



NIGHTMARES

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4 Short Scary Stories

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An Excerpt From “The Wall”

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ST. MARY'S

Based on a True Story

Christopher "Owen" Owens
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I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT all dogs go to Heaven. Who doesn't believe that their best furry friend deserves the best in the next life? The only thing more preposterous than dogs going to heaven would be imagining that dogs go to Hell. I mean, who could say that with a straight face?

When the topic came up at the bar, Daniel was quick to chime in. "No, no, you've got it all wrong," he said to me. "Dogs don't even have souls!"

I sipped my short glass – Johnny Walker Black and one large-ish ice cube, that had just just started to melt nicely, releasing the flavor. Daniel was holding a glass of wine, not by the stem, but palm up, the crystal cradled expertly. The white wine sloshed back and forth gently, like ocean waves, and Daniel spoke animatedly.

Debbie chimed in from two seats down. "Aww, how can you say dogs don't have souls? Of course they do! Isn't Boo just the cutey-est pwetty-est little thing you ever saw?" Debbie always brought her wire-haired terrier dog with her to the bar. It was unkempt in the

way terriers are, and it's white fur was more of an "cigarette smoker yellow". It's eye-gook left brown stains on either side of it's ugly little snout.

The dog's better behaved AND better looking than it's owner, I thought sarcastically, as I took another sip.

"In our traditions," Daniel said, "Almost every question you can think of has already been pondered over and studied by devout rabbis. You're not the first to ask the question, you know." He took a large gulp of wine to accentuate the point. This wasn't the first time he had some interesting insight relating to religion.

"Well, tell us then!" I said. "What does the Bible say about it?"

"You mean the Torah. The unequivocal stance of the Midrash is that animals simply don't have a place in the world to come. But some rabbis take the other approach. Not only do animals have souls – but even rocks and trees!"

Boo was staring through a window, watching passersby on the sidewalk outside, oblivious to the fact that the very fate of her immortal soul hung in the balance. She yawned.

The Johnny Walker had started working it's magic. My usual sardonic and bitter banter – brought on by years of pain and unfairness in my life – was softened to mere sarcasm. "We're not talking about plants," I said. "We're talking about pets. Pets are family – heck, they're the only family some people have."

Debbie emphasized her agreement. "That's right! No one else I would rather see in heaven than Boozy Woozy, isn't that right, wittle cutie pie?", shifting her attention to the dog. While I truly hated that little over-bred rat of a dog and Debbie's overly attached demeanor – I completely understood it.

After all, I felt the same way about Kota – my husky – even if I showed it differently. With all of the family drama I've had to deal with lately, I'd definitely choose the dog over any of my so-called "blood" any day. If Saint Peter forgot to install a doggie door on Heaven's Gate, then I can't say it's a place I'd want to visit.

* * *

My father died five, almost six years ago now, in May. (I'll stop you there – your condolences really aren't necessary. Isn't it weird how the first thing people inevitably say is that they're sorry?)

Anyway – we weren't that close, despite all the time I spent in Cleveland towards the end there. We were family, which only equals obligation in the great Midwest Catholic tradition, nothing more.

Usually the eldest would take care of family obligation. But Michael, my older brother, and his bitch-of-a-wife Hannah had moved to somewhere upstate New York a few years before. (I can never remember whether it's Buffalo or Rochester – they

were in a small town somewhere between the two and could never decide which one they were closer to.)

Besides, it made more sense for me to fly in and visit once a month. I was an airline attendant, after all. I could book a standby ticket anywhere I wanted to on my few meager days off. I worked 12 days on, 4 days off. 12 on, 3 off.

I visited dad once a month – usually on the shorter of my two “weekends”. Sometimes my boyfriend Brad would come with me, since he and dad both loved football and got along swimmingly. Steelers fans, the both of them. (Why would anyone root for a team from a town called Pittsburgh? More like Pitts-blergh.) Unlike Mom, Dad didn't care that I was gay. He was just grateful for the company.

Since Mom passed, Dad lived alone in that big house. All things considered, he did pretty well by himself. He managed to keep up the yard, a gratuitously large yard even by suburban standards. Every Sunday he attended mass religiously – pun intended – at a small parish nearby. Dad would only make the long drive to St. Mary's Cathedral three or four times a year. Christmas, of course, and to visit the attached graveyard where Mom was buried.

The last time I visited him, we planned to head over to Saint Mary's. It was a few days before Memorial Day, so we stopped at a corner drug store to find some

flowers. Although it was a very small selection, they had chrysanthemums – her favorite.

Mom was located on the very south side of the graveyard, next to the main road which bordered the large campus of the cathedral. There was a fence, of course, and some trees for shade. But the noise and fumes from the cars made it less peaceful than what people imagine graveyards to be.

That was the last trip that I saw Dad before he passed unexpectedly. I was the one they called when he didn't show up for Church on Sunday. I was the one who handled the mortuary business.

I was the one who had to call Michael and let him know.

* * *

I stared at the urn, sitting dead center on the mantle above my faux fireplace. A relic from a bygone era, it was jade green and bronze, with oriental tendencies. It looked one of a kind, but it was just one of the options from the mortuary – not the most expensive, but not the cheapest – and something about it spoke to me. It was masculine, looking more like a trophy than some ceramic pottery or fancy wooden box. I think Dad would have approved.

Dad didn't leave a will, unlike Mom. She spent her entire life to secure her plot at St Mary's Cathedral.

Because of the lack of will, there was a ton of legal paperwork that had to be taken care of on top of the normal rigmarole.

I once made the mistake of asking Michael to help with something with some property requirements for the estate sale. Although he was happy to help, and made it clear that he wasn't expecting anything in terms of inheritance – another facet of unspoken Midwestern sensibility – his wife Hannah insisted that he should inherit everything. After all, he was the eldest, and that's how it should work. But they didn't want to help with anything.

As a matter of fact, they filed for rights to manage the estate on their own, without telling me. *That bitch Hannah*, I thought. *She probably didn't even tell Michael. Just had him sign it without reading it.*

When I got the notice from the lawyers about the conflict of wills, I can't say I was surprised. Hannah definitely wore the pants in that family, and she always hated me and slighted me whenever she got the chance.

Although I had some limited power of attorney rights for Dad, they had filed the paperwork one day before I did. One day! When I talked to the lawyer about it, he said we had a pretty good chance to win the case. However, unlike injury lawyers who only get paid if you get a settlement, I had to pay up front. I spent more than \$10,000 on legal fees, even relying heavily

on my friend Joe, the paralegal, who was a great help with some of the form letters and such.

Finally, the case was settled. I was in charge of the estate – and collecting Dad's ashes. I had called Michael a couple of times during this period, although I wasn't really sure what I was going to say. He didn't answer and I didn't leave a voicemail. I didn't think he was mad at me – I had made it clear that we were going to split everything 50/50 – but that was before the fees racked up and I needed to recoup the costs.

I stared at the urn absently, as kind of a visual focal point, as my mind raced with all of the things I had to take care of. *Did dad even want to be cremated?* We never talked about it. I'm sure he would have preferred to be buried next to Mom at St. Mary's, but there was no space next to Mom's plot. They had a waiting list a 40 years long.

Maybe it would be nice to spread his ashes somewhere. With my flight benefits, I could have taken him to a beach at Hawaii. How gauche! That wasn't his style – I don't think Dad ever left Ohio, so why should he be dusted on the beach? Just because it was pretty or stereotypical didn't make much sense.

I know! I'll spread the ashes at Mom's plot, I had thought. How naïve! Not only did the church deny my request, the woman practically laughed me off the phone. After all, they believed exclusively in

preservation of the body in hope of resurrection. "Cremation was for animals", they told me.

Pragmatically, we finally made plans to spread Dad's ashes at the park near his house. He spent many a Saturday there, and after Mom passed, Sundays as well. It seemed fitting. It was Brad's idea, actually, and not a bad one.

Not taking my eyes off of the urn, I called my brother. I had to let him know we had set the location and a date, and to invite them. This time, surprisingly, I got through.

"Hey, Michael."

"Hey."

"Hey, so. We're planning on spreading Dad's ashes next month at River Park."

I could hear Hannah in the background, asking, "Who's that?" and Michael covering the phone and replying to her.

"Okay. Thanks for letting us know. Let me check with Hannah and see if we're available... you said it was a Friday, right?"

"Yeah. The 13th. I know it's not as easy as a Sunday, but that's the best I could do with my schedule."

He had switched it to speakerphone. They were talking, but in hushed tones, so I couldn't hear what they were saying. Then Michael asked, "So, who all is coming? I assume Aunt Janet probably. Is Brad coming with you?"

“Yeah, he is. He already got the day off work.”

A moment of silence. Then Hannah said, “Heeey, Kody. Do you really think that’s a good idea? After all, you know your Mom never approved of him.”

I nearly bit my tongue to stop from saying something I would regret – it was easy for me to lash out, but Hannah always seemed so indignant and it always made the already tense situation worse. “Well, Dad never seemed to mind him,” I purposely understated, adding mentally, *he liked Brad better than you, you bossy bitch, and you know it.*

“Hmm. Well, actually, it looks like we can’t make the 13th. You know, it’s not as easy for us to take time off willy-nilly,” she said. She was a terrible liar. “Maybe you could reschedule? Maybe a time when it’s just family that can attend.”

I was furious. Who did she think she was? She was no more family than Brad was – only by the tenuous bond of sanctimonious marriage, a thin veneer of legitimacy used to bolster her holier-than-thou attitude.

“I’ve had it up to here with you,” I said, barely containing my rage. “You went and filed a probate will behind my back, despite having never cared for the old man.”

Michael said, “What? What do you mean?”

“You don’t know?”

“Honey,” Hannah said to him, again reverting to hushed tones so it didn’t come over the speaker phone.

“You’re the eldest, and I just wanted to make sure that you were being given the opportunity. It was all online anyway, so not like I had to forge your signature, it was just an e-signature.”

Michael deferred the issue. “Honey, we’ll talk about this later.”

I pressed my point. “So are you gonna make it or not, Michael? You can leave Hannah at home for all I care.” I heard her gasp on the other side.

“Listen, Kody, I’m not so sure this is a good idea. But maybe you – and Brad – can come up here. Maybe we can make a trip to Niagara Falls to spread his ashes?” he offered.

I knew he was trying to navigate the tricky situation, but I was adamant. “No, Mike, I’ve already told you the plan. Be there or not. I don’t care.”

“You can’t just cut us out like this,” Hannah interjected.

My anger reached a tipping point. “Cut you out? I originally wanted to cut you in, 50/50. Right down the middle.” A mean-spirited thought came to me. “As a matter of fact, lets do it that way, okay?” My tone of voice becoming condescending. “Why don’t I ship you half of the ashes” – like King Solomon in the Bible, offering to cut the baby in half – “and then you two can do whatever you damn well please with them.”

With that, I stabbed the big red button on the phone to end the call, set my phone down by the urn. I headed

to the kitchen to find the Johnny Walker to help tame my rage for another night.

* * *

It was Memorial Day. As per the great Midwestern traditions that were a constant in every facet of our lives, our friends were having the mandatory barbecue – “Chill and Grill” as they called it – and insisted that I come. I was off work that Monday and Tuesday, and would have otherwise probably spent the day at the bar, or maybe just at home catching up on Netflix.

So I went to the barbecue. It was a grey day, warm but not sunny. The overcast sky matched my mood. I was grateful for the company of friends, but the diverse group mostly talked among themselves and I kept company with a little bit of cheap whiskey.

Long after the last of the dogs and burgers were served, the grill caught my attention. I noticed the charcoal briquettes had turned to ash. The warm breeze batted some of the ash around. I couldn't help but think of my father, in the same state – transformed into nothing but a little bit of dusty carbon, that the slightest breeze could stir up, leaving grey and black smears on your arms, your clothes, your face if you got too near.

My bitter mind often liked to play tricks on me – and it was then that I came up with the idea. It's not like you can DNA test ashes, after all. I gathered a couple of

plastic grocery store bags, double-bagged to make sure there were no holes in one. With a dry red Dixie cup, I carefully scooped the cooled ashes in to the bag.

Boozy, Debbie's ugly little terrier, stood at my feet, watching me intently. No judgment, just curiosity. "Hey Boo, leave him alone, cutie pie," Debbie called, and went back to her conversation, laughing at some inside joke. Boozy didn't move, her black eyes with streaked brown tear ducts looking up at me.

My bitterness had gotten the better of me, and was a driving force of its own. There weren't enough ashes, so I stopped by the grocery store and bought some kitty litter.

When I FedEx'ed the box to my brother's house, I made sure to address it "Hannah and Michael Richards", with her name first.

* * *

That was nearly six years ago, and Dad's ashes are still on the mantle. We never did spread them – I decided instead to keep it as a reminder. Michael and I haven't spoken much since then – the handful of calls around Christmas or birthdays, seeing how their kids are growing up. Despite superficially talking about family, it was an unspoken agreement to never talk about Dad or the ashes.

Brad and I broke up a couple of years ago now. He called me a bitter old drunk, and said that he wanted someone who was more kind. He complained that I drank too much. Ironically, the drinking was the only thing that made me less of an asshole, but even he couldn't see that. It was fine, I told myself. Working as an airline attendant meant that I didn't have much time, and I had become stubborn in my ways. I enjoyed my solitude.

At least I had Kota, my faithful, beautiful blue-eyed husky. Kota would talk to me, the "aroo-wooah-roo"s that huskies do, but quietly so as to never disturb the neighbors. Now as Kota got older, he was less frisky on his walks, sometimes not even wanting to go out in the cold Chicago winters and preferring to use the pee pads that we had set up in the house.

Suddenly, that changed too. Kota hadn't moved much for a couple of days, and was whimpering in pain. At first I didn't think much of it – *You and me both, buddy, this arthritis sucks* – but after a second day and an accident on his dogbed, I knew something was awry.

I took him that day to an emergency vet hospital, where they told me the bad news. He had congestive heart failure. He only had a few days at most, and was in a decent amount of pain. It would be more humane to put him down, they said, but that it was more common to instead take him home. Since I never got the

opportunity to properly say goodbye to Dad, I opted to take him home.

They wanted to make Kota's last days as comfortable as possible. A script for doggie painkillers was handed to me. It was explained clearly that it was human-grade Loratab, and that the seemingly-excessive 30 day supply was a standard part of "the grieving process."

I was going to buy a steak dinner for him the next day, but he didn't make it through the night. I was up all night with him, and I held him, the two of us on the couch, as he took his last breath.

Something broke in me. The flood of emotions that I felt at the loss of my friend – my best friend, my only friend, my family, closer to me than my own brother – left me sobbing into the couch, cradling his lifeless body. I didn't sleep at all, but when the sobbing subsided, I knew what I had to do.

* * *

Sitting for long periods really doesn't jive well with me. I'm stiff, and the arthritis in my hips borders on painful. In a car it was the worst, with the constant back and forth of the gas and brake. I much prefer flying.

But that wasn't an option.

The next day, I prepared. I had an old plastic tote bin, that had some old paperwork and mementos in it –

dusty, unopened, sitting in the back of the spare closet, as these things usually are. It was the only container large enough to suit my purpose.

I carefully wrapped Kota's body in my favorite tablecloth – the one Mom had made for me, a bright floral pattern – and managed to fit him inside the tote without too much trouble. It was heavier than I thought it would be. In the dim lighting of the hallway, I struggled to get it down the narrow stairs, but I finally managed to get it in the trunk of my car.

I drove down around the southern bend of Lake Michigan, taking the Chicago Skyway bridge to save a little time and hassle. Then due east. It was unusual for me to not have the radio on, but the silence was soothing, and matched my somber emotions. Blank. Quiet. Nothingness. Shouldn't I feel something, something sad, something more? But instead I was just numb. After a few hours, literally as well as figuratively.

I made it to St. Mary's inside of 5 hours, pretty good time. I timed it purposefully so that I would be there at lunch time, so there would be less chance of running into anyone.

I pulled just inside the entrance of the cemetery, looked around, and parked my car there. I retrieved the shovel from the trunk. I discreetly walked over to Mom's plot, scouting for people as well as for a spot.

There was a little space between the gravestone and the fence, about 4 feet wide. Perfect.

Here Lies Rebekah Richardson, 1947-2010.

I started digging.

It was damn hard work, especially after driving, but the ground was thankfully soft. I was able to get big shovelfuls of it at a time. It only took about 30 minutes or so to dig the couple of feet down that I needed.

I had just finished digging the hole, when a voice behind me tentatively offered, "Excuse me, sir? Can I help you?" It was a security officer; his car was parked just behind mine near the entrance, and he had snuck up on me since my back was turned.

"Oh, hey. No, I'm okay, I got it, thanks," I said, wiping my brow with my arm.

"No, I mean... what are you doing? You can't be digging in here. This is private property, and a cemetery I might add." *No shit Sherlock, do I look like a gardener?*

My sarcasm may have been my undoing in other aspects of my life, but here it served me well. "Oh, no, it's okay. This is my mom. She made us promise to plant a rosebush by her grave. I already got approval from the diocese," I lied. "Since it's right by the fence and the road, they agreed, since a rosebush would look great here."

The security officer was a young man, maybe 21 at the oldest. He had a fresh stain on his uniform,

ostensibly from lunch which he had just finished. I think he bought it, but then he grinned and narrowed his eyes. "So, where's the rosebush, then?"

"Oh. Uh, Dad went to go get it from... what's that place over on 95th? Sunshine?"

The cop's expression relaxed. "Oh, Sunnyside. Yeah, they do flowers and stuff for us here all the time. It's a pretty good nursery."

"It sure is. Dad went to go get it from there and should be back any minute now."

The cop's cell phone buzzed – a text, probably from his girlfriend or friends – and he dropped the issue, wanting to check it. "Okay then. Well I'm headed off to lunch, but I'll be back in 30 minutes or so. If you need anything, just go up to the office, they'll be happy to help."

"Much obliged," I said. Relief poured over me when he got in his security car and drove away, checking his text while he did. He pulled around the roundabout and back out to the street, and disappeared down the road. *That was too close.*

I barely waited for him to disappear down the road, before I made my move. I went to the trunk of my car, retrieved the tote, and placed it in the ground. It was a near perfect fit, and thankfully deep enough. I quickly shoveled the dirt back on top of it. I tried to pat it down but there was too much dirt, so there was a little mound.

I had already taken a few steps back towards the car when I realized – what would happen when Security Sam returned and didn't see a rosebush? I couldn't risk it – I had to do something. Looking around, the nearby tree offered an easy solution. One of its branches with other smaller branches looked like it might do the trick. I used the shovel to hack it off. I stripped some of the more obvious leaves to make it look more like a bush, and shoved the branch in the ground, making sure it would hold up.

I high-tailed it back to my car and drove off, damn near squealing the tires.

* * *

“Forgive me father, for I have sinned. It's been, uh, like 2 years since my last confession.”

“Go ahead, my son. God forgives those who confess their sins.”

I was back in Chicago before nightfall. The roadtrip had given me time to think. You know, if they wouldn't allow Dad's ashes to be spread, then surely what I did had to qualify as a sin. I stopped by Misericordia on my way home, the largest local Catholic church where I occasionally attended.

I didn't anticipate the priest's reaction. Usually they offered the usual penance of however-many Hail Mary's with a side of shame and guilt. With a loud

clack, the priest slammed the wooden divider closed, brusquely exited, and threw open my door. "I don't know why you bother coming to confession. I suggest you get out of here before the church falls down around you."

Although the jury may still be out on whether or not all dogs go to heaven, I at least wanted to give Kota a fighting chance.

AIKU

A Samoan Ghost Story

Christopher “Owen” Owens
October 2012

PART ONE

“That’s it, girls! Faster now! And step and push and push and swing, step and push and push and swing...” The music blared incessantly, pushing the speakers to the max, as everyone in the small room also pushed themselves to the max.

Thirty or so women, in (more-or-less) perfect lines, like a battle formation, weaved forwards and backwards, to the sides, doing the routine that they’ve done so many times before. Up and down, they swung themselves in time with the music.

Large masses of human flesh – asses and breasts, jiggly arms, large hips, as well as the more lithe individuals, everyone smiling (well, *almost* everyone), sweating and moving. Sweating and moving *with a purpose*.

This was the last time the group would meet before the big Zumba competition. And they were going to

absolutely clinch it. After all, they were the number one group on island, and they practiced four times a week! Giving up your Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, *and Saturdays* was no small commitment.

One large woman in the back stumbled on a particularly fast part of the routine, to the immediate callout of the instructor. “Tefa! Come on now, keep up!”

That was a stupid mistake, Tefa thought to herself.

• • •

They sat down to eat, talking quietly but laughing raucously when they laughed – which was often. There were few people in the restaurant, so they expected good service.

The waitress came by and took their drink orders, promptly and politely. Two “half-and-halves”, an unsweetened ice tea, and a Vailima for the big guy.

As they waited for their drinks, they barely looked at the menu. They had been here often enough that they all already knew what they wanted. Mateo (the one who had ordered the unsweetened iced tea) looked around and said, “eh, that’s strange! Nobody else is here tonight except for us! It’s Friday, there’s *always* someone here!”

10 long minutes later, they started to realize that their drinks had not come yet. *What's taking so long?*, Mateo thought. *Maybe they forgot about us?*

• • •

The official report said it was an accident. The bus driver had simply fallen asleep at the wheel, careening off the steep edge, killing four kids and one adult, and injuring the rest of the passengers.

Most people did not believe the official story. They thought maybe the bus driver did it on purpose, or more likely, he was drinking on the job – again.

The driver himself survived the accident, but not the guilt. He committed suicide a week later.

• • •

The waves swelled, pregnant to overflowing by the incessant rain. It was the rainy season – October was “*o le masiga o le timu*”, the month of the rains, in the old traditions.

He was sure he was going to die.

He had finally attempted the swim which was the benchmark for boys to become men – it was nearly a six hour ordeal! It was sunny and calm when he had started. But within an hour of his setting out, less than halfway across, a storm had blown in.

The ferries stopped.

The wind howled.

He had already swallowed some water, when a giant wave had taken him by surprise. Sputtering and gasping for breath, the second swell got him as well.

He hadn't given up yet. He couldn't. He was proud, and would fight until his strength gave out. But he knew, in his heart of hearts, that he was going to die out here in the ocean.



“Do you believe in *aiku*? ” one of the boys asked another.

“Ghosts? *Leai*! Of course not.”

“Are you sure about that?”

The one boy looked around. “Tell me, then, *uce*, who has seen a ghost? You can't see them, or touch them. How are we supposed to believe they are real? Just by the stories of our ancestors? *Oka*,” the boy finished.



It was late. Being after curfew in the villages, the *aumaga* and the *sa'o* had taken up their posts at the designated *fale*, and by now most of them had already dozed off. A few of them played cards in the bright florescent light.

Outside of the *fale*, all was quiet. The winds were calm, so the palm trees didn't whisper. The few dogs in this village barked, and all the kids were long asleep. Even the traffic of the cars had died down, as it was after midnight.

But sometimes, things were not as they seemed.

PART TWO

The Zumba competition had come and gone. Tefa and her group took second place – *it was all just a fashion contest, anyway*, she mused, knowing that her missteps had been a cause of their loss – and continued their Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday practices.

A few people had dropped out, as is always the case after a big completion. But Tefa persisted – it was one of her joys. “Everybody move to the front! Make room for newcomers in the back!” the instructor bellowed.

They started their routine, the speakers buzzing and crackling, the tempo well above 150 BPM. Just as the sweat started to pour, their unseen guests had arrived.

One by one, they filtered in. Literally walking through the back wall, they filled in the gaps of the lines and matched their living counterparts.

Although the people here couldn't see the *aiku*, you can imagine them as the stereotypical, low-budget Hollywood trope: an eerie blue glow, transparent like a hologram.

Most of the ghosts were fat, ironically. How can a being without mass be fat? One of the more scrawny ones wore a ghostly sweat band around her head, and scowled. She hated Zumba. Absolutely *loathed* it. And she especially hated that woman, that fat Tefa, who had since started dating her 'early' husband who had not yet joined her in the afterlife.

If she had a chance, she would trip Tefa up again. And again. It was petty revenge.

The living and the dead, dancing in perfect harmony. The *aiku* even had their own instructor up front, facing the class, leading them, in perfect harmony with the living.

• • •

They had placed their food orders as well. After a long twenty minutes, Mateo got up to check what was taking the waitress so long. As he stood, he stumbled, and fell back into the booth. He stood up again and went to go check.

The waitress was finally coming with their drinks. Their food order was still to come.

Unbeknownst to him, Mateo had nearly toppled into a ghost waiter, who was busy serving drinks, bringing sauces and utensils, when he rose the first time. The ghost waiter deftly dodged him, holding up his ghostly tray of drinks, gently shoved him back into the seat, and uttered a cuss word at the living man.

The place was packed. Every booth was taken by families of ghosts, mostly with kids running around, going right through the tables that were in the middle of the room.

The hold up on their food was caused by the ghost chefs in the back, using almost all of the prep space, calling orders unheard by the living. The human cooks paused, stumbled, and had to look for misplaced utensils and seasonings, unaware they were sharing the space.

• • •

The official report said it was an accident. Most people thought that the bus driver had taken up drinking again. But he *knew* what he had seen.

As he was driving over the steep mountain pass to the other side of the island, a small boy appeared in the middle of the road – from out of nowhere! Caught by surprise, the bus driver swerved.

Simple as that.

He was afraid to mention that he had seen this. Everyone would surely think that it was a withdrawal-induced hallucination. After all, it had only been a week since he had most recently stopped drinking. So he lied. He said he had fallen asleep at the wheel.

The ghost of the boy who had died in a bus accident, at the same place, nearly 25 years ago, had revealed himself to the bus driver for a split second, using all of his energy to do so.

That's all it took.

Now the ghost of the boy, and the ghosts of four other children who had died in this accident, played in the jungle all day, never having to go to school, although they were all dressed up in their uniforms. They played tag, and hide-and-seek, and chased the dogs into the street (since the dogs could see the ghosts). The dogs were often run over by cars – they laughed and laughed at this.

Dogs didn't become ghosts. They were gone for good.

The one adult who had died in the accident, haunted the bus driver. She was angry, and wanted revenge, and although the bus driver couldn't see her, he felt the ominous presence all the time.

Soon the guilt piled up on him, and he could hear her voice in his head. *If it weren't for you, we would still be alive! God will never forgive you!*

He finally decided to end it all.

The day they released him from the hospital, he decided he would throw himself in front of a bus, in a sick twist of karma.

As he walked along the street, trying to appear casual, he saw the bus coming. As it drew nearer, he started to have second thoughts – after all, self preservation was a strong instinct to overcome, even when racked with guilt.

The bus approached.

Just as he decided, *I can't do this, I have so much to live for*, he stumbled, fell into the street, and the bus didn't have time to move out of the way. It was over before he knew what had happened.

Did he trip, or was he pushed by the ghost who was haunting him?

• • •

The waves were getting higher, buffeting the swimmer, and pushing him further away from the coast.

His strength ebbed. He fought until his muscles cramped and he could no longer control them.

He finally passed out from the pain and the lack of oxygen.

A ghostly *fautasi* boat, glowing eerily blue in the dim grey day, swept by the floating body. One of the transparent rowers on board stopped rowing, and

grabbed the body, hauling it along as they made toward the coast.

An hour later, the swimmer awoke, on the shore, coughing up water, after being resuscitated by the ferry operators who had tied up the boats for the day. They all wondered how at low tide, that the boy washed up on shore. “Usually the tide pulls people out to the ocean at this time!” they exclaimed. “It is a miracle!”

The swimmer later told of the strangest dream he had, while he was unconscious in the tide, of a raiding party on a *fautasi* that had been caught in a storm.

They had all died a terrible death, in the unforgiving ocean.

• • •

“It doesn’t matter if you believe it,” one boy said. “They exist. And they are all around us.”

The rest of the boys grew quiet.

“How do you know, *sole*?” one ventured.

The first boy was quiet. “I just know, alright?”

• • •

It was after midnight.

All was quiet in the village.

As the *sa’o* and *aumaga* sat in the *fale*, the darkness had covered the island.

Unbeknownst to them, ghosts were busily walking up and down the main road, chatting and laughing, some of the kids chasing each other. A lone dog who could see the ghosts, barked and barked at this procession, despite it occurring every year at the same time. One of the men in the *fale* threw a rock, very nearly hitting the dog in the skull. “*Alu!*” the man barked.

The ghosts were on their pilgrimage. For some of them, it was time to go home. For others, who had longer penance to pay here, they went every year as far as they could.

When they reached the shore, there were goodbyes, embraces (as much as ethereal beings can be said to embrace each other), and even tears – mostly by those who could not cross.

The procession – hundreds of ghostly men and women, glowing blue in the dark night – walked across the ocean, disappearing into whatever comes next, while many who were banned from crossing, stood on the shore, waving, and watching them until they disappeared from sight.

MAD JACK

Based on a True Story

*Christopher “Owen” Owens
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CHAPTER ONE

“MAD“ JACK HEARTLESS was always angry. His forehead was furrowed, eyes perpetually squinted, and never was a smile to be found under his thick, bushy beard. Mad Jack was a hulk of a man, head and shoulders taller than anyone else, barrel chested. His Irish heritage showed clearly with his proclivity to drink, quickness to anger, and ability to hold a grudge longer than most people can remember. During the cold Michigan winters, he always wore a red-and-black flannel jacket – it was his uniform from the first chilly weekend in September until the weather had thawed the ground sometime in May.

His last name truly was Heartless, in the uncanny way that truth is often stranger than

fiction, and people bear a resemblance to their names. Despite the moniker, everyone in the small farm community in Michigan just called him “Mad Jack” – whether the convenience store clerks, or sometimes even his wife or children when speaking to others.

Mad Jack lived with his wife and their two boys, Mike and Chad, on a small farm on what used to be Chippewa land, about 30 miles from what is now Grand Rapids, Michigan. Now, it was “just off of Route 57, about 3 miles past the gas station”, on a stretch of flat land. Turning down a gravel road from the two-lane highway, you had to drive nearly another mile past big open fields broken by tufts of aspen trees, before making it to their property line.

Turning down their driveway (off the gravel and into a dirt road, which soon just petered out into tire tracks), you could see the large house that was theirs. A few hundred yards away, across a large grassy yard, a new house was almost complete. When the plot of land next door went up for sale, Jack was able to talk to the agent and purchase it, more than doubling their current acreage. The land this far out from Grand Rapids

wasn't in high demand, so it was almost too easy to talk down the price and expedite the paperwork to get the amended title for the land taken care of. I can't help but wonder if Mad Jack's gruff and stern way of conducting himself had something to do with that.

Behind the main house on the property was a lake. It was only a few hundred feet wide, and skinnier than it was long, but it provided a good landmark for the area. Someone had bought up the dilapidated house across the lake and was in the process of fixing that up as well. They were just far enough away you could never quite make out their faces, but occasionally if they were looking in this direction, a big, full arm wave may have been returned in kind, just as likely as not. Whether not seen or ignored, was up for debate. Occasionally, Mad Jack's two boys would try to holler at the strangers across the lake – to be met with a stern rebuff from Jack, usually delivered with a too-firm hand across the back of their heads. There was no road from this side over there, and thick bunches of aspen on the lake's edges made it impossible to take a car or pickup truck over there – they had a separate turn

in from another road. Interesting, that there were people so near and yet so far.

It was late November of 1957. Although the second house was only missing some finishing touches – some windows, some insulation in the basement, a permit for a new electrical connection – the second house wouldn't be completed for another 4 or 5 years. Occasionally on those endless summer days, the two boys would wander over and play make-believe in the house, pretending they were discovering lost ruins or exploring a palace of a jungle king. On one occasion, the younger of the boys – Chad, clumsy and unaware – had broken one of the new floorboards by jumping off the counter and landing too hard on it with both feet firmly planted. He was unharmed; it didn't fall through to the basement. The floor issued a resounding *CRACK!* that stunned both of them for a moment. After a brief moment, they both broke into laughter and carried on their game, oblivious to the wrath that would be waiting for them at home.

Two days later, when Mad Jack had discovered the broken floorboard and asked the contractors if

they had done it, it became obvious that the boys had been sneaking in to play and must have been responsible. That evening after coming home from a hard day's work, before dinner, he called the two boys to the living room. They were mere shadows in his looming presence.

He quietly asked, "Which one of you broke the floorboard?"

They didn't respond.

Jack sighed. "I'm not going to ask again, and we're not leaving here until I get an answer." He stared at each of the boys, with his disgruntled, angry visage.

Mike finally said quietly "It was me."

Jack waited a beat, and then subtly nodded his head. "Chad, go wash up for dinner and help your mother if she needs it." Chad exchanged a quick glance with Mike, an unspoken *thank you*, an acknowledgment of the many times that Mike had stood up for his little brother and taken the blame before.

Jack turned slowly, headed to the corner of the living room, where a skinny branch from one of the aspen trees lived. He grabbed it, and turned slowly back around. He nodded to Mike. This

wasn't the first time they were punished like this, so no words needed to be exchanged. There were no *I'm sorrys* or explanation needed – just the swift lash of the switch, three, four, five times, while the tears welled in Mike's eyes and he quietly sobbed to himself.

* * *

The winter that year was bitter cold. Although there hadn't been a lot of snow, the little that there was clung to the ground, beaten down by the winds whipping around the great open fields and around the trees.

The Christmas break was finally here. The kids were released from school, but Jack still had a full week of work before getting a couple of days off before New Year's. The boys' mother was busy in the house, decorating it (however sparsely) with winter decorations – cinnamon pinecones, a wreath (as they couldn't afford a tree), some special pictures including one gaudy, jewel-studded cross with red, white, and green fake gems, some of them missing, rattling between the glass and the frame, trapped forever

in their own little purgatory. She baked fresh bread, and while Jack was out working on removing trees from the yard, or was away at work, she would try to sneak a batch of chocolate chip cookies for her and the boys to secretly share. Jack despised anything sweeter than whiskey, and couldn't stand to see his family enjoy things he didn't understand.

Despite the relative warmth of the house compared to the cold outside, it was still drafty, and Jack wore his red-and-black flannel jacket both inside and outside the house. The boys had never seen him without it, and it's just as possible his wife had maybe only caught glances of him without it during those little hours of the night in the adults' bedroom.

The two boys were outside, poking around the yard with a couple of sticks. They were told to stay away from the lake (despite being well frozen and easy to walk on). Jack's wife was in the kitchen, furiously scrubbing at a pot which will never come clean. As Jack came into the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee, she spoke to him.

"Honey. I know we decided to not do anything special this year. But Miss Packey, the 2nd grade

teacher, told me they just opened a new toy store at the mall. I was able to get away for an hour this afternoon. Look at this!” she exclaimed, smiling, as she opened up the kitchen cupboard and, on her tip toes, tilted a wrapped package far enough for him to see it.

He didn’t bother looking up from his coffee for long enough that, she started to get uncomfortable standing there. He finally looked, and she indicated with her head. “They had a two-for-one set of Cowboy and Indian figures on sale, so I went ahead and got them for the boys. There has to be 50 different little plastic figurines – don’t you think the boys will just love them?”

Mad Jack’s face was red – not just from the warmth of the kitchen, or the coffee he just sipped, but out of unbridled anger. She recognized the look and quickly put the package back, closed the cupboard, and started to go back to the sink.

Jack grabbed her roughly by her shoulder, spun her around, and smacked her, hard, across the face. She nearly fell over. She regained her footing, and stood there, hand covering her face,

quivering, the sting burning her and making her eyes water.

“You can find time to get frivolous toys for the kids, but still haven’t found time to mend my jacket? I’ve asked you a month ago to do that.”

She knew better than to protest – he had mentioned it only once, offhandedly, a small tear in his jacket that he never took off – but if she would have said something to that effect, it would be more than just a slap.

He grabbed his mug of coffee and walked out of the kitchen, while she was left there with tears in her eyes. She saw out the kitchen window the boys in the yard, now pointing their sticks at each other like rifles, both simultaneously pretending to shoot and be shot, and falling over, laughing, blissfully unaware of what had transpired.

CHAPTER TWO

WITH A STRAIN, he hefted the axe overhead with both hands, and brought it down swiftly. The log only split halfway, with the axe stuck in it. He lifted again, pulling the log up, not very far, and brought it down on the stump again, cleaving the log in two, some splinters flying in either direction, and the axe sitting in the stump.

Chad wiped the sweat from his brow, and muttered something to himself and shook his head. He rubbed his shoulder with one hand, he could feel where he had re-awakened the old injury. The doctor told him that he shouldn't be doing anything with his shoulder, but he had to get more firewood for the new furnace they had installed for his mom's property next door. Although it was only October, the chill had already settled in and mom had been running the furnace during the days as well.

As he stood there, he felt a fire in his shoulder blade. He had overdone it for sure. He stood there

rubbing his upper shoulder the best he could, right arm hanging down. It was a grey day, not so much overcast; the sky was just a flat, endless stretch of nothingness.

The cat which prowled their property, was sitting by the edge of the trees, just staring at him. Chad hadn't originally hated the cat, but in the year or two the cat had been there, it had attacked him a couple of times when he went to go feed it or pet it, and no matter how much he yelled at it or waved his arms, the thing never listened to him. In his head, he named the cat "Deaf Leopard".

After the worst of the pain had passed, he used his left hand to pick up the wood he had chopped and add it to the small pile he had on a tarp. Then he grabbed two corners of the tarp, slowly dragged it from the back of the house by the lake and trees towards his mom's house next door. As he made his way, he tried to imagine he was at a beach bar, sipping on a whiskey and listening to some cheesy rendition of Jimmy Buffett, but instead he kept coming back to the circumstances which brought him to the situation at hand.

A few years ago, his mother had reached out to him to help pay the property taxes. He found it ironic, that he hadn't been back to the farm in nearly 15 years, and she had the gall! He had already been giving her money, but apparently she hadn't been a good steward. After an assessment nearly 7 years prior to that, raising the value of the property (and subsequently the taxes that went along with it), she had just stopped paying.

Now, they were threatening to take the property if they didn't pay the back taxes – nearly \$100,000! How was he supposed to come up with that money?

So he ended up selling his house, and using that to pay for it – but conditionally. After his shoulder injury, he was having a hard time keeping hours at the factory, and he was thinking about moving back to the farm. He had a little bit of savings and with the sale of his house, had enough to live on for a year – maybe two, if he could find some part time work at a convenience store.

He wanted to live in the main house. There was nobody there, and not many renters this far

outside of the city. Mom had tried unsuccessfully to turn it into an AirBnB, but a slew of bad reviews – “an isolated, creaky old house” – she had no choice but to take it down.

Plus, Mom was getting older and he wanted to make sure she wasn't alone. His brother Mike was serving time out in Colorado, and Dad was long gone, so it was just him. So he sold his house, quit his job, and moved back home. He never found work, and found that the rural life mostly suited him. He enjoyed the solitude, and had enough hobbies (and chores) to keep him occupied. He tried his hand at distilling whiskey, with some modest success. His “Autumn Bourblend” with cinnamon sold almost 100 bottles.

After a year of living on the farm, and getting into half-baked enterprises – his whiskey sales, and some multi-level marketing stuff, a brief stint as a bartender (until moving a keg one day tore his shoulder again, and he had to wear a sling for a month) – he found himself a steady girlfriend, who then became his wife. She helped pay some of the bills with her teacher's salary, and they lived there happily, improving the house and taking care of Mom.

He finally made it to the furnace – a big, detached, modern iron contraption on the outside of the second house, half sunk into the earth and with a loading door on one side. It was completely out of place in the rest of the wilderness. But it fed heat into the house from firewood, keeping fumes out, and with the abundance of ash, oak, aspen, and the other trees, they had basically unlimited fuel – as long as they could keep up with the tedious chore of chopping it. He invited friends sometimes to come help. They would watch some football on a gaudy bigscreen TV he installed in the basement, trying to turn it into a bar or mancave – and then challenge them to a wood splitting contest. Sometimes they got enough firewood from one afternoon to last almost a month of winter.

He opened the loading door, and noticed the furnace wasn't hot. There was still smoldering wood, but it wasn't on. *Damn, it went out again.* It happens sometimes when it's windy. So he loaded the firewood, using only his left arm, one piece at a time, protecting his shoulder but instead straining his back with leaning over and standing up.

When he was done, he noticed that Deaf Leopard had followed him across the field, and was watching him. “Damn cat. Get out of here!” he yelled at it, waving his left arm. The cat didn’t move.

He re-lit the furnace. Despite being modern, there was a little slot for some kindling, and you had to use a long-handled Bic lighter, which they hung on the side of the furnace, melted and gnarled from the weather. Chad then meandered over to his mom’s back door, a big sliding glass door to the lower level of the house. It was one of the extravagances which she wanted, since she spent most of her time in the den in the basement there.

He peered inside, saw mom on the couch, who waved him in.

“Hi, mom. Sheesh, it’s warm in here!”

She waved at him, both a “come sit down” and a “shush, child” motion all in one gesture. Some soapy actress was making her plea about having a child of her own to carry on her dynasty, then it went to commercial, which she muted with the remote.

“Mom, it’s like 90 degrees in here! Did you mess with the thermostat again?”

“Oh, Chaddy. I told you that wood furnace heats up the den more than the rest of the house! It gets so cold upstairs at night, but today it’s too warm so I went ahead and turned it off.”

He caught himself before he raised his voice, as he got up and went over to the thermostat. The temperature gauge was set to 90, but it was turned off. “Mom, I told you. Leave it at 75, it’ll be 75 down here and 70 upstairs. If you’re cold, put on some blankets or a jacket! And whatever you do, don’t turn it off – I have to go restart it if it goes off!”

She muttered her “okay, okay” agreement like she always did. “Did I tell you Mike called today?”

“Mom, those collect calls from the prison cost like five bucks a minute! You don’t need to talk to him every week.”

“Okay, okay,” she said dismissively, “But good news, he’s up for parole again next month. I really think that this time he might make it....”

She continued talking about Mike’s renewed activity in the church groups and good behavior,

while Chad fiddled with the thermostat and largely tuned her out. She had always loved her two boys – perhaps too much so, since her late husband Jack had been so cold and mean to her, and her boys brought her the only joy and warmth she had known in her life. At least until the warm glow of cable TV in her retirement became a steadfast routine.

“...and he even said that he’d come back here to be with us! Can you believe it? After all that time in Colorado he wants to come home. I told him he could stay with you in the main house, as y’all have extra room upstairs –”

“Mom, sheesh. You know Mike. He’s not gonna come home. And even if he did, why did you offer for him to stay in my house? You know I have my wife and her kids. The last thing we need is a freeloader.”

She sipped her wine, and then set it back down. “You know, you’re the one that Jack banished in his will, not Mike. Sometimes I wonder why you’re even here.”

Chad bit his tongue to prevent saying something terrible to his own mother, but his inner monologue was less inhibited. *That*

ungrateful bitch! he thought. *I paid for the property, sacrificed the life I was building to move to this miserable farm, and she wonders why I'm here?*

“Mom, I choose to believe that Jack mentioned in his will that I can never come back to the property was for my own good – that I should break the chains of being stuck here, and create my own life. Not that he was doing it out of malice. And I respected that for 15 years. But you're the one who called me, asking for help.” *Probably because Mike wasn't around,* he thought bitterly.

“Okay, okay.”

With the deftness of a veteran TV watcher, she un-muted the TV in the brief transition between the last commercial and the resumption of the soap opera with perfect timing. He sighed, pulled out his phone and waited until the next commercial break. This was her one show that she watched religiously and wouldn't talk during it, so he had to wait until the next commercials. He opened up Facebook, to be hit with people's pictures of a better life than his – vacationing on beaches in Puerto Rico, mountain climbing, a

new wedding announcement of one of his regulars from the bar – not to mention the ads for refinancing, for lower back pain (so close and yet so far!), and for farm equipment.

After a moment he closed it and opened his Bible app. He's been trying to be more faithful, and as part of the church's Wednesday night Bible studies, they were starting the New Testament with a focus on the four Gospels and Acts. He had just started Matthew a few days ago, and was on chapter 6 or 7. The Sermon on the Mount. *Blessed are the patient*, he thought, *for they shall have their chance to talk*.

Commercial break – this time, not as fast with the remote, so a blast of extreme volume before the mute kicked in. Before he could say anything, Mom said, “So, what's the plan for the lake this month? Are you finally going to get around to doing something with that seaweed? It's starting to stink to high heavens!”

“Of course, Mom, it's what I've been focusing on. You can't even smell it from here, it's much stronger up by our house. I've been drying that last batch of algae – again, not seaweed or kelp.

It's 'Better Than Kelp'. It's great for fertilizer, I just gotta get it bottled and sold."

"Meanwhile, you have another ton of it growing out there, and rotting, and killing the fish. That's what stinks the worst," she said as she sipped her wine again.

Chad had explained the eutrophication process to her a few times before. The widespread use of industrial phosphate fertilizer all ends up running off and collecting in the lake. That, combined with the rich sediment, leads to an overgrowth of algae – distinctly different than seaweed. Then, the overgrowth robs the lake of oxygen and kills the fish.

Drying the algae and reusing it as a fertilizer was a brilliant way to make the best use of it, as well as some extra income. But marketing it – even in farmland-rich rural Michigan – was harder than getting whiskey on the market.

"Don't worry, mom. I'll take care of it."

I always do.

* * *

After giving Mom a hug, he left. Night had fallen, but suddenly the completely blank greyness of the sky had given away to a clear night and a full moon. It wasn't clouds, the sky earlier really was just grey. The full moon was still low in the sky, making it easy to see, he gathered the tarp (again only using his left side) and walked back to the house.

He went inside, where his wife Melissa was watching some animated movie about animals with superpowers. She got up and followed him as he wandered about the house. "So how'd it go? How's your mom?"

" 'Okay, okay' ", he said. She smiled a thin-lipped Mona Lisa smile, knowing what he meant. "She's fine. I guess Mikey is up for parole, and she wouldn't stop harping about the lake."

"It's really bad this year", she said. "I thought you were gonna get out there last weekend and clean the algae?"

He sighed. What a day. "Listen, honey – you remember what happened last time, right? I'm sorry I've been putting it off but I will get out there this week and do it. But I've had a long day.

I'm gonna go watch some TV and relax, okay?" Melissa nodded.

She returned to watching TV, and he went upstairs to his private room. He poured himself a whiskey, spilling a little as he's not left handed, and started seeing what there was to watch. Nothing looked very good so he put on a comedy special. The comedian wasn't very funny so he found himself finished with his first – and second – whiskey in a short time.

The moon was coming in through the window, and it caught his eye. It was so bright that he could notice every little spec on the window, and where it cast a shadow on the couch and the floor. The routine ended, and he started another one on his watch list, but turned it down low, and just watched the moon for a bit.

This comedian had no problem finding her stride, and Chad's attention was captivated by the TV.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something move across the window. It seemed... like a child's silhouette? *Probably just a bird*, he thought. *This is the 2nd floor. There's nothing up this high, no trees or anything.*

He got up to get himself another whiskey. While his back was to the window, he saw another shadow on the wooden floor. This time, much bigger than the first. It was a man's shadow, clearly, moving left to right, on the floor, walking across the window. Chad froze, mid-pour, and stared in disbelief.

The figure had almost made it completely to the other side, when it stopped in its tracks – took a step backwards – and the shadow turned. It seemed like it was staring right in the window.

Chad set down the bottle, shot the little whiskey he had poured, closed his eyes, counted to three, turned around, and opened his eyes to look directly at the window.

There was nothing there. Just the moon, specks of dirt, and some comedian who's time was up and thanking everyone for coming.

CHAPTER THREE

STANDING IN THE LAKE, the water nearly up to his chest, Chad rested for a minute. *Lord, this is hard work*, he thought. His shoulder was aflame, but with the waders on he didn't have enough freedom of movement to rub it to provide some temporary relief. So he just rested for a moment.

He had already cut and collected as much algae as he could reach, walking around the shallow shore. Half of it was already dead and afloat, having been displaced by new algae in less than 2 weeks' time. There was a pile on the tarp, covering it nearly from edge to edge and to a

height of almost 2 feet. He was letting it air dry in the cold sun.

Now, he was in between shoveling the sediment that he could reach. While they had a water-vacuum attachment for their shop vac, it stopped working almost a month ago, even though he only used it twice before. *That's what you get for ordering cheap things on Amazon.* Hell, it didn't even do a good job pulling up the sediment – it just sucked water out of the lake mostly.

There was no escaping having to use his shoulder for the shoveling, but he used mostly his left arm, which got tired quickly. One shovel full at a time, he'd walk and dump the sediment about 10 feet away, near a small tuft of trees.

He squinted against the sun and looked around. At least it was cool (pleasant for hard work – doing this during the summer was actually worse, sweating inside the waders was unbearably hot). He looked over at the neighbor's house, who lived on the other side of the lake. Looks like the neighbor was on the porch, pacing a little. Chad waited until he was facing his direction, and waved with his left arm, two big waves. The

neighbor must have been talking on the phone since he continued his back-and-forth gait, not returning the wave.

Dickhead, Chad thought. Technically, the neighbor owned half the lake, but since the wind blew everything towards Chad's property, the neighbor didn't bother to clean up the algae. The neighbor even had a little dock. During the summer, they had a couple of kayaks and an inflatable raft out there, but they had now put them away for the year.

He should be out here helping. If we didn't clean it up, it'd only be a matter of time before the lake choked his half of the water as well with slimy algae, and then the stink would reach him as well. See how his wife and kids would like their vacation home then!

Chad carried another shovelful of sediment, slowly rising out of the water, and depositing the dirt near the trees again. Although he'd been out for a few hours, with having to do the seaweed first, he'd only completed maybe a dozen shovelfuls of sediment. *One more*, he thought.

They had paid for a professional analysis of the sediment, trying to understand if it needed to be

removed or not. As part of that, they discovered that the lake was over 3000 years old. It took many hundreds of years for the sediment to build up, which helped intensify the eutrophication cycle, especially with runoff from nearby farms. The organophosphates from industrial fertilizers which dominated the region was partly to blame for the algae blooms, but clearing the sediment was the one step they could take to help prevent the issue.

Whether it was 3000 years old or 3 million years old, the only way to get the sediment out was by one shovelful at a time.

Deaf Leopard, the outside cat, was laying down in the grass, watching Chad with an air of disinterest. The cat would lazily bat its eyes a few times, lick it's paw, and resume it's halfhearted stare – as though Chad was nothing more than cheap entertainment.

He waded back in. As he was about waste deep, he went to go take a step, and caught his toes on something – it felt like a root or a branch, maybe – and stumbled forward. The cold, muddy waters rushed into the waders, and although he righted himself pretty quickly, he was now

waterlogged, the water settling just above his knees.

Dammit. The last time this happened, he had waded too far out trying to get the water vacuum toward the looser sediment a bit deeper out. That time, the water was up to his armpits, just an inch below the top of the waders. But had he leaned the wrong way when the water vacuum started making weird vibrations, and tons of muddy water rushed in to the waders. It had actually pushed him down, making him heavy enough to shift the sediment out from underneath him, so he had to tilt his head back to keep his mouth above water. He had tried hollering for help, even though Melissa was at work.

He couldn't move very quickly. Swimming was no good as he was too heavy; he could barely move. He had slowly but surely moved inch by inch, until he could lower his head a bit, and then was able to walk a few inches at a time, until he made it back to shore, only 20 feet away, but exhausted. He had collapsed, the water spilling like a burst water balloon. Thankful to just be alive, he had just laid there.

From that experience, he knew that any water in his waders signaled the end of work – maybe he did it on purpose? No, he definitely tripped over something.

He worked his way out of the lake, leaving the shovel by the drying kelp, and walked to the back porch of the house. Under the shade of the upstairs deck, he stripped off the waders, now only in a t-shirt and underwear. He dumped out the water from the waders, hung them up by the toes to dry, and went inside.

The basement was a work in progress, but it was his domain, and he was proud of it. It had come a long way, it used to be unfinished and now it held a nice open area they sometimes used to entertain guests. It was warm inside compared to the chilliness of outside.

He went upstairs, showered, and then came back downstairs to get a beer from the fridge he kept down there. Although he didn't drink beer often, he deserved it after today.

He walked to the far side of the large open basement, around the bar, grabbed a beer. As he stepped back around the bar, popping the can

open, he stopped and took a long swig, followed by the ‘ah’ that people make when they’re thirsty.

Chad started to head back across the room to return upstairs, when Deaf Leopard came running down the stairs, and came right at Chad. The cat curled around his legs – and then stood there, as if it were hiding behind him.

Well, this is a first! he thought. *Now the cat wants to be friends!* He reached down to pet the cat, and felt the hair on the cat’s back standing up, staticky, and the cat didn’t move, still huddled behind him. The cat’s eyes were fixated on the far side of the room.

Suddenly, the hair on Chad’s neck stood up as well, that peculiar anxiety shiver that runs down your spine – even that hurt his shoulder. The room got a little darker, as if a shadow had passed overhead, although they were inside, and the light from the outside didn’t seem diminished.

He stood, also watching, when he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. There was a shadow – just like a normal shadow that people cast with light on them – but it was moving down the stairs, as if a light were being cast on a person that wasn’t there, tracing the silhouette of a

shadow on the wall. It faded in and out, darkening or brightening a little as it moved, making it hard to see in the dimness of the basement.

The cat let out a low whine, drawn out in the way a spooked cat will do, one long syllable of complaint. The sound was eerie and frightened Chad even more – the hair on his arms and neck stood on end.

The shadow wasn't easy to see, but it seemed to be changing size. Sometimes it seemed larger than life, hulking, brooding, dominating the space between the floor and the 12-foot ceilings – and other times it seemed like a child, smaller, innocent, but sad and trodding along.

I must be seeing things, I'm freaking myself out, this isn't real, Chad thought. So he did the only thing he knew. He took another long swig from the can, then threw it, only half empty, across the room while yelling, "Get out of here!"

It seemed to have worked. The cat started, and ran across the room. The shadow seemed to retreat, folding in on itself and back up the stairs, fleeing. The cat stopped at the bottom of the stairs, and watched, upwards.

It was a long time before either of them moved.

* * *

A few days later, Chad and his wife Melissa were at the mall. They needed to get something for some early Christmas shopping for one of their family members who were flying in to see them for the first time in a few years.

Since it was peak shopping season, it was busy. The gift store they wanted – Sears – was at one end of the mall. But they looped up and down every parking aisle in the lot, getting stuck behind someone else waiting to turn in to a spot soon-to-be vacated by people leaving, stuffing their gifts in the back of their SUVs, sometimes conspicuously slow and showing off the new 70” flatscreen that would only fit diagonally by making a scene.

After almost 20 minutes of this, Melissa finally said, “Why don’t you try the other side? It’s always less busy over there.”

“Do you really want to walk 20 minutes through the mall?”

“Better than sitting here.”

A sigh. “Fine.”

So they looped around and parked on the far side of the mall. They hadn’t parked here in years, as usually the west lot had some availability. This side of the mall was dominated by the stale smell of movie theater popcorn and heatlamp-warmed fast food from the food court.

They entered through the food court. They walked past the Orange Julius store, with bored, ugly, acne-ridden teenagers standing around staring at their phones. Since it was cold this time of year, few people were ordering frozen drinks. The Starbucks teenagers were cooler, but busier – having no trouble punching in orders since they told everyone they were out of the fancy whipped strawberry cranberry whatever delight – even though it was a lie. They just didn’t want to have to clean the machine. Past the pizza place, the warm glow attracting faces like moths to the lamp, even if they weren’t hungry, at least the warmth and the smell was nice.

As they walked through the small hall which connected the food court with the rest of the mall, Chad noticed a store he hadn’t seen before. It was

one of those Chinese Oriental stores, which sell bamboo and statues of Buddha and incense. But the front display on one side of the entrance had carved wooden figures, unpainted with the cheap gaudy lead paint that everything else was, and strangely not made of plastic. There were Christmas figures, but also Christian figures – Christ with crown of thorns, Christ on cross, etc. He was strangely drawn to them.

Keep up! He stopped rubbernecking. They went and purchased the gift card along with a greeting card – much more practical gifts, especially for their family who was flying in and would have to find room to stuff gifts in their luggage for their journey home.

As they were leaving, back through the narrow hall, Chad purposefully walked closer to the store. This time he could make out the sign. The wooden figurines were made from the wood of trees from Mt. Olive, one of the blessed sites that Christ had supposedly visited, so long ago. They were marketed as “blessed”.

He pointed it out to Melissa. “Honey, look at those. Wouldn’t that go nice with our house?”

She took a minute to regard them. “Yeah, actually. That’s really nice. Which one do you like?”

The tormented Christ with the crown of thorns, eyes pleading strangely upward and blank, with no pupils, was a little freaky to him. But the Christ on the cross wasn’t so pitiful – that Christ was looking straight ahead, as if he were peering into Chad’s soul. That Christ was fearless. “I like that one”, he said, pointing.

“Me too.”

So they went in to purchase it. They asked the man behind the counter, who was of medium complexion but with a long beard, thin but well kept. He was pleasantly surprised that they asked for it. “My brother is from Lebanon, and recently completed his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He picked these up from a vendor there who was hand carving them, and blessing them, promising they’d drive away demons.”

Melissa turned her head to Chad, shooting him a skeptical look. Although they were devout Christians, it was more in the vein of “do good to each other” and attend church every week, not

hellfire and exorcism level of belief. Chad noticed her look but just raised his eyebrows.

He hadn't told her about what had transpired with the shadows in the basement.

"Great, we'll take it." The shopkeeper dug around behind the counter, and pulled out a little vial of olive oil, barely larger than the tip of your pinky, and a small card with some strange language on it. "Okay, but first we must bless it again, alright?"

He poured the oil on the statue. Barely more than a couple of drops. But he rubbed it an while reciting a blessing. He may have been reading from the card, but he seemed to have it memorized. The words sounded foreign and magical. After he was done, he opened his eyes, wiped his hands on his shirt, and put the statue, the empty vial, and the card in a small paper bag.

"That'll be \$17.84 with tax. Visa?"

* * *

On the drive back home, Chad took out the card from the bag to look at it. Upon closer inspection, it didn't have any mystical writing on

it – it was just a business card, English on one side, Hebrew on the other, with address and phone number of an export store located in Lebanon.

When they got home, the first thing Chad did was fetch his drill and tools to hang it up. He found a place over a side table near the kitchen and living room, right in the most prominent place in the house. He moved the “Live Laugh Love” plaque that was there and hung the wooden statue in its place.

For the three or four months following that, the shadows seemed to have disappeared from the house. Chad had almost completely forgotten about what had happened – the ghosts walking in front of his window, the shadow in the basement. Despite the cold winter, the house seemed warm and safe, and everything was fine. Until one day in early March, when the phone rang.

CHAPTER FOUR

MOST PEOPLE GET THE concept of “Sacred Indian Burial Ground” completely wrong. They think that it’s just a single tradition that all of the Native Americans followed. But each tribe had their own traditions, and it varied widely based on location.

For example, in the southwest, the brave tribes of Apache, Mesquite, and Utes all did the opposite of burying their dead. Rather, they found the highest open point in the desert they could find, and left the dead there for the vultures to take. They believed that the best course was to return the energy to nature, that the vultures were

sacred intermediaries between Earth and Father Sky.

The Chippewa were the tribe which largely inhabited modern Michigan. You can tell by most of the place names – Chatahoogie, Kalamazoo. These were Indian words. Although their descendants were only found in the reservations (often unknown to the outside world, other than as a destination off the side of the highway for a casino and cheap cigarettes), their words lived on.

The lake behind the Heartless property had been called “Lake Nipawin” by the Chippewa, for the hundreds of years which it had been part of their domain. It was based on the Chippewa word for sleep, *niba’awin*. When modern American surveyors were mapping out the land in the mid 1920’s, they were just passing through and didn’t spend a lot of time finding the details of everything. Instead, on modern maps, to this day, it is just named as “Lake 17”. And with the passing of generations, between the Bison, to the homesteaders, to the modern rural life, it was forgotten that this was once Indian burial ground of its own.

What makes Indian burial ground sacred? Is it just because it's rude to disturb those who have gone before, especially in a culture of ancestor worship? Some modern historians point out the concept of "goofer dust", supposedly magic powder that either came from the dead to give you visions, or was used as a resting place for the dead. It supposedly made it easier for the souls to transform from Earth to Father Sky – perhaps it was just a term for composting?

As these traditions were only passed down orally and largely forgotten to the neon lights and all-you-can-eat buffets of the casinos, there's still some debate. After all, how would you know goofer dust even if you found it – did it look different?

While some of these details were lost to history, by the time the land was settled as part of the frontier in the 1860s, there were small towns and newspapers, which started modern record keeping. The Grand Rapids libraries has the first town newspaper dated as far back as 1859, and aside from a missing print here or there, has kept a copy on microfiche – and now, digital – ever since.

What's not lost, was the blizzard of 1876-1877. This blizzard was definitely one of the worst to hit Michigan in over 100 years, and the state has only seen the likes of it two times since – once in the 50's, and again in December of 1983. While the two modern blizzards were bad, the electricity had held out and so most people had no problem riding out the storm. But the more rural homes, those still using wood furnaces for heat, had a chilly winter.

The big storm had hit the day after Christmas, and continued through January 3rd – over a full week, with almost 14 feet of snow. The houses were largely uninsulated, and some settlers were caught unprepared – after all, aside from the Mormons who went further out west, very few made a point to stockpile canned goods.

The small village which had existed at the end of the gravel road off of what used to be called Donner's' road, now Route 57, were all farmers, so there wasn't a food vendor near. The general store sold out of canned goods a couple days before Christmas, as they would close for the holiday and people felt the storm was coming.

However, as families started running out of food by the top of the year – with the snow continuing to pile up, with their dry indoor stockpile of firewood depleted, and Christmas leftovers now 2 days gone – there was a feeling of hunger and hopelessness in the air.

The newspapers from the era document that the village resorted to cannibalism to survive. A few older residents were the first to disappear, but then also some of the younger children seemed to go missing. It wasn't until later that year, 1877, than some bones had been discovered in one of the backyards during a land dispute and the full scope came to light. Although it was only 4 days, accounts indicate than more than 8 people had been killed or gone missing during this time from this small village. This cast the village in a bad light, and many of the residents moved away, selling the land for cheap.

This is where the Heartless family came to own the house by the lake. Mad Jack's grandfather was a retired farmer. Although he didn't have much money, the secret of the town wasn't exactly common knowledge to those outside of the area, and the land was cheap. So he

moved himself (a widower) and his two grown sons to the property. They worked nearby farms in exchange for a wage, and he largely fished and made little improvements to the property.

Out of all the Chippewa stories and words which were lost, some did carry down, the most interesting of which is the Wendigo. The story of the Wendigo is that of a shapeshifting, cannibal spirit. It's only fitting that the county, just southwest of Grand Rapids county, is named Wendigo.

CHAPTER FIVE

“HELLO?”, CHAD SAID, ANSWERING the telephone tentatively. He usually didn’t answer numbers he didn’t know, but it was a 303 area code – Denver, Colorado – and called three times in a row, after he had ignored the first two.

“Chaddy! How you doin’, brother?”

“Mike? Hey, great to hear your voice. Wait – are you out?”

“Yeah man! I finally got paroled and I’m out of the big house.”

“That’s great, that’s great. So how’s Denver? What’s the plan now? You got a job lined up or anything?”

“Actually, that’s why I’m calling. I’m not in Denver, I’m actually in Iowa right now. Or wait, maybe Nebraska. Are we in Nebraska still? I’m headed home! I’ll be there tomorrow about dinner time.”

Tomorrow? Sheesh, a little notice would have been nice.

“Tomorrow?”, Chad said. “Where are you gonna stay?”

“I already talked to Mom, she said I could stay with you. That’s not a problem, right?”

Chad sighed and hung his head. “Yeah man, sure, not a problem. Listen, let me go get the room ready and break the news to Melissa.”

The connection was bad and cut out a little, but Chad heard Mike say something about excited to meet her and repeating that he’ll be there tomorrow.

* * *

After two years in prison, Manslaughter Mike’s manners and mannerisms suffered. Mike was louder and brasher than ever, which was difficult to imagine as he was already loud and

brash before. After his friend dropped him off (and insisted on using the bathroom, taking far too long – what were they doing in there anyway?), the obligatory introductions were made.

Mike hugged Melissa, quickly, but holding it for too long. She couldn't protest. Chad quickly cuffed his brother's shoulder and pulled him back, and said "let me get another hug" to deflect the awkwardness. Their mom had come over, and was just finishing up in the kitchen and setting the table for them, before she came over and got another hug.

"Long way to drive just for a place to stay," Chad said. "Why not stay in Colorado? You've been out there for what, ten, fifteen years? Why move back now?"

"Listen, Chad, thanks again man. And you too, Mom. I really appreciate y'all letting me stay here. Although I have some friends in Colorado, they are all still using and I really do want to try to stay clean. Almost two years sober thanks to the penal system, no reason to go back to that."

Mom of course believed him – her children meant the world to her, and a mother will always

choose to believe the best of their children's intentions. Chad only almost believed him.

Mike hadn't gone to prison for drugs – well, not directly, at least. He had hit a pedestrian with his car while driving under the influence and seriously injured the man, but thankfully didn't kill him. Perhaps some time to get clean and re-evaluate had done him some good?

“Of course man. You're always welcome here.”

They sat down to eat. Mike had picked up his fork and knife and cut the pork chop, quickly stuffing the first bite and some mashed potatoes in his mouth, before Melissa said, “hey, actually we say grace here before we eat.”

Mike laughed while chewing, nearly choking, quickly swallowed the bite and said, “okay, okay. Yeah, of course.”

They lowered their heads and Chad gave a quick blessing over the food – and family – and then they all dug in.

During dinner they talked. Since he and Mom talked on the phone once in a while, there wasn't a lot to catch up on, so the conversation was halting and awkward. Mike resorted to telling

some off-color prison stories, which made the ladies uncomfortable.

“Honey,” she said, “It’s nice to have you home, but perhaps you can save the stories for another time? We’re trying to eat. We don’t need to hear about all the gory details.”

“Okay, okay,” Mike said. “I mean, I was actually toning it down, but I guess it’s still over the top.”

“Sometimes you remind me of your father,” Mom said.

* * *

Later that night, after Mom had gone home and Chad and Melissa washed the dishes, Chad and Mike headed downstairs to the man cave and hung out and talked. Although it was almost 1 am, Chad was nursing only his 2nd beer – although he did have some whiskey as well – but Mike had nearly depleted the entire case of beer that had been in the fridge. He finished the last bit of one, and popped another.

“Hey man, like I said, I don’t mind if you drink all my beer. It just means less for the game

tomorrow – and you'll owe me a case", Chad chided him.

"Can I tell you how goddamn refreshing Bud Light is after 2 years of not having anything?" Mike quipped.

"Man, don't say that."

"But it is! Hell, I'd even drink Miller."

"No, not that. Beer is refreshing, yes. I mean... do me a favor and don't use the Lord's name in vain."

Mike furrowed his brow. "Really? You went and got all religious, huh? Surprising, coming from you. I thought you didn't give a damn about any of that? Er, I mean, a darn," he said, chasing the words with a swig of his beer.

Chad said, "Come on man, it's not that big of a deal. Yeah, I met Melissa and started going to Church every weekend. They really helped me when I first blew out my shoulder. Heck, they even did a fundraiser. And since then, yeah, I believe in Christ. Not saying you have to, just have a little respect. If Melissa heard you using the Lord's name in vain, she wouldn't say anything to you, but I'd get an ass-chewing, that's for sure."

They laughed, and talked the night away, reminiscing about the few years in their early 20s before they left the farm and went separate ways, talking about old girlfriends who now either work at the bar the next city over, or married up and moved the burbs outside of the city. The next day, a few friends came over (thankfully, with a case of beer) to watch the Lions lose to Kansas City.

* * *

The next day, Melissa was teaching at school, and Chad had asked Mike to help with some of the chores. The lake had just thawed a couple weeks ago, so the neighbor across the lake had already put their kayaks and the inflatable raft out. While they were out there, Mike had waived at the neighbors and hollered a friendly “Hello over there”, to which the neighbors all waved back and their kids (or more likely, grandkids) yelled back “Hi! Hi!”

The dead algae recently uncovered in the thaw from last season stunk, as well as the new “crop”, already in bloom. Mike had swum out in the lake, grabbing strands and trying to rip them out,

having moderate success. Chad was in his waders and grabbing some of the easier stuff close to shore. This stuff was dead and slimy, and not worth trying to turn into fertilizer, so they were putting it back by the trees, on the compost pile.

Although Chad dreaded the work, time went quickly with Mike helping. They didn't talk a lot, and Mike was exploring his freedom and enjoying every second of swimming in the lake. He got some algae wrapped around his leg once or twice. Although it took him a few moments to extricate himself, he was no worse for wear.

After the chores were done, they headed back to the house to shower. Mike had his own shower upstairs with his room, while Chad was on the first level.

While Mike was upstairs, Chad noticed a picture on the bookshelf on the far corner of his bedroom. The bookshelf was haphazard, with board games, decorations, and old drink coasters. There was one clean shelf with the candles that Melissa liked – but there were a few family photos in frames there. There was the one with Chad and Mom, but then one behind it – one with Chad and Mike, one of the years they both

managed to come home for Christmas after they left. They had to be what, 24 or 25 years old? That was 15 years ago or so. It might have been the last time they saw each other before this reunion. Maybe that's why he kept the photo. Mike was wearing an ugly Christmas sweater, a green and red monstrosity with white fuzzy balls of yarn hanging off.

Chad stopped his reverie, gathered his clothes, went to the shower. He turned on the water and waited for it to warm up – although they had a good water heater and tank, the pressure in this shower was abysmal.

He finally got in, closing the old plastic shower curtain behind him, and almost slipping on the slimy, soap scum bottom of the tub. Washing off the worry of the day – and bits of dried algae, which somehow got in his hair, despite not having been in the water the same way as his brother.

He sighed, and squeezed out some shampoo in one palm, and closed his eyes and stuck his head under the water, lathering and rinsing at the same time.

He still had his eyes closed when he heard the bathroom door fly open.

“Jesus FUCKING Christ!”

Chad nearly fell down, grabbing the shower curtain to stay upright, ripping the cheap dollar store plastic on one or two of the rings. He stuck his head out and Mike was in there, panicked.

The soap stinging his eyes, Chad exclaimed, “What the actual fuck, Mike?!”

“Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ” Mike muttered over and over.

“Jesus, Mike, what did I tell you about that language?!” The irony was lost on him. “I’m trying to shower, what the fuck is your deal?”

Mike finally made eye contact with his brother and stuttered through an explanation. “Dude, there is something out there. It... it darted across your bedroom.”

Chad ducked his head back into the shower to rinse his eyes. Turning off the shower, he laughed, “Did that cat get inside the house again? Sheesh, Mike, forgotten what a cat looks like?”

Mike raised his voice. “Not a fucking cat, dickhead. There is SOMETHING out there.”

The tone of his voice made Chad pause. *Oh no. It's back.*

“Alright, calm the fuck down. Get the fuck out of here and give me a minute to dry off.”

“No way, man”, Mike said. He was legitimately frightened. “I’m not going back out there.”

“What were you doing in my room anyway?”

The accusatory tone stung. “Believe it or not, I was looking for family photos. I saw a couple around. But that doesn’t matter, you need to come check this shit out.”

“I’m not getting out until you get out,” Chad said, reaching for the towel and pulling it in the shower with him.

“Dude, Chad, I don’t care if you’re naked. I’ll turn around, okay? But I am NOT going back out there.”

As Chad dried and then grabbed his clothes, Mike calmed down a bit. Finally clothed, Chad said “Maybe it was just the light? Sometimes this old place has weird shadows if you don’t turn the lights on.”

They tentatively opened the bathroom door to the bedroom. There was nothing out there. “I’m telling you, it ran into the closet.”

They tip-toed towards the closet. Most of their lives, Chad was the one hiding behind Mike. Being the bigger brother, Mike had always protected him, and always took the fall for him if it came to that. But now he was hiding behind Chad.

The mirror doors on the outside of the closed closet were clean. As they neared, they would glance at each other in their reflections.

“You say it went in the closet? The doors are closed.”

“Dude, it went through the door. It was like... like, a shadow.”

Chad turned and grabbed Mike by the shoulders – his left hand gripping stronger and higher than his right. “Don’t fuck with me.”

Mike brushed off his grip, but didn’t break the stare. “I’m not. I know what I saw. I’m not crazy.”

“Listen, I believe you, okay? But just... just, don’t tell Melissa about it. It’ll freak her out too much.”

Chad had never told Melissa about what he saw. A few times he had asked her obliquely about it. The off-handed “do you believe in ghosts?”. But there was no indication that she had ever seen anything in the house.

“Okay, okay,” Mike said.

They turned back to the closet door, bracing themselves and counting to three while staring at each other in the reflection, before Chad finally opened the closet door with one big push.

There was a child hiding behind the clothes, hugging its knees. It stared up at them with its big eyes, completely devoid of emotion.

But they could see through it, and it was floating above the floor.

They only caught a glimpse before they both took off, retreating downstairs to the safety of the man cave. Mike grabbed a beer and chugged it; Chad doing the same with a bottle of whiskey.

They never talked about it, but afterwards, Chad removed the door from the closet to keep it open, so Melissa wouldn’t close it.

CHAPTER SIX

Chad and Mike were out in the lake again. Mike had been able to fix the water vacuum by disassembling and cleaning it – sediment had jammed it up – and was able to improve the suction by pointing it more directly in the sediment. They had an entire goopy pile of it by the lake now.

The day was hot for March, but the lake was still cool, so it was nice work. Chad had already cleaned most of the dead algae, and was now cutting back more of the live algae and laying it out to dry. The lake was looking pretty good – it was clearer, and didn't smell as bad as before.

Plus, the batches of “Better than Kelp” had done pretty well – he had experimented adding it to some tomato plants, to some flowers, and given some to some farmer friends – all of whom raved about it. He even had a small deal lined up to sell some more jars of it at the local garden store.

Things were looking up.

Mike cut off the pump, and Chad looked up. Mike was looking over to the neighbor’s place on the other side of the lake. Due to the way it sat on the hill, they couldn’t see much, but they noticed three or four black SUVs parked over there. They looked like police vehicles.

“Damn, I wonder what happened over there?” Mike mused.

“Whoa, are those police vehicles? Crazy.”

It wasn’t until later that evening, when talking with Mom that they found out what happened. “Oh it’s just terrible, isn’t it? Poor Julie. I ought to make her a casserole or something so she doesn’t have to worry about cooking. Although, I don’t know if they are vegetarian or not... maybe cheesy potatoes?”

“What happened?” Chad asked.

“Well, I saw the police vehicles over there. And we did exchange phone numbers with them when they first moved in, what, five or six years ago now. So I gave them a call. Just terrible. Frank had just retired, right? Maybe a month ago. He’s been trying to do some home repairs and such. Maybe you’ve seen him up on the roof? Well, he was up trying to get some of the shingles replaced, standing on the ladder on the side of the house, and must have reached too far. The ladder slipped, he fell and landed badly... right on his neck....”

“Wait, the neighbor died? Holy shit, that’s crazy.”

“Yeah, I guess the SUVs weren’t police, but from the Wendigo County coroner’s office and the mortuary assistants. They came to pick up the body. Just terrible.”

Chad and Mike exchanged a glance, as if to say, *I wonder if...*, and then they broke the glance, looking back to Mom, thinking, *No, of course not. That’s crazy.*

Mom took a long sip of her wine, the TV on mute while some game show was on in the background. She started to cry a little.

“Whoa, you okay, Mom? It’s tragic, I guess, but we didn’t really know them that well...” Chad offered.

“If they wouldn’t have been so standoffish, they could have asked for our help. Someone should have been watching the ladder while he was on it. With the ground de-thawing this time of year, and all,” Mike rambled.

Mom said, “Mike, that sounds like something your Father would have said. Have a little Christian grace for them, alright? After all, you remember...” she trailed off.

“Remember what?”

“What happened to your father!” The barely contained tears turned into big heaving sobs.

Mike and Chad looked at each other. In actuality, they didn’t know how their father died. They were away visiting their cousins for a few weeks during summer vacation when it had happened, and Mom had never given them the details.

“Oh, Mom. Is this about Dad? Actually... we never knew exactly what happened. We just knew there was an accident. Remember, we were with

the Richardson's that summer?" Chad tried to console her.

Mike said, "How did Dad die? What happened?"

Mom finally had caught her composure, finished her wine in one gulp, and got up to get more. When she returned, she traded the wineglass for the Bible from the coffee table and held it in her lap while she spoke. She didn't paint a picture – she just told them in very plain words.

"Jack was cutting down the big oak tree – which is now the logging stump out back. It was rotting. They had used steel cables tied down to help hold it while they worked on it. As he was working on the tree, one of the cables snapped, whipped around – and decapitated him."

They all sat there in a moment of stunned silence. To be 45 years old and just finding out that your father was decapitated by some freak accident? They assumed it was a heart attack, or maybe a liver problem that finally caught up to him. People back in the 50's didn't die of things like cancer... or decapitation.

After the tension had eased, Mike offered astutely, “Mom, that’s really terrible. I’m sorry the neighbor’s death brought that up for you. Thank you for telling us. But I gotta ask....”

Chad smacked him on the arm, as if to say, *Don’t you dare*. But Mike went ahead anyway.

“Have you ever... seen anything around here?”

Mom didn’t look in their direction, instead looking at the glass of wine on the table. Her grip on the Bible tightened.

“I don’t mean like, vagabonds or coyotes, I mean... like... do you believe in ghosts?”

“No, they’re not ghosts,” Mom was quick to reply. “The Bible never talks about ghosts. Ghosts mean the spirit of a person, right? But we know when we die we go to Heaven to be with Jesus. Human spirits don’t just hang around. When a person is dead, they are gone from here, for better or for worse.

“But the Bible does talk about spirits and demons.”

Chad’s curiosity had gotten the best of him. Although he’d been here a year, he’d never been able to bring this up with his mom. “Mom, do you think our house may be haunted?”

She laughed a little. “No, no. Haunting implies ghosts. Like I said, when people leave, their energy doesn’t just hang around and what, push plates off tables or whatever. But I think there may be a spirit or something... but it’s only in the main house, not here.

“That’s why,” she said, “I moved out of it and into this second house. It’s much safer here.”

* * *

“Hey, man, shut the fuck up. Don’t talk about Mom that way!” Chad said, not taking his eyes off the road.

“But it’s true. She knew the house was fucking haunted, and had me stay up there with you, instead of with her. She is a lying bitch,” Mike fumed.

Chad replied, “Can you blame her? It’s hard to talk about this stuff. I mean, I haven’t told Melissa or asked her about it and we’ve been there almost 2 years now. It’s just too... I dunno, too weird, man. It’s too far out.”

They were driving to the store to pick up something inconsequential. Perhaps an excuse

just to get out of the house. While they were driving, Chad got a text from Melissa to remind them to also pick up pickles. He knew he shouldn't be texting while driving, but on these rural two lane roads, straight as an arrow, and driving with his left arm only since his right shoulder hurt too much, it was easy enough to text back.

He tapped a quick "OK" and hit send, and then put the phone in the cupholder.

"Listen, Mike. It's been nice catching up and having you around. Really, I mean that, brother. But it's been a few months and Melissa is getting anxious. You haven't indicated what your next step is."

"I told you man, I'm just trying to help you guys out at this point. I've been going to meetings, you know I haven't been using...."

"It's not that," Chad shook his head. "We know you're good there. We're so proud of you. It's just... we don't make a lot of money with only her salary, I've had a hard time finding work. And you do drink a lot of beer and eat a lot of our food."

“Okay, okay”, Mike said. It was their family’s way of saying *I hear you, but don’t wanna talk about it.*

The phone buzzed, and Chad looked at it. Melissa had replied, “What?” to the message he sent.

When they finally parked at the grocery store, he looked at the phone. He hadn’t texted her “OK”. He texted her “Read your Bible”. *What the heck...?*

He didn’t try to explain over text. When they returned with the milk and the pickles, he told her it was just a typo. But somehow, he felt the message was meant for him.

It had been a couple of months since he’d last really dug into the Bible. His church group had moved on – they were already starting Luke – but the Bible app on his phone was still book marked where he had left off.

So that night, imagine his surprise when he opened it up on his phone – after having finished a small glass of whiskey – and seeing this passage come up, from Matthew chapter 12:

“When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first.”

Chad squeezed his eyes closed, and prayed harder than he ever had in his whole life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUMMER HAD COME AND gone again, and it was once again fall. The aspens were starting to go bare, the few oak trees had already turned orange, and the air was chilly.

Mike had moved out shortly after Chad brought it up with him. Whether he was afraid of the unexplained phenomena, or more afraid of Melissa's wrath – after all, hell hath no fury like a woman inconvenienced – he bid them farewell, and arranged a ride from a friend. He was going to spend a month in Detroit working with a friend of a friend, while he saved up some money for a

place of his own, perhaps a plane ticket back to Colorado.

Chad was glad that he had a chance to reconnect with Mike, but was also glad he was gone. The one thing he truly missed though was Mike's help with the lake. The end of the summer brought the worst overgrowth cycle that they had seen. It got too much for him to handle, and after seeing that removing the sediment really did help, they took out a loan to hire a professional septic tank cleaner to have them come and dredge up the sediment.

The crew arrived, predictably late as appointments in the countryside often were, and Chad pointed them back to the lake. From the house, he could see the long black hoses and the vacuum truck they had carefully backed down there, the crew of 2 or 3 guys in the lake trying to get the sediment while not getting tangled in the algae. They had already filled the truck tank once – then drove out to the middle of the field, more than 300 feet away, and dumped it out there – then back at it again.

Chad was watching this with some amusement. God, was he grateful to not be out there having to

deal with this. Maybe this would finally take care of the algae bloom once and for all.

While he was watching from the back porch, one of the workers motioned to the other to stop, and then come check something out. There was quite a commotion, and finally the foreman started up toward the house.

Chad met him halfway. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Hey, man, sorry. Uh, we have to stop.”

“Why?”

The chubby man sucked his teeth. “Well... we found some bones in the lake. Don’t worry,” he was quick to add, “they look clean which means they’re old. It’s not like you dumped somebody back there, right? But because this is technically old Indian ground, we went ahead and called it in.”

“Called it in? Like, to the chief?”

The foreman laughed. “Not the Indian chief. The police chief. Don’t worry, this is completely normal, you’re not in trouble. Unless, of course, you have something to hide?”

Chad was not amused. The foreman continued, “Here’s what’ll happen. They’ll take a look, if it’s fresh, they’ll bring in their own forensics and

probably ask you some questions. Probably run some DNA. If it's Native, they'll call the tribal council who will make arrangements with you. Otherwise, when that's all done you can give us a call and we can bring a specialty team to help finish."

Unbelievable, Chad thought. He argued, "Why in the world would I call a cleaning company if I had dumped a body? I just wanted this damn lake cleaned. We were finally getting somewhere, and now this. I assume you're not giving me a discount," Chad quipped.

It took nearly 90 long minutes for the police to arrive. Chad had some whiskey and a sandwich, and offered some beer and chips to the workers, who accepted graciously (after the foreman gave them the OK) and sat in the shade under the back deck.

When the detective arrived, he repeated almost word-for-word the same thing that the foreman did. The detective took one look at the bones, cleared Chad of any suspicion, and took a DNA sample. While talking with Chad, he grabbed a small box, opened it, and handed him a long q-tip type swab.

“What’s this?” Chad said.

“We need a sample. Your DNA. Swab it in your mouth, please,” the detective said.

“My DNA? Why?”

The detective narrowed his glance. “Just covering all the bases,” he said.

* * *

The whole ordeal took the rest of the day. The county coroner’s office sent both their official team, wearing bright yellow waders and blue latex gloves, as well as the mortuary officials, out of place in their suits and ties. Chad watched the process from his window with some curiosity.

The official underwater picture didn’t reveal much. Afterwards, the official team pulled out the bones, one by one, handing them off and laying them out on the shore in roughly the position they were found. It became clear that the skeleton belonged to that of a child.

At the end of process, the mortuary officials strapped on blue latex gloves (matching those of the coroner’s team), and none-too-gently put the bones in a cardboard box.

Their initial investigation estimated the child to be maybe 9 years old, and the remains had been there for 150 years – give or take. The bones were worn smooth from the water and sand. There were no indications of trauma; not just broken bones, but no evidence of knife or hacksaw type marks left on the bones. (If any of them had known about the blizzard of 1876, they would have been relieved at that fact.)

The next week seemed eerily quiet around the house, and the routine of normalcy set in. Chad's shoulder hurt while doing chores; Mom would make spaghetti dinner one night. One day, a plain white envelope arrived in the mail. Chad left it on the kitchen counter, unopened.

Melissa arrived home from work, and upon seeing it, turned it over in her hands. *Probably another bill collector*, she thought.

She opened it, and was surprised to see that it was the DNA results from the lab regarding the child. There was a short cover letter, along with a handful of pages for the detailed report. The cover letter summarized the findings, which surprised her so much that she stopped reading and called Chad to come look.

“Alright, let’s see what we’ve got here,” he said, putting his reading glasses on. “Thank you for your cooperation, yadda-yadda... forensics... carbon dating, we already knew this... ancestry shows not of Native blood.” He looked up. “That’s great! We won’t have to get the tribal council involved.”

“Keep going.”

“... Furthermore, with modern DNA techniques, we have determined that you are related to the deceased. The mitochron... mito... whatever, that type of DNA indicates... a cousin or uncle type relationship.”

Melissa just stared at him without moving.

“What the heck!” Chad exclaimed. “Nobody ever mentioned anything about someone in the family who died. I don’t even know who it could be, especially going back 150 years.”

“But aren’t you curious?”

“Kind of, yeah,” he admitted.

“We could probably find out,” Melissa offered.

“How?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe the vital records department?”

And so began their personal investigation. Although the official case had been closed, morbid curiosity propelled them to keep digging to find an answer. Mom got involved as well, spending days at the library looking through old microfiche and digital records. Melissa signed up for Ancestry.com, as well as insisting on 23andMe tests. She joked that Chad surely had Neanderthal ancestry.

Finally a breakthrough; after some ancestry searches returned info about married names and long-forgotten branches of the family tree, it became clear that Mad Jack's father – Chad's grandfather – had kept a secret.

He had never met his dear old Grandpappy, who passed before Chad was born. When the boys were 4 or 5, Mad Jack told them only one thing about their grandfather. The big tree, right out back, had been planted in Grandpappy's honor. That tree was now the stump they used as a chopping block; the fact that it had been their grandpa's tree had escaped Chad.

Apparently, Grandpappy had a son from a first marriage. *That's strange... Dad never mentioned*

anything about a brother... let alone one that may have passed away.

Now that they knew what they were looking for, Mom found some old news articles about the incident. The first was from 1872, and was quite the scandal.

The summer of that year, when the child had drowned in the lake, the police thoroughly investigated the incident. It wasn't their first time there at the farm; they had made house calls on multiple occasions. Mad Jack's father was abusive. Besides the run-of-the-mill abuse, Grandpappy had locked his son in the closet for hours on end, as one of his most sadistic punishments.

However, the incident truly was a freak accident. The child had simply been swimming in the lake, when he got caught in the algae and drowned.

After the death of their child, his first wife left him. She knew it was an accident, as she could see the grief weigh on him. But the anger and grief made him bitter, and the abuse didn't stop. She left him. Eventually he remarried and had

another son; but his abusive behavior towards his new wife and Jack didn't stop.

* * *

During their frequent trips to the city, Chad, Melissa, and Mom got to know some of the folks who worked at the places they frequented. One time at the library, Melissa ran into a reporter, who offered to do a human interest segment; she politely declined, but much to her chagrin, the story ran one night on the 10 o'clock news anyway.

The next day, an unexpected phone call. Someone from the Grand Rapids Methodist Cemetery had caught the news segment, and offered – nay, insisted – on donating a final resting place for the child in their garden ossuary.

The day seemed unreal for Chad. Melissa had already printed off the paperwork on one of the school's printers. The first stop was the morgue, to collect a box of bones. It was literally, a cardboard box with a perfunctory "HUMAN REMAINS" stamped across it.

Driving across town to the church cemetery, he caught glimpses of the box in the backseat in his rear view mirror. When he did this, the sun seemed to dim and he felt a little chilly; but it was just his imagination.

The staff in the church visitor center were nice enough, and they encouraged Chad to come with them as they went to inter the bones in the garden vault.

I always wondered who or what they had in those buildings, he mused. Bones. Who knew? He had to ask what ossuary meant, the first time they had mentioned it.

They placed the box on a shelf, next to similar boxes. Some of the boxes had decayed into nothingness, leaving seemingly random bones in there; there was even one on the floor.

After a handshake, Chad returned to his car. The sun came out, and it was much warmer than it was earlier.

* * *

That was nearly 10 years ago. Since that time, no one had experienced any further unexplained activity there.

The lake had stayed much healthier, with no overgrowth. They installed a simple floating dock, and had put down two dump truck fulls of sand, to create a nice little beach. They successfully rented their renovated basement space as an event space via AirBnB; it was popular as a small wedding venue with fully included bar and barbecue catering. It received only 5 star reviews.

Yet, in the very depths of the lake, in the bed of clay which forms the basin of the lake, there were more bones. There were bones from the Chippewa, where they did lay their dead to sleep in the lake they called Nibawin – as well as the remains of at least one of the missing persons from the 1876 blizzard.

Those bones will never be found.

THE LIVING DEAD

Christopher “Owen” Owens
October 31 2012

The sun withdrew, tentatively, tucking itself behind the hills and trees on the horizon. Long, thin beams of light cast between the high rise buildings of the city. The contrast was palpable: dark, bright, dark. Shadow and light.

The great expanse of the sky bled blue into yellow, and within a couple of minutes, began to blush into a rose color.

This is it, Dallas said to himself. *The night we've all been waiting for*. He took another drag on his unfiltered cigarette, held it a pause, and exhaled quietly.

Twilight. There were no lights in the city to keep the darkness at bay. The sun finally closed its one enormous eye; the sky turned blue-black; and the stars twinkled, dull and muted in the clear sky.

The moon began its ghostly journey, weaving in and out of the high rise buildings like a spectre sneaking through ancient columns. *Not very often did a full moon coincide with such a special day*, he mused. *I've waited a long time for this*.

He flicked the stub of the burning stub off the side of the building; watched as it drifted down, down, dancing in the currents and landing somewhere in the darkness below.

Dallas slowly rose to his feet, turned, and went inside.

• • •

He checked his supplies, already gathered and sorted, and began to suit up. He had planned for this day for nearly two years now, and wasn't going to let something as simple as a stupid mistake stop him.

Besides, when you have all the time in the world on your hands, it's hard not to plan and visualize the few upcoming things that are actually on your calendar.

He actually had a calendar on the wall. It was handmade, and one of the few things that connected him to his past life. Not much was the same after Z-Day, and if you tried to pretend it was, you'd find yourself shuffling among the Streetwalkers yourself before you could strum a chord.

But the calendar was vital to his sanity. It's easy to lose track of time, when you have nothing to measure it by. Day follows day, week after week, and even the changing of the seasons had become blurred, since mankind had fucked up the natural climate of the planet.

The hastily drawn lines formed a grid, and each day simply had a large number in the middle of it. No need to plan what bills were due that day, nothing of that sort. Just the simple fact of each day, taking a red marker he had found, and drawing a single, blood-red line diagonally through the box. (He decided sometime back to stop doing Xs, since it was using twice as much ink. He hadn't been able to find another marker. This one was slowly but surely fading, and would soon be as dead as the Streetwalkers below.)

He uncapped the marker, savoring its chemical smell, and slashed it from left to right, slowly, deliberately, crossing out the number "31".

As he capped the off-brand marker, tossed it on the dusty desk underneath the calendar, and walked back to finish his preparations, the date at the top of the calendar came into view.

It read "October 2039". It was a Saturday night, it was Halloween, and it was the real thing this time.

• • •

Since Z-Day, nothing much has been the same. It only took a couple of weeks before society completely collapsed, with the few living left fighting amongst themselves for supplies – guns, ammo, anti-rad meds, and most of all, food.

Nobody actually believed that something of this magnitude could happen. The Dead, come back to Life? That's the material of cheap dime-store novels and bad fairy tales.

But as our science progressed faster than our moral and spiritual mores did, we found ourselves living in a new world that we weren't quite ready for.

You know all that super-secret government research Like genetic enhancements and cloning and all of that? As it turns out, that was actually what was going on.

Except it wasn't the governments.

Some dipshit company out of Russia, calling itself NovaTech, was doing research on how to stop the AIDS virus. AIDS had become so prevalent and widespread that they thought there would never be any hope for curing it... except maybe killing everyone who was infected.

NovaTech thought they had a for-sure thing. They were using a retrovirus, able to inject DNA into the host, and had finally found the key markers.

Only the results were not what they had expected.

Turns out, the first batch of injections (in illicit human testing) actually killed the host. And the second. So they kept tweaking it, trying to find a way to extract the virus while keeping the host alive. After a few years of a standstill, they finally discovered a way to make it work... however, they weren't able to make their retrovirus self terminating. After doing the dirty work

and killing the virus, the cure – another virus itself – was latent within the host.

This didn't seem to cause any problems at first.

But whether it was weapons research gone wrong, or a freak mutation, thank-you-very-much Mother Nature, the latent hosts began to get sick.

Then they died... but they didn't stop moving. They turned into the walking Dead, operating on brain stem functionality only, wandering as much as their bodies would allow them, looking to fill an insatiable hunger, even though their digestion had long since stopped working.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how Z-Day happened.

The good news, however, is that this would not last forever. By law, all genetic work had to have some sort of self-termination in it, to prevent runaway processes from replicating indefinitely. Like that fucking worked. They purposely programmed the telomerase to stop replicating after about 1000 generations.

The bad news? The “cure” retro-virus was slow moving, and didn't replicate quickly. Only about once a day.

Some quick math indicates that it should have about a 3 year life. And what happens then? It's been just over 3 years since Z-Day, and already some of the earlier zombies were starting to slow down, and die a second death.

There's the Dead, and then there's the *dead*.

Sometimes you couldn't be too sure. You'd come across what looked like a normal corpse, or a bunch of them. You'd see if they respond to light or noise. Nothing.

Then suddenly something falls and hits one of them, or you bump one, and they move a little. They all do the "tired zombie shuffle", trying to get to their feet, many of them just opening and closing their jaws (if they still had mandibles), a pathetic imitation of hungry children.

If the survivors of Z-Day (if there were any, besides Dallas) could make it three years from when most people were infected, they were over the worst of it, and may actually be able to survive the immediate crisis. Find other survivors. Hell, even rebuild society.

The bad news was, chances of surviving that long were a trillion-to-one.

• • •

Dallas made his way quickly through the city. He stayed on fire escapes, up high – the Dead were called Streetwalkers for a reason.

He had even fashioned makeshift bridges out of rubble, wood, rope, whatever he could find, to go from building to building.

His black leather clothes helped him to blend into the dark. Being up high, it didn't matter much whether he

was detected or not. The zombies would just try to turn their heads upwards, if they still had the necessary ligaments to do so.

But things got trickier when you were on the ground.

First of all, silence is key. The world is silent now. Unlike zombie movies of yore, the walking Dead actually didn't moan and groan. They shuffled about or crawled around, their entrails making the same wet sound that mopping makes, as they slimed along the cement. But after the newly-dead had dried out, all you'd hear is a rustle, a breeze, not much louder than your own hushed breathing.

And for all Dallas knew, he was the only Living left for a hundred miles around. And the silence?

The silence was driving him *insane*.

• • •

Dallas wasn't much of an electrician. But once all the food started to go bad due to lack of refrigeration, the nights became dark due to lack of lights, and worst of all – the music stopped – he had to do something.

So Dallas decided to “learn himself” how to hook up a generator. It was a hasty idea, but then carefully planned and followed through. He knew that it carried as much risk as it did reward. Especially these days, he wasn't keen on attracting attention to himself, from either the Living or the Dead.

The few Living that remained after Z-Day tended towards violent anarchy; they'd just as soon kill you for your gear and ammo as they would team up. The more mouths to feed, the bigger the problem. So Dallas decided against setting up a radio beacon, although he occasionally scanned the radio frequencies to see if someone was out there.

Once he caught a shortwave transmission, but it ended in gunshots and a sick, gurgling sound. Then the inevitable crunching and munching sounds that followed.

But Dallas couldn't stand how quiet the world had become. How could a musician live without music? So he set about to do something about it.

• • •

Dallas had once been a professional musician, if you can call playing "the bar circuit" professional. Still, he and his band, *Die Young*, had a cult-like following, and set the bar high for local metal bands.

When their bass player Michelle suddenly overdosed, convulsing on the ground, white powder smeared across the glass table, her face, foaming at the mouth, everything changed. They had taken a month off from The Circuit, spent all of their days auditioning prospects and all of their nights drinking. They could

never find someone who matched the intensity and the punk-as-fuck style that she had brought to the band.

One night the lead guitarist, a long-haired Native American named Johnny Little Dancing Bear, or just “Little” to his friends, got fed up.

“The fuck I won’t!” he was yelling. “Man, that could have been any one of us. Extinguished, man, dead as a doornail. Our families don’t give three-quarters of a fuck, and neither do we apparently.”

“Dude –“

“Don’t fucking ‘dude’ me.” His dark eyes flashed with a fire, whiskey on his breath, his leather jacket wet with beer. “She’s gone. Get it? One-way train to Hell. And it wasn’t 24 hours before we were out looking for someone new. People aren’t just paper plates, man, or like plastic cups, you can’t just use it and throw it away and get another one. Doesn’t anybody else think this is the end of the line?” He looked around, expecting a challenge.

Dallas spoke up. “You’re talking about quitting the band.”

Little’s eyebrows piqued. “That’s fuckin’ right, man. It’s not the same without her.” He swigged on the bottle of whiskey, then said, “fuck it, I’m out. Y’all better start auditioning for a lead guitarist too.” His volume went up a notch. “All y’all fuck-ups know *I’m* irreplaceable!”

He threw the bottle onto the table in the corner, knocking over the lamp and half-full beer cans, and stormed out.

That was the end of *Die Young*.

• • •

Although Dallas often thought about this, he had had enough time now to reflect and not be bitter.

None of them had known that Little and Michelle were lovers under cover. They kept it a secret from the band for fear of repercussions.

As he reflected on his past life, Dallas found that his current solo act was much more manageable. Instead of having to juggle a half-dozen hotheads every weekend for band practice or for their shows, he only had one person to manage now.

Himself.

Having nothing to do since Z-Day, he played music every day. It helped pass the time. He started to get tired of the old material, and started writing new songs. He had written about three dozen songs over the past two years. After the first half-dozen or so, he realized that he basically had an album that nobody would ever get the chance to listen to.

In a moment of inspiration, he decided on a new band name, even though he was just a solo act now. Hell, if it was good enough for Trent Reznor or Stevie

Nicks or Jethro Tull to go by pseudonyms, it was damn well good enough for him.

After much thought, only one name stood out above the rest.

The Living Dead. After all, we're all Dead; it's just a matter of time.

• • •

He strapped "Robbie", his custom Warrior V six-string electric, over his back, and cinched it tight. Coiled some extra cables and strapped them to his belt. He double-checked the pedals and triple-checked the power supplies, and had them in a small, flat case, which was easy to throw in his satchel and move quickly with.

He had been playing music for almost 25 years now. Piano lessons when he was a kid. Drums as an adolescent. Bass as a teenager. Cello and violin in college. And finally, the mother of all instruments, the guitar. He picked it up when he had met Kristina, who later became his first wife. She was a spunky, soulful singer, who often performed at open mics, as well as opening acts at a couple of the bars on The Circuit.

She often had different guitarists playing the music, while she just sang. Dallas decided he wanted to impress her, so he learned a few songs and kept his ear to the ground for an opportunity.

One night at a show, her accompaniment was particularly awful, his rhythm sloppy. The guy was tanked, so drunk he could barely stand upright after the show.

Dallas wandered around the back of the bar and found her yelling at the guitarist, and him making lame excuses. She decked him, hard, with a right hook to the face, and he was on the ground.

She spit on him and started to walk away.

Dallas caught up to her. "Fuck off" she said, without turning around. How did she even know he was there?

"Listen, all I want is the chance to audition and play guitar for you." His words came off pandering and unsure.

She stopped dead, swung around, their faces an inch apart, her right forefinger buttonholing him. "You and every other god-damned wet-behind-the-ears cocksucker...." She trailed off, taken with his stolid stare, and handsome, dark features.

He just stared.

She said, "It's a little soon, don't you think?" Somewhere off behind them, the drunk guitarist was trying to get to his feet, and fell over, more people gathering and laughing at him.

The corner of Dallas' mouth moved slightly; the closest thing to a grin that he had to offer. "Sometimes you gotta move quickly."

They were married less than a year later.

• • •

Sometimes you gotta move quickly. Those words haunted him, worse than the unyielding onslaught of dead bodies below.

He was prepared.

All of this planning and preparation to come down to a few minutes of action. 30 minutes, maybe 45 if he were lucky. An hour? He could only wish.

He was going to have a Halloween Concert. The real deal. Too bad there wouldn't be anybody to listen.

He had found an abandoned school. There were almost no zombies inside; no zombie kids, at least. He dispatched a couple of them that seemed to have crawled in through broken windows, the first couple of times he scoped the place out. The doors were locked and it seemed that the kids were not at school when Z-Day finally hit.

He had found a few portable generators down in the outskirts of the industrial area. With a small cart, the kind you find at hardware stores, he was able to move three of them to the school.

This, in and of itself, took almost six months. He had to go out in daylight, when the zombies were the least active, but where he had the distinct possibility of being seen. He had found a bolt cutter to open the chained school doors, and found the keys to lock up as well.

He used the same cart to move a couple stacks of amplifier speakers to the school, since the built-in PA didn't seem to have any way to hook it up to generator power.

He had to go to the outskirts of town for gasoline; all the gas stations had already been drained, or blown up. The outlying houses usually had a spare gas can in their shed, which was his only source.

He finally had amassed about two dozen gallons of gasoline. He had thought about using it to power a vehicle, but even if he found a vehicle in working repair – where would he go? The highways were basically death traps, with cars piled up preventing fast movement, and being out in the open, you were a target for Dead and Living alike.

So he spent almost 2 years now, planning and executing this. All because of one night.

• • •

He was drunk, which was a dangerous way to be when there's danger all around. But he had finally found a place where the Streetwalkers couldn't get him, after nearly 6 months of being constantly on the move.

The first six months after Z-Day tested Dallas to his very core. In addition to watching the epidemic sweep the globe, as TV's and internet broadcast the scenes of violence sweeping Madrid, Cairo, Beijing, Mexico City,

he then watched chaos descend into the society that he had detested for so long.

And then the TVs stopped broadcasting. The internet went silent.

He watched as groups formed, bartering for goods such as ammo and other amenities. He watched as the groups split up from the inside, often violently, when there wasn't enough food to go around. Farming was out of the question, as staying in one place long enough for Zombies to get you was a sure recipe for disaster. After all, there were literally 10 billion of them to your one.

After the hydrogen bombs dropped, the few survivors went underground, literally and figuratively. Living out of caves or at least away from the cities. Natural sources of food such as berries and wild crops, fishing, animals became scarce, sick, poisoned.

The radiation didn't seem to affect the dead, other than high doses causing them to fall apart more quickly than they otherwise would have.

The only thing worse than a group of zombies, is a group of radioactive zombies.

Luckily, Dallas lived far enough north that he was away from major population centers and the worst of it. He couldn't find a Geiger counter, but could see the tell-tale signs of radioactivity. The rivers that flowed from the south were polluted. Schools of dead fish

floated along, contributing to the stench that gripped the city.

Wild animals were non-existent in the city. The few meathouses and such that were on the outskirts, were already overrun with zombies. Cows, stray dogs, other livestock – it all tastes like Brains.

Some birds had managed to survive the zombie onslaught, but many soon died of starvation. They were Dallas's only source of fresh food. He had tried to grow vegetables on the roof, but didn't have the water to sustain it. He ate mostly out of cans that he had found in the storage areas of the outlying houses.

As he sat on the edge of the roof of the building, he was overcome with despair. He hadn't seen a living person in almost three months now. He hadn't heard a gunshot in two.

And since his beloved Kristina was among the first to become a Streetwalker, he had truly no one and nothing to live for.

"The world's gone to shit, a one-way ticket to hell!" he hollered, hearing his echo off of the high rise buildings around him.

The few zombies that could, turned their heads up and looked at him, waving frantic *rigor-mortis*'ed arms.

That's when he came up with the idea.

He was never much of a philosopher, but if there was nothing else to do, he might as well do what he loved.

And that was music.

He had a vision of himself, up on a stage, playing as loud as he would ever have a chance to do in this life.

The challenge to set it all up wasn't a negative factor at all. Although daunting, it gave him a set of steps to go through, something to live for, a challenge, life or death, that he could die at anytime while pursuing what he loved.

• • •

He ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

The sprint from the last building he had strung together with makeshift bridges, to the school, was only about 200 yards. But the shortest path required him to go through an alley. He never took it when moving the goods there, but when it was just him, he was fast enough and the Dead were few and far enough between he could get through without much of a problem.

He had learned that guns were not his forte. Dallas was a terrible aim, and the ammo and guns he had found (.22s; why did everyone have a .22 for home defense?) didn't have the stopping power to definitively put down a zombie and ensure they didn't get up again.

He found that blunt weapons worked better than sharp ones – and that, accidentally. Once when he was headed down to the auditorium for a sound check, he was surprised by a group of three Dead who cornered him.

He only had his guitar with him.

He didn't hesitate.

Swinging the strap off his shoulder, he grabbed it by the neck, and swung as hard as he could. He found that once you knocked them down, it took a minute for them to get up again – buying precious time to run.

After all, you can't kill the Dead.

So on this most special of nights, as he ran towards the auditorium with all of his gear, his heart rate starting to match the speed of his thoughts, he wasn't surprised to see a group of Dead in his way. They were devouring a dog. One swallowed and the bloody pulp dropped out from the hole that used to be a neck, dripping down the front of the Dead, bits landing on the ground.

There was no avoiding them – they were right in his way.

He had anticipated this. He had reinforced his guitar with scraps of metal that he had screwed to the sides of it, and the long, sloping angle of it gave him plenty of striking power. He had a custom guard over the strings, providing him a better grip.

He didn't break stride as he swung his axe around, double-handed it, and swung in a wide, sweeping arc as he plowed through them. All three Dead went flying, bits of zombie and dog landing on the walls and cement nearby.

He kept it in his hands as he sprinted to the school. There were more Dead than he anticipated – he rarely

went out after dark. They were already surrounding the school.

He kept the doors to the school closed, but not locked; they couldn't get inside, or so he hoped. He bashed a couple more on his way to door, one in the head, twisting around all the way like that scene from the Exorcist.

He ran to the door, twisting the handle, slamming it behind him. He grabbed the nearby broomstick and jammed it between the bars, locking them out.

He turned and walked through the next set of doors, using both hands to push them wide, and there it was.

The Venue.

He walked down the center aisle of the school auditorium, deliberately, savoring the moment.

He had waited two long years for this.

He took the stage and strapped on the guitar. Stage right, he cranked up a couple of in-line generators, flipped a six-switch and a couple of power switches, and did a quick sound check.

And he started to play.

He started with an old Queens of the Stone Age song, something about a Song for the Dead.

He sang.

The entire time, his body twisted as he put every ounce of energy into this performace, albeit a performance for ghosts.

He played one of his own songs.

He played a sad song, soulfully sang:

*If I die before I get it done will you decide?
Take my words, turn them into signs, they will survive
Because a long time ago I knew not to deprive*

*It's safe out there now, you're every where like the sky
You are love, you are a lucid dream, you are the ride
When you hear this, know it's your jam, it's your good
bye*

*We all cross, when we're feeling lost, it's just the time
Kateri cried the day her lover died, she recognized
You gave her a life of real love it's no surprise*

*Nights are long but the years are short when you're
alive*

*Way back when, will never be again, it was a time
It's gonna catch you, so glad I met you, walk the line*

*Let me live so when it's time to die even the Reaper
cries*

Let me die so when it's time to live another sun will rise

And he sang it out, tears running down his face,
pushing his voice to its limits:

Like I said you know I'm almost dead, you know I'm almost gone! Like I said you know I'm almost dead, you know I'm almost gone!

By this time, the Dead had already found their way inside the school. Some of them were wandering the halls, but most of them were following the sound.

After all, in a silent world, he who makes the most noise is the last one alive... or the first one to die.

The Dead meandered down the auditorium, tripping over the seating, filling up the center isle as quickly as they did the sides. Thanks to some careful pre-planning, he blocked the center isle with desks and other obstacles.

The Dead reached the front, but there were no stairs and no way for them to mount the five-foot ledge, so they clambered up to the edge of the stage, reaching half-heartedly for his feet and legs. He stood as far forward as he dared, sometimes kicking at their hands.

Suddenly, one of the generators hiccupped; the stage left amp, burst into flames. Dallas was deep in the middle of a solo, lost in the moment, eyes closed as his hands and heart sped.

The Dead began to overflow, crawling over each other, finally getting up onto the stage.

He kept on playing, and as the first of the Dead deluge crawled up on stage, he'd stop long enough to

take a giant swing at them, from the bottom up like a golf swing, knocking them back and buying himself precious moments.

He started freestyling, playing a heavy, moving beat, stamping one foot to the beat, and sang into the mic, “I have a promise to keep, a sacred vow / I’ll be damned if I let the Dead stop me now....”

Finally, the amp that was on fire started to blaze brightly, and the Dead had organized enough to start sending five or six at a time up on stage.

Dallas’ final thought as he stood on the mic was, *it’s not that much different than the Living. They all shuffle around like it means nothing, but try to get as close as possible.*

Without getting burned.

He flipped his guitar over his head, deftly with both hands, and swung in a wide arc, knocking a couple of the Dead backwards.

He ran behind the amp on fire, and kicked it once, twice, three times, to knock it over. *Guess I didn’t need my lighter after all*, he thought.

The trail of gasoline he had poured across the front of stage burst into flames, a long snake all the way across. Three or four excited fans too close to the stage caught on fire, although they didn’t stop to put it out; they kept waving their arms frantically, and a few continued to try and get through it.

Dallas made a hasty escape through the back. He used his guitar no less than a dozen times, knocking off the Dead left and right, making his escape.

He ran, the smoldering building behind him trailing a thin column of smoke into the sky. He hoped that the booby trap he had set had worked.

As he made it back from the school, back to where he lived, he climbed the stormpipe he often used as a ladder, Robbie the guitar swinging back and forth on his back. He finally was safe.

But more importantly, he had played his show. His Halloween show. He looked up, breathing heavy, face covered in soot from the fire.

The moon was full, bright, and directly overhead; he felt dizzy, and momentarily thought he was going to fall back off the building. He sat down on the gravel roof, and tears started to flow down his face.

He was kind of hoping that it would be his last show. Now, he wasn't so sure.

Below, the Dead continued to shuffle.

Hungry. Always hungry.

• • •

That night on the radio, he heard quite a few voices. In burst transmission, clips of words, spaced as to prevent location via radio triangulation.

They were all saying the same thing. “King to Bishop-5. Who put on the concert downtown tonight? Over.”

“Bishop-5, unknown, over.”

“Deuces, whiskey-tango-foxtrot, over.”

“Bishop-5, ten-twenty, over.”

Dallas hesitantly picked up the broadcaster; he had never used it before, didn’t know if it worked. There *were* other Living out there, after all! He had secretly harbored this fear that he was the last one.

Whoever the Living were, they sounded organized. He was scared. Should he try and broadcast, and potentially expose himself?

Dallas waited another 7 minutes before the next transmission.

“Deuces, it takes a lot of guts to put yourself out there like that. Lot of planning. Possible asset to us, over.”

Immediately: “King, ten-four. This might explain the missing generators as well, over.”

Dallas cleared his throat. He switched on the transmit, and said slowly, deliberately: “Romero, auditions next weekend.” A pause. “The next full moon on Halloween isn’t for another twenty years, gives us plenty of time to practice.”

He set down the transmitter.

He smiled.

Dallas had found something to live for.

THE WALL

EXCERPT

The Wall is a forthcoming full-length novel.

Set in the near future, it's a gritty tale of vampires on the edge of extinction following a hepatitis outbreak; anono-journalists exposing the shadowy figures behind the scenes of a political conspiracy; and a junkie-turned-vampire anti-hero who is looking for a way out of his lifestyles.

Christopher "Owen" Owens
November 2019

CHAPTER THREE

“THE FED”

SAN DIEGO

At first it was hardly noticeable; a small urge on the back of the neck, or on his leg. Zeke would brush it away, and try to focus on the movie.

He was with Ensley. They were at her brother or cousin's apartment, maybe even her boyfriend, who was out of the house at work. He had ran into her near the bus stop near Abril's, and she invited him to come crash, knowing that he had nowhere else to go.

She didn't have enough to share; so she pushed off, with the last little bit of her stash, while Zeke tried to ignore the urge.

Ensley drifted in and out of consciousness. Zeke tried to focus on the movie. Some shitty adventure

movie, with unique shots of first person white water rafting, the new display technology of 3d making the droplets look like they were coming out of the TV. However, the TV had a bad panel in the lower right corner, so part of the display was garbled, with no 3d effect.

The feeling Zeke was trying to ignore, got worse; there was a insufferable itch on his back, his arms. He would scratch, but within moments it would be back. It was like being bitten by mosquitoes on a summer night.

It got worse. The itching turned into sharper pains. And he started wincing, as he would scratch, and smack himself. He was warm and feverish.

Ensley stirred, moved, passed out again.

The itching was nothing new; Zeke had known that feeling all too well. There's a reason that heroin addicts can't just stop using; the physical pain of withdrawal was too much to bear or ignore. It always started with the itching too.

Zeke abruptly stood up off the couch, and found his way to the bathroom. Filthy. He looked in the mirror and drawers for any Benadryl or other antihistamine, even Dramamine. But there was nothing.

Zeke usually had some resources, some money or a friend who would hook him up. He tried calling Abril, but it went straight to her voicemail.

What could he do? He knew that there was one place he could go. He left without waking Ensley.

• • •

It was the middle of the night. Zeke had a rough idea of what neighborhood he was in, but wasn't sure which way he was facing or the exact cross streets. He wandered around, once retracing a street for 10 minutes in the opposite direction after he found a crossroad.

This time of night, the usual activity had died down; there weren't any joggers or dog walkers about. The only cars that drove by were either in a hurry to get out of that part of town, or gangbangers driving around patrolling their hood.

Zeke walked by one stretch of street that had a 24 hour taco place, with the "*abierto* – open" sign flashing and the harsh glare of the sterile fluorescent lights pouring out. There was a man and a woman outside, the man smoking, while the two of them talked; obviously a late night date, but no chance of scoring from them. There was nobody else around.

He continued further east until he got out of the main residential and commercial area. A forgotten, run down area, with old factories and abandoned buildings replacing houses and restaurants. There were fewer streetlights.

Another block down was a small freeway; he walked under the overpass, where a few homeless were camped out. There were no fires or people around; everyone was passed out, mostly with cardboard and newspapers. There were a few tents. The small group was clustered around a single orange sodium light that had partially burnt out, casting a dim orange glow; but they stayed within the radius that the light cast, as if the shadows were something to be afraid of.

He kept walking.

Eventually, he found himself walking along a boarded up fence with corrugated tin siding, the type that's common in less developed parts of the world, but you don't often see in the United States.

This was it.

He turned the corner, and followed the fence. There were gang signs tagged on it.

His fever had gotten worse; even though it was warm for December, he felt chilled, and was shaking.

He eyeballed the fence until he saw where one sheet didn't quite line up with the other; he tested it and it pulled back far enough that he could squeeze through. He just barely fit, despite being stick thin.

He pulled himself through, catching his torn up shoe and losing it, and having to reach back through to grab it.

Replacing his shoe, he looked up.

There it was.

The Fed.

It was an abandoned 2 story school building. The brick work was crumbling in many places, windows broken and boarded. The name was in old-style silver letters, mostly missing; only a few letters remained: A crooked F, a space, the letter E, and then a few broken letters hanging down. Finally a D on another row. Thus, the Fed.

It was an old place where homeless would camp out, and junkies would come to use and crash. But usually there were some lights on; the electrical connection provided by an extension cable from a nearby factory, that nobody bothered to disconnect.

But tonight, it was pitch black.

A shiver ran down Zeke's spine; not just the fever. He had never seen it blacked out before, and it deeply unsettled him. He froze in place, squinting at the building.

He had come here a few times before, and was no stranger to the sights and sound that came with someplace like this. The only time Zeke had ever seen a dead body was here; they went to find a room to shoot up in and crash, but there was a dead man there, the needle still in his arm; his eyes were open, face in a death grimace. Another time, he had seen a particularly violent knife fight between 3 guys, in which everyone lost.

But tonight was different. He was immediately overcome with a deep sense of dread. The darkness was palpable, and impenetrable. What do you call it when someplace is so abandoned, that even the hopeless have fled it's grasp?

He stood and stared at it for a moment, transfixed by it. It was beautiful in it's own way; and he had conflicting urges of being drawn to it, and being pushed away.

In the midst of this moment, he knew that he wouldn't find what he came there to find. If there was anyone there, it was unlikely he could find someone to share with.

He swore that he could almost make out shapes in the darkness, a flash of light like the reflection in animal eyes.

He backed away, and then turned and scurried through the fence. He could swear he was being watched.

As he ran down the street, away from that dark place, there was movement in the shadows. He was, indeed, being watched.