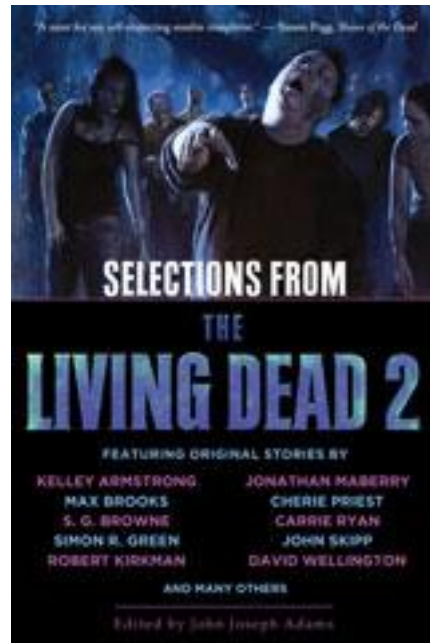


# Selections from The Living Dead 2



## Advance Praise for The Living Dead 2

“A must for any self respecting zombie completist.”

—Simon Pegg, *Shaun of the Dead*

“You don’t have to be a zombie-lover to enjoy this outstanding follow-up to 2008’s *The Living Dead*. Anthologist extraordinaire Adams has assembled 44 stories that showcase strong writing and imagination. ... Readers will hope for many further additions to the series even after the zombie craze passes.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (Starred Review)

“I described *The Living Dead* as the best collection of zombie fiction stories ever collected—this follow-up anthology is even better.”

—Paul Goat Allen, Barnes & Noble.com

“Like its predecessor, *The Living Dead 2* truly is one of the great zombie short story collections out there and you are definitely getting a lot of bang for your buck here! Kudos to editor John Joseph Adams for putting together another memorable anthology sure to delight zombie and horror fans everywhere!”

—*Fatally Yours*

“I proclaimed [*The Living Dead*] the best zombie anthology I’d ever read. Well, there’s a new anthology due in September that actually surpasses *The Living Dead*—and it’s *The Living Dead 2*! ... There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that *The Living Dead 2*, and all who contributed to her, will be well-represented across the various genre literature awards over the next year. In the meantime, zombie aficionados should place this publication at the very top of their Want List, above firearms, bottled water, and chainsaws.”

—*HorrorScope*

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*The Book of Cthulhu*

# **Edited by John Joseph Adams**

**Night Shade Books  
San Francisco**

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# Introduction

## By John Joseph Adams

**T**urns out, zombies *really* don't want to die.

When Night Shade Books and I put the first *The Living Dead* anthology together a couple years ago (which I will refer to hereafter as *Volume One*), we had the sense that zombies would be big, but I don't think any of us realized just *how big* they would become.

When the book actually came out in September of 2008, it seemed like the timing was perfect, that we would be hitting right at the crest of the zombie's popularity. But now it looks like they've only become *more* popular in the intervening period, spreading throughout an unsuspecting population like zombiism itself.

In the last couple years there have been a slew of new zombie entertainments released, across all media. There have been new movies (*Quarantine*, *REC*<sup>2</sup>, *Deadgirl*, *Diary of the Dead*, *Survival of the Dead*, *Dead Snow*, *Zombie Strippers*, *Zombieland*); video games (*Plants vs. Zombies*, *Dead Rising 2*, *Dead Space*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Left 4 Dead 2*); and a veritable *horde* of books (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and its sequel, books from several of the contributors to this anthology, and even a *Star Wars* zombie novel called *Death Troopers*). *Plus*, a film adaptation is in the works for Max Brooks's *World War Z*, and Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* is being made into a television series.

And all of that's just off the top of my head—if I wanted to make an extensive list, I'm sure it could be ten times longer. If you were inclined to have zombies in all of your entertainment, I expect you'd have very little trouble finding things to watch, play, or read, all of them chock-full of zombie mayhem.

But since zombies have continued to dominate the popular consciousness—and *Volume One* was so popular with readers and critics—it was an easy decision to do a second volume of zombie stories; after all, even at 230,000 words, I couldn't fit everything I wanted to into the first book!

And while it's obvious that the public can't get enough of zombies, well, I guess it's just as obvious neither can I.

Let's talk a bit about this anthology in particular, and how it is similar to and different from *Volume One*.

*Volume One* was comprised entirely of reprints (except for one original story, by John Langan), but this volume is mostly original with a mix of selected reprints. Twenty-five of the forty-four stories appear for the first time in this anthology.

With the popularity of zombies infecting the pop culture like it has, more writers than ever have been itching to try their hand at a zombie story, so it was not difficult to find writers eager to participate in the book. I asked some of the top names in zombie fiction—Max Brooks (*World War Z*), Robert Kirkman (*The Walking Dead*), David Wellington (*Monster Island*), Brian Keene (*The Rising*), and others—along with some bestsellers and rising stars of the science fiction, fantasy, and horror fields—to write me original stories. And boy did they deliver.

For *Volume One*, I chose stories that I felt represented the best of the best and together

showcased the range of what zombie fiction was capable of. This time around, because my intent was to include the best *new* stories, I focused on finding the best material that had never previously appeared in a zombie anthology before. So while nineteen of the stories are reprints, there's a good chance that—even if you're a hardcore zombie fan—they'll be entirely new to you.

To bring this introduction to a close, let's bring it back to where it started: Why *are* zombies so appealing?

Since *Volume One* came out, that's one of my most frequently asked questions. (It's kind of a curious question, as if there's some reason zombies *shouldn't* be popular. Do people ask NFL football players why football is so popular?)

I can't claim to know exactly why it is that people love zombies so much, but there are a number of common theories about their popularity.

Zombies are:

- ☐ an enemy that used to be us, that we can become at any time;
- ☐ a canvas writers can use to comment on almost anything;
- ☐ a morality-free way to fulfill a world-destruction fantasy;
- ☐ a monster that remains scary and cannot be easily romanticized.

I'm sure that's all part of it, and we could continue to speculate *ad nauseam*—I'm sure there are dissertations being written on the subject as we speak. But one thing is clear: Zombies aren't going to be dying off any time soon, and we'd better learn how to live with them.

# Mouja

## By Matt London

Matt London is an author and filmmaker who lives in New York City. He is a graduate of the Clarion Writers Workshop, and a columnist for Tor.com. This story is his first piece of published fiction. He has no less than three escape plans should the zombies take Manhattan.

The samurai were a warrior caste in feudal Japan who wore distinctive armor and often fought with a sword in either hand, one long (a katana or tachi) and one short (a wakizashi or tantō). Though they were feared because they had the authority to execute any commoner who displeased them, they were bound by a strict code of honor—Bushido—which demanded they commit seppuku—ritual suicide—should they dishonor themselves.

Samurai have had a massive impact on popular culture, everything from westerns (*The Magnificent Seven* and *A Fistful of Dollars* are remakes of Akira Kurosawa samurai movies) to *Star Wars* (the film is heavily influenced by the Kurosawa film *Hidden Fortress*, and Darth Vader's helmet is modeled after a samurai helmet).

Our next story explores what happens when these highly trained soldiers face off against their first horde of zombies. The author says, "Lore would have us believe that samurai were almost superhuman in their devotion, but of course people are people. I wanted to create a character who is a slave to what he is, much as the zombies are slaves to what they are. I studied film at NYU, where I had a passionate interest in Kurosawa and horror cinema. *Seven Samurai* essentially has the same plot as most zombie movies: protagonists improve the defenses of a location, deal with social problems among the survivors, and then fight off the horde."

London's primary resource in writing the story was the *Hagakure* by Tsunetomo Yamamoto, a samurai how-to pamphlet written in the eighteenth century. Its opening line is: "I have found the essence of Bushido: to die! In other words, when you have a choice between life and death, then always choose death." Which somehow seems appropriate as a lead-in to a zombie story.

From the window of his guard hut, Takashi Shimada watched the trees. Three of the mouja lurked at the edge of the forest on the far side of the rice paddies. Takashi could just make out their shapes through the thick misty rain that made the flooded paddies seem to boil. Two of the figures at the edge of the forest were men in muddy tunics, caked with blood; the third was a woman, her kimono shamelessly open. Takashi watched, waiting, as the shadowy figures shambled toward the village. It did not matter if they traveled one mile per day or a hundred. The dead were coming, and they carried with them a hunger for human flesh. A loud twang pierced the silence, like the string of a shamisen harshly plucked; an arrow whizzed through the air, cutting through raindrops as they fell to the earth. It struck one of the men in the forehead, splitting his rotting skull like a ripe kabocha. Undeterred, the other mouja lumbered forward as the man's body fell to the ground in a heap. In the next hut over, Seiji stood motionless, unwavering since letting the arrow fly, his falcon eyes peering into the distance. Takashi wondered if Seiji was admiring his precise shot, or if his mind was elsewhere, asking himself why he had come to this inconsequential farming village to fight these monsters. All of the samurai had doubted their mission since arriving at the village, though none of them shared their concern with the others—such behavior was unbecoming of a samurai. Seiji finally lowered his bow, then knelt on the ground. After a moment of silent meditation, he



drew an arrow from his rabbit-hide quiver, nocked it, and rose to his feet once more.

When the mouja first arrived, it was discovered they only fell when struck directly in the head by an arrow, sword, or spear. Takashi recalled the samurai's confusion as they watched the creatures approach the village looking like blowfish, their bodies riddled with arrows. Seiji's technique was so precise he never wasted an arrow. When only a few wandering mouja appeared at a time, the other samurai left it to him to eliminate the threat.

Watching the fluid elegance of Seiji's ritual put Takashi at peace. Seiji raised the bow so that the horizontal shaft of the arrow was level with his eyes. He extended his hands, his movement loose and calm. His knuckles were curved, as if he held two tiny teacups in his fingers.

Had Takashi been the one holding Seiji's bow, he would have found it difficult to fire at a woman. He might have needed Seiji to place a nimble hand on his shoulder and remind him that it was not a woman anymore.

Seiji's drawing hand opened like the wing of a bird, and with remarkable grace he let the arrow fly. It was a perfect shot. The arrowhead pierced the woman's eye, erupted out the back of her skull, and passed through the remaining man's eye socket as well. The arrow continued on, finally coming to rest in the soggy bark of a lilac tree.

Takashi looked away, feeling the vomit crawl up his throat. He wondered whose grandmother, dead and buried years before, that had been. He wondered whose father, too slow to escape the mouja, had just been defiled.

In this new world, Bushido was just a specter lurking in the dark caves of samurai minds. Takashi knew a curse had fallen over the five islands, that none could die without rising as a perverse rotting thing, mindless and hungry for flesh. To obey the honor laws was to set a place for Death at one's own table.

Edo, Kyoto—for all Takashi knew all of the major cities had already fallen. This little village would have been defenseless. But the farmers had known that the mouja were on their way, so they had sought out a champion.

They had found Takashi at a trading post and begged him to take up their cause. It was a hopeless task. They needed an army to stand a chance. But hell was coming, and honor dictated it is better to go down fighting, protecting those who could not protect themselves. Bushido or no, doing anything was better than sitting around and drinking sake, awaiting the inevitable. So Takashi had agreed, and recruited a few other ronin to join him in protecting the town.

"Look alive," Seiji called from his window. The words were a suggestion as much as a greeting. "I am going to retrieve my arrows. You never know when we may need more than we have. Shout if you see anything that needs killing."

Seiji bounded from the hut and splashed across the rice paddies, the rain beating down on his gray cloak. When he reached the three mouja corpses, Seiji checked to make sure they were truly dead by prodding them with his katana. Takashi marveled. He had not even seen Seiji draw his sword. Other samurai had been recruited to defend the village, but Takashi would have traded any two of them for another Seiji. He was more dangerous with a fish knife than the others were with swords.

Days earlier, Isao, the youngest among the samurai protecting the village, had been watching Seiji's unmatched accuracy at work. "Your aim is perfect every time," he had said. "What is the trick?"

"The trick," Seiji had said, "is not caring if you hit the target."

The rain stopped. As the sound of roaring water faded, Takashi came out of his reverie. On the edge of the forest, Seiji was examining his arrows. One shaft had broken two inches below the fletching, so Seiji snapped off the arrowhead and kept it. The other arrow—the one that had killed two mouja with one shot—was fine once the gore was stripped off.

After sliding the arrow into his quiver, Seiji started back across the paddy field, but then suddenly froze. His ears pricked up, and he looked like a thirsty buck at a stream. From his expression the

cause of his concern was clear: he was being hunted.

With the slightest motion of his head, Seiji turned. Takashi followed his gaze. Through the trees he could see a chubby, bearded man wearing a leather armor breastplate and deerskin chaps, with a brown bandana around his head. His face was ashen, his eyes the color of bird droppings. The man's left arm and his teeth were missing, and aropy line of blood and saliva dribbled from his mouth.

If not for the beloved hatchet slung across the man's back, Takashi never would have believed it was Minoru. Poor Minoru, the first of the samurai to fall, had now vacated the funeral mound where the others had buried him. He stood leaning against a tree, staring at Seiji with a hungry mouth and those swirling eyes. All of his good humor was gone. Only the hunger remained.

Seiji raised his sword into a medium stance and looked at Takashi as if to ask "Should I?" Takashi had to tell himself that this creature was no more Minoru than a palace raided by bandits was still a king's home. Minoru's mind had new tenants. Takashi nodded to Seiji, then looked away. He shut his eyes as he heard the heavy thud of Minoru's severed head hitting the ground.

As Seiji returned to Takashi's hut, the young samurai Isao came running up to the rear window. "Masters! Masters! Come quickly!" he shouted. "The villagers—there was something they didn't tell us about the outlying homesteads. We just found out, there's a hunting lodge about an hour's walk from the center of town. Long walls, strong wooden building. Apparently, an old woodsman used to live there, but he died a few years ago. Master Takashi, Master Seiji, the farmers say there are rifles hidden in the lodge. Master Toshiro wants to go get the rifles. Do you think the rifles will fend off the mouja?"

Takashi and Seiji ordered two farmers to take their posts and followed Isao to the town square. On the way, they passed the fields where old men and women not fit for sentry duty were up to their elbows in murky water. They harvested the rice impassively. These farmers were a simple people, simple and simple-minded. They had no music, no art, no higher purpose. All they cared for was the harvest, and they would defend the harvest at any cost. Their only drive was to feed their families.

Daisuke, Toshiro, and the mayor were waiting for the other samurai by the old well in the center of town. The situation was as Isao had described. Toshiro was shouting at the mayor, furious that he had not told the samurai about the rifles.

But of course the farmers had kept it secret. In tough times, samurai could be just as greedy as the mouja, consume just as much. Ronin were known to burn villages, rape daughters, steal property, and even kill men for no reason.

Daisuke was in favor of retrieving the rifles, but not so close to dark. Toshiro and Isao wanted to fetch them right away—Toshiro for the adventure, Isao out of fear. The young one did not think they would last the night without stronger arms.

Takashi agreed with Daisuke. At least three samurai would have to go to the hunter's lodge, and leaving the village's defenses so thin at night would be suicide.

Toshiro slapped the ground with both hands. "Don't you see? You fool! With those rifles, we could fight them from a safe distance. We lost Minoru because he was forced to get close to the mouja and draw his sword. Rifles can be fired from a safer distance than bows. We must retrieve these weapons now. The boy is right. The sun sinks quickly; the darkness calls those foul things like a hungry dog to supper. We need the guns."

In the hope that Seiji could sort out this mess, Takashi turned to receive the skilled warrior's advice, but when he looked, the samurai was gone. This argument was not his concern. Slaying the foul creatures and protecting the villagers were all that mattered to him. So Takashi was the deciding vote. He was the leader, after all. They would wait until morning, and at dawn's first light, he, Daisuke, and Isao would set out for the hunter's lodge to retrieve the guns.

Day turned to dusk, and the sun splattered the western ridge with fire. Takashi squinted at the

horizon. The silhouettes of the monsters looked like scarecrows, jutting up from the crest of the hill overlooking the village.

"Master Takashi! Master Takashi!" Isao again. He ran up to Takashi, breathless. "It is Toshiro, master. He told me he was going off to the hunter's lodge alone. He is going for the guns."

Takashi felt his stomach tighten into a thick knot. They could not spare a man. Without assistance, Toshiro would be lost, and with him the village. Takashi ordered Isao to take his bow and join Daisuke at the barricade. He posted most of the townspeople at the river, where the water would slow the creatures enough for the farmers to pierce them with their spears.

Takashi then ran to Seiji's post to tell him what had happened, and together, their swords glinting in the light of the setting sun, they made for the hunter's lodge.

Regret crept into Takashi's mind. To leave the village when so many mouja were on the move, when so few villagers were primed to defend...the desertion shamed him. His fear, unbecoming of a samurai, fogged his mind all the way through the woods.

On occasion, Seiji halted their progress and drew his sword just long enough to finish off the mouja that lay tangled in ferns along the path. "It is fortunate we have encountered so few on this journey," Seiji said as he wiped his blade clean. "If our luck holds up, Toshiro may still be alive when we find him."

As they walked, Takashi noticed groves of flowers lined the hillsides. The trees had white, pink, and yellow blossoms, each dripping gemstones of rain. The samurai's thoughts wandered back to the village. Hopefully the farmers had picked up the patrols Seiji and he were missing. The farmers' vigilance would be integral to their survival. If they kept the watch, they might just make it through the night. Apprehension coiled around Takashi's throat like a serpent. He should have left Seiji in charge of the village's defense, and taken Daisuke with him to the lodge.

But the truth was Takashi feared what hid in the ever-darkening woodland. His concern for his own life and the knowledge that Seiji was at his side kept him feeling safe, so he chanced to leave the village with weakened defenses and tried to stay optimistic. Perhaps they would retrieve Toshiro and the rifles, return safely, and defend the village with great success. His gamble still might pay off.

They stepped through a small grove of trees and saw the hunter's lodge in the distance. The building was the same width as the farmers' cottages, but three times as long, about the size of a small barn. Seiji stepped cautiously toward the building.

"I smell blood," Takashi said, but Seiji ignored the warning and entered the lodge. Takashi sniffed the air, scanning the trees.

Inside, the floor was sprinkled with dry hay. Tanned animal skins hung from the walls. A dusty bedroll took up one corner of the room. A hunched figure, bathed in shadow, crept around the far side of the lodge. A large clay pot smashed to the floor as the figure tore open a storage crate. He pulled out a long stiff bundle wrapped in blankets and began to unravel it.

"Toshiro?" Takashi called out.

The rugged samurai turned to face them. The barrels of three muskets were visible in his arms. He grinned, his teeth flashing in the darkness, and laughed a monkey's laugh. "You see this?" He spat on the floor. "With these we can take out those filthy mouja for sure. And you were going to let them just sit here and collect dust. Ha!"

Takashi was about to reprimand the stubborn fool when Seiji said, "We must go at once." He made for the door.

The instant Seiji opened the door he slammed it shut again. He took a pitchfork from a rack of tools on the wall and slid it through the door handles, barring the entrance. "They are upon us," Seiji said. "At least twenty. Load those muskets. We must fight!"

A cacophony sounded outside the lodge. Rotting fists banged on the walls, the windows, the door, even the ceiling. Takashi could hear unbearable suffering in their groans. The creatures were

starving.

The samurai each grabbed a rifle. Seiji swiped Toshiro's weapon away from him. "We do not have the time or ammunition to teach you how to aim." Carrying a gun in each hand, Seiji ran to the window and fired the first rifle, then took the other and slew a second mouja.

Takashi aimed out the window on the opposite side of the lodge and fired into the crowd assembled there. The lead ball struck one of the mouja in the throat. The creature gurgled and kept moving forward. Takashi gritted his teeth and stabbed the wounded mouja in the head, using the barrel of the musket as a spear. It collapsed outside the window, dropping from view.

Seiji tossed the two muskets to Toshiro. "Reload," he demanded, drawing his sword. A flash of glinting steel left three of the dead in pieces outside Seiji's window.

Takashi released his second round, incapacitating another mouja so only an infinite number remained. Behind him, he heard Toshiro fumble with the ramrod, trying to pack the gunpowder into place. As soon as he finished, Seiji snatched the muskets, then aimed them out the window and fired off two quick shots.

"I would also like to fight. I am not your student!" Toshiro barked as Takashi hurried to the center of the room to load another round.

Seiji grabbed Takashi's rifle and threw it to the ground. He kicked the muskets from Toshiro's hands, sending them skittering across the floor. "Forget it," Seiji said. "It is no use. Takashi, Toshiro, draw your swords for the last time. Better we go down fighting with steel in our hands."

But the despair of Seiji's words only seemed to energize their blades. Takashi rushed to the window and began to jab and thrust, piercing the brains of any mouja close enough to strike. Toshiro and Seiji matched Takashi's tactic. They struck down dozens in this way, and the bodies piled up in front of the windows, obstructing the approach of the others.

"Ha ha!" Toshiro whooped. "We're making our own barricade of flesh. Perverse, but effective!"

Time moved fast in the thick of battle. Bodies accumulated in three mounds outside the windows of the lodge. Before long, the windows were covered completely.

With the windows blocked, the chamber darkened and the foul noises dampened, but the smell...the smell penetrated them. It saturated their clothes and skin, even their topknots. The samurai retched at the overwhelming reek of death. Even Seiji was not immune.

Takashi covered his nose. "Perhaps the smell will fool them into moving on. If we wait, they might pass by, leaving us behind, so we may escape."

Toshiro appeared hopeful, but Seiji gave them a skeptical look. "I am sorry, my friends. But the only way we are leaving here is mindless and hungry."

A noise broke the silence, louder than before, but it was something different, not the groaning of the creatures. Takashi looked up and wiped his blade. It was coming from the ceiling. The wooden-slatted roof creaked and shifted under the weight of something.

"Is that the wind?" Toshiro asked.

"No," Seiji said. "Them."

The roof collapsed in a hail of splinters and bodies. The samurai screamed, squinting against the flurry, and flailed their weapons. They hacked at the waterfall of ghouls that rained down on them from above. Black blood splattered the walls—the hunting lodge became a butcher shop.

As the bodies continued to fall to the floor, quick strikes from the samurai's blades destroyed them. Takashi leaped into the air, attacking the mouja before they could drop down into the lodge. He stabbed the head of one of them, and the body brought his weapon to the floor as it dropped. As he struggled to remove his sword from the skull of one of the fallen, he chanced a look up, and saw a mouja dangling above him, about to fall. Seiji cried out Takashi's name and pushed his comrade out of the way. He grappled with the mouja as it fell upon him.

Toshiro hurried to the rescue. He stood over them, following the mouja's head with the tip of his blade. The thing was a young man, no older than nineteen. Toshiro pushed his blade straight through the young man's ear...but it wasn't really a young man anymore. It was a dead thing.

Seiji sat up, clutching his bloody hands. The creature had bitten off the third and fourth fingers of

his left hand. He glanced at Takashi expectantly. Toshiro backed away, waiting for Takashi to make a move.

Takashi had always viewed Seiji with a certain invincibility, and seeing him in that state, unable to shoot, barely able to wield a katana, it set Takashi's heart on the edge of a blade.

Seiji howled. His body snapped rigid and flailed about on the floor. His muscles hardened, his skin turned to the color of the ocean depths, and his eyes clouded like dirty cubes of ice. He emitted one last sound, a sound like steel against a rough stone. Beneath the grating noise, Takashi discerned a single word—kaishakunin.

Seiji retained none of his masterful dexterity in the afterlife. His stiff legs fought to propel him forward, limping and forcing every jerky step. His arms dangled. His fingers could not flex. His sword forgotten, Seiji's mouth and shredded fingers dripped dark blood as they reached for Takashi.

Was Seiji's final word a request? Kaishakunin. When a samurai committed seppuku, the kaishakunin served as the principal's second; once the samurai had disemboweled himself, the kaishakunin decapitated the principal to alleviate the immense pain. It was a difficult job, physically and emotionally. Was this what Seiji asked of Takashi? It sickened him to think of destroying a great warrior such as this. To kill a friend.

Seiji lunged at Takashi with a growl. Takashi's blade flashed.

For all of Seiji's proficiencies, his neck was no thicker than any other man's. His head rolled into a dark corner of the room.

The silence that followed unnerved the remaining samurai. Takashi opened the door and inspected the area surrounding the lodge. There were bodies all around, but the rest of the mouja appeared to have vanished.

Toshiro wrapped the muskets in the belt and blanket the way he had found them and strapped the parcel over his shoulder. "They may still be useful," Toshiro said as he joined Takashi outside the lodge, "from a distance."

Takashi was too stunned to lead the way, so Toshiro guided him back to the village. The forest was dark. Without a torch, Takashi had no idea where they were going. He was amazed that Toshiro was able to find the right direction, weaving between trees, dodging exposed roots, and not once did they come across what they both feared—more of the mouja. Takashi's thoughts were of Seiji, the elegant work of art that he had been forced to destroy. No. That he had chosen to destroy. There must have been a way Takashi could have saved Seiji, or at least preserved him in his undead state long enough to find a cure for this illness. The wound was superficial. With skill such as his, a few short digits would not have slowed Seiji for long.

A pain twisted in Takashi's stomach again, a dull rotting pain, tying his guts into knots. It was tragic, really, what happened to Seiji. "Is there no honor left in this world?" Takashi shouted over the noise. There was a grumbling roar in the distance, growing louder. "A man such as Seiji deserved better. I should not have cut him down, Toshiro. I have dishonored myself. I must face consequences for that."

But no, Takashi thought. Seppuku was not the way. He had a mission. He had sworn an oath. It was his duty to protect these helpless farmers.

Toshiro was not listening. They had reached the ridge overlooking the town. Down in the pit, the town served one final purpose. It would act as a signal fire to warn neighboring villages that the swarm was on its way. The houses were all aflame, the air was polluted with acrid black smoke, and countless mouja prowled the streets. Takashi couldn't see any people. They must have been in the streets, among the mouja, driven only to feed on their families. Isao and Daisuke were nowhere to be found.

Looking down at the village, Takashi's heart sank. He fell to his knees and drew his tantō. Slowly and carefully, Takashi untied the sash of his kimono and pulled it open. He tucked the sleeves beneath his knees. He wanted to be sure to fall forward. "I swore to protect these people, Toshiro, and I have failed. This is my fault."

"This is no one's fault," Toshiro said.

"It was my decision to leave the village, and this is the result. Toshiro, you will have to be my kaishakunin. Once I make the cut, be very quick and careful. I do not want to return as one of those things. When I am gone, hurry to the next village. You are fast in the dark. Perhaps you can warn them before those creatures arrive."

Toshiro sneered. He grabbed Takashi by the collar. "No. I will not allow you to do this. Better we go down fighting with steel in our hands. Besides, two samurai with katanas are more powerful than the tallest tsunami. We will take many of them with us. We may even find survivors.

Takashi's eyes met Toshiro's intense gaze. Where Seiji had skill, Toshiro had spirit. Takashi held out his hand; Toshiro grasped his arm and pulled him to his feet. They drew their swords, walking with deliberate steps down the ridge. Their eyes glowed with fire. They navigated around the fallen bodies, cutting down mouja whenever one came near. Takashi whispered, "These poor farmers. They never stood a chance."

Toshiro spat. "It is their lot to suffer."

At the center of town, a crowd of mouja had congregated. Their shadows danced on the sandy ground like demons in the firelight. One thousand cloudy eyes found the samurai at once. The mouja charged. Takashi and Toshiro swung hard.

Blood and fire glinted on their blades.

# The Skull-Faced City

## By David Barr Kirtley

David Barr Kirtley has been described as “one of the newest and freshest voices in sf.” His work frequently appears in *Realms of Fantasy*, and he has also sold fiction to the magazines *Weird Tales* and *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, the podcasts *Escape Pod* and *Pseudopod*, and the anthologies *New Voices in Science Fiction*, *The Dragon Done It*, and *Fantasy: The Best of the Year*. I’ve previously published him in the first *The Living Dead* anthology and in my online science fiction magazine *Lightspeed*. He also has a story forthcoming in my anthology *The Way of the Wizard* that’s due out in November. Kirtley is also the co-host (with me) of the *Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy* podcast.

This story is a sequel to one that appeared in the first *The Living Dead* anthology. In “The Skull-Faced Boy,” Dustin and Jack, two recent college grads, die in a car accident and rise as intelligent zombies. Dustin—called “the skull-faced boy” due to his injuries—organizes hordes of mindless zombies into an army and declares war against the living, while Jack becomes his reluctant accomplice. Their rivalry over a girl named Ashley eventually leads Dustin to carve off her face as well.

When “The Skull-Faced Boy” appeared on the *Pseudopod* horror podcast, it was very well received, and several listeners requested more material set in the same universe. So it was in the back of Kirtley’s mind for a while to possibly expand the story into something longer. When I told him I was editing *The Living Dead 2*, I encouraged him to submit a sequel story.

“This is the first sequel I’ve written, and it’s hard,” Kirtley says. “For a long time I was stuck, since by the end of ‘The Skull-Faced Boy’ the conflicts and agendas of the characters are all pretty much on the table. My big break came when I considered creating a new main character, Park. And so as not to repeat myself, I made him completely different from my original protagonist, Jack. Jack is an ordinary young man, sensitive, kind of a doormat type, whereas Park is a very, very dangerous soldier.”

Park watched from his car as a pickup screeched to a halt in front of the supermarket. He’d known they would come. The armies of the living were on the march, and the living needed food. The pickup’s doors flew open and two figures leapt out—a black man and a blond woman. The man, who was older, maybe forty, carried a shotgun. He sprinted toward the store and the woman ran close behind him, her hands wrapped tight around a large silver pistol. The man threw open the entrance doors and vanished into the darkness while the woman waited outside, keeping watch. Smart. But it would not save them.

Park slipped from his car, his scoped rifle clutched to his chest. He crept forward, using abandoned cars as cover. Finally he lay down on the asphalt and leveled his rifle at the pickup.

A dead man in a green apron wandered around the side of the building. He spotted the woman, groaned exultantly, and stumbled toward her, his arms outstretched. The woman took aim at his forehead.

Park pulled the trigger at the same moment she did. The report of her pistol drowned out the soft pinging that his round made as it drilled a neat hole through her pickup’s gas tank. The dead man’s skull smacked against the pavement, and the woman lowered her gun. She didn’t notice the gas pooling beneath her truck.

Park sneaked back to his car and got in. He waited, watching as the woman took down several more of the moaning dead who strayed too close. Later her companion emerged, pushing a loaded shopping cart. The woman hurriedly tossed its contents into the bed of her truck while the man dashed to the store again. This was repeated several times. The commotion attracted an

ever-growing audience of moaners, which the woman eyed nervously.

Finally the man and woman leapt into their vehicle and peeled out. The pickup careened across the parking lot, and the dead men who staggered into its path were hurled aside or crushed beneath its tires.

Park donned his black ski mask, pulled his goggles down over his eyes, and started his car. He tailed the pickup along the highway, keeping his distance. When the truck rolled to a stop, he pulled over too and got out.

The man and woman fled from their vehicle and into a nearby field, which was crawling with the dead. Park followed them through the grass and into the woods. He watched through his scope as the pair expended the last of their ammo and tossed away their guns, and then they stood back to back and drew machetes against the clusters of moaners who continued to stumble from the trees all around.

Park approached, using his rifle to pick off the nearby dead men. One shot to each head, cleanly destroying each brain—what was left of them.

He pointed his rifle at the living man and shouted, “Drop it.”

The man shouted back, “Who are you? What do you want?”

Park shifted his aim to the woman and said, “Now. I only need one of you alive.”

“Wait!” the man said. “Damn it.” He tossed his machete into the brush. “There. Okay?”

“And you,” Park told the woman. She hesitated, then flung her weapon away as well.

Park said, “Turn around. Kneel. Hands on your heads.”

They complied. Park strode forward and handcuffed them both. “Up,” he said. “Move.”

The pair stood, and marched. The woman glanced back at Park.

“Eyes front,” he ordered.

She gasped. “Oh my god.” To the man she hissed frantically, “He’s one of them! The ones that can talk.”

The man turned to stare too, his face full of terror.

“Eyes front!” Park shouted.

The man and woman looked away. After a minute, the woman said quietly, “Are you going to eat us?”

“I don’t intend to,” Park said.

“So why do you want us?” she asked.

“It’s not me that wants you,” Park answered.

“Who does then?” the man demanded.

For a long moment Park said nothing. Then he removed his goggles, exposing dark sockets and two huge eyeballs threaded with veins. He yanked off his ski mask, revealing a gaping nose cavity, bone-white forehead and cheeks—a horrific skull-visage.

“You’ll see,” he said.

As dusk fell Park drove down a long straight road that passed between rows of corn. In the fields, dead men with skull faces wielded scythes against the stalks.

“Crops,” said the man in the back seat. “Those are crops.”

Beside him the woman said, “What do the dead need with food?”

“To feed the living,” Park answered.

For the first time her voice held a trace of hope. “So we’ll be kept alive?”

“Some are, it would seem,” Park said.

And Mei? he wondered. He just didn’t know.

In front of his car loomed the necropolis, its walls clumsy constructions of stone, twenty feet high. Crews of skull-faced men listlessly piled on more rocks.

The woman watched this, her jaw slack. She murmured, “What happened to your faces?”

Park glanced at her in the rearview mirror. The car bounced over a pothole, and the mirror trembled as he answered, “Faces are vanity. The dead are beyond such things.”



He pulled to a stop before a gap in the stone wall. The dirty yellow side of a school bus blocked his way. He rolled down his window.

From the shadows emerged one of the dead, a guard. This one did have a face—nose and cheeks and forehead—though the flesh was green and mottled. A rifle hung from his shoulder. He shined a flashlight at Park, then at the captives.

“For the Commander,” Park said.

The guard waved at someone in the bus, the vehicle rumbled forward out of the way, and Park drove on through.

The woman said, “That one had a face.”

“That one is weak,” Park snapped. “Still enamored with the trappings of life. And so here he is, far from the Commander’s favor.”

Park drove down a narrow causeway bordered on both sides by chain-link fences. Every few minutes he passed a tall steel pole upon which was mounted a loudspeaker. Beyond the fences, scores of moaners wandered aimlessly in the light of the setting sun. The man and woman lapsed again into silence. Plainly they could see that this army of corpses presented a formidable obstacle to either escape or rescue.

Park remembered the first time he’d come here, almost three months ago, pursuing a trail of clues. Upon beholding the necropolis his first thought had been: The city that never sleeps.

He passed through another gate and into a large courtyard. “End of the line,” he said as he opened the door and got out.

A group of uniformed dead men with rifles and skull-faces ambled toward him. Their sergeant said, “You again. Park, isn’t it? What’ve you got?”

“Two,” Park replied. “Man and woman.”

The sergeant nodded to his soldiers, who yanked open the car doors and seized the prisoners. As the pair was led away, the sergeant said to Park, “All right. Come on.”

Park was escorted across the yard. From a loudspeaker mounted on a nearby pole came the recorded voice of the Commander:

“Once you were lost,” said the voice, “but now you’ve found peace. Once you were afflicted by the ills of the flesh. The hot sun made you sweat, and the icy wind made you shiver. You sickened and fell and were buried in muck. You were slaves to the most vile lusts, and you gorged yourselves on sugar and grease. But now, now you are strong, and the only hunger you feel is the hunger for victory, the hunger to destroy our enemies, to bend them to the true path by the power of your righteous hands and teeth. Once you were vain, preoccupied by the shape of your nose, the shape of your cheeks. You gazed into the mirror and felt shame. Shame is for the living. Let them keep their shame. We are beyond them, above them. Your face is a symbol of bondage to a fallen world, a reminder of all that you once were and now rightfully despise. Take up your knife now and carve away your face. Embrace the future. Embrace death.”

Park was taken to a nearby building and led to a room piled high with ammo clips and small arms—the currency of the dead. He filled a duffel. As he made his way back to his car, another skull-faced man came hurrying over and called out, “Hey. Hey you.”

Park looked up.

The man gestured for him to follow and announced, “The Commander wants to meet you.”

This is what Park had been waiting for. He dumped the duffel in the trunk of his car, then followed the man to an armored truck. They drove together toward the palace. The building had been a prison once, but now hordes of dead laborers had transformed it into a crude and sinister fortress.

The truck arrived at the palace, then stopped in a dim alley. Park got out and was led inside. He surrendered his handcuffs to an armed guard, walked through a metal detector, then retrieved them.

He was shown to a large chamber. Against the far wall stood two throne-like wooden chairs, in one of which sat a slender skull-faced young man who held an automatic rifle across his lap.

Beside him sat a skull-faced girl with long auburn hair. She wore an elegant white gown, and Park imagined that she must have been very beautiful once. The man in the chair wore a military uniform, as did the row of a dozen skull-faced men who stood flanking him.

Park stepped into the center of the room.

"Welcome," said the man in the chair. "I am the Commander. This is my wife." He gestured to the girl beside him. "And my generals." He waved at the assembled dead. "And you are Park."

"Sir," Park said.

"You're quickly becoming our favorite supplier."

Park was silent.

The Commander leaned forward and regarded him. "Tell me, Park. How did you die?"

Park hesitated a moment, then said, "Friendly fire. When my base was overrun."

And he'd been damn lucky in that. Those who died after being bitten by the dead always came back as moaners, as the rest of his company had.

The Commander said, "You were a soldier?"

"Scout sniper, sir."

The Commander nodded. "Good." He added wryly, "I like the look of you, Park. You remind me of myself."

"Thank you, sir."

"But tell me," the Commander went on. "Why do you keep bringing us the living? I'm grateful, but you can't still need the reward. You must have plenty of guns by now."

"I want to do more," Park said. "Help you. Convert the living. End the war."

The Commander settled back in his chair. "Yes," he said thoughtfully. "Perhaps you can help us. We'll discuss it after dinner."

Dinner. The word filled Park with dread. Fortunately he had no face to give him away.

She reminded him of his grandmother. A woman in her seventies, naked, gagged, and tied to a steel platter. When she was placed on the table, and saw a dozen skull-faces with all their eyeballs staring down at her, she began to bray into her gag and thrash against her bonds.

The Commander, who now wore his rifle strapped to his shoulder, said to Park, "Guests first."

Park leaned over the woman, who whimpered and tried to squirm away. He wanted to tell her: I'm sorry. I have no choice.

He bit into her arm, tore. The woman screamed. Park straightened and began to chew. No flavor at all. The dead couldn't taste, though he did feel a diminishment of the perpetual hunger that the dead bore for the living.

The Commander turned to the skull-faced girl and said, "Now you, my dear." She began to feed. Soon the others joined in.

When it was over, Park looked up and noticed that the living man and woman he'd just brought in were now present. They stood in the corner, naked and trembling, held up by dead men who clutched them by the arms.

What now? Park wondered.

The old woman was moving again, moaning. The Commander ordered her released. He murmured, "We eat of this flesh, and proclaim death." To the woman he added, "Rise now in glory. Go."

There wasn't much left of her, really. A crimson skeleton festooned with gobbets. The thing that had once been a woman dragged itself off the table and lurched as best it could toward the exit.

"Now," the Commander said. "We have a bit of after-dinner entertainment. Some fresh material." He waved at Park. "Thanks to our friend here."

Park followed as the captives were dragged out the door, down a long corridor, and into another chamber. This room was smaller, with chairs lined up along one wall, all of them facing a king-sized bed. The man and woman were brought to the bed and dumped upon it, where they sat dazed. The seats filled with spectators. The skull-faced girl sat beside the Commander, who

assumed the centermost chair.

The Commander pointed at the living man and said, "You. Take her. Now." The generals watched, silent but rapt.

The man stood, made a fist. "Fuck you, freak." Behind him the woman sat pale and stricken.

The Commander shrugged. "Maybe you're not in the mood. We have something for that." He turned to the door and called, "The aphrodisiac, please."

For almost a minute nothing happened. Then from the corridor came a terrible groaning. The sound grew louder, closer. The woman on the bed wrinkled her nose and whispered, "No." A dark form appeared in the doorway.

It was one of the ones who had been buried in the ground before coming back. They always returned as moaners too, and had always rotted terribly.

The man and woman scrambled away, onto the floor.

Around its neck the moaner wore a steel collar, which was attached to a chain held by a skull-faced guard. The moaner shrieked, and slavered, and swiped at the air with clawlike fingers. It lunged at the living, and its handler, just barely able to keep it under control, was half-dragged along behind it. With each charge, the creature came closer to the man and woman, who cowered on the floor in the corner, the man kicking feebly in the direction of the monster.

When the thing was just a few feet away the man shrieked, "All right! All right! Get it off me!"

The Commander lifted a hand, and the moaner was hauled back.

The man and woman trooped grimly to the bed. The woman was young, maybe twenty. Mei's age, Park thought. Had Mei gone through this? No. Don't think about it.

The woman lay down on the bed and the man climbed awkwardly on top of her. The Commander stared. He reached over, took the hand of the skull-faced girl, and held it. For a long time the living man nuzzled the woman, pawed her, rubbed against her, but he was too frightened, and couldn't become aroused.

Finally the Commander called out, "Enough!"

The figures on the bed froze.

The Commander stood. "This grows tedious. Another night, perhaps?" The pair on the bed pulled away from each other and watched anxiously. The Commander said to them, "Don't worry. There'll be other chances. Next time will be better." To the generals he instructed, "Take them away. Put them with the rest."

The rest? Park thought.

"Park," said the Commander. "Walk with me."

Park followed him through several doorways, then up a few flights of stairs. They emerged onto what must have once been simply a rooftop, but which had been augmented through the exertions of the dead with a sort of parapet.

The Commander said, "So how did you enjoy that?"

"I... it was..."

The Commander said sharply, "Don't dissemble. I don't like that." All of a sudden there was real anger in his voice, and Park was afraid, but just as suddenly the man's eerie calm returned. He went on, "You were uneasy."

Park thought fast. "I just... you always say lust of the flesh is—"

"For the masses," the Commander cut in. "Black and white. Right and wrong. But men like you and I must take a more nuanced view. Besides, it's for a greater purpose. You'll see."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"And don't apologize," the Commander said. "Now... there's something you want to discuss?"

"Yes." Park collected his thoughts. Then: "In what way does one become an officer in your army?"

"I am the way," the Commander said. "Tell me why you want to join."

"I hate the living," Park said. "Always have. Even when I was one of them. Especially then. But I never saw any alternative. Until now."

"I understand," the Commander told him. "You seem a useful sort, Park, and I'm always damned short of good men. I think I'm going to be glad I met you."

The Commander turned away and gazed out over the battlements to admire his city, his domain. There in the darkness, with the man's back turned and no one else around, Park allowed himself one fleeting instant to glare at the Commander with pure hatred.

No, Park thought. You won't be glad. Not at all.

So Park was designated a "lieutenant," and given a room in a far corner of the palace, and often he was called on to perform routine tasks, mostly drilling the other officers in marksmanship. The Commander's voice was a constant presence, as the loudspeakers blared forth an endless mix of propaganda and instructions for the maintenance of the city. Sometimes pairs of living prisoners were brought out to perform for the Commander and his wife, but Mei was never among them.

Most information was still restricted from Park, and most areas of the palace were still off-limits. A few times he heard men refer to the top floor of the east wing as the "petting zoo." Was that where the living were kept? The palace was severely undermanned, but even so trying to slip in where he wasn't wanted would be chancy at best. Patience, he told himself. Wait, and watch. This is who you are. This is what you do. And when you strike, you strike hard, and they never see it coming.

One day Park returned to his room to find someone waiting in the hall. It was Greavey, a heavysset man with a scattering of red hairs whose jowls hung slack below his skeletal face.

Park nodded to him. "General."

"Park," said Greavey. "Can I ask you a favor? A private lesson?"

"Of course," Park said.

He retrieved a pair of rifles from his car, then took Greavey to a muddy yard nearby, where Park lined up empty cans upon a wooden table. The two of them positioned themselves at the far end of the field.

Greavey took aim and fired. His shot went wide. He growled, and said, "I was a soldier too, in life. Like you. Never was a terrific shot though."

Park fired and knocked over the first can. "It's easier now. Your body is more still."

Greavey raised his rifle again. As he sighted, he said casually, "You may have fooled him, but you don't fool me." He fired. A can went flying.

Park didn't answer. He took another shot, took down another can.

Greavey's voice was gruff. "You don't buy all his bullshit. His little cult. And neither do I." He fired again. Missed. "Damn."

Park had been expecting something like this. He took aim again. "And what if I don't?" He fired. Another hit.

"Listen," Greavey told him. "You're new around here. You don't know what he's like. We're losing this war, losing bad, because of him. We don't have enough officers, and every time one of us shows a little promise... well, he doesn't like rivals much. So watch yourself. It's only a matter of time before he turns on you too."

"So what's the alternative?" Park said. "The moaners are loyal to him. They've been listening to his voice every day and night now for how long? What's going to happen if he's gone? You think they'll obey you? You think you can control them?"

"Man, they'll listen to anyone—" Greavey waved at a loudspeaker— "who gets on that PA."

Park raised his rifle to his shoulder and sighted downrange. "It's too much of a risk."

"That's not what you'll be saying when the living storm is here and blow our brains out."

Park fired. Another can. "Who then? If not him?"

Greavey said, "You know he never did shit before all this? He likes to play soldier—all of them do—but he's just some college kid. Now, he's smart, I'll give him that, but not as smart as he thinks he is. We need someone in charge who knows this army and who's got real military

training.”

“You then?” Park said.

Greavey shrugged. “Seems sensible.”

“I’ve got training,” Park said. Another shot. Another can.

“Look,” Greavey said. “You shoot real good, but come on. You just got here. Back me and I promise I’ll—”

“No.”

Greavey was silent a while. He raised his rifle, hesitated, lowered it. Finally: “What do you want?”

“Half,” Park said.

“Half what?”

“Half everything. The guns, trucks, troops—”

“No way.”

Park raised his rifle again. “Maybe I should see what *he* thinks about all this.”

Greavey stared as Park took down another can, then said, “Fine. If that’s the way it’s got to be. You and me. Full partners. All right?”

“All right.” Park glanced toward the palace. “Except... no one but him’s allowed to bring weapons in there. He’s always armed, obviously he never sleeps—”

“He comes out sometimes,” Greavey said. “To supervise things personally, or lead his army in the field. And like I said, you shoot real good.”

At this, Park nodded slowly. “I see,” he said, as he took down the final can.

Later, as Park strode through the palace, he thought: A good try. Convincing. Much of it likely true. Greavey plotting assassination? A lie. But the Commander too reliant on his legion of moaners? Eliminating clever officers who might become rivals? Probably yes. Also true: The Commander not as smart as he thinks he is.

Park turned a corner toward the Commander’s private suite. Two skull-faced men stood guard.

“I have to see the Commander,” Park said.

The men eyed him. One of them said, “Wait here,” and disappeared around a corner. A short time later he returned and said, “All right. Come on.”

They walked down the hall to an office, where the Commander sat behind a desk, his rifle leaning against a nearby wall. He held a combat knife, which he fiddled with absently as he said, “Talk.”

Park said, “Sir, Greavey is plotting against you.”

The Commander leaned back in his chair. “Give me details. Everything.”

So Park relayed the conversation, leaving out nothing.

Afterward, the Commander stood and began to pace. “This is good to know.”

Park said, “Sir, let me handle Greavey. I’ll—”

“Greavey’s fine.”

“Sir?”

The Commander pointed his knife at Park and said, “Listen to me carefully. Nothing happens in this city without my knowledge, without my order. Do you understand?”

Park feigned bafflement. “You mean it was... a test?”

“An exercise,” the Commander said. “I apologize, but it’s necessary. I’ve been betrayed before. I have to make sure.”

A few weeks later, just after dawn, Park heard a rumble from outside, as of distant thunder. He hurried to the window of his chamber and looked out. A giant plume of black smoke was rising from the southern end of the city.

A short time later the Commander’s recorded speech cut out abruptly. Then the Commander came on and announced, “The city is under attack. The south wall has been breached. Muster at the south wall. I repeat, the south wall.” The message continued in this vein, until the moaners got the idea and began to march to the city’s defense.

Park lay low, hoping to be missed in the confusion. He waited until he saw a column of trucks go speeding away to the south. Eight trucks—enough to carry most of the officers who lurked about the palace. Park knew he might never get a better chance to scout out the “petting zoo.”

He raced through the halls, but saw no one. The east wing seemed deserted. If anyone caught him—

No. They would not catch him. He’d make sure of that.

One time he heard footfalls approaching. He slipped into a shadowed alcove, and a guard passed by, heedless. Another time, as Park climbed a staircase, he imagined he heard wailing, but when he stopped to listen there was nothing.

He reached the top floor and moved quickly down a long hallway lined with windows. To his right was a door, open just a crack. He crept up to it and peeked inside.

On a nearby couch sat a woman with auburn hair, who was bent over something in her lap. She was murmuring, “Hey. Hey, it’s okay. Mommy’s here.”

Park shifted slightly and scanned the room. The walls were painted yellow. He saw cribs, toys... Children.

Living children, six of them, none more than a year old.

The petting zoo. It was a goddamn... nursery. But... why?

No, he told himself. Ponder later. Get out now. Mei’s not here.

The woman on the couch raised her head, and Park caught just a glimpse of her skeletal profile as he eased away from the door.

He heard voices then, back the way he’d come. He hurried in the other direction. He slipped through a door and onto a balcony. At its far end was another door.

The wall to his left was crenellated, and as he hurried along he could see down into the yard below, where a few dead men wandered, moaning, “The south wall...” Apparently they were attempting to join the battle but were too witless to find their way there.

A voice at his side said, “Oh. Hey.”

Park leapt back, almost stumbling.

A decapitated human head was impaled on an iron spike between two battlements. The head was that of a young man, blond, who even in this grisly state retained a look of gentle innocence.

“Sorry,” said the head. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s all right,” Park said, turning away.

“Wait,” the head called. “Who are you? I’ve never seen you before. I’m Jack.”

Damn it. Park said, “Look, I really have to—”

The head narrowed its eyes. “You’re not supposed to be here, are you?”

Shit. Park eyed the head. It could report him to the others. Should he destroy it?

“Don’t,” the head warned, anticipating him. “He’ll know something’s up. Listen, you can trust me. I’m not on his side. I mean, he’s the one who put me here.”

Park was at a loss.

“I can help you,” the head added. “I know things. What are you doing here?”

Park hesitated. Did he dare trust it? But what choice did he have? He said, “I’m looking for my sister. She was captured. I don’t—”

“How old is she?” said the head.

“Twenty.”

“Good.” The head gave him an encouraging look. “Then she was probably kept alive to breed. The prisoners are in the south wing, down in the basement. But you’ll need keys to the cells. Dustin’s got a set, and Greavey’s got the other.”

“Dustin?” said Park.

“The Commander,” the head explained. It added, “I knew him before all this. We were friends.”

Park whispered, “Why did he do this to you?”

The head gave a sad, wry smile. “I tried to free the prisoners,” it said.

Park slipped from the east wing without being noticed. Hours later one of the trucks returned. Park lurked in the corridor and watched as the Commander and Greavey strode back into the palace. The two men conferred, then the Commander headed off in the direction of his suite. Park tailed Greavey down a hallway.

After a minute, Greavey turned. "Oh, it's you."

Park sidled up. "What's the situation?"

Greavey was grim. "The living are inside the walls. They'll be here by nightfall. Tough bastards. Militia types, called the Sons of Perdition."

Park knew of them. They had a ghastly reputation.

Greavey said, "The Commander's gone to issue new orders. Where the hell have you been?"

Park nodded at some metal piping that ran up the wall from floor to ceiling, and said, "Over there." Greavey turned to look.

Park grabbed the man and ran him into the pipes. Greavey's skull-face rebounded with a crack, and he went down. Park straddled him, seized the man's left wrist and cuffed it, then slipped the cuffs around the pipes and bound Greavey's right wrist too.

Park dug through the man's pockets. A keyring. Park hoped the head on the wall—Jack—had been telling the truth.

As Park made his way to the south wing, the Commander's voice came over the loudspeakers: "Fall back to the palace. Defend the palace at all costs. I repeat, defend the palace."

Park spent maddening minutes navigating the unfamiliar corridors. Finally he clambered down a set of metal steps and emerged into a dim, grimy hallway lined with cells. He donned his mask and goggles, then moved from door to door. "Mei?" he called out. "Mei? Are you here?" Vague figures huddled in the darkness.

Then, from a cell he'd just passed, a weak voice: "Hello?"

She was there, her tiny fingers wrapped around the bars. He ran to her. "I'm getting you out," he said, as he tried a key in the lock. It didn't fit.

"Park?" she said, unbelieving. "I thought—"

She stiffened then, as she watched him. In a near-whisper she said, "Take off your mask."

He tried another key.

"Park," she said, insistent.

He stopped. For a moment he just stood there. Then he carefully removed his mask and goggles, revealing his terrible skull-face for all to see.

Mei recoiled. "But... you're one of them, one of his—"

"It was the only way," Park said. He tried another key.

Beside her in the cell, a skinny white man with curly black hair said, "I know you. You're the one who captured me, who brought me here."

Mei said, "Is that... true?"

"Yes," Park said. He couldn't meet her gaze. He tried another key, which turned with a click, and he slid the door open.

The skinny man tried to rush out, but Park stiff-armed him back and said, "Only her."

"No," Mei said. "We can't—"

"Mei, come here," he told her.

She shook her head, withdrawing. Park looked down and saw that she was pregnant. She asked, "What's happened to you? You're—"

"I'm what I have to be!" he shouted. "To save you. Now come on!"

For a moment he thought he had her. She took a tentative step forward.

Then he heard clanging footsteps on the stairs behind him, and knew it was over.

The Commander strode into the hall, his rifle raised. Behind him came the skull-faced girl and Greavey. The handcuffs dangled from Greavey's right wrist, and half his left hand was gone—he'd chewed it off to get free.

The Commander stared at Park with baleful eyes. There was a long silence. Then the

Commander barked, "Get away from there!"

Park took a few steps back.

"Keep going! Move!" The Commander advanced. When he was even with the cell, he glanced at its occupants. "You brought us so many," he said slowly, to himself. "Why a change of heart?"

Park glared back, said nothing.

"No," the Commander declared then, with sudden triumph. "You're not the compassionate sort. You only care about... one." He swung his rifle around so that it menaced the skinny man in the cell, and demanded, "Who's he here for?"

The man shrank back, holding up his hands defensively. "Her! The girl! Please."

Park inched forward, but instantly the gun was back on him. The Commander said to Greavey, "Get her."

Greavey strode into the cell and with his good hand snatched Mei by her long dark hair and dragged her stumbling into the corridor. He stood her there in the middle of the hall, then stepped aside. She trembled.

Behind the Commander, the skull-faced girl said softly, "Dustin, she's pregnant."

"Not for long." He leveled his rifle at Mei's belly.

Park stared at Mei, his sister, as she stood there right in front of him after so long, and he knew there was nothing he could do to save her.

Then the skull-faced girl shoved the Commander as hard as she could.

His rifle discharged, spraying rounds into the cement as he sprawled. The gun flew from his grasp and skittered across the floor, coming to rest at Mei's feet. She spun and kicked it to Park, but not hard enough. The rifle slid to a stop near Greavey, who fell to his knees, grasping for it.

Park leapt forward and tackled him, and they went down together, grappling. Park wrapped both arms around Greavey's meaty right bicep, pinning it. The man's mutilated left hand brushed over the rifle's stock, but couldn't get a grip on it. The Commander scrambled to his feet.

Park pushed against the floor with his heels, pivoting him and Greavey. Park kept hold of Greavey's bicep with one arm while with the other he reached out and snatched the rifle. He shoved the muzzle up under Greavey's chin and held down the trigger. Chunks of the man's fleshy jowls splattered across the floor, and his body went limp.

Park rolled off him and came up in a crouch with the rifle aimed at the Commander, who slid to a halt just a few feet away. "Back!" Park said, and the Commander slowly retreated, holding up his hands.

Park said, "Mei! Come here."

She staggered toward him. "Park... we can't—"

He held out the keys to her and said, "Get these goddamn cells open. Now."

The skull-faced girl approached him. The prisoners watched her with a mix of unease and wonder. She said quietly, "And the children. Please."

Park considered this. "All right," he told her. "And the children."

An hour later Park returned to the cell block with a duffel slung over his shoulder. The prisoners were free now, around twenty of them, and were armed with weapons from the trunk of his car. The skull-faced girl had fetched the children, each of whom was being carried by an adult. The guards had fled, and Park had taken care of the Commander.

Park said to the crowd, "You know the city's under attack by an army of the living. They're called the Sons of Perdition. You all know who they are?"

The crowd was somber.

"Anyone want to join them?" Park said. "Now's your chance."

No one moved.

"All right," he said. "Then let's get the hell out of here."

They formed a convoy of vehicles and set out north, away from the fighting. Park drove his car, and the others followed. On the seat beside him rested the duffel, and in the back seat sat Mei



and the skull-faced girl, each of them holding a child. At first Park was forced to barrel through clusters of moaners, but once he got away from the palace the streets were mostly deserted. The skull-faced girl stared out the window. One time she spoke faintly, "I said I wanted children. I was just... I didn't think... He wanted to—when they got older—make them like us. He—"

"It's okay," Park said. "It's over."

The girl fell silent.

"What's your name?" Mei asked her.

"Ashley," she said.

The convoy passed through the north gate without encountering any of the invaders. Park was faintly hopeful about slipping away unnoticed, but as he followed a two-lane road toward a cluster of wooded hills, a small fleet of pickups came racing out of the west, throwing up great clouds of dust.

"Shit," Park said. He hoped he could at least make it to the treeline before being overtaken.

He did. Barely.

"Get out," he told Mei and Ashley then. "Move to another vehicle." He passed the duffel to Ashley and said, "Take this. It's Jack. Look after him."

"I will," she promised.

Mei lingered. "How will we meet up after—?"

"Go, Mei," he said.

She insisted, "I don't want—"

"I said go!" he screamed.

She gave him one last worried look, then fled.

Park backed up his car so that it blocked the road, then he got out, fetched his scoped rifle, put on his mask and goggles, and crouched in the shadow of his car. Behind him, the rest of the convoy sped away.

The pursuers drew near, seven trucks. Park lay his rifle across the hood of his car, then put a round through the windshield of the lead vehicle. The truck slid to a halt, and the others pulled up alongside it. Men with rifles poured out, taking cover behind the doors of their vehicles. Thirty guns, maybe more.

The driver of the lead vehicle, a giant man with a blond beard who was dressed all in black leather, shouted, "You shot my truck."

Park didn't respond.

The man yelled, "You have any idea who you're fucking with?"

Again, Park said nothing.

"Listen," the man called. "This is real simple. We saw you all coming out. We know you've got women. We need them, your guns, and your vehicles. And you're all drafted."

They didn't seem to realize that Park was one of the dead. Good. He shouted back, "We don't want anything to do with your army."

"Drafted means you got no choice," said the man.

Park crept into the underbrush and took up a position behind a tree.

"Hey," the man called. "What's your plan, huh? Just how do you think this is going to end?"

For you? Park thought. Like this.

He fired. The man's body toppled against the truck, then slumped to the pavement.

Park crawled away as the other men started shooting, their bullets shredding the foliage all around him.

By dusk Park was down to his last bullet. It didn't matter. He'd won. Thirty men had come charging up the hill after him, and he'd kept ahead of them, taking them out one by one. He'd dropped nine already, and there were moaners in these woods too who'd surprised and overwhelmed maybe two or three more. Mei and Ashley and the others were well away.

Park had been hit twice in the chest, and many more times in the arms and legs, but those

scarcely troubled him. By now his pursuers must know that he was one of the dead, and they would be going only for headshots.

One of the men emerged from behind a boulder and crept closer, scanning the bushes. Make the last shot count, Park thought, as he eased his rifle into place and peered through the scope.

He was shocked. My face, he thought. My old face.

No, he decided then, studying the man. But close. We could be brothers.

Park's finger twitched, tapping the trigger. He could easily put a bullet through that face, but he hesitated. It had been such a long time since he'd looked in a mirror. Since he'd recognized himself.

Any moment now he'd be spotted. Take the shot, his mind urged. Do it. But what difference did it make? Mei was safe. Park continued to stare. He didn't want to see that face destroyed.

No. Not *that* face.

He imagined the eyes of all the people he'd delivered into the horrors of the necropolis. He imagined the old woman screaming as his teeth tore into her. He heard Mei's voice crying, "What's happened to you?" and his own replying, "I'm what I have to be. To save you."

Slowly he reached up and grasped a handful of fabric.

There. The man had seen him, was taking aim. For an instant the two of them stared at each other through their scopes.

Park removed his mask.

Dustin watched from the wall of his palace as an army of the living battled through the city toward him, but he was powerless to do anything.

In the yard below, one of his followers came into view.

"Hey!" Dustin shouted. "You! Up here!"

The man stopped and looked at him.

"Listen to me very carefully," Dustin said. "This is your Commander speaking. You are to walk around this palace to the main entrance. Once inside, turn right and keep going until you reach the stairs. Take them to the top floor and continue on the way you were. You'll come to a door leading out onto this balcony. Then remove me from this fucking spike! Do you understand?"

The man stared back with vacant eyes. "Walk around the palace..." it moaned.

"Yes," Dustin said. "And the rest of it. Turn right—"

"Walk around the palace..." The creature took a step toward him, then away. "Walk around the palace..." it repeated, as it wandered, back and forth.

# Obedience

## By Brenna Yovanoff

Brenna Yovanoff's first novel, a contemporary young adult fantasy called *The Replacement*, should be out from Razorbill around the same time as this anthology. Her short fiction has appeared in *Chiaroscuro* and *Strange Horizons*. On her LiveJournal ([brennayovanoff.livejournal.com](http://brennayovanoff.livejournal.com)), she claims to be good at soccer, violent video games, and making very flaky pie pastry, but bad at dancing, making decisions, and inspiring confidence as an authority figure.

One of the most wrenching aspects of a zombie plague that makes it completely different from, say, an invasion of alien arachnids is the knowledge that these hordes of enemies were once our friends and neighbors, were once decent, loving people. As we perforate their faces with a .50 caliber machinegun, or hack at their clutching hands with a machete, axe, or chainsaw, it's impossible not to wonder whether these moaning ghouls retain any trace of their former personality. Are the people they once were still trapped in there somewhere, aware of what's happening around them? Might they ever be cured, the way a mentally ill patient can be, with the right treatment?

Books and films are filled with incidents in which survivors try to show mercy to zombies—as with the barn full of zombies in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*—or will even fight to protect them, as with the zombified newborn in the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. Michael Crichton's novel *Jurassic Park* suggests that it's impossible to safely keep dinosaurs in captivity, and much the same thing seems to be true of zombies. The temptation is always there, though—what if it were just one zombie? Just one little girl, surely we could handle that?

But if zombie stories have taught us anything, it's that keeping zombies around, whether out of mercy or as research subjects, seems to have a way of ending up badly for everyone involved—and by “badly” we mean with teeth, blood, and screams.

When the first drinking glass hit the floor and broke, Private Grace pressed her back against the wall and steadied the sidearm with both hands. The window above her was single-paned, the weather-stripping rotten. To her left, a freestanding radiator was rusting gently. The house was a summer cabin, cramped, and redolent with the smell of mice. They'd spent the better part of an hour nailing the windows shut, then gathering glassware—pitchers, vases, dinner plates, a souvenir ashtray with a cartoon walrus painted in the bottom—and arranging the dishes in rows along the sills.

Now, they hunkered down, waiting. There had been food at least, canned, coated in dust. They ate quickly, passing the open cans back and forth as evening fell. The sound the glass made when it landed was explosive, a mortar going off.

“What do we show these giddy bastards?” Whitaker called from the adjoining room, sounding clipped and perfunctory.

The answer came from a dozen positions, followed by the metallic sound of carbines, magazines and bolt assemblies clattering into place. “No mercy, *sir*.”

They had begun as an infantry platoon of forty-seven, mostly up from New Mexico and Texas. Now, they were thirteen. Ten privates, one combat medic, and Denton the Marine, all serving under Whitaker.

Of the privates, only Grace and a trooper named Knotts were from Whitaker's original squad. The other eight and Jacobs, the medic, had come off a company that had gotten pinned down at the Air Force base and, for the most part, died there.

The base had been a short-term El Dorado, but when they arrived, their grand welcome was absent, save for a few survivors holed up in the bunkers. Some of the medical technicians had made a last-ditch effort to seal themselves in the sleep chambers. It was difficult to say whether the massacre had happened with the techs scrambling for safety or already in stasis, but one thing was certain. The flyboys had been dead for weeks.

Where Denton originated from remained somewhat of a mystery. It was theorized that he was a deserter, but in truth, Grace did not much care. Denton had the best guns.

"Smirkers," someone shouted in the front hall, immediately followed by a crash as the door splintered. Fire came in three-round bursts, rattling through the tiny house.

Grace crouched lower, sinking into her nanovest, bracing her shoulder against the radiator. She checked the cuffs of her jacket, tucked them deep into the tops of her gloves. Outside, pale hands seemed to float, palms flat against the windows. They were laughing, a storm of high-pitched giggles.

They smiled. No training in the world prepared you for that. They smiled as they slashed and bit, tearing flesh off their victims in chunks. They smiled as they ran, a merciless full-out sprint, headlong, ravenous. They smiled right before you leveled the barrel and squeezed the trigger. Sometimes, if the shot was high enough, the caliber small enough, even when they fell back—smoke rising from a neat round hole in the forehead—they were still smiling.

Jacobs said it was neurological, an involuntary tic. He talked about them a lot, his language precise, his hands sketching neural pathways. It had been his idea to come up here, strike for the research complex near Rosewood. They were close now, a couple miles off, but the slopes were crawling with smirkers and everything had started to seem wildly impossible.

A window broke somewhere and the house was suddenly awash with a new influx. They poured into the little common room. One was wearing a Christmas sweater, red, sprinkled intermittently with green trees, white reindeer.

Against the other wall, Denton was cutting swaths through the mob—systematic, businesslike. His arms were massive, the muscles displayed in sharp relief as he swung the carbine up. The smirker in the Christmas sweater was closing. It moved fast, turning on him with hands outstretched.

"Semper Fi," Denton said, but it sounded flat and ironic. He jammed the muzzle in the smirker's face.

In the front hall, Private Sutter was shouting something. He was always shouting, hooting, whooping. Sutter, with the God-awful tattoo on his neck, upwards arrow pointing to the base of his skull. Corsican script said, in an incongruously graceful hand, *Eat Me*.

Smirkers did not, in actuality, express much preference for the brain over other organs. They seemed content to take any piece they could get, but the celluloid lore of old movies was hard to shake.

In the last few weeks, some of the privates had taken to painting targets on their helmets. *Aim here in case of infection*. Whitaker didn't like it, but allowed the targets in the same indulgent way he allowed Sutter's tattoo. Harmless, letting off steam. Grace thought it was morbid.

The window above her fell in with a glittering crash, and she rose and popped the first smirker in the face. It slumped forward and she turned to meet the two that came after, dropping them on the carpet. After that, the process became automatic. Her territory extended outward for two yards and ran the distance of the wall. Every other inch of the house was someone else's problem.

Something moved behind her and she swung around, already reaching for her combat knife. It had been a boy, sixteen, maybe seventeen. The face still bore the faint interruptions of acne. He grinned and his teeth were coated in a thin veneer of blood.

The carbines were light, easy to maneuver, and the sidearm was more versatile still, but for such close quarters, Grace favored the knife. She slipped it from the sheath and brought the blade up. The throat first, and directly after that, the right eye.

Preferred it controlled, preferred it close. Some of the others couldn't stand to let the smirkers get

near. Instead, they ran themselves out, not keeping count. A dull, shocked look when the handgun clicked empty. They thought about themselves before they thought about the job. That was the secret; if you thought about the job before you thought about anything else, if you just did your job, you got out. She drew her hand back, let the boy drop, and stepped over him. She wiped the blade on her fatigues and then peeled the gloves off. They were soaked.

The shooting had stopped. Grace stood, contemplating the room. Her heart beat hard and fast in her ears, and she could not precisely reckon how much time had passed. Smirkers lay everywhere, sprawled out, tangled together on the floor. After a cursory check to make sure that none were still moving, she started for the doorway.

In the front hall, she found Emery, standing with his back to her. His rifle hung at his side and he was breathing in long, whining gasps.

He was one of the ones with a target, a concentric bull's-eye painted in red on the front of his helmet. But when he turned toward her with a mystified expression, the bite on his shoulder already weeping yellow, she aimed for the eye socket. He whimpered and begged a little, but in her head, she had squeezed the trigger a thousand times, and it was no great effort to do it now, in the cramped cabin, with the daylight dropping away and the smell of bodies heavy in the air. The report was very loud in the narrow hall. At her feet, he lay still. After a moment, the blood began to pool out from under him.

Her progress through the house was slow. The floor was littered with debris, spent ammunition. Bodies lay with their limbs jutting at odd angles—smirkers and soldiers. They were mostly accounted for. She didn't recognize Denton at first, except by his size. Someone had shot him in the face. There were bite marks all over his arms. His skin oozed with the thick, pestilential yellow of infection.

In the kitchen, she found Sergeant Whitaker. He was propped in a corner, shoulders wedged in the join between two cabinets.

He looked up at her—a hard, dignified look that stopped her in the doorway. The side of his neck had been torn away, leaving shreds of muscle, exposed tendons. His voice was hoarse and liquid. "Are they dead?"

She did not know if he was referring to their makeshift squad or to the recent barrage of smirkers. "Yes, sir."

"What do you think those Washington fucks are doing right now?"

Dead, of course, all dead. Except the ones still shambling around smiling to themselves. Giggling their high-pitched giggles.

"They don't pay me to think, sir."

Whitaker laughed at that, a wet, clotted sound. "No one's paid us to do a damn thing in months. Maybe you could take up thinking as a sideline. It wouldn't have to be on the clock."

He laughed again, viscous, close to choking. The stripes on his sleeve were the brightest thing in the room. The gold looked almost white in the failing light. The blood was seeping out of him, leaving his face gray. Infection imminent.

"You should've made corporal," he said, and it sounded watery. "I'm sorry for that."

"Don't worry yourself, sir. I don't imagine I would have cared for it."

"You never know. Look at you now—you're the one who's going to walk out of here tonight."

Blood and foul yellow seepage were running down the side of his throat, soaking into his shirt.

"Do you want me to take care of it?" she said, jerking her head in the direction of his sidearm.

He smiled at her, a slow, complicated smile. "No, I got this."

She did not disbelieve Whitaker, even at the last. He was a good man, dependable. Already holding the 9mm to his temple. But she stood in the doorway to make sure. The report made her flinch. When he slumped forward and his hand let go, she turned and started back through the house.

A wooden pull-down ladder stood spindly and erect in the hall. It was fixed to the ceiling by a hinge, and led up to an open skylight. The angle of the ladder was stark, surprising. In the past

weeks, the world had taken on an increasingly surreal cast and the ladder did not seem disconcerting now, but only natural and right.

"I'm coming up," Grace said, to no one in particular—to whomever might be at the top, waiting to put a bullet in the first person to stick their head through the opening.

On the roof, Jacobs the medic was sitting with his legs drawn up and his elbows resting on his knees.

"How do they always know?" he said, staring off over the hillside, the dark trees. The sky was deep purple, already speckled with stars. "We go along, covering our tracks, moving in the daytime. And still, they always know."

Grace nodded, because his assessment was true. Not a thing you argued with, but how it was. They would always find you. It was what they did.

"There aren't any bugs up here," Jacobs said.

"No," said Grace, taking a pack of cigarettes from her pocket. "No, I haven't seen any."

"It's the air. It's thin."

She wondered if he was cracking up. He didn't seem the type, but still, with these smart ones, it was hard to say. Sometimes they fell apart, just from thinking too much.

"They're not hunting people," he said.

"What do you call it then—what they're doing?"

"I mean, they're not hunting people exclusively. They're not strictly cannibals. We saw eviscerated deer when we were coming up—and rabbits—but they're not picked clean. They never eat the dead."

Grace pulled a cigarette out of the pack with her teeth, lit it. Her hands were steady, but felt light and disconnected.

When she breathed out, Jacobs coughed and fanned at the air. "How does something like this just *happen*?"

Grace observed Jacobs, his raised head, his profile, hard against the velvety sky. She assumed he must be talking in some broad, abstract sense, because the how-and-why of it was far from mysterious.

The methodology was simple. Escalating reports of a blood-borne pathogen carried by insects, high fatality rate, drug-resistant. The government had been frightened of pandemic. They had pushed immunization, pushed it hard, and in the end, they got their pandemic, all right. A vector that began at vaccination and exploded outward, extravagant. Uncontainable.

It had begun on the West Coast, vaccination facilities popping up in grocery stores and shopping centers. And everyone lined up. It had taken approximately six hours to ascertain that something was wrong, but in that time, the event had affected nearly half a million people. And it spread like fire. In a way, it was good the infection came on fast. Otherwise, they might have all had the shot, every last one of them, offering their arms to the needle without the slightest indication that anything was amiss.

"What if it's a signature," Jacobs said, turning to her.

"I don't follow."

"A carbon dioxide signature. Blood-seekers—they know to come after you. They follow a trail of chemicals, a stamp. Mosquitoes can sense living blood from almost forty meters."

Grace nodded as he spoke, not comprehending his train of thought exactly, but not needing to. The words sounded round, fat, reassuring.

"We could verify it," he said. "All we'd need is a controlled environment, some preliminary tests. We could keep going, get to Rosewood. They'll have everything we need. It would only take a few trials. I mean, then we'd *know*. And Rosewood's only four miles out. If we run—"

"If there's any still in the woods, they'll be on us in two seconds, sir. I don't see much chance."

Jacobs stood up, brushing impatiently at his fatigues. "There's a way, though. There's always a way."

He started down the ladder, his boots clattering on the wooden rungs. There was a smear of blood

on the back of his shirt. Grace squashed the cigarette under her toe and wondered again if they were only prolonging something inevitable.

It didn't matter. With a purpose, a mission, the blackness of recent days did not seem so close. They would go to Rosewood and test his theory. Jacobs was not Whitaker, but he was capable. He knew things. And a short-term itinerary was better than none at all. They would go to Rosewood and find a brilliant solution. After a minute, Grace rose and followed Jacobs down.

In the bathroom, she found him standing over the body of Knotts, legs splayed to avoid the mess. He had opened the medicine cabinet and was rummaging along the shelves.

"What are you after?"

"DEET," he said, flinging bottles and tubes from cabinet haphazardly. "Why don't these rednecks have any fucking DEET?"

"You said it before, sir. There's no bugs up here."

The floor at his feet was littered with adhesive bandages, aspirin, a topical antibiotic.

"Knotts was up from Florida," she said.

Jacobs gave her a distracted look, then turned back to the cabinet.

"They got bugs in Florida like you wouldn't believe. I bet he carries it in with his personal effects. A thing like that, it just gets to be a habit."

"Check him then, check his things if you think he's got it." Another bottle hit the floor. The cap flew off and a cascade of white pills rattled across the linoleum, washed up against the motionless form of Knotts, got stuck in the congealing blood.

"And you think we could keep them off us? With mosquito repellent, sir?"

"It doesn't repel, it interferes. It corrupts receptors."

The logic was mysterious. Grace was not much in the way of parsing scientific theories, but he seemed to be missing a vital link, some key component. *A person is not a mosquito*, she thought of saying, but in the end, she knelt over Knotts's body and began to pick through his satchel. The bottle of bug spray was very small.

"Give it to me," Jacobs said, peeling his shirt over his head.

"Is this enough?"

"It'll have to be, won't it? It doesn't last more than an hour, hour and a half, anyway. We just need to get beyond them." He was already smearing the stuff down his arms. "Take off your vest."

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Take it off. And your shirt. We need it thick, all over. Put it in your hair."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Does it matter, then? We're dead anyway. Everyone's dead eventually."

And that was logic she couldn't argue with.

They reached the Rosewood complex shortly after midnight. The moon was pale and heavy in the sky, fat as a dogtick. Their progress went undetected, although Grace had no position as to whether it was due at all to the DEET.

They crossed the perimeter of the complex. The west entrance already stood open, a dark gaping maw. Jacobs lit his xenon lamp, holding it to the doorway. Somewhere beyond the halo of light, a shape was moving.

Grace loosened her gun in its holster. "Something's there."

"Good," Jacobs said. "We just need one. I want one alone in the lab for fifteen minutes."

Grace nodded and didn't answer. There was never just one.

From far away, a shrill giggle rose. It echoed back and forth in the corridor, trickling down the walls. Another came from somewhere in the northern sector.

At the reception station, they paused to examine the attendant signs of disuse. The control panel was coated in dust.

Jacobs indicated a bank of monitors. "See if you can bring the lights up while I find the medical bay. I need to get some supplies together."

Grace nodded again. Her skin was prickling with adrenaline, but this was not the time to go jumpy. There would be warning. There always was.

When she accessed the backup system, the lights came up sluggishly on the generator, hazy and dim, like being underwater.

She stood in the reception area and waited. The time that passed was deep and faceless and full of sound.

When an unwieldy figure came toward her down the hall, she raised her pistol, but it was only Jacobs. He wore a biohazard suit, fitted with a portable respirator and a curved Plexiglas face-mask. With one gloved hand, he gestured her to follow.

He led her through a maze of corridors to the medical wing and ushered her into a glass-fronted observation room. Grace maneuvered between counter tops and stasis chambers to peer through the long window into an adjacent exam room.

The girl was in bad shape, skin discolored, covered in welts and scratches. She was smiling the smile, gleeful, manic. Grace watched her make a circuit of the room. Eight or nine years old. Must have belonged to one of the technicians, maybe a project manager. The girl had been someone's daughter.

Jacobs turned from a cooler at the far end of the room. Cupped in his hands was a white rat.

"Is it dead?" Grace asked.

Jacobs shook his head. He had to spit out the mouthpiece before speaking. "They've got hundreds in there, in stasis. I'd say we've got five, maybe ten minutes before it revives. I need to see what she does."

Grace touched the rat's side. Its fur felt cold and matted.

Jacobs secured the face-mask again, then motioned her away from the exam room door and entered, carrying the rat.

The girl reacted with no particular venom to Jacob's presence.

When he offered his gloved hand, she took it without looking up. He lifted her and set her on the edge of a gurney. He left the rat resting beside her.

Back in the observation room, he took off the headpiece and set it on the counter.

"Now watch," he said, leaning towards the glass.

The girl sat where he'd left her, swinging her feet, smiling the deranged smile. Beside her, the rat lay peaceful and motionless.

"Right now, its body's still retaining carbon dioxide, but as it comes up, the emissions will be transiently high. It's going to be a little CO<sup>2</sup> bomb in a minute."

The rat twitched violently.

When the girl moved, it was with unexpected ferocity, snatching up the rat and sinking her teeth into its side. Blood ran copiously, soaking into the front of her dress.

As Grace watched through the glass, the girl's eyes turned up to meet her gaze. She was holding the animal to her mouth with both hands and then she let it fall. Blood was dripping from her chin and the rat lay motionless and red on the cement floor.

Jacobs had pillaged a battery-powered tablet from somewhere and was making rapid marks with the stylus, murmuring to himself.

There was a low, industrial whirring as the fans came on. Grace flinched as the ventilation system roared to life. Jacobs only stood with his head bent, tapping at the little screen.

On the other side of the glass, the girl began to pace frantically, scraping at the walls with her fingers.

"What's she doing?"

Jacobs glanced up. Above them, ducts ran along the ceiling, their shining planes punctuated by vents.

"She's just got a whiff of us," he said. "The air's circulating again."

In the other room, the girl was scrabbling at the floor vents and then at the edges of a broad grate in the wall. It occurred to Grace that if the DEET worked like Jacobs said it did, then the girl wasn't



responding to it. That she must be smelling something else. Or maybe the DEET didn't work after all, but was only a placebo. She did not know whether Jacobs had intended the fallacy to comfort her or himself.

"Are they really mindless?" she said, with her palms against the glass.

Jacobs looked at her strangely. "You mean, did they experience brain injury? If we could mitigate the reaction to incidental levels of CO<sup>2</sup>, we'd be certain. But no, I don't think they're stupid."

The lights failed then, and the room lapsed into blackness except for the flicker of the tablet. Without ceremony, Jacobs lit the xenon lamp and continued his notations. Grace reached for her sidearm.

Out in the corridor, footsteps echoed. Multiple people—eight, nine maybe—and coming closer, but they were unattended by the manic sounds of laughter. Grace moved so that her back was to the wall.

Jacobs still scribbled on his tablet, letters slanting down in a frantic scrawl before the CPU converted them to type. He was talking to himself under his breath, alive suddenly, animated. His intensity had become frantic, bordering on possession, and it frightened her.

The door swung open and the strangers came in slowly, with wary looks and raised guns.

"Who are you?" said a tall, craggy man at the head of the group. He stepped into the light. "What are you doing here?"

He wore no uniform. Someone had sewn stripes onto the sleeves of his jacket, but the stitches were sloppy, inexpert. A scar ran across the bridge of his nose and then jagged abruptly down one cheek. Behind him, a contingent of men held firearms. Mostly hunting rifles and shotguns.

Grace moved forward, standing at attention. "Private Maureen Grace and Sergeant Rabe Jacobs, 68W."

The man nodded. "Trask," he said.

He gave no rank and did not need to. His manner conveyed the brutal authority of a general, although the unit behind him was motley. Probably local militia. He was looking past her to the bare desk and the glassed-in examination room. "And what are you doing here, Private Maureen Grace?"

She glanced at Jacobs, who sat limply, watching the newcomers with the air of someone drugged. "We're investigating a possible course of action. The sergeant's developing a theory and has acquired a research subject."

"This research subject here?" Trask said, raising his pistol to the glass. "This raggedy little bitch right here?"

At the desk, Jacobs set the tablet down. "What are you doing? She's not a threat, you moron. She's just a little girl."

The look Trask gave him was long, calculating. "And she'd have your throat out in two seconds."

"I had her *calm*. I had her sedate, even when I was in the room. We have all the preliminary evidence necessary to pursue this. Are you listening? We could alleviate their aggression. We could *fix* them!"

"And lead them around like pets? Keep them until they've had enough one night, and kill us in our beds?"

Jacobs scrambled up from the desk. "It is our *duty* to cure them."

"There is no cure," Trask said, coming down hard on each word. "No cure but to rout them, and pick them off one at a time until it's over. There's no way to play nice and then go home."

Around him, the other men nodded, their gestures tied to his orbit like moons or planets. Grace watched them. Trask embodied all the qualities vital in a leader. His voice was low and commanding. His face was honest. It promised suffering to anyone who got in his way.

Above them, the ductwork clattered. In the eerie glow of Jacobs's lantern, the men started, raising their weapons to the ceiling.

Grace crossed to the observation window and pressed her face to the glass. "She's gone, sir."

When the ventilation duct dropped down into the observation room, the sound was very loud. The

whole apparatus seemed to peel away from the ceiling—a long, shining arc that hung for an instant at its apex, then crashed to the floor with a deafening clang.

Grace watched as a dim figure scrambled out on hands and knees, slashing and clawing at everything in reach. Lank, dirty hair, tattered dress, dark splatters down the front. Then nothing but the smile. The handgun was light, not powerful, but efficient, up out of the holster and in her hand. She put the girl down from eight yards.

Beside the desk, Jacobs lay under the remains of the duct. The aluminum had torn jaggedly, like a mouthful of teeth. Her ears still rung with the sound of metal striking cement and on another plane, laid over the metallic clatter, the shot echoed again and again.

She did not recall crossing the room, but there she was beside him. His cheek had been raked open and he gasped for breath, looking up at her. A dull, shocked look, like he was offended by the treachery of the world. The wound in his side was long. Not a puncture, but a ragged gash, first through the material of the biohazard suit and then through his skin and after that, the subcutaneous fat. The blood was bright, arterial red.

Grace knelt over him and pressed her hands to the wound.

Somewhere in the ducts, a sharp, high-pitched giggle broke loose, echoing down on them like spilled nails.

“Welcome to the zoo,” Trask said behind her.

“You know I’m right,” Jacobs whispered. “Don’t you know I’m right?”

But Grace knew nothing about chemistry or pathology. The mysteries of science were Jacobs’s domain, and the brilliance of his vision eluded her.

He was coughing now, bloody saliva collecting at the corners of his mouth. On the other side of an examination table, the dead girl grinned and grinned.

Trask moved closer. He was wearing work-boots and the soles squeaked on the linoleum. “Look at his face. He’s infected anyway. You know it, I know it. Just end it—for him and for us. We need to be strong if we’re going to restore the nation.”

All through the compound came the sounds of scrabbling, shuffling laughing. Grace had a strange, unbidden thought. *There is no nation; only people.*

Under her palms, Jacobs coughed again. The skin around his eyes had taken on a bluish hue.

Trask had nothing on his side but grim conviction and force of will. A man who was simply not afraid could persuade the masses to follow him anywhere. He might not be a war hero, but he could marshal the survivors.

Above them, the metallic clamor was much louder. Grace lifted her hands.

She raised the gun, held the muzzle to Jacobs’s cheek. His eyes were pained and cloudy. She felt for the trigger and did not think, because it was easier not to.

# Rural Dead

## By Bret Hammond

Bret Hammond is the coauthor of the book *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Geocaching* and the publisher of Geocacher University ([www.geocacher-u.com](http://www.geocacher-u.com)), a website devoted to providing education and materials to both new and experienced geocachers. This story is his first and only fiction published to date, which originally appeared on the zombie website *Tales of the Zombie War*. In addition to his interest in geocaching and zombies, he's also a pastor and has published articles and cartoons in a variety of religious publications.

The Amish are a Christian community of Swiss-German origin centered in Pennsylvania, perhaps best-known in pop culture thanks to the Harrison Ford movie *Witness*. Amish culture emphasizes hard work, humility, and family. They dress simply, largely forego modern technology (notably automobiles and electrical appliances), socialize mainly among themselves, and work in trades such as farming, construction, and crafts-making. Their main method of ensuring that members keep to Amish ways is peer pressure, known as shunning. Whether or not an individual is to be shunned is determined by the leadership, and when someone is being shunned even their spouse may refuse to speak to them. In severe cases of noncompliance a person may be expelled from the community, though they are always welcome to return if they mend their ways.

Many schisms have developed in Amish communities over the years over what rules are to be followed and how severe shunning should be. The Supreme Court case *Wisconsin v. Yoder* established the precedent that Amish are exempt from many American laws, including those involving compulsory education (Amish children are not educated past eighth grade), child labor, and Social Security. The Amish are also extreme pacifists, and once faced severe penalties and abuse for refusing to fight in America's wars.

Our next story, which is a *bit* more wholesome than the last one, takes a look at how this unusual and close-knit community weathers a zombie apocalypse, and what happens when extreme pacifism collides with extreme circumstances.

**W**e've blocked off the reference room in the small community library for these interviews.

Otto Miller sits across the table from me, his arms folded tightly against his chest. He is an elder in this small Amish community and looks every bit the part. I ask him to state his name and he simply stares at me and then looks down at the digital recorder I've placed on the table. He strokes his beard a couple times and then folds his arms again. I can see we're going to get nowhere with this.

I click the device off. That's not enough. I put it back down in my satchel and pull out a yellow legal tablet. As I click my pen he begins to speak.

"I have nothing against you, English, nor your devices. But you have to understand *us*. We don't cling to your machines, we don't participate in your ways, we don't ask anything of you. But you and your...things...your ways...they are constantly thrust upon us. Even your plague."

He points his finger squarely at me. I've heard of "righteous indignation," but I think this is the first time I've ever seen it. "I read your newspapers, listen to your broadcasts. You think this plague was the hand of God? Wouldn't that be convenient? If all this were simply the divine pouring out judgment and wrath upon the world? No, this was your own doing. You—you English—you played with the natural order of things and this was the result. Like breeding your livestock in one family line, sooner or later the results will haunt you. They haunt all of us."

I'm eager to get the interview on track. "Why don't we back up a bit, Mr. Miller. When was it the

infection first touched your community?"

Otto Miller looks out the window for a moment and gathers his thoughts. "You are from the city, yes?"

I smile. "Yes. New York. My home is very far removed from what you have around here."

"You might think that we're completely isolated from the rest of the world, but it's not true, that's not our way. Separate but not isolated. We are not yoked to the world the way you are. So we were aware of the sickness, the "African Rabies," as they called it. We read the reports in the newspapers, listened to the radio and even watched the news on the television in the store in town. As more and more truth came out about what the disease truly was we were...cautious. But it seemed as far removed from us as...well...as New York City.

"It was in March, after that first winter. It was a hard winter, and I suppose if it hadn't been we would have seen them sooner and maybe been able to prepare ourselves better. I was up at 4:00 a.m. preparing for my morning chores. I was walking into the milking barn when I heard an odd sound in the pasture. I raised my lantern and that's when I saw my first...plague victim.

"In life he had been Jonas Yoder, a Mennonite from up the road. Jonas was a good man, I had known him all my life. There he stood in my pasture, mouth open, moaning, and what must have been a pitchfork wound through his chest."

Elder Miller looks deep into my eyes to the point of discomfort. "I suppose something you need to understand, being from the city, is that the first victims we ever saw were our friends and neighbors. People we had known our whole lives. I've read your 'survival guides' with faceless pictures of the undead. These were faces we had known and welcomed into our homes for years. You need to understand that to understand us."

I nod, and he continues. "It was still an hour or so from daylight, so I was very aware of the need to get back inside. I wasn't sure how Jonas got into my pasture, but I felt sure he couldn't get back out on the side closest to my home. I went back inside, locked the door and waited for sunup with my wife.

"Sunrise brought a horrifying sight. Jonas wasn't alone. There was Rebecca his wife. Further out in the pasture I noticed members of the King family, the Beilers and a few people from town—some of them familiar, others not. I also saw the gaping hole in my fence on the side closest to the road. That's how they had gotten in.

"Even worse they had gotten into the barn through some loose planks I had intended to fix in the spring. They were in the stalls with my work animals. The sounds were awful. I could hear my horses crying out as their flesh was torn. The sound drew the undead into the barn to feed. By the time my son arrived there must have been over thirty of them in the barn."

"So what did you and your son do?" I ask.

Otto Miller chuckles. "We simply did what needed to be done. We fixed the fence."

I laugh with him. Here was a man who faced the worst disaster in history with the simple truth he had learned all his life—if there's a hole in the fence you have to fix it. The world was going to hell but the Amish remained unchanged.

"We knew enough not to get close, we knew about the danger of the bites. But they were in the barn, so my son Amos locked them in and we went to work fixing the fence. We couldn't afford to have any more on our land so we strengthened the fence, added braces and chicken wire.

"So at this time it was just you, your wife, and your son?"

"He had brought his wife and two children with him. After we fixed the fence he went out to the neighbors and brought back everyone he could find and convince to come. We are blessed with a large home that was often used as a meeting place. By the end of the day there were sixteen of us. We were able to bring a few more of our fellowship in over the next week or so. We grew to thirty-three members in our home."

"That seems like a lot of people to house, let alone feed."

Mr. Miller straightened in his chair. If I didn't know of the humility of these people I would have thought there was a touch of pride in his response. "To be Amish is to know how to provide for

your family and those you are in covenant with—even in the most difficult times. That is simply our way. Your infection simply allowed us to do for one another what we had always prepared to do.

“Canned goods were brought from other homes. There were still chickens in the coop, so we had eggs and the occasional fowl. We had to keep the birds inside the coop most of the time, though, their movement attracted too much attention from the infected and—we feared—would attract attention from survivors as well.”

“You saw other survivors from outside your community?”

“Occasionally. It is very difficult to know the intentions of those outside of the fellowship. We did our best to remain out of sight—as we always had—but occasionally they would come to the house looking for help or refuge.”

“Did they get any?”

“We wouldn’t turn them away empty, English. That wouldn’t be Christian. But we would give them some food, some water and send them on their way. ‘A cup of cold water in Jesus’ name’ is what the Scripture commands. They received that and more.

“However, we were very aware that our supplies were limited. It was just gardening season and while we could grow plenty for ourselves it would be some time before we could harvest. And we had no idea how long the ordeal would last. We knew it was best to not attract attention to ourselves. It was then that we realized we could use the infected to our advantage. Just like with our livestock, we would release them from the barn every morning and let them into the pasture. The sight of them was enough to keep the curious away.”

“So you would let them out of the barn by day? What about at night?”

Otto Miller looks at me like his next answer was the most logical and obvious. “We would herd them back into the barn. We had always done it with our livestock, it just seemed natural to do it with the undead. Also, we were uncomfortable with the idea of them roaming at night.”

“I’ve interviewed survivors all over the world. No one else ever reported ‘herding’ the zombies. How did you...”

“Herding is something we’ve done all our lives. We were able to modify the cattle chutes that we had used to guide livestock into wagons for market. We would walk in front of them, guiding them to the barn and then use a rope ladder to get ourselves into the hayloft and back out of the barn.”

It seems time to ask the question that I’ve been waiting for, the question that makes the survival story of this Old Order Amish community so unique. “So was that when you came upon the idea to...make use of them?”

“As spring wore on and summer was coming we became aware that we might be in for a long stay. The infected had killed my workhorses and while we wouldn’t need as many crops, a few acres of corn and wheat would go a long way towards providing for us over the coming winter.

“Abraham Schrock was with us and he was an exceptionally skilled woodworker. One night as the women were putting the children to bed he showed me his plans for a new type of yoke. He estimated it would take eight of the infected to pull a plow and we would have to learn how to direct them but it seemed possible. He had brought his woodworking tools and within a few days we were ready to test the new yoke out.”

Mr. Miller catches my laughter. I shake my head and comment, “You actually farmed with zombies.”

His glare narrows at me. “What would you have me do? These were infected people who I had known all my life. It’s not in our way to ‘remove the head’ as your news reporters so eloquently put it. The Word of God tells us, ‘if any would not work, neither should he eat.’ Well, they had already eaten my livestock. It was time for them to work.”

We are silent for a moment. I use the time to collect my thoughts and clarify my notes. Finally I break the silence. “So how well did it...work?”

“Better than you might think. It took two men with ropes to hold them straight from the sides, one man to guide the plow from behind and one or two of the little ones in front to...encourage them.”

“Little ones?” I ask.

"The children. We found that they made good lures for the infected—like dangling a carrot in front of an old mule. Yes, our children work, they do their share. They are strong and capable and never were in any real danger—no more danger than being trampled by a horse and we have known too many of those losses over the years.

"At any rate, the crops were in the ground. It would be a late harvest but there was still plenty of time. That winter there would be grain for flour, bread for the table, warmth in the home."

"It sounds almost ideal. You're an amazing group to have survived so well."

"We know it was the Lord's blessing. In fact, that fall we decided to hold a feast—a harvest festival. We prepared food from our crops, killed a few of the chickens and gave thanks. I remember it was the Sabbath—Sunday. We do not work on the Sabbath so the infected were kept in the barn all day.

"I suppose that's why 'they' came. They didn't see the infected and the children were playing in the yard under the trees. The adults were inside on the porch talking when my grandson brought the men to us."

He shakes his head and looks down. "They were scavengers. Vile men who were simply moving from town to town, taking what they wanted. Killing. Raping. Here they had come...on our Sabbath. On our day of thanksgiving.

"They had guns. They walked into my home and ordered us to the center of the sitting room. There were only five of them but...it's not our way to fight and with the women and children there it would have been...improper. They needed to see that our faith was strong, that our ways were steadfast.

"I spoke up and told them what I had told the other visitors over the months. We had food and would share and could provide them with water and even directions but they could not stay. They merely laughed.

"One of them spoke up. I supposed he was their leader. From his swagger and his large gun I suspect he was used to others kowtowing to him. He said, 'Well, I'm sorry, Old-Timer, but that's just not going to work for us. You see, we're going to stay for as long as we want and take what we want.'

"Those words were emphasized with a glance towards my daughter-in-law. I saw Amos bristle and step forward. I raised my palm to him and he backed down...as he should have. The outsiders just laughed.

"One of the other men must have realized that Amos was her husband, he pushed him with the butt of his rifle and Amos...poor Amos...always with the temper. He swung a fist at the man. The blow connected and he knocked him to the floor. That was when the leader stepped forward...put his gun to the side of Amos' head and pulled the trigger."

Mr. Miller stops and lowers his head. He removes his glasses and wipes his eyes, all the while in silence. I know enough to realize it's their way in prayer. I know better than to break the silence.

He sighs. "My son was gone. All those months among those undead, what some consider monsters and yet here these 'uninfected' had brought the worst plague upon my home. My wife was in tears, holding our son. His wife in tears beside her. My grandchildren simply looking on...frozen in the moment."

"I'm sorry," I offer, knowing my words mean nothing. "You have my sympathy."

"I think it was then," he continued, "that those men began to speculate on whether or not this would be as easy as they had thought. One of them said, 'We don't need this trouble, there's too many of them. It'd be a waste of ammo. Let's just take what we need and get out of here.'"

"That must have sounded agreeable to their leader. He shook his head and looked back at me. 'We're going to need food. All we can carry.'"

"The women will pack it for you," I told him, glancing over at Katie Schrock. She nodded and went to the kitchen to prepare the bags for them.

"The man tapped me on the chest with the barrel of his gun. 'You're Amish, so I don't suppose you have a car, but you must have horses around here somewhere. We're going to need

transportation.”

“I tried to tell him the horses were gone but he didn’t believe me. In earnest, I didn’t want to delay his leaving us so I didn’t offer much more of an explanation. Finally he raised his weapon at my daughter-in-law and tapped the barrel against her head with each word: ‘Where...are...the...animals?’

“I looked him in the eye—just as I’m looking at you now, English, and I told him quite simply, ‘They’re in the barn.’”

The words just hang there and we sit in silence as I let the full weight of them press down on me. I cannot help but think of the “scavengers” as they walked out to the barn and wonder what images of riding off into the sunset filled their minds.

Otto Miller stands and takes his hat in hand. He nods a “good-bye” my way and walks out of the room. I surmise that in his mind the interview is over. He has told his story. The rest is actually common knowledge in the area, told in hushed tones by the “outsiders.” Mr. Miller led his scavengers to the barn, held the door for them as they walked in, closed it behind them and braced it. Muffled screams were heard and one or two shots were fired. The next spring he added three new members to his plowing team.

Otto Miller is a simple Amish man. His plain homemade clothes identical to those worn by his father and grandfather. His life as it always has been, revolving around his family, his fields and his faith. Whatever else he has done is between him and his God and certainly not open to the speculation of an outsider.

# WHO WE USED TO BE

## By David Moody

David Moody's short fiction has appeared in the anthologies *The Undead* and *666: The Number of the Beast*. His zombie novel *Autumn* and its sequels were originally self-published and released for free online; the books have been downloaded more than a half-million times and are currently being rereleased in print by Thomas Dunne Books. A film based on *Autumn*, starring Dexter Fletcher and David Carradine, was released in the U.S. earlier this year. Moody's novel *Hater* is also currently being adapted for film, with Guillermo del Toro producing and *The Orphanage's* J. A. Bayona directing. Moody's other novels include *Dog Blood* (the sequel to *Hater*), *Straight to You*, and *Trust*.

Prominent atheist Richard Dawkins was recently asked if, since he did not believe in any sort of afterlife, he was afraid of death. He replied that he was not afraid of death—after all, the universe had existed just fine without him for billions of years before he was born, so why should it trouble him to imagine that it would go on existing without him for billions of years after he's gone? Rather, he was afraid of *dying*, because current laws compel dying patients to endure a torturous gauntlet of pain and suffering rather than letting them decide for themselves when to let go.

"I think many people assume that if they really did find themselves facing-off against the living dead, they'd react like the people in the movies and books: they'd hunt out weapons and supplies and fight off wave after wave of the dead," Moody says. "I think the reality would be very different. Many people would just implode. Others would deny the impossible events unfolding around them and try to continue with their day-to-day as usual."

Our next story questions the logic of trying to survive for as long as possible when all you're doing is wasting precious time and effort prolonging the inevitable. "It's like keeping a dying patient alive by pumping them continually with drugs which make them feel worse," Moody says, "but sometimes you just have to accept that letting go might just be the kindest and most sensible option."

**T**here was something beautifully ironic about the way mankind completely overlooked its own annihilation. Our society, for too long increasingly focused on the irrelevant, wasn't even looking in the right direction when more than six billion lives were abruptly ended. Had anyone survived, they'd no doubt have been able to come up with a thousand and one half-baked, incorrect explanations: a mutated virus, terrorism, scattered debris from a comet tail, a crashed satellite leaking radiation.... Truth was, even if by some chance they had stumbled on the right reason, it wouldn't have made any difference. And anyway, if anyone *had* been watching, then what happened next would have been even harder to comprehend than the sudden loss of billions of lives. Just minutes later, as if each person's individual death had been nothing more than an inconvenient blip as trivial and unimportant as a momentary power-cut in the middle of a reality TV program, every last one of the dead got back up again and tried to carry on.

Simon Parker had been in his home office when it happened, poring fanatically over business projections. What he'd originally envisaged as an hour's work had, as usual, wiped out his entire Saturday morning. But it didn't matter. The work needed to be done. Without the business they could kiss goodbye to this house, the cars, the holidays.... Janice and Nathan understood. He felt bad that he'd left his son on his own for so long, but he'd make it up to him when he got the chance. He knew Janice wasn't bothered. She'd just got back from shopping, arms laden with bags of clothes and other things they didn't need. Retail therapy kept her happy.



Simon mistook his death for a blackout. There were no choirs of angels or long tunnels leading towards brilliant white lights, no endless flights of heavenly steps to climb.... Instead, his death came as a sudden, crushing pressure followed by absolutely nothing. One minute he was staring at the screen searching for a particular line of figures, the next he was flat on his back, looking up at the ceiling, unable to focus his eyes. He immediately began to search for explanations. Had he suffered a heart attack? An electric shock from a faulty power outlet? A physical manifestation of the stress-related problems his doctor had repeatedly warned him about? He tried to shout for Janice but he couldn't speak.

His sudden paralysis was suffocating and terrifying but, to his immense relief, it was only temporary. With an unprecedented amount of mute effort and concentration, he finally managed to focus his eyes on the light fixture above him. Then he slowly turned his head a little. Then, with even more concentration and effort, he was able to screw his right hand into a fist and bend his arm at the elbow. He managed to draw his knees up to his chest and roll over onto his side. Then, having to will every individual muscle and sinew to move independently, he hauled himself up. No sooner had he stood upright when his center of balance shifted unexpectedly and he staggered across the room, stumbling like a new born animal taking its first unsteady steps in the wild. He tried to aim for the door but missed and hit the wall, face-first.

*That didn't hurt*, he thought to himself, panicking inside but unable to show it. Leaning back, he slid his hand under his shirt and pressed his palm against his chest. *Fingers must still be numb*, he decided. *Can't feel anything. Got to get help. Got to get to Janice.*

Leaning to one side until he over-balanced again, he rolled along the wall until he reached the open door and fell through. He staggered a few steps further, then landed on top of Janice who had collapsed halfway down the hallway. His son Nathan watched them both from where he lay on his back at the very top of the stairs, with his head lolling back and eyes unfocused.

Both immediately suspected as much, but common-sense prevented Simon and Janice from accepting they were dead for a considerable length of time.

They had gradually been able to move around with a little more freedom and control and, between the pair of them, had dragged Nathan down into the living room. When the TV didn't tell them anything and the phone calls they tried to make went unanswered, Simon went outside to look for help. What he saw out there confirmed their bizarre and improbable suspicions.

When he left the house, Simon had braced himself for the expected sudden drop in temperature outside. He was only wearing a thin T-shirt and jeans—putting on anything else in his current ungainly state would have been too much of an ordeal—and yet he hadn't felt a thing. He hadn't felt the rain he could see splashing in the puddles around his bare feet, or the wind which whipped through the tops of the trees he could see behind the houses at the end of the cul-de-sac.

He'd originally planned to try and get to Jack Thompson, a retired GP who lived several doors down, but he hadn't even reached the gate at the end of his own drive before he'd lost his nerve and turned around. His hearing was strangely muffled and unclear, but a sudden noise over to his far left had been loud enough to hear clearly. He turned towards the sound, struggling with knees which wouldn't bend, hips which wouldn't cooperate and feet which were heavy as lead, and saw that Dennis Pugh, the pompous, odious property developer who lived directly opposite, was trying to drive his car.

Obviously stricken by the same mysterious affliction as Simon as his family, Pugh's bloated, unresponsive right foot had become wedged down on the accelerator pedal while his left foot had slipped off the clutch. With inflexible arms he fought to control the car as it careened forward at speed, clipping the low stone wall at the end of his drive then swerving out across the road and missing Simon's gate by the narrowest of margins. Simon watched as Pugh ploughed down Kathleen Malins from number seventeen before smashing into the back of a builder's van. Pugh half-climbed, half-fell out of the wreck of his car and staggered back towards his house, crimson blood dribbling down his gray face from a deep gash across his forehead.

Simon barely even looked at him. Instead, he watched Kathleen—one of Janice's circle of friends—as she tried to get back home. She was crawling along the road, badly broken legs dragging uselessly behind.

Safely back inside his house, Simon leant against the door and tried to make sense of everything he'd just seen. He caught sight of his face in the long mirror on the wall and squinted hard to try and force his eyes to focus. He looked bad. His flesh was lifeless and pallid, his expression vacant and dull. His skin, he thought, looked tightly stretched over his bones like it belonged to someone else, as if he'd borrowed it from someone a size smaller.

Nathan sat in front of the TV while his parents had a long, difficult and surreal conversation in the kitchen about their sudden, unexpected deaths and their equally sudden and unexpected reanimation.

They had all stopped breathing but quickly discovered that by swallowing a lungful of air and forcing it back out again, they could just about speak. The Internet was still working—thank god—and they stood together over Simon's laptop, prodding the keyboard with cold, clumsy fingers. While most major news portals and corporate sites remained frozen and had not been updated, they were able to access enough personal blogs, micro-blogs and social networks to answer their most pressing questions: Yes, they were dead. Yes, it had happened to everyone, everywhere. No, there was nothing they could do about it.

The film that Nathan had been watching on TV ended and was replaced with nothing. Simon returned to the living room, his legs stiffening, to see why the sound had stopped. He picked up the remote and began flicking through the channels. Some continued with their automated, pre-programmed broadcasts as if nothing had happened. Other stations remained ominously blank. Some showed a screen of unchanging, unhelpful emergency information and one—a twenty-four-hour news channel—just showed an empty desk, the tousled hair of a collapsed news anchor visible in the foreground of the shot.

"Getting stiff," Janice said as she lurched into the room and fell down onto the sofa next to Nathan. "*Rigor mortis*," Simon wheezed as he sat down heavily opposite them, barely able to believe what he was saying. "Won't last long. Read it online."

"Scared," Nathan said quietly, the first word he'd managed to say since he'd died.

"I know," Simon replied, trying to focus on his son's face.

"We'll all just sit here," Janice said, pausing mid-sentence to swallow more air, "and rest. I'll get us some dinner later."

*Rigor mortis* kept the family frozen in position for almost a whole day. For a time, they were barely able to speak, let alone move. In the all-consuming darkness of the long winter night, Simon stared into space, unblinking, and tried unsuccessfully to come to terms with what had happened. His family was dead, and yet he felt surprisingly calm—perhaps because they were still together and they could still communicate. Maybe the loss would hit him later. He tried to imagine how any of this could be possible—how their brains could even continue to function. He wondered: Is this strange state of post-death consciousness just temporary? Would it last as long as their physical bodies held together? Or might it end at any moment?

He tried to distract himself with other thoughts but it was impossible. Everything had changed now that they were dead. Janice's earlier words rattled around his head: her instinctive offer of a dinner he knew she'd never cook. He realized they'd never eat or drink again. He'd never again get drunk. He'd never smell anything again, never sleep or dream, never make love.... For a while that really bothered him. It wasn't that he wanted sex—and even if he did, his sudden lack of circulation meant that the act was a physical impossibility now—what hurt was the fact that that aspect of his life had been abruptly ended with such dispassionate brutality.

Silent, unanswered questions about trivial practicalities and inconveniences soon gave way to other more important but equally unanswerable questions about what would happen next. What

will happen to our bodies? How long will we last? For how long will we be able to move and talk, and see and hear each other?

As the long, indeterminable hours passed, still more questions plagued him. He thought about Janice's faith. (Although he believed her regular trips to church each Sunday were more about seeing people and being seen than anything else.) Was there a god? Or had the events of the last day been proof positive that all religions were based on superstition and bullshit? Was this heaven—if there was such a place—or its unthinkable opposite?

He suddenly remembered a line from a horror film he'd seen once and adapted it to fit his own bizarre circumstance. *When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk their living rooms, hallways and kitchens.*

The next day, Janice had been the first to move. With a wheezing groan of effort she'd pushed herself up out of her seat next to Nathan—casting a disappointed glance at the large yellow stain she'd left on the cream-colored leather—then dragged herself upstairs on all fours. Simon went back to his office, leaving Nathan in front of the now lifeless TV. He needed to find answers to some of the many questions he'd asked himself last night.

Simon got lost on the still-functioning parts of the Internet. It took him a frustrating age to type and to move the mouse—he could barely hold it and click the buttons today—but he still managed to waste hours searching pointlessly as he'd regularly done before he'd died. He heard Janice crashing about in the kitchen, and her noise finally prompted him to move.

He checked in on Nathan as he passed the living room door. The boy looked bad. His legs and feet were swollen and bruised. His skin had an unnatural blue-green hue and one corner of his mouth hung open. A dribble of stringy, yellow-brown saliva trickled steadily down his chin, staining his favorite football shirt.

"Okay son?" Simon asked, having to remind himself how to talk again. Nathan slowly lifted his head and looked over in the general direction of his father.

"Bored."

"Just sit there for a bit," he said between breaths as he carried on down the hall. "Mum and I will work out what we're going to do."

Janice's appearance caught him by surprise. She'd changed her clothes and was wearing a dress she'd bought yesterday.

"Might as well get some wear out of it," she said.

"You look nice," he said automatically, even though she didn't. *Always compliment your wife*, he thought, *even in death*. Truth was, the way she looked made him feel uneasy. By squeezing herself into such a tight, once-flattering dress, she'd highlighted the extent to which her body had already changed. Her ankles were bruised and bloated like Nathan's (because the blood which was no longer being pumped around her body was pooling there—he'd learnt that online) and her belly was swollen (most probably with gas from countless chemical reactions—he'd learnt that online too). Her once-pert breasts hung heavy and unsupported like two small, sagging sacks of grain. She lurched into the light and, just for a second, Simon was thankful for the frozen, expressionless mask that death had given him and which hid his true reaction.

Janice looked grotesque. She'd covered her face in a thick layer of concealer which appeared even more unnatural than the jaundiced tinge of decay her skin had shown previously. She'd applied mascara (managing to coat her eyeballs more than her eyelashes), eyeshadow and lipstick with clumsy hands, leaving her looking more like a drunken clown than anything else. He didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

"Just want to feel normal again," she said. "Just because I'm dead, doesn't mean I have to forget who I am."

For a moment the two of them stared at each other in silence, standing and swaying at opposite ends of the room.

"Been trying to find out what's going to happen," Simon told her.

"What do you mean?"

"What's going to happen to us. How bad things will get before..."

Janice moved unexpectedly. She didn't want to hear this. She headed for the dishwasher which she hadn't emptied since they'd died.

"Don't want to know..."

"Need to think about it. Got to be ready for it."

"I know," she wheezed. She squinted in frustration at the white china plate she held in her hand. It was dirty again now that she'd picked it up but she put it away in the cupboard anyway. "How long will we have before...?"

"Depends," he said, anticipating the end of her question. "Could be six months. Need to keep the house cool, stay dry..."

She nodded (although her head didn't move enough to notice), stopped unloading, and leant heavily against the nearest cupboard.

"We're lucky really," Simon said, pausing to take another deep breath of air. "Six months is a long time to have to say goodbye."

By mid-afternoon the street outside the house was an unexpected mass of clumsy, chaotic movement. More and more dead people had dragged themselves out into the open as the day had progressed. Simon thought he recognized some of them, although they were pale shadows of who they used to be.

What were they hoping to achieve out there? Surely they must have realized by now that the situation was beyond hope? *No one's going to help you*, he thought. You can't cure death or make it any easier—these people needed to get a grip and get back indoors. Some of them began to squabble and fight, unable to react to their impossible situation in any other way. Most, though, simply staggered around aimlessly.

Simon watched them all walking in the same clichéd, slothful way—shuffling and stumbling, legs inflexible, arms stiff and straight. That was one thing those horror film people got right, he decided. They were out by a mile with just about every other aspect of how they'd imagined the dead would reanimate, but they'd got the painfully slow and clumsy zombie walk spot-on.

Zombies, he thought to himself, smiling inwardly. *What am I thinking?* He cursed himself for using such a stupid word. He wasn't a zombie, and neither were Janice or Nathan.

Where was Nathan?

Janice was in the kitchen, still cleaning and fussing pointlessly, but he hadn't seen Nathan for a while. He tried shouting for him but he couldn't make his voice loud enough to be heard. The boy wasn't anywhere downstairs and Simon couldn't face the long climb up to check his room. He lurched into the kitchen.

"Where Nathan?"

Janice stopped brushing her lank, greasy hair and looked up.

"Thought you with him?"

Simon walked past his dead wife and headed for the utility room at the far end of the kitchen. Using the walls and washing machines for support, he hauled himself along the narrow passageway and looked up. The back door was wide open. The whole house would no doubt be freezing cold but, as they were no longer able to feel the temperature, humidity, air pressure, or anything else, neither of them had noticed. He squinted into the distance and thought he could see Nathan near the bottom of their long garden. There was definitely something moving around down there....

He went out to investigate, struggling to keep his balance through the long, wet grass. The shape slowly came into focus. It was Nathan, crawling around on his hands and knees.

"What the hell you doing?"

"Playing," Nathan answered, still trying to keep going forward, unaware he'd crawled headfirst into an overgrown bramble patch. "Lost ball."

"Inside," Simon ordered, leaning down and trying unsuccessfully to grab hold of his son's collar. Nathan reluctantly did as he was told. He reversed direction and shuffled back out, dragging spiteful, prickly bramble stems with him which refused to let go. He stood up, fell back down when one of his legs gave way, then got back up again.

"What you doing?" Simon demanded, managing to swallow just enough air to make his voice sound almost as angry as he felt.

"Fed up. Want to play..."

Simon grabbed Nathan's hand and dragged him back towards the house. He stopped and held the boy's discolored wrist up closer to his face. His paper-thin skin had been slashed to ribbons by branches and thorns. His ankles were in an even worse state. Flaps of flesh hung down over the sides of his feet like loose-fitting socks.

"Look what you done! Won't get better!"

Nathan snatched his hand away and trudged back towards the house, zigzagging awkwardly up the boggy lawn.

Simon's eyes weren't working as well as they had been earlier. It was getting dark, but when he looked outside it was still bright. The light was moving, flickering.

"Think it's... a fire," Janice gasped, inhaling mid-sentence. "House on fire."

He turned around to look at her. She was scrubbing at a dirty brown handprint on the wall, her barely coordinated efforts seeming only to increase the size of the grubby mark. He noticed that she'd changed her clothes again. Probably for the best; several large, bile-colored stains had appeared on the white dress since she'd started wearing it. Now she wore only a shapeless, baggy pullover. He noticed that lumpy brown liquid was dribbling down the insides of her bare legs and splashing on the carpet between her feet.

"What we going to do?"

Simon had been trying to think of an answer to that question all day, and he'd come to the conclusion that they only had one choice now—to barricade themselves in the house and try to maximize the time they had left together.

Earlier, when it had been lighter and he'd been able to see more clearly, he'd watched the chaos on the road outside with a mixture of fascination and unease. Their quiet cul-de-sac had become a seething cesspit of activity. There seemed to be a constant flood of people filling the street, marching incessantly towards nothing. (*Just like in the films*, he thought.) He remembered how he'd seen several of them trip and fall, only to be trampled down by countless others who were being forced forward *en masse* by the pressure of the swollen crowds behind. The street had become little more than a putrid, flesh-filled channel, ankle deep in places. But still they came, and still they fell. Stupid. Pointless. He was glad he'd had the foresight to have a gate installed across the drive. It made it easier to protect his family from the madness outside.

And what about Nathan? He'd caused irreparable damage to himself whilst on his own outside, and that had only been the beginning of his problems today. In punishment, Simon had sent him to his room, only for him to stumble back down an hour or so later, clutching his stomach. He'd fallen off his bed and had torn a deep gash in his side. Struggling to coordinate their clumsy and frustratingly slow movements, he and Janice had patched up their son as best they could. They packed his gaping wound with towels, then wrapped virtually an entire roll of gaffer tape around his misshapen gut to keep the wadding in place. He now sat on a stiff-backed chair in the corner of the room, under orders not to move.

"What we going to do?" Janice asked again. Simon had lost himself in his thoughts. That kept happening.

"Stay here," he eventually answered. "Open windows upstairs...make it cold. Block doors."

"Go out," Nathan grumbled from the corner, trying to pick a maggot out from a hole in his left leg just above his knee. The bones were sticking out of the ends of two of his fingers, making them as difficult to use as chopsticks.

"Not out," Simon snapped, conscious that their conversation was beginning to sound primitive and almost totally monosyllabic.

"Yes, out!" Nathan said again. "Bored here."

"Can't," Janice said, positioning her tottering, half-naked frame directly in front of what was left of her only child. "Listen to Dad."

"No point..."

"Go out and get hurt!" Simon yelled.

"Already dead!"

Nathan's bizarre but factually correct response completely floored his father. His response, like many parents who lose an argument with their child, was to ignore him.

"Not going out. End of talk."

The dark came again, then the light, then the dark. The family had barely moved in hours but, as dawn broke on the fourth day after death, Simon was forced to take action. When the bright sun was finally strong enough for him to be able to see out with his increasingly weak and useless eyes, he saw that the front of their house was surrounded.

He staggered towards the window and squinted out. The number of dead people crammed into their crowded cul-de-sac had continued to increase. During the night just ended, the size of the crowd must have reached critical mass. The gate had finally given way and their block-paved driveway was now filled to capacity with rotting flesh. There were hundreds of them out there, faces pressed against *his* windows and doors. Furious and frightened, he hobbled over to one side and pulled the curtains shut.

"What matter?" Janice croaked from where she lay slumped in a puddle of herself on the floor.

"Outside," was all he said as he limped past her and headed for the hall. Janice picked herself up and followed, her rapidly escaping, putrefying innards leaving a trail on the carpet behind her. Nathan watched his parents disappear into the gloom of the rest of the house.

In the hall, Simon looked at the front door. He could see them moving on the other side. Barely able to coordinate his movements, he purposefully collided with the coat stand by the mirror, knocking it sideways. It clattered down and, more through luck than judgment, became wedged across the full width of the door. Janice bent down and started to pick up the bags, coats, hats, and scarves which had fallen off and lay on the floor.

"Windows," Simon groaned, already moving towards the next room. Janice followed, desperately trying to keep him in focus as he stumbled into his office. She saw him grab at the venetian blind with bloated hands. His stiff, twisted fingers became caught in the metal slats and he fell, pulling the blind down and revealing another mass of cold, emotionless faces outside. Janice tried to help him up but she couldn't. When he crawled away from her she dropped to her knees and tried to pick up the blind.

"Out!" he mumbled, pulling himself back up, using the door frame for support. Janice, momentarily confused and disorientated, managed to work out where he was standing and shuffled towards his voice. Once she'd gone past him, Simon made a grab for the door handle, catching it with his fourth downwards swipe and managing to pull it shut.

They stood together in the hallway, leaning against each other, unsteady legs constantly threatening to buckle. Simon concentrated hard and forced himself to swallow air.

"Back door," he said. "Then safe. All blocked."

He pushed Janice away so that he could move again. She toppled back, then lurched forward, her face slapping against the wall like rotten fruit. Instinctively she took an unsteady step back and tried to wipe away the stain she'd left behind. She was still rubbing at it several minutes later when Simon limped back towards her.

"In," he wheezed, his voice barely audible now. Together they crashed back through the living room door. "Block it."

"Careful," she mumbled as he moved towards the bookcase adjacent to the door. "My things..."

She began trying to pick precious items and heirlooms off the shelves—a trophy, a crystal decanter, a framed photograph of the three of them—but Simon wasn't interested. Summoning all the effort he could muster, he pushed and pulled the bookcase until it came crashing down across the living room door, trapping them safely inside. Janice stood and looked at the mess. Simon collapsed. He aimed for the sofa but skidded in another rancid puddle and ended up on the floor. He was past caring.

They were safe. The house was secure.

After a while, he looked around the room. Something was wrong. He knew his eyes were failing, but he could still see enough to know that someone was missing.

"Where Nathan?"

Janice and Simon lasted another eighteen days together. They sat slumped on the floor at opposite ends of the living room for more than four hundred hours, longer than anyone else for several miles around, still recognizable when most others had been reduced to slurry.

It felt like forever; hour after hour, after silent, empty hour, they sat and remembered who they used to be and what they did and how they'd miss all that they'd lost. Had they been capable of feeling anything, the end would have finally come as a relief. More than a week after they'd died, first Simon and then Janice's brain activity dwindled and then stopped like batteries running flat.

Nathan only lasted a day after going outside. His dad had been right about one thing: by staying indoors, in cool, dry conditions, their rate of decay had been slowed dramatically. But Nathan hadn't wanted to sit there doing nothing. In his one long day, he played football (after a fashion), made friends with a frog, chased a cat, tried to climb a tree, and explored that part of the garden that Mum and Dad didn't like him exploring. And even when he couldn't move anymore, when everything but his brain and his eyes had stopped working, he lay on his back on the grass and looked up at the lights and the clouds and the birds and planned what he was going to do tomorrow.

# Flotsam & Jetsam

## By Carrie Ryan

Carrie Ryan's first novel *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* debuted to great acclaim when it was released in 2009. The sequel, *The Dead-Tossed Waves*, came out earlier this year, and the third volume, *The Dark and Hollow Places*, is due out in Spring 2011. Our next story shares the same milieu as her novels, but takes place several hundred years earlier. Another piece of Ryan's zombie fiction appears in the anthology *Zombies vs. Unicorns*. Her love of zombies is all her fiancé JP's fault. Since becoming infected with the zombie bug, she has begun converting her friends and family to her cause, much like a zombie would.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle recommends that storytellers observe a unity of time (no large jumps forward in time), place (one location), and action (few or no subplots). Well, things don't get much more unified than a couple of characters on a lifeboat. Hitchcock used this scenario to great effect in his World War II-era film *Lifeboat*, in which the survivors begin to suspect that one of them is a German agent. Gary Larson, author of the beloved newspaper comic *The Far Side*, repeatedly used gags involving lifeboats. (In one such strip, three men and a dog draw lots to see which of them will be eaten—the dog comes up a winner, and looks suitably smug.)

Our next tale also utilizes the grim immediacy and forced intimacy of a lifeboat scenario. "My original idea for this story was to have infection break out on an airplane, which caused airports to constantly divert it," Ryan says. "As I thought more about the idea, I wanted to simplify it and boil it down. I was out to dinner with friends and talking about my idea, and my fiancé suggested using a boat instead. I'd been doing a lot of research into *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* for another project so the first line was obvious, and the entire story unfolded from there. I love using zombies in my fiction because it allows me to ask what differentiates the living from the dead. How do we determine our own lives and futures beyond mindlessly doing what someone tells us?"

“W ater, water everywhere, and—”

“Damn it, Jeremy! If you say that one more time...” It's when I see his face fall that I swallow the rest of what I'm going to say. But the unspoken words circle my head, the rage stinging just under my skin. Honestly, I'd love nothing more than to reach across the tiny little raft and rip his throat out with my bare fingers.

I close my eyes, try to inhale slow and deep. I feel him shift, feel the ripple and dip of the rubber underneath us that pushes me just a little off balance. To avoid the urge to kick him, I pull my legs up to my chest, resting my forehead on my knees.

“Sorry, man,” he says, his voice a tiny defeated squeak.

I press my face harder against my kneecaps, digging the prickle of my unshaven chin into my skin. Trying to focus all my pain into a single point. Trying to burn out my frustration. Waves dip and tumble underneath us, tilting us toward the sun and then away, water whispering around our tiny octagonal rubber island.

The cruise ship still hulks on the horizon and no matter how hard I try, I can't resist staring at it. Bright orange specks hover around it like chiggers—other lifeboats stuffed with other potential survivors. I start to unroll the nylon canopy, attaching it to the raft walls and pulling it over the inflated cross bar arcing across the center of the raft when Jeremy glances at me, looking startled.

“We could go back,” he says, hesitant. “We could try to get closer. Just to see.”

I stop struggling with the canopy and close my eyes tight again, curling back over my knees.



"No," I tell him, my voice echoing between my legs. He sighs and dips his hand over the edge of the raft. I can hear the drip of the salt water as it plinks from his fingers. I should tell him to stop, tell him that the salt's not good for him. But we both know it won't matter. Not in a few days if the reports have been right.

Jeremy has nightmares. Not that I don't, but Jeremy's are bad—worse than bad: horrific. The first two days on the life raft neither of us sleep. Instead, we sit here, eyes riveted on the gigantic cruise ship as we drift farther and farther away.

It's during the second night when he finally falls asleep. I'm still staring at the ship, struck by how bright and dazzling it is—how it looks exactly like all the commercials as it lights up the night. I even start to think that perhaps we'd been stupid to evacuate so hastily and that maybe we should circle in closer, see if they've somehow been able to contain the infection.

That's when Jeremy starts screaming and thrashing around. It makes the little raft buck and dip, one of the sides catching a wave and letting water slosh in. I jump on him, pinning him down and he swings at me before I'm able to get to his hands.

He wakes up with me straddling him and panting hard, my heart loud like gunshots in my ears. He doesn't know he'd been having nightmares and he frowns, his face draining.

"Get off me," he says, twisting to the side, and I let go his hands and scuttle back to the other side of the raft. He looks at me like I'm a monster and it makes me feel awkward and weird.

"You were screaming," I tell him but he just grunts and won't look at me. He keeps staring at the ship, watching the lights glitter like nothing's changed. I pull my legs up to my chest and tuck into one of the corners, making sure no part of me touches any part of him for the rest of the night.

Smoke billows from the ship on the fourth day. It's been dry, the sun burning and keeping us sweltering under the sagging canopy. I think about licking the sweat from my arms but it's full of salt—just as useless as the water surrounding us.

"You think Nancy and them are still on there?" Jeremy asks. He's pressed against the only opening, blocking the fresh air. I nudge him with my foot and he moves over slightly. I wonder how the hell eight people are supposed to survive on this tiny thing, how they could ever stand each other.

Eight supply pouches ring the inside of the octagonal raft, one per potential survivor, and I give each a name. A friend who was on the ship with me that I've left behind: Francis, Omar, Leroy, Margaret, Nancy, Micah, and Tamara. I know that leaves Jeremy out, but I don't care. I wasn't supposed to end up on this stupid life raft with him in the first place. He wasn't even supposed to be going on the damn cruise and wouldn't be here if it weren't for Nancy and her soft heart and inability to say no to losers.

Jeremy cranes his neck around and looks at me. "Should we look for them? Maybe pull a little closer to see if they're on other rafts?"

I shake my head, dig my fingers into my arms until I'm pinching the muscle. I should tell Jeremy I saw them already. The night we jumped ship I saw them running. Saw the blood and bites. Saw the expression on Francis's face.

*Fucking Francis*, I think to myself. Of course he'd have been the first one bitten.

Jeremy wears glasses and the lenses are crusted with salt. Everything's so layered with it that he can't even find a way to clean them anymore and so he doesn't bother. Just stares at everything through the white haze.

I hate looking at him like that. It makes him look like he's already gone. Like he's already one of them.

He doesn't think I know about his bite. His hand keeps slipping to it, pressing against it, tracing the outline of it under his shirt. I pretend not to notice but it's not like he's being subtle about it. If I

hadn't seen the raw red ring of bite marks along his ribs that first night I'd struggled with him during his nightmares, I'd have figured it out eventually.

I mean, Christ, it's running towards one hundred degrees every day and even though we huddle under the canopy of the life raft, it's not like it's cool in the shade. I ditched my shirt the first day but Jeremy still keeps his on and I don't care how self-conscious and scrawny he might be: when the temperature hits triple digits and you're stranded with a guy in the middle of the damn ocean while the world falls apart, you lose things like modesty.

If I can watch him slip into the water to take a dump, I can deal with his pale thin muscles and a chest like a plucked turkey. I may not be the smartest, but I'd have figured out he was hiding something under that shirt.

"How long you think it takes them to turn after they're bitten?" I ask him. I know I'm an asshole but I'm bored and I wonder how much I can prod and poke at him before he admits the truth. Plus, he's smarter than I am. Jeremy's the one who first figured out that we needed to get off the ship, even though they hadn't called an official evacuation. He was the one keeping up with the news when the rest of us were testing out our fake IDs in the bar and pretending everything was going to be okay.

He swallows, sharp dagger of an Adam's apple dragging along his throat. "Depends how bad the bite was," he says, pinching the web of skin between his thumb and forefinger.

I stare at him, willing him to have the balls to tell me himself but he just shifts and stares back at the boat. "Maybe we should pull in closer," he says. "Just in case someone needs our help."

I shake my head. "No," I tell him. "Too risky."

The thing Jeremy doesn't understand is that the first time he fell asleep, I couldn't resist the pull of all those lights. That promise of safety and warmth—the idea that everything was under control. So I'd paddled us closer.

There were people everywhere, all over the decks. Running. Screaming. Jumping. They were panicked and desperate. I saw other lifeboats rocking as they fought against them, the living and the dead.

Something had flashed in one of the windows and I stared at it, trying to see what was going on inside. That's when I saw a hand, fingers scratching at the glass. That's when I saw the teeth and mouth, banging against the window again and again, desperate to get out.

Even though I'd smothered our emergency beacon light, I felt like the thing was staring straight at me. That more than anything else she wanted to rip every bit of flesh from my bones and pull apart every muscle. Open me up like a frog on the dissection tray.

I'd let us drift back away then. Just before Jeremy started screaming. Just before I saw the bite marks along his ribs.

"You ever had sex?" I ask him.

His back stiffens, his shirt sticking to his body. Even though we've been rationing water he's been sweating a lot—too much. His skin's hot and flushed and he wants me to think it's from the sun and heat but I can smell the way his wound's festering, the sweet putrid stink of it. He pulls his head under the canopy and slumps against the wall. "Why?" he asks.

"Why sex? It's supposed to be pretty damn good," I tell him, trying to lighten his mood.

"Supposed to be?" he repeats, raising an eyebrow.

I scowl, cross my arms over my chest. "Don't you think about those things, being out here?" He starts to look at me funny and I think about the night I pinned him in his sleep. I roll my eyes. "I just mean, it's not like we have anything else to do but think. It's just sex is one of those things I'd planned on doing before I died. I'm kinda pissed it might not happen."

He shrugs. "Who says you're going to die?"

I notice he doesn't say "we" and I swallow, my tongue suddenly feeling a little thick. Scrunching down until I can prop my feet against the raft wall, I stare up at the peak of the canopy, watching

it stretch and ripple over the inflated support bar. "What do you think's happening back home?" I say. It's a question I've been trying desperately not to ask but it's all I can think about recently. Well, that and sex.

Jeremy's silent and I let my head flop over until I'm looking at him. He's staring out at the horizon but from here all I can see is gray water, gray sky, gray life. Slowly I push myself to my hands and knees and crawl until I'm sitting next to him.

The ship's farther away now. We'd lost sight of it the day before and for a while we'd been panicked, not realizing until then how much we needed to have it out there even if we kept our distance. How empty everything seemed without it.

But then we'd seen the smoke rising out of nowhere and we'd paddled toward it until we saw it billowing from the decks of the ship. For most of the day it's been listing to the side, slowly and inevitably capsizing.

"I think they might all be gone," Jeremy finally says softly, before dancing his fingers along his side as if I don't know what he's hiding.

Every time he falls asleep, Jeremy screams. He never remembers it, or at least never acknowledges it. It's driving me insane and a part of me hopes the infection goes ahead and takes him soon so I can be done with it.

The thing is, it's not like Jeremy or I were being stupid. It's not like we didn't know how the whole thing works: someone gets bitten, gets infected, dies and comes back from the dead hungering for flesh. We'd seen the movies and played the video games. We *knew*.

It's just...when it came down to it, it wasn't that easy. It was never supposed to be real, never supposed to actually happen. Everything got confused and strange. We lost our friends trying to run through the cruise ship and we fought over taking a life raft and ditching or staying for official evacuation orders.

Really, this isn't what was supposed to happen at all—this isn't how it was supposed to end up. We'd treated it like a joke because we'd have panicked otherwise. "Ha-ha, the zombie apocalypse's hit, let's take a life raft and run."

Ha-ha, joke's on us. Or them. I can't remember anymore.

Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't just make more sense to confront Jeremy and force him overboard. After all, it's not like he has a chance of surviving this, and in the meantime he's taking up resources that I might need.

Neither one of us says anything but we both know: if there was going to be a rescue, it'd have happened by now. There've been no planes, no coast guard or bright orange helicopters. Our little raft beacon chirps and blinks away merrily, sending little distress "rescue me" signals out into the world that either no one's there to hear or they're too busy ignoring us.

We *know* this. Just like we know that land can't really be that far away—we'd been on a cruise after all. The whole point is to visit all the islands—they have to be out here somewhere.

But we can't bring ourselves to lose sight of the ship to find out. Just in case.

I don't realize what it is at first, the huge groaning noise like a whale's swallowed us whole. There's this massive, deep popping sound, a high-pitched whine and then the sound of the world sucking itself up with a straw.

The wave hits not too long after, tossing us around the boat. I grab the canopy trying to hold on and end up tearing part of it away from the sides.

"What the hell?" I ask, running my fingers over the raft to make sure nothing's damaged.

Water knocks us around, up and down and up and down, and Jeremy's at the flap, staring out in the night.

"No!" he shouts into the darkness and I suddenly realize just how dark it is. It's nothing; pure

absolute emptiness. The cruise ship's gone, devoured by the ocean.

Jeremy jumps into the water and starts swimming as if he could somehow bring it back from the depths. I can't even see him, he's been swallowed up already, but I hear his splashing.

"It can't go yet!" he screams. "I'm not ready. I'm not ready!"

I kneel in the boat, my arms over the side trying to feel for him as I listen to him beat at the waves and curse everything for taking away the ship once and for all.

When I finally get him back on board he shivers in my lap, his arms crossed tight over his chest.

"I'm not ready," he mutters, turning his face to my chest as tears burn hot against my skin.

I hold on to him, letting the raft rock us both, the silence of the sea settling around the sunken ship our only lullaby.

"Jenny Lyons," I tell him and he cracks a small smile.

"Her?" he asks. "Really?"

I shrug. "It was eighth grade and computer class."

"Didn't she have braces then?"

"Oh yeah."

He shakes his head.

"How about you?" I ask.

If possible, his cheeks pinken even more.

"Oh don't tell me, sweet sixteen and never been kissed?" I mean it like a tease.

"More like eighteen," he says staring at his lap.

I feel my smile tighten as I think about the bite on his ribs and suddenly it doesn't seem so funny anymore.

It's pitch-black dark when he finally comes clean. "Listen, I gotta tell you something," he says. He must have known I was pretending to sleep because he doesn't bother trying to wake me up first. I shift a little, feeling the boat rock slowly under my movement. We haven't seen anything else for days: no ship, land, rafts. Only so much nothing that it feels like we have to be the last people left.

As he explains I bite my teeth together as hard as possible, wondering if I can break them—break everything and be done with it.

"I'll go overboard, if you want," he says. In the darkness his voice has no body, no infection. It just is.

"But then you'll turn into one of those things," I tell him.

His breath shakes. "I'm going to turn into one of those things no matter what," he says.

I push my fingers into my eyes, trying to poke them hard enough to bring tears because it's the only way I can think of to unleash the searing pain inside. "Is that what you want?" I ask him.

"If I stay on this raft and turn, I'll go after you," he finally says. He pauses and in the emptiness our hearts keep beating. "I don't want that," he adds softly.

"So you think you can take me?" I ask him.

He doesn't laugh, not really. It was a lame joke anyway, but I do hear him exhale a little harder as if he'd thought about laughing. "You have to promise me you'll throw me over when it happens," he finally says. "Promise me you'll make me sink."

I press my fingers harder against my eyes.

"Promise me." His voice is urgent.

I shake my head. "I promise," I mutter.

"I think Nancy had a little crush on you," I tell him. It's a thick soupy day, taunting us with rain and I'm organizing our water bottles to catch what I can. My mouth tries to salivate at the thought of it, cool and wet, sliding down my throat, filling every dry space inside me.

"I hope so, since she's the one who bit me." He's leaning back in the shade of the canopy, shirt

off now that I know his secret. I can't look at him without glancing at the bite festering along his ribs. It's like he's proud of it, forcing us both to deal with it.

And then I realize what his words mean. "So you knew." I don't ask it as a question. I turn to face him. "If she's the one who bit you, you knew about everyone else. Francis, Nancy and the others."

"Why do you think I told you we shouldn't wait for them?" he asks. Red streaks along his skin, marking every vein through his body with an infection whose heat sometimes radiates along the rubber of the raft.

"Then why did you keep asking to go back if you knew?"

He shrugs, stares at his hands. "I wanted to be wrong. Doesn't matter now, I guess."

And he's right. We lost sight of the last raft two days ago.

His hands are hot as he grabs for me. He's gasping for breath and at first I think he's turned, gurgling on moans, but then I realize he's trying to say my name. "Get up," he says, shaking me, but his muscles are weak from so many days of disuse and I'm still much larger and stronger than he is.

"Get up," he prods again.

He shoves something into my hand, the lanyards that lashed the flap of the canopy shut. "Tie me up," he says. "It's time. Tie me up, sink me."

It's been harder and harder for me to surface from sleep and I struggle to understand what Jeremy's saying. He's wheezing now as he takes my hands, wraps my fingers around the ropes, pulls them tight along his wrists and elbows.

His skin's dry and cracked and I try to blink the salt from my eyes so I can focus on what's going on. It's dark in the little raft, pitch-black swallowing us everywhere with just the tiny hiccups of the alert beacon flashing.

-flash-

Jeremy knotting the ropes. Using his teeth to tighten them.

-flash-

Me winding them around his torso, tucking up his knees.

-flash-

Jeremy's eyes glassy and bright. His chest barely moving.

-flash-

I don't know what to say. What to do. What to tell him.

-flash-

I slip my fingers into his. "I'm sorry, Jeremy."

-flash-

He's nothing.

-flash-

Dead eyes. Still heart.

-flash-

Waves tilt and whirl as his body becomes a shell.

-flash-

I breathe in. Hold it.

-flash-

-flash-

-flash-

I exhale.

And before the light can flash again he explodes, straining and struggling.

I see the perfectly straight teeth, the gleaming white as he tries to lunge for me.

As he snaps at the air.

Screaming, I throw myself across the raft. Pushing and forcing myself back. Wishing the walls

could absorb me. Keep me safe. His moans are like growls, guttural and wet. He's insane with what looks like agony and rage and a desire so intense I can smell it.

Beneath me the entire raft bucks and swirls, his movements teetering us around, his feet ripping at the canopy overhead as he tries to gain his balance, tries to push himself closer to me.

I can't get near him, can only watch as he pulls and pops against the ropes. Can only hear the strain on his joints, the snap of his wrist breaking apart under the twisting jolts. It's too much. I can't stand it, can't be near him anymore. Can't see him like this.

I dive through the opening in the canopy into the night, letting the waves close over my head until I can't hear, can't see, can't forget as the raft twists and shudders above me.

"Do you believe in God?" I ask Jeremy. Water pools around the divot in the raft where I'm crouching and I've pulled open the canopy, hoping the sun will burn it away so that my poor chaffed skin can find relief.

Jeremy bucks against the soggy ropes holding him tight. I've lashed him to the other side of the raft and used strips of my shirt to tie his mouth shut. He still manages to moan, deep nasal sounds that reverberate through the raft so that I'm always feeling them even when I shove my hands to my ears.

I tried to push him overboard, I swear. But I just couldn't do it. I couldn't let go of him.

He's all I have left. I couldn't drift away from him on the empty horizon.

"Blink once for yes, twice for no," I tell him, staring into his face. He doesn't blink, just tries to lunge for me, his shoulder buckling back at a sickening angle.

"Jeremy?" I whisper. It's night, pitch black, and I swore I woke up to screaming. I swore I woke up to Jeremy and his nightmares.

The raft shudders. Jeremy still desperate to escape. Still desperate for me. I shake my head, feeling like my ears are full of water, every sound distant and dull.

"Jeremy?" I ask again.

Carefully, I crawl across the raft, my muscles having a hard time keeping me from falling over. The bottom sags every place I set my hand and knee, feeling as if it too is giving up. I pull myself face to face with Jeremy, too close to be safe.

"Is there anything left?" I ask him.

And I can't tell if he's shaking his head or if he's just twisting against his ropes to get closer to me.

I'm pretty sure Jeremy's been talking to me. When I wake up I'm positive I hear his voice in my head. And when I'm staring at the horizon, trying to find shapes in the wavering distance, I swear he's saying something.

"You promised." He's starting to sag against his ropes. His body's pretty torn up, joints dislocated and his left arm fractured where he pulled too hard. His skin's tight over his face, cheekbones sharp and accusing.

"I'm not ready," I tell him.

"Neither was I," he says.

I turn away again. Nothing inside me is willing to cooperate anymore. Everything shudders and falls apart, muscles failing to fire, bones shifting under my skin so that I always hurt.

"You promised," he says over and over and over again until I almost do want to throw him over just to shut him up.

It's raining, so our water bottles are full again. One of the survival pouches has a fishing kit and I've been sitting here for a while staring at the gleaming little hook. Part of me wants to draw it along the raft, wondering if it's sharp enough to gash the boat and sink us both.

We ran out of food three days ago, so I don't have anything to use as bait. I've tried using just the

hook but nothing bites. I stare at Jeremy, at the flesh flayed off his broken thumb. His moans are more like whimpers now and my stomach heaves as I pinch at his skin, tearing the little flap off. I shove it on the hook and toss it in the water and wait, thinking of the fish circling underneath us, wondering if eating Jeremy's undead flesh will cause them to turn as well. Thinking of the feel of their meat on my tongue, the thick oily taste of it, makes me weak with desperation so intense I tremble.

Hours pass, the storm dwindles and nothing. Wincing, I close my eyes, cut a sliver of my own skin away. As soon as the scent of my blood hits the air, Jeremy explodes, thrashing harder than he has in days. Startled, the hook slips through my fingers and falls away into the depths.

I sit staring at the bloody flesh in my fingers, red and bright and wet. Inside I'm empty, nothing but water sloshing through my veins, nothing but the taste of salt coating my tongue. Slowly I raise the bit of skin to my lips and close my eyes.

Jeremy moans and writhes as I force myself to swallow.

It's dark again, so dark that nothing makes sense. There's a storm whipping around outside, dragging the raft and tossing it around. I brace my hands against the walls and try to hold on tight but still I'm thrown into Jeremy, thrust against him again and again.

Everything's soaking wet, water seeping through tears in the canopy even though I've done my best to lash it shut. It's slippery and I can't keep my balance. I reach for Jeremy's hands.

*"I don't want to be alone,"* I scream at him, my throat raw and cracked. *"I'm scared."*

It's too hard to keep doing this, to keep surviving. I'm exhausted and my body's beyond pain: salt leaches into my cuts, my skin's tight and shrunken with sunburn and my stomach is so empty I'm frightened it no longer exists.

*"I'm afraid to die,"* I tell Jeremy. His fingers grab for me, clutch on to me as if he understands what I'm saying. He seems so much stronger than I am.

I kneel in front of him and pull the scrap of shirt from his head, unleashing his jaw. He snaps and moans, louder than the roar of the storm. My breath is shaking as I reach my arm up to him, push it toward his mouth.

A wave crashes down on us, flooding the tiny raft and in the murk of it I feel the sharp sting of his teeth closing around me.

I rest my head in Jeremy's lap and stare up at the calm blue sky. There's something comforting about him, about the feel of him underneath me like I'm a kid curled up on my parents' bed on a Saturday morning.

Already I feel the sear of the infection, my body offering up little resistance. I've been shutting down, muscles twitching, throat closing, stomach ceasing to rattle and growl and my heart a bare whisper. I haven't felt my toes for a day and what bothers me is that I no longer care.

*"My dad made the best waffles,"* I tell Jeremy, staring at the clouds. *"He'd leave the butter out overnight so it was soft and melty. I'd drown them with syrup."* I run the tip of my tongue against the roof of my barren mouth, trying to remember the feel of it.

I'm so wrapped up in the memory that seeing the bird doesn't make sense, doesn't penetrate the fantasy I have in my head of a table heaped with food. But then the bird screams and I jolt up, my head colliding with Jeremy's chin, snapping him back.

*"Oh my God!"* I shout. *"Oh my God!"* There's a tiny spit of land cresting over the horizon. Exerting every force I can muster from my muscles, I hold my hand up, trace the curve of a tree with my finger. We draw closer and closer, the island growing larger and larger, the infection inside me roaring hotter and hotter.

I'm weeping, barely able to move.

Jeremy sags against the wall next to me, red gashes covering his body where the rope's rubbed him raw. I put my hand on his foot and he twitches, leans toward me. *"We made it, Jeremy,"* I say with cracked lips.

He leans toward me, his mouth finding my knuckles. He's so weak now, so torn apart from struggling that he can barely bite, and what hurts more than his teeth grazing my flesh is the sting of salt from his lips penetrating the raw skin.

My eyes blur with tears. "We made it," I whisper. Overwhelmed with a crush of emotions so intense I can't even untangle them, I hug him tight, press my face into the curve of his neck and pretend his struggles are joy at being saved.



# The Days of Flaming Motorcycles

## Catherynne M. Valente

Catherynne M. Valente is the critically acclaimed author of *The Orphan's Tales* series, which has won the Tiptree Award, the Mythopoeic Award, and was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Her novel, *Palimpsest*—which she describes as “a baroque meeting of science fiction and fantasy”—is a finalist for the 2010 Hugo Awards. Her young adult novel, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*, which was originally self-published online and is forthcoming in print from Feiwel and Friends, recently won the Andre Norton Award. A new series, beginning in November with *The Habitation of the Blessed*, retells the legend of Prester John. Her short fiction has appeared in the magazines *Clarkesworld*, *Electric Velocipede*, and *Lightspeed*, and in the anthology *Dark Faith*, where this story first appeared.

The inspiration for this story came when Valente visited Augusta, Maine, for the first time. “Augusta, despite being the state capitol, is an extremely economically depressed region, and the dilapidation of the downtown area and the general atmosphere of silence and a city long past its prime truly struck me,” she says. “It looked like the zombies had taken over in 1974 and people just said: ‘Well, we have to go to work tomorrow.’ The idea of that quiet apocalypse took hold of my heart; an apocalypse you just have to live through and find a way to co-exist with was fascinating. I finally felt like I had something new to say about zombies.”

Zombies may be caused by any number of factors—a supernatural event, a man-made virus, or radiation from a passing comet—but one thing is nearly universal: you have to kill them to survive, and killing them is completely justified because it's self-defense and you have no choice. But what if zombies didn't have to be killed? What if they *shouldn't* be? What if you could live side-by-side with them and make a new kind of life for yourself among them, even as the world around you has fallen to pieces?

**T**o tell you the truth, my father wasn't really that much different after he became a zombie.

My mother just wandered off. I think she always wanted to do that, anyway. Just set off walking down the road and never look back. Just like my father always wanted to stop washing his hair and hunker down in the basement and snarl at everyone he met. He chased me and hollered and hit me before. Once, when I stayed out with some boy whose name I can't even remember, he even bit me. He slapped me and for once I slapped him back, and we did this standing-wrestling thing, trying to hold each other back. Finally, in frustration, he bit me, hard, on the side of my hand. I didn't know what to do—we just stared at each other, breathing heavily, knowing something really absurd or horrible had just happened, and if we laughed it could be absurd and if we didn't we'd never get over it. I laughed. But I knew the look in his eye that meant he was coming for me, that glowering, black look, and now it's the only look he's got.

It's been a year now, and that's about all I can tell you about the apocalypse. There was no flash of gold in the sky, no chasms opened up in the earth, no pale riders with silver scythes. People just started acting the way they'd always wanted to but hadn't because they were more afraid of the police or their boss or losing out on the prime mating opportunities offered by the greater Augusta area. Everyone stopped being afraid. Of anything. And sometimes that means eating each other.

But sometimes it doesn't. They don't always do that, you know. Sometimes they just stand there and watch you, shoulders slumped, blood dripping off their noses, their eyes all

unfocused. And then they howl. But not like a wolf. Like something broken and small. Like they're sad.

Now, zombies aren't supposed to get sad. Everyone knows that. I've had a lot of time to think since working down at the Java Shack on Front Street became seriously pointless. I still go to the shop in the morning, though. If you don't have habits, you don't have anything. I turn over the sign, I boot up the register—I even made the muffins for a while, until the flour ran out. Carrot-macadamia on Mondays, mascarpone-mango on Tuesdays, blueberry with a dusting of marzipan on Wednesdays. So on. So forth. Used to be I'd have a line of senators out the door by 8:00 a.m. I brought the last of the muffins home to my dad. He turned one over and over in his bloody, swollen hands until it came apart, then he made that awful howling-crying sound and licked the crumbs off his fingers. And he starting saying my name over and over, only muddled, because his tongue had gone all puffy and purple in his mouth. Caitlin, Caitlin, Caitlin.

So now I drink the pot of coffee by myself and I write down everything I can think of in a kid's notebook with a flaming motorcycle on the cover. I have a bunch like it. I cleaned out all the stores. In a few months I'll move on to the punky princess covers, and then the Looney Tunes ones. I mark time that way. I don't even think of seasons. These are the days of Flaming Motorcycles. Those were the days of Football Ogres. So on. So forth.

They don't bother me, mostly. And okay, the pot of coffee is just hot water now. No arabica for months. But at least the power's still on. But what I was saying is that I've had a lot of time to think, about them, about me, about the virus—because of course it must have been a virus, right? Which isn't really any better than saying fairies or angels did it. Didn't monks used to argue about how many angels could fit on the head of a pin? I seem to think I remember that, in some book, somewhere. So angels are tiny, like viruses. Invisible, too, or you wouldn't have to argue about it, you'd just count the bastards up. So they said virus, I said it doesn't matter, my dad just bit his own finger off. And he howls like he's so sad he wants to die, but being sad means you have a soul and they don't; they're worse than animals. It's a kindness to put them down. That's what the manuals say. Back when there were new manuals every week. Sometimes I think the only way you can tell if something has a soul is if they can still be sad. Sometimes it's the only way I know I have one.

Sometimes I don't think I do.

I'm not the last person on Earth. Not by a long way. I get radio reports on the regular news from Portland, Boston—just a month ago New York was broadcasting loud and clear, loading zombies into the same hangars they kept protesters in back in '04. They gas them and dump them at sea. Brooklyn is still a problem, but Manhattan is coming around. Channel 3 is still going strong, but it's all emergency directives. I don't watch it. I mean, how many times can you sit through The Warning Signs or What We Know? Plus, I have reason to believe they don't know shit.

I might be the last person in Augusta, though. That wouldn't be hard. Did you ever see Augusta before the angel-virus? It was a burnt-out hole. It is a burnt-out hole. Just about every year, the Kennebec floods downtown, so at any given time there's only about three businesses on the main street, and one of them will have a cheerful We'll Be Back! sign up with the clock hands broken off. There's literally nothing going on in this town. Not now, and not then. Down by the river the buildings are pockmarked and broken, the houses are boarded up, windows shattered, only one or two people wandering dazed down the streets. All gas supplied by the Dead River Company, all your dead interred at Burnt Hill Burying Ground. And that was before. Even our Wal-Mart had to close up because nobody ever shopped there.

And you know, way back in the pilgrim days, or Maine's version of them, which starts in the 1700s sometime, there was a guy named James Purington who freaked out one winter and murdered his whole family with an axe. Eight children and his wife. They hanged him and

buried him at the crossroads so he wouldn't come back as a vampire. Which would seem silly, except, well, look around. The point is life in Augusta has been both shitty and deeply warped for quite some time. So we greeted this particular horrific circumstance much as Mainers have greeted economic collapse and the total disregard of the rest of the country for the better part of forever: with no surprise whatsoever. Anyway, I haven't seen anyone else on the pink and healthy side in a long time. A big group took off for Portland on foot a few months ago (the days of Kermit and Company), but I stayed behind. I have to think of my father. I know that sounds bizarre, but there's nothing like a parent who bites you to make you incapable of leaving them. Incapable of not wanting their love. I'll probably turn thirty and still be stuck here, trying to be a good daughter while his blood dries on the kitchen tiles.

Channel 3 says a zombie is a reanimated corpse with no observable sell-by date and seriously poor id-control. But I have come to realize that my situation is not like Manhattan or Boston or even Portland. See, I live with zombies. My dad isn't chained up in the basement. He lives with me like he always lived with me. My neighbors, those of them who didn't wander off, are all among the pustulous and dripping. I watched those movies before it happened and I think we all, for a little while, just reacted like the movies told us to: get a bat and start swinging. But I've never killed one, and I've never even come close to being bitten. It's not a fucking movie. And if Channel 3 slaps their bullet points all over everywhere, I guess I should write my own What We Know here. Just in case anyone wonders why zombies can cry.

What Is a Zombie?  
by Caitlin Zielinski

*Grade...well, if the college were still going I guess I'd be Grade 14.*

*A zombie is not a reanimated corpse. This was never a Night of the Living Dead scenario. The word zombie isn't even right—a zombie is something a voodoo priest makes, to obey his will. That has nothing to do with the price of coffee in Augusta. My dad didn't die. His skin ruptured and he got boils and he started snorting instead of talking and bleeding out of his eyes and lunging at Mr. Almeida next door with his fingernails out, but he didn't die. If he didn't die, he's not a corpse. QED, Channel 3.*

*A zombie is not a cannibal. This is kind of complicated: Channel 3 says they're not human, which is why you can't get arrested for killing one. So if they eat us, it wouldn't be cannibalism anyway, just, you know, lunch. Like if I ate a dog. Not what you expect from a nice American girl, but not cannibalism. But also, zombies don't just eat humans. If that were true, I'd have been dinner and they'd have been dead long before now, because, as I said, Augusta is pretty empty of anything resembling bright eyed and bushy tailed. They eat animals, they eat old meat in any freezer they can get open, they eat energy bars if that's what they find. Anything. Once I saw a woman—I didn't know her—on her hands and knees down by the river bank, clawing up the mud and eating it, smearing it on her bleeding breasts, staring up at the sky, her jaw wagging uselessly.*

*A zombie is not mindless. Channel 3 would have a fit if they heard me say that. It's dogma—zombies are slow and stupid. Well, I saw plenty of people slower and stupider than a zombie in the old days. I worked next to the state capitol, after all. Sometimes I think the only difference is that they're ugly. The world was always full of drooling morons who only wanted me for my body. Anyway, some are fast and some are slow. If the girl was a jogger before, she's probably pretty spry now. If the guy never moved but to change the channel, he's not gonna catch you any time soon. And my father still knows my name. I can't be sure but I think it's only that they can't talk. Their tongues swell up and their throats expand—all of them. One of the early warning signs is slurred speech. They might be as smart as they ever were—see jogging—but they can't communicate except by screaming. I'd scream, too, if I were bleeding from my ears*

*and my skin were melting off.*

*Zombies will not kill anything that moves. My dad hasn't bitten me. He could have, plenty of times. They're not harmless. I've had to get good at running and I have six locks on every door of the house. Even my bedroom, because my father can't be trusted. He hits me, still. His fist leaves a smear of blood and pus and something darker, purpler, on my face. But he doesn't bite me. At first, he barked and went for my neck at least once a day. But I'm faster. I'm always faster. He doesn't even try anymore. Sometimes he just stands in the living room, drool pooling in the side of his mouth till it falls out, and he looks at me like he remembers that strange night when he bit me before, and he's still ashamed. I laugh, and he almost smiles. He shambles back down the hall and starts peeling off the wallpaper, shoving it into his mouth in long pink strips like skin.*

There's something else I know. It's hard to talk about, because I don't understand it. I don't understand it because I'm not a zombie. It's like a secret society, and I'm on the outside. I can watch what they do, but I don't know the code. I couldn't tell Channel 3 about this, even if they came to town with all their cameras and sat me in a plush chair like one of their endless Rockette-line of doctors. What makes you think they have intelligence, Miss Zielinski? And I would tell them about my father saying my name, but not about the river. No one would believe me. After all, it's never happened anywhere else. And I have an idea about that, too. Because people in Manhattan are pretty up on their zombie-killing tactics, and god help a zombie in Texas if he should ever be so unfortunate as to encounter a human. But here there's nothing left. No one to kill them. They own this town, and they're learning how to live in it, just like anyone does. Maybe Augusta always belonged to them and James Purington and the Dead River Company. All hail the oozing, pestilent kings and queens of the apocalypse.

This is what I know: One night, my father picked up our toaster and left the house. I'm not overly attached to the toaster, but he didn't often leave. I feed him good hamburger, nice and raw, and I don't knock him in his brainpan with a bat. Zombies know a good thing.

The next night he took the hallway mirror. Then the microwave, then the coffeepot, then a sack full of pots and pans. All the zombie movies in the world do not prepare you to see your father, his hair matted with blood, his bathrobe torn and seeping, packing your cooking materiel into a flowered king-size pillowcase. And then one night he took a picture off of the bookshelf. My mother, himself, and me, smiling in one of those terrible posed portraits. I was eight or nine in the picture, wearing a green corduroy jumper and big, long brown pigtails. I was smiling so wide, and so were they. You have to, in those kinds of portraits. The photographer makes you, and if you don't, he practically starts turning cartwheels to get you to smile like an angel just appeared over his left shoulder clutching a handful of pins. My mother, her glasses way too big for her face. My father, in plaid flannel, his big hand holding me protectively.

I followed him. It wasn't difficult; his hearing went about the same time as his tongue. In a way, I guess it's a lot like getting old. Your body starts failing in all sorts of weird ways, and you can't talk right or hear well or see clearly, and you just rage at things because everything is slipping away and you're never going to get any better. If one person goes that way, it's tragic. If everyone does, it's the end of the world.

It gets really dark in Augusta, and the streetlights have all been shot out or burned out. There is no darker night than a Maine night before the first snow, all starless and cold. No friendly pools of orange chemical light to break the long, black street. Just my father, shuffling along with his portrait clutched to his suppurating chest. He turned toward downtown, crossing Front Street after looking both ways out of sheer muscle memory. I crept behind him, down past the riverside shops, past the Java Shack, down to the riverbank and the empty parking lots along the waterfront.

Hundreds of zombies gathered down there by the slowly lapping water. Maybe the whole of dead Augusta, everyone left. My father joined the crowd. I tried not to breathe; I'd never seen

so many in one place. They weren't fighting or hunting, either. They moaned, a little. Most of them had brought something—more toasters, dresser drawers, light bulbs, broken kitchen chairs, coat racks, televisions, car doors. All junk, gouged out of houses, out of their old lives. They arranged it, almost lovingly, around a massive tower of garbage, teetering, swaying in the wet night wind. A light bulb fell from the top, shattering with a bright pop. They didn't notice. The tower was sloppy, but even I could see that it was meant to be a tower, more than a tower—bed-slats formed flying buttresses between the main column and a smaller one, still being built. Masses of electric devices, dead and inert, piled up between them, showing their screens and gray, lifeless displays to the water. And below the screens rested dozens of family portraits just like ours, leaning against the dark plasma screens and speakers. A few zombies added to the pile—and some of them lay photos down that clearly belonged to some other family. I thought I saw Mrs. Holloway, my first grade teacher, among them, and she treated her portrait of a Chinese family as tenderly as a child. I don't think they knew who exactly the pictures showed. They just understood the general sense they conveyed, of happiness and family. My father added his picture to the crowd and rocked back and forth, howling, crying, holding his head in his hands.

I wriggled down between a dark streetlamp and a park bench, trying to turn invisible as quickly as possible. But they paid no attention to me. And then the moon crowned the spikes of junk, cresting between the two towers.

The zombies all fell to their knees, their arms outstretched to the white, full moon, horrible black tears streaming down their ruined faces, keening and ululating, throwing their faces down into the river-mud, bits of them falling off in their rapture, their eagerness to abase themselves before their cathedral. I think it was a cathedral, when I think about it now. I think it had to be. They sent up their awful crooning moan, and I clapped my hands over my ears to escape it. Finally, Mrs. Holloway stood up and turned to the rest of them. She dragged her nails across her cheeks and shrieked wordlessly into the night. My father went to her and I thought he was going to bite her, the way he bit me, the way zombies bite anyone when they want to. Instead, he kissed her.

He kissed her on the cheek, heavily, smackingly, and his face came away with her blood on it. One by one the others kissed her too, surrounding her with groping hands and hungry mouths, and the moon shone down on her face, blanching her so she was nothing but black and white, blood and skin, an old movie monster, only she wept. She wept from a place so deep I can't imagine it; she wept, and she smiled, even as they finished kissing her and began pulling her apart, each keeping a piece of her for themselves, just a scrap of flesh, which they ate solemnly, reverently. They didn't squabble over it, her leg or her arm or her eyes, and Mrs. Holloway didn't try to fight them. She had offered herself, I think, and they took her. I know what worship looks like.

I was crying by that time. You would, too, if you saw that. I had to cry or I had to throw up, and crying was quieter. Your body can make calculations like that, if it has to. But crying isn't that quiet, really. One of them sniffed the air and turned toward me—the rest turned as one. They're a herd, if they are anything. They know much more together than they know separately. I wonder if, in a few decades, they will have figured out how to run Channel 3, and will broadcast *How to Recognize a Human in Three Easy Steps*, or *What We Know*.

They fell on me, which is pretty much how zombies do anything. They groped and pulled, but there were too many of them for any one to get a good grip, and I may not have killed one before but I wasn't opposed to the idea. I swung my fists and oh, they were so soft, like jam. I clamped my mouth shut—I knew my infection vectors as well as any kid in my generation. But they didn't bite me, and finally my father threw back his head and bellowed. I know that bellow. I've always known it, and it hasn't changed. They pulled away, panting, exhausted. That was the first time I realized how fragile they are. They're like lions. In short bursts, they'll eviscerate you and your zebra without a second thought. But they have to save up the strength for it, day

in and day out. I stood there, back against the streetlamp, fingernails out, asthma kicking in because of course, it would. And my father limped over to me, dragging his broken left foot—they don't die but they don't heal. I tried to set it once and that was the closest I ever came to getting bitten before that night on the river.

He stood over me, his eyebrows crusted with old fluid, his eyes streaming tears like ink, his jaw dislocated and hanging, his cheeks puffed out with infection. He reached out and hooted gently like an ape. To anyone else it would have been just another animal noise from a rotting zombie, but I heard it as clear as anything: Caitlin, Caitlin, Caitlin. I had nowhere to go, and he reached for me, brushing my hair out of my face. With one bloody thumb he traced a circle onto my forehead, like a priest on Ash Wednesday. Caitlin, Caitlin, Caitlin. His blood was cold.

After that, none of them ever came after me again. That's why I can have my nice little habit of opening the Java Shack and writing in my notebooks. These are the days of Punky Princesses, and I am safe. The mark on my forehead never went away. It's faint, like a birthmark, but it's there. Sometimes I meet one of them on the road, wandering dazed and unhappy in the daylight, squinting as if it doesn't understand where the light is coming from. When they see me, their eyes go dark with hunger—but then, their gaze flicks up to my forehead, and they fall down on their knees, keening and sobbing. It's not me, I know that. It's the cathedral, still growing, on the banks of the Kennebec. The mark means I'm of the faith, somehow. Saint Caitlin of the Java Shack, Patroness of the Living.

Sometimes I think about leaving. I hear Portsmouth is mostly clean. I could make that on my bicycle. Maybe I could even hotwire a car. I've seen them do it on television. The first time I stayed, I stayed for my father. But he doesn't come home much anymore. There's little enough left for him to scavenge for the church. He keeps up his kneeling and praying down there, except when the moon is dark, and then they mourn like lost children. Now, I think I stay because I want to see the finished cathedral, I want to understand what they are doing when they eat one of their own. If it's like communion, the way I understand it, or something else entirely. I want to see the world they're building out here in the abandoned capital. If maybe they're not sick, but just new, like babies, incomprehensible and violent and frustrated that nothing is as they expected it to be.

It's afternoon in the Java Shack. The sun is thin and wintry. I pour myself hot water and it occurs to me that apocalypse originally meant to uncover something. To reveal a hidden thing. I get that now. It was never about fire and lightning shearing off the palaces of the world. And if I wait, here on the black shores of the Kennebec, here in the city that has been ruined for as long as it has lived, maybe, someday soon, the face of their god will come up out of the depths, uncovered, revealed.

So on. So forth.

# And the Next, and the Next

## By Genevieve Valentine

Genevieve Valentine's first novel, *Mechanique: a Tale of the Circus Tresaulti*, is forthcoming from Prime Books in 2011. Her short fiction has appeared in the anthology *Running with the Pack* and in the magazines *Strange Horizons*, *Futurismic*, *Clarkesworld*, *Journal of Mythic Arts*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Escape Pod*, and more. Her work can also be found in my anthology *Federations* and in my online magazine *Lightspeed*. In addition to writing fiction, Valentine is a columnist for *Tor.com* and *Fantasy Magazine*.

In *Dawn of the Dead*, George Romero's follow-up to his classic, genre-defining *Night of the Living Dead*, we see hordes of zombies converge upon a shopping mall, bust through the doors, and proceed to shamble aimlessly up and down its halls. We are told that they remember what was important to them in life and are moved to re-enact their routines in death, and so we are moved to reflect that these mindless dead are not so very different from our own consumerist neighbors who also seem to converge on the mall and wander its tacky displays for no better reason than a kind of grim atavistic inertia and lack of conscious thought.

As terrifying as it is to imagine being bitten by a zombie and transformed into a mindless shell of your former self, even more terrifying is the idea of having to pretend to be one of them, to enact a meaningless ritualized existence while fully conscious and never giving away that you are actually wide awake. Many stories have played with this theme, from its humorous treatment in *Shaun of the Dead* to its more serious treatment in the 2007 film *Invasion* to its positively grueling treatment in Adam-Troy Castro's "Dead Like Me," which appeared in the first *The Living Dead* anthology.

Maybe you feel like you're surrounded by mindless drones and that you have to pretend to be something you're not just to fit in. If so, the scenario presented in our next tale may feel eerily familiar.

Y

ou know them by their milky eyes, but they're easy to fool. If you survive the first crush of them, and can master the art of walking slowly and staring straight ahead, none of them in the packed train car will even look at you.

(Once you get their interest, it's over. Someone in the car behind you tries to run for it near Prospect Avenue and gets swarmed. If you glance over, it will look like a glass box stuffed with maggots. Do not glance over; you must look straight ahead.)

You will do better to ignore the smell of rotting apples that's seeping into the train car from all their open mouths hanging limp.

You need to get to open water—you're trying to get to Coney Island, to get someplace where they haven't devoured everything.

(You're already too late.)

As you hit New Utrecht, two men run into the train car. They're holding baseball bats, looking over their shoulders, smug and relieved to have escaped.

Every head turns, every milky eye in the train car fixes suddenly on them, and the slack mouths pull up into a hundred rictus grins.

The men turn and bolt. One of them gets caught in the closing doors, and as the train pulls away from the station his arm drops out of sight, and something tears.

That man is lucky.

The other man is trapped in the train car with them (with you). He gets two or three good swings in before they swarm him, and after a few seconds his screaming gets eaten up by a single, sucking, wet sound that you don't want to think about.

(You must look straight ahead.)

All along the open-air platforms they gather, headed south, pressing themselves into the cars whenever the doors ding open. They step on in twos and threes, pulling children or parts of children, patiently grasping the little hands carrying the little arms that lead to empty shoulders.

They line the tracks all the way south, five deep, then eight, then ten, waiting for the train to stop so they can get on.

(They're not fast, it turns out, but they're patient, and there are more of them every minute.)

The boardwalk is packed shoulder-to-shoulder, all of them moving slowly and without direction, shambling onto the beach and back again. Some of them, the ones with dents in their skulls, walk in small circles with their heads cocked like birds.

(You are too late; any hope of finding others is gone. You walk slowly alongside all the others, out of the train and down the concrete path and up the ramp to the wooden walk. There is nothing else, now, that you can do.)

At first it's hard to see much through the boardwalk crowd, but there is enough movement for you to slip forward by degrees. Your goal is Brighton Beach (anything where you can duck into a side street, get out of the sun), but when you reach the fencing you stop alongside the others and stare into Astroland.

The grown ones have all brought their children, hundreds of them waiting patiently in lines that snake back and forth beside the little rollercoaster shaped like a dragon, the little flying boats shaped like whales, the carousel.

The adults trudge up to the ride in pairs and deposit a child into an empty seat, one child at a time until the ride is full. Then the switch is thrown. (The park employees must not have been fast enough to get out; they pull their levers with the same clockwork motions you've always seen.)

The little children with their milky eyes turn slowly with the engine-wheel, rising up and down. Every once in a while, one of them utters a sound through its slack mouth, bleating and wordless as a calf.

From time to time the ride stops, and they march up and lift a child—any child—out of the seat and wander to the next event. The carousel is crowded; the adults forget to leave, and they sway unsteadily as the horses lurch into motion.

Over at the rollercoaster, a child has come back without a head. A pair of parents picks the body up by the shoulders, carries it away.

(You must not run.)

When the crowd moves forward, it dissolves into the park, little wandering circuits. Now you can break away, you think. If you can get past the Wonder Wheel and back onto the street there has to be some apartment left empty where you can take refuge.

You walk carefully past the whales and the roller coaster, down the maw of the Wonder Wheel. The metal corrals are full, but the crowd is so quiet that you can hear the creaking carriages as the wheel stops and the doors open, and the line moves forward all at once, like a worm surging over the grass.

The girl operating the wheel has green eyes, bright and clear, and you're so surprised that you stop in your tracks. You startle her (bad sign, the last thing you need is to draw their notice), and when she looks at you she sucks in a breath like she's about to call out to you, but remembers herself and flips the switch instead. As the wheel lurches into motion, a chorus of half-hearted groans floats down from the cars.

You wait in line, snaking closer, and when you're at the center of the line and the car swings into place you step aside and let the ones behind you haul themselves into the carriage, their slack jaws swinging back and forth as the wheel carries them away.

"How many of us are left?" she asks under her breath. Her legs are trembling; you wonder how long she's been trapped here, pulling the lever back and forth. It's taken you since yesterday to get this far; has she been trapped here all that time?



"I don't know how many," you say.

(It's a mercy not to tell her the truth about what the city looks like now; what good would it do her to know that it's too late?)

"Help me," she says. Her eyes are bright and fixed on you, and the panic is starting to set in. You know what she's feeling; you had this same desperate hope, just for a moment, when the two men ran into the train car. You almost stood up.

(Once you get their attention it's all over).

You can't help her; they would notice if the wheel didn't stop.

"I'm sorry," you say, and walk slowly between the cars, threading your way into the departing riders and out the wheel on the other side.

"No," she says softly, and then louder, more shrilly, "Help me! You have to help me! Fuck you, come back!" but by then they've noticed her.

You sit in the nearest photo booth, safe behind the flimsy curtain, until all the sounds have stopped.

You sit there for a long time, looking down at the edge of the curtain, watching them pass slowly back and forth.

You don't know where you can go. You can't swim very far. You'll need a boat, you think.

(You can't drive a boat. You can barely swim. You sit in the booth a long time. You do not admit you are stranded. How can you?)

Outside the booth, through the little spaces between the bumper cars, you can see that the streets are crawling with them. There's no escape there. You have to keep going the way that you came.

In the arcade, three children are playing basketball. The balls fly away from the tips of their fingers in a waltz beat, one-two-three, and they scoop up the next without looking; their blind white eyes never move from the basket.

Amid the sound of the bumper cars, you walk out up the ramp, under a banner printed in bright block letters: *Deno's Wonder Wheel: Open This Year, and the Next, and the Next, and the Next, and the Next...*

At the top of the ramp you risk a look behind you; the girl is still standing at the Wonder Wheel. Now she's milky-eyed, one hand on the lever, the other hanging slack at her side. The top of her head has been opened like a soft-boiled egg.

You turn away too fast; you have to steady yourself before you keep walking out and up to the boardwalk.

(Don't glance over. You must look straight ahead.)

On the boardwalk, the adults are absently feeding the children, their little mouths mechanically chewing. It looks like funnel cake, but you know better by now what they eat, and you don't investigate.

The sun is blazing. The whole place is starting to smell like a fish market.

Out on the beach it's easier to walk the way you should; the sand sucks at your feet, forces you to be slow and careful.

Some of them are walking out into the water. They walk straight out until the water's too deep to stand in, and when the current takes them they give in, float with arms and legs loose.

(You remember, suddenly, the summer you were ten years old and the kid a few doors down from you drowned in the pool in his backyard. For the rest of the summer none of the neighborhood kids were allowed to go out of sight of their parents, which ruined everything your friends had planned all year.

They moaned all summer about how boring it was to have to stay so close to the house. You agreed.

You were tired all that summer, because whenever you closed your eyes at night you imagined that kid in the moment before he fell into the water, when he had just begun to lean forward, when

it wasn't too late for someone to pull him back and save him.)

You walk towards the surf, picking your way over the ones on the beach. Where they have laid out flat in the sand, white eyes turned to the sun, there's the rancid smell of eggs gone bad.

You wonder how long you can last this way, sneaking amongst them. Will you have to go back on the train, make it through the city, head south on the highway walking one mile an hour? How far will you have to go before you reach someplace where this hasn't happened?

(You will never find that place. There are more of them every minute.)

By now there's a web of them across the water, floating akimbo. In some places they're locked together tight as puzzle pieces. If you were brave enough, you could walk across them.

Behind you, someone has figured out how to start the Cyclone. There's the crank of cars on the way up the rails, a collective off-key moan as they plummet. On the stretch of boardwalk behind you, some of them turn to look at the sound, lose interest when they recognize what it is.

They seem sad to see that it's nothing exciting. It's strange to watch them looking disappointed; you don't know what will happen to them when there are no real people left.

(You have already given up hope. They will win. They are patient.)

When you step into the ocean, the water is already cool on your ankles. By nightfall it will be cold.

You don't know how far you can swim in cold water.

(Not far enough.)

You take another step. The water soaks into your shoes, your pants. The next step is more difficult than the last one.

Behind you, they are coming, sloshing dutifully into the water the way they remember doing. They will not make way for you to turn around. You cannot go back now.

You think about the moment before the child falls into the pool.

(You must look straight ahead.)

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John is currently the co-host of *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast, a writer for Tor.com, and has published hundreds of interviews and other pieces of non-fiction. He lives in New Jersey.