lurch he had captured and smashed a fist into the creature's jaw. Soon he was hitting the thing over and over, unable to stop, until finally bone crunched under his fist. He struggled for self-control, his breathing ragged and shallow. The lurch's jaw twisted unnaturally to one side beneath the duct tape. Mac forced himself to step away from the creature. Taylor wouldn't pay as much if merchandise intended for the bloater pen arrived already damaged. Mac half dragged, half carried the lurch to the truck, where he deposited it without ceremony in the pickup bed. Returning to the clearing, he reset the snare and began singing again, his voice still taut with anger.

Within a couple of hours, Mac had captured another lurch—an elderly woman, judging by her tattered dress and filthy white hair. For an old woman, she put up quite a struggle, lashing out so furiously it was difficult to pin her arms to her sides, but at last Mac had her trussed and stowed in the pickup bed as well. He would have liked to capture a couple more lurches before setting off for the bloater pen, but darkness would be coming on soon and Mac didn't want to attempt this work in the dark. There was too much at stake, too many ways to screw up if one of the creatures managed to get past the snares.

He drove slowly on the way back to Taylor's, not because he cared whether the two lurches got banged around in the pickup bed, but out of concern for the truck's suspension. Lengthening shadows made the numerous ruts hard to see. Besides, Mac's anger had been somewhat appeased by the thought of what lay in store for the two dead things once they arrived at the bloater pen. That fate almost made up for not being able to cut their heads off immediately.

Behind him rose reddish brown dust, stirred by the truck's passage. It settled thickly over the string of drying heads that dangled above the pickup bed, testimonials to Mac's profession. Occasionally, he passed houses set back among clusters of ancient elms. Most of the houses were deserted now. The boarded up windows and reinforced doors gave the structures

a besieged appearance. Mac ignored them. They were evidence of civilization's decline, and it didn't pay to dwell on the way things had been in the before time. Before the dead started to walk. Before they came back to feed.

So it was that he was rolling slowly by one of the houses set back from the road when he noticed a child, hardly more than a toddler, meandering unsteadily on its infant legs in the front yard. The tow-headed boy reminded Mac of a younger Brian. Mac slowed, wondering who would allow a child to play unsupervised in a world where lurches roamed free. Then he noticed the front door of the house standing open.

Without thinking, he swung the truck onto the gravel drive and slammed on the brakes. He grabbed the shotgun off the seat and leaped from the vehicle, crossing the yard at a run. He had just reached the child when, as if to confirm his apprehension, the figure of a woman pitched through the doorway toward the boy, moving with the familiar gait of a lurch. It was like Anne's attack on Brian all over again. Mac swept the child up in his left arm even as he raised the shotgun with the right, aiming for the woman's head. Other than decapitation, the only way to stop a lurch was to blow its brains out.

"Put him down!" the woman shrieked, still staggering toward him.

Mac wavered, confused by the prospect of a talking lurch. Before he could make sense of the situation, sharp needles of pain shot through his left arm. He looked down to see the child sinking its baby teeth into his flesh. With horror, he yanked the child free and spun it around, staring into its eyes.

They were flat and milky. The child was dead. But not incapacitated. Its jaws snapped like an angry turtle's in an effort to get at Mac again. He flung the creature to the ground in disgust. Before it could get to its feet, the woman had hobbled up to it. While Mac stood frozen with uncharacteristic dread, she dropped awkwardly to her knees and began hewing off the thing's head with a butcher knife, careful to avoid its frantic teeth.

It was hard, grisly work, as Mac knew from experience, and the sight of her struggle brought him back to himself. He hurried to the truck, grabbed his machete, and returned to the woman. "Here," he said, "let me." The woman, numb with grief, allowed herself to be eased aside, and Mac finished severing the child's head with several well-placed blows. Once the job was done, the woman pushed herself clumsily to her feet. Only then did Mac notice her leg braces—the reason her step had resembled a lurch's.

"I thought you were . . . well, you know. One of them," he said.

It took a moment for his words to register, since her attention remained riveted on the dead child. Finally, she wrenched her gaze away and grimaced, glancing at the braces. "I had polio as a girl." Her voice came out flat, stripped of emotion.

Mac didn't know what to say, so he jerked his head to indicate the decapitated thing on the ground. "Was it yours?"

"He, not *it*," she corrected. Tears trickled down her face, but she didn't let herself give way to crying. "He was a human being and had a name. Zachary. And, yes, he was my son." She sighed with a weariness that sounded bone deep.

Mac bristled at the idea that the thing on the ground, this obscene creature that had bitten and possibly infected him, could ever be considered human. But he remembered what it had been like having to cut off Anne's and Brian's heads, and resisted saying anything. At the memory, raw anguish rose in him like bile, overwhelming even his fear of the bite he'd received. Automatically, he forced all emotion down again, concentrating instead on the woman's words.

"He's been very sick," she went on, "cholera probably. I thought fresh air might do him some good, so I brought him outside. When I noticed he was . . . that he had . . . when I realized what had happened, I hurried inside for a knife." She wiped the blade clean of gore and turned to Mac. "You just had the bad luck to arrive before I got back outside." She sucked in a deep breath with a shudder that Mac recognized as the effort required to push back a grief that threatened to consume her. "But you're hurt. We'd better see to that arm."

"I've had worse," he growled, although he let her lead him into the house. Even a minor bite from a lurch could be a chancy thing. In the kitchen, she had him pull back his torn sleeve. The shirt had protected him against the worst of the damage, although a couple of small puncture marks showed as blue swellings against his skin. "It's not too bad," Mac insisted, fighting a cold knot of alarm that formed in his belly at the sight.

The woman merely grunted and tried to wash the wound with soap and water at the sink. Mac shook her off. "That won't do any good," he said. He unsheathed the hunting knife at his belt and made a couple of quick, deep incisions over each puncture, then sucked out the poison as if treating a snake bite. The woman, meanwhile, brought a bottle of brandy from a cabinet. "This is going to burn," she said and poured the contents over the bite.

Mac drew in his breath with a hiss, but held his arm steady. He doubted the brandy would help, and hated to see good liquor go to waste. But the woman clearly needed to do something. After she had bathed the wound, she tied a strip of cloth around Mac's arm as a bandage and let him pull down his sleeve.

"Thanks," he said.

She nodded. "I'm Helen."

"Mac." He stuck out his hand and she shook it clumsily; like many women, she was apparently unused to the practice. Mac jerked his head toward the front door. "About your . . . boy out there." He gritted his teeth at the word, hating the thought of granting that much humanity to such a creature, but forced himself to continue. He owed the woman something for her kindness. "You got a shovel?" he asked. "Least I can do is help bury him."

She rummaged up a snow shovel from the garage. Mac cocked an eyebrow at it, knowing he'd be in for some hard digging with such a tool, even if the dirt were soft. But he said nothing. If digging a grave with the broad, flat shovel would be difficult for him, he figured it would be nearly impossible for her, hampered as she was by braces. They went out back to a garden and Helen pointed at the ground. "Here," she whispered, weariness again seeping into her voice. Her shoulders slumped. "I've always been particularly fond of this spot. It looks quite pretty in the spring, when the daffodils come up."

There was already one grave in the garden, next to the spot Helen had indicated for Zachary. She must have realized Mac was looking at it, for she said softly, "That was Michelle. She was my other child."

"Did you have to dig her grave yourself?" Mac asked, wondering how she had managed.

She shook her head. "My husband, Eric, buried her. That was a while ago, in the beginning. Just after those . . . things started preying on everyone. I guess Eric just couldn't handle it, because he left right after Michelle was in the ground and I haven't seen him since."

Mac said nothing, and started digging. He was solidly muscled, yet he sweated at his task, laboring for each blade full of dirt. Inwardly, he was glad the creature was so small; he wouldn't have to scrape out as large a hole as an older lurch would have required. As he dug, he had the awful sensation that his efforts were causing the pain in his injured arm to spread, but assured himself this was just groundless anxiety. Finally he had a grave deep enough to protect the corpse

against scavengers. Helen, meanwhile, had carried the child's body and head around from the front, moving awkwardly under the burden. She laid the pieces in the hole and stood back. Mac hesitated, feeling he should say something to commemorate the death of this woman's son. But he couldn't bring himself to offer healing words over a lurch's corpse. And anyway, the dead had grown legion in recent times under the combined onslaught of lurches and disease. It was pointless to mark the passing of any one individual.

When the dirt was mounded over the tiny grave, Mac tamped down the soft earth with the back of the blade, and returned the shovel to the garage. He tried to ignore the pain in his injured arm, assuring himself it hadn't gotten any worse. But awareness of it gnawed at his insides.

"You going to be all right out here alone?" he asked Helen before stepping out the front door.

"Yeah, I'll be okay," she said, sounding resolute.

"You could come into town."

She shrugged. "This is my home. My children are buried here."

Mac nodded stiffly, determined not to argue her choice of words. Besides, she wouldn't necessarily be any better off in town. "Civilization" offered the illusion of security while in fact opening a person up to predation by both the living and the dead.

It was now dark outside. Over Mac's objections, Helen got out a flashlight and walked him to his truck, as if he were the one in greater danger. He couldn't help but admire her courage and her willingness to do what had to be done. Not every woman could chop off the head of a lurch if the need arose, especially if the lurch had once been her son.

They reached the truck and Mac opened the door. Helen started to turn back to the house, but the beam of her flashlight picked out the heads hanging above the pickup bed. "You're a bounty hunter," she said, the words lacking inflection. Just then, one of the lurches in back shifted, banging against the side of the truck. "What was that?" Helen hissed.

Mac felt a sudden reluctance for Helen to see the lurches he carried. He moved to block her view, but it was too late. The flashlight played over the pair of hog-tied corpses, their eyes staring back dully in the light.

"What's this?" Helen asked, though her voice made it plain she knew. Knew, and disapproved. "You're taking these to that awful place down the road."

Mac's face flamed hot, but he refused to answer.

"Would you have taken Zachary there too if you'd had the chance?" Helen demanded. "Would he have ended up just another source of sadistic entertainment?"

"It's hardly sadistic," he snapped. "These creatures are neither human nor alive."

Helen stared, then spun and stalked back to the house, her movements made ungainly by her braces.

Furious, Mac climbed into the truck and slammed the door. This time he drove too fast, heedless of the ruts or the damage each bounce caused the lurches in back. He didn't care whether he broke anything on them or not. That was Taylor's problem, not his. All the while, Mac wonder why he cared about the opinion of some woman he'd just met. Nevertheless, he couldn't shake the image of Helen working with the butcher knife at the grisly task of removing Zachary's head, all the while the dead boy trying to bite her. He respected her for that, even though he tried hard not to.

He reached the two-lane asphalt and mashed the accelerator to the floor, flying along the darkened highway. Soon, he neared the floodlights that provided security for the bloater pen, set up on the outskirts of the little town of Morganville. Lights didn't deter the lurches, but they made the creatures easier to see if they ventured into the compound. Mac slewed the truck off the road and bounced across the field to the lighted area. Gravel and dirt sprayed as he hit the brakes. He was out of the truck almost before it had stopped rolling. Even at a distance from the circular, corral-style pen, the odor of decaying flesh filled the air. Ignoring the smell, Mac strode to the rear of the truck and dragged the lurches over the lowered tailgate, dumping them on the ground. They didn't look to have anything broken, except for the jaw he had smashed on the first dead thing. For good measure, he kicked each corpse a time or two, venting a little of his rage.

Taylor—a small, pot-bellied, balding man who looked too harmless for the occupation he had chosen—came out while Mac was unloading the lurches. He grinned when he saw the two creatures. "Damn, but I can sure use these," he said. "Business has been brisk." He motioned for a couple of his men to take the creatures over to the holding cages. Then he gestured at Mac's shirtsleeve. "Looks like one of 'em got too close."

Mac pulled back his sleeve, revealing the bandage, and grimaced. "Yeah, but it wasn't one of these. A little one, a toddler, hardly into its first teeth."

Taylor glanced around the empty truck bed. "Well, where is it? One that young would bring premium rates in the pen."

"It isn't here. It's been destroyed and buried."

Taylor spun back to stare at Mac. "What? You destroyed a perfectly good lurch? One I could have used in the pen? Why'd you do a stupid thing like that?"

"I didn't. Its mother did."

"Why didn't you talk some sense into her first? I mean, those things aren't human, after all. Not anymore."

Mac looked down at the smaller man, confused emotions coiling in his stomach. "For chrissake, Taylor, she was its mother. Have some compassion."

Taylor shrugged. "Compassion's an expensive commodity. And misplaced. I'm here to make a profit, and a lurch like that could have brought me a hefty return. People find the little ones all the more frightening because they look so innocent. Makes 'em hate the little monsters all the more. They'll pay top dollar for that."

Mac glanced over at the holding cages where the two new lurches were being untied and confined. Several other dead things in various stages of "ripening" already waited in the steel-mesh enclosures. Suddenly Mac felt exhausted. He shook his head to dispel a fuzziness around the periphery of his vision.

"You okay?" Taylor asked, sounding unusually solicitous.

"Yeah. Just tired, that's all." Mac started toward the trailers where Taylor and the rest of the crew slept. "See you in the morning."

"Sure," Taylor replied. "Sure thing. Sleep well."

Mac nodded and kept going. By the time he reached his bunk, he was stumbling with fatigue. He fell into bed without bothering to take his clothes off. While he waited for sleep, he attempted to work an increasing stiffness from his injured arm. His body felt alternately hot and cold, and he sweated equally through either extreme. Finally, he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

Sometime after midnight, he was awakened by hands grabbing his arms and legs. He struggled, his movements seeming to lack coordination. The overhead light came on and he saw four men holding him while Taylor watched to one side.

"What the hell—?" Mac demanded. His words came out unusually slurred, even for one suddenly roused from sleep.

"Just a precaution," Taylor said. He nodded to the men and they carried Mac from the trailer and across the compound to an empty holding cage. The whole time, Mac thrashed about futilely. Inside the cage, Taylor struck Mac an enervating blow

with a pistol butt on the back of the head. As Mac slid again into unconsciousness, he was dimly aware of the men closing the cage door, leaving him behind.

He awoke, still groggy, the next morning, squeezing his eyes tight against the assault of direct sunlight. His head pounded. Worse, the bandage on his arm had become excruciatingly tight, attesting to increased swelling, and the arm itself burned as if Helen's brandy were coursing through the veins around the wound. Mac didn't have to look at the flesh to know that it was putrefying. The pain assured him of that.

He was dying. That damned lurch's bite was proving fatal after all.

Panic gripped him. His heart thudded violently against his ribs and his stomach threatened to climb into his throat. The only thing left to him, now that Anne and Brian were gone, was his humanity; if he died from the lurch's bite, he'd lose even that. He'd become one of the living dead, just like all the others. Just like Anne and Brian. Tears of fury leaked through his tightly clenched eyes. "Not that," he whispered. "Please, anything but that. . . ."

A crowd's roar made him open his eyes, and he blinked rapidly to clear them. He was lying on his back in the cage, staring up into open sky through wire mesh. In the cages on either side, lurches being held until they were sufficiently bloated with decay snuffled and flailed against the shared wire walls. They were trying to get to him. But their efforts weren't as vigorous as usual when they sensed live meat, as if the creatures were already aware that he was dying.

Aware that he was becoming one of them.

Mac dragged himself weakly upright, using the mesh of the cage door for support, and looked for Taylor. Across the compound, business at the bloater pen had already begun for the day. Inside the pen, three or four lurches shambled about, trying to get at the live meats spaced around the inside of a ring. The lurches' mouths were still duct-taped shut to protect the living "players" from the creatures' bite; fortunately, the lurches were too stupid to notice or remove the tape.

The live meat were rubes from town, mostly men, although Mac noticed some women and even a few children, the latter prompted from behind by adults who were presumably parents. Each live meat wielded a rented baseball bat, which he or she swung whenever a lurch stumbled within range. Mac watched one boy, who looked to be about eight, nod eagerly as the man behind him showed him how to handle the heavy bat. The boy swung with enthusiasm if not skill,

somehow managing to connect with the elbow of an approaching lurch. Mac heard the sickening crunch of shattering bone. The boy beamed at the cheering brought on by his success. The lurch, spun part way around by the blow, blundered off after another possible victim, seemingly unaware that its left arm now dangled uselessly at its side.

But the real payoff of the game came whenever one of the live meats managed to burst a lurch's abdomen, so distended by the bacteria still active in its gut that each dead thing resembled a grotesque parody of a late-term pregnancy. Then the air would fill with spattered putrescence, like favors spewed forth by some deranged pinata, and the live meats, laughing even as they gagged on the stench, would flee the ring, abandoning it to the lurches who continued as if nothing had happened. Even the lurch with the burst abdomen would slip around in its swollen, eviscerated entrails as it tried to get at the fleeing players. These victories for the living were not easily come by, however, for the lurches' bellies proved remarkably resilient, the bats usually rebounding off them with a dull *thud*.

It was, as Taylor called it, quite a freak show.

Through it all, spotters armed with shotguns lounged around the outside of the ring to make sure no lurches accidentally reached any of the batters. Other live meats also waited outside the pen, eager for their turn in the ring. The would-be players brought canned foods, ammunition, jugs of gasoline, medical supplies—anything that could be bartered for a chance to get back at the creatures that had brought their world to its knees.

Watching Taylor's "freak show," Mac for the first time recognized the horror of it all. The poison in his system had brought him to the edge of a void. A few more hours, perhaps even as long as a day or two, and he would topple in, the fall stripping away everything that made him human. It was futile, but he resisted the void's awful pull. Not so with the locals who came to the pen to play. They seemed eager to shuck off the things that made them more than live meat, different from the lurches. They were plummeting into nothingness, but willingly.

"Taylor," Mac called. The name came out as a gasp. He took a faltering breath and tried again. "Taylor!"

At the bloater pen, the small figure of Taylor separated itself from where he had been bartering with new arrivals and sauntered over to the holding cages. "Morning, sunshine," he said.

Mac rattled the cage door; it had been secured with a loop of chain and a padlock. "Taylor, what the hell are you doing? Let me out of here."

Taylor shook his head, turned, and spat. "Can't do that."

A chill swept Mac, though whether from illness or Taylor's words, he couldn't be sure. "What are you doing?" he repeated in a whisper.

"Mac, you were a good bounty hunter and you brought in lots of lurches from the field. I appreciate that. Now it looks like your days of bagging that kind of game are over. But I figure you can still supply me with one last lurch."

"Honestly, it's not that bad a wound," Mac lied, grimacing as he flexed his swollen arm. "Just a scratch, really. The thing barely broke the skin, and I sucked the poison out. Hell, the mother even washed the wound with brandy. I'll be fine."

"Then you have nothing to worry about," Taylor replied. "I'll just keep you in a holding cage for now, and we'll see what happens." He shrugged. "If you live, I let you go. You die, you end up in the pen, like all the others." Taylor made an abrupt gesture that took in the corral behind him, where the crowd continued with its sport. The sight, he knew, explained everything. Then he headed back to the pen.

"Taylor!"

The little man never bothered to look back.

Mac threw himself against the cage door, determined to make it yield to his will. And though it flexed under his weight, the steel pipes that formed its frame wouldn't bend enough to let him wedge between the door and the side of the cage. He exhausted his already weakened body with the effort and finally had to stop; he crouched in the cage's center and considered his situation. To either side, the lurches in the adjacent cages were showing less and less interest in reaching him, although one or two still flailed at the mesh with desultory intent.

Mac ignored his fellow prisoners, drove away the fear with dreams of vengeance. His hatred for Taylor burned with a fierceness he'd never felt before, not even when confronting the lurches. Mac let those dark thoughts enfold him, shield him from all the horror around him. When he escaped—and he didn't dare doubt that he could—he would take Taylor hostage, dragging him back to the woods where Mac had captured the last two lurches. In the clearing, Mac would stake the bastard out on the ground, then climb a tree from which he could summon more of the dead things. He would watch them devour Taylor while the little man screamed for a mercy

he himself hadn't shown anyone or anything in a long, long time.

After a while, Mac realized the fury of these thoughts was draining what little energy he had. He needed to conserve his strength. He had to get free, to put the thoughts into action. For the next few hours, he crouched in the middle of the cage, his mind focused only on fighting off the sickness that washed over him in ever-increasing waves.

Around midday, another bounty hunter, a wiry man Mac knew only as Crete, pulled up outside the cages, returning in Mac's truck with the morning's catch. Mac gritted his teeth at the sight of another hunter climbing from his pickup. Apparently, the others already felt free to claim his possessions.

On sudden inspiration, Mac began to blunder about inside of his cage, windmilling his arms and shambling like one of the lurches. Taylor, who came over to inspect the new arrivals, stopped at Mac's cage to watch. After a moment, he grinned. "So, it looks like you'll be fodder for the bloater pen after all." He turned to Crete. "We'll put the new ones in with Mac. He won't be so difficult to handle now."

With a nasty laugh, Taylor picked up a long pole with a quick-release noose at the end, such as dogcatchers had once used with potentially rabid animals, then unlocked the cage. He opened the door an inch or two, using his body to block it. "Let's introduce you to your new roommates, shall we?" he said, sounding jovial as he slid the noose end of the pole into the cage and directed it toward Mac's head.

Mac flung himself at the cage door, forcing it open. The impact threw Taylor to the ground. Before the little man could react, Mac was on top of him, grabbing the pole from his hands. "Let's not," he snarled, thrusting the pole between Crete's legs and wrenching it savagely to one side. The other hunter toppled.

Working against an unaccustomed clumsiness, Mac unsnapped the holster on Taylor's belt and relieved him of his pistol. By the time Crete regained his feet, Mac had the muzzle pressed against his erstwhile employer's skull. Crete backed away, hands in the air. Mac motioned Taylor toward the pickup, which still sat idling. "Shall we?" he said, mimicking the smaller man's jaunty tone. "And do it quietly. If any of the others try to come to your rescue, I'll blow your brains out."

Mac was shaking by the time he got Taylor into the truck. The barrel of the gun jiggled erratically, although Mac managed to keep it aimed in his hostage's general direction. Taylor watched him dispassionately, obviously awaiting his chance to

jump Mac and turn the tables. Mac let out a ragged breath and wiped sweat from his forehead. He was cold, so very cold. Driving one-handed, the gun trained on Taylor, he slewed the truck around and hightailed it across the field to the highway. Halfway there, 12-gauge pellets peppered the rear of the pickup, although Mac was too far from the bloater pen by then for the shot to have much effect. In the mirror, he saw Taylor's men running for their own trucks to give chase.

Mac didn't stay on the highway long enough for them to catch up. Instead, he immediately swung onto a side road, and from there steered a tortuous route through backwoods. After a while, with no sign of pursuit, he risked pulling over long enough to tie up his hostage. "Can't have you trying to get the drop on me," Mac said through chattering teeth. "After all, I'm clearly not at my best right now."

"So what do you intend to do with me?" Taylor asked, a quaver betraying the forced calm of his voice.

"Oh, have I ever got plans for you," Mac said, recalling the images that had fed his imagination earlier. He shoved the gun into his belt and resumed driving, needing both hands now to hold the wheel steady. He checked the rearview mirror, but saw no one. For the moment, he had lost Taylor's men. They would pick up his trail eventually, but he had bought a little time.

But not much. He shivered again from a renewed onset of chills. Unfortunately, Taylor's men might not be what he most needed to fear right now. The void was close. Its call strong.

When he came to a dirt road he recognized from the previous day, he turned onto it. He wiped his forehead again with his sleeve and tried to remember how far it was to the clearing, to the place where he would have his revenge.

"Christ, Mac, have some compassion," Taylor whined.

"Oh, like you showed me?"

"You're dead already. You know that. I mean, look at you. It's just a matter of time."

"Yeah, well, I thought I should have my first live meal close at hand, for when the time comes," Mac said sourly. He glanced over in time to catch the look of terror that washed over Taylor's face. "Lurches get pretty hungry pretty fast."

They drove in silence after that. Taylor kept glancing at Mac, his eyes so wide with fear that the whites stood out. Mac wanted to savor the other man's terror, but his own horror at what was happening to him kept him from taking any real satisfaction in Taylor's misery. At least, he told himself that was the reason for the misgivings gnawing at him.

Up ahead, he saw a house he recognized, and slowed as he drew near. It was Helen's house. Mac gritted his teeth as he considered what she would say if she knew what he was doing now. If she thought supplying lurches to the bloater pen was bad, how much worse would she consider Mac's present plan? Some part of him shouted that he should not care, that Taylor deserved what was about to happen.

Nevertheless, Mac braked to a stop. For long moments, he sat there, letting the engine idle. The urge to drive on, to go deeper into the woods and let happen the things he had planned, was strong. He understood the attraction now, understood the relief he would feel if he only allowed himself to fall.

But then Mac saw what he was doing. He wasn't even a lurch yet, and he was ready to murder another man. Anne, at least, had been dead first. How had he dared think the less of her for what she had done to Brian? She had not gone over willingly, while he was in a position to choose his fate and still he was ready to fall. . . .

Oh, Anne, I am so sorry. Please forgive me.

"Mac?" Taylor was blubbering now. "What are you doing?"

His mind made up, Mac lunged across the cab and yanked open the glove box. His spare hunting knife was still stowed inside. Mac's hand shook so badly he had to make two attempts before he managed to grab the knife. He slid it from its sheath and leaned toward Taylor. The little man flinched, shifting as far away as the cab interior allowed. "Mac?"

"Hold still!" Steadying the knife with both hands, Mac cut the rope holding Taylor. "Get—out."

"Huh?"

"You heard me—get out! Quick, before I—change my—mind."

Whimpering, Taylor jerked the door open and practically fell to the ground in his hurry to get away. Mac watched in the mirror as the little man rushed headlong down the road, only pausing long enough to glance over his shoulder to see if Mac was in pursuit.

Mac waited until Taylor disappeared around a bend, then put the truck in reverse. He gunned it, backing up as far as Helen's house and onto her drive. He tried a couple of times to kill the engine, but couldn't make his hands work well enough to turn the key. Finally he gave up and left it running. He opened his door with difficulty, then slid from the cab. He fumbled under the seat for his machete. It had to be there. It was all that could offer him the hope of redemption now.

Eventually, he found it and stumbled toward Helen's door. At first, there was no answer to his knock. He tried again, pounding as hard as he could, though the results sounded faint even to his ears. At last, he heard Helen's voice on the other side, muffled by the heavy door. "Who is it?"

"Mac," he gasped. "From yesterday."

She didn't respond at first, then, "Okay." Bolts slid back and she opened the door just far enough to peer at him. "What?" Then her eyes widened as she took in his state. The door swung all the way open. "My God, Mac, what's happened to you?"

"You know—what's happening," he said falteringly. He leaned against the doorframe to keep from falling, and extended the machete to her. "Please. I don't have the right—to ask it, but you know—what needs—to be done. Now, while there's still—time."

She looked at him, holding his gaze. He felt her judgment of him shifting as something like pity crept into her expression. Slowly, pity turned into compassion, and then into respect. "All right," she said at last. Without ever averting her eyes, she reached to take the machete.

"Thank you," Mac sighed. And as he said them, those two words seemed to contain everything it meant to be human.

SITTING WITH THE DEAD

SHANE STEWART

It's not until he hears the padlock seal itself that he notices that everyone is gone. The noise startles him, pulling him from a brief slumber as he sits in the old folding chair. He looks around, checks his environment. There's a table by the far wall. Sealed double doors behind him. A stack of folding chairs to the left. And the coffin in front of him.

He stands slowly, stretching the tiredness out of his joints before he turns toward the doors. He tries the handles first, finds them securely locked. He pushes the doors a few times, throwing his weight against them. They refuse to move. Satisfied, he circles the room, checking the windows. It's painfully hot, even though the sun went down a little while ago. The windows are open, with a screen on each one to keep out the bugs and let the breeze in. Beyond the screen, thick iron bars prevent escape.

He glances at the coffin only briefly, doesn't even stop to survey the occupant. He simply crosses to the table. There's a thermos, heavy and metallic, with a single coffee-stained cup. Next to the thermos there's a slender black box and a short-handled steel mallet. Next to that, a snub-nosed .38.

He picks up the revolver, checks it out once, and then slides it into his jacket pocket. If he has to go for a gun, he's not sure what he'll grab for—the .38 or the 10 mm under his shoulder. But since the funeral director didn't know about the automatic he left the .38, just in case. You never know how these things will turn out, after all.

Still, he muses, it's good to have a backup.

He fingers the box briefly before grabbing the mallet. He doesn't want to open it, not yet. There's too much temptation to just get it all over with, and he doesn't want to let her down, just in case. Instead, he turns back toward the chair and drags it over to the table. He cracks open the thermos and pours thick black coffee into the cup. Sipping it makes him wince.

Never figured out what they put in the coffee around here, he thinks. But they wouldn't dare serve this at Starbucks.

He glances again at the coffin, but still refuses to walk over there. Instead, he pulls a deck of cards from his pocket. He leans back in the chair, props his feet on the table, and begins

shuffling. It doesn't take long before he starts bringing random cards to the top of the deck, quietly muttering the name of the card before he flips it over. Now and then he fans the cards, spreads them, cuts them, all the while keeping track of which card is where in the deck.

"The three of hearts."

The voice startles him. He glances outside reflexively and calmly notes how dark it's become, before looking at the coffin.

She's sitting up, smiling at him pleasantly. Her thin white hair hovers like a cloud around her head. "I pick the three of hearts," she says.

He smiles, then cuts the deck with one hand. He taps the top of the deck for flourish and peels the card away. He holds it up, face toward his audience. "What do you see?" he asks.

The wrinkled face smiles. "You did it again, Pumpkin."

He smiles thinly, puts the cards away. "Hello, Gram."

For a moment he thinks he sees light in the old, dead eyes staring at him. "I must look just awful," she says.

He stands up and stretches, then smiles at her. "You don't look too bad, all things considered."

"You mean," she says slowly, "considering that I'm dead and all."

He nods. The funeral director told him that it was impolite to remind the risen that they're dead. He's never been very polite, not since he left home at least, but he doesn't want to remind himself of her death either. Looking at her, the first thing he sees is her eyes. The pupils have spread, pushing all the color out of them. Big, black, dead eyes. He's suddenly very aware of the guns. The .38 pulls his jacket to the right, while the 10 mm brushes lightly against his side.

They stare at each other for several minutes before she glances around the room. "I've never seen Juniper's parlor so empty. I'm used to seeing at least a few people in here."

"Only one person gets to sit in here with you," he says. "The rest of the family is either at home or out in the main hall."

"I know. The old ways are the best, after all."

He shuffles, looks down at his feet.

"Nervous, Pumpkin?"

"No," he says. "Just . . . I don't know."

"Impatient, maybe?"

"No," he lies.

"They don't do this much anymore, do they? Not here in the holler, like we do. Not much call for folks to sit with the dead all night anymore. It's a shame really."

He stands motionless, resisting the urge to end this with a bullet. He still doesn't know which gun he'd go for first. He kicks at the floorboards. "I thought the floor was concrete in here?"

"It used to be," his zombie Gram says. "But there was a mudslide long about—I suppose it was six years ago now. Took some of the support right out from under the floor. The slab cracked in half and brought part of the funeral home down with it. Old Man Juniper had it cleared out, and then rebuilt it to how it is today. Managed to keep the same doors for the viewing room here though." She waves one hand at the thick double doors. "Those doors have been on this parlor since old Thomas W. Juniper first opened it back in 1853. Wouldn't be right, Eustace says, if they weren't here. And Eustace was the first person put to rest in his newly rebuilt parlor."

She looks at him, sees him staring at the floor. "I'm sorry, Pumpkin, I'm rambling again. Is something on your mind?"

"I was just thinking . . . did Eustace sit up?"

Her smile disappears. "Wouldn't really matter if he did. That no good Phillip went and hired someone to sit up with him. That weren't right, but that's just my opinion."

He laughs a little. "You've always been full of opinions, Gram."

"Maybe I have, but still . . ."

He looks up at her, tensing. "Gram?"

Her dead black eyes turn on him, and for a moment he considers grabbing the gun and shooting her in the head. Just like an off switch, he always tells himself. Just at range.

But her eyes suddenly shift, and she looks away. "I—I'm sorry, Pumpkin. I just—for a moment—I was just real . . . hungry for a second there." A faint smile returns to her undead lips. "I'm all right now."

"You sure?" he says. He still wants to draw a gun.

"I'm sure."

He stares at her for a moment before he lets himself relax.

"What was I saying, Pumpkin?"

"You were talking about your opinions, Gram."

"Oh. Oh, yes. I remember now. All those new ways to prepare the dead folk—they just aren't right. You remember Kendall Powell? He died when you were eleven, and his wife sent him off to be embalmed. Poor man sat up that night, and there was nothing left in there. His whole mind was gone. Tore out of here and started killing anything he could get his hands on. Ripped up three of our pigs before your grandfather, God

rest his soul, put the poor man down with his 12-gauge. There wasn't enough of poor Kendall's head left for a decent viewing after that. They had to lay a picture on top of his neck for the viewing. And that one boy, Billy Gray, what fell out of that tree when you were in high school? You remember him, don't you? They flushed him with water 'cause that other mortician came to town to try and run the Juniper's out of business, and Billy done sat up and killed poor Bobby Mitchell and stuffed him in his coffin. Then he went and just started killing and eating folks. You remember him, don't you Pumpkin?"

"Yeah," he says quietly. "Billy was the first zombie I ever shot."

"It ain't natural to go and mess with the dead like that. Nothing good comes from it."

"Is that why you wanted it done the old way? Because you didn't want to chance coming back like that?"

"Well, yes, that's—"

"You could have opted for cremation."

The silence surprises him, and he looks up from the floor to see her staring at him. Her mouth has gone slack, and her eyes are wide and dark. He starts to reach for a gun—only vaguely aware that he was reaching into his jacket—when she speaks again.

"Cremation! Never! My brother Barnaby died not three weeks after you left home, and he had them cremate him. They put him in that coffin, and they wheeled him into the fire, and the minute he started to burn, he began to pound on the coffin something fierce. He wailed and screamed and hollered and kicked and beat on that pine box the entire time he was burning. Then the box came apart, and he started crawling for the furnace door, and he beat on that and wailed until he couldn't wail no more. No, sir. I may not know what is waiting for us when we go, but I know one thing: Barnaby met the beyond screaming in terror. That is no way for someone to go."

"So you prefer this? You prefer nailing?"

"I prefer anything," she says, "that gives me the chance to talk to my family one last time."

"I see."

"Do you remember Julie Fisher, that girl you were always sweet on?"

"Yeah," he says.

"She died last year. That Isaacs boy—what was his name, Winfred? Whipple?"

"Winter, Gram. Patrick Winter Isaacs."

"Yes, that's it. She started living with him after you left the holler. Never married him. He got her pregnant, is why, but no one thinks she had a choice in the matter."

He listens to the silence for a second. "Gram?"

"What? I'm sorry, Pumpkin. I was just . . . so hungry. . . ."

"You were talking about Julie, Gram. Julie and Winter."

"I was? Oh, yes. Anyway, she died last year. Winter beat her to death. He got tossed in jail, and that's the last I heard of him. I suppose he's still in there, maybe. If he ever gets out, her father is liable to shoot the little so-and-so."

He grinds his teeth back and forth. "Gram," he says finally, "you're rambling."

"No, I'm not. I know exactly why I brought Julie up, young man."

"Why is that?"

"She asked me to be her nailer. I was her second choice, you should know."

"Who was her first?"

"You."

His heart stops, but only for a second. "Me? Why would she want me to—?"

"Because you left. Because you said you'd come back. Because she'd been hoping that you would come back. And because she wanted to tell you that she loved you before she died."

He falls back, leans against the wall, and stands there, silent, for several minutes. "And when no one could find me, they came to you. . . ."

"Yes. And she wanted me to tell you that she loves you, and that she's waiting for you."

He looks down, fingers the revolver through the fabric of his coat. *It wouldn't take much to end all of this*, he thinks.

"She lingered for a while, hoping you'd make it home. I—I had to shoot her, with Juniper's little revolver, late the following morning."

"I'm sorry, Gram."

"So am I. That was when I decided I wanted you to be my nailer. Partly because I had to pass on Julie's message, and partly because—well, it's been so long. What's happened to you, Lyle?"

"Nothing, really," he says. He turns away from her and looks to the floor. "Just a couple of runs of bad luck, is all."

He glances over at her. She just sits there, staring at him with those black eyes. *Silence for more than fifteen seconds*, he thinks, *and she's gone. Gram will be gone, and all that will be*

left is me, the gun, and a starving machine. One Mississippi. Two Mississippi.

At thirteen Mississippi, she speaks. "I'm waiting."

He rubs his eyes before he looks at her. "It all started going wrong in school. I lost my job, and tuition was due. I needed money fast, so I went to the casino. I walked up to the blackjack table with \$37 in my pocket. I walked away with a little over \$800. All because I'm good with cards."

He fiddles with the deck in his pocket. He tries to look away again, but he can't stop looking into those dead eyes. *I used to be able to avoid talking to her*, he thinks. *Once upon a time I could keep secrets from Gram.*

After a moment he decides it doesn't matter. *The dead tell no secrets. Neither did—does—Gram. . . .*

"I paid my tuition, then went looking for a new job. But I couldn't find one, or I'd get one and not be able to keep it. Classes started getting tough, and I thought if I had an easy source of income, I could study more. So I went back to the casino. I got escorted out by security that night, although they let me keep the \$300 I'd won. I started hitting the other casinos for cash. Pretty soon I was banned from all of them.

"So, once again I'm looking for a job. I end up at this warehouse, on the late shift. I'm up all night loading trucks, and in the morning, I'm sleeping in class—if I even made it to class. My grades are suffering, and I'm thinking it can't get much worse." He smiles thinly. "Was I ever wrong."

"What happened?"

"There were these homeless guys that came by the warehouse on Tuesday nights. The foreman would put them to work, give them some money the next day. One morning last January, all four of them come in, and they're dead. One of them froze to death the week before, and he had bitten his friends and killed them before he could stop himself. They got the foreman, then they got Sam and Adam. That left just me and Johnny.

"We made our way to the foreman's office. Johnny played baseball growing up, so he picked up a two-by-four on the way. He was swinging it around while I dug through the office. I found a long-barrel .22 pistol in the filing cabinet, and some bullets. That's when they found us. . . ."

"How many did you shoot, Lyle?"

"Three. Johnny got one with the board. Then the other three got hold of him. I . . . I couldn't load the gun fast enough."

He looks away from her. "I put a bullet in Johnny next. Then Sam, then Adam. There wasn't enough of the foreman

left to get back up, but I shot his corpse anyway. The police arrived not long after. They asked me questions, I answered them. When it was over, this guy walks up. Says he has a new job for me."

"I've heard," she says, "that sometimes folks die in the cities and no one notices before they rise up. And with no one to help them along, they can't get away from that hunger. And then you get packs of hungry dead folk running around."

He nods.

"I've heard that some people get paid to hunt them down."

He reaches under his jacket and pulls out the automatic. "They issue us these. We get a bounty for each zombie we drop. We get the pistol and a sack and a big knife. We shoot them, chop off their heads, and bring them in. Then we go around and collect the rest of the bodies. We can also be hired to take someone's place when they have a relative who wants to be dealt with in the traditional way."

"So you make a living off the dead now."

He nods. "Sometimes I get a few odd jobs here and there. Usually just to make things meet."

"I've heard bad things about people in your line of work."

"Some of the squads pad their quotas, supposedly, with homeless people that aren't dead. Others are supposed to hire themselves out as reasonably priced hit men."

"You don't do that."

"No, I don't," he says. "But sometimes I wonder if I would, given the chance."

"If you have to shoot me," she asks calmly, "which gun will you use?"

"I—" He looks at the floor for a moment, then up at her. "I don't know."

Several minutes pass without a sound.

"Do you have my nail?"

He looks up at her quickly. "It's on the table."

"Bring it here. I'd like to have a look at it, while I still can."

He retrieves the slim black box and walks over toward the coffin. He stops and looks at her. Her eyes are black and sparkling, and her smile has some faint, sinister bend to it. "Gram?"

"Hmm? What?"

"How are you doing?"

"I'm tired, dear. And—well, hungry, too."

He looks at her for a moment. Then he reaches into the box and pulls out the nail.

It's long, although he can't quite tell how long. Little more

than a foot, he'd guess. Fifteen inches, maybe. The head is wide, and the point is broad, like an arrowhead. He knows the clinical aspect of the nail, its purpose. The broad point cuts at the brain and, if inserted properly, will allow the risen to fade away and move on. And if the blow isn't precise enough, the nail still serves a purpose—holding the risen down in their coffins, where they'll stay, until rot finally claims them. Some of his associates on the squad purposefully nail people down wrong, then cut the spinal cord so the unfortunate can't move or make any noise. They're supposed to finish the risen off with a bullet through the temple. Most of them consider it a waste of ammunition.

Gram looks at the nail with a mixture of—what, exactly? He has a hard time reading the dead black pits her eyes have become. If he takes away the eyes, the look on her wrinkled face is calm, almost gentle. *Is that admiration?* he wonders. *Appreciation?* There's supposed to be some sort of greater significance to the nail, but he forgets what.

Finally, she speaks: "It's a good nail."

He nods.

"Have you ever—?"

"No," he says. "This is my first time."

She smiles. "Thank you for agreeing to be my nailer, Lyle."

"Your welcome, Gram." He takes the nail and holds it loosely in his hands. "Gram?"

"Yes?"

"Did people always come back like this?"

"I don't know, Pumpkin." She sighs, more out of expectation than anything else, he figures. She hasn't drawn a breath since she sat up. "I should be going now, I think. Before I start getting hungry again."

He nods, then walks over to the table to retrieve the hammer. He looks at the automatic in his hand, then lays it down on the table. He takes the .38 out of his pocket, too. When he walks back over, he carries only the hammer and the nail. She is smiling.

"Goodbye, Gram."

"Goodbye, Pumpkin."

She lays down in her coffin, folds her arms over her chest. He steps forward and places the tip of the nail against her forehead. She closes her eyes. He holds the hammer over the head, then brings it up for the first blow. Calmly, quietly, she starts to sing.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound . . ."

Tink.

“ . . . Th-that saved a-a wretch li-ike meee . . . ”

Tink.

“ . . . I-I once wassss losst, b-b-but n-n-ow I'm fff—ff— ”

“Found, Gram.”

“Ffff-found.” Her lips tremble slightly. “Ff-finish . . . i-it, P-p-p-pum . . . ”

He draws in breath as the hammer lifts. “Was blind . . . but now . . . I see. . . .”

Tink.

THE BLACK ROSE

DON D'AMMASSA

Some pretty desperate characters had passed through the town of Hopeless over the years, but none more dangerous than the Black Rose and the Silverfish Kid. They rode in one hot summer morning, without fanfare, all covered with trail dust, inside and out. There was no mistaking Rose even from a distance; her thick black hair fell almost to her waist and the distinctive ebony flower bud was displayed on her saddle, her boots, and on each of the holsters that rested against her hips. If she hadn't been with him, the Silverfish Kid might have cut an impressive figure with his silver-handled pistols and rhinestone-studded shirt, at least from a distance. Close up, he was just another punk kid with a fancy wrapper. It didn't matter though, because all eyes were inevitably drawn to Rose's chalk-white face and fine figure.

Rose was an albino, and people said that the torment she'd received from other kids during her childhood was what had turned her so mean. Other folks said she'd been born normal, and that something happened to her while she was young that scared all the pigment out of her skin and into her hair, which was as black as the darkest of nights. No one knew for sure because no one really knew just where it was that Rose grew up, and it was certain no one was about to ask her.

Calling Hopeless a town was a bit of an exaggeration. It had sprung up after a false rumor of a gold strike in a forgotten and forgettable corner of the Arizona territory. There was a saloon and a general store and a hotel and a blacksmith, and the latter did carpentry and coffin making as well. The barber did a little doctoring and a lot of dentistry. The whorehouse stood directly opposite the hotel, and it was better maintained, and more frequently patronized. There was no church, no sheriff's office, and the town hall hadn't been used in years; in fact, the faded sign over the front door still said *Hopeful*, the town's original name. A handful of small houses were scattered around, most tenanted by broken-down gunfighters and retired outlaws who'd tucked away just enough to live on, but whose faces had appeared on too many wanted posters for comfort. Hopeless survived because it was in the

middle of nowhere, and lawmen usually found excuses not to ride out that way. Retired outlaws weren't going to bother anybody, and the active ones wouldn't stay in a hellhole like Hopeless for long enough to matter.

Old Ben Walters was the first to spot them. Ben's bladder had been bothering him lately and he was up early, relieving himself against the back wall of Oates General Goods. Something moved on the horizon, and he raised one hand to shade his eyes, squinting because a brisk morning breeze was blowing the dust around a bit livelier than usual. It took a few seconds for his eyes to focus and count the two riders, and it took a few minutes before they were close enough for him to recognize Rose's ebony hair. Most people in Hopeless knew her only by reputation, but Old Ben had been visiting his sister in Kiamut City when she killed Deadpan Dooley right in front of the Baptist Church, and blew off Deke Wilson's cock when he tried to backshoot her. Deke cut his own throat when the town doctor left him alone for a few minutes, but the sheriff of Kiamut was heard to say that it was no tragedy Deke had died.

Ben hastily tied up his pants and headed for the saloon, figuring it was worth a free whiskey to be the one to announce the newcomers, and pass on what he knew about the Black Rose. Sam Grimm, the barkeep, would just be opening up, and his wife would be serving eggs and corn meal muffins to anyone willing to pay a dime for a plateful. As he made his way down the alley to Main Street, Ben wondered who the second rider might be. He couldn't remember ever hearing that Rose kept company with anyone longer than a single night.

As he'd expected, the saloon was open for business. Tom Grogan and Dewey Martin were sitting at a table, playing cards and drinking coffee that was almost certainly laced with whiskey. One of the whores from across the street was wolfing down eggs in the corner. Sam was behind the counter, polishing the frame around the mirror. He glanced back over his shoulder when he heard the doors swing open, nodded without changing expression, and turned back to his work.

"Got visitors coming!" Ben nearly fell over a stray chair in his haste to get to the bar. "It's the Black Rose and some feller."

Sam Grimm turned around, and his face showed just the slightest hint of interest. "Black Rose, you say? Haven't heard her name in a while."

"She keeps to herself, always rides alone. Doesn't look for trouble unless it's looking for her first."

"Sounds like she's not riding alone any more."

That stumped him. "Something's changed, that's for certain. Guess we'll find out soon enough."

Mary Grimm was pouring a cup of coffee for Ben when the hoofbeats became audible. He left it sitting on the bar and walked over to the swinging doors, staring back the way he'd come. They were coming slowly down Main Street, the unidentified man in front. Sam Grimm joined him, nodded to himself, and turned away. "That's the Silverfish Kid. Saw him over in Winslow when I went for supplies beginning of spring. Just starting to grow fuzz on his chin and already killed four men."

Old Ben's brow wrinkled. "Heard tell of him from one of those Comancheros came through here a couple of months back. Said the men he killed weren't real gunfighters, just farmers and suchlike that he picked a fight with."

"Well, they're dead farmers now anyways." Sam turned and was about to return to his polishing when Tom Grogan joined them.

"He's bad business, the Kid is. Figured he wouldn't last long; he's never been that fast. Them first four he shot, they wasn't much at all." Grogan took off his hat and scratched the bald patch in the middle of his filthy mat of hair. "Saw him take down Dermot Cross a month back. Queerest thing you ever saw. Cross should have shot him six, seven times before the Kid even had his gun out, but his pistol got tangled up in the holster and he couldn't pull it free in time. Three shots in the chest and down he went."

"Dame Luck is fickle," said Sam.

"Mebbe so. Mebbe not. Jack and Curly Blackburn tried to bushwhack the Kid when he left town the next day. Didn't see it myself, but they had their younger brother along to hold the horses, and young Jeb says Curly's feet went out from under him at just the right time to spoil the ambush. Slid down from behind his cover and took a bullet right in the face. Jack comes up behind the Kid with a dead bead on his back, but he's got a bad shell in his shotgun and it doesn't fire. He gets gutshot and dies in his little brother's arms."

"Sounds like the Kid got himself a good luck charm."

The twosome pulled up in front of the saloon and tied off their horses. Ben retreated to the bar and pretended to be interested in his coffee, but Sam stayed at the door and swung it open to admit the newcomers. "Welcome to Hopeless, folks. What can I get you?"

"Whiskey." Rose had a deep, gravelly voice that seemed to echo inside her throat. She brushed past Sam and headed straight for the bar. Her eyes swiftly catalogued everything and

everyone in sight, but she reacted to none of it. She was a striking woman, if not conventionally attractive, not yet thirty but with eyes infinitely older.

The Kid stuck his thumbs inside his gunbelt and sauntered in without speaking, his face lit by an exaggerated grin that emphasized all of his worst features. A pencil thin, lop-sided mustache hung over a comically weak chin. His eyes were narrow and a little bit glazed, as if he'd been buying peyote from the Indians or drinking a mite too much and too often. There was a curly white scar on his temple, and one of his ears was missing its lobe. He might have been twenty-two, but his eyes were those of a ten-year-old. Not a particularly likable ten-year-old, either.

Sam sighed and followed, poured Rose a whiskey, which she tossed down. He poured another for the Kid, who picked it up and sipped, then grimaced and set the glass down hard enough that some of the liquid splashed out. "That's pretty raw, barkeep. Why don't you bring out the good stuff?"

Sam refilled Rose's glass. "Folks around here don't take much interest in high-priced drinks. This is as good as it gets."

"Shit! I've had better served as medicine." The Kid smiled, revealing a pair of wooden teeth, and leaned forward. Something that sparkled even in the dim light glittered against his none-too-clean chest. "C'mon now, barkeep. I bet you've got at least one bottle of the good stuff tucked away for yourself."

Sam's voice remained flat, but he carefully avoiding meeting the gunman's eyes. "We don't do much drinking ourselves. You might try Miss Gordon across the way. I hear she keeps some fine brandy around for special occasions."

The Kid's face twitched into a mask of impatience. "Who the hell is Miss Gordon?"

"Runs the bordello." Rose answered without looking up from her drink, which was already half gone.

"What the hell's a *bordello*?" There was a dangerous whine in the Kid's voice now. Tom Grogan stood up abruptly and walked out of the saloon, leaving his winnings sitting on the table.

"It's a whorehouse," Sam explained quietly. "Right across from the hotel next door."

The Kid laughed, an ugly, high pitched sound that held little resemblance to humor. "Oh, well, we'll be paying Miss Gordon a visit soon enough, won't we, doll?" He put his arm around Rose and gave her a squeeze. She didn't react in any way, just continued to sip at her whiskey. The Kid glanced

around the room. "I'll bet y'all wonder why anyone keeping company with a fine-looking woman like this would be interested in visiting a whorehouse."

No one was, but that didn't stop him from explaining.

"I got me some powerful needs. Rose here gets plumb tuckered out sometimes trying to keep up, so whenever we get the chance, I like to spread myself around a bit. You know how it is." He leered at Sam, who carefully pretended not to notice, just started polishing the nearly spotless bar with his rag. Rose abruptly tossed down the rest of her drink and extended her arm. Sam made the bottle reappear and poured her another.

The Kid hesitated like a medicine show spieler who suddenly realizes his audience has drifted away. His lower lip trembled slightly and his hands clenched and unclenched. Sam must have sensed something because he dropped the cloth on the bar and casually reached down to where he kept his shotgun ready. But the moment of tension passed, and the Kid finished off his drink and tossed a coin down so hard that it bounced and fell behind the counter.

"C'mon, Rose. Let's find ourselves something decent to drink." And he was off toward the door without looking back. Rose finished her third whiskey, removed some coins from her pocket, and placed them carefully on the polished bar before following, her face as expressionless as ever.

Dewey Martin stood up and came over to the bar to pay his tab. "That there's trouble," he said quietly. "No sense at all and a bad temper to boot. She must've been pretty desperate to fall for that one."

Mary Grimm stepped out from the shadows where she'd been standing. "That's not the way it is. She hates him, pure and simple. He's got a rope on her though, one she can't slip. He'd better hope she never does."



Emma Gordon once ran one of the better whorehouses in St. Louis. Then one night a drunken customer mistook her daughter for one of the girls, and when she fought him he hit her a few times too many and broke her neck. Emma neutered and blinded him with a straight razor, but it turned out he was the son of a senator and the next day she was on the run. The senator was an unforgiving man with a long memory and lots of friends, and she'd almost lost her freedom more than once before she faked her death and sneaked off to Hopeless with what was left of her savings.

She'd measured the Kid pretty accurately by the time he'd burst into her front room and announced his purpose: not very bright, a brittle personality caught between the image of himself he was trying to create and the one he secretly recognized. The woman who joined them a moment later was more of a mystery. She'd heard of the Black Rose, an introspective loner who only broke the law when it was necessary, but who never seemed to hesitate when the need arose. Rumor had it she'd killed more than twenty men; Emma suspected it was half that. But none of them had been pokes with roving hands or sloppy mouths. That type she treated roughly, but broken bones and broken pride both healed eventually. The ones she killed were a different breed, living by their guns. Even the one lawman on her tally had been a corrupt bully who used his office to legitimize his crimes.

"We heard tell you had soft women and hard liquor, and we're of a mind to enjoy them both," the Kid announced.

Emma gestured toward the overstuffed couch, but neither the Kid nor Rose made a move in that direction. "It's a little early for either," she said quietly. "My girls need their beauty rest."

The Kid pulled a handful of silver coins from his pocket and tossed them down on a mahogany tabletop so hard that they scarred the finish. "Who gives a shit about their beauty rest? It's not their faces I'm interested in. We been riding all night and we need some relaxing—and we need it right now."

Emma drew a deep breath. "All right, have a seat and I'll call them down."

Apparently soothed by her quick surrender, the Kid visibly calmed. "That's better. And don't forget the liquor. The good stuff, not the crap they serve over in the saloon."

"I'll bring some brandy." And she was off.

Ten minutes later, three younger women descended from the second floor, two of them yawning and rubbing their eyes. Emma brought a fancy silver tray with a bottle of brandy and two glasses, set it on the mahogany table, and made the silver coins disappear. "This is Lily and Milly and Carlotta. Mandy's got a fever and Marybeth's out, probably eating breakfast over at the saloon." She poured the brandy.

The Kid emptied his glass with one toss and smacked his lips. "That's smooth, right enough. Ain't you got any bigger glasses than this?"

Emma ignored him, let her eyes flicker over to where Rose stood. The albino hadn't made a move toward her drink, was staring flatly out the front window toward the street. "I charge

two dollars per visit. The girls keep all their tips, so if you're pleased, you don't have to worry about the money going to me. Drinks are extra. My girls are clean and they're good at their job and I don't tolerate any violence."

At some unseen signal, two men stepped into the room, one black, one at least half Apache. They didn't say anything, but the message was clear. The Kid glanced in their direction, then laughed nervously. "I don't treat my women badly, do I, Rose?"

She didn't answer, and he repeated the question, a bit more sharply.

"No, Kid, you treat your women just fine." Her voice was completely neutral, but Emma gave her a quick glance, and a small frown.

The Kid glanced over at the three women and his finger pointed at Milly. "We'll take that one."

Looking neither pleased nor unhappy, Milly stepped forward and took the Kid's hand in hers. "Right this way, lover."

She started to lead him toward the stairs but he stopped and turned back. "C'mon, Rose. Don't let's keep the lady waiting."

For just a split second there was a flicker of expression on Rose's face, but it passed too quickly to be recognized. Then she turned and followed. Emma watched them climb the stairs, troubled in her thoughts, then shook her head and shot a look at the two men that warned them to stay on their toes. Just in case.



Milly led them to a surprisingly large room with an unsurprisingly large bed, and started to remove her clothing. The Kid plopped himself down in a caneback chair and watched while the Rose stood, motionless, just inside the door. Milly was down to just her underwear when she paused.

"What's the story? Is she going to watch or what?"

The Kid laughed unpleasantly. "No, love. I'm the one who's gonna do the watching."

Milly glanced back and forth between the two, not understanding until Rose sighed audibly and began removing her own clothing.



Marybeth returned while Emma was still standing at the foot of the stairs, wondering what was going on above her head. "They here?"

Emma glanced at the younger woman, nodded. "They're upstairs with Milly."

"Poor Milly. She always gets the queer ones, don't she?" Marybeth spotted the untouched glass of brandy and took it without asking. It felt wonderful burning its way down her throat. "Anything wrong?"

"I don't know, Marybeth. Something just doesn't feel right."

+ + +

Milly recovered from her surprise and gave a little shrug. "Long as you're paying, I got no problem with that." She and Carlotta slept together from time to time, although neither of them had ever had a lady customer before. It took only a few seconds to remove the rest of her clothing, and when she was completely naked, she turned to size up her prospective lover. Rose had just shucked off her shirt and vest, and was crouched over, working on her jeans. She straightened up just about then and Milly got her first good luck, and that's when she started screaming.

The Kid was amused at first, but he heard heavy feet rushing up the stairs, and sighed. "I wish you'd just shut up and get down to the loving," he said angrily. Milly closed her mouth and stretched out her arms for Rose, and then someone was knocking on the door and the Kid pulled his gun and eased the door just far enough open that those outside could see the muzzle. The two roughnecks were standing in the hall, and Emma Gordon was right behind them.

"No call to get excited folks. Everything's fine. The lady just saw a mouse run across the floor. Now if we'll all just get back to minding our own business, I'll be taking care of mine." No one moved for a handful of long seconds, and finally the Kid let the door slide a bit farther open, almost as if by accident, to let those who were outside see the two women locked in a squirming, passionate embrace on the bed. "C'mon folks, I'm not getting my money's worth standing here jawing with you all."

Another beat and Emma nodded. "Just remember what I told you about not hurting my girls."

"I won't hurt a hair on the pretty thing's head, ma'am." And he closed the door.

The Kid and the Black Rose left about an hour later, crossed to the hotel, and got themselves a room for the night. Emma Gordon went upstairs right after they left, to check on Milly. She found the girl naked, huddled under her blankets, apparently unharmed but in a state of mild shock. Emma asked her repeatedly what had caused her to scream, but Milly

never said a thing—and would never say anything again in her entire life.

+ + +

More strangers showed up in Hopeless later that day, and this time it was Crazy Ed Kane who brought the news. Crazy Ed was well into his fifties, a respectable age for a broken-down gunfighter who had at least five enemies somewhere for each of the fifteen notches on his belt. Ed got lucky late in life, doublecrossed his partners after robbing a train, and retired to Hopeless with enough gold to last more than a lifetime. But he'd also picked up a disease from a whore down in Juarez, and his brain was so pickled that no one knew when he was talking straight and when he was getting times and places confused in his mind.

So Dewey Martin went out to check and, sure enough, there was a big cloud of dust heading their way. "At least eight or ten riders," he told the group assembled in the saloon. About two dozen regulars had drifted in during the afternoon, more than usual, thirsting after information about the Black Rose as much as for the liquor.

"Posse?" Sam leaned forward on the bar, thinking hard.

"Might be. Either that or Comancheros back from raiding up north."

Sam tapped his fingers. "All right, someone better go warn our visitors." He didn't much care what happened to the Kid, but Rose was another matter, and Hopeless existed because it protected those who claimed refuge there. Oh, they wouldn't raise their guns to drive off the law. That would bring them the wrong kind of attention, even goad someone in authority into doing something about the rogue settlement. But they'd warn them and hide them and play dumb.

Old Ben volunteered, and a minute later Maggie Riley gave him the room number and he was hobbling up the stairs, one hand pressed against his sore kidney. He knocked on the door of number six, and it opened so quick that it was obvious Rose had been standing right behind it. Beyond, he could see the Kid roll over in the bed.

"What the hell is it now?"

"Company coming. Could be the law. We've got a place you can hide, down in the basement. Behind a false wall. Someone's already taken your horses out for a stroll so's they won't be spotted."

The Kid rolled out of bed with surprising grace. "Ain't hiding from nobody. Won't be necessary."



Half an hour later, an even dozen hard-looking men dismounted in front of the saloon. Tom Grogan identified one of them as Sheriff Bartlett from Parker's Passing, a good-sized town about a hundred miles to the west. "He's a tough man. Beat a drifter to death once."

Sam Grimm sighed and walked outside to greet the newcomers.

"Afternoon, gentleman. Welcome to Hopeless. First drink is on the house."

Bartlett adjusted his jacket so his badge showed. "We're not here to drink. We're looking for someone—tall thin man with a bad laugh, short woman with black hair and a white face."

"And what makes you think they're hereabouts, Sheriff?"

Bartlett never had a chance to answer. The Kid and the Black Rose appeared as if by magic, standing in the middle of the street. The Kid looked confident, Rose indifferent. The sheriff's men slowly moved apart, some checking to make sure they had a clear reach for their holsters, others moving rifles to a more convenient position.

"Don't you know when to quit, Sheriff." The Kid seemed both peeved and pleased at the same time. "How many of your deputies do we have to kill before you get the message?"

Sam stepped back and away, and the handful of onlookers who had emerged from the other buildings in town began to retreat, as well.

"One of those you cut down was my kid brother. You didn't really think I'd just let you ride away after that, did you?"

"Would've been better for you if you had." The Kid sighed dramatically. "Well, I suppose we ought to get this over with."

Afterward, no two people ever agreed on just exactly what happened, but Sam Grimm stood straight and watched and what he saw was that Rose got off three shots before any other gun spoke, and three men fell in the street and never got up again. Then there was lead flying every which way, and Sam hastily found himself some cover—but not before he watched Sheriff Bartlett fumble his revolver and drop it in the dirt, and a horse shy and knock over two of the deputies, and another deputy take a bad step and lose his balance, and still another have his gun jam. The Kid emptied both his pistols and clicked on empty chambers a few times before his arms dropped.

Not one member of the posse was moving and, impossible as it seemed, both the Kid and Rose were standing there, apparently unscathed.

The Kid raised the back of his hand to his mouth and stifled a yawn. "You see to things here, Rose. I'm going back to bed." And he turned and walked back toward the hotel, as though nothing at all had happened.

The townspeople were already crowding around to see if any of the deputies had survived, and to help themselves to their belongings. Sam grimaced and looked at Rose and she looked at him. "C'mon inside," he said. "I'll get you a drink."

The saloon was deserted when they entered. Sam poured her a whiskey, and then poured one for himself, and they sat at a table and looked at one another. "Been a long time, Rose."

She glanced around uneasily, until Sam shook his head. "Mary's gone back to the house." He swallowed some of the whiskey. "I told you I was married, Rose."

"Yes, but it's different, seeing her like that. You always said you were the settling-down type, but I never really believed it."

"And you weren't—aren't."

"Do you love her?"

He hesitated before answering. "She's a good person and a good friend. She's loyal to me and supports me in every way. I can't imagine living without her. Yes, I love her, Rose. Not the way you and I loved each other, but more comfortable like."

She let a ghost of a smile tickle the corners of her mouth, but it was gone almost as soon as it arrived. "Do you ever miss what we had?"

He hesitated again. "Yes—yes, I do. I wouldn't trade what I've got for it, but I don't have any regrets either."

"Then you're a lucky man, and she's a lucky woman." She finished her drink and turned to look toward the swinging doors, and when she did, her vest flapped open, revealing what lay beneath.

"You've been hit!" Sam was on his feet, alarmed.

Rose glanced down at the hole in her silk shirt and shrugged. "Just a scratch. I'm not even bleeding." And she laughed, but it was thin and humorless. "Don't fret."

He eased back down into the chair. "What happened, Rose? Why are you with him? He's trash."

"I've got my reasons."

"Reason enough to get on the wrong side of the law? We don't talk much in this town, but someone's gonna come looking when twelve men disappear, and sooner or later word will get out how they died."

"Don't push it, Sam. I don't want to talk about it."

She started to get up, but he reached out and caught her arm. "Do you remember the promise we made that night?"

Her face was still a mask, but her eyes reflected a terrible sadness. "Don't make me do this, Sam. You're better off not knowing."

"We promised each other the truth, Rose. I've kept my side of the bargain. Are you going to renege now?"

She met his eyes, held them, waited for him to waver. He never faltered. He was the only man who'd ever matched her stare. "Pour me another drink."

He did, she drank it, and he waited some more. "Rose?"

"All right, damn it!" She stood up. "You want the truth? Here it is!" She opened her vest and then she unbuttoned the black silk shirt beneath it, and Sam saw the neat little bullet hole in her shoulder, the flesh torn—but no blood, not a drop. That wasn't the worst part, though. The worst was the other three bullet holes in her abdomen. They weren't bleeding either, but they were filled with a churning mass of maggots.

She gave him an eyeful, then buttoned her blouse and sat down. He sat stunned while she poured out two more drinks.

"How?" It was the only thing he could think to say.

"The Kid did it. He took some kind of talisman off an Indian shaman about a year ago. Wore it around his neck as a souvenir, eventually figured out that it granted wishes. Apparently he wished that he would win every gunfight without getting a scratch. We crossed paths shortly after that and he—well, he killed me. Damned bird flew between us and took my first two shots. The third was a misfire."

Sam was visibly shaken, but his voice was calm. "What did you mean, he killed you?"

"Just what I said. I'm dead, Sam. Then he wished that I was alive to do his bidding or something like that, and so I am, more or less, and I have to do exactly what he tells me. Frankly, I liked it better dead. Only good part is the Kid can't get it up, so he doesn't bother me." She sighed. "But he does like watching me do it with others. Men, women, animals, doesn't matter to him."

"I'll kill him." Sam started to rise and Rose pulled him back down.

"He'd kill you, Sam. Even if you snuck up on him from behind. Even if you had four men holding him down. You can't even backshoot him. There ain't a bullet made that can touch him, so long as he's got that talisman."

"Then I'll take it away from him first."

"He sleeps with one hand resting on his gun and he sleeps real light."

Sam shook his head. "I don't get it. If he can wish for

anything he wants, what the hell is he doing in a rathole like this?" He spread his arms to encompass the entire town.

"The boy's not too bright, for one thing. For another, the charm doesn't always work. The old wishes stay in effect, but it takes a couple of months before it'll grant a new one. He just wasted one last night, in fact. Wished his whore would stop screaming and be quiet. She's quiet now, and always will be. He just wasn't thinking what he was doing. If it were mine—" her eyes looked off at something invisible to Sam "—I'd be real thoughtful about my wishes. First, I'd undo a couple of things—" her hand moved unconsciously to touch her maimed abdomen "—and then I'd take some time to just think. Go off by my own self someplace and figure out just what I want to do with my life."

Sam's eyes narrowed as he remembered something. "You said something about screaming. He didn't hurt one of Emma's girls, did he?"

She glanced away so he couldn't see her eyes. "Didn't hurt her, exactly. Scared her a lot. She's never gonna be the same again, though."

"Oh my God!" Sam was up and running before Rose could stop him, and when she followed him outside, he was already at Emma Gordon's door. He disappeared inside.

Puzzled, Rose started to walk that way, noticing that all of the bodies had been removed from the street. She was standing in front of the hotel when Sam reappeared, running in her direction.

"Emma's gone after him," he said hoarsely. "She's already killed two men for roughing up her girls. I've gotta stop her."

Rose stepped aside to let him pass, not interfering, but not caring. She followed more for lack of anything better to do than for any other reason.

Sam reached the landing at the top of the stairs and paused for breath. All of the doors were closed and there was no one in sight. There was nothing but silence. He had a presentiment that something terrible had happened, and wanted to turn away, but he couldn't abandon Emma. So he walked to the door of room six and raised his hand to knock.

The door was ajar.

He pushed it open slowly, ready to bolt if he saw a gun pointing in his direction. Instead, he saw the Kid, lying in his underwear on top of the blankets. The Kid was smiling, but not with his mouth. His mouth was twisted into an expression of surprise and shock, and his smile was a bright red crescent under his chin.

Emma Gordon sat on a chair beside the bed. She hadn't brought a gun, but there was a brand new straight razor in her lap. She looked up at Sam with her face set resolutely. "He hurt one of my girls," she said quietly. "No one hurts my girls."

Rose entered the room, looked down at the mess on the bed, and for the first time since coming to Hopeless, she smiled.

+ + +

The Black Rose left Hopeless around dusk that evening. She had a final drink at the saloon, then saddled up and headed out of town without saying where she was going. The last rays of the failing sun touched her as she went, and reflected brilliantly from the shiny bauble she wore against her breast, a breast that rose and fell with her breathing for the first time in months. She wondered how long it would be before she could make her next wish.

CHARLIE'S HOLE

JESSE BULLINGTON

"Get in the goddamn hole, Private!" Sergeant Reister was bellowing now.

"No, sir," Tosh repeated.

"You miserable piece of panda shit, get in the hole!"

"No, sir."

"I'm giving you to the count of five to get your scrawny ass down there before I put you there permanently, you disrespectful faggot."

"No, sir."

I felt sure Reister was gonna lay him out right there, put a bullet in his head or maybe just beat the life out of him, but no—he just stared at Tosh, loathing emanating from his eyes. All fifteen of us did our best to pretend not to notice the confrontation, but I'm sure everyone there could see the score. Tosh had snapped, and Reister didn't give two shits.

"Five," Reister said levelly. "You are not in the hole, Private."

"I am not going down there, sir," Tosh said, as if Reister hadn't heard right the first nine times.

"Am I to understand you are disobeying a direct order?" Reister now looked perfectly calm—serene, even. His smooth face glowed in the sunlight, giving him the look of a warlord, as opposed to a grimy sergeant.

"That is correct, sir," Tosh said in that monotone voice of his. "I've gone down six holes in the last month. That's every damn hole we've come across, and I'm sick of this shit. I'm no goddamn tunnel-rat, and you know it."

"Do you know what happens if you disobey my direct orders, you yellow turd?" Reister asked real sweetly.

"Court-martial, the brig," Tosh shrugged. "I don't care anymore. Anything to get the hell away from your crazy ass."

"Court-martial?" Reister grinned. "Court-martial's for a trial. Trivial offenses only, my boy. What you're talking about is sedition."

All the chatter stopped right then, and to my horror I saw Collins slinking toward me. Collins is definitely all right, but he usually thinks with his lips instead of his brain. He might've been the best friend I've had here, but his smart mouth had

gotten us the worst goddamn post possible: point. And the last thing this situation needed was a heckler. I tried to scoot away, but where could I go?

"Sedition?" Tosh yelled, finally raising his voice. "I didn't say shit about sedition and you know it!"

"Disobeying my direct orders is incitement to rebellion, and I have authority to neutralize a rebellion by any means necessary," Reister said cheerily. "At sea we'd call it mutiny, plain and simple."

At this all the other grunts ceased their chores to watch things play out, and all pretenses were dropped as Reister's hand folded up to grip the handle of his M-16. Some of the fellahs trained their pieces at Tosh. Others leaned forward, puffing their cigarettes. The shit was about to go down.

"Do it, then," Tosh shouted. "Enough of this bullshit!"

"You're going down that hole or you will be one dead dink, I shit you not," Reister spat.

I knew Tosh was gonna bite it right then and there, when Collins leans over to me, never minding the cataclysmic turn events had taken, and opens that goddamn mouth of his.

"Reister's hoping to find a Silver Star down one of these holes," the stupid fuck says as loud as day.

Did I say things were tense before? Shit. I heard a drop of sweat explode louder than a shell as it struck a leaf, and then the silence was broken. *Shattered* would be a better word.

"Fuckin' goddamn hell!" Reister's full attention had swiveled to Collins and me. "You think there's something funny about the way I run my ship, queerbait?"

He advanced on us through his disciples, and stopped ten feet away. I about shit my pants. I thought I was gonna get it, gunned down by my own sergeant. Reister looked back and forth between Collins and me. I was tempted to put my Colt in my mouth and end it all there, but I didn't.

"Eh?" I saw, with a mix of relief and dismay, that Reister was pleased. Immensely pleased. "Laugh it up, butt-buddies, 'cause you're going with him."

He turned back to Tosh, calling, "Now you got someone to hold your hand down there."

"More like his dick!" this big gorilla named Frank says, and all the grunts have a good belly laugh at our expense. Reister beamed at us like we'd just won a new car. I looked to the hole, where Tosh stood.

The mouth of the tunnel gaped at me like an open grave. It was an almost predatory opening, a gap in the floor of the jungle. Roots stuck out of its side, and I felt queasy watchin'

Tosh stick his head in there. It didn't look so steep, leisurely arcing down into the earth.

I shook like the coward I was as I descended into my first tunnel, Tosh's boots kicking wet dirt into my mouth. Of all the places to lose my VCTS cherry, it had to be this damn hole? The only good thing was that it hadn't been used in a while; the flip side of this being spiders, centipedes, and worse, all on my ass. All I'd brought was my pistol and canteen, and even then it felt tighter than a nun's ass in there. I even forgot my flashlight, so all I could see were shadows cast on Tosh's butt.

With each foot I wriggled, it got worse and worse, claustrophobic as fuck. I felt like I'd reverted to the me of six month's ago—freshmeat, a pussy. Of course, we all were. Assholes, dickheads, limpdicks, dickbiters, dicksmokers, faggots, queers, girls, bitches, pussies, pukes, chickenshit motherfuckers; any insult you can think of, Reister had called us. I'd always wanted to stick up for Tosh when Reister fucked with him, but how could I? I'd been in here for twenty-three weeks and five days, and I still got teary every time I went on point. A couple of times I'd nearly collapsed with fear in the jungle, so scared I couldn't breathe.

This felt worse. Much, much worse. I had no idea how far we'd gone, wondering if gunfire would come from ahead or behind. Reister, that psychotic bastard. I suddenly hated Tosh for causing the whole mess, and Collins even more. Then I hated myself for being such a pussy.

On we went, into the mud, into the very ass of Vietnam, until Tosh stopped, and I rammed my skull into his boot.

"It's cool," he said. Twisting his waist, he squirmed forward and disappeared from sight.

I could hardly breathe, and I nearly vomited as Tosh helped me out of the tunnel and into the tiny cave ahead.

"Dead end," Tosh whispered, waving his light around the burrow.

It couldn't have been more than a dozen feet across, and maybe six feet wide, but after that tunnel it felt as spacious as any mess hall. Collins' orange head poked out of the hole and we helped him up. Even squatting so our asses brushed the soft earth, my head still raked on the ceiling. It was a goddamn miracle this place hadn't caved in.

"Thank God," Collins panted, spitting dirt and pawing his vest.

"Lucky there weren't any snakes in this one," Tosh said as he leaned back and unscrewed his canteen. "Last one Sergeant sent me down had a goddamn pit viper in it."

My breathing had almost returned to normal, when Collins lights up a joint. I swear, that mother can be a right dick sometimes. I started coughing and turned to go back up the tunnel. I felt spooked, nauseous, cramped, and was more than ready to get topside. Tosh grabbed my boot, though, and turned to Collins.

"Put that shit out before you smoke up all our oxygen," he told Collins, as he passed me his canteen.

After a few more puffs, Collins stamped out his Jay and we all just laid back for a second. It stunk like weed and mold down in that cave, and I turned to leave again.

"What's your hurry?" Tosh asked. "This hole's cool—no other tunnels."

"But Reister," I began.

"Fuck 'em," he said. "He'll just have us stand watch or some shit when we get out. Better off down here with the spiders."

"So, Tosh—" Collins said, but Tosh cut him off.

"Toshiro, man. Toshiro," Tosh grinned. "I hate that 'Tosh' shit."

"So what's with you and Reister?" Collins asked him. "He seems eager to get rid of you."

"Why do you think?" Tosh snapped with sudden intensity. "Because in his book I'm just another slope, not a Japanese-American, not an American at all."

We were all quiet for a second, but then Collins, of course, keeps prodding.

"Jesus, why don't you transfer?"

"Why don't you?" Tosh smiled weakly. "No one gets out of this squad without his okay. I've tried, but he's not down. He wants me dead out here, and that's that."

"Bastard," Collins muttered, and began chewing up the remainder of his joint.

"What's his damage?" I thought aloud.

"Former drill sergeant," Tosh answered. "Got tired of being an asshole back home, needed to come be an asshole over here. Wanted to 'see the shit,' he told us once. 'Need to get some gook blood under my fingernails.' Stupid redneck fuck."

I slipped as my boots shifted in the sloppy dirt, and I toppled backward. I didn't hit the wall very hard, but my shoulder sunk in deep, so deep I had to put my elbow in the wall to push myself up.

"So I'm the only guy who thinks Reister's nuts, at least until you guys showed up," Tosh continued while Collins turned his flashlight on me. "I can't get him court-martialed, and even if I did, I'd get fucked up."

"Oh shit," I managed, as the part of wall I'd hit collapsed, and I pitched onto Collins to avoid falling in.

"Shut up, shut up," Tosh hissed, pointing his pistol and flashlight into the gap I'd busted in the wall. Tosh scooted to it and punched out a few more heaps of clay. Between the two beams of light we could see a second tunnel running alongside the wall. It was a little larger than the first, but not by much.

"Must've been a T-intersection they blocked off," Tosh whispered as he flashed his light down the tunnel in either direction. As he did, we all heard a faint rustling, but it went silent before we could get a bead on which way it had come from.

No one spoke, but a decision was made. There was no point in arguing; we were going down there. Not for Reister; not for the greater glory of the USMC; but for our own lives, worthless though they may be. The noise told us Vincent Charles was close, and we stood a much better chance down here than in his jungle later tonight. Splitting up was our only option. If they got behind us, we were fucked.

Tosh went right, Collins and me went left. We were to meet back at the cave in one hour. That seemed a helluva long time to me, but it was slow going in those tunnels. Collins had the flashlight, so I wiggled after him in the darkness. After a few dozen feet, I managed to get around so I could look behind us, but Tosh's light had already vanished. All I could hear was the wheezing of Collins' lungs and the gurgling in my own sorry guts.

The fear washed back over me, and I started to lag behind. Once I tried to tell Collins to wait up, but he shushed me immediately. I had to stop several times to get my breathing sorted out, and I was sure we must've gone too far. After shaking off the willies for the hundredth time, I noticed Collins had stopped up ahead at an intersection. It was another T, our tunnel dead-ending into it. I scrambled through the tight hole, unable to see anything but the firefly of Collins' flashlight far ahead of me.

I'd calmed down a bit, when my already-strained nerves were snapped by a sudden burst of gunfire somewhere back in the tunnels. Three shots in quick succession, then silence, then the rest of the clip going off. The possibilities were endless, but none of them were good. I cupped my hands to call out to Collins, but paused, unsure if I should disturb the tomblike quiet that had again enveloped the tunnel.

Then I heard the screams. The echoing wails came from

back the way we'd come, from Tosh. The shrieking got worse and worse, rising in pitch until it cut off suddenly.

For a while I lay still in the tunnel, feeling dizzy all of a sudden. Then Collins was waving his light in my eyes, and I lost it. I began to kick and claw the walls and ceiling, covering myself in mud.

"Get yer ass over here," Collins called out, his voice booming. "Chill the fuck out!"

Getting myself under control, I moved forward once more. Every few yards I'd have to stop and squirm around to glance back down the passage, even though I couldn't see a damn thing. I was getting close to Collins, a scant twenty-five feet away, when I heard it.

There are no words to describe the horror I felt at hearing that sound. I envied the dead as I heard that noise, and froze in mid-wiggle. It was the unmistakable scraping of someone or something pulling itself up the tunnel.

I groaned, trying to scream but too damn scared to do so. Collins must have heard as well, because he hurled his flashlight at me. It thudded off the floor, bouncing to within my reach. I frantically drew my Colt and turned the light down the tunnel. Its beam splashed over the pockmarked burrow, fading out down the passage.

"Come on, get over here," Collins said, his voice drowning out the scrape-scraping.

Then it hit me, a warm breeze fluttering down the tunnel. A sweet, charnel-house smell rode that draft, the odor of southern fried slope. I thought of a guy I'd hated in my last company, and how he'd smelled after the mortar had done its work and left him to the jungle for a few hours. That same, almost erotic smell of raw meat had hung over the crater his remains were spattered about.

The light revealed nothing but an empty tunnel. Still, I knew something lurked just beyond the beam's reach. The noise grew louder and louder, and the smell became worse and worse. I wanted desperately to crawl up the tunnel to Collins, but stayed rooted in place. Then the noise and stench coagulated into a sight, making substance from shadow at the tip of my beam, and all hell broke loose.

The thing didn't crawl so much as slither, its leathery skin sticking to the clay. I'd seen dead bodies on numerous occasions, and more importantly, I'd smelled them. Even if what came at me out of that pit had a whole face instead of that larvae-infested quilt of rotting skin, even if its chest was intact rather than split open and coated in gore; even then the

smell would have been enough for me to know: The thing was dead. A dead gook—moving, for God's sake!

Its left arm ended at the elbow, the flesh worn away to reveal splintered bone and the ragged threads of nerve and muscle. The fingers of its other hand were grated and mangled. Yet they pulled its mutilated body forward. As the thing leered fully into the light, I could make out the brainpan through a crack in its decaying face. It came at me out of the darkness, and I went totally fucking apeshit.

The first few shots sank into the side of the tunnel, but the weeping flesh-blossoms opening on its face and shoulders told me I'd hit it a few times. It stopped, but only momentarily, before lurching forward again. I sobbed and spat, pulling the trigger again and again, even after the clip ran dry. Unable to take my eyes off the crawling corpse, I tried to back up, but my legs wouldn't bend.

I chunked my empty gun at the crawling thing, but it fell short. Before I knew what I was doing, I had thrown the flashlight at it, too. That fell short, too, and worse—the light landed pointing into the wall. Most everything went dark, except for a small patch of tunnel wall lit up by the beam. I couldn't see the thing, but knew it was still there. And when the hand grabbed me by the back of my collar, I thought it had gotten behind me somehow—but it was only Collins, pulling me back up the tunnel by my head and flailing arms.

He probably said something, but I all I could hear was the scrape-scraping. And the smell—oh God, the smell! I stopped thrashing as Collins hauled me backward in short jerks. *Scrape, scrape, scrape.* Inspiration hit me, and I fumbled madly at my vest. Just as Collins backed into one of the cross-passages at the intersection, the thing bumped the flashlight and the beam spun around to spotlight that oozing face. Scraps of wet flesh dangled from its mouth, dribbling blood onto the clay.

Screaming, I yanked the pin from a grenade. Collins was screaming then, too, and I side-armed the explosive at the oncoming horror. I badly wanted to see if it would hit, but Collins punched me in the mouth. Then he was shoving me up a tunnel, grinding his back into my folded knees.

The light came next, so bright I could see miles and miles down the empty tunnel in front of me—hundreds of miles of dirt and clay and light—and then I went black.

I awoke to Collins screaming, and hands clawing at my legs. Whimpering, I kicked at the arms and began to pull myself away up the tunnel. It had got us, and I dared not think what

kind of shit we were in. Then Collins stopped screaming, and the hands stopped pawing.

"David," Collins gasped from behind me. "David, it's me, oh fuck, it's me, it's me. . . ."

He sounded far away down the tunnel. I wanted out of this shit, out of this damn grave I'd crawled into. I thought of the smell, and vomited onto myself.

"David," Collins was saying, "Jesus, David, help me. I can't feel my legs. They're gone—my legs, my fuckin' legs."

He began to cry, and in my delirium I crawled up the tunnel, away from the sobbing. The blast had done a number on me, and I paused to try to get a grip on what had happened. *Run*, I thought. *Get out now*. Then I remembered Collins lying fucked up in the dark. Part of me had to keep moving, but just as I resumed my crawling I heard Collins shouting my name. I couldn't leave him.

"David?" Collins whimpered. "Hey, fuckin' say something, man."

"It's me," I mumbled, uncertain how to proceed. I backed up a way, so that I lay awkwardly over Collins and could feel his arms and chest under my legs.

"My lighter," he groaned, and tried to get at his vest, but my knees were in his way. Blind and half deaf, my head grinding into the ceiling, I groped all over his muddy fatigues until I found the bulge of his Zippo. I clumsily pulled it out and squirmed off of him. It took some work, since I was shaking so badly, but I got it lit after a few tries. I fearfully waved it in Collins' direction, and began to laugh. The light was feeble compared to a flashlight, but I could clearly see that Collins lay buried up to his thighs in dirt; the tunnel behind us had caved in on him.

With some work we dug him out, and at finding his feet intact, he began to laugh like it was all some big fucking practical joke. It was miraculous he hadn't broken anything. He seemed a little shook up, but otherwise okay.

"A grenade?" Collins said. "That was fuckin' stupid."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, as those dingy old claws of fear began digging themselves into my heart again, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—oh shit, we are so fucked!"

Collins went silent, and he took his Zippo out of my hands and flicked it closed.

"Turn it on," I begged him.

"No."

"Please, I can't see—I can't—I can't," I stuttered.

"Look," Collins said, his voice a helluva lot sterner than I'd

ever heard it before, "we can't get out the way we came. That's obvious."

"But—"

"And if were gonna find another way out, we'll need some light. I don't want to burn the fluid until we really need to see something."

And even though I knew he was right, I couldn't stop shaking.

Buried alive, I kept thinking. My dumbass had buried us alive. How far to the surface? Were we going up or down? What was that thing? Seriously, what the fuck was it?

"Let's get going," Collins said, and I was squashed into the mud as he scrambled over me.

My fear didn't leave, but I beat it into submission, and followed Collins. Every time I moved forward, though, I'd sniff the air and perk my ears a bit. For shit's sake, I was scared.

All I could hear was the sound we made as we went, scraping and squishing. Rather than growing used to the dark, my eyes seemed to tint, the blackness appearing to thicken and harden. Several times we rested, our fingers just as raw and aching as our knees were bruised and sore. Once I thought I smelled the stench again, but immediately realized it was only my own stink of piss and puke and sweat. We encountered no adjoining passages, and I began to lose hope.

I had no grenades, no gun, and no flashlight—only a god-damn jackknife. The death I'd sentenced us to would not be quick. I couldn't stop thinking about the creature, and wanted to know what Collins thought about it, but he wasn't in the mood for conversation.

Collins stopped suddenly after God-knows-how-many hours, and I immediately curled up to get some shut-eye. He kicked me, and I was about to tell him to fuck off when I saw it, too: A speck of light glittered far off down the tunnel, a spot of brilliance in the catacombs.

I heard Collins un-holster his Colt, and as quietly as we could, we resumed crawling. My guts jumped about in agitation, and I had to suppress my giggles. We had finally made it, dragged our worn-out bodies through miles of tunnels all night long, and were now about to emerge into the morning jungle. After all the pain and terror and despair, we had made it.

With the light still apparently a long way off down the tunnel, Collins stopped again. I began to ask him what the score was when he kicked me quiet. I heard his Zippo flick open, and everything went white. As my eyes readjusted, I saw why we had stopped.

The passage ended not a foot in front of Collins. A smooth, reddish block—wholly out of place in this world of brown clay—was wedged into the tunnel. A hole no wider than a cigarette passed through the block, which was where the light was coming from. It wasn't sunlight either, not nearly bright enough.

Collins looked pretty rough, with blood caked on his chin and vest. He turned to me and put his index finger to his lips, the pistol concealing his face. Be quiet. No shit, Sherlock.

The tunnel wasn't any broader here, but Collins was small enough that he could swivel around in a fetal position after giving me the lighter, getting his feet in front of him. He clicked the safety off his Colt and pushed at the wall with his feet. Nothing. Killing the Zippo and pocketing it, I leaned into Collins as he gave it another go. The block shifted a fraction of an inch. With a groan, Collins heaved again, and the block moved another half-foot.

Light now trickled in from all four sides of the block. A final kick made it topple forward. Collins scooted into the light. He slid down a little way into what must have been a deeper, wider tunnel beyond the one that had brought us there, though I couldn't see any details yet. The back of Collins' head was in the way.

Suddenly Collins yelled, "Don't move, motherfucker!"

My gorge rose. We weren't alone anymore. Shit.

I nervously crawled to the end of the hole and stopped, paralyzed with awe. Not only were we not outside, we weren't in another tunnel, either. Stretching out above and below me lay an ornate temple, lit with several long candles that cast an unnatural amount of brightness on the room. The ceiling had clearly been carved from the clay, but the four walls all looked like they were made up of blocks similar to the one we had dislodged. The floor below my perch gleamed black and yellow, covered in a thin coating of moss.

I wanted to examine the carved ceiling and what appeared to be a shrine set against the opposite wall, but Collins and his new friend quickly reclaimed my attention. The man wore yellow robes, and stood in the center of the room. He looked old, like ancient fucking old, and rather amused at the pistol being waved in his face by the furious Irishman. It seemed ridiculous, but we'd apparently managed to bust out into the church of some weird gook god.

"David," Collins yelled, his back to me. "David, get down here! Oh shit, don't you fuckin' move, you fuck."

I tried clambering down, but slipped and fell, cracking my

shoulder painfully. The moss felt soft and nice, though, and I wanted sleep more than anything in the world, but Collins' boot persuaded me to rise once more. I got up, supporting myself on the loose block I'd narrowly avoided braining myself on.

"Oh, man," Collins said, "what the fuck is this, what the fuck?"

I looked up again at the images etched in the clay ceiling. It was like I couldn't help myself. They were kind of a cross between a sculpture and a picture, weird spirals of black clay rearing out of the smooth earth to form miniature people and less identifiable creatures. The detail seemed flawless, right down to the ribbons of drool hanging from the teeth of the monstrosities that tore their way free of the clay. My heart beat wildly, and I had to remind myself to breathe.

Then I looked to the shrine—a tiny spring encircled by clay beasts. The spring bubbled out a pathetic stream of black water. The run-off was carried along some tiles into a fungus-coated stone pipe, an aqueduct. Scrawled over the hole where the pipe left the room were a bunch of odd letters, not Vietnamese or Cambodian, but characters from some older, weirder alphabet.

Other than the way we had come and the aqueduct, there seemed to be no exits from the room.

My canteen was dry, so I made my way to the shrine on shaky legs. The idea to do so came to me suddenly, and seemed like a really good one. When I got close, I saw that the spring was only able to sustain the small pool. The run-off barely made it a few feet down the tunnel before moss sopped it up. As I bent to drink, Collins got agitated.

"Hey—hey! What're you doing?" he stammered. "Get the fuck away from there!"

I paused, looking back at Collins and the old man. The geezer had turned so that I could see he was still smiling, but I got real confused then, because I realized that the old guy was about as Charles as me or Collins. He looked—I dunno, Middle-Eastern, maybe—because of his long beard. His scalp was shaved smooth, but it looked like his head was covered by faded tattoos or something—the skin all blue and splotchy. He had the palest green eyes, almost white, and those eyes kept staring at me as if I were the only other person in the room, as if Collins and his gun didn't exist.

"Drink," the old man said, his English clear and precise, despite an almost German accent.

At this, Collins flipped his shit.

"You fuck," he babbled. "You're helpin' us—U. S. Marines, understand? Get us outta here, you—you—hey, how many of you bastards are down here? What the fuck is goin' on, what is this shit, what is this?"

"Relax," the old man said. "Drink. Sit. You are my guests."

As he said this, his eyes sparkled, and I moved away from the pool toward Collins.

"Relax?" Collins shook, wired on fear and confusion. "Dude, you got no fuckin' idea what we been through—what we saw—so shut the fuck up!"

"It's been such a long time," the old man continued, ignoring Collins, "since I've had company. Rest a while."

The old man's tranquility must have been contagious, because Collins calmed right down. "Look," he said, his finger easing off the trigger, "how do we get out? That's all we want."

The old man didn't answer, but his smile broadened. He turned his back on Collins, and went toward the spring. Collins, pissed at the brush off but no longer raging, walked after him. I watched anxiously, feeling lost and tired.

"Hey, you old gook," Collins said. "I said you're gonna help us." And at this the geezer spun around. He didn't look so frail anymore, and his beard stirred as if a wind brushed it, only I felt no wind.

"I am no 'gook', you wretched Western slug," he intoned, his smile gone, "I care not for your petty squabbling, and will not pick sides in your hollow wars. I did not help the others when they came, and I will not help you." And he turned away to kneel before the spring.

I felt sick, not just tired or scared, but one hundred percent, death's-door ill. So I gazed back up at the ceiling, trying to find a familiar, comforting image among the strange gods. Collins kept pressing though, advancing on the old man; like I said, he never did know when to shut the fuck up. "What others—the V.C.?" he said. "Where are they? When were they here?"

"When they built that tunnel, they came through the wall. After that, they all left. Most, anyway. There are still a few, I think, in here somewhere," he looked slowly around the walls of the temple, as if peering through the blocks or at something invisible to us.

Removing a clay cup from his robe, he filled it with the dark water. He offered this to Collins, who finally lowered his gun. I was relieved by that. The last thing I wanted was for Collins to shoot the old man. I didn't really know why.

"Came through the wall?" Collins asked, sipping the water.

"They came through," the old man said, "by chance, when they were excavating a tunnel system to hide from you crusaders."

"Crusaders?" Collins snorted, finishing his water and handing me the cup. "We're USMC, not King Arthur's fuckin' knights."

"Wait a second," I said, bending back down to refill the cup. "You said they came through the wall. So you were already here. If they built the tunnel, how did you get down here?"

"Yeah," Collins seconded, moving around the side of the pool. He squinted at something I couldn't see, so I turned away and put the cup to my lips. Sipping the water, I found it to be the sweetest I'd had since home. A little thick, but definitely refreshing.

"I read of a spring in the jungles a long time ago," the old man said, "a small creek mentioned in an ancient tome. Many years had passed since the book was penned, and many more passed before I found the stream. By the time I'd arrived, it had dwindled to a miniscule trickle in the hills, which I followed down into the earth, until I located its source." He waved his spindly arm at the pool before us.

Collins had reached the wall and, ducking down, leaned over the shrine to look down the aqueduct pipe.

"Hot damn," Collins said excitedly, "bet we could follow this all the way out!"

I looked apprehensively at the narrow exit. If possible, it seemed even smaller than the last two tunnels. But I'd spent more than enough time down in that damn temple, or whatever the hell it was.

"Yes," the old man said, his smile reappearing. "Yes, that leads to the surface."

"Aha!" yelped Collins. He snatched a small leather bag he'd spotted in a crevice by the pool, then tossed it to me. The weight of the thing nearly bowled me over. Collins was waving his gun around again, and for the first time I began to question his sanity. We should not fuck with the old man; that seemed obvious.

"What's in there?" Collins hooted. "If it's supplies or food, it's ours!"

My guts began to thrash around again, and I bent to open the bag. Just as my fingers undid the complex knot, the old man appeared over me, and for no reason I can name, I silently handed him back the bag. But as he took the offering, I distinctly felt movement from the satchel, the leather pushed violently outward by something inside.

"What the shit!" Collins gasped. "David, what the fuck is your problem?"

"We don't need it," I whispered, staring at the pulsating bag.

"What the fuck is in it?"

"Nothing to help you," the old man said. "Old books. They'll do the likes of you no good at all."

"Books?" Collins demanded. "Lets see them."

"There is nothing in them that will allow you to live to see the sunrise," the old man said, and even though I could no longer bring myself to look at his face, I knew he still smiled.

"What?" Collins screeched. "What? Fuck you!"

And Collins—nice, funny, a little dumb but okay Collins—emptied his clip into the old man.

I felt paralyzed, watching him jab his gun into the geezer's robes and blast away. But nothing happened. We all stood still for a moment, silent, waiting. Then Collins dropped his Colt, which skipped away off the moss.

The old man turned to Collins, who looked back at him. Collins even met his gaze—for about a minute. Then he collapsed, wailing and pulling at the old man's robes. As he bowed before the geezer, whispering apologies through his sobs, the man looked to me again, and try as I might to look away, I found myself peering into those treacherous green eyes of his.

He spun away, depositing his satchel back in the nook and striding to the block we'd knocked down. Then he began to mumble and chant. I hurried to Collins, who was still shaking and moaning, and splashed water onto this face. He looked pale and fever ridden, but he came to his senses enough for us to get our shit together. Retrieving his gun, I ejected the spent clip, found some extra rounds, reloaded it, and tucked it into my belt.

I turned back to the old man, who once more faced us. With stomach-turning horror I realized that the half-ton block was back in place, sealing the room. Collins had stopped crying, but when he looked at that block, I thought he might start up again.

The old man towered over us, and I knew the true meaning of fear. Not the fear that compels the feet to action; but a fear of such magnitude that awe or madness or worship can be the only possible responses to it. This was the fear of God that I had never known. Real terror confronted us in that instant, in the guise of that old man. And when he finally averted his glare, we knew that he owned us, and that, for the moment, he was a merciful master.

"Go," he said disgustedly.

We fled—not out of fright, but out of respect. We walked slowly to the pipe, our eyes fastened on the old man's robes. The farther we moved away from him, the more our wonder turned to dread. Finally, we panicked. As I'm bigger, I managed to push in front and began scrambling with maddened intensity down the narrow confines of the aqueduct.

I should've been too tired to move, let alone pull myself by my fingertips over miles of jagged stone, but I moved with a speed bordering on the supernatural. Our flight must have lasted many hours, but I can barely remember it. Once I must have slept, as Collins woke me with a pinch to the ankle. Sometime later I shit myself, the rancid smell an unwelcome reminder of the thing in the tunnel.

Finally, after losing three fingernails and a boot, I found the rock giving way to clay, and knew we'd made it. The tunnel grew wider, opening into a cave that the aqueduct passed through. The incline leveled off as the night sky came into view up ahead, revealed to us through gaps in the vines that dangled over the cave mouth. Grabbing Collins by the arm, I started to run forward, laughing as I approached freedom. If only I'd thought to use Collins' Zippo, we might have made it.

I didn't even feel the first few strikes, and had collapsed to my knees before I understood what had happened. Collins stepped back screaming, and went down hard. The moonlight barely reached us in the back of the cave, but I could see well enough to know I was fucked. Cobras, dozens of 'em, rearing at me out of the darkness, long fangs sinking in and ripping out, over and over and over.

It didn't sting so much as burn, my whole body incinerating from the inside. I felt the snakes writhing underneath me, the fire growing and growing, and they didn't stop. They were all over me, fat coils of scales rubbing, hoods flaring, and the noise—the *shick, shick, shick* of snake sliding on snake—and the screams . . .

After a time, they stopped biting. Every few minutes one would experimentally strike at a twitching limb, but the onslaught had ended. *I should die*, I thought, *any second the fire will cool, and I can rest—sleep—die*. But I didn't. The burning intensified, the sickness so bad I could feel my skin crack and ooze as the venom rotted me alive.

Then I remembered the Colt.

It took me a spell to jam my bloated finger into the trigger guard, and as I raised it, the gun went off. At this the snakes under and on me were striking and thrashing again, but I

couldn't care less. In the cave's dimness, I could see Collins' serpent-covered body still convulsing a few feet away, could hear his whimpers, soft but clear. I couldn't get up, so from where I lay I put five round into Collins' back, then put the barrel in my own mouth and pulled the trigger.

Thum-thump. Sleep. Thum-thump. Staring at the ceiling, can't sleep. Light enters the cave, snakes everywhere, slithering over and under and through us, out into the sunshine. Watch the light on the wall through my ruined face, feeling cold metal in my throat, hearing the damn heartbeat sound, louder and louder, and I'm dead. But I'm not. Heartbeat getting louder until I can't think, all I want is to die but I can't and it hurts, the fucking thundering heartbeat, and I'm clawing at my chest, digging through purple layers of poisoned meat until I find the bastard and put my fingers through it and tear at it until most of it comes off in my swollen fist and I squeeze until it's dribbling gore—and I realize it's not my heart that's making all the racket. Now I'm moving, ripping at Collins' breast, and he's pushing me away, saying, "Get offa me, get offa me."

I find his heart, the bullet holes making it easy, and I crush the fat, warm thing and I still fucking hear that *thum-thump, thum-thump*, and Collins' moans, "Lie down, we're dead, we're dead," and the burning's only gotten worse, and I watch the light dying away, but the snakes don't come back, only the stars.

"You still awake, David?" Collins asks. I try to answer, but my jaw's blown off, so I only gurgle up blood.

"Reister," Collins whispers after a while, and the starlight glimmers just like the old man's eyes, and I can see fine, even though I'm dead. The burning's finally cooling, but the noise is getting worse with every second. It takes some work, some real fucking work, but I conjure up Reister's face—Reister's damned, damning face—and I remember. Even though it hurts, I remember.

Moving makes it a little better, even though the *thum-thump* is even louder out in the grass on the hilltop, but me and Collins are soldiers again, and even with my legs all dripping and soft I run so fast, so damn fast, it's like I'm swimming through the jungle. I can't hear anything but the heartbeat, coming from everything, from everywhere, getting louder and louder, and we find their footprints, and it's so easy, so many footprints. Collins says things, and I want to answer, but I can't, and "Besides," he says, "they'll be able to kill us for sure, definitely, fuckin' A."

Then the jungle stops, and the *thum-thump, thum-thump* is so loud my ears rupture and bleed, and Collins is screaming. Frank, big Frank never liked us much, and Collins is on him—heh, some guard—and Frank is screaming, too, as he drops his gun and falls under Collins.

Soldiers everywhere, flares blinding me all around, but the *thum-thump* is worse, so terrible it hurts more than any bullet. Then he's right there, all three hundred pounds of throbbing fat and muscle: Reister. I want to show him, to lead him down through the tunnels to behold sights unseen by living men, so he can know, so he can understand. But watching him trip as he turns to run, shoving one of his terrified men between us, I know he already does: better him than you, after all, eh, Reister? Loyalty? Courage? Honor? Bullshit. Survival. Blood, under their fingernails or yours. *Thum-thump*. We run together, me and Reister, and then I'm on him, and then he's wide open, his guts unspooling into my arms in the grass under the stars, and the heartbeat gets a tiny bit softer, and it's fucking glorious. . . .

THE DEAD KID

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

It's been a lot of years, but I think I'm still afraid of Luke Bradley, because of what he showed me.

I knew him in the first grade, and he was a tough guy even then, the sort of kid who would sit on a tack and insist it didn't hurt, and then get *you* to sit on the same tack (which definitely *did* hurt) because you were afraid of what he'd do if you didn't. Once he found a bald-faced hornets' nest on a tree branch, broke it off, and ran yelling down the street, waving the branch around and around until, finally, the nest fell off and the hornets came out like a *cloud*. Nobody knew what happened after that because the rest of us had run away.

We didn't see Luke in school for a couple days afterward, so I suppose he got stung rather badly. When he did show up, he was his old self and beat up three other boys in one afternoon. Two of them needed stitches.

When I was about eight, the word went around the neighborhood that Luke Bradley had been eaten by a werewolf. "Come on," said Tommy Hitchens, Luke's current sidekick. "I'll show you what's left of him. Up in a tree."

I didn't believe any werewolf would have been a match for Luke Bradley, but I went. When Tommy pointed out the alleged remains of the corpse up in the tree, I could tell even from a distance that I was looking at a T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans stuffed with newspapers.

I said so and Tommy flattened me with a deft right hook, which broke my nose and my glasses.

The next day, Luke was in school as usual, though I had a splint on my nose. When he saw me, he called me a "pussy" and kicked me in the balls.

Already he was huge, probably a couple of years older than the rest of the class. Though he never admitted it, everybody knew he'd been held back in every grade at least once, even kindergarten.

But he wasn't stupid. He was *crazy*. That was the fascination of hanging out with him, even if you could get hurt in his company. He did *wild* things that no one else dared even think about. There was the stunt with the hornets' nest, or the time he picked up fresh dog-shit in both his bare hands

and claimed he was going to eat it right in front of us, before everybody got grossed out and ran because we were afraid he was going to make *us* do it. Maybe he really did eat it. He was just someone for whom the rules, *all* the rules, simply did not apply. That he was usually in detention, and had been picked up by the police several times, only added to his mystique.

And in the summer when I was twelve, Luke Bradley showed me the dead kid.

Things had progressed quite a bit since the hornets' nest. No one quite believed all the stories of Luke's exploits, though he would beat the crap out of you if you questioned them to his face. Had he really stolen a car? Did he really hang onto the outside of a P&W light-rail train and ride all the way into Philadelphia without getting caught?

Nobody knew, but when he said to me and to my ten-year-old brother Albert, "Hey, you two scuzzes—" *scuzz* being his favorite word of the moment—"there's a *dead kid* in Cabbage Creek Woods. Wanna see?" It wasn't really a question.

Albert tried to turn away, and said, "David, I don't think we should," but I knew what was good for us.

"Yeah," I said. "Sure we want to see."

Luke was already more than a head taller than either of us and fifty pounds heavier. He was cultivating the "hood" image from some hand-me-down memory of James Dean or Elvis, with his hair up in a greasy swirl and a black leather jacket worn even on hot days, when he kept his shirt unbuttoned so he could show off that he already had chest hair.

A cigarette dangled from his lips. He blew smoke in my face. I strained not to cough.

"Well, come on, then," he said. "It's really cool."

So we followed him, along with a kid called Animal, and another called Spike—the beginnings of Luke's "gang," with which he said he was going to make himself famous one day. My little brother tagged after us, reluctantly at first, but then as fascinated as I was to be initiated into this innermost, forbidden secret of the older, badder set.

Luke had quite a sense of showmanship. He led us under bushes, crawling through natural tunnels under vines and dead trees where, when we were smaller, we'd had our own secret hideouts, as, I suppose, all children do. Luke and his crowd were getting too big for that sort of thing, but they went crashing through the underbrush like bears. I was small and skinny enough. David was young enough. In fact, it was all we could do to keep up.

With a great flourish, Luke raised a vine curtain and we

emerged into the now half-abandoned Radnor Golf Course. It was an early Saturday morning. Mist was still rising from the poorly tended greens. I saw one golfer, far away. Otherwise, we had the world to ourselves.

We ran across the golf course, then across Lancaster Pike, then up the hill and back into the woods on the other side.

I only thought for a minute, *Hey, wait a minute; we're going to see a corpse—a kid like us, only dead.* . . . But, as I said, for Luke Bradley or even with him, all rules were suspended, and I knew better than try to ask what the kid died of, because we'd see soon enough.

In the woods again, by secret and hidden ways, we came to the old "fort," which had probably been occupied by generations of boys by then, though of course right now it belonged to the Luke Bradley Gang.

I don't know who built the fort or why. It was a rectangle of raised earth and piled stone, with logs laid across for a roof, and vines growing thickly over the whole thing so that from a distance it just looked like a hillock or knoll. That was part of its secret. You had to know it was there.

And only Luke, being the current owner, could let you in.

He raised another curtain of vines, and with a sweep of his hand and a bow said, "Welcome to my house, you assholes."

Spike and Animal laughed while Albert and I got down on our hands and knees, and crawled inside.

Immediately I almost gagged on the awful smell, like rotten garbage and worse. Albert started to cough. I thought he was going to throw up. But before I could say or do anything, Luke and his two henchmen had come in after us, and we all crowded around a pit in the middle of the dirt floor. The pit didn't use to be there. Now there was a four-foot drop, a roughly square cavity, and in the middle of that, a cardboard box that was clearly the source of the unbelievable stench.

Luke got out a flashlight, then reached down and opened the box.

"It's a dead kid. I found him in the woods in this box. He's mine."

I couldn't help but look. It was indeed a dead kid, an emaciated, pale thing, naked but for what might have been the remains of filthy underpants, lying on its side in a fetal position, little clawlike hands bunched up under its chin.

"A dead kid," said Luke. "Really cool."

Then Albert really was throwing up and screaming at the same time, and scrambling to get out of there, only Animal and then Spike had him by the back of his shirt the way you

pick up a kitten by the scruff of its neck, and they passed him back to Luke, who held his head in his hands and forced him down into that pit, saying, "Now look at it, you fucking pussy faggot." This because it was really cool.

Albert was sobbing and sniffing when Luke let him go, but he didn't try to run, nor did I, even when Luke got a stick and poked the dead kid with it.

"This is the best part," he said.

We didn't run away then because we *had* to watch, just to convince ourselves that we weren't crazy, because of what we were seeing.

Luke poked and the dead kid *moved*, spasming at first, then grabbing at the stick feebly, and finally crawling around inside the box like a slow, clumsy animal, just barely able to turn, scratching at the cardboard with bony fingertips.

"What *is* he?" I had to ask.

"A *zombie*," said Luke.

"Aren't zombies supposed to be black?"

"You mean like a nigger?" That was another of Luke's favorite words that year. He called everybody "nigger" no matter what color they were.

"Well, you know—voodoo. In Haiti, and all that."

As we spoke the dead kid reared up and almost got out of the box. Luke poked him in the forehead with his stick and knocked him down.

"I suppose if we let him *rot* long enough he'll be black enough even for you."

The dead kid stared up at us and made a bleating sound. The worst thing of all was that he didn't have any eyes, only huge sockets and an oozy mess inside them.

Albert was sobbing for his mommy by then, and after a while of poking and prodding the dead kid, Luke and his friends got tired of that sport. Luke turned to me and said, "You can go now, but you know if you or your piss-pants brother tell about this, I'll kill you both and put you in there for the dead kid to eat."

II

I can't remember much of what Albert and I did for the rest of that day. We ran through the woods, tripped, fell flat on our faces in a stream. Then, later, we were walking along the old railroad embankment, turning over ties to look for snakes, and all the while Albert was babbling on about the dead kid and how we had to do something. I just let him talk until he got it

all out of him. Then we went home for dinner and were very quiet when Mom and our stepdad, Steve, tried to find out what we had been doing all day.

"Just playing," I said. "In the woods."

"It's good for them to be outdoors," Steve said to Mom. "Too many kids spend all their time in from of the TV watching *unwholesome* junk these days. I'm glad our kids are *normal*."

But Albert ended up screaming in his sleep for weeks and wetting his bed, and things were anything but normal that summer. He was the one with the obvious problems. He was the one who ended up going to a specialist, and whatever he said in therapy must not have been believed, because the police didn't go tearing up Cabbage Creek Woods, Luke Bradley and his neanderthals were not arrested, and I was more or less left alone.

In fact, I had more unsupervised time than usual. And I used it to work out problems of my own, like why I hated school and why I hated Stepdad Steve for the sanctimonious prig that he was. I decided, with the full wisdom of my twelve years and some months, that if I was to survive in this rough, tough, evil world, I was going to have to become tough myself, *bad*, and very likely evil.

I decided that Luke Bradley had the answers.

So I sought him out. It wasn't hard. He had a knack for being in the right place at the right time when any kid in town was ready to sell his soul, just like the Devil.

I met him in front of the Wayne Toy Town, where I used to go to buy model kits and stuff. I still liked building models, and doing scientific puzzles, though I would never admit it to Luke Bradley.

So I just froze when I saw him there.

"Well, well," he said. "If it ain't the little pussy scuzz." He blew smoke from the perennial cigarette.

"Hello, Luke," I said. I nodded to his companions, who included Spike, Animal, and a virtually hairless, pale gorilla who went by the unlikely name of Corky. As I spoke, I slipped my latest purchase into my shoulder bag and hoped he didn't notice.

Corky grabbed me by the back of the neck and said, "Whaddaya want me to do with him?"

But before Luke could respond, I said, "Hey, have you still got the dead kid at the fort?"

They all hesitated. They weren't expecting that.

"Well, he's *cool*," I said. "I want to see him again."

"Okay," said Luke.

We didn't have any other way to get there, so we walked, about an hour, to Cabbage Creek Woods. Luke dispensed with ceremony. We just crawled into the fort and gathered around the pit.

The smell, if anything, was worse.

This time, the dead kid was already moving around inside the box. When Luke opened the cardboard flaps, the dead kid stood up, with his horrible, pus-filled eye sockets staring. He made that bleating, groaning sound again. He clawed at the edge of the box.

"Really cool," I forced myself to say, swallowing hard.

"I can make him do tricks," said Luke. "Watch this."

I watched as he shoved his finger *through* the skin under the dead kid's chin and lifted him up like a hooked fish out of the pit. The dead kid scrambled over the edge of the box, then crouched down on the dirt floor at the edge of the pit, staring into space.

Luke passed his hand slowly in front of the dead kid's face. He snapped his fingers. The dead kid didn't respond. Luke smacked him on the side of the head. The dead kid whimpered a little, and made that bleating sound.

"Everybody outside," Luke said.

So we all crawled out, and then Luke reached back inside with a stick and touched the dead kid, who came out, too, clinging to the stick, trying to chew on it, but not quite coordinated enough, so that he just snapped his teeth in the air and rubbed the side of his face along the stick.

I could see him clearly now. He really was rotten, with bone sticking out at his knees and elbows, only scraggly patches of dark hair left on his head, every rib showing in hideous relief on his bare back, and *holes* through his skin between some of them.

"Look!" said Luke. "Look at him dance!" He swirled the stick around and around, and the dead kid clung to it, staggering in a circle.

Corky spoke up. "Ya think if'n he gets dizzy he'll puke?"

Luke yanked the stick out of the dead kid's hands, then hit him hard with it across the back with a *thwack!* The dead kid dropped to all fours and just stayed there, his head hanging down.

"Can't puke. Got no guts left!" They all laughed at that. I didn't quite get the joke.

Despite everything, I *tried* to get the joke, despite even the incongruity that I really was, like it or not, a more or less "normal" kid and right now I had a model kit for a plastic Fokker

Triplane in my schoolbag. I still wanted to measure up to Luke Bradley, for all that I was more afraid of him than I had ever been. I figured you had to be afraid of what you did and who you hung out with if you were going to be really *bad*. You did what Luke did. That was what transgression was all about.

So I unzipped my fly and pissed on the dead kid. He made that bleating sound. The others chuckled nervously. Luke grinned.

"Pretty cool, Davey, my boy. Pretty cool."

Then Luke started to play the role of wise elder brother. He put his arm around my shoulders. He took me a little ways apart from the others and said, "I like you. I think you got something special in there." He rapped on my head with his knuckles, hard, but I didn't flinch away.

Then he led me back to the others and said, "I think we're gonna make David here a member of the gang."

So we all sat down in the clearing with the dead kid in our circle, as if he were one of the gang, too. Luke got out an old briefcase from inside the fort and produced some very crumpled nudie magazines and passed them around and we all looked at the pictures. He even made a big, funny show of opening out a foldout for the dead kid to admire.

He smoked and passed cigarettes out to all of us. I'd never had one before and it made me feel sick, but Luke told me to hold the smoke in, then breathe it out slowly.

I was amazed and appalled when, right in front of everyone, he unzipped his pants and started to jerk off. The others did it, too, making a point of trying to squirt on the dead kid.

Luke looked at me. "Come on. Join in with the other gentlemen." The other "gentlemen" brayed like jackasses.

I couldn't move then. I really wanted to be like them, but I knew I wasn't going to measure up. All I could hope for now was to put up a good front so maybe they'd decide I wasn't a pussy after all and maybe let me go after they beat me up a little bit. I could hope for that much.

But Luke had other ideas. He put his hand on the back of my neck. It could have been a friendly gesture, or, if he squeezed, he could have snapped my head off, for all I could have done anything about it.

"Now, David," he said, "I don't care if you've even *got* a dick, any more than I care if *he* does." He jerked his thumb at the dead kid. "But if you want to join our gang, if you want to be cool, you have to meet certain standards."

He flicked a switchblade open right in front of my face. I thought he was going to cut my nose with it, but with a sudden

motion, he slashed the dead kid's nose right off. It flew into the air. Corky caught it, then threw it away in mindless disgust.

The dead kid whimpered. His face was a black, oozing mess.

Then Luke took hold of my right hand and slashed the back of it. I let out a yell, and tried to stop the bleeding with my other hand.

"No," Luke said. "Let him lick it. He needs a little blood now and then to keep him healthy."

I screamed then, and sobbed, and whimpered the way Albert had that first time, but Luke held onto me with a grip so strong that I was the one who wriggled like a fish on a line, and he held my cut hand out to the dead kid.

I couldn't look, but something soft and wet touched my hand. I could only think, *Oh God, what kind of infection or disease am I going to get from this?*

"Okay, David," Luke said then. "You're doing just fine, but there is one more test. You have to *spend the whole night* in the fort with the dead kid. We've all done it. Now it's your turn."

They didn't wait for my answer, but, laughing, hauled me back inside the fort. Then Luke had the dead kid hooked under the chin again, and lowered him down into his box in the pit.

The others crawled back outside. Before he left, Luke turned to me: "You have to stay here until tomorrow morning. You know what I'll do to you if you pussy out."

So I spent the rest of the afternoon, and the evening, inside that fort, with the dead kid scratching around in his box. It was already dark in the fort. I couldn't tell what time it was. I couldn't think very clearly at all. I wondered if anyone was looking for me. I lay very still. I didn't want to be found, especially not by the dead kid, who, for all I knew, could crawl out of the box and the pit if he really wanted to, and maybe rip my throat out and drink my blood.

My hand hurt horribly. It seemed to be swelling. I was sure it was already rotten. The air was thick and foul.

But I stayed where I was—because I was afraid, because I was weak with nausea, but also, incredibly, because somehow, somewhere deep down inside myself, I still wanted to show how *tough* I was, to be like Luke Bradley, to be as amazing and crazy as he was. I knew that I *wasn't* cut out for this, and that's why I wanted it—to be *bad*, so no one would ever beat me up again. And if I hated my stepdad or my teachers, I could just tell them to go fuck off, as Luke would do.

Hours passed, and still the dead kid circled around and around inside his cardboard box, sliding against the sides. He made that bleating, coughing sound, as if he were trying to talk and didn't have any tongue left. For a time I thought there was almost some sense in it, some pattern. He was *clicking* like a cricket. This went on for hours. Maybe I even slept for a while, and fell into a kind of dream in which I was sinking slowly down into incredibly foul-smelling muck and there were thousands of bald-faced hornets swarming over me, all of them with little Luke Bradley faces saying, "Cool . . . really cool," until their voices blended together and became a buzzing, then became wind in the trees, then the roar of a P&W light-rail train rushing off toward Philadelphia; and the dead kid and I were hanging onto the outside of the car, swinging wildly. My arm hit a pole and snapped right off, and black ooze poured out of my shoulder, and the hornets swarmed over me, eating me up bit by bit.

Once, I am certain, the dead kid *did* reach up and touch me, very gently, running his dry, sharp fingertip down the side of my cheek, cutting me, then withdrawing with a little bit of blood and tears on his fingertip, to drink.

But, strangest of all, I wasn't afraid of him any longer. It came to me, then, that we two had more in common than not. We were both afraid and in pain and lost in the dark.

III

Then, somehow, it was morning. The sunlight blinded me when Luke opened the vine curtain over the door.

"Hey. You were really brave. I'm impressed, Davey."

I let him lead me out of the fort, taking comfort in his chum/big-brother manner. But I was too much in shock to say anything.

"You passed the test. You're one of us," he said. "Welcome to the gang. Now there is one last thing for you to do. Not a test. You've passed all the tests. It's just something we do to celebrate."

His goons had gathered once more in the clearing outside the fort.

One of them was holding a can of gasoline.

I stood there, swaying, about to faint, unable to figure out what the gasoline was for.

Luke brought the dead kid outside.

Corky poured gasoline over the dead kid, who just bleated a little and waved his hands in the air.

Luke handed me a cigarette lighter. He flicked it until there was a flame.

"Go on," he said. "It'll be cool."

But I couldn't. I was too scared, too sick. I just dropped to my knees, then onto all fours, and started puking.

So Luke lit the dead kid on fire and the others hooted and clapped as the dead kid went up like a torch, staggering and dancing around the clearing, trailing black, oily smoke. Then he fell down and seemed to shrivel up into a pile of blackened, smoldering sticks.

Luke forced me over to where the dead kid had fallen, and made me touch what was left with my swollen hand.

And the dead kid *moved*. He made that bleating sound. He whimpered.

"You see? You can't kill him because he's already dead."

They were all laughing, but I just puked again, and finally Luke hauled me to my feet by both shoulders, turned me around, and shoved me away, staggering, into the woods.

"Come back when you stop throwing up," he said.

IV

Somehow I found my way home, and when I did, Mom just stared at me in horror and said, "My God, what's that awful smell?" But Stepdad Steve shook me and demanded to know where I had been and what I'd been doing? Did I know the police were looking for me? Did I care? (No, and no.) He took me into the bathroom, washed and bandaged my hand, then held me so I couldn't turn away and said, "Have you been taking drugs?"

That was so stupid I started to laugh, and he *smacked* me across the face, something he rarely did. But this time, I think, he was determined to beat the truth out of me, and Mommy—dearest Mommy—didn't raise a finger to stop him as he laid on with his hand, then his belt, and I was shrieking my head off.

All they got out of me was the admission that I had been with Luke Bradley and his friends.

"I *don't* want you to associate with *those* boys any further. They're unwholesome."

He didn't know a tenth of it, and I started to laugh again, like I was drunk or something, and he was about to hit me again when Mom finally made him stop.

She told me to change my clothes and take a bath and then go to my room. I wasn't allowed out except for meals and to go to the bathroom.

That was fine with me. I didn't *want* to come out. I wanted to bury myself in there, to be quiet and dead, like the dead kid in his box.

But when I fell asleep, I was screaming in a dream, and I woke up screaming, in the dark, because it was night again.

Mom looked in briefly, but didn't say anything. The expression on her face was more of disgust than concern, as if she really wanted to say, *Serves him damn right, but, oh God, another crazy kid we'll have to send to the so, so expensive psychiatrist and I'd rather spend the money on a new mink coat or a car or something. . . .*

It was my kid brother Albert who snuck over to my bed and whispered, "It's the dead kid, isn't it?"

"Huh?"

"The dead kid. He talks to me in my dreams. He's told me all about himself. He's lost. His father's a magician who is still trying to find him. There was a war between magicians or something, and that's how he got lost."

"Huh? Is this something you read in a comic book?"

"No! It's the dead kid. You know what we have to do, David. We have to go save him."

I have to give my brother credit for bringing about my moral redemption as surely as if he'd handed me my sanity back on a silver platter and said, *Go on, don't be a pussy. Take it.*

Because he was right. We had to save the dead kid.

Maybe the dead kid talked to Albert in his dreams, but he didn't tell me anything. Why should he?

Still, I'd gotten the message.

So, that night, very late, Albert and I got dressed and slipped out the window of our room, dropping onto the lawn. *He wasn't afraid*, not a little bit. He led me, by the ritual route, under the arching bushes, through the tunnels of vines to all our secret places, as if we had to be in that location first to gain some special strength for the task at hand.

Under the bushes, in the darkness, we paused to scratch secret signs in the dirt.

Then we scurried across the golf course, across the highway, into Cabbage Creek Woods.

We came to the fort by the light of a full moon now flickering through swaying branches. It was a windy night. The woods were alive with sounds of branches creaking and snapping, of animals calling back and forth, and night-birds cawing. Somewhere, very close at hand, an owl cried out.

Albert got down on all fours in the doorway of the fort, poked his head in, and said, "Hey, dead kid! Are you in there?"

He backed out, and waited. There was a rustling sound, but the dead kid didn't come out. So we both crawled in and saw why. There wasn't much left of him. He was just a bundle of black sticks, his head like a charred pumpkin balanced precariously on top. All he could do was sit up weakly and peer over the side of the box.

So we had to lift him out of the pit, box and all.

"Come on," Albert said to him. "We want to show you some stuff."

We carried the dead kid between us. We took him back across the golf course, under the bushes, to our special places. We showed him the secret signs. Then we took him into town. We showed him the storefronts—Wayne Toy Town where I bought models, where there were always neat displays of miniature battlefields or of monsters in the windows. We showed him where the pet store was and the ice cream store, and where you got comic books.

Albert sat down on the merry-go-round in the playground, holding the dead kid's box securely beside him. I pushed them around slowly. Metal creaked.

We stood in front of our school for a while, and Albert had reached into the box, and he and the dead kid were *holding hands*, but it seemed natural and right.

Then we went away in the bright moonlight, through the empty streets. No one said anything, because whatever the dead kid could say or hear wasn't in words anyway. I couldn't hear it. I think Albert could.

In the end, the dead kid scrambled out of his box. Somehow he had regained enough strength to walk. Somehow, he was beginning to heal. In the end, he wanted to show *us* something.

He led us back across the golf course but away from Cabbage Creek Woods. We crossed the football field at Radnor High School, then went across the street, up in back of Wyeth Labs and across the high bridge over the P&W tracks. I was afraid the dead kid would slip on the metal stairs and fall, but he went more steadily than we did. (Albert and I were both a little afraid of heights.)

He led us across another field, into woods again, then through an opening where a stream flowed beneath the Pennsylvania Railroad embankment. We waded ankle-deep in the chilly water and came, at last, to the old Grant Estate, a huge ruin of a Victorian house, which every kid knew was haunted, which our parents told us to stay away from because it was dangerous. (We'd all heard a hundred times about kids murdered by tramps or falling through floors.) But now it

wasn't a ruin at all—no broken windows, no holes in the roof. Every window blazed with light.

From a high window in a tower, a man in black gazed down at us.

The dead kid looked up at him, then began to run.

I hurried after him. Now it was Albert (who had better sense) who hung back. I caught hold of the dead kid's arm, as if to stop him. I felt possessive for a moment, as if I *owned* him the way Luke Bradley had owned him.

"Hey, dead kid," I said. "Where are you going?"

He turned to me, and by some trick of the moonlight he seemed to have a face—pale, round, with dark eyes; and he said to me in that bleating, croaking voice of his, actually forming words for once, "My name is Jonathan."

That was the only thing he ever said to me. He never talked to me in dreams.

He went to the front of the house. The door opened. The light within seemed to swallow him. He turned back, briefly, and looked at us. I don't think he was just a bundle of sticks anymore.

Then he was gone and all the lights blinked out, and it was dawn. My brother and I stood before a ruined mansion in the morning twilight. Birds were singing raucously.

"We'd better get home," Albert said, "or we'll get in trouble."
"Yeah," I said.

V

That autumn, I began junior high school. Because I hadn't been very successful as a bad boy, and my grades were still a lot higher, I wasn't in any of Luke Bradley's classes. But he caught up with me in the locker room after school, several weeks into the term. All he said was, "I know what you did," and beat me so badly that he broke several of my ribs and one arm, and smashed in the whole side of my face, cracking the socket around my right eye. He stuffed me into a locker and left me there to die, and I spent the whole night in the darkness, in great pain, amid horrible smells, calling out for the dead kid to come and save me as I'd saved him. I made bleating, clicking sounds.

But he didn't come. The janitor found me in the morning. The smell was merely that I'd crapped in my pants.

I spent several weeks in the hospital, and afterward Stepdad Steve and Mom decided to move out of the state. They put both me and Albert in a prep school.

It was only after I got out of college that I went back to Radnor Township in Pennsylvania, where I'd grown up. Everything was changed. There was a Sears headquarters where the golf course used to be. Our old house had vanished beneath an apartment parking lot. Most of Cabbage Creek Woods had been cut down to make room for an Altman's department store, and the Grant Estate was gone, too, to make room for an office complex.

I didn't go into the remaining woods to see if the fort was still there.

I imagine it is. I imagine other kids own it now.

Later someone told me that Luke Bradley, who turned out to have really been three years older than me, had been expelled from high school, then committed several robberies in the company of his three goons, and that all of them had been killed in a shootout with the police.

What Luke Bradley inadvertently showed me was that I could have been with them, if Albert and the dead kid, whose name was Jonathan, hadn't saved me.

BRAINBURGERS AND BILE SHAKES:

A LOVE STORY

JIM C. HINES

When I met Bissa, she was selling brainburgers and bile shakes at horribly inflated prices.

I had more than blown my meal allowance from work, paying twenty-plus bucks for gray beef patties, a green milkshake, and watered-down ketchup. I didn't care. I kept going back to the counter, finding one excuse after another to talk to her, even if our conversation was less than romantic.

"Is something wrong with your brainburger?" she asked when I returned yet again.

I probably sounded like a zombie myself as I unknotted my tongue enough to stammer, "It's delicious."

She stared at me, waiting. Behind her, other employees of the ZombieLand Snack Shack scurried about, swapping baskets in the deep fryer and wrapping uniformly gray meat products in wax paper. The man with the *Manager* badge even adopted an exaggerated limp, mimicking the slow shuffle of the walking dead as he went from table to table.

Of course, the Snack Shack was one of the few places in ZombieLand where actual zombies were forbidden. The health inspectors would shut down the whole park if a zombie came within twenty feet of the restaurant.

The employees all wore the same uniform, but only Bissa made it beautiful. A blue cap hid her hair, except for a long, sleek braid. The embroidered blood splatters on her shirt highlighted the green of her eyes. Her skin was smooth and tan. She wore no makeup. Her small mouth quirked on one side.

"Sir?" She gestured at the line behind me. "Was there anything you needed, sir?"

"Jack. Jack Young." I peeked at the backlit menu behind her. "Um . . . the ribs sound good. How large is your child's portion?"

She held her hands about a foot apart, and my stomach gurgled in protest. In the past hour and a half, I had already eaten enough for three men.

"That seems like a lot."

One plucked eyebrow rose. "Listen, Jack Young, I don't know how small children are where you're from, but here in Nevada, this is the width of an average child's rib cage."

I stammered something about how I wasn't that hungry and glanced back at the menu. Only then did she break into a grin. She reached over the counter to squeeze my shoulder. "Gullible, aren't you? The kids meal is three pork riblets, a mini-shake, and a toy."

A more suave man would have replied with an amusing repartee, something to make her flash that smile again. I opened my mouth, hesitated, and mumbled that I would take the kid's ribs.

My meal came in a plastic bucket shaped like a human head. I popped the scalp off and removed the toy—a plastic green block with a gravestone at one end.

Bissa took it from my hand and set it on the counter. "Like this," she said, pressing the gravestone. A tiny, two-dimensional zombie popped up from the grass.

"Cute."

Another long silence. She seemed to be waiting for something. My face got hot again. An exasperated father tapped my shoulder before I could speak.

"Are you finished? My kids are waiting for their finger-on-a-stick treats."

"Sorry." I dropped the toy into my plastic head and retreated to my seat. There, I watched Bissa's hands move as she took the next order. She had long, graceful fingers with black nail polish.

I turned away, afraid she would catch me staring.

The whole place smelled like grease. It even overpowered the smell of rotting zombie that hung over the whole of ZombieLand.

Looking out the window, I watched a group of handlers lead a parade of zombies through the street, between lines of cheering kids and weary parents. Several zombies banged on bongos, their desiccated hands slapping the only instruments the walking dead could master. Two men with brooms and dustbins followed, scooping up fallen bits of flesh.

When I glanced at the counter again, Bissa was watching me. I managed to smile and prayed my teeth were reasonably rib-free.

Twenty minutes later, she came to my table and asked me out.

We met in the Mortuary Theater. I spotted Bissa sitting in an aisle seat in Row F. I handed my ticket to an attendant and hurried to join her.

"You're late," she said.

"I went to Sepulcher Stage by mistake," I said, still breathing hard from the run. I was sweating, and the sun beating down on the open theater didn't help. I hoped I didn't sweat through my shirt. "This place is a maze. How long did you work here before you learned where everything was?"

She smiled and tapped her temple. "Photographic memory. I memorized the map on my first day."

Feeling stupider by the minute, I nodded and pretended to watch the show. A zombie dressed in black velvet trimmed with gold thread trotted across the stage. A silver-hilted rapier hung from his belt. Not a real one, of course—federal regs, and all that.

A second zombie carried a shovel onto the stage and pretended to dig. The audience chuckled at the irony of a zombie gravedigger. The first zombie stepped forward and picked up a withered, blond-haired head.

"Alas, poor Yorick," a voice said. It was supposedly the zombie speaking in a cultured British accent, but that was impossible since his lips were missing and a poorly mended rip split his cheek. His mouth wasn't even moving. The pre-recorded dialogue came from speakers mounted above the stage.

"The head used to play Hamlet," Bissa whispered. "His body got torn up in the riots last year, so they decided to use him for Yorick. Cheaper than paying disposal fees, I guess."

Yorick's mouth was in better condition. His lips moved almost in synch with the speakers. "Ach, Hamlet, you've caught me at a bad time. I was about to go to the head."

A collective groan from the audience.

Before Hamlet could reply, the speakers squealed and died. The audience muttered as a woman in black Kevlar walked to the front of the stage. She had a ZombieLand patch on her shoulder.

Behind her, similarly dressed men used steel poles to loop plastic rings around the zombies' necks and lead them away. In the case of poor Yorick, they used a shovel.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for the interruption." The woman spoke in a calm voice tinged with a hint of a Southern accent. "Federal law requires us to hold occasional drills to make sure ZombieLand is prepared in case of an emergency."

"What kind of emergency?" yelled a teenager. He wore a baseball cap with foam brains stuck to the top. "I thought zombies were safe!"

"Safety standards at ZombieLand exceed state and federal requirements," she reassured us. "The drills are a holdover from years ago, before zombies were brought under control."

She gave the audience a confident smile. "Everything is perfectly safe. As a representative of ZombieLand, I apologize for any inconvenience. You will all receive free passes to the next showing."

"How often do they do these drills?" I asked as we filed out of the theater.

Bissa shrugged. "I've never seen one before. But I've only worked here since March."

"Oh." I searched for something else to say, anything to break the silence. I'd never been able to talk to women. I worried too much, and it made me freeze up. Like I was doing now. She was watching me again, waiting for me to speak.

"I think you're beautiful," I blurted out.

She dimpled. "Yeah, sure. My hair's a frizzed mess, I've got ketchup on my shirt, and I smell like burger grease. What's not to love?"

But she twined her fingers with mine as we walked through the crowd.



Bissa got us into the next show for free, which was a good thing since my wallet was running dry. We sat near the front row and watched a group of zombies in Army uniforms reenact the Firebombing of Fargo. Most of the seats were empty. A cardboard zombie outside the door had proclaimed that the show was *For Mature Humans Only*.

Up on stage, a lone woman—a human woman—sat in a mock control room, surrounded by blinking lights. The command station in Fargo, a small radio station where Linda Graystrom had condemned the town—and herself—to death.

"Tell me about yourself," whispered Bissa. "What do you do when you're not picking up women at ZombieLand?"

"I do field testing for the Department of Environmental Quality."

"A state employee? So you're halfway to being a zombie yourself." She chuckled. "Do your bosses know how you're spending your afternoon?"

Her laughter came from deep in her throat. And it was a real laugh, not the delicate tinkle some women affected.

At the control center in Fargo, zombies proceeded to break through the door, only to find Linda waiting. Even with leather mittens strapped over their hands and blue nylon stitches sealing their lips shut, the sight of attacking zombies still made many audience members shift uncomfortably.

Linda's pistol thundered again and again. Blanks, of course, but the zombies flopped backward as they had been trained to do. The biting smell of gunpowder drifted through the crowd. When the ammunition ran out, Linda attacked the last zombie with a foot-long knife, splattering drops of black blood across the stage. A plastic screen kept the audience from being splashed.

"What brought you to ZombieLand?" Bissa asked.

I turned away from the stage. "I was collecting water samples all morning." I had gotten lost three times before I finished. "I have test tubes from every drinking fountain, hose, sink, and bathroom in the park, all labeled and refrigerated in my car. I figured I'd relax for a bit before heading back."

"Spoken like a true state worker," she said. "So you're playing hooky? I hadn't pegged you for the rebel type."

"Once, I even stole a box of paperclips from supplies," I said, deadpan.

"Tell me more, bad boy." She squeezed my hand. "It makes me go all tingly."

We laughed again. I marveled at how natural it felt. I had started to relax enough to talk and joke, and she wasn't bored! She didn't even mention my initial awkwardness and embarrassment back at the Snack Shack.

On stage, Linda sat back in her chair. Her face was drawn and pale. Her sleeve was torn, bloody from the bite of a zombie. Historically, the wound had probably been deeper, but the blood dripping down her arm looked real enough.

She knew what would happen. She knew dozens of zombies were even now roaming the streets, and she knew what would happen if they weren't stopped. The speakers played the actual tape of Linda Graystrom's final orders, activating the contingency plan that wiped Fargo from the map. Then the actress set down the radio and raised her fake gun to her head. The curtains closed an instant before the gun went off.

The audience applauded politely.

I looked away, my cheerfulness gone.

"What's wrong?" Bissa asked.

"Nothing. I . . . can we go somewhere else?"

"How about the Hall of Dead Presidents? That's usually quiet. Too intellectual for most folks."

We had walked about a hundred yards when gunfire and screams from the theater cut through the afternoon air. I jumped, and Bissa glanced back.

"They must have added another act to the show. An encore, you know?" She touched my arm. "Hey, you look pretty shaken up. You're not one of those ZRA people, are you? If so, don't worry about the one who got knifed. They fix it up after every show. Staples, superglue, and a week in the dirt, and it's good as new. More or less."

"I'm not a Zombie Rights nut," I said, slipping an arm around her shoulder. "It's just . . ."

"You can tell me." Her voice was warm, and she looked up at me so openly that I kissed her before I realized what I was doing. It was only a quick peck, but she didn't pull away.

We kept walking in silence, our bodies pressed into one another like those couples I had watched and envied over the years. Now it was finally my turn. My turn to slip a hand around a beautiful girl's waist. My turn to pull her close and feel her do the same.

I was in heaven.

✦ ✦ ✦

"It's because of my brother, Sam," I said. "He joined the National Guard in college. When the first uprising hit, back before mandatory cremation, he was one of the guys they called in to protect Vegas."

Richard Nixon waved victory Vs at us from behind a wall of plexiglass. Tricky Dick was the healthiest zombie in the building, being the most recently deceased. The tip of his nose was a bit rotted, but overall, he was remarkably intact.

I wasn't impressed. Bissa had already explained how they had to implant steel rods to keep his fingers bent like that. When I looked closely, I could see the tip of one rod protruding through his index finger.

"What happened?" she asked gently as she pulled me along.

"They thought it would be easy. The zombies didn't put up much resistance, so the Guard herded them into the Luxor."

"That's the pyramid, right? The casino with the big spotlight on top?"

"Used to be," I said, then lost myself in the memories.

They sent a Guardsman to our house with the news. He arrived right before dinnertime. I still recalled the smell of my mother's chili simmering on the stove, and the overpowering scent of sage from the recent storms wafting through the house as my father opened the door.

Officially, Sam died battling zombies in the Luxor. Years later, I talked to a friend at the CDC and learned the truth.

Bissa gave my hand a squeeze and brought me back to the present. "So Sam was sent to the Luxor," she prompted.

I gave her a weak smile. "He was posted on the fourth floor, guarding the stairs. They had a few people on every floor, just in case. This was back before they knew how contagious the stuff was. I guess a group of zombies on the ground floor broke free and started feeding on anyone in sight. You know how they get when they're hungry."

"Yeah." She shivered. "You couldn't pay me enough to work as a feeder. One little slip, and . . ."

It was my turn to squeeze her hand. We waited while a group of school kids walked past, tapping the plexiglass to see if they could get a withered Harry Truman to react.

Bissa took a deep breath. "You said Sam was on the fourth floor."

"That's right. The Luxor is hollow on the inside. From the balcony, Sam could see everything that happened." I sighed raggedly. "The Guardsmen were outnumbered, and the zombies' sudden rush caught them off guard. . . ."

I relived it in my nightmares for months after I'd learned what happened. I could hear the rapid popping of gunfire, the shouted orders and panicked screams, and the crunch of shattering skulls as the zombies fed, splitting the heads of their enemies as easily as I might crack an eggshell.

"Sam rallied a handful of men," I said sadly. "They took up sniper positions and picked off zombies one by one."

"He sounds very brave."

"He was too late to save the men on the first floor, but he made sure the zombies didn't escape. I saw photos of the place. Real photos, not the sanitized stuff that made it into the papers. There was blood everywhere, red and black both. Blood on the statues, in the carpets, splattered over the slot machines and the roulette wheel." My voice caught. "Blood in the fountains."

Her grip tightened on mine.

"It got into the water supply," I said. "Sam must have taken a drink from a water fountain. Or maybe he needed to wash off after the slaughter, I don't know."

We stopped to watch Lyndon Johnson pace the length of his clear prison.

"They had to napalm the Luxor a week later. They caught Sam in Reno, eating his girlfriend's father. Sam had shot him in both legs to keep him from running."

Bissa's face was pale, and her lower lip trembled slightly. "I didn't know. I remember seeing the news—they said it was a minor outbreak, that a broken gas line caused the explosion. My God, how can you even stand to be here?"

"Years of therapy," I said. "That, and knowing Sam helped stop an outbreak. At least we never had to resort to nukes. Look at Taiwan or Sydney."

I concentrated on my breathing, going through the relaxation exercises my therapist had taught me. They didn't work.

"They told us Sam died fighting zombies, and that's what I choose to believe. He died a hero, as much as Linda Graystrom or anyone else."

"Sam was a hero," she said firmly. "And so are you. Driving all over the state to check the water and make sure nothing like that happens again." She kissed my cheek and, in a little girl voice, said, "My hero."

I thought about the samples locked in the cooler in my Jeep and tried not to feel guilty. I was no hero. In all the years I had worked at DEQ, I had yet to find a single contaminated water source. I had yet to do anything that mattered. My job was a joke. And every time I sent a test tube through the analyzer, it reminded me of Sam.

I didn't want my bitterness to ruin things with Bissa, so I smiled and said, "I guess so."

"Come on. Let's go someplace quieter."

Until she mentioned it, I hadn't noticed the screams outside. The Hall of Dead Presidents was sandwiched between the Pale Horse Water Ride and the Catacombs Coaster (guaranteed to scramble even the heartiest of brains). From the sound of it, the coaster delivered the promised terrors and more.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

Her eyes twinkled. "I know a place where nobody will bother us."

✦ ✦ ✦

"They're calling it the Petting Zoo," Bissa explained. She passed her ID card in front of the lock, and the LED turned green. "It's not scheduled to open until August, but they've already got some of the exhibits set up."

The air inside was cooler. It reminded me of the hay and excrement smell of a barn, but the stench of death and decay overpowered everything else. Bissa gave me an apologetic half-shrug.

"It'll smell better once they get the ventilation hooked up."

Come on—the far end of the building is all administrative offices and a gift shop. The stink shouldn't be as bad down there."

I glanced around as we walked through the corridor, our footsteps surprisingly loud against the cement floor. The zoo was laid out like the Hall of Dead Presidents, with individual rooms to either side, walled in by thick plexiglass.

In one cage a boa constrictor rested on a tilted two-by-four. Its middle segments were little more than bone, and its dirty skin flaked and peeled like a bad case of sunburn. On the other side, an otter banged a severed chicken's head against a rock, trying to get at the tender brains inside. In the next display, a squirrel scraped bloody claws against the cement, trying in vain to bury the half-eaten corpse of a mouse.

"You won't actually be able to pet them, of course," Bissa said. "I mean, they say animals can't infect humans, but you know how worked up people get about zombies." She bit her lip. "I didn't mean you. I meant . . . damn. That was stupid."

"It's okay," I said, with a hug to let her know I meant it. In truth, I was starting to like ZombieLand. I liked seeing them in cages or performing for their living masters. It was proof that we had won.

We moved on to a parrot that was flapping in vain as it tried to reach its perch. Its wings were featherless gray meat, the ends black with rot.

"They're trying to teach the animals tricks," Bissa explained. "I guess it's even harder than with human zombies. The handlers are always talking about how you can't teach a dead dog new tricks."

I smiled. "So where are the handlers?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Ella's supposed to be on duty today, but she's a flake." She poked me in the side and grinned. "Or maybe she found a good-looking, intelligent, compassionate man, and they went somewhere they could be alone."

Even I could read a signal like that. Our tongues danced together as we pressed our bodies close. Her hands grabbed my waist and moved lower.

When she finally pulled away, it was only to gasp for air and lead me to the empty gift shop down the hall. We locked the door behind us. Bissa was right—the smell was less noticeable in this part of the building.

Soon we were rolling on the carpet behind an empty display case, little more than animals ourselves.



Hours later, we snuck out the back door of the Petting Zoo and into the chill night air. I glanced at my pager to check the time. Nearly nine o'clock. Two hours after ZombieLand closed.

Most of the lights were out. We stumbled along in the moonlight, giddy and giggling as we held each other.

I stepped in something sticky. Hard to tell in the darkness, but it looked like someone's spilled Snack Shack meal, complete with a finger-on-a-stick, sans stick.

Bissa sniffed in disgust. "The cleaning crew should have taken care of that. They probably left early, figuring the pigeons would clean up the worst of it."

She appeared to be correct. I spotted a pair of birds picking at something stringy on a bench. They looked big for pigeons. Then again, these pigeons feasted on fried food every night. It was a miracle they weren't too fat to fly.

"When do I get to see you again?" I asked.

She licked her lips. "How about tonight? You can swing by my place and pick me up after I change out of these disgusting clothes."

"I . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"I can't." A part of me was still thinking about Sam, and the water samples in my Jeep. Every time a sample tested clean, it proved we had won, that Sam hadn't died for nothing. "I should get those test tubes back to the lab."

"It's a waste of taxpayer money," she said, leaning her body into mine. "All of our water gets piped through Reno. We're as clean as they are!"

I sniffed, then regretted it. The smell of blood and rot was stronger without the crowds to overpower the zombie stench.

"I have to," I said. I thought of the zombies I had seen today, a far cry from the monsters of my nightmares. When I spoke, my voice was full of surprise. "ZombieLand is Sam's memorial."

She didn't answer.

"What's the matter?"

She pointed at a large man in a ZombieLand uniform up ahead. "That's my boss. I never signed out this afternoon. He'll kill me if he knows I bailed before the dinner rush." She tugged me toward a photo booth where you could get your picture taken with an actual zombie.

It was too late. The Snack Shack manager hurried to cut us off, still affecting the limp I had seen during lunch. That limp had been laughable under the fluorescent lights of the

Snack Shack, but the night made it far more credible. His gait could have belonged to a real zombie.

"Relax," I said, pulling out my state I.D. "I'll tell him you were helping me on my inspection."

She smiled. "Look who's Mister Self-Confidence all of the sudden."

"It's you. And this place. . . ."

ZombieLand gave meaning to Sam's death, and to my life.

I glanced around, lost in thought as I approached Bissa's shambling boss. After today, I vowed to myself, there would be no more negligence, no more wasted afternoons or forgotten water samples.

My work was too important.

ZOMB, Inc.

J. ALLEN THOMAS

FROM: temp@zomb.com

TO: barb@warmbodies.com

CC:

SUBJECT: My Current Assignment

Barbara:

To be eaten. It's the only reason I'm here.

That's not the reason they gave you. Of course not. They need additional staff for an IRS audit. So they claimed. A temp to do last minute sorting, filing, and copying. Easy work. Simple tasks. Mind-numbing and boring.

They don't need the work done. No one needs it done. Who needs pink copies of invoices from ten years ago sorted by invoice number? The yellow copies are already sorted. I sorted them yesterday. Why sort the pink copies, too?

I'll tell you why: It's brain tenderizer. The work is softening up my gray matter, so it's tender and more delectable. My brain is going to be like veal to the zombie palate.

Look, Barbara. I don't want to seem ungrateful for the work, but plain and simple—you have to get me out of

I stop typing. I hit *Select All*. Hit *Delete*. Barbara's never going to buy it. She'll think I've cracked up. And I really do need the work. Got credit cards to pay. Send that email, and I'll never get another assignment from warmbodies.com.

Warmbodies.com. Name of my temp agency. Started as Internet only, providing temps to start-ups. The name is cynicism typical of the nineties. Never survive this decade with that name. Probably can't afford to change the business cards, so they don't change the name. Don't even have a URL anymore. Still providing warm bodies, though.

A sick joke. A good commercial in the nineties. Nice guy like me sent from warmbodies.com to work with zombies. See

how bad other placement services are? Inappropriate for 2002. If you ask me.

The job assignment is over on Friday. Over tomorrow. No matter what I tell Barbara, she'll say stick it out. Only one more day. Stick it out. Maybe lecture me on the warmbodies.com way of doing things. Of providing reliable and dependable services to clients.

Only one day. That's what she'll say.

One and a half days, actually. It's only one o'clock.

Pink copies are all sorted. I need to kill the rest of the afternoon. I'll make a list. Organize the facts. Look at where things stand. Put the matter in perspective. Get a hold of the situation.

FACTS ABOUT MY EMPLOYMENT AT ZOMB, INC.

FACT #1: The acronym.

Spells Zombi. Z-O-M-B plus the T in Inc. The company name is actually Zeeder, Oltemann, Morris, and Brown. But I think the names are made up. I've looked on the phone list. No one with any of those names works here.

CONCLUSION: I'm not sure what it means. It was my first clue. Maybe it's an inside joke. Never thought zombies had a sense of humor. Don't know what to make of it.

Also, I've looked at thousands of invoices. And I don't know what's being billed. I don't get it. Just can't figure out what ZOMB, Inc. does. What service it provides. Everyone works. Or looks like they're working. I just don't know what at. Maybe this should be Fact #2.

FACT #2: I have an office.

Temps don't get offices. Outside consultants get offices. Not temps. Degrades the employees sitting in cubicles. Makes them feel like a temp is more important. Makes them bitter. Sure, the controller says it's the only open workspace in Accounting. Right. I've worked lots of places. This is what happens: Cubicle person moves into office; I move into vacated cubicle.

CONCLUSION: They are trying to keep me isolated from other employees. Two reasons: 1) So I don't get suspicious; 2) So employees don't go into feeding frenzy.

FACT #3: The address.

1968 Romero Drive, Monroeville.

CONCLUSION: Coincidence? I think not.

FACT #4: The interior decor.

The walls are off-white. The carpet is beige. So are the cubicle walls and doors. The desks, file cabinets, and blinds, too. Come to think of it, the toilet stalls are beige, too. No colors anywhere. Only the occasional fake tree in the corner of an executive's office.

CONCLUSION: No living being could design such a bland office. More importantly, no living being could work for years in this office. Not without adding some color. Memos on blue or pink paper tacked up on the walls. Graffiti. Something. Ergo, no living beings work in this office.

FACT #5: The climate control.

It's always freezing. No one else seems to notice. Just me.

CONCLUSION: They keep it cold on purpose. To slow decomposition. Like putting hamburger in the freezer.

FACT #6: Injuries.

Or, at least, so-called injuries. Something is wrong with everyone in the office. The man two doors down has three fingers on his right hand. The receptionist at the front desk is missing her left hand. She wears a headset. She only needs one hand to dial the phone. But still.

And the list goes on. Eight cubicles in a row and each occupant with a wrist brace. Some on the right wrist. Some on the left. Some on both. Eight people with braces on their wrists. Supposed to think carpal tunnel syndrome (the black lung disease of the computer age)? But eight people in a row? A little much.

Even better. The man in the office down the hall. He sits behind a desk. He wears a suit and tie. Two crutches are leaned up against the wall. Sometimes he pushes his chair out from behind his desk, and rolls it over to a file cabinet. When he does, you can see him from the waist down. He wears bermuda shorts. Wrapped around both legs are puffy braces with Velcro straps running up the sides. His shorts hide the top of the braces. He wears patent leather shoes. Black dress socks are pulled up over the bottom of the braces. Supposed to think he's had knee surgery? That a lifetime of jogging and sports have ruined his knees? But no doctor operates on both knees at the same time.

CONCLUSION: They keep it cold, but not cold enough. Decomposition sets in. They slow it down, but it still happens.

Not easy to keep a dead body from rotting. Not without freezing the body solid.

The employees wear slings and braces to hold themselves together. Without them, they would fall apart. The employees lose fingers and hands. Probably toes, too, but shoes hide that. Come to think of it, none of the women wear open-toe shoes. No surprise. No surprise at all.

All zombies have this problem. Decomposition is an occupational hazard. But ZOMB, Inc. offers benefits. Good benefits including comprehensive health care that addresses the working zombie's needs. A steady supply of soft, temp brains to stop the decay and regenerate dead tissue. Not even a co-pay to get the prescription filled. The company pays for it all.

FACT #7: The work I do.

CONCLUSION: Brain tenderizer.

FACT #8: The employees' hair.

It's always the same. Day in and day out, it looks exactly same. Parted in the same place. Always the same length. It never changes. Not even in a strong wind. I walk out of the office, and the wind blows my hair all over the place. They walk out into the wind, their hair barely moves.

CONCLUSION: They wear wigs. No one could fix their hair the same way every morning. Make sure it stays the same all day. Not real hair. Even with styling gel and hair spray, haircuts every week, constant fixing using a compact or in front of a bathroom mirror, it's impossible.

Further evidence of wigs. I went into the bathroom the other week. An employee was adjusting his toupee. His toupee? No one wears a toupee nowadays. Hair implants, special lotions that reinvigorate follicles. Just watch late-night television. A thousand ways to cure baldness. Multimillion dollar industry. New advancements every year. But here they have toupees.

Why wigs? Obvious in light of the facts. None of the employees have any brains. Their brains were scooped, sucked, licked out when they first started here. And they have holes in their heads. The wigs hide the holes. Wearing hats indoors would be suspicious. Instead, they wear wigs.

FACT #9: That woman.

The one that just walked by my door. She walks past every fifteen minutes, starting at exactly 8:05 A.M. The last

time is at exactly 4:35 P.M. She always walks from right to left. Never the other way. She always carries a single sheet of paper. She walks slowly. She wears the same outfit every day. The outfit is gray and twenty years out of style. The woman is, too. Her hair, her skin—both gray.

I followed her once. This is her routine: She gets up from her desk. She picks up a sheet of paper from her in-box. She walks to the copier (past my office). She copies the sheet of paper. She walks to the fax machine with the two sheets of paper, original and copy. She faxes one of the sheets of paper. Always the original. She walks back to her cubicle (going the other way around the office). That's why I never see her walk from left to right. She sits down at her desk. She places the copy in her out-box. She places the original in a file drawer. She takes out a compact. Opens it. In the mirror, she makes sure her wig is still in place. It always is. She gets up from her desk, and does the circuit again. All day. Four times an hour. Except for the last hour. Then only three times. I don't know what she does with the last fifteen minutes.

CONCLUSION: That woman is a zombie.

SUMMARY:

Cunning and diabolic. The zombies have set up an office. They pretend to work. Pretend to keep busy. They bring in a new employee. They bring in a temp. They bring in a fresh brain. They get the brain nice and tender with stupid work, repetitive work. Then they eat the soft brain. Soft—exactly how they like a brain. A steady supply of fresh brains keeps the decay from getting out of hand. Keeps them from looking too freakish. Cunning and diabolic. No shambling around the streets chasing after living people. No breaking into houses. Nothing like that. The living come to them. After getting eaten for department lunch, the new employee becomes one of the living dead. Sticks around. Works his way up the ZOMB, Inc. corporate ladder. Puts away for 401k.

That woman walked by a few minutes ago. I look at the clock. 4:45 P.M. Time to wrap things up and go home.

I look over the facts. It's all there in black and white. Zombies waiting to eat me.

I fold up my fact sheet. Slide it in my back pocket. Don't want anyone to find that. Could be incriminating.

I open a drawer. Take out my time sheet. I pencil in eight hours for the day. I look at the bottom of the sheet. Specifically,

the supervisor's approval line. I need to get the controller to sign off on my hours tomorrow. If I'm not here, he won't do it. I won't get paid for this week. No signature means no pay. Guaranteed.

I have to be here tomorrow to get his approval. I have credit cards to pay. I need the money.

This is a problem. I'll have to think about this.

I put the time sheet back in the drawer and wait for five o'clock. Then I leave.

+ + +

Friday morning has come and gone. Sorting invoices makes time fly.

I walked in this morning to more invoices. Goldenrod copies this time. Same invoices, just a different color. A big pile of them on my desk with a Post-it Note on top. The note said: *Please sort these by invoice number. Thanks.*

No one's going to look for these invoices either. Just like no one will look for the pink copies.

I sorted them anyway. Had nothing better to do. And the morning flew by.

I have a plan. It's going to work. I'll get the controller's signature. Get paid. Get my credit cards paid.

This is the plan: I'll leave early. Take them by surprise. Walk into the controller's office at three o'clock. Ask him to sign off on my hours. Tell him I have to leave early. Going to visit my parents for the weekend. Got to catch a train. Sorry didn't tell him sooner. Just came up. Unexpected. Sorry, but these things happen.

He won't be able to cope.

These zombies have a routine. It's important to them. Zombies aren't free thinkers. Or deep thinkers. Or any kind of thinkers at all. You leave the office at five o'clock, not earlier. It's the routine. You can't break a zombie's routine. That and meals of soft, fresh brains. Can't take either of those away from a zombie. It's all the zombie has to look forward to.

The controller won't be able to cope. He'll just sign off. Say thanks for working so hard. Wish me well. What else can he do?

I lean back in my chair. Watch the minutes tick by on the clock. Consider how good my plan is. Foolproof. Proof against fools. It's that good.

2:55 P.M.: I open the desk drawer and take out my timesheet. I hum a song. Michael Jackson's "Thriller."

2:56 P.M.: I pencil in my hours for the day. All six of them. I sign my timesheet.

2:57 P.M.: I stretch my arms, crack my knuckles, and stand up.

2:58 P.M.: I leave the office, timesheet in hand. I remember to bring a pen. In case the controller pretends he can't find one. No easy excuses for him.

2:59 P.M.: I get to the controller's office early. The door closes.

Open-mouthed, I'm watching the controller close his door on me. My plan might be going awry. I suspect it is going awry.

The controller's assistant says, "Meeting. You can wait. If you want."

She's staring at her computer screen. Her eyes are out of focus. She's typing. Wearing headphones and a brace on her right wrist. Working foot pedals underneath the desk. She's typing up meeting notes from a tape recording.

I glance at her computer screen. Read what's there.

As per the discussion of May 15, resolution of this issue concerning employee wages and holiday bonuses will be postponed until the next meeting of the board, to take place on . . .

I look down the page. Read the next paragraph:

As per the discussion of May 15, resolution of this issue concerning adjustment of hiring policies, to be in accordance with new legislation, will be postponed until the next meeting . . .

The other paragraphs all begin the same way. Different issues, same resolution. Pages and pages of postponements.

+ + +

FACT #10: The board of directors.

The board of directors at ZOMB, Inc. never makes a decision. Always postpones decisions until their next meeting.

CONCLUSION: Further evidence that no work is actually done at ZOMB, Inc.

+ + +

I wait a half-hour. Wait an hour. The door finally opens. I look at my watch. 4:00 P.M.

I can work with this. Adjust my plan. Should still work. Still leave early. I was hoping to meet buddies for happy hour, but won't be able to now. Okay. No big deal. Plenty of drinks later. The plan should still work. I'm still breaking the zombie routine.

Two men come out of the office. The one I don't know walks with a cane. Both men wear gray suits. Have gray hair. Both are smiling. Stiff smiles. Each more like a rictus, than a smile. Both have bad teeth. Yellowish-brown teeth. Too much coffee, too many cigars. Maybe. More likely both have bad tooth decay. Both have zombie teeth.

"Speak of the devil," the controller says when he sees me.

"The young man?" the other asks.

"Yes, Mr. Zeeder."

"The temp? The hard worker?"

"The same, Mr. Zeeder."

The man looks at me. The one I don't know. Mr. Zeeder. I want to protest. He's not on the phone list. No office with a name plate for him. Where'd he come from?

Mr. Zeeder says, "Come with me. There's work for you to do. I need a hard worker."

I hold out my timesheet and pen. I start to speak. He interrupts, "Things for us to talk about? Later. Time for us to work. Plenty of time to talk. Later."

He leans on his cane. His other hand squeezes my shoulder. Then he leads me away. He drags his left leg and walks slowly.

He won't sign off on my timesheet. Not until the work is done. I know he won't.

I go with him. Adjust my plan. Do the work. Do it quickly. I can still get out of here early. I can still leave with my brains intact.

I make copies for him. He's going away on business. Going far away, for a little while. He needs copies of reports to take with him. Lots and lots of copies.

I hurry to get the copies done. The copier jams. The copier runs out of legal paper. The copier needs more toner. The copier is out to get me.

Finally done, I ask Mr. Zeeder to sign my timesheet. There's still time to get away. He looks at it. Looks at the clock. Looks at me. "Six hours for today? More like eight. Correct it. Want to be paid, don't you?"

I look at the clock. 4:58 P.M. I start to panic.

He says, "Don't worry. Only two minutes. No one will notice. Pencil in eight. Correct it and I'll sign off."

I'm hurrying to correct my timesheet. Scribble out the six. Pencil in an eight. I hand it over to Mr. Zeeder.

He says, "You forgot to initial it. Initial the changes. Standard policy." He hands back my timesheet. Unapproved.

I groan. Slump in my seat. Look at the time.

The workday is over.

I don't hear the employees leaving their desks. Shambling through the halls with off-white walls. Shuffling along the beige carpet. Coming to Mr. Zeeder's office. Gathering outside Mr. Zeeder's office door.

I don't hear them. But I know they're out there.

I initial the changes on my timesheet. Hand it back to Mr. Zeeder.

He smiles. He signs my timesheet. He doesn't hand it back to me. Instead, he says, "A hard worker. Fast copier. Zeeder, Oltemann, Morris, and Brown needs employees like you. Fresh blood. New insights. Fresh brains. . . ."

+ + +

FROM: temp@zomb.com

TO: barb@warmbodies.com

CC:

SUBJECT: My Current Assignment

Barbara:

I have accepted a full-time position at Zeeder, Oltemann, Morris, and Brown, Inc. The position provides me with a good salary and excellent benefits. Even 50% matching for my 401k.

Thank you for helping me get my foot in the door. Without you and warmbodies.com, none of this would have been possible. Your aid has been invaluable. This is an excellent opportunity.

In a related matter: The IRS audit has been postponed. But there is still work to be done. The controller has requested you send another temp. It would be appreciated.

Thanks again,

J. Thomas

Billing Clerk

Zeeder, Oltemann, Morris, and Brown, Inc.

LIFE SENTENCE

DAVID DVORKIN

Sid watched the young woman next to him and did his best to imitate her.

Raise the little pickaxe. Chip, chip, chip at the wall for fifteen seconds. Bend over, lay down pickaxe, scoop up the tiny bit of debris, and dump it in the bucket behind you. Pick up pickaxe. Straighten. Repeat cycle. What I did on my summer vacation. Perfect capstone to a wasted life.

He had had no idea how hard the rocks underlying the surface of the moon were. Every blow with the pick shuddered through his arm. He had a headache, and it increased with every impact. Each time, just a few small splinters of rock broke free and fell slowly to the ground.

The girl moved without thought or fatigue. Sid's fatigue was growing, and his thoughts wouldn't stop. She seemed so alive, she moved with such grace, her naked body was so firm and appealing. Why was she here? Insulted some small-town official, perhaps? Refused to sleep with someone? He imagined himself rescuing her and earning her undying love.

A large chunk of rock came loose under her pick and fell onto her right foot. She ignored it and went on chipping at the wall. Sid tried to concentrate on the wall, too.

It took less every year to be capitalized and stiffed. No doubt impersonating a zombie was covered somewhere in the fine print in the Union legal code. The need for cheap, low-maintenance labor kept increasing, fuel sources kept diminishing, and the laws kept getting, well, stiffer. If he slipped up, he could easily end up down here for real.

He glanced quickly at the young woman. No blood oozed from under the rock that had crushed her foot. She was moving much less gracefully now that one foot was pinned in place, but she continued mechanically, tirelessly with her work.

What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?

Sid knew what he was doing there, but he was growing less sure about the outcome.

Or at least he had thought he knew, when he was still on Earth, explaining his brainstorm to Jimmy. Things looked different back there, surrounded by lifers and an atmosphere. Breathing that atmosphere.

Jimmy had promised Sid that he'd provide everything. And, indeed, Jimmy had provided a sleazy surgeon and all the necessary paperwork, and had bribed a transportation guard to slip Sid in with the stiff. As the scheme progressed, it had become clear that Jimmy was spending far more money setting things up than Sid had estimated would be required. Sid was impressed. Jimmy collected money; only rarely was he willing to contribute any up front. This increased Sid's confidence in his own plan and made him think that the profits would be even greater than he'd suggested to Jimmy. It made him feel there really was a point to all of this, which would be a nice change in his life. It was almost enough to make him forget the surgeon with the dirty fingernails cutting into his chest.

Sid babbled nervously throughout the procedure, right up to the point where the power of speech was taken from him. The surgeon's replies were short and not all that informative. He just moved around the operating table, hooking Sid up to various curious machines, jabbing needles into his arms, and then, finally, slicing his chest open.

"Lie back," he said when Sid raised his head, trying to see what was being done to him.

Sid put his head back. "You know what you're doing, right?"

"I've done it before."

"Not for Jimmy."

The doctor shook his head. "For the zombie cults."

"That's illegal!"

The doctor laughed.

"You do regular surgery, too, right?" Sid stammered. "Legal surgery?"

"This pays better."

To Sid's relief, the doctor pulled on a pair of gloves over his unwashed hands. He placed a gadget in the incision in Sid's chest and touched a button. The gadget began to spread the incision apart, forcing Sid's chest open.

Sid gasped, even though he felt nothing. *I ought to be in agony*, he thought. Instead, he felt peaceful, calm, detached. And glad the doctor had told him to lie back and not try to watch.

Jimmy was standing nearby, watching everything with fascination. "What's that?" he asked, pointing into the gaping opening.

"Uh-uh." The doctor pushed his hand aside. "Don't touch."

Jimmy stepped back. He continued to stare. "Last time I

saw something like that. . . . Hey, Sid, you remember that guy a couple of years ago? Behind the tavern on South Washington?" He glanced at Sid, at the doctor, and said, "Never mind."

The doctor worked steadily, draining away Sid's blood and replacing it with an artificial substitute, implanting in Sid's abdominal cavity a small tank of liquid oxygen and a tiny gadget that began gasifying the oxygen, combining it with nutrients, and dribbling the result into the artificial blood.

"Good enough for a couple of weeks," the doctor muttered.

Sid felt motions, tugging, pressure, no pain. *Guess I'm already half zombie*, he thought.

Zombie cults. Sid had seen one of their recruitment videos. Illegal, strictly underground, but slickly produced and, by God, appealing.

He had also seen the videos put out by Corrections—had been required to watch them in school, a couple of times a year, from third grade on. The ones from Corrections were intended to scare kids away from a life of crime, or even from petty crimes. They showed ranks of staring, grimacing zombies working in mines or in deserts or underwater or on remote space stations. They all looked as though they were in pain, suffering, regretting the deeds that had brought them to that awful state. The video ended by saying, "Nowadays, the dead still work for the living. Those who die a natural death become part of the great natural cycle." Pictures of machines spreading fertilizer over fields of healthy grain. "Those who have been prematurely capitalized and stiffed because they turned to a life of crime earn a different fate." Pictures of the working, suffering zombies again. "It's your choice which path you'll take."

By contrast, the zombie cult video emphasized peacefulness, detachment, escape from the travails of life while still being in the world. Those stiffos weren't suffering. They were calm, transcendent. "Escape your worries," the voice-over had said. They were all young and beautiful, too. "Escape your life. Join us."

"What you did for the zombie cults," Sid said to the doctor, "that was like what you're doing to me. So they're not real zombies."

"Of course not. It's not like the technology the government has. This isn't permanent. It can be undone. You won't really be dead. When the government stiffos you, it's real and permanent."

"Is it worth it?" Sid asked. "The zombie cults. Paying a lot

of money to be a pretend stiff for a while and worrying about being caught. Is it worth it?"

The doctor said, "Is anything worth it?" He reached up and pulled a dangling tube down from the ceiling. "Any last words?"

Before Sid could respond, the doctor pointed the nozzle of the tube at him and sprayed something over his mouth, sealing it shut. Sid's eyes widened in shock, and the doctor sprayed the same stuff over his eyes, sealing them open, unblinking.

"Now you look the part," the doctor said. "After I close you up, I'll spray this stuff all over you. It was developed as a substitute for space suits. Turned out it breaks down under ultraviolet light. So no sunbathing." He chuckled.

You're enjoying yourself, Sid wanted to say, but he could only produce muffled sounds.

Jimmy said, "This is so cool!"

"Take a deep breath," the doctor said. "The last one." He did something inside Sid's chest, and Sid felt his heart . . . stop . . . beating.



Sid went from the dirty operating room to a cattle-car rocket, part of a night shipment of stiffs. He was filled with the excitement he always felt at the beginning of one of his little adventures.

He slept on and off during the trip to the moon. Lying atop a shipment of stiffs—all of them uncomplaining, unmoving, unthinking, unbreathing, uncaring—he stared into the airless darkness and felt the first tendrils of doubt.

He tried to preserve his couple of weeks of air by moving as little as possible. Early in the trip, though, he realized that sexual arousal was the thing most likely to give him away. He became intensely aware of his own nudity and the nudity of the others he was lying on. He concentrated on their deadness. That helped.

He was utterly shut off from them. Their brains were deadlier than their bodies. He reminded himself of that. They were stiffs, not lifers, and he must not make the mistake of forgetting that. Even if there had been air, they would not have been able to speak. They could receive simple orders through receivers implanted in their heads, attached to microcircuits hooked into various cerebral control centers.

"I could put one of those gadgets in you," the surgeon had told him, "if we could get our hands on one. Make your reactions more convincing. Probably kill you, though."

"I don't think I'd trust you inside my brain," Sid had said.

"You kidding? I used to do that—implant those things. Back when I worked for Corrections. Nothing to it. Always wanted to experiment, change the thing so that it could connect to the part of the brain that governs sex. You should see some of those stiffs." He had grinned at Sid. "Of course, you will."

The doctor had done something, Sid realized. He had once been part of the system, doing work that society respected—feared, anyway. He had been part of something larger. Unlike Sid, whose life was circumscribed by desperate plots to steal in order to survive for a few more months.

I lead a hell of a life, Sid thought. Still, it was more of a life than the stiffs lying in the vacuum with him had.

They had nothing and they had no interest in anything—not sex, not anything else. They were beyond all pleasure, all fulfillment. Beyond, too, the emotional agonies that sexual need leads to. That gave them a kind of peace, he supposed. Indeed, there was an air of peace in the quiet, dark, airless hold. *Rest in peace*, Sid thought, and he would have shivered if he could.



When the ship reached the moon, the stiffs were unloaded by what looked like giant spiders. The machines' bodies, suspended in the middle of a circle of legs, were hollow and open on top. There was no sign of a control cabin, no place Sid could see where a man might sit to direct the machine.

The cargo ship sat on the lunar soil—on the darkside, fortunately for Sid—hatch open to the vacuum. The spiders approached. Patiently, politely waiting their turn, they used one of their long, spindly legs as a crane to pick the stiffs up, one at a time, and deposit them in the open body.

Sid tensed as one of the legs moved toward him, its ends splitting into a huge pincer. It grasped him around the middle and lifted him easily in the low lunar gravity. The gentleness of the grip surprised him. Valuable merchandise, he realized. Or at least, there was no point in rendering a stiff inoperable right after it had arrived on the moon.

By contrast with the smoothness and efficiency with which they had unloaded the stiffs onto their backs, the spiders lurched across the surface toward a nearby building. They walked as though the movements were painful. Sid reminded himself that they were just machines under some sort of remote control. They were as mindless and thoughtless as the stiffs.

The building was an airlock. Inside, beyond the airlock, men waited as a signal from somewhere activated the stiffs. The men led them to an elevator and set them to work. Less than two days after watching the surgeon cut open his chest, Sid was underground, beneath the surface of the moon, chipping rocks from the wall of a mine in a vacuum, while the incisions in his chest and abdomen were still itching.

✦ ✦ ✦

Sid's headache was getting worse, and his thoughts had begun to get away from him. He wanted to blink, but couldn't. He wanted to breathe and hear his heart beat. Tendrils of panic, which had left him alone until now, spread from his unbeating zombie heart and threatened to overwhelm him.

He fought against the panic. *I'm going to be fine*, he told himself, and tallied up his victories so far. *I've fooled the guards, fooled everyone, to this point. I don't have to worry about sunlight destroying the stuff the doctor sprayed on me. Hey, I'm a thousand meters beneath the surface of the moon—*and here his thoughts got away from him again—*naked, not breathing, trying not to think, surrounded by zombies, chipping pebbles off a wall and dropping them into a bucket on the ground. . . .*

Sid got himself under control again by focusing on the reason he'd done all this. Surely he was going to find something big enough to make the whole thing worthwhile, and then he would sneak out of the mine and get back to Earth and have everything reconnected by the surgeon with the dirty hands. He wasn't certain what he was looking for among the chips of rock his pick was digging from the wall. Diamonds? Gold? Something more exotic? No one knew for sure, but it must be valuable, given the effort being put into lunar mining and the number of stiffs being soaked up by the enterprise, and it had to be something that was worth a great deal in small quantities, because only that would justify shipping it back home. He had gambled on being able to recognize the valuable stuff, whatever it was.

Before he was recognized for what he really was.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sid saw a white surface suit kangaroo-hopping down the tunnel toward him. A guard. Sid emulated the steady mindlessness of the young woman beside him. The white figure passed behind him.

Something slammed into his back and drove him against the wall. He dropped his hammer and fell into the dirt. Dust sprayed up around him and dropped back to the ground.

Sid lay on his back, confused. He was staring up at the suit, except that now Sid could see the guard's face through the visor. The guard was grinning in pleasure. He bent down, yanked Sid to his feet, handed him his pick, and faced him back toward the wall. He turned away from Sid, toward the girl.

The guard watched her for a while. She was still struggling to do her work, but her trapped foot was hampering her. It was obvious that when it was time for the stiffs to take their buckets and deliver their ore, she would be unable to go with them.

The guard reached a decision. He unclipped a small device from his belt, held it up before his visor to examine it briefly, and then bent forward and reached down toward the girl's trapped leg. At the moment the device touched the girl's leg and began to slice through it, Sid realized that it was some kind of saw and that this must be a common occurrence.

She continued to chip away at the wall as her flesh and bone sprayed into the vacuum and dropped to the ground. Sid watched, unable to move.

The saw cut all the way through, freeing the zombie from the rock. She toppled to one side, her hands chipping away at the air.

The guard stepped back to avoid the fallen girl. He turned sideways and caught sight of Sid's fascinated stare. The guard frowned and stepped forward, raising his saw. Sid stepped back, raising his hands automatically in defense. The guard dropped the saw in surprise.

Sid saw the guard's alarm through the visor, saw his mouth move as he began to yell a warning into his communicator. Without thinking, Sid slashed his rock pick across the guard's visor.

A crack shot across the visor, and the guard fell backward, clapping his hands to his face. Sid jumped forward, raising his pick and bringing it down on the suit. He hit the man again and again. Each blow made a hole, but each hole filled with something black that oozed out slightly and sealed it.

Sid looked around, desperate for some way of shutting the guard up before he could call others. The saw rested on the ground, its blade still vibrating. Beside it, the girl zombie lay on her back, chipping at the vacuum with her pick. The bloodless stump of her leg stuck up, the bone showing.

Sid scooped up the saw and sliced at the guard's leg. The saw cut through the fabric of the suit and into the flesh beneath.

This time, blood sprayed into the vacuum. The guard squirmed away desperately, but the saw cut deep, making too great a gash for the sealant to close. The suit collapsed, and the guard stopped moving.

Now I really am a dead man, Sid thought.

Down the tunnel, in both directions, the zombies worked on. Both sexes, all ages, all sizes and colors, they chipped at the walls of the tunnel and collected the rubble. Sid looked down at the young woman, still lying on her back and mining the vacuum. He stared at the blank face. Was there truly nothing inside there? He wanted her to be secretly alive, for them all to be—yearning for release and a return to air and warmth and human company. He realized now that he had convinced himself, somewhere deep down, that the others were really like him, only hiding their humanity. He had been that desperate to believe that he had not surrounded himself with the dead.

Sid looked down at the girl's severed foot and let his gaze wander to her face, to a cut on her cheek. He hadn't noticed that before; it was on the side of her face that had been hidden from him. The cut, like the more obvious wound from the saw, gaped open. No blood, no sign of pain. She really was dead, as dead as the guard he had just killed. . . .

He looked around at the others. Nearby, a man chipped steadily away at the rock wall even though the flesh of his arm, solidifying into rock itself from the cold, had split open, showing the muscle and bone beneath. Another struck her shoulder with each backswing of her rock hammer, doing as much damage to herself as she did to the wall.

There was no mind behind those expressionless faces. They were all dead in this cold, dry, dead place. These were simply flesh and bone that moved. These were zombies, just as dead as any of his ancestors buried in the ground in long-lost graveyards, the men and women of an earlier age when people had wasted their dead.

No, he was wrong. These faces weren't expressionless, they were placid. These were the dead, but they were the dead at peace. The dead of the zombie cult video. No grimaces, no agonies of the soul, no pain of the flesh, no regrets, no fears. He had never seen such calmness in the faces of the living—certainly not in his own.

A sense that he was intruding upon them, that he did not belong in this place, overwhelmed Sid. The feeling was so strong that it made him forget why he'd come there at all.

He dropped the saw and backed away from the girl.

Farther up the mainline tunnel, he joined a slow, lengthy procession of workers following a guard. Clearly, the warning sent by the murdered man had not been heard or had not yet reached its destination. Here, as everywhere in the mines, peace reigned. It made Sid feel alien, unwelcome, unclean.

At the first sign of a side tunnel, exiting at a right angle from the one he was in, he slipped away from the procession. He had no idea where the tunnel led. He just knew he had to get away from the dead guard's body, and remove his own jarring presence from the zombies' peace.

The side tunnel was narrow and low. He crouched as he walked along it. The ceiling lowered farther as he walked, and the dim light from the mainline tunnel dimmed. He feared irrationally that the tunnel would close in on him, trapping him forever in the lunar rock. Dead men would move calmly in the open tunnels, acting with their imposed purpose, contributing something to mankind, while he would be held immobile forever in the rock, his mind alive and screaming.

He shook the fear off and found his mind a bit clearer, now that he'd distanced himself from the dead. *Better worry about supplies*, he told himself. *That's more rational.*

All the extra exertion was a concern. How rapidly was he using up his internal store of liquid oxygen and nutrients for his organs? To hell with gold or diamonds or whatever. It was time to get out and find the guy who was supposed to get him back to Earth. Sid understood that he would owe Jimmy a lot, and that he'd have no windfall to pay the debt, but he'd worry about that when he got back to Earth and was normal again.

To his relief, the tunnel began to widen again. Sid straightened up as the ceiling rose. He could see light ahead. His feelings of panic receded.

He came to another mainline tunnel, just like the one he had left. A similar gang of placid zombies chipped at the walls. Sid stepped back into the side tunnel and waited.

After some seemingly endless time, a guard appeared. At a signal inaudible to Sid, the zombies dropped their pickaxes into their buckets, picked the buckets up, and formed a line behind the guard. Sid joined the line. He took the bucket and pick away from the unprotesting zombie behind him, a teenaged boy, and fell in behind another worker, a middle-aged man. The boy followed Sid. Unlike the others, who were weighted down by their full buckets, the boy bounced up with every step, almost hitting the ceiling.

The guard led them into a freight elevator and closed the door once all were inside. The elevator took them to the surface

level, and the guard directed them down another hallway and into what appeared to be a large room.

Once the dead workers had arrayed themselves in orderly rows, the guard pulled a heavy door closed and pushed down on the lever which locked it. He pressed a button beside the door. After a few seconds, he began to fiddle with his visor. He flipped it up and breathed deeply, gratefully, with a look of relief on his face.

Sid couldn't feel the air that had filled the room, but he longed to breathe it, to feel his lungs expand with it.

Then he forgot all about oxygen. At some inaudible signal, the zombies had rearranged themselves, shifted away from the living guard. And as they pressed close together, Sid finally saw the face of the middle-aged zombie he had been walking behind. It was the surgeon who had operated on him.

Jimmy had doublecrossed him. Sid swallowed a silent curse. *You liked my idea so much that you recruited the surgeon to play the same game. Bastards*, Sid thought. *I won't let you do this to me. . . .*

Now that the workers had shifted, the guard moved to another door and opened it. He set off down a hallway. The zombies plodded in a line behind him. Sid set his bucket and pick down silently, ran up the line, and pulled the surgeon aside.

The man kept trying to walk. Sid held onto his arm with both hands to keep him back. The surgeon watched the guard's retreating back and kept moving his legs. His feet slid on the plastic floor. At last the guard and the rest of the zombies disappeared around a corner. The surgeon's movements slowed and then stopped. He stood docilely, holding his bucket. He stared down the passageway after his vanished comrades as though he longed to join them.

Sid turned the surgeon to face him. They were the same height, and the surgeon stared into Sid's eyes, but there was no sense of human contact.

Sid tried to talk, but the coating covering his mouth and nose made it impossible to produce a sound. He shook the other man in frustration.

The bastard's playing the game, Sid thought. *Playing it well, too. But you know I've got you, you goddamn butcher. Playing zombie won't get you out of trouble now.*

He slapped the surgeon hard. The man swayed slightly, then regained his balance and stood still, unchanged. Sid could imagine that he was smiling inwardly and that sparked his anger. He slapped the man again, harder this time, but

again got no reaction. Furious, Sid snatched the pickaxe and bucket from the doctor and held the axe up threateningly. *See this? This'll make you react!*

But it didn't.

Then it hit Sid, and for the first time he wondered: If the doctor was playacting, too, who had operated on him?

He tossed the bucket away and lowered the pick until one point rested on the doctor's shoulder. Still no reaction. Sid steeled himself and pressed down hard. The tool pierced the doctor's skin and sank into his flesh. Sid pulled it out again. The doctor didn't move. There was no blood.

Sid dropped the pick and jumped back, releasing the doctor. Responding to a faint signal that only he could hear, the doctor turned slowly in the direction in which the guard and the other zombies had gone. He took one slow step in that direction, then a more confident one, and then he began to walk steadily away, gliding, following the vanished work group.

Sid could no longer deny the obvious. If the surgeon was here, then Jimmy had surely also been caught, capitalized, and stiffed.

Was Jimmy here, too?

No, almost certainly not. It must be coincidence that the surgeon had been sent to the very same mine and that Sid had encountered him. There were so many other places where zombies were being used, places where lifers would require too much protective gear, and the kind of specialized machinery that could do the work was too expensive and too difficult to keep in running condition. Jimmy might be at an Antarctic oil well or a continental shelf salvage job.

The video in grade school had shown one of those under-sea projects. Naked zombies did the work, under the direction of lifers in submersibles. Fish of every size cruised the project in huge numbers, darting in to bite at the stiffies. The wastage rate was enormous. Larger fish would sometimes show up and carry a stiff away whole. How productive the stiffies really were under such conditions, Sid could only guess, but the Corrections video had made it seem like a bargain for society. The presentation managed to make that clear, even with its emphasis on the underlying threat to the young: *Screw up and this will be you*. The video's effect upon Sid and his classmates had been profound. *Too bad it didn't last with me*, Sid thought.

But those underwater stiffies had also been grimacing, as though they were in pain, were aware of their situation, were suffering. What was the truth, or part of the crime prevention

propaganda? After what Sid had seen on the moon, he wondered if Jimmy might be under the sea or on the polar ice, naked, calm, at peace.

Maybe happy. No, that word meant nothing for zombies. At peace. Yes, that much Sid now understood.

He looked around the empty corridor and then down at his own nakedness. Someone was bound to show up sooner or later. Sid no longer had much confidence in his disguise. Despite all he'd been through, all that had been done to him, he had betrayed himself almost immediately to the guard who had sawed off the girl's foot. Any guard who was paying attention would know he was a lifer impersonating a stiff. Surely the guard he had murdered had been found by now, and Sid would be the obvious suspect if he were caught.

He snatched up the pickaxe again and hurried down the hallway after the doctor. He caught sight of him as soon as he turned the corner, and he fell into step behind him, imitating his slow, deliberate, gliding walk. Wherever the others were, the doctor, thanks to his implant, was following them, and at the moment, continuing this impersonation until he found out if his mine contact had been captured, too, was all Sid could think of to do.

The doctor had wanted to get his hands on one of the brain implants, Sid recalled. In a way, he had succeeded. Sid would have laughed at the thought, if his face had been mobile.

He followed the surgeon through the twists and turns of the mining base's corridors. They passed lifers from time to time, but these people glanced at them and then away, as though the two naked men were objects, merely part of the background. They passed other teams of zombies, too, many of them carrying buckets of splintered lunar ore.

Before they could catch up with their own work gang, Sid and the doctor passed a line of stiffs being herded into an airlock with the number 3 painted on the wall beside it. Sid made a mental note of the lock's location.

The way Jimmy had planned it, Sid would have seventy-two hours of lunar night left when he arrived on the moon. Before that time was up, he was supposed to get out through Airlock 3 and look for a man in a surface suit who would be waiting with some kind of ship to get him back to Earth. Simple enough, assuming the would-be pilot had not been capitalized.

Finally, Sid and the doctor caught up with their own team. The stiffs were dumping the contents of their buckets into a collecting bin. The surgeon followed the others, mimicking their movements as though he still held his bucket. The

guard watched him with an expression of disgust. Sid followed suit, emptying his nonexistent bucket into the bin. The guard plucked a clipboard from a hook on the wall and typed a notation into it. Then he put the clipboard back on its hook and walked away. The stiffs fell into line behind him, carrying their now-empty buckets.

As they began to troop back down the hallway, another guard ran up to them. The two lifers conferred with worried expressions. Sid strained to hear them, but the sounds were too muffled by his protective coating. He caught one word, though: *murder*. He had no doubt what murder they were talking about.

The new guard rushed off to spread the word, and the leader of Sid's work group, still looking worried, led his stiffs away, back to the elevator that would take them underground again. Sid hung back.

There was no point in trying to blend back in; even if he could manage to fool the guards, his own awareness of how little he belonged in the stiffs' presence would betray him, make him give himself away. All he could do now was get out and get himself back home.

When the team was out of sight, Sid made his way toward the airlock he had noted before. He stared straight ahead as he went, ignoring both the zombies and the lifers he passed. The hand holding his pick hung down by his side. He kept his back straight and glided along slowly, steadily, deliberately.

A team of lifers in surface suits were assembled at the airlock when he got there. He walked past without pausing, turned a corner, and waited. When he turned back, the corridor was empty and the airlock sealed.

Sid examined the gauges beside the door. One read *Outer Door Status: LOCKED*. Another, labeled *Chamber Pressure, MB*, read *0*. As he watched, the reading on the gauge began to increase, stopping when it reached *1,000*.

He waited a while longer, giving the team that had just passed through the lock a chance to move away on the surface. Then he lifted the lever, pulled the heavy door open, stepped inside, pulled the door shut behind him, and locked it. He pressed the button labeled *Evacuate* and watched the gauge beside it drop from *1,000* to *0*. For a passing moment, he felt panic as the air was sucked from the small room. He shook that feeling away and prepared himself for deliverance to his homeworld. He needed the kind of calm acceptance he had seen in the stiffs in the mines. He strove for that.

The door he had locked behind him shook suddenly. The

lever on it moved, as though someone were trying to open it. *Jesus!* he thought. *They've caught up with me!*

Then the lever moved again, and kept on moving. The men on the other side must have overridden the safety device that would normally keep the door from being opened while the chamber was evacuated. As long as the outer door remained locked, they could safely open the inner one. And trap him in the chamber.

In seconds, air would begin to enter the chamber and the safety device would activate to keep the outer door from being opened. Sid lunged at the outer door and pulled the lever up all the way. He turned toward the inner door, gripping his pick, ready to defend himself, and leaned backward against the door to freedom, pushing it open with his back.

The door into the station swung open toward him. Air rushed through it. Sid glimpsed the panicked men trying to pull the door closed again. Then he was flung backward against the outer door, and then through it, onto the surface of the moon.

And into brilliant sunlight.

He lay on the gritty surface, stunned by the impact, stunned by the light.

At last, he managed to get to his knees, and then to his feet. *Got to get away from the sunlight,* he thought. *The airlock? No, the guards are that way—the ones who survived, anyway.*

He looked around desperately. Where was the ship that was supposed to be waiting for him? Where was his contact?

A figure in a surface suit stood nearby, watching. After a moment, the figure came hopping toward the airlock door. Sid crouched, holding his pick defensively. The suited figure stopped before him and held out one gloved hand.

My pick, Sid thought. *He wants the pick. Why?* Then he realized that the man in the suit wanted whatever valuable item Sid had managed to find. *He must be my contact,* Sid thought. *He's been waiting here for me.* He looked around but saw no ship. And when he looked up into the man's face, the smirk there was clear, even through his helmet's faceplate.

There is no ship. There is no way out—never was. There's just the sunlight. Jimmy, he thought bitterly. *You deserve whatever's happening to you now.*

He shook his head at the man in the suit. When the man moved forward threateningly, Sid held his pick up in warning. The man paused for a moment, then turned and kangaroo-hopped away, passing out of sight behind one of the many low hills.

Sid watched him go, then he turned back toward the airlock. Men in surface suits were filing out of it. They carried what looked like rifles.

Maybe some of them died before they got the inner door closed again, Sid thought. *That's something, anyway.*

The men in the white suits kept coming out of the open airlock door, spreading out, trying to surround him, like white-suited attendants at an asylum trying to capture a wayward inmate.

But they soon made it clear that they weren't interested in capturing Sid.

One of them raised a rifle and aimed it at him. *They're going to shoot me,* Sid realized. *No trial. I won't even become a stiff. I've never been of any use to anybody, and I won't even be of any use in death. Just trash to be thrown away.*

Pain lanced through his shoulder. It shot down his arm, burned across his chest and down the other arm. Sid glanced down. Something that looked like cloudy plastic was curling away from his skin, dropping to the lunar soil. The coating was breaking down. His skin was burning in the sunlight, freezing and desiccating in the vacuum.

He turned and hopped after his suited betrayer, following his tracks in the lunar dust. Dirt puffed around him, bullets ricocheted. Sid leaped frantically away.

He found shade and shelter on the far side of the small hill behind which his betrayer had passed. He stopped for a moment. His brain wanted his lungs to gasp from the exertion. His body didn't need to. And he couldn't draw a breath, out here in vacuum.

Under the stars.

He looked up and marveled at the spectacle. You could see nothing like this on Earth. Even photographs from space didn't do this justice. Unlike perhaps any other member of the human race, Sid was really seeing the stars, his vision diminished only by the thin layer of his protective coating, thinner and less obscuring even than a surface suit's faceplate.

This was worth something! Even if he didn't make it, even if they did catch and kill him, at least he'd have seen this, which was more than anyone else ever had.

He started hopping again, staying in the shade. No one seemed to be following him, and he still had quite a few days' worth of air and nutrients in him. Maybe he could find something, some way off, some way back to Earth.

What would happen then—if he got back home—he didn't know. Maybe he could find another surgeon to undo what the

first one had done. Maybe he'd find a way of paying for that second surgery. Maybe.

He came across a vast crater. It was perhaps a kilometer across. The rim on the far side reared up, gleaming brilliantly with sunlight. The nearest section of the rim glowed a ghostly gray in the reflection of that light, but the rest was in the lunar shadow, the depths black and impenetrable. And yet Sid thought he saw movement down in that blackness. Astonished, frightened, he stopped moving.

The ground shivered beneath his feet. There was movement to his left, a huge shadow moving between him and the stars. Sid crouched and froze, hoping he was invisible in the darkness.

It was one of the mechanical spiders, dimly lit by the glow, looking immense from below, far bigger than it had when he'd seen it from the ship or even when he'd been dumped into its hollow body. Each awkward, swaying step sent tremors through the hard-packed lunar surface.

The spider crept up to the edge of the crater and stood for a moment as though it were looking down into the pit and wondering, just as Sid had, about the hints of movement there. Then it bent its front legs, crouching until its body banged into the dirt. The ground shook, almost knocking Sid over. He managed to keep his balance and remained still—invisible, he hoped—in the deep shadow. The spider slowly straightened its rear legs, tilting its body almost to the vertical.

Zombies, arms and legs flapping lazily in the low gravity, tumbled from the hold and into the darkness of the crater's pit, the final resting place for stiffies that were beyond usefulness.

Sid stared, unable to look away. He was sure that some of the stiffies were still moving, that it wasn't gravity or momentum causing them to appear mobile.

After the cascade of stiffies had ended, the spider bent its rear legs partway, straightened its front legs partway, and moved back from the crater. It turned about clumsily, shifting one metal leg at a time. Partway through its rotation, it stopped and stood for a moment facing Sid.

Infrared sensors! Sid thought. Maybe radar. So that the controller, wherever he is, can see where the machine is going when it's in shadow. Christ, they've got me now!

But then the spider started moving again, completed its turn, and crept slowly, painfully away.

When he was certain the spider was gone and he could no longer feel its halting steps shivering through the ground, Sid made his way to the edge of the crater again and stared hard

into the depths. He could see nothing. He knew they were down there—stiffs, perhaps thousands of them, piled atop each other, disconnected from any human control and abandoned even by their sense of peace. Were they, in fact, moving around down there, slithering against each other, making feeble, hopeless attempts to climb out?

Horror overcame Sid at the image. But then he realized that the movement he'd seen was only the shifting of the pile to accept the newcomers. All lay quiet, the ones beneath held motionless and calm by the weight above them. And the ones in the top layer—why, they could spend the hours and days before the next arrivals staring up at those amazing stars.

Sid, too, looked up at the cold, brilliant lights filling the sky. Then down into the pit again. This time, instead of feeling that overwhelming sense of distance from the dead, he felt their unearthly peace enveloping him, inviting him into their quiet world.

But Sid was not yet ready to take his place there, too aware of his own uselessness. With regret, he turned away and retraced his path back toward the station. He drifted over the blasted landscape like a ghost. All the while he felt the tug from the craters' denizens, promising him darkness and calm, even as he headed back toward the harsh light.

He knew finally what he wanted. At last, peace.

And he knew how he might get it.

He was close to the station now, close enough for someone to see him. Sunlight washed over him. He felt the coating fall away from his mouth and nostrils. He tried to breathe, to expand his chest, but the air left inside him *whooshed* out and his lungs collapsed.

His knees buckled and he floated down into a kneeling position. His eyes were freezing, his vision leaving him, but he could make out the white figures moving toward him. One of them raised a weapon of some kind, pointed it at Sid.

No! Sid tried to shout. They'd kill him, damaging his body beyond utility, and that would be the end of it—true death, no atonement for his life through being useful, no achievement of peace. Above all, no peace, just oblivion.

He had to act, had to stop them, had to kill himself before they shot.

He found enough strength to shove the pick into his stomach, probing for the canister of liquid oxygen. Through the agony, he felt the pick strike something solid inside him and then felt that something rupture. His final second of consciousness was a moment of triumph. He would know the

peace of true zombiehood. He would be of use to humanity, however briefly, and then he would spend eternity in that crater, gazing up at the stars.

Sid's brain had already shut down when the liquid oxygen gushed from the canister and triggered the explosives the doctor had implanted in him to ensure that the gadgetry could not be traced back to his clinic. Most of Sid's torso was vaporized. He became an expanding cloud of red and white. His feet and one hand rocketed away and out of sight.

His head survived. In long, lazy bounces, it made its way toward the crouching, shocked guards. The head ended up in the middle of the group of them, eyes staring blindly upward as the men gathered around it, fascinated, oblivious to the fine rain of the rest of Sid that had begun to fall on them.

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Sid awoke a few hours later, lurching clumsily on his many legs across the lunar surface, every movement of his new spider body a torment, his screams of agony inaudible, compelled to obey the simple commands transmitted to him, trapped in a metal body that would never be allowed to wear out.

MARTIN'S INFERNO

TYLER SIGMAN

"Mr. Martin!"

The bosun's shout startled me out of a particularly pleasant dream involving two half-casks of rum, the ship's cat, and a certain black-haired wench I'd met in Curaçao on last porting.

"Get ye aloft an' take yer shift, ye damned monkey. An' if I catch ye dozin' in the nest I swear t'Hell I'll come up there meself an' you'll feel the kiss of the whip wakin' ye!"

My legs were moving before my eyes even flapped open. Springing into action from a half-slumber is a skill earned by necessity on a ship; if it's not some sort of life-threatening emergency waking you at all hours, it's the things that your fellow crew might do to you while you're out. There is no such thing as deep, restful sleep on the seas.

I was ten feet up the mainmast's rigging before the bosun could get out another word. Henry van Piet was not a large man, but the flame in his eyes and the creases of his wizened face inspired respect and obedience, to say nothing of his arresting voice made raspy by years immeasurable spent screaming at mates like me. His skill with the lash was legendary, but perhaps as such, he rarely had to resort to it.

As I scrambled up the ropes, I was grateful for the light wind. My bare feet felt the familiar scratch of thick cord, and since there was little swaying I made short work of the distance up to the yard. I had been aloft plenty of times, even in storms, but that didn't mean I liked it. Gusts or no, it just takes one slip to end up a spot that some deckclubber has to swab off the planks with a holystone. Being somewhat small and perhaps a little too sure of foot, I was continuously being sent to the tops. The same was true of Syd, the closest thing I had to a friend on board the *Wind Mill*. As I neared the crow's nest, I saw his patch of blond hair and a hook nose peer out over the edge.

"'Bout time, Jon," said he, clambering to join me on the futtock shrouds. "Nice as Eden today, but nothin' going. Perfect fer a nap, but the old dog downstairs would have me hide fer it."

I snorted in agreement as I passed him. "I've got him stirred up already, so you've got fair warning."

As he began slipping down the main shrouds, Syd's face assumed the stern set that I recognized as his reputable van Piet impersonation. "Cheese down them lines faster, I say," barked Syd, "or I'll have ye wantin' t'get away from me lash so bad that ye go On Account just so's t'get hanged fer piracy!"

Chuckling, I grasped the lip of the nest and hauled myself in. It was a familiar roost: a small wooden basket perched high off the deck above the main yard, just big enough to fit someone of my stature sitting, kneeling, or standing.

As expected, a small brass-handled knife was stuck into one of the weathered boards. Its point was right between the legs of a very crudely carved woman with galleon-sized breasts. When we were in the nest, Syd and I amused ourselves by "cuttin' art," as he liked to call it. There was little else to do when the sky was clear, the weather was nice, and not a thing was in sight but water out to the sky's end in all directions. Like napping, though, if van Piet caught you whittling while you were supposed to be on lookout, he'd threaten all manner of bodily harm, and you just had to hope he cooled off by the time you made your way back down deckside. "Ye lazy-eyed mongrel!" I'd heard more than once. "While yer cleanin' yer fingernails we're liable to get ridden down by l'Olonais' ghost 'isself, and I swear on me mam's own jingles that death wilna stop me from gettin' a lash on ye before I'm taken!"

The old salt was perhaps overly dramatic, but he ran a tight ship, and van Piet knew that there were only two major worries for us on each voyage: storm and pirates. Starvation wasn't a concern because the *Wind Mill* always ran well stocked compared to the number of her crew. As far as the others, the best you could do to combat storms was to have a good crew that could steer clear of them when possible, and handle the sails well when it wasn't. For pirates, you just needed to see them coming from as far out as possible and then get a good lead in the opposite direction. The *Wind Mill* had twelve guns, a respectable load for her class, but when it came down to it, we weren't a fighting crew. We were traders.

I settled into position, leaning against the nest wall, and gave the horizon a long scan all around. There was nothing but golden rays playing on a vast blue blanket.

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Some time later, I started out of an open-eyed daydream. I had been ostensibly gazing back and forth over the waters, but my eyes hadn't been seeing much (except maybe that certain

woman in Curaçao). Then, straight ahead, I could just make out the form of a hull against the horizon. Instinctively I cupped my hands and drew a great breath.

"Sail ho!"

The response was instant. Those already on deck jumped to their feet, if they weren't there to begin with, and those not on deck soon were. The cap'n himself was out from his cabin before I could call the direction.

"One point off the starboard bow, four leagues!"

My hand dropped to my waist, where I had tied the old beaten spyglass that the cap'n let me use since I was so often on the masthead. I loosened the cord and brought it up to my eye, focusing in on the spotted vessel. The crew crowded onto the forecabin, anxious for a look. With the lack of wind the listing was minimal and I was able to get the ship in focus quickly. It was still quite far off, but I could see enough to get a read on it.

"Mr. Martin!" barked van Piet.

"Yes, sir!" I answered. "Three-masted square-rig. West Indiaman, maybe, sir."

"Her colors?" demanded the cap'n eagerly.

"She's flying none."

"Her outfit?"

I squinted into the spyglass, looking for the telltale black spots that marked cannon barrels. "I can't tell yet, sir. She's still too far away to count them. Wait, that's strange. . . ."

"Out w'it Mr. Martin," called the bosun.

"Well, sir," said I, pausing. "She's flying hardly any sail at all. Two points reefed, I'd say."

"In calm like this she should be full out if she's a prayer of ever gettin' anywhere t'all," growled van Piet. Our sails were completely unfurled, trying to catch every bit of push that the gentle breeze carried.

"Yes, sir," I agreed. "She's not moving at all, sir."

"Cap?" inquired van Piet, looking over at the man.

The cap'n was a portly, middle-aged man with a wiry blue-black beard and deceptively soft eyes. His look belied his stature; he had plied the West Indies for years, and never wavered to make whatever decision was best for the ship. His judgment had been proven sound enough times during my stint that I felt grateful to have a man such as he directing the vessel under my feet.

He fingered his beard for a moment before responding. "She's straight in our path and I don't want to divert unnecessarily. Mr. van Piet, bring us a bit closer so we can see how

she's armed and give her a chance to raise her colors. But keep ours down for the moment, too. When Mr. Martin can make her out, give full stop and wait for my order." The cap'n paused to survey the crew. "In the meantime," he called out, "get to the locker and arm yourselves. Shot your guns and light the slow matches. I want to be cleared for action before we're within a league of her. If she looks hostile, we'll fire a volley to let her know we've got enough to wound, but if it looks to be a fight, we'll be runnin'."

Van Piet nodded, squinting. "Ye heard 'im, lads! Get t'yer business an' quick!" He tossed the ship's locker key to a nearby sailor, and the forty-odd men scattered and threw themselves into action readying the *Wind Mill* to fight or flee. I continued to watch the sail ahead.

Gradually, we closed. After some time, I could make out the ship well enough to report more. "Still no colors, sir!" I shouted. "Damn! She's well-gunned for her size, sir. I count eighteen, if not more. She's pointed our way, but . . . well, I don't see any activity on her deck." Looking down I could see that the cap'n had his own spyglass out, and the polished walnut handles of his pistols were sticking from his belt.

"She's heavy in the water," the cap'n said. "Full cargo. What is she up to? Mr. van Piet, run up our colors and let's see what she thinks of it." The bosun shouted an order and I ran the Dutch flag up the pole. We waited a few moments.

"Nothing, sir," I called. "Nothing at all. I can't see any movement on deck. Sails are still at one-quarter and no maneuvering."

The cap'n sighed. "It's either a trick or she's adrift. But I don't understand why she still has her cargo if she was taken. That means she probably got lost and ran out of drinking water. Awful way to go." He looked around for a moment. "Mr. Thomas, we have forty tons of room left in the hold, do we no?"

The purser stumbled forward, a scrawny chap with a loose white shirt draped over him like a bedsheet. "Yes, sir. That's right."

"Very well. This is what we'll do. Mr. van Piet, run out the guns and let's approach her from the rear starboard quarter. If she starts to come about, blast her with the bowchasers and then swing and we'll give her the broadsides. If it's no trick then we'll send a man aboard to see what she's carrying and make sure it's not a plague ship. Mr. Martin, watch that deck. If you see as much as a rat squirm, I want to hear you bellow like a stuck pig."

"Aye!" I cried.

As we crept nearer, I could still see no movement on the ship. The *Wind Mill* skirted wide and then steered in to approach from the rear. As we approached gun range I began to discern what looked to be bodies littering the deck. "I can see crew!" I announced. "Sprawled out—they're not moving." We closed cannon range but still there was no sign of any life. Using my spyglass, I strained to get an up-close view. The forms were indeed bodies—at least a score or more were in plain sight. As expected, there wasn't anyone at the helm nor, thankfully, anyone tending cannon. "She's adrift, sir," I confirmed. "Crew's dead or playing it well."

We were now close enough that we could see the sails and rigging quite clearly. Any thoughts of things being a ruse vanished, for the disrepair of the sails and the flapping of unsecured ropes told an unequivocal story. No captain, however crass, would allow his ship to fall into such a state, and it looked like it had been that way for some time. The partially furled sails drooped like loose jowls on to the deck. The parts that caught wind were fluttering uselessly with several large tears. My eyes dipped to the hull and I could see the ship's name announced in bold black letters on the stern: *Inferno*.

"Mr. van Piet," called the cap'n sharply. "Take us abeam. Commence with grappling and send a man to scout." The bosun went about the task of coordinating three grapple teams to lay hold of the *Inferno* as we steered directly up beside her. We could all see the deck clearly now, and the sight was not kind.

Bodies lay strewn hither and thither, frozen in the throes of death. Some were on top of each other. It was obvious that the crew had met with violence: cutlasses, pistols, or other fighting implements could be seen near every corpse, some still clutched in stiff fingers. Ghastly wounds marked every figure we could see, a sight made all the worse because the bodies had been in the sun for some days, perhaps even weeks. Corpses slouched on the deck or the rails, or with backs up against the masts. I was thankful that I was up in the nest and elected not to use my spyglass for a better view.

"No plague ship, at any rate," huffed the bosun. "Mr. Fontaine!" A bald, burly, ear-ringed man dressed in loose red trousers stepped up. "Have a look in 'er hold an' see if there's anythin' wur havin'."

"Aye, skip," he nodded. The grapple teams had laid hold of the *Inferno* and the men were now hauling on the ropes. As the ships drew close, Fontaine pulled a heavy cutlass from his belt and stepped on to the rail. When the gap was only a few

feet, he sprang onto the *Inferno*, blade raised, gaze sweeping forth and back. He kicked a body at his feet and it rolled over to reveal a badly decomposed sailor with a gaping hole where his stomach should have been. The exposed skin was a leathery brown with a sick, greenish hue. The edges of the wound were jagged, and a lone, short length of reddish intestine hung out like the tongue of a panting dog. Fontaine spat and kicked the body again to roll it back over. Grimacing, he padded to the center deck, giving the other corpses as wide a berth as possible. He glanced back at van Piet, who nodded, and then Fontaine tucked his sword into his belt and disappeared down a ladder into the hold.

The cap'n propped one foot on the rail and rested his elbow on his knee. "Mr. van Piet, I'd like to know what happened here, whether we take her hold or no. If you'd be so good, fetch me the log. You know what and where to look for it."

"Sir!" the bosun acknowledged. He strode up and hopped his wiry frame onto the *Inferno* without delay. In unspoken agreement, though, he paused and turned just as the cap'n tossed him one of his pistols. Van Piet snatched it out of the air and headed for the aft cabin.

The cap'n watched him go and then turned to survey the rest of the crew still on board the *Wind Mill*. "Stay sharp, men! Keep to your duties and we'll see what's to be found. And sailor—" the last was directed at me up in the crow's nest—"keep a good eye out. I don't want to be surprised by even an insect sculling a twig while we're lashed up like this."

"Sir!" I nodded, already training my eye on the horizon, where the sun was beginning to set.

Several minutes passed, during which the crew couldn't help but peer over at the contorted, rotting bodies littering the *Inferno's* deck. I was a spectator as much as anyone, despite the fact that I was supposed to be on lookout. It was hard to ignore the dead, especially the ones whose decomposing faces grimaced skyward or those whose stiff extended arms and splayed fingers pointed toward me. Some looked like they had been picked at by crows, which was odd considering our distance from land.

The scene was troubling, and the men below shifted uneasily. Most of my crewmates were experienced sailors and had stared death in the face a few times, but there was also a reason that they were sailing on a merchantman. They preferred to avoid the sorts of battles that turned a vessel into a floating ossuary.

Worse than the sights of death was its smell. Even up

high I could sense it and it was very distinctive—like molding sugarcane mixed with bilge, all riding the full, salty breeze. One of the decklubbers hung his head over the rail and was sick.

The old Dutchman van Piet emerged from the aft cabin of the *Inferno* at a quick trot, pistol gripped in one hand and a leatherbound book in the other. He gave a quick glance over his shoulder, so fast as to almost be imperceptible, and continued his trot all the way back to the *Wind Mill*. The cap'n met him and took the book.

"Damn, sir," spat van Piet in his scratchy tone. "The cap'n is still in there—or what them bugs have left of 'im. Looks like 'e went down defendin' 'isself, as 'e's not alone."

"Very good," grunted the cap'n, leafing through the journal. As he scanned the pages he mumbled to himself, much too quietly for me to hear at my post. While he read, I looked over the *Inferno* a bit more.

It indeed possessed a full complement of guns. Some of them were twelve pounders, by the look. And other than the rigging, which had gone to seed, the ship appeared to be well-outfitted. The hull was in good shape, built to run fast and recently careened, if I wasn't mistaken. I glanced straight across at the crow's nest opposite me and noticed the corner of a black flag draped over the lip.

"Pirates!" I cried, causing an instant stir on the deck below. "I mean, sorry sir, I mean they are—or were—pirates, sir. They've black colors ready for use."

"Thank you, Mr. Martin," the cap'n called a touch irritably. "That's plain enough in here." He continued reading to himself, his brow furrowing. "Something strange has happened on that ship. I don't like it. Unless Mr. Fontaine has found the treasure fleet itself, I believe we should cast off at once."

As if on call, Mr. Fontaine used that moment to appear, climbing out of the hold. He stopped at the top of the ladder to cup one hand over his mouth. "She's loaded well, cap'n!" His voice sounded a little higher pitched than normal, and I could tell he was panting slightly. "More than the usual store of powder—a right keg you could call her. Sugar, rum, and two dozen chests of I know not what. But . . ." Fontaine hesitated.

"Out with it," prodded the cap'n.

"Damn but if something terrible didn't happen down there. Uhhh, Cap." Fontaine's voice now quite noticeably revealed his dread. The fact that he was afraid carried a message that his words couldn't; Fontaine was rowdy, bull-headed, and fearless, whether he was in a storm or a fistfight. Seeing

him anxious put the crew even more on edge than they already were.

"Under the circumstances," began the cap'n, but at that moment burst a hideous droning sound from over on the *Inferno*, originating very near Fontaine. It was a like the wailing cats make when they're wet, but much deeper. I could see Fontaine look down the ladder back into the hold and he stiffened.

"What in God's name—" began van Piet, but he was cut off by Fontaine who actually *screamed*.

The muscular sailor leaped almost convulsively off of the ladder and, in his haste, didn't quite make it fully back onto deck. He landed with his legs still dangling into the hold and frantically scrambled to get up. From my vantage, I could see down into the hold a bit, but not to its depths. I saw there was some sort of movement behind and beneath Fontaine, but not what it was.

Fontaine got both legs swung up onto the deck and sprung to his feet. Just as he turned back toward the *Wind Mill*, though, a hand shot up from the hold and locked around his ankle. With enormous force it yanked Fontaine's foot out and the big man fell onto the deck hard. The fall knocked him senseless, and while he lay there another arm reached out and took hold of his other ankle. Because I was up high, I could see part of the man who had Fontaine. It was a sailor hanging on the ladder—or what had once been a sailor—dressed in a loose white shirt that looked strange because the man's skin appeared noticeably greenish against it. More disturbing, it was from that sailor's gaping mouth that the hideous moaning came.

The jaundiced, droning sailor began hauling Fontaine into the hold, which roused the big man from his stupor. Fontaine took one look at the green-tinted arms securing his ankles and, to his credit, remembered the cutlass in his belt. He somehow freed the blade, and as he was being drawn in, he raised a muscled arm and struck. It was a cruel blow, and even given Fontaine's awkward positioning the stroke was delivered with enough fear-driven strength that it shore clean through the man's arm. Two things happened then that shook us all to our core.

The man did not scream, and he kept pulling with his remaining arm.

Fontaine froze for just a moment. Then, as the realization took him, he turned his head to regard the cap'n with wide eyes. A look passed between them I could not see, before

Fontaine turned back to the freakish sailor and let him have it with the cutlass again, this time at the point where the neck meets the shoulder. I winced at the sound of metal lodging in bone, but it affected Fontaine's attacker less. The one-armed *thing* gave a superhuman heave and my crewmate was ripped from the deck and vanished into the hold. There was a tremulous, high-pitched scream from where he disappeared, but it cut off sharply and, for the fleetest of moments, silence reigned.

The crew, who had been transfixed by the unnatural events unfolding before us, seemed to regain themselves. There was shouting from every quarter of the deck, and the cap'n and bosun struggled vainly to make themselves heard above the din. Some men rushed off in a panic; some grabbed their weapons; a few just stood staring dumbly at where Fontaine had last been seen.

For my part, I craned in the nest to try and peer down into the *Inferno's* hold. Unfortunately, I had not the right angle and was partially blocked by the one-armed greenish man-thing that had now returned on the ladder. His presence had somehow been overlooked for an instant as we all panicked. He reminded us, though, by opening his maw and issuing another awful cry. His jaw worked up and down, and he wailed with what sounded frighteningly like slurred speech. As he moaned, he clambered up off of the ladder to stand erect on the deck.

It looked like nothing but a corpse, the walking twin of any of the rest of the figures spread over the *Inferno's* deck. The man had skin hanging from his face in patches, with similar wounds upon his arm and his legs. His color was indeed greenish in hue, but mottled with smears of brown, black, and tan. My stomach convulsed just from the look of him. It was the utter defiance of nature's laws, given form and voice right before us!

The figure ambled forward with an unsteady gait, half stepping, half shuffling. A dark ichor drizzled out of the stump of its left arm to spatter on the deck.

"The Devil is upon us!" cried the cap'n. His next words were cut off, though, as to our utter dismay more voices joined in the droning moan. With slow, ponderous movements, the corpses on the *Inferno's* deck began to rise!

To a man, the figures stirred as if shrugging off whatever facade of death they had adopted. Rotting arms pushed up rotting torsos, and tendons baked stiff by the sun crackled as they flexed to move limbs that were, in some places, little more than white bones lashed together by the coffee-colored remnants of muscle.

Right beside the *Wind Mill*, the disemboweled sailor Fontaine had kicked when first boarding the *Inferno* groaned as he rose to his feet. He paused for a moment, looked blankly down at his gut, and grasped at what remained of his intestines. Then his chin raised up and, in a spastic half-fall, half-leap, he threw himself over the rail onto van Piet. The dead sailor grasped the bosun's head with both decaying hands and pulled the man's face toward his jaws, which were snapping feverishly. Van Piet howled once before the pair went down in a heap.

"Cast off! Cut the lines!" came the cap'n's strong, bellowing voice. His effort was valiant, but many of the crew were senseless beyond hearing. Any semblance of organization on the *Wind Mill* vanished; sailors tripped over themselves and their mates in a mad dash to get away from the murderous creatures. A limited few kept their wits enough to hear the cap'n's call, and they saw the logic in it at once.

A sandy-haired Frenchman that I had shared a cask with in Curaçao jumped on the rail and actually managed to hack through one of the grapple lines. Another man—the carpenter, I thought—tried to do the same thing but had less fortune. As he stepped up to use his blade, one of the moaning devils met him and swung a greenish arm with awful force. I heard a crack and the carpenter pitched over like a felled tree. The dead thing's arm hung at a new angle, but that did not distract it as it collapsed on its prey. Other dead men approached the rail, and my fellows fell back, none desiring to reach the grapples badly enough to brave the creatures.

The cap'n saw this and knew what it meant. "Fight! To arms, lads! Fight! Fight!" he hollered, even as he drew his remaining pistol and leveled it at one of the Devil-creatures crawling onto the rail. There was a report and then a wet thud as the pistol ball found its mark squarely in the thing's forehead. The monster pitched over, slid between the rails of the two ships, and splashed into the sea.

The deed inspired momentary hope in my fellow sailors—those who had not yet fled the fight altogether, at least—and most of them drew their weapons. They didn't exactly rush forward to meet the walking dead men, but the fiends were coming forward on their own so the fray was joined regardless. As I watched the combatants come together, some impulse—perhaps cowardice, perhaps wisdom—stopped me from climbing over the nest and hurrying down the rigging to do my part.

For a moment my heart leaped with hope as my fellows, armed with blades and the lust for survival, hacked away at

the dozen dead things that had managed to reach the *Wind Mill*'s rail. The creatures made no effort to dodge or otherwise save themselves from harm, and as such the blades found home and did wicked damage. If their foes were animated by anything less than foul devilry, my mates would have won through in the first moments, as cutlasses bit deep into rotting arms, legs, shoulders, and chests. But devilry can withstand such assaults, and accept such wounds as would have been instantly fatal to a normal man. So rather than destroying them, the noble assault merely drove the dead things a few steps back. They rallied and came on again.

A cacophony rose up from the deck. Shouts mixed with those terrifying moans, and all was punctuated by the solid, dull *thunk* of blades lodging in flesh. I saw one of my crewmates gain momentary success: He clove clean through a dead thing's neck, and the body slumped to the deck and did not rise. His victory was the exception, though, for the other dead men shuffled on despite the most grievous wounds to their bodies.

My heart still held foolish dreams, for we outnumbered the monsters by over two to one. But then I happened to glance back at the *Inferno* and was greeted by a numbing sight. More creatures rose up from the hold—and, hark! out of the cabin emerged another handful of the devils. One of them was dressed in an indigo-dyed coat, tan breeches, and black boots. His accouterments marked him as the *Inferno*'s cap'n. The coat was stained dark all over the front, the source a slash across his gut. Through the rent in his shirt I glimpsed the greenish flesh on his bloated stomach. His face was even more spectral; he had no nose at all and the entire right side of his jawbone was visible, no skin covering so much as a finger's width of it.

The dead cap'n staggered forward like the rest.

As I watched him, horrified, presently came the screams. It was just one initially—the first of the remaining living to fall prey to the ambling tide. My eyes left the dead cap'n in time to see a mate curled up like an infant while a dead thing fell upon him, rending and biting. Then came another scream; a sailor had lodged his cutlass in his foe's chest and as he struggled to rip it free, the devil seized his head between both hands, the grip like a vice. The man's yell cut off as the vice tightened, and I saw him shake and then go limp.

And so I witnessed, frozen and helpless, the overwhelming of my crew. And unlike our enemy, when one of my mates took a wound, they went down and stayed down. After a time,

I slunk into the nest. The outcome was clear, and I hadn't the courage to witness it unfold to the last.

I stared up at the peaceful blue sky and watched a puffy cloud float across it. Below came sounds of death: clanking, stomping, screaming, and the telltale moaning. I heard a report; the cap'n had perhaps reloaded his pistol, or maybe someone had taken the other one from van Piet's body.

How long I listened, I know not. I know only that gradually the clamor slowed. There was less shuffling. Less shouting. Less screaming. But in its place rose the unmistakable sounds of eating. It could have been a tavern full of sailors smacking their lips and diving into juicy mutton. Then even the moaning slowed and quieted, although the dead things still made noise. It was just more like cats purring contentedly instead of howling.

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I can't say I slept, but I remember little until the next day-break. The mind has ways to defend itself, and my tenuous hold on sanity was, perhaps, retained by shutting out the horror that was so undeniably close.

As the sun rose, though, I revived. I listened for a long time; hours maybe. The only sounds I heard were that of the gentle breeze flapping the sails, and that of the creaking of the two ships bumping easily together.

When the sun burned high overhead, I finally got up the nerve to peek over the edge of the crow's nest. One look told me everything I needed to know. The deck was littered with bodies, painted with blood. Nothing appeared to be moving, which confirmed that my crew was gone, but didn't tell me anything about the state of the enemy, who were also sprawled out in apparent death. I knew better than to assume that they were inanimate. I slid back down, sighed, and closed my eyes with my forehead resting against the wood. The sun beat down on my back.

Another night came and passed while my mind searched for options. I was cramping heavily in the nest. My throat was parched and my stomach was growling despite the nauseating feast that had occurred on the deck below. The hard truths of the situation were evident: I could either die sitting on my arse, or I could climb down and probably die the grisly death of my companions. Neither option was palatable.

Wasting away in the sun, however, is more than unpleasant, and the innate survival instinct all living things possess forced me into quick action. In the heat and near delirium of

dehydration, I decided that I had misinterpreted what had happened nearly two days prior. Maybe the pirates had planned some deliberate ruse to frighten us, and that the two crews had simply slaughtered one another. Or perhaps the pirates had been stone drunk with rum, which might explain why they were all passed out as we approached, but then came on unflinchingly after they awoke.

Both theories were foolish, but how much more foolish than believing that the dead had risen up to prey upon the living?

So with those hopeful thoughts racing through my mind I climbed stiffly over the nest onto the rigging. My legs nearly gave out, weak and stiff as they were from being bent double for hours interminable. I just clung to the ropes for a few moments, which was just as well, since that gave me time to observe the deck below and make certain that the figures didn't react to my movement. Thankfully, there was no stir, and, as my blood returned to my feet, I made my way down. As I began to descend I caught a glint of light off the small knife still stuck into the crow's nest wall. I reached back in and pulled it out, placing the blade between my teeth.

I had no great plan, truthfully, other than to collect some food and water and, with luck, make off with a skiff and leave the Hell-ships behind. One man can't sail a square-rigger, so it was either set off in a rowboat or wait for unlikely rescue aboard the *Wind Mill*. I was not keen to spend any more time in the proximity of the horrific creatures, so I decided to take my chances on the open sea.

My hands and feet moved in familiar patterns as I made my way down, while my head remained almost fixed watching the figures below. Some inner instinct railed against my approaching the danger rather than receding from it, but there was naught to be done for it. Presently I lowered my feet down onto the firm deck and breathed a sigh of relief mixed with sorrow when still I saw no bodies move. I took the blade from my mouth and tucked it into my belt.

Up close, the scene was even more horrific than I had expected. Everywhere were bodies, clotted blood, and offal. It seemed that most or all of the dead things from the *Inferno* had crossed to the *Wind Mill* to take part in the assault. The dead of both ships were slumped together in small piles, and I realized with fresh revulsion that for each newly made corpse there were one or more rotting bodies arrayed on top of it. My crewmates had been ravaged like deer taken by wolves. There was no more denying it, no matter that I needed some small hope intact—the men of the *Wind Mill* had been feasted upon!

Indeed, some of the greenish corpses were as yet still positioned in the act. It was as though they had eaten their fill and then collapsed at the table, sated. Dried blood stained the eaters and the eaten and, in more than one case, jaws still clamped down on the limbs of my fallen fellows. The sight alone would have been enough, but coupled with the unbearable stench, I bent over to lose my meal. With my stomach as empty as it was, I could only gasp in convulsions.

Straightening, I noticed that my cap'n's body was a scant two yards away. My throat swelling, I took instant notice of his waterskin, still slung about his sprawled frame. I cautiously knelt down and cut it off, watching for any sign of movement. After stowing my knife again, I raised the skin and gulped greedily. The water was warm and musty, but felt like rain over the desert of my raspy throat.

I all but emptied the skin, and as I lowered it at last, my eyes drifted to the cap'n's booted feet, next to which was the journal that van Piet had taken from the *Inferno*. Driven by curiosity, I retrieved the book. If the log's final entries held some clue as to what had happened, I needed to know.

I read slowly. The combination of my average skill with letters, a groggy head, and the pirate cap'n's sloppy hand made for tough going.

MARCH 2: Took a Flute today. Fine lot of sugar to add with our spoils already. Five men went On Account. Dumped the others after some sport.

MARCH 9: Beached her on a little cay NE of Inagua, location marked. Careen and rewater. Will visit the locals also.

APRIL 7: INFERNO is ready. Better shape than the village. Rum came out most of the past week. Had our way with folk. Had to put the blade to a few on account of them protecting their women. Mr. Clive took a wench that gave him a wicked scratch. Says she gave curses on him and he lost his head and gave her the knife. Good the ship is prepared as the men are ready for sailing with eyes set on a take.

APRIL 11: Clive has taken ill—damned ill. Scratches full of the Devil and he looks low.

APRIL 13: Clive went yesterday, screaming the whole time. Bit and scratched a few mates on his way out.

Bastard. We tossed him over but those he clawed are fevering. Spirits are low.

APRIL 14: The men are uneasy. One at least is mad, says he saw Clive hanging on the bowsprit in the moonlight while he was on watch. I gave him a few lashes for his lies. Six now are fevering with scratches. Damn but I think we'll head for land. St. Kitts if we can sneak in perhaps. Put in there and see a doctor. Maybe divide the take even which is a damned shame as the ship and men were ready for more.

APRIL 16: A madness is upon us! We are making two leagues if any. By God if the winds do not rise then I fear the result.

There were no more entries.

Uneasily, I tucked the book under one arm and picked my way aft toward the cabin, where I planned to bag some food for the boat. Weaving between bodies, I did my best both not to touch them and also not to see them. As I approached the passageway, I heard a sudden sound that turned my blood to ice: a low, mournful moan from just behind me.

I whipped around in fright and, in doing so, managed to turn my ankle and fall, the logbook thumping to the deck. There beside me was one of the newly dead, a sailor I would surely have recognized if not for his half-eaten face. He was struggling to push himself up, and his eyes fixed vacantly on me while his mouth emitted the dreaded moan. I stared face to face for a moment, breathless. The sailor reached out a hand at me and his jaw started working. I scrambled frantically backward, kicking at his arm while I tried to stand up.

The groaning came from more throats now. The bodies were all stirring. As I gained my feet again, so also were many corpses ponderously attempting to do the same. Thoughts of returning to the nest crossed my mind, but I could see that the way was blocked. In fact, all routes to safety seemed cut off by rising dead, including the way into the cabin. Like a rabbit surrounded by hounds, I looked desperately for an escape. The nearest thing to an opening was in the direction of the *Inferno*. And if the enemy's crew had all migrated to the *Wind Mill* for the feast, their ship would be the safer of the two.

I sprinted toward the *Inferno* just as the creatures closed in. They moved fast for all their awkward appearance, and I was nearly taken. Just as things closed in from either side, I

leaped forward over the rails. A raking, hot sensation tore across my gut, and then I tumbled onto the *Inferno's* deck. Stumbling up again, I ran my hand along my stomach; it came away bloody. I looked down to see four long scratches. The fingers of one of the demons had found purchase as I jumped.

I didn't have long to consider it, and the sight of the dead sailors giving chase drove me to instinct. I leaped onto the rigging and scaled it faster than I had ever done before. Despite the turned ankle, I found myself up at the *Inferno's* nest almost before I realized what I was doing. Perhaps some inner wisdom had driven me there, for it seemed unlikely that any of the awkward beasts could negotiate the ropes.

I clambered up into the basket and slumped in a heap, exhausted. There was a black flag draped inside—the same I had spotted days ago, in another life it seemed. On it I lay and lamented my poor fortune, chest heaving, ankle throbbing, and gut burning where the scratches were. The moaning rose below, and I could hear that the beasts had followed me over to the *Inferno*, but I had not the courage to peer over. Panting, a faintness overcame me and I closed my eyes.

+ + +

A low moan, coming from very near my position, woke me. My head felt thick and my eyelids were crusted shut. When I forced them open, the first thing I noted was the burning sun, high overhead. The next was an even greater burning in my stomach and sides. Dazedly I prodded the scratches with my fingers. The wounds were inflamed, crimson, and a kind of pus leaked from them. But I had not a moment to dwell on them, for the moaning returned and with it came a *clunk* against the crow's nest!

My mind raced and I kicked myself up stiff, back against the wood. Was it possible that the bloodthirsty things had negotiated the rigging? To my greatest despair yet, my fears were confirmed as a pale hand appeared and grasped the lip of the nest. I watched in horror as a patch of blond hair appeared and then wide, blank eyes and a familiar hook nose. I knew that face, even though it was now contorted and misshapen, with places on the cheek and chin bloody and chewed away.

"Syd!" I ejaculated. It had once been Syd, but no recognition beamed in his eyes—only hunger. He hooked one arm over the lip to pull himself up, and reached out with his other. Fear paralyzed me for a moment, which allowed Syd the opportunity to grab hold of my left shoulder. His finger clasped

me with terrible force. I could feel his fingernails digging into my flesh and then his mouth opened, drooling.

"Uhhhhhh," Syd moaned.

"No!" I cried, a rejection of all that had occurred. On its own, my right hand found the hilt of the carving knife, still secreted in my belt. I drew it forth and plunged the blade with all of my remaining strength into Syd's familiar face, a face that I had seen creased in laughter so many times. I felt a sickening crunch and Syd pitched backward, taking the knife with him. For a blessed instant there was silence, and then I heard a dull thump as his body struck the deck below.

Another groan sounded close at hand. Looking over the lip, I saw an awful sight, but I was too tired, too numb to feel the horror it should have inspired. The rigging below held two dozen of the creatures, or more, arrayed at various heights. I had been only partially correct in my initial assumption: the things weren't able to scale the ropes very well. But that didn't stop them from trying. As I watched even, a creature halfway up slipped, then toppled over backward to crash to the wood below. Within seconds, it was stirring again, rising up to try again.

Despite their clumsiness, some of the beasts had made impressive progress. The closest was a mere three yards from reaching my hideout. As I looked down at him, he groaned more loudly and reached out. In utter defeat, I turned away—and found myself confronted by a most unexpected sight: an approaching frigate off the port bow! I blinked and rubbed my crusted eyes, unbelieving. The massive ship remained.

She was flying English colors proudly and fearlessly. The water sprayed off of her bow and I marveled at her beauty: the lines of her hull, the bold markings of her sails, the imposing power of her arms. As she approached shot range I could make out a mob of men, presumably soldiers, arrayed on her deck.

For a fleeting moment, I thought that I had found my rescue. But then the words of the pirate cap'n's journal suddenly flashed through my mind: *scratches full of the Devil* . . .

No, my fate had been sealed. The angry red wounds on my side throbbed, as if confirming it.

With that realization, a clarity descended. I had indeed found my rescue. Or at least my salvation.

The frigate was approaching fast, headed straight in; it had little to fear from two ships lashed together. With fading strength, I rose to my knees and laid hold of the black flag draped inside the nest. With a painful heave I threw it out, then stood and reached up to grasp the flag runners. Staring

skyward, I started to pull, arm over arm, until the colors had been raised.

The response was predictable and immediate. As I ran out the black flag, the frigate, a pirate-hunter by the look of her, changed course and swung about to present her broadsides. I heard a now-familiar moan from below.

Gazing out over the water, my eyes lingered for a peaceful moment on the massive cannon battery, and the frantic little figures milling about the barrels. Then my knees gave out and I collapsed, my head catching the wood as I went down. My ears rang, and my vision blurred. I blinked a few times and my sight returned to me. And then I saw it, etched into the planks at the bottom of the nest—a crude carving of a naked woman, not unlike Syd's attempt on the *Wind Mill*. I heard myself chuckle softly.

The rumble of cannon sounded far off, like from ships dueling on the horizon. A small part of my mind, a very tiny part, was still racing—thinking, thinking. *How much powder did the Inferno carry? Had it spoiled while she lay adrift? How many guns did the frigate present? Cannonballs in flight glow red, red like coals. . . .*

I soon had my answers, and my salvation.

The ship shuddered below me as the first volley bit into her, and then all was bright.

MEMORY REMAINS

STEVE ELLER

The face in the bathroom mirror isn't dead. It's not alive.

I stopped living a few months ago; I know that. But I thought I was still alive. Now too many signs tell me otherwise. I'm not dead, though. I know dead when I see it.

Dead comes quick. It's a sudden thing, and a certainty. That's not what I am. I'm a slow unraveling. A day-by-day dissolution. Joints with a brittlestick crack, and muscles hanging like rotten fruit. Acid burning at the back of my throat, and ulcers in my mouth that won't heal. Breaths coming fewer at a time.

I twist the faucet and splash water on my face. Hot, cold, it doesn't matter. I can barely tell the difference anymore. I wipe my cheeks with my fingertips. My skin feels sticky, like half-melted wax. I watch my reflection, waiting, but no flesh is carried away by the dripping water. There's darkness below my cheekbones, and under my eyes. But I could pass for alive, if someone looked without care. And they never care.

I unbutton my soiled shirt and touch the bruises between my ribs. The skin is cool and sunken, like clay molded by a sculptor's touch. I can't shake the notion that something is missing. I lay my hand flat on my chest, and I feel nothing. Before I slept, my heart was pulsing at a frantic pace. Now, it's silent. I drop the shirt to the floor and turn out the light.

My apartment is dark because I keep the blinds closed. Passing through my living room, I wonder if it's day or night. But it's just a casual thought. Time only matters if someone is waiting for you. Or thinking of you.

The blankets are still bundled on the couch. This is where I sleep. Or just sit, watching television. There are still a few channels that come in, even with a disconnected cable. But most times I just watch the gray dots swirl. I listen to the static until my mind gives out and I drift away. I don't like sleeping in a bed anymore. Sometimes I leak in places, and I hate staining the sheets.

I sit down on the couch and wrap the blanket around my shoulders. I'm not cold, but it's a comforting thing to do. The refrigerator hums in the kitchen, and I try to recall the last time I ate anything. It seems it was a long time ago, but it's

hard to say. There might still be something in the refrigerator, blackening or withering to dust. Maybe there's something like that, inside of me.

Closing my eyes, I lean back against the couch. I swallow a deep breath, by reflex. But it never gets past my mouth. My throat is closed like a fist. I gag, and something flies out of my lips. A tooth, dotted with black blood.

+ + +

"I'm not your daddy."

It's something I say to him sometimes. A joke, a meaningless thing. He always wags his tongue at me, then runs off. Maybe it comes out differently this time, poisoned by the alcohol in my blood. Or maybe there's no reason to assume things will always be the way they were.

He gets deathly quiet. Tears well in his eyes, but he dashes away before they trickle down his face. This isn't the way he usually runs, with his bony arms jacking and his head thrown back. His hands are clenched across his stomach, and his chin touches his chest.

I get up, to go after him, but it takes a minute to get my bearings. A few too many beers in the hot sun. The world spins in a whorl of bright green grass and white vinyl siding and blue popsicle sky. By the time I find my balance, he's around the house and gone.

But it doesn't take long to find him.

He's in his castle. It's actually an old shed, too small to keep the lawnmower in. I was going to knock it down, but he said he wanted it. So we painted it gray, like stone, and drew meandering lines to look like mortar.

Matt is inside, holding his little plastic sword. His helmet and armor are beside him on the ground, like he tossed them away. Sir Matthew. That's what he calls himself when he defends his castle. The Lord of Light. When he plays this game, he won't answer unless you call him Sir Matthew Light.

"Hey," I say. "You know I didn't mean anything."

"You never mean anything."

Tears glaze his eyes, pupils as dark as melting chocolate. His hair is copper, with streaks of white and gold. His lip quivers, and he bites it to keep from crying. Six years old, and he's already struggling to keep it inside. Maybe he learned it from me, when I wasn't looking. When I was trying not to cry at his mother's funeral.

"You know I'm your daddy, don't you?"

He starts to pull away when I reach for his face, but he

doesn't. Light skin to match his hair, and a spray of freckles across his nose. His cheek is warm from playing in the sun.

"Not my real daddy," he says.

It doesn't matter if he says it to hurt me. He can't punish me any worse than I'm punishing myself. My beer buzz fades, replaced by a perfect clarity.

"Yes, I am. We've been together since you were two years old. I married your mommy. And gave you my name. I'm your daddy."

His eyes are deep, and wide open. He wants so badly to believe it. I catch myself biting my own lip.

"So don't say it anymore. Okay?"

"Okay, it's a deal. Never again."

+ + +

On a whim, I lift back the edge of the curtain and open the blinds.

It's daytime outside, a few wispy clouds in the sky like running cream. I start to open the window, for a breath of fresh air, until I remember I don't breathe anymore. It's just as well. The window overlooks the alley, and all I'd get is a noseful of dumpster stink.

I see, at the mouth of the alley, people strolling down the street. Dressed in suits, dressed in rags. It must be warm. Perfect pink skin sticks out from shirt sleeves and the legs of shorts. I see flat stomachs, some twinkling with belly rings. The sun glistens on bare skin, making it golden and soft, like butter. My stomach growls.

Thinking about warm, shiny flesh makes my mouth ache. It's like a hunger, what I remember of hunger. I want that skin against my lips, inside my mouth. There's no way I could eat. I can't even force a breath down my throat. But I still want it.

I close the blinds, and drop the curtain. Outside isn't for me anymore. I belong in my little dark apartment, alone with my thoughts. With my memories.

Falling back on the couch, I grab the television remote. My skin splits in a crescent around my left thumb. That's no surprise. I keep the sewing kit close these days. Hazy ghosts appear on the screen, their voices more buzz than words. Bathed in artificial light, I thread a needle.

+ + +

I haul the last of the shed to the curb. It's just a pile of rotten wood now, waiting for the trash truck to come. Matt hasn't set foot in his castle for years. Sir Matthew Light doesn't save the day anymore. Oak trees aren't hungry giants

now. Fire-breathing dragons have become overgrown hedges again.

Matt spends most of his time saving himself now. I've never seen a more accident-prone kid.

I remember the time he tumbled down the stairs of the back deck. He came limping into the house, wide-eyed and jittering. One side of his body was twisted, and my first thought was: *He's had a stroke*. He just looked at me, like he couldn't even speak. I put him on the floor, and searched him all over for blood. Then I grabbed my car keys. But the emergency room doctor, who looked about the same age as Matt, told me it was just bruising and muscle pain. A little shock. He gave me some painkillers.

I've never known anyone else born with ingrown eyelashes. They get long, curl back, and irritate his eyes. The first time it happened, I didn't know what to think. Some sort of seizure, maybe, that made his right eye flutter like a wounded bird. Every year or two, I have to take him in for laser surgery.

One night as he sat down to dinner, his ears were bright red inside. It was the middle of summer, so it couldn't be from playing outside in the cold. He kept scratching at them, and they smelled faintly sour. So we ended up at the emergency room again. They took a swab, and disappeared to cook the germs in some machine. When they came back, they told me the last thing I expected to hear. That my son had a yeast infection in his ears. The nurse smiled as she handed me the doctor's prescription for some lotion.

It's always something with that kid. More than the usual bumps and scrapes a ten-year-old boy accumulates. Like the time he played soccer without shoes, and managed to miss the ball and kick his toes through a chainlink fence. A half-dozen stitches.

After depositing the last of the shed curbside, I take off my splintery gloves and wipe the sweat from my forehead. It's time for my shower. Matt will be home from school soon. And we have an appointment at the doctor's. This time, it's his stomach.

✦ ✦ ✦

It's hard to walk. The joints in my legs are jelly-soft. I don't know how much longer they'll support me. But I have to go outside. I have to get closer to them.

This is the third time I've struggled down the back stairs to the alley. It may be the last. I hope I can make it back up to my apartment this time.

I can't smell the people walking down the street. My tongue pools like cold soup in the bowl of my mouth. I couldn't taste them. But I want to be near them. A hunger, one that has nothing to do with smell or taste, resonates in my head. Maybe not a hunger; only an appetite. But they draw me, and I feel them, like another sense is rising in me. A new awareness, like a mold spreading in the decay of my body.

It's getting dark, but I don't dare go any further than the alley's mouth. I've seen my reflection, and I'm a horror. Huddled in my shadow, I could reach out and brush one of them. I could grab one, and press him against my tongue. But I'm weak, and barely able to stand. I might not be able to catch one at all. Maybe a child. Like the little girl with milky skin and hair like straw, walking alone. I could fit her entire hand in my mouth. I could close my lips around it. Children disappear all the time. She'd just be one more.

But I won't. Because she's alone. If I decide, some time, to take one for myself, it would have to be a child surrounded by loved ones. Who held a parent's hand, or still wore a paper hat from a birthday party. Whose face would burn in someone's mind long after the milk carton was crushed and thrown away.

I stagger up the alley, toward the back door. Today isn't a day for having. Just for wanting. Just for knowing that I could have what I want, and still leave the child with what she needs. It's the most anyone can hope for.

+ + +

"Oh, blueberry muffin," Matt says.

His eyes are huge. He's so excited, telling me what the orderly brought for breakfast this morning. Like he found the muffin in a foil-wrapped present last Christmas. His last Christmas. Doctor Horner says to expect some random emotion, some disorientation. It's the ammonia, building up in Matt's brain.

It's almost like a mercy. His body manages to confuse him, even as it devours itself.

He smiles, and his gums are a ghostly white. His blood is going other places now. Mostly to his stomach. For almost a week, he didn't use the bathroom. When he finally did, his waste was an oily black, from the blood that should have been somewhere else in him. Warming him, keeping him alive.

"Daddy?"

Matt looks straight at me. Somewhere in the haze of dying, he finds a moment of lucidity. I see it in his eyes.

"Hey. Do you need something?"

"No," he says. "But I have to ask you something."

It's like he knows it's his time. The doctor says it will be within the next twenty-four hours. Matt's liver and kidneys are "on the knife's edge." Fourteen years old, and I hear it in Matt's hollow voice. He needs to put his affairs in order. The affairs of a child.

"Okay." I hope he can't see me clenching my jaw to keep from screaming.

"You won't forget me, will you?"

A cold hand reaches down my throat and steals my breath. The world doesn't seem real somehow, but it feels too real.

"Of course not, son. Never."

"Good."

He's calmer now, resting his head and shutting his eyes. His chest rises and falls beneath the dull white sheet. It seems impossible that it will just stop soon. That his heart will slow, and his life will slip away. In a single moment of time, he'll be gone.

"How could you even dream such a thing?"

"I don't know," he says. "It's just that . . ."

"What?"

"Mom's gone. I don't have any grandparents left. I haven't been at school in the last year or so. I just wonder if anybody will remember me."

"I will," I say.

I can barely get the words out my burning throat. I touch his fingers. So little flesh left on his bones. Plastic tubes taped to his hand. His fingers don't tighten around mine. His eyelids tremble, and I know he's drifting away from me again.

"Blueberry," he says.

+ + +

Coming apart at the seams.

It's something my mother used to say. It was just a cliché for her, but it's my reality.

The threads don't hold anymore. My bloated stomach expands a little more each day, and the skin splits and tears. The staple gun in my toolbox helps, but the flesh parts like water around the metal after a time.

The window is open, and I hear a tangle of voices outside. So much warm skin, so near. The appetite slithers through me, as much in my head as my belly. I don't need to close my eyes anymore to let my imagination loose in the darkness. I

couldn't see when I woke up this morning, and my eyes might be empty black sockets. I could touch my face, to learn, but it's too much of a chore to lift my hands.

I'd love to go outside, and be close to the passing people one more time, but I can't. My limbs are too fragile, my muscles too weak. If I stand, my bones might collapse like a rotten scaffold. My body might wander away, in a melting witch trickle.

Curled on my couch, I don't know what will happen to me. All I know is that I can't die. If I let myself go, there will be no one left to remember Matt. And then he's gone. Really gone. Not even a memory remaining. That's when someone is gone for good. When there's nobody left to remember him.

Make the most of what you have. That's another thing my mother used to say. I can't string words together that would etch themselves in someone's mind. I can't paint so that people would never forget their tears. All I have is my flesh.

The power must be off. I don't hear static crackling on the TV. The refrigerator is quiet in the kitchen. But I listen to the people on the street, and it keeps the darkness away. The darkness waiting to creep in at the edges of my mind. It's icy cold, and has a hunger of its own.

I have the people. I have my appetite. I have my memories. And there is no pain.

The rent is paid for another two months, with the last of the money from selling my house. Our house. When the rent runs out, someone will break down the door and come in. To see what's become of me. To learn the source of the smell. I wonder what they'll find. And what they'll do.

It doesn't matter.

I'll cling to a chip of bone, or a wisp of hair. If that crumbles to dust, I'll keep hold. I won't die. And I won't forget.

THE LITTLE DEATH OF MR. PHILLIPS

J. ROBERT KING

A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully but as a drunken sleep; careless, reckless, and fearless of what's past, present, or to come; insensible of mortality, and desperately mortal.

—*Measure for Measure*, IV. ii. 143–146

Although Mr. Phillips died on the morning of Tuesday, October 6th, he decided to go to work anyway. It wasn't that he was out of sick days; he'd not missed one day during his twenty-three years at the State Farm corporate office on Main Street. It was just that he had a lot of work to do, and he didn't feel that bad.

And he hadn't noticed he was dead.

It happened in the shower that morning, he realized later. As the lukewarm spray billowed out over him, beading on the lime-whitened tile, Mr. Phillips felt an odd, empty pain in his chest, a pain localized just left of his narrow sternum. He gasped a tiny inhalation—smaller than the breath he took that morning when Mr. Williams in the apartment next door had scalded him by flushing the toilet—and brought thin, soft fingers up against a sagging pectoral muscle.

His tongue clicked once, and he shook his head slightly. That second over-easy egg this morning had been one extravagance too many. His face flushed with the last, failing pulses of his heart. Then his skin went mottled and white.

He allowed himself a brief, circumspect moan of pain, his hand wrapping feebly about a fold in the plastic curtain. That's when he must have died. Looking down, he saw that he was fouling the tub. This sort of accident hadn't happened recently, not since that terrible flu in '78, after his father died. Ashamed but now strangely incapable of blushing, Mr. Phillips tried to halt the purgation. He couldn't. Instead he stood, legs braced, hands clinging to the shower spout like some New Yorker on a long commute, and he waited it out.

It was a miracle that he didn't fall, being dead. It was a miracle he could move at all, what with the cessation of synaptic impulse, the slow shut down of mitochondrial energy production, the minute jags of pain he experienced as each cell in

his body silently died. Indeed, if Mr. Phillips had gotten better grades in high school biology, he would have known to bow to fate. Instead, the successful insurance accountant didn't even notice his own death. Like most of the citizens of Normal, Illinois, he was driven on by a powerful, inexorable force.

Ignorant oblivion.

So, Mr. Phillips washed once again and stepped unaffected from the tub onto a waiting towel. He dried off in his routinized fashion: face, hair, left arm, right arm, chest, back, legs. His body felt oddly numb, and he had to steady himself twice against the tiger lily wallpaper.

All the while, his attention focused on the turbid tub. For a moment, he considered calling Mrs. McCreary with the white lie that Mr. Williams' toilet had backed up into his—Mr. Phillips'—tub. After all, the deaf retiree *had* flushed in the middle of Mr. Phillips' shower, despite their agreed-upon timetable. But, seeing the fouled water drain away, Mr. Phillips' better nature prevailed. Wrapping the towel about his waist, Mr. Phillips hunted down the catbox scoop he had bought for the cat he never adopted. Five quick swipes saw the mess cleaned up.

Then Mr. Phillips noticed his feet. They were reddish blue, bloated and smooth like lavender galoshes. He remembered reading a pamphlet from the home office that swollen feet were a symptom of myocardial infarction. "One day off the Shredded Wheat," he murmured disappointedly. He lifted a sausagelike finger to the flat of his wrist and felt for a pulse. He felt nothing: no pulse, no wrist, no finger *on* the wrist. Being honest, though, he never could find his pulse.

The rebel side of Mr. Phillips cried out that he should treat himself to a sick day. Thoughts of *Spencer for Hire* and *Cheers* drifted appealingly into his mind. Quickly the successful insurance accountant reasserted himself. He had too much work to do.

Minutes later, he sat on the bed, fully clothed save for his black wingtips. There was a dramatic disparity between the size of his stockinged feet and the size of his shoes. Lifting one of the heel-worn Weyenbergs, he noted the ragged Dr. Scholl's pad and nodded in self-deprecation. He couldn't blame his feet for rebelling. Still, that's what shoe horns were for.



As it turned out, Mr. Phillips' death didn't affect his work efficiency. His coworkers, between cups of coffee, didn't notice the corpse in their midst. Mr. Phillips finished fifteen claims

and made one phone call to confirm a name spelling. Aside from his death, the morning had been a good one.

The next clue to his decease came after a stroll to Annie's Diner on Monroe. Annie—an oven-shaped Polish woman with a bleached mustache and slightly unlevel eyes—greeted him with the same abusive affection she had directed his way for nineteen years.

"Phi'p's plate," she hollered through the orders window to her forty-year-old son, who arched his lean body over the stove. The irritable cook made a gesture that may well have been obscene but meant nothing to Mr. Phillips as he settled onto his customary stool. Annie reached a flaccid arm up to change the channel on the black-and-white TV that hovered over the breakfast bar. She turned and slapped Mr. Phillips heavily on the arm. "How the hell are you, Norman?"

Norman nodded respectfully and said, "Fine." For the first time in nineteen years, the whack from her fatty hand hadn't stung. He missed the sensation.

"Whoa," cried the woman, fanning her nose. "Your breath stinks."

"Does it?" Mr. Phillips asked meekly, holding a hand over his mouth. He breathed out, realizing he couldn't remember taking a single breath since that morning in the shower. He consciously filled his lungs. "I can't smell anything."

"You're lucky." The woman laughed, turning to wait on another customer.

Mr. Phillips, embarrassed and confused, began to consider the fact that he wasn't breathing. He looked up at the radium-faced clock that rattled above the orders window and decided to see how long he could go without air.

Seven minutes and thirteen seconds later, his meatloaf arrived. Staring down at the limp string beans, Mr. Phillips drew his first breath. He felt he ought to, but smelled nothing. Lifting the utensil pack, he drew out his spork. Its elegant lines looked odd beside his puffy, purplish fingers. He considered his hand, took another breath so that he could sigh, and edged the legumes onto the implement. The beans felt rubbery and tasteless on his lips and tongue—no surprise there. Mr. Phillips lifted another pile of the stuff to his mouth. It didn't even feel hot. The steaming meatloaf and the reconstituted potatoes felt the same.

Mr. Phillips leaned forward and deposited the large mass back onto his segmented plate.

A slug on the shoulder announced Annie's return. "What you doing?"

Looking furtively up toward the woman, Mr. Phillips said, "I think something is wrong."

"You're still paying," Annie barked, slapping the check down in front of him. "And I charged you for the breath mints in advance."

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The rest of the workday passed without incident, except for complaints about his breath. Mr. Phillips tried the breath mints, but they sat, dry and inert, on his tongue. In fact, when a customer called and Mr. Phillips started speaking, the mint on his tongue slid with a minute scratching noise and lodged against his stiffened uvula. A neatly crooked paperclip hooked the blockage and allowed the call to proceed to a tidy conclusion.

That night, remembering his near-trauma at Annie's diner, Mr. Phillips skipped the Swanson Swiss Steak he habitually ate on Tuesdays. He turned on the television and settled numbly in his stuffed chair. Seeing the familiar opening to *Wheel of Fortune*, Mr. Phillips inhaled again in order to sigh contentedly. After a day of surprises, a six o'clock session of the Wheel was always soothing.

The Wheel was like life, so full of puzzles. No, the Wheel was *better* than life: There were solutions and fabulous prizes. Even parting guests left with Turtle Wax or Open Pit. On the Wheel, everyone was kind and bystanders cheered. If only life were like that.

But as Mr. Phillips watched that majestic wheel spin, the disappointments of the day coalesced around him: the chest-pain, the soiled tub, the tight shoes, the dry meatloaf, the cessation of breath and heartbeat. Slowly, in a lurking and unobtrusive way, he realized he was dead.

Mr. Phillips very rarely had emergencies: He'd patiently organized his life so as to prevent them. Even now, he wasn't certain his untimely demise constituted an emergency.

As a bearded dentist from Boulder guessed at the grand prize, Mr. Phillips called the State Farm advisory nurse.

"Hello, this is Mr. Phillips," he said, but was put on hold before he even finished the second word. The woman's curt voice had been replaced almost immediately by a pleasant Barry Manilow song. Mr. Phillips waited.

Someone on the television was talking about vinyl siding and was very convincing.

"State Farm nurse," came a voice like crinkling paper, "may I help you?"

Mr. Phillips tried to clear his throat, but merely wheezed dryly. "This is Mr. Phillips; I called up about ten minutes ago. I think I've died."

"Very funny. Look, mister, we're busy tonight—everybody waits his turn. Now what's your problem?"

"My heart stopped this morning," Mr. Phillips replied, feeling a dull panic swell his gut, "and I haven't breathed all day. But when I do breathe, my breath is terrible."

"What do you mean you haven't breathed?" the woman asked. "You congested?"

"No," Mr. Phillips clarified. "I just don't need to. And my heart's not been beating."

"Look," the woman replied impatiently. "This advice line is for sick people, not dead people."

The phone buzzed a dial tone. Staring at the receiver, Mr. Phillips set it down gently. He stood up, shut the television off, and strode to the window to look outside. It was beautiful tonight, lights glowing in the velvety dark. A street cleaner rumbled past, its brushes stirring up dust.

Medical insurance wouldn't cover death—but he also had life insurance. He could collect the premium. His mind traced back over the policy. Upon his death, \$100,000 would go to Clara, the accounting secretary. She was a bright spot in the workaday world of ledgers and policies. She didn't even know he had named her beneficiary. He couldn't wait to see the look on her face.

Mr. Phillips' thoughts took a darker turn. How could he be dead and still be moving about? Shouldn't he just lie still, like they did on *Hill Street*? Shouldn't he have fallen in the bathtub and lain there under the pelting spray until Mrs. McCreary complained that he was taking all the hot water and making the heater rumble and thump like a man shoveling a grave? Shouldn't he have been taken to the emergency room and shocked with pads and put through that big round machine to find out what had happened?

"Maybe it's my soul," he told himself, a wistful look crossing his stiffened features. Perhaps his soul hadn't left his body. But why?

Memories of his third grade teacher came to mind. With a helmet of black hair, she stood before the class and told them all about the Indians. Indians believed the soul of a dead brave fled through his mouth, and if the mouth stayed closed, the soul couldn't escape. Mr. Phillips' sagging jowls turned grim. Perhaps he'd not opened his mouth wide enough when

he died, and so his soul, afraid of getting snagged, simply stayed.

Mr. Phillips almost made the hasty mistake of opening his mouth there at the window. It wouldn't do to let his body be found crumpled on the floor. Better to be in bed, in a nicely pressed suit.

Setting his lips firmly together, Mr. Phillips headed to his closet. He slid the doors along their scraping metal tracks, drew out his Monday-Wednesday-Friday suit, and laid it on the hide-a-bed. It took some work to get his shoes off; he had to unlace them and pry with the shoehorn. He slipped off his Tuesday-Thursday suit, and dressed himself for the next day. At one point, he almost began to whistle, which would have been catastrophic, leaving a half-naked body. And what a body. His feet and backside were black-purple, his legs were reddish, his belly green, and his face white. It would be like Mr. Williams to be found like that, but not Mr. Phillips.

The struggle with his shoes convinced Mr. Phillips to be found in his stocking feet. Stumping to the mirror, he checked himself over, remembering to zip his fly only at the last. He padded back toward the hide-a-bed, but slowed beside the dining table. Pulling a Post-It pad from the phone stand, Mr. Phillips penned a note, carried it to the bed, and lay down, placing it atop his chest.

This was not a suicide.

He didn't want the claims adjusters denying Clara her due.

He tried to close his eyes but realized he hadn't blinked all day. His eyeballs were dry and leathery, his eyelids like rawhide. Who would care if he were fully dressed if his eyes stared like deviled eggs?

Climbing up, Mr. Phillips drew a glass of water and dribbled it over his staring eyes. His eyelids still wouldn't move. Twenty-five Wesleyan Trojans tumblers later, Mr. Phillips gave up, lying on the hide-a-bed with one eye closed and the other squinting rakishly.

He opened his mouth.

He felt no change. Purposefully filling his lungs with air, Mr. Phillips released a long, forceful breath, an emphatic moan that rocked the couch against the wall. The sound evinced pounding from the other side, and a shout that ended with the preposition "off."

His soul wouldn't leave.

He lay that way, mouth agape, for a long while. Still no change. At last, discouraged, Mr. Phillips got up and trudged to work. If he'd have to wait for his soul to leave, he might as

well finish off those ledgers. In his haste, the immaculate Mr. Phillips forgot to put shoes on his feet. It didn't matter. They looked like patent leather.

+ + +

Next day, the bustle started around 8:15 A.M., and colleagues occasionally poked their heads into Mr. Phillips' office for a quick hello. Bob Leones of marketing even held a ten-minute conversation about a photo shoot, never noticing that Mr. Phillips neither moved nor spoke. Bob finished with, "Thanks for all the ideas, Phil, and don't go working yourself too hard. You gotta stop with these all-nighters. Go home. Take a shower. Get some rest." Turning, just before he passed from the door, Bob reiterated, "Take a shower."

Despite his stiff silence, Mr. Phillips' soul still hadn't escaped. His body now was rigored. He wondered how permanent this would be; he still had eleven invoices staring him in the face. He wished he'd stopped by the bookstore and gotten a book on death. Of course, then he would have gotten rigor mortis there, and the bookseller would have thrown him out. It was funny to think of the skinny shopkeeper hefting his—Mr. Phillips'—rigid body overhead and throwing him through the glass display window. That seemed unlikely; he'd more likely put Mr. Phillips on a dolly and dump him with the stripped books.

Clara happened in, carrying a cup of coffee. She was so beautiful and alive, her shoulder-length hair curled inward about her neck, a smile twinkling on her pear-shaped face. Even through his leathery eyes, she was beautiful. Bending her thick thighs ever so slightly, Clara set the cup down. "You've not been out of your office all morning. I thought you might like this."

Mr. Phillips offered wordless thanks with his wide, staring eyes.

Clara's face was tinged pink, embarrassed for her intrusion. She slipped through the door and shut it.

During the following hours of stiffness, Mr. Phillips developed a new theory: He wasn't dead, but only insane. This cheered him greatly. Insanity posed an attractive middle ground between living—with all its contingent surprises and looming emergencies—and dying—with all its humdrum days. Madness might well be the best mental state. He may have been mad all his life and not realized it until he stopped breathing and his feet turned black.

The cessation of rigor mortis by three o'clock supported

the notion that he wasn't really dead. Flushed with a new vision of himself in a strait jacket, Mr. Phillips rose stiffly from his chair and left his office. He proceeded to Clara's desk.

With what he considered to be a touch of panache, he leaned over her work station and fought the urge to say, "I've always loved you, Clara, and now that I am insane, I cannot be expected to hold my tongue and pine in silence." He had, in fact, rehearsed this speech, but instead asked, "Is Mr. Lance in?"

Charley Lance was the personnel counselor. Some said he himself was insane. Mr. Phillips hoped that Mr. Lance would not only confirm his insanity, but engage in a pleasant communion of unhinged minds, as well.

Without looking up from her humming computer, Clara nodded. She seemed miffed about his earlier silence.

Relishing the stone-hardness of her face, Mr. Phillips almost blurted, "Forgive my silence, but I had thought I was dead, though now I know I am only insane. Are you busy this evening?" Instead, Mr. Phillips took the moral high road and breezed past Clara to the elevator, whose button he pressed. When it stopped and he stepped on, the other workers disembarked. Mr. Phillips was pleased. He didn't want the whole company to know he was going to see the personnel counselor.

Mr. Lance had his office in the second basement, beneath an arterial cluster of pipes and conduits. The small, recently drywalled room had no windows, being thirty feet down, but Mr. Lance had compensated by installing wilderness posters back-lit by florescent lights. In general, Mr. Phillips was pleased to see the florescents; they'd help hide his mottling. Also, the cigarette smoke, which hung like a white, choking curtain just inside the door, would mask his putrid breath. Aside from the back-lit posters, the room was filled with leaning bookcases and stacks of books, including one musty pile of detective pulps from the thirties.

It was one of these that the therapist was reading when Mr. Phillips knocked quietly on the open door. The counselor looked up myopically from the tattered pages, his eyes straining through Coke-bottle glasses and thick smoke. Mr. Lance had a thinning crown of grayish hair, narrow eyes magnified by the glasses, a bony face with a pessimistic mouth, and hands like Don Knotts'.

Mr. Phillips felt an immediate soul-link.

After an uncomfortable pause, Mr. Lance asked in a smoker's voice, "May I help you?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Phillips, taking a tentative, uninvited

step into the room. "I am Mr. Phillips. I've thought for the last two days that I was dead. Indeed, I spent a most unproductive morning in a supposed rigor mortis. At any rate, I need you to assure me that I am only insane and not dead, so that I can make the appropriate adjustments and return to my desk, undiminished in my role as an accountant."

Half way through this effusion, Mr. Phillips extended his clammy, discolored hand in a gesture of friendship. The therapist did not notice, glancing between his book and the cigarette pack he'd been slowly unwrapping. Tipping back the box lid, he slightly compressed the bottom of the package, causing a healthy cluster of cigarettes to splay out. Then, setting the pack down, Mr. Lance snatched out two, lit them, and extended one to Mr. Phillips.

"No, thank you. I would, but I've not been breathing for the last two days."

The therapist blinked, disbelieving—not so much at the claim of breathlessness, but at the refusal of a cigarette—and motioned Mr. Phillips into an orange vinyl seat opposite him.

"You say you are dead?" the man asked pleasantly, sinking back into a creaking chair.

"Yes," Mr. Phillips replied.

"What makes you think that?"

"I had a heart attack in the shower yesterday and fouled the tub, which I rarely do," Mr. Phillips replied with an unaccustomed alacrity. "Since then, I've not had a heartbeat, or breathed, or eaten, and my work—though still on schedule—has lost its one-time luster."

"No heart, no lungs, no stomach, bored at work," the man considered, piling up the evidence. "Those things alone, coupled with the smell, seem to indicate you *are* dead."

Mr. Phillips smiled mildly, his dry lips cracking. "But, I should be less active if I am dead, right? I *am* just thinking I am dead, but not really."

Mr. Lance shook his head in a sudden pique of temper and took a deep drag on both cigarettes. "Why does everyone come into a therapist and tell him what they want him to say? You don't want to hear my opinion; you want me to say you're loony. Well, you're not. You're dead, not insane."

"But how could I be dead and still move around?" Mr. Phillips asked.

"Lots of ways," the therapist assured, tapping the cigarette pack to prepare another one. "Haven't you ever heard of ghosts, vampires, mummies, zombies?"

Mr. Phillips felt chastised for his lack of imagination.

"Perhaps," Mr. Lance continued, "you've been taken over by Satan. Or perhaps your body is experiencing some sort of complex cadaveric spasming, which so simulates your day-to-day activities that we all—you included—have been fooled into thinking you're alive. Or perhaps you're some kind of macabre puppet of the gods.

"The point is—" and here Mr. Lance leaned forward dramatically, lighting a third cigarette "—disability pay is for people unable to work. You obviously are able. Case closed." And, to indicate finality, the therapist snatched up his novel and began reading.

Mr. Phillips stood, suddenly uneasy. "I don't believe you. I can't be dead and still be walking about."

Sighing irritably, Mr. Lance stood and walked around the desk to the client. "Say, 'ah.'"

Mr. Phillips complied.

Wincing and holding his breath, the therapist jabbed his smoldering cigarette quickly into Mr. Phillips' mouth. He drew out a sizzling white object, which was stuck, squirming, to the cigarette's glowing tip. It was a maggot, arching its tiny segmented back as it burned.

Mr. Lance wore a bemused smile, "Give up the Binaca, Mr. Phillips, and switch over to Raid. Also, you'll want to get some Vaseline to keep your skin pliable. If you could start sleeping in a freezer, set at around thirty-five degrees, you'll last longer, too."

Wordlessly, Mr. Phillips turned on his heels and walked from the room. He decided not to stop by Clara's desk. Madness might be sexually attractive, but decay certainly was not.

He left early that day, after checking with his supervisor and logging his time on the sheet. He gave himself credit for only two of the ten nighttime hours he had spent, since eight of those were in rigor.

On the way home, he dutifully stopped at the library to find references that might address his condition. When he explained to one of the library aides that he was dead and wondered what he ought to read, she pointed him toward Jean Paul Sartre and Woody Allen. Mr. Phillips took neither, settling on the handy *Layman's Guide to Forensic Medicine*. The book had a scarred exterior—Mr. Phillips even fancied he saw idle scalpel marks on one corner—but it had plenty of pictures and a chatty, friendly tone. Throughout the book's pages, cartoons ran along the margin, showing a nervous little Tim Conway-figure fleeing from an ominous, black-robed skeleton with a scythe.

That night, as the majestic Wheel spun in its rattling circles, Mr. Phillips read about what would happen to his body next. There was a concise section called "Rot Around the Clock Tonight" that spelled out the stages of decay:

STAGE 1—POST MORTEM LIVIDITY (1-2 HOURS): *Blood pools and coagulates in the lower members of the body, turning them first reddish, and then purple as the blood is depleted of oxygen.*

STAGE 2—RIGOR MORTIS (14-30 HOURS): *Decomposition begins with a temporary period of body stiffness and general inflexibility.*

STAGE 3—MAGGOTS (24 HOURS): *If exposed for any length of time to flies, the body exhibits maggots in the early stages of decomposition.*

STAGE 4—PUTRESCENCE (3-5 DAYS): *Decay grows potently odoriferous in three days, unless heat or bacteria accelerates the process, or cold or lack of bacteria decelerates it.*

STAGE 5—BLOATING AND BLISTERS (1 WEEK): *Gases swell the gastric system, blisters of water and air form on the skin, epidermis is sloughed off, discoloration of livid sections (purple-black) and abdominal sections (green) deepens. Decomposition enters advance stages.*

STAGE 6—TOTAL DECOMPOSITION (5-9 WEEKS): *Under normal, nonwinter condition, flesh will disappear entirely in about two months, though bones may remain for decades or centuries.*

Mr. Phillips skimmed down to the screened box at the bottom of the page:

To remember these remarkable changes, just say to yourself, "Please Reserve My Plastic Body Bag. Thanks." The first letters of the words in this sentence are the first letters of each stage: Post mortem lividity, Rigor mortis, Maggots, Putrescence, Bloating and Blisters, Total decomposition.

Mr. Phillips repeated the sentence until he could remember each stage, his sandpaper tongue rasping over dry teeth. That's when he remembered the maggots, and realized he had

forgotten the Raid. Rummaging through his kitchen cabinets, he found only an old ant trap. He set the device in his mouth for the duration of *Wheel*, but it caught nothing. He tried brushing the maggots out with Crest and an Oral B, but the little worms seemed unaffected by the frothy blue foam. For a while, he directed a blow-drier down his throat, hoping to dry out the creatures. But he had no real success until he splashed some Skin Bracer into his mouth. Opening blackening lips, Mr. Phillips peered into the mirror to watch the creatures die. In the sloshing, greenish pool of aftershave, the white forms writhed in their death throes until, at last, they were still. Mr. Phillips spat them out in a chunky stream and smiled into the mirror.

He would need to take extra hygienic measures in the next five to eight weeks so as not to offend his coworkers. Showers and aftershave would see him through until the flesh had mostly dropped away and only a skeleton was left. Then, he'd wear a baggy overcoat and slacks and a wrap around his skull, like the Invisible Man. He could tell people he had accidentally fallen into a vat of acid. "No," he chided himself. "At that point, I should simply tell them I'm dead."

✦ ✦ ✦

The next day passed without incident, save that Mr. Phillips' coworkers repeatedly closed his office door. After work, he returned the library book, photocopying the pages he needed. In a croaking voice, he sang: "Please reserve my plastic body bag. Thanks." He strolled to the Walgreens on North Main and loaded up with health aids: petroleum jelly, cortisone, mercurochrome, Pepto-Bismol, Gas-X, Band-Aids, Visine, throat spray, cotton balls, gauze, slings, needles, rubber gloves, a dental mirror, and a twenty-four pack of swivel-head cartridge replacements. He even bought some potpourri and two steaming jars—one for his office, and one for his apartment. Armed for a life of decomposition, Mr. Phillips strode back home, whistling his new song.

The only disappointment that day was discovering that his left pinky finger had dropped off somewhere between the drugstore and home.

✦ ✦ ✦

Next day, Clara had to leave early because of vomiting and a hacking cough. Mr. Phillips was worried about her. He'd talked to her for some fifteen minutes before she left—well, whispered more than talked, since his vocal chords were starting to atrophy.

When he went to Clara's apartment that night, she pretended not to be in, though he saw the lights go out after he knocked. He left the roses on the stoop.

+ + +

On the following morning, the bloating and blisters stage was moving along ahead of schedule despite—or perhaps because of—the Pepto-Bismol he had forced down his throat with a gravy injector.

Before heading out the door, he got an angry phone call from Mrs. McCreary saying that Mr. Williams had complained about the stench and what was he keeping in that apartment anyway—a dead body? Mr. Phillips had to smile and tried to explain his predicament. The landlady might have been impressed, but his voice had given out entirely.

At work, a memo mysteriously appeared over lunch, this one emphatic about cleanliness. Mr. Phillips knew this memo had been addressed to him, exclusively. It was unfair attention, given his condition. In an uncommon fit of verve, Mr. Phillips stalked into the accounting supervisor's office and asked to borrow a pen and paper. The supervisor rudely excused himself, hand over his mouth. Stultified, Mr. Phillips returned to his office, noting with some embarrassment that he had left a thumb on the supervisor's desk.

This humiliation, coupled with uncontrollable and continuous belches and flatulence, caused Mr. Phillips considerable distraction in finishing his work.

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Next morning, before he was even out of the shower, a loud crash came at the door. Turning off the water, Mr. Phillips listened fearfully as two sets of footsteps—a light and agile pair, and a shuffling set—moved through his apartment.

"Mr. Phillips!" came one of the voices, rattling in his fragile eardrums. "Sheriff's office, Mr. Phillips. We have a warrant to search the place."

Gripping the plastic curtain for the second time that week, Mr. Phillips tried to call out that he would provide complete cooperation, but his voice wouldn't work. He decided against stepping out of the shower and drying off, figuring he could merely wait for the search to finish. Inhaling and exhaling slightly, just for nostalgia's sake, the accountant listened as drawers were slid open, cabinets rummaged through, the hide-a-bed opened and closed, windows and doors tried. He wondered what they could possibly be looking for.

Then, someone came into the bathroom and shouted back

to his colleague: "Smell's really strong in here. And there's a lot of moisture in the air." Footsteps approached the curtain, and a hand latched onto the other side. Mr. Phillips' wide, unblinking eyes opened another millimeter in shock.

The man yanked back the curtain, his blue and black uniform blotching in Mr. Phillips' dry eyes. "Jesus," he choked out, stumbling backward and falling to his backside next to the sink. He turned, half-crawling, half-scuttling out of the room, shouting all the way to his partner, "I found the body. It's so stiff it's standing up in the shower."

Mr. Phillips stepped out of the tub onto the waiting towel and began drying his maggoty face and clumped, thinning hair. By the time the two officers rushed into the bathroom, Mr. Phillips had fastened his towel a bit high to cover his green, bloated stomach and shriveled, blackened scrotum.

The other officer saw the man moving about and whacked his partner on the back of the head, "It's the old man, you idiot." Turning to Mr. Phillips, he nodded. "Sorry we disturbed you." He dragged a crumpled warrant from his jacket, flashed it once in front of Mr. Phillips, and backed out of the bathroom.

Mr. Phillips tried a final time to speak, to tell them he hadn't minded and that they were simply doing their jobs. All that emerged was a loud, prolonged fart.

That day was full of surprises. When Mr. Phillips returned from his lunchtime walk, he found a small pink note sitting on his chair, paperclipped to an envelop. He held the note and trembled, not even able to read it with his dimpling eyes. The paper appeared so clean and smooth in his boil-covered, three-fingered hand.

Twenty-three years without missing a single day, not even after he had died. . . . Mr. Phillips' mind reeled. This was an emergency, one from which he might never recover.

He left the State Farm office on Main Street, a cardboard box under his arm. Only now did Mr. Phillips allow himself the weary, shambling gait of a zombie. As he shuffled back to his apartment, he mentally reviewed his own insurance policies. Who could argue that his death had not become a disabling condition?

The source of rent money became moot when Mr. Phillips reached his apartment door. Another slip hung there, this one white. Its top contained the large letters *E-V-I-C-T-I-O-N*, which explained the padlock attached to his door.

He stood there a long while.

This was, in truth, no great tragedy. He didn't need an apartment. He didn't breathe or eat, sleep or feel pain, did not

need companionship, could not benefit from showers. . . . The loss of job and home in the same day was rather liberating.

The lack of a television would be a bother, but he could always find one somewhere to watch.

Mr. Phillips wandered the streets. On occasion, he passed other homeless folk. Some looked in worse health than he, and Mr. Phillips wondered idly if they might be dead as well. All he had to think about was the rhythm of his swollen feet and the next four to six weeks of total decomposition.

He happened on an overflowing Salvation Army bin and rooted around until he found a suitably concealing cloak, a second pair of pants, a scarf to cover his face, a platinum-blond wig, and some Garfield sunglasses. He stowed these all in a plastic sack he found blowing across the street and kept them in reserve for later stages. He wouldn't want to foul them now with his blisters and maggots.

In time, he wound up outside Clara's door. Reaching out to knock, Mr. Phillips pulled up short. If she peered out, she would be sickened by his appearance. The wig and glasses would only make it worse. Producing a scrap of paper and a pen from the breast pocket of his shirt, Mr. Phillips scrawled a brief note:

Dear Clara:

Please forgive my intrusion, but I've run into some misfortune. I'd like to talk this evening, if you are free. I'll knock and leave this note, and then wait around the corner of the hall for ten minutes. Thank you for your kindness.

—Norman

Folding the sheet once, he slid it partially under the door and knocked. Without waiting for a response, he shuffled down the hall. He hoped he would hear the whisper of paper sliding beneath the door, the rattle of the locks, and a cheerful voice cry, "Oh, poor Mr. Phillips! Please, come inside!" Rounding the corner, he stood in waiting stance, anxious to hear those sounds.

Two hours later he left. She had taken the note, but she never called out for him.

✦ ✦ ✦

That was a bad night. Mr. Phillips spent his time in Miller Park, wandering the abandoned playgrounds, walking over the bridges that spanned the manmade waterways. He approached the park zoo and peered in at the lion enclosure.

If he could not remove his soul from his body, perhaps he could remove his body from his soul. Mr. Phillips began to climb the bars, but then stopped. What if the lion ate only a single leg before getting full, and left the rest for an embarrassing discovery in the morning?

Mr. Phillips climbed down, went to a park bench, and sat to think. What other options lay open to him? A jet engine? A blast furnace? Just to get near them, he would need a peerless disguise. The platinum-blond wig and Garfield glasses seemed inadequate.

Dreams of disintegration vanished from Mr. Phillips' liquefying eyes, and he noticed that the sun was setting. He hadn't realized it had risen until he remembered ghostly and vaguely pedestrian forms moving among his sad thoughts. He must have sat there for a full day—and in the middle of the bench, he added in mild rebuke. Stiff, he slid to the end and sat, through that sunset and the next.

That's when the angels came.

They weren't angels, exactly, though Mr. Phillips' dimpled eyes and idle mind cast them in the role. Their voices on his papery eardrums seemed to speak in angelic tongues.

"Stilleer," said the lead one. "Ain'tmoovdin threedays."

"Sgottabby dead," said a second, "lye kai toljew. Jestaka wiff."

"Corsees dead. Cummawn," said the third, with a gurgling laugh. "Lessjesdew it. Thisselby fun."

Mr. Phillips wished he were Catholic so that he would know more about angels.

They began to anoint him. They lifted a red and yellow cube that flashed metallically, and water gushed over Mr. Phillips' head. It dowsed his clothes. He saw a few maggots fall from his face and writhe fitfully in his lap, and he thought of "the lake of fire where the worm does not die."

The angels flung a tongue of flame on his lap. An instant later, a heavenly inferno engulfed him. In the angry, whooshing glare, Mr. Phillips finally saw the faces of the three angels—young, handsome, Latino. . . . Now he really wished he were Catholic. They seemed to be laughing or singing. Mr. Phillips never had the chance to decide because, next moment, his eyes melted and his eardrums ruptured. A kind of grayness, like television static, engulfed him.

He waited for his body to burn away, waited for his trapped soul to fly free. The former occurred soon enough. The latter did not. After hours of burning, Mr. Phillips experienced no release. He couldn't see or feel anything, hear or

smell or taste. His body was gone, but he remained. This was a disappointment.

As a child, Norman had once pulled the legs off a daddy longlegs. Its round body landed on the sidewalk, a limbless lump. Anyone might've mistaken it for a clump of dirt, and that's what it had become, except that it was alive. Now Mr. Phillips knew how the daddy longlegs felt. He was a living pebble.

Oh, well. This was not an emergency. He needed merely to adjust to his new, empty lifestyle. It wouldn't be so different, sensing nothing and being utterly alone.

Still, he knew he'd miss the Wheel.

THE HYPHENATED SPIRIT

SCOT NOEL

Cursed be the sickly forms that err from honest Nature's rule!

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall"

Elizabeth embraced the early morning as she might a secret lover. It was a time of quiet, with curtains drawn against the coming of the light. The air was chill and clean. In these moments she would lose herself in the verses of Clare and Browning, or commit Tennyson to memory in whispers too soft for her sleeping sister to hear. For an hour or more there would be peace. No household to run. No constant fussing to keep her dear sister civilized. As Cordelia's *illness* intensified, the strain between them had grown to the breaking point. To give in to Cordelia one more time, Elizabeth knew, might prove fatal to them both.

With delicate fingers, Elizabeth turned a page. Besides her in the bed, Cordelia shifted uneasily, snoring, and then breaking wind. The chill air did little to dampen the stench. Elizabeth kept to her reading, having endured far worse.

Another movement and Elizabeth lowered the flame on the bedside lamp. Sleep had never come easily to the twins, and the import of the coming day had done them no favors, keeping them arguing well into the night. At last Cordelia had succumbed to exhaustion, while Elizabeth read aloud from Wordsworth's "Apology."

After a moment's consideration, she lowered the flame still further. The pleated curtain hanging between them might too easily permit through a shimmer of light, awakening Cordelia. The curtain should have been replaced with darker cloth, Elizabeth knew, but it and the four-poster bed on which it hung had been with them since childhood. Edged in Brussels lace, the separator lay gently across the band of flesh that conjoined Elizabeth to her sister.

In the fading light, Elizabeth continued to read from Tennyson. After a time she realized the marks on the page meant nothing, her spirit having grown too heavy to decipher them. She closed the musty volume.

Elizabeth lay back, putting aside her book. Frightened of the coming day, she drew her quilt close against the cold. A

tear began to form. She wished that she could pass now. Leave flesh, breath, and dreams behind. Slip away without fear. It was so hard, with Father gone and Mother having passed soon after. Three years past. For three years, everything had rested on Elizabeth's shoulders: the house, the servants downstairs, the caring for Cordelia. It weighed her down. It drowned her in a darkness she had never imagined.

Focusing her gaze on the lace canopy above, Elizabeth felt herself pulled toward the beauty and oblivion that had always fluttered like a heart within her.

A thump. Perhaps a servant stumbling in the dark. There followed a crash of glassware and a curse. It all but stopped Elizabeth's heart, but, more to the point, stirred Cordelia, bringing a quick tug to the ligament between them. There followed a rattling growl from the twin beyond the curtain. Elizabeth drew back, feeling the bed shake with the power of a nightmare aroused. The curtain swirled in parting, lost itself in shadow, torn aside by arms flailing and groping as much toward consciousness as toward the warm flesh and soft yellow light on Elizabeth's side of the bed.

"Sister, stop!" Elizabeth cried. She reached to the bedside, her hand groping for something unseen. A vicious tug to the ligament lifted her bodily away. Her hands flew to her defense as she repeated Cordelia's name over and over.

Coming at Elizabeth, out of the dark, loomed a beast within a cage, the head and shoulders of her wild twin having been secured within hoops and rods of iron. Behind this barrier, Cordelia's eyes held the rage of dying men. Their dark gaze was lost in pools of blood.

In the moment of awakening, Cordelia lost track of all precaution, forgetting the cage that enclosed her head and shoulders, forgetting everything. She grasped with darkened flesh at the powder-white shoulders of her twin. Lips pulled back, revealing teeth already broken and blunted by a taste for bone, for the softness within. Yet recognition, too, began to rise. Sluggishly, it registered on Cordelia's muddled countenance.

As the startling rumpus presented by her conjoined twin eased, Elizabeth once again reached to the side of the bed. There her fingers wrapped about the hilt of their father's silver-knobbed walking stick. With a will, she brought it crashing against Cordelia's imprisoned head.

The chill of Cordelia's fingers withdrew, lingering no more than a child's hand on a hot loaf. Next they went to the bird-cage, to the hoops and threads of iron that had been hammered into a special aviary, an enclosure capturing within Cordelia's

lust for flesh, a hunger they both knew she could not control upon awakening. Elizabeth banged against the cage again.

"Sister, sweet Sister!" the gray twin cried. "Stop it. I'm . . . awake now."

"It was a servant," Elizabeth explained, "making a noise. They shall learn the better of it on the morrow. They should not have disturbed you."

Seeing the pages of Tennyson thrown open across the bed, Cordelia groaned.

"Dear Sister, might you please put out the light?" Cordelia asked. "Or is it time to begin?"

"You've had too little rest."

"I feel fine."

"I'm afraid I know best, Cordelia. Now, if you should calm yourself, I promise to read you to sleep once again."

Cordelia growled. She grasped the thick book with unfeeling hands, tearing it away from Elizabeth. She recognized the pages, so well did she hate them. Leaves were brushed aside until the one she sought flickered in the light, its voice all too familiar. Elizabeth's voice.

She read: "'Thou art mated with a clown, and the grossness of his nature will have weight to drag thee down.'" Closing the book with a dusty wallop, the gray twin tossed the volume across her shoulder, where it bumped and thumped into darkness.

"Wake me when it is time," said Cordelia, reclining with her arms wrapped tightly, defiantly, about her bosom. Finding the edge of the separator, she pulled the curtain closed.

Encircling the ligament of flesh between them with the fingers of one hand, Elizabeth stroked gently at the navel they shared. It had always before calmed Cordelia's capricious nerves. "Sleep, dear Sister. Sleep."

When certain her twin had passed into Morpheus' realm, Elizabeth snuffled and closed her eyes. The need to escape was gone. Oblivion no longer beckoned. As her pillow grew wet with tears, she knew she could never leave Cordelia on her own, no matter what they had agreed.



The belts and buckles securing the birdcage over Cordelia's head were easily disentangled. Once awake, she remained in possession of significant faculties and seemed eager to hurry Elizabeth along. The new day brought its usual rituals, things as familiar as the chill of the floor against their feet, the cool waters of the washbowl, selecting the day's

wardrobe from the armoire, then carefully donning one of the dresses made especially for them by their mother.

Cordelia fumbled with her corset, and her sister came to the rescue. Elizabeth's fingers seemed everywhere, lighting about Cordelia like flies; Elizabeth's small talk an unending buzz.

"I can do it myself," Cordelia insisted, though looking helplessly at her own, numb hands.

"Do you remember how much fun we used to have?" Elizabeth asked. To her, the dark interior of the armoire before them loomed like a memory. "Do you remember hiding inside? We scared Mother so, popping out of it like monsters!"

"Keep the armoire," Cordelia fussed. "I want pounds."

"That's not what I meant," Elizabeth said indignantly. "It was the memory."

"It was dark and cold. I thought Mother would never come, that we were trapped forever."

"Nonsense, dear. It's a wonderful memory." Elizabeth drew them toward the mirror.

In form, each woman boasted her own seductive proportions. Two arms, two legs, a shapely bosom and firm buttocks, these were marks of fitness in any age, marred at first glance by a single imperfection: the strong hyphen of flesh joining them side to side.

After two and a half decades of life, the motions of the twins approached in all things the grace of a courtly dance. As children, Elizabeth and Cordelia had learned to swim in energetic harmony, an activity that served to stretch the ligament between them from five inches to a flexible seven and half.

"Look at me," Cordelia said, scowling into the silvered pane. "I'll go where no one can find me. I'll wear dark sheets, like some damned colored wog."

More than the band of flesh bridging their separateness marred the image now. Something of the soil had overtaken Cordelia, and the graying flesh lent an unholy aspect to her reflection.

"Even if today is successful," Elizabeth said, her voice leaving no doubt that she still stood firmly against the procedure, "you are welcome here. Always."

"No, not here."

When Cordelia tried to adjust a decorative chatelaine at her belt, Elizabeth slapped away the darkened fingers and fussed with careful ministrations that went from hemline to décolleté.

"Stop it," Cordelia said unsuccessfully, shutting her eyes

tight against the storm of powder Elizabeth applied to her cheeks, brow, and neckline. "What will I do without you, Sister?" The words couched more than a hint of sarcasm.

"We need to finish, Sister. Breakfast is waiting."

"I'm not hungry."

"You don't know what you're saying. We need our strength today." Elizabeth continued to powder Cordelia's neckline with studied proficiency, but her thoughts seemed to have turned elsewhere. At last she spoke, suddenly, answering a question Cordelia had not asked.

"They have died," Elizabeth said. She hesitated to broach the news. "There was a headline."

"Who? Ah, your correspondents? And you didn't tell me?" Cordelia said, feigning interest.

"It was late. You had fallen asleep, at last."

"It wasn't—" Cordelia stiffened. "It wasn't because of . . . a procedure?"

"No. Never mind. You have no interest."

Nothing more was said before breakfast. Sitting side by side, Elizabeth spooned porridge and Cordelia stared at a calf's liver waiting like a stain before her. With one gray finger she poked at it, drawing blood out across the milky china of her plate. A half-drained flagon of Poryter stood close by.

About them, the servants waited like nervous silhouettes, hurrying from the shadows only when called. They had already been reprimanded for the earlier commotion and watched Elizabeth with care. She seemed restless and discontent, even to Cordelia.

On the table lay a paper, a reminder of fate. It spoke of a destiny the sisters had shared for a while, shared with others across the Atlantic, in the United States.

The headlines told of the death of freaks. They spoke of Siamese twins separated from their dual life, of Chang and Eng Bunker, who had died on a cold night in North Carolina, spoiling Elizabeth's hope that 1874 might bring good news to both sets of unusual twins. Chang, like Cordelia, had not been feeling well.

"You're not eating," Elizabeth scolded.

"I told you. I am not hungry." Then, with voice lowered, a mumbled "not for this" followed, like the whisper of a petulant child. She took a long drink of the Poryter.

"I can have them bring you a fresh chicken."

"So they're dead," Cordelia interrupted, pointing to the paper. "Tell me."

"Well," Elizabeth began, pausing to compose herself. She

pushed her porridge aside and replaced it with the paper. "You know the one named Chang drank too much. It's something I've warned you about. Drink is not—"

Cordelia drained her dark brew in a single swallow and called, "More!"

"As you wish, dear," Elizabeth said. Her words were tight and clipped. "As it says here—" she pointed with authority to a paragraph in mid-column "—drink so weakened Chang that he was injured by a spill from their carriage. A stroke soon followed."

Elizabeth's eyes roamed to the top of the page. "The King of Siam condemned them to death when they were born, you understand. Their own people considered them monsters. It says the executioners never came. One of our countrymen found them and bought them. Can you imagine, being treated as property and taken on tours in England and America?"

"Aren't they wogs?"

"No. Well, heathens anyway," Elizabeth admitted. "Still, our fortune could not have been greater, Sister. What would we have done without Mother?"

"Without Mother? Without money, that is. Even so, I didn't realize you corresponded with chattel, dear Sister."

"That was long ago," Elizabeth said defensively, not taking as much offense as Cordelia might have hoped. "I mean, they own estates now, Cordelia, and slaves. Owned, I mean. The one called Chang died first, of a blood clot, it says. His brother Eng awoke and cried out in the night 'Then I am going!' It was Eng who answered my missives. They were so famous." With a silk kerchief, she dabbed at the corner of her eyes.

"At least they had lives," Cordelia said. "Real lives."

"And families. Children. Can you imagine, Sister?"

Cordelia sneered. "Yes, Sister, I can imagine."

"Not that!" Elizabeth blushed, flustered. "Wives and children—"

A shadow crossed the table, interrupting Elizabeth. It was a lithe and graceful dimming of the light. The cat had risen from the floor with a silent leap, a black feline drawn on by the smell of liver, or attracted by the fresh milk Elizabeth so prized for her porridge. It was an unthinkable offense, and it froze Elizabeth. She stared wordlessly at the moggy's approach.

"It's a tom," Cordelia cooed. She edged the liver toward the slowing shadow. "Unravel your nerves, Elizabeth. You'll frighten the dear. Another stumble of our servants, no doubt. Perhaps the noisemaker from this morning."

"Shoo it! For God's sake, Cordelia." Elizabeth threw up her hands. "Mrs. Mallet!" She called for the captain of her errant downstairs crew. "Remove this . . . thing!"

Cordelia continued to caress the cat, her stroke becoming more aggressive as Elizabeth's disquiet grew. Her sister's voice had taken on a tenor somewhere between frenzy and panic as she berated the servants and repeated her cries for Mrs. Mallet.

The tom, at first startled, held its ground, tearing away a bite of the prized liver. Though Elizabeth continued to rant, Cordelia ignored the high-pitched immediacy of her twin, or tried to. It was soon joined by another excited voice.

"Blessed Virgin!" Mrs. Mallet arrived at the table, her fat hands going immediately for the tom. "I've got the moggy."

But Cordelia turned on the old maid. With a snap of rotting teeth and a growl, she released something of the tension she had long held inside. Too long. Her grip on the cat tightened, causing Mrs. Mallet to retreat, but not to cease her deluge of excuses and panicked assurances.

"It must have come through the coal cellar!"

"On my mother's table!"

"It shan't happen again, Madam!"

But that was not the end of it. As the cat ran its rough tongue across bloodied plate and cold meat, the exchange between Elizabeth and Mrs. Mallet grew into a house-ringing din, and somewhere behind them, others had joined in, voices male and female adding coal to a fire they hoped to extinguish.

It was more than Cordelia could stand, and as had been true of every moment, waking and otherwise, there was no escape, no reprieve from the shackle of flesh that bound her to the dominant Elizabeth.

In Cordelia's protective grasp, the beast purred. It leaned into her stony whisper and enjoyed her leaden nails against its skin.

"Stop playing with it! Dirty, black thing on Mother's table!"

Cordelia was hunched now, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Her arms enfolded the cat in a grip so tight, the animal clawed and hissed for release. The voices pounded on her. Elizabeth's hands, Mrs. Mallet's hands, other hands: They pulled and touched. Their voices rang in her ears.

All at once Cordelia pressed the cat's jaw firmly against her plate, scrabbling with a free hand toward the silver before her.

A new voice cried out from the shadowed corner of the room. It hurried forth as Cordelia raised up her bread knife. She swung the knob of its silver handle hard against the tom's skull. The bone cracked, and Cordelia split the skull of the

still-wriggling beast as if it were a crab shell, pulling forth fingers coated in blood and brain. As the tom shook out its last, convulsive breath, Cordelia stuffed the sweet stink of her fingers against her tongue.

The melee in the room was silenced. No one breathed.

Cordelia giggled with delight.

"How could you?" Asked a bony girl, her voice soft as a prayer. The bloody disposition of her familiar was so shocking, it had yet to bring a tear.

"Never let your voice be heard!" Elizabeth said sternly. She did not bother to look at the housemaid. "Never talk to your mistress unless it is to deliver a message or to ask a necessary question."

As Elizabeth recited the *Servant's Behavior Book* to the startled girl, the general maid and the footman, having rushed in, caught at the young woman, pulling her away while offering words of comfort.

For her part, Cordelia continued to savor the contents of the cat's skull.

"Mrs. Mallet! That is the cousin you . . . recommended?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, Madam." The old voice remained proper, even stern. "She meant no harm. The cat—"

"Inexcusable," Elizabeth interrupted. "I want her out of this house, this afternoon. And you with her."

"Madam? You don't mean . . ." At first, the words gave way beneath the maid, as might the ice on a thawing lake. Mrs. Mallet soon recovered and went on the attack. "You would dismiss me over this monster's appetites?"

Cordelia giggled and swallowed brains.

"Miss Elizabeth, your mother set me to keep this house before you were born."

"You are to be fined five pounds and dismissed."

"Sister," Cordelia finally interjected, "You can't—"

"This is none of your affair! She is dismissed." Elizabeth stared straight ahead, acknowledging no presence or authority beyond her own. Cordelia turned a growling, bloody smile on her.

"You cannot do this," Mrs. Mallet insisted. The footmen gathered close, protective of her. "It won't be stood for. I could go to the authorities. The things you have brought into this house. She is a demon!" The men grumbled their agreement.

"Out, all of you!" Elizabeth shouted. "Leave us!"

There were footsteps and whispers, but the room cleared, and the doors leading to it were shut. When Elizabeth's breath

calmed, she continued. "How could they bring that *thing* into this house? And you, dear Sister, have your appetites no limits?" She reached over to dab the goo from Cordelia's lips with a napkin. Though Cordelia brushed it away, Elizabeth persisted.

"I hear they sell these in the market across the channel." Cordelia laughed. "Though not so fresh, I imagine." Then she returned to crunching with determined effort on a lifeless paw.



The afternoon was spent in preparation for the journey into town. With pen and ink, Elizabeth made final adjustments to the distribution of her property, willing everything to Cordelia. The thought that she might survive the day and her sister perish never occurred to her.

Cordelia chafed at the shuffling of papers, at Elizabeth's fussing over every minor preparation. At one point they made it as far as the carriage, only to have the coach sent back for repair to a minor blemish, and to have the lead team changed.

"We would never have made good time without Percival on the right," Elizabeth said.

"It doesn't matter," Cordelia returned. "They are horses. They will do."

"No, dear, they will not."

"You are impossible! If we are not to leave now, I want a drink, dear Sister."

Back in the parlor, Elizabeth took tea and waited. Cordelia tried to feel the heat of cognac in her numbed throat. When Elizabeth spoke, it seemed of random, unimportant things.

The settee upon which they sat had once been the property of an Afghan prince. It was presented to their father when he served abroad. The piano had been a gift from a friend in Parliament. Elizabeth seemed lost in reverie, recounting the history of every chair and cushion.

"I know why you're doing this," Cordelia said. "It won't work. I am leaving. You promised."

"Stop fussing." Elizabeth said. Putting down her tea, she seemed to conjure a small case out of nowhere, and with its contents began to powder Cordelia's nose. "My bird with the shining head, my own dove with the tender eye."

"Stop it! No more damned poetry. Look at me! Look at me!" Grasping Elizabeth's head between her hands, Cordelia drew them close. Bloodshot eyes met bouncing white. "I am a thing. Ugly to the bone. You cannot follow me. Let me go."

"Nonsense, dear. At first, I was frightened, I admit. But it seems no worse. The doctor will find—"

"I want this cut!" Cordelia grabbed the deep band of flesh between them and squeezed. Under the pressure, Elizabeth all but swooned. "You have to let me go. I want my own life. A little gold, a few pounds. Or none. I don't care, just—I don't care if I'm a monster."

"I've let you do things," Elizabeth snapped back, recovering. Her voice was reproachful. "Let you have your way. But I promised Mother I would take care of you."

"Yes, you've cared. Cared so very much. . . ." Cordelia grinned with blackened teeth. "You've sent me where you fear to go, Elizabeth. I've done things. Done things so that you could be there in your white gloves. Beside me. Watching."

"Stop this nonsense. We shall see the doctor. We will talk to him."

"We will do more than talk. All my life. You have been there all my life. I cannot shit without you."

"Watch what you say in my house!"

"Your house? When did it become your house?" Cordelia grimaced at her empty glass, pulled them toward an ornately carved walnut cupboard. Elizabeth resisted.

"You've had enough to drink."

"Always, you know what I should and should not have," said Cordelia. "When we were children, I ate dirt for you. Remember? Tasted the ground to satisfy you!"

"Balderdash. I . . . I would ask at dinner if the veal had been heavily salted."

"I tasted your food for you!"

"I never forced—"

"You hoped. You encouraged. You took pleasure in watching me drink, in watching me wallow with men and fornicate!"

Cordelia felt no sting from the blow her sister delivered. The slap rang out across the room. It did not stop the gray twin.

"When Croton took me, you were there, on the other side of the curtain."

"A valet. He was no good for you. I dismissed him the next day."

"He wasn't to your taste then? Like the dirt you made me eat?"

"You are one over. Sozzled. Talking nonsense."

"I was drunk when you saw him master me that night. On our own bed! Were you too scared to have him enter you, too? You might have felt something, mightn't you? How did it feel to mimic my position, there on your knees, watching our

shadows move through the curtain? Did anything come across this band that joins us?"

"No," Elizabeth said angrily. "As you admit, I've let you make bad decisions."

"And the priest you engaged to speak with Mother's ghost, the Vodoun? Was that my choice?"

"You missed her. You cried at night—every night."

"You put the thing into my head. Built it up. You had me speak with the wogs, arrange for this headman to come. But you! Couldn't even look at them, could you? There, hiding behind me, pinching me when I offered too much."

"You can't be taken advantage of by coloreds. What would they do with the money anyway?"

"You provoked the priest, Elizabeth. I can still see him. Bald, black head. The smoke dripping from his mouth. That awful cigar."

The tenor of the combat rose and was sustained for many minutes, easing only when the coarse voice of the coachman was heard above the din.

"Madams, your carriage awaits."

As Cordelia turned to go, Elizabeth felt a tug that could not be denied.



The journey to Doctor Baillie proved uneventful. Despite the winter air, they found the roads clear and traffic light. Patches of snow glittered beneath coal dust, and the world itself seemed to shimmer, caught in a glisten of twilight blue. Soon a row of elaborate houses appeared to their left as they turned down Highclere Street. Italianate giants stood side by side with mansions of Tudor design. On the streets there were few to wonder at the richly appointed rig, and even those who stared found little to see. An oversized parasol of pleated chiffon hid the twins above the shoulders, and their great hoop skirts and a single fur shawl concealed the rest. So coordinated were they in their movements that a small distance made them appear to any passerby as a single woman.

"It's a bit cold," said the driver as the twins turned toward the doors of Doctor Baillie's residence. "Madam, I mean. Might I take a moment inside?" He cupped his cold hands, one into the other, and blew steam through his fists.

"Stay with the coach," Elizabeth said bluntly. "If we are to stay the night, you will be informed."

Inside, the doctor himself took their coat. By long tradition, no one else was on duty, for the twins held a special place in

Baillie's practice. The bearded old Scot smiled and seemed genuinely pleased to see them. There was small talk. Tea and biscuits graced old silver. The examination room seemed more library than place of medicine. A claymore and tartan hung upon one wall, and Baillie himself, dressed in a rough brown suit, smelled more of tobacco than antiseptic.

"I miss your father," the doctor said. "The holidays are not the same without him. Your mother, too, of course. I wish you had come to the house as I asked."

"My apologies, Doctor," Elizabeth said sternly, "but could we proceed. With the examination, I mean."

"I brought you into this world, young lady," Baillie returned. He said nothing more, but carefully adjusted his lights and a handful of mirrors, leading Elizabeth and Cordelia to be seated on a bench. With studied patience he helped the twins maintain their modesty, even while probing where he must, using hand and eye. The hyphen of flesh between them he examined more closely, pulling out the stitches of the cloth enclosing it, laying it bare.

Here gray skin melted into healthy tissue. Pink flesh disappeared beneath calloused veins. In the battlefield between the two sisters, there was no apparent winner.

"Remarkable," Baillie commented, mostly to himself. "At first the progression was swift. Now the factor appears blocked. I had always assumed you shared blood, but now this seems uncertain. Elizabeth, have you felt anything?"

"No," Elizabeth answered. "I'm well, I assure you."

"It's not that," Cordelia said, breaking the silence she had maintained since entering the house. "This is no disease. It's a Vodoun curse. Doctor Baillie, you promised to separate us!"

"If Elizabeth's life were threatened, or yours. Whatever this is—" he touched the leaden flesh where it joined to Cordelia "—it seems arrested. Does your sister still crave flesh?"

"I'm here," Cordelia growled. "You don't always have to address her, as if I'm a child or incapable of answering."

Doctor Baillie nodded, conceding the point. After a moment, he pulled away, his expression pensive. He moved into shadow and, extracting a pipe from his suit pocket, lit it. "I have done research. This Vodoun-non, or high priest, he claimed to come from Africa, from Abeokuta to be precise? That would seem reasonable. They are an ancient people. Monstrous. It was very bad for you to have fallen in with one."

"Elizabeth refused him water," Cordelia said accusingly. "He was dancing and shouting, building up power. After a

time he looked right at us. I couldn't tell what he was saying; I was so scared. Then he made the motions with his hands, and I knew he wanted water. Elizabeth could not have a colored mouth touch our crystal."

"A disgusting mistake," said Elizabeth, shaking her head. "I should not have indulged Cordelia so."

"The demon coughed out words, filled the air with them like smoke." Cordelia looked off into the room, her eyes losing their focus. "He pulled something from his pocket, slashed it—" She moved an uncertain hand to her throat, left it trembling. "Here."

"A bone," Elizabeth added. "Or some of it was bone. A finger I think."

"I see. Water, you say." The doctor puffed mightily and withdrew again into shadow. When he reappeared, a book lay open between his hands. "Water is at the very heart of hoo doo, or *vaudaux*, as the French say it. You gave him a powerful insult, Elizabeth."

"Why should I care what a colored thinks?"

"Why, indeed," said Doctor Baillie. "You must understand, I'm not certain what has befallen the two of you. Not at all. In cases—in the literature—this affliction takes on a character altogether different."

"This beast out of the African darkness, he hasn't enslaved you. In fact, it appears he has fled the scene altogether. You have your own wills. You have your own thoughts. Cordelia has not become the always-ravaging animal these pages describe. If it is a curse this Vodoun-non has delivered upon you, it is one of his own devising."

"Do you think it is a curse, Doctor?" Elizabeth asked.

"I think medicine is where our faith must lie for now. This scratch." He lifted from his desk a remarkably sized magnifier and placed it against Cordelia's throat. He stared long into the great, chrome-rimmed eye. "It has never healed these months. Perhaps beneath it rests a breeding ground for some parasite, or a blood-borne necrosis. There are toxins in the jungle the nature of which we cannot fathom."

"They're dead, you know," Elizabeth blurted out.

"What? Oh, yes," said Doctor Baillie, now pricking repeatedly at Cordelia's neck with a scalpel. "Chang and Eng, I suppose. Sad thing that."

"Eng tried to look out after his brother, too."

"Oh, please!" Cordelia growled. An impatient fidget moved her hard against the scalpel. The blade sank into her throat with bloodless efficiency. Before removing the instrument,

Doctor Baillie probed deeper, fishing a bit in the hole he had created. The action reminded him of an autopsy.

"Remarkable."

"Is there anything that can be done?" Elizabeth asked.

"Tests, of course," said Doctor Baillie, pressing the wound between his fingers to see if it would close. He could sense that Cordelia was growing more impatient. "Papers to be written. Peer reviews. Could make a man famous, I daresay."

"You promised to separate us!" Cordelia insisted. "I can't stand this anymore. I don't care if I am dead. I just don't want to be next to her!"

Elizabeth turned to her sister, her stunned indignation as practiced as ever. "You don't know what you're saying, dear. I admit I was frightened when this began. I've told you. It might have been necessary, if you were . . . But you heard the doctor. I'll be fine. And there are tests."

"Now! Separate us now!" The agitation rising within Cordelia made it feel, for a moment, as though her blood once again ran warm. "What risk could there be? This could make you famous, too, Doctor Baillie!"

Putting aside scalpel and magnifier, the doctor once again took up his pipe. He looked thoughtfully toward the wall containing his family's tartan and the old claymore.

"Don't you see, Cordelia," he said. "You and Elizabeth are a hyphenated spirit. One has always been the cavalier, the epicurean, and the speculator. The other is the essence, the spirit—the mother to an unruly child. You could not survive apart, anymore than if I divided myself." Pipe firmly in his teeth, Doctor Baillie reached for the claymore, brought it down in a single sweeping movement as if to decapitate the twins. He stopped short, then laughed a smoking laugh.

"Were I to operate, it would be the same! Tell me which, and I will do either! Even in America, the most famous like you remained joined until the end."

"You see, Cordelia," Elizabeth scolded, "I cannot abandon you. There were moments, but I knew I could never leave you."

"I can't stand this, I tell you!" Cordelia lunged upward, pulling Elizabeth from the examination bench. Her cold fingers twisted numbly about the hilt of the claymore, making every attempt to prize it from the doctor's hands. "Let me do it! I can do it!" Her grim focus meant nothing to the grizzled old Scot. He maintained the sword and broke away without apology, turning from Cordelia to place the blade back where it belonged.

Agitated beyond redemption, Cordelia could hear nothing

but Elizabeth's voice ringing in her ears, could feel nothing but Elizabeth's hands grasping at her shoulders. Not thinking, she reached for Baillie's scalpel, but it clattered away from thick fingers. She raised up the magnifier instead. As Doctor Baillie turned, Cordelia hammered him behind the ear, then once above the eye. He fell like a slaughtered cow.

"Cordelia!" Elizabeth's voice rose high enough to break crystal. Again and again her twin bludgeoned the fallen man. Bludgeoned until scalp sloughed away and skull gleamed like ice shattered in a sea of red.

Cordelia's violence had driven them both to their knees. When she stopped, it was to hear Elizabeth's breathing fill the room like thunder. Cordelia's lips rested close to Baillie now, so close she could feel the prick of his beard, her tongue that near to sinking into a smear of blood. From the corner of her eye, a stunning spatter of brains invited her attention.

"Come now," Elizabeth said calmly. "We must go home."

There on her knees, Cordelia wavered, not knowing whether she would vomit or break into Baillie's opened skull and scoop out his brains. But her madness was spent—for the moment—and Elizabeth had her. They rose to their feet, their dresses decorated in a patchwork of blood and grizzly scraps.

As they made to go, not a word passing between them, Cordelia reached for the claymore, but Elizabeth pulled her away.



Outside, twilight had given way to fog and darkness. And though the coachman grumbled something beneath his breath, he responded satisfactorily to Elizabeth's commands.

All the way home, Elizabeth held Cordelia close, though the gray twin shivered not half so much as Elizabeth.

"What are we to do?" Cordelia asked repeatedly. "Doctor Baillie. It's not the same as a chicken. Or a cat."

"Let me think," Elizabeth answered repeatedly. But there was little time to think, and Cordelia's shock, as it waned, seemed no more than a veil behind which some new panic burned like a fever. Elizabeth planned to douse it in brandy.

The coach clattered over rough bricks as they turned in toward the great house. It drowned out Cordelia's hushed words.

"What, dear?" Elizabeth asked.

"Trapped. In a snare," Cordelia repeated.

"Yes, I suppose," Elizabeth said. "Still, they can hardly hold someone like you responsible. Don't worry. Our solicitor

will handle everything in the morning." Seeing the welcome lights of the house, Elizabeth hugged her sister close, then closer still. She never heard the whisper. Could not have conceived the design muttered from beneath glazed eyes, the strategy that fell in fragments from drool-encrusted lips.

As they pulled up before the main entrance, Mrs. Mallet greeted them by torchlight. Elizabeth accepted a hand down from the wagon.

"The girl has been dismissed?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, Madam," said the old maid, unflinching. "And five of my own pounds locked in the tea caddy. Shall I draw a bath for you and Miss Cordelia?"

"Yes, do so."

"As you please, Madam." Without another word, Mrs. Mallet had retained her position. In truth, it was because Elizabeth needed a warm bath more than an argument, and she could trust the old woman to do her duty.

"These clothes were soiled in the weather. Burn them."

"As you please, Madam."

An hour passed, then two. The fires in the house were stoked. The bath drawn by Mrs. Mallet was taken in an elaborate footed tub, and though Cordelia moved along with her sister, and accepted the scrubbing and dousing as she always had, there seemed no pleasure in it.

"Here, my dear. Take this." Elizabeth swirled a glass of amber liquor beneath Cordelia's nose. She had poured it from a decanter placed within arm's reach by Mrs. Mallet. "If you find the water soothing, this will do even more."

Cordelia accepted, downing three measures in a single swallow.

Another bucket of near-boiling water arrived. The bath steamed. Glassware and windows sweated, as did Elizabeth. She relaxed into the tub, drawing Cordelia even closer.

"Trapped," the gray twin whispered. "Like an animal."

"Oh, it's not so bad as that, I assure you," said Elizabeth. "My, how you've drunk it down! Mrs. Mallet, after this evening, I could stand a measure myself." And Mrs. Mallet was there to hand a snifter to the sovereign twin. Elizabeth took it out of the air, as though her word itself had conjured it. Not realizing how much it would burn on the way down, Elizabeth drank it and then coughed. Still, after a moment she swallowed more.

"Shall I prepare a late meal?" asked Mrs. Mallet.

"Do what you can," said Elizabeth lazily. "We shan't be much longer."

With Mrs. Mallet gone, Cordelia laid her head close upon

her twin's breasts, as though exhausted. She snuggled her cold brow against Elizabeth, looking down with lifeless eyes. There, centered in her gaze, lay the hyphen of flesh that seemed to imprison her forever.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and drank, her face already flushed with warmth.

"You see, Cordelia; it's not as you said. I'm not afraid to live." Emptying the last ochre swirl from the snifter, Elizabeth began to feel its somnifacient effects. "It will be taken care of," she said, breathing out this assurance as the heat and the brandy stole over her. "You will be with me forever."

Cordelia moved slowly. By quiet inches her face approached the still, white-flecked water. There, above the soapy tide lay the curl of muscle and mottled flesh, and though she tried, carefully, slowly, she could not reach it. With Elizabeth's warm flesh burning against her lips, she could go no farther.

"I'll tell you a poem," Elizabeth said, unaware. For a moment she seemed to have fallen asleep. Then, recovering, she continued. "Do you know the one: 'I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house, wherein at ease for aye to dwell. I said "*O soul, make merry and carouse. Dear soul, for all is well.*"' What do you think, dear. . . ?"

Cordelia nuzzled at her sister's breast. If she could not reach the hyphen at their middle, she would have to start higher.

"Animals," Cordelia said in a hush. "To escape. They chew off their own feet, don't they? Don't they, Sister?"

By now touching the threshold of sleep, Elizabeth did little more than nod. It was only after a moment's consideration that the oddness of the words appealed to her.

"What, dear?"



Mrs. Mallet stood outside the house, breathless. She held a cleaver in one hand; in the other, a chicken struggled on the block. When first the scream came, she chopped. For every scream after, she chopped again.

By the time the servants reached her with the news, there was nothing left.

INHERITING RED

ALEXANDER MARSH FREED

In an apple orchard in Zimbabwe, under the branches of a tree brown and withered by drought, a child was born January 5th, twenty years ago.

He was my brother—my real brother, in the ways that matter—and I would have loved him. But no one ever told me he existed, and so I never had the chance.

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“To me, death smells like lilies,” I told Doctor Sardinha, as she craned her neck back to drink from a carton of milk. Her eyes were closed to keep out the sun, and her throat pulsed twice before she put the carton next to her cellophane sandwich wrapper on the table. Despite myself, I found my attention caught by a drop of milk that escaped the carton’s mouth, worming its way down the cardboard side.

“I’m sorry?” Sardinha said. Her brow was crinkled and half-obsured by brown hair, and she was looking past my shoulder to the lab.

I forced a smile, trying to reassure her. “When we get a new set of memories, I always sift through them for the smell, and the perception of the smell.” The drop of milk slid to the table, seeping in and turning the wood dark. Six years ago, an electric company employee had watched his coworker break his neck on the table; the man had fallen, while trimming the branches of the oak tree overhead. He hadn’t been as graceful as the milk drop.

“If my children die now, they won’t know anything about lilies,” I continued. “All they’ll remember are the tubes and our faces past the glass. And even we’ll be filtered through red.” I sighed. “I won’t let even that much be lost, but . . . I don’t want them to die.”

“I know,” Sardinha said. “I’m doing my best, Rebecca. We all are. Doctor Dowley has some ideas, but we don’t have the people or the equipment that Unno’s group did. Besides, your children aren’t like you. Your DNA is—”

“I know,” I said. “I understand the reports. I know about the advantages my fathers had, and the problems with my children. But it’s your job to fix it. I *need* you to fix it.”

What she thought I meant, I don’t know. But she folded

her hands in her lap, and tried to keep her shoulders from shaking as she nodded. "We're trying," she said. "I swear we're trying."

"I know," I repeated. "But I want my children to see the world. I want them to see what *I* see. Not just for their sake, but for yours, too. You understand; you wouldn't be here, otherwise."

Doctor Sardinha bobbed her head again, but my attention left her and the campus and the lab. One of my brothers on the Argentine front had stopped a soldier from shooting himself, and I could taste the soldier's blood on my lips, feel his memories seeping into us. I wiped my mouth with my sleeve as I searched for lilies, and saw his wife wearing a blossom in her hair on the night of their first anniversary. The petals were edged with brown, and had begun losing their scent, but James had held her so close that he still remembered it.

I sent the thought to him as he rose, comforting him as he joined my siblings in the search for soldiers who were still resisting.

I put my children out of my mind. "Are the new volunteers here, yet?" I asked Doctor Sardinha, looking toward the laboratory's glass doors.



Two men and one woman walked alongside the stones, the sun drawing out the smell of vegetation. The trees nearby were mostly dead—some burned with half-shattered trunks, others fallen and rotting—but the underbrush was thick, and mold and mushrooms grew everywhere. Pietro ducked under a toppled trunk that leaned against the plateau above, and saw a horde of termites swarming across the underside.

Not one of the trio had seen for themselves what the land had looked like before the bombs fell. Neither had I, but I cherished the memories I had.

Genevieve found the cave entrance first. It was barely a crack in the stone, which explained why none of us had noticed it before. I looked through Pietro's eyes, and wondered how long it had been there—whether it was the result of the bombs and the collapse of the temple, or if laborers had opened it thousands of years ago. I imagined what it would have been like for the laborers, chipping away at stone as their backs shone with sweat. I wondered if they knew what they were doing; if they believed they were helping to create a better world, to forestall the Kali-Yuga and imprison a great

evil. Or if they were slaves, neither understanding nor caring to understand what they did. And I thought about their stories, which could have been saved, if they'd only acted differently.

If they were real. I didn't even know that.

Approaching the stone, Genevieve lowered her head and climbed into the crevice. She was the smallest, with Ugabe just a bit larger. Pietro would wait behind until we were sure this was the right cave, and that it didn't dead end. If Genevieve and Ugabe were lost or buried, it would be unfortunate—but their memories would remain with us, and someone needed to find our target.

There was no light inside the crevice, and barely enough room for Genevieve to reach ahead and feel the path of the stone. She worked herself against the rocks, twisting and squeezing farther inside. Strands of her hair lodged in a crack, and she pushed forward, tearing the roots free. By the time the cave opened up, her back and knees were bleeding—she was still young—and she stank heavily of soil. Ugabe was some distance behind, but she stood straight and moved on without waiting for him.

We adjusted to the darkness, and saw a series of bas reliefs carved into the walls. Genevieve walked past them without looking, and I nearly steered her back—but I could peruse the reliefs later. There was soon enough space for four men to walk abreast, and pale light glowed far ahead. As Ugabe struggled to squirm through the tunnel, I considered sending Pietro in, as well. This had to be the place.

Genevieve drew back my attention before I could decide. She had found the source of the light: a lantern set in a yellow plastic cage, suckling electricity through a cord running to a generator. The lantern was part of a small circle of objects—a notebook, sealed plastic bags holding granola and dried beef, a backpack, a toothbrush, and a razor. In the center of the circle sat an elderly man in an olive jacket, his silhouette obscuring the relief on the wall behind him. A computer rested in his lap, and he looked up at Genevieve coldly.

"Welcome home, brahmaparush," he said.



My brother Aeneas was six years old when he found a stranger in the orchard. The man was a dozen meters away from the edge of the dirt road dividing the property, lying in shallow grass with his head resting against a tree trunk. The air was hazy with heat and dust, and the stranger hissed as he drank it in.

Aeneas flinched when he saw the man, as he wandered between trees. Shaking, he thought about turning and racing home—but as he stared, he noticed the way the man's head lolled back, and how the man's shoulders dug into bark. He noticed the fresh tire grooves in the road, and the earth at the road's edge dappled with moisture.

Walking closer, taking shelter in shadows, Aeneas came near enough to see the stranger's eyes. They were huge, bright white and set shallowly in his face, tainted with yellow around the edges like inverted eggs. His hair was short and dark, and a red stain, centered on his stomach, spread over his white T-shirt.

Half-expecting the stranger to leap up and throttle him, and not entirely sure he wasn't imagining the whole thing, Aeneas yelled, "Hello?"

The man's head rolled, and his egg-eyes focused on Aeneas, pupils contracting tightly. "Hello," he called back. "My name is Billy. Is there . . . anyone else around?"

Unsure what answer would be safe, Aeneas merely nodded. "What's your name?" Billy asked.

Aeneas walked closer, until he was only a few meters away. Billy was shivering, and smelled foul.

"Aeneas," my brother said. "Are you hurt?"

Billy smiled wryly. "Smart boy," he said. "Yes. Is there someone around who can help me? Your father, maybe?"

"I don't know," Aeneas said. Most of the workers weren't at the orchard anymore—he didn't know why. His father wasn't home, and his mother . . . she was sick. Sicker than she'd been in a while. He wasn't supposed to bother her when she was this way.

Billy raised his head and made a sound like a bird before he dropped back to the tree. "Aeneas," he said, "if I don't get help, I will die. Please help me."

Aeneas began trembling. The man would die if he didn't help. . . .

Stepping still closer, Aeneas crouched at Billy's side and pointed with one finger at the stain on the man's shirt. "Is that where you're hurt?"

Billy barely nodded. "Please get help," he whispered. "I don't want to die. Please."

Screwing up his face, Aeneas lowered his finger to the stain and pressed down. He felt skin and cloth sink in, and let out a quiet cry at the sensation. He pressed down harder, lowered his palm to the blood, and wanted Billy to live. He begged for Billy to live.

In a few minutes, Billy's wound was closed.
That was the first time my brother healed a man.

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Andrea was the oldest of my children, but I rarely called her by name anymore. I didn't have the heart for it. I watched her float in the glass tube in the middle of the white room, watched her breathe in re-engineered amniotic fluid and twist among the red-tainted wires and tubes, and tried to think of her as something less than a person. Something that wouldn't hurt so much to lose.

There were fourteen others, in different labs in the building. I spent time with Andrea then because she was the oldest, and the closest to dying.

My fathers—my creators—had never felt that way about me. I'd looked through their memories, and while some had cared for my mother, feared for her when they'd implanted her with seeds from Daniel and my brothers who'd been trapped in the temple, few had worried about *me*. I was more than an experiment to them—I was an infant, and they cared if I lived or died—but they didn't care *who* I was. Who I would become.

I felt a surge of anger, and let some of it spill into Doctor Unno, where he lumbered through the Melbourne ruins in search of survivors and resistance troops. It was petty—he'd receive a flash of memory and pain, without understanding what it meant—but he was the only one of my creators left, and I needed to channel my feelings somewhere.

I walked to the door and stepped into the immaculate hallway. As I headed for my office, I peered through the eyes of a sister in the foyer, where Doctor Milken was rubbing at his glasses with his sleeve and talking to the new volunteers. Some of them stood straight and attentive, while others were huddled together on the wooden benches. They were listening to the usual speech about how important they were to the cause, as scientists and mechanics and janitors.

I entered my sister fully, and stifled her hunger as we looked over the group. They were a mix of men and women, mostly young. Almost a third of them had that tense, wide-eyed look whenever they glanced at me. I recognized the look; they were the desperate and the mad. The ones who wanted an escape, but who were too afraid to join my siblings. More of them had been coming to me, lately. Most of the truly devoted were already here.

But I needed as many sets of hands as I could get. I love

my siblings, but searching and feasting doesn't get a nursery built. I needed others for their knowledge, their numbers, and the manual dexterity to splice wires and hammer nails into wood. My children would be like me, gifted with the best of both worlds—but that was years in the future.

My children.

Back inside Rebecca, I sat among the paintings and masks of my office, digging my heels into carpet and settling into my ebony chair. I thought about Andrea, and let the visitors roam.

Within an hour, I heard the shriek of an alarm, and I knew it was for my daughter.

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I felt Genevieve's knees burst as they were ripped apart by bullets. I counted three shots, and even as Genevieve's ankles turned cold and wet, and her chin collided with earth, I hated the shooter for the second bullet—the one that passed between my sister's legs, to strike and scar one of the reliefs. Genevieve's body was replaceable. History was not.

The man in the olive jacket put his gun beside him with both hands, and drew a machete from his backpack. I could see his fingers shaking where he gripped the pommel. I guessed he was arthritic. "Crawl any closer and I'll cut your goddamn head off," he said. "I know you're listening, Becky—I'll cut her head off, and if I see anyone else, I'll splatter mine across the walls next."

Genevieve was hungry, and angry, and hurt. She deserved better, but I soothed her and kept her from approaching. Ugabe continued trying to squeeze past the rocks, tearing off a finger in the process.

The man lowered the knife to his lap without letting it go. He looked at his computer screen, then past it to Genevieve's body. "So, you found my wife," he said.

I pressed myself fully into Genevieve's head. Her tongue and mouth were decaying, but her throat could still function. I forced dead flesh to move. "I wanted to see you, Charles," I said. I hoped he could understand.

He unwrapped his hand from the knife and tapped a few keys. "I'm sure you did. You're seeing me. You're not going to get what you want."

I mouthed, "You don't know what I want," but no sound came out. Putting more effort into it, I said, "You damaged the relief."

"Did I?" Charles asked. "I've looked at them before, but it's

been a while." He balanced the knife on his thigh and lifted his gun again, firing two more shots. Behind me, I heard stone crumbling into dust. Genevieve's eyes wouldn't close, and I was forced to watch him reload with swift, jerky motions.

"You loved history," I said, wishing I could make Genevieve sound angry. In London, seven of my siblings were inside a nightclub, tearing open skulls and dragging customers away from doors as lasers glowed around them. They were about to become more vicious.

Charles hesitated. "I told you," he said. "I looked them over already. They're about what you'd expect: the brahmeparush unleashed, razing the world and devouring humankind. Rather graphic in parts, too. You mean to tell me no one you've eaten ever saw them?"

I shook my head. "I never knew any of this was down here. Was this . . . where you fled when Daniel opened the vault in the temple?"

"This was the place," he said. "Worked well then." He squinted at the computer screen. "Not so well now, I suppose."

I waited for more, then said, "He had great respect for you."

"I know. I figured that out without eating his brain."

Ugabo tore open the side of his arm, and emerged from the tunnel into the wider part of the cave. I urged him to wait there.

"You loved history," I said again.

"I did," Charles said. "But I really *hate* you."

"I never tried to hurt you," I said. "I want to learn about your life, to keep you from being forgotten. That's all."

"Then why did you send her?" Charles asked. He lifted the machete and waved the point in my direction. Genevieve's direction.

I didn't answer.



My brother was sixteen when he first heard of me. He was sitting in a café in Johannesburg, picking at slap chips from a brown paper bag and wiping the shine of grease and vinegar from his fingers with a thin paper napkin. Ceiling fans hummed and mixed with the voices of other customers, while Billy sat across from him, sipping a beer that had left a series of wet rings on the formica tabletop.

For the first time in a while, Aeneas wasn't thinking about his mother, and Billy was making an effort to relax. Neither spoke much; they needed their peace. They had their tickets

to the States and three days to rest. There was nothing else they could do.

They both turned their heads when the customers at the counter fell silent. The men there had stopped yelling at the football game on the grainy television near the cash register. They were still watching the television, but it had stopped showing football. Now it showed me.

I wore a green dress trimmed with silver, and I stood on a wooden bridge over a small pond. In the background, Melbourne was burning. I've regretted that ever since; if I'd known the resistance had planned to start setting fires, known my perfect picture would be ruined, I'd have filmed somewhere else. But I couldn't stop in the middle.

"Over the past few years," I said, "many of you have asked 'Why?' In truth, even my siblings—the ones you think of as zombies, your brahmapparush—didn't understand. They acted out of instinct, mindlessly consuming without knowing their real purpose."

"Who is that?" Aeneas whispered. Billy shook his head.

"But I am here to tell you that there *is* a purpose. That you need not mourn those who have joined me," I said. "We are not killers or sadists. We are revolutionaries and dreamers. Builders of a better tomorrow, where the idea that the dead live on in our memories is not a comforting lie, but the literal truth.

"When an individual joins us, when he rises among our ranks, his thoughts and memories are shared with us all. Every whisper and action in his or her past is preserved and cherished, and will last until the end of time. You ask why we come for the young and the old, the sick and the healthy—and the truth is we come because we could not bear to let any lives be lost when we could have saved them. Because even the young can fall prey to accidents, and those who appear healthy can die from the inside.

"And it is true that my siblings can't understand these things, or the memories they receive. That is why they are only the beginning. My name is Rebecca Adler, and I am the first of a *new* race. Like you, I possess identity, mind, and will—but I also share the memories of my siblings. My children will be like me, and will keep *my* memories when I die. And their children will keep theirs. They will bring about a new world—one where history cannot be lost or where lies fade away. Where our loved ones will last in our memories for eternity. A world where nothing is left undone or unsaid, and where the richness of humanity's past is part of us all.

"My children will walk this world, and make a paradise of it. The only cost is that we embrace change."

Outside the café, the streets were quiet, too. Slowly, every radio, television, and computer in Johannesburg was tuned to my speech. No one spoke a word.

"But I need your help," I said. "I am only one person, and while my siblings can keep the past safe, I need men and women who believe in my cause to help prepare for the future. To show others why they should join us, and to pave the way for my children.

"To those who oppose me—and I mean not only Presidents Mimura and DeLong, but every individual who raises a gun against us in the streets, or gives shelter to those who do—know that I love you. You fear me, but I will do everything I can to prevent your lives from being wasted and forgotten. In a thousand years, we will still remember your family, your lovers, and your dreams."

Aeneas blinked during the shot. When his eyes opened, the thunder had passed, and blood poured down my dress and speckled the bridge.

Billy was the first to his feet, but the rest of the café joined him as he moved. As if the football game were still on, he clapped his hands together and shouted a gleeful, "Yes!" Aeneas stared, his lips half-parted, watching me tremble and press my palms to my forehead.

The café patrons laughed and wrapped their arms around each other's shoulders. I moved my hands away from the hole in my head—and stared at the camera.

"Erin Soesbee," I said. "There was nothing you could have done to stop your brother from coming here. He wanted to die, and I was only an excuse. His memories are safe now."

I smiled, a little weakly. In the café, the cheering stopped, though no one moved. Aeneas still watched me.

"This changes nothing," I finished. "Please. Come to me."

The football game came back on. Billy sat down.

"That was all wrong," Aeneas whispered.

"No shit," Billy said, and stared at his beer.



Andrea's womb was halfway across the building. Rather than try to race from my office to the lab where it was housed, I shoved aside the remaining consciousness of a former lounge singer named Sean who guarded the cafeteria, and made my way with him into the halls. My legs were twisted and rotting, and the linoleum felt dangerously slick beneath

my feet, but I marched past identical windows and doors until I saw the lab I sought.

The door was swinging closed, and I heard shouting before it clicked shut. Something about heart failure, about draining fluid. I swore to myself that if Andrea died, I'd devour everyone in there to learn what had happened. Maybe even if she didn't.

I was seconds away when the door opened again, and a bassinet was rushed out. I glimpsed a red body wrapped in blankets, but didn't see movement. Doctors Milken and Dowley flanked the bassinet, ignoring me as they pushed it down the hall. I wondered where Doctor Sardinha was, and opened my mouth to try to speak. Nothing came out; my body was far too decomposed.

I slammed my knuckles against the wall, trying to get the doctors' attention, but they were halfway around a corner by then. I wobbled over to the lab window and peered through the streaked glass. No one was left, and the tube—its sides still stained crimson—stood open and empty. Amniotic fluid was splashed across the floor.

I wanted the doctors to die. I wanted their bodies; I wanted to do what they were too incompetent to do. Andrea was dying. She needed to live.

I urged Sean forward, and dropped back into Rebecca's body in the office. She could move faster. She could talk to the doctors and demand to know what was happening. I stepped out and ran for the labs.

Fluorescent lights blurred above me, making the floor look like white fuzz. I wasn't even certain where the doctors had gone, but I had ideas, and no one could go far without one of my siblings seeing. As it turned out, I did fine on my own; as I passed by a branch on my way to the secondary nursery, I heard voices coming from behind me.

"Who the fuck are you? Get out of the way!" someone said. It sounded like Doctor Dowley.

I turned and went back to the branch. A dozen meters down the hall, a dark-skinned man in a white T-shirt faced away from me, standing over Andrea's bassinet. Dowley and Milken were both staring at where my daughter should have been, but my view was blocked.

From the other end of the hall, Doctor Sardinha came running, her lab coat flapping at her ankles. "What's happening?" she called, then skidded to a stop when she saw me.

"She's alive," Doctor Milken whispered. He slowly removed his glasses without looking away from the bassinet.

I stalked forward, trying to get a look at Andrea. "What do you mean?" I hissed. "What happened?"

Dowley glanced up. "He saved her," he said, and gestured to the stranger, who turned to face me. "Andrea's fine. She wasn't breathing, and now she's . . . fine."

I looked at the stranger. I recognized him as one of the newcomers from the lobby, but there wasn't a thing remarkable about him. I was too surprised—and honestly, too shocked and relieved—to respond when he reached out and touched a sweaty palm to my neck.

Checkmate, you bitch.

✦ ✦ ✦

"You're not going to win," Charles said, looking back at his computer and tapping a few keys. "You've murdered two continents' worth of people, but you're not going to win."

It wasn't a topic I wanted to go into, but I tried to sound tolerant. It helped that Genevieve's tone was difficult to vary. "Why not?" I asked.

"I could tell you about righteous vengeance, or how, if something as terrible as the brahmapparush are real, something better must exist, too. But the real answer is that humanity's a resourceful lot, and when that many people want you dead, they'll find a way. We *have* found a way. You just don't realize it yet."

"Are you through taking potshots at me?" I said. Ugabe marched farther into the cave, keeping his distance so that his rotting face wasn't revealed by the lantern.

"I'm just passing the time before you kill me," Charles said. "What else do you want to talk about?"

I said nothing for a while, then asked, "Why haven't you spoken to me in all these years?"

Charles laughed, and the tremors made his hands shake again. He lifted them from the keyboard and placed them back on his gun. "Why would I want to?" he replied. "I like being safe, and you don't have anything interesting to say."

"I could tell you about the notes Daniel never finished compiling, or how he knew about—and forgave you for—what happened in Burma. I could tell you what happened to Nathan Stewart when he dropped out of your Asian Studies class thirty years ago. I could tell you anything you wanted to know about your wife."

Charles arched his brow. "And what would you want in return?"

"Don't kill yourself," I said. "Let me have your memories."

"So you can know our plans? Know who we have on the inside, what we've got satellite pictures of? I don't give up my life's work that easily, Becky."

I sent Ugabe a few steps forward, still keeping him out of view, then forced myself to regain control. "So I can know what you really think," I said. "So I can know that you know that you're *proud* that you and Daniel, studying, researching like you did, discovered that the brahmaparush were real. That you proved your theories to the world, and made people look at history a little differently."

Charles began to snicker. The sound was mixed with coughs and bursts of spittle, but I recognized it for what it truly was.

"That I'm proud of *you*, you mean?" he asked between coughs.

"Yes," I whispered.

He wheezed deep breaths, until he calmed enough to speak easily again. "If I could change the past," he said, "I'd do to this whole temple what I did to that relief. I'd be a failure my entire life rather than let you be born."

I couldn't control myself any longer. Ugabe stepped into view. Charles dropped his gun and put his fingers back on the keyboard. They were still shaking, and I stopped pretending it was arthritis. He was terrified.

Ugabe lurched forward. Genevieve, writhing and crawling through the dirt, hissed, "I only wanted to help you."

Charles smirked. "Of course you did," he said. "You're a helpful zombie." He drew another long breath, looked from Ugabe to Genevieve to his screen, and gave a tiny smile.

"Checkmate, you bitch," he said. He hit a key, and the cave exploded.

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My brother spent a year participating in experiments once Billy found someone who believed their story, then nine months in training once the project began in a formal way. Billy didn't live to see the end of it—reports had it that he died in a helicopter crash, of all things, on his way to Brasilia. My brother mourned, but he was strong, and he knew his mission. He put up with the secrecy, the tests, the hours of pouring through old briefings and reports and videos. By the time he left the Alcântara base, he had a more thorough knowledge of how things worked at my labs than the generals themselves did.

He infiltrated a follower group. He made it to my home.

But he slipped away from the tour before he was supposed to, was ready to throw the entire mission away, because he had heard that an infant was dying. Even knowing what Andrea was, he wanted to save her life.

After finishing with my daughter, he turned and saw me. He knew then that he could complete his mission after all. No one had told him what would come next; like me, he'd never wanted to hurt anyone. So they'd kept him in the dark for twenty-one months.

I will never forget my brother. I wish I could have loved him before he died.

+ + +

Under the cool sweat, the man's hand felt warm. I raised my arm to push him back—I didn't like being touched—and then felt the warmth spread. Uncomfortable and tingling, it rolled through my body, making my knees shake.

Whenever someone joins us, I search their memories for lilies. The truth is, it's because I can't smell so well myself anymore. The nose decays quickly, and nothing else replaces it; smell becomes a faint and distant thing.

When the warmth crawled through my skull, it felt like my nose was burning. Then the scents came to me—the salt of the stranger's sweat, the disinfectant used to clean the floor, the grease of my hair, and the odor of ashes and nicotine around Doctor Milken. My daughter was thick with smells, from her body, her blankets, and the amniotic fluid. They all came to me at once—most of them unpleasant—and I reveled in them.

I noticed, for the first time in a decade, how dry my mouth was, and I felt the swirl of air conditioning against my skin. I saw and heard with a clarity not possessed even by the newly dead, and when I looked down at myself, I barely dared to expect what was coming.

My skin was flushed and whole. I lifted a hand, pressed it to my forehead. The old bullet wound was gone.

I looked at the man, and as I did I felt moisture trail down my cheeks. In a cave in northern India, Charles, Genevieve, and Ugabe were burning and being crushed by falling rock. I barely cared anymore.

"I'm alive," I breathed. I *breathed*. "You brought me back."

He'd returned me to life. The implications began dawning on me even then.

"I didn't know," I said, and swallowed. "I didn't know this could happen. I didn't know you existed. . . ."

I stopped feeling Genevieve and Ugabe, but even the memory of being inside them felt strange now. Dirty.

They hadn't needed me after all. None of them had. This man could have saved them for real.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" I asked.

My brother opened his mouth to answer. There was the tin drum sound of a gunshot, and he fell forward, onto me. I felt something wet on my stomach, then heard two more shots. They hit me in the chest after carving through my brother. The wounds burned. They'd never burned before.

I wrapped my arms around my kinsman, and he wrapped his arms around me. Down the hall, Doctor Sardinha was turning a gun to her head.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't know."

I stayed with my brother as long as I could. Then I slipped out of Rebecca's dying body, and into Sean the lounge singer. I walked through Doctor Sardinha's blood, gazing at my daughter's face before going to preserve my brother's memories. I was as gentle as I could be when I opened his skull and ingested everything he knew.



Doctor Milken found the camera hidden in Doctor Sardinha's lab coat, and the encrypted messages on her computer. Even without Sardinha's and Charles' memories, it was easy to understand their plan: convince my brother to bring me back, then kill us both. They couldn't trust what they didn't comprehend.

But while I'd preserved Rebecca, made her my own, she wasn't the body my mother gave birth to. That one was somewhere safe. And there'd never been a reason to let the resistance know about it.

They'd killed my brother for nothing.

I found a new body, made a new speech. It was nothing special; I just wanted to let the world know that I was still around. And that I wasn't going to stop.

I lied a little. I told them I still loved them.

But while I understand that saving their memories is the right thing to do, it feels empty, now that I know there could have been a better way. That chance is gone, of course, along with most of my family. So I hold Andrea close at night, as I prepare the world for her. If she survives the month—no one's sure why she's sick—I won't tell her about her uncle. She'll discover the truth eventually, but in the meantime I hope she can find the joy I used to have.

In Georgia, my siblings find a rusting fallout shelter from the sixties, and carefully pry open the door. Two dozen people are crammed inside, sweating and trembling in the dark. We block the exit, and three of my siblings march in, devouring men and women for their pasts. I send my mind elsewhere, and let them do what they will. I don't bother to search for lilies.

GODDAMN REDNECK

SURFER ZOMBIES

MICHAEL J. JASPER

People stopped coming to the North Carolina coast when the dead returned to the beach after four decades away. Got to the point where folks couldn't sit outside their own beach-side trailers with a case of Bud without some rotting corpse staggering up and asking for directions to the cemetery or the bars or the bait shop, the whole time smelling like spoiled tuna. They killed us for most of the entire tourist season before we realized what they were up to, and actually did something about 'em. Goddamn zombies.

Back at the season's start, like now, I spent most of my days down at the end of the pier, the longest one in the state, where the stink of fish innards cooking in the sun never got to me like the reek of dead-person guts in some walking corpse does. If you come out to Long Beach—which you *should* do, even now, with the zombies and all—to fish and swim in the bath-warm water during the day and eat seafood and drink cold ones with us at night, you'll find me there at the farthest tip of the pier, past the signs saying *No Spectators Beyond This Point* and *King Mackerel Fishing Only*. If you give a shout for Big Al, I'll come over and say “hey” to you, long as the kings aren't biting.

Anyway, before things got messy again, I caught my limit most days by noon, smoking and drinking with the other old men with skin like leather and just enough teeth to hold their Camels in place. After the doc threatened to cut a hole in my neck, I stopped with the cancer sticks, but I still like a cold Bud while I watch my lines in the salty, hot Carolina air.

High point of those days came late in the afternoon, when the pretty girls came up and visited with us after a day of sun-bathing and gossiping. Oh Lord, to be young again. Their tanned stomachs were tight and their long hair was salty and wet from the Atlantic, and they acted like they wanted to learn about fishing. We all knew they weren't interested in any of that. They were up there on the pier with us for protection.

Because every afternoon, when the tide started to head out, the dead came lurching out of the brush on the other side

of the dunes and headed for the waves. The girls didn't want to be alone on the beach wearing just their bits of bikini as the zombies walked past, dragging their coffin lids behind 'em. Couple of the girls even recognized their grandparents, stripped down to their birthday suits, showing off their pale gray skin. That shook 'em up pretty good, let me tell you.

Far as I could tell, the girls didn't have nothing to worry about. These zombies were here for one thing only—they wanted to *surf*.

Some of us thought the zombies were attracted to the waves because of the pull of the tides. Mort and Lymon had their nicotine-and-six-pack theories about the moon's effect on the graveyards and the bodies buried in 'em. "Tidal forces from the moon," Mort said in his gravelly voice. "Pulls 'em up outta the ground just like it makes the waves come in and out. They put that cemetery too close to the ocean, that's what. Yeppers. Tidal forces."

We all just laughed and tried not to look at the naked corpses falling off their coffin lids like the newbies we called "grommets" back in my surfing days. Ten of the dead were out on the water that day, flinging their rotting and bloodless bodies toward the next wave. I recognized Alfie and Zach, old buddies from high school (flipped their car into the Intracoastal Waterway one Saturday night in '59 and drowned in three feet of water) along with my own mother (lung cancer, '82) surfing next to four-decades-dead Purnell Austin, forever twenty-one.

They took some tremendous tumbles, like the time Purnell was launched off his lid by a wave and slammed head-first into the lid of the rotting girl next to him, sending pieces of nose and teeth flying. That one was so bad I caught myself moving out of my chair toward the water. But the surfing dead don't need any kind of first aid, not any more. Purnell climbed back onto his coffin lid, twisted his head with both hands to the left once, hard, and got ready for the next wave with a laugh. Lucky he didn't lose his head on that one.

The zombies' laughter was like the cough of a lifelong smoker, and it made the hairs on my arms stand up. Must've been hard, laughing when you didn't need to breathe any more.

Quiet old Bob Mangum nodded his bald head toward the undead surfers. "It's the beginning of the end times, 'at's what it is. Nothing to do with no moon or no tidal forces." He hobbled back to his cooler of shrimp bait and his five fishing lines. "Keep an eye out for Jehovah 'n' the horsemen," he added.

Now, I've always been one to just let things be. Long as the

zombies left our people alone and no one went missing like last time, I was fine without getting into some sort of hassle with 'em. Cops didn't care about the zombies either, so long as no one was hurt. Still, there were more and more of 'em every day, almost to the point where they'd taken over the whole beach. And someone must've told the reporters this time, 'cause for a while there, they were almost as thick around here as the zombies.

Luckily, the film crews didn't last long, not after we started telling 'em it was all a hoax and they learned that the surfing dead didn't photograph well. All the zombies left were gray smears on film that looked like they'd been faked to even an old fart with bad eyes like mine. We told 'em they were wasting their time and their film, but who ever paid attention to a crusty old man like me? They were gone within a week with no story and a pile of worthless film.

Tourists were another story. Of course, they were scared shitless by the walking dead, whether they thought it all a big put-on or not. Us locals can adjust to 'most anything, long as it doesn't get in the way of the fishing, but most tourists ran off the instant they caught sight of some old zombie woman limping up the beach, tits hanging to her belly button, dragging her surf lid behind her like the train to a wedding dress. Even worse were the dead young 'uns, the teens killed in drunken car wrecks that went 'round as if they were showing off their missing arms and legs. Made it hard to concentrate on your John Grisham lawyer novel, or your gushy, Fabio-on-the-cover romance paperback, I'm sure.

The tourists that did stick around, wasting their film with more damn photos, didn't last too long. The zombies were "quaint" at first—swear to God I heard one of the Yankee women say this, heard it all the way up on the pier—but when their stink filled the air and the chunks of dead flesh started washing up onto the beach, they skedaddled real quick.

While packing up the kiddies and their plastic shovels and expensive umbrellas and chairs, some of the housewives showed another side of things. I saw some of 'em suck in their soft bellies when one of the fresher, not-dead-for-*too-too-long* male zombies whizzed past on his surf lid, as if those mamas had some sort of chance with a rotting old redneck boy whose last memory was red ambulance lights or a doctor beating on his chest a handful of years ago.

Now, I didn't mind getting rid of loud and rude tourists—most of 'em were Yankees anyhow, moved down here for their high falutin' tech jobs a few hours away up in Raleigh—but my

buddy Lou at the Surf 'n' Suds Pier Restaurant and Angie at the Wings store needed the cash that those tourists brought. They couldn't handle another bad season, not after three hurricanes in the past five years, including the near miss from barely a month earlier that had left half the beach underwater. It was hard enough getting folks to come to Long Beach the way it was, and then the goddamn undead showed up.

I've lived here all my life, and I've watched the landscape change as the ocean ate away the sand dunes and made the new hotels the developer fools built sink and dip like leaking ships, and in that time I saw the same sort of tourist come down to our beaches. They'd pack up the brats, soak up the sun 'til it burned 'em, spend their money in our shops, and try to catch fish off the shallow sides of our pier. Like clockwork, they'd leave one week later, not to return until the following year. At the end of summer us locals cleaned up their mess and got back to our own business. That was the way things went.

The only disruption in the pattern was back in '60. That was the summer I came back to Long Beach to find the cemeteries from here to Southport empty, and the dead walking the streets.



I'd been surfing for a decade by that point in time. I'd started with my older brother's board when I was 'most ten years old, most times falling off it like a grommet before a wave ever picked me up. But I stuck with it and spent most days surfing instead of in school with the other kids. I always figured one of these days I'd go back and get my diploma, but then my sixtieth, then my seventieth birthday snuck up on me, and after that I just didn't see the point of it, really. I get all I wanted in life with fishing.

That summer of 1960, when there weren't waves big enough to go surfing, I learned all about pier fishing. I figured if I made friends with the fishermen on the pier, at the least I'd get fewer sinkers thrown at me on those days that I surfed a bit too close to their lines. Surfers and fishermen hardly ever see eye to eye, dealing like they do with the ocean from two very different angles. But bribed with enough smokes and brews, the fishermen warmed to me and taught me all I'd ever want to know. After that summer I never got hooked by a cast or smacked with a thrown sinker.

And then the zombies came calling. It all started on a Monday morning in early September, right after Hurricane

Donna blasted through. I was half-buzzed by ten in the morning, nursing my fifth beer, when the first body flopped onto the flooded beach west of the pier. Looked like a damn fish thrown onto the sand by a rough wave, except the ocean was dead calm for a change. The body was shedding its pasty white skin, along with the occasional body part, with each spasm. An eyeball rolled back into the surf like a stray golf ball hit by an idiot tourist golfer.

Me and the boys were down there in five seconds. In spite of all our bad talk about the tourists, none of us wanted to see one of 'em die. And no fisherman or surfer wants to see a corpse on their beach. That's what we all figured this was, judging by the white skin of the man flailing on the sand: a near-drowning.

He wouldn't let us set him up to help him breathe, even though Bob was positive he couldn't get a pulse. For a mostly dead fella, he had the kind of strength I'd never felt before. I grabbed his arm, nearly sicking up my beers at the cold and loose feel of his flesh, like the skin on uncooked chicken. He lifted me right off the ground with that one arm.

It took us an hour to figure out what he was. His face had swollen up, but I swore there was something familiar about that crooked nose and that anchor tattoo on his shoulder.

Luckily the Oleandar Drive-In in Wilmington had been playing a horror triple-feature earlier that summer, and my buddy Marty had seen all three flicks, including *I Walked With a Zombie*.

"That's Jack Johnson!" Marty shouted. "Swear to God! He's one'a those zombers!"

The dead guy opened his one remaining eye and gave Marty what looked like a pissed-off glare. That's when I knew it was Jack, because of those Paul Newman ladykiller eyes. Or eye, I should say. His right one was floating up and down in the surf like a bobber. Jack was polite and didn't say anything about Marty's mangled terminology. Jack Johnson had drowned a week ago, caught out in the hurricane trying to save his boat.

"Ain't no such thing as a *zombie*," Bob said in his quiet voice as we helped Jack to his feet. Bob had been old even back then. If I was a fool like Marty, who died in 'Nam when he fell over a trip wire after three hits of acid and blew his face off, I'd be wondering if ol' Bob wasn't a "zomber," too.

We didn't know what else to do, so we handed Jack his eye, which he popped back in its socket, and let him be. The fish were biting, that's all I can say in our defense. Marty left

us to go surfing, and Jack walked off in the opposite direction of the pier.

We'd pretty much forgotten about him until we heard the screaming coming from the Dairy Queen up the road.

Purnell Austin, one of the biggest guys I knew back in school before I dropped out, had been stuffed into a garbage can outside the DQ. Both his legs had been broken, and they dangled out of the garbage can like dead flowers. But that wasn't the worst of it. When we pulled him out of the can, his head was split in two, and over half of his brain was gone. The top half of his head sat on a pile of bloody newspapers, looking like a hairy pottery bowl.

Before I sicked up my Budweiser breakfast, I saw two things that will stay with me until my dying day, and probably beyond even that.

The first was the teethmarks that had been left in the pinkish-gray brain matter of Purnell's battered skull.

The second was Jack Johnson's sky-blue eyeball, staring up at us from next to the garbage can.

+ + +

When the dead started showing up this time, 'most everything was different. The corpses on the beach were just as bad as the crew from four decades ago for stinking and losing body parts—but at least this time no one living has gone missing. Back in '60 we'd lost almost a dozen folks before we could get the situation under control. We'd been able to keep the reporters and the other authorities away. Only Sheriff Johnson knew about the zombies back then, and he hadn't been keen on letting anyone outside of the Long Beach community know that his brother Jack was a "zomber" with a taste for brains. We kept it hushed up, for our own good.

Seems to have worked out alright. This time no tourists have turned up dead, with their heads cracked open like walnuts, missing most of the gray shit that makes up people's brains. At least not yet.

The zombies came this time just for the surfing, and nothing more.

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I take full responsibility for that. I was the one who taught 'em how to surf. Goes to show you *can* teach an old dog new tricks, even if that old dog is dead. Or undead—however you wanna call it.

Nobody else was having any sort of luck keeping the zombies under control. You could shoot 'em or stab 'em with

a filleting knife, but they didn't even flinch. If you were close enough to stab at 'em you were probably a goner anyway. We didn't figure out until it was almost too late that we should've been aiming at their heads the whole time.

After four of us young punks got killed by the zombies, and I'd taken the worst beating of my life from Marty's Great-aunt Esther (dead of a stroke in '38), we had to regroup and find some other way to keep the zombies from chowing on our brains like undead stoners with the munchies. If the outside world heard about this, the town would shrivel up and die, and we'd be good as dead then ourselves.

It was me who came up with the idea of surfing. I loved it, I figured, so why wouldn't the dead? If there was a heaven, I figured it had clear skies and monster waves all day and night.

So we taught the zombies to surf. They took right to it, even though their bodies were never as coordinated as they'd been while they were alive. At least we didn't have to worry about anyone drowning.

Old Bob had the idea of collecting the brains from the fish we caught off the pier to give the dead to eat, sort of a good-will gesture, and they went along with it. For the rest of fall, nobody else went missing or showed up with a scooped-out skull. The zombies surfed up to the start of winter, until another tropical storm blew up in November. They made one last surf as the storm passed over, and then they went to rest again back in their waterlogged graves, settling their coffin lids and surfboards back on top of them like blankets.

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This has been the summer for surfing, that's for sure. The waves have been unbelievable, bringing with 'em the biggest fish I've ever caught. Just last week I pulled in a fifteen-pound king mackerel from off the pier and nearly pissed myself. I was getting ready to fillet it up after Lou took my picture with it when I smelled the stink of zombie on the fish. I tossed it over the side of the pier, hoping no one saw me do it.

I should have known then that the dead had overstayed their visit once again. I continued to ignore 'em, I really did, but they were affecting my livelihood now. A man's got to fish, and a man's got to eat.

Some of the other guys were noticing it, too. Most of the fish we caught went back over the side after a quick weighing and measuring. The too-sweet stink of rot was on our hands, and we couldn't get it off no matter how much we wiped 'em on our shorts and shirts.

Like I said before, I've always been one to let things be. If I got hungry enough I could cook the hell out of the fish I caught and choke down the zombie-tainted meat. If I had to. In fact I'd almost resigned myself to this two days ago when I heard a gaggle of our young girls on the beach. They were all screaming and pointing at the ocean.

Now, let me explain something to you about a man and fishing. If his concentration is just right, with the sun keeping his head warm and the fish keeping the muscles in his arms tense, you can drop a nuclear bomb on the bait house behind him and he'd only check his lines and maybe blink once or twice. So I'm not too surprised that I'd never noticed it had gotten so bad with the zombies.

Anyway, after hearing the commotion, I set down my reel like I was in slow motion, like it was the last time I'd ever see it, and I turned to look at the beach, where the girls were still screaming.

The ocean was *thick* with the goddamn redneck surfer zombies.

They were perched on top of their coffin lids, leaning into the waves from the back half of the lid, just like I'd taught 'em decades ago. It was as if they had some sort of Stick-Em keeping 'em attached to their lids, because not a single one fell off.

And that was when I noticed that all the zombies were aiming in the same direction, their surf lids pointed toward a circle of blood fifty yards beyond where the waves broke.

Old Bob was already running down the pier toward the beach, with Mort and Lymon busting a gut trying to keep up. I dropped my line, grabbed the pneumatic spear-fishing gun from the crow's nest upstairs, and did the best swan dive off the side of the pier that a seventy-six-year-old redneck could do, right into the salty waves. I thought I'd broken my neck until I resurfaced, eyes stinging and head reeling.

"Shoot 'em in the head," Marty had told me all those years ago. "It's the only way to take 'em out. . . ."

We'd been smoking and drinking all night on the beach, watching the corpses surf in the moonlight. Marty was leaving for Fort Leavenwood the next week for basic training, and then he'd be off to Vietnam a few years later, waiting for his encounters with acid and the tripwire.

"Blow their brains out, huh?" I finished off my bottle of beer and launched it at out at dead Purnell out there surfing. He was barely a month dead. It smacked him in the chest and knocked a chunk of gray flesh into the waves with a soft *plop*.

"Yeah. Go for the head," Marty said, nodding. "Spread

their brains out all over the place, so they can't put 'em back together."

Years later, after catching a midnight showing of *Night of the Living Dead*, I'd wondered if that George Romero fella had been out to Long Beach that summer, checking out the situation, maybe even talking to Marty. In any case, Marty had been right about the head shots. They stopped the ones that wouldn't leave the locals alone, and motivated the rest to pick another hobby. The zombies were much more interested in learning to surf once we blew off a few rotting heads.

As I swam through the waves after taking my dive off the pier, my old heart pounding in my ribs, I thought about Marty and all the others from Long Beach, including those of my friends who were now zombies. I wished there had been enough of ol' Marty left for 'em to ship back to us. He always loved catching a good wave.

Half a minute later I was there, outside a ring of thirty surf lids, each holding one zombie apiece. They were surrounding the bloody froth, watching the struggle with dumb, blank faces.

"Get back," I shouted, raising the gun and aiming it at the closest zombie. The coppery stink of blood was in the air, mixed with the zombie's odor of rot and the salty spray of the waves. I dog-paddled my way to the middle of the coffin lids and saw that the struggling had stopped. I lowered the spear gun and waited. Just like that, a zombie's head and shoulders lifted from the water, followed by the lifeless body of Janie Winters, covered in blood.

"Bastards!" I screamed as I pulled the trigger of the pneumatic gun.

I probably would have taken off the head of the zombie holding Janie, sending her under again, if the zombie closest to the two of 'em—Purnell Austin, actually, of all damn people—hadn't thrown himself in front of the spear and caught it with the back of his head. The spear got stuck in his skull, but still managed to scatter most of his face. The zombies closest to him were showered with whitened bits of brain and dried strips of brown flesh.

"Daaaa-aaamn," Alfie, the car wreck zombie, said in his guttural voice. "Why'd ya do thaaaa-aaat?"

Just like the summer of '60, it made me want to retch, having to kill someone who used to be my neighbor. But just like last time, they'd left me no choice. Or so I thought.

I dropped the gun when Janie moaned. A jagged gash ran the length of her thin arm, and that's when I realized how close I had come to making a huge mistake.

Blinking saltwater and sweat out of my eyes, I saw what had really been going on. The corpse of an eight-foot-long shark floated behind the zombie holding Janie, its side peppered with bloody, fist-sized holes. Four of the zombies had been torn to shreds fighting off the shark, which had gone after Janie, but they'd survive.

Well, maybe *survive* isn't the right word. But you know what I mean.

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We made an agreement, the zombies and us living folks. They can come surfing every couple of years during the low season, long as they leave when we ask 'em to and stick to eating fish—not human—brains. Otherwise, us humans will start digging up graves and blowing off some zombie heads.

To our shock, they agreed, even though I could tell it was killing 'em—ha ha ha—to leave the waves behind for the year. The surfing is *that* good 'round here.

And hey, if they're willing to keep the waters shark-free for their surfing pleasure, that's fine with us.

Janie is doing better, and is likely to get most of the movement back in her arm after the shark bite heals. She stays on the shore all the time these days, concentrating on her tan instead of swimming or surfing.

Meanwhile, I keep a close eye on the cemeteries from here to Southport, as well as the Weather Channel. You never know what the next hurricane might stir up, and I can't say I'm partial to cooking my fish until the taste of zombie is fried out of it.

But, at the same time, I know I'm getting on in years, and I'm sort of looking forward to surfing again someday soon.

Got a coffin lid all picked out, too.

NIGHT SHIFT

REBECCA BROCK

"We got a problem upstairs!"

I didn't have to even ask. I knew what Sharon was talking about. It had to be Tina, one of the new kids who had been assigned to the shelter just a day before all this shit started. She was thirteen years old and already had a ladder of scars up both wrists. We were supposed to be keeping her on suicide watch, but all of a sudden we had a few more pressing issues to keep us occupied. The life or death of one emotionally fucked up kid wasn't quite the priority that it used to be.

I glanced over my shoulder to Sharon, but I couldn't get away from the door; at that moment, the only thing between us and about twenty or so screaming dead people was me. Of all the nights for me to come in early. . . .

"What happened?" I shouted as I worked on nailing a thick piece of plywood over the entrance. Thank God we'd been in the middle of replacing a section of the kitchen floor when all this started. I didn't like to think of what would be happening right now if we hadn't had plywood and nails lying around.

"Tina broke a mirror," Sharon said. She stared warily at the rotted hands grasping through the holes in the boarded windows, then moved closer anyway. I had to give her credit for that.

"And?" I missed my mark and slammed the hammer into the back of a gray-green hand. Bone crunched, but there was no scream of pain. Bastards didn't feel *anything*.

"And she slit her wrists," Sharon said, keeping her voice low so the other kids couldn't hear her. I doubted any of them would have cared anyway. Most of them were only worried about their own asses.

"Is she dead?"

Sharon nodded. I knew she was probably feeling guilty. She'd been a relief worker for a couple years longer than me, and she was the type of person who actually cared about the messed up kids we had to deal with, even the ones who threatened to kill her. If the world hadn't been ending all around us, she'd be torn up over Tina's death. All it meant to me was that we had to get the kid out of the house.

I looked around. Danny and Larry were taking care of the porch-level windows, using bookshelves they'd pulled off the walls for a makeshift barrier. Joanie was piling up boxes of canned food from the pantry. We'd decided to try to hole up in the attic for as long as it took for help to find us. *If they found us.* I wasn't holding out much hope for any saviors to arrive.

"Sean! Take over!" I yelled, tossing the hammer over to one of the bigger guys, a surly teenager who was now so pale his zits seemed to glow against his skin. He'd been placed in the children's shelter because one day he'd decided he didn't like the way his mother treated him, so he grabbed her hair while she was driving and slammed her head into the side window. I didn't like Sean and he didn't like me, but since I outweighed him by a good fifty pounds and stood a foot taller than him, he stayed out of my way.

"Sean! Now!"

He acted like he didn't want to get close enough to the door to start pounding nails, so I grabbed him by the neck of his T-shirt and held him close enough to get a feel of the dead hands reaching through the openings between the boards. "Get your ass going or I swear to God I'll throw you out there."

Sean got to work.

The entire shelter was in chaos. We'd been at full capacity when the trouble started: six girls and four boys, with four counselors—Sharon, Danny, Larry, and Joanie—to handle them until the night shift arrived. I made it five. Most of the girls had become either catatonic or screechy, useless for anything but attracting more of those fuckers outside. The boys were trying to hold on to their tough-guy attitude, but most had already pissed their pants once they saw what was just outside the door. A couple of them still thought they were badasses, Sean being the worst of the bunch. I could tell that they were just waiting for their chance to do something. I wasn't looking forward to the time when I'd have to give them some kind of weapon. They'd be more likely to use it on me than on the dead things.

We were between shifts when the first ones showed up outside the house. Sharon had called me before that and asked if I could come in a couple of hours early to help with some of the troublemakers. Like everybody else, I'd heard the news reports about weird shit happening in other parts of the country, but I hadn't paid much attention to it. There'd been so much of it lately that I'd tuned it out.

Goddamn it. If I'd just waited to come in, I would have been home when it started. . . .

But I couldn't think about home. I couldn't think about what might be happening there.

"What are we going to do about Tina?" Sharon asked. I could hear the panicky rise of her voice. She was close to losing it. I couldn't blame her if she did; she'd left her kids with a sitter and wasn't able to get anyone on the phone before the lines went dead. I was surprised she'd lasted this long.

"How long has it been?" I asked as I ran for the steps.

"I don't know—two, maybe three hours. I lost track of her once everything started." Sharon caught my arm before I could go into the girls' bedroom. "Eddie . . . what are we going to do?"

"We need to get her out of the house and—"

"Not that. The kids."

I didn't know what to tell her. What *could* I tell her? That everything was going to be all right? That we just had to sit tight and wait for the cops to come and escort everybody home? I didn't even know if we still had homes to go to. Whatever was happening was happening fast. We still had power, but I didn't figure that would last for much longer. The scraps of news I was able to overhear on TV made it sound like everywhere had it just as bad as what we were dealing with here. The world had gone to hell and there wasn't anything anybody could do to stop it.

But before I could say any of that to Sharon, I heard something thump against the floor on the other side of the bedroom door, a slap like raw meat hitting concrete. Sharon and I looked at each other. I think we both knew, but didn't want to believe it.

"I thought you said—"

"I checked her pulse. She'd bled out. . . ." Sharon took a step away from the door. "I *know* she was dead."

The door shook in its hinges as the thing on the other side threw its weight against it. Underneath the shrill screams, the grunts and groans, I could hear it scratching at the wood with its nails, like it could claw its way through to get to us.

Downstairs, glass shattered. A couple of the kids screamed.

"Shit!" I ran for the stairs. "Keep her in there!"

Sharon made a grab for the doorknob just as it began to turn. "Eddie! She's opening the door!"

Down below, the dead things were pushing their way through a broken window. One of them had already gotten halfway in, its stomach caught on a piece of jagged glass. Behind me, Sharon held onto the doorknob, trying to keep Tina from opening the door from the inside.

Fuck.

I ran back to Sharon and shoved her away from the door. "Get down there with the kids. Now!"

The door opened as soon as Sharon let go of the knob. I felt the impact of the thing before I even saw it launch itself out of the bedroom. I couldn't think of anything but keeping those teeth away from me. I grabbed Tina by the hair and yanked her head back, hard, turning it around as I forced her down the long hallway, toward the window at the far end. It didn't take much to throw her through the glass. Tina hadn't been a very big girl.

By the time I got back downstairs, the dead thing that had been caught on the glass had managed to get inside. It came at me. For a second I couldn't react. The guy's face looked like it had been ripped off and eaten. Its nose was gone, a gaping hole right in the middle of its face. Its cheeks were ragged and torn. Intestines hung from its slashed gut. It reached for me and I could see that chunks of its arms had been torn away. There were teethmarks in its skin.

Before the thing could touch me, I grabbed its arm and yanked it behind its back, putting it in one of the restraint positions we used on the kids, forcing it to the floor. It kept twisting its head around, hoping to take a chunk out of me, so I did the only thing I could do: I slammed its head into the floor as hard as I could, over and over again, until I could hear the bones shattering and feel its skull caving in beneath my hand. I didn't stop until it quit moving.

And then I realized how quiet it had gotten. I looked around. Sharon had gathered the kids together and was herding them toward the steps. Joanie looked like she was just about to break, twitching at every creak of the boards on the porch, a Bible clutched to her chest. Danny stood at the door, watching the dirt road in front of the house. The shelter was at the top of a hill, one road in and out. If we could get to the van . . .

No. No way that was going to happen. The kids couldn't be controlled. I'd already seen a couple of the boys palming kitchen knives when they thought nobody was watching. They wouldn't be thinking of anything but getting their own asses out of here. And I didn't particularly want to end up with a knife blade between my shoulders.

"What's happening?" Larry asked quietly. His voice sounded raw. It was the first time since it had all started that any of us had had a chance to think about it. "What are those things?"

"It's Judgement Day," Joanie whispered. "The dead are rising up from their graves to punish the sinners."

"Shut up, Joanie." I went to the door and took a look outside. There were five or six of the things shuffling around on the front lawn, moving in and out of the porch lights' orange glow. I moved to the side, pressing my face against the boards so I could look down the road. The moon was full, so I could see clearly enough to count at least seven more on their way. Shit. . . .

"Start moving the food and water upstairs," I said, not looking away from the advancing dead things. I knew they were dead. They had to be dead. Some of them had been torn up pretty bad—guts hanging out of their bellies, faces shredded, limbs missing. They were dead, but they didn't look like they'd ever been buried. I just couldn't figure out how it all started so fast. And why we never had any warning.

"What about the basement?" Danny asked. "We might be safer—"

"Fine. Go down to the basement." I looked away from the window long enough to stare hard at Danny. "But I'm getting my ass up to the attic when the time comes. I don't care what you want to do."

The rumbling of an engine caught us all by surprise. I looked out again, joined by Sharon and Larry. The dead things were gone. For a minute all I could see was headlights, then I recognized Bob Carson's pickup truck as it bounced up the rutted road. Bob worked night shift with me. I hadn't realized it was so late.

But why the hell was he coming in to work? Why bother, unless—?

I hurried to flip on the outdoor floodlights and then almost immediately wished I hadn't. I could see the look on his face as he stopped the truck just in front of the sidewalk leading up to the porch. The man was scared shitless. The grill of his truck was covered with blood and meat and bits of hair. I didn't want to know what he'd seen on his way in. He must have thought he'd be safer here.

Bob looked both ways, saw that it was clear, and moved to open the truck's door.

"Don't get out!" I yelled, knowing he couldn't hear me. I grabbed a hammer and started prying loose the boards so he could get inside. Just because he couldn't see any of those things didn't mean they weren't out there. Fuckers were probably hiding in the dark. Just waiting.

Bob jumped out of the truck and hit the ground running.

And it was like he'd triggered some kind of alarm, because as soon as he was three steps from the truck cab they came at him, all of them at once.

"Help me!" I shouted to Larry and Danny. They didn't move, unable to look away from what was going on outside. Joanie was just as useless, spouting out prayers and bits of some godawful hymn, crying and singing and babbling all at once.

One of the boards finally gave way and I looked over to see that Sharon was prying out nails alongside me. I chanced another look outside. Bob was surrounded by the things. He pushed them aside and took the porch steps two at a time, just barely getting away from their grasping hands. He looked at me. I think he knew he wasn't going to make it.

"Let me in!" He threw his weight against the front door, rattling the doorknob, crying as he pounded at the wood. Behind him, five of the dead things closed in. One of them was a little girl holding a Raggedy Ann doll. I had the crazy thought that she shouldn't be out so late.

Two boards were down. Three left to go. We weren't going to make it. I looked around and saw that one of the porch windows was covered by a tabletop. Larry and Danny had used it to cover the hole where the thing had gotten inside earlier.

"Bob! Go to the left window! Now!"

I sprinted over to the window and managed to pull off the tabletop with my bare hands. I smashed out the rest of the glass with my hammer and leaned out. One of the things was on me in an instant. It grabbed me by the hair and yanked my head to the side, scraping my throat against the wood of the windowsill. I felt splinters go in. I swung the hammer and caught it in the wrist, shattering the bones with just enough force to make it let go of me. I swung again and buried the hammer's claw end between its eyes. It went down, stayed down.

Bob came barreling around the corner of the porch. He'd been bitten a couple of times. His T-shirt was soaked with blood. The things were right behind him, moving faster than dead people had a right to move—as if dead people had a right to move at all. I heard footsteps to my left and saw more of the bastards coming at the window. Fuck. There were probably fifteen of them on the porch alone.

"Jesus, Bob! Come on!" I reached for him and he made a lunge for my hand. I ducked back into the house, pulling him along with me. One of the things, an old woman with knitting needles sticking out of her throat, had grabbed him around

the waist and was gnawing at his belly. Bob screamed. It was the worst sound I have ever heard in my life.

I think I was crying at that point, but all I could think about was getting Bob inside, away from the things that were biting and chewing and ripping at him. I pulled, but they pulled back, like it was a tug-of-war with Bob as the prize. One of the things bit into his throat and an arc of blood sprayed out, hitting me full in the face.

He was looking at me when he died. And I think Bob knew exactly when I let go of his hand and let them have him. In those last seconds, I don't think he forgave me.

"Help me," I said to someone, anyone. I lifted the tabletop and put it back into place, hammering one nail after another as quickly as I could, smelling Bob's blood on my hands. Tasting it in my mouth. The claw of the hammer was covered with something black and thick. Brains, I guessed.

Sharon had managed to snap Danny and Larry out of their shock, and they all helped me secure the window. The things outside were too preoccupied with their catch to worry about storming the house for a while. I don't know if the others had realized it yet, but we were fucked.

"I can't stay here," Danny said abruptly, backing away from all of us. He looked at me and I swear to God his eyes were just blank. They looked like the eyes of the things outside the house.

"Where are you going to go?" I asked, wiping my hands on my jeans, using the sleeve of my shirt to wipe Bob's blood off my face. I spat to clear the saltiness of it out of my mouth. "We've got to get upstairs—"

Danny shook his head. "I gotta get out of here, man."

"You can't—"

"You're not stopping me, Ed." Danny stepped forward, the hammer in his hand. He didn't raise it, didn't threaten, but I could tell that he'd use it on me, and happily, if I got between him and the door. "Come with me. We've got a chance if we stay together."

Sharon and I looked at each other. I could see that she was tempted.

"What about the kids?" I asked quietly.

"What? You're going to stay here and protect a bunch of punks and junkies? Fuck 'em, man." Danny shook his head. "I've got to get home."

Larry stood by the window, looking at the front porch through a small opening in the boards. "I think you can get to your car, but you've gotta go now."

Danny looked at me. "You coming?"

I wanted to go. Any other time I would have gone. I hated the job. Hated the night shift. Hated the parade of juvenile sex offenders and drug addicts and petty criminals that I saw walk through here on a daily basis. There wasn't a single damn thing to make me stay.

But they were kids. In the end, they were just a bunch of scared kids.

"I gotta go," Danny said. "Come on while they're distracted."

"You'll be safer here," I said, knowing it was probably not true. Danny began tearing down the rest of the wood covering a broken window, making a hole big enough to crawl through. "We can barricade ourselves upstairs—"

"And then what? Starve to death? Fuck that, man. I'll take my chances out there." Danny hesitated at the window, looking at us like he might have wanted us to stop him.

And then he was gone, through the hole and onto the porch. He jumped down the porch steps and made a mad run for the parking lot. I actually thought he might make it . . . until he dropped his keys at the car door. Even before the pack of the things moved, I could see them in the darkness, just waiting. Their eyes caught the light and glowed like cats' eyes. I think Joanie saw them, too, because she screamed.

And then they pounced.

I turned away from the window and closed my eyes for a second. Joanie's screams got the girls started again, but even underneath all their noise, I could still hear Danny crying out. And I could hear them ripping and tearing and . . . eating him.

I picked up a hammer and a board and propped it against the open space. "Somebody help me fix this hole."

+ + +

The movies got it all wrong. The bad things didn't end just because the sun came up. By daylight there were even more of the dead people milling around the shelter. So far, by some dumb luck, the barricades were still holding at the doors and windows. It helped that they'd stopped banging on the boards so much, probably because they couldn't smell us anymore. We'd moved the kids and supplies up to the attic as soon as we finished plugging up the holes and reinforcing everything.

I spent the rest of the night sitting at the window, watching it all like I was God or something. I saw Danny rise up and take his place with the others. It looked like he was missing about ten pounds of flesh, most of it from his chest and stomach. Once I thought he looked up and saw me, but no way that

could happen. Those things didn't think like that. They couldn't feel. They just attacked. And ate. They didn't have any human intelligence left. And despite Joanie's praying and hymn singing, I didn't think they had any souls, either.

The kids finally settled down at dawn, curling up in old sleeping bags against the far wall. I wasn't worried too much about the girls, but something wasn't right with Sean and his gang. I kept seeing nervous looks pass between them, kept hearing whispers. There were just four of them—all but Sean barely big enough to reach my armpit—but if they decided to pull a stunt while Larry, Sharon, and me were distracted . . .

"I hope it was quick."

I looked up. Sharon was standing beside me, staring out past the parking lot, past the milling crowd of dead people in the yard.

"You hope what was quick?" I rubbed at my eyes. It felt like someone had sprinkled ground glass into them.

"My kids." Sharon looked over at me and smiled sadly. "I know they're not alive. I don't think Abby would have known what to do to protect them."

The matter-of-fact tone of her voice bothered me. Her eyes were red and swollen, and I'd heard her crying quietly all night, once we'd gotten settled in the attic. But the fact that she'd actually accepted that there was no hope made me wonder if it wouldn't have been kinder to all of us to just open the doors and get it over with. Why fight so hard when there was nothing to win?

"I just can't stand not being sure," Sharon said, still staring out to the road, to the escape so close but so out of our reach. "I keep imagining all these different ways that it might have happened. And I can hear them screaming—" Sharon's voice, thick with sudden tears, trembled. "And I can see those things . . . tearing at them. Oh, God. . . ."

She covered her face with her hands and I could tell that whatever strength she'd once possessed had finally run out. As she sank to the floor, rocking back and forth, wailing loud enough to wake the kids, I thought I should do something for her. Put my arms around her. Try to comfort her. Something.

But I didn't. There was no comfort to be found anywhere, least of all with me. I had my own dead to mourn. I'd left a pregnant wife and my mother at home, all because my damn job needed me. I should have been there, protecting them, instead of here, with these strangers, these people I didn't even like.

I could have comforted Sharon, lied to her and told her that

everything would be all right, but I didn't. Instead, I went over to the pile of supplies to ration out the morning meal.

+ + +

It didn't take long for the kids' natural tendencies to kick back into gear. By darkfall of that first day in the attic, boredom overtook them, what with no Playstation games or MTV to keep their short attention spans occupied. To entertain themselves they stole food from each other, fought, made crude weapons out of jagged metal lids. Two of the girls came to blows over a piece of lukewarm Spam.

And then there was Sean.

He knew he had Larry cowed. Larry came from the "we just need to reach them emotionally" school of counseling and always wanted to know how the kids were *feeling*, what they were *thinking*. It was horseshit and I knew it and the kids knew it. There were dozens of nights when they had to call me in to settle down fights on Larry's shift because he didn't want to get in the middle of a couple of prepubescent punks.

Joanie was just as bad, only she used religion as her bludgeon. The kids had learned to steer clear of doing anything in front of Joanie because if she caught them it would mean two hours of Bible study and an hour and a half of preaching and sermonizing to hammer her point home. The kids despised her. None of them respected what little authority she managed to have. They knew they could get away with murder, as long as they paid lip service to God and prayed a little with her. Then she'd forgive them and they'd be free to do whatever the hell they wanted.

By full dark, Joanie and Sharon seemed to have switched personalities. Sharon couldn't stop crying and Joanie discovered that this was the moment for which she had been waiting and praying all her life: the Rapture. I tried not to listen to her ranting, but she had a couple of the girls mesmerized with her stories of Apocalypse and the dead rising up for their final judgment. I didn't care what she wanted to believe, didn't care what she wanted to do, but it was pissing me off to see her wasting our drinking water by using it to baptize the girls.

The situation was getting worse by the minute. I couldn't stop thinking about Beth and Mom. Like Sharon, I kept imagining what had happened to them, what they might have done when the dead came to our door. We live in a little house about five minutes away from the shelter; I know that whatever brought those things here would have brought them to my home, too.

Beth was six months pregnant. We would have had a little girl.

I knew better than to think that they were still alive.

But I had to know for sure. All through that first day, the thoughts kept eating at me. Even though I knew they were gone, could feel that they were gone, I didn't know for sure. And it was killing me. It felt like an itch right in the middle of my back. My hands and feet twitched with wanting to move, to go, to get away.

Instead, I agreed to take the first watch. Around ten or so, with nothing better to do, everyone else had finally gone to sleep. Sharon was edging past grief and into catatonia, curled up in the far corner of the attic. Joanie and her two disciples slept with open Bibles lying across their chests like shields. Sean and the others slept huddled together like wild dogs on the other side of the room.

This was what I had chosen over my family.

"You're going to go, aren't you?"

Sharon was awake, watching me from her corner. Until she said the words, I hadn't actually thought I could do it.

"Yeah," I said softly. "I am."

"Will you check on Jamie and Lisa for me?" Sharon smiled slightly and shook her head. Even in the darkness, I could see that there was something wrong with that smile. "I know they're probably up past their bedtimes. They love to stay up late."

I nodded, not really knowing what else to do. "I'll check on them for you."

"Good. And tell them Mommy's going to be a little late, okay? They worry about me if I don't tell them when I'm coming home."

I stood and quietly opened the window. From the attic I could climb right out onto the porch roof. Then it was just a few feet to the ground. I could make it, easy, as long as I had plenty of room between me and the dead things.

I felt for my keys. I'd have to get them out before making the drop. My car was just a few feet from the porch. I could make it. I know I could.

"And tell them Mommy loves them," Sharon whispered, already falling asleep again. She was sleeping more and more now. I guessed that was better; being asleep beat the hell out of being conscious.

I ducked out the window, hesitating with one leg out and one still inside. I felt like a coward taking off in the middle of the night and leaving them, but I knew that the downstairs was

secure enough to buy them at least a few more days. There was enough food to last them if they were careful, and the kids had Larry and Joanie to watch over them. I wasn't leaving them high and dry. Hell, if anything, I would be helping them more by leaving. Maybe I could find the cops or the National Guard, get everybody out before the food ran dry or the barricades gave way.

That's what I was thinking as I climbed out. I almost had myself believing it, too.

+ + +

It felt weird being outside again. Almost wrong. The smell of those things was overwhelming, like a slaughterhouse at high noon. As I made my way down the incline of the roof, I could hear their moans and gasps. It almost sounded like they were talking to each other. The thought of them being smart enough to communicate, smart enough to group together and hunt in packs, made my stomach feel hollow and greasy. I'd brought a baseball bat as a weapon. Now, as I got closer to those walking dead men, the Louisville Slugger didn't seem nearly enough. A fully loaded Uzi wouldn't have been enough.

I scooted down the last bit of roof. One jump to the ground and then a few feet to the right and I'd be at my car. By my count there were three of the things that might give me trouble. Otherwise, it was a clear shot.

I fished the keys out of my pocket and got ready. And then I jumped.

There were a dozen of the them grouped together on the porch, and I think I surprised them as much as they surprised me. I was running for my car before they could move. I managed to duck two of the three I'd been worried about, but the third got close enough to touch me. Their hands aren't cold, but room temperature warm. And they feel wet—from the decay, I guess. When they touch you, you feel like you've been marked, tagged for them to get later. They had all the time in the world.

I tried not to think as I ran those few feet to the car. I had my keys in a deathgrip. I'd played out the scene in my mind: *Hit the door. Unlock it. Slide into the front seat. Close and lock the doors. Drive home as fast as you can.* All the things I should have done when the shit first started.

I dodged and weaved. Finally, the upper half of an old woman, which I'd missed from my vantage on the roof somehow, was the only dead thing between me and my car door, and I managed to jump over its grasping hands without it

even touching me. I looked around as I shakily unlocked the door. The closest ones were still a good ten feet away. I had time. I couldn't believe how easy it was proving to be.

The door opened and I dove inside my car, locking up even as I made sure all the windows were up. Then I took a second to close my eyes and breathe. I'd been holding my breath since jumping down from the roof. My chest burned. My hands felt locked in a deathgrip around my keys and the baseball bat. I had to force myself to unclench my muscles. Unless the fuckers could chew through glass and steel, I was safe for a minute.

They surrounded the car, throwing themselves on the hood, smearing their gray flesh on the windows as they scratched at the glass. Their moaning was even louder now, and I had the feeling that they were calling others of their kind. Their strength was in numbers, and with enough help, they might be able to break a window or even flip a car. Then I'd be trapped, helpless, and they could just crawl in with me and—

That was all I needed to imagine.

The car started on the first attempt. I hadn't even considered that it wouldn't. I edged forward slowly at first, but the stupid things refused to move. They were deliberately blocking my way.

I floored it.

The dead things went down like grass under a mower. And God help me, but it felt good to hear their bones cracking beneath my wheels. I think I was laughing as I plowed through them. Maybe I was crying. I don't know. There doesn't seem much difference between the two now.

I went home.

+ + +

No one was there.

I cut the engine but left the keys in the ignition and the door unlocked. The house's front door was gone. All the windows were broken. Every light was on.

But nothing moved. Not even the dead things. They'd taken what they'd wanted and moved on.

I shouldn't have gone inside, but I couldn't help myself. I knew that there was no chance Beth or Mom was alive, but I had to be certain. I knew I'd never be able to sleep again if there was even a chance that I'd walked away and left them hurt or dying inside our own home.

I never thought about what I'd do if I found them any other way.

The house was absolutely still. I think that bothered me more than the splintered doors or the smears of blood and God-knew-what along the walls. I searched every room. The fuckers had been everywhere. There was nowhere Mom and Beth could have hidden. Even if I had been home, I don't think I could have made this place safe for us.

The only room I couldn't go in was the nursery. From the doorway I could see that there was blood on the walls, smeared into the rainbow-patterned wallpaper that Beth had loved. They'd died in there. And they were probably walking around somewhere right now. Beth and the baby still inside her. Mom.

Dead, but not really gone. I had no illusions.

I spent the rest of the night curled up in the hall, just outside the nursery, staring at the bloody splatters all over those rainbows, wondering which was Beth's and which was Mom's.

And after a while, like an idiot, I slept.

+ + +

It was dusk when I woke up again. I think I'd half-hoped that the dead things would find me while I was asleep. They didn't. I was still alive. But now I knew what I had to do.

It didn't take long for me to find everything I needed. I boxed up all the canned food in the pantry, all the bottled water and juices and Coke that we had. I grabbed flashlights and batteries, my old camping gear, blankets and pillows, everything I thought I could use, and loaded it all in my trunk.

I slammed the trunk and looked back at my house. We'd only been living there a few months. Not enough time to create a bunch of sentimental memories.

So there was one more thing I had to do before going back up to the shelter.

I went around to the back, where I kept the kerosene grill. I'd just barbecued steaks for us a couple of nights ago, before the world began to end.

It was an old house. It'd burn quick.

I just wanted it gone.

+ + +

The fire drew the dead. I sat in my car for a long time, watching the flames, listening to the static on the radio. No broadcasts. Not a surprise. I don't think I wanted to know what was going on in the cities.

The things stood as close to the fire as they could. A few of them got too close and went up like they'd been soaked in gasoline. On the far side of the house, just behind the ruined

wall of the nursery, one of the things watched me instead of the flames. I stared at her for a long, long time. I remembered the pink nightgown and fuzzy houseshoes. The glasses hanging around her neck by a thick gold chain.

Mom. She'd come home.

I didn't want to stick around long enough to see if Beth had come with her.

+ + +

By the time I got back to the shelter, it was too late.

Dead things swarmed everywhere, pouring into the front door, through the windows. And there were so many of them now. More than I could handle with my baseball bat or my car. I wondered where they all came from, why they were drawn to the shelter.

Then I saw the bodies.

And I knew what they had done.

The little shits had gone "Lord of the Flies" up in that attic.

Joanie had been nailed to the slope of the roof, crucified just out of reach of the things. Whether she died of blood loss or shock, it didn't really matter now. She'd come back as one of them, and she was still pinned to the roof, struggling against the nails in her wrists and hands and feet. I didn't think it was the kind of resurrection she'd always imagined.

I stared so long at Joanie's snapping, snarling corpse that I didn't even notice Larry's body at first. Sean and the others had tied a rope around his feet and dangled him out of the attic window, letting him dip low enough to be devoured by the dead. I'll never know exactly what they did to him, but I've thought about it every night since. I imagined them toying with Larry, who none of them had ever liked. I imagined them keeping him alive for a long time, letting the dead things tear chunks out of his body and then pulling him just out of reach, so his blood would drip and splatter and make the things even more frenzied. . . .

And then I saw the rest. They'd joined the walking dead gathered beneath Larry's corpse. Bob. Danny. And now two of the girls who had huddled with Joanie and her Bible. The girls dragged themselves on broken legs, their heads cocked at unnatural angles. I guessed that they had objected to Sean's fun and games and gotten themselves thrown out the attic window for their troubles.

I don't remember much of what happened next. I don't remember getting out of the car. I don't remember swinging the bat at any of the dead things that got too close. I don't

remember opening the trunk and getting out the can of kerosene. I don't remember any of that.

I just remember looking up at that window and seeing Sean leaning out, laughing along with the other kids who'd stayed safe in the barricaded attic. And I remember the thing Sean held, dangling by its hair. I remember how its eyes still seemed to see, how its mouth still opened and closed and silently screamed. They'd killed her and let her come back. They hadn't even had the decency to let her stay dead.

I got close enough to splash kerosene on the front porch. Close enough to toss a match. Close enough to hear them screaming inside when the flames began to feed and rise.

I hoped Sharon had been sleeping when it happened, that she hadn't felt any pain. I hoped she'd been dreaming of her kids.

BRIGHT ANGELS

K. Z. PERRY

"Wait until you see our Bright Angels." Ms. Darth's cheerful voice carried in from the hallway. Her hair was woven into an elaborate bun, a basket of long brown braids held together by copper hairpins that sparkled as she ushered Mr. and Mrs. Carlson into her office. "You'll find we have a wonderful selection today."

With her face hidden behind dark glasses, Mrs. Carlson sniffed nervously, as if she was expecting a foul aroma. But the air smelled pleasant, of fresh coffee and the pink roses that were arranged in a centerpiece next to a plate of short-bread cookies. Mrs. Carlson hesitated in front of the tropical fish tank to watch the neon tetras dart around a hot pink coral castle, and removed her glasses, folding them into a stylish leather purse. Although she was attractive, with full pink lips and a tiny nose, dark, puffy circles beneath her eyes gave her face a worn look, as though she had been crying or going without sleep. Her husband, trailing in behind her, fiddled with the clasp on his umbrella until it exploded open, spraying water across the leg of his charcoal suit and onto the mahogany desk at the center of the room.

Ms. Darth appeared not to notice as Mr. Carlson fumbled to close the umbrella. Instead, she smiled warmly, her high cheekbones flushed with color. "Would you care to see our little darlings?"

Ten Bright Angel children between the ages of two and nine filed into the room and stiffly lined up against the shadows on the wall. Each child wore a white oxford shirt with cuffed blue slacks. The boys' hair was parted neatly to one side while the girls clasped theirs behind their ears with a silver barrette. A few clutched a small toy in their hands: a red ball, a plastic stegosaurus, and an orange pen with the latest Zipman logo running down the side.

Ms. Darth smoothed the hair of the tallest blond boy. The veins beneath his grayish skin appeared so blue they gave him a purple pallor. "We call him Andrei, our latest tuberculosis from Romania." His wide gray eyes stared intensely without blinking.

"From China we have two drownings: Li and Gong."

Two petite girls with straight black hair and greenish skin mechanically stepped forward. Li demurely cupped her hands together, as if she were begging, and nodded. Both had the standard intense Bright Angel eyes that reminded Mrs. Carlson of a tombstone.

"Excuse me," Mrs. Carlson fingered an opal locket, a scalloped heart perfectly centered at her neckline. "Must we know how they passed?"

"For the most part the rejuvenation process cannot remedy the amnesia caused by being brain dead. Occasionally the children retain some disjointed memories from their past—echoes of images, if you will. Full background disclosure is helpful in understanding the child's personality, the slight variations in how they respond to their pre-programmed commands. If you prefer, I could skip it."

While the couple leaned their heads together to discuss it in a whisper, Ms. Darth checked her manicure for chips. Finally, Mr. Carlson answered, "Go ahead. We'd like to know all the details."

Ms. Darth smiled proudly while stroking the chin of a boy with hair the color of milk chocolate. The boy stood motionless and made no indication that he was being touched, until she said, "Hug," at which point he obediently raised his arms around her waist and squeezed.

"Al died of leukemia. He's a unique case because he wasn't an orphan. We don't usually have access to orphanages in the Middle East or Africa. Their governments claim the process isn't compatible with their religious beliefs. Anyway, his parents paid a large fee to have his body shipped to the center in Virginia. Once he was rejuvenated, they rejected him because he wasn't exactly the same as before." Ms. Darth shrugged. "Such a shame. They abandoned him and disappeared. Never had the opportunity to see how wonderful he has become with the Affection Training Program, very sweet, very docile in his emotional display."

Mrs. Carlson made a face, as though tasting something sour. "We'd prefer a girl."

"Female Bright Angels are requested more frequently than males—less threatening to some, I suppose. We tend to find many more benefactors willing to sponsor the costs of rejuvenating young girls, especially ones once considered second rate in their respective societies. They find it rewarding to provide girls who come from war-torn countries a second chance at life with loving parents."

"Who is she?" Mrs. Carlson pointed to a wiry girl who

stood separate from the rest, next to a wrought iron birdcage that spanned from floor to ceiling and was filled with an assortment of stuffed birds, ranging from a toucan to a small parakeet, artfully arranged on crystal cake plates, with a few cacti serving as lush filler. Unlike the other Bright Angel children, whose complexions were mostly pale gray or greenish-white, this girl's skin was yellow. She looked as though her limbs were attached off-kilter.

"This is Sara, our special murder victim from New York City."

"I've heard that murders caused problems," muttered Mr. Carlson.

"In many cases murders are a bit more fragile and require touch-ups, especially the ones with an extended period between their time of death and the rejuvenation process. But we provide complimentary check-ups prior to releasing them, and a standard warranty." Ms. Darth didn't add that Sara's lips were surgically stitched upward to create a permanent smile. Although the parents that came here were desperate for anything resembling a child, it unsettled many of them when they learned the finer details of the manufacturing process.

"She looks deformed," whispered Mrs. Carlson. Sara flinched but kept her head down, still smiling.

"We have found that murder victims are particularly grateful and rewarding adoptions, despite their slight physical imperfections. You'll find that Sara is absolutely agreeable. Say hello to the Carlsons, Sara."

Sara kept her head down and refused to meet their gaze. Ms. Darth nudged the girl behind her shoulder to coax her away from the wall. Suddenly Sara stumbled forward, reaching for Mr. Carlson's legs to catch her balance. Startled, he jerked backward to prevent her from touching him and Sara toppled onto the parquet floor with a thud.

"Is she hurt?" Mrs. Carlson rushed to assist the girl, gently lifting her up beneath one armpit. Sara seized Mrs. Carlson's arm, her fingers clutching it like little vises, until Mr. Carlson stepped between them to pry away her hands.

Sara again reached for Mrs. Carlson, this time with her arms outstretched, in an attempt to hug her legs. There was a blur of agitated movement, with Mrs. Carlson resembling an animal wrestling free from a snare. A struggle, a soft *pop*, then a long slurping sound—followed by a high-pitched shriek from Mrs. Carlson. The scent of decaying meat filled the air. The three of them formed an odd triangle of hands: Mrs. Carlson covering her mouth; Mr. Carlson dragging Sara's detached

limb away, the hand still reaching out to touch Mrs. Carlson's black pumps; and Sara fumbling with her empty shirt sleeve, which now dangled limply against her side.

"My God, you've broken her!" Mrs. Carlson shuddered. "What did you do?"

Mr. Carlson dropped the limb, and it landed with a *splat* in front of the doorway, oozing thick gobs of blue gel. His hands raised, he backed up with odd, high little steps, as though the lifeless hand aimed a gun at his feet. "Are they supposed to try to hug you like that?"

For a few seconds they stood frozen, the question hanging in the air. Then Mrs. Carlson patted her face, seemingly to reassure herself it was still there, and Mr. Carlson, finally lowering his arms and shook his head, his expression caught between disgust and amazement. The children, meanwhile, remained motionless, statues posed against a neutral backdrop.

Ms. Darth appeared unfazed by the turn of the events. With calm efficiency she scooped up the limb and thrust it into Sara's remaining hand while repositioning her in her place in line. "Don't worry. Disconnections can be remedied."

Mr. Carlson tossed his wife a "told you so" look. She returned the favor with her best "shut up or else" glare.

"I'm so sorry, the poor girl," gushed Mrs. Carlson, her tone laced with concern. "I just hope we didn't hurt her."

Ms. Darth flipped a switch on the wall activating the overhead fan. "We believe that a Bright Angel's nerve endings no longer respond to physical stimuli such as heat, cold, pain, or pleasure."

"Are you certain that they have no feeling?" asked Mr. Carlson.

"We have trained them extensively to recognize various commands that, when issued, will enable them to provide what we perceive as the appropriate emotional response." Ms. Darth laughed lightly, revealing teeth with a yellowish tinge. "That's why they're called the perfect child or companion. They don't need to sleep, eat, or use the toilet, and they only do what you ask of them."

A tiny beep interrupted their conversation. Ms. Darth picked up the phone on her desk. A deep furrow formed between her brows as she plucked a piece of imaginary lint off her cream-colored suit. She listened for a few seconds more, clicked her tongue, and said, "I'll be right there," before disconnecting the call.

"Excuse me; I must attend to something down the hallway." She lifted a handheld from her orderly desk and gave it

to Mr. Carlson. "On this you'll find an extensive biography of each Bright Angel. They start on screen 3-B. Please have a seat and take this time to look through them for yourselves. I believe you'll find it helpful."

Shaking, Mrs. Carlson managed a small nod and allowed Mr. Carlson to lead her to the high-backed chairs arranged in front of the desk. After Ms. Darth left the room, the Carlsons tried to compose themselves, keeping their eyes averted from Sara and the blue gel oozing down her shirt cuff. From there the goo splattered down her pant leg before eventually forming a small pool near her feet.

For a short while the Carlsons consulted the handheld and discussed their options. When they came to a decision Mrs. Carlson rummaged through her briefcase to check her pager, and Mr. Carlson stared at the ceiling, jiggling his heel against the wooden floor.

An uneasy but familiar silence passed between them, as if their own thoughts were more important than the presence of each other in the room. When Mr. Carlson didn't speak, he had one of those faces that could easily be read: lips pressed together into a thin line that said he hadn't had sex with his wife in weeks, eyelids that hung low and twitched as he visualized Stephanie from the Corporate Finance department, just as he had when he jerked off in the shower that morning.

"Is yours charged? I need to check my messages," asked Mrs. Carlson.

Mr. Carlson removed a square black phone from his blazer pocket. And while the tightness along the line of his jaw said, *If you touched me, maybe you wouldn't need a Bright Angel as a replacement for my affection*, aloud he cleared his throat and noted coldly: "You have blue goop on your skirt. Do you think it stains?"

"I don't know."

Another silence followed, shorter this time. "Alexis, I don't know about this. Are you sure you don't want to try for another child instead?"

Mrs. Carlson glared at him with a mixture of horror and disbelief. "Wait another two years just so the birth mother can contest the adoption and snatch her away again? Maybe you didn't give a shit, but it'll kill me to go through something like that again."

"I'm sorry. You're right. It's just that they're really dead. It's eerie."

Her voice was icy. "Exactly. It'll be like buying a D-player or a robot. We won't risk falling in love with a Bright Angel,

and it will never love us back. So no one gets hurt, right? Just something that can be a companion for all those nights that I'm left by myself while you travel for work."

"Are we going to get into that argument again?" Mr. Carlson tilted his head back and banged it twice against the chair.

"Stop it. You promised you wouldn't do this here," hissed Mrs. Carlson.

"Do what?"

"It's just a two month trial period. If it doesn't work out we can return it or exchange it," pleaded Mrs. Carlson.

"I know. But did you see how Sara's arm fell off? I swear that I barely pulled and it fell off like cooked meat from the bone."

"Can you be any more crude? Maybe you should have been gentler. I've done the research. I didn't see anyone in the online Bright Angel family support groups complain about them falling apart." Suddenly all the sharp edges of Mrs. Carlson's face sagged. It was as though she had aged ten years in ten seconds.

"Please, don't make me go home alone. I can't." She didn't conceal the sadness in her voice.

"I still say we'd be better off with a dog or—" Mr. Carlson scowled and cut his sentence short as Ms. Darth swept back into the room.

"Have you made a decision?" Ms. Darth asked.

Mr. Carlson exhaled heavily and reached for his wife's hand. He stared at her face for a moment, as if searching for a sign, then squeezed, nodding. "We'd like Li."

From the corner a sound escaped from Sara's lips, barely perceptible in the quiet of the room, a faint gasp, like the sudden release of air from a balloon.

"What was that?" Mrs. Carlson turned sharply toward Sara. "You said Bright Angels don't have any feelings."

"I'm sure it was nothing but the equivalent of an aptly timed hiccup," cooed Ms. Darth, her tone smooth as butter. "Li, you've been selected. What do you do?"

Li stepped forward and bowed.

"Happy," prompted Ms. Darth.

Li gave a little hop and squealed once.

For the next twenty minutes Ms. Darth covered the technical details of the arrangements. "Here is our standard contract. It indicates that you have full understanding that you are receiving a trial adoption of a Bright Angel, not a child, along with our brochure of commands and corresponding

reactions. You'll find the transition period significantly easier if you refer often to the brochure during your initial interaction."

When all the necessary paperwork had been signed, hands were shaken all around. Throughout the procedure the Bright Angels kept their places, gazing at the scene with detached interest.

"Li, will you please show them to the clerk on the second floor, where you can collect your belongings and check out?"

Just before they exited, Ms. Darth held out her arm to stop them.

"I grow so attached to them." She blinked furiously, kissing Li on the forehead. "It's like watching my own go out into the world."

Mrs. Carlson gazed back at Sara. "Is she going to be all right?"

Ms. Darth handed Mr. Carlson his umbrella along with his signed copy of the contract.

"Of course," said Ms. Darth. "She is a Bright Angel, after all."

And then, finally, they were gone. The door sighed closed behind them, leaving only the gentle tick of the grandfather clock to beat away the seconds.

"Off you go to your cubicles," said Ms. Darth, briskly. The remaining Bright Angels obediently exited the room, shuffling their feet. One by one they marched out—except for Sara.

Ms. Darth smoothed her hands down her hips. She removed the hairpins from her bun, allowing the full length of her braids to fall around her shoulders like limp brown snakes. Suddenly the animated sparkle left her eyes and the deep creases between her eyebrows vanished, as if a cloth had wiped her face clear of emotion, smoothing her skin like porcelain. Even the tiny freckles on her cheeks seemed to fade. She shut off the overhead lighting, which gave the room a desirable warm orange glow, clicked on a small antique brass lamp on the side of her desk, and sat down.

Sara stood rigid in the shadows, scuffing her feet against the grain of the wood while Ms. Darth began typing on her computer. For a long time Ms. Darth worked in silence, staring at the screen, occasionally clearing her throat, until, finally, she glanced up.

"Bright Angel, why are you still here?" Ms. Darth's voice was cold and hard. "Go back to your cubicle."

She muttered under her breath words that she didn't intend Sara to hear. Or maybe she did. "Don't know why I let you still come down to each showing. No one is going to adopt

a murder. Not even the elderly, and they're *desperate* for companionship."

Although Sara's mouth maintained its ever-present smile, her shoulders visibly sagged. Slowly she headed out, lingering at the doorway to stare at Ms. Darth.

Under Sara's intense gaze, Ms. Darth sat motionless, her own gray eyes unblinking, her pale face glowing a ghostly white in the spotlight of the lamp.

THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF MEAT

CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE

Raymond and George had never thought much about religion. They'd tried going to services at their local church shortly after adopting the child—it seemed like the right thing to do—but the preacher said children weren't allowed. No animals of any kind. Only people. It had never occurred to Raymond and George that there was that kind of bigotry in the world. They shopped around and found a more open-minded church about a thirty-minute drive away from their home. It was more trouble than they'd bargained for, but they wanted to be good parents.

They weren't the first ones to adopt a fleshie as a pet child—almost a family member, really—but they were the first in their neighborhood. They decided to get a boy, hoping he'd fit in with the all-male character of their household. The agency said his name was Rod, but they didn't like that. So they called him Scott, instead. He was so cute.

They loved Scott like a son. It was biologically impossible for people to have children, and George had heard on the news that recent studies indicated that the lack of children was a probable cause of apathy and depression, an unconscious nostalgia for people's animal past. So, when George noticed that Raymond was maybe getting a little depressed, he suggested that they nip the problem in the bud and adopt a fleshie child. Even if it was expensive.

The mere idea of it had so lifted Raymond's mood that George had known it was the right thing to do. Besides, it's not like it was a long-term commitment or anything. Scott was already four years old; he'd only be a child for another ten years or so. Adoption was such a new fad that people didn't really know what they'd do with the fleshie children once they grew up. This was the topic of the preacher's sermon.

Scott was sitting between Raymond and George, with a gag in his mouth to keep him from shouting during the service and his hands tied to make sure he didn't remove the gag. George smiled when he noticed how affectionately Raymond kept his arm around the boy.

Most people thought that, once the children grew up, they should be sold so their brains could be used as food, or simply

killed by their adoptive families, their brains eaten fresh. Fresh brains were such a rare—and delicious—treat. That packaged stuff was never as good. Too many preservatives.

But the preacher at this church was a radical. She loudly advocated animal rights, even human rights, for fleshies. George listened. He had never considered these ideas seriously before. He used to snicker at anyone so naive as to buy into that sentimental propaganda. Glancing at the boy, he pondered the preacher's words. He wasn't convinced, but he realized that he now needed to think about all this more carefully.

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Food was a problem. Pet food came in two formats. There was kibble, which wasn't too smelly, but Scott clearly wasn't that enthusiastic about it. He loved the other kind, the moist food. But neither George nor Raymond could stand the smell of the stuff, those icky vegetable, leafy, and fruity odors.

They argued about it. Raymond was willing to try, for the boy's sake. Plus, the vet said that the moist food was healthier.

George, however, was far from convinced. "No! It's just too disgusting," he said as Raymond served dinner. They were having brain casserole with chunky brain sauce. The brain cake they were going to eat for dessert was baking in the oven. It all smelled so delicious.

He continued: "And who cares if it's healthier? It's not like he's going to have a long life or anything."

Raymond looked hurt. "Don't say that! You heard what the preacher said! We have to work toward becoming a more compassionate society! To stop thinking about these animals only as a resource, a source of food. I mean, look at them—they look almost exactly like us. Sure, their skin is kind of sickly smooth, without any rot, and you can't see any of their bones or anything, but, still, they almost look like people. They can talk. They walk on two legs. It's not their fault if they smell, well, alive or something. Sure, it's kind of revolting that they grow old and then just stop moving once they die. But what we do to them in those factory farms just isn't right!"

George waited before replying. There was a tense, uncomfortable silence—save for Scott's constant crying and yelling and pounding. The boy always had so much fun when they locked him in that closet. After a few minutes, George glared at Raymond and said, "Are you done? Can I speak now?"

Raymond crossed his arms and nodded reluctantly.

"First, where do you think this meal comes from? From dead animals—animals just like Scott. This is what these

animals are—food. Meat. They're our only source of food. And we have to farm them, or else we wouldn't be able to feed everyone. Do you—"

"Farming's not natural. The preacher said so! And she's right. You know she is."

George was livid. "Don't interrupt me! I let you drone on. Now you listen to me."

Pouting, Raymond said, "Okay, I'm listening."

George wagged his finger, his mouth open, ready to bark his anger at Raymond, but instead he let his arm and shoulders drop and said in a neutral voice, "Oh, what's the use." He walked out of the house.

What was really irritating George was that he found himself starting to agree with Raymond and the preacher. But he didn't want to. He hated this kind of sentimental anthropomorphizing. Meat was meat. He was starting to regret ever adopting the boy. None of this would be an issue if Raymond hadn't become so attached to Scott.

He wandered around the neighborhood for an hour or so and then decided to go back home.

He heard the screams even before he opened the door. He walked into the living room and saw Raymond playing with the boy. Scott's screams were so loud. He must really be enjoying himself. George could see that the boy had shat and peed himself in excitement, tears and snot running down his face. Raymond and Scott looked so beautiful playing hide-the-maggots that George's anger melted away. He took a handful of maggots out of his mouth and joined the two of them at their game. Scott screamed even louder when George started pushing maggots up the boy's nose. What fun! George softened even more and gave Raymond a loving look. They kissed, the boy's screams making it all the more meaningful.

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Basil and Judith Fesper were moonbathing on their front lawn when George stepped out of the house to wash the car. They waved at him to come over. Inwardly, he groaned. What were they going to complain about now? What had Scott done this time?

"Hello, Basil. Judith."

They were both smiling. Basil said, "I wanted to apologize for almost eating your boy last month."

That surprised George. "Huh . . . thanks." Scott had run away once, a few weeks ago, and George had found Basil Fesper about to pop the boy's skull open for a quick snack. But

George had intervened just in time. Basil had said, "If I ever find that animal on my property again, he'll be a meal!" Since then, Raymond and George usually kept the boy chained up to keep him out of trouble.

Judith shook her husband's shoulder, "Ask him, Basil. Ask him."

Basil looked irritated for a second, but then recovered. "What the wife and I mean is that hearing all those screams coming from your house. . . . Well, it makes us yearn for the pitter-patter of little feet, you know? We're thinking about getting a little one of our own. We were wondering if you could give us the number of the agency where you got Scooter."

"Scott."

"Right. Scott. So, what's the number?"

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The preacher led George through the church. George looked at the frescos depicting the seven-day meteor shower that, according to Scripture, released God's chosen from the ground and allowed them to inherit the Earth from the fleshie animals who had ruled it in prehistoric times. It was so hard for George to remember that chaotic age, centuries ago, when people first walked the Earth. All he could recall was an all-consuming hunger for fleshie brains. Scripture said the feeding frenzy before God gave people consciousness lasted another seven days, but who really knew? George had never really cared about religious dogma. He didn't see the point in arguing over details nobody could prove or disprove. Maybe people had simply been too hungry to think straight.

They reached her office in the back. She offered him a glass of brain juice. "It's organic," she said. "From free-range fleshies."

It tastes the same as regular brain juice, he thought.

Sitting behind her big desk, she asked, "Is everything alright with your family, George? How's Raymond? And little Scott?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong per se, but that is kind of why I'm here." George looked at the floor and shuffled his feet, not sure how to continue. The preacher waited patiently.

George plunged ahead. "I've been thinking a lot about all that animal rights stuff of yours. At first I was pretty dismissive of it, but now I'm not so sure. I think I might be starting to agree with you. Especially the part about how it's unnatural for people to live apart from animals. I mean, since we've adopted Scott, Raymond's happier than he's ever been. And

even I have to admit that the boy's fleshie screams are soothing for the soul. They make me feel . . . I dunno . . . complete or wholesome or something. And even the neighbors, who were antagonistic when we first got Scott, have been adopting fleshie children, too." George was getting wrapped up in what he was saying, talking more rapidly. "For example, just next door, the Fespers have adopted three children. Three!" He shook his hand to emphasize his point, and a morsel of flesh snapped off his index finger and fell to the floor.

"Now, there's a real sense of community in the neighborhood. There never was before. People throw parties and invite the neighbors to meet their new children. That kind of thing. There's never a moment without at least some screaming on our street. And it feels so right, so natural."

"I'm very glad to hear that, George. But I don't understand what your problem is."

"Well . . . I've been thinking about the appalling conditions in the factory farms, and all that. And I—I think I want to do more. I want to help change things. Make this a better world for others like Scott, for the fleshies."

The preacher stayed silent, scrutinizing George.

He fidgeted in his chair. "Did I say something wrong?"

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"No. Absolutely not. Have you gone crazy?"

George couldn't understand why Raymond was so upset.

"You're going to get arrested. And where would that leave poor little Scott, with you in jail and only me to look after him?"

"But, Raymond, I'm doing this for Scott, so that he can grow up in a better world. I thought you'd be proud of me. That you'd want to do this, too. You're always talking about this fleshie rights stuff. Arguing with me to see things your way. And now I do. I really do. And I want to do something about it. Talk isn't enough. It won't change the world without action to back it up."

"That doesn't mean that I condone this kind of—of terrorism. It's criminal, George. Plus, your first responsibility should be to your family. To me and little Scott."

George was getting angry and impatient. First Raymond fought with him because George didn't believe in animal rights, and now they were arguing because, more than simply spouting slogans, George actually wanted to do something to help the fleshies. Before he could stop himself, he yelled at Raymond, "You're such a hypocrite. Such a coward. You don't

really want what's best for Scott, just what's best for yourself!" And, with that, he stomped outside and drove away, to the rendezvous point the preacher had given him.

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The preacher said that they were going to hit a fleshie factory farm. Blow up walls and liberate the fleshies. Make the authorities notice that people really cared about this, that it wasn't just empty rhetoric.

There were nine of them altogether. George recognized some of them from church. They split up in three vans. One of the vans, not the one George was in, was loaded with explosives. They were going to aim that van at the wall of the farm. The explosion should blow a hole big enough to let the fleshies escape. In the confusion, they'd slip in and make sure all the fleshies were freed. There shouldn't be too many people at the plant. They'd chosen a religious holiday for their operation: the first day of the Week of the Sacred Meteors.

Well, that was the plan.

The first part went off well. They drove far out of town, to where the factory was. The driverless van hit the wall. It exploded. It brought the wall down. They waited a few minutes, but no fleshies ran out. In fact, nobody ran out.

Confused, the group advanced toward the factory. They walked through the damaged wall and into the building. Inside, they saw that the van had hit the security guard's office. His head had been torn off his body. It lay on the floor in the doorway to the corridor.

As the animal liberators walked by, the head said, "Hey! Who are you guys? What the flesh is going on here?"

The group ignored the security guard. George thought, *I sure hope that guy has good medical coverage. Recapitation's not cheap.* Then one of the guys kicked the head. The preacher got mad: "Ralph! There was no need for that!"

Ralph, who was so tall he had to bend down to walk through the doorway, looked sheepish and said, "Sorry. Got too revved up."

The factory felt empty, deserted. The corridor led to a number of closed doors. The preacher said, "The fleshies must be behind those doors. Come on. Let's do what we came here for."

The first door led to a broom closet. George opened the second door. Jackpot.

The room was huge. Naked fleshies were stacked in a big cage, pressed tightly against each other. Their arms and legs

had been amputated, but they were still alive. There must have been hundreds of them. They were all covered in excrement. Their mouths were sewn onto transparent plastic tubes that led to a big vat above their cage. George could see that there was some kind of liquid goop flowing from the machines and into the mouths of the fleshies.

George could never have even imagined these conditions.

Between the door and the cage, there was a long stretch of tables, on which were piled mountains of amputated fleshie corpses with their skulls sawn open. On the floor, there was a long and deep tub filled to the rim with unprocessed brains.

The smell of the raw brains was overpowering.

The group of animal liberators, George included, mobbed the big tub and started chomping away at the cornucopia of raw meat.

In less than an hour, the tub was licked dry. High on food, the activists approached the cage that held the live amputated fleshies. They tore the iron bars apart with their bare hands. They ripped the tubes from the fleshies' mouths. They cracked the skulls of the animals on the floor and gorged themselves on fresh brains.

They fed until they'd eaten all the meat stored at that factory.

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George lay on the floor in a stupor, his body covered in blood, gore, and brain goo. He was roused by the police sirens. Around him, the other liberators were slowly starting to come out of their post-binge daze. George, alarmed by the sound, collected himself and hurried out of the factory. He could see the police vehicles on the road. He ran to a ditch and jumped in. He prayed that the police hadn't seen him.

From the ditch, George saw the police round up all of his cohorts and search the would-be liberators' two remaining vans. After a while, they drove off. He'd managed to escape. Raymond had been right. This had been a crazy idea.

They hadn't done any good for the fleshies. All they'd done was eat.

And then George got angry at the preacher for putting all these stupid ideas into his head. Eating was natural. Meat was meat was meat. And that's all there was to it.

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George and Raymond invited the whole neighborhood to their backyard barbecue. The Fespers were the first to arrive, but soon dozens of people were milling about the yard, their

children tied up and well-behaved, screaming and crying. Scott was tied to the fence, next to the barbecue.

Basil Fesper said, "I've never trusted preachers. All that holiness. It warps the mind."

Raymond said, "Basil, it was only that one preacher who was criminally insane. Not all of them!"

Basil harrumphed. "They're all trying to contaminate us with their subversive notions, I tell you. I'll breathe before you ever see me in a church!"

His wife giggled. "Oh, Basil! Like you need an excuse for not going to church! Honestly, if I hadn't insisted on a traditional wedding . . ."

Holding hands, George and Raymond left the couple to bicker with each other.

Raymond turned to George and said, "Darling, I don't know why I got so depressed before we got Scott, but, almost losing you because of that stupid stunt, it really put things in perspective. I love you, and that's all that really matters."

"I love you, too, Raymond. I'm sorry we fought so much. That I got so tense and angry all the time."

"And all that over an animal! Over a ridiculous fad! What were we thinking?" They laughed.

Raymond clapped his hands to get the guests' attention. "Okay, everyone, I guess we should get started!"

George fired up the barbecue grill.

Everyone grabbed their children. Raymond looked at George, "He's all yours, darling."

George dug his fingers into Scott's skull and cracked it open. He was looking forward to better and better times with Raymond, now that they'd worked things out. *But*, George thought, *I'll miss the screams.*

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Rebecca Brock works at a small rural library in West Virginia and has written several file drawers of yet-to-be published novels and short horror stories. Influenced by EC comics, Jack Ketchum, Richard Laymon, and Robert R. McCammon, she inherited her love of horror from her mother, Leah, and is co-writing and producing several short horror films with her director brother, Dave. "Night Shift," her first professional horror work, owes its existence to her other brother, Matt, who works in a youth shelter and had the idea for the story. As of today, he has not had to put down a zombie invasion. But he's ready.

Jesse Bullington was born in rural Pennsylvania and is currently a sophomore at FSU in Tallahassee. He works at a video store that specializes in bizarre and obscure films. His parents raised him on a steady diet of Vincent Price and H. P. Lovecraft, in his opinion two of the greatest people who have ever lived. For kicks he hikes, reads, and writes. His ambition in life is to evolve into something a little more than human, but slightly less than divine. "Charlie's Hole" is his first published story.

Douglas W. Clark has written a number of fantasy and science fiction stories over the past several years, including three novels published by Avon Books. In addition to working as a technical and public relations writer and editor for such institutions as the New Mexico Water Resources Research Institute and the University of New Mexico, he has been an environmental consultant, a laboratory director, and a lecturer and teacher. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he now writes fiction full time.

Don D'Ammassa has loved horror fiction since he first read *Dracula* more than forty years ago. He is currently the lead book reviewer for *Science Fiction Chronicle* and author of the novel *Blood Beast*. His second novel, *Servants of Chaos*, will be published by Leisure Books in December 2002. He has had stories in a wide variety of magazines and anthologies including *Shock Rock*, Peter Straub's *Ghosts*, *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Borderlands*, and others.

David Dvorkin was born in England, lived in South Africa, and attended high school and college in the U. S. He has worked as an aerospace engineer, computer programmer, and technical writer. He has published fourteen books in various genres, as well as short stories and essays. His fifteenth book, a science fiction novel titled *Pit Planet*, will be published in March 2003 in hardcover by Wildside Press. His wife, Leonore, is the author of the mainstream novel *Apart From You*, published by Wildside. David and his son, Daniel, co-authored the Star Trek novel *The Captains' Honor* (ST:TNG #8). For more information, please see the Dvorkin web site, www.dvorkin.com.

Scott Edelman is currently the editor-in-chief of both *Science Fiction Weekly* (www.scifi.com/sfw), the Internet magazine of news, reviews, and interviews, and *Sci Fi*, the official magazine of the Sci Fi Channel. Prior to this, Edelman was also the creator and only editor of the award-winning *Science Fiction Age* magazine. He also edited other SF media magazines such as *Sci-Fi Universe* and *Sci-Fi Flix*. He has been published in *The Twilight Zone*, *Asimov's*, *Amazing Stories*, and numerous anthologies, including two appearances in *Best New Horror*. He was a Stoker Awards finalist for "A Plague on Both Your Houses," which can be found in his collection *These Words Are Haunted*. He has been a Hugo Award finalist for Best Editor on four occasions.

Steve Eller lives in Ohio. He shares a house with two females—one human, one feline. His work has appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies. His short story "Consumption" opened *The Book of All Flesh*. He is the editor of the popular anthologies *Brainbox: The Real Horror* and *Brainbox II: Son of Brainbox*. He won a Bram Stoker Award for his editing at *The Chiaroscuro*. He no longer edits, choosing to focus his time on an unnamed novel. But he still finds time to write the occasional story, like "Memory Remains." Sadly, way too much of it is true.

Paul Finch is a British ex-cop and journalist, now turned full-time writer. Most of his current professional sales are in British TV, where he concentrates mainly on crime drama, though horror and dark fantasy are his first loves, and he last year sold the script for a full-blown horror movie to a major UK production house. Other recent credits include *Aftershocks*, a British Fantasy Award-winning collection of his short stories, published by Ash-Tree Press, and "Cape Wrath," the first in a new line of original horror novelettes from British publisher,

Telos Books. Paul is thirty-eight and lives in Lancashire, England, with his wife Cathy and his two children, Eleanor and Harry.

Charles Coleman Finlay's stories can be found most often in the pages of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. He's the administrator for Online Writing Workshops and lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he does very little of interest aside from reading. "Fading Quayle, Dancing Quayle" was inspired by the work of cognitive science philosophers like John Searle and David J. Chalmers, particularly the latter's article, "Absent Qualia, Fading Qualia, Dancing Qualia."

Alexander Marsh Freed has written and edited material for roleplaying game sourcebooks, and is proud to make his first appearance as an author of fiction in *The Book of More Flesh*. Though his real-world experience with zombies is limited to his time working in computer systems administration and technical support, he believes those years have helped him add verisimilitude to "Inheriting Red" (whose rejected titles include "Reign of the Zombie Queen," and "Mother, Daughter, ZOMBIE"). He currently lives near Philadelphia.

Jim C. Hines began his writing career with a first-prize story in *Writers of the Future 15*. He has been published in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Full Unit Hookup*, and *The Book of All Flesh*, among others. He currently lives in Lansing, Michigan. To support his writing, Jim works as a state employee . . . an experience that has provided a great deal of insight into the habits and lifestyle of the zombie.

Michael J. Jasper left the American Midwest in 1994. Since then he has written a fantasy novel set in past and present Chicago, co-written a horror novel set in Nebraska, and is finishing a science fiction novel that also happens to take place in the Midwest. His fiction has been published in *Asimov's*, *Writers of the Future*, *Strange New Worlds IV*, *Strange Horizons*, *Future Orbits*, *The Raleigh News and Observer*, and other markets. He now lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with his lovely wife Elizabeth. He enjoys neither surfing nor red-necks, but he thinks the South and zombies are pretty nifty. His web site can be found at www.michaeljasper.net

J. Robert King began his publishing career with two horror novels—*Heart of Midnight* and *Carnival of Fear* (both acquired by editor Jim Lowder). After eighteen more novels and nearly

thirty short stories, he's returning to the horror genre and his first editor. Rob is best known for his hardcover Arthurian trilogy for Tor Books (*Mad Merlin*, *Lancelot du Lethe*, and *Le Morte d'Avalon*). He has also written numerous novels for Wizards of the Coast. He is purported to be the handsomest man in his writing group, the Alliterates, a dubious distinction. Find out more about Rob at www.alliterates.com.

Claude Lalumière is a review columnist for *Black Gate*, *Locus Online*, and *The Montreal Gazette*. Stories in his Lost Pages fantasy series have appeared in *Interzone* and in *Other Dimension*, and the first tale in his Vinny Demon horror series, "The World's Forgotten Boy and the Scorpions From Hell," will appear in *Redsine* in 2003. He is co-editor (with Marty Halpern) of *Witpunk: Stories with Attitude* (4 Walls 8 Windows, 2003). His website is www.lostpages.net.

James Lowder has worked extensively in fantasy and horror publishing on both sides of the editorial blotter. He's authored several bestselling fantasy and dark fantasy novels, including *Prince of Lies* and *Knight of the Black Rose*; short fiction for such diverse anthologies as *Historical Hauntings*, *Truth Until Paradox*, and the forthcoming *Shadows Over Baker Street*; and a large number of film and book reviews, feature articles, roleplaying game adventures, and even the occasional comic book script. His credits as anthologist include *Realms of Valor*, *The Doom of Camelot*, *Legends of the Pendragon*, and Eden Studios' first zombie anthology, *The Book of All Flesh*.

Mark McLaughlin's writings and artwork have appeared in more than four hundred magazines, anthologies, and web sites. These include *Black Gate*, *The Best of Palace Corbie*, *The Best of the Rest*, *The Best of HorrorFind*, and *The Year's Best Horror Stories* (DAW). He is one of the three writers featured in the poetry collection, *The Gossamer Eye*. Upcoming collections of his work include *Professor LaGungo's Exotic Artifacts & Assorted Mystic Collectibles*, *Slime After Slime* and *Hell Is Where the Heart Is*. Also, he serves as editor of *The Urbanite: Surreal & Lively & Bizarre*.

Scott Nicholson lives in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. His first novel, *The Red Church*, was published by Pinnacle Books, with his next, *The Harvest*, set for release in September 2003. He's sold over forty stories in seven countries, some of which were collected in *Thank You for the Flowers*. He studied creative writing at the University of North

Carolina and Appalachian State University. Nicholson's web site at www.hauntedcomputer.com contains fiction, author interviews, and writing articles.

Scot Noel is a computer software instructor, along with his wife Jane, for Computers Made Easy, a company they co-own. There he labors to make the mysteries of Microsoft Office clear to small businesses and home users alike. In his increasingly spare, spare time, Scot writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror. The idea for "The Hyphenated Spirit" came about when Scot received James Lowder's invitation to submit for this anthology. According to the instructions, these tales had to be "different," not treading the same ground covered in *The Book of All Flesh*. "Wait a minute, the original anthology had zombie sex, zombies in space, comic book zombies, Civil War and techno zombies! The only thing we didn't do in that one was conjoined twins as zombies." Ah ha!

K. Z. Perry is a graduate of the Clarion Writer's Workshop and has published short stories in *Hampton Shorts* literary magazine and *Talebones*. Her initial fascination with the dead occurred as a child and she hasn't rested since. Contrary to her fondness for breathing life into dark fiction, she still sleeps with a nightlight. K. Z. Perry has been accused of impersonating a zombie, particularly in the early morning, and was last seen shuffling among the undead in Manhattan.

Tom Piccirilli is the author of ten novels, including *The Night Class*, *A Lower Deep*, *Hexes*, *The Deceased*, *The Dead Past*, *Sorrow's Crown*, *Grave Men*, and *A Choir of Ill Children*. He's sold over one hundred and fifty stories in the mystery, horror, erotica, and science fiction fields. Tom's been a final nominee for the World Fantasy Award and he won the first Bram Stoker Award given in the category of Outstanding Achievement in Poetry. You can find more about his work at his web site, www.mikeoliveri.com/piccirilli.

Darrell Schweitzer is the author of over two hundred and fifty published fantasy and horror stories, many of which have been collected in such books as *Transients*, *Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out*, *Nightscares*, *Necromancies* and *Netherworlds* (collaborations with Jason Van Hollander), *The Great World and the Small*, and *Refugees From an Imaginary Country*, about which *The New York Review of Science Fiction* wrote, "The real imaginary country is where all fantasy writers get this good." Schweitzer has been three times nominated for the World

Fantasy Award, twice for Best Collection and once for Best Novella. His novels include *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, *The White Isle*, and *The Shattered Goddess*. He is also a poet, essayist, interviewer, columnist, and co-editor of the legendary magazine *Weird Tales*.

Tyler Sigman leads a deceptively ordinary day life as a degreed Aeronautical Engineer. By night, his exploits revolve around the dark underground of gaming, game design, and writing. Tyler runs Mythrole Games, a small-press operation that publishes *Night of the Ill-Tempered Squirrel*, *Shrimpin'*, and more (www.mythrole.com). In addition, he has a contributing writer credit on Wingnut Games' *Battle Cattle: Quest for the Holy Pail*. He lives in Bellingham, Washington with his wife, dogs, and cats. "Martin's Inferno" is Tyler's first published short story.

Shane Stewart finds his writing switching between fantasy, science fiction, and horror on an almost daily basis, with the occasional poem thrown in for good measure. Having finally published a story ("Sitting With the Dead" is his first professional sale), he finds it to be a far more pleasant thing than he feared, and something that is worth repeating. He currently lives in Ohio, but he was born and raised in Kentucky—which some people claim explains much.

J. Allen Thomas grew up in Dyer, Indiana and now resides in Indianapolis. He graduated from Indiana University, and performed much (unintentional) research for the story "ZOMB, Inc." while employed in the accounting department of a Chicago ad agency. He has since gone on to become one of the founders of Crocodile Games, and co-creator of the miniature war game, *War Gods of Ægyptus*. "ZOMB, Inc." is Allen's first published work of fiction.

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