

## Undead Lessons

My dad committed suicide three months ago. Since then, my mom has strived to stay upbeat, secretly drinking whenever I turned my fifteen-year-old back. Her attempts at stashing the liquor in the laundry basket are conspicuous. Whenever I've confronted her about it, she's denied and lied. Instead, she'll dredge up my own shortcomings since Dad's death in an attempt to redirect attention from herself, a pathetic tactic on her part.

While I've been ignoring people and hiding out in corners all school long, at least I haven't turned to excessive inebriation. A tiny town in the middle of nowhere with only one gas station does not offer a lot of caches for illegal intoxication of minors. Just a lot of woods to wonder aimlessly around.

Since the first two months of school began, I've attended a total of ten days. The 'mourning phase' doesn't exactly work after three months. At least, not to school faculty. But, as I so sardonically stated to the principal yesterday, the teachers haven't had their own father jump off a bridge have they? Friends, more like peer pressuring oafs, are now nonexistent for me. Extra curricular activities require extra effort; I possess no effort to begin with. My once conscientious mindset has been replaced by depression and carelessness. And I feel no regrets whatsoever.

Rain trickled overhead, slowly freezing my bones. I punched a kid on the bus, so the driver forced me out, wordlessly ordering me to walk the rest of the way home. The coalescing drops darkened my pants, collecting weight during my trudge. Early evening light kept the gray, showering clouds in an orange haze, but if I didn't get home soon, I'd be walking in the dark.

The bus driver had been on a back road and I lived in town. My mom broke her phone last week and couldn't afford a new one. So I called my cousin, Jace, who lived in town too.

Five years older than me and still living with his parents, Jace flaunted the bad-boy attitude, though rather poorly. With his perfect jawline and platinum blond hair that glowed in the sun, Jace loved irresponsibility and girls. I used to think him cool, like a fun, but negatively influential brother, but then my father killed himself and Jace was high at the funeral, shattering my admired image of him. Since then, I've maintained a vapid separation from him. Not difficult, since he spent most of his time looking for jobs then quitting them a week later. But he had a car, which is all I cared about at the moment.

By the time he arrived at my location, the sun was a shadow behind the tree line, barely illuminating, and the rain had dissipated to muggy fog. Three other young adults sat in Jace's silver impala, cleaving my ears with obnoxious laughter.

"Hey, Dami! How are you doing?" Jace asked while leaning over the open window.

"Don't call me that," I said, a growl vibrating my voice. My dad used to called me Dami.

"Alright then, whatever you want. Guys, this is *Damian*. Don't call him Dami." He snickered, covering his grin with his palm. "Cam, move over." The young man with a buzz cut and chest hair poking out of his v-neck scooted to the middle and I clamored in behind the driver's seat. Jace twisted in his seat, no seatbelt, and introduced the children in adult's bodies to me. "That's Cameron," to my left, "Hannah," next to Cameron, "and Kelli," in the passenger seat. They all gave half-hearted waves. I plonked my forehead against the cool glass and glowered out the window.

I passed the drive zoning out the others' conversations, topics ranging from semi-explicit to mature content. From her groping of Jace's bicep, Kelli was his girlfriend. Cameron waved his hands around sporadically, bumping his elbow into my side. I scowled but remained silent. The car filled with humid body heat and dizzying voices, souring my mood as the drive progressed. Shadows of trees swallowed the surrounding road and I realized, belatedly, we were driving out of town, not into it.

"Hey, where're we going?" I asked. Jace glanced at me in the rearview mirror, but Cameron answered,

"We're going to that old bridge that leads out of town." My insides seized and my throat clutched my incoming breath.

"Why?" I croaked out.

"Cause it's fun. Come on, Dami, you need to get out, you've been moping around for months," Jace said, ignoring the piercing I shot his way.

"And going to where my dad *killed* himself is 'getting out'?" I imagined throttling Jace to death. My clenched fists pressed themselves upon my thighs. Cameron slung an arm over my shoulder, keeping me pinned in place.

"Hey, do you know about a little rumor surrounding this old bridge?" he asked. Before I could respond he continued, "it's supposedly a suicide hotspot. A bunch of people have jumped over it. Apparently, due to some curse or something, if you off yourself on this bridge, you're stuck between the living and the dead. Can't go to Heaven nor Hell. You're trapped, like a zombie, for eternity. Oooooohh." He wiggled his fingers in my face, smiling with big, white teeth

in the dimness. His story didn't succeed in scaring me as he'd hoped. It only enraged me further and I scowled at him.

"I think it's like a lesson from God, trying to teach people not to kill themselves or else they'll like have to face the consequences," Hannah spoke up, her high-drawl voice grating on my already frayed nerves. Jace slammed the car to a stop and everyone climbed out. Jace had parked the car by the side of the bridge, right next to a decline leading down to the ravine underneath.

After hesitating for a few seconds I followed, holding onto bushy briars to ensure a safe descent. The decline wasn't steep, but it was muddy, the recent rainfall ensuring a slippery slide. Only a few shrubbery were stationed along the decline or in the ravine, which resulted in looser mud. I didn't know how long we'd been driving for, but the full moon was glowing dimly above us.

The bottom of the ravine looked as bleak as the surrounding rockslides. A flat ground with a few mounds and shrubs. Planks for the bridge dug sideways along the underpass. Birds sat in their nests between the crevices.

"This is what you brought me out here for? A barren ditch with an urban legend attached to it? Why couldn't you have just dropped me off then come here with your friends?" I said to Jace, who was taking pictures of Kelli in the moonlight.

"Why you gotta be such a spoilsport? Are you in agonizing pain from this experience? Loosen up, be cool," he said, spreading his arms wide to try and accommodate his overbearing ego.

"I'm annoyed," I stated while crossing my arms.

“You are such a goth. All broody and black,” Kelli said.

“Nah, he’s more like the silent, strong type. I mean, look at his hair,” Cameron said and ruffled my dirty blond hair into my skull. “He can’t be goth with that.” I whacked him in the shoulder and stalked away. So much stupid, hormonal atmosphere felt clammy and claustrophobic on my skin. Or maybe that was just the fog.

The moon against my back outlined my shadow in the dirt. It stretched as if reaching for something ahead. I pulled a branch sticking up from the ground. Lazy circles and geometric figures etched their way from my imagination onto the muddy ground.

Jace and his friends increased their volume and gaiety. They listened to rock songs from their phones, laughed at crummy jokes, and played flip tricks with a knife Jace owned. If my dad hadn’t killed himself, I’d probably be well on my way to being just like them, carefree and light. But it felt like bricks were chained to my feet, preventing me from moving forward or backward.

Something pale and oblong caught on my stick, buried underneath sludge. I crouched to get a better look and smeared the mud from the surface. My brow furrowed. The object was wrinkled and pallid with a rounded end and a chopped edge on the other side. Funny, how it almost looked like—

The thumb moved. It twitched, just barely, but my face was pressed almost in the dirt and I saw it. I blinked my eyes several times, chalking it up to my mind’s inaccuracy, but then it moved again. Dirt sunk and shifted when the rest of the hand twitched, unearthing itself. The hand, covered in slimy mud and a worm, jerked upward swiftly and I fell back on my rear in haste. The hand clenched shut, looking to grasp something.

I shook my head violently, trying to will away the horrid hallucination. The hand clawed at the loose dirt, pulling itself upward. I sat frozen. I should've ran or screamed. I finally did when something gelid seized my wrist and tugged. Mud splattered my cheeks and my face aligned with another. Skin hung from the skull like a frail veil, jowls swung as it opened its maw, and little beetles scuttled inside its sockets, some crawling underneath the loose skin.

My shriek coursed through me, jittering my bones beneath the muscles. Skin flayed where the *thing* clutched my wrist and I grasped it to rip its bony fingers off me. They peeled off its hand and I flung them away. The corpse, for it was a corpse with its emaciated torso and twig legs, pushed itself upward with its wiry arms and landed partially on top of my legs, flailing around. I shoved it away and crawled backwards on my hands. I screamed the whole time, never ceasing, and it raised a convoke.

In seconds, hands sprouted from the earth like accelerated plants. Though plastered in mud and dead leaves, they still looked like movable dead people: backs bent at unworkable angles, limbs broken, hanging limply at sides. Deteriorating skin hung over mangled bones and yellowed teeth stuck out of protruding jaws, snapping at anything within distance. Some eyeballs were gone, grounded into mush within the sockets while others held translucent white ones, no red veins spiraling in the sphere because no blood flowed within the streams. My stomach twisted around my lungs as I gazed into one's eyes not four feet away from me. While their bodies were obviously dead, their minds, their souls, still held some semblance of awareness. It made me sick to imagine someone residing in that body.

Unable to rationalize what was happening around me, I bolted for Jace and the others, who were running toward the decline to climb up and drive away. Other corpses surrounded

them as well and they screamed in terror. Fear proved a valuable motivator. I leapt over grasping limbs and deadened bodies, some too mutilated to follow me.

I'd been deeper underneath the bridge than the others, and Jace and his friends were already climbing up the incline. Hannah, the farthest along, clasped a bush to pull herself up when mandibles attached to a body appeared beneath her and sunk its teeth into her neck. Her screech halted abruptly when the blood flooded her lungs. The half buried corpse on the incline suckled her neck as she died. Kelli froze partway up the incline, tears swallowing her vision and was pulled back down by a hand. She didn't even scream, just continued to cry as the corpse clawed its way into her torso.

I coughed bile up, smearing my shirt as I reached the incline and passed the corpses feasting on Kelli. Dirt sat underneath my fingernails and painted me all over. I spared a glance back and desecrated several dozen undead corpses following us from the bridge. I flinched and nearly lost my balance when Cameron pulled himself up beside me. For some reason, we both froze at the eye contact. It was a brief second of connection, but I could tell from that second alone, we were both thinking the same thing and hating it: his story about being stuck as the undead for eternity. Then a smaller corpse, just a teenager, jumped onto Cameron's back and pulled him backwards, back down the incline. His arms reached up into the air before he tumbled down into a pile of corpses.

The rainfall had made the ground mushy, and as such, my feet sunk into the earth, slowing my escape. I lost my left sneaker. Over halfway up, something snatched my ankle, stymieing my ascent. Bloated, black features stared back at me and I shouted and kicked it in the

face. It only clung tighter. Dirt drizzled down on my crown and I glanced up. Jace was only a little ahead of me and to the right, a swarm of corpses on his tail.

“Jace! Jace, help!” I yelled, continuing to kick the corpse, but it started dragging me down. I shoved my hands into the muddy earth for purchase. “Jace!! HELP! *PLEASE!*” He didn’t even look back, not even a twitch. Tears, against my will, welled up in my eyes and spilled, slicing tracks through the dirt on my cheeks.

Other corpses dragged themselves up the incline toward me and the one at my feet opened its maw to bite- but another corpse bounded onto its back and pulled its head back, away from me. It shredded its nails through the corpse’s eye sockets, making it moan laboriously. Sliding back down the slope, the corpse glanced back up at me. Its hair wasn’t as stringy and thin as the others; its clothes not as torn and decomposed; its eyes were a pale, pale green, staring back at me with scary clarity and familiarity.

“Dad?” I whispered. His dirty blond hair was covered in mud, but he wore his golden wedding ring on his left wrist. He worked his jaw up and down, his lips chapped and decaying.

“Rrrru- rrrr- rruuu-nn. Rrrruuuuu-n.” *Run.* He fell back into the mass of corpses, still clinging to the other cadaver. I scrambled up, plowing into the ground for purchase. My climbing halted with a scream. Jace, who’d been overrun by corpses during my own fight, was encrusted with his own blood, multiple bite marks lancing up his arms and legs. He had a knife and used it to slash corpses away from himself, but they were encompassing him, slowly devouring him.

Unconsciously, without forethought, I slid down, used a thin tree trunk to keep myself upright, and held out a hand for him. He booted a corpse in the chest, making a couple tumble



backwards, and clasped his hand around my forearm. I started to haul him up but a corpse moved quickly and bit him on the arm, making him jerk his hand back and out of my grasp.

He fell into the horde of corpses, his screams mixing with their groans. Tears slipped off my nose and fell down through the air to land on a corpse's. I flung myself the rest of the way up the hill and yanked on Jace's car. The doors were locked. Jace had had the keys. I ran.

I ran back the way we came, through forested roads, using the beaming moon as a guide point. Saliva stuck to the roof of my mouth and my respiration turned weaker and strained the longer I fled, away from that bridge and the corpses, both old and new. Eventually, I slowed down, heavy with thoughts and tiredness. I shambled along the road, wondering if someone was *killed* on that bridge, were they stuck between life and death for eternity too?

I refused to think about my dad. Maybe it had all been a dream? It certainly made more sense than it being real. But the dried blood of Jace on my arm reminded me of the truth. I could go to the police, but that doesn't mean I should. They wouldn't believe me. No one would. So, maybe I should go home and pretend I never saw Jace that day.

As I walked, contemplating possible directions, flashing red and blue lights appeared in my peripherals. A squad car drove up behind me and stopped. I stopped too and turned around. I think I was too dazed to react properly or worry about the fact that a police officer was walking up to me. I think I didn't care much either. He flashed a light in my eyes and I shut them tightly.

"Hello, there," he spoke gruffly, "who are you?" I remained silent. "What are you doing out here." I glanced behind at the road, wishing I could walk down it and disappear. "Are you Damian Phillips?" He pulled out a card, my school I.D. and I realized he'd been to the bridge. He

found Jace's car and my backpack left inside and I knew I couldn't play dumb about not seeing Jace. The blood on my arm would give it away too when they ran a DNA test.

I stared at the pavement as he walked behind me and cuffed my wrists together. I plonked my head on the glass pane as he drove me to the police department, literally a five minute drive from the state park he found me in. I spoke into the microphone recording our conversation as I told them what happened and they didn't believe me. I leaned back against the door as the police car transferred me to the 'health center' in the next city over; people frowned at me when I called it a loony bin. And I stared at the white wall as you recorded my story.

"There. You have the story. And you don't believe it," I said and leaned back in the chair. Dr. Jones stared back at me with sympathy behind her glasses, her pen poised on paper.

"You have to admit, Damian, it's difficult to believe. I can understand why you believe it. Perhaps your mind substituted the killer for the corpses."

"That's not what the jury ruled." They ruled me murdering Jace and his friends and just being too insane to comprehend it.

"Regardless of whether or not you actually killed your cousin, Damian, Jace and his friends disappeared that night. And you were the last to see them. You have to understand this situation from our perspective."

"And the only reason you won't understand my perspective is because it sounds crazy to you guys. Yes, I know it sounds made up, but something doesn't have to be probable to be possible." Dr. Jones sighed and clicked her pen shut. Four shrinks in four years who thought they could compartmentalize and rationalize my story.

“Do you think there’s any reason why you saw those corpses that night?” she asked on her way out, hand grasping the handle.

“... I think. Cameron said if someone committed *suicide* on the bridge, they’d be stuck between life and death for eternity. And Hannah said it was like the suicide victims are paying the punishment for wanting to end their lives. I think the corpses were warnings. Warnings saying that we shouldn’t commit suicide.”

“The corpses were trying to teach you, Jace, and the others a lesson?”

“No. I think they were just teaching me, specifically. I mean, I had been feeling suicidal after Dad killed himself. Maybe that’s why he saved me. So I could learn the lesson and pass it on.”

Dr. Jones murmured, “I see,” and left me alone, locking the door behind her.