# Isaac Marion

# WARM BODIES

For the foster-kids I’ve met.

You have known, O Gilgamesh,

What interests me,

To drink from the Well of Immortality.

Which means to make the dead

Rise from their graves

And the prisoners from their cells

The sinners from their sins.

I think love’s kiss kills our heart of flesh.

It is the only way to eternal life,

Which should be unbearable if lived

Among the dying flowers

And the shrieking farewells

Of the overstretched arms of our spoiled hopes.

Herbert Mason,

Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative ‘…’

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* ,

Tablet II, lines 147, 153, 154, 278, 279

## step one

## wanting

I am dead, but it’s not so bad. I’ve learned to live with it. I’m sorry I can’t properly introduce myself, but I don’t have a name any more. Hardly any of us do. We lose them like car keys, forget them like anniversaries. Mine might have started with an ‘R’, but that’s all I have now. It’s funny because back when I was alive, I was always forgetting *other* people’s names. My friend ‘M’ says the irony of being a zombie is that everything is funny, but you can’t smile, because your lips have rotted off.

None of us are particularly attractive, but death has been kinder to me than some. I’m still in the early stages of decay. Just the grey skin, the unpleasant smell, the dark circles under my eyes. I could almost pass for a Living man in need of a vacation. Before I became a zombie I must have been a businessman, a banker or broker or some young temp learning the ropes, because I’m wearing fairly nice clothes. Black slacks, grey shirt, red tie. M makes fun of me sometimes. He points at my tie and tries to laugh, a choked, gurgling rumble deep in his gut. His clothes are holey jeans and a plain white T-shirt. The shirt is looking pretty macabre by now. He should have picked a darker colour.

We like to joke and speculate about our clothes, since these final fashion choices are the only indication of who we were before we became no one. Some are less obvious than mine: shorts and a sweater, skirt and a blouse. So we make random guesses.

You were a waitress. You were a student. Ring any bells?

It never does.

No one I know has any specific memories. Just a vague, vestigial knowledge of a world long gone. Faint impressions of past lives that linger like phantom limbs. We recognise civilisation — buildings, cars, a general overview — but we have no personal role in it. No history. We are just *here* . We do what we do, time passes, and no one asks questions. But like I’ve said, it’s not so bad. We may appear mindless, but we aren’t. The rusty cogs of cogency still spin, just geared down and down till the outer motion is barely visible. We grunt and groan, we shrug and nod, and sometimes a few words slip out. It’s not that different from before.

But it does make me sad that we’ve forgotten our names. Out of everything, this seems to me the most tragic. I miss my own and I mourn for everyone else’s, because I’d like to love them, but I don’t know who they are.

There are hundreds of us living in an abandoned airport outside some large city. We don’t need shelter or warmth, obviously, but we like having the walls and roofs over our heads. Otherwise we’d just be wandering in an open field of dust somewhere, and that would be strangely horrific. To have nothing at all around us, nothing to touch or look at, no hard lines whatsoever, just us and the gaping maw of the sky. I imagine that’s what being full-dead is like. An emptiness vast and absolute.

I think we’ve been here a long time. I still have all my flesh, but there are elders who are little more than skeletons with clinging bits of muscle, dry as jerky. Somehow it still extends and contracts, and they keep moving. I have never seen any of us ‘die’ of old age. Maybe we live for ever, I don’t know. The future is as blurry to me as the past. I can’t seem to make myself care about anything to the right or left of the present, and the present isn’t exactly urgent. You might say death has relaxed me.

I am riding the escalators when M finds me. I ride the escalators several times a day, whenever they move. It’s become a ritual. The airport is derelict, but the power still flickers on sometimes, maybe flowing from emergency generators stuttering deep underground. Lights flash and screens blink, machines jolt into motion. I cherish these moments. The feeling of things coming to life. I stand on the steps and ascend like a soul into Heaven, that sugary dream of our childhoods, now a tasteless joke.

After maybe thirty repetitions, I rise to find M waiting for me at the top. He is hundreds of pounds of muscle and fat draped on a six-foot-five frame. Bearded, bald, bruised and rotten, his grisly visage slides into view as I crest the staircase summit. Is he the angel that greets me at the gates? His ragged mouth is oozing black drool.

He points in a vague direction and grunts, ‘City.’

I nod and follow him.

We are going out to find food. A hunting party forms around us as we shuffle towards town. It’s not hard to find recruits for these expeditions, even if no one is hungry. Focused thought is a rare occurrence here, and we all follow it when it manifests. Otherwise we’d just be standing around and groaning all day. We do a lot of standing around and groaning. Years pass this way. The flesh withers on our bones and we stand here, waiting for it to go. I often wonder how old I am.

The city where we do our hunting is conveniently close. We arrive around noon the next day and start looking for flesh. The new hunger is a strange feeling. We don’t feel it in our stomachs — some of us don’t even have those. We feel it everywhere equally, a sinking, sagging sensation, as if our cells are deflating. Last winter, when so many Living joined the Dead and our prey became scarce, I watched some of my friends become full-dead. The transition was undramatic. They just slowed down, then stopped, and after a while I realised they were corpses. It disquieted me at first, but it’s against etiquette to notice when one of us dies. I distracted myself with some groaning.

I think the world has mostly ended, because the cities we wander through are as rotten as we are. Buildings have collapsed. Rusted cars clog the streets. Most glass is shattered, and the wind drifting through the hollow high-rises moans like an animal left to die. I don’t know what happened. Disease? War? Social collapse? Or was it just us? The Dead replacing the Living? I guess it’s not so important. Once you’ve arrived at the the end of the world, it hardly matters which route you took.

We start to smell the Living as we approach a dilapidated apartment building. The smell is not the musk of sweat and skin, but the effervescence of life energy, like the ionised tang of lightning and lavender. We don’t smell it in our noses. It hits us deeper inside, near our brains, like wasabi. We converge on the building and crash our way inside.

We find them huddled in a small studio unit with the windows boarded up. They are dressed worse than we are, wrapped in filthy tatters and rags, all of them badly in need of a shave. M will be saddled with a short blond beard for the rest of his Fleshy existence, but everyone else in our party is clean-shaven. It’s one of the perks of being Dead, another thing we don’t have to worry about any more. Beards, hair, toenails… no more fighting biology. Our wild bodies have finally been tamed.

Slow and clumsy but with unswerving commitment, we launch ourselves at the Living. Shotgun blasts fill the dusty air with gunpowder and gore. Black blood spatters the walls. The loss of an arm, a leg, a portion of torso, this is disregarded, shrugged off. A minor cosmetic issue. But some of us take shots to our brains, and we drop. Apparently there’s still something of value in that withered grey sponge, because if we lose it, we are corpses. The zombies to my left and right hit the ground with moist thuds. But there are plenty of us. We are overwhelming. We set upon the Living, and we eat.

Eating is not a pleasant business. I chew off a man’s arm, and I hate it. I hate his screams, because I don’t like pain, I don’t like hurting people, but this is the world now. This is what we do. Of course if I don’t eat all of him, if I spare his brain, he’ll rise up and follow me back to the airport, and that might make me feel better. I’ll introduce him to everyone, and maybe we’ll stand around and groan for a while. It’s hard to say what ‘friends’ are any more, but that might be close. If I restrain myself, if I leave enough…

But I don’t. I can’t. As always I go straight for the good part, the part that makes my head light up like a picture tube. I eat the brain and, for about thirty seconds, I have memories. Flashes of parades, perfume, music… *life* . Then it fades, and I get up, and we all stumble out of the city, still cold and grey, but feeling a little better. Not ‘good’, exactly, not ‘happy’, certainly not ‘alive’, but… a little less dead. This is the best we can do.

I trail behind the group as the city disappears behind us. My steps plod a little heavier than the others’. When I pause at a rain-filled pothole to scrub gore off my face and clothes, M drops back and slaps a hand on my shoulder. He knows my distaste for some of our routines. He knows I’m a little more sensitive than most. Sometimes he teases me, twirls my messy black hair into pigtails and says, ‘Girl. Such… girl.’ But he knows when to take my gloom seriously. He pats my shoulder and just looks at me. His face isn’t capable of much expressive nuance any more, but I know what he wants to say. I nod, and we keep walking.

I don’t know why we have to kill people. I don’t know what chewing through a man’s neck accomplishes. I steal what he has to replace what I lack. He disappears, and I stay. It’s simple but senseless, arbitrary laws from some lunatic legislator in the sky. But following those laws keeps me walking, so I follow them to the letter. I eat until I stop eating, then I eat again.

How did this start? How did we become what we are? Was it some mysterious virus? Gamma rays? An ancient curse? Or something even more absurd? No one talks about it much. We are here, and this is the way it is. We don’t complain. We don’t ask questions. We go about our business.

There is a chasm between me and the world outside of me. A gap so wide my feelings can’t cross it. By the time my screams reach the other side, they have dwindled into groans.

At the Arrivals gate, we are greeted by a small crowd, watching us with hungry eyes or eye sockets. We drop our cargo on the floor: two mostly intact men, a few meaty legs and a dismembered torso, all still warm. Call it leftovers. Call it takeout. Our fellow Dead fall on them and feast right there on the floor like animals. The life remaining in those cells will keep them from full-dying, but the Dead who don’t hunt will never quite be satisfied. Like men at sea deprived of fresh fruit, they will wither in their deficiencies, weak and perpetually empty, because the new hunger is a lonely monster. It grudgingly accepts the brown meat and lukewarm blood, but what it craves is closeness, that grim sense of connection that courses between their eyes and ours in those final moments, like some dark negative of love.

I wave to M and then break free from the crowd. I have long since become acclimatised to the Dead’s pervasive stench, but the haze rising off them today feels especially fetid. Breathing is optional, but I need some air.

I wander out into the connecting hallways and ride the conveyors. I stand on the belt and watch the scenery scroll by through the window wall. Not much to see. The runways are turning green, overrun with grass and brush. Jets lie motionless on the concrete like beached whales, white and monumental. Moby-Dick, conquered at last.

Before, when I was alive, I could never have done this. Standing still, watching the world pass by me, thinking about nearly nothing. I remember effort. I remember targets and deadlines, goals and ambitions. I remember being *purposeful* , always everywhere all the time. Now I’m just standing here on the conveyor, along for the ride. I reach the end, turn around, and go back the other way. The world has been distilled. Being dead is easy.

After a few hours of this, I notice a female on the opposite conveyor. She doesn’t lurch or groan like most of us; her head just lolls from side to side. I like that about her, that she doesn’t lurch or groan. I catch her eye and stare at her as we approach. For a brief moment we are side by side, only a few feet away. We pass, then travel on to opposite ends of the hall. We turn around and look at each other. We get back on the conveyors. We pass each other again. I grimace, and she grimaces back. On our third pass, the airport power dies, and we come to a halt perfectly aligned. I wheeze hello, and she responds with a hunch of her shoulder.

I like her. I reach out and touch her hair. Like me, her decomposition is at an early stage. Her skin is pale and her eyes are sunken, but she has no exposed bones or organs. Her irises are an especially light shade of that strange pewter grey all the Dead share. Her graveclothes are a black skirt and a snug white blouse. I suspect she used to be a receptionist.

Pinned to her chest is a silver name tag.

She has a name.

I stare hard at the tag, I lean in close, putting my face inches from her breasts, but it doesn’t help. The letters spin and reverse in my vision; I can’t hold them down. As always, they elude me, just a series of meaningless lines and blots.

Another of M’s undead ironies — from name tags to newspapers, the answers to our questions are written all around us, and we don’t know how to read.

I point at the tag and look her in the eyes. ‘Your… name?’

She looks at me blankly.

I point at myself and pronounce the remaining fragment of my own name. ‘Rrr.’ Then I point at her again.

Her eyes drop to the floor. She shakes her head. She doesn’t remember. She doesn’t even have syllable-one, like M and I do. She is no one. But aren’t I expecting too much? I reach out and take her hand. We walk off the conveyers with our arms stretched across the divider.

This female and I have fallen in love. Or what’s left of it.

I remember what love was like before. There were complex emotional and biological factors at work. We had elaborate tests to pass, connections to forge, ups and downs and tears and whirlwinds. It was an ordeal, an exercise in agony, but it was alive. The new love is simpler. Easier. But small.

My girlfriend doesn’t talk much. We walk through the echoing corridors of the airport, occasionally passing someone staring out of a window or at a wall. I try to think of things to say but nothing comes, and if something did come I probably couldn’t say it. This is my great obstacle, the biggest of all the boulders littering my path. In my mind I am eloquent; I can climb intricate scaffolds of words to reach the highest cathedral ceilings and paint my thoughts. But when I open my mouth, everything collapses. So far my personal record is four rolling syllables before some… thing… jams. And I may be the most loquacious zombie in this airport.

I don’t know why we don’t speak. I can’t explain the suffocating silence that hangs over our world, cutting us off from each other like prison-visit Plexiglas. Prepositions are painful, articles are arduous, adjectives are wild overachievements. Is this muteness a real physical handicap? One of the many symptoms of being Dead? Or do we just have nothing left to say?

I attempt conversation with my girlfriend, testing out a few awkward phrases and shallow questions, trying to get a reaction out of her, any twitch of wit. But she just looks at me like I’m weird.

We wander for a few hours, directionless, then she grips my hand and starts leading me somewhere. We stumble our way down the halted escalators and out onto the tarmac. I sigh wearily.

She is taking me to church.

The Dead have built a sanctuary on the runway. At some point in the distant past someone pushed all the stair-trucks together into a circle, forming a kind of amphitheatre. We gather here, we stand here, we lift our arms and moan. The ancient Boneys wave their skeletal limbs in the centre circle, rasping out dry, wordless sermons through toothy grins. I don’t understand what this is. I don’t think any of us do. But it’s the only time we willingly gather under the open sky. That vast cosmic mouth, distant mountains like teeth in the skull of God, yawning wide to devour us. To swallow us down to where we probably belong.

My girlfriend appears much more devout than I do. She closes her eyes and waves her arms in a way that almost looks heartfelt. I stand next to her and hold my hands in the air silently. At some unknown cue, maybe drawn by her fervour, the Boneys stop their preaching and stare at us. One of them comes forward, climbs our stairs, and takes us both by the wrists. It leads us down into the circle and raises our hands in its clawed grip. It lets out a kind of roar, an unearthly sound like a blast of air through a broken hunting horn, shockingly loud, frightening birds out of trees.

The congregation murmurs in response, and it’s done. We are married.

We step back onto the stair seats. The service resumes. My new wife closes her eyes and waves her arms.

The day after our wedding, we have children. A small group of Boneys stops us in the hall and presents them to us. A boy and a girl, both around six years old. The boy is curly blond, with grey skin and grey eyes, perhaps once Caucasian. The girl is darker, with black hair and ashy brown skin, deeply shadowed around her steely eyes. She may have been Arab. The Boneys nudge them forward and they give us tentative smiles, hug our legs. I pat them on their heads and ask their names, but they don’t have any. I sigh, and my wife and I keep walking, hand in hand with our new children.

I wasn’t exactly expecting this. This is a big responsibility. The young Dead don’t have the natural feeding instincts the adults do. They have to be tended and trained. And they will never grow up. Stunted by our curse, they will stay small and rot, then become little skeletons, animate but empty, their brains rattling stiff in their skulls, repeating their routines and rituals until one day, I can only assume, the bones themselves will disintegrate, and they’ll just be gone.

Look at them. Watch them as my wife and I release their hands and they wander outside to play. They tease each other and grin. They play with things that aren’t even toys: staplers and mugs and calculators. They giggle and laugh, though it sounds choked through their dry throats. We’ve bleached their brains, robbed them of breath, but they still cling to the cliff edge. They resist our curse for as long as they possibly can.

I watch them disappear into the pale daylight at the end of the hall. Deep inside me, in some dark and cobwebbed chamber, I feel something twitch.

It’s time to feed again.

I don’t know how long it’s been since our last hunting trip, probably just a few days, but I feel it. I feel the electricity in my limbs fizzling, fading. I see relentless visions of blood in my mind, that brilliant, mesmerising red, flowing through bright pink tissues in intricate webs and Pollock fractals, pulsing and vibrating with life.

I find M in the food court talking to some girls. He is a little different from me. He does seem to enjoy the company of women, and his better-than-average diction draws them in like dazzled carp, but he keeps a distance. He laughs them off. The Boneys once tried to set him up with a wife, but he simply walked away. Sometimes I wonder if he has a philosophy. Maybe even a world view. I’d like to sit down with him and pick his brain, just a tiny bite somewhere in the frontal lobe to get a taste of his thoughts. But he’s too much of a tough guy to ever be that vulnerable.

‘City,’ I say, putting a hand on my stomach. ‘Food.’

The girls he’s talking to look at me and shuffle away. I’ve noticed I make some people nervous.

‘Just… ate,’ M says, frowning at me a little. ‘Two days… ago.’

I grab my stomach again. ‘Feel empty. Feel… dead.’

He nods. ‘Marr… iage.’

I glare at him. I shake my head and clutch my stomach harder. ‘*Need* . Go… get others.’

He sighs and walks out, bumping into me hard on his way past, but I’m not sure if it’s intentional. He is, after all, a zombie.

He manages to find a few others with appetites, and we form a small posse. Very small. Unsafely small. But I don’t care. I don’t recall ever being this hungry.

We set out towards the city. We take the freeway. Like everything else, the roads are returning to nature. We wander down empty lanes and under ivy-curtained overpasses. My residual memories of these roads contrast dramatically with their peaceful present state. I take a deep breath of the sweet, silent air.

We press further into the city than normal. The only scent I pick up is rust and dust. The unsheltered Living are getting scarcer, and the ones with shelter are venturing out less frequently. I suspect their stadium fortresses are becoming self-sufficient. I imagine vast gardens planted in the dugouts, bursting with carrots and beans. Cattle in the press box. Rice paddies in the outfield. We can see the largest of these citadels looming on the hazy horizon, its retractable roof open to the sun, taunting us.

But, finally, we sense prey. The life scent electrifies our nostrils, abrupt and intense. They are very close, and there are a lot of them. Maybe close to half our own number. We hesitate, stumbling to a halt. M looks at me. He looks at our small group, then back at me. ‘No,’ he grunts.

I point towards the crooked, collapsed skyscraper that’s emitting the aroma, like a cartoon tendril of scent beckoning *come* …

‘Eat,’ I insist.

M shakes his head. ‘Too… many.’

‘*Eat* .’

He looks at our group again. He sniffs the air. The rest of them are undecided. Some of them also sniff warily, but others are more single-minded like me. They groan and drool and snap their teeth.

I’m getting agitated. ‘Need it!’ I shout, glaring at M. ‘Come… on.’ I turn and start speed-lumbering towards the sky-scraper. Focused thought. The rest of the group reflexively follows. M catches up and walks beside me, watching me with an uneasy grimace.

Spurred to an unusual level of intensity by my desperate energy, our group crashes through the revolving doors and rushes down the dark hallways. Some earthquake or explosion has knocked out part of the foundation, and the entire high-rise leans at a dizzying, funhouse angle. It’s hard to navigate the zigzagging halls, and the inclines make it a challenge to even walk, but the scent is overpowering. After a few flights of stairs I start to hear them as well, clattering around and talking to each other in those steady, melodious streams of words. Living speech has always been a sonic pheromone to me, and I spasm briefly when it hits my ears. I’ve yet to meet another zombie who shares my appreciation for those silky rhythms. M thinks it’s a sick fetish.

As we approach their level of the building, some of us start groaning loudly, and the Living hear us. One of them shouts the alarm and I hear guns cocking, but we don’t hesitate. We burst through a final door and rush them. M grunts when he sees how many there are, but he lunges with me at the nearest man and grabs his arms while I rip out his throat. The burning red taste of blood floods my mouth. The sparkle of life sprays out of his cells like citrus mist from an orange peel, and I suck it in.

The darkness of the room is pulsing with gunfire, and by our standards we are grossly outnumbered — there are only three of us to every one of them — but something is tipping things in our favour. Our manic speed is uncharacteristic of the Dead, and our prey are not prepared for it. Is this all coming from me? Creatures without desire don’t move quickly, but they’re following my lead, and I am an angry whirlwind. What has come over me? Am I just having a bad day?

There is one other factor working to our advantage. These Living are not seasoned veterans. They are young. Teenagers, mostly, boys and girls. One of them has such gruesome acne he’s likely to get shot by mistake in this flickering light. Their leader is a slightly older kid with a patchy beard, standing on a cubicle desk in the middle of the room and shouting panicked commands to his men. As they fall to the floor under the weight of our hunger, as dots of blood pointilise the walls, this boy leans protectively over a small figure crouched below him on the desk. A girl, young and blonde, bracing her bird-boned shoulder against her shotgun as she fires blindly into the dark.

I lope across the room and grab the boy’s boots. I pull his feet out from under him and he falls, cracking his head on the edge of the desk. Without hesitation I pounce on him and bite through his neck. Then I dig my fingers into the crack in his skull, and prise his head open like an eggshell. His brain pulses hot and pink inside. I take a deep, wide, ravenous bite and—

I am Perry Kelvin, a nine-year-old boy growing up in rural nowhere. The threats are all on some distant coast and we don’t worry about them here. Other than the emergency chain-link fence between the river and the mountain ridge, life is almost normal. I’m in school. I’m learning about George Washington. I’m riding my bike down dusty roads in shorts and a tank top, feeling the summer sun braise the back of my neck. My neck. My neck hurts, it—

I am eating a slice of pizza with my mom and dad. It’s my birthday and they are doing what they can to treat me, though their money isn’t worth much any more. I’ve just turned eleven, and they’re finally taking me to see one of the countless zombie movies cropping up lately. I’m so excited I can barely taste my pizza. I take an oversized bite and the thick cheese sticks in my throat. I choke it back up and my parents laugh. Tomato sauce stains my shirt like—

I am fifteen, gazing out the window at the looming walls of my new home. Clouded grey sunlight drifts down through the Stadium’s open roof. I’m at school again, listening to a lecture on salvage safety and trying not to stare at the beautiful girl sitting next to me. She has short, choppy blonde hair and blue eyes that dance with private amusement. My palms are sweating. My mouth is full of laundry lint. When the class ends, I catch her in the hall and say, ‘Hi.’

‘Hi,’ she says.

‘I’m new here.’

‘I know.’

‘My name’s Perry.’

She smiles. ‘I’m Julie.’

She smiles. Her eyes glitter. ‘I’m Julie.’

She smiles. I glimpse her braces. Her eyes are classic novels and poetry. ‘I’m Julie,’ she says.

She says—

‘Perry,’ Julie whispers in my ear as I kiss her neck. She twines her fingers into mine and squeezes hard.

I kiss her deep and caress the back of her head with my free hand, tangling my fingers in her hair. I look her in the eyes. ‘Do you want to?’ I breathe.

She smiles. She closes her eyes and says, ‘Yes.’

I crush her against me. I want to be part of her. Not just inside her but all around her. I want our ribcages to crack open and our hearts to migrate and merge. I want our cells to braid together like living thread.

And now I’m older, wiser, gunning a motorcycle down a forgotten downtown boulevard. Julie is on the seat behind me, her arms clutching my chest, her legs wrapped around mine. Her aviators glint in the sun as she grins, showing her perfectly straight teeth. The grin is not mine to share any more, and I know this, I have accepted the way things are and the way things are going to be, even if she hasn’t and won’t. But at least I can protect her. At least I can keep her safe. She is so unbearably beautiful and sometimes I see a future with her in my head, but my head, my head hurts, oh God my head is—

Stop.

Who are you? Let the memories dissolve. Your eyes are crusted — blink them. Gasp in a ragged breath.

You’re you again. You’re no one.

Welcome back.

I feel the carpet under my fingers. I hear the gunshots. I stand up and look around, dizzy and reeling. I have never had a vision so deep, like an entire life spooling through my head. The sting of tears burns in my eyes, but my ducts no longer have fluid. The feeling rages unquenched like pepper spray. It’s the first time I’ve felt pain since I died.

I hear a scream nearby and I turn. It’s her. She’s here. *Julie* is here, older now, maybe nineteen, her baby fat melted away revealing sharper lines and finer poise, muscles small but toned on her girlish frame. She is huddled in a corner, unarmed, sobbing and screaming as M creeps towards her. He always finds the women. Their memories are porn to him. I still feel disorientated, unsure of where or who I am, but…

I shove M aside and snarl, ‘*No* . Mine.’

He grits his teeth like he’s about to turn on me, but a gunshot tears into his shoulder and he shuffles across the room to help two other zombies bring down a heavily armed kid.

I approach the girl. She cowers before me, her tender flesh offering me all the things I’m accustomed to taking, and my instincts start to reassert themselves. The urge to rip and tear surges into my arms and jaw. But then she screams again, and something inside me moves, a feeble moth struggling against a web. In this brief moment of hesitation, still warm with the nectar of a young man’s memories, I make a choice.

I let out a gentle groan and inch towards the girl, trying to force kindness into my dull expression. I am not no one. I am a nine-year-old boy, I am a fifteen-year-old boy, I am—

She throws a knife at my head.

The blade sticks straight into the centre of my forehead and quivers there. But it has penetrated less than an inch, only grazing my frontal lobe. I pull it out and drop it. I hold out my hands, making soft noises through my lips, but I’m helpless. How do I appear unthreatening when her lover’s blood is running down my chin?

I’m just a few feet away from her now. She is fumbling through her jeans for another weapon. Behind me, the Dead are finishing their butchery. Soon they will turn their attention to this dim corner of the room. I take a deep breath.

‘*Ju* … *lie* ,’ I say.

It rolls off my tongue like honey. I feel good just saying it.

Her eyes go wide. She freezes.

‘Julie,’ I say again. I put out my hands. I point at the zombies behind me. I shake my head.

She stares at me, making no sign that she understands. But when I reach out to touch her, she doesn’t move. And she doesn’t stab me.

I reach my free hand into the head-wound of a fallen zombie and collect a palmful of black, lifeless blood. Slowly, with gentle movements, I smear it on her face, down her neck and onto her clothes. She doesn’t even flinch. She is probably catatonic.

I take her hand and pull her to her feet. At that moment M and the others finish devouring their prey and turn to inspect the room. Their eyes fall on me. They fall on Julie. I walk towards them, gripping her hand, not quite dragging her. She staggers behind me, staring straight ahead.

M sniffs the air cautiously. But I know he’s smelling exactly what I’m smelling: nothing. Just the negative-smell of Dead blood. It’s spattered all over the walls, soaked into our clothes, and smeared carefully on a young Living girl, concealing the glow of her life under its dark, overpowering musk.

Without a word, we leave the high-rise and head back to the airport. I walk in a daze, full of strange and kaleidoscopic thoughts. Julie holds limply to my hand, staring at the side of my face with wide eyes, trembling lips.

After delivering our abundant harvest of leftover flesh to the non-hunters — the Boneys, the children, the stay-at-home moms — I take Julie to my house. My fellow Dead give me curious looks as I pass. Because it requires both volition and restraint, the act of intentionally converting the Living is almost never performed. Most conversions happen by accident: a feeding zombie is killed or otherwise distracted before finishing his business, *voro interruptus* . The rest of our converts arise from traditional deaths, private affairs of illness or mishap or classical Living-on-Living violence that take place outside our sphere of interest. So the fact that I have purposely brought this girl home unconsumed is a thing of mystery, a miracle on a par with giving birth. M and the others allow me plenty of room in the halls, regarding me with confusion and wonder. If they knew the full truth of what I’m doing, their reactions would be… less moderate.

Gripping Julie’s hand, I hurry her away from their probing eyes. I lead her to Gate 12, down the boarding tunnel and into my home: a 747 commercial jet. It’s not very spacious, the floor plan is impractical, but it’s the most isolated place in the airport and I enjoy the privacy. Sometimes it even tickles my numb memory. Looking at my clothes, I seem like the kind of person who probably travelled a lot. Sometimes when I ‘sleep’ here, I feel the faint rising sensation of flight, the blasts of recycled air blowing in my face, the soggy nausea of packaged sandwiches. And then the fresh lemon zing of *poisson* in Paris. The burn of *tajine* in Morocco. Are these places all gone now? Silent streets, cafes full of dusty skeletons?

Julie and I stand in the centre aisle, looking at each other. I point to a window seat and raise my eyebrows. Keeping her eyes solidly on me, she backs into the row and sits down. Her hands grip the armrests like the plane is in a flaming death dive.

I sit in the aisle seat and release an involuntary wheeze, looking straight ahead at my stacks of memorabilia. Every time I go into the city, I bring back one thing that catches my eye. A puzzle. A shot glass. A Barbie. A dildo. Flowers. Magazines. Books. I bring them here to my home, strew them around the seats and aisles, and stare at them for hours. The piles reach to the ceiling now. M keeps asking me why I do this. I have no answer.

‘Not… eat,’ I groan at Julie, looking her in the eyes. ‘I… won’t eat.’

She stares at me. Her lips are tight and pale.

I point at her. I open my mouth and point at my crooked, bloodstained teeth. I shake my head. She presses herself against the window. A terrified whimper rises in her throat. This is not working.

‘Safe,’ I tell her, letting out a sigh. ‘Keep… you safe.’

I stand up and go to my record player. I dig through my LP collection in the overhead compartments and pull out an album. I take the headphones back to my seat and place them on Julie’s ears. She is still frozen, wide-eyed.

The record plays. It’s Frank Sinatra. I can hear it faintly through the phones, like a distant eulogy drifting on autumn air.

*Last night* … *when we were young* …

I close my eyes and hunch forward. My head sways vaguely in time with the music as verses float through the jet cabin, blending together in my ears.

*Life was so new* … *so real, so right* …

‘Safe,’ I mumble. ‘Keep you… safe.’

…*ages ago* … *last night* …

When my eyes finally open, Julie’s face has changed. The terror has faded, and she regards me with disbelief.

‘What *are* you?’ she whispers.

I turn my face away. I stand and duck out of the plane. Her bewildered gaze follows me down the tunnel.

In the airport parking garage, there is a classic Mercedes convertible that I’ve been playing with for several months. After weeks of staring at it, I figured out how to fill its tank from a barrel of stabilised gasoline I found in the service rooms. Then I remembered how to turn the key and start it, after pushing its owner’s dry corpse to the pavement. But I have no idea how to drive. The best I’ve been able to do is back out of the parking spot and ram into a nearby Hummer. Sometimes I just sit there with the engine purring, my hands resting limply on the wheel, willing a true memory to pop into my head. Not another hazy impression or vague awareness cribbed from the collective subconscious. Something specific, bright and vivid. Something unmistakably mine. I strain myself, trying to wrench it out of the blackness.

I meet M later that evening at his home in the women’s bathroom. He is sitting in front of a TV plugged into a long extension cord, gaping at a late-night soft-core movie he found in some dead man’s luggage. I don’t know why he does this. Erotica is meaningless for us now. The blood doesn’t pump, the passion doesn’t surge. I’ve walked in on M with his ‘girlfriends’ before, and they’re just standing there naked, staring at each other, sometimes rubbing their bodies together but looking tired and lost. Maybe it’s a kind of death throe. A distant echo of that great motivator that once started wars and inspired symphonies, that drove human history out of the caves and into space. M may be holding on, but those days are over now. Sex, once a law as undisputed as gravity, has been disproved. The equation is erased, the blackboard broken.

Sometimes it’s a relief. I remember the need, the insatiable hunger that ruled my life and the lives of everyone around me. Sometimes I’m glad to be free of it. There’s less trouble now. But our loss of this, the most basic of all human passions, might sum up our loss of everything else. It’s made things quieter. Simpler. And it’s one of the surest signs that we’re dead.

I watch M from the doorway. He sits on the little metal folding chair with his hands between his knees like a schoolboy facing the principal. There are times when I can almost glimpse the person he once was under all that rotting flesh, and it prickles my heart.

‘Did… bring it?’ he asks, without looking away from the TV.

I hold up what I’ve been carrying. A human brain, fresh from today’s hunting trip, no longer warm but still pink and buzzing with life.

We sit against the tiles of the bathroom wall with our legs sprawled out in front of us, passing the brain back and forth, taking small, leisurely bites and enjoying brief flashes of human experience.

‘Good… shit,’ M wheezes.

The brain contains the life of some young military grunt from the city. His existence isn’t particularly interesting to me, just endless repetitions of training, eating and mowing down zombies, but M seems to like it. His tastes are a little less demanding than mine. I watch his mouth form silent words. I watch his face shuffle through emotions. Anger, fear, joy, lust. It’s like watching a dreaming dog kick and whimper, but far more heartbreaking. When he wakes up, this will all disappear. He will be empty again. He will be dead.

After an hour or two, we are down to one small gobbet of pink tissue. M pops it in his mouth and his pupils dilate as he has his visions. The brain is gone, but I’m not satisfied. I reach furtively into my pocket and pull out a fist-sized chunk that I’ve been saving. This one is different, though. This one is special. I tear off a bite, and chew.

I am Perry Kelvin, a sixteen-year-old boy, watching my girlfriend write in her journal. The black leather cover is tattered and worn, the inside a maze of scribbles, drawings, little notes and quotes. I am sitting on the couch with a salvaged first edition of *On the Road* , longing to live in any era but this one, and she is curled in my lap, penning furiously. I poke my head over her shoulder, trying to get a glimpse. She pulls the journal away and gives me a coy smile. ‘No,’ she says, and returns her attention to her work.

‘What are you writing about?’

‘Nooot tellinnng.’

‘Journal or poetry?’

‘Both, silly.’

‘Am I in it?’

She chuckles.

I lace my arms around her shoulders. She burrows into me a little deeper. I bury my face in her hair and kiss the back of her head. The spicy smell of her shampoo—

M is looking at me. ‘You… have more?’ he grunts. He holds out his hand for me to pass it. But I don’t pass it. I take another bite and close my eyes.

‘Perry,’ Julie says.

‘Yeah.’

We are at our secret spot on the Stadium roof. We lie on our backs on a red blanket on the white steel panels, squinting up at the blinding blue sky.

‘I miss airplanes,’ she says.

I nod. ‘Me too.’

‘Not flying in them. I never got to do that anyway with Dad the way he is. I just miss *airplanes* . That muffled thunder in the distance, those white lines… the way they sliced across the sky and made designs in the blue? My mom used to say it looked like Etch A Sketch. It was so beautiful.’

I smile at the thought. She’s right. Airplanes were beautiful. So were fireworks. Flowers. Concerts. Kites. All the indulgences we can no longer afford.

‘I like how you remember things,’ I say.

She looks at me. ‘Well, we have to. We have to remember everything. If we don’t, by the time we grow up it’ll be gone for ever.’

I close my eyes and let the scorching light blaze red through my lids. I let it saturate my brain. I turn my head and kiss Julie. We make love there on the blanket on the Stadium roof, four hundred feet above the ground. The sun stands guard over us like a kind-hearted chaperone, smiling silently.

‘Hey!’

My eyes snap open. M is glaring at me. He makes a grab for the piece of brain in my hand and I yank it away.

‘*No* ,’ I growl.

I suppose M is my friend, but I would rather kill him than let him taste this. The thought of his filthy fingers poking and fondling these memories makes me want to rip his chest open and squish his heart in my hands, stomp his brain till he stops existing. This is *mine* .

M looks at me. He sees the warning flare in my eyes, hears the rising air-raid klaxon. He drops his hand away. He stares at me for a moment, annoyed and confused. ‘Bo… gart,’ he mutters, and locks himself in a toilet stall.

I leave the bathroom with abnormally purposeful strides. I slip in through the door of the 747 and stand there in the faint oval of light. Julie is lying back in a reclined seat, snoring gently. I knock on the side of the fuselage and she bolts upright, instantly awake. She watches me warily as I approach her. My eyes are burning again. I grab her messenger bag off the floor and dig through it. I find her wallet, and then I find a photo. A portrait of a young man. I hold the photo up to her eyes.

‘I’m… sorry,’ I say hoarsely.

She looks at me, stone-faced.

I point at my mouth. I clutch my stomach. I point at her mouth. I touch her stomach. Then I point out the window, at the cloudless black sky of merciless stars. It’s the weakest defence for murder ever offered, but it’s all I have. I clench my jaw and squint my eyes, trying to ease their dry sting.

Julie’s lower lip is tensed. Her eyes are red and wet. ‘Which one of you did it?’ she says in a voice on the verge of breaking. ‘Was it that big one? That fat fuck that almost got me?’

I stare at her for a moment, not grasping her questions. And then it hits me, and my eyes go wide.

She doesn’t know it was me.

The room was dark and I came from behind. She didn’t see it. She doesn’t know. Her penetrating eyes address me like a creature worthy of address, unaware that I recently killed her lover, ate his life and digested his soul, and am right now carrying a prime cut of his brain in the front pocket of my slacks. I can feel it burning there like a coal of guilt, and I reflexively back away from her, unable to comprehend this curdled mercy.

‘Why me?’ she demands, blinking an angry tear out of her eye. ‘Why did you save *me* ?’ She twists her back to me and curls up on the chair, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. ‘Out of everyone…’ she mumbles into the cushion. ‘Why me.’

These are her first questions. Not the ones urgent for her own well-being, not the mystery of how I know her name or the terrifying prospect of what my plans for her might be; she doesn’t rush to satisfy those hungers. Her first questions are for others. For her friends, for her lover, wondering why she couldn’t take their place.

I am the lowest thing. I am the bottom of the universe.

I drop the photo onto the seat and look at the floor. ‘I’m… sorry,’ I say again, and leave the plane.

When I emerge from the boarding tunnel, there are several Dead grouped near the doorway. They watch me without expressions. We stand there in silence, still as statues. Then I brush past them and wander off into the dark halls.

The cracked pavement rumbles under our truck’s tyres. It abuses the old Ford’s creaky suspension, making a quiet roar like stifled rage. I look at my dad. He looks older than I remember. Weaker. He grips the steering wheel hard. His knuckles are white.

‘Dad?’ I say.

‘What, Perry.’

‘Where are we going to go?’

‘Someplace safe.’

I watch him carefully. ‘Are there still safe places?’

He hesitates, too long. ‘Someplace safer.’

Behind us, in the valley where we used to swim and pick strawberries, eat pizza and go to movies, the valley where I was born and grew up and discovered everything that’s now inside me, plumes of smoke rise. The gas station where I bought Coke Slushies is on fire. The windows of my grade school are shattered. The kids in the public swimming pool are not swimming.

‘Dad?’ I say.

‘What.’

‘Is Mom coming back?’

My dad finally looks at me, but says nothing.

‘As one of them?’

He looks back at the road. ‘No.’

‘But I thought she would. I thought everyone comes back now.’

‘Perry,’ my dad says, and the word seems to barely escape his throat. ‘I fixed it. So she won’t.’

The hard lines in his face fascinate and repel me. My voice cracks. ‘Why, Dad?’

‘Because she’s gone. No one comes back. Not really. Do you understand that?’

The scrub brush and barren hills ahead start to blur in my vision. I try to focus on the windshield itself, the crushed bugs and tiny fractures. Those blur, too.

‘Just remember her,’ my dad says. ‘As much as you can, for as long as you can. That’s how she comes back. *We* make her live. Not some ridiculous curse.’

I watch his face, trying to read the truth in his squinted eyes. I’ve never heard him talk like this.

‘Bodies are just meat,’ he says. ‘The part of her that matters most… we get to keep that.’

‘Julie.’

‘What?’

‘Come here. Look at this.’

The wind makes a ripping sound through the shattered plate glass of the hospital we’re salvaging. Julie steps to the window’s edge with me and looks down.

‘What’s it doing?’

‘I don’t know.’

On the snow-dusted street below, a single zombie walks in a loose circle. It bumps into a car and stumbles, slowly backs up against a wall, turns, shuffles in another direction. It makes no sound and doesn’t seem to be looking at anything. Julie and I watch it for a few minutes.

‘I don’t like this,’ she says.

‘Yeah.’

‘It’s… sad.’

‘Yeah.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Don’t know.’

It stops in the middle of the street, swaying slightly. Its face displays absolutely nothing. Just skin stretched over a skull.

‘I wonder how it feels,’ she says.

‘What?’

‘To be like them.’

I watch the zombie. It starts swaying a little harder, then it collapses. It lies there on its side, staring at the frozen pavement.

‘What’s it… ?’ Julie starts, then stops. She looks at me with wide eyes, then back at the crumpled body. ‘Did it just *die* ?’

We wait in silence. The corpse doesn’t move. I feel a wriggling sensation inside me, tiny things creeping down my spine.

‘Let’s go,’ Julie says, and turns away. I follow her back into the building. We can’t think of anything to say all the way home.

*Stop* .

Breathe those useless breaths. Drop this piece of life you’re holding to your lips. Where are you? How long have you been here? Stop now. You have to stop.

Squeeze shut your stinging eyes, and take another bite.

In the morning, my wife finds me slumped against one of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the runways. My eyes are open and full of dust. My head leans to one side. I rarely allow myself to look so corpse-like.

Something is wrong with me. There is a sick emptiness in my stomach, a feeling somewhere between starvation and hangover. My wife grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. She starts walking, dragging me behind her like rolling luggage. I feel a flash of bitter heat pulse through me and I start speaking at her. ‘Name,’ I say, glaring into her ear. ‘Name?’

She shoots me a cold look and keeps walking.

‘Job? School?’ My tone shifts from query to accusation. ‘Movie? Song?’ It bubbles out of me like oil from a punctured pipeline. ‘*Book* ?’ I shout at her. ‘Home? *Name?* ’

My wife turns and spits at me. Actually spits on my shirt, snarling like an animal. But the look in her eyes instantly cools my eruption. She’s… frightened. Her lips quiver. What am I doing?

I look at the floor. We stand in silence for several minutes. Then she resumes walking, and I follow her, trying to shake off this strange black cloud that’s settled over me.

She leads me to a gutted, burned-out gift shop and lets out an emphatic groan. Our kids emerge from behind an overturned bookcase full of best-sellers that will never be read. They’re each gnawing a human forearm, slightly brown at the stumps, not exactly fresh.

‘Where did… get those?’ I ask them. They shrug. I turn to my wife. ‘Need… better.’

She frowns and points at me. She grunts in annoyance, and my face falls, duly chastised. It’s true, I haven’t been the most involved parent. Is it possible to have a midlife crisis if you have no idea how old you are? I could be in my early thirties or late teens. I could be younger than Julie.

My wife grunts at the kids and gestures down the hall. They hang their heads and make a wheezy whining noise, but they follow us. We are taking them to their first day of school.

Some of us, maybe the same industrious Dead who built the Boneys’ stair-church, have built a ‘classroom’ in the food court by stacking heavy luggage into high walls. As my family and I approach, we hear groans and screams from inside this arena. There is a line of youngsters in front of the entryway, waiting their turn. My wife and I lead our kids to the back of the line and watch the lesson now in progress.

Five Dead youths are circling a skinny, middle-aged Living man. The man backs up against the luggage, looking frantically left and right, his empty hands balled into fists. Two of the youths dive at him and try to hold his arms down, but he shakes them off. The third one nips a tiny bite in his shoulder and the man screams as if he’s been mortally wounded, because, in effect, he has. From zombie bites to starvation to good old-fashioned age and disease, there are so many options for dying in this new world. So many ways for the Living to stop. But with just a few debrained exceptions, all roads lead to *us* , the Dead, and our very unglamorous immortality.

‘Wrong!’ their teacher roars. ‘Get… throat!’

The children back away and watch the man warily.

‘Throat!’ the teacher repeats. He and his assistant lumber into the arena and tackle the man, forcing him to the ground. The teacher kills him and stands up, blood streaming down his chin. ‘Throat,’ he says again, pointing to the body.

The five children exit shamefaced, and the next five in line are prodded inside. My kids look up at me anxiously. I pat their heads.

The five youths inside are nervous, but the teacher shouts at them and they begin to move in. When they get close enough all five lunge at the same time, two grabbing for each arm and the fifth going for the throat. But the old man is shockingly strong. He twists around and flings two of them hard against the wall of luggage. The impact shakes the wall and a sturdy metal briefcase topples down from the top. The man grabs it by the handle, raises it high, and smashes it down on one of the youths’ heads. The youth’s skull caves in and his brain squishes out. He doesn’t scream or twitch or quiver, he just abruptly collapses into a heap of limbs, flat and flush with the floor as if he’s been dead for months already. Death takes hold of him with retroactive finality.

The whole school goes silent. The remaining four children back out of the arena. No one really pays attention as the adults rush inside to deal with the man. We all gaze at the youth’s crumpled corpse with sad resignation. We can’t tell which of the gathered adults might be his parents, since all our expressions are about the same. Whoever they are, they will forget their loss soon enough. By tomorrow the Boneys will show up with another boy or girl to replace this one. We allow a few uncomfortable seconds of silence for the killed child, then school resumes. A few parents glance at each other, maybe wondering what to think, wondering what this all means, this bent, inverted cycle of life. Or maybe that’s just me.

My kids are next in line. They watch the current lesson intently, sometimes standing on tiptoes to see, but they aren’t afraid. They are younger than the rest, and will probably be matched against someone too frail to put up much fight, but they don’t know this, and it’s not why they’re unafraid. When the entire world is built on death and horror, when existence is a constant state of panic, it’s hard to get worked up about any one thing. Specific fears have become irrelevant. We’ve replaced them with a smothering blanket far worse.

I pace outside the 747 boarding tunnel for about an hour before going in. I open the jet’s door quietly. Julie is curled up in business class, sleeping. She has wrapped herself in a quilt made of cut-up jeans that I brought back as a souvenir a few weeks ago. The morning sun makes a halo in her yellow hair, sainting her.

‘Julie,’ I whisper.

Her eyes slide open a crack. This time she doesn’t jolt upright or edge away from me. She just looks at me with tired, puffy eyes. ‘What?’ she mumbles.

‘How… are… ?’

‘How do you think I am?’ She puts her back to me and wraps the blanket around her shoulders.

I watch her for a moment. Her posture is a brick wall. I lower my head and turn to go. But as I step through the doorway she says, ‘Wait.’

I turn around. She is sitting up, the blanket piled on her lap. ‘I’m hungry,’ she says.

I look at her blankly. Hungry? Does she want an arm or leg? Hot blood, meat and life? She’s Living… does she want to eat herself? Then I remember what being hungry used to mean. I remember beefsteaks and pancakes, grains and fruits and vegetables, that quaint little food pyramid. Sometimes I miss savouring taste and texture instead of just swallowing energy, but I try not to dwell on it. The old food does nothing to quench our hunger any more. Even bright red meat from a freshly killed rabbit or deer is beneath our culinary standards; its energy is simply incompatible, like trying to run a computer on diesel. There is no easy way out for us, no humane alternative for the fashionably moral. The new hunger demands sacrifice. It demands human suffering as the price for our pleasures, meagre and cheap as they are.

‘You know, *food* ?’ Julie prompts. She mimes the act of taking a bite. ‘Sandwiches? Pizza? Stuff that doesn’t involve *killing* people?’

I nod. ‘I’ll… get.’

I start to leave but she stops me again.

‘Just let me *go* ,’ she says. ‘What are you *doing* ? Why are you keeping me here?’

I think for a moment. I step to her window and point to the runways below. She looks, and sees the church service in progress. The congregation of the Dead, swaying and groaning. The skeletons rattling back and forth, voiceless but somehow charismatic, gnashing their splintered teeth. There are dozens of them down there, swarming.

‘Keep you… safe.’

She looks up at me from her chair with an expression I can’t read. Her eyes are narrowed and her lips are tight, but it’s not exactly rage. ‘How do you know my name?’ she demands.

There it is. It had to come eventually.

‘In that building. You said my name, I remember it. How the *fuck* do you know my name?’

I make no attempt to answer. No way to explain what I know and how I know it, not with my kindergarten vocabulary and special-ed speech impediments. So I simply retreat, exiting the plane and trudging up the boarding tunnel, feeling more acutely than ever the limitations of what I am.

As I stand in Gate 12 considering where to go from here, I feel a touch on my shoulder. Julie is standing behind me. She stuffs her hands into the pockets of her tight black jeans, looking uncertain. ‘Just let me get out and walk around a little,’ she says. ‘I’m going crazy in that plane.’

I don’t answer. I look around the hallways.

‘Come on,’ she says. ‘I walked *in* here and nobody ate me. Let me go with you to get food. You don’t know what I like.’

This is… not entirely true. I know she loves pad thai. I know she drools over sushi. I know she has a weakness for greasy cheeseburgers, despite the Stadium’s rigorous fitness routines. But that knowledge is not mine to use. That knowledge is stolen.

I nod slowly and point at her. ‘Dead,’ I pronounce. I click my teeth and do an exaggerated zombie shuffle.

‘Okay,’ she says.

I lumber around in a circle with slow, shaky steps, letting out an occasional groan.

‘Got it.’

I take her by the wrist and lead her out into the hallway. I gesture in each direction, indicating the small cliques of zombies wandering in the dim morning shadows. I look her straight in the eyes. ‘Don’t… run.’

She crosses her heart. ‘Promise.’

Standing so close to her, I find that I can smell her again. She has wiped much of the black blood off her skin, and through the gaps I can detect traces of her life-energy. It bubbles out and sparkles like champagne, igniting flashes deep in the back of my sinuses. Still holding her gaze, I rub my palm into a recent gash on my forearm, and although it’s nearly dry now, I manage to collect a thin smear of blood. I slowly spread this ink on her cheek and down her neck. She shudders, but doesn’t pull away. She is, at the bottom of everything, a very smart girl.

‘Okay?’ I ask, raising my eyebrows.

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, cringes at the smell of my fluids, then nods. ‘Okay.’

I walk and she follows, stumbling along behind me and groaning every three or four steps. She is overdoing it, overacting like high school Shakespeare, but she will pass. We walk through crowds of Dead, shambling past us on both sides, and no one glances at us. To my amazement, Julie’s fear seems to be *diminishing* as we walk, despite the obvious peril of her situation. At a few points I catch her fighting a smile after letting out a particularly hammy moan. I smile too, making sure she doesn’t see me.

This is… new.

I take Julie to the food court, and she gives me an odd look when I immediately start moving towards the Thai restaurant. As we get closer she cringes and covers her nose. ‘Oh God,’ she moans. The warming bins in front are frothing with dried-up rot, dead maggots and mould. I’m pretty much impervious to odour by now, but judging by Julie’s expression, it’s foul. We dig around in the back room for a while, but the airport’s intermittent power means the freezers only work part-time, so everything inside is rancid. I head towards the burger joint. Julie gives me that quizzical look again and follows me. In the walk-in freezer we find a few burger patties that are currently cold, but have clearly been thawed and refrozen many times. Dead flies speckle the white freezer floor.

Julie sighs. ‘Well?’

I look off into the distance, thinking. The airport does have a sushi bar… but I remember a little about sushi, and if a few hours can spoil a fresh hamachi fillet, I don’t want to see what years can do.

‘God,’ Julie says as I stand there deliberating, ‘you really know how to plan a dinner date.’ She opens a few boxes of mouldy buns, wrinkles up her nose. ‘You’ve never done this before, have you? Taken a human home alive?’

I shake my head apologetically, but I wince at her use of the word ‘human’. I’ve never liked that differentiation. She is Living and I’m Dead, but I’d like to believe we’re both human. Call me an idealist.

I raise a finger as if to stall her. ‘One… more place.’

We walk to an unmarked side area of the food court. Several doors later, we’re in the airport’s central storage area. I prise open a freezer door and a cloud of icy air billows out. I hide my relief. This was starting to get awkward. We step inside and stand among shelves stacked high with in-flight meal trays.

‘What have we here…’ Julie says, and starts digging through the low shelves, inspecting the Salisbury steaks and processed potatoes. Thanks to whatever glorious preservatives they contain, the meals appear to be edible.

Julie scans the labels on the upper shelves she can’t reach and suddenly beams, showing rows of white teeth that childhood braces made perfect. ‘Look, pad thai! I love…’ She trails off, looking at me uneasily. She points to the shelf. ‘I’ll have that.’

I stretch over her head and grab an armful of frozen pad thai. I don’t want any of the Dead to see Julie eating this lifeless waste, these empty calories, so I lead her to a table hidden behind some collapsed postcard kiosks. I try to steer her as far away from the School as possible, but we can still hear the wretched screams echoing down the halls. Julie keeps her face utterly placid during even the shrillest wails, doing everything short of whistling a tune to show that she doesn’t notice the carnage. Is this for my benefit, or hers?

We sit down at the cafe table and I set one of the meal trays in front of her. ‘En… joy,’ I say.

She jabs at the frozen-solid noodles with a plastic fork. She looks at me. ‘You really don’t remember much, do you? How long has it been since you ate real food?’

I shrug.

‘How long has it been since you… died or whatever?’

I tap a finger against my temple and shake my head.

She looks me over. ‘Well, it can’t have been very long. You look pretty good for a corpse.’

I wince again at her language, but I realise she can’t possibly know the sensitive cultural connotations of the word ‘corpse’. M uses it sometimes as a joke, and I use it myself in some of my darker moments, but coming from an outsider it ignites a defensive indignation she wouldn’t understand. I breathe deep and let it go.

‘Anyway, I can’t eat it like this,’ she says, pushing her plastic fork into the food until one of the tines snaps. ‘I’m going to go find a microwave. Hold on.’

She gets up and wanders into one of the empty restaurants. She has forgotten her shamble, and her hips sway rhythmically. It’s risky, but I find myself not caring.

‘Here we go,’ she says when she comes back, taking a deep whiff of spicy steam. ‘Mmm. I haven’t had Thai in for ever. We don’t do real food at the Stadium any more, just basic nutrition and Carbtein. Carbtein tablets, Carbtein powder, Carbtein *juice* . Jesus H. Gross.’ She sits down and takes a bite of freezer-burned tofu. ‘Oh wow. That’s almost *tasty* .’

I sit there and watch her eat. I notice she seems to be having trouble getting the clumpy, congealed noodles down her throat. I fetch a lukewarm bottle of beer from the restaurant’s cooler and set it on the table.

Julie stops eating and looks at the bottle. She looks at me and smiles. ‘Why, Mr Zombie, you read my mind.’ She twists off the cap and takes a long drink. ‘I haven’t had beer in a while, either. No mind-altering substances allowed in the Stadium. Have to stay alert at all times, stay vigilant, blah blah blah.’ She takes another drink and gives me an appraising look laced with sarcasm. ‘Maybe you’re not such a monster, Mr Zombie. I mean, anyone who appreciates a good beer is at least halfway okay in my book.’

I look at her and hold a hand to my chest. ‘My… name…’ I wheeze, but can’t think how to continue.

She sets the beer down and leans forward a little. ‘You have a name?’

I nod.

Her lip curls in an amused half-smile. ‘What’s your name?’

I close my eyes and think hard, trying to pull it out of the void, but I’ve tried this so many times before. ‘Rrr,’ I say, trying to pronounce it.

‘Rur? Your name is Rur?’

I shake my head. ‘Rrrrr…’

‘Rrr? It starts with R?’

I nod.

‘Robert?’

I shake my head.

‘Rick? Rodney?’

I shake my head.

‘Uh… Rambo?’

I let out a sigh and look at the table.

‘How about I just call you “R”? That’s a start, right?’

My eyes dart to hers. ‘R.’ A slow smile creeps across my face.

‘Hi, R,’ she says. ‘I’m Julie. But you knew that already, didn’t you. Guess I’m a fucking celebrity.’ She nudges the beer towards me. ‘Have a drink.’

I eye the bottle for a second, feeling a strange kind of nausea at the thought of what’s inside. Dark amber emptiness. Lifeless piss. But I don’t want to ruin this improbably warm moment with my stupid undead hang-ups. I accept the beer and take a long pull. I can feel it trickling through tiny perforations in my stomach and dampening my shirt. And to my amazement, I can feel a slight buzz spreading through my brain. This isn’t possible, of course, since I have no blood-stream for the alcohol to enter, but I feel it anyway. Is it psychosomatic? Maybe a distant memory of the drinking experience left over from my old life? If so, apparently I was a lightweight.

Julie grins at my stupefied expression. ‘Drink up,’ she says. ‘I’m actually more of a wine girl anyway.’

I take another pull. I can taste her raspberry lip gloss on the rim. I find myself imagining her dolled up for a concert, her neck-length hair swept and styled, her small body radiant in a red party dress, and me kissing her, the lipstick smearing onto my mouth, spreading bright rouge onto my grey lips…

I slide the bottle a safe distance away from me.

Julie chuckles and returns to her food. She pokes at it for a few minutes, ignoring my presence at the table. I’m about to make a doomed attempt at small talk when she looks up at me, all traces of joviality gone from her face, and says, ‘So, “R”. Why are you keeping me here?’

The question hits me like a surprise slap. I look at the ceiling. I gesture around at the airport in general, towards the distant groans of my fellow Dead. ‘Keep you safe.’

‘Bullshit.’

There is silence. She looks at me hard. My eyes retreat.

‘Listen,’ she says. ‘I get that you saved my life back there in the city. And I guess I’m grateful for that. So, yeah. Thanks for saving my life. Or sparing my life. Whatever. But you walked me *into* this place, I’m sure you could walk me out. So again: why are you keeping me here?’

Her eyes are like hot irons on the side of my face, and I realise I can’t escape. I put a hand on my chest, over my heart. My ‘heart’. Does that pitiful organ still represent anything? It lies motionless in my chest, pumping no blood, serving no purpose, and yet my feelings still seem to originate inside its cold walls. My muted sadness, my vague longing, my rare flickers of joy. They pool in the centre of my chest and seep out from there, diluted and faint, but real.

I press my hand against my heart. Then I reach slowly towards Julie, and press against hers. Somehow, I manage to meet her eyes.

She looks down at my hand, then gives me a dry stare. ‘Are you. Fucking. Kidding me.’

I withdraw my hand and drop my eyes to the table, grateful that I’m incapable of blushing. ‘Need… to wait,’ I mumble. ‘They… think you’re… new convert. They’ll notice.’

‘How long?’

‘Few… days. They’ll… forget.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ she sighs, and covers her eyes with her hand, shaking her head.

‘You’ll… be okay,’ I tell her. ‘Promise.’

She ignores this. She pulls an iPod out of her pocket and stuffs the earbuds into her ears. She returns to her food, listening to music that’s just a faint hiss to me.

This date is not going well. Once again the absurdity of my inner thoughts overwhelms me, and I want to crawl out of my skin, escape my ugly, awkward flesh and be a skeleton, naked and anonymous. I’m about to stand up and leave when Julie pulls a bud out of one ear and gives me a squinting, penetrating look. ‘You’re… different, aren’t you?’ she says.

I don’t respond.

‘Because I’ve never heard a zombie talk, other than “brains!” and all that silly groaning. And I’ve never seen a zombie take any interest in humans beyond eating them. I’ve *definitely* never had one buy me a drink. Are there… others like you?’

Again I feel the urge to blush. ‘Don’t… know.’

She pushes her noodles around the plate. ‘A few days,’ she repeats.

I nod.

‘What am I supposed to do here till it’s safe to run away? I hope you don’t expect me to just sit in your housejet taking blood baths all week.’

I think for a moment. A rainbow of images floods my head, probably snippets of old movies I’ve seen, all sappy and romantic and utterly impossible. I have got to get ahold of myself.

‘I’ll… entertain,’ I say eventually, and offer an unconvincing smile. ‘You are… guest.’

She rolls her eyes and resumes eating. The second earbud is still sitting on the table. Without looking up from her plate she casually offers it to me. I stick it in my ear, and the voice of Paul McCartney drifts into my head, singing all those wistful antonyms, yes/no, high/low, hello/goodbye/hello.

‘You know John Lennon hated this song?’ Julie says as it plays, speaking in my direction but not really addressing me. ‘He thought it was meaningless gibberish. Funny coming from the guy who wrote “I Am the Walrus”.’

‘Goo goo… g’joob,’ I say.

She stops, looks at me, tilts her head in pleasant surprise. ‘Yeah, exactly, right?’ She takes a sip of the beer, forgetting the imprint of my lips on the bottle, and my eyes widen in brief panic. But nothing happens. Maybe my infection can’t travel through soft moments like these. Maybe it needs the violence of the bite.

‘Anyway,’ she says, ‘it’s a little too chipper for me right now.’ She skips the song. I hear a brief snippet of Ava Gardner singing ‘Bill’, then she skips a few more times, lands on an unfamiliar rock tune, and cranks the volume. I’m distantly aware of the music, but I have tuned out. I watch Julie bob her head from side to side with eyes closed. Even now, here, in the darkest and strangest of places with the most macabre of company, the music moves her and her life pulses hard. I smell it again, a white glowing vapour wafting out from under my black blood. And even for Julie’s safety, I can’t bring myself to smother it.

What is wrong with me? I stare at my hand, at its pale grey flesh, cool and stiff, and I dream it pink, warm and supple, able to guide and build and caress. I dream my necrotic cells shrugging off their lethargy, inflating and lighting up like Christmas deep in my dark core. Am I inventing all this like the beer buzz? A placebo? An optimistic illusion? Either way, I feel the flatline of my existence disrupting, forming heartbeat hills and valleys.