



*Once Upon An*  
**Apocalypse**

**23**  
*Twisted  
Fairy  
Tales*

*Forward by Jonathan Maberry*

*Edited by Scott T. Goudsward & Rachel Kenley*





# *Once Upon an Apocalypse*

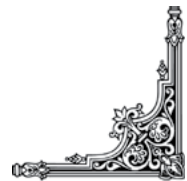
*Volume 1*

*Edited By*

*Scott T. Goudsward*

*&*

*Rachel Kenley*





### *Dedication*

*2013 was a year filled with devastating losses to the horror community. To name a few James Herbert, Gary Brandner and the icon Richard Matheson. To not mention them would be criminal on our parts. But with all the losses suffered, one hit us the deepest.*

*This book is dedicated to the memory of “The Other Writer From Maine” Rick Hautala. There wasn’t enough rum, cigars or time for all the stories.*

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Interior art by Caleb Cleveland

Cover layout by Meghan McLean

Editing by Scott T. Goudsward & Rachel Kenley

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# Once Upon an Apocalypse

An Introduction by Jonathan Maberry

So...let's talk zombies.

And fairy tales.

But, zombies first.

Unlike vampires or werewolves, ghosts or goblins, zombies are a wholly fictional construct. They're cut from whole cloth. Sure, that cloth may be a wormy shroud or bloody morgue linens, but the end is the same. We made up the whole zombies thing.

To be fair, George Romero made it up.

In a way.

The backstory is complicated, so here's the short course.

George Romero wanted to make a vampire movie. Specifically he wanted to make a movie out of one of the most influential vampire novels of all time — Richard Matheson's landmark *I Am Legend*.

Problem was, the rights weren't available.

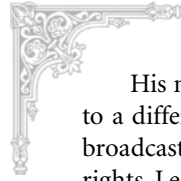
So Romero did what any enterprising filmmaker would do when he can't do what he wants, he does the next best thing by imitating the best elements of the thing he can't get rights to. To his enduring credit, Romero did not do a total rip-off of *I Am Legend*. What he did was cut it open and remove its heart.

If you've read the book (and you qualify for handicapped plates if you haven't), Romero's flick, *Night of the Living Dead*, has as its centerpiece a house under siege by pasty-faced, ravenous creatures who returned from death to feast on the living. The legions of undead are the result of a global plague. The authorities are unable to stop it, the infrastructure collapses, and people are left to fend for themselves in increasingly dire circumstances. And, it ends badly for the good guys.

So...yeah, there's a lot of *I Am Legend* in *Night of the Living Dead*.

The monsters, however, aren't vampires. Matheson's book explores the line between myth and science, between ignorant assumption and rational understanding. And the story's often misunderstood ending — hinted at by the title — is meditation on our role as rightful owners of the world in which we live.

Romero went in a different direction.



His movie, released fourteen years after *Legend* was published, belonged to a different era. The late sixties were the era of Viet Nam, of investigative broadcast journalism, of societal unrest, of rebellion, of civil and human rights. Less so about the post-WW II, post-Korean War fears of Communism. Though, to be fair, there's some of that in the mix as well.

And...no vampires.

Romero built a new monster. Dead? Yes. Ravenous? Sure. Attacking in great numbers? Absolutely.

Vampires?

Not so much.

His monsters were ghouls.

They didn't drink blood.

They ate flesh.

From a distance you'd think, so what? How's that a distinction?

For Romero...and for the genre that followed as a result of his inexpensive little indie flick, the distinction was huge.

Vampires, even the nearly mindless ones in *Legend*, retained some trace of their personality and memories. They were monsters, sure, but they were biologically corrupted versions of the people they'd been. The original inhabitants hadn't received eviction notices when they died. That matters.

For Romero, his dead creatures are animated flesh. They're meat machines. They walk, they attack, they consume, but there is no animus there. There's no directing intelligence. There's no remnant of who they'd once been.

The difference is huge.

Really huge.

It's a tragedy of equal scope but entirely different.

If there's even a remnant, a scrap of the original personality left in a monster then there's the opportunity for pity, for connection, for interaction. When all of that is gone, all that's left is the threat. You couldn't relate to a zombie anymore than you could relate to a bacterium or a virus.

The loss is total.

The horror is total.

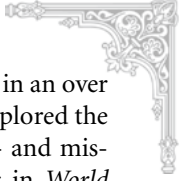
And...for writers, the creative potential is total.

It allows for a much broader and cleaner canvas on which to tell stories — not about monsters (and, let's face it, vampire stories are a tad angsty) but about humans. Instead of focusing on the burden of being young, slim, pale, good looking immortal super beings, we focus instead on the very human people who are dealing with very human emotions. Loss. Grief. Paranoia. And also heroism, courage, ingenuity, and more.

In other words, vampire stories are about vampires and zombie stories are about human beings.

Weird, I know, but there it is.

The zombie stories allow us to explore an infinite number of 'what if' scenarios. In his movies, Romero explored paranoia (*Night of the Living Dead*), runaway consumerism (*Dawn of the Dead*), the build up of the American mil-



itary-industrial complex (*Day of the Dead*), and the loss of identity in an over technologized world (*Diary of the Dead*). In fiction, Max Brooks explored the dynamics of political game-playing, the cult of governmental dis- and misinformation, and the general paranoia about a global pandemic in *World War Z*. Joe McKinney used *Dead City* and its sequels to skewer the fractured bureaucracy of FEMA and governmental politics; I used *Rot & Ruin* and its sequels to examine the questions of what is the value of human life and what does it mean to be ‘human’. And so on.

The zombie paradigm allows for every kind of story.

And stories are what it’s all about.

Stories, in all of their varied form — from parables to fables to ballads and novels — have been the way in which we communicate so many things. Some of them are profound (read any the holy texts of any religion), some are education (Aesop, you sneaky bugger), some target social issues (classic *Star Trek*, any episode of the old *Twilight Zone*), and some are there for pure entertainment.

Like fairy tales.

We all grew up on fairy tales. We all remember our favorites. Most of us can recite some version of one or more (usually more) fairy tales.

Couple things about that genre.

Most fairy tales don’t involve fairies. It’s not a requirement. Perhaps a more accurate word would be ‘fanciful tales’. They’re made-up stories. They’re not histories, or even stylized histories (like *The Iliad*, which, let’s face it, was not straight reportage about the Trojan War).

Fairy tales are, like zombies, made up of whole cloth. They’re fantastical tales in which anything — absolutely anything — can happen. Some can have morals, some don’t. Some are for kids, some aren’t. Actually, the oldest ones were told by adults to adults. Wonderful, credulous adults.

Fairy tales are populated by the weird and the bizarre. Elves and dragons, bridge trolls and deep-sea mermaids, sprites and goblins, talking animals and talking trees, and, sometimes, even fairies.

There are no limits to what can be used in a fairy tale, or in what a fairy tale can be about.

Which is why neither of us — not you, the person reading this book, or me the guy writing the introduction — should be in any way surprised that these are fairy tales about zombies. Or, in some cases, zombie stories with fairies, or even fairy tales in which zombies also appear. The differences are subtle, and you’ll grasp it as you read.

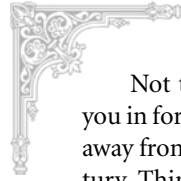
If you’ve never read real fairy tales, then you might be saying to yourself: “Wait, aren’t fairy tales cute stories about talking bunnies and Disney characters?”

The answer is yes.

And no.

Some are, most — actually — are not.





Not the old ones. If you've never read the Brothers Grimm — wow, are you in for a shock. The 'fairy tale ending' we've come to know, is a million miles away from what Jacob and Wilhelm were writing back in early nineteenth century. Things tended to end very, very badly for the characters. Even the good guys. Hell, during the rise of the Third Reich the Grimm Fairytales were used to foster nationalism and the Nazi ideal. Chew on that for a moment.

Fairy tales were actually pretty damn scary.

Many of them still are. Disney wouldn't go within a million miles of filming the Grimm stories as written. Though... I would buy that DVD if they did.

So, I expect, would the writers whose works fill these pages.

They're all fine storytellers. Some are close friends. Others are writers whose work I've been watching with genuine interest for sometime. And some new kids who have brought very strange toys to the literary playground.

These tales are not for innocent little children.

Not unless you are trying to remove the innocence.

Or unless you're a sadistic bastard.

Or, unless you have very, very strange children.

Instead, these tales are for that odd little child in each of us. The child who once crouched on the bed, hidden under blankets, reading old *Eerie* and *Creepy* and *Tomb of Dracula* by flashlight. Or those kids from later generations, the ones born after Romero, who grew up playing *Resident Evil* and *Left 4 Dead*. The ones who sat through the most jarring episodes of *The Walking Dead* after the grown-ups fled the room. The cool kids.

Kids like us. You and me.

The writers in *Once Upon an Apocalypse*, bring a certain sensibility to the game. Not all of the stories are scary. Some are downright hilarious. Some are tragic. Some are simply...disturbing.

However each contains within it a spark of real magic. That special element that separates these stories from others of the horror genre.

These are fairy stories.

And in fairy stories absolutely anything can happen.

There are no rules.

There are few happy endings.

These are fairy stories.

And they're zombie stories.

And they are absolutely magical.

And I mean that in the least comforting possible way.

So...enjoy.

~Jonathan Maberry,  
New York Times bestselling and  
multiple Bram Stoker Award-  
winning author of *Extinction  
Machine*, *Bad blood* and *Fire & Ash*.



# Wednesday's Goats

By Justin Short

*Based on Three Billy Goats Gruff*

The morning fog was thick on the Golden Gate Bridge. A trio of goats rested at its southern end. Brothers.

Linen Gruff, the youngest, bared his teeth. "It's now or never, you two."

Aluminum finished eating a clump of earth. "Yeah, I know. Soon the whole thing will be in pieces."

"I smell goaties!" a voice called from the fog. "C'mon, now. I gots the munchies!"

Cardboard, the eldest goat, stood up and spat in the direction of the bridge. "And there's our problem. Back where we started."

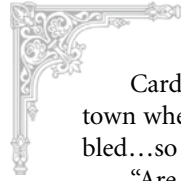
A metallic groan rang out. "Uh-oh!" the unseen voice taunted. "Time's runnin' out!"

It had been like this the past couple weeks. The best Cardboard could figure, the San Francisco peninsula was drifting away from the mainland. Naturally, the Golden Gate was the only remaining connection, but who knew how much longer it would hold? The Bay Bridge had tumbled into the blue two days ago. The other bridges – the southeast ones – had been impassable for months.

Cardboard traced the whole mess back to the "falling down," as the goats were calling it. That strange afternoon, about six months back, when thousands of pieces of garbage fell out of the sky. Metallic, human-made garbage. Old satellites, weather balloons, chunks of rockets and space stations, and a million other fragments of unidentifiable space trash.

It must have been poisonous, because every human in sight dropped dead. Aluminum, the middle brother, reckoned it was some kind of fungus or virus from space, with the junk acting as a transmitter, sort of like King Tut's tomb and the centuries-old funk of Egypt. Aluminum was a history freak. Not even goat history, but human history. Strange kid, Aluminum.

Since then, it'd been green pastures in the city by the bay. Free everything, as much as you could eat. No need to worry about cars, zookeepers or animal patrol. A regular smorgasbord. Right up until the discovery of the crumbling bridges and the disconnection of the peninsula.



Cardboard cursed himself for not leaving earlier. They should have split town when the other goats left. But there were so many delicacies to be nibbled...so many free-spirited nanny goats to romance.

"Are we gonna do this or not?" Linen asked. "Not sure about you two, but I don't want to drift out to sea. Heard some crazy stories about goat-eating pelicans out that way."

"Alright, we'll do it. We just have to outsmart the brute."

"Bring some peanut butter!" the idiotic voice bellowed. "And some bread! I'm jonesing for goat samiches!"

Aluminum squared his horns and took a step onto the bridge. "Yeah, that shouldn't be difficult."

The goats marched ahead, feet tromping on cold, orange metal. After a few silent minutes, they passed under the first tower. No more shouts from the fool in the middle. Maybe he'd given up and fallen asleep or something.

Their hooves made deep echoes across the bridge's surface. They continued, not daring to speak. They dodged vehicles. The bridge wasn't packed like old times, but there were scatterings of cars, maybe two or three hundred. All with windows rolled down, some still with skeletons in the seats. Birds had done a pretty good job cleaning up the place after the falling down.

They passed an overturned truck. On either side, the suspension cables were nearing ground level. This was the middle, and the source of the voice was nowhere to be seen—

Wait—a shadow under the cables. A strange creature in the darkness...

Cancel that. It was just Satin, a fellow goat and one of Aluminum's old rivals. He was laughing. "Had you scared to death. Them urban legends run deep, billies. Troll on the bridge? Come on!"

Before Aluminum had time to give him a good cussing, a gray blur filled the sky. There was a prolonged moaning, and then it touched down. And it was unsightly. The new arrival reeked of dead fish and sheep vomit, and didn't look much better.

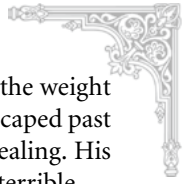
He was shorter than those trolls from the tales. Maybe six or seven feet tall. More or less human. Thick, pink eyes bulged out of its head. Before the three brothers fully knew what was happening, the creature pulled Satin into the shadows.

A second later, Satin's headless body landed inches in front of their hooves. The monster/troll/whatever shuffled its way into the light, casting greedy eyes on the trio.

Linen gulped. Thinking was hard when an old friend's corpse was lying before you. Still, he tried something from early memory: "Hey, some other goats are coming after us. Big ones, too."

"Yeah," Aluminum added, choking back goat emotion. "Thick ones. Real meaty."

The pale human-thing looked past them, as if searching for the promised goats.



“Run!” Cardboard shouted. He lunged at the thing, throwing the weight of his horns into one of the man’s eyeballs. Aluminum and Linen escaped past his legs. The man rocked back and forth, holding his eye and squealing. His stomps and collisions with the cables shook the bridge something terrible.

Cardboard joined his brothers and the three of them raced for the northern end of the Golden Gate. Cables snapped and metal popped behind them. The bridge was tearing apart under their hooves. At one point Cardboard felt open air beneath his tail, but managed to thrust himself to safety. No one slowed his speed till they were well past the last traces of orange metal.

The remaining supports crashed into the water. The goats watched the far tower topple over and sink; it was a fitting grave for the still-hungry man.

Finally they collapsed on the ground. “Whew,” Linen said finally. “We did it.” Aluminum nodded. “Yeah. Can’t say the same for Satin.”

Cardboard managed a grin. “Excuse me fellahs – I need to pass out.”



He jerked awake with a strange sensation on his head. It was his left horn. He rarely felt the thing, sometimes almost forgot it was there, but it was definitely being shoved. He hopped upright in his shock; the action also shook someone loose. He watched as a body hit the ground in front of him.

It was a goat! More precisely, it was Satin. His head was tilted awkwardly on his neck, like it had been stuck on sideways. His eyes were black holes, and a jagged wound covered most his skull. His fur was soaked. Cardboard didn’t have time to wonder about his miraculous head reattachment. He stared at his old acquaintance for a few seconds, and then Satin rushed him, grabbing his horn with his teeth.

“No!” Cardboard shouted, ramming his horn into the goat’s gut. Satin dropped to the pavement, but stood back up immediately.

The goat-thing pursed his lips and nodded to indicate Cardboard’s head. “Brains?” he said, his voice thick and liquidy. “Please?”

By this time Linen and Aluminum were awake. “What’s this?” Linen asked.

Cardboard ignored his brother and rammed Satin’s evil twin with all his force, sending the surprisingly-light body soaring over a ridge, where it struck the asphalt and remained still. Linen started to chastise him, but changed his expression when he realized what had happened. “Cardboard, your horn. It’s half gone!”

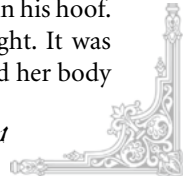
“Afraid of that. He was trying to eat my brain.”

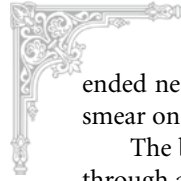
“That’s not normal.”

“No. Not for goats, at least.”

Aluminum turned a slow circle, making sure there weren’t any others around. Thankfully, they were alone. Turning their back on the bay, the goats Gruff headed westward along the coast. After all, the mountains could be seen farther on that way, and the sight of a mountain gave a goat an itch in his hoof.

It wasn’t long before they stumbled upon an unfortunate sight. It was the remains of a goat. A nanny. Her fur was missing in patches, and her body





ended near the neck. No head, not even a skeleton, remained. Just a grayish smear on the grass.

The brothers shook their beards over the corpse and continued. Passing through a sudden copse of firs, they emerged onto one of those odd beaches that were part grass and part rock, but contained almost zero sand. "Look!" Linen whispered.

Not twenty feet distant, a young goat was being chased. Its pursuers resembled the strange man from the bridge. Except here, there were no less than fifteen of them, all grayish and ragged-looking, most of them with signs of decay in their abdomens or lower legs.

They weren't chasing the kid in a traditional sense. More like crowding it, pushing it toward the ocean, forming a slow-moving semicircle penning him inside. Two or three were moaning; most just ambled wordlessly, stretching their arms toward their prey.

Cardboard shared a nod with his brothers. A half-second later, the trio sprinted toward the mob. The human-things didn't notice the new arrivals until three of their number were hurtling toward the ocean, courtesy of goat horns in the lower back.

"Thanks," the kid said. Then he, too, lowered his horns and drove them through the stomach of the nearest one. By now the group was alert; that's not to say they really changed their behavior. Most of them kept their attention on the kid, while a small subset altered direction and dragged themselves toward the brothers.

Cardboard dug his hooves in the grass, shifted his weight and launched himself toward another human. This one was a hairless woman with an eye-ball missing and a dark, red stain stretching from her scalp to her shoulder. He felt the pleasing thump of collision, and watched her sail into the ocean, her body breaking into two pieces before she reached the waves.

Linen was screaming. A quick glance showed that two of them had teamed up on him. Each had a grip on his horns, and were alternately pushing and pulling him. Blood-colored slobber dangled from their mouths. Before Linen made a move, Aluminum rammed one of the attackers in the soft part of the neck. The man sank to the grass, his head landing beside him. The other one leaned in, digging his teeth into the furry patch just above Linen's eye.

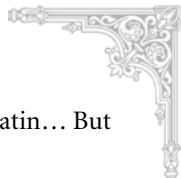
Linen wheeled around, and his free horn sliced the human through the ribs. He expected to meet resistance but he cut the body as easily as a clump of mud.

It didn't take long to clear out the survivors. A few well-placed horns to the chest sent the leftovers falling the same way as their friends. When it was over, Aluminum patrolled the grounds, stomping on an occasional body part, ensuring all were dead.

Eventually they remembered the fourth goat. He was staring out at the water, waiting for the brothers to approach him. He'd been brought up well, Cardboard mused. Waiting his turn; paying his respects to the longer beards.

"You saved my hide," he said. "Thanks."

"No concern, kid. What were those things? They looked human, but..."



The kid sighed. "You ever hear of zombies?"

Aluminum snorted. "Of course. It makes sense. The bridge...Satin... But wait, I thought that was only a human legend."

"Me too."

It was Cardboard's turn to snort. "You telling me these are human corpses, brought back around?"

"Yes."

"Because of the falling down?"

"Not sure. Maybe."

"And their diet is goat brains?"

"Brains in general. From what we've seen so far, goats and buzzards are about the only ones that survived the falling down. Maybe a few insects here and there."

"And the birds got the sky, so that makes us the obvious target."

"Basically. That's the theory, at least. My mom explained a lot of this to me before... Anyway, she thinks goats survived because of our hardiness. Dogs and cats, they're weak, but a goat can eat a tin can and be happy. And buzzards, what don't they eat?"

"I'm sorry, kid. Was that your mom back there?"

"Yeah. They got her."

"Real shame."



The kid traveled with the three brothers. Nowhere else to go, and traveling in numbers was a good idea. With packs of goat-eating zombies roaming around, this was no time to play heroic billy.

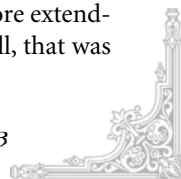
At length the beach ended and they moved into cover of forest. At least the shade was welcome, though Aluminum worried about the possibility of a zombie ambush. But somehow, he reckoned they weren't exactly smart enough to hide behind trees and lay in wait.

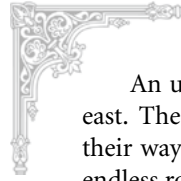
The hike through the woods was long and difficult. But no one said a thing. Their ancestors lived on mountaintop crags, for goatherd's sake! Surely they could manage a march of a few pathetic miles.

They only stopped for the occasional bite of grass. On three separate occasions, they came across more goat remains. No one said much about it, just shook their beards and carried on.

Finally, with the sun setting, they emerged from the woods. Ahead of them was a grassy plain. And just at the other side, the first slopes of the great mountains. It was truly beautiful, that last green stretch before the promise of new life.

Well, it would have been beautiful, if it weren't for the zombies. Literally thousands of them stood in the field, arms swinging stupidly, swaying back and forth with the breeze. A look to the west revealed hundreds more extending from the lea down to the shoreline. But a look to the east...well, that was an image guaranteed to give a goat nightmares for life.





An uncountable number of amblers littered the plains and fields to the east. The zombies were packed shoulder-to-shoulder, all of them shoving their way toward the too-crowded plain. Dots covered the horizon. Infinite, endless rows of them.

"I think I get it now," Cardboard said. "They're all coming from the east. Out here, when the falling down killed them, they stayed dead. Maybe it was the ocean air. Sea breezes or what-have-you. But the air's different inland."

The new kid nodded. "And the ones we've been seeing recently, they're the first migrators. Took them this many weeks to make it out here."

Linen scratched his hoof. "If you're done talking, I'd like to run away now."

"No, Linen. Look yonder. If we make the mountain pass, we can climb up where they'll never follow. At least I hope not. Even if they do, we'll have the higher ground. We can hold them off forever."

"That sounds familiar," Aluminum said.

"I read a couple of human history books, kid. Old military stuff."

"Ah."

The kid shook his beard in preparation. "Well, it's now or never."

"Best of luck, billies—"

Cardboard let out a bleat that echoed across the plain. With the others slightly behind him, he charged into the sea of undead. Almost immediately, zombies were flying. They hit them four at a time, slinging them over the heads of their fellows. At one point Cardboard got one stuck in his horn, so he spun in circles, using the zombie to bludgeon the crowd.

Soon the goats were boxed in. A throng surrounded them, arms reaching over arms, all trying to grab a horn or ear or anything close to the brain. When they were knocked to the grass, those decaying mouths with their graveyard stink looming over them, the situation appeared grim. Borderline hopeless.

This was when Linen thought to shout: "Look behind us! Check out them big ol' goats!"

"Yeah!" Aluminum seconded. "Lots of brains that-a-way!"

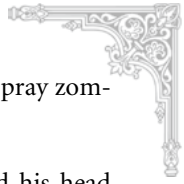
"Juicy ones too! Good eatin'!"

Their words didn't cause the zombies to back off. They did, however, distract enough of them to give Cardboard some breathing room. With a thrust that gored three zombies simultaneously, the goats were free.

Making it to the pass after that was simple. There were still thousands of undead stumblers to contend with, but it became more of a game, a competition to see who could smash the most zombies at once, who could ram hard enough to cause a domino effect, who could get the most airtime on one of his attacks. This continued until they reached the other end of the clearing.

One glance back showed hundreds of body parts strewn across the green like cannibal's crumbs. The way the failing sunlight illuminated the chunks of organs and piles of rot was disgustingly perfect. But the goats didn't spare any additional time for reflection, because the mountain was ahead.

Reaching the first peak, they let out a collective sigh. "We did it."



Aluminum shook some entrails out of his horns. “Yessir. Just pray zombies don’t take up mountain climbing.”

“Agreed.”


Linen hung back from the others for a moment. He rubbed his head against the stone wall, trying to massage away the sudden pain near his eye. It was the stupid bite mark he’d earned in their beachfront scuffle. Oh well. No need to tell the others and cause a fuss. And he definitely didn’t need to inform them of the coldness in his hooves, or the way his vision was growing grayer and grayer. No way.

“Wait for me,” he said.

With thoughts of nannies and better pastures filling their still-intact brains, the goats Gruff set off into the dusk.







# Ali Baba and the Forty Zombies

By Suzanne Robb

*Based on Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*

Ali Baba stared from the watchtower in horror while zombies overtook Necropah. The undead numbers grew each day. Outside the walls, as far as the eye could see, smoke decorated the sky in patterns of grey and white.

Screams echoed in the alleyways and entry gates as people streamed in. The end was here, and everyone thought they could outrun it. Blood flowed over the dirt walkways and from water wells. Moans floated to him on the humid air and caused hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end.

Stragglers, both alive and dead, made their way from other towns and villages. Those with a pulse hoped royal guards would protect them since it was the capitol. Ali shook his head. They couldn't have been more wrong.

The haggard and terrified expressions etched on their faces changed to hopelessness. Ali watched as dreams of safety evaporated like water in the desert when the bodies of soldiers sworn to protect were found either littering streets, or roaming them looking for a meal.

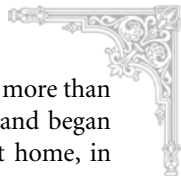
The scimitar Ali held dripped dark red blood as he lifted it in the fading light. When the sun set, the same thought plagued him – would he die tonight?

A groan alerted him to the presence of one of the undead. He spun and came face to face with Morgianna, the apothecary. Her once bright skirt and top stank of blood and other things he chose not to name. She worked her mouth, gnashing chipped teeth as she ambled forward.

With a quick slice, Ali decapitated her and leapt out of his temporary safe haven. He prowled along tiled roofs looking for Anya, the one person who'd loved him for who he was, though he doubted she'd be happy with the man he became. Before the end caught up to him, Ali would make sure to put her to rest. He would not allow her to wander the Earth as a zombie, the eternal need of human flesh consuming her.

None of this was supposed to happen. Who would believe the greed of one man would bring about the end of the world? Ali thought back to the day things were set into motion and life would never be the same.

• • •



Perfect, he thought. The tree came into full view, ninety feet tall and more than a man's height wide. Ali pulled his axe from the protective cover and began chopping. With each strike, images of his beautiful wife, Anya, at home, in threads flashed through his mind.

She never once complained. The love they shared was more than enough for her to live on. Ali grunted as the axe snagged on a knot, wiggling it free. Voices caught his attention, and he wandered to the stream to listen in.

"Iftah ya, simsim." Open Sesame.

Ali brushed aside a bush and almost fell as a door appeared in the side of a rock wall. He watched as at least forty men rode in, their horses laden with treasure.

The words, "Close, simsim," echoed out to him, and the entrance sealed.

After a few moments, Ali stepped out with care. He examined the space but saw no indication of a crack or other way in.

"Magic."

A grinding noise came from the rocks, and Ali dove into the bushes before being discovered. He didn't move for a long time. Thieves punished others with no remorse. Ali stood with the intention of returning to his axe and tree, his unimpressive job as a woodcutter, but found himself in front of the secret entrance.

"Iftah ya, simsim." Open Sesame.

The words tumbled out of his mouth in a rush but worked. Cautious steps carried him into the large cavern without his permission. Then more words, "Close, simsim."

Utter darkness fell over him, and fear soaked his bones. He felt around and found a torch. An old flint stone from his pocket took several strikes but sparked and lit the oil soaked rag. His eyes adjusted after a few seconds, and he didn't believe what he saw. No way could there be this much treasure in the world.

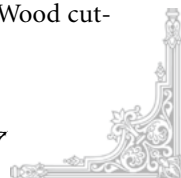
Ali thought of Cassim his brother, who had everything; money, a nice house, and their father's business. Ali wasn't jealous, he didn't want those things for himself, but years of watching Anya stretch meagre amounts of food to keep their bellies full, and stitching up holes with rags, Ali wanted her to have something nice for a change. His offerings of wildflowers from the fields as gifts seemed inadequate, and the looks of sadness on her face when they passed the dressmakers all bore down on him.

For Anya, he'd steal from the thieves. The bag he loaded with coin and jewels would hardly be missed.



Ali watched as Anya twirled in the new dress he bought her. The smile on her face was worth any retribution he might suffer if his crime discovered. Someone knocked at the door before bursting in with such force the rusty hinges almost gave way.

"Brother, I hear you've been spending money in the market? Wood cutting paying well these days?"



“Cassim, come in. Have some tea with us,” Ali said. He wrinkled his nose at the scent of liquor on his brother’s breath.

“How about you come with me?” Cassim kicked a chair and turned over the table.

Ali kissed Anya on the cheek and put a hand to her face. “Love you, I’ll be back later.”

“You better, nothing else matters to me but you.” She smiled at him with such affection he felt his heart tighten.

Cassim dragged him to the woods. “Now tell me, Ali, where did you get the money?”

“I earned it,” Ali said.

“That dress would cost you a year’s worth of cutting trees. Stop lying to me.” Cassim raised a meaty fist and hit Ali.

He stared up at his brother from the ground. His cheek throbbed, and he knew if he didn’t explain everything, his brother would kill him in a drunken rage.

Ali took a deep breath and told the story. Laughter greeted him as well as a kick to the side.

“You expect me to believe that nonsense?” Cassim shook his fist in warning.

“I swear it’s true,” Ali pled.

“Fine, then take me there.”

Ali nodded and stood. An hour later, his brother grunted with effort behind him. “You better be telling me the truth, or I’ll kill you.”

Ali lowered his head. “Here it is.”

Cassim looked at the rock face in front of them and lunged at his brother. “I warned you.”

Ali spoke the words before his brother could strike him again. “Iftah ya simsim.”

The rocks pulled apart, and Cassim stared inside with wide eyes. Sun glinted off the piles of gold and baubles. Like a moth to a flame, he staggered into the cave.

“How could you keep something like this from me? I’m your brother,” Cassim yelled.

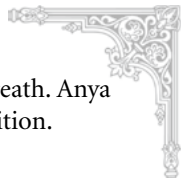
Ali felt anger rise in him, something new for him. “Brother,” he sneered. “You took all of father’s money and let me and Anya live in squalor while you got fat on feasts we were not welcome at. How could you do something like that to me?” Ali snapped.

“Close, simsim.” The words fell out of Ali’s mouth before he could stop them. Cassim reached out a hand as the entrance disappeared.

“You’ll pay for this!”

Ali couldn’t believe what he’d done. Guilt washed over him taking away the anger. He opened his mouth to recite the magical words when the sound of hooves reached his ears. The thieves were back.

• • •



When the sun set, Ali arrived home covered in sweat and out of breath. Anya greeted him with a smile, then concern when she noticed his condition.

“Ali, what happened? Where’s Cassim?”

Ali bent over and gasped for breath. Warnings long forgotten came to mind. His mother told him the use of magic had unintended consequences. Blood spilled on ill-gotten gains would bring about the end. An innocent man led astray would cause the dead to rise.

Horrific images filled his mind, and he shut his eyes to ward them off. Anya’s sweet scent and soft hands brought him back. Brown eyes looked at him with trust and love. Shame swept through him as he realized what he’d done.

His jealousy led him to steal. The fact he did it to provide for his wife like a real man didn’t matter. Now his brother was locked in a cave with thieves, possibly murderers.



“How did you get in here?” the thief demanded.

Cassim wanted to threaten the man but refrained when he heard the sound of a blade being pulled from its sheath.

“Ali, my brother, brought me here. He’s been stealing from you. I told him not to, but he wouldn’t listen. It’s him you want.”

The thief circled him and with quick motions slashed the pockets of Cassim’s pants. Gold coins, rubies, and emeralds fell to the floor. “Really, and what about these? Did your brother force you to steal as well?”

“Yes, yes, he did. He overloaded himself and made me take more. His greed is insatiable.”

The thief looked at him with knowing eyes. “You shall find out what it is to be insatiable.”

Cassim screamed as he felt the sword enter his gut. Excruciating pain shot throughout his body. Red liquid coated his hands.

The thief smiled as Cassim fell to the floor.

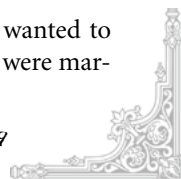
While his life drained away, Cassim heard bits and pieces of a chant. He caught a few words about rising from the dead and feeding on the flesh of the living. Wind swirled through the room, and a coughing spasm took hold of him. A wad of blood flew from his mouth seconds before he died.

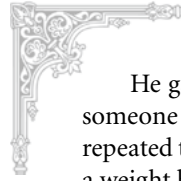


After Ali told Anya what happened, she took the dress off then wrapped it. She wore her threadbare outfit with pride despite its condition. She smiled sadly and kissed him on the cheek and walked out of the house with the package under her arm.

“I’m going to return this. When I come back, I want you to be ready to go back and put things right with your brother...and the thieves.” She left without another word.

Ali had never felt so ashamed in his life. The one person he wanted to make happy walked away from him. He’d known long before they were married that Anya deserved better. His actions only served to prove it.





He gathered up his things and left their modest house. Anya would find someone better unless he did something to redeem himself in her eyes. Ali repeated this to himself as he left the city limits. The axe felt heavy in his hand, a weight he couldn't bear to carry any longer.

The tree he'd set out to cut appeared, and he placed the axe against it. A fitting end to his career as a wood cutter. He stepped away, and sticky hands wrapped around his neck. He grabbed at them and gagged when the flesh of his attacker came loose in his grip.

The thing snarled in his ear and gnashed its teeth. The combination made Ali's skin crawl. He glanced up and saw the thieves on their horses. This time though, the eyes of the beasts shone with fire, and the riders on them appeared dead, their skin falling off in areas, rib cages exposed, bits of their insides visible.

Ali slipped free from his hellish prison and turned to see Cassim. His brother lurched forward, and Ali jumped back to avoid the swipe. His eyes were deceiving him. No way could this be happening.

Cassim lunged again, pinning Ali between him and the tree. Fetid breath made Ali gag. He pushed Cassim off and reached behind to grab his axe. Ali raised it to swing but stopped at the last second. If he killed his own brother, Anya would never forgive him.

Ali ran away, back to the city, to Anya. The sound of horses behind him all the encouragement he needed. Something hit him from behind, and he stumbled to the ground. Evil beasts rode over him. He rolled away, but not before one crushed his left hand.

He hid beneath an outcropping and waited for the danger to pass. His brother was nowhere to be seen among the undead army.

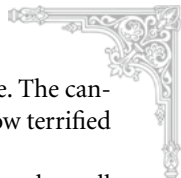
Darkness enveloped everything around him and he stumbled his way to the city gates. People screamed in the streets, and a man rushed towards him mouth agape. Ali swung the axe with both hands. His instinct to survive took over, and he forgot about his injury.

Pain made his blow less forceful, and the blade severed only half the neck and wedged in the top of the spine. As the creature wriggled, Ali struggled and pulled the weapon free. A second swing finished the job. The body slumped to the ground, and the head rolled away.

Moans reverberated off the walls, joined by screams and sounds of people fighting. Ali ran to his home, he needed to find Anya. Twenty feet away, he ran into two of the thieves. Their horses reared back and made savage noises. One of them reached for Ali but missed.

The man continued forward and out of the city, the other turned and faced Ali. Fear took over as the beast barreled down on him. He moved out of the way and grabbed at the reaching arm.

The body fell on Ali, a pile of decayed skin and bones. Forcing the bile down and ignoring the pain, Ali pummelled the zombie disregarding the scratches and gouges inflicted on him. Exhausted, Ali stopped fighting when the thing stopped moving. The skull cracked open, and bits of brain and fluids oozed onto the road.



Ali forced himself up and jogged the rest of the way to his house. The candle in the window warmed his heart. At that moment, he realized how terrified he truly was of losing Anya.

He pushed open the door with trepidation. Shadows danced on the wall as the flame flickered. There was no mistaking his brother next to the bloody corpse of his wife.

Ali screamed. A primal rage from somewhere deep within propelled him forward into the body of Cassim. The man that was once his brother lay beneath him, one of the undead now. Ali raised the axe, pain in his hand forgotten. When he brought it down, he smiled, and his face turned cruel.

A cry to his side alerted him Anya was still alive. Ali rushed to her side and cradled her head in his lap. He pulled the tattered top together, refusing to believe the carnage beneath it.

“Everything’s going to be okay. I’m here now, and I won’t ever leave you again.”

Ali stayed in the same position until his legs cramped and the body of his wife was ice cold. Ali’s tears dropped onto her face. When Anya’s eyes popped open, he had a moment of hope until he saw blackened teeth snap. Her once brown eyes were milky and he realized there was no saving her which meant no future for him.

Part of him wanted her to punish him for leaving her, to dole out what he deserved for bringing the apocalypse. He hated himself for being so weak. The justification of stealing so he could buy something nice for Anya made him feel sick.

Why couldn’t he have just been happy with things the way they were. Why did he let his curiosity get the better of him? Why did he let Cassim make him open the thieves den?

Anya moved again, and he screamed. Killing her was too much. Ali ran from the house into the alleyways picked up a discarded scimitar and hacked and slashed his way through the city.

By day, he hid in various places he’d found as a child. He listened as people called for help and did nothing. When the sun set, he took to the shadows and dispatched as many of the undead as he could.

After two weeks, he looked like the emaciated skeletons he fought. Food was not a priority to him anymore. A few sips of water here and there were enough to tide him over until he had the guts to do what needed to be done. To be the man Anya married. To get back what Anya hoped he would become again when he returned the stolen goods.

Bits of news floated his way as survivors arrived. They spoke of devastation and the dead rising from their graves, of decapitating and burning anyone thought to be infected. Burnt offerings to the Gods.

Ali cringed at the happenings around him.



As he wandered the streets, killing the undead who crossed his path, Ali ended up back at his house. He put his ear to the door. Something scratched inside.

His stomach fell. Anya was still in there, starved. For so long, he'd searched the streets for her, never thinking she had been trapped inside their home. When he realized the condition he left her, Ali knew it was the most unforgivable thing he could've done. How would he ever deserve her forgiveness?

With his bandaged hand, he lifted the latch and pushed. The odor knocked him back. Decay, rot, and stale air invaded his lungs. He braced himself and walked into the dark house.

Anya's arms wrapped around him, and he held her at bay with his good arm. Too weak to do much more than drool, his dead wife opened and closed her mouth in slow motion. A few attempts later, her lower jaw snapped off, hitting the floor with a sticky thud.

Ali brushed her cheek with his bandaged hand. The bit of light slipping into the room reflected off her greenish face. He decided what he needed to do in order to earn her love.

Moving his hand in front of her mouth, he let her sink her teeth deep into his forearm. He let her drag the blackened, jagged teeth across his flesh. When he felt certain he'd been infected, he pulled his arm away.

With watery eyes, he raised his sword one last time and cut her head off. The weapon fell to the floor with a clang, but he ignored it. Instead, he moved and caught the body before it hit the ground.


A curtain separated the bedroom from the rest of the room, and as he lifted her body, he felt more guilt at how light she was. While he ran around hiding from what he'd caused, she'd suffered, starved. Would the list of things he did wrong when it came to his wife ever end?

He edged the curtain aside with his shoulder and placed the body on the hay-filled mattress. He picked her head up with care and placed it upon the pillow. His own body started to react to the poison in his blood. Only a few moments to set his plan into place.

Ali lifted the sheet from the floor and covered Anya with it. He placed a brief kiss on her forehead oblivious to the bits of skin stuck to his lips. Moving into the main room, he barred the front door, closed the shutters, and stood in the center.

Soon he would be one of the undead. The end would come for all of them, there was no outrunning it, and it was his fault. He would make it up to Anya though. From now until the end of time, he would stand guard over her.

An eternal vigil was the only way he might be able to earn her back. As his joints stiffened, the hunger for human flesh made his stomach cramp, he welcomed it.



# Steadfast in the Face of Zombies

By Trisha J. Wooldridge

*Based on The Steadfast Tin Soldier*

Dear Suzanne,

I only got here and our camp's on light discipline, which means that a shambler horde is close. Most of us can't sleep and are up writing and sharing these tiny LED headlamps.

Dave's company is at this camp, too. We saw each other at mess, and he looked like crap. Worse when he saw me. No one told him I'd been drafted. He never expected it with my bum leg. He said no one was talking about the front lines, but if they drafted someone like me, things must be really bad.

I told him I was here for more... political reasons. I don't want him doing something stupid to your dad when we get back because he would. He didn't think it was possible they could mess with medical records or pay off enough people to get me drafted, but here I am. Both of us are worried about Mom. You're still checking in on her, right? Are you able to without causing any problems with your dad? I really hope so. Give her our love. She must be a wreck.

I know your performance is coming up, and I wish I were watching you dance and leap rather than being here. But, I don't regret our kiss. No matter what your dad thinks he can do, I'll return to you for another. And thinking of that and thinking I am maybe keeping these horrors from getting to you, help me get through.

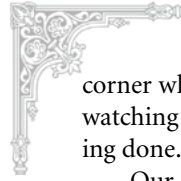
Love,  
Peter

...

Dearest Peter,

God, I miss you and pray for you every morning and night! I will not forgive my Dad. You belong here, going to college, becoming the famous screenwriter of your dreams. Being at all my rehearsals and performances, writing in the





corner while I'm doing my barre exercises. Trying to hide the fact that you're watching every pas, arabesque, and pirouette and getting absolutely no writing done. (You knew I always knew, right?)

Our next performance is the Nutcracker for Christmas. I'm trying for the Sugar Plum Fairy, if that helps you picture me dancing. You've seen me practice that part before, so you can imagine me better.

We haven't gotten any news about what's going on over there. They're not releasing how many aren't coming home. There are a lot of people posting YouTube videos about protests because they're not giving casualty information, and that the CDC won't allow any bodies to touch U.S. soil, so people are asking what's going to happen when (I won't say if!) you all start coming home? Will they keep everyone there until all the infected people are dead or contained?

I don't want to think of that!

Are you seeing anything of China? I don't even know what you would see, even if I knew where you were. I only have the air-mail drop information. If you're in a "light discipline," have you... actually seen the things? Do they look like they do in the movies and groan?

You know, I hope you haven't. I don't want you anywhere near them. Be safe! I love you!

Love,  
Suze

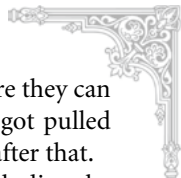
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Dear Suze,

At this point, I'm not sure where we are in China, even if it's still China. Your letter arrived the day we lost the camp. They broke through, so many of them. Some in our uniforms.

A bunch of us escaped in helicopters, but not all of us. And I haven't seen David anywhere. One of the guys on our helicopter was barely eighteen and scared shitless. He had gotten bitten earlier, but was hiding it. It wasn't like the movies. It's more like when I would go to see Grandad in the nursing home. All of a sudden, the one bitten just forgets who they are and who you are. Then they start getting angry. It killed the pilot before we contained and shot it. We crashed. Two more of our group died from that. The rest of us took care of the bodies, took what weapons and ammo we could carry and tried to find shelter. God help me, I am afraid of slowing the rest of my squad down with my leg.

We made it to the river and sold some guns and ammo for passage with a family. The grandfather, the one who looked the oldest, made us strip down naked. When he saw none of us were currently injured (he paused at the scar on my leg, it's obvious it's that old), he let us on the boat with him and his family. Those things, we call them shamblers because zombie sounds so damn ridiculous. Anyway, they can't swim and sink in water over their heads. But the water level is pretty low so we have to stay in the very middle of this



long, muddy river. Because in some parts, it's shallow enough where they can reach up from the water. One civilian who had shared our boat got pulled overboard the night after we left. We started 24-hour guard shifts after that.

There are fourteen of us on this homemade pontoon now, including the old man and his family. I don't know where we're going except mostly South, but the old man uses gestures to tell us the best he can that he believes we're going somewhere safe.

I don't know when I will be able to mail these to you, but I need to keep writing, keep thinking of you. Everything is so unreal, you're all I can think of left that's good in the world. I love you, and stay safe! I pray this mess never makes it out of Asia.

Love,  
Peter

• • •

Dearest Peter,

My father was nominated as the Republican candidate. He's so happy, and there are all sorts of parties – and people are going at this election like mad dogs. Most of the people haven't brought up the fact our troops are still over in Asia and more are going to Thailand, Laos, Burma and even India and the Middle East! The politicians and news people talk about other crap that just doesn't matter.

They haven't stopped the Internet, though. And a lot of us are still getting news from there. Someone filmed a horde in India, I think, and there were a lot of people running – and a lot of cell phone videos. News stations over here are saying it's a hoax, but I don't believe them anymore. And I think – or, at least I hope – more and more people don't believe the news stations.

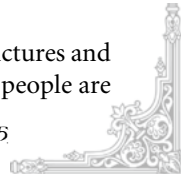
I dance because I don't know what else to do. *Battement tendu. Pointe tendu. Pas de Basque.* I have to move. Something.

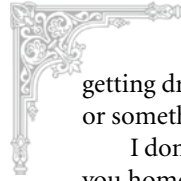
It's like half this globe is pretty much going to hell, literally, and people in this country are trying to ignore that. I don't know what they're doing in Europe or anywhere else, but I have heard they are all sending troops too. The whole country of China has gone offline. The whole country! No one is getting in and out, and no information is going in and out. India and Thailand are still sending stuff, but we're not getting a lot of it. There are a few reports from some of those Middle East countries, too, but you can only get those online.

People are worried that the Chinese will use nuclear bombs on their own soil to “neutralize the threat,” but nothing “official” can confirm anything.

And I haven't heard from you in months and months. No one has heard from any of our soldiers, except some of the generals and such who say they “are in communication” and “everything is stable” and “our men and women are safe,” which sounds like bullshit, but I have to believe it, because I have to believe you're all right and you'll come home to me.

Its like a ghost town here, and people on the web are posting pictures and videos of their home towns looking the same. Dead. Empty. More people are





getting drafted — they may as well all be getting secretly yanked out windows or something — and while there are protests, nothing is happening.

I don't know what to think, except I just don't want you over there. I want you home, with me, your ballerina who loves you.

Love,  
Suze

• • •

Dear Suze,

I haven't come across anywhere to send you letters, and I don't even know how I'd get yours, but I have to keep writing you.

Every village we've come across has been destroyed or empty. Four times our little crew has had confrontations. We're down to ten now. The old man, his daughter, her three children, and five of my company are all that's left. Her husband was lost in our last attempt to find a town and to refresh our supplies, along with MacP, one of ours. They came running from the jungle, threw bags of food and cans and water bottles and fuel onto the pontoon, then kicked us toward the middle while they both stayed, firing at the shamblers so they wouldn't follow. It was really shallow with no current to hold them back.

I'm in charge of the motor when we're deep enough to use it. It was like hell having to crank it up when Leiderman and Grandfather paddled us deep enough. All we could do is watch them firing, making sure the things didn't get any ideas of testing the water. It's not like our boat can move that fast. We just had to get where it was too deep for them to reach us.

The man's wife started screaming as soon as the motor started, then the children did. Grandfather, and Saunders, one of my company, both had to hold her back. Leiderman and Gregson held the children. Neilson, our sergeant, stood away from them, gun aimed at the shore.

I knew he wanted to fire. I wanted to fire. Give them the only gift we could. Gift of mercy. But we're low on ammunition. We just watched, he and I, being with them in their last moments. When they were tiny figures on a far away shore, and the shambler horde was upon them, the two men fired upon each other.

Neilson lowered the muzzle of his gun and crossed himself. I prayed they were brain dead before the infection could change them.

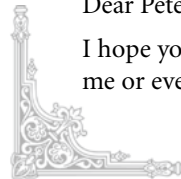
I don't think I'll send this letter to you, Suze. I don't know if I will ever find a place where I can send mail. I just need to record what's happening over here.

I pray we can stop this, so no one else has to go through this. God keep you safe, Suze. I love you, always.

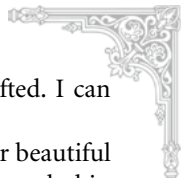
Peter

• • •

Dear Peter,



I hope you'll forgive me for this, but I've enlisted. My dad refuses to speak to me or even acknowledge my existence, but I don't give a damn. I'm nineteen,



I'm more fit than half the men and women who are getting drafted. I can make a difference.

I know you want me safe, and you want to think of me as your beautiful ballerina waiting to pirouette for you, but I cannot simply dance through this. I must do something.

The presidential debates are all about whether or not to bring any soldiers home. The CDC says they can't ensure anyone brought home won't be a carrier because some people come in contact with the disease, have sustained wounds, and don't get infected. But, they can infect others.

If you may never come home, then maybe I can find you. I know it's next to impossible, but right now, staying here and hoping they even let you come home seems even more impossible.

And selfish.

I love you, always, Peter, and I want to make a difference. I hope you understand.

Love, always,  
Suzanne



Dear Suze,

Here is another letter added to my pile that I can only pray will get mailed someday – or, I hope and pray – hand to you in person if we can contain this threat.

But I'm afraid we won't. And things are getting harder for our little group.

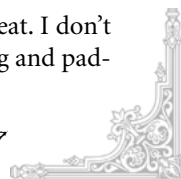
The woman killed herself three days after we left her husband. She fucking killed herself. Suze, by God and all that is holy, swear to me if something happens you won't do that! I know she was hurting. Hell, I can't even imagine how I'd feel if I heard the infected came to U.S. soil – and I can imagine how you feel with me over here, but swear to me you would never do this!


You won't, I know. You're too strong. But I've seen what heartbreak does.

The woman, after she stopped crying just shut down. She wouldn't eat or drink or even look at her children. Her own children! Instead Grandfather and Gregson take care of them. Gregson makes cartoon voices and faces and does magic tricks for them. But they should never have had to go through this.

It was the middle of the night and we'd turned the motor off because we were in a shallow part again. Neilson and Saunders were paddling and keeping watch when the woman "fell" off the side. We didn't see the blood in her corner until later. Neilson and Saunders woke us up, and we hauled her back on the boat, but she was dead. She'd taken one of our knives and sliced her own femoral, bleeding out while she was in the water. Most people don't think of the femoral artery. She knew what she was doing. It wasn't a cry for help; it was a decision. A selfish one.

We all took turns trying to comfort the children, get them to eat. I don't remember much else except that I was relieved to take over steering and paddling so I wouldn't have to think of anything else.





Please, Suze, even if I don't make it back, keep living. Keep dancing.  
Love always,  
Peter

• • •

Dear Peter,

I just got back from basic and checked on your Mom. She told me David is coming home!

I hadn't heard they were letting anyone back. God, I don't know if you'll get this letter, but I know you'd want to know. There's no word about any of your other brothers or your Dad, but David will be home safe.

I think he got lucky on a few levels because when I talked to my Mom (after Dad had left, because we're still not speaking), I heard my cousin, Henry, is coming home on the same boat. They're landing in California and then the soldiers — there are about 100 fr43332q om what I heard. Only 100? — are all flying home.

Supposedly, this is the first group and more are coming. It seems they voted in some decision to start bringing some people back. It's been almost two years since you left, longer for some of the others.

Some people are saying it's a dangerous choice and the vote was just to get the Republicans to look good in the upcoming election. They say, "Are we sure no one's bringing the virus back to the U.S.?" And the answer they get is that everyone will go through a quarantine process in California, but anyone coming home is supposedly clean of being a carrier of what they say is a mutated virus the Chinese were experimenting with.

I believe it's good they're coming home. I only wish you were, too, even if I'm about to be deployed.

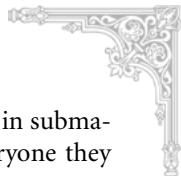
I love you always.  
Your ballerina,  
Suzanne

• • •

Dear Suze,

I've got almost two dozen letters I've collected if we ever get to civilization. Yesterday, we made it to the ocean. The fucking ocean, Suze!

We had less than a week's worth of provisions, but we could see shamblers every time we looked to land. So, we rode out to the ocean. We had a compass, and Grandfather, who was learning some English now, and we've picked up some Mandarin -- Grandfather said we might find one of the islands where we'd be safe since the things don't easily cross water. The thing is, we didn't know if we'd survive that long on the little food and fresh water we had.



But we didn't have to find out.

It seems the Japanese have been secretly observing the waters in submarines all the way down to the Philippines. They're capturing everyone they find leaving the shores of infected countries.

And there are a lot of infected countries. From what I hear, things have spread almost to Europe. They're talking serious about bombing, and that terrifies me, Suze.

Like Grandfather, the submarine crew made us all strip naked to ensure none of us had any cuts. They were in full hazmat suits when they inspected us.

Thing is, Gregson did have a cut on his leg. It wasn't a bad one, but it was getting infected. We all knew it was just an abrasion from when we were trying to catch fish and he dropped the makeshift spear we'd made. We kept it as clean as possible, but it festered. The Japanese wouldn't let him leave our boat, though. They held him at gunpoint. Saunders — she and Gregson had gotten close while we were on the boat — refused to leave him. They asked to keep the compass and the food, and they'd just leave. None of us spoke Japanese, but one of the submarine men spoke English, and he said the rest of us could board their submarine and they would take us somewhere safe. The poor kids were terrified, and didn't want to leave Gregson behind, but we got them on the submarine.

I was last. At this point, having been on the boat with hardly enough water to keep us alive and well out of my pain meds, I was barely moving. Two of the Japanese helped me get to their sub. I was only a few rungs down the ladder when I heard the shots.

Two shots. Two thuds.

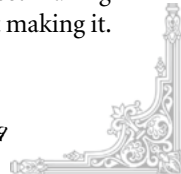
I tried to scramble back up the ladder, but my bad leg got tangled in the rungs and I fell right on my tailbone. Pain burned all the way up my backbone and I couldn't feel my legs for a few minutes. I knew the soldier had killed Gregson and Saunders just like that, in cold blood, after promising to let them go. I should have been more outraged. Furious. But that would come later. I was in fucking pain.

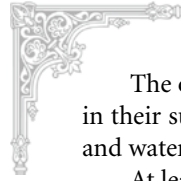
Neilson just about climbed over me to go up the ladder, but three of the Japanese detained him, and one detained me — though I wasn't going anywhere. I could hardly breathe.

When I woke back up, I was in the infirmary, on my side. I managed to break my tailbone. Fuck. Sorry I have taken up more cursing, but that's how I feel. Two of my friends were gunned down and I couldn't do anything — and now I had the most dumb-assed injury anyone could get: a broken ass.

The English speaking Japanese guy came and tried to explain things to me, still in his hazmat suit. Anyway, he tried to tell me they couldn't take any chance of the disease spreading. The two could have gotten to one of the islands, which had zero instances of the viruses and continued the spread.

Saunders and Gregson almost made it. A lot of people are almost making it. The next stop on this journey could end with the rest of us almost making it.





The others are able to visit me, always under the watch of more Japanese in their suits. They're limited to where they can go, but getting enough food and water, and so am I. And pain medicine.

At least that's some comfort. It makes it easier to dream of you, Suzanne. Dancing around me in my cot. I know you're more beautiful than I can remember, too, but just remembering you helps.

Maybe we won't be almost safe. Maybe I'll get home and get back to you.

Love,

Peter

• • •

Dearest Peter,

It's happened.

The first incursion happened in California. But it also happened at home, with David. He'd cleared quarantine. Supposedly, all the soldiers did.

I wasn't there. I was already en route to Sacramento. Well, outside of Sacramento. We're trying to contain Sacramento.

It was on the news, and there are riots all about it. Greenscranton was destroyed. Not cordoned, not contained, not shit. Destroyed.

My family, unsurprisingly, happened to be out of the state when the decision was made. I don't know how much weight my dad had in that decision. Supposedly, he's still ahead on polls despite his hometown being leveled by the National Guard. I can't even begin to process this.

I'm so sorry, Peter. God, I'm sorry! I don't know what else to say. I don't even know if you'll get this letter. We've got a hot drop in California. Hardly a chance to stop for mail. I'll keep this safe for you for when we meet again.

Because I have to believe we will meet again. I have to believe in something good.

When everyone's asleep, I do my movements. I stretch. I dance for you.

Love, always,

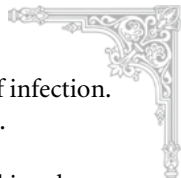
Suzanne, your ballerina

• • •

Dear Suze,

I dreamed you were dancing for me last night, at the studio, like you always did after class when I was doing homework or writing something. You were doing that spin thing with your leg all the way up your side. And then you stopped, like that one time you noticed me watching you, and you just kind of balanced on one leg, hugging the other. And then you winked. It was so beautiful.

We were taken to a floating quarantine. It's the size of an aircraft carrier, and we're at the very bottom of it. I feel like Jonah in the belly of the whale. Except there's a few hundred soldiers down here with me. American, Australian, British, German, French, Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese. They keep us together. From what I hear, there's a failsafe where this whole cordon can be



released and let sink to the bottom of the ocean if there's any sign of infection. All three quarantine levels can be released. Just sunk and forgotten.

My walking is even worse now; I need crutches.

At least they are feeding us well and we have plenty of water, working showers and toilets. I don't feel like a prisoner. Much. I just am stuck in the belly of a quarantine whale floating somewhere in the Pacific.

I hope you are safe and this disease hasn't made it to U.S. shores yet. Keep dancing, my Suzanne.

Love,  
Peter



Dearest Peter,

There are outbreaks in San Jose and San Francisco now. There were outbreaks in Kentucky and Louisiana, where other soldiers went home... those were rural communities. While they haven't razed anything, like they did in Greenscranton, they're under strict quarantine. Any city one of the returned soldiers visited or went home to is under strict quarantine. Anything leaving the containment area is to be eliminated. There are riots all over the place.

Sacramento is contained right now, but some soldiers went home to highly urbanized civilian zones: San Jose, San Francisco, San Diego out here in California, but New York, Atlanta, Boston, and Miami, too. Those of us on domestic deployment and the National Guard are mobilizing there now, all hospitals are on high alert to contact military regarding any possible infection victims.

Which means it's fucking insane. Every single hospital is calling us, terrified. My squad is deploying to support the National Guard in San Francisco. It's a mess between the riots and the panic. No one trusts the military. And I can't say I blame them.

None of the news stations showed footage of what happened in Greenscranton, but some of the people in my company still have smartphones. Videos from some of the soldiers were all over YouTube. They started getting taken down, but they can't erase our brains — yet — and there are other places on the Internet where people have copied the videos.

I haven't done a single pas, movement or even a stretch, but when I go to bed, I dance in my head. And we're back in high school, hiding in the back booth of Missy's diner, giggling. And then you ask if you can kiss me, and I say yes. It's the most beautiful feeling ever.

I know you don't want me fighting in this war, but keep sending your love and prayers, and I'll send mine to you. It's all we've got now.

Love,  
Suzanne

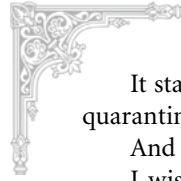


Dear Suzanne,

I don't know how it happened, but we're coming home.







It started with a feverish German. That put the rest of us in the bottom quarantine level into a panic. None of us went near him. And then he turned. And we somehow stormed our way upward.

I wish I could tell you who did what, or, hell, what happened. I don't know. All I remember was everyone running. And Neilson and Leiderman each grabbed one of my arms and hauled my ass with them. They weren't going to leave me, no matter how many times I said I was slowing them down. God bless them!

The quarantine levels should have been released when the German turned, but we think the infection actually started topside, because there were already shamblers there. Inside hazmat suits. It was already a battle zone when we got up there. The three of us headed to the control room with another contingent and took it over.

We dumped all the quarantine levels and all the infected into the Pacific. After it was over, there were less than a hundred of us left to run this medical ship the size of an aircraft carrier. I'd never been on anything so big. And so empty.

Because we had to do exactly what those submarine officers did.

After the battle, we killed every single man and woman who had any injury. We collected their IDs and dog tags.

Their families would at least know their loved ones weren't monsters or suffering. They deserved that; their families deserved that. To know.

But we killed them.

Leiderman got bit. He handed us his tags and pulled his own trigger right on the side so he'd fall overboard.

Not two days later, the U.S. Air Force intercepted us. More hazmat suits, more tests. Now, they're transferring us onto U.S. transport. We'll be landing in San Jose, California in a few days. That's all they told us. That's all I think we can process right now. We're coming home.

I'm still numb. Even my broken tailbone and my leg are numb. I don't think humans were meant for this kind of pain, Suzanne. I hope you never have to face this. I dream of you at home dancing, still. And then I feel guilty because how could I ask you to love someone who's killed people in cold blood? Some of them begging to be given a chance to prove they aren't infected?

But picturing you as the Sugar Plum Fairy, like you described in the last letter of yours I received keeps me going.


I'll be a monster if it keeps you safe.

Love,

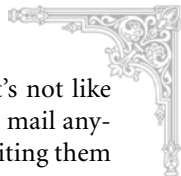
Peter

• • •

Dear Peter,



We're moving to San Jose to support one of the Veteran's hospitals. It's a dark op because any more outbreaks on U.S. soil might just destroy this country's soul. Especially at a VA hospital.



I haven't mailed a single of my letters since I enlisted, so it's not like I'm leaking anything. When China went black, I had nowhere to mail anything anyway, so I've saved them all. Thinking that maybe just writing them would send the message to the universe and you'd know.

I know it sounds crazy, but that's what I'm thinking. And I'm not the only one. A few of the others are also writing and saving. They've taken our phones and we're on disciplined communication

If — no, when, I must hold onto when — you see me again, will you even recognize me? I feel so different. Much different than that sweet ballerina who had plans for Julliard with her boyfriend who was going to write movies.

I killed my dad. My own dad. He was in San Francisco for some press conference or another, and he'd been bitten at a small outbreak. The outbreak was contained. Orders were all bitten subjects were to be eliminated, no quarter.

I expected my dad to ask for an exception, and he didn't. He just stood there. And nodded. And I had to pull the trigger. Marks, my partner, offered to take the shot. But I needed to be the one to do it.

You know, he loved seeing me dance, too, like you. After I... eliminated the threat, I told myself I had no right to dance again.

Tomorrow, before dawn, we'll arrive at the VA hospital. They say there's a chance one of the soldiers, or a few of them, have brought back the virus. A bunch were rescued from a quarantine ship out in the Pacific. And I'm desperately afraid of what we'll have to do. I'm more scared of that, Peter, than if I do get bit. I might be able to take my own life before I change, but when someone's begging you... and you know they're going to change into a monster? God, it's hell. How can anyone dance?

But when we stopped for tonight, I couldn't sleep. My feet were itching, twitching. So, I snuck out of my bed. At first I just put my feet into the positions, did a few basic stretches. Then plié. Rélevé. Arabesque. I couldn't stop. I couldn't help myself. I kept moving. Just next to my bed. I had to. I don't know why, but I did. I'm dancing because somewhere I imagine you wanting to see me dance. I guess I can't change that much. I hope?

If you'll still have me, I'll always be your ballerina.

Love, always,

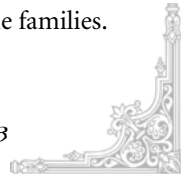
Suzanne



Dear Suze,

The Air Force brought us to San Jose yesterday. To a veteran's hospital they say is prepared for returning military with proper quarantines. That floating quarantine was supposedly prepared. We went through the usual tests.

We were still numb. Even Neilson. We just did as told, handing over our personal items, our letters, and the dog tags and IDs we collected from the floating quarantine. Trusting our compatriots to return them to the families.



We watched them put it all in a lock box that they say is going out tomorrow. Forgive me if some of the letters are horrific. I had sealed them all and now I don't remember which I had never planned to send you.

But I need you to know the truth.

When I see you again, Suzanne, I will ask you to marry me. But I want you to know the person who wants to marry you.

We haven't seen any news programs. They don't even have TVs on anywhere. It's a little spooky, but none of us question. We just need to rest.

Then we can find out what's going on in the rest of the world. If we're winning. If it's getting contained

I am dreaming of you dancing, my Suze.

Love always,

Peter



Dear Peter,

This is last letter I write.

I was called back from the front lines. The VA hospital was hot, and I'm part of the contingent plan.

I don't even want to talk about it.

I'm not coming home, Peter. They told us that and collected our personal items and put them in a lock box. I scribbled this and sealed it just before. I put your old Greenscranton address on it. No one even noticed. It doesn't matter, though. I just needed to write this. Maybe God will deliver it to you himself.

I love you, Peter. I'll dance for you in Heaven. Be safe!

Love,

Suzanne, Your Ballerina



On Display at the Los Angeles Monument for the  
Soldiers and Civilians of The War of the Virus:

Item 14:

High resolution digital reproduction of photo records of fused soldier remains washed up on the Nevada shore. Dog tags (items 14A and 14B) identify remains as Private First Class Peter Baker and Private First Class Suzanne Miller. This particular image was the most circulated upon its discovery ten years ago, dubbed "The Lovers," because the two bodies appeared to be fused together in a final embrace at ground zero of the San Jose detonation that began the sinking of California. In a locked fire box that washed up around the same time (item 15), was a collection of letters from hundreds of soldiers, among them the love letters of a "Suzanne" and "Peter," which are digitally displayed (items 15a1-15a16).





# The Oven

By Sean Eads

*Based on The Gingerbread Man*

We are staring down fifty shambling Pillsbury Doughboys who look at me like they've suddenly discovered what they've been missing. They're almost half-way across the bridge I've rigged with explosives every ten yards. I'm on the other end, calm, contemplating their advance. Billy stands beside me. Billy's not calm.

"Why don't you go ahead, Ginge?"

"Not yet."

The Doughboys' flesh is white and gleaming and stretched over each bloated belly, which reminds me of a cooper's barrel stuffed with meat. The Doughboys' pace could madden an hourglass.

"Guess it's the old joke, right? If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen."

"Dumb joke," I say.

"How about out of the frying pan, into—"

"I don't know anything about a frying pan. I was baked. And I can stand the heat. I was born from the heat. My heart was forged in a 360-degree hell, boy. So don't presume to tell me about heat."

Billy jumps back from me, as much as his bulky body lets him jump. I smile at him, but this means nothing. I cannot help but smile, despite the contempt I feel for just about everything. I must look evil to Billy, with bright yellow eyes and a bright yellow mouth fixed in a bright, cheery U.

I must look insane.

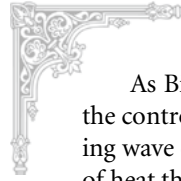
"C'mon, Ginge. Please—"

"I'm waiting for all the pastry gents to get in position."

Billy rakes both hands through his stringy, unkempt brown hair. "Just blow the goddamn bridge!"

The Doughboys are getting a little too close now. Despite their lethargy, they always seem to sneak up on you when your attention falters. Billy has reasons to fear, of course. These monstrosities will ignore me entirely. They like flesh. They like meat.

I'm neither.



As Billy blubbers, I scan down the bridge and decide it's time. I activate the control device. The far end of the bridge buckles and launches a devastating wave of concrete and fire. I brace for the flame and exalt in the brief blast of heat that reawakens memories of the oven, memories of that first delicious sear of consciousness as I woke to find my skin browning and hardening. I remember sitting up in the baking pan to see a sliver of my mother's hideous face as she cracked the oven door to glimpse me.

"Satisfied, Billy?"

Billy nods, suddenly Mr. Cool.

"Then giddyup."

With a quick but gentle touch you'd never guess chubby, clumsy Billy could possess, he takes me from the ground and lifts me toward his face. For just a moment he looks like he might try to eat me. Then he smiles.

"We sure kicked those Doughboys' asses, didn't we, Ginge?"

"We? You did all the work. I was just along for the ride."

Billy smiles. Fairy tales make him happy. He then inserts me into the special chest holster designed just for me. It places me at his sternum, close to his heart, still thudding from his recent fear.

"Colonel Monroe is going to be very impressed when he hears about this," he says as we start back to the army camp.

"I doubt it. Come tomorrow he'll suddenly say we need that bridge, and its destruction spells the doom of the human race."

"You're so paranoid, Ginge."

"Paranoid, hell. I've never gotten along with him."

"Why is that?"

"For one thing, he's a damn racist. Like most humans."

"Are you a race, Ginge? Sorry to be awkward about it, but—"

"But what? Doesn't matter what I am. Doesn't matter where I'm from or how I came to be alive. Cogito ergo sum. And since the Doughboys took over, it seems I've been forced to cogito for the whole human race. I'm literally saving you people from yourselves."

Before what Billy calls zombies showed up, I'd been laying low for over a century. A few people knew my secret, knew my origins. Or thought they did. The Gingerbread Man. Old Mr. Smiley Face. The stuff of legend, supposedly dead at the jaws of a fox. Idiot people. What fox would eat gingerbread? What fox could eat me?

Of course I faked my death.

Run, run as fast as you can;

You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man.

That's very true. From the moment of my birth, no one could ever catch me. My mother designed me to be fast. Hell, I'm like the wind. But Mother didn't consider that I'd get tired of running.

Tired of living.

"Was your mom really a witch, Ginge?"

"Yes."



“She conjured you with magic.”

“Black Magic Woman, just like Santana sang about.”

“Do you really have the blood of seven different animals in you?”

“I’m much more than the sum of my ingredients. But yes.”

“And human hair?”

“One strand, no follicle.”

“Gosh, that’s something,” Billy says. His heart is really laboring. “How come none of that’s in the fairy tale?”

“Well, like human history, certain parts get cleaned up.”

Despite his pestering, I like Billy. He’s twenty-two, loyal, trusting, imaginative. Exactly the sort to get himself killed without a chaperone.

“I’ve been thinking about Colonel Monroe. Even if he doesn’t like you, Ginge, which I’m not sure I believe, he needs you. You’re our best at everything. Best spy, best demolitions man—our best demolitions Gingerbread Man. That’s funny!”

“Riotous.”

“And you’re our best courier if communications go down. Christ, you’re faster than a jet! ‘Run, run just as—”

“Best stop while you’re ahead, Billy.”

“I just mean if we don’t turn this thing around soon, we can say goodbye to technology. God, I miss Internet porn.”

Here’s how “this thing” went to hell: A Pillsbury Pie Crust was infected with some sort of microbe that infected a group at a church picnic, turning them into flesh eating monsters. Said monsters soon got a monopoly on most of civilization. Bread has fucked with the human race for a long time. Supposedly bad wheat caused hallucinations that led to the Salem Witch Trials (a touchy subject with mommy dearest). “And now the world is toast,” Billy likes to say. Ironic that some bad dough is responsible for over half the human race becoming monstrous cannibals. It’s a Very Special Atkins Diet world now, for sure. But speaking as the only living creature made of a bread product, matters could be worse.

We reach base camp. Billy lifts me from the chest harness to the concrete.

A jeep races toward us.

“Jesus, that’s Colonel Monroe now.”

The jeep pulls up to close and by instinct I jump away from its massive left wheel, though it could not hurt me. Colonel Monroe leans out the window, glaring. “The bridge?”

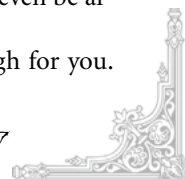
“Destroyed, sir. Ginge—I mean, The Gingerbread Man—must have killed a hundred—”

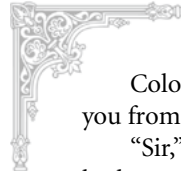
“Destroyed? I didn’t authorize such an action.”

Billy looks appalled. “It had to be done!”

“Don’t argue with me, son. You’re not military. You wouldn’t even be allowed on this base except he’s taken a shine to you.”

“Well if I’m good enough for Ginge, I should be good enough for you. Right?”





Colonel Monroe swallows. “Go to the barracks. Shower up. I can sniff you from here.”

“Sir,” Billy says, leaving. Colonel Monroe gets out and towers over me. I look up at the imposing man. There’s a lot of thinking and deliberating going on behind his eyes. But I wager it’s all about making one decision: whether to try to step on me or not.

If he wants to lose a foot, he’s welcome to try.

“Wipe that damn smile off your face.”

“Don’t think I’ll be doing that, sir. It’s somewhat baked on.”

“Did you really feel it necessary to blow the bridge?”

“Had it remained intact, this section would be overrun by Doughboys before tomorrow morning.”

“Our ground forces are cut off from Lincoln County now. I intended to move in and recover survivors. That bridge was the most direct route.”

We might argue but neither of us feels like engaging. Colonel Monroe is tired. I don’t get tired—not exactly. I can far exceed human endurance in most things. But even I have limits, and when I reach them I have to recharge. There’s only one way to do it.

After being dismissed, I go to the barracks. The soldiers are okay. They’re still getting used to my existence. When they first heard about The Gingerbread Man, they assumed it was a code name of some sort, the *nome du garre* of some badass commando. When I walked in, not even a foot tall, half the unit started laughing. The catcalls were expected.

“Man, I’m hungry. Bet it’d taste good if I bit off your head.”

“Go ahead and try. It’s your dental bill.”

“Hey, I remember you,” said another grunt, and broke into the obnoxious old song. “Run, run just as fast as you can—”

I had his nuts frogged and his body writhing on the ground before he said another word. I’ve earned their respect. They all want to be my best friend. They hate Billy because they think he is my best friend, rather than a dopey kid I didn’t want to see dead.

“Hey, GBM,” a soldier says. “You want to fuck my girl? She’s got this yeast infection. Bet you’d like that.”

“Like it? Hell, I gave it to her.”

The unit cracks up at this. I turn to show my famous, frozen smile, and walk on.

I leap onto Billy’s bunk. He stirs awake and blinks at me.

In a low voice, I say, “You have to get me to the mess hall.”

He sits up on one elbow, looking perplexed. “Ginge, you don’t eat.”

“I need to get in some rack time.”

He stares.

“Got to tan, my man.”

Now he understands, sitting up. “The oven?”

“Quiet. I need to bake for about twenty minutes. I don’t know how to explain why, but it recharges me.”



“I could get in trouble.”

If my yellow eyes could roll, they would. “Please, Billy. I really need your help on this.”

He puts on the chest holster and I climb in. Then he dons a jacket and zips it up, despite the summer swelter. I say nothing about this idiotic attempt at subterfuge. It’s sort of touching to see Billy’s determination to help me. I don’t really need it. I wouldn’t be denied some oven time, not with my importance. I just don’t want anyone to know that I sometimes need to bake. Call it embarrassment.

Call it prudence.

We enter the mess hall, which is empty, and go to the quiet, cold kitchen.

“Turn the temperature up to four hundred degrees.”

“Okay. Now what?”

“Put me in.”

Billy looks doubtful, even pained.

“It won’t hurt me, Billy. It will only help.”

I don’t know, Ginge.”

“Billy. Trust me. The way I’m trusting you right now.”

I bake. Billy squats down on the floor and waits. Sometimes he stands to check on me, his fat face filling the oven window. I’m kicked back on the rack, soaking up energy and power.

When I get out, Billy says, “Damn, you smell good, Ginge! Fresh!”

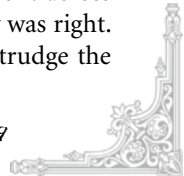
“Don’t get ideas. Here, I’ll get in the holster myself. Don’t touch me. I’m hot.”

After that night, our relationship deepens. Billy talks about the trust between us. He asks me more questions about my origins, consuming the details. Repeating questions to see if I’ll give different answers. The human mind has always been unfathomable to me. People seem to believe in nothing, yet they are eager to pour their hopes into anything. Everyone’s sanity is hooked to something they suppose to be solid and concrete, unbreakable and therefore safe.

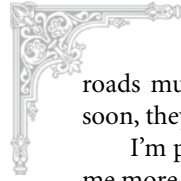
Billy’s sanity is more complicated. I feel guilty for not wanting to know his background the way he wants to know mine. He tells me anyway. Both parents are dead, killed by eating bread infected with a slightly different strain of the Doughboy microbe. Billy would have suffered the same fate, except he’d just switched over to a low-carbohydrate diet. In fact, Billy boasts about how skinny he’s become, his self-perception warped by years of morbid obesity. Still, being close to one hundred pounds overweight, Billy does not belong in this or any army. But manpower being short, and Billy’s bulk being worth at least four men, Colonel Monroe allows it.

My insistence has something to do with it too.

Three weeks after destroying the bridge, Billy and I are doing recon in a mountainous area our troops will have to pass through to make it across Colorado’s western slope and rendezvous with units in Utah. Billy was right. Technology is failing fast, to the point where soldiers now must trudge the







roads much like warriors from some distant century. Without a re-supply soon, they'll be fighting with bayonets and swords.

I'm perched on a rock, scanning the trees while Billy, winded, sits telling me more about his past.

"When I was like . . . three . . . my mom started reading me . . . fairy tales."

The sound of his wheezing distracts me from my task.

"Quit talking and catch your breath."

"Sure thing . . . Ginge."

I look back at the dark trees, my yellow eyes aflame with light. The Doughboys are there, wandering the woods for any semblance of meat. The slightest sound shifts their direction. There must be hundreds of them, probably the entire population of some infected town. Our troops will not have a good position to fight from if they get attacked. And they will get attacked. Armies do not move quietly. Soldiers do not tiptoe. There's no way Monroe's men can take this route without bleeding their ammunition dry.

"I believed them all," Billy says.

"All what?"

"The fairy tales. They seemed truer to me than anything else. I'd go to bed and dream I was rescuing Rapunzel."

I imagine his fat ass shimmying up a braid of hair and can only snicker.

"Or I was outwitting Rumpelstilzkin. Or I was . . . chasing . . . after . . ."

I turn around again to find Billy clutching his head.

"Chasing after what?"

"The Gingerbread Man."

I stare at him a long time, the light from my eyes bathing his face in yellow, making his flushed cheeks the color of mud.

My stupid, fixed smile does not convey what I feel.

I didn't always use to hate that my existence became the basis of a ridiculous fairy tale. When reality exceeds realism, it must become a myth or a legend or a fairy tale in order to be contained. I was even amused to discover that children learned about me in books. It gave me a chuckle to think they would never know the story's truths and falsehoods. Once upon a time it gave me the cover I needed to go into hiding, to escape the world. I was content to be transformed into a silly parable for young minds.

The amusement died after a century or so, once my mother died and I had no company. Who the hell were humans to deny my existence? My anger was eating me up. I would have come out of hiding even if an apocalypse had not overthrown the world. My coming forward might have caused an apocalypse for all I know. In some sense, perhaps it is better this way. Human fear of me is counterbalanced by human need of me.

"Billy—"

"Are they all real, Ginge?"

"What do you mean?"

"The fairy tales. Did Cinderella once put on a glass slipper? Did the Little Mermaid come out of the sea? Did an emperor once wear his new clothes?"



“They’re stories, Billy.”

“So were you!”

“I’m different.”

“I used to be so terrified for Hansel and Gretel. You said your mother was a witch.”

“Yes.”

“Did she make a house of gingerbread, the way she made you? Did she lure children to her oven?”

“You sound almost hopeful, Billy.”

His eyes sparkle. “The saddest day of my life was when I went to school and was mocked for believing fairy tales. I was worse than the rubes that fell for the Easter Bunny and Santa. I went home and cried and I ate. Do you want to know what I ate, Ginge? I bet you’ll never guess.”

I can and I do. As soon as I say it, Billy throws his bulk down onto his knees and clasps his hands, beseeching my forgiveness. Though he towers over my little body, his supplication makes him seem very small. I stare at him fascinated, imagining him as a blond and blue-eyed boy like Hansel, fattening himself on gingerbread men, biting off replicas of my head to spite the fact that he had ever believed I or Cinderella or Snow White ever existed.

Billy begins to sob and blubber apologies. He speaks in such a broken way, every syllable like the speck of a cookie that crumbles at the lips and gives the tongue, the palate no satisfaction.

“If you exist, then all of those other stories must be true. There must be something to them. I was right to believe.”

“Believe whatever you want to, Billy. Why not? It’s the end of the world.”

He shakes his head. “Not with you here. You’re eternal, aren’t you? You can’t die.”

The concept of death is unsettling even as a hypothetical. I know I cannot go out the way I do in the story. If someone tried to eat me, they’d just break their teeth. Thank you, mommy magic. But am I truly invulnerable? Immortal? The notion is less appealing in a world populated by Doughboys and decay.

Billy adds, in a whisper: “If you can’t die, I can’t die.”

He looks up. His eyes are glittery again, his stare fixed on the mountains.

“That’s a very unsound notion, Billy.”

“You’re a fairy tale. I’m a fairy tale. Fairy tales are true. They don’t die.”

“Billy, are you with me?”

His gaze strays to the sky. “I can run. I can run fast.”

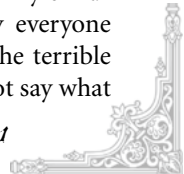
He most certainly cannot.

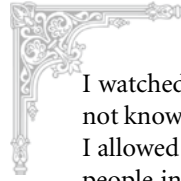
He shouts out and the hills ring with the familiar, mocking ditty:

Run, run just as fast as you can!

You can’t catch me, I’m the Gingerbread Man.

I scowl at this even if my expression never changes. I think of my childhood arrogance, the horrible ways I taunted people. The story everyone knows about me is wrong in so many ways. It does not record the terrible things I did, abetted by my size and stealth and strength. It does not say what





I watched men and women do when they believed they had privacy; it does not know the mischief I caused farmers in the middle of the night. Sometimes I allowed myself to be caught, as it were: to be seen. I frightened and angered people into chasing me. Sometimes I would act crippled. I'd slow down just enough to think they'd caught me. Then I would sing out my goading little couplet and haul ass.

I came up with the story about being eaten by a fox out of guilt for my misdeeds. I came to think that I deserved such a fate.

I'm lost in memory when the Doughboys come, as of course they would, drawn by Billy's cry. They swarm us and cut off all escape routes. For the first time, I experience fear. Not for myself, but for Billy. It is remarkable in its beauty and tragedy to care for someone else. I have always thought it must be. The essence of my unwritten story is the desire to love and to create through love, to not be alone. The story everyone knows is nothing but a tale of crude consumption, creation for the sake of an appetite that is thwarted and delayed at every turn until the end, when an animal gets to represent all of humanity. If mankind has ever had absolute faith in anything, it is the certainty of implacable hunger. The stomach, not the brain, is their tyrant. What surprise is it that such a world would give rise to Doughboys?

"Come get me!" Billy says, waving his arms. "They'll never catch us, will they, Ginge? They can't catch us, we're the Gingerbread Men!"

A Doughboy has gotten very close to Billy. I summon my strength and leap, twisting my body faster and faster. Soon I am like a drill-bit in the air and hard as a diamond. I penetrate the Doughboy's skull and come out the other end in seconds, dropping him. I land on the ground and shake off gray matter. I climb onto the bluff of Billy's stomach and tug at my holster.

"Time to get moving."

"Why, Ginge? You can take them all down. We can."

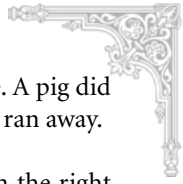
"Not this many, Billy."

He lurches up, throwing me to the ground. Billy has a firearm but only the most basic of training. Colonel Monroe probably gave it to him assuming he'd kill himself in a situation like this. But Billy is firing at the Doughboys, and the perishing gap between them leaves little possibility for missing. He goes six-for-six and keeps firing despite the pathetic click confirming empty chambers. He doesn't seem to realize he's spent. The Doughboys come on, eager for his flesh, their faces ghastly white and puffy, their sagging white stomachs like something left to bake in a cold oven. Billy squeezes the trigger again and again, showing no sign of panic.

Suddenly he tosses the gun and turns.

"That's right! Chase me! Run, run, just as fast—"

He clutches his chest and drops, wheezing. This cannot be happening. I leap and spin, leap and spin, destroying Doughboys left and right. But they keep coming. They get past me and drop to their knees on either side of Billy's body. They drop their heads like monks in some kind of prayer. No, more like



pigs crowding around a trough. The fairy tale is right on one score. A pig did try to eat me, and I, being very young and terrified of the creature, ran away.

Pigs disgust me to this day.

I drill through the Doughboys on Billy's left, but the ones on the right have begun their ravenous work. Billy screams even though he has no breath. Unable to save him, it would be nice to think he's at least past feeling pain. Hearing his flesh tear, I stumble back and turn away. My one consistent nightmare has always been about a creature comes along with teeth that can penetrate me, break me, crumble me.

It is impossible to look at Billy and not see myself.

More Doughboys come. I kill some out of vengeance, knowing it is too late, too futile. Billy is laughing now, weak at first, and then louder as I break out of the skull of the Doughboy nearest his head and land right beside his right ear.

"Look at me, Ginge. I'm like you, at the end."

"No, Billy."

"When the . . . fox . . ."

"No, Billy!"

Something is wrong with my eyes.

Billy looks down and cackles at the sight of his denuded leg bones. "I'm quarter gone!"

I look at the sky. It's not even close to night, and all I find is darkness. It's not cloudy, and my face feels rain.

"Look, Ginge! Now I'm half gone!"

I cannot even glance at Billy. Something is very wrong with my eyes.

"Ginge," Billy says, but the chewing and grunting noises of the Doughboys almost drown him out.

"Ginge, I'm three-quarters gone!"

I'm crying. I've never cried before. I never thought I could. I don't know what this means.

Yes, I do. The mind's an oven too. Certain images, certain feelings bake in them a long time. Some things cook in there forever and never get done.

I turn and sprint off to warn Colonel Monroe and his troops. I'm just as fast as I've always been.

But I've finally found something I cannot outrun.





# The Seven Ravens

By Celeste Hall

*Based on The Seven Ravens*

Jana cried out in pain as jagged teeth sank into her shoulder.

Instantly her father swung his metal baseball bat around to strike the zombie between the eyes. The force of the blow sent the creature's head upward and back at such an angle the jaw was forced to open.

Jana spun around the moment she was freed from its grasp, her little knife raised for attack. Such a short blade made a poor weapon against the undead, it was all she had.

Zombies were little more than walking corpses, mindlessly drawn to feed upon anything that moved. Yet they were incredibly strong and nearly impossible to kill. The only way to be sure was to annihilate their brain.

The duo had killed their fair share of zombies in the past. Of course they had limited themselves to loners or very small groups, nothing like the undead army surrounding them. Their team was in serious trouble, and not simply because Jana was bitten.

If she and her father could not find a break in the horde, they would both be shredded into bite size pieces. And with this many mouths to feed, there wouldn't be enough of their bodies left for the virus to reanimate.

The sudden, repetitive shock of gunfire snapped the pair of them around. A group of men in black fatigues and t-shirts were jogging down the eastern hillside. All of them carried assault rifles, which they put to good use on the shuffling swarm.

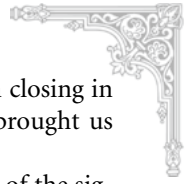
"This way, hurry!"

Father and daughter moved as one, scrambling over the path of fallen corpses. Skeletal hands reached out for Jana, snagging her jeans. She nearly went down before one of the black clad men could catch her, half dragging her up the hill.

A constant spray of bullets ripped through the horde behind her.

By the time Jana was allowed to stop and catch her breath, she looked back to see nothing but a heap of rotting bodies.

"My name is Stefan," her rescuer spoke up. "We are Ravens. We can protect you." His sky blue gaze was momentarily captured by the ring she wore on her left hand.



“A pretty trinket from happier times,” he mused. “With death closing in around us, we sometimes forget the beautiful things that once brought us comfort. Husbands, children...”

Jana blushed beneath the searching focus of those eyes, aware of the significance a ring on this particular finger once held.

“I was never married or engaged,” she murmured. “This ring belonged to my mother. It’s all I have left to remember her by.”

“Jana!”

Her father’s face was ghastly white as he hurried to her side.

“Let me see your shoulder. Did it break the skin?”

Jana winced as she heard Stefan hiss.

“She was bitten?”

The old man tore the rip in Jana’s shirt wider, revealing a double row of punctures.

Every Raven cursed. They would now be forced to destroy a helpless woman.

Jana’s father quickly shook his head.

“No! No, you don’t understand!” the old man exclaimed. “I was one of the scientists that created the original compound, the source of this virus...”

His admission drew every gun in the circle.

“Please, listen to me,” he begged. “It was supposed to be an enhancement drug for soldiers. Like you.” The admission won him no friends.

“Our experiments were flawless. The drug will work, I swear it. So long as the patients receive all four of the chemical components. The zombie condition occurs in victims who die before they receive the subsequent injections. My daughter still lives. We need only to give her the final three elixirs.”

“Where would we find such elixirs?” Stefan asked from just behind Jana. The unexpected proximity made her uneasy. Was the Raven maneuvering to slip a blade through her brain while her father was preoccupied?

“If I tell you, will you let the girl live?” the scientist pleaded. “Will you bring back the syringes I need to cure her?”

“That would depend on where the vaccine is,” a second Raven answered. “If it actually exists.”

A father’s hope and love required him to give the directions, but the old man again petitioned for mercy.

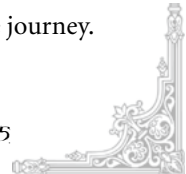
It was Stefan that acquiesced.

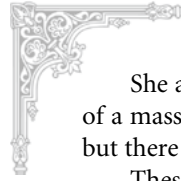
“I will take a small group of volunteers to search for your vaccine. If we find it, I will bring enough back for the girl. Brothers, which of you will join me?”

A few dark clad warriors stepped forward. With their blue eyed leader, that made Seven Ravens willing to accept such a mission.

“We will radio back every six hours, on the hour,” Stefan informed the remaining men.

There was no time for Jana to wish her potential saviors a safe journey.





She and her father were herded over the next hill, and through the gates of a massive cement fortress. They were each given a barren room and a cot, but there were no locks on the doors.

These Ravens obviously felt that an old man and a young woman posed very little threat, which was how Jana's father happened to be standing near the lookout tower at dusk, and heard the Ravens talking. Too many hours had passed, and the Brotherhood of Seven had failed to make radio contact.

Dear Lord! The old man knew the Seven Ravens were Jana's only chance. If they were lost or fallen, his precious daughter would die. He would lose everything and everyone that he loved.

Pain and rage overwhelmed him.

In his grief he looked to the direction the Brotherhood had taken.

"I curse you! I wish you all damned to the very carrion birds you were named for!"



That very moment, seven enormous black ravens took flight over his head.

There were shouts of alarm from the wall. Fear that the birds were drawn by the stench of death and decay, winged harbingers of approaching zombie hordes.

Amidst that chaos, the old man slipped away. Overcome by such a grim vision. Seven colossal ravens, flying overhead the very moment he cursed the Brotherhood. It could only foretell disaster.

Jana rushed up to discover the cause for such shouting. But the old man caught her, pulling her back into the relative safety of their rooms.

"Father, what's wrong?"

"The Seven are lost," he admitted. "But I won't let them hurt you, Jana. I won't let them hurt you!"

Even as he embraced her, weeping reassurances, the girl knew what she must do.

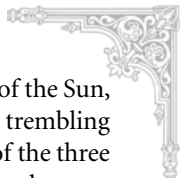
If the Ravens did not kill her first, the virus would take her. When it did, she might be the cause of her own dear father's destruction.

Jana waited until the darkest hours after midnight; then packed a small knapsack with only a loaf of bread, a canteen of water, and her little knife for protection. Nobody noticed as she slipped out over the walls of the fortress.

By noon on the first day, Jana found herself in the blistering wasteland just outside the Sun City laboratory.

The stench of sweltering death was a caustic thing that clawed at her senses. Every scorched street paved with seared and smoldering corpses. This once great city was now an infernal oven for the damned.

A fiery blast of trapped heat enveloped her, as Jana opened the doors of the Sun laboratory. Sweat pricked at her flesh and trickled down to burn her eyes, making it difficult to see the devouring hordes that filled every room. But the fetid reek of charred bodies masked her stealthy passage.



The precious vials containing her cure were stored in the heart of the Sun, Jana found it difficult to press the needle to her feverish skin. Her trembling hands were slippery with sweat. At last she succeeded with the first of the three injections she needed, carefully stowing another seven syringes in her bag.

Jana left the blazing ruins of Sun behind, heading next for the Silver Moon lab.



It was midnight as she reached the edges of Moon City.

The moment she stepped foot within the pallid glow of buildings, an arctic wind awakened. It was a piercing and malicious thing. Shivery talons raked through her body, chilling to the bone. But the glacial bite of night had frozen the exposed flesh of her enemies, making the zombies slow and easy to out run.

In the heart of the Moon, Jana injected the second elixir she needed. Adding seven more syringes to her bag.

She was just closing the mouth of her knapsack, when a monstrous zombie rose up from within the frigid chamber behind her. Crystalline flesh as white as the lab coat it wore. Frost encrusted eyes locking on Jana with a keening hunger that sent fear skittering along her spine.

Jana raced from the icebound horrors of Moon.

There was only the Endless Stars ahead of her, the location storing her final treatment. Yet the Sun and Moon labs had been so horrible, could she survive the largest city of them all?

Throughout the next day, as she trudged towards her destination, Jana feared what sort of reception she might find in the Stars.

At noon, when the sun was high above her, Jana found a bit of shade beneath an oak to nap. It was a dangerous venture for a human traveling alone. She would be helplessly unaware of a zombie's approach. But Jana was exhausted from her journey, and knew that the worst might yet be ahead.

She dreamed of Stefan's bright blue eyes, and of his willingness to place his life in danger to save her.

The rasping cry of a raven startled her awake. Seven of the monstrous birds perched in the branches above her. Seven pairs of beady black eyes peered down with interest.

"I'm not dead yet," she growled, sitting up.

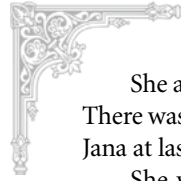
The ravens scattered to the wind, cawing and cackling their reproach.

Jana scanned the wilderness around her, but the retreating birds were the only sign of life.

From the length of the shadows on the ground, she must have slept for several hours. Yet it felt like minutes. Her body pleaded for more time, but Jana knew it wouldn't be wise. Ravens followed the undead. She might not see them yet, but there must be zombies nearby.







She ate the last few bites of bread, and drank the last few swallows of water. There was no going back for more. She could only journey on. It was dark when Jana at last confronted the Endless Stars laboratory.

She was ragged and bleeding from at least a dozen cuts and abrasions, all received during the last few hours of battle. The streets were infested by zombies. It was worse than expected. Even now they were coming for her. A shuffling promenade formed by hundreds and thousands of undead.

Jana lifted her chin with determination, and raced into the Stars.

She had only gone a short way into the building, when several white robed figures stepped out to greet her.

“Gracious child, you’re bleeding,” an elderly woman murmured. “Please, come in and wash yourself. We have a lovely dinner set, and would be honored to have you as our guest.”

The Stars showed her to a chamber where she bathed in hot soapy water, scrubbing away the blood and grime of her journey. Her clothes were washed and mended. A delicious meal was shared. And after Jana expressed her weariness, she was shown to a private bedroom with a large comfortable bed.

Again she dreamed of Stefan, of the warmth of his touch on her arm. As brief as it was, it was the most meaningful moment she’d had in months.

A soft knock on the door awakened her at dawn.

“Child, are you there? Doctor Morningstar would like to speak with you.”

Jana hurried to dress and followed the elderly woman down into the inner chambers of the laboratory. All of the Stars were gathered in a great room that had a circular glass table at its heart.

Numerous graphs and sheets of research covered the surface of the table.

There were chairs for each of the Stars to sit and discuss their plans, but they made no effort to do so now. Instead, they turned to their leader, as Morningstar explained his reason for summoning Jana.

“We know you are infected,” the aging scientist disclosed. “As you are probably aware, the virus will take over your body and turn you into a zombie. However, there is a cure.”

“Yes,” Jana agreed. “I know. My father was one of the men who created the first elixir. I was bitten, but I have already been to the Sun and the Moon. Your compound is the last that I need to survive.”

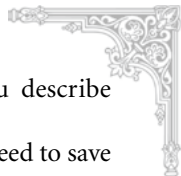
This brought quite a few surprised looks from the Stars.

“Did you have help on your journey? Those cities are overrun by the undead. It was a miracle that you were even capable of reaching us!”

“A Brotherhood of Seven Ravens was sent before me,” Jana admitted. “Warriors with guns, dressed all in black. But they were lost. I knew that if I did not attempt the journey myself, I might risk the life of my father. So here I am.”

“Seven Ravens you say? Dressed all in black? I believe those very men are trapped within a glass tower at the center of this city. We are only Stars or we might have attempted to free them.”

“Are you certain?” Jana asked, feeling hope swell up in her chest. “Seven of them, all dressed in black?”



“Yes, child,” Morningstar smiled. “They are exactly as you describe them.”

“I must go to them at once! But first, may I have the elixirs I need to save myself and the Brotherhood?”

Morningstar motioned for his companions to collect the required number of syringes. Then he returned his gaze to Jana.

“The tower is surrounded by zombies. With the fusion of all four elixirs in your body, you might be the only chance those men have for escape. But you will require a unique key to get in. Follow me.”

Morningstar led her to the kitchens, where he rummaged through the remains of their dinner from the night before. At last he found the cleaned drumstick of a chicken. Using a sharp knife, he whittled one end into a blunted point.

“Keep it safe,” he warned, offering Jana the ivory key. “It will open a door on the eastern side of the building, nearest this lab. Come to the window. See there? That is the glass tower where your Brotherhood is trapped. Are you certain you want to accept such a mission?”

“Yes,” Jana assured him, carefully wrapping the drumstick in a cloth napkin, and tucking it into her pocket.

The remainder of Stars had returned. Bringing her the final treatment she needed, and seven to spare for the Ravens. They all watched as the elixir was emptied into her vein, hope shining brightly in their eyes.

“If you live through this adventure, spread the word to other survivors,” Morningstar urged. “Perhaps more of them can be given immunity. It might be the last hope for mankind.”

“I will,” Jana promised.

“Hurry now, you will want to leave before the city grows dark. The creatures grow restless at night, and are hidden by shadows.”

The moment she left the Stars, a horde of undead gave chase. But Jana was determined to reach her destination, fighting and slashing her way through their vile ranks.

With malodorous swarms closing in from every side, she reached the eastern door of the enormous glass skyscraper, and found it securely shut.

Yet at shoulder height, on the right side of the entrance, was a narrow cavity. A hole left behind after a button was hewn off by a particularly hungry zombie. It was just large enough for the whittled piece of drumstick, yet when she searched her pocket for the cloth, the key was gone.

There was no escape for her now. The swarm was almost upon her. There were no sticks or other objects to jam into that hole, and no path for her to escape back to the Stars for another bone.

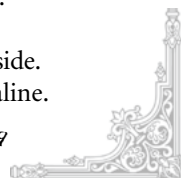
In the last precious seconds she had, Jana used her little knife on herself.

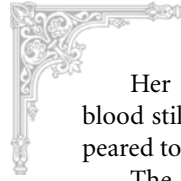
Gasping at the sharp spasm of pain, she cut off the smallest finger on her left hand, stripping the flesh so it would fit into the narrow crevice.

The door clicked open.

She leaped inside before it could close, locking the zombies outside.

Just inside the door, she stood, panting with agony and adrenaline.





Her gaze dropped to the raw stump she had made. Crimson tears of blood still wept from the wound, yet she was stunned by how quickly it appeared to be healing. Already the searing hurt was fading.

The last injection she'd taken had completed the series. Her body was mutating, evolving, regenerating. She was becoming the super-human soldier that science had hoped to create, but instead destroyed the world.

Awe soothed the erratic pounding of her heart. With new hope, she started down the corridor before her.

She had scarcely gone far before a little man stepped out to confront her. A shock of white hair stood up from his head, and his eyes held the glimmer of madness.

“Girl, what are you looking for?”

“I am looking for the Brotherhood of Seven Ravens.”

“The lord Ravens are not at home, but if you can wait here until they come, step in.”

Jana was confused. The Stars had been certain the Brotherhood were trapped. So who was this aberrant fellow, and where could the Ravens have gone?

The dwarf led her into a banquet room, where a table was set with seven chairs around it. As she watched, the little man brought in food and drink to fill each of the seven plates and seven glasses.

He muttered nonsensically as he worked, occasionally offering a few notes of some forgotten song. And when the table was set and readied, the dwarf vanished back out the way he had come, leaving Jana quite alone.

She almost went after the little fellow, but hesitated.

Even if he led her to the seven black clad men the Stars had promised her, they may not be the seven men she sought. They might be seven strangers, as mad as the dwarf that served them.

It would be wiser to hide and wait for them here, where she might secretly study their demeanors. If the men proved to be dangerous, she would run back out of the tower, and take her chances with the undead.

Jana's stomach offered a plaintive noise as she gazed at the aromatic meal set out before her. But there were only seven places around the table. The little man hadn't bothered to offer a plate or cup for her.

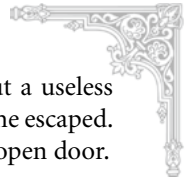
She glanced at the doorway. But there was only empty silence beyond.

If this meal was truly intended for the Brotherhood, they would not begrudge her a small portion. And if the food were meant for someone else, she might need her strength for escape.

Jana silently stepped around the table, eating a little morsel from each plate, and taking a little sip from each cup. While sipping from the last cup, she had a clever idea for discovering the identity of these men.

She slid her mother's ring from her finger and dropped it inside the vessel.

If these were the Brotherhood of Seven, then Stefan was their leader. He had commented upon her ring. He would recognize it and know that she had come for them.



But if these were strangers, the trinket would be nothing but a useless bauble. They would cast it aside, and Jana would reclaim it before she escaped.

A sudden whirring of sound had the girl ducking behind the open door. Deep male voices approached from the corridor.

As they entered the room, not one of the men cast eyes about in search of her. The little man had not yet warned them of her presence. And Jana was glad for that, because these men hardly resembled the lost Brotherhood.

Tatters of black cloth hung from their bodies like ragged wings, disguising figures beneath. Every face so streaked with grime it was rendered unrecognizable.

“We can’t go back,” one of the foul shrouded figures growled, loudly enough for Jana to understand. “We’re no better than those mewling zombies clawing at the walls outside.”

“If we can get to the next city...” another started, but a third voice quickly cut him off.

“That is tommyrot and nonsense! The story we were told was a lie!”

“We cannot be sure unless...”

“Shut up!” A fourth voice bellowed, gesturing to the table in front of him. “Look. Someone has been eating off my plate.”

Every eye in the room was now focused on the table.

“Someone ate off all of our plates.”

“They drank out of my cup as well.”

“They drank out of all our cups.”

Jana watched as one of them reached for the cup where she’d hidden her ring. He lifted the vessel, looked inside, and then reached for the little piece of jewelry it contained.

“Look. I found a ring.” They all looked to study the delicate trinket, and one of them gasped.

“That ring belongs to the girl we came here to save. It was her mother’s ring. She would never let it out of her sight.”

Upon hearing those words, Jana knew at once that these were the Seven Ravens. She stepped out from behind the door, smiling beatifically at the man who had recognized her keepsake. Watching as his sky blue eyes widened in surprise.

“Jana! By all that is still good in this world...how did you find us?”

“The Stars sent me here to rescue you. They told me you were trapped.”

A Raven near the head of the table shook his head.

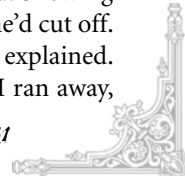
“They were right. You shouldn’t have come. We are all infected. We can’t go back.”

“Yes, you can. Look.”

Yanking off her knapsack, Jana dumped its burden of syringes out onto the table.

The Ravens still looked confused, so she held out her left hand. Showing each of them the healthy skin growing back to replace the finger she’d cut off.

“The vaccine works, just like my father claimed it would,” she explained. “After the seven of you vanished, the fortress wasn’t safe for me. I ran away,



going to each of the three labs for the needed components. Each time storing seven syringes, just in case I found you. There is enough here for each of you.”

Abruptly Stefan laughed.

“We are Ravens. All of us heavily armed warriors. Yet along comes this beautiful and brave little woman, to rescue us. Whatever shall we tell her father?”

There ensued a boisterous round of merry bedevilment over their situation, yet each man was quick to accept his allotted vaccines.

Jana waited for Stefan to inject his final dose before speaking.

“How soon can we go back? I miss my father. I want him to know that I’m alright.”

“There’s only one more thing I must do,” Stefan admitted.

“Will it take long?”

“You tell me,” he laughed, and snatched her up for a kiss.





# *The Undead Rose*

By Christopher Peruzzi

*Based on Sleeping Beauty*

Once upon a time in a castle by the sea, a young king and queen dreamed of having a beautiful daughter. Each day the queen would walk into the courtyard garden and make a wish for her dream child. She would wish the child as beautiful as the morning dawn with hair as yellow as the sun, eyes as blue as the sky on a cloudless day, and lips as red as the reddest roses that grew in her garden. With that wish she would plant a new rose with a drop of blood from a pricked finger. Roses grew throughout the castle court yard, clinging to the walls and climbing up the stone tower. And each spring, the kingdom filled with the intoxicating aroma of the queen's roses.

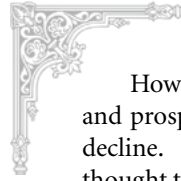
One warm summer evening, the queen awoke. She looked up at the night sky and was bathed in the full Buck Moon's light. This was the moon when a buck's new antlers pushed out of their foreheads in coatings of velvety fur. She listened and heard summer fairies whisper to her. They said, "Your majesty, we have heard your plea. We love you and the roses you have given us. Now, we will give you your baby. Your child will be the most beautiful girl in all the land. Expect her when the roses bloom at spring's first full Pink Moon."

The queen was overjoyed and told the king the good news. The summer months passed. Autumn took the green, and winter killed it. When the spring's first full Pink Moon came, the queen gave birth to a beautiful daughter. In gratitude to the fairies, the king and queen named their daughter "Rose." And with that birth, the land bloomed with fresh green grass and new flowers that sang with beauty. The king sent news throughout the land, proclaiming the day a holiday and a day of celebration.

The fairies of spring and summer arrived first. Each came with gifts of beauty, virtue, grace, and love. After the fairies gave their gifts, they danced joyfully around the cradle.

"She will love with all her heart and her first love will give her his heart," the spring fairies sang.

The summer fairies then gave her wisdom, kindness, and practicality. "She will be wise, intelligent, and always know what to do." Then the fairies laughed, sang, and danced along with their spring cousins.



However, there were dark fairies who did not want the kingdom to thrive and prosper. The fairies of fall and winter grew strong on death and man's decline. They saw Rose's gifts and scowled with anger and jealousy. They thought the young fairies were foolish to give such gifts of goodness and light. Humanity should know pain, suffering, sadness, and death. Death fed life. Life fed death. How else could the world make room for more living?

Each season the dark fairies watched the queen's roses bloom. Each year when the autumn fairies danced their dance of sickness and death, they turned the roses black and wilted them until the spring fairies danced their dance of life to regrow them.

Now things were out of balance.

"Gifts? I shall give the princess a gift." Griselda, the dark winter fairy, spat from a shadow. "On her twenty-first birthday she will prick her hand on a black rose. I will see her become as cold as ice. Her heart will freeze as still as death." With that, the dark winter fairy cast a frost curse on the garden roses.

"Is that all, dear sister?" Obexia, the dark fairy of famine and gluttony, scoffed. "I will give her endless hunger for anything that breathes. She will feast like a ghoulish cannibal on the still living flesh of those she loves. With every bite, she will want more." Obexia cursed the roses in a foul bile green spell.

Her sister, the dark fairy of sickness and contagion, Infectia, wheezed. "I, too, will give her a gift. I will give her disease and contagion. She will spread our gifts to all she bites or scratches. Each scratch will burn with fire and acid, bringing death without rest. It will spread quickly throughout the kingdom." Infectia cursed the roses with a fever burning red-orange spell.

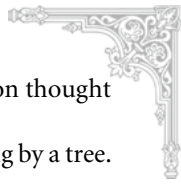
Mortia, the eldest and darkest of the fairies, glared at the child with pure hatred. For all that child was, Mortia was not. As the dark fairy of death and dying, the fairies laughter irritated her. Her laugh was low, sharp, and full of malice as she proclaimed, "I won't kill this child; I'll make her a mockery of life. She'll know death yet walk. I will see that she rots and decays with the stink of an open grave."

She drew her claw-like fingers and a black curse born of a morgue erupted from her nails, striking each of the queen's blood roses. Pleased with her work, Mortia smiled then raised a black cloak of shadow which enveloped all the dark fairies as they disappeared.

• • •

Each year Rose grew more beautiful. Her hair flowed like the sun's golden rays. She spent her days outside breathing fresh clean air and growing strong. Each morning, she'd wake with the bluebird's song. Each afternoon she'd run with the deer in the meadow and laugh with the woodland creatures. And each night she'd fall asleep to the crickets' serenade.

When the winter season came she'd spend hours reading in the royal library, learning all she could. She read as much about the kingdom's historic battles as she did about medicine and horticulture. The princess studied vo-



raciously and everything she read she remembered. Her father soon thought she'd make a wise ruler and wonderful queen.

One day, Rose was playing in the field when she saw a boy crying by a tree. "Why are you crying?" She asked.

"My brothers were playing 'War' with their wooden swords and they said I couldn't play because I'm too stupid and weak."

"What is your name, boy?"

"Thomas."

"Well Thomas, I think they're wrong. Anyone who knows anything about war knows you have to learn to think first. You have to know your enemy."

"That's not what they do," Thomas sniffed. "They just run around and hit people with their swords."

"Would you like to play with me instead? We'll play War the right way."

"But, you're a girl. What do you know about fighting?"

"More than your brothers, I'll bet." Rose smiled. "We'll go to the castle library and I'll show you how battles are won."

"We can't go there. That's where the king lives."

"That's where I live, too. You can come with me. I promise it will be all right."

"You live there, too? Are you the princess?" Thomas asked cautiously.

"I'm your friend. My name is Rose."

She took him to the castle. They walked along the courtyard, through the large doors that led to the library. Thomas listened intently as Rose told him stories about the kingdom's old wars and campaigns. Each was a new adventure. She stressed that every successful battle was due to a properly executed plan based on intelligence and forethought.

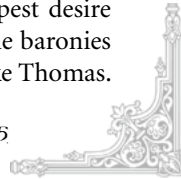
"You must always know your enemy, Thomas." Rose instructed. "Acting rashly without intelligence will get you killed every time. If you think – use your head – and use whatever's at hand with enough skill, more times than not, you will win."

That summer she and Thomas spent every day together. Rose would tell Thomas stories of historic battles. On sunny days they'd go out to the field through a secret passageway in the castle. They'd play and Rose would teach Thomas about the swordplay lessons she'd read. Then they'd take sticks from the field and practice them.

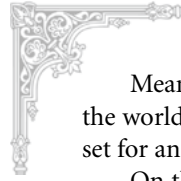
She and Thomas sometimes would play in the library with toy soldiers made when Roses' great, great, grandfather was a boy. Rose would instruct Thomas after she outflanked his army, "Never go into a battle without having a way out of it."

Thomas learned quickly and the two became the best of friends.

As she grew older, Rose traveled to other kingdoms. The king expected her to assume more royal responsibilities. It was the king's deepest desire that his daughter find a proper companion of equal breeding. The baronies introduced Rose to many suitors, but no one could fill her heart like Thomas.







Meanwhile, Thomas was sent away with his brothers to learn the ways of the world. His family had a responsibility to the kingdom and Thomas was set for an apprenticeship.

On the day before her twenty-first birthday, Rose returned to the castle. The winter's cold was just starting to fade as the spring sun warmed the land. She was tired of traveling and longed for the simplicity of her mother's garden. The suitors she'd met were arrogant and pompous fools. Although she was kind and virtuous, the suitors saw Rose as nothing but a princess and a way to the throne. She would have none of them.

This was the time of year her mother, the queen, would prepare the garden for the new spring flowers. Rose looked forward to helping her plant the seeds and clearing the dry dead plants. She loved working the earth with her hands. There was something honest about gardening. It made her feel better. The problem was that the king would not allow Rose to play around in the dirt much longer. It was unbecoming of a princess. Gardening was servant's work.

The next morning, she began at the wilted dead section of the rose garden. She saw that a few of the buds showed new life, but most of them did not survive February's frost. She snapped a brittle brown stem and tossed it into her basket. Then she threw some of the old leaves and petals with it. In the corner of the garden was a large black rose. The princess had never seen anything like it. While it looked dead, it had not wilted. Also, unlike all of the other roses that bloomed, it reeked with a foul odor.

"This rose must be dead," Rose said. "My mother would never allow anything this rotten in her garden." The princess took her knife and reached for the rose. When her bare hand touched the stem, a thorn shot from it, stabbing the princess through her thumb.

The princess fell to the ground and lay still.

A young guard had seen the princess fall and rushed to help her. Rose was brought to her chambers. Despite the efforts of the best healers and physicians in the land, the princess would not stir. Each of the healers had seen her cold gray skin and knew her frozen heart would never beat again.

The kingdom had lost their precious Rose.

The grieving king could not bring himself to bury his beautiful daughter. Instead, he had her placed in the royal crypt, in a transparent coffin made of crystal. It was cool and preserved the princesses' body from death's touch. There her cold body lay as still as a sculpture.

A month later as the Full Flower moon rose and its light illuminated Rose's dead skin, the spring fairies wept around her coffin. This was not what they wanted. She was life, and death should not have claimed her.

When the last of the fairies left, the princess slowly opened her lifeless blue eyes.

• • •



The next morning five of the night guards were found dead at their posts. Three more with scratches on their necks were taken ill with fever. Later that day, the sick guards died. Each of the bodies brought to the crypt.

As a result of the killings, the king doubled the guard around the castle and locked the gates to outsiders. Surely, if there were intruders or spies within the kingdom, they would be found. And if there were a plague spreading, he wanted the castle safe from carriers.

The next morning more guards were found dead and more guards had taken ill. Each of the sick guards babbled incoherently as the fever took them.

“The dead rose,” a sick guard muttered.

That night the king tripled his guard. The castle was obviously under attack by an assassin; one who worked quietly and poisoned his victims. This time each of the guards would need to be on high alert.

But no matter how many guards the king assigned, more and more were killed or struck dead of fever. By the end of the second week, the dead filled so much of the crypt, the king feared he would have no guards.

That day, the king sent word to his army and ordered his three bravest knights back to the castle.

The king, with the last of his guards, sealed the palace. He locked the gates to the kingdom so that no man could pass. Palace sentries were now stationed on the roof.

It was well past midnight when the first guard heard the moans. The moans grew louder, yet there was no one outside the palace walls. The invaders were on the castle grounds. One of the sentries heard a louder noise, but this came from the courtyard. Turning his attention to the garden, he saw a shambling figure move toward the gate. The figure staggered toward the black roses.

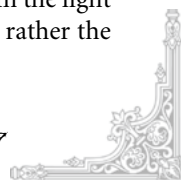
This figure was joined by a mass of others. Each moaned walking with the same stilted shuffling as they wandered around the courtyard.

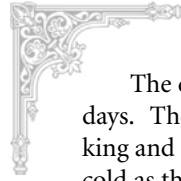
The sentry saw dozens of these figures lumber out. They came from the crypt. He grabbed a crossbow and shot one of the figures through the chest. The arrow stuck proudly out of the target’s sternum and the figure continued if nothing had happened at all. This was sorcery. No man could survive an arrow to the chest and live.

The sentry called for the captain of the guard. The captain saw the mob of shuffling figures within the garden and ran to see the king.

The king and queen were asleep when they heard hands slapping and scratching at their chamber door. Angered at the intrusion, the king threw open the door and was greeted with a cold gray claw to his face. The hulking creature lurched forward, sinking his teeth into the king’s shoulder and then took the queen as its next meal.

When the sun rose the next day, the creatures were still there. In the light of day, an observer would note they were not foreign invaders but rather the king’s fallen guards.





The dead guards moaned and wandered within the castle for three more days. The weather grew warmer, making the dead rot and fester. The dead king and dead queen hobbled along the halls of their dead kingdom – each as cold as the stones beneath their feet. They were un-dead – neither living nor dead. They did not think. They did not feel. They were only driven by an all-consuming hunger for living flesh. Each of these undead creatures lumbered without purpose throughout the palace grounds, stumbling along or stopping only for the stray squirrel or bird landing near them. Those poor animals were ripped to pieces and then eaten.

When the three knights arrived, they saw the horde of stinking undead, and entered the castle through a secret passage. The knights, who were three brothers, had fought many campaigns together for the outer baronies. Each was talented in his own way. The oldest knight was the strongest and could cut anything with his sword. The second knight was the fastest and could out maneuver any arrow. And the youngest knight, while not being the strongest or the fastest, had won battles through his intelligence and patience.

They found a safe stronghold and waited until nightfall.

The oldest knight said, “I will cut these things apart with my mighty sword. They shall be vanquished by the morning.” The two younger brothers tried to advise him, but the mighty knight’s mind was set to rush impetuously forward and slay the creatures.

The mighty knight lowered a rope and climbed down to the courtyard. Immediately, he drew his sword and stabbed the first undead guard he saw. Nothing happened. Then the knight swung his sword and cut the undead guard’s abdomen open, spilling its entrails out onto the ground. Again, the thing was unfazed. Then the mighty knight took his sword and cut off the guard’s arm. And while the guard’s arm fell dead to the ground, the guard continued to approach him.

Finally, the knight cut off its head. The gray head continued to snap its teeth; however its body toppled to the ground, lying still.

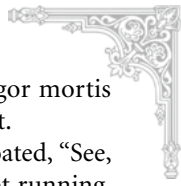
The oldest knight exclaimed, “That’s how you do it! Cut off the head!” The knight cut off three more of the undead monstrosities’ heads and made his way to the tower. Now, the mighty knight’s arms began to tire. He stopped momentarily, lowering his sword to rest, and did not see one of the things behind him. The creature bit into his neck above his armor line.

The mighty knight fell dead and a group of undead feasted on his body.

The second knight said, “I am faster than any of these creatures. I saw how our older brother killed these things. If I can stab them through the eye quickly, they may perish as well.”

The youngest brother tried to stop his older sibling. He asked him to be patient so they could come up with a plan.

The second knight would hear none of it for he was mad with vengeance. He climbed down the rope toward the undead horde then ran from one creature to the next, stabbing them through the eyes with his sword.



Each of the undead was dispatched. The creatures stiff from rigor mortis could not move with enough dexterity to catch the second knight.

The second knight looked up to his younger brother and gloated, "See, little brother, I am too swift for these things." As the brother kept running, darting around the undead, he tripped over one of the heads his older brother had severed and fell to the ground. The horde fell upon him.

The youngest knight cried for the loss of his brothers.

"If they had only listened," he said to himself. "You always need a plan."

The youngest knight observed his brothers and watched how the undead behaved. The creatures were easily distracted. A quick strike to the head would finish them. The young knight reasoned that if they were immobilized and bound together, they could be taken easily.

He snuck to the fishmonger's quarters – careful to not attract any of the creatures. He took several fishing nets and sewed them together. Then he quietly stole to the stables and took a small lamb, covering its mouth with his hand to ensure silence. He then made a harness and tied it to a long, strong rope. Placing the lamb into the harness, the knight lowered it down the castle wall but kept it just out of the creatures' reach.

The sheep bleated loudly.

The undead swarmed, reaching madly for it. Each shuffled to the sheep, pushing through the others like a restless mob. When the undead massed together, the knight dropped the net on the horde and pulled the sheep back up.

The horde could not move. Each fell over the other and could not get up. The knight lowered himself into the courtyard and safely drew his sword. He began to destroy the trapped creatures nearest him. He did not rush and he did not tire, nor was there any reason to run. Within an hour, the young knight had vanquished the undead in the courtyard.

When he found what was left of his brothers he sobbed and bowed his head in love and respect.

"Forgive me," he said picking up two large stones and crushed their heads.

The knight walked to the tower and opened the door to the crypt. There he saw Rose. She was lying on the slab, surrounded by broken glass. Though decaying, she looked to be merely sleeping. When he saw her cold gray skin and smelled the stench within the room, he fell to his knees and sobbed.

"Rose, I am too late for you." Sir Thomas, the knight said.

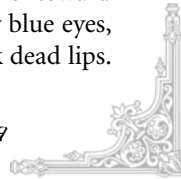
Rose opened her eyes and stared at her beloved.

Thomas looked at her in horror. She, too, was undead. He stepped back and knew his true love had passed into the next world.

"I loved you," he cried. "All I wanted was to see you again."

The undead princess sat up and got up from the slab. She shuffled toward Thomas, spreading her gray frozen arms wide.

Thomas walked to Rose. He took her ice cold hand and drew her toward him, waiting for the inevitable. But first he looked into her milky blue eyes, ran his hand through her matted yellow hair, and kissed her black dead lips.




Rose's fetid mouth opened. It was rank with the smell of rotting flesh and death. She did not breathe.

Rose bit into his mouth and tore the flesh from it. Thomas shrieked and felt the coldness of the winter fairies' curse radiate through his body as the madness and all-consuming hunger filled his being. Thomas died and reanimated hours later. He'd be with his Rose forever now. They'd exist together until their bodies rotted and turned to dust.

Years passed and the stench of the kingdom's dead filled the countryside's air, warning any passersby foolish enough to break through the gate that this land was cursed and best not be disturbed. While the king and queen may welcome guests with a bite, the dead princess and her knight would walk together forever and the roses would bloom black with decadence.

And they'd be undead together happily ever after.





# *The Undead and the Shoemaker*

By T. Fox Dunham

*Based on The Elf and the Shoemaker*

After the death, unnatural awakening, and death again of her husband (the village shoemaker), Ingrid fell on hard times. They had meager means before the elven curse—living in a two-room hut on the edge of Marburg, cobbling leather into shoes for a measly living. And since the start of winter, when the fey brought on their terrible undead curse in pursuit of eternal life, her belly had shrunk, and she had but few sticks to burn to keep warm.

The burgermeister banged on the door, and Ingrid, weak with hunger, dragged herself from her straw mat in the bedroom. She picked the lice from her hair and wrapped her bones in a filthy shawl. She pulled the front door open.

“Frau Koch,” said the burgermeister. “Your rent is due. You owe me for last month’s too. I know these are hard times with the rising of our loved ones, but the world still functions.”

“Ja,” she said. “The world must turn. But how can I pay the rent when I have no leather to sew into shoes? My hands are crippled and cannot work a needle. My weak arms cannot dig in the garden. I have but bugs to eat.”

The burgermeister dropped from his horse. He glowed in the gray dawn light, resplendent in red livery. He smelled of sweet oil, and meat juices lingered on his chin having just feasted.

“And so you wept to me last month, Frau Koch. And in my charity, I gave you one month. Now the time has come. I didn’t make the world.”

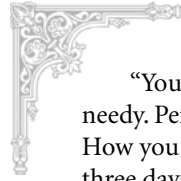
From the next hovel, she heard a low groan, an animal’s moan. Such hungry calls cried common in the land these dark days. She readied to shut the door and spied her broom to use as a weapon. The burgermeister jumped in the stirrup, ready to be off to leave this poor old lady to be a meal for one of those rotting wretches. A threadbare dog crawled from around the house and moaned.

“And what will I use to pay?” she said. “I have but memories and an old heart.”

He looked her over, sizing up her flesh the way a butcher does at farmer’s market before buying a cow. She shivered from his gaze.

“You’ve got some meat still on you,” he said, sneering. “You’d best make good on your rent, or you’ll be sent to work in debtor’s prison.”

“Please!” she cried. “I’ll find the money. Just give me more time.”



“You and your husband have always been generous, giving alms to the needy. Perhaps if he had been less giving, you would not be so poor. Very well. How you take advantage of my Christian nature, Frau Koch. Have the rent in three days, or off to the debtor’s prison you go.”

“Danke,” she said.

“Now I go, Frau Koch. To join in an elf hunt in the Schwarzwald, to take our revenge on the pagan fey who brought this hell on the world.”

He mounted his horse and rode off to join a group of riders heading for the forest. Tormenting the elves had become new sport.

She shut the door and grabbed her broom to sweep the floor. How could she pay? She had no money or goods to trade for leather or thread. Their needles rusted. Their shoe mold had snapped. She wept as she swept. To be confined to the debtor’s prison was to be served up as food for the undead. She scratched the floor with the bristles.

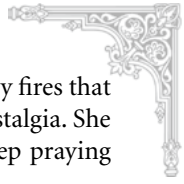
At first, the world went mad with the walking corpses. The elves in the forest worked their dark potions with recipes from fallen gods, all in their unholy lust for eternal life. In their madness, they released a dark cloud that fed the rain causing all who died to rise again as animals hungry for the flesh of living humans. No other flesh would satisfy the undead, not animal, dead flesh or even fey flesh. The undead devoured many villages, and the wretches scoured the land for food.

Two months ago, her husband had shut his eyes, sitting by the fire, ready to go to his eternal reward for living a good and hard working life. Then, his eyes opened, the orbs stained yellow. On the first day, he wandered about the house, bumping into walls, dumb and senseless. On the second day, he decayed and belched vile gas that smelled of rotting cow. On the third night, he raged, and she tied him down to his chair. He chomped the air when she came near, and she begged him to calm. When Fräulein Jergens came to collect her mended boots, Ingrid’s husband broke from his bonds, fell upon the poor girl and chewed her neck. The girl’s shrill screams summoned men returning from the fields, and they cracked his head with a yoke.

Some of the barons had found work for the mindless wretches. They could still manage simple tasks if trained patiently with repetition, becoming basic machines. They put them to work plowing fields or turning mills, but on the third day, the undead must be fed warm human flesh. They rage. They break free from their bonds, and they no longer work. If not fed, then they need to be put down, and all the training and time goes to waste. Mindless slave labor proved quite lucrative, and the barons in this world always sipped the top cream.

The barons emptied their dungeons. They fed criminals meant to be hanged to the wretches, but they soon ran through their stock. Now, she heard, even those kept in debtor’s prisons went missing.

Ingrid raked the floor, dislodging beetles from beneath her table. She fell on her knees, swept the bugs up and sucked them down. This was the daily meal. She had one potato left hidden in the hearth ashes for when she could find no more bugs to eat. She set the broom on the wall, then curled



up in front of the damp hearth and tried to remember all the hearty fires that burned there in the past, trying to warm her bag of bones with nostalgia. She wept, having no inkling how she could pay her rent. She fell asleep praying for a miracle.



A bang on the door woke her. She shivered on the cold floor, and rubbed her thin frame to promote circulation. Her stomach rolled and growled, and her mouth watered for the potato in the ash. Something struck her door again. She froze. She heard a groan from the other side, and crawled to fetch the broom for defense. She almost wanted the wretched corpse to break through the door and end all her suffering. The latch rattled. She had no lock. She aimed the broom handle.

“Please,” a trilling voice said through the door. “Oh please, mortal. Be kind. Old and poor mortal. Have a warm heart and grant me sanctuary.”

The sweet voice calmed her heart. She opened the door. The elf collapsed through the threshold, falling on her floor. He bled from cuts and bruises on his angular face. Blood stained the fey’s flaxen hair. Rips shredded his linen shirt, and he wore only one shoe. She lifted the short elf and sat him on her only chair. His legs dangled from the seat.

“What’s become of you, poor creature?” she said.

“I was the hunting party. I was out in the forest gathering wood for my workers to carve into furniture. I am a carpenter among many other occupations learned in my centuries of life.”

The poor dear wheezed, trying to catch his breath. She fetched some rain-water from a barrel. She cleaned the fey’s wounds with her shawl. His dim gray eyes glowed silvery.

“You poor dear,” she said.

“Nay do I wish to bring this trouble to your door. If they catch you helping me, you’ll be dinner for the undead.”

“Pay that no mind,” she said. “My husband was always generous and kind and never turned a troubled soul away. I live by his example, even though it’s brought me to a dark end with no money for rent.”

“The world is unjust,” the elf said. “It will not do.”

The elf fainted, nearly falling from the chair. She caught his short body and dripped water on his face till he woke up.

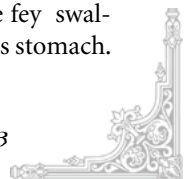
“I’ve had naught to eat, so weak,” he whispered.

She thought of the hidden potato, nearly grabbing it to give to the poor fey, but she paused, hesitant to surrender her only food. Still, she decided to follow the example of her husband to honor his memory. She fetched the potato from the ashes and dusted it with her shawl.

“So sweet,” the elf said. “Such a good soul.”

He leaned forward and sucked the potato from her hand. The fey swallowed it whole, and his neck bulged as the tuber went down into his stomach.

“Will you not join me in my meal?” he said.





“I have no more food,” she said. “That was my last potato.”

“Nay! You’ve given me your last morsel even though you starve? This will not stand. You have given me shelter, cleaned my wounds, fed me with your last potato. There is a debt to be paid. A debt is a debt and must always be satisfied. What is your labor, mortal?”

She finished cleaning his cuts.

“My husband and I cobbled. Many feet did we clothe.”

The elf’s silver eyes ignited.

“Serendipity. Cobbling is one of my many trades. Have you leather to weave new shoes?”

She shook her head.

“No matter,” said the elf. “None at all. I will be your savior. On this night and for two more to come, you are to remain in your bedroom and not come out. You will be rich again with the finest wares, and your rent shall be paid.”

She embraced the elf, nearly squeezing the wind out of his lungs.

“Now go into yon room and do not come out until dawn.”

If she’d had the strength, she would have leapt and clicked her heels. She stepped into the other room and shut the door. She wondered about the plans of her savior elf, so she spied him through the keyhole. He jumped from the chair and left the house. After waiting an hour, she feared he might not return. Then, the front door opened, and he stepped in. He led three shambling figures on a chain and carried a sack.

The salty reek of decay gagged her. The three wretches stumbled inside, and the elf shut the door. Two of the zombies appeared fresh with some hue still in their skin, their yellow eyes less faded. The third zombie had long since rotted. His ribs poked through his leathery skin. He groaned and bumped into a wall, nearly falling. The second zombie yanked clumps of straw hair and skin from her head. Ingrid stifled a scream with her hand. She nearly threw the door open to run, but she’d never get by the wretches.

“Now stand still, rotting deadies,” the elf ordered. He pulled a slender skinning knife from a belt sheath and cut off the shirt of the first zombie. He ran his fingers down its stomach.

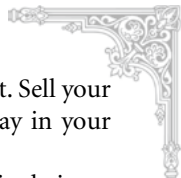
“This should do. It’s dried nicely. Tough and tensile.”

He flayed the zombie’s stomach, cutting patches of skin, revealing a pruned stomach and deflated intestines. The zombie paid no attention. It gazed ahead at the bedroom door. The elf harvested skin from its stomach and back. Then, he filled the hearth with wood from his sack and lit a fire. The house warmed. He set the skin in front of the fire to dry on a rack.

The fey laid out tools on the table and spools of thread and waited for the skin to dry, sipping from a clay jug, then he took the first square and cut it into shape with scissors. He formed the leather to clay model, shaping the toe.

“Now work, you miserable lot!” he said.

The zombie trio worked at the table, slowly cutting pieces, following a single task they’d been trained to do. They labored through the night. By morning, the elf fabricated three pairs of skin shoes.



“I will leave this night, but I will return tomorrow and the next. Sell your new shoes at market tomorrow. And when the sun sets, hide away in your bedroom and do not come out.”

At dawn, the elf left, pulling his trio of undead workers by their chain.

She quickly grabbed each pair and filled a sack, then walked to the village marketplace. The fine shoes quickly sold for much coin, enough to pay the rent for several months. The buyers commented on the quality of the material.



When the sun had set on the second night, she took to her bedroom and watched through the keyhole. As promised, the elf returned. His wounds had healed, and he grinned as he worked. He cut the skin from the zombie’s arms and the remainder from their backs. They cobbled six shoes, and left at dawn.

She carried her wares into town, and soon she had enough money to buy wood for the fireplace and warmer clothing. She filled her belly with bread and salted pork and sang for the first time since her husband died.



On the third night, she retired to her bedroom. She’d bought new furs and blankets. She’d dumped the moldy straw and gotten a bag of feathers on which to sleep. She rested comfortably with a full belly and all her worries cast away. The elf had saved her and given her comfort in her last years. She giggled and got up to dance on her toes.

She had to repay him. She couldn’t stand to think the elf would leave without knowing her gratitude. She couldn’t just let him return to the hostile world sans even a few words of thanks.

At dusk, the elf returned, leading the trio of near-skinless workers. Their exposed bones worked and popped. Their dehydrated organs oozed in the open cavities. A lung fell from the abdomen of the last zombie. He paid no attention to it.

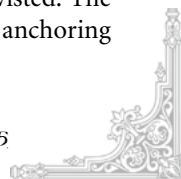
The elf set out his tools from his bag, and he studied the first zombie, searching for skin he’d yet to harvest. The zombies rocked and groaned, no longer as docile as the previous two nights. The older zombie turned and clawed at the front door, and the elf yanked his chain until he calmed. The woman zombie tugged her head, exposing most of her skull. Ingrid grabbed the latch, ready to burst into the room and hugged the fey. She remembered his instructions, but he was probably merely shy and embarrassed by gratitude. He wouldn’t mind a little praise. She opened the bedroom door.

“You have saved me, friend elf,” she said. “God bless you.”

“You fool, Frau Koch,” he said. “Your ears are stuffed. I can do nothing now. Idiot mortal.”

“I wanted to thank you for all the good you’ve done me.”

The zombies saw her. They moaned, and Ingrid’s stomach twisted. The three lunged for her, but the middle zombie on the chain collapsed, anchoring the others down.



“Wasted,” said the elf. “They care not for dead or animal flesh, nor do they feed on fey, for we of the forest taste of wood. They care only for living human fare.”

The middle zombie got to her feet. Her intestines unraveled to the floor. They clawed at Ingrid, groaning and moaning.

“Please. Stop them. I beg you.”

“I was going to put them down tonight with no living flesh to spare to feed them. Still, the debt is paid. All debts must be paid, and they have given their skin for your wares. Now, we must balance the scales.”

Ingrid backed into the corner. She reached and grabbed her broom. She fended off the first zombie, but the other two fell on her. As they fed, she looked down at their feet and recognized their shoes. Her husband cobbled the very best.





# *And the Beast*

By Rachel Kenley

*Based on Beauty and the Beast*

The zombies were shambling closer and Rose couldn't help but wonder if this was the time they got her. She was so tired of running, hiding and scavenging that part of her considered surrendering to what seemed like an inevitable fate. At least then she wouldn't be alone, missing everyone she'd ever known and loved.

Even though the creatures didn't move fast, nothing seemed to slow them down, and Rose tripped over every branch and root on the forest floor. The sound they made haunted her dreams so even when she did sleep, it wasn't restful. She stood behind a tree, hoping it would shield her long enough to catch her breath. When a rotted hand touched her shoulder she jumped and moved out of its reach. She'd rested too long.

Dashing forward in the waning light she put as much distance between her and the things that wanted to devour her. Unexpectedly she pushed into a clearing and was thrilled to see a small castle, likely belonging to a baron or other lord, a short run away. She ran full out for the gate sending up a prayer that she would find it unlocked.

Her prayers were answered both for the gate and the doors that lay beyond were open.

The smell in the castle was terrible, musty and rank, but Rose had experienced worse since the zombies invaded their kingdom. She closed and bolted the doors behind her, worried that finding them unlocked could mean the creatures were within the castle walls. Leaning against the crossbar she stood in the silence listening and waiting.

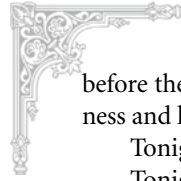
No shuffles.

No long drawn out moans.

No tell tale sounds of any monsters within. Or life of any kind.

She was running out of hope that there was anyone fully human left. It was a heartbreaking thought. She ached for simple contact. Conversation, laughter, companionship. What was once common was now precious.

Rose was determined to believe there were others still unaffected by the plague. Hope was necessary in the darkest times. As her mother lay dying, years



before the current tragedy, she made Rose promise to never give up on happiness and love. They were worth looking for, waiting for. Maybe even living for.

Tonight however she had other priorities.

Tonight she needed something to eat and then as many hours as possible of uninterrupted sleep. It had been days since she'd slept more than two hours at a time and it was taking a toll on her focus and reaction time, two things she needed in this hostile world.

Although she was starving and wished to hurry to find food, Rose moved quietly and carefully through the castle, listening and looking for any undead intruders. Eventually she made it to the kitchen where her luck held. The people who lived here must have left recently because there was food in the pantry. In the waning light of day she was able to find bread and some cheese that hadn't gone completely moldy as well as a nearly full casket of mead.

It took all her remaining reserve to eat slowly. She'd learned the cost of wolfing down her food during her first few days alone after her father died. She'd stuffed her face at an abandoned tavern only to be sick for an hour after. She sipped the mead savoring the taste and cool sensation of the honeyed liquid, enjoying the confidence of knowing it wasn't tainted. Clean water was in short supply and Rose felt thirsty almost all the time. Her new survival instincts told her to tuck the rest of the bread in her bag, and fill her water jug with more of the mead, in case she could find no more the next day or had to leave quickly.

Sated, she felt her eyes closing. Time to find a bedroom, she thought, but before she could stand, she fell asleep where she sat.



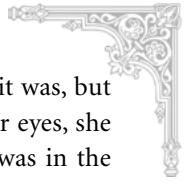
He found her with her head on her arms. The light from his lantern showed long uncombed brown hair, eyes with long lashes and full lips. He never thought to see such beauty again in this life, but here it was breathing slowly in his kitchen.

He considered leaving her there to keep his presence a secret, but she stirred giving a small moan. It wasn't a comfortable position for sleeping and the castle had more than enough bedrooms. And he liked the thought of doing something kind for the girl. It was unlikely he'd ever have the chance again. She was light in his arms and no trouble to carry to a second floor room, even with the lantern in his hand. He pushed open the door and thought to worry for a moment about the dust.

"Ridiculous," he whispered. With all that was happening around them, the cleanliness of a comfortable room was not a concern.

He placed her in the center of the bed and was rewarded with a soft sigh. He gave her one last look before leaving, keeping the door partially open so she would be less frightened when she woke.

Walking back to his room, he tried to ignore the shuffle in his step.



When Rose woke she couldn't tell from the light what time it was, but realizing she was in a bed made her leap to her feet. Rubbing her eyes, she tried to remember arriving at this room, but her last memory was in the kitchen. If she'd fallen asleep there the only explanation was that someone had brought her here. Someone who didn't want to wake her.

Or eat her.

Hope rose in her heart, and she ran out into the corridor to find the other inhabitant.

"Hello," she called. "Hello? I know someone's here. I want to thank you for putting me to bed last night."

Rose stopped, covering her mouth. That hadn't sounded right. She shrugged. Manners were the least of anyone's concerns these days although perhaps that made them more important than ever. "Please, won't you show yourself? I'd love to talk to you. Please," she said again not able to keep the longing from her voice, and not caring that she couldn't. She continued to search the castle hoping the one who helped her was the only one about and that she wouldn't accidentally wake something undesirable.

Finally as she was about to open another set of doors she heard a deep voice say, "You're welcome."

She stopped, her hand on the knob. "Are you in here? May I join you?"

"Not until tonight, my guest. We will speak then. I've left some food for you in the kitchen. Do you recall how to get there?"

"Yes, thank you. Can I bring you anything?"

"No, I am fine for now. We'll talk later, miss."

"Rose. My name is Rose."

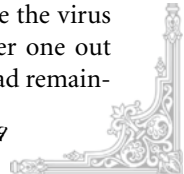
"I am William."

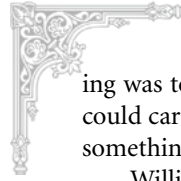
"Until later then?" She should feel foolish talking through a closed door, but just knowing someone was close made her happier than she'd been in months.

"Until later."

With a light heart she went down to the kitchen where there was not only bread, but cooked meat, still warm, along with a large cup of mead. Had he hunted for her? For them? How wonderfully brave of her new friend. She couldn't stop the moan when she bit into the food, recognizing the taste of rabbit, not remembering the last time she'd had it. Something else to thank William for this evening. As the food filled her something else did as well – happiness. All her wishes were coming true. She was someplace safe, no zombies nearby, food and someone for company. She didn't stop smiling for the rest of the day.

She sounded so damn hopeful, so happy. And it pleased him to do that for her. What a mess. There was no telling how long he had before the virus completely took him over and he became a beast like every other one out there. Still, the thought of having company for the short time he had remain-





ing was too appealing for him to him to suggest she take whatever food she could carry and run. It also motivated him to go out into the forests to hunt, something he hadn't done in weeks.

William wasn't even certain his growing physical limitations would allow him to be successful at hunting, but since the zombies weren't eating game, the woods were plentiful and he found a quiet place to wait so when the rabbit came by, one arrow took it out. Every minute out of the castle acting like a man again was wonderful. Anything was better than waiting to die in the darkness. Until yesterday he hadn't cared what he ate or if he ate at all, but with her – Rose – needing her strength, he had a reason to go out.

She was so lovely.

Which he wouldn't let himself think about.

He'd always prided himself on his logic and clear thinking. He wouldn't – couldn't – ignore what he was becoming. There was no cure for this plague. Being a baron was as worthless as he always believed it to be. Noble blood was no protection when the virus took hold.

Once the king's rival created his zombie army the war was over. Of course, the enemy was dead before the plague arrived. An alchemist's mistake gone horribly wrong explained the soldiers who arrived to tell of the coming apocalypse. Sadly, most of them were already infected. Before zombies shambled onto their lands, many of the people were succumbing to the illness. William had no idea how far the plague spread beyond their kingdom, but it didn't matter. Since trying to help someone who came to the castle and getting infected for his trouble, his world had only him in it.

And now Rose. She was in danger and she didn't know. If she stayed he'd devour her. He vowed he would find a way to make her leave before that happened.

When night fell Rose hurried to the room and knocked. "Are you there, William?"

"I am."

"May I come in?"

"Absolutely."

It felt both silly and wonderful to be so formal, but given the size of his house she could only assume he was nobility and she would use her best manners so as not to come off too much from the merchant class. She shook her head and stepped into the room, laughing at herself and the way old worries returned in the face of such normal interaction.

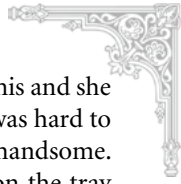
The room was large and there seemed to be books lining the walls, but it was hard to tell since other than the glow in the fireplace, there were no lights.

"I can hardly see," she said. "Shall I light some of the torches?"

"No, it's better not to. It's been quiet around here, but I'd rather not advertise the place is occupied and attract unwanted attention. I hope you don't mind. I've gotten used to the dark in the last months."

"I can understand."

"Join me at the fire."



She walked toward him. There was an empty seat across from his and she settled into it. His chair was pushed back into the shadows and it was hard to get a good look at his face, although what she could see was quite handsome. He gestured to two partially filled glasses and a decanter sitting on the tray between them. "I've some brandy from our stores, but nothing else to offer with it. Sweets were the first things to go."

"I would be much more surprised if you did. I appreciate you sharing what you do have. Which reminds me, thank you so much for the rabbit this morning."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Very much. I picked up some trapping skills since I've been on my own, but that doesn't always work. I wish I could hunt but, as you said, having a fire going can be a danger too, so it's hard to cook anything I do catch."

"It's an odd world we live in."

"Finding someone who is willing to share is a rare thing. Most people didn't. There were days of slammed doors and weapons pointed at her in the early weeks of wandering."

She thought she noticed him shrug. "When this first happened, I was a complete miser, not letting anyone in or even near the castle. I don't know how many people I chased away trying to keep the disease out, but now it's been so long since I've seen an uninfected person, hunting seems a small price to pay for the company. Truly, I'm delighted to have you here."

She could feel a blush in her cheeks. "Let us toast," she said. "To you finding me."

"And to you being here."

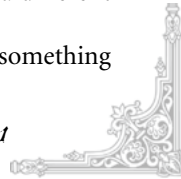
He saluted her with his glass, but did not lean forward to touch it to hers. She took a sip of her brandy and enjoyed the warmth it brought.

They talked until Rose was falling asleep in her chair and the fire was nearly out. He was grateful when she said she'd see herself to her room, not knowing what he would do if she required an escort. His right leg was worse today especially after the walking he'd done for hunting then sitting for so long this evening. And he thought he was noticing a similar problem in his left side. Not that it mattered. The virus would overtake him, but for the first time, he wanted longer. He wished for a way to slow the process. He didn't want to be a monster for her.

Their days soon had a routine. She spent her time either in the library reading or in the kitchen preparing what he hunted while he slept. He slept most of the day and they met in the evenings. At first she thought it strange to never see him during the day, but given all that was odd in their world, this was minor. She treasured their conversations and her growing feelings for him.

One night when she went into his study she smelled something different. It became stronger as she neared him, but she decided it must be a different type of wood being burned in the fireplace. It wasn't a concern.

What concerned her was seeing he didn't touch his dinner. "Is something wrong, William?"





He didn't answer at first. "I'm not feeling well."

"I can hear that. Your voice sounds wrong. I could make some soup out of the bones and carcasses of the rabbits. That might help."

"Nothing will help, Rose."

She didn't say anything.

"Do you understand what I am telling you? Nothing. Will. Help."

"I understand." And she did. She'd suspected, but she'd needed to hope.

"I will be leaving in the next day or so."

"Why you? It's your home. Shouldn't I go?"

"To what end? It's not like there will be anything here for me. You deserve to be safe. I may as well be out there with the other beasts."

"No! That's not you. I can't bear to think of you like that."

"You have no choice," he said firmly and for the first time, moved into the full light of the fire.

Rose feared she would scream or try to move away from him. But she didn't. She couldn't. This was the man she loved. How he looked was only a part of who he was. And, truthfully she wasn't surprised.

But he did look horrible. The disease was taking over his face, which explained the gravelly sound of voice, and it already claimed most of his body. He looked sloped in the chair and uncomfortable. His legs were splayed in awkward angles and his fingers were gnarled.

"The worst part of the disease is not knowing what will happen to my mind. I would hate to exist without at least the memory of you."

"William," she cried and with tears in her eyes, she threw herself into his embrace. His arms came stiffly around her, but still it felt wonderful. "I can't leave you."

"You will."

"Why are you asking this of me?"

"I'm not asking. I'm telling. You and I know what is going to happen."

She stayed in his arms, not wanting to lose the contact. With a clarity she hadn't expected, she made a decision. "I am not going to lose you." She kissed him passionately and ran out of the room.

Once on the other side of the door, she raced to her room, grabbed some wood and ran back to his study where she slid the lumber through the door handles. Once she knew it was secure, she began rummaging through the nearest rooms looking for furniture of a good size which she could also move. She was grateful the doors to his room opened out into the hall or her plan wouldn't work.

A few hours later she was happy with the barricade she built. As she shoved the last piece in place, she heard him push at the door.

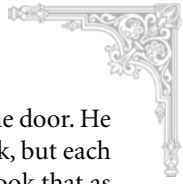
"What the hell?"

"You're not getting out."

"Rose, what are you playing at?"

"I'm not playing. And I'm not leaving."

"Let me out," he bellowed.



“No, my love,” she said and left, the tears starting again.

The first days when she checked on him they talked through the door. He stopped trying to change her mind. Soon it was hard for him to talk, but each day he said her name, telling her he hadn’t forgotten her and she took that as a good sign.

The day came when all she heard was him screaming her name and throwing things around the room. She imagined all the beautiful furniture being demolished, the books destroyed. But more, she imagined William, not a man anymore, but a beast.

It didn’t matter.

He would be hers, now and forever.

She waited two more days making sure his hunger grew and feeling better about her decision when she heard her name. Finally it was time to take down the barrier. She had no doubts about what she was doing.

Taking a deep breath, she slid the wood out and opened the doors. “William?” she called. “I’m here. I’m here for you.”

He dragged himself out of the shadows. Only his eyes were familiar, but that was enough.

“Hungry, Rose,” he said with a coarse growl.

“I know, William. I’ll help.”

He grabbed her and pulled her close. She tipped her head back and braced for the pain. It was worse than she imagined. There was a tearing, a burning, then the warmth of blood running down her skin. Her blood. She could feel the virus begin its course through her body.

Her initial exposure was greater than his. It wouldn’t take long before she was as he was. She wasn’t afraid.

Together forever.





# Alice's Undead Adventures

By Amber Keller

*Based on Alice in Wonderland*

Alice had been falling for a very long time. It might have been days, except she wasn't hungry or very thirsty. As she fell, there was a horrible noise that echoed from above. Beside her was her very good friend, the White Rabbit, holding faithfully to his pocket watch.

His whiskers twitched and his ears trembled and occasionally he would sneak a glance up with a worried look on his furry rabbit face. Curiously, the more Alice fell, the more she forgot. It seemed there had been a ruckus at home, but she couldn't remember exactly what had happened.

The dirt walls that surrounded them were very familiar. She had nearly memorized every root and rock over the years.

She would never tell her mum, but she secretly considered Wonderland her real home.

Alice noticed the White Rabbit's petticoat was streaked with filth in a most unattractive manner. And his face had bands of red standing out against his beautiful, white fur. She opened her mouth to inquire about the nature of his disposition when he turned toward her and chattered in a low voice, "Now Alice you must keep quiet, as I said before."

His eyes were round, nearly popping from their sockets and outlined with thin, red veins. He must be having a very bad day, Alice thought.

With nothing else to do, Alice picked at her dress, rolling it between her two fingers. As she moved her hands over it, she felt a sticky wetness. Looking down, she could see lines of deep red and dirt crumbled across the pale blue fabric. She did not remember ever being so dirty. Her mum would be very angry.

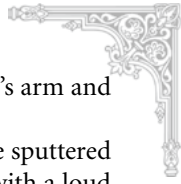
Alice stopped herself before she spoke out loud to question why she should look like this. A flash of a memory quickly flitted through her head of her family and friends growling horribly, arms stretched for her, as she ran away.

Fear plucked into her core giving her an icy cold shudder.

They soon reached the bottom and landed gently on their feet.

Within moments, the Dodo ran up to them, winded and bobbing his head. In his hand he held onto a monocle.

"I need cooperation! Compensation! Assistance!" he stammered, struggling to catch his breath and trying to hold himself steady with little success.



“What is wrong?” The White Rabbit put his paw on the Dodo’s arm and began to pat him in a calming way.

“It is the Cook. Something is very wrong. The baby.” Again he sputtered the last few words. “I was summoned to find you. Go now!” And with a loud squawk, he ran off in the opposite direction, monocle in hand, flailing his wings wildly.

The White Rabbit began acting in a peculiar way. His head twisted sharp toward his shoulder and his eyes strained. He clenched his large teeth and balled up his fists. Alice was confused.

“What is wrong, dear Rabbit?”

As fast as his body had contorted, he snapped back out of it, ignoring her question.

“Let’s go!” He said, pushing his pocket watch back into his pocket. “We’ve no time to waste!”

The two of them ran through Wonderland in the direction of the Cook’s house.

Upon reaching the large house, the Cook’s normal screams were replaced by loud, pitiful sobs. The White Rabbit pushed the door opened carefully, peeking in first.

“Oh Cook?”

The sobs grew in volume as a crescendo of wails.

They followed the sound to the kitchen where Cook was sitting on the floor, holding her knees and rocking. Her cries echoed throughout the kitchen, swirling in an angry rage. The White Rabbit rushed to her side.

“Dear Cook, whatever is the matter?”

“The baby,” she said, pointing a stubby finger in the direction of a white bassinet.

The White Rabbit turned to Alice and said “be a dear and go check on the baby while I try to comfort her.” He turned his attention back to the Cook who had begun another louder round of cries.

Alice approached the woven, white bassinet with ease, but the closer she got, the more she felt something was wrong.

The inside of the bedding was a twisted mess. The baby was lying on its back, its face screwed up in an expression of rage, yet no sound came from its open mouth.

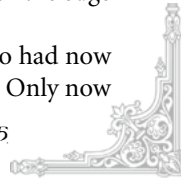
She reached into the bassinet and placed her hand lightly on the babe’s belly. As Alice watched the child, its form changed from an infant to a pig with tusks protruding from its mouth. A burst of high-pitched squees issued from the pig that was candidly wearing a bonnet.

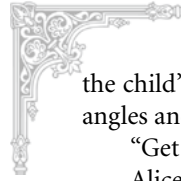
Alice’s shock wore soundly on her face.

The Cook screamed, “Get your hand off the baby!”

It surprised Alice so that she stumbled forward and had to clutch the edge of the bassinet to keep from falling over.

A small hand grasped hers and she turned to see the baby, who had now turned back to a human child, pulling her hand to its open mouth. Only now





the child's face was hideous. There were jagged teeth jutting out at awkward angles and spittle slobbered down its chin in small bubbles.

"Get away!" screamed the Cook.

Alice pulled her hand back, but the baby had surprising strength.

They wrestled momentarily for who would get her hand, but Alice ultimately won out when she braced her leg against the foot of the bassinet and pried it from the child's hold.

Shrieks peeled from the babe and Cook began to wail once more.

Alice backed away from the baby bed and returned to the White Rabbit's side.

"The child bit me," said Cook, holding out her hand to show them a nasty wound under her pinky finger. The skin was turning green and black.

The White Rabbit started to tremble and shake. His body quickly became uncontrolled, and he writhed, his arms and legs bending and popping alternately.

Alice covered her mouth with her hand and Cook buried her face in her apron.

The White Rabbit shot from the room with impressive speed and Alice tried to keep up.

Outside, he crossed the lawn then stopped to face Alice.

His face was contorted into harsh lines and a sneer. His eyes, red now, locked on Alice.

For a moment Alice thought he was going to attack, then his face softened and he looked sad.

"Alice, I have to go. I am not well. Do not follow me. Keep safe... Somehow." And with a turn, he was gone in a growling, snarling whirl.

Alice fell to her knees. The cries from Cook and the baby carried on the breeze, blending into a horrid chorus.

Tears fell down her cheeks and her shoulders shook. Alice felt helpless.

"Alice, get up. Stop that crying!" said a familiar voice.

Alice looked up and saw a face forming in a mist above her. The sky had darkened and the large grin glowed silver against the purple heavens.

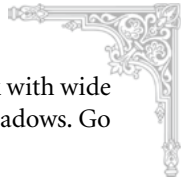
"Cheshire Cat!" Alice was instantly cheered upon seeing the Cat. "I have been so frightened. The White Rabbit, he –"

"Never you mind. There are bigger problems afoot. The Queen of Hearts has sent for you. She knows that you are here."

"I thought I made my peace with the Queen. Why should she be angry with me?" Alice scowled and stood up, fussing unnecessarily at grass on her already dirty dress.

"Listen to me. Wonderland needs you. The Queen is in a state. Everything is falling apart. You must save us all." The Cheshire Cat wore an uncharacteristically serious face.

"Save you? How could I possibly do that?" Alice was worried and scared and confused. How could she, merely a child herself, save all of Wonderland, she wondered. If it would have soothed her, she would have cried, but the tears wouldn't come.



The Cheshire Cat snapped its head to the side and looked back with wide eyes at Alice. "I must go now. Get to the Mad Hatter. Stay in the shadows. Go at once!"

The Cat was gone.

"Stay in the shadows?" Alice said to no one in particular. "Well, I guess I must go find the Mad Hatter. Maybe he will tell me what to do."

And Alice started walking into the forest, where she knew the Mad Hatter would be having tea.

The forest was dark, but not so dark that she couldn't see. However, minding the advice of the Cheshire Cat, Alice hopped from shadow to shadow, always looking out for what she didn't know.

Alice soon came upon the Mad Hatter's very long tea table.

She walked the length of it but no one was there.

Exasperated, she sat down at the head of the table, her head in her hands, and began to swing her feet which didn't quite meet the floor.

"Ouch!" squeaked someone.

Alice ducked down and looked under the table for the source of the voice.

There, with a table cloth draped over him, was the Mad Hatter. An empty teacup in his hand, he looked terribly frightened.

"Why are you hiding under the table?" asked Alice.

"They came and ruined my tea party. They rudely began to eat my guests. And we were having such a grand time." His eyes were wide and his face was white.

Alice guided him out. "Who came?"

He didn't answer, but hid his face instead.

"The Cheshire Cat told me to find you. Can you help me save Wonderland?" asked Alice.

The Mad Hatter put his head high in the air. He sniffed in deep.

Jumping on top of the table in one bound, he pulled a brass spyglass from his waistcoat pocket and extending it, peered through it into the woods to their left.

"They're coming. I can smell them."

Alice couldn't smell anything except for the tea and cookies.

He hopped down and took Alice by the hand. "We must leave now." He glanced back once over his shoulder, then pulled her toward the opposite side of the forest.

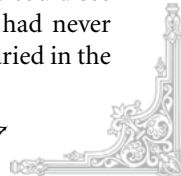
Alice looked back but couldn't see anything in the darkness.

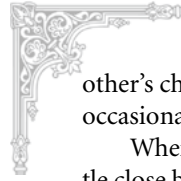
They walked for what seemed like a long time in the same direction.

Just as Alice was going to ask where they were going, they saw something in the trees.

The Mad Hatter put one finger to his mouth, shushing Alice, and pointed for them to move away from it.

As they walked by, Alice strained her eyes in the darkness and could see Tweedledum and Tweedledee on the ground. One of them, she had never been good at telling them apart, was bent over the other, his face buried in the





other's chest. The one that was lying on the ground didn't move except for an occasional twitch. It was a peculiar scene, indeed.

When they neared the edge of the forest, Alice could see the Queen's castle close by. She turned to tell the Mad Hatter and his hand clamped down on her shoulder, pushing her to the ground.

"Stay here! They are coming." He put her behind a tree and walked back around it to see.

Alice got back up on her feet just in time to see a few of the Queen's cards coming into view. They were smeared with gore and their teeth were bared.

The Mad Hatter turned to hide with her and they spotted him.

When they opened their mouths, growls and howls came out, and they ran straight for him.

They grabbed him and drug him back into the forest.

Alice reached for him but it was too late.

"Take this. It has what you need. Run Alice! Run to the Queen!" He took the hat off his head and tossed it at Alice. Those were his last words before he was dragged into the darkness.

Alice bent and picked up his hat. She looked once more at the forest, and remembering his words, she ran to the castle.

The grounds were silent. Alice walked straight to the enormous doors and let herself in. There was no sight of anyone.

She made her way to the Queen's chamber, the Mad Hatter's hat tucked up under one arm.

When she entered the great room, the Queen was not on her throne. Instead, she was sitting in the floor.

Alice walked to her.

The Queen looked at Alice and her face lit up. "Oh Alice! It's so wonderful to see you!"

This was not at all like the Queen to behave this way, thought Alice. She had never been happy to see her before.

The Queen had an idiotic grin on her face and her eyes were strange.

"Dear Queen," Alice said with a curtsy, "I was told that Wonderland needed help. I offer you my services, although I don't know what I can really do."

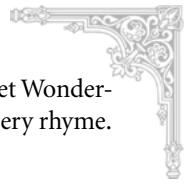
The Queen's face dropped. Her shoulders trembled as she started to cry softly. "I can't do it. Wonderland is ruined."

Alice bent down and tried to dab at the Queen's tears with the edge of her dress. She thought it was the appropriate thing to do to a Queen.

"The Jabberwocky has turned. My troops have all been either changed into monsters or eaten. There is nothing more to do. Wonderland is gone."

Alice had never seen the Queen act so weak, so vulnerable. She felt bad for her, but didn't know what to say.

The Queen stopped crying and looked back up at Alice. "Let's sing a song, shall we? Twinkle, twinkle, little star..." She had begun smiling again and was waving her finger in the air to the beat of the tune. Alice straightened up, annoyed at the Queen's odd behavior.



"You must get up and do something!" pleaded Alice. "You can't let Wonderland be ruined." The Queen closed her eyes and started another nursery rhyme.

Alice grunted in frustration.

She didn't know what to do.

"Alice, I told you it would have to be you who would save Wonderland." The Cheshire Cat's calm tone was the most perfect thing Alice could have heard.

The Cat was floating next to Alice in full body form.

"What do I do?"

The Cat pointed to the hat. "It is in there."

Alice looked down at the Mad Hatter's hat. She turned it upside down and looked into it. There, deep down at the bottom, was a glimmer.

She reached in and pulled out the vorpal sword. The long blade was thick and heavy in her hands.

"The Jabberwocky escaped yesterday. It made its way to the surface. Once it was in your world, its bite changed. The venom it delivered caused your kind to become unnatural creatures, ones who attack others. The White Rabbit came to rescue you, to bring you back here to save us all and he got to you in the nick of time. He, unfortunately, was injured along the way," the Cheshire Cat looked down momentarily and wiped a tear away. It looked back up at Alice, "The Jabberwocky made its way back here and attacked the Queen's card troops. Now they are running across the land, terrorizing Wonderland. You must kill the Jabberwocky. Wonderland will return to the way it was. The sword has the power."

Alice felt small. "I cannot do that. I am not strong enough."

"Yes you are and yes you will. Do not worry, I will be there with you." The Cat grinned at her and gave her a wink.

Alice paused. What choice did she have? She couldn't watch her friends get hurt, couldn't let Wonderland be ruined. Alice stood up straight and took a deep breath and said, "I am ready."

The Cheshire Cat walked alongside Alice as she made her way to the top of the castle. The first rays of the morning were breaking through a stormy sky.

She stood overlooking the kingdom.

"Jabberwocky! I call upon you!"

Alice's voice rang through the land. The Jabberwocky roared in reply.

Its giant body lumbered through the woods toward the castle. Alice walked down to the grounds to face it.

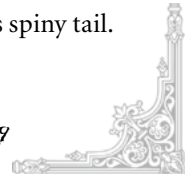
She stood on the lawn, the sword in both hands, shining.

Alice swallowed hard. There was no time for fear.

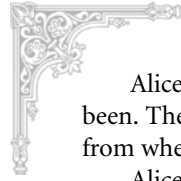
The giant beast approached Alice and stopped, raising its head to let out a scream.

"Strike hard, Alice," said the Cheshire Cat who had retreated a few feet behind her. "And remember, you have to take off the head."

The Jabberwocky made the first move, striking at her with its spiny tail.







Alice hopped out of the way, more limber and agile than she had ever been. The sword glanced off the side of the massive tail and smoke billowed from where it had touched its skin.

Alice knew then that she could do it. She could save Wonderland.

They fought hard, lashing and striking at each other. Alice avoided its bite several times and the Jabberwocky only became angrier.

In a moment of desperation, Alice leapt onto the beast's back. It struggled and writhed to knock her off, but its front arms were too short and Alice was too clever.

"Do it now!" yelled the Cheshire Cat who disappeared in a poof right before the Jabberwocky's tail sliced through the air where the Cat had been.

The Queen appeared on the balcony of the castle, laughing maniacally and yelling repeatedly, "Off with its head!"

Alice ran up the Jabberwocky's back and threw herself down at the base of its neck. Locking her legs around its massive body, she lifted the sword above her head and brought it down hard, sinking it deep into the Jabberwocky's neck.

It screamed in agony and flailed helplessly.

Alice sliced until the head fell to the ground. Its body crashed to the side and Alice slid off.

The sky opened up to reveal a brilliant shade of blue. The sun was bright and the birds began to sing.

The Cheshire Cat was once again next to her, smiling. Alice smiled back.

The Queen seemed to have been cured of the sickness she was under and when she saw Alice standing next to the body of her beloved Jabberwocky, she began to wail.

"Off! Off! Off with her head!"

The card troops began to file into the yard.

"We need to get you out of here," said the Cheshire Cat. "Come over here."

The Cat showed her a small hole in the hedges she could barely fit through. Alice crawled in and when she came out the other side, she was once again at the bottom of the rabbit hole. The White Rabbit and the Mad Hatter, both fine, were there as well.

Alice ran to each of them and gave them a hug in turn. She was so happy to see her friends once again.

"It's time to go home," said the Cheshire Cat.

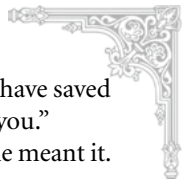
Alice fought back tears and nodded in agreement.

The White Rabbit stepped forward and took his pocket watch out of his pocket.

They started to float up the hole.

As they floated, the White Rabbit touched the hands of the clock and turned the time back. Alice's dress became the pale shade of blue it had been. The dirt marks were gone.

When they reached the surface, everything had become normal once again.



“All is well here,” said the Rabbit. He turned to face Alice. “You have saved us all, you have saved Wonderland. We will be forever indebted to you.”

“I would do it again and again. I love you all,” said Alice. And she meant it. The White Rabbit hugged Alice for one last time.


He turned and hopped into the rabbit hole, his fluffy white tail disappearing last.

Alice ran to the edge and got on her knees. She put her head into the dark hole and said, “Goodbye, White Rabbit! Goodbye, Mad Hatter! Goodbye, Cheshire Cat!”

The Mad Hatter’s unique laugh echoed up the hole.

Alice smiled again for what wouldn’t be the last time that day.





# Mary Had a Little Limb

By Wendy Dabrowski

*Based on Mary Had a Little Lamb*

Mary had a little limb,  
That once was Uncle Walt's;  
The laboratory claimed that they  
Were just improving salt.

She took the limb to school one day,  
To share at Show and Tell.  
It made the children heave and sway  
(And that was just the smell).

Miss Harkness locked the menace in  
Her bottom file drawer;  
A single stolen bobby pin  
Released the tiny corps.

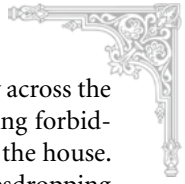
The limb chased Mary 'round the room;  
Her best friend Amy tried  
To whack it with the classroom broom,  
But everybody died.

— — —

All Mary wanted was an arm and a leg. That's why Uncle Walt was her favorite: he let her get away with anything. When he came to live with them after losing his job at the mill, Mary skipped everywhere for a week. How could she have known the two of them would cause an apocalyptic cataclysm that would destroy the town? She was only six.

— — —

Uncle Walt arrived with all his clothes shoved into two huge trash bags. He also had a TV-DVD combo, a CD player, and several small cardboard boxes full of comics, CDs, and movies. Mom set him up on the daybed in the sewing room and two days later, her tidy flat surfaces were covered in Walt's dirty underwear.



At first, it was like vacation. After school, Mary picked her way across the floor and spent the afternoon looking at comic books and watching forbidden movies. After a few weeks, Walt's detritus spread to the rest of the house. Mary stood in the bathroom, which had the best acoustics for eavesdropping on dining-room conversations.

"We agreed to help you get back on your feet."

"Geez, Amanda. It's not my fault I can't find anything. There's a recession, you know."

Mary's dad worked at Accu-Bio Farm Laboratories, on a research team developing hypo-allergenic peanuts. He handed Walt a brochure. "The night shift is always short on janitors. Just show up tonight, tell them you're my brother-in-law, and they'll skip the application."

Walt glanced at the brochure and crushed an empty can. "Better Eating Through Science?" he read. "I don't know, Ted. Third shift?"

Mary's mom sighed. "We're not asking, Walt. If you don't do this, you can pack up."

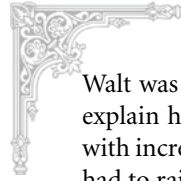
The fact that he was able to keep the job for over three weeks surprised everyone, including Walt. He enjoyed it, though. Walt had always been accident-prone: broken arms, sprained ankles, and tennis elbow. He never understood how he'd gotten tennis elbow without playing tennis, but it didn't affect his ability to slam a six-pack.

This new job was perfect for him; there wasn't much chance of injury and he could sleep as long as he liked every morning. Every night at ten, he ambled into the locker room. His last name --Lamb-- was scribbled with Sharpie on a strip of masking tape, marked locker 67 as his. He stripped off his jeans, t-shirt, and sneakers, cramming them into the cubby. Pulling on the greasy coveralls, he tucked his iPod into the left breast pocket, snapped it shut, and tugged on the boots. Slamming the locker door, he spun the combo-lock for extra security.

All he had to do was mop the floors and empty the trash barrels filled by the day crew. He took his time, kept his ear-buds in, and stopped periodically to eat something from the janitorial snack bar on the third floor. He found it at the end of his first week, tucked into a corner of one of the labs where scientists had genetically engineered salt to intensify the flavor of everything it touched. It kept the pounds off, too.

There was a row of refrigerators along one wall; a microwave and several specialized warmers lined the adjacent counter. One of the fridges bore a laminated sign: Night Shift Janitorial Meals. Walt was furious; no one told him he got free food! Initially, he restricted himself to heating up a prepared dinner halfway through his shift, but the more he ate, the hungrier he got. He stopped in regularly for huge helpings of kettle chips, garlic breadsticks, and beer-battered onion rings. Better Eating Through Science, indeed.





Walt was certain his clumsiness catching up with him again, but that didn't explain how a simple shaving nick could get so infected. He kept it covered with increasingly larger Scooby-Doo and Hello Kitty band-aids. Eventually he had to raid the first-aid station at the Lab.

"Walt? What's wrong with your face?" Amanda sat across the table, staring at the patch on his jaw.

"Nothing. Just a cut from my razor. Must've been rusty."

"It's starting to smell gross," offered Mary.

"You're wasting away, Walt. Go see a doctor." Mary's mom said.

"That amazing job you forced me into doesn't come with health insurance."

Ted looked confused. "There's a free clinic on-site for part-time staff. Just stop by during the day."

Walt rolled his eyes, made a mental note to get up earlier the next morning, then slept late instead.

It got harder to control his movements; his limbs jerked and his joints felt sticky. After wrenching his elbow picking up a trash barrel, he left the mess strewn across the floor and spent the rest of the shift gorging himself on salty snacks before heading home to sleep. Over the next week, his elbow got worse. He stopped bothering with the trash barrels beyond rolling them down to the loading dock and leaving them clustered beside the dumpsters. One night, he twisted his ankle doing the Risky Business slide down a hallway he'd just mopped.

Cursing, Walt flung his mop guitar down and limped to the third floor. "No job is worth this," he muttered, emptying the entire snack bar into a clean trash bag, hoisting it over his shoulder, and struggling home.

The stash didn't last long. He tried to ration it, but he was always hungry and nothing satisfied his urges. Once the contraband was gone Walt spent most of the day in bed, moaning. The pain disappeared after a few weeks, though he still couldn't use the appendages. Plus, they stank. Early one Saturday Mary ran in, pounced, and landed on his privates. Shocked from a sound sleep, Walt doubled over instinctively before realizing that nothing hurt. Perturbed, he pushed the covers off and struggled to a sitting position. His useless right forearm lay on the bed, buried in blankets. Walt stared.

Mary shrieked and leapt off the bed. After a moment, she leaned forward and poked the arm, which twitched. "It's alive," she whispered. Smiling, she ran from the room. "Mom! It's amazing!"

"Get it out of the house!" Mom stood on a chair, holding Mary.

"Lemme down! It's so cool!" Mary twisted and squirmed.

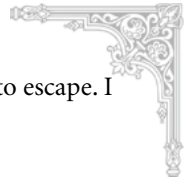
Dad shook his head. "There's no blood. That can't be good."

"I swear it doesn't hurt!"

Dad reached for the phone. "We really should call someone. Maybe the CDC?"

"No!" Mary kicked. "I've seen it in movies! They'll take Uncle Walt! They'll take my pet!"

Mom let go and Mary slid to the floor. "Your pet?"



"It's perfect! No fur to bug Dad's allergies. Not small enough to escape. I won't have to feed it. And it won't poo everywhere!"

The three adults stared at Mary.

"What? I've already got a name picked out."

"A name? For my severed arm?" Even Walt was creeped out.

Amanda and Ted agreed to keep Walt's blight a secret. "Nobody'd believe us," said Ted. "Just don't go outside or answer the door." He pulled the curtains shut.

"Fine by me," Walt replied, limping back to bed.

It took amazing amounts of work intermixed with cataclysmic whining to convince her parents to let her keep the arm as a pet, but Mary prevailed. It seemed friendly enough and came running when she called.

Mary cradled Handsome Armando in her lap, petting him from wrist to elbow, and his ring finger wagged. She rubbed him with lotion to keep his skin soft and supple. Every day after school, Mary took Handsome Armando outside to play in the back yard. He scuttled around on his fingers like a crab and rolled in the flowerbeds. When Mary sat on the porch, drawing, Handsome Armando stayed beneath the elm tree; he blistered in the sun.

Walt's foot fell off the following Saturday and Mary secreted it away, gave it a bubble bath, and invited it out to the back yard. Hopalong Anklovitch was especially thrilled with the slide and Mary had difficulty convincing him to come indoors at bedtime.

Walt's speech became slurred as the infection ate away his jaw. He stopped leaving his room during the day. The smell was so bad Mary wouldn't join him for movies anymore. She could hear him thumping through the house at night, gathering snacks and beer for the following day. Handsome Armando and Hopalong Anklovitch were in poor shape, too. Skin sloughed off in patches, leaving glistening sores that turned brown, then grey. Mary had to stop rubbing lotion on them; the pressure of her hands was enough to sever the fragile connection between epidermis and muscle. She stole Mom's Channel No. 5 and doused them both.



Even the Sponge-Bob toaster waffles wouldn't distract Mary.

"But it's the last Show and Tell of the year!"

"It's not a good idea."

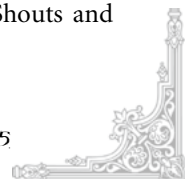
"He's such a good pet!" She held up a mess of tangled string. "I even made a collar and leash so he could come outside for recess."

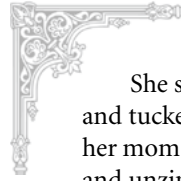
"No! Take your rock collection."

"I'll ask Dad."

"Dad is trying to talk some sense into your uncle. Now cooperate or you're not going anywhere except the timeout chair!"

Mary pushed the waffles away and stomped to her room. Shouts and thuds emanated from Walt's room.





She set off to the bus stop with the arm wrapped in her old baby blanket and tucked into her backpack. She carried the shoebox of rocks, glowering at her mom. Once the bus rolled away, Mary plunked the shoebox onto the floor and unzipped her backpack.

"It's okay," she whispered, unwrapping the arm a little and giving it a tickle.

"What's that?" Amy joined her.

Mary grinned. "Handsome Armando. I'm bringing him for Show and Tell?"

"Ooh! Best Friend Rights! Lemme see!"

"Mom got really mad. I had to sneak him out. I better just wait."

"Okay, but I get to come over after school today and finally play with him."

"Cross my heart and hope to die!"

• • •

The morning seemed longer than usual. After lunch, Miss Harkness pulled the Show and Tell stool from behind her desk. At least half the class begged to be first, but Mary waited patiently. She wanted to go last so nobody could upstage her.

Mary took a seat on the Show and Tell stool, hugging the backpack. "I have the best pet ever. He's the only one in the whole world."

"Mary, what have I told you about exaggerating?"

"Oh, I'm not exaggerating this time. You can ask my parents."

Miss Harkness sighed and Mary continued.

"He never eats, or sleeps, or goes to the bathroom. His favorite thing is digging up Mom's gladiolas." Mary paused, extracted the arm and unwaddled it. "His name is Handsome Armando!"

Shrieks reverberated through the classroom. Several kids in the front row passed out. Joanie and Michael retched, adding the sour aroma of partially digested beans and franks to the tangy stench that rolled off the arm. Miss Harkness said a word Mary had never heard before and reached for the classroom phone.

The arm stood upright on its elbow stump and surveyed the classroom. Its fingers swayed like antennae. Mary regarded her pet with curiosity; she hadn't taught it this trick. Behind her, she heard the classroom door slam shut. After a moment, the arm leapt at Tammy. It landed on her desk with a wet thud and fought to regain its balance, Tammy scrambled out of her seat.

"Ew!" She threw a Step-One reader at it and missed.

The arm curved its fingers into a snarl and attacked.

"Handsome Armando! No! She didn't mean to hurt your feelings!" Mary ran forward, tripping over her classmates on the floor, but the arm was clawing at Tammy's neck. Her wails filled the air. Children clamped their hands over their ears, scrambled toward the door, and stopped.

Standing there was Walt's severed foot.

"Hopalong!" Mary called. "Help!"

The foot curled its toes but remained at its post.



Miss Harkness shouted into the phone. “Evacuate the school! Get everybody out and bolt the doors!”

The fire alarm blared.

Handsome Armando finished with Tammy and skidded through the blood towards the unconscious kids on the floor.

One of the boys awakened at the feel of when something warm misted across his face. “Mom,” he mumbled, “I don’t like the shower.” He sat up, slipping in the liquid, and saw the arm scuttling across the floor. Before he could faint again, it was on him.

In the hallway, the noise of students and teachers responding to the fire alarm was waning. Inside the classroom, the volume rose as children turned from the foot at the door and saw the pool of blood and the arm working on its second victim. They ran toward the windows, which were too high to reach.

“Make a ladder! Make steps!” Jason shouted as he and Susan pushed a desk toward the outer wall.

Several others roused from their shock and turned to help. The foot hopped away from the door. Unable to claw, it thumped around, kicking students in the stomach and tripping them as they struggled to escape. At the bank of windows, Jason and Susan made progress.

“Hurry! This way!” Susan said. Handsome Armando turned his attention from the rapidly diminishing pile of unconscious children and skidded across the floor to stop the would-be heroes. Caught by surprise, Susan went down with minimal effort. Her arterial spray drenched the makeshift staircase. Hopalong climbed the structure, knocking children off either side.

Miss Harkness had been busy at her desk. Prying the stapled-on flag from the wooden flagpole, she held the pole like a spear-fisher. She brought the make-shift weapon down into the nub of Uncle Walt’s ankle joint.

“No! Leave him alone!” Mary tried to pull the spear from her teacher’s grasp. Amy shoved her out of the way and grabbed the spiked foot. She held it aloft like a banner.

Handsome Armando abandoned Jason’s remains and attacked the teacher. Miss Harkness backed toward the desk as she fought to keep the fingers off her throat.

“Bottom drawer, Amy!”

Amy positioned herself.

“Now!”

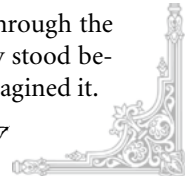
Amy swung the spear, dumping the foot into the drawer. Miss Harkness forced the arm on top of the foot and slammed the drawer shut, leaning against it.

“Keys on my desk.” Amy snatched up the bundle and held it out.


“Which one?”

“Purple nail polish.”

Amy found it and locked the drawer. The fire alarm blared through the empty hallways. Children sniffled and clung to one another. Mary stood beside the Show and Tell stool, crying. This was not the way she’d imagined it.







Miss Harkness opened the door. Children ran toward the main doors and the waiting police and fire crews. Mary sat on the floor, holding her baby blanket. Amy sat beside her.

From inside the old wooden desk, they heard thumps and scratches. The desk moved an inch with every thud. Miss Harkness tried to coax Mary up.

“We need to leave.”

“No.”

“Mary,” Miss Harkness started impatiently.

“I’m not leaving them.”

“But they’re monsters,” said Amy.

“They’re just misunderstood! You scared them! Everybody did!” Mary stood up, shoved her traitorous best friend, and pulled a loose bobby pin from Miss Harkness’s tangled hair.

Uncle Walt had taught her to open a locked door when she was three. She ran to the desk, jammed the bobby pin into the cheap lock and twisted. The drawer opened and the appendages climbed out. Pus oozed from Hopalong’s ankle. Armando’s fingers were soft and pulpy; Mary saw the bones poking out like cat’s claws.

“Hopalong! Armando! You’re hurt!” Armando swiped at her. Mary shrieked, backing away as they advanced.

Amy ran to the Cleaning Cubby, grabbed the broom, and chased after the limbs, thwacking them again and again. The pair continued to close in on Mary, forcing her against the “Things My Body Can Do” bulletin board.

Miss Harkness had a plan. “The kitchen!” She grabbed the broom from Amy and chased Armando and Hopalong into the hallway.

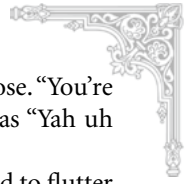
Amy jogged beside her, shouting “Get them! Kill them! Smash the freaks to bits!”

“We’ve got to burn them,” Miss Harkness explained, between swats. “Get them in the oven and set it to CLEAN.”

Mary followed, howling her own set of instructions interspersed with pleas for mercy. “Stop it! They’re just defending themselves! Hopalong, kick her in the gut! Miss Harkness, ‘when we hit, it doesn’t help!’ Armando, choke her! Poke her in the eyes!” As they approached the back doors and the cafeteria, Amy spun around and smacked Mary across the face.

Mary stared at her for a moment, then grabbed a hank of hair and pulled. Amy stumbled and landed flat on her stomach like a starfish. Miss Harkness turned to help Amy. Nobody was looking at the rear doors when the safety glass shattered and Walt’s left hand reached through letting in what was left of Mary’s uncle.

As the door clunked shut behind him, he dropped the axe and lurched toward the living trio. Hopalong and Armando fidgeted.



Wrapping his good arm around Miss Harkness, he drew her close. “You’re a pretty thing,” he said. Because of his festering jaw, it came out as “Yah uh heey hin.”

She gagged, but forced herself to keep eye contact and managed to flutter her eyelashes a bit. “I was just heading to the cafeteria,” she replied, trying to sound seductive. “Why don’t you join me?” She turned toward the cafeteria doors. When Walt didn’t stop her, she took a few steps. “You can even bring your friends.” Walt tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace. He stumbled after her; she’d be tasty.

Mary hadn’t seen Uncle Walt in over a week. She didn’t understand how her uncle had become the putrid creature making lewd suggestions to her teacher. How could Miss Harkness stand to cuddle up to him and giggle while his face dripped onto her blouse?

As Walt struggled to take in his new surroundings, the girls shut the kitchen door; Amy locked it. Miss Harkness headed for the enormous conveyor oven. She flipped the startup switch, removed the safety panel, and took a deep breath before turning back to face the dripping, stinking Walt. For once, she was glad she’d spent her college years blowing the manager of Pizza Pizzazz in the walk-in.

Amy held Mary’s hand and edged toward the bank of wall ovens; Mary hadn’t said a word since her uncle had shown up. Amy opened all the oven doors, pulled out the racks, and faced her friend. “Here’s what we have to do.” She relayed their teacher’s instructions and moved toward the back of the prep line to wait.

Miss Harkness sashayed across the floor and wrapped her arms around Walt. “Dance with me?”

“Das?”

Miss Harkness positioned Walt’s good arm around her waist and held his mushy stump in her hand. Her smile wavered a little but Walt was too thrilled to notice; this chick was proof he did, too, have mojo. She led as they danced to a waltz he couldn’t hear. He tried to kiss her, but only managed to coat her face in slobber and pus. When the oven reached temperature, Miss Harkness steered him toward the broiler.

“You know what?” she cooed.

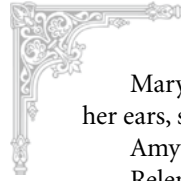
“Huh?”

“You’re really hot.” She pushed him onto the scalding rollers and threw herself on top of him. His body squelched beneath hers and her lunch came up. Uncle Walt fought, but nothing worked the way it was supposed to. His bones snapped as the teacher wrapped her arms and legs around him. She kept him pinned against her they rolled into the oven. Her breath was uneven, her eyes shut tight. Mary could have sworn she smelled burnt cheese.

The limbs tried the door, then the serving window, before turning on Amy. She kicked at Hopalong as Armando reached for her face.

“Mary!”





Mary looked at her friend, then the ovens. Closing her eyes and covering her ears, she shook her head.

Amy screamed; Handsome Armando dug at one of her eyes.

Relenting, Mary grabbed Hopalong and flung him into a wall oven. Shutting the door, she yanked the lever and pushed the Self Clean button. Hopalong kicked the door, but the lock held and the oven heated up.

She turned and found Amy struggling to keep Armando's fingers from clawing further into her throat.

"Help!"

Mary pulled Armando off, but his bony fingers had found the artery.

She threw him into the oven but slammed the door too hard; it popped back open and Armando's fingers curled around the edge. Mary tried again, leaning against it as she reached for the lever. It clunked into place, she started the Self Clean cycle, then fell to the floor beside Amy.

• • •

Mary wouldn't unlock the kitchen door. Firefighters and police officers tried to coax her out, but she sat beside Amy and stared at the floor. Hopalong and Armando no longer thumped. Uncle Walt and Miss Harkness fell off the far edge of the conveyor, smoldering. Smoke filled the room as the ovens reduced her pets to ash and bone. Several hours later, the ovens clicked off and the heat dissipated. Mary sat holding Amy's hand, staring at the mound of bone and ash that was Uncle Walt and Miss Harkness.

It wasn't until her mother showed up, arm in a cast and a bandage across one side of her neck, that Mary opened the door.

"Mom." Her voice cracked.

Her mother pulled her into a one-armed hug and led her outside to the waiting EMTs.

Accu-Bio Farm Laboratories disposed of Walt's leftover pieces and buried the remaining genetically modified salt in an empty field beside the elementary school. Six months later, the land was donated to the town and repurposed as a community vegetable garden.

The Lab paid off the victims' families and settled Mary and her parents into a windowless suite behind several locked doors. Mom and Dad festered and rotted until one day they weren't there in the morning. Bound by a gag order, Mary went back home with Grandma Lamb.

The next summer, town residents marveled at their effortless weight loss and the intense flavor of the corn, peas, tomatoes, and watermelon grown in the community garden. Mary sat on the porch and watched. Skinned knees festered. Arms dangled. Jaws dropped.





# Cinders

By Katherine Marciniak

*Based on Cinderella*

The shot intended for Prince Benjamin went into the zombie's head.

Damn it, this was not what I signed up for. Then again, years of near slavery at the hands of my step family wasn't exactly what I wanted either. That's why I ran away.

The zombie sputtered and collapsed into a pile at the prince's feet, its moldy limbs splayed, rotting eyes wide open. Goosebumps marched up my arms as I nudged it with the gold slippers Dicky had custom made for my obnoxiously tiny feet. It was dead.

Assassinate the prince and get out. That had been my job. This complicated matters.

"There'll be more," the Prince said, not bothering to question why I brought a gun to his ball, or for that matter, to this handy make-out spot. "We better hide."

More? I smiled inwardly. Good. Then they'd kill the Prince, and I wouldn't have to. Except they could also kill Dicky.

My hands were full with my skirts and the gun as I bolted down the hallway. I needed to find Dicky. I couldn't just stand around and wait for something to kill her! Not since I'd already lost my precious guild sister, Edwina.

"Wait, Ella, come back!" Prince Benjamin shouted after me.

I ran down the stairs, my eyes darting about the room. Zombies swarmed the ballroom. The once swirling pastel dresses were now limp and blood spattered. Instead of music, the castle echoed with screams.

"Dicky!" I yelled. I scanned the ballroom for her plain yellow dress. God, where was she? She would never let a zombie get her, would she?

I bit my lower lip and fought back tears.

My blood ran cold when something groaned behind me. Before I could turn, the zombie had me in its clutches, its mouth uncomfortably close to my face. I fought to get free, but it held tight, as if I were a chew toy it refused to part with. "Brains," it whispered in my ear. Its breath reeked of death, something I'd smelled too often. I struggled again, but something inside told me it was fruitless – there was no living without Dicky and Edwina. I closed my eyes and waited for the end.



It didn't come. The zombie crumpled and fell to the floor. I stared at it wide-eyed, and then at the person who'd killed it.

Prince Benjamin stood there with a chair leg. "You have to get it in the head."

My head spun – I needed to lean on something. "You kill zombies?"

Prince Benjamin shrugged, still holding the chair leg. "You kill people."

He'd figured that out. It wasn't like we went around randomly killing people. We always had a reason. His family was responsible for the zombies in our midst. They'd turned Edwina into a zombie which was reason enough for me. Now it was Benjamin's turn to die. "Only the bad ones." I glared.

"Of course," Prince Benjamin said, adding, "We'll both be dead if we stay here. Come on. I know where we can go." He took my hand.

I twisted my hand out of his. "I'm going to find Dicky."

"We're going to the lab."

I froze. The lab was where they'd turned Edwina into a zombie, and they'd almost gotten me as well. I was not going to the lab.

"Dicky's out there. She's my family, my best friend."

Prince Benjamin pulled on my arm. "We're going to the lab. Doctor Marston can solve this."

"Only because he created this," I snapped.

Another zombie lumbered up to us, lips bloody from a previous meal. From reflex I shot it in the head. My hands trembled and I lowered the gun.

"Let's go!" I valued my life more than I was afraid of the lab.

Prince Benjamin ran his hand against the wall underneath the grand staircase until he opened a narrow door, exposing a spiral staircase. "Just go down, I'll lock it again."

I didn't need to be told twice.

• • •

When the guild boss, known as the Godmother, gave me this assignment – to seduce and kill the prince — I'd balked. Look at me I'm an assassin. You really think I'm going to fit in at a ball?

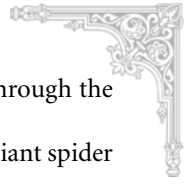
That's when the boss and Dicky brought out the fancy dress and the gold slippers. We'll make it work, they'd said and transformed me into a princess. Everything will be perfect.

That's what Dad said, too, when he brought home my stepmother and stepsisters.

• • •

As Benjamin and I descended, my mind wandered to the last time I was in the lab. Edwina and I had been two more corpses from the hospital. Two more corpses they were going to inject with the zombie virus. Except I wasn't dead yet. I woke up as they were about to infect me. I made sure they knew I was alive.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, I considered shooting the Prince and running back. I didn't need to see the lab again. I was a part of the assassin's guild, not a zombie hunter. This place would be a perfect cover. Everyone



would assume zombies did the deed. Assuming the zombies ate through the bullet hole.

“So, what’s your real name?” the Prince asked, sidestepping a giant spider web as we walked down the stone corridors.

I stopped. He wasn’t supposed to figure that out, either. “Lady Eleanor of the Mountains.” Almost true — it was my alibi. ‘Cinders’ the orphaned child was a notorious assassin taken in by the guild for her brains and survival instincts. Lady Eleanor didn’t have anyone’s blood on her hands.

“Fine. Don’t tell me,” Prince Benjamin said as we pushed through a heavy door to the wine cellars.

The sickly smell of wood mixed with grapes made me wrinkle my nose. I was trapped in the wine cellars last time before I escaped. The guards chasing me and the overpowering smell of alcohol were permanently stamped in my memory.

“I’m curious,” I said, “Why do you kill zombies when you and your parents wanted them in the first place?”

“We didn’t want them,” Prince Benjamin said. “How could you think that? We wanted Terrance back. He was the charming one. The one supposed to marry well and live happily ever after.”

The floor was slick as we neared the other end of the wine cellar, and a nasty smell hung in the air. “Have you ever seen the people they bring in?” I asked, treading carefully over the slippery parts, trying not to fall. “The cadavers?”

The Prince shook his head. “I’m away most of the time. Why?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer because something growled at us from behind the wine barrels. “Did you hear that?” I whispered.

The zombie rushed out. I reeled and pointed my gun at it, adrenaline pounding through my veins. But when I got a good look at it, I dropped the gun. It was Edwina. My sister.

“What are you doing?!” Prince Benjamin yelled. “Kill it!”

“I can’t!” I choked. Edwina came towards me, growling and snorting. This Edwina had raisin eyes instead of laughing ones, and a sneer instead of a comforting smile, but she was unmistakably the same person, “It’s my sister!”

We’d promised we’d always be there for each other.

Prince Benjamin clocked her with his chair leg, and Edwina loped after him. Wasn’t this what I wanted? For Benjamin to be dead? I moistened my lips. But he’d saved me, hadn’t he?

I scooped up the pistol. With trembling hands, I shot Edwina. Her body crumpled to the floor.

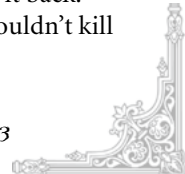
What had I done?

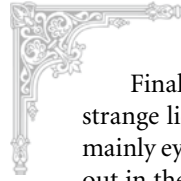
The wine cellar was quiet except for the distant wail of people and zombies. I’d killed her. No, I’d killed the zombie. She was already dead.

“Thanks,” Benjamin said, his hand slipped into mine. I pulled it back.

Benjamin and I fell into silence, and I looked over at him. I couldn’t kill someone who’d saved my life twice. It was just plain wrong.

Could he truly be a prince in the best sense of the word?





Finally we reached the lab. It was worse than I remembered. Vials of strange liquids bubbled on Bunsen burners against the wall. Jars of things – mainly eyes – stared at me from sagging shelves. Two metal tables lay stretched out in the middle of the room. Crimson blood trickled down into the center of the room and disappeared down a small drain.

I clutched my gun with trembling fingers.

“Doc Marston?” Prince Benjamin walked around one of the tables, following the trail of blood. “Are you hurt?”

I shuddered as I remembered Ed’s stiff body on that table.

“Ella, get over here!”

I peered over at Prince Benjamin and Doctor Marston, keeping the table between us. Doctor Marston was slumped over, dying. He glanced up at me. “You! Cinders!”

“Hey, Doc. Miss me?” I narrowed my eyes at him. At least there was no way he could kill me now.

Prince Benjamin asked, “How do we stop those zombies?”

Doctor Marston’s chest heaved and he took his hands away from his stomach. Both were drenched in dark blood. “Not... not much time...” he whispered. “Midnight, zombies forever. Eat salt... salt... turns... human. Or shoot them... in the head.” His chest rose and fell, the breaths betting more shallow. “They’re still vaguely sentient, midnight is the key.” He coughed, blood bubbled from his lips and his eyes closed.

“It’s okay, Doc,” Prince Benjamin said. “You’ll be fine.” Marston’s eyes snapped open.

“No,” Doc Marston said. “Got me. Here. Shoot me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What?”

The mad scientist convulsed and slumped back against the wall, dead. I smiled to myself, realizing something.

“Good job, Ed. You got him,” I said to myself.

The dead doctor groaned.

“Oh, no,” Benjamin said. “Not again...”

The doctor raised his head, staring at me with blank eyes. As he pushed himself up, I took my gun and shot him in the face. Now that was justice.

“Let’s go,” Prince Benjamin said, his words laced with fear.

“Where?” I asked.

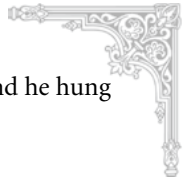
Prince Benjamin shook his head. “Anywhere. Salt! The kitchens have salt!”

“The zombies aren’t going to want salt. They want brains! And warm still beating hearts.”

“We’ll put meat in bowls with the salt. Come on, let’s go!”

We ran down the hallways, time not on our side. It was close to midnight already. Every time I thought I heard a zombie behind us, I pushed myself to run faster.

“Your name is Cinders,” Prince Benjamin said, helping me up a ladder that led into the kitchen.



“Good guess,” I said, reaching the top. I lent him a hand up, and he hung on to it for longer than necessary.

“Why?” he said, a smile behind his blue eyes.

“Because I’m filthy and I talk so damn dirty.”

Prince Benjamin laughed, squeezing my hand. “Cinderella. I like it.”

We stood up in the kitchen, grinning madly as we brushed the dirt and dust off our knees. We’d escaped the worst of it. We were alive!

“How did you get in here? You zombies?”

I jerked my head up, fear slipping into my stomach, and saw several servants standing around us, jabbing pokers in our direction.

“Elisha, it’s me,” Prince Benjamin said, holding his hands up in surrender. “Remember me? Benjamin? Benji?”

“How can we prove you and your friend aren’t dead?” said one of the poker-holding servants. I guessed she was Elisha.

I took a step forward, only to be jabbed harder. “Well, you could kill us for one thing,” I said, moving the poker away from me.

“I detest brains,” Benjamin said.

Elisha lowered the poker. “I guess we can believe you. What do you want?”

“As much raw meat as you can round up and salt, bowls of it.” I said.

The servants burst out laughing, “What, to throw over your shoulder?”

“We need to feed the zombies salt,” Benjamin said. “It’ll stop them. You’ve got to help us.”

“And it’s almost midnight,” I added. “We have to work fast, otherwise it won’t work at all!”

“Ah!” Elisha said, grinning from ear to ear. “First you have to have some salt, too,” I raised my eyebrows. “After all, you might be zombies.” Shooting Elisha in the face would be satisfying but hardly beneficial to our cause.

I opened my mouth to protest, and got a spoonful of salt. I gagged on it and my eyes watered. My heart raced. “Ew.”

“Can’t be too safe,” Elisha shrugged, almost apologetic.

I coughed and glared in her direction.

Prince Benjamin was having the same experience, but he kept it more to himself. “Let’s go feed some zombies,” he sputtered after a minute of salty hell.

“Where’s the meat?” I asked, “We don’t have much time.”

Elisha shook her head, “We used most of what we had on the ball. It was eaten hours ago.”

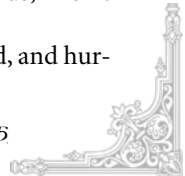
I bit my lip. There had to be some meat in this place. Maybe there were scraps in the trash. “Come on.”

“What? Where are we going?” Benjamin asked, as I grabbed his sleeve.

“We’re going to find meat,” I said. “And we’re going to look in the trash, wherever that is.”

Elisha waved her hands in front of us in a feeble attempt to stop us, “Don’t go. Stay here – be safe with us.”

“We’re never going to bring down the zombies if we stay,” I said, and hurried off to find the meat. There had to be some.





It took us a little while, but we found it, in the trash. There was little more than fat and gristle left. Scraps not big enough for a stray dog, but it had to be enough. I ripped my stupid fancy dress trying to get at it, but we got it, and that's what counted. The dining room was quiet except for the clock ticking, a morbid reminder that time was running out. I felt certain something would jump out from behind the curtains or from under a table every time I went in to put the bowls of salt and meat around. My arms were full of the bowls, I'd spilled so much on the way from the kitchens I had to be cursed with bad luck.

What if it wasn't enough? What if it didn't work? What if Marston was setting us up? He'd never struck me as a trustworthy guy, especially since he'd tried to turn me into a zombie.

"You know," Prince Benjamin said as we went back for more bowls of salt, "the zombies weren't supposed to be bad. They weren't supposed to come out from the lab. When my older brother died, they were going to resurrect him, so he could be king. He's got all the training. It just went very wrong."

"Ironic, my sister died to help resurrect your brother," I said.

"They didn't care who died. It could easily have been you," Prince Benjamin said. He wasn't as stupid as I originally thought. "Don't lie, you were scared going back into that lab."

I shrugged it off, "I did throw things at Marston last time I was in there."

Prince Benjamin grinned, and his hand caught mine again. "I'm sorry, though. If I had known..."

I shook my head. "No, it's all right. I—"

I didn't get to finish that sentence. A hand shot up through the grating I was walking over, grabbing my foot and tripping me, sending the bowl of salty meat I was carrying flying. I struggled to get free, but the hand held fast to my shoe. Prince Benjamin knelt down and tried to pry the fingers off of my foot, but a more urgent matter caught his attention: zombies coming down the hallway.

"Shit!" I screamed. "Get them. Just get them!" I shoved the gun into his hands. "Get them to the dining room. I'll be there in a minute."

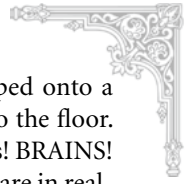
"I'm not going to leave you!" the Prince said. Amazing how a few hours ago I would've thought that sounded too sticky sweet and romantic for me, but now it sounded sincere. And kind of nice.

"Just go!" I shouted, struggling. "I'll be fine!"

I watched him run down the hallway towards the zombies with my gun, and it dawned on me I was sitting here, alone and defenseless, with a zombie on my foot. Not my brightest move.

I wrenched off the gold shoe, freeing myself. What else could I do? I had been hoping to sell the shoes as a pair and get some money for them, but that didn't seem important anymore. I tore the other one off and threw it into the hallway, so it was easier to run.

In the dining room, Benjamin waved the gun in front of him, in an attempt to ward off the zombies. Apparently we were out of ammunition.



I grabbed a sword from one of the suits of armor and jumped onto a table, knocking over one of the bowls of salt, the meat tumbled to the floor. “Zombies, come one, come all!” I shouted. “Feast yourselves on this! BRAINS! Yes, I know, much less gooey than what you usually have, but these are in reality, dried brains! We just happened to have some here in the castle, so, dig in!”

The zombies lurched over to the table and stared at the bowls. Then they looked up at me. Damn. I probably did look tastier than salt. I probably was tastier than salt.

“Just keep talking!” Benjamin said. He grabbed a sword from another suit and held it up, his blue eyes meeting mine, you can do it.

I nodded, clutching my weapon. “Taken directly from the skulls of the juiciest people in the kingdom! From people out of the kingdom! Have you ever wanted the smartest person’s brain? Well, have a bite of this!”

One of them licked the salt and then another tasted the meat, and another. I crossed my fingers and looked at the grandfather clock in the corner. It was almost midnight. This had to work.

“Look out!” Benjamin shouted. I whirled around to see one zombie had decided he wasn’t interested in “dried brains” and had crawled onto the table with me. I swung the sword and lopped his head off. The stupid sword was heavy.

The zombies ate the salt and meat and transformed back into human corpses.

When the clock struck midnight, they were dead. Really dead, not undead anymore.

The Prince ran over to the corpse of his mother as I clambered off the table. His father was nowhere in sight.

I looked at the faces of the dead men and women. Amazing they’d all been here for the music and the dancing and the good time, and now they were dead. None of them were Dicky, I noticed, a pang of hope in my gut.

Dicky... she’d been in charge of the Queen. Maybe she had been smart enough to get out when the zombies came. Let Dicky not be here, I prayed to whatever deity might’ve been watching me.

“I guess,” Benjamin said, standing up and wiping tears from his eyes, “I should call in the authorities.”

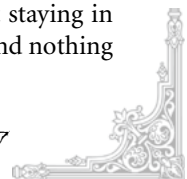
“In that case,” I said, abandoning my search, “I should leave.” Nobody he called would be forgiving to an assassin.

He came over to me, first putting his hand on my shoulder, then giving me a hug. “I wish you didn’t have to. Will I see you again?”

“Maybe,” I said, as the embrace ended. “And can you do me a favor? Find Dicky for me.”



I was home – the one Dicky, Ed and I had shared – packing. I’d shed the fancy ball gown, which was trashed, and was ready for flight. I was not staying in this hellhole any longer. There was too much risk of being found and nothing



to keep me here. I threw a knife into my suitcase when someone knocked on my door. “Whoever the hell you are, leave!” I cried.

“In the name of the king, open up!”

Oh, shit, they’d found me. “No one’s home!”

They banged the door open anyway. I sighed and went into the front room, where I found a surly looking guard and the Prince.

“Her,” Prince Benjamin said, pointing to me.

I studied his face. What was he doing? Oh, God, he knew my name, and my alibi, he knew my profession. He’d come to arrest me. My heart pounded. I wouldn’t feel betrayed. I was going to shoot him last night. He had a right to lock me up forever.

“Benji...” I whispered, hoping to find compassion somewhere in his stony expression.

“Sit down,” The guard commanded.

I did as I was told – really, there was no sense in arguing – and the guard slipped the golden shoe onto my foot. The shoe I’d thrown into the hall.

Prince Benjamin gave a shaky laugh and a slow smile, like the Prince I knew. “It is you. It really is you. You looked so different. Cinders, you have to come back with me.”

“Oh hell no. They’ll kill me,” I said.

“No,” Benjamin said. “The threat of the zombies isn’t gone. We both know how great a zombie killer you are. You have to come back and help me fight. We’ll find Dicky. And my father.”

I sat there and stared at him for a minute. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Benjamin said taking my hand. “Will you come back? As my partner?”

A smile crept onto my face. I had been hoping to see him again. But partners? Well, that remained to be seen.

“Sure,” I said, “Let’s go.”

Benjamin gripped my hand tighter, and I kept my smile hidden. I’d play along for now, and see what came next.





# Thumbelina's Bloodbath

By Herb Shallcross

*Based on Thumbelina*

Being just one inch tall was never a drawback where Thumbelina was concerned. When a daffodil was blown from its stalk, Thumbelina chased it down and repurposed it as an oversized fancy hat. A berry or a walnut fed her for a week, and the shell served as a new serving bowl. Thumbelina had everything she wanted, and cherished every moment of her splendid life in the garden.

That is, until the frogs came and took her, and things only went downhill from there.

Thumbelina was fast asleep when she was kidnapped, and remained asleep as the evil frog queen whisked her out of the garden and into the swamp. The tiny lady never woke or stirred as the frog placed Thumbelina on a lily pad in the middle of the treacherous swamp. The queen planned to keep Thumbelina trapped until the preparations were made for the wedding to her gruesome son. Fortunately, a school of kind fish saw the beautiful and innocent Thumbelina, and they chewed the pad loose from the stalk mooring it to the pond floor.

"Thank you, sweet fishies!" Thumbelina called, as her lily pad floated downstream.

At first Thumbelina was terrified and lonely, until a delightful butterfly alighted next to her on the lily pad.

"You must be the most beautiful creature I've ever seen!" Thumbelina said. At the butterfly's prompting, she tied a string from it to the lily pad, that the butterfly might act as a sail to speed Thumbelina's journey.

"We need to get you south as quickly as we can," the butterfly warned. "Strange things are happening up north. Strange things, indeed!"

"Whatever do you mean?" Thumbelina asked, being utterly unacquainted with awful things, outside of the horrid frogs.

"Well," the butterfly said, not wanting to terrify the poor child, but realizing he must prepare her for what was coming, "the dead are not staying in the ground."

Thumbelina thought about this for a moment, puzzled.

"That's not awful," she said finally. "It's wonderful! I always said how splendid it would be if we all could live forever!"

"Trust me, it's not splendid," the butterfly said. "Something evil is spreading. They come back hungry."

"I should think so," Thumbelina said. "Anyone who goes through such an ordeal deserves a feast."

"You don't understand, my dear girl. They come back hungry for brains."

"I don't believe it," Thumbelina said. "The world is only full of wonderful things, what you say is impossible."

"Men have made it possible," the butterfly said. "They spray the earth with a chemical that warps everything it touches, turning life to something much worse than death. Any creature infected becomes contagious, and their bite spreads the ungodly sickness."

Thumbelina stumbled, her mouth moving mutely as the stream gurgled around the racing lily pad. She was about to object that the butterfly must be mistaken, nothing so horrid could surface on the wonderful Earth she loved so much, when a hellish sound filled the air. Thumbelina turned to see a mayfly buzzing toward them, chittering like mad, its soft tissue showing through its exoskeleton in gruesome patches. Its jagged mouth was chomping wildly, a sickly white froth bubbling out and being lost behind it to the wind.

"Oh, no!" the butterfly shouted. "It's one of them! Untie me, girl, please!"

Thumbelina fumbled with the line, but the mayfly was upon them too soon. It crash-landed on Thumbelina and sent her soaring off the lily pad into the torrid stream, where she caught hold of a twig and used it as a buoy. Downstream, she saw the zombified mayfly on the lily pad, gorging on the poor, defenseless butterfly.

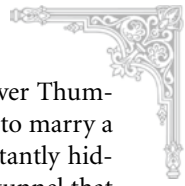
Even after she washed ashore, Thumbelina wept until the sun fell and darkness overtook the land. Only then did Thumbelina's fear overtake her grief. She picked herself up from the muddy bank and trounced through the foreign cornfield, which was a forest for her. Suddenly every shadow and every hollow housed specters and monsters, all stalking Thumbelina and waiting for the moment to pounce and devour her brains, where once had been splendid secrets waiting to be discovered.

Fortunately, Thumbelina did not encounter any more walking or buzzing dead, but she marched for several days and nights with very little in the way of food. The cornstalks were far too tall and tough for her to eat. Thumbelina was starving and in tatters when she arrived at the home of a field mouse, who graciously invited her in.

"Winter is coming, my dear," the field mouse said. "It won't do to leave you out in the cold."

"Something much worse than winter is coming," Thumbelina warned, but the field mouse dismissed the girl's claims as delusions brought about by fatigue and starvation.

Thumbelina did the mouse's chores in exchange for food and shelter. Each evening, after the mouse was asleep, the tiny beauty stayed up late into the night honing weapons to defend herself against the zombie creatures. She fitted a thorn to the end of a twig, which would serve her as a sturdy spear.



A zombie apocalypse was not the only dark cloud hanging over Thumbelina's head. To make matters worse, the mouse was pushing her to marry a blind mole who lived in a connected cove. Thumbelina was constantly hiding from the curmudgeonly mole, all the while sneaking into the tunnel that connected their quarters to tend to a sweet sick bird that she had found there.

"You're such a kind little lady," the sick bird said to Thumbelina, as she fed it soup from a ladle made from a strip of dried corn husk. "I'll be healthy soon, then I'll take you away to our tiny kingdom in the meadow."

"I wish I could," Thumbelina said, "but I can't abandon the field mouse after she's been so kind to me."

The next day, Thumbelina decided to talk to the field mouse about the bird's offer. Thumbelina wanted the mouse to come with them, where they could all live happily in the tiny kingdom. They could leave the mouse's possessions for the mole (as possessions were all he cared about), so everyone would be happy. She found the mouse sitting in the corner, cleaning herself with her mouth. Thumbelina spoke to the field mouse's back, and she neither turned nor answered, but only kept on gnawing at her feet and her tail. Finally, frustrated at being ignored, Thumbelina burst out:

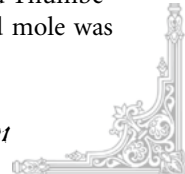
"What do you say, my dear woman? Give me an answer, please!"

When the mouse wheeled around, her eyes were red and savage just as the mayfly's had been. She was frothing, and the smile that had always greeted Thumbelina was now replaced with a sinister, famished sneer. Suddenly Thumbelina saw how sharp the field mouse's teeth were, how lithe and hard her brown body. The homely creature was a feral beast, with claws bared and murder in every clumsy movement. She advanced on Thumbelina with a low, slow growl, the fur on her back stark upright like the hackles of a wolf on the hunt.

Thumbelina darted backward, racing toward her weapon kit. But the field mouse lumbered toward her too quickly, her fearsome snout leading the charge. Thumbelina punched the zombie mouse across the nose, sending both of them wheeling around and falling to the floor. Thumbelina was first to scramble to her feet, and she ran to her room to grab the spear. When she turned, the mouse was centimeters away, and not a second from tearing Thumbelina apart with her savage snapping jaws. But Thumbelina lifted the spear just in time, and the field mouse ran herself through on the thorn. Thumbelina panted at the squirming, doubly dead monster she held impaled on her weapon, the same sweet lady she'd loved so dearly just moments before.

"Thanks for everything," Thumbelina said, "and may you sleep well." Then she kicked the body off her spear and dumped it in the dirt with a thud.

Thumbelina went racing to make sure her bird friend was safe, but the moment she stepped into the tunnel she knew something was terribly wrong. The smell was unbearable, and the sound of a strange labored breathing came bouncing off the walls. It was nearly pitch dark in the tunnels, and Thumbelina knew that she would be at a major disadvantage if the blind mole was after her, as he could navigate the tunnels deftly by smell.



“Stay away from me, mole,” Thumbelina shouted, “or I’ll gut you like I gutted the field mouse! And I liked her.”

Of course, the mole was many times the size of the field mouse, and when he came lumbering around the corner his stench filled the tunnel and froze Thumbelina as if she were in wet clay. Thumbelina retched as she stumbled backward, horrified. The huge mole had torn its own useless eyes out, and it now advanced on poor Thumbelina with a pair of oozing wounds in its face. Thumbelina held her spear up at chest height, but her reach was dwarfed by the towering mole. So she turned and sprinted back through the labyrinth of tunnels, stumbling through the darkness, the mole stalking her every step of the way. Just when she thought there was some distance between them, Thumbelina ran around a corner and straight into the rancid fur of the zombie mole.

Thumbelina gasped in what she suspected would be her last breath, but the mole was rocked from behind. Her bird friend had come to her rescue! The two creatures tumbled in a tangle of fur and feathers, the mole gnashing blindly at its new foe. It was just about to seize the bird by the throat when Thumbelina rushed in and ran her spear through the zombie mole’s neck. Blood and bile gurgled from the mole’s wound, and the two friends panted together in the darkness.

“Are you bit?” Thumbelina asked.

“No, thank heavens,” the bird said. Indeed, he had escaped the foray relatively unscathed. “Now mount up, girl. It’s time to get you to the tiny kingdom.”

“Are you sure you’re well enough to fly?” Thumbelina asked.

“I’ll have to be,” the bird said. “This is no place for a little beauty like you.”

Thumbelina climbed aboard the bird’s back and he took flight through a hidden hole in the tunnel ceiling. Below, Thumbelina saw the bloodied form of the field mouse crawling after them.

“She’s still not done,” Thumbelina mused, horrified.

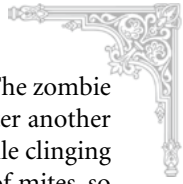
But off they winged, at a speed that Thumbelina had never known. Far below, everything was suddenly of a size Thumbelina could relate to: cornstalks like pea pods, fir trees like ferns. The bird told Thumbelina of the wonders of the tiny kingdom, and how happy she would be there. But at length the bird grew silent, and its wings began to beat in a clunky, jarring rhythm.

“Are you alright, dear friend?” Thumbelina called up to the bird. “Maybe we should stop for a rest.”

No response came. Thumbelina was acutely aware of just how far away the ground really was. To her horror, she noticed a miniscule motion riffing under the bird’s feathers. Thumbelina brushed aside a feather to find a bunch of tiny mites, each one wild eyed and frothing. The little devils were all over her poor bird friend, gnawing him up and gorging on his flesh with their legion of ravenous mouths.

“My poor friend, you’re being eaten alive!”

The bird’s neck swiveled to reveal a likewise ravenous, lifeless face; another of Thumbelina’s friends turned. The bird snapped back at Thumbelina, wrenching itself loose from its own flight path. Suddenly the lot of them went



careening in senseless circles down toward the unforgiving earth. The zombie mites teemed at Thumbelina's feet, and she skewered them one after another while dodging around to avoid the bird's frothing beak, all the while clinging to his feathers for dear life. Her spear grew heavy with the bodies of mites, so Thumbelina hefted it up over her head and clubbed the bird with it, knocking him into a daze. They went into a freefall, and Thumbelina crawled under the bird's wing to brace for impact, vigilant for surviving mites.

They hit the ground with a splat-crunch, the bird's chest left utterly caved in. At length the wing raised and Thumbelina crawled out, dazed but very much alive.

Thumbelina looked around, amazed. What she saw was a fantastic meadow that matched everything the bird had told her of the tiny kingdom. Except, of course, for the army of one-inch zombies marching steadily toward her across the grass.

"This is not how this was supposed to be!" Thumbelina cried. "This is no happy ending at all!"

She bounded away through the meadow, full of flowers just as bright and fragrant as the bird had promised. She dug in to put some distance between herself and the clumsy zombies, but wound up nearly crashing into a frog that landed in front of her. The tilted crown on his head said it all; it was the same putrid frog prince that she was meant to marry! A living frog was bad enough, but Thumbelina cringed to see the bones gleaming through the skinless patches in his legs and face.

He was unwashed and undead and everything Thumbelina had come to hate. As frustrated and fired up as she had ever been, the little beauty let out a war cry and charged the frog prince with her spear, but it hopped out of the way, leaving her to fall flat on her face and lose her weapon. She rolled over to see the frog pouncing high into the air, soon to land on and devour her. But behind the frog, a gorgeous purple flower opened as if in bloom, and within its petals stood a handsome prince just one inch tall. He raised a tiny bow and drew a minute arrow from a quiver on his back, and sent a shot straight through the back of the zombie frog. It landed at Thumbelina's feet, writhing and lashing out uselessly.

"Thank you so much, kind sir!" Thumbelina gushed, flabbergasted. "But who are you?"

"You're quite welcome, my lady. I am Prince Charmalito, ruler of this kingdom. Unfortunately, there are few of us left uninfected."

"Is all lost, then?" Thumbelina said.

"No, not all," the prince said. "The humans have discovered an antidote against infection, and they are spreading it now." The prince pointed overhead to where a plane buzzed by, leaving a plume of brown mist in the air behind it.

"Then we're saved!" Thumbelina said. "Everything will go back to normal! Oh, I should not have spared so many of my friends."





“No, you were right to put them down,” Prince Charmalito said. “The antidote does not work retroactively. The current zombies will have to be disposed of, there’s no way around it.”

The prince wafted down to Thumbelina on tiny fly wings. As he drew closer, Charmalito was stricken by her beauty.

“I would be honored if you will be my princess,” Prince Charmalito said. “I promise to protect you from these darned zombies, and to lavish you with a life of plenty once this ordeal is behind us.”

“Of course!” Thumbelina cried, embracing her new husband. He fitted her with her own set of fly wings, and handed her a new spear made from a white wolf’s smallest tooth grafted to a bundle of alfalfa stalks. Then the happy newlyweds turned to greet their ravenous horde of wedding guests, and went to work slaughtering them one and all.





# The Zombie Bridegroom

By Sheri White

*Based on The Robber Bridegroom*

Helene, the miller's beautiful daughter, was now sixteen, an age when she would be married. One day, as the miller toiled over his grains, a rich man approached for directions. After talking with this man, the miller decided he would be suitable to take his daughter's hand in marriage. He offered Helene to the man, who accepted right away.

But Helene was not pleased with her father's intentions. She was cold to the man, Thomas was his name, when he came to dinner. Although he was handsome, Helene was not attracted to Thomas; in fact, she was somewhat afraid of him. He didn't act unkindly toward her; he was kind and attentive, but Helene knew something was wrong with him. She could not marry him, even if it angered her father.


Helene tried to tell her father of her reservations, but he wouldn't listen. The miller was pleased with the match, satisfied that his daughter would be taken care of once he had passed on. He invited Thomas several times for supper, hoping his daughter would become taken with the man and agree to marry him. Instead, however, she became more afraid and repulsed by him. This did not deter Thomas in the least. If anything, Helene's reticence attracted him even more.

"Helene, my love, why have you never visited me in my home? It will soon be your home as well."

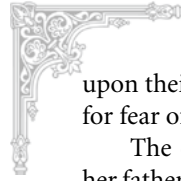
Helene shuddered at the endearment. "I do not know where it is, Thomas. I'm afraid I would not be able to find my way back," Helene answered, hoping she stalled him.

"My house is in the dark woods. You will come in three days to visit me. There will be invited guests I would like you to meet. I will leave a trail of ashes for you to follow so you will not get lost."

Helene knew she would have to go.



Two days before Helene's visit to her bridegroom, a terrifying epidemic struck the small town. Many people died of a high fever, but rose again before they were buried. Even more horrifying, these "un-dead" townspeople feasted



upon their family members. Helene and her father wouldn't leave their home for fear of coming down with the fever.

The day arrived that Helene dreaded. Although the town was plagued, her father insisted she go. He felt sure she would be safer walking in the woods rather than into town.

"Father, please don't make me go. I do not love Thomas and I don't want to marry him."

"Daughter, you must. I promised you to him, and knowing you will be taken care of helps me worry less about you and your future. I am old and don't have much time left. Please do this for me."

Helene sighed, her eyes brimming with tears. "Of course, I will do as you wish, Father." Helene wrapped her cloak around her and walked out the door.

Helene's father knew his daughter disliked Thomas. And he felt sympathetic to her sadness. But he had to know his daughter would be safe. Already he felt the fever upon him. With a heavy heart, he watched her go. When he could no longer see her, he brushed away the ashes so she couldn't find her way home.



Helene saw the trail of ashes spread for her at the entrance to the woods. She took a deep breath and followed the path. Her cloak pockets were filled with hard peas and lentils to mark her way back in case the ashes were washed away by rain. She dropped some every few minutes until she reached the middle of the woods, where it was darkest.

In the distance stood a small house, sinister in its silence. Helene walked to it, and with a trembling hand opened the door. "Hello? Thomas?" There was no answer. The house was empty. Relieved, Helene turned to make her way back home, but stopped hearing a small voice.

"Go back, Miss!"

Helene looked around, but didn't see anyone.

"Who's there?" Helene asked, a tremor in her voice.

"Leave now, Miss! You're in grave danger in this house." The voice was a whisper, but Helene heard it very clearly. It was a female voice; to Helene, it sounded urgent and frightened.

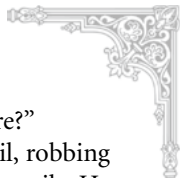
"Please tell me who you are," Helene whispered back. "What danger is there here?"

"Go home, young bride — this is a house of dead. You will die if you don't leave!"

Helene walked throughout, but found nobody. Then she saw who was calling to her — it wasn't a woman after all, but a bird in a cage that hung from the ceiling.

"Leave now, Miss!"

Shaken, Helene continued to walk through the house, finding no human soul until she got to the basement. There, an old woman sat in a wooden rocking chair. She looked up at Helene and shook her head.



“Child, why are you here?”

“I am supposed to visit my bridegroom. Does Thomas live here?”

“He did, but no longer. When he was a living man, he was evil, robbing and killing at random. Now that he has suffered the fever, he is more vile. He has become one of the un-dead and will devour your body and soul given the chance. But it is now too late to leave this house — he walks the woods in search of the living. You must stay here tonight and run home as fast as you can at first light.”

“But who are you, may I ask?”

“Ah, child. I am Thomas’s mother. He has broken my heart and hurt my soul with his horrible acts. Still, I nursed him when he was stricken with the fever, like a mother should. But after he succumbed, he rose before I could get him buried properly. Thankfully, I ran down here before he hurt me. I know he’s walking in the woods now. You’re very lucky you made it here alive.”

Helene thought back to some rustling noises she noticed when walking to the house and paled. “Thank you, ma’am. I will stay the night.”



The next morning, Helene awoke on the floor next to the old woman’s chair. The woman still sat, but no longer rocked back and forth.

Helene tapped her on the shoulder. “Ma’am? I’m going to leave now.”

The woman didn’t answer, didn’t awake. Helene put her hand on the woman’s face; her skin felt cold to Helene’s touch. Suddenly, the old woman’s eyes opened and she moaned. Helene stepped back as the woman reached for her with mottled hands.

The woman, now un-dead, craved Helene’s warm flesh.

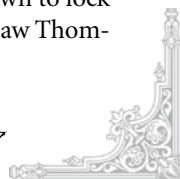
Helene fled from the house, the old woman’s moans following her out the door.



She ran through the dark woods, following the peas and lentils, sharp branches tearing at her cloak. Tears flowed down her face and her heart pounded with fear. Her breath puffed white in front of her face. Then she heard a stick crack nearby. She stopped and held her breath, listening and looking all around. Hearing nothing else, she continued running toward home.

Suddenly, Thomas shambled out from behind a tree, reaching out as if he were a man in search of his beloved. Helene tried to stop, but tripped on a tree root and fell at his feet. She screamed and scrambled backwards on her hands and knees, then got up and turned to run. Thomas grabbed her cloak, pulling her back and choking her. He snapped at her, but wasn’t able to bite her. Helene yanked away from his hand, ripping her cloak, but setting herself free.

Sobbing, she made her way out of the woods, reaching her home. Helene slammed the door shut behind her and put the wooden bar down to lock Thomas out. She peeked out the window between the curtains and saw Thomas — what used to be Thomas — shuffling toward the house.



“Father! Father, help me, please! Thomas has the fever! He almost killed me!”

She ran to her father’s room, but he wasn’t there. She heard Thomas banging on the door, moaning as he smelled her blood and flesh.

“Father? Please, I need you!”

Helene walked to the tiny kitchen, hoping her father had fallen asleep in his chair like he did after breakfast. Or maybe gone to town to get food, even though he was nervous about the fever.

As she walked into the room, she felt a hand on her shoulder from behind her.

“Oh, Father, thank God!” Helene turned to embrace her father, finally feeling safe. Then she saw his face. He moaned and snapped at her. Helene pulled away, but he caught her by her long hair. She realized she was not lucky this time and closed her eyes as her father’s fetid breath filled her nose.

She screamed when he tore the flesh from her neck.





# Matches

By Randy Lindsay

*Based on The Little Match Girl*

Bingo!

Bree opened a case of Gamma flares and stuffed them in her backpack. There were dozens of crates stockpiled here. She'd be selling the Marauder deterrents for years. Not to mention that an intact facility like this one was bound to have some other pre-war tech stashed around.

If she played it cool, she could sell off the first batch of flares without anyone suspecting there were more. A lot more. And the less flares people thought were available the more they'd be willing to pay for them.

Her backpack bulged with the flares. She tried to close it, but the strap didn't reach the buckle. One at a time, she pulled out flares until she could secure the pack. Even then it looked as if it might break open with a good tug. There was no way she was going to fit through the air vents with the pack on; she'd have to take it off and push it along in front of her.

She slung the pack over one shoulder and retraced her steps through the door and down the hall to the maintenance room with the vent. Her steps echoed along the dim, stark corridor. Despite being long abandoned the facility smelled more of chemicals than dust or mold.

In a couple of hours she'd be back in Barter Town. If it only had a Master Blaster running the place it'd be like the movie she'd seen before the apocalypse. A smile crept across her face when she thought about how excited her younger brother and sister would be at the news of her find. The three of them would eat tonight until their bellies were full and tomorrow –

A hand reached out from the shadows and grabbed her shoulder.

Crap. She should've been watching out for Marauders.

Bree tried to twist away as the thing spun her around, hoping to wrench free. The zombie's grip was weaker than the Marauders she'd previously encountered. Its fingers just slid along the leather sleeve of her jacket rather than clamping down.

As soon as she'd tugged loose, she bolted down the hall. Her run lasted all of two steps before the backpack pulled against her shoulder and she heard the buckle pop. Flares scattered across the floor.

She paused for a micro-second to calculate the risk of scooping up an armful of the flares before she left. The Marauders were slow, but she couldn't

take the chance of making another mistake. She could sell whatever flares were still in the pack and then come back later for another load.

"I locked the door to the air filtration room," said the Marauder.

Marauders didn't talk.

Bree stopped halfway down the hall and turned around. The Marauder had bent over to retrieve one of the flares. He examined it briefly before standing up and looking at her. "Is that why you broke into this facility? To steal these?"

Maybe he wasn't a Marauder. Even though his face was sullen and pale like one, and his movements a little bit stiff, if he had enough of a mind to ask questions then he wasn't a zombie.

"People are always in the market for Gamma flares."

"Gamma flares?" The man lifted one of the flares to his face and looked it over. "Do you mean these?"

"Yes."

"These are Gamma Series, Self-Igniting, Virus Inhibitor Sticks."

"Whatever." Bree shrugged. "I trade them for food."

"Technically they belong to the facility and are therefore government property." He spoke slowly and with difficulty, like a man who had suffered a head injury or drank too much. "However, as the highest ranking member of the facility still in residence I guess I could authorize you to take some of them."

Bree relaxed at the announcement. She wasn't much of a brawler, surviving mostly by stealth and her quick reflexes. If she could get of flares out without having to mix it up with the creepy looking guy, so much the better.

"Thanks, Mister. If you don't mind, I'll just pick up the rest of these and head on home. My brother and sister are really going to appreciate this."

"Siblings?"

Bree inched forward to where the first of the flares rested on the floor. "Yeah, I have a younger brother and sister that I look after."

"What about your parents? Were both of them infected by the virus?"

"A pack of Marauders got them."

"Then essentially they were overcome by the virus."

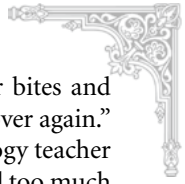
Bree bagged all of the flares within her reach and moved a couple of feet forward. That put her uncomfortably close to the man spouting crazy talk. He acted like the type of person who enjoyed talking. As long as she kept asking him questions he might not pay as much attention to her.

"So, how do you figure the virus got them?" she asked.

"Marauder behavior is programmed by the virus."

"Huh?"

The man stared at Bree for a moment and then straightened himself to his full height, his voice switching to lecture mode. "Viruses have limited opportunity to replicate within a single host. In order to survive they must continually infect other organisms. The most common method of infection is by attacking the host body until it expels them via expectoration or fluid discharge. When the Chinese engineered the Marauder virus they found a way for it to manipulate the behavioral centers of the human brain. The virus causes



the host to attack anyone who hasn't already been infected, their bites and scratches transfer the virus to the victim and the process starts all over again."

This guy really liked talking. Bree tried to recall what her biology teacher had taught her about viruses, but that was a couple of years ago and too much happened since then.

"Sounds like some sort of cold. Why don't you give everyone a shot?"

A crooked smile snaked its way across the man's face. "The comparison between the Marauder virus and the common cold is a little simplistic, but that is what I've been working on here."

The ripped backpack wouldn't hold as many of the flares. Bree took off her belt and wrapped it around the pack, securing the flares that fit as best she could, leaving the rest on the floor.

"If you are ready now, I can escort you out of the facility."

As much as she wanted to take the flares and run, it made more sense to have the creepy guy show her the way out. Or at least have him think he was. No one gave away valuable merchandise for free. Walking around with him would give her a better idea of the layout of this place, making any future scavenging trips that much easier.

He turned around and headed the opposite direction her instincts said to go.

"I'm pretty sure the exit's the other way," Bree said.

"There are still a large number of Marauders in the building. If we go in this direction we can avoid running into them."

The explanation the man gave sounded wrong. They were headed deeper into the facility and that made it a longer, more dangerous escape when she finally decided to make her break. She didn't need any extra chances of running into Marauders on her way out.

Then it occurred to her that the man didn't seem too worried about being jumped by a pack of zombies. He ambled down the hall at an infuriatingly slow pace. At least he kept his distance.

"Do you have a name?" Bree asked.

He stopped and stared at her. Eventually, he grasped the top of his lab coat and pulled it away from his body. Beneath it, pinned to his shirt, was a name tag that said Leonard Helm. He studied the tag and then looked up. "I'm Leonard."

She gave him a nod. "My folks named me Bree, but everyone calls me Matches."

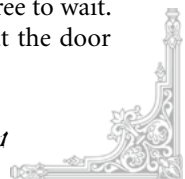
A confused look spread across Leonard's face. "Why do they call you that?"

Bree held up one of the flares. "Because I sell these."

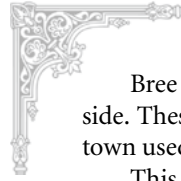
When the perplexed look remained she pretended to light the flare. "You strike them like a match and they light up. Get it? Matches!"

"Oh, I see," Leonard said at last, turning to resume his trek down the hall.

They stopped in front of a door and Leonard motioned for Bree to wait. He opened it just wide enough to squeeze through and then shut the door behind him.







Bree put her ear to the door, but couldn't hear anything from the other side. These weren't the flimsy wood constructs that most of the buildings in town used. The doors here were thick, and stout, and apparently sound proof.

This seemed like as good a time as any to ditch the crazy guy. However, when she turned to walk away she thought she noticed something moving in the distance. She backed up and tried to melt into the doorway. If it was a Marauder the chances were good that it would wander in another direction before it got close enough to track her. Bree hung back and waited.

Her thoughts drifted back to the flares and the price she'd get for them when she got back. If she played it cool and didn't let on that there were crates filled with these things then she might be able to sell off the entire first batch for a premium price. Maybe she'd get enough for Johnny, Abigail, and herself to rent a place to live; nothing fancy, just four walls and a roof.

The door opened and Leonard motioned for her to enter.

She stepped inside. It looked like an operating room she had seen on television before the war. A table, with restraining straps, stood in the center of the room surrounded by stainless steel tools, beeping machines, and the once white floor.

It reeked of unhealthy flesh. Not the rotting smell of dead meat, but the sour stench of sickness. It was the smell of infected wounds — amplified.

Bree looked for Marauders, but none were in the room — at the moment.

“Your arrival at the facility couldn't have been timed any better,” said Leonard as he shut the door behind her and slid the locking bolt into place. “I finished developing the latest series of the virus antidote and need a subject so that I can test the cure.”

With one hand on the door, Leonard reached into the pocket of his smock and pulled out a syringe.

“Test it on yourself,” Bree shouted, oddly relieved now that the maniac had made his move.

Leonard arched his eyebrows. “I have. Didn't you notice the unhealthy color of my skin, or the awkwardness I display with simple physical tasks? These are all symptoms of an incomplete Marauder transformation.”

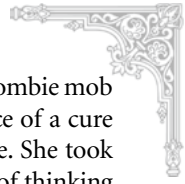
He was half Marauder. Did that make him more dangerous than one of the slow-moving, dim-witted zombies that roamed the countryside? Or less?

“I think I'll pass,” said Bree. “If you want, I can bring a volunteer with me next time.”

“No, that won't do at all. The fate of humanity depends on the success of my research. This is a situation where the needs of the many outweigh the opinion and desires of the one. I apologize, but you must submit.”

Bree grabbed one of the flares that was sticking out of her pack and dragged it across the floor, igniting it on the first strike. Blue light blossomed from the far end of the stick and a thick, black smoke began to fill the air. She pointed it at Leonard.

Leonard's face remained impassive. “I had hoped this process would go smoothly. Now, it looks as if I'll have to administer the cure after you're infected. And that means there's a chance that I won't be able to intervene in time.”



What kind of screwed up mind thought of throwing a girl to a zombie mob as a process? A small part of her mind argued about the importance of a cure and how someone needed to make the sacrifice so others could live. She took that part of her mind and pushed it away until it shut up; that kind of thinking wouldn't help Johnny and Abigail.

He transferred the syringe to his other hand and pulled out a remote door opener. He pushed a big, red button, a pair of doors on the far wall opened, and zombies poured out. They hesitated as soon as they ran into the smoke.

"What are you doing?" Bree screamed. "They'll get you too."

"The virus is only interested in spreading to uninfected hosts. I've been living in the midst of them since the outbreak."

"Let me out of here!" Bree pulled out another flare and lit it off the first. She kept one between her and the Marauder mob and the other she used to threaten Leonard.

"That is annoying." Leonard coughed as he attempted to fan the smoke away. "However, thanks to the Series Two cure, it really isn't anything more than a distraction to me."

Bree lunged towards Leonard and shoved the flare into his face. Flesh sizzled and Leonard screamed. She shoved him aside and tossed one of the flares on the floor between herself and the zombies. Before Mr. Half-Marauder could recover she threw back the bolt, opened the door, and sped down the hall.

They hadn't walked very far to reach the lab. Bree found the door to the air filtration room after only one wrong turn. She tried to turn the knob, but it was locked.

She kicked the door and screamed at it to open.

The first of the Marauders shuffled into view. It moaned as soon as it spotted her. The sound would attract the rest of the zombie horde that was chasing her.

Bree tossed the flare halfway down the hall. That should keep the zombies at bay until it went out, giving her time to try and open the door. She unzipped her belt pouch and felt around for the impromptu lock picks she kept there, keeping an eye on the Marauders as she did.

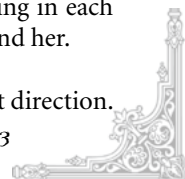
Her fingers trembled as she inserted the picks into the lock and located the tumbler. Twice she had to start over because her attention was on the growing Marauder mob down the hall. Then she used too much force and one of the picks snapped.

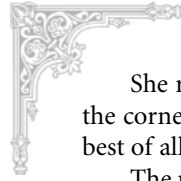
When she glanced back at the zombies she spotted Leonard showing his way through the packed bodies. He reached the spot on the floor where the flare continued to gout great clouds of smoke and crushed the flames under his heel.

She had no intention of waiting to see what Leonard would do next. As she sprinted down the hall she lit another flare and tossed it behind her. At the next intersection she struck two more flares to life and sent them twirling in each direction. Maybe the smoke would make it harder for Leonard to find her.

Bree ran.

Whenever she spotted a zombie, she turned and ran a different direction.





She ran through the corridors and rooms until she caught a sign out of the corner of her eye. Water Recycling Systems. That seemed promising and best of all, the handle turned when she tried to open it.

The room was filled with enormous pipes that passed through a series of machines. In the far corner there were steps leading down. They followed the path of one especially large pipe.

Bree had seen pipes like this before and they usually marked a service exit out of a building. None of the Marauders had seen her in this room and she wasn't going to give them a chance to catch sight of her now.

She sparked another flare to light her way and headed down the stairs. They led to a service tunnel that extended as far as she could see by the dim light of the flare. It was tall enough and wide enough for her to walk along it without bending down. Which meant it was also big enough to conceal a zombie.

The smoke from the flare made her cough, sending echoes down the tunnel.

Bree froze in mid-step and listened for any sounds that she had alerted a zombie to her location. Only the steady drip of water came out of the darkness.

Two hundred. Three hundred. Four hundred feet and no Marauders snatched at her from behind the minor pipes and wire bundles that shared the tunnel with the water main. No footsteps echoed from behind her.

At about five hundred feet the tunnel ended in a massive steel grate. The large pipe continued on, but this was the end of the line for Bree. The slots in the grate were too small for anything but her fingers to fit through. Whatever lock it used must be located on the other side. When she pushed against it – it barely budged, rattling against its constraints.

She thought she heard the moaning of a Marauder outside and decided against making a lot of noise that might draw a crowd of zombies. Instead she slumped to the ground and rested. Maybe if she waited until morning there'd be enough light for her to see a way to get free.

Then the flare went out.

That meant she'd been down here for fifteen minutes.

Without the light from the flare the tunnel was completely black. Any sounds she heard seemed amplified. The drip of water. Pops and pings from the pipes, and a scratching that happened at irregular intervals.

She wanted to light another flare, but decided against it. A flare was worth a week's worth of food, at least. And now that she knew about Leonard she didn't plan on coming back.

While she waited, she pulled the backpack off and set it in her lap. Bree counted the flares in the dark. Twelve.

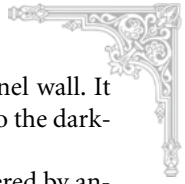
Twelve!

There should be three times that many of them, even after the spill. She must have lost most of them when she was running.

A scuff echoed through the tunnel.

Bree turned her head towards the sound and listened.

Just as she started to think she imagined it she heard it again. Closer.



She took the flare in her hand and dragged it across the tunnel wall. It sputtered to life. With a flick of her wrist she sent it a dozen feet into the darkness. The sputtering light revealed a Marauder.

It moaned. The sound flowed down the tunnel and was answered by another. Then another. And then even more.

In the close quarters of the tunnel, the zombies had the advantage. Her speed and agility were useless. There was less room for her to dodge their attacks and if they packed in too tightly she would have no chance at all.

Bree scrambled to her feet. After readjusting her pack, she walked toward the lit flare and picked it up. When she held it up she could make out the shape of two zombies standing a few feet from her. They shuffled backward, away from the expanding cloud of smoke, but a draft sent most of it out of the tunnel, through the grate.

If she timed it right she might be able to rush forward when they took a step backward and catch them off balance.

She took a couple of steps forward and waited for them to retreat from the smoke and light of the flare. As soon as the closest one lifted a foot she barreled ahead, leaning forward, slamming her shoulder into the Marauder's midsection.

The first zombie fell and Bree ran over him. She nearly made it past the second when another pair loomed ahead at the far edge of the flare's light.

When she paused to line up her next dash a hand clamped down on her shoulder.

She spun away, but the hand stayed attached to her.

Instinctively, she shoved the flare into the zombie's mouth before it could bite her and the hand released.

Bree threw herself backwards, hitting the floor and sliding along the muddy surface, reaching for another flare before she stopped. She tossed it short of where the zombies stood and watched them back away.

Four zombies blocked the tunnel. That was three more than she could expect to evade in such a small space. And who knew how many more were behind them.

She returned to the grate and sat against the wall, facing straight ahead, ignoring the anxious moans of the zombies.

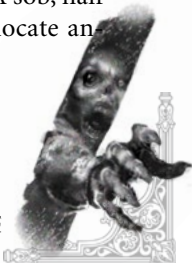
Fifteen minutes later the flare died and darkness engulfed her. Bree struck another one and sent it skittering along the tunnel floor.

Then again after another fifteen minutes.

And again.

A knot caught in Bree's throat when she reached into the bag and found nothing. She patted herself down, hoping to find one last match. A sob, half fear — half despair, escaped from her chest when she failed to locate another flare. "I'm sorry," she whispered to Johnny and Abigail.

Scuffling sounds echoed from the darkness nearby.





# Pin

By John Boden

*Based on Pinocchio*

Painted eyes watched. What began as a spot of darkness, blacker than the surrounding shadows. The spot grew and sprawled and lengthened like a shadow in a coal chute. The shadow pooled and stretched until it literally stood beside the boy on the stool. A voice like cockroach scuttle hissed in his carved ear.

“The old man is lonely and has made you to ease that loneliness. His silent wishes called me here. He wants a son and a friend, and you shall be both. It begins now, by the end of week, you shall be a real boy. It shall be.” The shadow dragged a (too long) finger down the side of the puppet’s face. A thin line remained for a few seconds before fading. The shadow chuckled then faded away. Pin saw this through green painted eyes and was unsure. In the other room, the old man slept, his snores like bees filled the cottage.

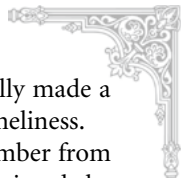
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The room was chilly and the wooden boy sad. He held the kiddie scissors in one stiff hand and his severed strings in the other. He stared up at the crossbar where it rested on the hook, where Papa had placed it. Papa had gone into town for some things, a few hours ago, maybe days, maybe longer. Pin looked at Papa’s day chart where it hung above the workbench. A Calendar, he remembered, but was uncertain how it worked. There was a pretty lady pictured there, she had no dress on and was laying in the grass. She was smiling and had a beard beneath her belly. Pin looked to the scissors and felt twinges of sadness that he would not know was guilt staining his balsam skull. Pin had only wanted, to be free. He had sat alone on the stool so many times, for so many days, wishing and working up the nerve to cut himself free, but now that he had finally cut his ties, he was terrified. A bristling fear stuck in his throat like sandpaper.

Fear is good, he thought, fear is what a real boy would feel. He smiled and dropped the scissors to the floor.

• • •

Papa Petto was a lonely man. Never married but almost. Once. He lived alone in the small house on the end of the street. He worked now and then, repair-



ing machines in the local factories. When he came home he usually made a modest supper and sat alone watching TV and wallowing in his loneliness.

Papa decided to make a boy. He used scraps of wood and lumber from long finished or forgotten projects and set about the task. He jointed the knees and elbows with old wire spools and swiveled the waist and attached strings. A marionette of a boy, for the son he'd never had.

He went into the attic and found a box of clothes from his youth and dressed the wooden lad in them, a pair of cut off jeans and an old black shirt with the words, IRON MAIDEN, in faded red letters. Petto carefully painted features on the puppet and they were as realistic as his talents could render. When he was finished, Petto sighed, smiled and wished with all his heart the boy was real. Petto talked to the boy every minute he was in the house, as though he was a real little boy. "Pin, When you are grown and find a nice girl, don't forget your papa," his raspy voice would fill the room while fiddling with a small engine part or carving a piece of furniture. Pin would not answer, for the puppet was not alive. But listen, Pin did this very well.



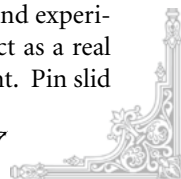
Maybe Papa won't notice the strings, Pin thought. Maybe he could climb up and attach them and pretend as though nothing happened. Pin knew he was fooling himself, he didn't know how to tie. He looked at the pictures Papa taped to the grey wall for him to stare at and day dream. Colorful scenes of children running and playing. Fields of lush grass and sunny skies. Bright flowers and birds. Blue skies with cottony clouds. He looked at them and felt a warmth in his chest that rose to his head. His fear began to ebb.

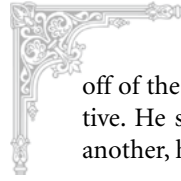


"When you are able and go outside, my boy, you will love the world." Papa was painting on Pin's face. "And one thing the world needs is more love," and with this Papa sang a song that he often did while working. Pin knew it was by a group called THE BEATLES, as Papa always spoke of them. "See this, this is the sky. It is an ocean of no water. Beautiful and blue and where birds and butterflies play and fly," Papa said as he taped another picture to the wall in front of Pin. "And this, this is a field, full of plants and flowers and bees and life, my Pin, Life!" He smoothed the tape with a large calloused thumb and patted Pin on his hard head. "My son, the world is a kaleidoscope. Always the same, always different depending on how you look and how you turn." Papa went into the kitchen, stiffly and slowly, and lit the stove and prepared dinner. Were he a real boy, he could have smelled the ham slices as they sizzled and sputtered. Pin turned his head ever so slightly and watched him.



He would do no such thing. He was free to go out into the world and experience the promise of the pictures Papa hung for him. He would act as a real boy. When Papa returned he would tell him, and it would be alright. Pin slid





off of the stool and clattered to the floor, his unsteady limbs were uncooperative. He stood, slowly and stared at the door. With a furtive step, and then another, he crossed the space to the doorway.

▲ ▲ ▲

Papa was listening to the radio again, he had been for a few days making a strange face, part frown and part sad face. His features looked wet and pale. He rubbed the spot above his eyes and listened. The radio man talked about death and chaos and zombies, but Pin knew not what those words meant. “Pin, I must run to town for supplies. You stay here and wait for my return,” Papa said as he jingled the keys to the truck in his pocket. Pin sat stone-still and said nothing.

Papa walked to the door and slipped out. Pin thought he heard shouting. Someday I will go out into that gorgeous world, he thought. I will be Papa’s boy, we will play and it will be wonderful. Pin could not wait until he was fully real and could finally surprise his Papa. He felt that day would come very soon.

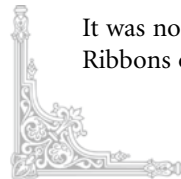
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“I will go outside, and I will wait for Papa’s return. He will be so surprised and happy to see me, a real boy. I will finally be his son when he comes back. He will not be angry that I freed myself,” Pin reasoned. His smile grew wide, a rush of excitement and giddiness blossomed within him. It was a winged thing that fluttered and tickled his small chest. That happy place was waiting, a turn of the doorknob away. He took another cautious but unsteady step towards the huge door. Without his strings, he had poor balance. Pin stood and looked at the latch and chain. He glanced around and saw Papa’s broom leaning by the closet. He used it to lift the chain free and watched it swing, giggling at his resourcefulness. Using what strength he could muster, Pin grabbed the metal knob and pulled the door open, and in an instant the strength and giddiness were gone.

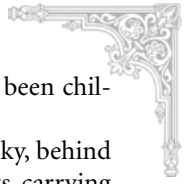
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Papa nailed boards over the windows. He had pushed the large table on its end and leaned it against the back door and then the couch. Pin sat and watched. “My Pinny, the world has gone mad. Now a feral thing.” Papa was muttering, barely loud enough for Pin to hear. “Eating our own” and “Demons” were the words that stood out from the gibberish. Papa went to the cellar and pulled the light string. He grabbed the axe and pick that hung there. He leaned them by the front door. He stopped and looked at Pin. He knelt and placed a trembling arm around the wooden boy’s small shoulders. “Pin,” he whispered, “it will be okay,” and with the last word his voice flew away like a moth. Small and transparent, and dying for light.

▲ ▲ ▲



It was nothing like Papa’s pictures. The sky was thick and grey and burning. Ribbons of black smoke snaked like enormous spectral serpents. The streets



were littered with skeletons and smoldering things that had once been children and adults.

There were great flashes of bright colors and light across the sky, behind the clouds and smoke. Giants in white plastic suits walked the streets, carrying sticks that blew flames. They chased shambling, growling things. Things that looked like skeletons filled with rotten potatoes and wrapped in old burlap. Things that shrieked and ran and pulled people from their cars. One of these things yanked a woman from her car window and tore a hole in her cheek with its teeth.

Another gnawed on the stomach of a baby, the mother apparently being devoured on the stoop of the hardware store. The air crackled with shouting, screaming and spraying blood. Pin could not fathom what was happening. He looked again to the sky. No blue. No clouds. Ash and smoke and grey. He looked around and saw no green fields and no birds or butterflies or children playing and running. The only children he saw were running from the things. These things must be what the radio man called zombies. Zombies were terrible. Pin stood and moved not a muscle.



“The world’s gone mad,” Papa said. “It’s going to be okay, don’t forget your Papa.” Pin heard the voice in his head. Raspy but loving and his stomach felt funny. His throat felt like something was sticking in it.



These things were eating the dead. They were also eating the living. One was gnawing on a sign post. The buildings on the other side of the street were on fire. Those being chased by the things were running into burning homes. A large truck drove slowly behind the men who carried the flame guns, blasting all with a foaming spray of water. Pin stood and felt his happiness die. Pin looked at the sidewalk before him and then over at the driveway. Papa’s truck was there, a large spatter of red paint smeared across the door and the window broken. Legs jutted from beneath it and something had been eating them. The shoeless feet were missing toes, the bones in the legs were visible. Flies buzzed and congregated there. On the cement, at those feet were Papa’s keys. The happiness and warmth evaporated, as something stinging and cold took its place. He looked as far as he could see. Despair and screams and chaos. Smoking terror and the walking dead. Pin knew not what any of this meant. He knew it was not like the pictures. He knew that Papa was gone. He also knew from the salty tears wetting his cheeks, he was finally a real boy.







# Seven

By K. H. Vaughan

*Based on Snow White*

*In the deep midwinter, a Queen sat sewing by her window and watched the gentle snow fall across the land. Distracted from her work, she pricked her finger and the bright blood dripped upon the snow. She looked at the drops, pretty against the snow and the ebony wood of the window frame, and thought to herself: "I wish I had a child, skin so white as snow, lips so red as blood, and hair so black as ebony." She went into her husband's chambers and in time the Queen had three daughters. Two of them she ate at once, and one she saved.*

-Traditional children's tale

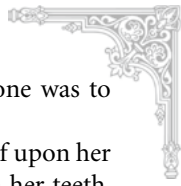
The Huntsman poured the contents of the sodden leather sack upon the table. The lungs and liver slapped wetly, and dark blood ran across the surface, dripping through the gaps between the boards to pool upon the floor. The lungs were small, pallid flaps, vascular and spongy. The Queen pressed one with her fingers and black blood spurted from the bronchi. The liver was meaty and red-brown, the color of dark brick. It glistened in the guttering candlelight. The great hall was filled with haze from candles and torches. The pennants and standards of the Kingdom and its noble knights, the commemorations of past victories, hung from the rafters in the dark above, dull with smoke and grease. Guards bound in leather and iron stood to the sides. They could not see, for their eyes had been removed and eaten by the Queen long ago.

"It is done," The Huntsman said.

"These are my daughter's?" asked the Queen.

"If they were some other's you would surely know," he said. "Then it would be my life forfeit."

"Or worse," she sneered. The Queen picked up the liver and took a full bite from the organ. Blood ran down her face. "I can taste the innocence, the youth. If you had brought her back whole I would have bathed in her flesh. Or what there was of it, the scrawny little thing."



“I followed your instructions, your Majesty,” he said. “No one was to know. The wolves will eat the corpse. Or the Lazarene.”

But the Queen was no longer listening. She was gorging herself upon her daughter’s offal, holding it with both hands and tearing at it with her teeth. She made horrible slurping and smacking sounds. Blood stained the front of her robe. If she suspected his treachery she gave no sign.

The huntsman bowed his head and backed away without speaking. Any notice she took of him from this point forward could only be dangerous. He made his way through the great doors of heavy oak bound in iron and breathed with relief when they were barred to lock her in. He hurried to leave the heap of black stone behind him and return to the safety of the woods, where he would search alone for any of the resurrected that had penetrated the thickness of the forest from beyond. Fortunately the Lazarene were bereft of their intelligence and the forest labyrinthine and impassible. Often foreign Lazarene would be found entangled in the thickets, grasping helplessly when he came to put them to the axe. Once safely away, he thought of his betrayal and cursed.



“Where are we going?” the Princess asked as they walked. Her hair was black as coal like her mothers, her face pale as snow. It was a great adventure to travel away from the castle. She often saw the Huntsman from her window. He was so handsome, in a rough way, and she imagined that someday her prince would look like him.

“It is a surprise,” said the Huntsman.

“But what of the Lazarene?”

“I am a huntsman,” he said. “I have my axe.”

Even at her age she knew enough to stay within the protected lands. Inside the boundary, the King’s wardens scoured the remaining hamlets lest anyone fall ill and die without being given final rites. His huntsmen tracked the wild dead within the woods. When the dead first began to rise, it was a miracle, and the priests proclaimed that Jesus had returned. But if he had, no one saw him. Many pretended, but it did not take long to establish that none was the Son of God. There were no priests left now; only the Bishop hiding within the castle’s bowels. The Lazarene shambled across the lands feeding on the living and nearby kingdoms grew silent.

They passed through a tiny hamlet and a waiting-in, where the newly dead lay bound in public. All feared their loved ones might merely be in a deep sleep and wake to find themselves buried alive, but they worried more that they would rise still dead. The bodies wore the Crown of Thorns, nails embedded within so their points rested against the skin. If the eyes opened with the empty stare of the Lazarene, the nails could be driven into the skull with ready mallets to send the deceased on to the grace of God.

“Why did God send the Lazarene?” the Princess asked.

“I don’t know,” the Huntsman said.



“They say it is because man ate the flesh of man, and that God sent them to show us this is wrong.”

“If you say so, my Royal Highness.”

She laughed because he was big and tall and serious, but he insisted on calling her that, no matter what she said. They stopped to rest often. Her whole life she had been kept away in a small room of the castle, penned up like a veal calf. She whistled at the birds and animals and they ignored her.

He walked with her to the riverbank, where he kept a small boat for those times he must cross over. He bade her get in.

“But I can’t. It is forbidden!”

“Today you must. Your mother has ordered me and I must obey.”

“But there are Lazarene on the other side.”

“Yes. They can’t cross the river. The current is too strong and when they fall in they are swept away to the sea. We have the mountains to our back and the great forest around us. Thus we live while other kingdoms perish. But we can only patrol a small area; protect the castle and the village hard by and hope the peasants can bring in a sufficient crop.”

Each year the crop was less. When the Lazarene first appeared some of the peasants blamed it on the King and Queen; surely it must reflect upon a sickness in the castle, they said, and some tried to flee to other lands. Few came back, and there were no travelers from abroad. No goods came from outside and each year there were fewer to work the land. Some peasants died, others fell into despair and were found hanged. Many simply wandered off into the woods and were never seen again. Maidens married, but if they suspected they were with child most ran to the apothecary or a wise women for tinctures of emmenagogues of pennyroyal, tansy, and prostitute’s root.

“But why are we crossing the river?” the girl said.

“It is a surprise.”

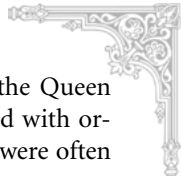


Once across the river, the Huntsman looked back to see if they had been followed, and listened carefully for movement. Then he led her down a game path through the dark woods. When she tried to speak he ordered her roughly to be quiet lest her voice bring the dead. They came to a small clearing, perhaps a mile from the riverbank, and he stopped. He could hear birds, which was often a sign that Lazarene were not close by; there was that at least.

“The Queen has ordered me to kill you as she did your sisters,” he said. “Run, child, before I change my mind and do it.”

She did not believe him at first, so he pulled his long knife and took a step toward her. She burst into tears and fled.

The Huntsman made his way back across the river and thought about the pathetic girl whom he had watched grow like a flower choked by weeds. She had been sweet and kind despite her mother, and would wave to him sometimes from the window where she was locked away.



He had known he would have to bring something back to the Queen when he released the girl. There was a farm nearby overburdened with orphans, and he started in that direction. The poor starving things were often out scavenging for acorns and roots.

He considered praying God to have mercy on the girl's soul and on his as well.

He decided not to.



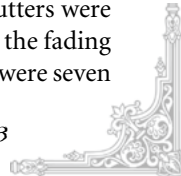
The Princess picked her way gingerly through the thickets and brush, the woods were dark and frightening even though the sun had hours left in the sky. Her dress was torn and she was bleeding from tiny cuts and scrapes along her arms and knees. Insects harassed and bit her. She had never been so alone. There was a trail, or the remains of one at least, and she followed it as best she could until she came to a glen with a small stream. She collapsed beside it to drink and wash her face. Her feet were blistered and swollen and she held them in the water to rub them. Once, she had seen a prisoner condemned to have his feet closed in shoes of hot iron. He had danced and screamed and people laughed until he collapsed insensate. She could smell his flesh cooking within and it smelled much like any other joint laid upon the fire. They hanged him later, which seemed merciful.

She was startled by a noise in the brush across the shallow stream. A small corpse stood there. She took it for a child at first, but then saw it had full whiskers. The Lazarene was smaller even than most peasants, whose crude constitutions did not allow them to properly digest meat. They were forbidden to eat much of it for their own protection. She gave a small shriek and fled down the streambed, knowing that the thing was slow and clumsy. It pursued, shambling slowly after.

Almost at once she came upon a tiny cottage, smaller than she would have imagined. Outside she spied another of the diminutive Lazarene, shorter than even she. She ran in through the open door of the cottage and closed it behind her. It had once been neat and was filled with miniature furnishings. Now the place was unkempt and filthy. Tiny beds were soiled with blood and yellow discharge. Bandages were left in stinking clumps upon the floor. All was turned over and in disarray. Outside she could hear moans and the sound of hands fumbling against the door and shutters.

The fireplace was long cold. She never made a fire before, but had seen it done. She built a mound of dried leaves and kindling and found a tinder box on the mantel with flint, steel, and char-cloth. It was near sundown and her knuckles were bloodied from trying to make a spark by the time it caught and the small, warm glow filled the room.

She cut furry blue mold from a piece of cheese and a dried loaf she found in the cupboard, and checked again to make sure the door and shutters were barred. The Lazarene remained outside, stumbling and pathetic in the fading light. She counted six, all showing a similar degree of decay. There were seven



beds inside, but she searched well and there was no corpse hidden within. Perhaps the other had run off or had been eaten. Several were injured in one way or another: this one's face chewed to the bone, that one's arm hanging by bloody strip, that other's guts dragging behind when it walked. They moved more slowly than most Lazarene because their legs were so small.

She threw the filthy linens from the least befouled bed, placed new quilts over the tiny mattress and fell asleep.



The queen awoke in her chambers, the taste of the child's organs still clinging to her palate. Servants used to wake her but feared her rages so much they now avoided it unless ordered to in advance. She looked to her husband, addled from the medicines she plied him with. His brain was long since rotted from her ministrations. He could no longer even manage his bedroom duties, which meant she must kill him and choose a consort if she wished more children to use for her renewal. Was it time?

"Mother! Mother!" the Queen shrieked, climbing to the tower where she kept her chained. She unlocked the door to her mother's chamber, high away from all else. The crone scowled from her pallet of straw.

"Tell me, mother," the Queen said. "What potion should I use to be finished with my husband? I give him mandrake and pokersounce, but he is no longer of any use."

"It is not your husband you should worry about," said her mother. "It is the child. She begins to bud. Womanhood will follow."

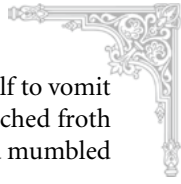
The Queen laughed.

"You think I am stupid! Only yesterday I sent the Huntsman to murder her in the woods and then feasted on her lungs and liver when he returned. Now I am without child. I need a consort to provide me with a new one. Perhaps even the Huntsman himself. He is dumb, but virile enough to serve that purpose."

"You vain, foolish creature," sneered her mother. "I can see the grey in your hair even if you do try to cover it with soot. I'll bet your useless husband sees more than that. Do you think the huntsman would have killed her? She is lovelier than you! Look at me!" The old woman stood, dragging her chain by her ankle. She threw off her filthy robe and stood there naked before the Queen. Her skin was wrinkled and spotted, her hair ash gray. Her breasts pointed to the floor like empty meal sacks.

"Look at me damn you, before I tear your eyes out! You are me, you fat, miserable thing! This is what you will become while that child lives. She is the fairest!"

The Queen recoiled in horror and fled the chamber. Behind, she could hear her mother's voice calling. "I should have eaten you like I ate your sisters! You look at me and know I see you! How else do you even know that you exist, you filthy, fat, ugly hag?"



The Queen jammed her fingers down her throat, forcing herself to vomit in the slops basin in her chambers. She was rewarded with a wretched froth of lung and liver mixed with her own bile. On the bed her husband mumbled feebly and incoherently.

It was a chambermaid who warned the Huntsman that the Queen was ranting and screaming of betrayal. He fled, taking a horse from the stables. Musketeers fired their crude weapons at him as he rode away and a ball lodged in his back, where it burned like fire. He kept to his saddle and rode to the river.



The girl awoke and ate the last bit of crust. There was flour but it was mealy and she had no idea how to make bread. She peeked outside.

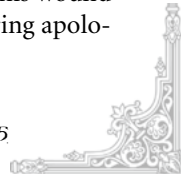
The Lazarene shambled aimlessly in the small yard. She discovered that if she made enough noise at one side of the house they would assemble there. It was easy enough to move them back and forth to where it suited her. If she was quiet, she could sneak from a window on the other side and get back in before they discovered her. She gathered firewood from the pile outside, drew a bucket of fresh water, and dug a few small potatoes from the weedy garden while they staggered awkwardly in pursuit.

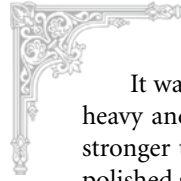
On the other side of a small fenced yard was a workshop with a carpenter's tools, workbench, and a small forge for metalwork. There, she found small traps for animals and chains and irons of various types. They were heavy and it hurt to lift them. But she understood shackles well. Her mother had kept her in them often.



The girl had tidied her cottage neatly, and her six small Lazarene were now leashed. It was not difficult once she developed a plan; she lured them one by one into the fenced yard and then snuck up behind with metal collars from the shed. It was strange that they should have so many collars and manacles, and she did not want to imagine why. They were so slow and clumsy that it was like playing tag with toddlers. She had watched children play tag from her window many times, and now found that it was great fun. All six were chained, and she could tug them wherever she wished. They would fall and tumble, but eventually they would right themselves. Really, as long as they could see or hear her, she did not have to do anything to lead them.

She was surprised when the Huntsman came crashing through the woods, and she had to fend off two of the Lazarene with the fire poker when he collapsed before the cottage. The hot iron sizzled on their flesh. They did not seem to mind the burns, but the force of blows tumbled them back. The Huntsman, so pale from loss of blood, tried to gain his feet but could not. She pushed three of the tiny beds together and dragged him inside to lay him down across. He was huge in her small space. She tried to clean his wound and pressed cold cloths against his fevered brow. He was still slurring apologies and warning her about the Queen when he died.





It was almost impossible to drag his dead weight to the yard. He was so heavy and she so small, but she was afraid he would awaken and be much stronger than her other companions. She used a rug, which slid across the polished stone floor, but only barely got him outside.

She put on an iron collar and chained him away from the door to wait. She realized he would be too big to ever come inside the house, and went to the workshop for an axe. She cut both legs off at the knees, and cauterized the ends so they would not ooze. Then she placed his boots over the stumps and laced them tight. She left him his right leg that he might have something to eat when he rose, and gave the left leg to the six other dwarves to share among themselves.

The girl waited overnight for the Queen's men to come for her, and did not sleep. By dawn, the only noise was the shambling and moaning of the Lazarene on their chains outside, and the sound of tearing flesh.

In the morning, the girl re-arranged her Lazarene in line with her plan, and set things in place to wait for her mother. They were difficult, pulling on their chains and grasping for her insistently. She did not think she would have to wait long, for surely the Queen's woodsmen could track a dying man bleeding in the forest easily enough. Betrayed once already, her mother would come herself this time.

It was not long. The Queen broke into the clearing from the wood, accompanied by the game warden with the cruel, pocked face the girl had always hated. He always leered at her in ways that made her uncomfortable, but she did not yet understand why. They looked around but there was no one in sight. The girl threw open a window by the door.

"Oh Mother!" she sobbed. "I was so afraid! That awful huntsman took me away and left me alone in the forest! Thank God you've come! I'm afraid to come outside because there must be Lazarene about!"

"There, there, my child," the Queen said. "Mommy's here for you."

The Queen motioned the Game Warden back and walked toward the door. She was pale and statuesque, and her smile was rigid as if it might break to pieces. She did not see the small animal trap covered in leaves. The iron jaw snapped shut with a sickening crunch and she screamed.

It was hard work, opening the trap and hammering the stake to secure it in place. The girl's arms and shoulders ached from the labor. She could not worry about that now, for the Warden was coming to her mother's aid. The girl ran across the cottage and reached out the window to pull the iron bar that secured the chains of her seven Lazarene in place. They were straining against their bonds and lurched forward immediately toward the screaming in front of the house.

They came faster than the girl anticipated; perhaps the fresh blood from last night had invigorated them. The Warden saw them first, and abandoned the Queen to make his escape. The Huntsman's shortened legs did not work

as she had hoped, but he was able to propel himself forward impressively with his strong arms and shoulders. Her mother screamed in terror at the sight, and pulled in vain against the trap. Soon they were on her, tearing at her flesh with their hands and teeth.

“You filthy slut!” the Queen screamed as they dragged her to the ground. “You won’t replace me! I will live forever!”

Long afterwards, when the Lazarene had calmed, the princess lured them back to the yard and secured their chains. The one with the torn face continued to clutch a leg bone, and gnawed at it with determination. The way his teeth showed through his cheek made him look so angry all the time. She giggled at the thought.

The Huntsman she left tied in the front of the cottage near the woods, where he could guard the path and warn her if anyone approached. She bent to pick her mother’s golden crown from bloody muck, shook tattered clots of flesh and hair from it, and placed it upon her head. Thus crowned, she went inside to find a mirror.







# Giuseppe Cavalletta and His Aunts

By Jeffrey C. Pettengill

*Based on The Ant and the Grasshopper*

“You can’t be serious, Aunties,” the young man groaned as he stretched out languidly over the arms of the overstuffed chair. He pulled the harmonica from his mouth and focused his eyes upon the two dowager old nuns standing in the library’s doorway.

“We’re very serious, Giuseppe,” said the shorter of the two silver-topped spinsters. She returned his imploring look with one of fixed determination.

Giuseppe Cavalletta turned his gaze from his Aunt Isabella to his Aunt Sophia. He deepened the look on his face, endeavoring to give each his most heart-softening expression. The look which had always gotten him his way with the Formiche sisters. Unfortunately, his attempts proved ineffectual. They both glared back at him with their cold black eyes.

“Yes, Giuseppe, very serious,” echoed Sophia. “Now, get your lazy ass out of that chair and go into town and get the supplies we asked you to get two days ago.”

“But why, Aunt Sophia?” The young man whined as he first dragged one long, skinny leg from the chair’s arm and let it fall to the floor with such a thud that it sounded as if it were made of lead. Then, with much exaggerated effort, he twisted himself in the chair and lowered his other foot to the floor with the same resounding thud. “You really don’t believe all this stuff the news is saying about the dead rising from their graves and killing people do you? It has to be a hoax. Some sort of publicity stunt a big Hollywood studio is putting on to promote a new horror movie or television show.”

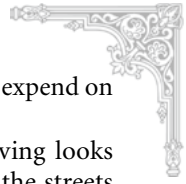
The fingers of the two women worked their way around the rosaries each of them clutched. Their faces never changed expressions from the look of a nun who had given a command and expected to be obeyed.

“Yes, we do,” Sophia said.

“But why?”

“Because God has told us,” Isabella explained.

The young man struggled to keep from rolling his eyes. He was regretting having come here to spend time with his aunts, the last of his mother’s family, after his father’s funeral. It had taken a great deal of effort to stay out of their



way over the past few weeks, more effort than he normally liked to expend on anything other than his harmonica.

Not only did he have to deal with their constant disapproving looks and comments, but since the first stories of “zombies” roaming the streets of New York, Boston, Los Angeles and thousands of other cities around the world showed up on the news, he had to put up with their ever increasing religious fervor.

“So, God is talking to you, is He?”

“Not just to us,” Sophia said, “but to everyone in the abbey.”

“Well, he hasn’t said anything to me,” Giuseppe retorted.

“Why should he?” Isabella chided. “You don’t pray to him, not even in gratitude for the food he sets before you without you having to work for it.”

Her tone of contempt was very familiar. He had heard it many times whenever any of his mother’s relatives spoke to or about his father. The Formiches had always been a hard-working family. Whereas his father had been a blues guitarist who traveled from gig to gig with barely enough money to keep his bass out of hock.

“And just what has God told you, Aunties?”

The stern looks on the women’s faces deepened into scowls of reproach at the quality of ridicule in their nephew’s voice. “Do not take such a tone when speaking of Our Lord.” Isabella snapped her words as sharp as a wooden ruler across a student’s knuckles.

Giuseppe flinched. He had never seen either of his aunts so outraged before. “Sorry, Aunt Isabella, Aunt Sophia.” He bowed his head. “I didn’t mean anything disrespectful. I think you are getting worked up about something that isn’t really going on.”

“Not going on?” Sophia looked in disbelief at her sister’s son. “Are you blind or as much of a dreamer as your father?”

“Calm, sister,” Isabella said, resting one hand on Sophia’s shoulder. “I can understand Giuseppe’s disbelief. I will admit that I, too, did not believe the reports at first. Not until Our Heavenly Father spoke to all of us and told of us his plan to rid the world of sinners by raising those who had been sinned against from the grave to seek their vengeance.”

Giuseppe’s jaw fell open. He stared at his aunts, his mind struggling to accept what he had just heard. “You’re saying this is God’s doing?”

The sisters nodded in unison. “Yes,” Isabella said.

“Why?” Giuseppe stammered. “Why would he do this? Why would he do something like this?”

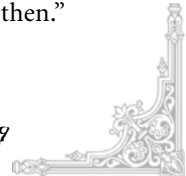
“Why did he cause The Great Flood?” Sophia asked.

“Why did he destroy Sodom and Gomorrah?” Isabella asked.

“Why did he bring down the Tower of Babel?” asked Sophia.

“Because the world was full of sin, hypocrisy, and blasphemy,” Isabella continued, “just as it is today. Probably more so than it was back then.”

“So, based on a dream you had...,” Giuseppe began.



“Based on a vision everyone in this abbey shared,” Isabella corrected, “we have begun preparations to withstand this ‘zombie apocalypse’ as the media is calling it.”

“I see,” Giuseppe said. His shoulders slumped and his hands dropped down between his legs. He knew there was no way he was going to dissuade them from their delusion. He was the only sane one left on these grounds. Everyone had been running around for the past couple of days stashing food supplies and other things. It was like a militia camp preparing for an invasion from Homeland Security. The truly unsettling part was watching nuns and clergymen in action, not members of some lunatic fringe group. Perhaps it was time he thought about moving on. The questions were where to go and how to get away without a fight from his aunts.

“Don’t you have enough supplies stowed away?” he asked as he tried to figure out a good reason to give for him to escape this religious madhouse.

“Definitely not,” Aunt Sophia said. “Noah’s flood lasted forty days and forty nights. There is no telling how long this holy scourge will take. Besides, we don’t have any firearms.”

This last statement was made with such a matter of fact manner Giuseppe’s head reeled. He felt like a combination of Alice tumbling through the looking glass into Wonderland and Dorothy riding the twister into Oz. The thought of nuns armed and dangerous was just too surreal for him to take. “Guns, Aunt Sophia? You can’t be serious?”

“Absolutely serious.”

Isabella nodded in agreement. “In this time of Holy Cleansing, we must make every effort to protect this house of Our Lord and his faithful servants.”

“I-I-I,” Giuseppe stammered, “I figured you’d be believing God would do that.”

“Of course he will,” Isabella said, her tone that of a parent or teacher dealing with a slow-witted child. “He will do that by making sure we have the tools necessary to defend ourselves against those carrying out his Holy Wrath.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the story of the man caught in the flood who was so sure God would save him he turned down offers from three people to help him get off his roof and out of the flood zone?” Sophia asked.

“Yes,” Giuseppe nodded. “The man drowns, goes to Heaven and asks God why he didn’t save him.”

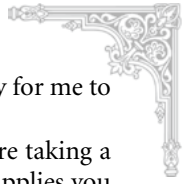
“And what does God tell the man?”

“That he sent three people to save him but he refused their help.”

“Correct,” Sophia said with a smile of approval. “You have been paying attention at times. God has given us the means to defend and protect his home and his followers. We need to take hold of his gifts and accept them.”

A shudder ran down the young man’s spine. This is insane, he thought, his eyes shifting from one aunt to the other. Totally, absolutely, fucking insane.

Beyond his aunts, in the hallway outside the library, Giuseppe could see nuns hustling about carrying boxes, bags, blankets, and anything else they thought they might need to survive in a world supposedly overrun by zombies.



That's it, he thought. I'm out of here. And there's only one way for me to get out of here without having to explain why.

"Okay," Giuseppe said rising slowly from the chair, as if it were taking a great deal of effort to do so, "I'll go into town and get whatever supplies you need."



The truck was old and rickety with bad shocks and an even worse seat in it, and Giuseppe felt each bump and pothole in the dirt road. The power steering was gone and the brakes nearly went through the floor whenever he stepped on them. The road was so full of twists and turns that he crawled along like he was in the midst of a big city traffic jam for fear of the brakes giving out as he slowed to make one of the nasty bends in the road.

"Christ Almighty," he cursed under his breath and put all his effort into wrenching the steering wheel to the left to avoid a pothole the size of a moon crater. "How far am I really going to get in this thing? I'm going to be exhausted by the time I get to town. This is completely unfair."

Finally, arms and ass aching, the truck pulled onto a paved road. He sighed when he saw the painted lines and felt the smooth road beneath his tires. He turned left, heading towards the setting sun and the town.

Within minutes the town appeared. There was a single main street with no traffic lights because there was not enough traffic to warrant one. It had no side streets, only narrow alleyways between the dozen or so buildings which made up the center. It wasn't hard to find the hand-painted sign of George's General Store. His aunts told him he'd be able to get firearms from Zebulon George.

Just as he was about to pull into the diagonal parking spot in front of the store, a neon sign caught his eyes. He straightened the truck back onto the street and passed the store.

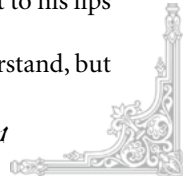
"It won't do any harm to stop in here for a beer," he smiled as he pulled into a parking spot in front of Romero's Watering Hole. The sign above the door sputtered and crackled threatening to go dark as he turned the vehicle off and got out.

There were sounds coming from inside the run down tavern. Music was playing, though he couldn't tell if it was from a band or a juke box. Unconsciously he slipped his hand into his pants pocket and felt the harmonica. Perhaps he could sit in with whoever was playing.

The bar was strangely quiet, with little conversation and the music coming from a jukebox. The bang of a door made him jump back, his head whipping around to see a squat, rotund man with a high and tight haircut backing his way through the swinging door next to the bar. The jukebox started into another raucous tune.

"Hey, buddy," he said to the bartender, "how do ya feel about mouth organ music?" He removed his harmonica from his pocket, brought it to his lips and blew through the holes as he ran it across his lips.

He mumbled something, which Giuseppe couldn't quite understand, but which sounded like, "S'alright."



Smiling Giuseppe asked, "Mind if I play along with the juke?"

Another indistinct mumble as the bartender focused on removing the bottles of beer from the case he had been carrying.

"Glad to oblige," Giuseppe responded to what he decided was the man's permission. He settled himself on the stool and began to jam with the song.

As he played, his heart lightened and the worries and concerns about his aunts, the supposed zombie apocalypse, and the tension which had filled him upon entering the bar faded away. The music cheered him. It energized him. In the music there were no cares, no fears. There was only the joy of each note flowing seamlessly into the next creating magic which spread out from him, and entrancing those around him so they would forget their troubles for a short while. It was what he loved about music. While it was present, the world's horrors didn't and couldn't exist. Nothing could harm him while he was in within its grasp.

Giuseppe paid no attention to anyone else in the bar as he played. All his world had room for was the music. The rapture was all-consuming, and it was shattered by the sound of a siren wailing.

Lowering the harmonica from his lips, Giuseppe blinked the hypnotic fugue out of his eyes. "What the hell is that?" The question came out slow, through the thick lips of someone waking from a drunken stupor.

Nobody responded. The tables were empty as the patrons made their way through the door. The siren's blaring grew louder as the door opened, filling the bar, drowning out the music, demanding attention.

Turning around to face the bar, he saw the bartender reach under the counter and withdraw a short barreled shotgun. "What's that sound?" he asked again.

"Fire alarm." The bartender moved to the door, pumping a round into the firearm's chamber.

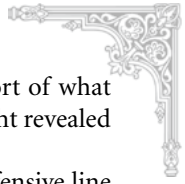
"What's the shotgun for? You can't put out a fire with it."

Without pausing, and without looking back, the bartender answered. "The zombies."

Could his aunts have been right about a zombie apocalypse? The idea was insane. And yet... All these people couldn't be as crazy as Sophia and Isabella. Giuseppe took one step towards the door and found himself on the sticky floor as the shockwave of an explosion rocked the building.

Scrambling back up to his feet, he made his way to the door. Flinging it open, he was assaulted not only by the siren, but also screams of pain, gunfire, and an unearthly sound which he could not place. But the sounds were nothing compared to the sights.

The night was alight, unlike when he had first entered the town. He saw flames engulfed George's General Store. Watching the wooden building go up like a matchstick, Giuseppe's heart twisted within his chest. With the store destroyed, there was no way he was going to be able to fulfill his aunts' request.



That concern was replaced by other emotions. The full import of what was happening set in. Besides the general store being ablaze, firelight revealed the gruesome battle being waged before him.

Bar patrons formed a semicircle in front of the bar like an offensive line protecting their quarterback, armed with a variety of guns, knives, farm implements, tire irons, and even a chainsaw or two.

Against them came a mob of creatures no longer human. They were shambling animated corpses. In spite of the many horror movies Giuseppe had seen, even the best FX did not compare to the noxiousness of the real things.

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap,” Giuseppe mumbled. Got to get out of here, he thought. Got to get out of here. Don’t want to die.

Thrusting his hand into his pockets, he grabbed its contents. Pulling everything out, he staggered towards the truck separating its keys from the other stuff; the other stuff fell to the ground. His harmonica glinted in the firelight, looking sad and lonely.

He reached for the truck’s door, hope of escape growing inside.

Giuseppe screamed as a zombie grabbed his wrist. Turning, he gagged at seeing the thing. Its mouth hung open, a black, rotting tongue dangling out of it. He struggled to back away from it, but its grip was surprisingly tight and wasn’t letting go.

“Get away,” Giuseppe shrieked. “Get away. Let go. Let me go.” He yanked his arm again trying to free himself.

The thing’s head exploded; bits of rotten flesh struck his face. Screaming, the adrenaline surged through his body giving him the strength to pull free and stagger to the truck.

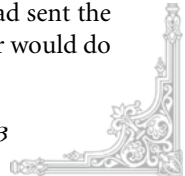
Yanking the door open Giuseppe jumped into the truck, shoved the key into the ignition, twisted, and stamped down the accelerator to get every ounce of power out of the engine. He struggled to get his mind off of the images it kept showing him of the zombies tearing the townspeople to pieces. Unfortunately, he was losing the fight, and his stomach was roiling so horrifically that every pothole’s jounce threatened to coat the grimy windshield with a putrid spray of its contents.

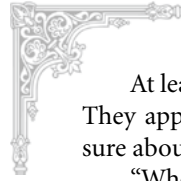
He needed to get back to his aunts. They’d protect him, take care of him. They’d see that the zombies didn’t get him.

Turning onto the twisting road leading back to the abbey, the truck fish-tailed and threatened to go up on two wheels as Giuseppe refused to lessen the pressure on the gas pedal. Tears rolled down his cheeks cutting a path through the soot and blood. His nose ran steadily. His breath came in panicky sobs.

“Oh, dear God!” Giuseppe cried. He slammed both feet on the brakes, tightening his hold on the steering wheel. His mind put all its efforts into willing the truck to come to a stop before striking the figures standing in the road.

“Our Lord, who art in heaven...” he whispered, hoping like hell the words would be heard, though if his aunts were correct and He had sent the zombie curse upon the world, then he seriously doubted the prayer would do much good.





At least a hundred zombies stumbled about within the truck's headlights. They appeared disoriented, as if they had just woken up and weren't quite sure about where to go or what to do.

"Where did they come from?" he whispered. "And how am I going to get past all of them?" He felt a fresh rush of panic starting.

From off to the right, more zombies staggered from the tree-lined edge into the road. Seeing them, Giuseppe knew where the crowd of undead originated, and the dirt clumps clinging to them confirmed it. The monsters were coming out of the abbey's cemetery.

The hoard in front of Giuseppe turned as if with one mind and stared at the truck then surged forward.

Giuseppe screamed something incoherent and stomped on the accelerator so hard the floorboard cracked. Tires spun furiously, kicking up dirt and rocks propelling the truck forward.

The unintelligible war cry did nothing to deafen the sounds of denting metal, crunching bones, or softly exploding bodies as the vehicle plowed into the unholy things coming for him. The truck pushed its way forward, rolling over the undead bodies.

The view before him disappeared as the windshield became coated with a thick amalgam of putrefying flesh, blood, pus, and bone fragments. Once more Giuseppe's stomach threatened to revolt, but he held it in check and turned on the wipers, smearing the goop in sickening streaks which were harder to see through.

Driving grew more difficult as the tires spun inside the bloated bodies in an attempt to find purchase on the solid gore-soaked ground. The mass of bodies in front was proving a more effective barrier to his progress than he anticipated. Yet, the truck continued to slog forward, spinning wheels now spraying rotting flesh in addition to the dirt and pebbles.

With each foot he progressed Giuseppe prayed, "Dear God, please, please, PLEASE get me through this mess. I know you're angry at everyone for not following your commandments more closely. But I also know You don't include me amongst those unworthy souls."

"I know I haven't been to church in a while, at least not since you took mom from me, but I've never gone against your commandments. And I know I haven't really prayed to You a lot lately, but I've always believed in You and known You were there looking out for me. So, I just want to make sure You're still watching out for me now. You're going to make sure I can get to the abbey now, right? You'll see that I come through this unharmed and make it safely to my aunts?"

Then, after a moment's silence, he added, "And please make sure they're safe as well so they can take care of me once I get there."

As if in answer, the truck bulldozed the last few zombies out of the way. With the path clear, Giuseppe sped up and turned into the abbey's driveway. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the sanctuary's lights. Without thinking of



stopping, he rammed the truck into the iron gate which was the only space to enter through the ten foot high brick wall.

The tired truck, as if it were a knight's spent horse, died in the midst of the attempt. It remained stuck half in and half out of the gate. Giuseppe had to lean into the door to extract himself from the vehicle. As he lurched through the door, he fell into the gate's iron bars. One flailing arm struck a sharp, barbed bar which tore into and through his bicep. He screamed in pain.

Warm blood coursed down his arm as rapidly as the new tears ran down his face as he finally took the last shambling steps to the abbey's door. His blood-slicked hand slipped trying to turn the knob. He wiped it against his torn, dirty shirt and tried again. The doorknob didn't move.

The low moaning at the cemetery made the blood grow cold in his veins.

"Aunt Sophia!" he screamed. He pounded on the door. "Aunt Isabella! It's Giuseppe! Open the door and let me in!"

He leaned one ear against the wood, straining to hear anything, but the thick door didn't allow any sound to be heard.

He renewed his efforts to get anyone's attention. "Aunt Isabella! Aunt Sophia! Open up! It's Giuseppe, your beloved nephew." Uncontrolled panic cracked his voice. "Don't leave me out here with the zombies."

The wicket in the middle of the door opened and Giuseppe found himself looking into the stern face of Aunt Sophia.

"So, you have returned, you lazy good for nothing. No guns to help us?" He shook his head. "Then what do you want?" The normally crisp but loving eyes which had shown him such care were like stone. Giuseppe staggered back a step. He'd never heard his aunt use such a disapproving tone with him before. His jaw flapped open in an attempt to respond, but no sound came out. Their eyes locked and he felt hope leave his body. His limbs were numb, and the pain in his arm was forgotten.

"Aunt Sophia," his voice came out soft, weak, "aren't you going to let me in?" She remained silent. She simply stared.

"Aunt Sophia?" Giuseppe whimpered.

"Be gone, Little Grasshopper," she hissed. "Like your namesake, you did nothing to help us prepare for this. You were too lazy and self-absorbed to be concerned with anyone other than yourself and your own pleasure. You are one of the ones God is attempting to remove from the face of the earth. Now you must face His judgment and punishment for your faithless, uncaring actions. You are beyond my ability to aid. Your soul is in His gracious hands, my nephew."

The emotionless face vanished and the little window's door snapped shut.

"Aunt Sophia!" he called, the sound rebounding off the pitiless door.

From the cemetery, the zombies' moans seemed to answer Giuseppe's forlorn cry and he fell to his knees. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...."







# Foxy and Wolf

By Brian M. Sammons

*Based on The Wolf and the Fox*

Wolf rolled off of Foxy with an animalistic grunt and flopped onto his hairy back. Panting, he huffed whisky-breath into the cold air. His lust was sated, albeit only temporary, but the brute was never truly happy. And while he had fed one of his hungers, the other still remained, as evident by the loud growl coming from his gut with the word ‘pride’ tattooed across it.

Foxy reached for a nearby damp rag and used it to wipe as much of his stink off of her as she could, and then to clean the mess he left inside her. She didn’t say anything, didn’t look at the blond giant lying beside her, but knew what he would demand of her next.

Sure enough: “Time for you to go out again.”

“No one’s left, none but them dead things,” she said, but knew her argument would fall on deaf ears.

“I saw a new car in that Motel 6 out by the highway, in the back, trying to blend in with the others. Too bad for them, I got all those cars memorized. No one comes into this town without me knowing about it.”

That was true. When the pair had come to the small Canadian town some months back, Wolf picked out the nicest house on the highest hill on the western side. There he constantly used a telescope to keep watch. He followed the movements of the wandering dead and kept an eye out for other survivors looking for a safe place to hold up. He rarely missed anything, even if he didn’t go outside anymore.

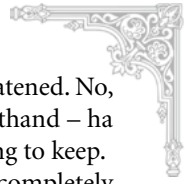
Not that he has to with me around, Foxy thought.

Wolf reached out his left hand, the one with the swastika tattoo on the back of it, grabbed her chin and turned her head to face him. His large, pale paw stood out in marked contrast against her darker skin.

“I haven’t eaten anything in two days, and you haven’t for what, three?”

She nodded.

“Well the shed out back is empty, but I sure as shit intend to eat something by tomorrow. So if you don’t get your pretty ass out there and find me something, guess what?”



Foxy didn't have to guess, it was the same thing he always threatened. No, not threaten; promised. A threat could be idle, she knew from firsthand – ha ha – experience that Wolf only made promises he was all too willing to keep.

“It only started getting cold a few days back; the dead aren't completely frozen up. Can't I wait for another day at least? It looks like we'll get some snow tomorrow.”

“You're a clever girl, Foxy, I'm sure you'll be fine.”

And that was that. Foxy never argued with Wolf, she had learned only pain came from doing so.

“Ok, I'll go.”

“Good girl.” He said, “And remember; you're clever when it comes to avoiding those dead fucks, but you're not clever enough to avoid me. You run again, and I won't be as nice as I was last time.”

Foxy had heard the same speech over a dozen times since she had gotten the courage to run from this lunatic the first time he had ordered her to go out and bring back food. She had lived to regret that moment of impulsive hope. Just thinking about what it had cost her sent phantom pains through her left arm, down to the cauterized stump about four inches above where her wrist had once been. A shiver trickled down her spine at the memory of him screaming at her, ‘open your eyes, watch me, bitch’ as he first cooked her severed arm and then ate every morsel he could, including cracking her finger bones to suck out the marrow.

When Wolf was hungry, he would eat, no matter what.

The woman got out of the stained bed and dressed. As she did, Wolf looked at the little tattoo she had on the back of her neck. It said ‘foxy’ and above it was a silhouette of that famously clever little creature.

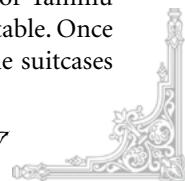
“That's my smart, lil' Foxy.” He muttered.

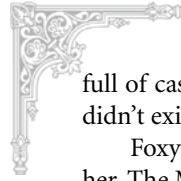
God I hate that name, she thought. But it was the only name he ever called her. She had told him her real name when they first met months ago during the savage spring when everyone was still running flu-scared, but he didn't care. She would always be his ‘Foxy’. Similarly he was only ‘Wolf’, also by his choice. He hated the name Wolfgang his Finnish immigrant parents had saddled him with, or at least that's what he had told her.

Wolf and Foxy, we're meant to be together. If he had said that once, he'd said it a hundred times.

A tear formed in her right eye, but she wiped it away surreptitiously when she pulled on her sweater. Wolf enjoyed tears too much, and she didn't feel like giving him the satisfaction right now. Once dressed for the cold, she picked up the belt with her knife and empty pistol hanging from it. Ammo was too precious a commodity to be used by anyone other than Wolf and then only to save his own hide.

She went to the front door, her boot slipping on ampoules of Tamiflu that spilled out of stacked up and dust covered boxes on a hallway table. Once worth more than gold, the drugs now just took up space. Like the suitcases





full of cash Wolf had stashed in a closet, they were remnants of a world that didn't exist anymore.

Foxy left the house and heard Wolf bar and chain the thick door behind her. The Motel 6 was about five miles away, so she started off at a trot because and hoped to make it there and back before nightfall.

Night was when the dead really came alive.

• • •

On her way to the motel, Foxy only saw three of the walking dead. Considering the overcast day, she thought there would have been more out. The decomposition of the corpses combined with the cold meant they moved slower than usual, so she easily outpaced them. That was the one good thing about living this far north. It was the reason she, Wolf, and probably whoever the poor slob was in the motel, came here. The last broadcast from the government had advised everyone to go as far north as possible. The reasoning being that since the dead lacked body heat, the colder the climate, the more likely it was they would freeze up and the longer they would remain frozen. The fact that this advice was offered in mid-April wasn't lost on Foxy. It meant the people in charge saw no end of the Chinese Flu in sight, and therefore neither should she.

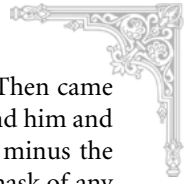
Chinese flu, she thought and shook her head. Even then they still called it the flu. Even after it was proven that the hordes of murderers springing up all over the globe were not crazy rabies victims, as was first thought, but the honest to god walking dead. But people had to call the epidemic something, and the fact that it started in China didn't help in giving it an accurate name. By the time the true horror was revealed it was too late. The dead were walking and attacking and creating more dead to walk and attack. The governments were not prepared, everyone panicked, and it was too late to damn China, because they were already damned. China was gone, and when one point four billion dead began to walk throughout Asia and into Europe, adding to its numbers as it spread. It really didn't matter what you called the end of the world, the result was the same.

Back then Foxy was still making the long trek up north from Arizona. The only currency she had was the only thing she could always rely on; the good looks she'd inherited from her Mexican mother. It was how she made a living as a stripper before the dead rose up and it was how she survived after.

Trading on her looks, she managed to make it all the way across the U.S. and into Canada. She would either act the eyelash-batting woman in trouble or the pouty seductress willing to trade sex for food, protection, or at the start, medicine. Her looks also meant that most people she met wrote her off as just a hot piece of ass. They never stopped to consider if she had a brain inside her pretty little head, and it her wits saved her far more often than her surgically enhanced tits.

Then she had the misfortune to cross paths with Wolf.

The big Nazi biker had actually been her hero, once upon a time in a land far, far away. She had been trapped in a drug store by four walking dead while



stupidly looking for flu meds and she was sure her time was up. Then came Wolf. The Nordic giant rushed in, long blond hair streaming behind him and wielding a fire axe. He was the very picture of a Viking warrior, minus the horned helmet. The fact that he was brave enough to not wear a mask of any sort excited her.

When the dead were still and he saw her staring at the white power tats on his bare chest, he smiled, extended a hand, and said, "Don't worry, I'm not as stupid as I once was. It doesn't matter what color your skin is now, as long as it ain't rotting-green, am I right?"

And clever Foxy did something really stupid; she believed him.

Now months later and she could not believe how far she'd fallen. Giving a guy a BJ for a can of beans on the long road north was bad, but the things Wolf made her do were much, much worse. Things she didn't know how to live with herself for doing. Things like what she was planning on doing now.

Foxy sat inside an unlocked minivan across the street from the motel for two hours before she saw anyone. It was a man in a leather jacket, blue jeans, and Red Wings cap. He crawled out of a window in one of the middle motel rooms and then stopped to lean back inside for some reason. Foxy pulled out a tiny pair of binoculars from her jacket and saw that he was kissing a woman goodbye. When they were through, he helped her pull up the wooden barricade that they used to cover the broken window back into place.

Don't think of him as a man with a woman who loves him. Don't think about anything except what Wolf will do to you should you come back empty handed. She thought, but could not stop from hating herself a little more.

She followed the man discreetly, using buildings and vehicles as cover. She saw that he was making a straight line to the abandoned Loblaw store, no doubt looking for the same thing she was; food. Too bad for him, Wolf and her had already cleaned that place out of anything edible months back. They had also cleared out every house and building in this town of anything canned or preserved. It's when that ran out that Wolf started making her go out and hunt.

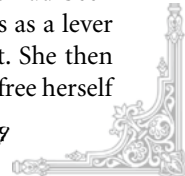
On his way to the store, she saw him spot a single walking corpse as it shambled towards him. He pulled a pistol out of his jacket, but wisely didn't shoot the stumbling thing. Gunshots always brought more dead, even in broad daylight. Instead he ran and once some distance away, he quickly broke right and hid behind a building until the frost-covered dead woman slowly shuffled past.

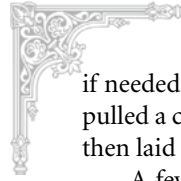
Foxy smiled but then forcefully made herself stop. There was no reason to admire the man, not with what Wolf was going to do to him.

It's him or you, remember that.

She knew he would stay hidden for a while, to make sure that the dead lady was well away before starting for the grocery store again, so she ran ahead.

Once inside the Loblaw she found an aisle where the shelves had been overturned. She grabbed a couple of mops and used their handles as a lever to lift one of the shelves up enough to stick her leg underneath it. She then gingerly lowered it. It wasn't all that heavy, and she knew she could free herself





if needed, but it was far from comfortable. She tossed the mop handles away, pulled a crumpled brown paper bag from her pocket and placed it next to her, then laid back and waited.

A few minutes later she heard the man's soft footsteps and he carefully trod over the broken glass at the front of the store.

Showtime, she thought bitterly.

"Hello, is someone there?" She called out.

The footsteps suddenly stopped but no one answered.

"Please, I need help. I'm trapped and I can't lift this thing. There's no walking dead here, but they might come back. Please, just help me get out of here."

The man came cautiously, his pistol in his hand, his eyes checking all around, looking for nasty surprises, before they rested on her.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Just someone like you, out looking for food. I went for a can way back on the top shelf and this damn thing came down on top of me. My leg is pinned and I can't lift it, see." Foxy showed the man her missing hand to reinforce the idea that she was a harmless, helpless woman.

He gaped at the missing appendage and raised his pistol up a little bit.

"Wait, no, I wasn't bit. This was a long time ago. Some asshole cut it off."

And that was the honest truth. While anyone still alive now was immune to the airborne strain of the Chinese Flu, no one appeared to be immune to the virus spread through the bites of the dead.

"Why would someone cut off your hand?"

"Like I said, he was an asshole and crazy too, but I didn't know that when I met him. Please, if you can just lift this off of me, I will go on my way. I won't bother you." She said, and then added with a slight smile. "Or, I could stay for a while... if you want."

Indecision, humanity, fear, and lust all mixed together in his eyes. In the end, it was humanity or lust that won out. He put his pistol in his pocket, walked over, and lifted the shelf off of her so she could crawl out. Before he could quietly set it back down, she pressed her empty pistol against the side of his head.

"Don't move." She said.

"Come on. I just helped you."

"Shut it. If you want to live, you'll do what I say. Take the gun from your pocket and drop it."

With only a moment's hesitation he did as he was told.

"Now see that paper bag? Pick it up and put what's inside on."

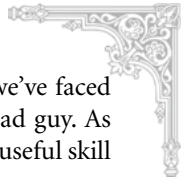
He picked up the bag and upturned it to drop a pair of handcuffs into his other hand.

"Why?" he asked.

"Just do it with your hands behind your back."

"If you're going to kill me then do it." He said, defeated and weary.

"I'm not going to kill you." She said, again telling a very selective truth. She then followed it up with a familiar lie. "Look, I'm with a small group of



survivors and we run this town. Now we're not bad people, but we've faced bad people before. So we've got to make sure that you're not a bad guy. As soon as we do that, you can go. Or if you want, and you have some useful skill or something, you might be able to stay here, with us."

"Really?" He said with confused hope in his voice.

He bought it, she thought before saying, "Yes, but I've got to protect myself, being a one handed woman and all. So put on the cuffs and let's get going. You know the dead are always more active at night and we've got a few miles to cover."

"OK, sure." He said and almost sounded happy as he handcuffed himself.

Clever Foxy, she heard Wolf say inside her head.

Fuck you! She thought back, but she wasn't sure if she was silently yelling at the thought of Wolf or herself.

The two made the long walk back to Wolf's den in good time, but not silently. All along the way the man, who told her his name was Jason, would not shut up. He assured her he was a good guy. He said that he was from Warren, Michigan and had been an electrician at General Motors before the flu. He was sure he would be useful to their group. He told her that he had a wife and two kids, although he did lie – poorly – and told her that they were not with him.

Foxy didn't want to hear his story. She didn't want to know this guy, not with what Wolf was planning for him. She told him to be quiet repeatedly, using the ever present threat of the dead to justify the silence. But Jason wouldn't shut up. He was like a shook up soda, once he opened up, there was no stopping him.

Then when they were back in Wolf's fortified house and Jason saw the vicious looking giant grinning at him, holding his favorite meat cleaver, he was at last quiet.

"Good girl, Foxy. I knew I could count on you." Wolf said, pleased.

Foxy nodded as Jason said, "What's going on? What do you want?"

Wolf chuckled as he stepped up and kicked the man square in the groin, causing him to drop with a whine.

"He alone?" Wolf asked.

Foxy heisted a bit too long before answering, "Yeah, he's alone."

Jason looked up at her, tears welling in his eyes, but she did not return the look.

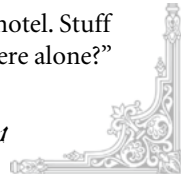
"Hmmm," Wolf said, trying to sound wise. He grabbed Jason by the shoulder and hauled him to his feet. He menaced the small man, smiling at him and pressing his cleaver against his cheek to keep Jason from turning away from his cold, blue eyes. "Are you alone?" he growled.

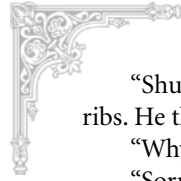
"Yes." Jason squeaked.

"Bullshit." Wolf said and then kned the man once more in the balls, which again sent him toppling to the floor.

"I saw you the other night, taking stuff out of your car at the motel. Stuff like a woman's and kids' clothes. Why would you have that if you were alone?"

"Please." The man whispered.





“Shut up.” Wolf snarled and punctuated his point by kicking him in the ribs. He then turned toward Foxy.

“Why did you lie to me?”

“Sorry, Wolf. But I got him for you. And we don’t need the others –” His heavy hand slapping across her face cut her off.

“Who are you to decide what I need?”

“But if we get too much, it won’t keep. It will spoil like that other time.”

“Stupid bitch, that was in August, its winter now. In the shed they’ll stay frozen until spring. You think I’m gonna let all that meat go?”

“But...” Foxy started, and she wanted to add they’re just a mother and her kids, but she knew that wouldn’t matter to Wolf. Hell, the mention of another woman might just excite the animal.

Again Wolf’s hand shot out. This time it was a punch to her stomach that dropped her to the ground next to where Jason wept.

“But nothing. I call the shots here, not you. I’ll take care of this guy. You always do it half-assed and leave too much meat to waste on the bone. You get your skinny brown ass out there and think of a way to get all of them over here. Or I swear I’ll take another pound or two of flesh off of you. Perhaps I’ll cut those fake tits off. If you ain’t gonna use them to bring dupes to me no more, why have them at all?”

“OK, I’ll go.” She said.

“Please don’t.” Jason pleaded.

Wolf shut him up with another kick.

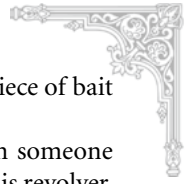
“I’m sorry I have to” she whispered.

Foxy got up shakily and without another look at either the sobbing man or the grinning beast, she left the building with sunset only minutes away. Right then, she could not have cared less. The dead flesh eating monsters outside were preferable to the live flesh eating monster inside, and they were far less scary.



Two days passed and Foxy had not returned. Wolf could not believe she would try to leave him again, not after what he did to her the first time. That meant her luck must have run out and one of the dead had finally gotten a hold of her. Even though the temperature outside had dropped drastically over the last few days and the dead should all be popsicles by now, you could never be too careful with them.

Shame about Foxy, she was a fine piece of ass. He thought as he gnawed the flavor out of a rib bone. But by now the dead gotta be frozen solid or at least slow as molasses. Guess I’ll have to go looking for the wife and kiddies myself. Hmm, maybe if the wife is cute, I’ll keep her around for a while. Save her to the end, or perhaps train her like I did Foxy. Or maybe one of the kids is a girl. Nothing too young that she’s no use to me except as meat, but young enough that she’ll learn good and be someone I can still have some fun with.



Twelve or thirteen would be perfect. No one could resist a choice piece of bait like that.

Wolf was grinning at the thought of fresh young meat when someone knocked on the front door. The big man leapt to his feet, grabbed his revolver, went to the door and looked out the peephole. He was surprised to see Foxy standing on the other side, but angry that she was alone. He opened the reinforced door up, grabbed the woman by the coat collar, and yanked her inside.

“Where have you been?” He asked.

“Looking for the others like you told me to do. I went back to the motel, banged on the door and looked in the windows, but they were gone. So I had to search for them. That took me two days.”

“So where are they? You get too scared or hungry out there and come crawling home? Too bad, I ain’t gonna feed someone who returns empty handed.”

“No, I managed to kill a stray cat and ate him a day back. As far as being scared, all of the dead are frozen stiff. Oh a few can barely move at a snail’s pace. I came back because I found the others, but I’m going to need your help to get them.”

“Why?” Wolf asked.

“They locked themselves into the basement of a house. I tried all my tricks to get them to open up, but the lady said she’d only open the door for her husband, and that isn’t likely to happen, right? But you’re big and strong and I’m sure you can bash the door down. Then together we can round them up and bring them back.”

“I don’t know...”

“Look, I said all the dead are frozen, there’s nothing to be scared of now.”

“What did you say?” He snarled. “You saying that I’m scared to go outside?”

“No,” she began cautiously, “It’s just — “

His hand shot out, grabbed her by the throat, and slammed her against the wall “Remember it was me that saved you and not the other way around, ungrateful bitch.”

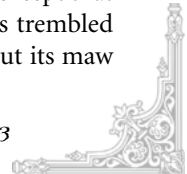
“But you always send me out there, you never go.”

“So, that doesn’t mean I’m scared of those dead fucks. It means I’m smart enough to know that people will respond better to you than me.”

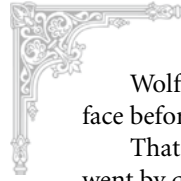
“Okay,” she gasped. “I didn’t mean anything by that. Look, if you want those others, I know where they are, but we’re both going to have to go get them, I can’t do it by myself. And we had better go now, because they might move again now that I found them.”

Wolf let go of her throat, making sure to shove her head back into the wall for good measure. “Alright, let me get dressed.”

On the way there they only saw one dead guy and it wasn’t walking any more. The thing was frozen and lying on the ground. Wolf cautiously went over to examine the corpse. It looked like any ordinary dead body, except that one of its milky eyes sluggishly turned to look up at him. Its jaws trembled slightly as the dead thing tried to open its mouth to take a bite, but its maw was frozen shut.







Wolf laughed. He took a moment to piss on the dead man's rotted, frozen face before stomping its head in with the heel of his boot.

That seemed to put Wolf into a much better mood and the rest of the trip went by quickly and without further incident.

"What's that?" Wolf asked, pointing to where smoke drifted out of a chimney of an abandoned two story house on the eastern side of town.

"That's how I found them. They must have found a place with a heater or fireplace or something and lit it to stay warm."

"Ha, might as well hang up a sign saying 'we're here.'"

"Let's see if they're still inside." Foxy said and then jogged towards the house. Wolf, ever cautious, waited until Foxy went in first before following her.

"It's warm in here." He said upon entering the front room.

"Yeah, they've really got the heat cranked up."

"And Christ does it stink."

"I know, I checked it out when I first came here. There's a family upstairs. Murder suicide done by the parents. Don't worry, they're really dead."

"So where are the motel people?"

"In the kitchen there's a door to the basement. That's where I talked to the woman." Foxy pointed deeper into the house.

Wolf motioned with his pistol for her to lead the way.

A sense of déjà vu came over Wolf. He recognized bits and pieces of the house from when he and Foxy raided all the abandoned buildings of anything valuable. But there had been so many homes, and they had torn through them so quickly, that Wolf couldn't remember much about the place.

Now in the kitchen, Foxy walked up to a door and knocked on it.

"It's me from yesterday, you still here?"

There was no answer.

"Come on, I know you're still down there. Like I said before, I don't mean you any harm and this part of town isn't safe. A lot of dead people are in these old houses and they like to wander at night. If you come back with me, my friends can keep you safe."

When still no answer came, Foxy turned to Wolf and whispered, "Maybe they're gone?"

Wolf shook his head. "Too nice and warm here, they wouldn't leave this."

Foxy looked Wolf in the eye, something she hadn't done in a long time. "Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, a mother and her kids? That seems kind of —"

Wolf cut her off. "I've told you, its dog eat dog. You've got to do what you've got to do to survive. Now out of my way, I'll get this bitch and her brats."

Wolf put one of his massive boots to the door, but it didn't budge.

"Damn." He said.

"I told you they reinforced it. Maybe it's even too strong for you to break down?"

“Bullshit, ain’t no such thing.” He said, walking to the other side of the kitchen before hurtling himself at the door and hitting it with his shoulder.

The door exploded inwards with a loud cracking sound. Wolf rushed past, into the darkness beyond the doorway, and then fell twelve feet to the cold concrete floor of the basement with a surprised yelp.

Because Foxy had destroyed the old wooden basement steps the day before.

Foxy had been busy for those two days she was away from Wolf. First, she found a house with a wood burning furnace and lit it. Then she made sure anything someone could use to climb out of the basement with was removed, just in case. Next she rigged a thick bar across the basement door, but she tied a rope to the bar and fed that rope over the top of the door. With that she could keep the locking bar raised, shut the door from the outside, and then lower the bar in place, cutting off the leftover rope once she was done. Her last bit of handy work had been taking a sledgehammer to the old stairs. Not an easy task for a one-handed woman, but she was motivated.

Then came the nearly frozen dead.

One by one she lured the walking dead into the house, using herself as bait. She would get them in front of the open basement door and then shove them in. As stiff and slow as the dead were, they weren’t all that threatening. Thus the reason for finding a house with an easy to start heater. After more than a day down there in the dark, out of the freezing wind, next to the furnace, the dead would be much more like their usual, lethal selves. Foxy had gathered eighteen of the walking dead, all of the shambling corpses she could find in the neighborhood. As she stared down into the basement from the kitchen, she saw they thawed out nicely.

The dead rushed at Wolf, who was still face down and dazed on the cement floor. Before he could lift his head to look around, they fell on him. His screams of fear and pain began as rotting things tore chunks of meat out of him by the mouthful. Thankfully, Foxy couldn’t see much down there. The only light was the faint orange glow from the furnace, but even the blurry shapes and shadows were almost too much for her. She had seen the hungry dead eat before and her mind filled in the gory details from memory. She found some satisfaction in listening to Wolf’s cries. After all the pleading, whimpers, and screams he had caused others to make, it was good to hear him sing the same song.

Clever Foxy, she heard Wolf say inside her head.

This time she agreed with him.





# The Pied Piper of Cottageville

By Tracy L. Carbone

*Based on The Pied Piper*

When the dark haired, steely-eyed man in a black trench coat showed up at our town border claiming he'd lead the zombies away for a price, of course we had to believe him. The damn things were everywhere, leering at us, scratching at our windows at night, threatening to devour the few of us who were left. That's when Stanley cruised in on a bicycle, armed with promises of salvation.

We'd tried getting rid of the monsters ourselves. We burned our dead when they showed signs of contagion. Unlike some other places, we weren't haunted by wives or parents or children chasing us down as food. Ours were cremated and we were safe. We treated the dead with as much dignity as we dared under the circumstances.

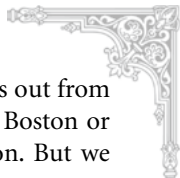
But the undead from other towns, where they multiplied unchecked, found their way to us, sniffed us out. They were like roaches. If you saw one, there were a dozen others soon scurrying along. We needed help and were foolish enough to believe that this visitor was the answer.

Our terror started long before Stanley arrived though. Long before even the Sky Flash. Admittedly, it was time for our day of reckoning. The world had become unlivable. We were a society of overeaters, overdrinkers, overthinkers. We took drugs to slow our brains, others to speed them up. The government was both under and over involved. People worked less and complained more. Commercials for alcohol and diet pills and condoms and tanning beds were interspersed with the religious folks calling for an end to sin, even though many of them were guiltier than anyone.

The world was moving too fast and we were clamoring for it to slow the hell down. And then one day it was over.

It was a normal Saturday afternoon in August. I was on a picnic with the wife and kids at a park that isn't there anymore. The sky was blue one minute, then blood red. Then it all went white. It was months before the sky was anything but white. Eventually the sky turned blue again but by then, most of the humans were gone.

I don't know the science behind what happened; only that one of the many countries who hated us called the president's bluff and bombed us. I heard through the grapevine the bombs were delivered through guided mis-



siles to every major city in the U.S. We lived about a hundred miles out from anything, in a safe rural town called Cottageville. If we'd lived in Boston or Hartford, we'd have died that instant, like most of the population. But we were insulated. Or so we thought.

After the Sky Flash, we ran to our homes, barricaded the doors, turned on the TVs and computers to get the instant information we'd grown accustomed to. Nothing worked. We had no lights either. The A/C was broken, as was the microwave. After a day or two of panic followed by a couple of weeks of moaning about all we'd lost, the small percentage of people left banded together and learned to improvise.

It was like that for a year. A year to the day. We adjusted and rebuilt, and lived the best we could. Without electricity we had no access to our bank accounts or gas pumps or water filtration, but it was okay. We were getting by and the world seemed better somehow. Freer and safer than before the Sky Flash.

It was peaceful until the day Pastor Jim turned. His wife rolled over in bed in the morning and found him dead. Probably a heart attack. By the time Dr. Finley arrived, Pastor Jim was alive again, sort of. You've all seen the zombie movies, you know how it goes. Pastor Jim's eyes grew wild, and he bit his wife, and then the doctor. Within a few days, our small population dwindled by half.

It's not important how we controlled it, or who we had to kill. I'm not going to relive the process of throwing my writhing children into the crematorium, or my wife. I did what I had to do.

After a lot of death and re-death and tears, our town was once again restored. But then the zombies from other towns came, and fed. We burned again. But they kept coming.

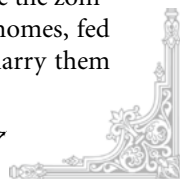
And then one fine day Stanley arrived in his black trench coat. He rode in on his bicycle and pulled a silver flute from a worn bag. "I can lead the zombies away for you."

In the beginning, it was a miracle.

The first night, as we all watched from the safety of our homes clustered in the center of town, Stanley walked out, right in the open. I spied him through a peephole in the door. I saw him, but barely believed it.

Within a minute or two, bushes in the distance rustled. Then the shuffling zombies showed their ragged pale faces. But Stanley didn't run. He stood his ground. The zombies grew in number and picked up their pace, hungry and thrilled to have their dinner waiting and willing. When they were a few feet from him, Stanley held his flute to his lips and played a sweet melody. It sounded familiar but I couldn't place it. Still can't. They became immediately entranced, as if someone had hit an on switch. He led the placid zombies straight to a waiting pit of fire. They walked right in, didn't pause, and didn't fight him, only dropped like lemmings off a cliff.

And so it went for months. Every night Stanley would serenade the zombies. We couldn't have been more grateful. We let him into our homes, fed him for free at our restaurants. All the young girls hoped he'd marry them



and they could have his children. We even chipped in together and used town funds to erect a statue of him. We hoped he'd stay with us forever.

Then one day he asked for a town meeting. I expected it was because he was going to propose to Donna. He'd dated a few of the local girls but Donna was the ex-Pastor's daughter and quite lovely. They spent a lot of time together and she'd told everyone who would listen that she just knew he was going to pop the question. What better place to propose than town hall in front of all the citizens?

I sat with the others in the fold out chairs. All of us happy to be able to walk the streets at night without fearing for our lives. Our lanterns hung on the wall pegs, illuminating the hall. Donna sat in the front row. No doubt she too thought this meeting involved a wedding proposal.

Stanley walked in through the backdoor. He walked to the podium, resting his lantern next to him. The crowd hushed. He had become our savior in the new world and his words were gospel.

"I brought you all here tonight to talk about the next step in all our lives," he said.

Donna squirmed in her seat and I saw the other women smile on her behalf.

"As you all know, the population of the earth has dwindled by about seventy-five percent," he said in his usual calm manner. "We can't change the past. We all suffered the tragedy of losing someone, me included. But if we're going to battle the rest of the zombies out there and rebuild society we need to take steps."

So far so good. He made a reasonable point.

"I completed the service for you of making your town safe. Do you all agree?"

Of course we did. We cheered for Stanley.

"I never asked for payment. We agreed that when your town was safe, we would settle up. And so tonight, I would like to put a value to my work, tell you what I require."

"Whatever you ask, Stanley, we can scrape it together. Somehow. We've got some cash in the town kitty," Keith the town treasurer said.

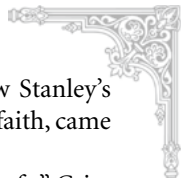
"And I've got some cash in my house," Flora, the woman who had always been the richest in town, said. "And my jewelry. We owe you everything so whatever you want—"

Little Billy O'Neill, who had moved in the Smiths when his parents turned and tried to infect him, stood up and clapped. "You can have my baseball cards." Others in the crowd rose too, offered up their most prized possessions.

If it all ended there, this would be an uplifting story. Except in superhero movies though, no one storms a town wielding weapons, or musical instruments solely for their own gratification or for cash. There's always a catch.

"I am pleased you are all so willing to pay me my fair share," Stanley said. The crowd hushed once more and took their seats.

"I am not a magic man. My flute is an instrument of a higher power."



I can't speak for the others, but I had never questioned how Stanley's methods worked. I accepted them on faith. And now I learned that faith, came with a price.

"My God is demanding one life for the time I have kept you safe." Cries rang out, a rebellion. Stanley didn't stop it. He let it run its course. When the crowd had shouted themselves hoarse, without a reaction from him, they all regained their seats.

I had been silent throughout but stood up. "How will we choose who dies? Will your god smote him?" My tone was sardonic but he replied without emotion.

"Our world has been restored to the old ways, the old gods. We are back in a time where we rely on crops and nature. And God. This revived God demands your faith and your sacrifice. If you do not comply, my flute will not work and your safe little village will be overrun tenfold with zombies."

I was a tax accountant before the Sky Flash and rarely got caught up on the emotional contagion of the others. I dealt with absolutes. "How? How will he be chosen and sacrificed, if we agree?"

I felt hateful stares from the others. I turned to them. "I am not saying I do agree but we need to know this man's demands."

"They are not my demands, Paul," Stanley said. "They are my God's demands."

Pastor Mike, our new pastor since his uncle turned, stood up. "You cannot talk about God like that. He would not ask for sacrifices! He would not send help and then demand we kill our own in his name. He wouldn't trick us like that."

"Did I say He was your God?" Stanley asked.

Pastor Mike's face flushed with rage. "How dare you!"

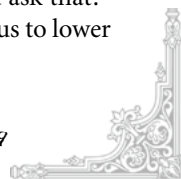
Stanley threw his arms in the air. "His price. Take it or leave it."

"How do we choose and what is the process of sacrifice?" I asked again. No one else would. For me, the ones I loved most were gone and I was operating on keeping myself alive and finding happiness where I could. I'd hardened and become cold, maybe lost the ability to care. There was no one particular person I was attached to more than any other. To me, it mattered not who was killed but it was clear someone had to go. I hadn't been religious since I was a kid, and I still struggled with the idea of emotional devotion to someone I couldn't see. I did however believe in the laws of cause and effect. Hundreds of zombies were gone and would return if we didn't offer up one of our flock.

Stanley scanned the crowd. "Choose your favorite. Stone him or her to death at a public gathering, to show your devotion to my God."

Everyone gasped and protested.

"We have already lost our favorites. We've lost so many. Three quarters of the world, gone. There are so few people left. Why would any God ask that?" Pastor Mike shouted. "No one who represents goodness would ask us to lower our numbers even further."



“Ours is not to reason why, Pastor Mike. Choose your sacrifice or the zombies will return.”



Collectively the town decided to reject Stanley's request. Pastor Mike convinced us that Stanley was not a man sent by God, but a raving lunatic with a magic flute sent by Satan.

I didn't give it much thought either way. Seemed to me Stanley did a service and should be paid. It was only fair. The idea of using gods and demons didn't enter into it. Business was business. But we were a united town and majority ruled. We rejected Stanley's request. What could he do?

As night fell we got our answer.

We were having our nightly town dinner, a gathering that had started shortly after Stanley rid us of the zombies months ago. Our tables were set, folding chairs opened, lanterns illuminated the evening. Stanley's seat was empty as expected. He'd packed his things and left when we refused to pay him.

From the woods, the soft sound of a flute playing interrupted our chatter. As the sound grew louder, and the flautist grew closer, grunts and crunching branches added noise. Branches separated and I spied the familiar decayed fingers and bloated bodies of zombies.

“He's brought them from another town to punish us. He is not a vehicle of God. He is a false God and we can't give in to him!” Pastor Mike yelled.

But no one knew what to do, who to listen to.

People rose and stood in place. They looked to Pastor Mike and to each other.

“We've got to do something!” Donna screamed. “He's leading them here to kill us all! We've got to do what he says!”

The crowd began to turn on each other. Who was the favorite? Whose death would God accept as an ample sacrifice to save us from the zombies?

We ran from the zombies, and from Stanley who led their charge. People grabbed at each other, screamed out names. “Take Micah! He's the most innocent!” Or “Give up Angela, she's a virgin. Get her!”

The zombies surrounded us and we found ourselves in a circle surrounding the granite statue we'd erected of Stanley with his trench coat waving as he stepped, the magic flute poised in his lips.

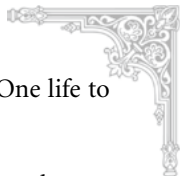
I pointed. “Stanley is our favorite! Stanley! Is our favorite! Our most loved!”

Silence from the crowd. Stanley's flute continued to play, to lead the undead to ravage us. But we were silent.

Pastor Mike echoed my words. “Stanley is our favorite! In the name of our God, stone him!”

It happened in seconds. Townsfolk grabbed rocks. Someone smashed the statue and grabbed pieces of the stone Stanley to use to commit the sacrifice.

“Stanley is the chosen one!” We chanted it in unison. It felt so natural, working together as a group to save our town, to save our lives. Maybe it was



wrong to kill in the name of any God, but it was a business deal. One life to save all of ours.

“Get him!” I screamed louder than everyone else.

The zombies were merely feet away but we charged ahead to make our sacrifice. For those few minutes we were no longer afraid. I could smell their rancid breath and hear the horrific rustle of their dry dead skin as they shuffled closer. Their groans grew louder and they closed in on us. But we were on a mission, perhaps guided by our God or maybe from his, or merely on a mission of self-preservation.

We heaved our weapons. The rocks crashed onto him, smashing his head. His bones cracked and pierced through his trench coat as we roared in frenzied excitement. We were getting off on this man’s death. I looked up and one point and saw myself in the zombies. We had become like them.

Micah, the youngest of all the townsfolk at four years, old threw the rock that crushed the flute.

And it was in that second that we had another Sky Flash. Blinding blood red light replaced the night sky. For seconds, we were blinded. When our eyes adjusted, the sky grew pink and then white.

The zombies dropped where they stood. We waited for them to move again, but they didn’t.

With Stanley’s death, with his sacrifice, came an end to the zombie apocalypse. Was it a coincidence?



The people of Cottageville never knew what caused the flash. On the rare occasions someone new came to town, they brought no information. It was a mystery to everyone. The second flash didn’t cost any life though, that much was clear, and after, the air was cleaner, people were healthier. The birthrate went up and the dead stayed dead.

We left Stanley’s desecrated statue up in the center of town, as a reminder to all of how things had been, should the future generations ever forget.

Sometimes in the middle of the night, the sounds of flute music drift through my window and I remember Stanley, the man who was our savior and in whose death we were saved again. I am still not a religious man, but it does make me wonder...







# Metzger of the Acres

By Sean Logan

*Based on Dunderbeck's Machine*

There weren't many men like Metzger Dunderbeck in the Acres.

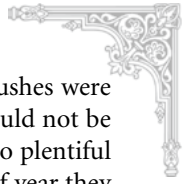
Inside its wrought iron gates, the oversized houses of the Rolling Acres Community stood shoulder to shoulder, each only a slight variation on its neighbor, crowding the winding, sloping streets, twice the size and half the distance apart of any house beyond its walls. It gave them the appearance of being swollen, a bloated version of the more modest homes down the hill, an infected iteration of the unpretentious and unprotected neighborhoods below. The houses of the Acres were pretentious. And they were most certainly protected.

In one of these homes lived Metzger Dunderbeck and his sons. Hugo and Johann Dunderbeck--starting defensive tackle and middle linebacker, respectively, for the Oakland Raiders--brought their father with them to the Acres, and he was no doubt as uncomfortable with the situation as we were. In the years before the world was overrun with its own rotting dead, he could be seen peering between the parted blinds of a second story window at anyone with the audacity to let their dog lift a leg on his emerald green lawn.

He could sometimes be seen in his entirety on dewy Sunday mornings when he would shuffle down his front walk to retrieve his paper, hair rising like a silver flame from his liver-spotted scalp, bony chickenskin legs strewn with plump purple veins beneath his frayed bathrobe, shambling like the dead who would later consume our thoughts, and many of our neighbors.

No, there were not many men like Metzger Dunderbeck in the Acres. But after the apocalypse he became the most important man in town. And in a world where the dead lived and the living died, perhaps that made sense.

Jesse Armstrong picked blackberries from an angry tangle of thorned bushes no one else knew about. He handled each delicate berry with great care because he understood that each one kept him and his mother one tiny step away from starvation. People in the Acres weren't starving yet, but what little food remained, which had been pooled together and stored in the Common Center, was dwindling fast and tightly rationed. Today, Jesse was given just one can of green beans. And even though his mother was not well and had little appetite, that half can was not enough to keep the stomach from rumbling.



The berries, however, made all the difference for now. The bushes were down the hill in a crevasse along the north end of the gate and could not be seen from the street or from any of the houses. The berries were so plentiful he could eat his fill and have enough for his mother. At this time of year they were ripening so fast he didn't need to restrain himself.

Jesse often felt a grinding sense of guilt that he didn't share his secret, but understood that if he did, within a day there'd be nothing left to share. The one person he would have trusted with this secret, his one true friend in the Acres, was Andy Price, best friend in his fifth grade class, Robin to his Batman, Tonto to his Lone Ranger. But he wasn't there anymore.

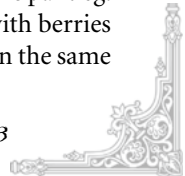
It happened five weeks ago, after the black cloud came out of nowhere and without warning, oozing across the sky. It blotted out the sun for most of the afternoon, the air thick with oily mist, leaving a greasy film on the skin and every other surface. It was after the dead began to scratch at the inside of their mausoleum doors, and after they had begun to dig themselves out of their graves, with fingers wriggling up through the cemetery grass like earthworms in the rain. It was after they knew there was a problem, but before they knew just how bad it really was. That was when Andy and his family had loaded themselves in their Acura MDX and gone into town for supplies. And never came back.

No, that's not actually true. They did come back, mostly. Andy, his father, Ray, and mother, Julie, showed up at the gate a week later, pale and dull eyed. Andy's younger brother, Jake, was not with them. The family was not intact, and neither were its remaining members. Ray was missing his left arm just below the elbow. Julie was missing fingers on her mangled right hand. Andy was not missing any of his extremities, but one side of his face had been chewed away. They had showed up outside the gate, and there they remained a month later, slowly decaying, cheeks collapsing, eyes sinking into their skulls, skin growing tight and leathery.

Nearly all of the residents of the Acres who died on the outside came back and were still moaning outside its gates. Jesse figured that some part of their brains knew there were people in the Acres and that drew them. But maybe there was another part that wanted to be back inside, that remembered that the Acres was a place where they felt safety and comfort.

When Jesse was done picking his berries he sat on the grass and ate as the dead wailed, reaching through the bars. It was relentless, but the only way they would ever get through it was in pieces. When they first showed themselves, people tried to shoot them in the head, because that's how it worked in the movies. But they just kept coming. If a piece fell off, it continued forward, drawn not by sight or sound or smell, but some new sense, toward any living thing. The only time Jesse had ever been attacked was when a disembodied hand had crawled under the gate like a spider and tried to scurry up his pantleg.

When Jesse was done eating, he headed home, pockets filled with berries for his mother. Several of his neighbors were heading up the street in the same



direction. He saw Annie Pickering, his mother's friend, who no longer came around much now that his mother was ill.

"Missus Pickering, where's everyone going?"

"To the Dunderbeck house. Metzger, the father, says he has food, enough for everyone."

This seemed too good to be true. "What kind of food?"

"I don't know, but I guess we'll find out, won't we?" She gave his cheek a pinch, more happy and animated than anyone he'd seen since the gates were sealed shut.

By the time they reached the Dunderbeck house there was already a small crowd spilling out onto the porch. They pressed in amongst the throng, making their way through the large oak doors and into the marble entryway, others pushing their way back out through the crowd, happily clutching newspaper-wrapped packages.

"What is it you have there?" Annie Pickering said to Bob Wilkins, who used to own Wilkins Sporting Goods, as he pushed past them, holding his package like it might try to fly away.

"Sausage," he said, eyes manic with hunger.

"What kind of sausage?" Jesse said. "What's it made out of?"

"It's made out of food," he said and dashed off.

Jesse continued to be swept along in the crush of people until he reached the kitchen, where stooped and angular Metzger Dunderbeck and his two stout, brawny sons stood beside some sort of machine, four feet tall and oddly constructed of mismatched parts, sprawling across half of the spacious kitchen. Jesse thought he recognized some of the parts as a car radiator, an oscillating fan, a small pellet stove, a garden hose, and a standing mixer with meat grinder attachment.

"Enjoy your zauzagez," Metzger said, the sagging skin of his gaunt face pulled back in a broad grin, handing out his wrapped bundles, which were stacked on the kitchen's granite center island. "Der vill be more tomorrow. Yez, yez, enough for everyone."

"My lord," Annie Pickering said. "What is that contraption you got there, Metzger?"

"Thiz iz my zauzage meat machine. Iz mine own invention. It grindz zauzagez by zteam power!"

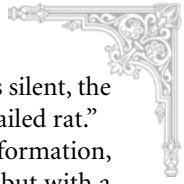
"You have sausages for us to eat?" Annie said. "Oh Metzger, you're a life-saver!"

"What are the sausages made of?" Jesse said.

Metzger turned his dark eyes to Jesse. "Iz family recipe. Onion from garden in back of houze. Can tomato. Powdered herb."

"What about the meat?" Jesse said, a bit nervous that it wasn't the first ingredient he listed. "Where did you get the meat to make all of these sausages?"

Metzger's grin shrank by a few yellow teeth. "Yez, yez, there iz meat. Good, clean, healthy meat. But iz probably meat you don't eat before. Iz meat of one



animal ztill alive in the Acres.” Metzger paused and the kitchen was silent, the bustle of the crowd momentarily halted. “Iz the meat of the long-tailed rat.”

For a hushed moment the mob seemed to consider this new information, then slowly resumed taking the packages from Hugo and Johann, but with a bit less enthusiasm than before.

“Rat meat iz no vorse nor better than any other meat,” Metzger said. “Ven I vas boy in Vaterstetten, every vinter ven the znow coverz the vorld like thick blanket, we eat the rat. And he keep uz ztrong until the znow melt. Because, you zee, the bird in the zky and the rabbit in the field may dizappear, but there iz alvayz more rat.”

Jesse reached the front of the line. Hugo handed him a paper-wrapped sausage. He took it.

“Yez,” Metzger said, “iz good.”

Jesse returned home and unwrapped the sausage. It was plump and fleshy and looked like any other sausage he’d ever seen. But knowing what it was made of made his bowels rumble. He imagined that frizzy haired old man and his two bulky sons emptying their rat traps of the dirty vermin, gathering up the limp rodents and tossing the pile into that strange piecemeal contraption, the tails and snouts and rat guts crushed and ground into a wet, pink paste.

Jesse decided that he’d eaten enough today. Maybe tomorrow he’d eat the sausages, but for now, the blackberries and the one can of green beans made a splendid meal, thank you very much.



After another morning at the blackberry bushes, Jesse returned to the Dunderbeck house. Perhaps he’d gather his nerve and eat the sausages. Or maybe he could trade his sausage with one of his neighbors for their daily ration.

Once again, there was a crowd leading into the kitchen of Metzger and his sons. But today the crowd seemed less animated, slack postures, moving listlessly. Jesse saw Annie Pickering. She looked peaked, her skin pale and eyes rimmed red.

“Hi Missus Pickering,” Jesse said. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Not so great,” she replied. “Got a little fever, I think, and my stomach was doing backflips all night. I guess eating some real food for a change didn’t sit right.”

Jesse knew eating those homemade tubes of rat meat wasn’t a good idea. It looked as though everyone had food poisoning, whether Annie Pickering wanted to admit that to herself or not. However, Jesse hoped to trade his sausage for another can of beans or a bag of rice, perhaps.

He took his sausage and thanked old man Dunderbeck, who nodded and gave him a look that Jesse took for suspicious.

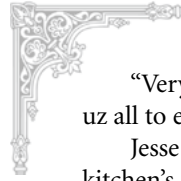
“I am glad to zee you again,” Metzger said. “I take it you enjoy your meat?”

“Yes, Mister Dunderbeck, very much. Thank you.”

“And your muzzer?”

“My mother? Yes, she enjoyed it as well.”





“Very good,” Metzger said. “I know zhe iz in poor health. Iz important for uz all to eat vell and keep ztrong in theze troubled timez.”

Jesse returned home, unwrapped the meat and put it on the plate on his kitchen’s center island. Looking at those two swollen sausages, knowing not only what they were made of but also that they were probably rancid with salmonella poisoning, Jesse felt a greasy turning in his stomach. Once again, he went to bed without any rat meat in his belly, and he was just fine with that.

~ ~ ~

At some unknown point in the dead hours of the night, Jesse opened his eyes, suddenly and completely awake, a cold awareness at the tip of his nerves. He looked about, feeling as if someone had been crouching in a corner, watching. The full moon outside his window cast a silvery glow across his room and he could see it was empty.

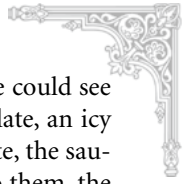
When the tension didn’t subside, Jesse got out of bed. The house was cold--the heater had stopped working a few weeks ago when the power went out. He was wet with the sweat of sleeping under thick blankets and the frosty air prickled his skin, making him shiver worse than he already was.

Jesse slid on his sweatpants and hooded sweatshirt and went to his mother’s room to make sure she was all right, wondering if his fear was from sensing that her health had made that inevitable final turn. But when he opened her door he saw her in the center of her large bed, no better nor worse than before, skinny and wasted, mouth open, a faint wheeze with each labored breath. Anyone seeing her for the first time would have thought she was on the cusp of becoming one of those walking corpses outside the gate. But it was just good old fashioned cancer. His mother never was one to follow the latest trend.

As Jesse headed back toward his room he heard a noise from downstairs, a rattling or scratching sound. Maybe it was one of those long-tailed rats he’d been hearing so much about. The Acres must be full of them for there to be enough to feed everyone who still lived here. As Jesse crept down the stairs in the dark he realized he’d never actually seen a rat inside the Acres. Perhaps a little field mouse once by the blackberry bush, but never a rat.

Downstairs the moonlight shined in through the windows along the eastern side of the house, cutting strips of pale light across the living room and entryway. Jesse could hear that the rattling sound was coming from the kitchen. Maybe a rat was nibbling on one of the sausages, not knowing it was one of his cousins he was eating.

Jesse crept toward the kitchen, the marble floor cold on his bare feet. The moonlight didn’t reach the westward facing kitchen and it was too dark to see in there, but Jesse could hear the plate on the center island rattling. He opened the drawer by the kitchen entrance and found the flashlight his mother kept in there. He aimed it toward the island, steeling his nerves, ready to see the black eyes of a startled rat staring back at him. He flicked the switch and a harsh white light hit the center island and the plate and the sausages, but no rat.



Jesse wondered for just a second if it had darted off before he could see it. But the plate was still rattling. He eased forward, toward the plate, an icy shiver creeping up his spine, a sick twisting in his guts. On the plate, the sausages were moving, wriggling like worms. The closer Jesse came to them, the more agitated and twitchy their movements, as if they sensed his presence. One of the sausages thrashed like a dog that didn't want to be held and it fell to the floor. It started squirming toward Jesse.

Jesse dropped the flashlight and scrambled backward in blind revulsion, out of the kitchen and into the living room. He backed up toward the front door, his eyes on the arched passageway to the kitchen.

Like a small, limbless animal, the sausage squirmed out onto the marble hallway floor. It rolled and twisted and wiggled toward Jesse, who was filled with loathing, his head light and unbalanced.

He bumped into the front door, darted outside into the cold night air and slammed the door shut behind him, putting an inch and a half of solid wood between him and that revolting abomination. It didn't feel like enough.

Jesse started walking toward the Dunderbeck house. He had to let Metzger and his sons know there was something horribly wrong with his sausages. He had no idea what it could be, but in this world that had turned upside down, the rules no longer seemed to apply and anything--any horrible thing--now seemed possible.

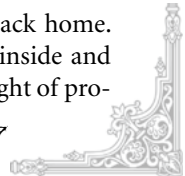
As Jesse began to head up Alderbrook, he noticed movement to the north along the gate. He couldn't quite make out what was happening down there, but the frantic, jerky motions told him he should be cautious and not let himself be seen for now.

He kept close to the houses that lined the street, crouching and moving slowly. When he was close he could tell that it was Hugo and Johann Dunderbeck at the gate, recognizing the brothers from their bulky frames. Jesse got behind a juniper hedgerow and crept closer until he could see what they were up to.

The gate was crowded with the moaning dead, as always. They were reaching between the bars, arms outstretched, fingers clasping at the air. Hugo Dunderbeck was holding the arm of a tall dead man, leaning back so the arm was stretched tight. Johann raised a butcher's cleaver and brought it down, hacking the arm close to the shoulder. A second hack and the arm came free. Hugo tossed the arm into a sack that was already mostly full of arms. And now Jesse saw that all of the dead that lined the gate in front of the Dunderbecks were armless, bumping themselves against the wrought iron bars.

The space between the bars was wide enough for an arm to pass through, but not the leg of an adult. However, there was an armless young boy at the gate. Hugo reached between the bars and pulled his leg through. Just before the boy fell backward and Johann hacked off his leg, Jesse saw that it was his old friend Andy Price who was being reduced to a limbless torso.

When their bag was full, the Dunderbeck brothers headed back home. Jesse followed, unsure what to do, what he could do. They went inside and Jesse went around to the kitchen window, which glowed from the light of pro-



pane lanterns. He peered in. Metzger was there, standing next to his machine. There was a fire burning in the pellet stove, which was heating water in the car radiator. Steam was hissing from the seams of various tubes. Metzger twisted knobs, gears turned. The brothers dropped their bag of limbs on the floor and Metzger shooed them out of the room. He began pushing the limbs into a large funnel on top of the standing mixer and a moment later pink ground meat began curling out of the meat grinder attachment. Metzger caught the meat in tubes that he twisted at six inch intervals.

Hugo burst into the kitchen. He looked like he was about to tell his father some pressing news, but he paused, finger raised. He seemed to look past his father--to the window! Jesse's heart froze. Was he seen?

Jesse ducked out of view. Had Hugo seen him? No, he couldn't have seen into the dark from a brightly lit room. It wasn't possible.

Cautiously, Jesse raised his head just enough to see over the lower frame of the kitchen window--and Hugo, Johann and Metzger were all right there staring at him, their faces against the glass and a murderous look in their eyes.

Jesse screamed, and ran. A second later he heard the front door of the Dunderbeck house open and someone running behind him. As he descended Alderbrook Avenue, doors to several of the houses opened. His neighbors. They heard his cry and were coming to help him. They'd protect him from the Dunderbecks.

Annie Pickering's house was on the northwest corner, and her door was opening, she was stepping out onto the porch. Jesse ran up toward her, but as he got close, he could see that something wasn't right. Her eyes, the dull, hungry look in her eyes--she looked like one of the dead outside the gate. That couldn't be. But when he was close she lunged for him, snarling, teeth bared, dull eyes wide.

Jesse kept running past her, his bare feet burning from slapping against the cold asphalt. He ran between houses, jumped up and pulled himself over a fence, then another and he was running past the Common Center and through the park. He couldn't go home, he'd lead them to his mother, so he ran to the only place he felt safe, to the blackberry bush along the northside fence.

He pushed himself into the thorned bushes and sat as quietly as he could, trying to slow his breathing. There was nothing more he could do, just wait and hope that whatever was happening would soon pass.

But that didn't seem likely.





# *The Little Red Survivalist*

By Benjamin T. Smith

*Based on The Little Red Hen*

*“The future belongs to those who prepare for it today.”*

- Malcolm X

Little Red Hen strutted from her coop one morning and beheld a most curious sight: Farmer Brown and his entire family heading down the driveway, piled into a truck packed solid with their belongings. She raised one of her wings to wave, and clucked in consternation when Farmer Brown did not wave back, as was his custom.

She watched the heavily-laden vehicle wind its way down the dirt path towards the old county road that ran adjacent to the property. Even after the beat-up truck smoked its way out of view around a bend she continued to watch, unsure of what to think. She had never seen Farmer Brown leave in such a manner, and certainly not before coming out to see to her and the other animals.

Little Red Hen went about her daily tasks, turning her head from time to time to look at the empty driveway. Alas, the entire day went by with no sign of a returning Brown family.

As the next dawn came she looked over at the farmhouse and noticed that the truck had still not returned. This worried her greatly, and she decided that something must be done.

“Who will come with me to see where the Browns have gone?” she asked the assembled animals.

“Not me,” yawned Ginger Cat. “They’re probably on vacation.”

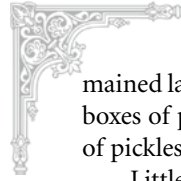
“If they’re gone, it’s much better for me,” squeaked Gray Rat. “I need not fear Mrs. Brown’s broom.”

“As long as they’re back before my slop trough is empty, I am content,” Pink Pig said, turning to waddle back to the aforementioned trough.

“Very well,” sighed Little Red Hen. “I shall go and see what is amiss.”

She walked into the house through the unlocked kitchen door and looked around. The first thing Little Red Hen noticed was the open pantry door. She investigated and found that much of the larder had been pillaged. What re-





mained lay in disarray: cans scattered about the shelves or resting on the floor; boxes of pasta knocked aside in favor of whatever lay behind them; and a jar of pickles had broken open, causing the entire room to reek.

Little Red Hen searched the bedrooms next. They were as much a mess as the pantry. Discarded dresser drawers lay on the floor, their contents taken save for the stray article of clothing here or there.

As Little Red Hen came downstairs she knew one thing was certain: wherever the Browns were bound, they were well provisioned, and not likely to return anytime soon.

She heard something in the living room then. She entered and saw that the television was on, and a news broadcast was playing. Little Red Hen hoped this would shed some light on the family's strange behavior, she climbed onto the couch and settled in to watch, thankful she had taken time to learn the spoken tongue of men.

According to the news reports a strange new plague was spreading across the nation and other parts of the globe. Originating in major cities, it was turning those infected into crazed beasts, almost like rabies but much, much more virulent. The United States had no means to contain the illness, other than quarantining cities under martial law.

Even these cordons were ineffective, as cases of the disease were cropping up in smaller cities and even some large towns all across the country. Those who could flee into remote areas were doing so in droves, in the hope that the contagion would not affect them.

By the time Little Red Hen left the house it was early afternoon. She watched the news until the information repeated itself, and it left her shaken. If the Browns evacuated, it meant they might not be coming back at all. How would they manage without any human help?

The miller and the baker! The thought struck her like an acorn falling from a tree. They lived in the neighboring town. If they had not evacuated already, maybe they would want to come live on the farm? They would certainly be of great help to the animals.

They would also be more reliable than her current group of neighbors, although she would not say this out loud.

Little Red Hen gathered the others together again and told them what she had learned. She then spoke of her concern for the miller and baker and asked, "Who will go with me to town to check on them?"

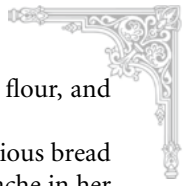
"They never did anything for me," Ginger Cat scoffed while grooming his paw. "Why should I care?"

"They would just chase me away," Gray Rat complained.

"I have my young to think about," Pink Pig objected. "I can't go with you."

"Very well," Little Red Hen said. "I will go myself."

Though autumn was upon them the noontime sun was hot. Little Red Hen donned a straw hat and set off on the dirt path the Browns had driven down the day before. Soon she was on the county road, heading east. The town was about two hours away on foot. She had made the trip before, and



at the time she had carried a goodly amount of wheat, and then flour, and finally bread.

Little Red Hen clucked in content as she thought of that delicious bread she had eaten that day, made from the sweat of her brow and the ache in her back. It had felt good to enjoy the fruits of one's own labor.

She clucked again, this time in annoyance, thinking of her fellow animals on the farm, and how lackadaisical they all were. She had hoped the bread baking incident would have been enough to shake them out of it, but it was not to be. She now hoped the current situation would be enough to break through their perpetual laziness.

The miller's house lay on the outskirts of town closest to the Farm, so she visited him first. From the street she could tell it was abandoned, and a quick search of the inside proved that was the case. She walked back out onto his porch and looked at the neighboring homes and saw that they, too, were empty.

Was the whole city dead?

The baker's house lay in the center of town, so she set off at once, down the main street. She looked around apprehensively as the vacant homes and businesses began to crowd onto one another, and could not shake the feeling something here was very wrong.

She squawked at the distant report of a rifle. Several more shots echoed from up the street, causing her to scamper to the nearest fence for cover. She had no idea who was doing the shooting, but it was coming from the center of town. Maybe the baker was in trouble? She gathered her courage and pressed on.

When she reached the town's central plaza she hid behind an overturned trash can and looked out across the clearing. What she saw made her gasp.

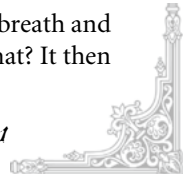
The baker was doing the shooting, from his house on a corner of the central plaza. He had fortified his abode, boarding up the windows and doors of the ground level and leaving the second level open in case he needed to climb down. He stood in one of those upper windows, a rifle pressed tight against his shoulder as he took aim and fired into the crowd gathering at his door.

The mob was comprised of the strangest, most frightening group of humans Little Red Hen had ever laid eyes on. They shambled about in a listless manner, as if they were sick, and smelled incredibly foul. Groans, moans, and gurgles escaped diseased lips as they stumbled inexorably towards the baker's house, arms outstretched towards his silhouetted figure.

Several times the baker shot one particular human, a man in a ruined business suit. She flinched as bullet after bullet pierced his body, but he staggered on, as if he had not felt the impact. It was not until the baker shifted his aim and put a round through the man's forehead that he collapsed.

Little Red Hen had seen enough. She turned and ran back for home. She could not help the baker, who appeared as prepared as anybody could be in these circumstances. Attempting to reach him would be suicide.

Once Little Red Hen was out of town she stopped to catch her breath and gather her thoughts. Something was familiar about all this, but what? It then came to her:



Zombies!

She clucked softly to herself as the pieces in her head clicked together. Farmer Brown's son was an avid reader, and would often read to Little Red Hen the stories he liked. One such tale involved these creatures – these zombies – that rose from the dead and attacked the living. Brown's son had imitated the way they walked and attacked, and it matched what she had witnessed in the plaza.

Little Red Hen started back toward the farm at a trot. If that was the case, then work needed to be done.

Night had fallen by the time she made it back to the Brown farm. The others were asleep, and she knew it would do her no good to wake them. She retired to her coop, though unable to rest. The sights and sounds – and smells – of the day tormented her all through the night.

When dawn finally came Little Red Hen trudged out of her coop, in as much of a stupor as some of the zombies in the town square. The animals, upon seeing her home, gathered around to hear what she had to say. She confirmed the worst of the news reports, and told them about the zombies. She described the setup the baker had at his home, and she spoke of the need to prepare in case the zombies might come out here.

"This coop and the barn are the most defensible locations," Little Red Hen explained. "Who will help me gather food and supplies from around the farm and put them here and there?"

"Food is of little importance to me," Ginger Cat responded, opening a lazy eye and focusing it on a small shape nearby. "I can always hunt if I get hungry." Gray Rat squeaked and ran off.

"I prefer grazing outside," Charcoal Cow said, turning to head out to the field. "I'm stuck in the barn all winter."

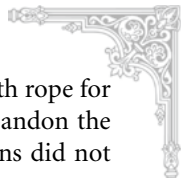
"Can't you bring it out to my trough?" Pink Pig demanded. "It's so much more convenient."

"Very well," Little Red Hen said, "I will gather the supplies."

And she did. Starting with the house, she began tallying up what food was left in the pantry and root cellar. The Browns were experienced at canning, so it was no surprise that the root cellar was filled with jarred goods the family could not take with them on the road for fear of breakage. There was enough to last her and her incorrigible neighbors through winter and into spring, when they could plant again.

It took her all day to move the foodstuffs into the barn and chicken coop, but somehow she managed. The next day was taken up with gathering other supplies: water in whatever jugs and containers she could find, lanterns and oil, blankets for the winter months, what few medical supplies the Browns had not taken, and various other items she thought necessary for their survival. All this she divided as best she could between the two locations.

She even came across a small, red backpack that Farmer Brown's young daughter left behind. Little Red Hen tried it on and found it fit perfectly. Clucking in approval, she took a little bit of time to pack it with some food, a



small flashlight with extra batteries, a hunting knife, and a tarp with rope for fashioning a makeshift tent. She hoped she would not need to abandon the farm, but these days who could know? She was certain the Browns did not want to flee, either.

The bag she put in the coop with the other supplies there, just in case.

Through both of these days she was constantly scanning the horizon. No longer did she look for the Browns' old Dodge coming down the path. Instead, she looked for any signs of movement along the property line, hopeful there would be nothing fearful.

By the time she finished gathering supplies Little Red Hen approached the others about the next phase of the operation:

"We need to fortify the farm, to keep these zombies out," Little Red Hen declared. "Who will help me set up defenses, and gather weapons with which to protect ourselves?"

Ginger Cat unsheathed her claws. "These are the only weapons I have ever needed," he purred.

"We're not in a city or a town," Charcoal Cow explained. "They'll never come out this far."

"If they do come, I'll just hide in the mud," Pink Pig said.

"You animals are hopeless!" Little Red Hen cried. "Very well, I will see to our defense myself."

And she did. Weapons were the first thing on her mind, so Little Red Hen went on another search of the farm. She remembered seeing an old revolver that Farmer Brown used to carry from time to time, but it had been taken with his rifles and shotguns. This did not surprise her, for in these times one functioning firearm was too precious to lose.

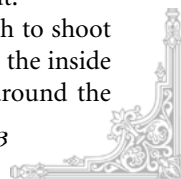
A search of the son's room uncovered a crossbow pistol that suited Little Red Hen perfectly. With it was a quiver of about fifty small bolts, and this she took eagerly. She set up a target and practiced, clucking in satisfaction when she hit close to the bull's eye. These would do just fine.

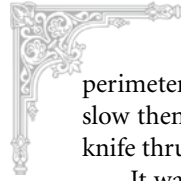
A return trip to the tool shed uncovered several farm tools that could be used as stabbing weapons if it came down to it: pitchforks, spades, even a few hunting knives.

As she gathered weapons she thought long and hard on what could be done to fortify the farm. She clucked in frustration when she realized she could not secure the entire property line all on her own. If only her neighbors would help...

By the time Little Red Hen was ready to start the fortifications she determined that only the barn and chicken coop could be protected. She started on the coop first, as it was the smallest and it was better to have one small area complete than one large area unfinished. It was also the closest to the well, which would become important once their meager supplies ran out.

The windows she boarded up, leaving tiny slits through which to shoot or stab. She modified the sole doorway so it could be barred from the inside rather than outside. A large roll of chicken wire was stretched around the





perimeter of the coop. The zombies she had seen were clumsy, so this would slow them down long enough to take them down with a well-aimed bolt or knife thrust.

It was nightfall when she finished with the coop's defenses. She had just sat down to take a small break when she heard it:

The sound of shambling footfalls accompanied by that strange series of moans and groans.

A chill ran through Little Red Hen as she jumped to her feet. A quick scan of the surroundings revealed several silhouettes stumbling from out of the tree line. Ahead of those shapes she caught sight of a small figure frantically trying to stay ahead of them.

"Help me, Little Red Hen!" Ginger Cat shouted, running off towards the barn with several zombies giving chase.

Another shape darted by, heading towards the barn as well. "They're after me, too!" screamed Gray Rat. "And I'm not much of a meal!"

"Save my little ones!" Pink Pig squealed, trying to wallow deeper into the mud she had trusted implicitly only moments before. She nudged her piglets closer to the coop. "Please!"

"Defend yourselves!" Little Red Hen called out. "We can do this!"

Little Red Hen put up a valiant effort. As the first zombies closed in on her she calmly took aim with the crossbow pistol and sent quarrel after quarrel into the foreheads of the undead assailants. Several fell close to the mud pit Pink Pig was in, but more came in behind them.

Little Red Hen ushered the piglets into the coop before stepping in after them. She looked at the stranded Pink Pig, said a prayer for her, and closed the door. She dropped the heavy bar across it and took up position at one of the windows, and proceeded to shoot more zombies that were coming out of the shadows towards her coop.

As Little Red Hen continued to thin the mob of undead she heard the bellowing of Charcoal Cow in the distant field. Her screams grew closer by the second. Little Red Hen looked out of one of the slits on that side of the coop, and what she saw gave her quite a start:

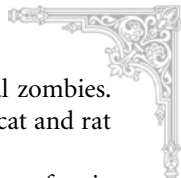
Charcoal Cow was running straight at her coop, and behind were more zombies in close pursuit!

The hefty bovine crashed through the chicken wire fencing as if it was nothing, and slammed her head up against the barred door. Charcoal Cow cracked her skull against it over and over. The coop shook and the walls swayed.

"Let me in!" Charcoal Cow screamed as she battered frantically at the door. "Let me in!"



Several days later a military patrol made its way through the area. Upon sighting the farm, the patrol commander decided to investigate for possible survivors.



They quickly cleared the house and barn, dispatching several zombies. Aside from the zombies all they discovered were the remains of a cat and rat in the barn, and nothing in the farmhouse.

One of the men noticed the number of bodies — including that of a pig — surrounding the collapsed chicken coop and reasoned that someone had been defending it. Maybe that person was trapped inside?

Carefully the men cleared the debris, calling out for anyone inside to speak up. As they lifted up the remains of the doorway the entire coop shook, as if something big was trapped underneath and had begun to rouse. The soldiers quickly backed up, their rifles raised to their shoulders.

With a moan an undead cow shook herself free of the broken pieces of the coop. She turned her sightless gaze on the soldiers and staggered towards them.

She did not make two faltering steps before the soldiers fired. The zombie cow collapsed to the ground, where she moved no more.

The work resumed, and before long they had finished searching the coop. There was no sign of a body, although a small pile of provisions was found in one of the corners. It was obvious someone had been here, but where had they gone? A swift search of the area revealed no tracks.

No human tracks, that is. Had the commander looked closer he might have noticed a single set of anisodactyl tracks, as of a chicken or other barnyard fowl. Following in its wake were several sets of tiny split-hooves, as if a farrow of piglets were following the bird.

If he had followed these tracks he would have seen them disappear somewhere in the tree line, heading deeper into remote territory that, hopefully, was free of this undead blight.

The Browns eventually returned to the farm and burned the corpses of the zombies and of Ginger Cat, Gray Rat, Pink Pig, and Charcoal Cow. They never again saw Little Red Hen or Pink Pig's farrow of piglets, and it became the subject of many dinner conversations.

Farmer Brown thought back to the time Little Red Hen had grown the wheat and produced her bread. She was industrious, and resourceful. With that in mind he would often smile and say, "Maybe, just maybe..."





# Four and Twenty

By Stephen D. Rogers

*Based on Sing a Song of Sixpence*

Vaughn whispered from under his camouflage, “What’s she saying? Are they coming?”

Jason leaned closer to his mother, straining to hear what she mumbled. “Sing a song of sing a song of sing....” Great. And how did Jason translate that into the “yes” or “no” Vaughn demanded?

The “yes” Vaughn demanded. Jason knew he really had no choice but to say, “They’re coming. She says they’re coming.”

“Good.”

Vaughn wanted the zombie blackbirds to appear so he could blast away at them with his shotgun, and Kim wanted them to appear since baiting the zirds was her plan, but Jason needed the monstrous creatures to appear. He’d had to say they were still coming because earlier his mother had made that prediction.

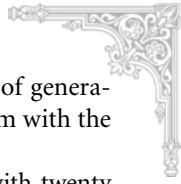
The only reason Vaughn and Kim protected Jason and his mother was her perceived ability. If his mother’s prophecies failed to come true, the two of them were dead meat. Jason shuddered. He’d seen so many people ripped apart by the zombie blackbirds that he still flinched whenever he saw a butterfly.

Jason glanced at the second pile of camouflage. Kim, who’d barely finished blowing out the candles at her sweet-sixteen party when the world ended, was second gun, their sniper. Jason had overheard her telling Vaughn that the two of them didn’t need Jason and his mother, that they were nothing but excess baggage.

Unfortunately, Jason knew she was right. But Vaughn liked having someone on his team who could spin prophecies. And so Jason and his mother survived.

Jason stroked his mother’s hair, the newly gray strands brittle beneath his fingers. When she was his age, she’d been a wife and mother, running after him as he toddled about. And now that he’d reached his twenty-fourth year, he cared for her, shattered by the events of the last few months.

Upside down. Everything had been turned upside down by the 4ND20 virus and the resulting zombie blackbirds that terrorized and then toppled civilization.



Kim had a plan. “Birds have been eating seeds for thousands of generations. If some of that instinct remains in the birds, we can bait them with the bag of rye seed we found.”

Kim might have been a hunter, but Vaughn was ex-military with twenty years in. He understood the art of ambush. “Let’s do it.” He’d then included Jason in the conversation. “We’re counting on your mother to get us into position.”

And this was where she directed them. More or less. Jason scanned the skies for movement and cringed when he saw it, the weirdly lurching flight of the zombie blackbirds.

A flock of them, maybe fifty, coming in from the south. He hugged his mother. “Shhh. Everything is going to be all right.”

One of the birds broke the loose formation and headed for the open patch of ground where Kim had sprinkled the seed.

Before the bird landed, the rest had followed. The flock of them staggered about, pecking at the ground. Jason didn’t know whether to throw up or scream.

“Now!” Vaughn blasted away with his shotgun while Kim took down one bird at a time. Jason covered his mother’s ears.

Made brittle by the virus, the birds seemed to explode when hit.

Vaughn and Kim emerged from their camouflage to knock down the birds as they scattered. Then they put down their guns and searched for fallen birds, snapping their necks to be sure.

“See, Mom? I told you everything was going to be fine. The others just needed to make some noise to scare away the birds.”

His mother whimpered.

“No, Mom. The birds are gone. All gone.”

“Thanks for doing that for us.” A voice rang out from behind Jason. One voice, but there must have been twenty of them armed with spears aimed at the group. “Don’t.”

Vaughn stopped moving towards his shotgun.

The speaker spun his sword in a circle. “I’m King Daniel, and you’ve been saved.”

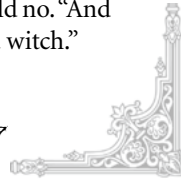


Life at Stickfence gave Jason a sense of purpose. From dawn until dusk, he shoveled shit. Jason followed the animals and shoveled shit into wheelbarrows. Dumped the wheelbarrows and shoveled shit into the gardens.

Kim and Vaughn caught sentry duty, stationed along the parapets to shoot blackbirds, the guns chained in place. The two of them had no more freedom than he did, but at least there was something dignified about their assignment.

His mother wandered the compound mumbling to herself.

Jason asked if she could come with him on his rounds but was told no. “And you better do something about her before people start saying she’s a witch.”





“My mother is not a witch.” Broken, maybe certifiably crazy, but not a witch.

“She makes them nervous. Make it stop.”

Make it stop. Perhaps Jason should go back in time and stop the spread of the 4ND20 virus, stop the blackbirds from turning into zombies, stop his father and sister from going into the attic where they would be pecked to death, only to be discovered three hours later by his mother.

Wouldn't that be great?

Instead of inventing time travel and saving the world, however, Jason had been relegated to recycling.

He pushed an empty wheelbarrow down the lane created by two fences, the sticks rising twenty feet in the air, the space between them covered by steel mesh.

Jason had to admit King Daniel had been clever to hole up in a driving range covered by netting. Although the birds eventually breached the nets, the delay gave King Daniel time to erect the stick fences and cover them with something stronger.

Not that he'd done the work. No, he allowed survivors to enter his stronghold only if they agreed to serve him.

“Hey.”

Jason stopped. Through the spaces between sticks, he could see a form on the other side of the wall. “Yeah?”

“It's Kim. I saw you down here, and told Vaughn to signal if my absence might be noticed. How are they treating you?”

She could probably smell him through the cracks. “I think that's pretty obvious.”

“We're busting out.”

“I'm in. What's your plan?”

“We've captured some zirds.”

“What? Tell me you're joking.” Maybe the strain had been too much for her. Maybe she'd forgotten what their group had experienced before being brought inside.

“Just listen. I target lone fliers, bait them with rye seeds, and open a hole in the netting just long enough to catch them. We've got them in a heavy burlap bag. When the time is right, Vaughn will give you the bag--”

“No.”

“Yes. You can do this, Jason. When you release the zirds in the dining hall, they'll scatter. You slip out in the chaos.”

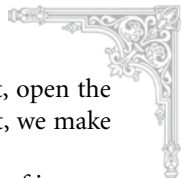
“The dining hall?”

“There's a feast scheduled.”

“I didn't hear anything about a feast.”

“You will. King Daniel has decided to throw a festival in his honor, and I suggested you be the one who wheels in the basket of fresh fruits.”

“Fresh fruits?” Jason hoped she couldn't see him drool.



“It’s a surprise to cap the celebration. You’ll wheel in the cart, open the basket, and release the zirds. While everybody is dealing with that, we make our move.”

“I have to be honest, Kim. I don’t see them giving me any kind of important role.”

“Wheeling in the cart isn’t that important, and I’ve made sure you’re getting the job.”

“How?”

“The how is not important.” She mumbled something about being a princess. “Don’t tell your mother. She might say something, not meaning to.”

“Okay.” Jason waited for Kim to continue but heard nothing. “Kim?” He pressed his face against the fence. She’d already left.



The Festival of King Daniel occurred seven long days later.

They gave Jason a uniform to wear. A costume. They decked him out as a court jester, complete with hat and bell-ringing shoes.

He’d survived worse. Even more important, Jason knew the large wicker basket no longer contained fresh fruit but Kim’s zirds.

Jason wheeled the cart down the corridor that led to the dining hall. Even through the closed doors he could hear the rousing festivities, the crowd laughing at the entertainment.

At least they hadn’t put his mother on stage, for which Jason probably had Kim to thank. Vaughn was responsible for bringing out Jason’s mother.

Having reached the doors, Jason pushed the cart against them until they parted. The scene that greeted his eyes was wilder than he had imagined, musicians and dancers performing on top of long banquet tables, banners flying in the air. But then Jason saw something that narrowed his vision, Kim sitting at King Daniel’s side.

The how didn’t matter. That’s what she said. Jason hadn’t imagined, hadn’t wanted to imagine, the truth. Indeed, the world had been turned upside down.

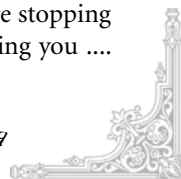
Jason held Kim’s gaze as he wheeled the cart to the middle of the room.

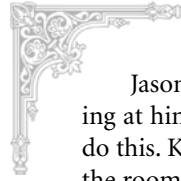
King Daniel stood and clapped once, quieting the room. “My peoples, a special occasion calls for a special treat, and that is what I have arranged for you.”

He waved his arms until applause filled the room. Someone started a chant that soon echoed against the walls as the people stood to shout, “King Daniel! King Daniel! King Daniel!”

Jason brought the cart to a halt in the middle of the hall. People glanced at the large wicker basket, quietly whispered among themselves, perhaps guessing at the contents.

King Daniel basked in the adulation for several minutes before stopping the chant with a cutting motion. He pointed at Jason’s cart. “I bring you ... dessert!”





Jason froze. King Daniel, the guards, everybody in the hall, were all staring at him expectantly. He couldn't do this. All eyes were on him. He had to do this. Kim stood, stepped around her throne, and walked along the edge of the room. Jason reached for the handle. Felt the room tense. Pulled away the cover and ran for the door.

Behind him, Jason heard the basket erupt. People jumped, panicked, their eyes and mouths wide. Chairs tipped, tables went over, the mob headed for the door as the birds attacked.

Kim grabbed his arm and pulled him aside. "Come!" She led him back through the dining hall towards the throne.

"We're going the wrong way!"

"No we're not!"

Around them, people screamed and shoved, waved chairs above their heads, hid under tables. Guards swung swords and thrust spears. The blackbirds swarmed, swooped and tore out chunks of flesh.

Jason kept his head low and his arm in his socket as Kim yanked him through and around the chaos. Kim dropped to the ground in front of the throne, pulling Jason down with her. She swept aside the skirt and wiggled under the staging.

A trap door. Kim flipped the cover and crawled inside. Jason didn't hesitate but immediately scrambled into the unlit tunnel, his jester shoes jingling.

• • •

After crawling through darkness long enough for his eyes to adjust, Jason emerged and lay on the ground, breathing the fresh night air.

Kim tugged him to his feet. "King Daniel is out here somewhere, and he's armed."

A sound from the bushes to Jason's left made him spin. From out of the foliage, Vaughn appeared with Jason's mother on his arm.

"Mom!" Jason ran to her.

"How sweet." King Daniel stepped out of the darkness, his sword raised. "You ruined my party, boy. Didn't expect to get upstaged by the clown."

Jason hugged his mother.

"Boy, I'm talking to you."

Letting go of his mother, Jason faced King Daniel. "Still glad you captured us?"

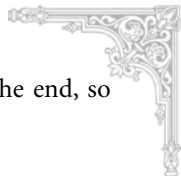
King Daniel spun the sword, the blade sparkling in the moonlight. "I'm going to cut you into pieces so small the blackbirds won't be able to find them."

A solid thud, and a rock tumbled off King Daniel's forehead. He staggered back, tangled his legs, and then collapsed to the ground.

Kim leapt forward to grab the sword, grinning up at Vaughn. "One shot, one kill. That's why I win the prize."

Vaughn twisted King Daniel's neck. Just to be sure.

Jason looked away and squeezed his mother's hand. "We're safe again, Mom."



She pointed past him at King Daniel. “He danced there at the end, so dainty.”



Jason stirred the vegetable soup that bubbled above the cooking fire. Things had been difficult for the tiny band ever since they lost their guns, but Vaughn and Kim had developed catapult arms.

He could unleash a dozen pebbles within a few seconds. She could hurl a rock that connected with a bird in flight. They both thought their method best, and together they kept the birds at bay.

Three weeks had elapsed since she’d defeated King Daniel. Nobody had come after them, but who knew how many of the community had survived.

Jason still woke with nightmares filled with images of that day. Images of the hell he’d created. How many had died?


Vaughn had argued for heading back to Stickfence for the guns, perhaps staying there as rulers. Kim claimed she could rule as queen. Jason, however, thought their best chance remained out here and on the move.

For whatever reason, his suggestion won, and the band had continued heading for the horizon.

Jason glanced over at his mother, sitting cross-legged on the ground, pencil in her hand and paper in her lap. She wasn’t her old self yet, but she’d stopped muttering to herself, having found a more sensible outlet, documenting the story of all they’d endured.

She looked up at him and smiled.





# More Than Watchmen Wait for the Dawn

By Joe McKinney

*Based on The Maiden With No Hands*

A little more each year, John Miller fell behind, until at last there was nothing left to support his family but a rundown mill and the pear tree that grew behind it. And very soon, as his fortunes continued to slide, it looked like he would lose even that, so that he and his wife and their beautiful daughter, Charity, would be turned out upon the hard mercies of the world. Day upon day of dealing with this stress, which he had hidden from his wife and daughter as best he was able, had made him a tense and desperate man, and one day, while walking through the forest that surrounded his land, he chanced to meet a handsome man dressed all in black. This man spoke kindly to John Miller, and knew all about his problems. "You have no need to fear the future," the man in black said. "I can make you rich, if you so desire it."

Too desperate to be cautious, John Miller blurted out, "I do!" And then, a moment later, more soberly, he said: "But how?"

"I want that which is standing behind your mill."

Ah, John Miller thought, my old pear tree. It had been the one steady source of food for his family these last few years. But, steady as it was, he had come to associate its fruit with the bitter taste of poverty. What would it hurt if he never ate another pear as long as he lived?

"You needn't worry about that," the man in black said. His eyes seemed to burn red like the embers of a fire as he shoved a piece of parchment into John Miller's hands. "Sign your promise over to me and I will see you live a long time still."

"How can you promise me that?"

"You know who I am," the man in black said, and as he spoke the corruption of the grave made John Miller gag. "When the time comes, I will carry you away. But for now, upon your signature, you have my word you will have many years to enjoy your fortune."

At this, John Miller trembled, for there was no doubt in his mind who this man really was. Still, the hunger of desperation rumbled in John Miller's stomach. "I'll be rich, you said?"

"Exceedingly rich," the man in black said. His voice had grown quiet and cold.



John Miller eagerly signed.

“Excellent,” the man said. “I will come to you in three years to collect that which you have signed over to me today.” And with those words he left.

Later, at his home, John Miller found his kitchen table laden with gold coins, and his wife very much afraid, even as her eyes shone in the reflected light of so much wealth.

“How?” she asked.

John Miller told her of the man he chanced to meet, and of their bargain. But all at once, upon hearing this, his wife let out a great cry of anguish.

“Oh, my husband,” she said. “The devil has played a cruel joke on you, and taken from us both the one treasure we still possessed, yet wasn’t ours to give.”

“But, the pear tree...?”

“No,” she said. “Not the pear tree, for at the moment you described just now, our daughter was in the yard, sweeping cobwebs from the fence. It is she, not the pear tree, you have signed over to the devil.”

John Miller fell into a chair beside the piles of gold, distraught beyond all comfort, and began to cry.



But the girl, Charity, was made of stronger stuff than her father — than her mother too, for that matter — and over the next three years she continued to devote her soul to God and her days to works of kindness. And on the eve of the third anniversary of her father’s foul bargain, she prayed until morning. Then she rose, and washed her body clean, drew a chalk circle around her feet, and waited for the Adversary to come.

But he could not take her.

Angry, his eyes burning with hate, the devil approached John Miller and ordered him to take all water from the girl, for he couldn’t touch one so clean. “Fail in this, and you will forfeit your own life in exchange for hers.”

Over the years, John Miller’s desperation had turned to cowardice. He was a rich man now, and he had no intention of giving that up.

And so he took all water away from his daughter.

Pious, but afraid of the devil nonetheless, Charity wept the night through, constantly wiping her tears away from her face with her hands. A night full of tears left her hands clean as any bath, and when the morning came and the devil came for his prize, he once again found the girl too clean for his purposes.

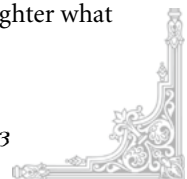
“I will not be denied a third time,” he told John Miller. “Go and cut off her hands so that she can’t cry on them.”

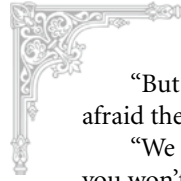
“But, she is my child. How can I do such a thing?”

“You ask me this now? Are you really so dense? Go, and cut off her hands! I will have my prize. Or I will have you.”

This made up John Miller’s mind for him, and he told his daughter what he intended to do.

To his great relief, she consented.





“But Father,” she said. “I’m afraid. My hands will shake so badly, I’m afraid the cut won’t be clean.”

“We will tie your hands behind your back,” John Miller said. “That way, you won’t see the axe as it falls.”

And so it was done. The girl was tied with her hands behind her back and her wrists placed across the stump of an old dead tree.

“Please forgive me,” he said, and swung his axe.

Charity was brave. She did not flinch. But John Miller was not as brave, and his first swipe of the axe was a bad one. He failed to cleave the bone of Charity’s right wrist, and the tip of his axe merely bit a piece of flesh away from the left one.

“Oh God,” he cried, and was so horrified at all the blood that he nearly fainted.

But Charity pleaded with him to go on. She was in terrible pain, and in her addled state, she imagined only a true blow would free her.

“Please, Father, be brave.”

John Miller gathered what strength he had and made another cut, again a bad one. Then he brought the axe down a third, and a fourth time, before finally separating his daughter from her hands.

The deed was done, but the girl was dead from a loss of blood. And when the devil came to collect, he found the father standing in a pool of blood and the beautiful young creature that had so enthralled him a mangled corpse. He roared at John Miller, ranted at him, and swore vengeance.

John Miller fell to the ground and cowered in his daughter’s blood. He expected the devil to take him, but to his surprise, that didn’t happen. Instead, the devil reached down to Charity’s ruined body and pulled her to her feet. He turned the girl’s dead face on John Miller, and when he wouldn’t open his eyes, the devil did it for him.

“Look upon the fate of the world,” he said. “Look into the eyes of ruin.”

The face staring back at John Miller was not that of his beautiful little girl. Not anymore. It was instead a horror, a vacant, depthless horror, and where before there had been piety, and charity, and kindness, there was now only hunger.

The devil leaned into the girl’s ear and whispered something John Miller didn’t hear, and while the girl gave no word she understood, she turned and wandered off, her mangled arms still bound behind her back, blood running down the back of her dress.

“What have you done?” John Miller said.

The devil stood over him, and when he spoke, it wasn’t with the icy menace of judgment, but, strangely, with a bland note of disinterest.

“I have loosed her upon the world, and death will follow in her wake.”

“But why?”

“There are no reasons, John Miller. None that men such as yourself would understand. There are only bargains.”

And with that, the devil left him.



Each year, John Miller grew even more rich.

But for all his wealth, he was not a happy man. His wife died of a broken heart over the loss of their daughter, leaving him alone, bitter, and filled with a crippling self-loathing. Day after day he sat in his kitchen, disgusted with himself even as he was surrounded by piles of money that seemed to grow from nothing. The desire to end his suffering became very strong.

The devil's bargain, though, allowed no loopholes. The devil had promised him a long life and years of wealth, and such he would have. Every attempt to kill himself failed, and with every failed attempt he sank deeper into heartsick darkness. This went on for several years, until at last John Miller could stand it no longer. He left his home for the first time since making his deal with the devil, and it did not take him long to reach a village that had suffered a great fire. Most of the buildings were burned out ruins.

As he walked down the central lane of this little village he felt the weight of stares on his back.

He saw movement in a nearby doorway, and stopped.

A dead woman was standing there.

Then, behind her, the faces of her dead children resolved out of the darkness.

They stared at him with the same empty, bottomless hunger he had seen in his beloved Charity's face before she wandered off. Aghast, John Miller backed away from the little house. The dead woman and her brood followed after him, the smell of decay and rot coming with them, causing him to gag.

He turned away from the house, intent on running, but stopped before he'd taken more than a few steps.

The dead were emerging from every house, every ruined shop.

They staggered toward him, their hands outstretched clutching at the air like beggars. John Miller turned in a slow circle. They were all around him now, silently closing in and all the while clutching for him.

"What are you doing? Run!"

The voice caught John Miller by surprise, and it took him a moment to spot the wounded, mud-covered man hiding beneath a nearby house.

"Run!" the man said again.

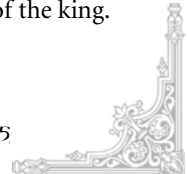
But John Miller was too scared to run. He was paralyzed by his fear, and all he could do was stammer at the wild-eyed muddy man begging him to save himself.

"Run!"

When John Miller still wouldn't move the man came out from beneath the house and took him by the hand and together they fled the village and didn't stop until they were on the road. Only then did John Miller recover his wits and see that, beneath the mud, the man was dressed in the clothes of the king.

"Why did you not run when I told you to?" the King said.

"I was frightened," John Miller admitted.





“Have you never seen the hungry dead?”

John Miller said that he hadn't.

“My kingdom has been beset these past three years,” the king said, “by an evil curse. The dead will not stay dead. They walk the roads and haunt the villages and attack and eat any living person they happen to see. And whosoever is bitten by one of these dead suffers greatly before dying and coming back as one of their kind.”

“There is no cure?”

“None but the sword. And now I think even that is lost to us, for I came here with those few knights still living to fight the dead, to reclaim our land for the living.” The King hung his head and sighed. “We were overrun. I alone am escaped to tell the story, and I fear my kingdom is lost.”

“Are the dead really so numerous as that?”

“Indeed,” the King said. “And it began with a single young maiden, a child really, without hands.”

“Without...?”

“You haven't heard of her?”

John Miller shook his head.

“An evil deed was committed upon her. Her wrists were bound behind her back and her hands cut off. No one knows where she came from or who committed this awful deed, but it is said the curse she spreads came from that vile offense against her.”

To this John Miller was silent, for he knew the young maiden of whom the King spoke was none other than his beloved Charity.

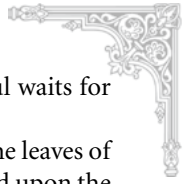
“How is that you know nothing of this, my friend?” asked the King.

His conscience stirred at this, but John Miller's fear of the devil's bargain was rivaled only by his fear of being discovered by the King, and so he lied, telling the King that he was a traveler from a distant land, and he was only passing through.

To this the King sighed. “Well then,” he said, “you should continue on your way and leave this cursed land, for only the dead live here.”

John Miller was eager to be gone, and so he fled, taking to the road and wandering many days and many nights before finally coming to a beautiful pear tree orchard on the hills above a ruined castle. There he sat, and eating a pear from one of the trees, thought about the pear tree behind his old mill. The fruit from that tree had once reminded him of poverty. Now, with the sun setting behind the castle, it reminded him of the last time he was truly happy. He had been a poor man then, but he had had his wife, and they had had their daughter, Charity, for their joy and comfort. For all his wealth, he was a poorer man now than before his bargain. Broken, he fell to his knees and recited the only prayer he knew:

From the depths I cry out to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication. If you, Lord, were to mark iniquities, who, O Lord, shall stand? But with you is forgiveness, that you may



be revered. I trust in the Lord; My soul trusts in his word. My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen wait for the dawn.

Several hours later the moon rose over the orchard, silvering the leaves of the trees. Too crippled by his grief to move, John Miller laid his head upon the grass and watched the wind toss the trees about.

And then he saw a figure moving through the trees.

It was his beloved daughter. Though the grace she'd had in life was now a pathetic shuffle, he recognized her at a glance.

She drew closer, though she still hadn't seen him, and as she neared, he could see her arms, which ended in mangled stubs, still tied behind her back.

"Oh, my child," he said. "My poor, innocent child."

She appeared to be looking for something, and a moment later, he saw the person she was hunting. It was the King. He looked exhausted. He could barely lift the sword in his hand, nor lift his chin from his chest. A fearsome moan rose from the girl, and when she opened her mouth, John Miller could see her teeth were broken and spotted with blood.

"Stop!" he yelled, and stood between his daughter and the King.

"My friend," the King said. "You must run. Save yourself."

"I cannot," said John Miller. "I will not, for my greed has caused this plague upon your land."

He told the King everything then, from his bargain with the devil to his cowardice to his loneliness. He confessed it all. The King listened, growing angrier with every revelation, and when John Miller was finished, the King raised his sword.

"You are a wicked man," the King said. "For your crimes, I sentence you to death."

"No, please stop!" John Miller said. "Stay your blade a moment. I have been a wicked man that is true. I deserve to die, that too is true. But I must set this to right ere you serve my sentence upon me. My crimes are many, but the greatest of all my crimes is greed. There is only one way to overcome greed, and that is with charity. Please, cut the ropes that bind my daughter's arms."

"What?" the King said. The girl had stopped advancing, and she stood still, swaying in the moonlight, watching them. But the King did not trust the girl, for she had killed many, many men. "I will not cut her loose."

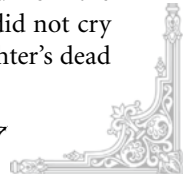
"You must," John Miller said, "for she must have that which was taken from her."

He held out his hands to the King, and all at once the King understood what was to be done. He sliced the ropes from the girl's arms, then lifted his blade above John Miller's wrists.

"Are you ready?"

"I am."

Then the King sliced John Miller's hands away. Blood gushed from the wound, forming a black puddle upon the grass. But John Miller did not cry out. Instead, he looked down at his hands, and then met his daughter's dead eyes.



“Please forgive me. I was weak. I was stupid. I was cruel. And through it all you were perfect. Be perfect again.”

He turned to the King.

“You must give her my hands, so that I may see my child whole once more before I die.”

The King put John Miller’s hands upon the wrists of the dead girl, and when she was whole again, she gasped, and life returned to her. At this the King was much amazed, for where before there had been a detestable rotting corpse, there was now a beautiful young woman, whole and full of the light of life.

The young woman knelt by her father’s side, and moved the sweaty locks of hair from his eyes. Death had taken him, and his dead eyes stared vacantly toward the dawn, which had broken over the horizon, coloring the sky. She leaned forward and kissed his brow, and when she had said her goodbyes she rose and faced the King.

“A heavy stone has fallen from off his heart,” she said. “May God have mercy on his soul.”

At her great piety the King was much impressed, and he took her home to be his queen, and there were great rejoicings everywhere as life returned to the kingdom, and the King and Queen lived contentedly to the end of their long lives.



# Author Biographies



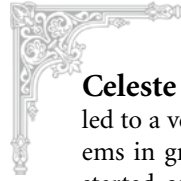
**John Boden** lives a stones throw from Three Mile Island with his wonderful wife and sons. A baker by day, he spends his off time writing, working on Shock Totem or watching M\*A\*S\*H re-runs. He likes Diet Pepsi, cheeseburgers, heavy metal and sports ferocious sideburns. While his output as a writer is fairly small, it has a bit of a reputation for being unique. His work has appeared in 52 STITCHES, EVERYDAY WEIRDNESS, METAZEN, BLACK INK HORROR, WEIRDYEAR, NECON E-BOOKS, SHOCK TOTEM and the John Skipp edited PSYCHOS. He is currently working on several projects.

**Tracy Carbone** is a Massachusetts native who's been writing as long as she can remember. She lives with her daughter and a house full of pets, and commutes into Boston to a corporate banking job. Much of her brainstorming and writing happens on her train commute. She's published dozens of horror and literary stories in anthologies and magazines in the U.S. and Canada, and more recently has made her work available on Kindle. *Restitution*, a novel of suspense is her newest release from Shadowridge Press. It is available from Amazon, BN.com and other online retailers. Visit her at [www.tracycarbone.com](http://www.tracycarbone.com).

**Wendy Dabrowski** lives in Massachusetts with her high-tech husband, twin daughters, and an opinionated beagle. She would like to thank her daughters for introducing her to Mary.

**T. Fox Dunham** resides outside of Philadelphia PA—author and historian. He's published in nearly 200 international journals and anthologies, and his first novella, *New World*, was published by May December Publisher. *Martyr*, his second, will be published later this year. He's a cancer survivor. His friends call him fox, being his totem animal, and his motto is: Wrecking civilization one story at a time. Blog: <http://tfoxdunham.blogspot.com/>. <http://www.facebook.com/tfoxdunham> & Twitter: @TFoxDunham

**Sean Eads** is a writer living in Denver, CO. Originally from Kentucky, he has a Masters degree in literature from the University of Kentucky and works as a reference librarian. His writing has appeared in various places, including the *Journal of Popular Culture* and *Shock Totem*. His first novel, *The Survivors*, was released in October 2012 by Lethe Press. His favorite writers include Ray Bradbury and Cormac McCarthy. He hates the taste of gingerbread.



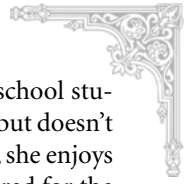
**Celeste Hall** has a vivid imagination and a profound love of books, which led to a very early start at writing. Celeste was finishing short stories and poems in grade school and full length novels in junior high. By the time she started college there were boxes of literary adventures squirreled away her mother's basement, where they sat collecting dust as Celeste went on to get married and raise a family. At last she has come back to her passion, publishing a few of her earlier stories while composing an eclectic library of new tales. [www.celestehall.com](http://www.celestehall.com)

**Amber Keller** mostly pens strange and unusual horror and dark fiction. She has been multi-published in magazines and several anthologies including *Hills of Fire: Bare-Knuckle Yarns of Appalachia*, *Night Terrors II* and *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed*, to name a few. A member of the Horror Writers Association, she also contributes to many websites and eMagazines, as well as provides book reviews at *Fresh Fiction* and horror/science fiction movie reviews for *The Gasp Factor*. You can find more of her stories for free on her site at: <http://adiaryofawriter.blogspot.com>. She's always searching for things that go bump in the night.

**Rachel Kenley** writes from her garage office in New England, although she is still a Jersey Girl at heart. Her current erotic romance novels and stories are published with *Ravenous Romance* and *Ellora's Cave*. Rachel's days consist of an unending quest to balance her many roles while maintaining her sanity and sense of humor. She loves retold fairy tales in all their forms along with chocolate, coffee and retail therapy, also in all their forms. Coming soon – *Once Upon a Menage*, erotic ménage fairytales. She can be found on facebook and on the web at [www.rachelkenley.com](http://www.rachelkenley.com)

**Randy Lindsay** was born and raised in Phoenix, where he lives with his wife, five children, and a basement full of games and books. He previously worked in the Hobby-Game industry designing card and role-playing games. Randy has had several short stories published in the fantasy/sci-fi market and is looking for a publisher for his first novel, *HELLATHON*, which he describes as a dead man's race.

**Sean Logan** lives in northern California with his wife and a big scary rottweiler that will run at the first sign of trouble. At night he writes horror stories and at his marketing day job he writes about something really scary--banking software. His stories have appeared in about two dozen publications and are forthcoming in *Eulogies II: Tales From the Cellar*, *Postscripts to Darkness* and in *Twice Upon an Apocalypse*.



**Katherine Marciniak** prefers to be called Katie and is a high school student in New Jersey. She lives with her parents and younger brother, but doesn't have a dog or cat because everyone else is allergic. In her spare time, she enjoys acting in school plays and shooting archery. She is utterly unprepared for the zombie apocalypse, but her friends think she's awesome anyway. This is her first published work.


**Joe McKinney** has been a patrol officer for the San Antonio Police Department, a homicide detective, a disaster mitigation specialist, a patrol commander, and a successful novelist. His books include the four part Dead World series, Quarantined, Inheritance, Lost Girl of the Lake, Crooked House and Dodging Bullets. His short fiction has been collected in The Red Empire and Other Stories and Dating in Dead World and Other Stories. In 2011, McKinney received the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award for Best Novel. For more information go to <http://joemckinney.wordpress.com>.

**Jeffrey C. Pettengill** is a New England native whose mild mannered cover as a hospital's financial analyst keeps others from suspecting what lurks within his imagination. Since beginning seriously writing five years ago, he has had eight short stories published, including one in the Bram Stoker Award nominated anthology Epitaphs. In addition to writing, he expresses his creativity by cooking, creating spreadsheets and by role-playing. He also loves movies, the theater, and his wife.

**Christopher Peruzzi** is a science fiction and horror enthusiast. He is a writer by night and an IT professional by day. He regularly writes articles about zombie contingency planning and other scifi topics on Hubpages at <http://cperuzzi.hubpages.com>. Chris is currently working on his first novel, a horror story centered in the garden state of New Jersey. Chris is married to his wife, Sharon, and lives in Freehold, NJ.

**Suzanne Robb** is the author of Z-Boat, Were-wolves, Apocalypses, and Genetic Mutation, Oh my!, and Contaminated She is a contributing editor at Hidden Thoughts Press, and co-edited Read The End First with Adrian Chamberlin. In her free time she reads, watches movies, plays with her dog, and enjoys chocolate and LEGO's.





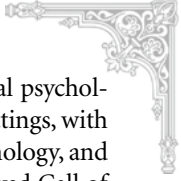
**Stephen D. Rogers** is the author of *A DICTIONARY OF MADE-UP LANGUAGES*, *SHOT TO DEATH*, *THREE-MINUTE MYSTERIES*, and more than 700 shorter pieces. His website, [www.StephenDRogers.com](http://www.StephenDRogers.com), includes a list of new and upcoming titles as well as other timely information. Stephen's favorite zombie movie is *DEAD SNOW* (2009), his favorite zombie novel is *WORLD WAR Z* (Max Brooks), and his favorite zombie short story is "Where There's a Will" (Richard and Richard Christian Matheson). <http://www.StephenDRogers.com>

**Brian M. Sammons** has appeared in such books as *Arkham Tales*, *Horrors Beyond*, *Monstrous*, *Dead but Dreaming 2*, *Horror for the Holidays*, *Over the Mountains of Madness*, and more. He has edited the shot story collections; *Cthulhu Unbound 3*, *Undead & Unbound*, *Eldritch Chrome*, *Edge of Sundown*, *Steampunk Cthulhu*, and *Atomic Age Cthulhu*. His first novella, *The R'lyeh Singularity*, co-written with David Conyers, just came out and he is currently far too busy for any sane man. For more about this guy that neighbors describe as "such a nice, quiet man" you can check out his very infrequently updated webpage here: [http://brian\\_sammons.webs.com/](http://brian_sammons.webs.com/)

**Herb Shallcross** graduated from Drexel in 2007 with a BS in Psychology and a Certificate in Writing and Publishing. His stories and poems have appeared online at *Apiary Magazine* and *Eclectic Flash*, and in anthologies from *Elektrik Milk Bath Press*, *QW Publishers*, and *quiet*. Herb lives a fairy tale life in Queens with his several little monsters.

**Justin Short** lives in the Midwest. His fiction has previously appeared in *Mad Scientist Journal* and *365 Tomorrows*

**Benjamin Smith** is a sci-fi, fantasy and horror writer. When not crouched over the keyboard he is reading, watching anime, or irritating his wife with story ideas. Previous work includes an honorable mention for a Warhammer short story contest (Alas, unpublished) and a fantasy short story published in *Kaleidotrope Magazine*. Ben is currently working on several short stories and even a novel or two. He lives out in the middle of rural America with his wife, their collection of anime and books, and their garden. Keep up with him at [BenjaminSmith.net](http://BenjaminSmith.net). When he decides to post, that is!



**K. H. Vaughan** is a refugee from academia with a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. In his other life he taught, published, and practiced in various settings, with particular interest in decision theory, forensic psychology, psychopathology, and methodology. An avid fan of H. P. Lovecraft and gaming, he has played Call of Cthulhu since the early 80s. He lives with his wife and three children in New England. Information on upcoming releases can be found at [www.khvaughan.com](http://www.khvaughan.com).

**Sheri White** is a writer, editor, and reviewer in the horror genre. She has been published in anthologies and magazines, and she reviews for many small-press horror presses and sites. She recently edited a special edition of *Morpheus Tales* magazine, and has stories in several upcoming anthologies. She is completely obsessed with The Beatles and Paul McCartney and loves to talk about them with other fans. Sheri can be contacted at [swhite1965@comcast.net](mailto:swhite1965@comcast.net) or (<https://www.facebook.com/sheriw1965>).

**Trisha J. Wooldridge** is the current president of Broad Universe ([www.broaduniverse.org](http://www.broaduniverse.org)), as well as a member of New England Horror Writers, the HWA, and the Worcester Writers Collaborative. She co-produced the Spencer Hill Press *UnCONventional* and *Doorways to Extra Time* (August 2013) anthologies. Her writing can be found in the EPIC award-winning *Bad-Ass Faeries* anthologies; *NEHW's Epitaphs*; *Corrupts Absolutely?* from Damnation Press, and *Poetry Locksmith*. She also gets paid to review food, play with horses, and interview chefs, bands and people who make movies. Her first novel, *The Kelpie*, will be available December 2013 from Spencer Hill Press. [www.anovelfriend.com](http://www.anovelfriend.com) found on Facebook





