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## You'll Never Walk Alone

By Scott Nicholson

Daddy said them that eat human flesh will suffer under Hell.

I ain't figured that out yet, how there can be a place under Hell. Daddy couldn't hardly describe it hisself. It's just a real bad place, hotter than the regular Hell and probably lonelier, too, since Hell's about full up and nobody's a stranger. Been so much sinning the Devil had to build a basement for the gray people.

It was Saturday when we heard about them. I was watching cartoons and eating a bowl of corn flakes. I like cereal with lots of sugar, so when the flakes are done you can drink down that thick milk at the bottom of the bowl. It come up like a commercial, some square-headed man in a suit sitting at a desk, with that beeping sound like when they tell you a bad storm's coming. Daddy was drinking coffee with his boots off, and he said wasn't a cloud in the sky and the wind was lazy as a cut cat. So he figured it was just another thing about the Aye-rabs and who cared if they blew each other to Kingdom Come, except then they showed some of that TV that looks like them cop shows, the

camera wiggly so you can't half see what they're trying to show you.

Daddy kept the cartoons turned down low because he said the music hurt his ears, but this time he took the remote from beside my cereal bowl and punched it three or four times with his thumb. The square-headed man was talking faster than they usually do, like a flatlander, acting like he deserved a pat on the head because he was doing such a good job telling about something bad. Then the TV showed somebody in rags moving toward the camera and Daddy said, Lordy, looked like something walked out of one of them suicide bombs, because its face was gray and looked like the meat had melted off the bone.

But the square-headed man said the picture was live from Winston-Salem, that's about two hours from us here in the mountains. The man said it was happening all over, the hospitals was crowded and the governor done called out the National Guard. Then the television switched and it was the President standing at a bunch of microphones, saying something about a new terror threat but how everybody ought to stay calm because you never show fear in the face of the enemy.

Daddy said them damned ragheads must have finally let the bugs out of the bottle. I don't see how bugs could tear up a man's skin that way, to where it looked like he'd stuck his head in a lawn mower and then washed his face with battery acid and grease rags. I saw a dead raccoon once, in the ditch when I was walking home from school, and maggots was squirming in its eye holes and them shiny green dookie flies was swarming around its tail. I reckon that's what kind of bugs Daddy meant, only worse, because these ones get you while

you're still breathing.

I was scared then, but it was the kind where you just sort of feel like the ashes in the pan at the bottom of the woodstove. Where you don't know what to be afraid of. At least when you hear something moving in the dark woods, your hands get sweaty and your heart jumps a mite faster and you know which way to run. But looking at the TV, all I could think of was the time I woke up and Momma wasn't making breakfast, and Momma didn't come home from work, and Momma didn't make supper. A kind of scared that fills you up belly first, and you can't figure it out, and you can't take a stick to it like you can that thing in the dark woods. And then there was the next day when Momma still didn't come home, and that's how I felt about the bugs out of the bottle, because it seems like you can't do nothing to stop it. Then I felt bad because the President would probably say I was showing fear in the face of the enemy, and Daddy voted for the President because it was high time for a change.

I asked Daddy what we was going to do, and he said the Lord would show the way. Said he was loading the shotgun just in case, because the Lord helped those that helped themselves. Said he didn't know whether them things could drive a car or not. If they had to walk all the way from the big city, they probably wouldn't get here for three days. If they come here at all.

Daddy told me to go put up the cows. Said the TV man said they liked living flesh, but you can't trust what the TV says half the time because they want to sell you something. I didn't figure how they could sell anything by scaring people like that. But I was awful glad we lived a mile up a dirt road in a little notch in the mountains. It was cold for March, maybe too cold for them

bugs. But I wasn't too happy about fetching the cows, because they tend to wander in the mornings and not come in 'til dark. Cows like to spend their days all the same. If you do something new, they stomp and stir and start in with the moos, and I was afraid the moos might bring the bugs or them gray people that eat living flesh.

I about told Daddy I was too scared to fetch them by myself, but he might have got mad because of what the President said and all. Besides, he was busy putting on his boots. So I took my hickory stick from by the door and called Shep. He was probably digging for ground hogs up by the creek and couldn't hear me. I walked out to the fields on the north side, where the grass grows slow and we don't put cows except early spring. Some of the trees was starting to get new leaves, but the woods was mostly brown rot and granite stone. That made me feel a little better, because a bug-bit gray person would have a harder time sneaking up on me.

We was down to only four cows because of the long drought and we had to cull some steers last year or else buy hay. Four is easy to round up, because all you got to do is get one of them moving and the rest will follow. Cows in a herd almost always point their heads in the same direction, like they all know they're bound for the same place sooner or later. Most people think cows are dumb but some things they got a lot of sense about. You hardly ever see a cow in a hurry. I figure they don't worry much, and they probably don't know about being scared, except when you take them to the barn in the middle of the day. Then maybe they remember the blood on the walls and the steaming guts and the smell of raw meat and the jingle of the slaughter chains.

By the time I got them penned up, Shep had come in from wherever and gave out a bark like he'd been helping the whole time. I took him into the house with me. I don't ever do that unless it's come a big snow or when icicles hang from his fur. Daddy was dressed and the shotgun was laying on the kitchen table. I gave Shep the last of my cereal milk. Daddy said the TV said the gray people was walking all over, even in the little towns, but said some of the telephone wires was down so nobody could tell much what was going on where.

I asked Daddy if these was like the End Times of the Bible, like what Preacher Danny Lee Aldridge talked about when the sermon was almost over and the time had come to pass the plate. I always got scared about the End Times, even sitting in the church with all the wood and candles and that soft red cloth on the back of the pews. The End Times was the same as Hell to me. But Preacher Aldridge always wrapped up by saying that the way out of Hell was to walk through the house of the Lord, climb them stairs and let the loving light burn ever little shred of sin out of you. All you had to do was ask, but you had to do it alone. Nobody else could do it for you.

So you got to pray to the Lord. I like to pray in church, where there's lots of people and the Lord has to mind everybody at the same time. It's probably wrong, but I get scared when I try to pray all by myself. I used to pray with Momma and Daddy, then just Daddy, and that's okay because I figured Daddy's louder than me and probably has more to talk about. I just get that sharp rock feeling in my belly every time I think about the Lord looking at nobody but me, when I ain't got nothing to hide behind and my stick is out of

reach.

But these ain't the End Times, Daddy said, because the gray people don't have horns and the TV didn't say nothing about a dragon coming up out of the sea. But he said since they eat human flesh they're of the Devil, and said their bodies may be walking around but you better believe their souls are roasting under Hell. Especially if they got bit by the Aye-rab bug. I told him the cattle was put up and he said the chickens would be okay, you can't catch a chicken even when your legs is working right, much less when you're wobbling around like somebody beat the tar out of you with an ax handle.

He said to get in the truck. I made Shep jump up in the truck bed, Daddy come out of the house with a loaf of white bread and some cans of sardines. Had the shotgun, too. He got in the truck and started it and I asked him where we was headed. He said in troubled times you go get closer to the Lord.

I asked him if maybe he thought Momma would be okay. He said it didn't matter none, since the Devil done got her ages ago. Said she was already a gray person before this bug mess even started. Said to waste no prayers on her.

The dirt road was mushy from winter. The road runs by the creek for a while, then crosses a little bridge by the Hodges place. That's where I always caught the school bus, with Johnny Hodges and his sister Raylene. Smoke was coming out of their chimney and I asked Daddy if we ought to stop and tell them about what the TV said. Daddy said they might be gray people already. I tried to picture Johnny with his face all slopped around, or Raylene with bugs

eating her soft places. Mister Hodges didn't go to church and Johnny told me he used to beat them sometimes when he drank too much. I wondered if all the people who didn't go to church had turned gray and started eating human flesh.

We passed a few other houses but didn't see nobody, even at the preacher's place. The church was right there where the gravel turned to paved, set up above the road on a little green hill. The graveyard was tucked away to one side, where barbed wire strung off a pasture. The church was made of brick, the windows up high so that people wouldn't look outside during the preaching. Seeing that white cross jabbed up into the sky made me feel not so scared.

We parked the truck around back. Daddy had me carry the food and he carried the shotgun. Said a Bible and a shotgun was all a man needed. I didn't say nothing about a man needed food. I found a little pack of sugar in the truck's ashtray and I hid it in my pocket. We didn't have no Co'-colas.

They keep the church unlocked in case people want to come in and pray. Daddy said people in the big city lock their churches. If they don't, people might come in and sleep or steal the candle holders and hymn books. But this is the mountains, where people all know each other and get along and you don't need to lock everything. So we went inside. Daddy made Shep stay out, said it would be disrespecting to the Lord. We locked the door from the inside. I thought somebody else might want to come get close to the Lord in these troubled times, but Daddy said they could knock if they wanted in.

We went up to the front where the pulpit is and Daddy said we might as

well get down and give thanks for deliverance. I didn't feel delivered yet but Daddy was a lot smarter about the Bible, so I went on my knees and kept my eyes closed while Daddy said oh Lord it's looking mighty dark but the clouds will part and heaven will knock down them gray people and set things right. I joined in on the amen and said I was hungry.

Daddy opened up the sardines and they stank. I spilled some of the fish juice on the floor. We ate some of the bread. It was gummy and stuck to my teeth. I was tired and tried to lay down in the front pew but it was like sleeping in a rock coffin. I didn't know why people in the big city would want to do such a thing. Daddy started reading from the Bible but the light got bad as the afternoon wore on. The church ain't got electric power.

I asked Daddy how long we was going to stay holed up and he said as long as it took. I wished we had a TV so we could see what was going on. Night finally come, and I was using the bathroom in back when I heard Shep whimpering. I reckon he was lonely out there. Sounded like he was scratching in the dirt out back of the church.

I climbed up on the sink and looked out the little window. Under the moonlight I saw the graveyard, and it looked like somebody had took a shovel to it, tore up the dirt real bad. Somebody was coming up out of one of the holes, and I reckon that's what Shep was whimpering about.

I went and told Daddy what I seen and he said maybe it was the End Times after all. Shep started barking and I begged Daddy to let me open the door. He said the Lord would take care of Shep, but then I heard him bark



again and I was trying to open the door when Daddy knocked me away. Said he'd take a look, stepped outside with the shotgun, and the gun went off and Daddy started cussing goddamn right there on the church steps. Shep started moaning and I ran to the door and Shep was crawling toward the woods on his belly like his back was broke. I thought Daddy had shot him and I started to cry but then I seen somebody coming from the woods. Daddy racked another shell into the chamber and hollered but the person just kept coming. Daddy told me to go in and lock the door but I couldn't. I was too scared to be in that big dark church by myself.

Daddy shot high and the pellets scattered through the tops of the trees and still the person kept coming, walking slow with a limp. Another person came out of the trees, then another. They was all headed in the same direction. Straight toward the church.

One of them bent down and got Shep and I never heard such a sound from a dog. Daddy was cussing a blue streak and let loose both barrels and one of the people stood still for just a second, and I could see that gray face turned up toward the moon, the eye holes empty. Then his insides tumbled out but he kept on coming for us and Daddy was pushing me back through the door and we got inside and locked it.

Daddy went up front and I could hear him crying. Except for that, the church was quiet. I thought the gray people might try to knock the door down but maybe they got scared away because of it being a church and all. I went up beside Daddy and waited until he was hisself again. He said he was sorry for showing fear in the face of the enemy and said Oh Lord, give me the strength

to do your work. I said Lord, protect Momma wherever she is and Daddy said it was wrong to ask for selfish things.

Daddy said the End Times was a test for the weak. Said you had to stay strong in the Lord. Said it about fifteen hundred times in a row, over and over, in a whisper, and it made me scared.

I was about asleep when Daddy poked me with the gun. Said come here, son, over by the window where I can see you good. The moon was coming through the window and I could hear the gray people walking outside. They was going around in circles, all headed in the same direction.

Daddy asked me if I got bit by one of them bugs. I said don't reckon. He said, well, you're looking a little gray, and I told him I didn't feel nary bit gray. He asked me if I was getting hungry and I said a little. He gave me the rest of the bread and said eat it. I took a bite and he said you didn't say thanks to the Lord. Then he thanked the Lord for both of us.

I asked Daddy if Shep had gone to heaven. He said it depended on whether he was dead before the gray people ate him. Said Shep might have done turned gray hisself and might bite me if he saw me again. I almost asked Daddy to say a prayer for Shep but that sounded like a selfish thing.

I must have finally dozed off because I didn't know where I was when I opened my eyes. Daddy was at the front of the church, in the pulpit where Preacher Aldridge stood of a Sunday. The sun was about up and Daddy had the Bible open and was trying to read in the bad light. Somebody was

knocking on the church door.

Daddy said the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Daddy stopped just like Preacher Aldridge did, like he wanted to catch his breath and make you scared at the same time. Then Daddy got louder and said we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

I asked what did that mean and Daddy said the Lord come down among people and nobody saw the signs. Said they treated Him just like any normal person, except then He set off doing miracles and people got scared and nailed Him to the cross. Said it was probably gray people that done it. I asked Daddy if we ought to open the church door and see who was knocking.

Daddy said gray people wasn't fit to set foot in the house of the Lord. I asked what if it's the preacher or the Hodges kids or Opalee Rominger from down the road. Daddy said they're all gray, everybody. Said they was all headed under Hell. Said ever sinner is wicked and blind to their sinning ways. I didn't see how Opalee Rominger could eat living flesh, because she ain't got no teeth.

The knocking stopped and I didn't hear no screams so maybe whoever it was didn't get ate up.

I listened to Daddy read the Bible. The sun come up higher and I wondered about the cows. Did the gray people eat them all? It wasn't like they ain't enough sinners to go around. I didn't for a minute believe that everybody was gray. There had to be others like us. There's a hymn that says you'll never walk alone. I don't reckon the Lord breaks promises like that but I was way too

scared to ask. Daddy's eyes were getting bloodshot, like he hadn't slept a wink, and he was whispering to himself again.

I drank water from the plate that Preacher Aldridge passed around on Sundays. The water tasted like old pennies. Daddy didn't drink nothing. I asked him if he wanted the last can of sardines but he said man can't live by bread alone but by the word of the Lord. I wondered what the Lord's words tasted like. I wondered what people tasted like. I ate the sardines by myself.

That night was quiet, like the gray people had done gone on to wherever they were headed. I woke up in the morning plenty sore and I asked Daddy if we could take a peek out the door. Daddy hadn't moved, stood up there at the pulpit like he was getting ready to let loose with a sermon. He had the shotgun raised toward heaven and I don't reckon he heard me. I asked it louder and he said you can't see the gray people because ever sinner is blind. I said I ain't no sinner but he said you're looking mighty gray to me.

I said I ain't gray, and then he made me prove it. Said get on your knees and beg the Lord to forgive you. He pointed the shotgun at me. I didn't know if he would use it or not, but the way his eye twitched I wasn't taking no chances. I got on my knees but I was scared to close my eyes. When you close your eyes and pray it's just you and the Lord. You're blind but the Lord sees everything. I asked Daddy to pray with me.

Daddy set in to asking the Lord to forgive us our sins and trespasses. I wondered if we was trespassing on the church. It belonged to the Lord, and we was here so we wouldn't get ate up. I didn't say nothing to Daddy about it,

though. I added an extra loud amen just so Daddy would know for sure that I wasn't gray.

Later I asked Daddy how come ever sinner is gray. He said the Lord decides such things. He said Momma was a sinner and that's why she was gray all along and her soul was already under Hell. I didn't say nothing to that. Sometimes Daddy said I took after my Momma. I wished I'd took after Daddy instead and been able to pray all by myself.

I said it sounded like the gray people was gone. Daddy said you can't trust the Devil's tricks. Said the only way out was through the Lord. I said I was getting hungry again. Daddy said get some sleep and pray.

I woke up lost in the dark and Daddy was screaming his head off. He was sitting where the moon come through the window and he said look at me, look at my skin. He held up his hands and said I'm gray, I'm gray, I'm gray. Said he was unfit to be in the House of the Lord. He put the shotgun barrel up to the side of his neck and then there was a flash of light and sounded like the world split in half and then something wet slapped against the walls.

I crawled over to him and laid beside him 'til all the warm had leaked out. I was scared and I wanted to pray but without Daddy to help me the Lord would look right into me and that was worse than anything. Then I thought if Daddy was in heaven now, maybe I could say a prayer to him instead and he could pass along my words to the Lord.

The sun come up finally and Daddy didn't look gray at all. He was white. His belly gurgled and the blood around his neck hole turned brown. I went to

the door and unlocked it. Since it was Sunday morning, I figured people would be coming to hear the sermon. With more people in the church, I could pray without being so scared.

I stacked up some of the hymn books and stood on them so I could look out the window. They was back. More gray people were walking by, all headed in the same direction. I figured they were going to that place under Hell, just like Daddy said, and it made me happy that Daddy died before he turned gray.

Time passed real slow and the bread was long gone and nobody come to church. I never figured so many people that I used to pray with would end up turning gray. Like church didn't do them no good at all. I thought of all the prayers I said with them and it made me scared, the kind of scared that fills you up belly first. I wondered what the Lord thought about all them sinners, and what kind of words the Lord said back to them when they prayed.

Daddy's fingers had gone stiff and I about had to break them to get the shotgun away. He'd used up the last shell. The door was unlocked but nobody set foot in the church. I was hoping whoever had knocked the other day might come back, but they didn't.

The gray people didn't come in the church. I figured if they was eating live flesh they would get me sooner or later. Except maybe they was afraid about the church and all, or being in plain sight of the Lord. Or maybe they ain't figured out doors yet. I wondered if you go through doors to get under Hell.

Night come again. Daddy was dead cold. I was real hungry and I asked Daddy to tell the Lord about it, but I reckon Daddy would call that a selfish thing

and wouldn't pass it on. I kept trying to pray but I was scared. Preacher Aldridge said you got to do it alone, can't nobody do it for you.

Maybe one of them Aye-rab bugs got in while the door was open. Maybe the gray people ain't ate me yet because I ain't live flesh no more. Only the Lord knows. All I know is I can't stay in this church another minute. Daddy's starting to stink and the Lord's looking right at me.

Like I'm already gray.

I don't feel like I am, but Daddy said ever sinner is blind. And it's the kind of hungry that hurts.

Outside the church, the morning is fresh and cold and smells like broken flowers. I hear footsteps in the wet grass. I turn and walk, and I fit right in like they was saving a place for me. I'm one of them, following the ones ahead and leading the ones behind. We're all headed in the same direction. Maybe this entire world is the place under Hell, and we've been here all along.

I ain't scared no more, just hungry. The hungry runs deep. You can't live by bread alone. Sometimes you need meat instead of words.

I don't have to pray no more, out here where it ain't never dark. Where the Lord don't look at you. Where we're all sinners. Where you're born gray, again and again, and the End Times never end.

Where you never walk alone.

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