



sex in The Time of zombies



A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION
BY

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Special thanks to Ms Tiffany Shepis for being so cool with her small part in this collection; and, as always to my oldest and truest fan, #1 editor, and wife, Farrell; without her support and encouragement, this book would not have been possible and she truly is the wind beneath my wings

INTRODUCTION:

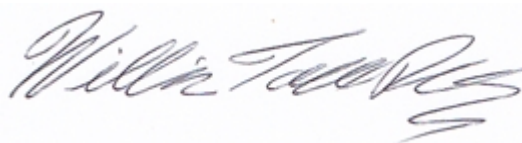
If you downloaded this book expecting lurid tales teeming with pornographic descriptions of unspeakable acts, then I'm afraid you're reading the wrong collection. Certainly there are events within these stories that some may find shocking or disturbing. Portions of it may even be considered erotic. But the focus in all of these stories isn't so much the physical act of sex; rather it's the idea of sex and sexuality as a common thread linking together disparate characters across the timeline of an undead apocalypse. Sex as motivation, sex as a weapon, sex as a way of asserting your humanity in a world of the dead: these are the types of things that interest me.

I've always been intrigued with the psychological and sociological ramifications of a single, shared event . . . in this case, the collapse of civilization as we know it. How individual people cope and deal with this collective tragedy would undoubtedly be as varied as the personalities involved. And, for me, that is the true root of my obsession with the alternate reality of the walking dead I've created. In my novel, *The Dead & Dying*, I set up the basic rules: zombies are referred to as alternately freshies or rotters (depending on the degree of decomposition), you don't necessarily have to be bit to come back, and so on.. In *Sex in The Time of Zombies*, I've went a little further and explored a specific, universal theme and various perspectives on it. As such, these are not so much stories about zombies as they are about the people who now must struggle for survival in a world they no longer control. But don't get me wrong: the undead are the glue which binds this particular world together and their presence certainly factors into the equation.

While it is true that these stories could be read in random order and still have them stand on their own merits, I highly recommend reading them sequentially. They are laid out, more or less, chronologically and take us from the very first day of the outbreak to points that are years in the future.

Regardless of *how* you read them, I hope that you'll enjoy them as much as I did creating them. And who knows? Maybe, somewhere within these pages, you'll catch a little glimpse of yourself

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'William Todd Rose', with a stylized, flowing script.

William Todd Rose



Dance With The Dead

It's three thirty-six on a Wednesday afternoon; but time really doesn't apply in the Jaybird Lounge. Windowless and dim, with only ambient light coming from the GOBOs and strobes hidden overhead, it could be any point between opening and last call. The entire joint smells of old beer and stale cigarettes. The Health Department actually banned indoor smoking nearly two years ago but the scent has seeped into the scuffed wood of the bar and the threadbare carpet. It lingers like a ghost that refuses to move on to the next life, haunting patrons who want nothing more than a few quick puffs with their Jager bomb.

Hidden in the shadows of the far corner, Jimmy Z sits atop a riser and cues up the next song. I see him for a moment in the soft glow of his DJ rig: horn rimmed glasses, shaven head glistening softly as he presses the headphones against one ear. He fiddles with the soundboard and then disappears back into the darkness, fading like the remnants of a dream.

The end result of his adjustments fill the Jaybird with electronic rhythms that seem to flow from one side of the room to the other before melting into the air like sugar on an absinthe spoon. What very well could be the voice of God booms out *Cowgirl's do it bareback* and echoes into infinity before being overpowered by the steady thud of a kick drum. Jimmy's got the bass pumped up and I can feel the drum pounding in my chest, thudding away as if it were actually hidden somewhere behind my heart and lungs.

And that's me, Rikki Wildride, up there on the stage. Yes, the one with with white, cheeky shorts laced up the front and the red fringed bikini top that barely covers my glitter-dusted breasts. I've teased my red hair until I look like some refugee from an 80s pop video and that stupid white cowboy hat keeps trying to slide off my head like it's got some sort of clinical

aversion to Aqua-Net. At least, though, the holsters are staying in place when I swing my hips. Which is more than I can say for yesterday.

This is actually my least favorite number and I'm not really sure why. Maybe its got something to do with the damn stiletto heels on those boots. Or it could be that the Old West simply isn't my thing. I've always been more into the sci-fi and horror scenes ; in fact I'll be breaking out the Gothic Lolita routine later on in the evening, after the Jaybird has been packed with horny business types on their way home from work. Now that's a bit I can really get into. And, coincidentally, it's also the one which usually brings in the majority of my tips for the night.

For now, though, I'm not really working it. There's only a few customers this early in the day and I'm just going through the motions while my mind wanders.

I'm wondering what had been going down outside this afternoon. The drive to work had been crazy, all sirens and flashing lights while every type of emergency vehicle imaginable sped by. I could see a dark cloud of smoke billowing up in the distance, probably down around the mall, and a stream of helicopters flew toward it, low and fast. Must've been something major going down out there to rate that kind of response. Terrorist shit, maybe. But I wouldn't know because some dickwad smashed out my window three days back and boosted a stereo that couldn't be worth more than twenty bucks, tops. Bunch of savages in this town . . .

Chester pulls me out of my thoughts as he presses up against the edge of the stage with one end of a dollar clamped between his teeth. I swing my hips back and forth as I lower down into a kind of wide-stance crouch right in front of him; leaning forward, I take the other end of the bill in my teeth and give the twins a little jiggle. Chester's a regular and seems to be an okay guy for the most part: he tips often, never gets grabby or causes any trouble. Hell, my top's not even off yet and he's already started letting the cash flow so he's fine by me.

Oh yeah, and that skanky slut behind him? The one who sank money into boobs when she shoulda been thinking orthodontia? That's Bambi. She's the type that gives the rest of us girls a bad rap. If you've got the cash and want one of her *private dances* in the backseat of her Pinto, well that can be arranged. In the mood for a little hand massage beneath the table? Yeah,

she'll do that too. Fact is, there's not a whole helluva lot that bitch *won't* do. If Hollister knew about it, she'd be out on her ass in the amount of time it takes to chip a nail. But there's a lot that goes down the boss-lady doesn't know about.

Right now for example. See how that whore's sidled up to the table with the guy passed out on it? I saw that dude come in when I was just starting my shift. Totally trippin' balls on some pretty serious shit by the look of it. His face looked like all the color had been drained out of it and even though his hair was literally streaming sweat down his forehead, he had his jacket buttoned all the way up. Came stumbling in and holding his gut like maybe he had the cramps real bad, ordered a beer, and collapsed into that chair there. And he's been slumped over the tabletop ever since, wallet right out in the open while his drink gets warm. But Bambi, she's acting like she's actually chatting him up, tossing her hair over her shoulder and laughing like he just told one of the jokes we've all heard a million times. The show has to be for Chester because the only witnesses are me, Jimmy Z, and Wilson who's pulling triple duty as bartender, bouncer, and doorman. And we all know exactly what she's up to.

See there? How she slid that wallet off the table as easily as she slips out of a halter top? If the dude wasn't so strung out, I'd almost feel sorry for the poor son of a bitch. But maybe Bambi's not as slick as she thinks she is; looks like he's starting to stir, almost as if there were some sort of psychic burglar alarm on that tattered fold of leather. She's scramblin' now, fishing twenty's out of the wallet and dropping it back to the table in one smooth movement. But junkie boy there, he's so whacked out of his gourd I don't think he even realized where he's at. Much less that some piece of white trash just nicked the payment for his next fix: his eyes have this dull, sunken look to them and if I thought he was pale when he came in it's nothin' next to how he looks now. Shit, dude's so far gone you can see the veins just under his skin, like little blue roadmaps.

Bambi, she just keeps tryin' to play out cool.

“Shit, sugar, I sure as hell would love a drink. As long as it's a'coming from a good lookin' stud like you.”

God, I hate that stupid little cum rag. That little southern twang to her voice? As fake as

those tits. And everything else about her for that matter.

Bambi calls out to Wilson for two shots of tequila and to make hers a light. Which is actually code. Her and Wilson have a deal worked out, see; when Hollister's not around and Bambi orders a *light*, he'll basically just fill her shot glass with water. Well, he's bringing over the drinks now so just watch how this goes down.

See how Wilson makes sure Bambi gets her drink first? Wouldn't do to have a customer get the water shot. He puts the salt shaker and the little dish of lemon wedges on the table, takes the money, and heads back to the bar. They'll split the night's *light tequila* take in the parking lot later; but for now, Bambi shakes a little salt onto the fleshy part of her hand, licks it off, throws back the water, and immediately suckles that little sliver of lemon. Lick it, slam it, suck it. The story of her life. But the smell of the lemon, it keeps the mark from noticing there's no alcohol on her breath if he gets that close.

The music's been blarin' through the amps this entire time and I thought I was just kinda watchin' all this while I teased my way to the point where the clothes start comin' off. But maybe my dance has lost a bit of its *oomph*; or perhaps I just can't hide the complete and utter disgust I feel for that revolting little tramp. Whatever the cause, Chester starts to turn around so he can see whatever the hell it is I'm lookin' at and Bambi shoots me one of those back-off-bitch stares that she's famous for. The expression, though, is as fleeting as sobriety on Two-For-One Tuesdays. By the time he's facing them, Bambi's all sugar and spice again.

Junkie boy looks like he's starting to come out of whatever drug-induced haze he's been floating in. Like he's just now startin' to realize that ain't a tuna fish sandwich he smells in the air.

Bambi puts more salt on her hand and holds a lemon wedge with the other.

“Hey, darlin', why dont'cha let Bambi give you a hand with that drink of yours.”

Dude makes no move toward the shot glass, but Bambi's launched into a full production now that she's got an audience. She shakes her ass a little and leans forward so that her boobs practically defy gravity by staying in her top. She reaches the salted hand forward.

“It's okay, sugar . . . go ahead and give little 'ole Bambi a lick.”

I don't know why but the little hairs on the back of my neck start to bristle and my stomach feels like its turned into a petrified walnut. I realize that the cowgirl song is still blasting with its incessant techno beat . . . but my dancing slows to the point that that I probably look more like a mental patient than anything even remotely exotic.

I find myself wishing that the six-shooters slung around my hips fired more than just blanks. But, again, I don't know why. All I know is that something is wrong. But I can't quite put my finger on what.

Junkie boy turns his head slightly and looks at the salted hand being offered to him. There's something familiar in his eyes. Something that reminds me of the way the pervs stare at my tits when they talk to me. As if I were nothing more than just a piece of meat.

Everything happens in a blur. The table overturning as junkie boy bolts out of his chair, grabs Bambi's wrist, and yanks her to him. It looks like he's trying to give her a hickey right where the pile of salt was, but Bambi is screaming, her voice shrill and piercing. Her face is a mask of pain and she tries to pull away, but he's got her wrist tight and she's pounding at his face with her free hand. Now I see the blood starting to ooze across her skin and notice that it's also on junkie boy's lips and chin and the full realization hits me: he's biting her. Chewing on her hand, ripping through the flesh and muscle with his teeth . . .

I stand up there on the stage and the music sounds so muffled and distant now, as if I were hearing it through a concrete wall five feet thick. For a moment everything seems to swim in and out of focus and I start to wobble on these damn stiletto heels. I can feel my heart fluttering and the air I'm breathing seems too warm, too thin . . . I grab onto the silver pole, the one closest to the front of the stage, to brace myself. Part of my mind is yelling *do something, do something!* but I can only stand and watch, transfixed by the way Bambi's blood glistens in the strobes.

Wilson, however, is running across the floor but to me it seems as if he's moving in slow motion. He's got a Louisville Slugger and he's choked up on the grip nice and low, same way my Dad taught me to do it. Gritting his teeth together he swings and the bat whacks into cannibal boy's spine but that mother fucker just keeps right on going. He's tearing chunks of

flesh away now and Bambi's still struggling and screaming, lines of dark mascara and tears running down her cheeks.

Wilson swings again, this time hittin' right around the left kidney. Cannibal boy whirls around, his clenched teeth pulling a long ribbon of muscle from Bambi's hand as she stumbles backwards. Before Wilson can even ready the bat again, freak show launches himself at the bartender and tackles him to the floor. This time he goes straight for the kill like some kind of fuckin' jungle cat, biting and gnashing at Wilson's neck as this spray of blood arcs out and splatters against the fucker's face.

Everything is thrown back into sharp focus again and it's almost a physical feeling, like being in a speeding car that suddenly slams on the brakes. Chester's huddled in a corner and he's yelling at his cell phone, his voice barely audible over the *unn-tiss-unn-tiss-unn-tiss* beat of the music; Bambi's scrambling backward on the floor, clutching her injured hand to her chest and leaving bloody smears across her cleavage.

Wilson has stopped kicking and twitching and seems to hold little interest for cannibal boy now that's he's perfectly still.

Dead. Wilson is dead.

At some point during the struggle, Wilson had ripped the buttons off that fucker's jacket and when cannibal boy turns to face the stage I see a shredded white t-shirt crusted with blood. Bulging out of the rips in the fabric is something pink, something that almost looks like linked sausage, and I realize he wasn't cramping when he first staggered into the bar. He was trying to hold his own guts in. Now, however, that doesn't seem to be much of a priority. They slide out of his wound and plop to the floor as a stench like a combination of rotting food and warm shit overpowers the usual scent of the bar.

The drums have stopped and there's this long, slow note that seems to slide down into my very soul.

No one could live through that . . .

We stare at each other for a moment and there's a pause in the music, just long enough for a heavily reverbed sample of the hawk-like flute from those Clint Eastwood westerns to echo

through the club

You've gotta be freakin' kidding me.

Snare drums, synthesizers, and bass all kick into overdrive and this is the part where my top would normally be flung off in perfect sync with the explosion of music, revealing the twins in all their perky glory. Instead, I've got this fucking dead guy runnin' full blast toward me, blood streaking his face while his guts trail along behind him like he's some dog that's pulled free from its lead.

He clamors up the side of the stage and my heart is pounding twice as fast as the music, which is rapidly building toward a crescendo; this weird taste floods my mouth, like I've just stuck the tip of my tongue to a battery or something, and my field of vision narrows to the point where all I can see is this blood drenched *thing* scrambling across the stage with outstretched arms.

Without thinking, I grab onto the pole tightly with both hands, take a few steps backward, and then throw my body forward as I lift my legs. The world is a blur as I whip around the pole; I've pulled my knees up almost to my chest and allow centrifugal force to swing me back around again.

The fucker is so close that for a fraction of a second I can see thin lines of blood outlining the contours of his teeth and smell the salty, metallic scent of the gore that covers him.. But then I'm kicking out with my feet and there's a jolt that travels up my legs and jars my hips; the stiletto heel of my right boot has plunged deep into the freak's eye and thick, dark blood oozes out of the socket.

For what seems to be an eternity, I'm suspended there between that son of a bitch and the pole, a bridge of barely covered flesh connecting the two. He's twitchin' like my nephew Sonny having a seizure, but his hands hang limply at his sides. I flex my legs and, using the pole for leverage, kick forward again.

It feels like I've just sank my heel into thick mud but this seems to do the trick. Junkie-cannibal boy goes entirely limp.

Only he's not a junkie. He's not a cannibal, either. Not really.

I've seen enough movies to know exactly what he is . . . or, rather, what he was. But I just can't seem to bring myself to think the actual word because, despite everything that's just happened, just thinking about it makes me feel like a foolish little schoolgirl.

The weight of his body snaps the heel off my boot and he and I both fall to the stage at the same time. I can hear Bambi crying and Chester is shouting something about how you shouldn't get a fuckin' busy signal when you dial 911.

I kick boots off and think about Wilson. About Bambi. If the things I've seen in the movies are accurate, it's gonna get a lot worse in here. And soon.

Kitty and Towanda have burst through the curtain of the dressing room and they're heading toward the door, their bouncing boobs heaving with panicked breaths.

Jimmy Z has shimmied down from the riser and he's making time toward the exit as well. Without him to cue up the next song, the Jaybird is strangely silent with only the sounds of suffering to fill the void.

He and the girls all get the door at the same time. Just as they're about to push their way through, it bursts open and this chick with skin that looks like crispy bacon throws herself at Kitty.

Wilson's fingers have started to wiggle but that's all I see because I'm heading toward the back of the club as fast as my legs can carry me. No way I'm stickin' around for this bloodbath. Consider it my resignation.

I bust into Hollister's office and am getting ready to throw open the door that leads into the smoking area behind the club when I stop. Hanging above her desk, she's got this homemade plaque with the words *Employee Conflict Resolution* carved into the wood. Two metal brackets stick out from either side of the plaque and, resting upon them, is a shiny silver machete.

I remove the weapon from its cradle and run the tip of my thumb lightly along the blade. Sharp. I knew it would be.

The grip feels almost like sandpaper but not quite as rough. Which is good. I imagine blood would make it hard to hang onto something that wasn't textured.

I throw open the door and sunlight floods into the office. For a few minutes everything is

washed out in a blinding glare of light that rams needles of pain into my eyes. I blink rapidly and shade my face with my forearm until the bluish flash-bursts of light stop exploding in my field of vision like fireworks.

I step into the alley. Barefoot and wearing this ridiculous cowgirl stripper outfit, I take a deep breath. The air smells of smoke and gasoline; screams echo off the buildings and mock those who try in vain to scramble for safety; sirens wail like banshees and I feel an explosion rumble the concrete beneath my feet.

At the head of the alley, this thing steps into view. It's missing one arm and pieces of broken glass jut out of its face, glimmering in the sunlight like fairy dust.

It sees me and breaks into a run.

I hoist my weapon to shoulder level and stare directly at the thing's head. It takes a lot of upper body strength and tone to work the pole; I'm pretty sure I can cleave the skull and dig the blade into its brain in one try.

It's halfway through the alley now and I adjust the brim of my hat to help keep the sun out of my eyes. The weight of the machete feels reassuring in my hand and I take a long, slow breath.

You wanna tango, mother fucker?

Let's do it.

I'm Rikki Wildride . . . and if there's one thing I can do, it's dance.



NIGHT OF THE LIVING FURRIES

Three weeks earlier everything had changed. The day before *it* happened had been just like any other: people woke up just long enough to slap the snooze button on the torture device known as an alarm clock, slept for fifteen more minutes, and then poured bitter coffee down their gullets as they cursed at roadwork; they parked in garages, at meters, in lots that charged monthly for the little tag of plastic that gave them the right to occupy their slot number without being towed. They pecked at keyboards, answered phones, flipped burgers, and pounded nails into the frames of houses that would never be completed. Some were born, some died, some hid themselves in the shadows of bars, trying so desperately to find what could have been somewhere within the suds of their brew. None of them knew that by the time the sun mustered the strength to rise again, it would do so on a different world.

The change began in hospitals and at the scenes of accidents. Murder-suicides, wrinkled old men and women who'd closed their eyes the night before and slipped into that fabled better place as clocks ticked toward Armageddon: these were the foot soldiers of the apocalypse, the harbingers of a new era where Death no longer held sway in his skeletal palace.

In times to come, there would be many theories. Speculation would run as rampant as the packs of dogs who, without masters, prowled city streets in search of carrion. Some claimed it was some sort of cosmic radiation that had erupted from the sun; others said it was a virus, bio-engineered in terrorist labs and set loose upon the world before its fathers had a true understanding of the jihad they were unleashing. And, of course, there were those who saw the blight as Divine retribution: it was a pestilence that made the ten plagues of Egypt look like a mere practice round, the punishment of an angry God upon the wicked masses.

In truth, however, no one really knew for sure. The only thing that was for certain was

that the dead were not staying that way. They were rising up and were utterly stripped of whatever tiny spark had previously made them human. No expression, no sound passing through lungs that no longer billowed with air, no apparent sense of right and wrong, or even the most rudimentary of critical thinking skills. They were creatures of instinct, slaves to the twin masters of consequence and reaction. They heard a sound and they pursued it; they saw movement and they were drawn to it like ants to a picnic.

And, in those initial days, they were fast. They had run and leaped and pounced, had swarmed through the cities and towns of the Earth like a wave of destruction. The sick, the very young, the old, and crippled: these were the first to be cut from the fold, to be taken down like gazelle on the dusty plains of Africa. Bitten and clawed, their flesh was rendered from bone and organs blossomed from stomachs like the contents of a twice-baked potato. And they, too, rose. They too walked and hunted and added to the legion of corpses that had been turned loose upon the land.

Eventually, the muscles and connective tissues would fall prey to the forces of entropy. These swift predators would find themselves moving a little more slowly, would stumble and stagger as they stalked those still alive; but, by then, their strength no longer lay in blitzkrieg attacks that caused the sidewalks to glisten with blood in the afternoon sun. By the time the stench of rot surrounded them like a putrid aura, their greatest ally had become their sheer numbers. They would close in around their victims, slowly tightening the circle until it was no longer possible to burst through their ranks like someone whose name had been called in a macabre game of Red Rover. Isolate, engulf, and overcome was the new strategy and, as a result, the refugees of a ruined world found themselves spending more and more time hiding; venturing out only when the pangs of hunger could no longer be tricked by sucking on small pebbles or snatching insects from the rubble, the human race had slowed to a crawl. As silent as the dead who hunted them, they crouched and trembled, dreaming of some miracle that would descend from the heavens and deliver them from this nightmarish new reality.

Corporal J.T. Washington, however, was not one to sit idly by and simply wait for things to happen. During his seven year career in the former U.S. Army, he'd garnered a reputation

among his peers as being somewhat impulsive. No one would have went as far as calling him reckless; however it was a well known fact that patience was not ranked high on his list of virtues. What others failed to realize, though, was that what seemed to be nothing more than spur of the moment decisions were actually well thought out plans. Even as a child, he'd had a gift for recognizing the consequences of cause and effect. It was almost as if all the conceivable outcomes for a suggested course of action played out in his mind simultaneously. In the amount of time it took to blink twice, he'd instinctively considered and computed every variable until the undertaking with the highest probability of success stood out among all the others. This talent had led him to capture the presidency of the chess club despite the fact that he was only a freshman; it had guided him through maneuvers both in the field and in training. And, now, it was responsible for keeping his ass alive in an undead world.

He knew for example, that he needed to get off the streets. And quick. Even though he slipped through the shadows with the stealth of a trained killer, the world had become as silent as a tomb. The slightest rustle could draw unwanted attention as effectively as a shout and the light of the full moon only complicated matters further. It caused the buildings of the city to be silhouetted against the sky like a series of black monoliths and cast pools of shadow on the land below; but, at the same time, crossing streets would put him right out in the open. Bathed in moonlight, he would be as clearly visible as if the lamps lining either side of the sidewalks were still functioning. No, in this situation, traveling by daylight would be better; plus, his body and mind were beginning to show the first signs of fatigue. It had been close to thirty-six hours since he'd been able to capture more than a few minutes of sleep at a time. His muscles were rubbery and sore and his thoughts had the feeling of existing somewhere deep within the recesses of his brain; they seemed to bleed out slowly from fissures cracked open by weariness and struggled for substance and rationality. At this rate, it would only be a matter of time before he made a stupid mistake: kicking a tin can that he should have clearly seen, knocking over a pile of rubble, or even simply yawning a little too loudly.

Currently, he was crouched behind an overturned dumpster at the mouth of an alley. His eyes scanned the street for signs of movement, but this sector – for the time being – seemed

clear. He had no doubt that the undead were near . . . it seemed as if they always were; but if he was going to get moving, now would be the time.

Across the four lane was a tall building that had the look of an upscale hotel or highrise apartment complex. The side of the building was lined with these little wrought iron balconies and he could just make out the fluttering of curtains where the sliding doors behind some of them had either been left open or broken out. The building looked to be between twenty to thirty stories, but his gaze focused on the second floor: it was still close enough to the ground that he could leap from a window to the street in the event that he found himself flanked by a battalion of staggering corpses. Any higher and he'd run the risk of breaking a leg or twisting an ankle as his body absorbed the shock of the concrete below. Furthermore, he should be able to find a room facing the east so that the rising sun would stream through the window and awaken him once the sun had decided to grace the world with its presence again.

“Alright, Washington, deploy. Move, move, move!”

The gruff voice that rattled through his memory belonged to Sargent Wilcox and for a moment an image of the man appeared like a ghost in the street: fatigues spattered with blood, his round jaw slack, and his skin paler than the moon overhead; where his throat had once been was now only a jagged hole with ribbons of flesh that flapped softly like banners in the breeze.

Forcing the specter back into the brig of imagination, Julius abandoned his cover. He moved across the street in a half-crouch with the textured grip of his Desert Eagle clutched firmly in his right hand while his left braced his wrist. Every movement was carefully calculated as he zigzagged between wrecked cars and the bodies of fallen zombies that had been left to rot on the streets; his eyes swept the perimeter like sentry cameras, panning and tilting as every detail was captured in brief glances.

Within seconds, he'd crossed the road and was standing before what used to be a large, plate glass window. Now, however, it was nothing more than a gaping hole in the side of the building with only the sparkle of little nuggets of glass on the sidewalk to prove that it had ever been anything different. His combat boots crunched through the remnants of the window as he eased his way through the opening, taking care that none of the tooth-like shards still remaining

in the sill had an opportunity to bite him.

It was much darker inside the building than it had been on the streets and he took a moment to give his eyes time to adjust to the gloom. The floor of the lobby was polished marble and reflected the columns lining the room, giving the impression that the Greco-Roman features simply descended into a lower floor that was a mirror image of this one. He could make out a long wooden desk directly across from him with reams of paper scattered about; to his left was what appeared to be a restaurant of sorts with tables and chairs toppled in the darkness. A coffee shop, wide stairs curling up to the second level, a bank of elevators to the right . . . bodies littered about the floor like discarded rag dolls in pools of blood that had dried black.

If he thought it had been quiet outside, it was nothing compared to the interior of the hotel. Here the silence was so complete that he heard a high-pitched ring in his ears and his own, controlled breathing sounded like the pneumatics of some machine hidden within the bluish walls.

Once he was confident that he was alone in the lobby, Washington crossed the expanse and worked his way behind the front desk. Luckily, this was an old-school hotel: the keys to the rooms hung on little pegs behind the desk with brown, leather fobs embossed with gold numbers. If the establishment had bowed to the trends of technology, there would've been nothing more than encoded cards to swipe through the readers attached to the rooms. Utterly useless in a world where electricity had gone the way of the dodo and dinosaurs.

He plucked one down that had the number 207B imprinted on the tag and was making his way toward the stairs when a set of double doors that he'd previously overlooked captured his attention. Above the doors was a wooden plaque with intricate scrollwork depicting flora and fauna; carved into this piece of wood in elegant script were the words *McDonough Conference and Ball Room*.

The doors below were just as ornate as the sign. They were highly polished and carved with what appeared to be laurel leaves and vines with an occasional rosebud unfurling its petals. The handles were shiny brass and someone had thrust a long, slender pipe through them at some point, forming a crude but effective lock.

Placing his ear against the cool wood, Washington could just make out muffled sounds from the other side. Not voices, but what sounded like furtive movements. A thud, something that sounded like papers shuffling, a shuffling sound that may or may not have been footsteps.

Whoever had placed the pipe across the doors had obviously been locking something in. And it wasn't hard to imagine what.

Washington knew that he should just walk away. That he should leave the doors secured, find his room, and bed down for the night. Get some shut eye and try to regroup with another regiment in the morning.

But another part of him wanted to know exactly what lay on the other side. Maybe it was some sort of morbid curiosity; perhaps exhaustion was beginning to take its toll on his lightning quick decision making abilities. Whatever the reason, this portion of his mind saw the room on the other side of the doors as a mystery that had to be investigated, a riddle in search of a solution.

He glanced below the door handles, hoping to see a keyhole through which he could spy. No such luck. Furthermore, the doors were nearly flush with the marble floor: no chance of peeking through there.

Lying next to the door was a black marquee with white block letters spelling out *URRY CONVENTION*. Other letters were scattered about the floor like alphabetic shrapnel around a disk that looked somewhat like a shiny, silver landmine. So that was it then: the rod fortifying the doors had once been the support for this placard. But what kind of convention had the sign been announcing? Washington's mind ticked off the possibilities: *curry, hurry, blurry, scurry* . . . none of them made any sense.

Now, he was definitely intrigued. Besides, what if this wasn't the only way out? What if the other side of the room had a doppelganger of these doors that weren't barricaded as well? If he wanted to make it through this night alive, he would have to understand the enemies position . . . wouldn't he?

Wasn't recognizance among a soldier's most valued weapons? As Sun Tzu wrote, a hundred battles could be won without a single loss by knowing both yourself and your opponent.

Washington holstered his weapon and took a slow breath through his nostrils. A quiver of apprehension caused the muscles in his stomach to tremor, but he pushed the fear aside as his hands gripped either side of the rod that barred the doors. He lifted it so slowly than a casual observer might have assumed it was wired to some sort of IED. Taking care that the metal didn't scrape against the wood and brass of the doors, he began sliding the pipe free.

Next he laid the rod against the floor so gingerly that there wasn't so much as even the smallest clang. He paused and listened at the door again. This time all seemed quiet on the other side. If anything was rushing toward the door, it was doing so with a stealth that the undead simply didn't possess.

With his ear pressed against the door, Washington studied the hinges on either side. All of them looked fairly new. Shouldn't be any issues with them creaking.

He placed one hand on the stock of his pistol and the other on one of the door handles. Holding his breath, he depressed the little lever with his thumb slowly. The bolt slid out of the catch as silently as a cat in the darkness, without even a soft click to announce that the doors could now be thrown wide open.

Washington opened the door as if in slow motion. Every muscle in his body had tensed and his heart hammered within his chest so hard that he was surprised his dog tags didn't jingle in response.

Finally, there was a crack just large enough to allow him to peek through. Squinting one eye, he leaned his head forward and peered into the room that had so captured his imagination.

For a moment, he felt as though he had nodded off and slipped into some kind of dream. Moonlight streamed through the skylights and he could see tables and folding chairs in the room, most of them overturned on the plush carpet amid scattered pamphlets, books, and papers. Broken glass seemed to be everywhere and the toile wallpaper was streaked with what had to be blood. All of this, though, had been expected; what caused all of his thoughts to stop as abruptly as a car slamming into a brick wall were the occupants of the room.

There had to be between thirty to forty of them stumbling about the convention hall. They bumped into one another like bit actors in some silent comedy, tripped over their own feet,

and shuffled aimlessly back and forth. But these didn't appear to be people. No, they were all . . . *animals?*

Six foot tall rabbits with glossy, plastic eyes brushed against bushy tailed skunks; what appeared to be a Panda ran its paws over the far wall as if it could somehow scratch its way through the other side while a red fox lost its footing on some loose paper and tumbled to the floor. Squirrels, dogs, and even what looked to be a giant jack-a-lope, of all things: all walking upright, all seeming confused and lost. Most of them had fur matted with blood and large, dark gashes around their necks and stomachs.

It was like catching a glimpse of cartoon Hell.

On the far side of the room, a woman in a form-fitting, leopard print leotard pushed her way through the crowd. Round, furry ears peeked out through a tangle of dark hair and a long tail hung limply from her hind side. Unlike the others, her face looked as if it had been painted to resemble the features of a jungle cat: the tip of her nose was as dark as coal and a thin line connected it to lips that, even in death, looked full and pouty against the dark spots that covered her face. Washington knew that red smears on her chin, however, had not been part of the original costume.

For some reason, he found it nearly impossible to take his eyes off this woman. Maybe it was the way the tights clung to the shape of her body, perfectly contouring to the swells of her breasts and the soft curves of her hips and ass. She had to be completely naked beneath them, as there wasn't even the slightest hint of pantyline around her camel toe.

This time it was his mother's face that shrieked through his imagination.

“Julius Tyrone Washington! You dirty, *dirty* little boy!”

His face and chest grew warm and he suddenly no longer felt like a highly trained and efficient soldier; he was twelve years old again and withering beneath his mother's caustic glare. Tears clouded his vision and he wanted to shrink into himself, to simply curl into a ball so small and tight that he simply winked out of existence.

Her words echoed through his memory, gathering strength with each shameful repetition.

. . . *disgusting little pervert.*

His stomach churned with bitter acids and he was trembling now as images of the clothespin snapping shut flashed through his mind.

. . . doesn't feel so good now, does it, you sick little bastard?

Perhaps he whimpered. Or maybe he choked back the sob that felt like a bubble rising through his chest. Whatever the cause, the end result was the same: every plush head in the convention hall snapped toward the door simultaneously, as if connected by some invisible rod.

“Son of a bitch.”

Most of the human-animal hybrids were slow and lumbering, as could be expected. The leopard woman, however, was surprisingly quick. Maybe the tightness of her costume had somehow slowed down deterioration, for she moved almost as quickly as the freshly dead.

She shouldered her way past her fellow occupants with no regard for decorum, breaking into a slow run as she extended her arms as if she could somehow magically extend their reach. Even though twenty or more feet still separated them, he could see the long, black nails that tipped each finger and they clawed at the air as she ran like the animal she was pretending to be.

For a moment, all of Washington's training went AWOL. He stumbled backward as his hand fumbled for his weapon, struggling to remove the pistol from a holster that now seemed more complicated than it had the right to be.

Before the others had crossed even half the distance, Leopard Woman had burst through the double doors. She was close enough now that Washington could see a film of dust on the green contacts that made it look as though her pupils were dark slivers of almonds.

Those unblinking eyes were focused entirely on him as she rushed across the few feet that still separated them, her teeth already gnashing at the air in hopes of finding flesh.

His holster finally gave up its prize and he brought the barrel up as his finger squeezed off a round. The shot echoed through the lobby as if it had been fired from a weapon of much higher caliber, seeming to be three times as loud as it would have been out in the open. At that exact moment, Leopard Woman's feet rolled over the rod that had previously barred the door. Her body pitched backwards and Washington's bullet ripped through the fabric of her prosthetic ear, exploding it into a shower of fluff and stuffing.

She landed on her back with her legs spread wide but no sooner than her head had cracked against the stone floor, it snapped up again, eyes still fixated on her prey.

A second shot caused a spray of dark blood and pink gristle to explode like a geyser from the back of her head. Bits of bone peppered the wall behind her and her lithe body went limp as the sulfuric cloud of smoke released from the gun dissipated like a soul that had found release.

The rest of the anthropomorphic crowd hadn't made it close enough to the doors yet to be an issue; however, Washington knew that if he took the time to try and re-secure the door he'd be pushing his luck. Instead he bolted for the stairs, taking them three at a time and diving for cover once he'd reached the second floor landing. He pressed his back flat against the wall and concentrated on his breathing, trying to ensure that he was as silent as humanly possible; at the same time, he fished a small, rectangular mirror from his shirt pocket and angled it around the wall so he would be able to monitor their movements without revealing his position to the enemy down below.

In the reflection, he could see that the giant animals had just begun filing through the open door. Some of them walked across the now-still body of Leopard Woman as if she were nothing more than a bulky rug while others seemed to skirt around her. However, none of them seemed to be heading for the stairs. A more intelligent hunter would have looked around and tried to pick up the trail of their prey through any means necessary; with the living dead, however, it was a different story. As long as he remained completely silent, as long as he stayed hidden from view, Washington simply did not exist. Chances were they'd already forgotten the brief glimpse they'd caught of him.

He wasn't sure exactly how long he sat like that, watching these *things* mill about the lobby like confused tourists. Long enough for the muscles in his legs to begin to cramp and for his eyelids to feel as if someone had glued pennies to them; long enough for the shame of memory to burrow deep within his soul and simmer on the coals of guilt.

And here I thought you was a good little boy. You think good little boys do that?

Finally, he saw a blood-drenched gopher stagger out the broken window as if it were the entrance to a burrow and disappear into the streets beyond. The lobby was silent and he finally

allowed himself to stretch.

Now, to find that room and get so much needed R&R

The hotel room was much nicer than any of the ones Washington had ever stayed in. Rather than having carpet so threadbare that it felt like walking on sandpaper, the plush shag seemed to billow around his bare feet. He sat on the edge of the bed and flexed his toes as he looked around. The far wall was dominated by a large window and he'd quickly pulled the thick, taupe drapes over the flimsier curtains behind them when first entering the room. In front of the window were a pair of overstuffed chairs with a round table sitting between them. There was a television, a writing desk nestled into an alcove, a wardrobe and dresser, and a few lamps scattered about. But there was also a small, black refrigerator with a glass door; through this door, he could see these little bottles of alcohol staring back and soon after stripping off his uniform he'd carried a fistful to the bed and downed them in rapid succession.

The empty bottles now clustered about his feet, collateral damage in the war against memories that refused to be put down. He'd spent his entire adult life pushing these thoughts into the furthest recesses of his mind and, for the most part, had been successful. If you didn't think about it, his reasoning went, then it was almost like it had never happened. But those damn freaks in the animal costumes had ruined all that, hadn't they? They had to bring everything back, to make his past come charging toward the front like an insurgent hellbent on emotional jihad.

The voice of his mother still echoed through his head like a moment looped in time. The contempt in her clipped tone jabbed fiery bayonets into his gut and the part of his anatomy the old bitch had always called his *dirty worm* ached with the phantom memories of pain.

"Fuck you, woman. Fuck . . . you."

He twisted the cap off the final bottle of Absolut, tilted his head back, and allowed the liquid to gurgle into his throat. The vodka left a trail of napalm down his esophagus and spread like the fires of a Molotov when it hit his stomach.

Normally, Washington could hold his liquor with the best of them. But he'd had so little

to eat over the past few days, that the alcohol had quickly dulled his tired mind even further. By the time the bottle had joined its comrades on the hotel's floor, it felt as though he'd somehow stumbled into an out of focus photograph that was just beginning to show the effects of age. Everything seemed fuzzy and indistinct: the sharp edges of the writing desk and wardrobe blurred into hazy patches of reality and the bed looked like it were a mere prop. The down comforter, the crisp white sheets, and carefully fluffed pillows . . . none of these things looked like they were ever meant to be actually used. They were too ethereal for that, too perfect for a world that seemed as if it were about to careen off into the furthest reaches of space. And, on top of all of this, everything had a grainy quality as well. Like one of the old black and white films he'd watched as a kid when . . .

Washington squeezed his eyes shut and massaged his temples with the tips of his fingers. It was better not to think about childhood, to continue dredging up all those memories. Maybe if he could somehow just manage to focus on the here and now, the room would stop this crazy carousel spin; maybe he could simply let go and be free.

But with his eyes closed, it all come rushing back. So clear that it could have been yesterday.

He was twelve again and had only recently begun to realize that girls weren't exactly the nuisance he'd always assumed. In fact, they'd begun to awake something within him. Something that was like a tingling just above his dirty worm; but, at the same time, it also gave him the same sensation that riding The Big Dipper did when the cars finally plummeted down the other side of the largest hill; for a brief second, he could see the entire park stretched out around him. There was that sense of exhilaration, of being at the summit of the world, only to it feel as though his stomach had been left near the top of the coaster once he began the plunge.

Except for his little sister, Brittany. She was annoying as ever with her whining and the way she was always taking his action figures and making them do ridiculous things. Like shopping. G.I. Joe wouldn't be caught dead in the Dream Car. He'd be out, saving the world from COBRA and keeping democracy safe. Not chatting away with Barbie about how pretty her

dress was. Luckily, he was four years older than she; Brittany had already been put to bed for the night and he didn't have to worry about the little brat bursting through his bedroom door with all of her stupid little questions.

He could hear the television through his bedroom door and occasionally his mother's muffled laugh. Which was good. As long as he could hear her, he knew where she was. Still, he couldn't help but to steal glances at the door every few seconds. As if half-expecting to see the knob turning slowly.

Part of him felt this guilty excitement. It was like that time Ronny had dared him to steal the Hot Wheels from old man Pendleton's store. He'd known it was wrong, that he would be in *so* much trouble if he got caught. But there was also this little thrill that made his breathing feel funny and caused him to border on dizziness. It felt like he was trembling from the inside out and was a confusing mash of good and bad wrapped in the same package.

He licked his dry lips and looked at the raccoon sitting on his lap. It was wearing this yellow t-shirt that said *Molly* and its button eyes were dull and scratched; one ear was ravaged from the time Bowser had decided Molly should be his new chew toy and in places its synthetic fur was matted with dried glue.

For nearly six months, Brittany had taken this stuffed animal everywhere with her. At all hours of the day, she would squeeze its stomach and, from somewhere within all that cloth and stuffing, this little voice would giggle. A second squeeze and it would exclaim *Let's play!* Yet another and this girly voice would shyly say *I want you to be me friend.*

Brittany's obsession, however, had ended shortly after she'd tried to take Molly into the bath with her. From that point on, it was almost as if the raccoon had suffered minor brain damage after a near drowning experience. Almost its entire vocabulary had been wiped out and forgotten; only three words remained in Molly's repertoire and she would repeat them over and over as long as pressure was continually applied.

Those three words were the reason JT had snuck into the hallway closet the night before and secreted the animal away. They were the reason he now felt as if everything inside him had turned to warm mush. And the reason he'd taken his pocket knife and sliced a small gash

between the toy's legs and then pushed some of the stuffing aside with the tip of his finger.

He lay naked on his bed with Molly The Raccoon on his lap. His right hand squeezed the hard lump of the voice activator like the nurse at school working a blood pressure bulb. And Molly responded, time and time again, with the exact same phrase.

I want you . . .

I want you . . .

I want you . . .

Flash forward: crying in the bathroom, Mama looming over him, her face red and angry, while Brittany banged on the bathroom door, demanding to know what was going on. Still naked, he'd tried to cover himself but Mama kept smacking his hands away with hard raps from the backside of a hairbrush.

“You ashamed? You should be, you dirty little boy. You filthy little pervert!”

He felt smaller than he ever had in his life and wished he could just hop into the bathtub and disappear down the drain. His entire body trembled, this time with fear, and he kept his gaze pointed toward the floor, far from the angry glare of Mama's eyes.

“God hates perverts, Julius! God hates you right now, too . . . you hear me? God *hates* you!”

Even over his sobbing and the way his heart seemed to pound within his eardrums, he heard the rattle of the clothespin bag as Mama took it down from the hook on the back of the door. Her footsteps thundered across the linoleum and he heard a sharp snapping sound as she the clothespin opened and closed within her hand.

“Perverts get VD! Perverts get disease! You know what VD feels like, you dirty little boy?”

He'd rapidly shook his head, slinging snot and tears from his face in the same way Bowser flung water after a bath.

“I'll show you what VD feels like.”

The clack of the clothespin punctuated every word.

“I'll show you what it does to your dirty worm!”

He must have passed out at some point for he was sprawled across the bed in his boxers. For a moment, he wasn't sure where he was. In the darkness, everything about the hotel room looked strange and foreign . . . like some alien landscape he'd been plopped into the middle of after a late night abduction.

“Wha's that?”

Washington's voice sounded slurred, even to his own ears, and it took a moment for the world to catch up with him when he sat up. He felt slightly nauseous but stumbled out of bed anyway, banging his shin on the bedside table with a curse.

“Who . . . what”

He could hear something. Like a soft rubbing sound, furtive and distant.

He spun in a slow circle, surveying the shadows.

“Wha's that?”

Nothing. He was entirely alone in the room . . . but he still heard the sound. Almost like scratching. Only smoother. Slow and rhythmic, like something being drug through sand. Or wood. Yeah, like something that was being pulled across wood.

There was a loud thump and rattle, so unexpected that he jumped slightly as his head snapped toward the source of the sound. It was followed by a moment of silence and then that soft rubbing sound again.

It was the door.

The noise was coming from the door.

Washington weaved across the room, trailing one hand over the wall to keep from tripping over his own feet.

The sound was louder now, more insistent. And definitely coming from the other side of the door.

“Shomeone there?”

At the sound of his voice the sound grew louder, doubling in intensity. For some reason an image of Bowser came to mind: the dog was standing in the kitchen, scratching at the wall as

he looked from the door to the family seated at the dinner table.

Washington practically fell against the door and he pressed his palms flat against the cool wood as he leaned forward; with his left eye squinted, his head bobbed back and forth as he attempted to peer through the round peephole.

“M . . . Molly?”

Through his fish-eye view of the hallway, he could see a distorted, gray raccoon on the other side. It's paws were sliding over the door and, as he watched, its furry little head lurched forward and thumped off the wood.

“You're . . . you're not Molly. Nope, nope, nope.”

For one, this raccoon had perfect ears. It's eyes were glossy white with blue irises, not the scarred, black buttons of his little sister's toy. Nor was it wearing a t-shirt.

“And you're big, too. Really, really big.”

It all came back to him then: the convention hall with its parade of life-size animals, Leopard Woman in her sexy little leotard, the bottles of vodka, and his journey through memory. And then he heard his mother's voice again, so clear that she could have been standing just over his shoulder.

I'll show you what VD does to your dirty worm . . .

Washington pressed his face against the door and realized he was crying. The tears were hot and stung his eyes like needles and he wrapped his arms around his stomach, resting the weight of his body squarely on the side of his face.

“I was just a little boy, you mean old bitch . . . I didn't do anything wrong. You hear me? I didn't do anything wrong!”

Tears quickly gave way to a rage that exploded within him like a bombing run. His muscles trembled with years of pent-up frustration and he slammed his fist into the solid door. The sharp crack of knuckles against wood elicited a response from the other side. The raccoon pounded on the door as well, almost as if it were mocking the drunken man on the other side.

“Fuck you, Mama. Fuck you, fuck you, *fuck you!*”

Washington was breathing heavily through his nostrils and his fists were clenched so

tightly that his fingernails dug little crescent moons into the palms of his hands.

“I didn't do anything wrong, bitch!”

He'd show her. After all these years

He slid his boxers down his legs and stumbled out of them. Somehow, being naked in this hotel room made him feel invincible and powerful. He felt as if he could take on an entire platoon single handedly and he snapped to attention.

“This is not a dirty worm . . . it's a fucking penis. There are many like it, but this one is *mine*, damn it!”

The muscles in his body quivered and jerked and his breathing was so heavy that it almost sounded as if he were wearing a gas mask.

“You wanna see how dirty I can get, Mama? You wanna see all the nasty things I can do to Molly?”

He turned the little lever and the door unlocked with a soft click. Flinging it open, he threw his head back and yelled at the ceiling.

“And God still won't hate me, you hear? *God still won't fucking hate me!*”

The giant raccoon heaved forward and suddenly its soft arms were wrapping around Washington, almost as if it were trying to comfort him with a hug. The fur tickled his naked flesh and sent little shivers tingling along his spine and scalp and a giggle bubbled up from somewhere.

“It's me and Molly now, Mama. Just me and Molly after all these fucking years.”

Paws slid over his ribs again and again like Molly was petting him.

“And you can't stop us this time. Not this time.”

The raccoon squirmed against his body, tangling its furry feet within his own, and suddenly Washington was falling. He thudded to the floor with the animal still clinging to him and looked at the ceiling as he stroked its back with one hand. So soft, so nice

“You watching, Mama? You getting a good long look?”

Washington wedged his other hand between their bodies until he felt something springy and stiff within his own hand. He worked himself slowly and, as the plush fur rubbed against his

sensitive skin, he closed his eyes. The raccoon was nuzzling his neck now, the nose hard and cold in sharp contrast to the rest of its body.

“You want me, Molly?” he whispered with closed eyes. “You want me?”

Everything seemed soft and distant and Washington's head lolled to the side as waves of fatigue crashed over him. With his hand still cupped over his crotch, his breathing steadied slowly and, before he'd even had a chance for release, the gravity of alcohol pulled him back down into its darkness.

He laid perfectly still as the giant animal continued to writhe over his naked body, its padded hands desperately attempting to scratch through his skin.

Perhaps if he wouldn't have downed that last bottle of Absolut, he would've noticed the round patch of mesh on the animal's throat. Perhaps he would have seen the face floating like a specter in the darkness beyond, the unblinking eyes, and the spiderwebs of blue veins against its waxen flesh. Perhaps it would have made a difference

But, as it was, Washington simply laid on the floor, safely tucked within the confines of dreams as teeth began to pull and rip at the thin netting that separated it from the too-frail skin of his exposed neck.

He slept and dreamed he was a boy again.

He stood in his childhood bathroom with a cloth bag by his feet and calmly removed each clothespin from it one at a time.

He broke each one in half as a raccoon with a chewed up ear watched from its perch on the toilet tank.

“We're free, Molly.” the little boy said. “We're finally free.”

Terrible is The Nightmare

The trailer had a musty aroma, as if water had soaked into the threadbare carpet at some point and infected the foam padding beneath with mildew. It wasn't overpowering but was omnipresent none-the-less, a subtle reminder that the entire world was slowly edging toward decay while its inhabitants struggled in vain to prevent this from happening. Even the smell of hot wax couldn't entirely cover it: the candles flickered and caused shadows to dance and jump across the faux-wood paneling, some of them scented slightly of lilac and sandalwood, others possessing only a scent that brought boxes of brightly colored crayons to mind. Most of the furniture in the room had been piled in front of the thin door and every so often a coffee table or bookshelf would change positions with a thump as the knob jiggled and the the cheap glass rattled in the rectangular windows; but, for the most part, the barricade seemed to be holding. For now at least.

Neither of the two occupants had any delusions that the obstruction would last forever; they knew that the glow of their candles would be like a beacon in the night for any zombies within close range of the mobile home park. They would be drawn to the light like moths, attracted by the only source of illumination on a night as dark as the heart of Satan. They would swarm around the trailer, clamoring for a way in. They would break windows and cause the doors to creak on their hinges. And eventually they would find an opening. They would swarm through in a seemingly endless stream, would fill the living room with the stench of rotting flesh, and fall upon the couple: it was inevitable. The single wide already rocked slightly from all of the hands that currently pounded and scratched at its vinyl siding . . . it was only a matter of time.

But, for the time being, none of that mattered. Luke lay on the couch cushions that had been arranged across the floor and watched as Carrie made her way toward him. In the soft candlelight, her skin looked smooth and radiant, the way he'd always imagined an angel would look. Blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders like strands of silken moonlight and hung over her small breasts, hiding her nipples behind its sheen. Her blue eyes sparkled like the waters of Lake Norman on a cloudless day and her thin lips smiled as she handed him a tumbler half-full of dark liquid.

“Afraid it's a tad bit warm, darlin'.”

Her voice was soft and gentle and seemed slightly out of place in the barrage of banging from outside.

“Couldn't find any wine glasses, neither so these'll have to make do.”

She squatted beside him and he found his attention drawn to the patch of curly hair between her legs. At the same time, he felt a stirring in his own nether regions and his face warmed with embarrassment; his stomach did a flip-flop, just as if he were riding Thunder Road at Carowinds, and the wine within the plastic cup seemed to vibrate as he took the tumbler into his trembling hands.

Carrie had to have noticed but, to her credit, she simply placed her hand against his bare chest and stroked the nest of hair between his pecks. Her touch was light and warm and sent chill bumps tingling along his scalp and arms. Closing his eyes, Luke breathed in slowly as a smile crept across his own face.

“To us . . .”

He opened his eyes again to see Carrie holding her own tumbler aloft.

“In this crazy, nightmare world everything's been turned on end. The dead won't stay that way. People would just as soon kill ya as say hello. Everyone we ever knew . . . everyone we ever cared about . . . are gone. But we still got each other. We still got this one night. We still got love. And those bastards out there won't ever be able to take that from us.”

The words were a typical Carrie speech; she'd always dreamed of being a poetess, had filled notebooks with scribbles of verse, stanzas of longing and remorse. As such, she tended to

lean toward the melodramatic which (though Luke never would have dreamed of admitting to her) sometimes came across as a little corny. But there was something different about this toast: perhaps it was the way her voice quivered with emotion or how the little muscle in her neck seemed to tremble as she spoke.

“So, to us, my love . . . to us.”

They touched their glasses together and tilted back their heads to drink. The wine was dry with only a hint of sweetness; but there was also a bitterness in the aftertaste that made Luke pucker his lips and squeeze his eyes shut.

“Drink it all, Darlin'. Bottom's up.”

Taking a deep breath, he threw back his head again and gulped the remainder of the wine quickly. It warmed his stomach and left his throat feeling as if he could use a glass of water. But these thoughts were immediately vanquished as Carrie took his free hand and raised it to her breast.

Luke felt as if his heart had skipped several beats and the bitterness seemed to form a hard lump somewhere in the back of his throat. Every nerve in his body tingled and he stroked her nipple softly with this thumb, his excitement building as it grew firm beneath his touch.

“Go ahead,” she whispered, “it ain't going to bite ya.”

He squeezed a little more firmly and his breath caught in his throat with a gasp as her other hand snaked between his legs.

“Don't be scared, darlin'. I'll be gentle.”

He dreamed of this very moment so often, had pleased himself on countless nights with fantasies of how Carrie's lips would feel against his own, how her breath would tickle the little hairs in his ear as she moaned softly. But nothing his imagination had ever conjured could compare with the sensation of her tongue slowly sliding across his belly or the way her bangs lightly brushed against his skin.

His hands ran along her back, tracing the arch of her spine with his fingertips, massaging the firm cheeks of her ass. Neither of them said a word. They simply allowed their hands to explore each others body: probing, caressing, petting, squeezing gently as sighs as soft of the

wind passed through their lips.

Finally, she eased herself onto him, enveloping his member with the warmth of her body and moving in a way that was somewhere between a bounce and a slow rocking motion. Her hands pressed against his chest and her head was tilted slightly to the side; with eyes half closed she bit her bottom lip and slid her pelvis back and forth as she whispered his name over and over.

Every nerve in Luke's body seemed to tingle as he clutched her gyrating hips in his hands; he began thrusting in time with Carrie's own movements, perfectly matching her rhythm as his pulse quickened. So she was soft, so warm, so beautiful and perfect.

“I love you, oh God, Carrie, I love you . . .”

Nothing else mattered: the dead outside, the fires that burned out of control in Charlotte, the fact that the reactor at Duke Power would probably go into meltdown soon without anyone around to man the controls. All of that may have as well existed in some other time, some distant dimension that was as hazy and insubstantial as a half-remembered dream. All that mattered was this very moment, this closeness with the woman he'd once feared would be nothing more than a friend, these two bodies that had merged together and moved with the synchronicity of a single organism.

Carrie was moaning now and she rode him more intently, the muscles in her face tightening and relaxing with each push into her body. Her chest glistened with a sheen of sweat and her breasts jiggled as spasms coursed through her body.

“I love you too, I've always loved you, always, always, always . . .”

Within moments, Luke erupted into her, clenching his teeth as his fingers gripped her sides so tightly that his nails left little red marks in their wake. Carrie collapsed on top of him, her breasts pressed firmly against his chest, and together they panted as they tried to regain their breath. He wrapped her hair around his index finger, toying with it lazily, and his eyes felt heavy. It was almost as if ejaculating had drained every ounce of energy from his body: he felt satisfied, happy, and as lazy as a cloud drifting across the Carolina skies.

“Thank you, baby. Thank you, so much.”

His voice sounded distant and fuzzy to his own ears and when Carrie replied her words were thick and slurred.

“Couldn't . . .”

She yawned and nuzzled her cheek against his chest slightly.

“Couldn't let ya . . . die . . . a virgin . . . darlin'.”

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her with the last vestiges of his fading strength. And he was tired . . . so damn tired . . .

They closed their eyes together and, with their naked bodies lying atop one another, allowed the beating of their hearts to lull them into the darkness of sleep.

Outside, the dead continued their assault on the trailer. More and more corpses joined the congregation and pieces of siding were ripped away as they clamored over each other. The hinges of the door had begun to creak as screws slowly gave way to the force being exerted on them. But it no longer mattered. For sitting on the kitchen counter within the trailer was a partially full bottle of wine; the bottle's cork rested beside an empty bottle of sleeping pills that left a bitter aftertaste in the mouths of anyone who took them. And, just beneath the bottle, was a sheet of notebook paper. Written in careful script across the blue lines were the following words:

*“Or bid me go into a new-made grave,
And hide me with a dead man in his shroud
Things that, to hear them told, have made me tremble
And I will do it without fear or doubt . . .”*

-William Shakespeare

Signed,

Luke James Gilford and Carrie Marie Tate

R.I.P

Food Whore

Yeah, I'll admit it. I've sucked cock for as little as a half a tin of cat food a year past its expiration date. I've given handjobs for a few sips of water and have no problem spreadin' my legs if the payoff is right. I mean, damn . . . it's just sex, ya know? It's hard enough making your way in this sorry excuse for a life. Some folks are blessed with strength and can drop an undead mother fucker with a single swing of an ax. Others got speed and agility: they run through the forests and old cities, bobbing and jumping and weaving like deers with their tails on fire. And then there's the folks who got smarts. These brainiacs can build traps like you wouldn't believe. Complicated shit too, but they just seem to pull these ideas outta their asses like it was nothing more than a worm that poked its head out to say howdy. Me? I ain't got none of that stuff.

Back when there was still schools and shit, I'd always be the last one crossing the finish line in phys-ed. Huffin' and puffin' and so red in the face that I probably looked like a big, swollen penis. And fuck that whole climbing the rope bullshit. Only thing I ever got outta that little experience was friction burns all over my hands and an achin' ass from falling off it over and over. In all my other classes, I did good enough to get by. I mean, I weren't no retard or nothin'. But, at the same time, I wasn't the one up there givin' the speech at graduation neither.

So, ya see, I gotsta use what I got. And what I got are tits. What I got is an ass that just won't stop and a pair of lips that could suck your soul right outta your pee hole. Shit, I know I ain't nearly as pretty as I used to be. None of us are. We're all nothin' more than a buncha smelly, dirty, underfed skeletons that ain't got the good sense to lay down and die. Clothes aren't

no more than rags really and most folks done given up on their hair altogether. Mats and tangles and little bird nest clumps that stick out all over the place . . . it's enough to give a former beautician nightmares for life.

But me? I make damn sure I've got this little silver brush with me everywhere I go. Hundred strokes a night, right before bed, just like Granny Foster taught me. Keeps my hair as soft and dark as a raven's feather. And that makes a lot of difference, ya know. I ain't the only food whore out here. There's stiff competition and anything that gives you an edge, you best be takin'.

Course, just as important as my little brush is this here knife. I like the way it's small enough to hide in the palm of my hand so it's always ready if'n I need it. See, most guys are perfectly happy to get their jollies, give you the food, and be on their way before the cum has even started to dry. But there's also some sickos out there, believe you me. Real bastards who can't get it up unless you're screaming like a bobcat in a beartrap. There was even this one fella who liked to drink your tears after he done messed you up real bad like. Held you down and licked them right outta the corner of your eye as he shots his load all over your tits, if you can believe that. All the travelin' girls talked about him the same way people used to talk about Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. But it was real twisted shit, ya know?

And Jamie Lynn Summers, she don't play that game, no sir. You try to take more than what I'm willin' to give and you're gonna end up with the business end of this here knife sticking outta your throat sure as the sun comes up in the morning. I've done it before and as God as my witness. I'll do it again. Just try me and it'll make ya wonder why the hell weaklings and wimps were ever called *pussies* to begin with.

But most of the guys you meet out here, they're okay, ya know? They're just lonely and scared like the rest of us, lookin' for a little comfort anywhere they can find it. And there ain't nothing wrong with that, right? Hell, it's almost like I'm performing a friggin' public service.

Take Master Twinklebottom for example. Swear to God he made me call him that, though for the longest time I didn't know why . But he was alright as far as people go. Back when all this shit first went down, he was a married man: wife, kid's, good payin' job and all that

jazz. I suppose he reckoned life would just go on as it always had with the business meetings, PTA fundraisers, the rare date night with Mrs. Twinklebottom. And who could blame him? Hell, ain't a single one of us saw this comin'. It was like we all woke up one morning and found our nightmares had somehow followed us right outta our dreams, ya know?

Anyways, most folks who like havin' that *Master* tagged to the beginnin' of their name are into the kinky shit. I don't ever let them tie me up or nothin' . . . that would just be plain stupid and Granny Foster didn't raise no idjits. But if they wanna pinch my nipple, slap my ass, and call me a dirty bitch? I'm okay with that, as long as they got the food to pay for it. And that shit costs extra.

But Twinklebottom, he wasn't like that at all. He was probably the most gentle guy I ever been with, truth be told. He took the time to actually caress instead of just grabbin' a breast and yankin' like a dog with a chew toy. He kissed my neck and trembled as my hair slid through his fingers. And he never just thrust it in there like it was some kind of fuckin' Olympic event. No, he slipped in so softly that for a moment I always wondered if he was even hard. And then, as he rocked back and forth above me with his eyes closed, he started cryin' so softly that you'd swear he never even knew those tears were leakin' outta his eyes. And the entire time, he's whisperin' *I love you, Monica, Monica, I love you* . . .

I tried to tell him once that my name weren't Monica; but he just looked at me with this sad little smile on his face and said, "When I'm with you, you are."

Plum near broke my heart right then and there.

'Course, a girl can't keep somethin' like that to herself. Soon as he was gone, I went lookin' for Ginger St. Claire, who's about the closest thing I got to a friend in this world, I s'pose; Ginger's also in the business but she deals with a pretty specific kind of client: the kind of guys who like other guys who look like girls, if ya get my meaning. From what I understand, back in the day, Miss Ginger was the reignin' queen of the types of places that cotton to that lifestyle. She told me once that she could do backflips across the stage in three inch heels and go into a full split without ever makin' her wig the least bit lopsided. 'Course that was a long time ago. All them clubs she loved so much? Nothing more than ashes by now, I'm sure. Maybe

somewhere, hidden beneath a pile of rubble that used to be a wall, there's a crumpled picture of her in that sparklin' tiara and one of them silky sashes holdin' a big 'ole bouquet of roses. And I bet she looks as beautiful as any woman that God actually gifted with the parts.

Nowdays, though, Ginger is lookin' kinda rough. She shaves when she can and tries her best to keep that stubble from sproutin' into a full blown moonshiner's beard like most guys got these days. But razors aren't as easy to come by as they once were. Most of the time, she has t' use this big 'ole huntin' knife and, of course, she ain't got no shavin' cream to lather all over that pointy chin of hers; so her skin's gotten a bit rough. Still has that soft cocoa color to it, but her neck and cheeks got these little bumps all over 'em that kinda reminds me of the sandpaper Granddaddy used t' keep out in the garage.

'Course the guys who come to see her don't pay it all that much mind. I reckon as long as she's got tits that's all they really care about. See, Ginger had been savin' up all that money she won from them contests so she could get an operation that would take that eclair of hers and turn it into a donut. Said she'd started with these here injections that made her grow a pretty impressive rack. I've touched 'em, too, and let me tell ya that if I didn't know better I'd swear they were the real thing; only that was about as far as she ever got, seein' as how everything turned to shit not long after. So now she's got these knockers most chicks would kill for but, at the same time, her private parts still got the twig and berries hangin' outta the bush.

But look at me. I been goin' on and on 'bout Ginger when what I set out t' talk about was Master Twinklebottom. Granny Foster always said as I was about as long winded as a Baptist sermon, and I reckon this just goes to show how she was right.

So anyways, I found Ginger out by this old factory that a lot of the girls like to hang around, bein' near to a well traveled road and all. She was sittin' up against this chain link fence and pullin' hairs outta her nose one by one but her face lit up like the sun in the morning when she saw me comin'.

I squatted down next to her and started tellin' her all about Master Twinklebottom and what he said about callin' me Monica and all that.

“Plum near the most romantic thing I ever heard.” I finished up. “Except for *nobody puts*

Baby in a corner. I swear Gin, you shoulda see the look in his eyes when he said it. Was like he was there with me, but somewhere far, far away at the same time.”

“Twinklebottom . . . he the guy gots the scar on his right cheek? Kinda looks like a big old pink zigzag?”

I told her that was him. Unlike most folks, who just kinda pass through these here parts, Twinklebottom's been around long enough that most of th' regulars have at least seen 'im.

So Ginger starts tellin' me how she actually knew him, back before society got flushed down the shitter.

“James? Jack? Somethin' simple like that. John. Yeah that was it. John somethin' or other. Used to work at that repair shop out on Route 35. Took my little Honda there all the time. They weren't as cheap as Snyder's, but Snyder's didn't have no grease monkeys cute as him neither. I always thought *that man can give me a lube job any day*. Didn't realize he was one of yours, sweetie.”

So I begin tellin' Ginger 'bout how, as far as I could tell, there weren't any other girl for him but me. And how he always made sure he had the food t' pay for what he was wantin' and never tried to talk his way into gettin' a piece of the action on credit. And how his hands seemed to know exactly how to touch me when most every other guy just wanted t' stick it in, pump their spunk, and be on their merry way.

But when I was talkin', Ginger started gettin' this look on her face like I was tellin' her that my favorite kitten just got run over with a lawnmower. She was shakin' her head real slow like and she took my hand in hers and looked directly at me with those dark eyes.

“Oh, sweetie, “ she says, “I see that look in your eye and don't you fool yourself. I've been doin' this longer than you've had pubes. Even back when money was still worth somethin'. You ain't nothin' more than a piece of tail. Let me tell ya a thing or two about your dear Twinklebottom”

The way Ginger told it, back when Twinklebottom was still John Something-or-Other he was the most dedicated husband a girl could ever wish for. Lots of ladies down at that repair

shop brought their business there just so they could see him leanin' over that engine with his fine, tight ass clinchin' everytime he'd turn a wrench. And not all of 'em was shy about it either. They'd twirl their hair 'round their fingers and lean in so close that he'd be able to smell the perfume driftin' up from their cleavage; they'd touch him softly on the arm, run their hands gently across his, and slip phone numbers on folded pieces of paper when they handed over their credit cards.

So yeah, he coulda had his pick of pussy practically any night of the week. But he wouldn't even so much as flirt back. Ginger said he would just get this little grin on his face, raise his left hand, and point to that gold band circlin' his finger.

“Girl,” I told her, “if you're thinkin' I'm gettin' sweet on him . . . and I ain't sayin' I am . . . then you sure gotta helluva way of talkin' me out of it.”

“What I'm trying to tell ya, sweetie,” Ginger had said, “is that you ain't got a chance in Hell with that man. He calls you Monica, honey. And I'd bet a week's worth of payout that when he's got his eye's closed he ain't picturin' your sweet little lips wrapped around that dick of his.”

Most times, I get along with Gin as well as chickens and ducks. But for some reason, I just kinda got this angry little feelin' deep down inside. Felt like I wanted to break somethin' and wouldn't never be happy unless I did. And I don't like feelin' like that, ya know? Makes you all bound up inside, like everything about you is just bein' smashed down into this tight little ball. So I pick up this rock and chuck it at the factory, hopin' to maybe knock out one of them little triangles of glass that still stick up outta the panes. Only I missed 'cause Grandpa always said I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn even if'n I was three feet away. So that just made me wanna find a bigger rock and just keep tossin' those fuckers until I actually broke somethin', ya know?

And it weren't the same talkin' to Ginger after that. I kinda started half listenin' to what she was actually sayin'. I could hear the words but they were like the way adults voices sound when you're a little kid and you're just startin' to fall asleep in the back of the car. Kinda muffled and far off sounding, like something that can't make up its mind on whether it's real or not.

I was tryin' to think up some excuse, some reason I had to go, cause that mumble felt like

it was vibrating inside my head and I was gettin' as worked up as a bee in a shaken jar. Turns out, though, I didn't have to say nothin'. This guy comes up and he's got this dead squirrel in his hand, right? And he's lookin' at Gin with this grin that's greasier than cooked possum. I don't like the looks of this fella right away. He had these beady little eyes and this rat-like nose and he was kinda jerked his head to the side every time he'd talk. But Gin don't seem to pay him no mind. She only got eyes for that red squirrel and I swear I could hear her tummy just rumblin' away as she stood up and lead that dude into the factory.

With Gin in there earnin' her keep, I just kinda up and walked away, ya know? Didn't really have no place in mind that I was goin'. Just wanderin' around with my head in the clouds, thinkin' about John Twinklebottom and picturin' how he musta looked in those coveralls with a big 'ole silver wrench stickin' outta the back pocket. I could see 'im so clearly that I could almost smell the oil on his hands and hear the clank and clack of him a'workin'. And, for some reason, just thinkin' about him made that little ball of anger down inside my belly just melt away like butter on toast.

So I get this idea in my head that I'm gonna find him, right? I mean, we've talked and I have a pretty good idea where he stays and all. It weren't that far from the factory neither. Took me about ten minutes or so and next thing I know I'm standin' outside this shack that looks like maybe it used to hold firewood or garden tools or somethin' in it. A little ways behind the shack is this old house only there ain't all that much of it left anymore. Those blocks that made up its foundation are all dark and sooty and you can still see some of the beams which held the whole thing together. Only they're all black and charred lookin', kinda like a match once you've let it burn down so far that it hurts your fingers. Everything else is just this big 'ole mound of cinders and ash piled up in the middle of where that house used to stand and it's funny but I could still kinda smell the smoke just hangin' out in the air. Even though that damn house been burnt down for pert close to a year now.

So I knock on the door of the little shack, right? And I feel all funny and nervous; kinda like I did the first time I ever let a boy touch my cooter. But I just tell myself it's 'cause I ain't knocked on someone's door for so damn long that it reminds me of how everything used to be.

Twinklebottom answers after two or three more knocks and his eyes are all red like maybe I woke him up. He ain't got no shirt on and for a moment I just stood there, lookin' at him but not really sayin' anything. I reckon I hadn't thought far enough into this to really know what I was gonna do, so I just kinda smiled at him, ya know?

If he was surprised to see me, he didn't let it show. Just looked at me real sad like.

"Ain't got no food." he says.

"Don't matter none." I tell 'im. "You can pay me later if'n ya want."

And there it was. I done went and broke the cardinal rule: don't ever give nothin' away for free that you can sell. But right then and there, with the sun beatin' down on the back of my neck and the birds singin' in the trees, I didn't pay it no mind.

He stepped off to the side a little bit and closed the door behind me.

So, afterwards, we're just kinda layin' there on his bedroll, lettin' the sweat cool our skin; and I'm just a'lookin' around at everything and thinkin' about how I would just about take a dirty sanchez for a cigarette. I knew I should probably just put my clothes back on and be on my way, but there's this part of me that weren't quite ready yet. For some reason I liked that dark little shack, the sound of him breathin' beside me, and that little tickle when my hip brushed up against his thigh. So I'm takin' in the milk crate off to the side that has a picture of a woman and a little girl propped up in front of it. The mostly melted candle and the pile of clothes layin' at our feet like a faithful dog. And I'm just babblin' away, chatterin' about nothin' and everything all at the same time.

"So Granny Foster told me that I was named Jamie after the bionic woman. Only her last name was spelled with an O, not a U like mine is. She said my mommy just knew I was gonna grow up to do great things and that she had this idea that if she gave me the right name then that would just make sure of it."

Twinklebottom rolled over onto his side and looked at me, but he really didn't say nothin'. Of course he weren't tellin' me to get out neither, which I reckoned had to mean somethin'. So I just kinda stretch like a cat in a patch of sunlight and decide to come right out and ask him.

“Anyhows,” I said, “that’s where I got my name.”

I swallowed hard and watched this fly crawlin’ across the ceiling so I wouldn’t hafta look at him when I said it.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Why . . . why do you always want me to call you Twinklebottom?”

It was so quiet in that shack that I could hear the wind that had kicked up whistlin’ through the planks on the wall. And suddenly I get real scared, right? Like maybe I’d done pissed him off so bad that he wouldn’t never so much look at me again. So I steal this glance outta the corner of my eye and he’s layin’ on his back now with his hands pressed into his eyes. And I just wanna hold him in my arms, to tell him it’s okay, I don’t really wanna know, and then maybe throw in a blow job or somethin’ to make him forget I ever asked. But there’s another part of me that *does* wanna know. And it’s tellin’ me to keep my fool mouth shut.

After what seems like forever, he starts talkin’ and his voice sounds so small and tiny. It’s got this little waver in it that makes me think he might be cryin’ again behind those hands. But I’m afraid if I touch him that he’ll shut up so I kinda lay there twirlin’ my hair around my finger and listenin’.

“My wife . . . she used to call me that.”

The fly is buzzin’ around the room now and I’m holdin’ my breath cause I don’t even wanna breathe. I just want him to talk, to hear the sound of his voice . . .

“When we first got married,” he says real slow like, “I thought maybe we should try something a little . . . different. So we got all these books, these fuzzy little handcuffs and stuff. Only it didn’t work out quite like we thought it would.”

He had this sad little laugh and I remember thinkin’ how I would face down a pack of freshies right then and there if there was anyway I could put just a bit of joy back into that voice. But I still stayed real quiet, ‘cause it was almost like he wasn’t really talkin’ to me. Almost like he was just speakin’ to hear the sound of his own voice and I didn’t wanna remind him that I was listening.

“Monica said I was about as forceful as a kitten with a ball of yarn. We kinda gave up on the whole bondage thing after a while. But, after that, she always kinda playfully teased me, ya know? *Yes, Master Twinklebottom . . . what's your bidding, Master Twinklebottom?*”

He really was cryin' now. I could feel his chest heavin' beside me and his pain was so intense it was almost like this force that was pressin' down on me, makin' it hard to breathe and shit. I felt my eyes all cloudin' up too and I just kinda reached out and touched his arm real light like. Only he grabbed onto my hand so fast and hard I kinda jumped a little, like it scared me or something.

“Fuckin' rotters . . . they got . . . they broke through the . . .”

I pulled him real close to me, let him just lay his head on my chest and cry as I held on. I didn't even care that he was snottin' all over my tits or leavin' these sticky little smears everywhere. I just held this poor man and stroked his other head for a change, lettin' him cry it out like Wanda Polowski used to say.

Now, he'd cried in front of me plenty of times. Just damn near every time we did it the waterworks would turn on at one point or another. This time was different, though. Afterwards, when he was wipin' his eyes on this dirty 'ole t-shirt, it almost seemed like he was embarrassed. Couldn't look me in the eyes and just kept mumblin' about how sorry he was, how I didn't need to see that and all. But even then there was somethin' different between us. It was like there was this little silver cord connectin' our souls and when I went to hug him he only resisted for a second before squeezin' me back.

“There's someone I want you to meet.” I told him. “A friend of mine. Not far from here.”

He just kinda nodded and started puttin' on his clothes, not really sayin' anything at all. But I got the felling that I coulda told him we were gonna walk to China and he woulda been okay with it.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not sayin' that he fell head over heels in love with me just 'cause I let him cry and listened to 'im talk about his old life. But, somehow, that *did* make us connected. I'm sure of it . . . even if I can't explain why that would be.

So anyways, we're walkin' toward the factory where Gin was hangin' out and inside I'm feelin' like the cat that just got the cream. I just can't wait to see the look in her eyes when the two of us walk up to her and I got this little speech prepared in my mind. How I'm gonna say that me and John were just talkin' 'bout the old days and it got me to thinkin' about her. By the time it was all over, she'd been eatin' her words more than that squirrel she had her eye on.

Only we got to the factory and there weren't nobody around. It's quiet most of the time these days. There ain't no planes roarin' overhead or cars hiss'n by, no radios thumpin' out that damn hippity-hop as Granny Foster used to say. But the silence surrounding that factory? Somehow, it felt heavy. Like it was just hangin' in the air and waitin' to drop down outta the sky and crush us.

"Gin?" I called out. "It's me . . . Jaimie Lynn."

And then I hear something. It's almost like a muffled scream, how I imagine it would sound if someone was shoutin' into a pillow.

"Gin?"

I hear it again and now I got this nervous feelin' all up in my chest and goosebumps start crawlin' up my arm just like someone done walked over my grave.

"The factory!"

The words weren't hardly outta John's mouth before he's runnin' toward that rusty old building. And I'm right there behind him, tryin' to keep up with my heart skippin' beats and this this feelin' that I just couldn't shake. It was like I somehow knew we was gonna find somethin' really, really bad in there. . . .

Part of the metal wall of the factory looked like it'd been peeled back with a giant can opener and John ducks in there quick as a whistle with me hot on his heels. It was dark and cool inside the building and everything has almost gasoline like smell to it. We could hear that scream a little more clear now and John ran over to where there were all these dented drums layin' on the ground and picked this metal tool up. It looked kinda like one of those forks people use when they're tunin' an instrument, only it was a lot bigger and its handle was shaped like a T. Ginny had one just like that she keeps at her place for protection and she told me once it was

called a bung wrench and was used on bung holes. At the time, I thought it was pretty near the funniest thing I'd ever heard and mentioned how I wouldn't let anyone put that thing in *my* bung hole even if they were offerin' an entire Chinese buffet.

It weren't so funny now with those screams seemin' to come from all around us and John lookin' like he was about ready to go postal on someone. We didn't say nothin' but just kinda looked around, tryin' to figure out where those screams were comin' from.

All at once John's runnin' again and I figure he musta got a bead on it so I'm right behind him. We turn the corner over by this big, rusty machine that looks like somethin' outta Star Wars and I stopped so quick I almost fell forward.

Funny thing is, the first thing I noticed was that Ginny was naked. Maybe it was cause I'd never seen her without her clothes on before and my mind just kinda blanked when I saw tits and a dick connected to the same body. But then I saw that her skin was covered in these red smears and she had all these lines criss-crossin' her flesh like she'd just run nude through a briar patch. And I see how her hands and feet are tied to this metal framework and she's all spread out like she was in the middle of makin' a snow angel. She's got this wild look in her eye, like a muskrat caught in a trap, and there's this guy leaning over her and yanking on this bandana that's tied around her mouth. He cinches that thing so tight that even from a distance I could see the way her cheeks just kinda puff out around it.

Maybe John was just as shocked as I was 'cause we both just stand there for a second and the realization dawns on me that the guy gaggin' my best friend is that same fucker with the beady eyes and the squirrel. Only he must not know we're there yet since he doesn't pay us no mind. He picks up this big 'ole knife and he just kinda slices it right across Gin's belly and she's squirmin' around now and I saw that twisted fuck lean over her.

He's workin' himself with his hand and for a second I think he's kissin' her at the same time. But then I get this sick feelin' in my stomach as I realize what's *really* goin' down.

"He's lickin' her." I think. "Lickin' her damn tears."

I kinda snapped outta whatever daze I was in and see that John is almost to where Gin and the tear drinker are. He's runnin' like there's no tomorrow and he's got that bung wrench

raised over his head, yellin' to beat the devil.

The bastard attackin' Gin looks up just as that wrench smacks into his jaw. His head jerks to the side and I see this spray of blood shoot outta his mouth along with a white chunk of tooth. And John is just swingin' away with more and more blood eruptin' outta that fucker's head

The dude is flat on his back now and John is straddlin' him like a cowboy at the rodeo. From where I'm standin', all I can see is his back and how he keeps on bringin' that wrench down again and again. The factory is echoing with these wet smacks and panting and it almost seems weird, the way nobody is talkin' or yellin' or anything.

Next thing I know I'm halfway across the factory and thinkin' *I gotta get Gin untied* but I don't really remember startin' to run or anything. It's like there's this tiny little piece of memory that was just washed away somehow.

I'm almost to where they are when I catch movement outta the corner of my eye. I'd been so focused on Ginny, I'd totally lost track of John and how he was beatin' the mortal fuck outta the tear drinker. My head snaps to the side, thinkin' that maybe there's actually two of 'em, but all I see is John just kinda stumblin' around like he was a damn rotter or somethin'. His face is so pale it almost seemed to glow and his mouth and eyes made these perfectly round O's. He's got his hands pressed against his belly and I notice how there's this big, red stain spreadin' across his shirt.

And then I saw the hilt of the knife stickin' outta his belly like a meat fork in a turkey. He kinda falls to his knees, sees me watchin', and reaches a blood soaked hand toward me.

“Mon . . . Monica”

Somehow, I'm suddenly right over there next to the tear drinker and his face is this bloody pulp of swollen skin. I see a tooth stickin' through his top lip like a piercing and that rat-like nose is now all swollen and bloody and blackened from where that wrench busted it up real good.

After that I only have these little bits and pieces of memory. Kinda like photographs that flash through my mind. I see his hands raised in the air as if he were tryin' to push me away.

My hands in his hair as I slam his head against the concrete floor so hard I can feel the thud jar my body. That bung wrench halfway down his throat and me just leanin' on it, driving it deeper and deeper with all my weight.

I see John staring at the ceiling with eyes that don't never blink or move, a pool of blood surrounding his body like the crimson wings of an angel. Someone who might be me pullin' the knife outta his gut and tryin' to muster up the courage to drive that blade into his eye, to make sure that he finds peace with his wife and daughter and doesn't come back as a freshy.

Then there's Gin pressin' against me, cryin' and screamin' while I take off my own clothes and put them on her. The two of us, huddled together and staggerin' away from that damn factory, me in nothin' more than my dirty undies and her all covered in blood with these little squiggles where the tears cut through it all to showed clean skin beneath.

It musta been close to a week an a half before I actually started gettin' hungry. Most of the time I just layed around in my lean-to, cryin' until my stomach muscles felt like I'd done a thousand situps and I couldn't cry no more. I didn't sleep much, but when I did I saw Master Twinklebottom in my dreams. He was sittin' in his shack and tellin' me stories about how he'd once seen a fish as big as a car and then Granny Foster would come in with this steaming apple pie and say somethin' about the cows gettin' outta the barn again.

But a girl's gotta eat, right? Even if those damn rotters out there seem like they've got more life in 'em than you do, sooner or later ya gotta put somethin' in your belly. Ya gotta find a way to carry on, to keep movin' forward in the hopes that someday you might feel whole again. It's what he woulda wanted, see?

So that's why I'm kneelin' before this skinny little guy who came around with his cans of tuna. That's why I'm kneadin' his prick in my hand, tryin' to coax an erection from that limp noodle and whisperin' encouragement.

“You can do it. That's it. Come on, now. Get it up for me. You want it, don't ya?”

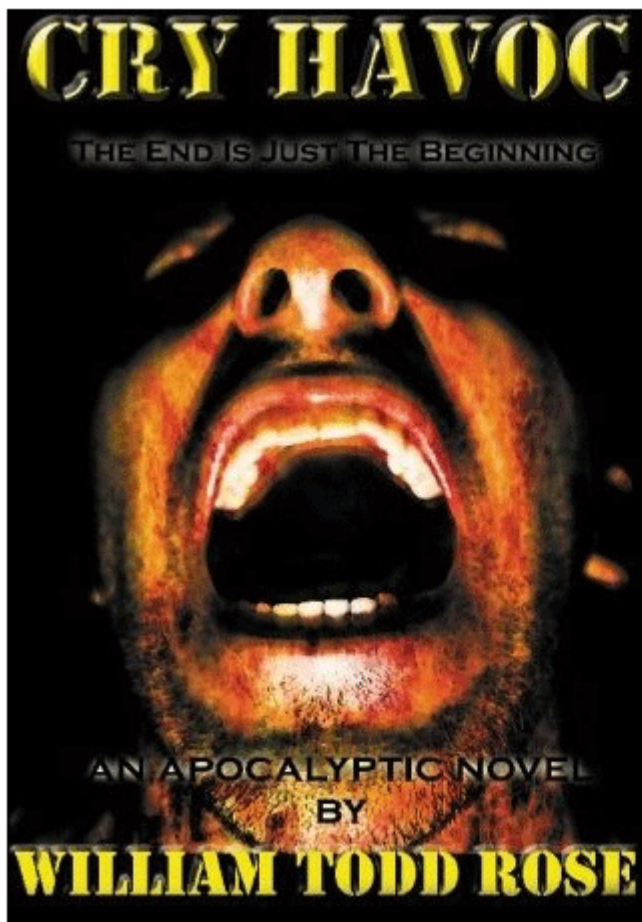
He nods his head rapidly but his eyes are closed tight and he's kinda got his tongue peekin' out between his lips.

“That's it, John . . . that's it”

His eyes flutter open and he gets this confused look for a second. He seems unsure of himself, like he don't know whether he should say somethin' or not. Finally, he does talk. He says in this shaky, small voice, “Uh, yeah . . . ummm . . . I'm . . . my name's not John.”

I smile as I close my eyes and press his junk against my cheek.

“Honey,” I say with a sad smile, “when you're with me it is.”



Outside the city is embroiled in violent chaos: street fights rage with the intensity of urban warfare, buildings burn unchecked, and blood flows along the sidewalks and drips into the depths of the hungry gutters. The entire country, it seems, has gone collectively insane.

But all of that seems so far away. Despite the fact that they can see the anarchy through their apartment window, two young couples struggle to maintain a sense of normality within the confines of their four walls. They listen to helicopters clatter overhead. They watch as news reports roll in, trying to ignore the explosions that rock the very foundations of their home. They sip coffee and debate the finer points of the collapse of civilization, never dreaming that the shadow of death has already fell across their refuge. Never dreaming of the lengths some of them will go to just to stay alive in this violent, new world

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TIFFANY shepis and The FarBOY OF The aPOcalypse

That no good, two-timing, sneak thief Tanny Henderson had to die. A bullet or two to the head would drop a rotter like Judgment Day, but that would be too good for that degenerate son of a bitch. No, Tanny had to be made to suffer: he needed to experience every agonizing second of the brutality Owen was going to unload on his sorry ass. That backstabbing piece of shit would end up praying to God *and* the Devil to release him from the torment that would be wrought upon his fleshy prison; and if Old Scratch answered first, the fires of Hell would seem like a welcome relief after what Owen had planned.

He'd already touched down in the center of the campsite, devastating it within the span of a few seconds like a tornado in a trailer park. Clothing was scattered about the clearing as if it had exploded from a central point; rocks and limbs lay atop crushed boxes of food and the little elbows of macaroni resembled the discarded bodies of those who could not withstand the fury of nature. Even the tent hadn't been immune: its pegs had been pulled from the ground and guy lines coiled about the trunks of trees like nylon serpents; the canvass flapped in the breeze, having been ripped into long, jagged ribbons that fluttered like banners heralding the arrival of some dark god.

Owen stood in the center of the destruction and his nostrils flared with each labored breath. His shoulders were hunched to the point that his neck seemed to be swallowed by the collar of his shirt and his features were as twisted and gnarled as the trunks of the oldest trees in the surrounding forest. Behind the cracked lenses of his glasses, the man's eyes smoldered like the embers he'd kicked from the remnants of last night's campfire. The heat quickly spread to

his face and tinted his normally pale complexion a fiery crimson as the little vein above his left temple throbbed in time with his racing heart.

That little weasel was out there somewhere. Right now. With *her*. And doing God knows what.

His eyes darted to an old stump he'd drug into the clearing and the corner of his mouth began to twitch. Embedded in the outer rim of the wood was the shiny, steel blade of a hatchet. The metal contorted his reflection into a fun-house caricature that seemed to pulse in the sunlight dappling through the canopy of leaves.

You dirty, filthy, little pervert

Images of Tanny flooded his mind like geysers of sewage from a broken main. Owen saw the twerp brushing her cheek gently with his stubby fingers. Staring into her soft eyes with that lecherous smile of his. Reducing her into nothing more than an object for his sick little fantasies.

You son of a bitch, you mother fuckin' son of a bitch

Owen's body trembled as if the temperature had just dropped thirty degrees and he felt something like a deep rumble vibrate within his chest. The reverberation grew in intensity and within moments a pressure had grown within that threatening to burst his flesh like an overinflated balloon. It erupted through his esophagus, shot up past his vocal cords with acidic fire, and spewed from his mouth in the form of a guttural scream that echoed off the hills and startled a flock of birds into flight.

He stormed across the campsite, clearing the few feet between him and the stump with short, quick strides. Wrenching the hatchet free, he raised it above his tangled mop of blond hair like a victorious gladiator and yelled his threat to the rising sun.

"Here comes your nightmare, man. Here comes your frickin' nightmare!"

He'd find them. He'd rescue her from that little troll and prop her against the base of a tree where she could relish every bloody moment of Tanny's punishment; where she could bask in his screams and delight in his pleas for mercy.

No . . . that wasn't right. She was so good and kind; she'd probably flinch, maybe even

beg Owen to stop. But there would be at least a small part of her, he was certain, that would recognize how special she was to him. How far he would go to defend her honor and keep her safe from all the things that slithered through this season of darkness, whether that threat be from the hordes of shambling dead or a pathetic excuse of a man who thought he could just waltz right in and steal the only woman who'd ever meant anything to Owen.

“Kiss your ass goodbye, mother fucker. I'll find you. Mark my words, I will.”

With this final statement of resolve Owen crashed through the undergrowth, the hatchet swinging in his hand and already feeling like a natural extension of his body.

It hadn't taken Tanny Henderson long to realize his traveling companion has some serious issues. Oh, he'd seemed normal enough when they'd first met on the muddy banks of the Elk River. More than normal, in fact: he'd seemed decent . . . which was a rare commodity in this day and age. He hadn't cracked any of the lame jokes Tanny had heard a million times, hadn't held him down and laughed about claiming the pot of gold. Nor were there any references to The Lollipop Guild, hobbit holes, or the ever-popular reply that everything was just smurfy. If Owen Reid had any misgivings about the stature of a man who stood eye-level with his belt buckle, he'd done a damn good job of keeping it to himself. Even the most conscientious of people normally couldn't resist the subconscious impulse to stoop down with their hands on their thighs when they spoke to Tanny. As if they were speaking to a small child and not a man with thirty plus years of life behind him.

“I think we should probably stick together for a bit.” Owen had said as he watched the emerald waters of the river gurgle over some rocky shoals. “I hear that Charleston is crawling with them undead bastards.”

“Where you heading, anyway?”

Owen's eyes had gotten a distant look to them: as if he were peering straight through the hills with their lush foliage and hidden reams of dark coal. When he spoke, his voice was so soft that it was like listening to someone through the muffled veil of impending sleep; but, at the same time, there was a reverence to his answer. Almost as if he were uttering the name of a

some mythical land where gods were born.

“Tuscon, Arizona.”

“Me,” Tanny had replied, “I’m going to Chattanooga, myself. Hoping that my brother might still be alive. Hook up with him and see where fate leads us, I guess. You got someone in Tuscon, Owen?”

“Yeah . . . my girl.”

Owen had flushed slightly and jammed his hands in his hips pockets as he stared at the tips of his red Chucks. He glanced at Tanny every few seconds as if half expecting his new friend to laugh and seemed as uncomfortable as a teenager asking his first crush on a date.

“You don’t say? You lucky, devil, you . . .”

A smile had flitted across Owen’s face and his eyes seemed to twinkle in the afternoon sunlight.

“Yeah, I guess I am. Aren’t I?”

Tanny had just finished taking a long pull from his canteen and wiped the droplets of water from his red beard with the back of his hand. He lifted the round container as if in a toast.

“Well, here’s hoping she’s still alive, buddy.”

In the time it took for a bird to warble twice, everything about Owen changed. His body tensed and his eyes sparked with seething rage as his hands balled into fists. He thrust himself forward so quickly that Tanny stumbled backward and instinctively raised his hands in an open-palmed expression of submission.

“She’s not dead, damn it!”

Spittle flew from Owen’s snarled lips and his jaw quivered with the force of the words.

“She tough and she’s strong and and she’s noble and there’s not a rotter this side of China that could take her down. She’s there, in Tuscon, and she’s waiting for me so you just shut your fuckin’ mouth!”

In retrospect, Tanny should have hightailed it off that river bank right then and there. Instead, he found himself speaking to Owen in even, measured tones and quickly offering the blond man a smoke from the crumpled pack he pulled from his breast pocket. *Everyone* these

days had lost the ones they loved most. The Earth had been turned into a planet of orphans and refugees; as a result people clung to hope wherever they could find it. If the belief that his girlfriend was out there somewhere, fighting through the hordes of the dead like some movie heroine, kept the man motivated enough to ensure his own survival then so be it. Taking that from him would be like withholding food from a starving man. And it just wasn't within Tanny's character to be so cruel.

"You're right, kid, I don't know her. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. I bet you're right. I bet she watches for you everyday."

Owen had stared at his companion and chewed on his bottom lip; he seemed torn, as if he secretly suspected that Tanny were somehow making fun of him but desperately wanted to believe otherwise. His kicked at a pile of pebbles with his foot and adjusted the backpack slung over his shoulders, immediately running his fingers through his hair afterward.

"You . . . your really think so?"

Tanny smiled and lit a cigarette of his own when Owen finally refused the offer with a shake of his head.

"Sure, kid . . . that's the power of love, right? When you get to Tuscon, she'll come running into your arms. It'll be just like in the movies, you'll see."

Owen's face had brightened and that far-away expression passed over his face again; Tanny could see the tension psychically leave his companion's body: the droop of the shoulders, the way his chest seemed to deflate a little, how his eyes were no longer narrow slits

"Yeah," Owen said dreamily, "I bet you're right, Tanny. We'll have us a little adobe house with some cactus in the yard with enough guns and food to see us through. And maybe you and your brother can come visit us someday. Yeah . . . that'd be pretty cool, too."

The rest of the afternoon had been filled with the usual small talk: places they'd been, people they'd met, and little snippets of news they'd garnered along the way. Tanny had kept expecting Owen to apologize for his earlier outburst, but it was almost as if the exchange had never taken place; allusions to it didn't even cause so much of a flicker of recognition to register on Owen's face, so eventually Tanny had stopped fishing for redress. If Owen was man enough

to be able to just let it go, then he would be too

Throughout the afternoon dark clouds had been amassing in the eastern sky like a pack of nebulous rotters closing in on prey. By the time the sun had nearly completed its descent, they had devoured nearly every speck of blue and they flickered with distant lightning. The wind had picked up as well and the boughs of pine trees swayed as their needles whispered the secret language of nature.

“Looks like rain.” Owen had said as he surveyed the sky with one hand cupped over his eyes. “Smells like it too.”

“Think it's gonna be a corker, kid. I don't like the way those clouds look.”

They'd decided to head up into the hills, reasoning that the thick cover of leaves would shelter them from the brunt of the storm. There would be less risk of the undead as well. The corpses tended to throng toward places more likely to harbor the living: cities and towns, railways, old roadside attractions that were slowly crumbling from the twin forces of time and neglect. Perhaps it was instinct; or even the last vestiges of memory in minds that had lost practically every shred of humanity when their souls had fled the bodies. Whatever the reason, as long as the wilderness didn't jut up against an interstate or some abandoned resort, the chances were greater of seeing a bear out there than a rotter.

The hillside turned out to be steeper than it looked and conversation had quickly been replaced by labored breathing and grunts. At several points, the pair had to press themselves against the side of the hill with their arms and legs splayed wide as they searched for roots and rocks to use as handholds. Avalanches of dirt tumbled from feet that scrambled for purchase and, despite the cool breeze that rippled their clothing, both men soon found that sweat had plastered their shirts to their backs like a second skin.

Dozens of tiny cuts and abrasions stung his hands and Tanny had begun to think that he wouldn't make it, that his heart would burst on the side of this bastard of a mountain and he'd become just another stiff wandering around in Graveyard Earth. His muscles trembled and felt as if inquisitors had stretched him across the rack before piling invisible rocks onto his back. The pressure seemed to press the air from his lungs and, at that moment, he would have

confessed to kissing the arse of Satan on a moonlit night, to boiling children in a wicked brew, and blighting the crops of neighboring farms with pestilence: anything to find a modicum of relief from the burning ache the radiated from his chest and shoulders.

But the ground had leveled off shortly thereafter and the two collapsed against the trunks of trees that had stood on this mountain long before either of their ancestors had worked up the courage to tame this wild land. They huffed and panted, sucking in great lungfuls of air that had the musty scent of old vegetation as distant thunder rumbled through the hills and valleys.

“You know, kid,” Tanny panted, “this looks like a fine spot to me. What d'ya say?”

It took longer for them to catch their breath than it did for the clearing to be transformed into a full-fledged campsite. Owen pitched the tent with the skill of a man who probably could have completed the task in complete darkness. While he hammered the pegs into the moss covered ground, Tanny began dragging fallen limbs and branches from the surrounding forest and arranged them in an almost pyramidal shape. Dry leaves, scraps of bark, and small twigs were shoved through the gaps in the wood and made good company for the flame of his disposable lighter.

From his backpack, he removed two tin cans whose sides looked blackened and scorched. The cans had jagged holes punched through either side and Tanny threaded lengths of wire through them and then twisted the ends together. The overall effect was that the man had just fashioned a couple of miniature pails and he poured water into them like a scientist carefully measuring his flasks. Once each had been filled to his liking, he recapped his canteen and hung the pair of cans from two forked branches that had been thrust into the earth.

“Hey,” Owen had called, “that's pretty damn smart.”

The cans dangled over the crackling tongues of flame and soon had wisps of steam curling from them as the water roiled and bubbled within. Into each can, Tanny shook a measured amount of macaroni and stirred it every few minutes with a small piece of wood. After half a dozen repetitions of this, he wrapped an old shirt around his hands and slowly drained the water off into a small bowl, into which he tossed a couple of teabags.

Owen offered a couple of Slim Jims from his own stash and the two snapped the meat

sticks into little logs which were summarily stirred into the pale and bloated pasta. The men ate directly from the cans, tilting them back and allowing the food to practically slide down their throats. When the meal was over, Tanny poured the now-steeped tea into each can and the two clinked them together as if they were sharing a snort of brandy at the gentleman's club.

“Kind of starchy,” Tanny said apologetically, “but I'm not about to waste a drop of that water.”

By this time, shadows had crept through the forest and seemed to parry and thrust with the flickering glow of the fire. Beyond the clearing was only a ring of darkness that struggled to conquer their oasis of light like an invading cancer.

“Think that storm might blow over after all.” Tanny observed. “Looks like its moving off to the south. Shame, though. Was hoping to maybe collect a little rain by morning.”

Owen grunted a reply as he rifled through his own pack and Tanny's brow furrowed as he watched the objects his companion pulled from it. First was a tea candle no bigger than a fifty cent piece; but this was quickly followed by a slender stick of incense that tinted the air with the scent of strawberries. Next, he removed a manilla envelope and then busied himself with pulling out handfuls of small stones.

Who the hell carries a bunch of rocks around all day? What the fuck?

Tanny's gaze shifted from the envelope to Owen, who appeared to be building some sort of miniature wall out of the little pieces of granite and quartz.

“Hey, kid, what'cha doing?”

Owen was so engrossed in his work that Tanny's voice didn't seem to register in the least bit. His glasses had begun to slip down the bridge of his nose and he took a moment to push them back up with the tip of his finger before setting back to work.

Reaching over, Tanny picked the envelope and turned it over in his hands: it was so flat and light that for a moment, he wondered if there was actually anything in it. He'd seen a lot of weird shit since he'd been on the road: people who proclaimed the zombies to be Divine messengers of God, a man who swore this was all just some consensual hallucination brought about by the drugs the government had introduced into the water supply But something

about the look on Owen's face made him feel as though those people had been nothing more than eccentric.

At times, the boy looked as though he were aglow with some sort of inner radiance. Excitement flickered behind those glasses and a smile spread across his face like someone who'd just witnessed something so miraculous, so wonderful, that human language would never be able to capture it in words. But just as quickly as this state of grace descended upon him, so would it be lifted. The muscles in his face seemed to lose their will and his jaw hung open as drool pooled up and glistened on his bottom lip. Simultaneously, the color drained from his face, leaving only a ghostly pallor surrounding eyes that now looked more like two dull marbles. For all intents and purposes, it was like watching one of those damn zombies. Albeit, one who'd been tasked with constructing what was turning out to be a ring of stones.

Tanny glanced at the envelope again, raised it to his ear, and shook gently. He could hear something move inside: not a rattle or shake, though. More like something sliding around. Paper?

He placed the envelope on his lap and lit a cigarette as he eyed Owen again. His friend now had a look of terrible determination to him, as if the fate of the world depended entirely upon him placing the next stone in just the right position..

What the hell was in that thing anyway?

Exhaling a slow plume of smoke, Tanny allowed the cigarette to hang loosely in his lips.

"Damn you and your locked door, Bluebeard." he mumbled.

Lifting the envelope, he undid the metal clasp on the back and stole one more look at Owen. The man was oblivious to Tanny, entirely focused on completing his edifice. Tanny tilted the container, shook it slightly, and a piece of paper slid out into his waiting hand.

It was a glossy eight by ten of a woman with dark, wavy hair that cascaded down to her shoulder blades. She was turned partially away from the camera and looked back over her shoulder with the tip of her index finger resting lightly on her bottom teeth. The corners of her mouth were turned up in the hint of a smile, as if she were privy to some secret information and delighted in teasing the viewer with vague hints and innuendo. Her back was arched slightly,

causing shadows to fall along the graceful curve of her spine. Her left forearm blocked her breasts from view, but it was all too easy to imagine them rounding out the front of the bra that snugly hugged her back.

Tanny's eyes panned down the picture slowly, drinking in the matching underwear with its raised polka dot nubs and how the panties clung to the curves of that perfect ass like a needy lover. Long, smooth legs flowed effortlessly into a pair of calf-high black boots with silver buckles and heels that you could stake a vampire with. Scrawled across the bottom left hand corner of the photo, in what appeared to be a medium point magic marker were the words *Owen, you rock!* Beneath the inscription, was what Tanny assumed was a signature; however it was nearly impossible to read, consisting mostly of intricate loops and swirls that merely suggested letters.

Taking the cigarette in one hand, Tanny pursed his lips and let out a slow whistle as his eyes scanned the picture again.

“What are you doing?”

Owen's voice was as flat as the stones he'd used to for the base of his now completed circle. His eyes however looked just as cold and hard and Tanny felt like a child who'd just been caught sneaking a peak at Dad's special magazines.

“Oh hey, kid . . . I was just . . . well, I was . . .”

He licked his lips and smiled, changing tact mid-sentence.

“Wow, she's quite a looker, my man. Who is she?”

Owen snorted and his brow creased with what appeared to be disapproval.

“*Who is she?* Seriously? That's only Tiffany Shepis, dummy.”

Tanny took a drag from his cigarette, arched his eyebrows and shrugged, causing his companion to shake his head slowly.

“Tiffany Shepis? Only the greatest scream queen since Linnea Quigley? Hell, since *ever* for that matter.”

His voice trembled with the type of reverence usually reserved for gods and his words spilled out in an excited babble; but there was still something about his eyes that made Tanny

feel as though the younger man were peeling back layers of skin with his gaze. He tried to keep the banter light and flowing, as if they were simply two old buddies on a camping trip.

“Oh, I see . . . so she was some kind of actress then?”

“No!”

Owen's voice was as sharp as a handgun firing and he paced around the clearing now as he tugged at his left earlobe.

“No, no, no. not just *some* actress . . . *the* actress. Would you call the Mona Lisa *just some painting*? Is the Taj Mahal just *some* building?”

Tanny chuckled in an attempt to hide the nervous fluttering in his stomach. Subconsciously, he stroked the picture in his hand with the ball of his thumb, tracing the path of her legs over and over.

“So I take it you were a fan then?”

He'd meant the question as a joke but Owen turned so quickly that it was almost as if Tanny had just bitch-slapped him across the face. His mouth drew back into a snarl and the campfire reflected in the lenses of his glasses, making it appear as though flames raged within the dark recesses of his skull.

“Fan? *Fan*? I am *not* a fuckin' fan. Me and Tiffany, we got something beautiful, see? She understands me. She *loves* me. And they know! They make sure at least once, in every damn film, she's allowed to send a special message. Just for me. We've got this blood oath, see? Me and Tiffany, til the very fucking end. When I get to Tuscon, you'll see. The ghouls better watch the fuck out because there's nothing me and Tiff won't be able to do when we finally meet!”

The cigarette in Tanny's mouth had been forgotten and the ash seemed to defy gravity as it curled toward the ground. He could feel the night pressing in around him like a dark cloak and the realization of exactly how isolated they were out here struck him with an almost physical force. Far beyond fluttering, his stomach now churned the half-digested macaroni in raging seas of acid and bile stung the back of his throat. He swallowed hard and glanced down at the picture so he wouldn't have to feel the heat of Owen's stare burning into his soul.

“Yeah, look . . . kid, I understand. Really, I do. I mean, who wouldn't fall for a sweet piece of ass like that?”

Owen sprung across the clearing before Tanny had a chance to regret the words that had blurted from his mouth. The larger man's body crashed into his Tanny with the force of a boulder hurled by the gods. Tanny's body flew backwards as Owen's full weight crushed the air from his lungs and sent the cigarette tumbling from his mouth with a whoosh of air.

“You son of a bitch!”

Tanny's fingers clawed at his attacker: grasping, scratching, pulling, and pummeling the man's chest with hollow thuds. But Owen's reach was too long and he had a handful of the little man's red hair clutched in a death grip. He slammed Tanny's head against the forest floor again and again; the ground that had seemed so soft when they were setting up camp now caused flashes of darkness to explode before Tanny's eyes. The flashes grew in size and frequency with each burst of pain that radiated from the back of his skull.

“You don't talk about her that way! *No one* talks about her that way!”

Owen looked more animal than human. As he screamed his lips seemed to shrivel back, revealing pink gums and teeth that were bared like a rabid wolf. His eyelids twitched and fluttered and the muscles in his neck were like twisted cords that had been pulled so tightly that they quivered beneath the strain. Even his voice seemed to rumble like the bastard child of words and a growl.

“Fuckin' cock sucker! Piece of shit! She's too damn good for you!”

Rings of darkness edged Tanny's vision and everything not engulfed by the encroaching gloom seemed to waver like an out of focus film. He was vaguely aware of something warm and sticky oozing through his hair but the thump and squish of his head pounding against the ground almost seemed to recede with each repetition. In some distant, fuzzy patch of consciousness Tanny heard his own voice, like the echo of a dream:

I'm going to die . . .

Owen grabbed the man by both ears, twisting them like the grips on a motorcycle, and yanked Tanny up until they were so close that the spiced meat on his breath wafted over his

companions face with each breath.

“You understand, you fuckin' freak? She's *mine!*”

Releasing one ear, Tanny drove a fist into Tanny's face and his companion fell backward again as blood gushed from a lip that had split like an overripe tomato. And then Owen was scrambling up his body, his bony knees jabbing painfully into Tanny's shoulder blades and pinning the man to the ground.

As if by magic, the cigarette butt appeared in Owen's hand and he held it so close to Tanny's eye that the heat wafting from its ember felt like a pinprick searing into his lid. Despite the tenuous grip Tanny held on consciousness, he instinctively tried to twist away, but Owen's other hand pressed against the man's forehead with the full weight of his body.

“You apologize, you little turd! You apologize right now!”

“I'm sorry.” Tanny croaked. “Dear God, I'm sorry okay?”

Owen inched the smoldering cigarette closer to Tanny eye.

“Not to me, dumb ass.” he sneered. “To her. Apologize to *her!*”

Owen jerked his head to the side, indicating the eight-by-ten that lay on the ground. Tanny tried to follow his attacker's line of sight, but Owen still had his head pinned to the ground so tightly that he could barely move his neck. Instead, he glanced out of the corner of his eye and could barely make out the edges of the photo in his peripheral vision.

“I'm sorry . . . I . . . didn't mean to insult you.”

Tanny felt some of the pressure ease from his head and the cigarette was pulled far enough away that the smoke no longer curled up into his stinging eyes. At the same time, waves of dizziness washed over him and it felt as if his head had turned into a balloon that had been rapidly inflated. When Owen spoke again, his voice was lower but still seemed to seethe with the promise of violence.

“I swear to God, if you ever . . . and I mean *ever* . . . talk about her like that again I will fuckin' kill you. You understand? I will cut your balls off and shove 'em down your throat til you die.”

At this point, Tanny would have agreed to wearing a saddle and letting Owen ride him

through the forest if it meant getting that crazy fucker of his chest.

“Yeah, yeah I understand., please let me go, I'm sorry, man . . . it won't happen again, I promise.”

Owen flipped the cigarette into the woods and picked up the photo of Tiffany Shepis so gingerly that it almost seemed as if he half-expected it to turn to dust in his fingers. He stroked her cheek with the tip of one finger and the rage that had possessed him seemed to dissolve a little more with each loving caress.

“I'm sorry you had to see that, baby.”

He walked over to the little stone wall he'd built and placed the picture within its confines before lighting the tea candle and setting it in front of the photo. For a moment, Owen simply stood there and watched the glow of the candlelight flicker against the glossy surface of the photo. The rage had entirely disappeared and his face was now as serene as an altar boy contemplating the votives at mass. Laying down upon the ground, he curled up his knees into an almost fetal position and began whispering to the picture: his voice was nothing more than a soft murmur, the individual words lost in a rhythmic lull that was occasionally punctuated by a chuckle or sigh.

Tanny had scooted backwards until he was leaning against an old log and he watched Owen as if expecting the man to charge across the clearing at any moment. Every instinct in his body told him to run, to just scamper off into the forest and leave this little campsite far behind; but he was trembling so violently that he didn't entirely trust his legs to support his own weight and the back of his head was throbbing like a heart trapped within a vise. Besides, what if that crazy son of a bitch saw him? What if he chased the little man through the woods and cornered him? Tanny's hand scrambled across the forest floor until it felt the jagged edges of a rock and he quickly snatched it, holding it tightly to his chest as if it were a small animal that he had to protect.

I'll bash his fucking brains out, I swear I will, he's crazy, just let him try, I swear to God I'll kill that fucked up nut-job

But Owen seemed to have forgotten that he wasn't alone within those woods. His eyes

never strayed from the shrine he'd constructed. In fact, he seemed totally oblivious to everything around him: the chirping of insects, the rustling of underbrush as some hidden creature scurried through the darkness, and the distant call of a nocturnal bird that sounded as if it were whistling some secret all-clear signal. None of these things seemed to register at all.

As the flames of the campfire dwindled to the point that there were only occasional eruptions from the mound of red cinders, Owen's voice had begun trailing off. It would grow softer and softer until there was only the sounds of the wilderness at night to keep Tanny company. Within a few seconds, his body would jerk as if an electric current had just coursed through it and there would be a few mumbled sentences before the entire scene replayed itself. Eventually, however, exhaustion overtook the blond man and snores rumbled from his open mouth.

Tanny wasn't sure how long he'd watched Owen sleep; long enough to make sure that it wasn't just some clever ruse, some trap the wacko had come up with to test his companion's true intentions. Though the back of his head still ached like a son of a bitch, Tanny stumbled to his feet and clutched the rock in his fist so tightly that its crags seemed to be attempting to embed themselves in his hand. He took a few steps across the clearing and stopped, watching for the slightest signs of movement from the sleeping man.

Owen, however, hadn't changed positions since the last time he'd bolted awake. He was still sprawled across the ground, one hand reaching toward the picture of Tiffany Shepis like that painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Tanny stood as still as the trees in the forest and his heart thumped in his chest so hard he was certain the sound of its beats would stir Owen from his slumber. He tried to breathe softly and scanned the ground ahead for any dry twigs that might betray his presence with a sharp snap.

Taking three more steps, Owen stopped again. Listened. Watched. Moved again once he was certain that his so-called friend was still safely nestled within whatever dreams flitted through that twisted mind.

After what seemed to be an eternity of creeping across the campsite, Tanny glared down at the sleeping man. The rock in his hand seemed as heavy as a brick and he stared at the tangle

of blond hair just above the little knot at the base of the skull. Every muscle in his body seemed tense, as if they had been pulled tightly across his diminutive skeleton and longed for release.

I could do it. Right now. Let that bastard see what it feels like. Let him have a taste of his own fucking medicine.

Owen's chest continued to rise and fall as a tiny spider crept across the folds of his clothes.

Serve that crazy asshole right

Tanny felt as if he were towering over his traveling companion, as if he were a giant that could rain death and destruction down upon a village that was no bigger than the ones he'd once set upon his mantle at Christmas. It would be so easy to simply swing his arm, to feel the thud jar his elbow and shoulder as rock crashed into bone. So easy to let the man's blood flow into the hungry soil out here, hidden by the trees and darkness with all the little insects who'd parade in to strip the flesh from Owen's battered carcass. He could do it

In the back of his mind a voice that fluttered with nervous excitement babbled.

What if you don't kill him? What if he wakes up and yanks the rock out of your hand? Shit, you saw what happened earlier. What the fuck would he do if you were actually attacking him? You want to end up being the one left to rot out here? That's how it would end Do you really want to die because some obsessed crazy man got the best of you? Damn it, Tanny think! Think, think, think!

The spider had made its way to Owen's collar now and it's spindly legs stretched out as it pulled its body onto bare flesh. The man mumbled thickly as his brow creased and, reaching up with one hand, he flipped the little arachnid away.

Tanny felt as though he'd just plunged into an icy river. Chills tingled his scalp and a sharp pain jabbed through the center of his chest as his heart forgot to beat. He held the rock above his head as steadily as he held his breath.

Kill me, he's gonna kill me, the psycho son of a bitch

Owen rolled onto his side and smacked his lips lightly. He sighed and muttered groggily; for the most part it was nothing more than an incoherent babble. But there was one word that

Tanny heard as clearly as the hissing embers of the campfire: Tiffany.

At the same time, the blonde man pulled Tanny's satchel close to his body. He spooned the light brown pack like a lover and nestled his cheek against the canvass as if it were the soft flesh of his obsession.

Tanny thought of all his supplies and belongings, tucked away under Owen's head. His food. His clothing. The pocket knife and lengths of cord.

Fuck it. Fat lot of good those things would do him if his brains were splattered across the forest floor. He'd put the rock carefully upon the ground and then simply slip into the darkness of the night. By the time this maniac woke up, Tanny would be far away from the mountain; he'd be safe and, with an interesting story to share with other survivors, would begin the process of gathering supplies again.

Yet, part of his soul still burned with anger. It was as some ancient demon had seeped through the gash on the back of his skull and infected his mind with the poison of vengeance. It demanded retribution, some sort of satisfaction for the indignities the little man had endured. People just shouldn't be allowed to get away with shit like that. It wasn't fucking right and that bastard deserved to hurt so damn bad that he'd rue the day he ever heard the name Tanny Henderson.

A grin caused Tanny's mustache to bristle like an angry cur as a cold glee frosted his eyes.

Yeah, he'd hurt this ass licker in the worst possible way. He'd crumble this degenerate fuck's world just like the rotters had laid waste to the real one. Leave him crying on the ground like a little baby with a diaper full of shit.

With a smirk, Tanny snatched the picture of Tiffany Shepis from it's little altar.

Owen had been raised in the woods. He'd grown up in a rundown shack where *running water* meant the creek that wound its way down from the hills and divided the front yard. At eight years old, he'd been left to wander through the night as he searched the forest for the mythical snipe with paper sack firmly in hand. He'd spent the better part of his childhood

hiking, fishing, and camping; his grandfather had taught him how to hunt long before he'd even had his first wet dream. Owen knew that sweet little spot just above a deer's front leg where a thirty-ought-six would make short work of the heart-lung area. But he also knew how rare it was to drop an animal where it stood; which is why Grandpa Reid had made damn sure the boy knew how to track as well.

That fuckin' animal wasn't bleeding, not yet at least, but he'd still been running scared once he'd gotten a good piece away from the campsite. Once the panic had kicked in, that little bastard may have as well been leaving little note cards saying *This way* tucked in the bent and snapped twigs of bushes. The trail was so clear, in fact, that Owen could almost picture that warbly rat scampering ahead of him like a ghost.

"You'll be a ghost soon enough, you pint-sized cock. I'll be dropping evil on your ass so hard you'll hear your backbone pop right before I chew your fuckin' heart out."

The hatchet trembled in Owen's hand as if excited by the promise of blood; he could even feel it throbbing and pulsing in his white-knuckled grip, as if dark forces surged through the grain of the wood.

"Soon." he thought as the trees and rocks blurred by, "So very fucking soon."

Shortly before dawn, the ground had opened up beneath Tanny Henderson's feet. He'd been scrambling down a hillside, doing more sliding than running actually, when the soil suddenly gave way beneath his weight. His foot plunged into the sinkhole, but momentum and gravity had demanded that he continue fleeing. Caught between the two forces, his arms pinwheeled for balance as his body lurched forward and, within the span of a second, his face had smacked against the unforgiving ground. He'd tried to stand, to brush the dirt off his clothes and just keep right on going; but his ankle felt as if it were encircled with fiery bands of steel and he collapsed beneath his own weight.

Clenching his teeth against the pain, Tanny had scooted the rest of the way down the hill. He drug his ass over the rocks and dirt like a dog with intestinal worms, wincing with every hard fought yard of ground he covered.

When he finally reached the bottom, he'd crawled to a thicket of trees and leaned against the rough bark as he rolled up his pant leg to survey the damage. The skin had already started to puff up around his shoe and was already showing the first dark splotches of bruising. He touched it tentatively, the way a child might touch a snake, and his muscles felt warm and tight. At the same time, waves of pain radiated from the pressure of his fingertips and he drew his breath in through his teeth as he pulled his hand away. He could see the phantoms of his fingertips on the wounded flesh, ovular apparitions which blossomed sickly white before slowly fading into the surrounding redness.

Not broken, thank God.

He watched streaks of color paint the eastern sky, stretching the clouds into broad brushstrokes of oranges, reds, and vibrant pink. The birds twittered and chirped, their call and response songs adding texture to this still life portrait of a perfect morning. It was hard to believe that beyond the tranquility of this forest the rest of the world lay in ruins. Entire cities may be burning unchecked, haggard refugees would be struggling for one more day of life, and those damn corpses would still be shredding every law of nature by their very existence: but, out here, life continued on as it had for centuries. There was the sweet scent of flowers and earthy vegetation, the birds and the breeze; it was all too easy to imagine that none of the preceding horrors had ever happened.

The pain that throbbed through Tanny's ankle was the only voice of dissension that railed against this fleeting fantasy. It reminded him that things were so much more dire than this picturesque dawn implied. In his past life, a twisted ankle – even one this badly sprained – would have been nothing more than an inconvenience. He'd pop a few pain meds, maybe spend a day or two soaking up sympathy from pretty girls as he hobbled around the office on a pair of crutches, and keep it elevated as he flipped through the channels at home. But, in this new reality, even a simple injury could turn lethal if given the right set of circumstances.

Maybe if he just rested here for a bit and took a little cat nap some of the swelling would recede by the time he woke up. Then he could plan his next move.

Tanny shifted slightly so that the eighty by ten he'd rolled up and tucked into the pocket

of his jeans wouldn't scratch at his back and closed his eyes.

“Where the fuck is she, you thieving little worm?”

Tanny's eyes snapped open as the voice boomed through the silence. The sun had moved on toward the west and, at the top of the hill that had mangled his ankle, he saw a hulking silhouette against the backdrop of trees. The shadow seemed to be bent slightly forward with its shoulders hunched and knees slightly bent. For some reason, an image of the Wolf Man passed through Tanny's thoughts; but then he saw the outline of the object in the dark figure's hand. The slender handle leading up to the slightly curved blade. The hammer-like head on the opposite side.

“Where the hell is my Tiffany?”

Tanny would have been more relieved to see an army of rotters looming over him. Fear shredded his intestines and the sudden surge of adrenaline caused his wounded ankle to surge in time with his racing heart.

Pushing himself from the ground, Tanny leaned against the tree for support for a brief second as he gritted his teeth against the agony in his foot.

Doesn't hurt half as bad as that damn hatchet will. Get your ass moving!

“Fuckin' shit-eating son of bitch!”

Owen began scuttling down the hillside as Tanny darted into the trees. The little man tried to run but felt as if he were in constant danger of toppling to the right. His ankle protested the torture with every step and the searing pain caused the forest to seem to alternately close in on him and withdraw. As if the tall oaks and pines were a vicious pack testing the fortitude of injured prey.

But still he limped on, moving through the wilderness as quickly as his limp would allow. He constantly scanned his surroundings, looking for somewhere to hide, for something he could use as a weapon, for some little cave or crevice he could wedge himself into. If he could just find somewhere that Owen was too large to fit into, he'd thrust the picture to him, would give him anything he wanted.

Please, please, please . . .

He could hear something crashing through the underbrush behind him: a growl and yell rolled into a single sound, inhuman and totally devoid of reasoning; pure, primal fury filtered through regression and rage.

Tanny burst through a line of trees and the forest was suddenly gone. Before him was the dark asphalt of a country road bordered by these spindly blue flowers and gravel. Directly across from him was a house that looked as if it had fallen into disrepair long before society had ever collapsed. Faded planks covered its walls and shattered windows grinned like dark mouths, the remaining shards of glass tooth-like in the gaping maw. The front door was partially open and Tanny could just make out peeling red paint before it disappeared into the gloom. The house was obviously empty . . . no help there.

He looked around with quick snaps of his head. There! Cresting the hill about a quarter mile away. A dark, human shaped speck.

“Help!”

His yell wavered with pain and beads of sweat dotted his forehead. But he felt the first stirrings of hope within his soul, the little twinges of relief that eased the tension in his muscles.

“Murder! Murder! Help me!”

The person in the distance stopped as Tanny's voice reached his ears. He stood there for a moment, as still as the battered mailbox in front of the abandoned house.

“Please!”

He could hear Owen behind him. Huffing. Running. Growing closer with each second.

“Oh God, help me! Help, help, help!”

Tanny was scuttling across the road, but his eyes were still focused entirely on the person who could potentially be his savior.

“Oh, shit . . . shit, shit, *shit!*”

The person had turned slowly toward him, seeming to stagger like a drunkard as it fought for balance. At the same time, more figures appeared. They shuffled out of the forest, congregated from the other side of the hill, some seeming to simply *appear* out of nowhere.

And, as a collective, they began to totter toward him, their limbs pitching like marionettes whose strings were savagely jerked at random intervals.

Oh, you fucked up, you fucked up bad . . .

Tanny's focus was entirely on the rotters that floundered toward him. He wasn't aware of Owen pouncing from the forest or the crunch of the man's feet on gravel. He didn't see the savage grin as the blond man hoisted the hatchet so that it was slightly behind his own ear. Nor did he witness the sharp flick of Owen's wrist or the blur that spiraled through the air with a soft whistling sound.

Tanny's skull felt as if it had shattered into a thousand fragments and he collapsed to his knees as he pressed his hands against his temples. The hatchet lay on the ground beside him, the blunt end splotted with fresh blood from where it had hammered against his head. As the little man swooned, Owen scooped the weapon from the ground and grabbed a fistful of red hair with his free hand.

"Steal my fuckin' girl, will ya? Fuckin' dirty her up like she was just some common piece of trash? Well, you're about to join the fraternity of the dead, mother fucker. And you can consider this the hazing."

Owen yanked Tanny's head back and drew the blade of the hatchet sharply across his brow. A furrow of blood added a new crease to the little man's forehead and the sting of severed nerve endings cut through the fog that had overtaken Tanny's mind as cleanly as the hatchet had his flesh.

"Zombies . . .", he gasped. "Owen . . . coming . . ."

"Zombies? You're about to embrace the darkness and that's all you can think of to say, you fuckin' turd? Now, you tell me where she is and I *might* make this quick."

"Zombies . . ."

"Zombies, zombies, zombies! I fuckin' get it . . . *now where the hell is she, mother fucker?*"

Tanny nodded his head slightly to the side and Owen's eyes followed the movement, thinking he'd see his beloved starlet lying on the road like a damsel tied to the train tracks in

some old film. For a moment all of the rage drained from his face and his eyes grew large and round.

The dead were close now. So close that the stench of decaying flesh wafted to the two men like a hot wind. Fifteen to twenty of the undead bastards staggered forward with outstretched hands, their skin blackened and bloated and seeming to rip with the force of escaping gasses.

“Son of a bitch . . .”

Owen pulled Tanny by the hair, dragging the man across the street as his small legs flailed and kicked.

“Hurts! Ow . . . shit . . . let me go. Let me go!”

“I ain't done with you yet, fuckwad.”

“You son of a bitch!”

Tanny squirmed and writhed.

“Let me go! Where the hell do you think you're going anyway, you bastard?”

“The red door.” Owen panted. “Get a bit of privacy. What d'ya say?”

The rotters were closing ranks and formed a tight cluster of purification as they zeroed in on the living.

“Damn it, Owen!”

The rickety stairs leading to the porch jarred Tanny's spine and the picture of Tiffany Shepis wedged in his back pocket raked the skin beneath his shirt with its crisp edges. Somehow, he had to make sure it remained hidden: it was the only card he had to play and his life, quite literally, could very well depend on what he chose to do with it.

Tanny was pulled to his feet and roughly shoved through the doorway as Owen spun around and slammed the door behind them. The red door, however, had long since given up its locking mechanism and swung back open with a creak.

Outside, the dead clamored across the lawn. They bumped into one another, tripped and stumbled over the tangle of feet, and teetered like players in some macabre slapstick. But, even still, they kept coming. Kept pursuing the warm flesh within the house with mindless, dogged

devotion.

Owen knew he could probably take out a few with a couple well placed blows of the hatchet. But not all. There was simply too many. He scanned the room quickly, taking in the dust motes that swirled lazily in shafts of light. Furniture so feeble and decrepit that it seemed to be held together by sheer willpower. Peeled wallpaper.

Tanny was scooting across the floor and tears streamed down his pale face. He whimpered softly as Owen stormed toward him and threw his hands in front of his face.

“Get the fuck up, maggot!”

The larger man shook the hatchet at Tanny.

“Where the hell are we going to go? We're trapped, dumb ass!”

It was more of a high pitched plea than any sort of defiance; in fact, Tanny looked as if he were struggling to come to terms with his impending death. If this maniac didn't cleave his skull in half, then the rotters would soon be streaming through the door. Either way, he was fucked. Maybe if his ankle didn't feel as if it were wrapped in barbed wire. Maybe if he had some sort of weapon of his own. But he hurt like hell, he was tired, and he just wanted it to be over. All of it.

He pushed himself up off the floor slowly and wobbled back and forth, trying to support as much of his weight on his good leg as possible. Meanwhile, Owen was still searching the house with his eyes.

“There! Through there!”

“Where?”

More like a sigh than a question.

“The basement, jack. Get your scrawny ass down there!”

Owen indicated a door just down the hall. Tanny could see a hint of stairs descending just on the other side. Without further complaint, he limped toward the opening like a death row inmate taking that final walk toward The Chair. His chin hung against his chest and Owen occasionally encouraged him with rough shoves in the back.

“Move it!”

The stairs creaked and popped as Tanny struggled down them. They seemed to shift with his weight as if the entire structure was about to come crashing down.

“What the hell is with the locks in this damn place?”

Owen gave up on trying to secure the door and took the steps two at a time, seemingly oblivious to the way they shook beneath him.

“Look here, little man, this all ends *now*. You hand over that picture and we find a way out of this shit, all right? You go your way, I go mine. Deal?”

The cellar smelled musty and greenish mold clung to the block walls. On the far side of the room, a small window was embedded just above ground level and it let in enough light to reveal the stack of boxes and cluttered junk below it.

“You promise? I give you that damn picture and we call it even?”

“What fuckin' choice do I have? But I swear, if you don't hand it over in the next three seconds I'm gonna peel the skin right off your body.”

Dull thumps and thuds came from overhead and released a shower of dust in the air. They were in the house now and Tanny could track their position by the sound of their shuffling footsteps. Maybe one of them had seen Owen fighting with the door. Maybe they somehow just *knew*. But it was obvious that they were slowly making their way toward the entrance to the cellar.

Pulling the rolled up photo from his pocket, Tanny thrust it toward his one-time friend. He jerked his hand back just as Owen snatched it away and edged backward.

“Ok. There. You've got it.”

“Tiffany . . . sweetie.” Owen's voice was a soft whisper. “What did he do with . . . to you? It's okay. I'm here now. Everything's okay.”

“So . . . what now, Owen?”

Owen propped the picture against a can of paint that sat on top of a rusty chest freezer. He fiddled with it slightly, angling the photo as if he were trying to ensure that the brunette could see as much of the room as possible. When he was satisfied with his handiwork, he turned to Tanny with a cold smile.

“Now? Now, you wish you'd never been born. Now this place becomes a fuckin' death factory!”

“B-but . . . we had a deal, man!”

Owen threw back his head and cackled as he gave the hatchet a few practice swings.

“It's the rule of three, you little shit. What goes around, comes around? You really think I'm just gonna let you get away with the shit you did? You think I don't *know* the disgusting things you were doing to her out there?”

Owen walked calmly forward as he spat the words but his eyes twinkled with brutal amusement.

“I didn't do anything! I swear to God, I just wanted to . . .”

“To *what*? To fuck her? To take her from me? To rub your filthy little parts . . .”

“No, no, it wasn't like that, I swear, Owen . . .”

Tanny had backed into the shelving now and could retreat no further. And yet Owen still advanced, slapping the flat part of the blade against his palm with each step.

“I fuckin' trusted you, man. And now, you're gonna pay. That's my blood oath, little man.”

At the top of the stairs the door swung open and the dead clamored over one another as they pushed their way through the opening. They swarmed down the steps and Tanny's eyes darted from their tattered clothing to Owen's hatchet.

“See, I'm the violent kind, Tanny . . .”

Behind Owen, the steps gave way with a crash. A cluster of rotters fell through the air with the remnants of the staircase and smacked flatly against the floor. Undaunted, they staggered to their feet and stepped through broken scraps of wood and railing while the companions overhead simply stepped into the void where stairs had once been and plummeted to the ground.

Owen's head had snapped around at the sudden cacophony and his promise of revenge seemed to be wiped from his mind. The initial crowd of zombies were between him and the picture with more closing in.

“Get away from her, you fucks!”

He charged forward with the hatchet raised above his head.

“I’m coming, baby!”

The undead surged forward and Tanny saw Owen's weapon swing through the air. It's edge bit into the skull of the zombie closest to him and the man shoved it's body back with his free hand even as he prepared for another swing.

“Tiffany!”

Tanny, however, wasn't sticking around for the massacre. He scrambled up the mountain of refuse below the window, kicked over boxes, and sent jars careening to the ground where they shattered and spilled their dark fluids over the floor. The pain in his ankle was like bolts of lightning, but he clenched his teeth and fought through it until he'd reached the very top of the pile.

The window was now right before him and stealing a glance over his shoulder, he saw that the dead had formed a loose ring around Owen. Their hands snatched and grabbed as the man spun in circles, swinging the hatchet wildly at his attackers.

“Tiff!”

But then Tanny was pushing the window with both hands, forcing the rusted hinges to swing it outward. It was a tight fit, even for his diminutive body, but he was able to wiggle and squirm until he was crawling across the grass of the backyard. He picked himself up and took a deep breath.

Maybe he'd head back into the woods for a while, see if he could find his way back to their campsite. With food and safety, he could rest for a few days, give his ankle a chance to heal before moving on. He took one final look at the window he'd just forced himself through before beginning to edge his way back toward the road.

“So long, fanboy.”

Tanny had barely reached the front of the house by the time the wordless screams of pain from the basement came to an abrupt end. He peeked around the corner to ensure the coast was clear and made for the line of trees on the other side of the road. A bitter

smile broke through the grimace of pain that contorted his face.

Owen and his starlet were together again.

And they would be for a long, long time

"William Todd Rose tells an excellent story . . . He uses a poetic writing style that almost enables the reader to see what Bobby sees, and hear what Bobby hears. Rose keeps you guessing until the very end and will leave you saying wow" **-The Horror Fiction Review**
January 2010, 4 out of 5 stars

In the forest something has awoken; something that whispers to the mind of a young boy who happened to be taking a shortcut home; something that demands ever increasing amounts of wood & blood to sate its appetite for carnage. Being drawn deeper into the vortex of violence that engulfs him, his impressionable mind becomes a willing slave to the creature that slithers within the branches. Angry and alienated, he begins walking a path that will ultimately reveal the secret of what lurks within the shadow of the woodpile



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It was dark when she awoke. For a moment she laid in the sleeping bag with her eyes closed and listened to the shuffle of footsteps out in the hall. She could hear the heavy doors of the other cells being opened, one of the new girls sobbing softly, the murmur of conversation as her captors made their rounds . . . just like always. Every day the same sequence of events played out as if she were nothing more than a character in some macabre loop film. Judging by how muffled the sounds were, she knew she would hear seven other cell doors swing open before they made it to hers; and as the squeaking of hinges grew louder, so would the terse commands of their keepers. The same set of orders repeated in voices that sounded emotionless and bored. Day in. Day out.

Her bladder felt as if a heavy stone had grown in it overnight. The stone had sharp edges that raked against the soft, unprotected lining of the organ, flaring with pain as she struggled to hold it in. A little wooden bucket sat in one corner of her cell but even with the sleeping bag pulled up over her face she could still smell it: the stench of stale piss and caked-on shit, so thick that it seemed to lodge itself in little chunks in the back of her throat. A steady stream of urine would only make matters worse, churning yesterday's waste into a frothy, brown sludge and releasing even more of the noxious vapors. No, it was better to wait. Before they left her cell, they would empty it into the drum which sat across the hall. If not clean, at least it would be *cleaner*.

All part of the routine.

She finally opened her eyes and pulled the sleeping bag down to her shoulders. The view

that greeted her was the usual brick walls that glistened with condensation, the concrete floor with its Rorschach stains of various bodily fluids; her cell was no larger than a broom closet and the only light came through the small, barred window on the wooden door . . . and even then only when torches had been lit in the hall. The wall opposite the door also had one of these windows, but beyond it was only a darkness so complete that she could only hear the things that shuffled on the other side..

That would change soon, however. It was also part of the daily routine; the moment her door opened, they would be at the window, grasping through the bars with hands that looked shriveled and mummified in the dim light of the cell. With fingernails worn down to ragged splinters, they would reach through and claw at the air, scratching at the bricks as if they could somehow erode the rough mortar through persistence alone. The creatures had deteriorated to the point that they no longer had an odor but anytime a freshie was added to the group there would be weeks where the stench of decay overpowered even the toilet bucket. Somehow, that was the worst part of the ordeal: smelling the greasy, sweet reek of rotting meat and knowing that once it had been someone just like her. Someone who had learned to cope with life in the cells as best as she could. Someone whom she'd spoken with, perhaps, through the bars on their doors. Someone who was no longer useful

“Assume the position, Mole.”

The voice was closer now. Maybe only four doors down or so.

“I said, *assume the position, Mole!*”

More annoyed than angry. But if the unseen woman continued to resist, things could turn bad quickly. She'd heard (and felt) the beatings before: the dull thud and smack of sawed-off broomsticks against thighs; the cries of pain, the tears and sobbing and pleading apologies.

“Just do, it.” she muttered. “Make it easy on yourself, Mole.”

She felt her face grow warm and her stomach churned in a nauseous mixture of disgust and shame. *Mole*. She'd actually called the woman that. Like their captors, she'd stripped away every fiber of personality from her fellow prisoner with a single word. A word that reduced a living, breathing, thinking *person* into nothing more than a single characteristic. A word that left

her mouth feeling so dirty that she would rather drink her bucket of waste than utter it again.

She, too, had a name once; but now she was simply Hips. Like her mother and boyfriend, it had disappeared into the mists of time and memory. Sometimes, while the darkened hallway beyond her cell echoed with snores, she would lay in the gloom and whisper that name over and over. As if it were some sort of mantra that could magically teleport her from this dank dungeon to some distant place where she would feel the warmth of sun on her skin and hear birds chirping overhead. Without fail, though, it always took her mind back to that last day of freedom. To the day she lost everything

They were hunkered down in a burned out storefront, hidden behind the charred remains of the front counter; the sun had set several hours earlier and a darkness had fallen across the town that made it seem as if they had been plunged into the void of space. The days of street lamps and the soft glow of curtained windows were over; no headlights splayed across the soot stained walls, no winking neon or stop lights cycling through their array of colors. And on that particular night there wasn't even the pale luminescence of moonlight to chase away the shadows.

With the darkness came silence as well. She'd never realized how noisy society was until it had all been taken away. The humming of air conditioners, traffic four blocks over hissing through rain-slick streets, the muffled beat of music seeping through the walls of bars and clubs: all those things were missing now. The million other tiny sounds her ears had learned to take for granted had been replaced with a silence so complete that only a high pitched ringing filled her ears.

And it was really the quiet that worried her most. They had ran their hands along the cinder-like edge of the counter and smeared the dark ash across their faces and arms commando style. They'd curled up beneath a black tarp Jeremy had found a few days back, had tried everything within their power to pass themselves off as just another cluster of shadows. So, in a sense, the darkness was their ally. Her boyfriend, however, had a tendency to talk in his sleep. In the bedroom of their apartment it had been nothing more than softly muttered gibberish, not

even loud enough to wake her if she were sleeping. But out here that same sound would be like a loudspeaker broadcasting in the night: *we're here, we're hiding over here, come get us, come quick . . .*

Which was one of the reasons sleep came in short, quick bursts. Even though she was so exhausted that her muscles felt as if they were made of overcooked spaghetti, she had to be ready. Ready to clamp her hand over Jeremy's mouth, to push the words back into his throat if she could. Ready to keep her loved ones safe.

She didn't have to worry about Mama, however. About two weeks earlier they'd been attempting to sneak through a heavily infested area just outside of Redfield. There were rumors of a FEMA rescue station nearby and her stepfather, Denny, had insisted on scouting the route ahead of them. They'd followed about fifty yards behind and hid behind dumpsters or wrecked cars when he'd form his hand into a fist and then move on when he'd wave. Start and stop. Duck and hide, picking their way through the rubble and debris of a once proud society. But then he'd been pulled down by a pack of corpses that seemed to appear from nowhere, ripped apart right before their very eyes. Sometimes she'd still see him in her dreams: the way he fought and clawed and punched even as his knees buckled from the force of the assault . . . the bright, crimson arc of blood that spurted with slow-motion clarity as teeth pulled strands of flesh and muscle from a throat no longer capable of producing sound. He'd been a good husband and decent stepfather but, in the end, had made a horrible scout. He should have pushed his ego aside and listened to her suggestions instead of simply shrugging them off. Maybe if she'd been the one running point things would've turned out differently.

But she'd learned quickly that in this new world regrets could quickly get your ass killed. You had to focus on the here and now, to push memory into the farthest corners of your mind and bury it beneath the weight of more pressing concerns. Food. Clean water. Shelter and survival.

The future operated on the same principle. In her previous life she'd had dreams: she'd finish college, get a job with a decent newspaper in a medium size town, get married, kids eventually. At some hazy point on the timeline of her life, the grandchildren would come

bursting through the front door with squeals of *Grandma!*; she'd shower them with hugs and treats and smile serenely at the man by her side . . . the man whose face she'd seen morph from the smooth flesh of the young into a wrinkled mask of experience. But things had changed, hadn't they? Hopes and ambitions were now exclusively short-term; her ambitions had been reduced to making it through yet another night alive, of finding that mythical pocket of society that had somehow been untouched by the insanity that had swept over the world like a tsunami of death and mutilation. Life had been reduced to an almost constant state of *now* and those who dared to dream too long would quickly find themselves wrapped in the darkness of a sleep from which they would never awaken.

The world had changed. And she, in turn, had been forced to change with it.

The sun had just begun to paint the eastern horizon with streaks of amber and orange when she heard it: a scuffling sound from outside, so soft and furtive that it was almost lost beneath the rhythmic lull of her companions' breathing. Footsteps? The sound of well-worn soles sliding over concrete and asphalt?

She closed her eyes and tried to listen for the sounds to repeat, to lock in their distance and general location; but her heart hammered in her chest with such force that she could only hear the whooshing of blood as it surged through her veins.

The cold hand of fear squeezed her stomach and caused bile to shoot up through her esophagus and flooded her mouth with stinging bitterness; beads of sweat dotted her forehead and the muscle below her left eye twitched like a caged bird longing for flight.

She held her breath.

Remained perfectly still.

Listening.

Praying.

Maybe it had only been the breeze. A yellowed scrap of newspaper, perhaps. Or a small animal. Dogs and cats were few and far between these days, having been hunted almost to extinction by the same masters who'd once showered them with toys and treats. They were rare, but not entirely unheard of.

Could that be it then? Nothing more than a mangy cur scavenging for carrion?

She took a breath through her nostrils so slowly that it took nearly ten seconds for her lungs to fill. She could smell the musty scent of age within the store, the smoky ghost of the fire that had gutted this place and refused to leave its haunt . . . the sharp bite of dried sweat. If the stench of rotting flesh existed outside the shattered shop window, it was masked by these other odors.

But surely the reek of a rotter would've overpowered them? It had been so hot lately that the sun-bloated corpses who staggered across the landscape traveled in a cloud of fetor so repugnant that even the flies shunned them.

Had she imagined it all? Perhaps she'd slipped into sleep for a fraction of a second and her mind had amplified the sound of the tarp shifting into something much more sinister?

That had to be it. The dead were notoriously noisy, caring not for stealth or cunning. While it was true that they didn't grunt or growl or groan, they were clumsy for the most part and prone to knocking over precariously balanced piles of rubble or kicking old bottles as they shuffled forward. Surely a freshie or rotter would've tripped across the string of tin cans she'd tied between the splintered telephone pole and an old parking meter by now; they weren't smart enough to avoid traps, after all. Not even such primitive early detection systems as her's.

Mere feet away, something thumped against the floorboards of the store and every muscle in her body tensed.

Fight or run? Shit, how many of them are there? Shit, shit, shit . . .

A long, slow creak as the wooden planks flexed beneath the weight of the intruder.

Just one. Has to be. More would be nosier. I can deal with just one. I know I can.

Her hand began crawling across the floor as if of its own accord, its fingertips searching for the cool reassurance of the tire iron.

Two blows. Quick crack to the skull to stun it. Then plunge the business end into the eye socket, go for the brain, use all your strength, all your weight, drive that fucker home.

The muscles in her arms and legs had begun to quiver with a mixture of fear and adrenaline; her heart thudded out a cryptic message in Morse code, and her throat felt as if it had

somehow expanded to allow more air to flow into her lungs.

You can do this, girl. You wake up Mama and Jeremy and they'll be dead before they've even cleared the cobwebs outta their minds. You have to do this.

Her fingers wrapped around the smooth metal of the tire tool and she lifted it from the floor so slowly that it almost seemed as if she suspected it would disintegrate if hoisted too quickly. Though her palms were warm and slick, the weight of the weapon immediately caused her breathing to even out.

Drop that fucker fast and then get the hell outta here . . .

Opening her eyes, she saw a dark shadow against the golden glow of sunrise on the wall. The silhouette was human shaped and grew larger with each beat of her heart. She couldn't lie to herself any longer: they were not alone in this old store and the time had come to walk the tightrope between life and death.

She sprung from the floor with the speed of a striking serpent and vaulted across the counter in a single, fluid move. In her mind, a shrill battle cry trilled through the stillness of the morning and she felt the spirits of a thousand Amazonian warriors raise their spears and shields in solidarity. In reality, however, she was as silent and swift as sudden death; only her eyes reflected the intensity of the rage that boiled within her, the grim determination of a woman who would *not* go gentle into that good night.

The man across from her scrambled backwards as his hands flew up in an open palmed display of surrender; his eyes grew wide beneath his curly bangs and he continued backpedaling as his hoarse voice stammered words so quickly that the syllables all ran together.

“Wait! No! Alive! I'm alive! I'm living, here!”

For a moment, his pleading didn't register in her mind. She continued her assault; the tire tool was raised above her head like the sword of a charging samurai and, like those legendary weapons, seemed to demand a taste of blood before allowing itself to be lowered.

The man's hands shot to the rifle slung over his shoulder and snapped it into firing position as his knees braced himself against the force of the attack.

“Damn it, I'm not one of them!”

His sharp tone cut through the haze of battle and she stopped so suddenly that momentum almost caused her to stumble forward. They stood facing each other for what seemed to be an eternity: she with the tire iron poised and ready to strike, he with the bore of his rifle staring at her like a dark, unblinking eye.

“Please, I don't want to shoot you. But I will. I swear to God, I will.”

“You're . . . you're really alive?”

“No, I'm the smartest damn zombie that ever existed. What the hell do you think? Of course, I'm alive.”

She felt a hand on her shoulder and a familiar voice whispered in her ear.

“It's okay, sweetie . . . “

Jeremy. She'd been so focused on her attack that she hadn't even heard him stir. But it stood to reason that the flurry of activity would've awakened him. Mama, too, most likely.

“Look, folks, I'm here to help. I really am.”

Together, the two of them lowered their respective weapons. She was breathing heavily now, her chest heaving with each breath, and for some reason tears had begun to make the world around her swim in and out of focus. She blinked rapidly, trying to focus on the bearded man in the tattered clothes whom she'd been mere seconds away from killing; but he wavered as if she were viewing him from the other side of a waterfall and the first tear had just begun to leave its warm path down her cheek as he unclipped the walkie talkie from his belt.

“Eden Team, this is Serpent Six, over.”

There was a hiss of static and then his voice again.

“Serpent Six to Eden Team. Come in, Eden Team. Over.”

“Serpent Six this is Eden Team. Over.”

The voice was thin and soft, but it was the voice of someone else like them. Someone left alive in a world ruled by the dead.

“Eden Team, I have three survivors. Two female, one male, none apparently infected. Repeat . . . I have three survivors. Over.”

“Serpent Six, rendezvous at Alpha Base One at oh-nine-hundred hours. Reanimate

activity in sector seven high. Advance with extreme caution. We'll notify The Garden that the mission was successful and we're coming home. Over.”

“Copy that, Eden Team. Serpent Six, out.”

There hadn't been much time for conversation, but she'd learned the man's name was Donnelly and he was apparently nothing more than a small cog in a much larger machine. What the man on the other end of the radio had referred to as The Garden.

The Garden, Donnelly had explained, was a collective that had established a fortified outpost about half a day's walk from their current location. Whereas the dregs of humanity seemed content with cowering in the shadows like frightened animals, The Garden had loftier ambitions. They were going to rebuild society, reclaim the coveted position at the top of the food chain, and re-establish mankind's dominance over the world. The human race, he said, had been decimated and the undead far outnumbered the living. But in the future they envisioned, the tide would be turned. Children would be trained as efficiently as soldiers and once their numbers were great enough they would rise up against the undead in one, final battle. Within fifteen to twenty years, tops, the world would be theirs again and the blight of the living dead would be no more than a chapter in history books yet to be written.

It had sounded so promising: a place where they would be sheltered from the horrors of the outside world, a society that still functioned, that sent out teams to find those still left alive and bring them back . . . no wonder they referred to themselves with terms like *Eden* and *The Garden*. True, their ambitions sounded lofty. But at least they still had goals and plans. At least they could envision a world that consisted of something more than picking at the carcass of civilization like nomadic scavengers. At least they had *hope*.

So they had followed this man, Donnelly. She and Jeremy and Mama had allowed him to guide them through the maze of mangled cars and toppled buildings. They had slipped through the wreckage of the city like ghosts, skirting around enclaves of rotters so skillfully that the dead never realized they were there. For the most part, they progressed in silence; but every so often, when Donnelly decided they were well out of harm's way, they would stop for a quick rest. During this down time, they would whisper to one another and she slowly began to grasp

the full extent of The Garden's plans.

“To beat your enemy,” Donnelly had told them, “you first have to understand him.”

He was part of Eden Team, whose job was to search out those wandering the wastelands who would be able to assist in repopulating the cities of the earth. But there was also a group he referred to as The Tree of Knowledge. Their entire purpose, he said, was to study the undead menace. But not, just the ways in which they could be dispatched. No, The Tree of Knowledge wanted to know everything they could about their adversaries.

“Everyone knows a bite will kill your ass and bring you back. But did you know that any exchange of bodily fluids will do the same damn thing? You kiss someone who's infected, for example, and get even the smallest amount of spit in your mouth and you're done for.”

When he spoke about The Garden and its various projects, his voice raised slightly in pitch and the words came more rapidly. Breathlessly, he told them about the actual gardens where they grew crops, the kitten nurseries with their self-replenishing sources of meat, and the various ways they had of collecting and purifying water; and the entire time, his green eyes shone with the light of the true believer.

His enthusiasm was as contagious as any of the corpses in this God forsaken land. As they pressed on, her mind was filled with images of what The Garden would be like: how she would never have to know the sharp pangs of hunger or the fear of darkness again. Perhaps she and Jeremy would be able to recapture the sort of life that, just hours ago, she was sure they had been robbed of. Only, hopefully, it would be better than she'd ever dreamed.

Her stepfather had never really approved of her boyfriend. He'd said Jeremy was weak and unfocused, that she could do so much better than a guy whose major goal in life was to beat the most current level of whatever video game he was playing. And, on some level, she'd kind of agreed with Denny . . . even though she would never outwardly admit it. She'd silently hoped that someday her boyfriend would tire of being just another telemarketer tethered to his cubical by a headset; maybe he'd start to dream of management or even actually creating the games he loved playing so much. A little time at the gym wouldn't have hurt either . . . even before fresh food had become as rare as gold, Jeremy had been thin and gangly. Kind of like a tall, pubescent

boy really.

But maybe The Garden would have the positive effect on him that had somehow been lacking in their previous lives. Perhaps there he would find something he was so passionate about that his eyes would spark with excitement the way Donnelly's did. He might even decide that he wanted to become part of Eden Team and those thin arms might bulk up with the same sinewy muscle that strained at the sleeves of their guide's t-shirt. Not that she wanted him to be *exactly* like their new-found benefactor; she did love him for who he was, after all. But a little maturity wouldn't hurt . . . would it?

After what seemed like hours of walking, the group finally crested a small hill that overlooked a valley lush with trees and a patchwork of multicolored foliage. The sun was hanging low in the sky but the temperature had already begun to climb which caused her skin to be coated with a sheen of sweat. From this distance she could just make out a stream that snaked its way through the valley below; its waters sparkled as if millions of pixies bobbed on its surface and it was all too easy to imagine how cool that water would be as it lapped against her sunburned skin, how good it would feel as it quenched the dry harshness of her throat . . .

“Wait here.”

Donnelly's command had pulled her thoughts away from the meandering creek and back to the cluster of camouflaged tents clustered just within the grove of trees before them. Three men walked out to meet him, each with a rifle slung over their shoulders by a thin strap. All of the men were similar in build to their guide: muscular, seemingly well-fed and healthy, and obviously selected for Eden Team because of their athletic physique. However the center of attention seemed to be a short bulldog of a man with a neck so thick and brown that it could have passed for the trunk of a small tree. As the others spoke, this man kept shooting glances at the newcomers through his spectacles and something about his gaze had made her feel like an insect beneath a microscope.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot and kept discovering new patches of skin on her arms and face that needed scratched; something about this little man and his cold, hard eyes made her uneasy.

“Must be their leader.” Jeremy said. “Kinda looks like a general, huh?”

She'd nodded in response, maybe uttered some non-committal answer . . . she couldn't be sure. All she knew was that, for reasons she couldn't understand, she now felt as uneasy as if they were standing among a group of ravenous rotters. But that was ridiculous. These people were here to help, right? They were Eden Team. From The Garden.

The group of men disbanded, Donnely disappearing into the woods as the others walked slowly toward them. The one Jeremy had referred to as a general seemed to be smirking slightly and she'd gulped hard, trying to tell herself that it was simply thirst that made her feel as if her airways were constricting.

Maybe if they'd actually said something, she would have felt better. But no. General Bulldog and one of them men stopped several yards away from them and seemed to study the small group with their eyes. At the same time, the other man circled around them and for some reason the image of a pack of dogs came to mind: the way they would circle their prey, cutting off any means of escape before lunging into their attack.

But that was silly. Of course these men would be wary. The world was full of people who saw the apocalypse as a handy excuse to simply do whatever the hell they wanted. Rapists, murderers, thieves: as the number of survivors had decreased, the sins of those left alive had grown exponentially. It made sense that they would be very careful about the people who were brought into their fold.

It was all entirely logical. But logic did little to assuage the nervous tightening in her stomach and even less to silence the voice in the back of her mind which whispered that something just wasn't right.

General Bulldog's eyes studied her for a moment and for some reason she felt the same way she had when she'd walked through the din of catcalls and innuendo of construction workers. Like she was nothing more than a piece of meat, something to be had and discarded.

“Useable. Good hips.”

His voice was gruff and abrupt and somehow sounded as if he were passing judgment on her. She immediately felt herself stiffen as her hands balled into fists; she wanted to spit some

caustic remark back at him, but her mind balked and left her simply standing there with her mouth agape.

The little man's eyes darted to Jeremy and for a moment he almost seemed to wince.

“Weak. Bad stock.”

Then onto Mama.

“Too old.”

A moment of silence before the man spoke again.

“Tree of Life has an adequate number of test subjects. These two are useless.”

It happened with the quickness of a lightning strike. One moment, these two groups of people were simply standing on the hillside staring at one another as a cloud passed across the sun. The next, General Bulldog and his underling had their rifles shouldered as if by magic. Two shots rang out and echoed through the valley below, startling a flock of birds into flight as twin puffs of spent gunpowder filled the morning with their sulfuric odor.

Jeremy and Mama's heads snapped back as a crimson mist seemed to spray in slow motion from the dime-sized holes that had appeared in their foreheads. Their bodies crumpled to the ground, falling atop one another while unblinking eyes stared at the boots of the men who'd killed them.

She'd screamed and turned to run then, spinning around just in time to see the stock of a rifle racing toward her face. A flash of pain, dark spots that had exploded like antimatter fireworks in her field of vision, the sensation of falling backwards . . . and then nothing but darkness.

When she came to, her forehead throbbed as if her heart had taken up residence just above the bridge of her nose. Her entire face ached and she could feel something tacky on her bangs, something that felt like half-dried glue. Reaching up, she winced as her fingertips brushed her wound: streaks of pain radiated from a central point and her head immediately felt as if it had tripled in size; she was nauseous, as if her stomach were on the verge of purging what little food it contained, and she viewed the room she was in as if through a fog. But even so, she realized that the dark stains on her fingers were partially congealed blood.

“Just cooperate.”

The voice was familiar, but not overly so. Where had she heard it before?

“It’ll be easier if you do.”

She turned her head toward the source of the words and it seemed as if it took the world a fraction of a second to catch up with her. But when it did, she saw Donnely. He was on the other side of the door, looking in through the little window with his hands wrapped around the bars. For a moment he became nothing more than a blur before snapping back into sharp focus.

“You should feel honored, really. They don’t select just anyone.”

He seemed to be looking everywhere but directly at her. As if he couldn’t bring himself to meet her gaze.

“Wh . . . where am I?”

Her voice sounded as if it were coming from the end of an infinitely long tunnel and only the stabs of pain that accompanied the movement of her jaws convinced her that it was her own.

“The Garden. You’re safe now.”

Something about his tone sounded almost apologetic. Or as if he were trying to convince himself of his own statement.

She closed her eyes for a second and was suddenly back on the hillside. She saw Jeremy and Mama lying in the grass, their blood mingling in a collective pool below them. Unmoving. Silent. Dead.

Her eyes snapped open and, even though it hurt like hell to do so, her brow furrowed as she glared at the man on the other side of the door.

“You bastard. What the hell have you done? What the fuck”

But then she was sobbing, her back heaving with tears as her fingers pressed against her temples and bubbles of snot erupted from her nostrils.

“I’m . . . I’m sorry. It had to be done. For the good of all. For . . . humanity. See? There’s a greater good. A higher purpose. But for what it’s worth . . . I am sorry.”

That was the last time she’d ever seen Donnely. In the beginning, she’d entertained fantasies of him returning in the middle of the night; dreams of keys rattling in the lock and the

door swinging open to reveal him silhouetted by torchlight , ready to whisk her away from this place and make amends for the evil he'd brought upon her.

But that was so long ago and she now knew he would never return. On some level, he probably did feel bad for his part in what had happened; but she couldn't help but remember the look in his eyes as he'd described the work done here. What she'd rightfully identified as the passion of a true believer. Any guilt that kept him awake at night was undoubtedly overshadowed by the zeal of his belief.

The door to her cell swung open and two men shuffled inside. This morning it was the ones she thought of as Fred and Barney, which meant that Larry and Curly would be making the evening rounds.

Barney glanced down at the clipboard he held in his hands and thumbed through the pages with bored detachment.

“Says here her last period was two weeks ago.”

Fred nodded and propped his sawed-off broomstick against the wall.

“Assume the position, Hips.”

In the beginning, she'd fought. She'd scratched and bit and kicked and ripped out clumps of hair. She'd been beaten until it hurt to take a breath, had been held down and forced to take part in the routine no matter how much she squirmed and writhed. She'd had breakfast and dinner withheld. Even though it was the temperature and consistency of warm puke, it was still food . . . and she'd gotten tired. So tired of the purple and green bruises, of trying to sleep when it felt as though her ribs had been kicked by a wild mule. No matter how hard she fought the result was always the same. Donnely had been right: it was much easier just to cooperate.

And so it was that she closed her eyes, bent over in a wide-legged stance, and gripped her ankles. She imagined that she was back in her little apartment: Lady Gaga was on the radio and Jeremy was bitching about some cock-knocking camper who'd just picked him off three times in a row. Outside, an ice cream truck called to children with its pied piper jingle and the scent of curry drifted from the Singh's apartment next door.

She tried not to let the cold glass of the rectal thermometer shatter the illusion as it invaded her body, tried to convince herself that she was only gritting her teeth because Jeremy had launched into another curse-laden tirade against the sniper who'd become the bane of his existence.

The DJ on the radio was calling for sunny skies with a ten percent chance of precipitation; but then his voice melded with Barney's nasal whine as she felt the thermometer glide out of her most secret of places.

“Congratulations, Hips . . . you're ovulating.”

She heard one of them crossing the room, cursing beneath his breath as he picked up the waste bucket with a slosh.

“Hard to believe someone so pretty can smell so damn bad. Shit.”

She kept her eyes closed as she stood upright, continued envisioning her apartment, the potted plant by the door, the opening notes of *The Entertainer* as her cellphone lit up with Mama's number.

It had been Fred complaining about the bucket. Which meant Barney was currently bringing in the gruel that passed as breakfast. As if on cue, the smell of the meat and vegetable slop overpowered the curry of her dreamworld.

“Eat up, Hips. You're gonna need your energy.”

They both laughed as if they'd heard the joke the DJ had just made about lesbians, potpourri, and open cans of tuna. And then her door creaked shut, there was the click of the lock, footsteps, and the entire scene replaying itself in Scar's cell.

She bit her bottom lip and tried to take a long, slow breath but the air seemed to stick somewhere in the back of her throat.

Ovulation.

She knew what that meant. Within an hour, there would be a stream of men coming through her cell. Each one having his way with her. Each one filling her with millions of tiny swimmers, some of which were destined to trickle down thighs that would soon feel raw and stingy. For the next few days, she would know practically every man in The Garden. Multiple

times. Some would border on brutality with their savage thrusts and the twisting of her nipples; others would behave as if this were simply another chore, no different than cooking the slop or slaughtering the cats which went into it. A select few would be shy and apologetic, each telling her that she had to understand that there was a greater good.

They had to repopulate the world after all. They had to outnumber the dead. To have children who would grow into soldiers. To keep the gene pool as diverse as possible.

Within a few months, her fate would be decided. If their seed didn't take purchase, if her belly didn't begin to balloon out and her monthly flow come to end, then she would be declared barren. She didn't know exactly how it would be done, but the end result would be the same: she would end up on the other side of this cell, in the darkness with the other rotters, just another subject for The Tree of Life to experiment on.

She opened her eyes and saw their hands reaching through the bars of the wall's window. Flaky skin, some deteriorated to the point that strands of muscle could be seen beneath patches that had been eaten away by time. They grabbed and grasped with mindless enthusiasm, seeking purchase that would never come.

But the living *would* come. And come. And come.

To them, she was nothing more than an incubator, just another breeder in a long row of nameless women.

She walked over to the hands, keeping just out of reach and inciting them into a frenzy with her presence.

Those men had killed Jeremy. Had killed Mama.

They'd locked her up and humiliated her on a daily basis.

Raped her countless times all in the name of procreation.

And they'd kill her, too, if she didn't produce a child soon. But what if she did? Nine months of respite? Nine months of being in the maternity wing before being transported back to this dingy cell? Wouldn't it be worse then? Knowing that there was better food, more comfortable quarters with no chance of beatings for fear of damaging the fetus? It would all begin again. The daily inspections. Assuming the position. The monthly violations.

The hands were so close that she could see the little black specks beneath what was left of the fingernails. They clutched at the air, seeming to squeeze invisible stress balls with sheer abandon.

Even now Donnely, and others like him, were probably out there. Scouring the countryside. Searching for fresh stock. For new victims, for more women to defile.

How long would this go on?

“No more.”

Her voice was a soft whisper but was filled with more resolve than the loudest shout. She could still fight back. She could bring the entire Garden crumbling down, could utterly destroy all they'd worked so hard to build. And it would serve the bastards right.

She extended her hand quickly before she had a chance to lose her nerve. Thrusting it into the darkness, through the bars on the little windows, squeezing her eyes shut.

It didn't hurt as badly as she thought it would. The bite was quick and felt no different, really, than the time she'd been nipped by the neighbor's chow as a kid. Wrestling her arm free from the rotter's weak grasp she immediately wrapped the open wound in the hem of her dirty smock and applied pressure. Blood blossomed on the fabric like a rose in a dirty field of snow, but it had been nothing more than a flesh wound. Within fifteen minutes, the blood had clotted and she licked the iron tasting flecks from the tip of her finger. If anyone bothered to ask, she's simply say she'd jabbed a splinter from the door into it. But no one would. She knew this as surely as she knew the contagion was flowing through her veins, poisoning her healthy cells with the infection of the walking dead.

“Bring it on, fuckers!” She shouted so loudly that her vocal cords felt strained with the words. “Bring it fucking on!”

At the same time she heard another voice, this one echoing through the corridors of her mind instead of the hallway with its series of cells and captives: it was the voice of Donnely, culled from her memory.

“Did you know that any exchange of bodily fluids will do the same damn thing? You kiss someone who's infected, for example, and get even the smallest amount of spit in your

mouth and you're done for.”

So let them come. Let the parade of rapists begin. She would spread her legs and would welcome them into her body, would take every single man in the colony if they sent him. She would exchange bodily fluids with each and every one and let them have their way.

She would have her revenge.

From down the hall she heard a door swing open. A male voice doing an off-key rendition of Snoop Dogg's *Sexual Seduction*.

Laying back on her sleeping bag, she closed her eyes and waited for him to enter her cell.

“My name is Alejandra.” she whispered.

“My name is Alejandra”

COMING SOON



The 7 Habits of Highly Infective People

A Novel of Contagion, Drugs, Time
Travel, and the Living Dead
by

WILLIAM TODD ROSE

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**I.
FRESHIES & ROTTERS**

The basic rules of Freshies and Rotters:

1. Half of the players are designated Refugees and represent the living. Refugees can basically do as they please and are bound to no special handicaps.
2. The other half are Rotters. Rotters can only stagger after the refugees and are not allowed to use tools or anything that would denote a higher intelligence. The job of a rotter is to pursue the Refugees through the muddy streets of Free Town and try to catch them.
3. If a Rotter lays a hand on a Refugee, then that player becomes a Freshy. Freshies are allowed to sprint after the remaining Refugees as quickly as they can. However, they can only run for the amount of time it takes to count, out loud, to thirty. After reaching thirty, the Freshy becomes a Rotter and must shamble along with the rest of the undead team.
4. The game continues until the last Refugee has been cornered and changed into a zombie.

I spent God knows how many hours playing this game as a child. And I was good at it, too. Whenever I was on the refugee team, I would always be the last one left alive. So much so

that some of the other kids began demanding that I always start out as a Rotter. I declared it wasn't fair that I should always be undead just because I was good at running; they would argue back that they wanted to know what it felt like to be the last person left alive and that I was ruining the game for them. Sometimes, it would even come to blows and we would scuffle the ways boys will, fighting over something that really doesn't really mean a damn in the larger scheme of things. But to me it was important: I loved that silly little game more than anything else in the world.

I remember the feel of the mud squishing through my bare toes, the smells of shit and piss and boiling roots that wafted from the shanties and lean-tos, the constant coughing and hacking as dark smoke curled from barrels aglow with crackling flames. Free Town was the only world I'd ever known and I was enamored with every soot stained nook and cranny of it. Some of the kids would lean against the wall that encircled our little city and press their ears so tightly against the bricks that they would leave bloody pucker marks when they finally pulled their heads away again; they would try to listen for the world beyond the wall, for the scratching of the corpses we knew were just on the other side. Tommy Ballister used to stand like that and daydream about exploring the wilderness beyond our home, of hacking his way through the undead horde and discovering cities hidden in the undergrowth of forest; and Sarah Thompson would be right there with him because, as she so often reminded us, her Grandpa had taught her everything she'd ever need to know about surviving in the outside world. They wanted to be adventurers, to find the artifacts and relics of a world we had never known. A world some of us doubted had ever really existed. But me? I was happy with my family's tent, with the mouth-watering aroma of roasted rat on Sundays, with life inside the wall. The other world held no interest for me: let me do my chores, let my mother teach me to read and write, let me play Freshies and Rotters until it was time to bed down for the night. I was perfectly content.

Though it was never put to us in this manner, I can now see that Freshies and Rotters was basically a parable game. And the lesson it taught was the lesson of life outside the wall: in the end, you can't win. Everyone becomes a freshy or rotter sooner or later; the undead team will just keep coming after you until there's no refugees left.

Maybe if someone had explained it to us like that things would have turned out differently. Perhaps there would have been more fear of what waited out there in the dark. Or maybe it wouldn't have made any difference what-so-ever. Maybe we would've thought it was just another made-up story to scare little kids like the Boogeyman or Charlie Manson. But at least we would have had the facts. At least we would have *known*.

II. RETURN TO INNOCENCE

Sometimes, I awake in the darkness with tears still warming my face. I listen to the chirping of insects in the underbrush, to the distant call of an owl who sounds so forlorn and alone that he could very well be the last of his species. I awake with the feeling that something inside me, part of my soul perhaps, has collapsed like a sinkhole during my sleep, leaving nothing more than a dark, empty pit.

I curl into the smallest ball possible, pull my knees practically up to my chin, and wrap my arms around my legs. I try to tell myself that it's only to help trap my body heat, to ward off the damp air that seeps into my flesh with a chill that penetrates the very marrow of my bone. But I know better.

For some reason, laying like this makes me feel less exposed, less vulnerable. It doesn't matter if I'm in some old structure with wood that smells of mildew or some cramped cave with its army of gnats and mosquitoes. I can never make myself tiny enough to escape from myself. So I lay there and cry, all the while listening to each snap of a twig, each rustle of undergrowth, to ensure my soft sobs haven't garnered unwanted attention.

The dream is always the same. I am small. So small that people tower above me like gods, their faces shining down benevolence and love but far too distant to ever touch. I'm with my mom and dad and they are on either side, each with one of my little hands entirely folded into one of their own. Above us are monstrous buildings of steel and glass; they gleam in the

sunlight like the swords of angels and cast long shadows over the throngs of people who pass below.

And there are so many people, more than I ever thought possible. Men and women and children of all ages, all packed together shoulder to shoulder, some smiling, some talking into these weird little boxes they press against their ears. No one is running. No one screams or looks frightened in the least bit. They simply walk by, well-fed and clean, as if they are the only ones who exist. As if a crowd of rotters could be sidling right up beside them and they would never know.

In the dream I can feel a flutter of excitement so strong that it almost makes me nauseous. My parents and I are going to something called dizzy knee on ice and I am jabbering on and on about seeing the giant mouse and the duck who gets so mad you can't understand what he's saying. My parents laugh and squeeze my hands softly as they look at one another with a smile.

It's one of those dreams that feels like a memory and maybe that's why I always wake up crying afterward. But I know how absurd this is. For one, ducks can't talk. Plain and simple. And mice don't grow to the size of the one we were going to see. But there's this small part of me that feels this tugging: like there's these little strings attached to my heart. And I want so badly to be pulled back into that surreal landscape of my dreams. To be in that place and never have to wake up from it.

I've thought about this a lot. Which really shouldn't be any surprise. Other than scavenging for food and water and hiding in the shadows, there's not much to do out here. I just try to stay alive and my mind turns over the dream again and again, picking it apart piece by piece.

I think what I'm really missing is Free Town and those huge buildings represent the security and safety I felt behind its walls. My parents and all the other residents, obviously, are still there in their little tents and shacks so that explains their presence and all the other people in the dream as well. As far as I can tell, the mouse and duck are just odd little things my mind threw in for reasons I'll never be able to comprehend. But I definitely know why I'm so

small . . . I want to return to the innocence of my childhood, to a time when my biggest concern was whether I would be a refugee or a rotter. I want this emptiness in my stomach to be filled with the greasy warmth of possum and to be explaining the rules of Freshies and Rotters to some kid who's just now old enough to learn how to play.

The rules were simple. But everything is when you're a child. And that's what I want to return to: a time of simplicity and ease. A time when I didn't have to worry about where my next meal would come from or whether or not I would live to see the sun rise on another day.

Damn that Tommy Ballister. This is all his fucking fault. *He* may have wanted this, but not me. Not in a million years. All I ever wanted was Free Town. But I'll never be able to feel its cool mud on my feet again and because of that, if for nothing else, I 'm glad that Tommy's dead. Looking back, I only wish I would've killed him myself.

III.

GANGS OF FREETOWN

I had grown too old for Freshies and Rotters. At fourteen, I was nearly a man; within the next couple of years, I would be expected to move out of my parent's tent and make my own way in Free Town. I would provide my own food, make sure the Emperor got his required share, and go about the business of being an adult. The problem was, I wasn't quite ready for all of that responsibility. While I'd cast aside the games and toys of childhood, I needed something to take its place. Something that would exist as a buffer between the innocence of youth and the obligations of maturity. Which is where the gangs came in.

There were three major gangs within the confines of Free Town, each comprised of approximately eight teenage boys at any given time: *Los Muertos*, *The Rotter Nation*, and *The Free Town Freshies*. Los Muertos had way too many rules for my tastes: they dictated everything from what you could wear to who you were allowed to speak with . . . if I wanted to subject myself to that kind of control, then I'd just stay at the tent all day while my mom and dad

barked orders at me; it was also generally agreed that The Free Town Freshies were a bunch of pansies and posers. So by default, the gang I really wanted to belong to was The Rotter Nation.

For some reason, the boys in The Nation seemed so much cooler than anyone else I knew. They all had this swagger in the way they walked, as if they were the true emperors of Free Town, and they could nick apples from someone's basket without that person even realizing what they were up to. Which is saying a lot; the gangs are generally distrusted and people tend to keep their food close to their bosom, as my mother used to say. But somehow they pulled it off, time and time again, while members of the other gangs were routinely brought before the Emperor for punishment.

As it turned out, Tommy Ballister also wanted to join The Rotter Nation. We'd never spent much time together as kids: I was too busy playing Freshies and Rotters while he was pretending his stick was a machete and the hulks of twisted metal littering Free Town where zombies needing dispatched. But we knew each other enough to throw back our heads at one another as we passed and knew quite a few people, like Sarah Thompson, in common.

Sarah, though, wasn't doing so well. The fever had set in a few weeks back and her condition had gradually declined with each passing day. Which, secretly, caused me to whisper prayers for her when no one was listening. See, I'd developed something of a crush on her: every time she'd look at me with those big green eyes, I'd feel this little quiver in my stomach and I wouldn't know whether to throw up or just keep grinning until my face cracked. I'd lay on my bedroll at night, long after my mom and dad were both snoring loud enough to call the dead, and picture her long dark hair and the little smattering of freckles across her nose. I'd think of those thin lips, the swells of breasts that rounded the front of her shirt . . .

But I was much too worried about how I would look in front of the other guys to admit this. They all thought she was kind of weird because she'd picked up this odd little habit after her baby brother had died. At least once a day, she would walk to the walls of Free Town and place her hands against them. She would stand there and talk to the Rotters on the other side. She'd tell them little details about her morning . . . what she had for breakfast, how her mother was teaching her to sew, that sort of thing. And even though she couldn't see the corpses she was

talking to, she gave them names: *I don't know, Robert, but I think Anna might not be as good of a friend as I thought . . . I hope you're well today, Shirley, or at least as well as possible seeing as how you're dead and all.*

The other kids called her a zombie lover and would laugh and point as she passed. The boys would find dead mice to throw at her and the girls would hold her down in the mud while long strands of spit slowly descended towards her face. She was ridiculed, mocked, beaten up, and threatened at every turn; but day after day she persisted in making her pilgrimage to the wall and talking with the dead.

When I would string together my elaborate fantasies in the dark of night, they almost always began the same way: a bunch of other kids had her surrounded and they were pushing her from one person to the next as they spat their derision in words carefully chosen to inflict maximum emotional damage. Tears streamed from her eyes and she yelled for help until her voice cracked but this just seemed to incite the kids even further and the jeers got more vicious, more personal. But then I showed up and pushed my way through the crowd; my voice boomed above their mocking chants and they all immediately lowered their eyes in shame as I scooped the trembling Sara into my arms and whispered *everything will be alright, now. I'm here . . .*

In real life, however, it was an entirely different story. Even though it left me feeling like I needed to somehow clean myself from the inside out, I was right there in the crowd. My voice might not have been the loudest and my comments may not have been the most biting, but other people were watching. I had to say something . . . even if it was only to call her a dirty zombie lover.

Of course it didn't help matters any that her cousin, Carlos Thompson, was usually the one responsible for the attack in the first place. He seethed with hatred for his cousin and made no attempt at hiding it from anyone other than their family. When he looked at her, his face had this expression that seemed to encompass anger, shame, and disgust all at the same time. Spitfire would fly from his snarled lips as he hurled insults at her and if she began to cry or tried to run away, his eyes would spark with cruel amusement as he doubled his efforts.

He was a real piece of work, that Carlos. He'd been before the Emperor so many times

that his body was still covered with bruises from his last punishment. The usual food rations and ever increasing amounts of time in the solitary hole never seemed to have much of an effect on 'ole Carlos. So when he killed the Henderson's prize kitten and tainted the meat by making sure that all the internal organs had ruptured, it was obvious more drastic measures were needed.

The entire Henderson family were given these long wooden dowels and Carlos had to kneel naked before them as they struck him over and over as hard as they could. The Emperor had decreed that the beating should continue for as long as the Hendersons had strength left in their arms; when all was said and done, Carlos had to be carried back to his tent and had been laid up in bed for nearly three days. His mother and aunt had stirred up quite a fuss, claiming that the evidence was all circumstantial and that everyone was just out to get their family for some reason I never quite understood.

But Carlos wore those bruises like badges of honor, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt so that everyone could clearly see the blue and green splotches covering his arms. He bragged how the entire time he'd never screamed and begged for mercy . . . how he'd just knelt there and took his punishment like a man.

Whether or not that was true was anyone's guess. The entire scene had played out within the confines of the Emperor's doublewide trailer and it was strictly forbidden for anyone to come close enough to his palace to have witnessed anything. But Carlos *was* one tough son of a bitch; and, as the de facto leader of The Rotter Nation, it was easy to imagine him kneeling there with an expression of grim determination as the dowels whacked his flesh again and again.

Sometimes, I think that maybe that's why he hated Sarah with such fervor. Being related to her might have caused others to wonder if it was something in the blood; if perhaps he, too, was somehow tinged by the same madness that gripped his younger cousin. Could he also be considered a zombie lover by default? If so, how would this effect his standing within the gang? Perhaps some young upstart might see his relationship to Sarah as a sign of weakness and lay challenge to his role as leader; all it would take was a few whispered conversations, several well-rehearsed lies, and a gaggle of gossip.

Or maybe he was just a cruel and sadistic mother fucker who didn't have a cell of

compassion within his entire body. The truth is, I'll never really know for sure. All I know is that during that point in my life, I worshiped this man like a god. Anytime I'd filch a bit of food from some other resident of Free Town, I'd always ensure that he got a fair share of the booty. As if he were the emperor and I a humble supplicant showing gratitude for his protection and mercy. Sometimes, but only when Carlos was in clear view, I would pick out a member of the Free Town Freshies and start a bit of trouble. The scenario I played into was always the same; some imagined disrespect the other boy had shown me, some little slight I'd dreamed up the night before. And I would beat that kid into the ground, would pummel him until his face was nothing more than a bloody mess and all the fire had gone out of his eyes.

But the entire time, I was keeping watch out of my peripheral vision. Watching Carlos and that little grin of approval that would spread across his face

IV.

HISTORY & LORE

My parents told me once that when the world was still alive, Free Town had been what used to be called a junk yard. They said it was a place that people had taken their trash and rubbish to, all the garbage leftover from their day to day existence. They also claimed that the emperor hadn't built the walls that surrounded our little city. These had existed long before the world knew what a freshy or rotter was; the emperor, they claimed, simply saw the possibilities that the enclosure offered and began the task of transforming this place of refuse into a refuge. The earliest residents had helped him clear away most of the wrecked cars that littered what would become Free Town; they'd drug them outside the wall and surrounded the city with these rusty hulks of metal as a kind of additional barricade against the dead.

However, the zombies, it turned out, were far more persistent than anyone had ever dreamed. They came clamoring through the doorless shells of trucks, squirmed between the tight passages of this metal labyrinth, and slowly made their way to the outer wall. Drawn by

the sounds of life like ants to a crust of bread, they clustered together and clawed at the bricks, scrambled over one another as they searched for even the smallest weakness in our defenses.

So a new plan had to be put into place. I have vague memories from when I was very small of hammering and pounding as the residents of Free Town constructed a series of platforms that rose almost to the very top of our great wall. These structures looked rickety with their planks jutting off at odd angles and the rungs of ladders being nailed in at irregular intervals; but they were surprisingly sturdy. As we would come to learn, they were actually capable of supporting the combined weight of every person in Free Town without so much as even a creak or groan.

Once the platforms had been constructed, a group of men had been sent outside the wall with picks and shovels. Their first order of business had been to kill the rotters who'd surrounded our little enclave like an invading army. I don't know how many widows were made in this undertaking or how long that battle outside raged on . . . I was, after all, just a small child and barely understood the events that were unfolding around me. History, however, has taught me that the mission was a success and that these men quickly set to their primary objective.

In a spot that was mostly free of wrecked vehicles, they dug out a long trench that hugged the base of the wall like an earthen shadow. Somehow, they also managed to bore a hole through the bricks just large enough to insert a metal pipe. The pipe juttied out of the wall at a forty-five degree angle and connected the safety of our life within Free Town to the savage wilderness outside.

And that, my parents said, was how The Day of Burning came to be.

V.

THE DAY OF BURNING

All of Free Town was buzzing with the babble of excited conversations, the clanging of

pots and pans, and the squeal of laughing children as they zig-zagged through town. And the scents . . . good God, the scents. Deep fried hawk mingled with the spicy aroma of batter dipped rabbit and the smell of those little wild onions that grow down by the south side of the wall was sweet and pungent, permeating the tents and shacks like the promise of heaven. Mushrooms, crispy crickets, rhubarb pie baking in rusty ovens whose sides had become blackened from the fires that crackled underneath: every household was preparing their finest dish in the hopes that the Emperor would bestow upon them the coveted title of Best in Show.

Tattered streamers had been strung between the structures of our city and the multicolored triangles and squares flapped in the breeze as if they were applauding the collective efforts of the residents. Some of the banners sparkled with large, block letters that formed words I didn't understand: *SALE!*, *Clearance*, and *Grand Opening*. But these strange phrases really weren't the point; no, the point was that a collective madness had seized the residents of Free Town and brought smiles to faces that otherwise were locked into deeply creased frowns and tight-lipped expressions of disapproval.

Two Finger Freddy had set himself up on the back of a flatbed truck and the strumming of his battered guitar was soft and haunting as Sadie Hoffman sang cryptic lyrics. Something about imaging there was no heaven or hell. Not normally my thing, but I, too, had been swept up in the whirlwind of cheer that made eyes sparkle like jewels in the sunlight.

I was lounging in the shade of what the older folks called *a refrigerator* with my eyes closed, breathing in the smells as my stomach gurgled, and listening to the music drift through the wordless drone of a dozen overlapping conversations. By the time the sun had begun its descent in the sky, the real festivities would have started: people dancing in the brightly colored costumes exclusively reserved for The Day of Burning, wrestling matches where grown men squirmed in mud in the hopes of claiming the wild pig that had been snared from the wilderness following the last Day of Burning and allowed to grow fat and round. Maybe I'd try for that pig, I thought to myself, bring it home and let my mother prepare it however she liked . . .

“Smitty.”

I opened my eyes and squinted at the boy who stood before me, shading my eyes with a

cupped hand.

“S'up, Ballister?”

Tommy Ballister squatted down and began picking small pebbles from the ground as he cocked his head first to the left, and then to the right.

“You hear? The Emperor picked the Thompsons to be the Fire Bringers this time.”

He spat a glob of spit into the dirt and rattled his collection of small rocks in his hand as he looked up at me.

“Yeah, Skinny Tyrell said somethin' about it earlier. He was pissed 'cause his family has never been picked and this is the second time for the Thompsons.”

Tommy leaned in so close that I could smell the rankness of his breath as he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. He glanced over both shoulders before dropping his voice to a whisper.

“I bet old lady Thompson is sucking his cock.”

“Whose? Skinny's?”

Tommy laughed and shook his head as if he'd just seen a trained mouse perform an elaborate trick.

“Fuck no, rotter brain . . . the Emperor.”

I turned this over in my mind and tried to imagine Mrs. Thompson with her head bent over the Emperor's lap. This time, it was my turn to laugh.

“No way, Ballister. He probably just feels sorry for them. Because of Sarah and everything.”

“Shit, man, who wouldn't feel sorry for them? Having that little zombie lover for a daughter? Probably why she's so sick . . . done caught the walking death from her little *friends*. I bet she'd suck off one of the bastards if she had the chance. Probably even go all the way with the stinkin' sons of bitches.”

I felt my left hand clench and imagined how it would feel to drive that fist right into Tommy Ballister's nose: the sharp crack of bone, the squish of blood and mucus, the surprise and pain in his murky eyes. But, instead, I simply glanced over at the flatbed where Freddy and

Sadie had now launched into a duet about islands in a stream. What the hell did that even mean, any way?

“I'm thinkin' about going for the pig.” I said, changing the subject. “I think I could probably take just about anyone who”

“No, you're not.”

Tommy had begun chucking the little pebbles in his hand at the flatbed and they pinged off the metal at erratic intervals.

“Oh yeah, asshole? And why's that?”

He had no clue exactly how close he was to getting the beating of his life. Every frustration, every time I'd ever caved and spat insults at Sarah, every iota of pent up anger would be taken out on his freckled, little face and it would take all of the Emperor's guards to pull me away.

“Because, “ he said with a smile, “I been talkin' to Carlos. We're in, man. We're fuckin' *in!*”

I sat up so quickly that a wave of dizziness overtook me and my anger dissipated like fog in the morning sun.

“The Nation? Don't shit me, man. I swear to God if you're”

“I wouldn't pull your leg, Smitty. Not about somethin' like this.”

Inside, I felt like turning somersaults all the way to the Thompson's home, scooping Sarah's fevered body to mine, and planting a kiss on those dry, chapped lips of hers. I wanted to laugh and dance, to jump up on the stage with Freddy and Sadie and lend my voice to their pathetic song.

“Fuck, man. Fuck”

Tommy was grinning like a toddler eating rat as a smile devoured the lower half of his face, revealing rows of crooked teeth marred with dark cavities. He tossed his last pebble and it thudded against Freddy's guitar, distracting the man just long enough to elicit a jangled chord that otherwise would have rang out like the tolling of a bell.

“Yeah, I'm sayin'. Carlos says we just gotta pass initiation and then we're full fledged

members. You and me, my man . . . The Rotter Nation, all the way!”

“What we gotta do?”

“ I dunno. Somethin' he called *skinning the freshy*. Whatever the fuck that is. Doesn't matter anyway, fuckwad. The point is, we're fuckin' in, man!”

VI.

THE ANTICIPATION OF THINGS TO COME

The rest of the day passed in a blur. I hung around the judging table as the Emperor tasted each dish before him, nodding his approval for some and simply shaking his head at others. I watched the sun slowly make its arc across the sky, wishing there was some way I could help it on its way, that I could push it closer and closer to the horizon. I half-watched the wrestling but the cheers of the crowd sounded as if they were miles away and my mind kept turning a single phrase over and over, trying to decipher its hidden meaning.

Skinning the Freshy.

I couldn't even begin to fathom what secrets were cloaked in those three words. Would it require strength? Agility? Cunning?

Skinning the Freshy . . .

Or maybe it was just some sort of ritual that was completed; I'd heard rumors that Los Muertos required their new initiates to slice their thumbs with a special knife that was kept in a velvet lined box and used exclusively for this particular rite. Supposedly, each member of the gang also did this and then allowed their blood to drip into a cup shaped like a human skull. When they'd collected enough, the new members would make some sort of solemn pledge and then drink for the crimson stained cup until not even the smallest drop remained.

Skinning the Freshy.

Was it something like that then? Nothing more than some silly little ceremony and an oath of allegiance? No, that didn't seem like The Nation's style. They were the toughest of the

tough, the most daring gang to walk the streets of Free Town. I was sure that gaining entrance into their club would require something more extreme. Something that would actually demonstrate the loyalty a new member could otherwise simply mouth.

All I knew for certain was that Tommy and I were supposed to meet Carlos by the dump truck once darkness had fallen. Everyone else would be on the platforms, listening to the Emperor's speech as the dead below attempted to scramble up the side of the wall. The corpses would be clustered in the trench that had been dug so long ago and, at the appointed time, one of the royal guard would tilt the red, plastic can into the end of the pipe that ran through the wall. A smell unlike any other in Free Town would waft from the end of the pipe as liquid gurgled through its passageway and fumes wavered in the air above its opening. The Thompsons would then bring the ceremonial torch and light it with one of the matches reserved especially for the celebration.

From past experience, I knew there would be a great whoosh and a mushroom of flame would rise from the end of the pipe, bathing the Fire Bringers in a reddish-orange glow. At the same time, the fire would race along the inside of the pipe, burning the sharp smelling liquid that had been poured into it, and emerging from the other side like a river of flames. The fire would quickly engulf the rotters below and the night would be filled with the crackling and hissing of sun-dried flesh as the crowd above let out a deafening cheer.

But, for the first time in my life, I wouldn't be there to help rain down sticks and wood upon the fiery zombies who still tried to scale our defenses; I wouldn't breathe in the stench of burning bodies and laugh as what was left of their brains boiled away into a thick sludge that oozed from every orifice in their heads. I wouldn't see their crispy forms drop, one by one, into the trench, robbed of whatever strange magic had kept the alive even after death.

No, I would be taking the first steps to becoming a member of The Rotter Nation. I would be proving my worth.

I would be skinning the freshy.

And I couldn't wait.

VII. THE INITIATION

Carlos led Tommy and I through the deserted streets of Free Town at a quick pace and we scrambled to keep up with him. Even though the rest of the population were gathered along the platforms on the outskirts of town and we were cutting through the very center, we still spoke in hushed tones.

“You guys want to have an alibi at the ready.” Carlos instructed. “People'll want to know why you weren't at the burning and ya gotta tell 'em something. And ya gotta keep your stories straight, dig?”

“What about you? What's your cover, Carlos?”

Carlos glanced back over his shoulder and flashed a toothy smile in the moonlight.

“Oh man, I got it made. My aunt and uncle? They were picked to be the Fire Bringers, right? Only with that little bitch bein' so sick they were worried 'bout leaving her all by herself. Afraid she might do us all a favor and up 'n die while they were away or something.”

Carlos' voice almost cracked with delight as the words spilled out of his mouth.

“So I says *hey Auntie Juanita, no sweat . . . I got you covered, man. You guys go to the Burning and I'll keep a close eye on Sarah for ya.*”

Tommy giggled like a little girl and slapped his hand against the side of his leg.

“Oh, man . . . and they bought that shit?”

“You bet your sweet ass they did. 'Course they tried t' play it off like it was too much t' ask, ya know? But I could tell by th' look in their eyes that they're just as sick of bein' 'round that little cunt as me.

I felt as if my soul were tied to the center of the rope in a cosmic game of tug-of-war. I thought of Sarah: the soft contours of her cheeks and chin, her long wispy hair blowing in the breeze as she smiled and cast her gaze toward her feet. I thought of her and wanted nothing more than to speak up, to tell Carlos and Tommy that they had it all wrong with her. She was

good and sweet and funny and if they lost their baby brother they'd probably be a little wiggled out, too. She wasn't all that bad . . . in fact, she was the closest thing to perfection this town had to offer.

I cleared my throat, feeling the need to say something but also like my neck was being squeezed by an infinitely strong hand. Carlos and Tommy turned to look at me with arched eyebrows and the older boy shrugged as if to say, "What gives?"

"Dirty fuckin' zombie lover."

The moment the words crossed my lips, I felt as if an invisible rotter had devoured everything within me that was ever worth a damn and left only a hollow shell in its place.

"Damn straight, brother. Ain't no room in The Rotter Nation for zombie lovers. You're gonna fit right in. Living Power all the way, baby."

The next few moments were spent in silence. As we walked, we could hear the Emperor's voice delivering his address; but the celebration was so distant that it sounded as if the words were reaching us through the corridors of time. Finally, we stood before the flaps of a familiar tent and I felt the contents of my stomach churn as I bit my bottom lip.

Carlos had turned to face us and his pock-marked skin almost seemed to glow in the soft light of the moon. He was smiling as if the greatest surprise in the world lay just on the other side of that mud-stained canvass.

"What . . . what are we doing here?"

In the distance, the crowd roared amid thunderous applause. The Emperor, then, had concluded his speech and The Burning was about to commence. And, at that moment, I wanted to be there on the platforms; I wanted to be wedged shoulder to shoulder with my mom and dad, all of our neighbors, to be just another face in the throngs of people peering over the edge of the wall.

Carlos' grin widened and his eyes seemed to twinkle with mischief.

"You boys ready to skin the freshy?"

Tommy and I were so quiet that you could have heard the sweat drip from my armpits. I wanted to turn and run, to forsake the Rotter Nation and all they stood for; I wished for an

antique firearm or a heavy wooden club, anything that would bolster my strength and confidence. But in the end, I simply shuffled inside as Carlos threw back the flap and swept his free arm in a beckoning motion.

A few lanterns flickered inside the tent and caused shadows to dance across the walls like demons celebrating the return of their master. A threadbare carpet with interlocking shapes was spread across the floor beside a pile of books and personal effects were strewn about almost haphazardly: mounds of clothing, cooking utensils, a smattering of faded photographs propped against rocks and bricks and metal shelving that seemed to defy gravity with its bent frame.

In a way, I felt as if I had somehow stepped inside one of those old photos. Like I was hovering somewhere just outside the camera's scope, looking on at the scene before me; not a participant but a casual observer, distanced and aloof.

Sarah was tied to an old bed like someone who was about to be drawn and quartered. Her arms and legs were splayed out wide, the ropes digging so deeply into her wrists and ankles that the surrounding skin seemed to overlap the tight cords. She struggled against the restraints, writhing and pulling as if she could somehow rip the bedposts from the frame. Lying in the floor was a white nightgown that looked as if it had been ripped and shredded by some wild animal.

Tears had begun to sting my eyes and I felt cold inside, so cold that I doubted if I could ever know the warmth of the sun again. I tried to speak, to say something, to say *anything*; but that powerful hand now gripped me so tightly that I began to swoon from lack of air.

Sarah's skin was pale . . . so damn pale. Her bare midriff, the curves of the breasts I had so often dreamed of seeing and touching and tasting . . .

But not like this, good Lord, not like this, not like this

Not a single goosebump or dimple to mar its alabaster surface. Just a thin network of bluish veins spreading like roots just beneath the surface of her flesh.

Her head was wrapped in some kind of clear plastic so tightly that her eyes and mouth formed small dips.

Her eyes, sweet Jesus, her beautiful eyes

Any glow which had once taken residence there had now fled, leaving only two lusterless

orbs which tracked Carlos' movements through the room. Through the plastic wrap, I could barely make out these little black specks that seemed to somehow float in the whites of her eyes.

No, no, no

Carlos ripped the plastic away from her face and she immediately tried to lunge forward, her teeth clacking like stones as she gnashed at the air. She seemed more animal than human. Not at all like the girl I'd fantasized of taking into my arms, of nuzzling and kissing and caressing.

"Time to skin the freshy, boys."

It was the voice of the devil, dripping poison with each syllable.

"I don't . . . I . . ."

A scowl passed over Carlos' face and his eyes narrowed into mere slits.

"Look here, you little pussies, you wanna be in The Nation or not? We got fifteen minutes tops before I gotta put on my little production, turn on the waterworks, and tell everyone how poor little Sarah went quietly in her sleep and how I had to take care of her when she reanimated."

"We don't know what to do." Tommy stammered. "You tell us what you want and consider it done, Carlos. Ain't that right, Smitty?"

Carlos laughed and I felt a shiver race along my spine.

"Do I gotta spell it out for you rotter brains? Take off your fuckin' clothes and do this zombie bitch. You shoot your load without getting' bit and you're in."

I watched the thing that had once been Sarah as her jaws continued to snap at the air, as she twisted and turned and arched her back to the point I was sure we'd hear her spinal cord snap like a dry twig. Where had the goodness gone? Where was the shy smile, the fluttering of eyelashes, and the embarrassed flush in her cheeks?

My legs had begun to tremble and I felt as if a million needles were jabbing into my skull. I had to look away, to focus on something else, anything other than this snared, naked creature.

For some reason, it was a box of matches that caught my attention. It was a nice wooden

box with little jewels embedded around the strip of sandpaper on it's side. Such a pretty little box, such

“What the fuck, Smitty?”

I turned to look at Tommy. His clothes were in a pile by his feet and for a moment I was confused: why was he naked? Why was he showing me his private parts and looking like he expected something from me? What the hell was going on?

“Don't you fuck this up for me, man. Take off your damn clothes!”

I stood there and blinked like a frightened animal as I struggled to make sense of everything that was happening. Sarah was . . . *dead*? And they wanted me to . . . to

“Shit, Smitty, don't tell me you're a fucking zombie lover, too?”

Tommy's words cut through the haze that my thoughts had struggled to force their way through.. I pictured a future where I was ringed by taunting boys, where spittle rained down on me like a thunderstorm; I would be ganged up on, beaten within an inch of my life, and left lying in the mud with only my bloody tears to keep me company. Los Meurtos, The Free Town Freshies, The Rotter Nation . . . they would all rally around a common enemy, would take turns degrading me in ways I couldn't begin to imagine. My life would become a hell on earth. Like poor Sarah's had

“Fuck this! I'll stick it in. I'm no pussy.”

Tommy stormed forward but Carlos blocked the way, holding his hands on his hips like some mythic sentinel to the gates of Hell.

“Uh-uh. Your friend's gotta go first. Otherwise neither one of ya are getting' in.”

Tommy spun around and if his eyes had been weapons I would've been a rotter by now. Every inch of his face was twisted by rage and it somehow seemed to draw his features out, to make them longer and sharper.

“Smitty, you son of a bitch, *take off your damn clothes!*”

I looked from Tommy to the thing tied to the bed.. Sarah Thompson. The only girl in this entire town who'd ever caught my eye. Gone forever.

“Why, you no good, zombie lovin' piece of shit!”

I couldn't do it.

I couldn't live out the rest of my days being the object of ridicule, being mercilessly pursued and baited, shunned by the very people I'd once called friends. I just couldn't.

I felt as if I were moving through a thick sludge as my pants and underwear slid down around my ankles. I stepped out of them as I peeled my shirt off, grateful for that brief second when the cloth blocked the horror of my situation from view. My cheeks and chest felt warm enough to cook a bird's egg, but I knew this embarrassment was nothing compared to what lay in store if I didn't go through with this.

“My man! I knew you weren't no zombie lover! I *fucking* knew it!”

It took an eternity to cross that room. I didn't want to look at the creature on the bed, wanted to close my eyes and wish it all away; but, somehow, I found that I couldn't take my eyes off her. Not in the same way as before, though. When she'd been living, Sarah was like this beautiful butterfly the flittered by; a butterfly so rare and exotic that no one else was privileged enough to witness its graceful dance through the air. But there was no beauty here . . . not anymore. Now there was only the viscous snap of teeth as she chewed at the air . . . unblinking eyes that locked onto mine with pupils so round that the irises seemed to be mere outlines.

I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry . . .

I placed my hands on either side of the bed and pulled myself into position.

I had to do this.

I had to be part of The Rotter Nation.

There was no other choice now.

I closed my eyes and tried to will away that shaking in my arms and legs. Just do it. Do it and get it over with.

At that moment, I heard a sound unlike any I'd ever heard before. It was a shrill scream that sounded as if a bobcat had mated with a human. So loud that my eardrums quivered in pain and my eyes watered; it was the sound of rage and anguish and shock and every other emotion that can tear a person down all rolled into a single, undulating screech.

VIII.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

As it turned out, that ornate matchbox I'd focused so much of my attention on had been our undoing. After the Emperor had finished his speech, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson had solemnly carried the ceremonial torch to the end of the pipe with all of the reverence it deserved. The crowd had waited in hushed anticipation for the spark that would culminate the day's festivities. But it was a spark that would never come.

See, the Thompsons were exhausted . They'd spent weeks caring for their sick daughter, waking up at all hours of the night when she'd cry out in fevered delirium, sitting by her side with cool rags and whispered lullabies; so it was understandable how they that might forget the all-important matches back at their tent. It was also understandable that Mrs. Thompson would go running through the streets of Free Town as quickly as her feet would carry her. She had to retrieve them, after all, had to make the ritual complete.

Mrs. Thompson's screams had echoed through the town like the cry of a banshee before being abruptly cut off. Other residents quickly arrived to find Carlos straddling his aunt's limp body, her throat squeezed between his hands as if he meant to pop her head open. But they'd responded too fast to those initial screams; when they tackled the leader of The Rotter Nation, Mrs. Thompson gasped for air and coughed as she scrambled into a far corner of the tent.

And, of course, she'd told them what she'd witnessed. Tommy. Me. Naked. Preparing to . . . to . . . She broke down then, collapsed in a huddle of tears; but even the most unimaginative person in Free Town was able to piece together the rest of the story.

The zombie that had once been Sarah . . . tied to the bed, legs spread wide. The way I couldn't meet their stares and could only gaze at my own feet as tears silently streamed down my face. Tommy hollering over and over that he didn't want to do it, that me and Carlos had forced him, that he'd tried to stop us.

The next day the three of us were tethered together like the little flags that still dangled from streamers throughout the town. Carlos led the way, his hands bound, a rope tightly cinched around his waist, and tied at the back, this same rope encircled me as well, and then trailed off to Tommy, who brought up the rear.

We were paraded through the center of town and citizens on either side spat at us as we passed, their warm, thick spittle sliding down my cheeks and soaking into the collar of my shirt. Others hurled stones that bounced off our ribs and foreheads, leaving angry welts and thick blood in their wake.

Murderers!

Bastards!

Kill 'em! Kill the dirty . . .

At one point, I saw my father in the crowd. He was holding my mother close to him, as if his arms were the only things that kept her from collapsing into the dirt; both had aged twenty years overnight, their faces pained and wrinkled and tired, oh so very tired . . .

I tried to mouth *I'm sorry* as I passed; but in unison, they both turned away, leaving me with only the sight of their backs to serve as the final memory of my parents.

We were led to the age of town, to the platform where the Burning should have taken place the night before. The Emperor stood atop the platform, flanked on either side by his most trusted guards, and the wind rustled his thin, gray hair as he looked down upon us.

At some point during the night, a machine had been built upon the platform. The thing looked like a giant arm attached to a wooden base and, at the very top of the arm was a little metal disk. A rope ran through the grooves in the pulley and dangled down to street level where it circled slowly in the wind. Attached to the end of the rope was what looked like a harness of some sort. It, too, was formed of rope, of loops and swirls that could easily accommodate the arms and legs of a full grown man.

The Emperor raised his arms and the jeers of the crowd surrounding us trickled into silence. In the distance I heard a bird call out and the leaves in the forest whispered their secret language as the seconds drug on into minutes.

Even though I couldn't bring myself to look at the Emperor, I could feel his stern gaze burning into my soul. After what was probably the longest moments of my life, I finally heard the old man's voice boom out over the congregation.

“I have little to say to you boys. Other than this.”

I was crying again and my cheeks glistened in the morning sun. But these tears weren't for myself or what would become of me. No, I completely deserved what-ever punishment was passed upon us. I knew this as surely as I knew I would never see Sarah speaking with the dead again.

“May God have mercy on your souls . . . because I most certainly will not.”

The crowd erupted in a great cheer and I felt the rope around my waist tighten as Tommy began struggling against his restraints.

“I didn't do nothing! I swear, I didn't”

A guard rushed by my peripheral vision and there was the sharp crack as the ax handle connected with Tommy's jaw, a grunt of pain, and a dull thud as Tommy fell to the ground. He was quiet after that, save for a soft weeping that somehow sounded wet and gurgly.

“Carlos Thompson, for repeated crimes against the community and residents of Free Town I sentence you to death by hanging.”

My head snapped up as the guards cut through the rope connecting me to the older boy and drug him to the suspended harness. Carlos was screaming, his voice as high pitched as a woman's and he struggled against his bindings. Just like Sarah had struggled against hers

It didn't take long to secure him within the rope sling and I watched as he was hoisted into their air. Within moments he'd been pulled to the top of the platform; but then the entire contraption swiveled with a squeal only matched by his own. His feet kicked in the air as he dangled over the other side of the wall and he cried out for his mother over and over. And then he was slowly lowered like a human pinata into the crowd of rotters below.

When his screams finally faded, the Emperor nodded and a second, smaller rope, was pulled. This must have somehow released the harness, for it was quickly followed by a dull thud that could only have been Carlos Thompson's body plummeting to the ground. Gas was poured

through the pipe. A match sparked and then a great, black cloud of smoke arose from the other side of the wall . . . the Burning Ceremony had finally been completed.

Tommy and I were kept standing in the middle of the crowd until the last lick of flame had finally burned away. I can't really say how I felt then: every cell of my body was numb and even thoughts were few and far between. It was almost like back in the tent, when I had that sensation of existing somewhere outside of my own body.

“Thomas Ballister . . . Johnathon Smith . . . for your crimes, I sentence you to banishment from this great city. May your shadows never darken our walls again.”

One by one, Tommy and I were hoisted into the harness. One by one we were dropped into the cinders and smoking ashes of the dead on the other side. No supplies other than the clothes on our backs. No food or weapons. Just two teenage delinquents turned loose in a wilderness ruled by the living dead.

IX.

FRESHIES & ROTTERS (*Revisited*)

Tommy didn't last three days. We were running from a pack of rotters, scrambling up a hillside so steep that even the trees seemed to be struggling to keep their grasp. One moment he was right behind me, panting and crying as his hands reached out for the next root, the next rock . . . and then he was gone. Tumbling downward, screaming my name over and over even as the first rotter grabbed his shirt in its decaying hand.

But that was three cycles of the moon ago. And I'm still out here. Running. Hiding. Staining my lips and fingertips with berries and occasionally eating the raw flesh of some small animal I've managed to spear with a sharpened stick.

And, sometimes, I think I can see her in the distance: this pretty young girl with shy eyes and chapped lips. She seems to be beckoning to me, urging me to come to the arms in which I'd always dreamed of being held. But, by the time I get there, she's always just a little further

away. Always so distant and unobtainable.

But I'll make it to her eventually. I have to. I need to look into those beautiful eyes of hers, need to hold her cheeks in my hands, and let her know how very, very sorry I am. I need to somehow make things right, to purge this sadness that taints my soul and makes me punch at my own reflection in the stream. Without her, I can never forgive myself. Without her, I can never be whole again.

And maybe that's why she's always just out of reach. Perhaps I haven't suffered enough yet. Perhaps there are still years of atonement in my future before I can know the warmth of her touch.

I won't give up. I'll pursue her to the ends of the earth if I have to. And I know that I'll eventually reach my dear, sweet Sarah. After all, I was always the best . . . I was always the last of the refugee team left alive. But even then, I still know in my heart that the game is not truly over until the last survivor has been cornered.

I just need to make sure I can find the redemption I so desperately need before I'm called home.

THIS SUMMER . . .

Return to a ruined world where rotters and
freshies scour the land for the smallest
signs of the living . . .

Return to a tortured existence where
survivors and refugees struggle
for survival . . .

Return to the universe of Sex in The Time of Zombies

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