

UNCLE BONES

by Damien Broderick

Damien Broderick is the science fiction editor for *Cosmos* magazine. He published his first short story collection as an undergraduate at Monash university in Melbourne, Australia, and has since written twenty novels, seven of them with Rory Barnes, and a second collection. Damien has also compiled six anthologies. His most recent book, *Year Million* (Atlas & Co.), asked leading scientists and science writers to imagine the fate of humanity or the universe a million years in the future. Damien's first story for *Asimov's*, "Resurrection," appeared in our August 1984 issue. We are pleased to welcome him back to our pages with a decidedly different look at that theme.

I never liked the way Uncle Bones smelled. Elaine said I should just zip my lip and keep my opinions to myself.

Bones smelled like...

Well, it's hard to be precise, if you've never met a Stinky. Ever stuck your nose near a dead thing? I don't mean a piece of steak fresh out of the freezer. That's dead cow kept cool and clean. I'm talking about *dead and disgusting*. We tried to make a joke out of it, Bones and me. It was an old gag he'd heard from his grandfather, who was also Elaine's granddad, of course, my great-granddad:

"My dog has no nose."

"Yeah? Then how does he smell?"

"*Terrible!*"

Ha ha. But it's not so funny, being a walking dead man. Once I overheard Bones talking to my mother. "It's better than being six feet under," Bones said, "but only just."

"It's a *lot* better than being six feet under," Elaine said, and her voice broke. "If they'd brought John back, I'd bless every smelly cell in his poor dear body."

It's hard to know how much I actually remember about my father and how much I know because I've seen the vids. He's teaching me to catch a softball, or jogging along the Riverwalk with me on his shoulders. When he

left to go fight in the Saudi, he hugged me so hard it hurt. I was only like three but I remember that.

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We had a Social Studies class on the Stinkies. Sorry, I'm the last person who should use such an ugly word. "Revitalized citizens." That class got me thinking, and maybe ended up killing me. I didn't really know that much about Bones and exactly how he got that way. It's not that I never wondered. But he just didn't talk about himself, and that became a kind of unspoken rule. Mrs. Bartle's class made me want to know anyway. Maybe it would upset Bones, but hey.

That afternoon I rushed through most of my 'work, then went into the family room, kind of nervous, trying not to show it. I took a deep breath, and then wished I hadn't. The room was rank, even with the front window open a crack. My uncle never wore a mask indoors, and hardly ever outdoors for that matter, so he was stinking up a storm just breathing. He glanced up from his book, and I blurted out, "Hey Bones, I've been wondering, um, how long ago did you, uh—"

He said, after a silent moment, "Spit it out, son, I won't bite."

I swallowed. "—did you, you know, die?"

He frowned and said in his whispery voice, "Twelve years, Jim." He looked at the top of the news page, at the date, and I saw his cracked, dry lips moving silently. "And four months," he added. "And a few days."

No wonder I couldn't remember it. Three years after I was *born*. Oh. Of course. Both of them probably.

He sighed. "The army medics patched me up, even though I was going stiff already when they found me. Brought me halfway back, best they could do. Anything else on your mind?"

All the things we never, ever talked about. I swallowed even harder. "So you and my dad ... were you with my dad when—"

Elaine was in the kitchen getting dinner ready, but she obviously had her ears pricked up because she came galloping into the family room and whisked me away.

"Sorry, Bonaparte." You know how mothers are. She took me firmly

by the arm. "Don't be nosy, Jim, it's rude." Over her shoulder, she asked, "Can I get you anything to drink, Bones? We're out of milk, but Jimmy can run down to the shop and get some."

"Milky coffee would be good."

Elaine put me out the back door with the exact change, including coins. She didn't like to use cards, too easy to scam. I was supposed to go the extra three blocks down to the convenience store and gas pump place on East Courtland to get a big carton of milk because the price was about \$3.40 cheaper than at the McCullough Grocery at the end of our block. We don't have much money, I guess that should be obvious, and Elaine often said she didn't have a buck or a moment to spare, but when Bones came to visit he expected her to look after him hand and foot. He came and went without a word. Bonaparte Hector Jones had been Mom's older brother when he was alive. Well, he was *still* her older brother, except you didn't exactly think of dead people that way, like family. Unless someone got in your face about it.

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Coming back from the store, I took a short cut across the corner of the car wash on McCullough Street. Elaine didn't like me cutting through the car wash because she figured someday I'd get run down by a monster hydrogen-guzzling sport utility vehicle piloted by some weedy accountant who figured he was the shit. I wished I'd listened to her when I remembered the Boofhead brothers were working there after school. Bill dropped the gushing hose with the brush on the end. With a happy whoop, he caught me before I could get to the street, jerked me off my feet, and his brother Sam kicked me in the ankle. It was like being stuck in some old Simpsons episode with all the bullies yelling "*Nyah-hah!*" I dropped the carton of milk when I fell over and wanted to see if it'd spilled, but if they saw me looking they'd jump on it and waste it all. My mother would finish off whatever was left of me after the Boofheads got through.

"You stink, gayboy!" Bill yelled in my ear. Spittle sprayed the side of my face.

With brilliant wit, I said back, "*You stink,*" clawing to get free. I felt sick and frightened.

Sam shoved me in the gutter. "*You're the dirty Stinky-lover!*"

It's true I never liked the way Uncle Bones smelled, but that doesn't mean I'll put up with some stupid shithead mocking people who live in my own house, especially my own flesh and blood. Even if they don't have blood, and their flesh is flaking off. But Bill Boofhead was yelling in my face. "He's *associating with gnome fellas*, Sammy, that's what this creep's Stinky uncle's doing. *Associating with gnome fellas!*"

Not a clue what the prick was talking about, and I didn't care much because he was squeezing my mouth so hard my teeth ached.

A pasty-faced guy crossed the street, baseball cap wrong way round, bill in front, and for a mad moment I thought I was saved. What he gave the two Boofheads was a filthy look. Gee, thanks. Bill stared right back at him. The guy sniffed and sidled past, then turned back.

"You okay?" he called out to me.

Yeah, right, bozo. Happy as a mud crab in crap. Sam was shoving me along in the gutter, banging at my bruised ankles, and Bill was trying to fit my right arm into my left hand pocket.

"Just having *some fun*, aren't we, stinky?" Bill said with a sneer.

I croaked something. It was getting hard to breath. Bill had his armpit right in my face, gag a maggot. I wished I had Dodger with me. The Dodge was my main man even though he went to a different school, over six feet tall already and not even a year older than me. I'm more the stocky, low-to-the-ground type. It's not just that Dodge is bigger and tougher than me—he'd get mad. His older sister Ashanti was the only other Stinky I knew except for Bones. Not that I'd ever met her. She never left their house.

The old guy came a bit closer. "It doesn't look like *fun* to me," he said. "How about letting him go, you thugs?"

"Yeah, sure." Sam made a horrible wet noise and spat at the ground. The loogie was a big green one, sucked backwards out of his nose, and it hit the concrete about an inch from the guy's shiny 'boks. "What're *you* gonna do about it?"

The guy pulled his foot back quickly, and the look on his face said he wanted to beat the crap out of Sam, but instead he plugged his phone in his ear and starting thumbing numbers. "Well, for starters, call the cops."

That made the Boofhead brothers break up shouting hilariously. They laughed so hard they let go of me, so I took my chance, grabbed the milk carton, and ran like hell across the street, nearly splattered by a bus in the process. I heard Sam yell at the guy, “Hey, great idea, dude. Ask for Sergeant Bouvier.” On the far side, half-safe, I stopped to watch. I’m curious, okay?

Bouvier was their father. Huge pot belly and thick red arms covered in red hairs, a red bald head. Like seven feet tall. One time I saw him drag two cursing thugs out of the Bloodhouse on North Main and shove them into his cop car, no sweat.

The Boofhead brothers slouched back to an old Dodge Ram covered in streaky foam bubbles. Half the soapy water was pouring down the drain and the rest ran out on the street. I don’t think they got paid much, but they probably liked the job because they could hang around cars. Bill was old enough to drive legally, Sam not quite although he was a year and a half older than me even if he was in the same class. The baseball hat dude had taken his phone off. He caught my eye and shook his head, looking disgusted. I shrugged and ran the rest of the way home. My arm still felt pulled from its socket, but my legs worked, I wasn’t bleeding, and the carton had all the milk on the inside. I’d gotten off easy.

* * * *

As I say, that was the day Mrs. Bartle had ranted on in Social Studies about revitalized citizens, and how we should treat them with respect. Imagine the reaction. Sam Bouvier the Boofhead got out of his seat and lurched around like a zombie, groaning and letting drool froth out of his mouth. Jenny Bean, who loves watching old movies from the twentieth, pulled a scared face and shoved out her tits and whispered loudly, “I ... see ... *dead people*,” and the whole class screamed with laughter. That made Mrs. Bartle angry and depressed, and she got very scientific about the topic. It didn’t stop the sniggering.

I could tell a lot of them were sniggering at me, because they knew about my revie uncle, and that made me mad—at them, and at Uncle Bones. It wasn’t *my* fault we had a dead guy living with us! *Hey, Jim!* I told myself. *Not fair to poor Bones!* My uncle was a good guy. Those times when he came to stay at our place he’d been the closest thing to a father to me. He took me swimming in the Guadalupe River where the water was so clear you could see every rock on the bottom. Sure, people moved away from us, scowling, but we didn’t care. I didn’t, anyway, not back then; I was having fun splashing about. You could see scars where he’d been shot right

through the heart. When I was a Cub Scout, Uncle Bones taught me how to tie knots and play table tennis in the Youth Center, but not for long. He'd been a scoutmaster, before he was killed, but they didn't like having him around there, either.

Mrs. Bartle mentioned *side-effects*, which wasn't real major news. Being turned into a Stinky was the biggie. I'd covered my ears during lots of the lesson, because it made me feel creepy and sick to think about Uncle Bones that way. Barf. So they banned it under some law called the Nanotechnology Terrorism Lumbago, whatever. What they'd done was, they injected my uncle's dead body full of millions and billions of teeny endobots but it couldn't completely stop him rotting inside. And they didn't bother making his heart beat again, because the nanobots shoved oxygen from his lungs through all his tissues, which just about kept him going.

Twelve years ago. Wow. Okay, Bones must have been killed in Saudi, when they were trying out Revitalization. Not just on soldiers who died in the war, either. A lot of revies were offed by criminals or gangs, others got totaled as road kill. A few were very sick kids who died in the hospital, like Dodger's sister Ashanti. But if you just wore out and died of old age, so sad, too bad.

That's all I knew, though. Stinkies kept to themselves, usually, like Ashanti, and you couldn't blame them. Sure, it was better than being really dead and buried in a coffin in the ground—but as Bones said, maybe not that much better. Elaine always changed the subject. She really, really didn't like talking about it.

* * * *

I went in the back way through the alley, gave Elaine the carton and went straight into my room, past the family room. Its door was closed, and Uncle Bones was talking to someone in his whispery voice. You couldn't tell when someone called him, because he kept his phone on vibrate—he really hated ringtones, said they were “the music of the devil.” And he didn't like being interrupted, even though it was Mom's house, and mine, too, for that matter. My own door was still covered with smartass signs from when I was a little kid saying stuff like GENIUS AT WERK with the last word crossed out and *work* scribbled in. I'd started to clean it off once, but Elaine stopped me. I think she yearned for those days, closer to the time when Dad was still with us. As I closed the door behind me, I heard Bones say, “Look, I have to take a dump. You can leave, or you can wait. My bowels won't.” He sounded angry.

Huh? Bones never had visitors. A moment later I heard him shuffle past in the hallway. I screwed my face up. Probably the *real* reason reviews were called “Stinkies.” The stench they left behind in the bathroom ... You don’t want to know.

My look is a cheap old recycled thing, but it works okay. I kicked the chair sideways and sat down. It showed the spaceship *Discovery* in orbit around Jupiter, from my favorite movie, *2010*. The year I was born. I’ve been airtyping since I was a kid, it’s still the best way to score high in the top games. Uncle Bones showed me how to type, come to think of it. I guess by then I’d sort of learned to deal with the way he smelled, and how he looked like a zombie. That’s why it made me mad, hearing the Boofs diss him like that.

Anyway, I was suddenly curious, so I Googled on dead people. Mostly what I found was spam, advertising bogus cures.

“YOU CAN *LIVE* AGAIN! Forget those expensive *masks* and *perfumes*! Walk free and proud in the *streets*, without people *STARING* and *LAUGHING*. For just \$1,999.99—”

They’d warned us about this sort of thing when we were taught how to sort spam from useful information. Criminals tried to suck in revs and scam all their savings and insurance so their skin wasn’t rotting, and most of all, they’d be able to get it up again. Pure bogosity, but some revs threw away more and more money because, you know, it had to be true. The skulls worked behind layers of steg, cops following along miles behind, and kept finding new ways to rip off the schmucks.

I kept clicking. Mostly I found pages and pages of hateful stuff about how the Stinkies should be killed again, they were fiends from Hell walking the earth (which I *knew* wasn’t true), they should be locked up in those old detention centers where illegals used to be kept.

And more spam, along with all the other shit clogging the net. It made me feel sick.

I clicked on the new game called *Yeah-No*, but I couldn’t get into it, and crashed out on the fifth level. I couldn’t keep the Boofheads out of my brain. *Associating*? Was that what they’d said? With *gnome fellas*. Some sort of cop jargon they were repeating mindlessly. Why can’t voters just say what they mean? I keyed *gnome fellas* into Google, which asked me politely:

—

Did you mean: *Known felons*

—

So I clicked and got this, which made me feel cold even on such a warm day:

felon

person of bad or criminal character

I keyed in the whole *associating with known felons* phrase, and found

for example:

While out of jail on probation, he was arrested for associating with hired killers and other known felons

—

Whoa! I sat back and stared at the look. *Bones?* Hanging around with hit men? Skells, they call them on TV. *While out of jail on probation?* Poor old lazy Bonaparte Jones had been arrested and charged? What for? I certainly couldn't picture him locked up in jail, it just wasn't him.

Oh well. I clicked the sounds icon, found Jangle Central and clicked it, then turned the volume down. Elaine always said "that kind of racket" gave her a headache. She and Bones only liked classic rap and hip-hop. I grunted along to the rhythm, Googling some more on *consorting*, but it didn't get me any further. It struck me that I could just go and *ask* Bones, once he was back out of the bathroom and settled again in his comfortable chair. Dad's old chair. *Hey, Uncle B., is it true you did time in the big house? And how about that "associating with criminals" thing?* Yikes! Imagine Mom's face, and the pressure of her fingers on my arm as she pushed me out of the family room. Yeah. She'd love that. Calling her poor dead brother a skell, to his face, right in our own house.

Still, it beat messing around on the net and getting nowhere. I slammed my door behind me and slouched into the family room. A huge

man in a blue uniform stood up from Dad's old armchair and started toward me. Sergeant Bouvier, the father of the Boofheads. I had no chance to screech to a stop and head back to the safety of my own room like the Road Runner when it sees Wile E. Coyote. He held his arm out in front of him, and it looked like a baseball bat covered with muscle, sunburned skin and red hair. He smelled of some manly fragrance, aftershave or hair gel or something, not that he had much hair on his head.

"You must be the Stokes boy," he said. His thick fingers closed on my own hand and squeezed. "I'm just waiting for your uncle, we've been talking. Why don't you sit down over here with me, boy?"

* * * *

Uh-oh. I blurted out, "It wasn't my fault, it was Bi—"

I swallowed my words. The first and second rule about bullies is, you don't tell. The last person in the world to tell about Bill and Sam was their own father. He wouldn't believe me, and I'd be in deep crap because he'd assume I was lying. Worse still, maybe he *would* believe me. If he believed me, he might roust out the Boofheads, and then I was *sure* to hear about it again. And it would hurt, a lot.

He noticed. "Been having trouble with some of the other kids picking on you about Boney, haven't you?"

Did he know it was mostly his own sons? Elaine used to make excuses for Bill and Sam whenever she heard from snitches that they'd got in trouble. She'd shake her head and explain that they'd missed out on a mother's care and attention. Big deal, I'd lost a father in the terrorism war, they'd lost a mother in a head-on traffic crash, it was all so sad, but so what? I didn't go around punishing little kids. I didn't like the Boofhead brothers and they didn't like me, but still, that didn't mean I was about to rat them out. I just nodded.

"I bet they call your uncle a Stinky," the Sergeant was saying. "Dead Meat. Zomboy. Johnny Rotten. Other nasty names like that."

He drew me by my upper arm toward a chair, and sat me down on it.

I really was starting to get alarmed. Had Bones done something truly bad? Was the Sergeant here to arrest him and haul him away? I craned my neck to look through the curtains and saw his cop car parked out the front. Not a social call.

“Look at me, son, we still have those questions.”

I looked him in the eye, swallowing hard.

“Okay, young James—”

“Jim,” I said. “Jimmy.”

“Jim, I need to ask you if your uncle has been acting oddly lately. Staying out all night? Meeting with strangers, maybe?”

I jerked my head around, blinking. Bones should be finished crapping by now. I hopped up and moved quickly to the door into the kitchen. “I’ll get my uncle for you, sir.”

“Boney will be back,” the cop said. He didn’t have to move a muscle. I turned sheepishly and returned to my chair.

“Uh, okay.” I tried to force myself to meet his eyes again, but stared at his feet instead. Really enormous shoes, very black, a bit scuffed at the toes. What terrible crime had Bones committed? That couldn’t be it, or the Sergeant would have read him his rights and locked his wrists in shiny bucky ties and hauled him off to a cell. If you can trust cop shows.

“No need to be scared, boy.”

Mom came into the room then, flour on her hands. She liked cooking our dinners, even though she was tired after being in the office all day, she said it relaxed her. “Sorry, Wi—Sergeant. Come on Jim, back to your homework.”

“I’ve finished,” I started to say, but the Sergeant interrupted me.

“Please join us, Mrs. Stokes, there’s something I’d like to show you both.” To my surprise, he was fishing about in the top pocket of his blue shirt. He pulled out a creased old photo and held it out to Mom, saying nothing. She wiped off the last of the flour and took it from him carefully and we both stared at it. She said nothing, and after a moment she let me take it from her hand.

Four young men in some sort of uniform. Maybe they were soldiers, the camo uniforms didn’t look like what police wear, all blotches of brown and green and gray. One of them looked like Bill the Boofhead with short

hair, almost shaved down to his skull. With a jolt I realized that it was an old picture of Sergeant Bouvier, when he was way younger. I stared at the other three men. One I'd never seen before. The other two were healthy, smiling fit to bust. One was my father, John Stokes, and the other one looked a bit like Elaine if she'd been a man with a shaved head.

"It's you and my dad and my Uncle Bones."

"Correct, son." The Sergeant took back the photo, slid it into his uniform pocket without another glance. You could tell he treasured it. "Bones Jones and I were friends back during the war. He introduced me and John to your Mom here when we were home on leave, and John was lucky enough to marry her."

"William," Mom said to him in a funny voice, "that's all in the past." She went back to the kitchen, and said over her shoulder, "Don't go filling the boy's head with a lot of nonsense about his father."

I couldn't quite take all this in. Most of my life, Uncle Bones had been a dead man. For some reason he and Elaine hadn't kept any old pictures of him around the house, although there were five photos of Dad and Mom on the mantelpiece and hanging on the walls of the lounge room, and another one in a silver frame next to Mom's bed. Maybe it made Bones depressed to be reminded how young and healthy he'd been, back when he was alive. Well, he didn't smell like a Stinky back then, either.

"He was a hero, you know, your uncle." Sergeant William Bouvier's voice softened. "And your Dad, too, son. Both of them damned wonderful heroes." He sighed. "And only one of them came back. I think maybe your mother blames me for that. But it was nobody's fault. Just really awful timing."

I wasn't sure what he meant. I looked down again, feeling my eyes prickle. I felt incredibly sad, even though I couldn't remember my dad very well.

Sergeant Bouvier shook his head in a sort of unhappy amazement. We were both quiet for a moment, then he added: "I'm sorry, Jimmy. The doctors tried, you know, but they just weren't able to save your father. He'd been dead too long."

I swallowed hard, to make the lump in my throat go away. I didn't want the policeman to see my tears, so I looked out the window again. I thought: I'll bet my dad wouldn't have wanted to get turned into a Stinky anyway.

“Maybe Bones was worried you might be coming to arrest him,” I heard myself say.

“And why would I be doing that, Jim?”

“Maybe he was mixed up in something.” My voice dropped to a whisper. “A kid said. Something about skulls.”

“Hmmm. Where’s he got to, anyway?” Sergeant Bouvier jumped to his feet and went to the door, put his head into the kitchen. “Mrs. Stokes,” he said to Mom, “I’m getting a bit worried about Boney.”

In a rather strained voice, she said, “Not a problem, Sarge, he had to go to the—you know.”

“Yeah, quite a while back. You don’t suppose he’s got into any trouble? Perhaps you could knock on the door and check?”

“I’ll do that, William,” my mother said. I heard her open the hallway door and close it again. The Sergeant came back but didn’t sit down. He was frowning. After a moment Elaine came in, looking panicky. “He’s gone, William. He didn’t answer, and I tried the bathroom door, but it’s locked, and I called his cell and he didn’t answer, so I went outside to see if he was in the yard and the bathroom window is open—”

Sergeant Bouvier ran to the hallway, and I scampered after him. With a tremendous crash, he broke the lock of the bathroom, kicking it hard with the heel of his heavy shoe. He looked inside, shook his head. “He’s gone,” the policeman told us. “The silly man has run off. Now I’ve got to go chasing after him.”

* * * *

It came together in my head. Bones was mixed up with spam artists. Paying criminals for fake medicines, pissing his pension away? The other possibility made me feel sick to consider it. Was he one of the criminals *himself*? Scamming bogus medications to Stinkies just like him?

No, I *really* couldn’t believe it!

Sergeant Bouvier ran out the back, and Elaine stopped me from following him.

“Don’t get underfoot, Jimmy.”

“I just want to see—”

“I know, but I’m sure Bonaparte hasn’t done anything wrong.” She saw right through me, smiled in a concerned way, kissed me on the forehead. For once I didn’t pull away (I mean, man, I’m way too old for that stuff). “Go play with your computer, son. I’ll let you know when we find Bones. Come on, I’ve had a hard day at work and now I have to finish making dinner.”

Sergeant Bouvier came in the back door, out of breath.

“No sign of him, he’s not in the alley. I’ll have to put out a bulletin. I think he might be in a bit of trouble, nothing we can’t sort out. Don’t worry, Mrs. Stokes, he can’t have gone far.”

I ducked my head down, chewing at my lip. I knew where Bones had probably hidden himself. Should I tell them? No, I couldn’t believe old Bones was a scummy skell. I didn’t want to point an accusing finger at my mom’s dead brother. Elaine was looking at the Sergeant, biting her own lip. “I wish you wouldn’t get all formal like that, William. Why don’t you just call me Elaine?”

“I’m on duty now, Mrs. Stokes. Proper procedure.” His red face was getting redder, and he pulled his police hat on and shoved mirrored shades in front of his eyes. In his blue uniform he looked exactly like a cop, and not at all like an old friend of my father and Uncle Bones. I couldn’t get that photo out of my mind. So weird, all of them together, back during the war.

Mom gave me a little push in the back. “Say ‘Good evening’ to Sergeant Bouvier, son.” I did, and he shook my hand quickly, then half-ran for the front door. I trotted off down the hall, and opened my own door. It smelled terrible in my room, and not just from my socks and dirty underpants on the floor. I opened my closet door, and looked up at Uncle Bones. He waved his bony hand at me, making shushing noises. In a shadow of his usual whispery voice, so soft I could hardly hear him, he said, “Not a word, Jimmy. I’ll explain in a moment. Is he gone?”

“Just left,” I whispered back, and my throat felt tight and painful. I started coughing and my eyes watered. It was scary, standing there looking at this rev hiding in my closet, even if it was just old Uncle Bones. Man, the cops were after him! “What have you—?”

“Shh! Shh!” Bones waved his hands frantically in front of his mouth.

The skin was peeling off, as usual. His face was screwed up as if he was in terrible pain, but I knew that wasn't it, because revs can't feel pain. That's what they'd told us at school, anyway.

"I have to go out and help Mom with dinner," I said. "Please don't run away 'til I get back."

"I have things to do," Bones said, not promising anything. "Not a word, you hear?"

"Okay," I said, doubtfully.

"Everything will work out fine." Bones paused, and then gave me a mischievous, surprising grin. "Scout's honor."

* * * *

Elaine took off her apron and poked at her hair a bit.

"I'm going out to look for Bonaparte, Jimmy. I don't know what the poor man has got himself caught up in now." She kicked off her green plastic sandals and pulled on a pair of socks and walking shoes. "I can't imagine what Will—what the Sergeant could have said to upset him so badly." She leaned across and kissed me on the forehead, and went to the front door. "Keep an eye on the house, sweetie, all right?"

"Okay, Mom. I'll do my homework." I'd already told her I'd finished it, but she didn't seem to notice.

"You're a good boy, Jimmy," she said, and turned around to give me an extra quick hug. "I'll be back in one shake of a lamb's tail."

The moment she was gone, I shot into my room and threw open the closet door. My heart sank. The smell was faded. Uncle Bones was gone. I felt a little sick at my stomach. I had a quick look at the carport. He hadn't driven off in Elaine's car, but probably wasn't just roaming around, because most people resent revs walking freely in the street. You see them sniffing angrily as the Stinkies pass. Sometimes they even shove them into the gutter. Bones had to be in some safe place that nobody ever went. "Scout's honor," he said. Oh.

I jumped up with a shout, put my fist in front of my mouth, shook my head and grinned. Nobody was in the house to hear me. I wanted to run out, but I'd promised Mom I'd stay in the house until she got back. I hopped

from foot to foot, grinding my teeth and clenching my fists. “She won’t mind,” I muttered. Yes, she *would* mind. She’d be majorly pissed if we *both* disappeared, Bones and me. I was getting dizzy with excitement. The toilet window was still wide open where Bones had pretended to escape before he snuck back and hid in my closet before he *really* escaped. Scraps of scaly white skin were stuck to the frame where dead stuff had scraped off his hands. I pulled the window shut, smelling the faint odor of decay.

Sergeant Bouvier thought it was better than being really dead and buried, like my dad. What was the point of being a hero when you were dead and buried? I sent Dodger an Instant Message. He was probably the only person who’d understand, because of his sister. No response.

d00d, unW? cops r chasing bones

He came on the look, holding his iBerry. He was on a basketball court behind his private school, sweat running down his face. Dodger’s father had been a three-point shooter for the San Antonio Spurs, back in the day before he blew out his right shoulder.

“Can’t talk now, buddy. Hoops practice. Catch ya later.” He clicked off.

It felt like there was *nothing* I could do. I was going nuts.

“How’s the homework going, Jimmy?” Elaine was in the hallway, headed my way. I switched back to the *Discovery* flying through deep space. My heart was pounding like it was ready to explode.

“Done. Going out now, Mom.” I tried to sound bored. “Me and Dodger want to go down to the mall and watch the new bot fighters.”

Elaine stood in my doorway, looking worried. “All right, son. Keep out of trouble, and be home by six-thirty for dinner. And no junk food!”

“Okay. Love ya, Mom!” I dashed out the back way before she could change her mind, and headed along the alley in the direction of the old closed-down building used by the Scouts when Bones was a kid, right next to the McAllister Freeway where it crossed Highway I35.

* * * *

I wasn't supposed to go into this rundown neighborhood by myself. Elaine would shit a pig if she knew. Weeds grew all around the dilapidated old place. A few gaps in the cyclone fence showed where homeless people must have crawled through to get some shelter for the night. I tripped on an empty bottle in the long grass. The front door had been locked ever since the place was shut down, so I didn't even try it, and the downstairs windows were covered with corrugated steel sheeting firmly nailed into place, but I went around to the far side, where the shadowed ground stretched under the enormous expanse of the concrete freeway. Up there, cars were streaming home from work, driving fast, thudding high above me. You could see in the shadows where someone had been burning old scraps of wood in a fire, either for warmth or to cook their dinner.

It hadn't always been this bad. According to Elaine, when the freeway was built it had cut our part of San Antonio in half. People started drifting away, and the houses were left unrepaired. Our own place was nearly at the edge of the bad neighborhood, easy walking distance, I hadn't needed my bike. A few years ago, Uncle Bones had walked past here with me and Mom, revisiting their childhood memories. It used to be a school gymnasium, then it was used for scout meetings. They'd closed it before I was born. I used to walk down here sometimes and think about my mother and Uncle Bones when they were young and my dad was still alive. But I'd never tried to get inside.

One of the thin sheets of rotting plywood that covered the back door had been partly kicked in. I crouched down, whispered through the opening: "Bones? You there?"

Nothing. I heard a train in the distance, hooting each time it approached a crossing. Something scurried inside the old building. Might have been a mouse, or a feral cat, or Bones trying to hide. It was impossible to see anything from where I was. Late afternoon summer light was still bright, but all the windows were blocked up and the inside was dark. I pushed the decaying plywood aside and crawled in.

I smelled him before I saw him.

* * * *

The room was musty—mice had been leaving their droppings on the floor—but you couldn't miss the stink of a Stinky.

More loudly, staying just inside the half-opening, I said, "Uncle Bones, I know you're here."

A flashlight came on, dazzling me. I raised my arm in front of my eyes, squinting. A dark figure held the flashlight, standing near the rotten staircase in front of the closed main door.

"You shouldn't be here, Jimmy," a whispery voice said. The light moved away from my eyes. I blinked, seeing two red spots. "You've got to go."

"Well, you've caused all kinds of trouble, Bones," I said accusingly. "Mom is worried, and Sergeant Bouvier—"

"That busybody!" Bones switched off the flashlight and we stood in the smelly darkness. "He's had years. Outstanding time to pay a social call." His laugh sounded like a bark. "Bill Bouvier and I used to be friends, Jim. And your father. Thick as thieves, we were."

"Thieves!" I blurted it out. "Is that why you've been *associating with felons*?"

After a strange silence, Bones burst out laughing, or coughing, it was hard to tell the difference. He sounded like he was coughing up a lung. Maybe he was.

"*Associating with felons*? Jimmy boy, who have you been talking to now?"

"Bill Boof—Bill Bouvier. He said that to me today. Maybe he heard something from his dad."

He coughed some more. "Those boys have been completely out of control since their mother died, everyone says so."

"Bones," I started, then stopped. He didn't say anything. "Bones, why did you run away from the Sergeant?"

"No, the real question, Jim, is what to do with you." Bones groaned. "You can't stay here, you'll be in danger. But if you go straight home, I suppose you'll tell Elaine and she'll call William Bouvier back and everything will be ruined. Months of hard work. Look, I'll give you some money and you can catch an IMAX for a couple of hours."

“Mom—”

“I’ll call your mother so she won’t be worried.” The light fell briefly on his other hand, holding his cell at the ready.

That was just nuts. Go to the *movies*? But he was right—if I couldn’t talk him into coming back home with me, I’d have to tell Elaine where he was hiding. I felt sick with fright again, this was so terrible. My mind raced round and round like the reflector on a bike wheel.

“Hey!” I yelled out aloud.

“Shoosh, silly puppy. We don’t want to attract attention.”

“You’re trying to *trap* them.”

Bones said nothing, and then, “Scammers.” I thought I could see him grinning at me like a skull. “We’ll stop *stinking*,” Bones said bitterly. “We won’t *rot* with our skin *falling off* us. Our hearts’ll start *beating* again. So we can be ordinary people and not get spat at in the street.”

In a faint voice, I said, “But it *is* a scam, isn’t it? They can’t really do any of that, can they?”

“No, they can’t, Jim. They are maggots and grave-robbers, but this time their victims are still alive. Almost alive.”

Stuff still didn’t fit. My eyes stung in the dark. “Sergeant Bouvier wanted to know if you’d been hanging around with any strange people.”

“I’m a sort of cop, too, James. I was in the army with your dad—”

“And with Sergeant Bouvier,” I said, thinking of the photograph.

“William Bouvier was older than us, but yeah, we were friends back then. Before your dad and I got killed.” He fell silent, and I could tell he was looking down at the dark floor, seeing nothing, remembering those days. “And the medics pulled me back, but not Johnny.” He sighed. “Ah well, what’s done can’t be undone. Not all of it, anyway. Yeah, we were in the army. I still am, undercover. I’m a military policeman, Jim. I’ve been hunting down these maggots for years.”

He looked at his watch again. “I have a meet set up here in half an

hour. That's really as much as I can tell you, and now it's time for you to get out of here and go straight—"

* * * *

I heard a loud crash and my eyes were dazzled. It was like the sound the Sergeant made kicking in the lock of the bathroom. This time it was the front door of the old decaying hall. Dark figures burst in through the brighter rectangle of the door, wide open now but already swinging closed again: two men, three. They must have been blinded by the darkness inside; Bones grabbed me, shoved me behind him.

"That was unnecessary, gentlemen," he said in his voice like paper rustling in a breeze. "The door was unlocked. I used to be a Scoutmaster here. Now what is all this nonsense? We have an arrangement. You're early, that's not polite. Are you ready to unload the stuff?"

Stuff? I thought.

"I don't trust you, Jones," one of the men said in an unpleasant, sneering tone. I started crawling away along the wall to the hardboard gap where I'd snuck in. "Yeah, we've got the goods, you'd better have the transfer keyed in."

Light slashed the man's face. The beam of light twisted in the air. Bones' long, heavy flashlight hit the skull in the forehead, and he yelled. I saw a flash of light from overhead, heard a loud cracking, then another. Twilight poured into the room from above. Two men in black uniforms dropped on ropes from manholes in the ceiling, followed by another pair. They held tangle-guns, and started firing streams of yellowy-green sticky gloop the moment their feet hit the floor. Men's voices shouted and cursed. The scammers were on the floor now, tangled up in green, luminous spaghetti. One of the morons pulled something heavy from his coat and threw it into the air. Nothing radioactive, it turned out, thank god. But you could see the shaped shock of concussion go upward into the dust, and I felt the bang.

The rotten old top floor, weakened by years of rain leaking through the roof, gave up the ghost.

* * * *

Dust slammed up and then down, poured into the golden shafts of afternoon light from overhead, followed by splintering floorboards. We

jumped wildly away from crashing timber, arms over our heads, grit in our blinking eyes, ears ringing. The skulls struggled against their green restraining loops. A military cop in black was smashed by a falling timber. Bones leaped in a sort of cottonwool silence through the ruins to help him, and a huge cross-beam came straight down like a bomb from above and slammed into his back. Uncle Bones crashed to the floor, jerked in the dimness, lay still. Two of his men ran to him, shoved the heavy beam aside, picked him up carefully and started carrying him outside into the daylight. He looked very, very dead.

More than anything, I wanted to howl with fear and fury. I made a wet snuffly noise I could scarcely hear, even from the inside, and something enormous slammed into me, too, along the side of my head.

* * * *

People asked me afterward if it was like getting kicked by a horse. Maybe, I've never seen a real live horse. Maybe getting kicked by a horse is like being whacked in the head by a huge falling piece of two-by-ten timber. I went down in the dust and felt everything going away.

The last thing I saw before I was killed seemed impossible, Sergeant William Bouvier, his mouth shouting angrily, his roaring loud voice switched off, lights shining at the doorway, very bright lights, and more people than you'd think could fit into the old hall came pushing into the place, bringing the lights in, yelling silent warnings, probably screaming at the tops of their voices, and then I was gone.

Which is not so surprising because the top of my skull had been torn off and I was bleeding to death.

* * * *

I woke up slowly, tired, like I'd spent all of yesterday swimming and shooting hoops but now had to get up at five in the morning to go fishing. I stretched, yawned, and tried to open my eyes.

My eyelids seemed to be stuck together. And the sheets felt odd. Not like my bed sheets at all, stiff, and they smelled overpowering, like disinfectant. Like a deodorant. As if the scent was trying to cover something up.

Oh, shit.

Everything came rushing back. The dark smelly collapsing building, Bones slammed by falling wreckage, me too. And now I couldn't see. Maybe my eyes were gone, eaten away, empty sockets, like a dead possum I once found in the street. I put my fingers up to my eyes. A bandage was wrapped tightly over the top of my head.

But nothing hurt. If anything, I felt ... *numb*. I was exhausted, and starving hungry, but feeling no pain. That was the amazing part.

"Something hit me," I said aloud. My tongue was thick, and my lips were numb. "Coulda *killed* me."

I struggled against the tight sheets and blanket, tried to get my legs over the edge of the bed. I seemed to be tied down somehow. First I couldn't see, now I was trapped. And under the revoltingly sweet chemical flower smell of the deodorant, there was something even more revolting—

"Hey!" I shouted loudly. "Hey, what's going on?"

Feet came running on clickety-clack tiles, and soft hands seemed to grasp mine, although I wasn't sure. A sweetly perfumed cheek was pressed to my face. Mom! I'd know her anywhere, even without my eyes. She was sobbing, I could hear it and feel it, her body shook against me, and that made me cry too. I started to shake really hard and couldn't stop. I sniffed at her perfume, and then, still shaking and shuddering with fright, I lifted one hand up to my nose and sniffed at it.

My breath came back at me. It stank faintly of rotting meat.

I screamed like a girl, lifted my other hand, cupped them and had a really deep huff, sniffing hard.

The stench of death. I started crying harder.

"They've turned me into a Stinky Dead Meat," I blurted, between sobs. They'd stuck those shitty enbots in me. I'd stink so bad nobody would want to be anywhere near me. I sobbed some more. Not even Dodger. The Boofhead brothers would beat the crap out of me every day.

My own odor cut through Mom's perfume. I tried to wave it away, and the same foul odor still clung in my nostrils. It was coming from deep inside me.

"Don't worry about any of that. You're all right now, sweetie," Mom

said softly in my ear, but her voice broke. She kept crying softly. “Really you are. There’s nothing to be worried about.”

“Mom!” Suddenly I stopped feeling sorry for *myself*. “What happened to Uncle Bones?” I was ashamed. “His back was broken, Mom, I saw it happen. Is he dead?” I stopped, confused. “I mean, I know he’s dead, but is he *really truly* dead now? Did Uncle Bonaparte get killed again?”

“Not a chance, buddy,” said a whispery voice I recognized. “Alive again, alive and kicking, shaking a leg.”

My mouth fell open. “Bones?” I stared around and couldn’t see anything, of course, because of the bandages over my eyes. But there was nothing wrong with my nose. With a rather rude loud sniff, I tested the air. *Sniff, sniff.*

A stronger stench of Stinky. From me, and now, even riper, from Uncle Bones as well. My starving stomach clenched, and I started to wail again, sick with horror.

“Hey, it’s not so bad. They fixed us up, young fellow,” Bones said cheerfully. “Me for a second time.” He sounded amused.

“So I really *was* dead?” It’s one thing to suspect something like that, it’s another to hear that you were right. I shivered, still feeling sick. But part of me, I think, was strangely proud. Hey, pretty cool, really. How many other kids had died and been brought back? Ashanti was the only one I knew of, and I’d only ever spoken to her on the phone a couple of times, calling Dodger’s house. They’d stopped doing the treatment when it was obvious it had gone wrong, and she was just a kid when she died, back around 2012. I was confused. If the doctors weren’t doing revivals any longer, how come I was now a Stinky? Something must have changed.

“Where am I?” I knew I wasn’t at home. A hospital? *Jail?*

“We’re having a little stay at Fort Sam Houston.” Okay, Fort Sam was the big military base with a huge medical center, I’d seen it from the car. They had a helicopter landing pad right next to the freeway. Not the nicest part of the city. “Brooke General Hospital,” Bones added, and you’d swear there was a note of pride in his voice. “We were lucky, kiddo. Biggest military medical training facility in the world. And right now, the most important.”

Made sense—if Bones was still a soldier, still with the Army, they had to look after him. And their military doctors were the ones who'd done most of the old revivals, according to Mrs. Bartle. She said thousands of recently dead service people had been flown back from the Terrorism War, full of temporary enmachines. It still didn't explain why the Army had made *me* into a Stinky as well.

“Am I stuck here? In the hospital?” I tried to imagine what it'd be like to stay here for days, maybe for weeks. Grim. Elaine and Dodger and Bones would visit, for sure, but I just wanted to go home. I wanted to go into my own room and shut the door marked GENIUS AT WERK, and play *Yeah-No* on my old look.

“Just for a bit,” Elaine said. “Can you deal with that, darling boy?”

“Yeah no,” I said.

I was in luck, really, when you thought about it. Even if I did smell like dead rotting meat and nobody would talk to me when I got out. Shit kind of luck, but worse had happened to plenty of others. My Dad. Sergeant Bouvier's wife.

A trolley was being rolled in, with at least one squeaky wheel. A grumpy man's voice said, “You all have to leave except the boy's mother. It's time for the bandages to come off, and I don't want a circus in my hospital ward. I'm tired of people getting underfoot and in my hair.”

Bones leaned down and whispered in my ear, breathing out stink, “*He* hasn't *got* any hair, that's why he's so pissed.”

I laughed, and that surprised me. “Hey, I'm *starving*. Did I miss out on dinner?”

* * * *

“Left foot forward, young Mr. Stokes,” said nurse Florez. She held my arm while I reached with numb fingers to grab on to the parallel rails at waist height. When she let go, I lurched forward like Frankenstein's monster, reaching for the rails and getting my feet tangled together. At least I wasn't wearing hospital pajamas any more, and I could see. The enbots had healed my broken head, but broken everything else inside me, broken it and fixed it, and broken it again and fixed it again, and again, and again. No wonder I was dizzy all the time. They had let me put on a tracksuit and

slippers for my morning exercise session. Felt like walking through thick mud. Being a rev makes you clumsy, as well as hungry all the time. I started to topple forward onto my face, but nurse Florez was there to catch me, as wide across as she was tall, which did not make her very tall but certainly very wide. Big muscles under a padding of comforting fat. I liked her, and it embarrassed me to be so clumsy.

“Can I have a rest soon?”

“Shame on you, Mr. Stokes.” The nurse wagged one finger in the air in front of my nose. I wasn’t wearing a mask, but she didn’t avert her own nose. Nice of her. “We are going all the way to the end of the rails—and back.” She grinned and three of her chins tucked themselves together. “Then we’ll see about a snack. I’m feeling a little peckish myself.”

* * * *

That went on for a whole week, while I tried to keep up with schoolwork, downloading from the net. It wasn’t as dull as being in class, but it sure wasn’t as good as having a holiday. Sometimes, when no one was around, I pulled the sheets up over my head and cried for a couple of minutes. Call me a sissy, but you’d cry too, if you suddenly turned into a rev zombie. And there were worse things. I now knew exactly why all the Stinky spam screamed about getting it up. Being a rev killed the juice. I tried jerking off a couple of times in the bathroom, with the door locked, and just couldn’t. It was humiliating.

Elaine usually didn’t get away from work until late in the afternoon, but Bones came every day to see me. “You’ll soon get the hang of it, Jim,” he assured me. “It’s just a matter of retraining. Our bodies aren’t working the way they used to. Here, I want you to check out this site when you have a chance. It’ll help you understand what’s going on with you.”

Instead of shooting it straight to my look, he handed me a card with an url. I put it on the gray metal cabinet next to the bed. All I wanted was to get out and go for a walk. Brooke Hospital was okay—for a hospital. Not the fun place. Bones sat quietly next to me. I looked at his hand resting on the arm of his chair like a claw. Grayish skin. Yellow nails. Mine weren’t that bad; but then I hadn’t been dead long. I didn’t want to stare, but I found myself examining his face. Now that I had the use of my eyes back, I kept *gazing* at things. You don’t really see people you know well, only what you expect. Now that I looked carefully, it was obvious why they called people like us zombies. The skin on his face was tight against the bones, dull and flaking, the way your skin peels off after bad sunburn. Bones’ face did not have the

bright healthy glow of sunburn. His eyes were sunk into their sockets. I knew I was starting to look nearly as bad, there were mirrors in the bathroom.

I blurted out, "They should have just left me there." Buried me beside Dad.

"Bleeding to death?" Bones said. He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Aren't you ever sorry they saved *your* life?"

"Eh? Of course not, boy."

"Well, don't you blame the doctors for what they've done to you?"

"Jim, you have your whole life. Me, I still have quite a lot of mine."

I hung my head. Not looking at him, I said, "Yeah no, but I'm never going to have a girlfriend now. The kids at school will hate me." I meant *pick on me, treat me like shit*, but I didn't want to sound like a wimp. I took a deep breath, and my own odor almost made me gag. "And I *stink!*"

"Better than the alternative, old son. Believe me. Far better than the alternative."

I wondered how Dad would feel, if he could see me now.

* * * *

I kept nagging, and eventually nurse Florez and the doctors decided I was well enough to take a walk outside. Sorry, I don't mean "well enough"—I wasn't sick, exactly, more like a racehorse that overnight has been changed by an evil magician into a dung beetle. You have to learn the simplest things all over again. They let me wear my proper bagged clothes, and a pair of sneakers, but insisted that I carry an electronic walking stick, like an old man. Okay, anything to get out of that room. Dodger came over for the big event, on Saturday morning, and to my surprise his father and mother came visiting as well.

"Hey, dude." He slapped my hand. I was starting to get back some sensation in my skin, and it felt good. I grinned at him, then held out my hand to the 'rents.

“Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Washington. Thanks for driving Dodger over.”

“We were bringing Ashanti in,” Mr. Washington told me, “for her, uh, check-up.” It was still hard for me to believe that my pal’s father was the great Ty Washington, formerly of the Spurs. “Elijah nagged us until we included him as well.” I swear, it took a moment to realize they were talking about Dodger.

“Do, do you think I could see Ashanti?” I really needed to talk to another ... *revitalized person* ... closer to my own age.

“My daughter is very shy,” Mr. Washington said, and frowned. “I don’t believe—”

“You’re looking quite fine, Jim,” Mrs. Washington said quickly, changing the subject. *Looking fine?* I blinked, but she wasn’t mocking me, she really meant it. Well, she’d had years to get used to the idea, looking after Ashanti. “Why don’t we take that little stroll outside while Ashie is seeing her doctor? Got your rebreather?”

“I don’t wear a mask,” I said. I found my stick and led them back to the elevator. The air felt hot and sticky after the cool air conditioning of the hospital. There was a lawn of thick green grass in front of the parking lot, but it seemed safer to stay on the sidewalk. I held my hand up to shade my eyes, and saw a drift of fine particles falling in the sunlight. My skin, flaking off.

Fairly soon I had to hustle back inside to take a dump. Also embarrassing, but that’s one of the problems with being dead. You can’t digest your food properly.

“Elijah can visit with you a little longer, Jim,” Ty Washington told me. “We’ll come back in an hour.” I glanced at Dodger quickly to see if he was rolling his eyes, wanting to be airvac’d out, but he really didn’t seem to mind. The moment the ‘rents were out the door, he pulled the visitor’s chair over beside me and grabbed my look.

“Hey, Ashanti wanted me to tell you about a site she thinks you should hit. I bet you’ve been avoiding this stuff like the plague.” He gave a laugh like a dog barking and nudged me in the ribs. “Like the plague, get it?”

“Very funny. There’s nothing wrong with me, except that I’m dead.”

“Yeah no, obviously you’re not *really*. Here, have a look at this.”

He had clicked on a site with all kinds of gruesome medical pictures of dying people getting fixed up with the nanomed revival bots Bones and I had been injected with. I thought the site looked vaguely familiar, and grabbed the card Bones had left with me.

Right. I’d started looking at this days ago, and just felt sick at the sight of it. Now that Dodger and I were viewing it together, this stuff looked much more interesting. Maybe I was just getting used to being a rev. I clicked on a program about being a Stinky, and fast-forwarded to some stuff about how it worked. “These repair units are only a few thousandths of a millionth of a meter in size,” a pretty young scientist was saying to the camera. She was dressed like an *Earth Idol* star. Blah blah. Those things were crawling around inside me and Uncle Bones and Dodger’s sister. Inside our cells. It made me shiver, and I felt my stomach tighten up.

A man with white hair and a white lab coat took over. “So what about those experiments, now forbidden by Congress, to revive the recently dead?” A very respectful image of a corpse appeared, but you couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman.

The graphic peeled open the skin, as if the camera was going down into the red and purple and white insides of the dead person.

“Yikes,” Dodger said. “That’s what they did to you and Ash, nerdhead.”

“When any creature dies, including a human being, the cells start to break down,” the man told me. “Oxygen no longer feeds the brain and other tissues.” More blah blah. I skipped forward. A needle was suddenly shooting enbots into a dead person. Okay, they had to replace all the blood with these machines floating in some sort of pale blue gloop. Why Uncle Bones had no heartbeat, and felt cold if you leaned against him. I shivered. Me too, now. My hand reached up and touched my chest. No *thump-thump*. I watched the nanos on the monitor spread out through the corpse, like an open carton of milk poured into a bucket of water.

The little machines started spreading into the stiff, cold body. They found broken cells and started fixing them, kind of sewed them up, although everything soon kept falling apart again and they had to keep fixing it. Like doing your ‘work. You get it done, and hand it in, and the next day there’s a whole other batch to do. It just never stops.

“This is a very simplified picture of what really happens, of course,” said the young pop star, who now wore a white lab coat herself, looking very serious. “Early experiments were encouraging. People who had been given up for dead returned to life. Problem was, the nano-repair method turned out to have many drawbacks and side effects, which is why such treatments have been banned for the last seven years.”

Side effects again. I watched in misery as the man and woman took it in turns to explain why the little machines could only do limited repairs, so they had to keep fixing up the cells as fast as the cells tried to fall apart and die again.

Now wearing a black gown and holding a judge’s gavel, the man told us: “Meanwhile, criminals prey upon the thousands of victims of those failed experiments.”

A couple of Stinkies huddling away from the taunts of people in the street. Someone driving by flung an empty bottle at them. Crash of smashing glass, and bright splinters stung them. The rev lady started to cry. “Revitalized people are often shunned by heartless and frightened members of our communities. Sometimes they are called the Living Dead, Zombies, or worse names. They cling to a single hopeless dream: to recover their full health and life some day. Leading scientists agree that this is still impossible, yet greedy criminals continue to extort millions of dollars by selling—”

I thumbed the vid off. “Right. That’s what Bones was trying to stop.” I felt pretty good, saying that. Even though I wished I’d never set foot in the old Scout building.

* * * *

3.

My homeroom at the Astronaut Michael Collins High is right up against big air-conditioning fans, so there are no windows. The only light comes from bright white LED strips on the ceiling. You can hear the fans thudding away on the other side of the brick wall. I like it, it covers up all the hooting and shoving in the back of the room. That day a lot of it was aimed at me—my first day back at school and nobody wanted to sit next to me. I felt like the last man on Earth.

There was a knock on the door, and the principal walked straight in. She was wearing her official fake-fur Davy Crockett coonskin hat, with a Go

Spurs T-shirt under her jacket. I thought the coonskin hat looked dumb, but Mrs. Sanchez said it was to get us into the right spirit for the one hundred and ninetieth anniversary of the Battle of the Alamo, even though that wasn't due for another year. She nodded to Mr. Blakeley, bent over his look getting our schedules straightened out.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.” She insisted on that, maybe because that fuckwit Sam Boofhead was nearly seventeen—he'd had to repeat a year. Because of his mom's death, he was so upset. Yeah, right.

“Buenos dias, Mrs. Sanchez,” most of us droned, although a few called out, “Yo.”

She was smiling directly at me with big shiny teeth, and I tried to sink with my heart down into the seat.

“Come up here to the front for a moment, Mr. Stokes.”

Feet shuffled in embarrassment, and I don't just mean mine. Whispering broke out as I lurched to my feet. Someone hissed, “Mr. *Stinky*, you mean.” Boofhead.

Mrs. Sanchez stood even straighter, and looked at the back of the room with graser eyes. “None of that in this room, Mr. Bouvier, and none in this school.” I shambled to the front, and she placed one hand firmly on my shoulder. “This school is proudly named for the great command pilot of Apollo 11, the first spacecraft to land men on the Moon! Although Astronaut Collins never set foot on the Moon, his role was just as important as the two who landed there.”

We'd heard this a thousand times. Man, if I went all the way to the Moon, I'd want to *land* there, not just stay stuck up in the sky going round and round until the other guys dawdled back. I didn't have time to think about that. Mrs. Sanchez was telling the class about my unfortunate series of events, and how glad she was that I had returned to the school *from the very jaws of death*, and how it was a testament to my bravery that I was here now, and how *nobody* in the school was going to give me a hard time, and if anyone did it would be *over her dead body*.

There was a snigger at that. I looked up at her myself, sideways, and Mrs. Sanchez closed her mouth, frowned, glanced at me, and went faintly red for a moment.

“You know what I mean, class. This young man has been through a lot. I want you all to give him every consideration. Thank you. Go back to your seat, Jim. The class is yours, Mr. Blakeley.”

I trudged back, humiliated, and sank into my chair. Julia Hernandez had taken the chance to move away to a spare desk, and someone up the back muttered, “Did someone cut the *cheese*?” Some other wit muttered back, “Nah, someone brought their *dead cat* to class.” Stifled laughs. “You’d think he could wear a *mask*.” That was Bones’s fault, he said it amounted to giving in to prejudice. “A *bag* over his head!” More sniggering. I gritted my teeth and clicked on my look, wishing I’d stayed in Brooke Hospital.

* * * *

The rest of the day was pretty much like that. I ate by myself in the cafeteria, and everyone else stayed well away, so there was a wide hoop of empty tables around me and the other kids were crammed up together, laughing and eating and drinking while I tried to choke down my lunch. I was still horribly hungry all the time. The enbots used up a lot of raw material, constantly rebuilding my flaking cells, and it had to come from somewhere. I’d even been given special permission to snack in class if I had to, and I’d gobbled down a couple of apples and a cold pizza during our history lesson on the Nat Turner rebellion. Trouble was, food tasted terrible these days. No, not terrible—just *blah*. Like chewing and swallowing polystyrene packing peanuts. By the end of the day I was angry and tired. The last thing I wanted was a message from Mrs. Sanchez’s secretary, but it flashed up on my look:

—

Mr. Stokes, a visitor will be waiting at the entrance on North Main to take you home.

for: Principal Sanchez.

—

Elaine? Maybe she’d taken off early from work. I stumped along with happiness in my heart. The uniformed guard was checking everyone out of the building, watching his detector displays as usual. I looked around. No Mom. No Bones, either. My good mood hissed out like air from a punctured balloon.

“Jim?”

I smelled something faintly unpleasant, turned. A terribly thin young woman stood against the wall, under a display of the Spurs, in a lavender mask. Not a cheerleader, that’s for sure. Her dark face looked a little gray, eyes sunken, cheekbones sharp above the rebreather. She didn’t look sick, exactly—just ... *frail*. A purple scarf hid her hair. She was smiling shyly at me. I’d seen her picture, of course, Dodger had posted a bunch. Taken before her death, and after.

“Ashanti?” I said.

She nodded, and held out her hand. “Rough day, Jim? Come on, I’ll give you a lift home.” Her voice was quite clear, you wouldn’t have guessed she had a mask blocking her mouth.

“Uh, sorry, there’s someone picking me—” Oh. I shook my head. “That’d be you.”

“Right. Come on, I left my car out in the street, I don’t want to get a ticket.”

* * * *

Suddenly my misery was gone. I’d been curious to know more about Ashanti Washington ever since the day I met Dodger, which only happened because Uncle Bones introduced us at Cubs. Turned out he knew Dodger’s dad somehow, which was pretty impressive. “My sister’s like your uncle,” Dodger told me. “She’s what they call a ‘Stinky’ too.” The next year I stopped going to Cubs, and never joined the Scouts even though Dodge did. Maybe that was because he went to a private junior high that Elaine couldn’t afford, up in Alamo Heights. St. Rufus’s is almost a military academy, major emphasis on sports, and they had their own Scout troop. We stayed friends, but somehow I’d never been invited to his house. I’d figured it was because Ash didn’t like to see people. Live people, that is.

“Listen, would your mom mind if I took you somewhere else before I drop you off ? Here, you can call her.” She held out her cell.

“They have a cell jammer where she works, just like school. It’ll be okay. Can I drive?”

“You have a license, of course.” It was obvious that I didn’t.

“Spoilsport. Where to?”

“Hop in, I’ll show you.”

We drove in her last-year’s Prius past the huge Community University, and along busy San Pedro toward downtown. The freeway loomed up. We went under it, and in a few minutes we were passing the Alamo. Stores across Alamo Plaza were doing brisk business in mementos and snacks. Ash swung into a disabled parking slot—“Hey, if dead people aren’t disabled, who is?”—and I was relieved to see that she had the right pinger on her window. We crossed the grass, through the throng of visitors in brand-new Alamo T-shirts and ten-gallon hats. Little kids dashed around wailing or laughing, parents tried to keep them in line. Lots of elderly retired folks, too, here for a glimpse of history.

“Makes you proud, doesn’t it?” Ashanti said, pausing before the open doors of the sunlit stone Mission building.

I shrugged. “Sure,” I said. “But my folks aren’t really Texans, my mom and dad came from up north. Dad was stationed here at Lackland when he flew out to—”

She touched my arm. “Yes. I know.” Like an older sister (not *that* much older), she took my hand and drew me away toward Crockett Street. “Let’s go for a stroll along the Riverwalk. I haven’t been there since I was a little girl.”

“Okay.” Her hand was trembling. Ashanti was scared. I looked around. Just tourists and locals, wandering this way and that. One or two of them cast us dirty looks as we passed, covered their noses in a rude way, coughed, looked at each other. I remembered the vid of smashing glass and jeering people. “Uh, Ashanti,” I said, “is this really such a great idea?”

“I think so,” she said. Her voice shook a little. “I’ve been putting it off way too long, Jim. It’s why I brought you here. I don’t want you to fall into the same trap.”

* * * *

We stopped at an intersection to wait for the walk signal. The afternoon sun was warm on my back, and our shadows stretched out ahead of us. You could smell pizza and barbecue and beer. Soon the eateries would be opening for early dinner. I was hungry again, but the odors didn’t

do much for my appetite. I couldn't help but notice our stinky sweat, like a cloud of death that moved along with us. A little boy stared up at us and said, "Ooooh, they smell *awful*, Mommy." His mother looked embarrassed and his father shushed him, but they drew away from us. As the light went green, the family turned sharply around the corner. I was pretty sure they'd been about to cross with us.

"Nothing's changed. Sorry, this is how it is, Jim," Ashanti told me. I felt bad, because most of the smell probably came from me, crap given off by what Mrs. Bartle had called "anaerobic bacterial decay" or something. In other words, my rotting guts. I decided on the spot to make Elaine buy me a mask, whatever Bones thought of the idea. We went down the steps to the Riverwalk, the long, pretty pedestrian path running on both sides of the San Antonio River through the heart of the city. Large hotels rose up on both sides, and an open boat ploughed through the rather dirty water, two guitar players, passengers being served way early dinner. A guide spoke loudly in Spanish. Big crowds hadn't yet started to surge back and forth on the Riverwalk, but people strolled along, some walking dogs. A nasty-looking creature on a short leash, wire mask over its muzzle, growled at me, and lunged before its owner jerked sharply on the lead. No apologies, just a furious look at us. The man muttered something as he passed. Like doggie, like master.

"Oh dear. This really was a bad idea, Jim." Ashanti looked awful. She stumbled toward a metal seat, dropped down on it. "I'm sorry, I thought I could do this. I wanted you to know that it's not necessary to..." She trailed off, closed her eyes. Sitting like that, not breathing, she really did look like a corpse left out in the sun. "...To hide away. For us Stinkies." Tears started leaking from her closed eyes, rolled down her sunken cheeks and over the seal of her mask.

"Come on," I said, "we should get out of here." People looked at us as they passed, but nobody offered to help, or get her a glass of water like they do in the movies.

I pulled Ashanti to her feet, and wondered if I should use her cell phone to call 911. Or maybe her mom or dad. She got up, but as she took a step she stumbled, bumped into a red-faced beefy man twice as big as her, laughing like a hyena with his thuggy pals. I wondered what people like that were doing on the Riverwalk. Picking pockets, maybe? The man jerked around as she bumped him.

"Hey, watch it, bitch!" He shoved back, and poor Ashanti went sprawling. He looked down at her. I got a whiff of his beery breath. "Look,

Duke, a couple of *Stinkies*. Wadda ya say we chuck ‘em both in the water? See if they float.”

“Come on, Shorty,” said one of his friends, pulling at his arm. “You don’t wanna do that.”

“Shouldn’t be allowed out in public,” the red-faced man shouted. He didn’t like being contradicted by his friend. I realized he probably wasn’t much older than Ashanti, maybe one of the millions of people who had never had a job because computers did it better or it had been outsourced to Nigeria. Elaine said that’s why I had to study hard, so I could get a decent job. Shorty grabbed Ashanti by the arm, clumsily swung her toward the edge of the Riverwalk, braying his laugh. Huge joke.

What he didn’t realize was how fragile and tired revs get. Ashanti flew off her feet, hurtled into the murky water.

“You idiot, Shorty,” one of his friends said. “Now see what—”

I looked about wildly. Nobody was doing anything—not Shorty, and not his loutish friends. On the far side of the river, two old ladies walking small dogs were staring in shock. One of them turned her head and started to scream. I followed her gaze, and saw that the cruise boat was coming back, churning through the water toward us.

Ashanti was sinking. She looked ... well, *dead*. A moment later, I couldn’t even see her in the murky water. Her purple scarf floated on the surface. I threw myself over the edge and into the water. Nasty gritty stuff went up my nose and into my mouth. I choked for a moment, tried to spit it back. But I was plunging into the darkness, and bubbles came out between my lips and into my eyes. I thrashed about, looking for Ash. There she was, tumbling slowly, like a dark starfish with four limbs. My chest started to squeeze tight in panic. But if I went up to the surface, I’d never find her again. I’d hit my head on the boat, or get caught in its propeller. I forced my mouth closed and swam on.

And suddenly my chest didn’t hurt any more. I kicked hard toward Ashanti. My shoes felt heavy, and my uniform cargo pants dragged against the water, but I wasn’t choking and I wasn’t drowning.

Something hit my outstretched hand. Something cool, but warmer than the water. Ashanti’s masked face. I forgot about breathing, grabbed her under the arms. A shadow was passing over us—the cruise boat. My foot hit the slushy bottom, and I churned my way through it. Ash began to

struggle, and I saw the white wild flash of her eyes. She was terrified. I waved my spare hand in front of her eyes, and shook my head. Not drowning, waving.

The nano gloop was still breathing for us, of course.

When we breathed, the machines had taken oxygen from our lungs, and packed it away inside ridiculous little engines that swept themselves through our blood, which didn't need to be pushed along by our still hearts. I knew there was a limit to how long we could go without taking another breath, but it might be time enough to get us to the other side of the river.

It was awfully dark. Someone was singing a high note in my ears.

I kept going, half-carrying and half-pushing Ashanti. Thump! I'd run into the concrete wall of the Riverwalk. Now all we had to do was climb up.

Ashanti pulled loose from my arms. She was trying to get out by herself, but now she had one hand clutched in mine. Darker water was dragging me down again, into the murk. I was choking, finally. The air had run out. My arms and legs weren't working. I went away into a whirling—

"Well, young man, you must really like this place." Nurse Florez's cheerful voice.

"Huh?" I hurt all over and my head was muzzy.

"Please don't say 'Where am I?' They all do that. But since you ask, you're in the pediatric wing of Brooke Hospital, same place you were last time. But this time it was for drowning." She paused, gave a burbling laugh. "To start with."

Oh, right. Drowning.

"How's Ash?" I yelped. My throat really did hurt. Maybe they'd pushed a tube down to pump out all the repulsive river water I'd swallowed. My arms and legs hurt, too. Everything hurt. "Ashanti Washington," I added.

"She's just fine. You're a hero, dude."

Something was different, and I couldn't put my finger on it. I clutched at the sheets. They also felt different. Not different from home, different from last time. Huh? And something else—

I sniffed. Hospital odors, nothing rotting. I must be used to it by now, I thought gloomily. Used to my own stench.

“Sit up, now, Jimmy boy, you have some important people here to see you.”

Elaine? No, two men stood in the doorway, one of them extremely tall, with a closely shaved dark head. I didn't recognize the other one.

“Mr. Washington.” Then: “Bones? Is that you?” But of course it was.

Dodger's father stayed put at the door. “You first, Colonel.”

My uncle grinned and stepped forward. Over his shoulder, as he took me firmly by the hand, he said, “Hey, we're not in uniform, Ty. Call me Bones.”

“Can't do that, Colonel. Wouldn't be proper.” Ty Washington stepped forward and stood beside Bones, towering over him. One day, I thought, Dodger will be that tall. “Thank you, James, from the bottom of my heart. To have lost her a second time, and just at the moment when—” He broke off, and I swear there were tears in his eyes. He glanced at Bones.

“No secret any longer, Captain Washington,” Bones said. “Or it won't be, in a day or two. And it's not as if we can hide it from the kid anyway. Look at both of us, we're as healthy as prize stallions.”

“That's 'Ty' and you know it ... Bones,” said Mr. Washington. He said to me: “He was my commanding officer in the desert. Before the poor fool got himself killed.”

“And Ty was the one who dragged me out of the burning IBFV and got me to the medics.” I knew an IBFV was an armored Improved Bradley Fighting Vehicle, but I'd never known Bones was a colonel.

“Of course, the colonel was only a captain himself, back in those days.”

“Jim isn't interested in our old war stories,” Bones said. Wrong! I wanted to know everything, about Bones, about my dad. But I was trying to put it all together. I looked down at my hands, and touched my face. The skin was clear, no horrid flaking. Things felt right again. We were *fixed!*

“Your mom will be here shortly. She's driving in with the sergeant.” He

sat on the edge of the bed. “There’s a few details you’ll need to hold back from your school friends for another day or two. Luckily, it’s the weekend.”

Huh? “How can it be? Today’s—”

“Oh. You’ve been here eleven days, Jim. Getting the new treatment. So has Ashanti. And I have, too. As you can surely see.” Bones was grinning fit to bust. He looked ten years younger, and ten times as alive.

* * * *

A great heavy pair of shoes came clumping up the corridor. Sergeant Bouvier’s tread. Mom came in with him, and ran over to kiss me. A moment later the policeman’s large hand came down on my shoulder. I flinched, but his squeeze was gentle.

“Well, young fellow, you’ve given your mother an awful fright—for a second time. I’m relieved to see you among the living again.” He stopped, and I imagined the frowning looks the adults were shooting at each other. “You’re a smart boy, Jim,” the sergeant said. “Smarter than I was. Nobody bothered telling me this rogue Bonaparte was still in the same line of police work.”

Me either, but hey. I sat up in the hard hospital bed. Mom moved a pillow behind my shoulders. “You figured I’d lead you to Uncle Bones,” I said. “So you followed me, then called in your troops.”

“Close enough,” he said. “I’ve apologized to your family for my suspicions, Jim.”

“You really thought Bones might be doing some ... nasty deal ... right?”

“Yep. If I couldn’t stop him, at least I’d frighten him into running to his friends.” He cleared his throat. “Bones was way ahead of me. He knew exactly what he was doing.”

“Hey,” Bones said. “Anyway, it went wrong. Without your crew, Bill, Jimmy here and my squad would’ve been in *big* trouble. Me especially.”

I found myself grinning, and couldn’t believe how good I felt, suddenly. Big trouble. We’d both got killed stone dead, but that wasn’t enough trouble for Bones?

"I tell you, Jim," he said, "we both look a hell of a lot better."

"Without the stinks," I said in a small voice. "Gone for good?"

"Without *any* of the problems, darling," Elaine told me. She had both my hands in hers, and was rubbing them on her cheek. I felt a brief stupid burst of shame, thinking for an instant that she'd have to scrub her face clean to get the smell off of her. Then I remembered all over again that I wasn't a zombie now. "It was just a matter of time."

Mr. Washington said, "Once the doctors got it working in mice and gerbils—"

"*Mice?*"

"They had to make sure, Jim," Elaine said. She sounded awfully tired; I wondered how much sleep she'd had during the last two weeks. "We got special permission from a closed court so you could have the old embargoed nano treatment. Bonaparte explained to the judge that it was just a matter of weeks until the full cure was announced." She pressed the top of my head with her hand.

"So what about all those fool Stink—*victims* who paid the scammers for fake cures?"

"Not fools, Jim, just desperate people," Bones said. "They weren't prepared to wait for the science."

The sergeant grunted. "Always skulls abusing the hopes of disappointed people."

Yeah, okay, enough with the moralizing. "You want to trap as many as you can. Once people hear that—"

"They'll stop buying fake meds," my mom said angrily, "and the shitheads'll be off pulling some new scam on someone else."

I stared at her. Well, the shitheads *had* killed her son and her brother. So hey, she's entitled.

We heard a polite knock. Ashanti Washington, without a rebreather mask and wearing a bright green scarf, stood in the open doorway with her mother. Dodger was grinning like crazy behind them. Ash still looked drawn

and undernourished, but her eyes were bright, and I guessed her awful rotting meat odor was gone. Like mine.

“Come in, come in,” Elaine called, unabashed by her outburst. “The more the merrier!”

Nurse Florez put her head into the room. “You’ll have to quiet down, please, you’re annoying the other patients. The sick ones.”

I grinned back at the Dodge and waved. Uncle Bones was leaning across to mutter something in Ashanti’s ear. With a big grin, she came over to me and bent down, and I smelled a sweet fragrance. She whispered in my own ear, “Hey, Jim, my dog has no nose.”

I looked at her in astonishment. Her eyes danced. Man, I was halfway in *love* with this girl!

“Yeah? How does he smell?”

“*Terrible!*” we both yelled together, and the nurse shook her head but you could tell she was pleased. Elaine started crying again because I *didn’t* smell terrible, not any more, and neither did Ashie or Bones, and that was okay by me.