

INTRODUCTION

It goes by many names: “The Crisis,” “The Dark Years,” “The Walking Plague,” as well as newer and more “hip” titles such as “World War Z” or “Z War One.” I personally dislike this last moniker as it implies an inevitable “Z War Two.” For me, it will always be “The Zombie War,” and while many may protest the scientific accuracy of the word *zombie*, they will be hard-pressed to discover a more globally accepted term for the creatures that almost caused our extinction. *Zombie* remains a devastating word, unrivaled in its power to conjure up so many memories or emotions, and it is these memories, and emotions, that are the subject of this book.

This record of the greatest conflict in human history owes its genesis to a much smaller, much more personal conflict between me and the chairperson of the United Nation’s Postwar Commission Report. My initial work for the Commission could be described as nothing short of a labor of love. My travel stipend, my security access, my battery of translators, both human and electronic, as well as my small, but nearly priceless voice-activated transcription “pal” (the greatest gift the world’s slowest typist could ask for), all spoke to the respect and value my work was afforded on this project. So, needless to say, it came as a shock when I found almost half of that work deleted from the report’s final edition.

“It was all too intimate,” the chairperson said during one of our many “animated” discussions.

“Too many opinions, too many feelings. That’s not what this report is about. We need clear facts and figures, unclouded by the human factor.” Of course, she was right. The official report was a collection of cold, hard data, an objective “after-action report” that would allow future generations to study the events of that apocalyptic decade without being influenced by “the human factor.” But isn’t the human factor what connects us so deeply to our past? Will future generations care as much for chronologies and casualty statistics as they would for the personal accounts of individuals not so different from themselves? By excluding the human factor, aren’t we risking the kind of personal detachment from a history that may, heaven forbid, lead us one day to repeat it? And in the end, isn’t the human factor the only true difference between us and the enemy we now refer to as “the living dead”? I presented this argument, perhaps less professionally than was appropriate, to my “boss,” who after my final exclamation of “we can’t let these stories die” responded immediately with, “Then don’t. Write a book. You’ve still got all your notes, and the legal freedom to use them. Who’s stopping you from

very careful. If you showed any signs of advanced infection, they wouldn't go near you. They were out to protect their business. The golden rule was, you couldn't fool foreign immigration officials until you fooled your shetou first. You had to look and act completely healthy, and even then, it was always a race against time. Before Flight 575, I heard this one story about a couple, a very well-to-do businessman and his wife. He had been bitten. Not a serious one, you understand, but one of the

"slow burns," where all the major blood vessels are missed. I'm sure they thought there was a cure in the West, a lot of the infected did. Apparently, they reached their hotel room in Paris just as he began to collapse. His wife tried to call the doctor, but he forbade it. He was afraid they would be sent back. Instead, he ordered her to abandon him, to leave now before he lapsed into coma. I hear that she did, and after two days of groans and commotion, the hotel staff finally ignored the DO

NOT DISTURB sign and broke into the room. I'm not sure if that is how the Paris outbreak started, though it would make sense.

You say they didn't call for a doctor, that they were afraid they'd be sent back, but then why try to find a cure in the West?

You really don't understand a refugee's heart, do you? These people were desperate. They were trapped between their infections and being rounded up and "treated" by their own government. If you had a loved one, a family member, a child, who was infected, and you thought there was a shred of hope in some other country, wouldn't you do everything in your power to get there?

Wouldn't you want to believe there was hope?

You said that man's wife, along with the other rentshe, vanished into thin air.

It has always been this way, even before the outbreaks. Some stay with family, some with friends.

Many of the poorer ones had to work off their bao 3 to the local Chinese mafia. The majority of them simply melted into the host country's underbelly.

The low-income areas?

If that's what you want to call them. What better place to hide than

AN INTRODUCTION

It's as hard to have a favorite sequence of myths as it is to have a favorite style of cooking (some nights you might want Thai food, some nights sushi, other nights you crave the plain home cooking you grew up on). But if I had to declare a favorite, it would probably be for the Norse myths.

My first encounter with Asgard and its inhabitants was as a small boy, no more than seven, reading the adventures of the Mighty Thor as depicted by American comics artist Jack Kirby, in stories plotted by Kirby and Stan Lee and dialogued by Stan Lee's brother, Larry Lieber. Kirby's Thor was powerful and good-looking, his Asgard a towering science fictional city of imposing buildings and dangerous edifices, his Odin wise and noble, his Loki a sardonic horn-helmeted creature of pure mischief. I loved Kirby's blond hammer-wielding Thor, and I wanted to learn more about him.

I borrowed a copy of *Myths of the Norsemen* by Roger Lancelyn Green and read and reread it with delight and puzzlement: Asgard, in this telling, was no longer a Kirbyesque Future City but was a Viking hall and collection of buildings out on the frozen wastes; Odin the all-father was no longer gentle, wise, and irascible, but instead he was brilliant, unknowable, and dangerous; Thor was just as strong as the Mighty Thor in the comics, his hammer as powerful, but he was . . . well, honestly, not the brightest of the gods; and Loki was not evil, although he was certainly not a force for good. Loki was . . . complicated.

In addition, I learned, the Norse gods came with their own doomsday: Ragnarok, the twilight of the gods, the end of it all. The gods were going to battle the frost giants, and they were all going to die.

Had Ragnarok happened yet? Was it still to happen? I did not know

"You are guests here. Do not stand on ceremony. Take as much as you can eat from the pot," said Hymir expansively. The strangers were small, after all—how much could they eat? After all, the oxen were enormous.

Thor said he didn't mind if he did, and he proceeded to devour two of the oxen all by himself, one after the other, leaving nothing but clean-picked bones. Then he belched in a satisfied way.

"That's a lot of food, Veor," said Hymir. "It was meant to feed us for several days. I do not think I have ever seen even a giant eat two of my oxen at once before."

"I was hungry," said Thor. "And I got a little carried away. Look, tomorrow, why don't we go out fishing? I hear you are quite a fisherman."

Hymir prided himself on his skills at fishing. "I am an excellent fisherman," he said. "We can catch tomorrow night's dinner."

"I too am a fine fisherman," said Thor. He had never fished before, but how hard could it be?

"We'll meet tomorrow at dawn, out on the dock," said Hymir.

In their huge bedroom that night, Tyr said to Thor, "I hope you know what you are doing."

"Of course I do," said Thor. But he didn't. He was just doing whatever he felt like doing. That was what Thor did best.

In the gray light before dawn, Thor met Hymir on the dock.

"I should warn you, little Veor," said the giant, "that we will be going far out into the icy waters. I row farther out into the cold and stay out longer than a tiny thing like you can survive. Icicles will form on your beard and your hair, and you will turn blue with cold. Probably you will die."

"Doesn't worry me," said Thor. "I like the cold. It's bracing. What are we using for bait?"

"I already have my own bait," said Hymir. "You must find your own. You could look in the field of the oxen for it. Nice big maggots in the ox dung, after all. Bring whatever you want from there."

Thor looked at Hymir. He thought about hitting Hymir with his hammer, but then he would never get the cauldron, not without a fight. He walked back up the shore.

In the meadow was Hymir's herd of beautiful oxen. There were giant patties of dung on the ground, with huge maggots writhing and burrowing in them, but Thor avoided all of them. Instead he walked over to the biggest, most majestic, fattest of the beasts, raised his fist,