

ZOMBIE NIGHTS

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Zero

Dave Connor was only thirty two years old when he unexpectedly passed away. He was still only thirty two when he even more unexpectedly undied. At first he couldn't remember how he'd ended up in that shallow grave; he just knew it was hell to claw his way out, and that the taste of its dirt would remain in his mouth for the rest of his time on this earth.

He felt the cold more than anything. That and the darkness and the worms crawling across his face. There wasn't exactly the thought of "I've got to get out of here". There was the action, a sudden panic surged within him and the struggle to move his arms which were pinned by his side. He could only wiggle them at first; pushing out as hard as he could he felt his elbows grab a little space, and his fingers stretch until he could curl them just a bit. It was all he needed. Bit by bit he cleared enough room to clear a little more. Now kicking and punching and scratching the wet clammy dirt, feeling every instant as if he would choke on the grains that poured into his mouth and into his nose, filling his eyes and his ears until suddenly, air breaking free; the cold night air with a sprinkle of rain coming down. He was out.

It was almost as dark above ground as it had been below. Foggy drizzle dripped from the trees and he had no idea where he was. A forest it seemed. He sat on wet grass by the remains of his tomb and spat out the dirt and wiped futilely at the clothes which would never get clean. There was mud in his hair and blood on his face and his hands. On his side was a hole in his shirt that led to a hole in his stomach. The bleeding had stopped and the mess was congealed, gooey with puss. He didn't feel pain.

He decided to get up and walk. He didn't care which way he went. He was lost anyway. If there was a path, he didn't notice. He just walked, through the trees, over rocks, by a stream, over a small wooden bridge. There were trail signs posted at random, but he didn't bother to read them or follow. It registered vaguely that he must be in some kind of park. That meant there were people somewhere. That meant he ought to get out before it got light. None of that made any sense, but it is what he thought. It was instinct.

But he didn't make it out right away. He could sense that the dawn was arriving, so he looked for a cave, or some bushes in which he could hide. He found an old half burned out tree that would do. He hunkered down in it, and waited. Day came. Day lasted awhile. He kept his eyes open and noticed some things. He noticed he never got hungry. He never got thirsty. He never got tired, or bored. He had no desires. No physical urging. It was all very new and he felt that it was and there was a certain satisfaction, as if patience was something he'd never achieved until now.

He had leftover instincts as well. He put a thumb to his wrist and could feel a faint pulse. He noticed his lungs weren't filling with air. He was breathing but not with his mouth or his nose. It seemed his whole body was breath, that each pore in his skin absorbed air and ejected it too. This soaking in of the atmosphere was pushing the blood through his veins, and into his brain. He knew what things were. Trees, for example, and sky. He watched animals go through their motions, birds in their frenzy at daybreak. The squirrels, racing and chasing. Insects buzzing. Bees humming. The rain stopped and the sky became blue, with some clouds. He waited and watched for the sun to go down, and followed its direction to find out where he was. When it grew dark again he followed it west.

He journeyed as straight as he could, ever west. To not go in circles was his most basic plan. He thought that at least he would get somewhere else, out of the woods, and then ... and then, next. He traveled for hours, occasionally stumbling over rocks and roots but for the most time getting along fine and taking it slow, and sometime, late at night, he arrived at the edge of the woods. There he stood on a hill, looking down at the lights of a town he knew well. He even remembered its name, Spring Hill Lake.

One

He was standing at the edge of Fulsom Park, a semi-public woodlands situated on a bluff above the city, which lay in a valley and lined the banks of the meandering Wetford river. In the distance he could make out the lights of Sea Dragons stadium, a brand new structure which was rumored to be mysteriously haunted. It marked the northern end of the city. Closer to him, the half dozen or so tallish buildings which boasted downtown. Even closer, the old abandoned waterfront, relic of the city's early trading days.

Dave turned his attention to that neighborhood. He felt drawn toward it and began to walk down the hillside, keeping off the main park road, cutting through the rocky ridge instead, remembering vaguely the stories about wolves and their secret caves thereabouts. He felt nothing. No fear. No fatigue. No cold. He just kept walking and soon he was entering the city through the narrow alleys and side streets that surrounded the old harbor. He saw no one and was pretty sure that no one saw him either.

Along the edge of the river he came across a narrow road and turned into it. At the end he stopped before an old bungalow and considered it. It was dark inside, but as it was still before dawn, that was no surprise. He studied its peeling white paint and the concrete steps that led to the front door. As if by magnet he felt himself pulled into the lawn and up those stairs, and then he heard his hand on the door, pounding on it steadily in a slow persistent rhythm. After a few minutes, the door swung open, and a grumpy old man stood before him, rubbing his eyes.

The man looked very familiar, with his buzz cut, his long brown face, that pencil mustache, the ubiquitous Hawaiian shirt. He felt he had come to this house and knocked on its door for a good reason, though he didn't know more than that. He tried to make a smile in greeting but his face was frozen, its features wouldn't move. For the first time, he felt a little troubled. He was unable to do what he wanted to do.

The man yawned and scratched his head a bit, then said,

"Davey. What are you doing here?"

He found he couldn't speak. He had no breath to push the sounds through his mouth. It was puzzling. He had some words in his mind but they wouldn't come out.

"And so damn early too", the man said. "Well, come on in if you're coming", and he turned away and Dave saw the man's slippers carry him into the house. He followed. The man's path led into the kitchen, where he began to fumble around with a coffee maker, while gesturing for Dave to sit down. He did.

"Nothing to say?" the man asked. "Or maybe you're in one of your moods?" he chuckled to himself. When he turned to look to see the effect of these words on his visitor, he saw Dave's head suddenly lurch to the left, and then, with great effort, slowly pull back to the right. It was the best he could do. The man didn't seem to notice his difficulty, but turned back towards his preparations. For the next few minutes, Dave sat there motionless while the old man made the coffee.

It wasn't until he'd poured the cups and came to sit down that the man seemed to really be aware of Dave. What he noticed was the smell.

"Phew!" he blurted out and, gagging, backed away, spilling some of the hot liquid on his arm and cursing about that.

"You stink, man!" he continued. "I mean, really. Ever take a bath or anything? Where've you been?"

Again, there was no answer from his guest, who tried to shrug or make any expression with his face to indicate some kind of communication. The fact was, he didn't know that he smelled bad. He wasn't smelling anything, even the drink in front of him.

"Got to clean you up", the man said. "Your old Uncle Ray can't deal with that stench, not this early at least". He tried to laugh it off, then he sat himself down at the far end of the table, and looked more intently at his nephew.

"Blood", he murmured. "You've been hurt, eh? I'll take a closer look in a minute, but first, the java", and he raised his cup and drank some.

"Can't do anything without my coffee", he muttered.

"Still got nothing to say?" he said a minute or two later. "It's not like you, Davey boy. Used to always have something to say. Couldn't shut you up half the time."

He gave a wink and a smile at this, but his visitor was still unable to respond. He was certainly trying. He was concentrating as hard as he could, attempting to move any facial muscle at all but it just wasn't happening. Eyebrows? Nope. Mouth? Wouldn't budge. Nose? Couldn't even crinkle it. Maybe if I could write something down, he thought, and turned his head towards the kitchen counter, while at the same time his hand jerked outward and his knuckles cracked against the side of the table.

"Looking for something, eh?" said Ray. "I wonder what. Hungry?"

Dave managed to swing his head to the left and the right again, this time a bit more controlled. He was shaking his head. Definitely. This could work.

"That's a no, I take it", Ray said, and this time Dave lifted his chin and lowered it to signal a 'yes'.

"And that's a yes", said Ray. "Now we're getting somewhere. More like twenty questions but better than nothing I guess."

After a pause he asked,

"Thirsty?"

Again Dave shook his head 'no'.

"Tired?"

Another 'no'. He jerked his hand up again and tried to make a writing motion. It was clumsy, awkward, but Uncle Ray figured it out after the third or fourth pantomimed attempt, and brought him a pencil and a piece of paper. He sat back again and watched as Dave struggled to make sensible markings. It was not coming easily and several times he had to cross out whatever he'd scribbled. He shook his head and would have sighed deeply if only he could breathe. Eventually he managed to write one word - wounded.

"Wounded?" Ray stood up. "Where? How? Let me take a look at you."

He came closer again, holding his breath this time so he wouldn't have to smell the guy. He took hold of Dave by the shoulders and turned him out from the table so he could see him entirely. Dave stretched up a bit and tried to glance down at his side to give Ray a hint, but Ray saw the gaping hole in front and was already ripping away the shirt. When he'd exposed the wound to air he gasped and had to turn away and exhale deeply.

"Holy mother of pearl", he exclaimed. "That's some wound, and hardly fresh, by the look of it. Man oh man! We've got to get you cleaned up, son. And I won't be taking any more of those shaken heads for an answer. I'm getting the tub started up right now", and he left to do what he said.

Dave followed willingly to the bathroom and tried his best to cooperate as Ray removed his clothing and helped him into a heaping hot bubble bath. Dave didn't feel it, not the water, not the heat, not the soap. He felt he'd lost all sense of all his senses except for sight and hearing. Couldn't smell, couldn't taste anything but dirt. Couldn't feel any touch. Couldn't speak. It was strange. It occurred to him that maybe he was in a coma, that all of this was just a dream. How would he know? How could he tell for sure?

Uncle Ray, the man said. My uncle? How is that? He didn't really remember him but something was very familiar; everything was. He felt at ease, without anxiety or worry. Uncle Ray was scrubbing his body, his face, his hands, his hair, the hole in his side.

"This ain't normal", Ray was saying. "Some of this junk just won't come off and that bloody wound. It won't be cleaned. I ought to know a thing or two. Haven't I been a barber now fifty years? You'd think I'd be having some idea but no. Ain't never seen nothing like this before. Wish you were talking, son. Well, maybe you're writing will get better and you can tell me what the heck is going on."

"Criminy. Look at that!" he nearly shouted and jumped back. While scrubbing Dave's face a patch of skin came clean off with the sponge, exposing the rawness beneath. Dave looked up at him with an attempt at a questioning look.

"Where you been?" Ray shook his head, as he helped Dave out of the tub, got him dried off and wrapped him up in an old worn robe.

"Still smells pretty bad", he muttered to himself, "and that wound, won't clean up at all, hardly. If I didn't know any better ..."

He paused to consider the implications of his thought. He tried to laugh it off but kept looking back at his nephew and with each glance the notion seemed less and less strange - less strange than the appearance of the young man, and the stink, and the blood, and the skin.

"It's like you were dead", he finally blurted out.

They were back in the kitchen, seated around the table once more. Dave hadn't touched his coffee. Ray had had three cups. Dave was writing once more.

'Under ground', he wrote, passing the note over to Ray, and then seizing another piece of paper and scribbling furiously.

'Dug out night'.

'In park', came the next note.

'One day', he pushed across the table.

Uncle Ray laid the notes side by side and repeated the words, then formed a sentence.

"You were in the ground. Dug yourself out. Last night. Up in the park. Fulsom Park?"

Dave nodded as best he could.

"You mean to say you were buried up there?"

Again a round of furious head bobbing. It was making sense now. After he had clawed his way out of the grave he had forgotten all about that. He had only been concerned with moving on. He had not been piecing together one moment to the next, but each moment was its own discrete reality. Now that he was sitting there, conversing in a manner, he was recalling the sequence, stringing together the facts. It could not be denied. He was dead.

"That would make you what they call a zombie", Uncle Ray shook his head in disbelief. "Or I guess you could look on the bright side. Some people might say you've been resurrected, boy. Hallelujah to that!"

Two

"I'm going to need some bacon!" Ray declared, getting up from his seat and heading to the fridge.

"I don't know what it is about bacon, but sometimes I just need it. How about you?" he asked, and turning, saw Dave shaking his head, more adeptly this time.

"Oh that's right", Ray mumbled. "Not hungry. Don't suppose you'd be wanting any human flesh or nothing?"

He smiled a bit uneasily and was reassured to see another head shake by his nephew, who was now writing again and pushed over a note that read - 'don't need food'.

"Well, that's something", Ray said, starting to fry up his breakfast. "Guess I never gave it much thought. What it'd be like, and all. Course since it's impossible!" he snorted.

"So it's pretty clear you were murdered", he announced, turning back to Dave. "Who did it?"

Dave shook his head again.

"Don't know? How can you not know? Stabbed you right in the gut, looks like to me. Must've been standing right in front of you. Maybe caught you by surprise, eh? That it?"

"Don't remember", Dave wrote and pointed at the note.

'Anything', he added.

"Anything? Huh. Must remember something. Remember me, right? My house? You got yourself here, didn't you?"

'Don't know you', Dave wrote, and then added. 'Don't know me'.

He tapped his fingers on the table impatiently as Ray was too busy wolfing down his necessary bacon and didn't see the latest note at first. He pulled it across the table and looked at it thoughtfully for a few moments while he chewed.

"But you found your way here", he murmured, and glanced up to see Dave's version of a shrug.

"Body memory, maybe", Ray theorized. "Huh. Well, what can I tell you. Name is Ray. Already told you that, didn't I? Thought so. And you, Davey, are David Connor, my little brother's boy. Your dad, Harry, may he rest in peace. More peace than you, at least."

Dave was getting used to Ray's attempts at humor, and didn't bat an eye at this one either. In fact, he rarely blinked at all, just enough to keep the eyes moist enough to function, it seemed. His whole body seemed foreign, behaving in ways he didn't expect and didn't understand. Ray was still talking.

'Must be about thirty or so by now. That'd be about right. Your dad was about your age when you were born. Your mom, remember your mom? No? Chloe Simkatki was her name. Glad to be a Connor when she married your dad. Both of them gone now, sad to say. Taken too young. Cancer, the both of them. As for you ... got no brothers, no sisters. Used to come visit here sometimes on holidays. Or I'd go there. Yeah, that's right. You don't live here in Spring Hill, never did. Grew up in Wetford, down the river. Worked at some kind of storage warehouse last I heard. Been a few years since I've seen you, though. Not since your mother passed. I could say 'my how you've changed', heh."

None of this information seemed especially interesting to Dave. He couldn't picture his mother or his father, but he thought if he saw a photo they would both seem vaguely familiar, like Uncle Ray. It didn't matter to him, though. The names and places brought back no concrete associations in his mind. He was aware of an increasing sense of distress, though, and realized, when he glanced up, that it was the light of the dawn peeking through the kitchen window that was causing this unease. He reached for the pencil and wrote 'light not good'.

Uncle Ray didn't understand. It took several more notes before Dave was able to convince him to take him someplace where the light could not get in. Uncle Ray had a downstairs, a sort of converted den he'd built down there out of the garage and some storage space. There were no windows in it and Dave immediately felt better once he'd situated himself on the couch. The room had very little in it. Aside from the couch, a

small table and a recliner chair, it had a television, a few books, and an old-fashioned radio kit.

Dave had brought down the pencil and paper and wrote to Ray explaining that he would like to remain in that room as long as it was daytime outside, if that was okay. Ray told him he had to go to work - he still made a regular appearance at the barbershop down by the boathouse - but he'd be back after lunch. That was all right with Dave. He had a lot to think about.

Ray did too. It wasn't every day you had a dead guy come to visit.

Three

He didn't really have to go in to work, but Ray Connor was happy to get out of that house. He was a bit worried, tell the truth. It only occurred to him now as he took the four block stroll that he might actually be in physical danger. On the one hand, he'd known Davey since the kid was a baby. On the other hand - heck, the man was a walking corpse! He'd seen enough movies to know this might not be a good thing.

Of course, he didn't have any first hand experience with such a creature, until now, and so far it seemed pretty harmless, like an outcast alien from another planet. Hardly seemed to be the same person at all and yet, in all the little ways, he was, like how he held himself when sitting, and how he still had his father's eyes. It was going to be a tough morning, he considered. By profession he was naturally a talker, and here was something he didn't know how to go about telling, or even if he should. Just before he got to the shop he decided he wouldn't say a word, but that didn't hold up five minutes under the scrutiny of his long-time business partner, Clayton Jeffries.

"Look like you seen a ghost", Clayton said, almost as soon as Ray came out of the back room with his smock on. They were known as "Ray'n'Clay" and had been for so long now they could hardly remember when it stuck. Ray'd been there first, apprenticed way back when with old man Harley when he still barely a man himself. He'd been snipping and shaving all sorts of people ever since. The neighborhood had gone through many economic and ethnic changes over those decades, each era leaving its relics behind, relics that became the regulars of the scarcely visited barbershop. Aside from all those leftovers, the only new faces were from the young rich kids who sailed their boats and yachts out onto the river.

Clay was young, by Ray's count, only in his mid-sixties thereabouts. He liked to call him 'kid', as he did now.

"Not no ghost, kid", he said. He figured now he'd tell some half-truths and see if that worked. "It's my nephew, Davey. Showed up early this morning. Been in some kind of a fight from the looks of it."

"Harry's boy?" Clay queried, knowing darn well it was. They had no secrets from each other after all that time, and knew each other's families as well or better than their own.

"That boy was always into something", Clay went on, getting up from his chair and putting the morning paper down where he'd been sitting. He paced a bit across the front door, peering out to see if any customers might show. He knew there wouldn't be any, at least not for half an hour, and then it would only be Richard, who'd come for his special ninety cent shave, as he did every Tuesday whether he needed it or not.

"He's a good boy", Ray countered, pulling out the broom and sweeping at random illusions of dust on the floor. The place was spotless. The men spoke slowly, took turns going about their incoherent and unnecessary routines. It was a living, barely. If it weren't for social security and having paid off that house a long time since, well, Ray didn't even want to think about that. Now that he did, though, he had to wonder how long Davey was going to stay, and how much it was going to cost him.

'At least the kid don't eat or drink', he said to himself. 'That'll make it cheap. All he really needs, as far as I can tell, is some clothes. Can't keep wearing that bloody outfit. Pants, shoes, jacket, shirt. Underwear, socks ought to do it', and he figured in his head how much all that might cost and when he would get around to it. Shame was that Davey was a good six inches taller and maybe fifty pounds heavier than Ray, so he couldn't wear any of his stuff.

"So's the kid sticking around?" Clay asked. "He at your place?"

"Yeah", Ray nodded. "Don't know how long. Long as he needs to, I guess. Neither me or him's got no other family, you know. Got to take care of your own."

"Got to", Clay agreed. "Like my Willa. Keeps coming back, like a wooden nickel."

He laughed and then added,

"Is that right? A wooden nickel that keeps turning up?"

"Think it's a bad penny", Ray told him, and Clay nodded and said,

"A bad penny. Should've named her Penny in the first place. Then it'd make some sense at least."

"She ain't left yet?" Ray inquired.

"Nope. Says the husband's bound to beat her up again, she shows her face. Says 'papa I can stay right?' trying to make that little face she always made when she was six and begging for another ice cream. I say course so darling, even though she's more than forty now."

"Kid will always be a kid", Ray said,

"That Davey was a wild one", Clayton reminded him. "Remember that time he showed up in that Mustang with that gang of hoodlums?"

"Wasn't no gang", Ray said. "Just joy riding is all."

"It was too a gang", Clay disagreed. "Some of them later got popped for robbing a bank. Two of them guys it was."

"Davey said he didn't even know them."

"Davey said a lot of things", Clayton replied crossly. "How about that time he needed that three hundred dollars."

"Sure", Ray snorted. "How can I forget when you remind me all the time. Sure he lied about it. Didn't want to talk about it. Girlfriend. Abortion. Kind of thing happens to people."

"If that's really what it was", Clay replied. "I never was so sure to believe either the first lie or the second."

On that note, the ever reliable Richard walked through the door and before he even took his seat, he removed his battered fedora, straightened up his old dark purple tweed jacket, studied Clayton's face with a serious look and said,

"Always believe the second lie. Second lie's the one they're gonna stick to, so you might as well accept it."

Then, after a laugh far outsize the humor of the statement, he coughed and sputtered and sat down in the door-side barber chair. It was Ray's turn to do the shave. They liked to alternate customers, seeing as there were so few. They hardly ever had to work at the same time anymore. Ray got busy, spreading the cloak around Richard, fastening the collar, lathering the lather, soaking the towel in the warm water, picking out his razor. While he went about this business, Richard kept on talking.

"I always prefer to come up with a good lie to begin with" he informed them. "Then I never modify. Never modify. I come home late and I'll tell Becky 'I was at the circus and caught a ride on a tiger'. She won't even bother to question my integrity, not after that. A man comes up with a good enough story, he don't ever have to worry about changing it."

"Something outrageous, huh", muttered Ray, and it occurred to him that maybe all that stuff Davey said about digging his way out of the grave, but then he remembered the wound, and the smell, and the way that part of his cheek rubbed off. It gave him shivers to think of it, but also brought in the idea that he'd have to do something about the boy's appearance. He was going to need some kind of make-up if he was ever to go out in the world again. You couldn't go around like that, with the skin falling off your face in strips. And some kind of bandage to go around the waist. Yep, he was going to have to do a little shopping.

"Crazier the better", Richard declared. "Why I'd tell my wife I was dead if I thought it would get me off the hook!"

"She might even make it so", Clay chimed in with a chuckle.

"She might at that", Richard agreed. It was all a bunch of talk, and everybody knew it. Becky, his wife, had once been Becky Jeffries - Clay's big sister - and they'd had one of the happiest and most easy-going marriages anyone had ever known. Three kids, all grown by now, and two of them with kids of their own, happy little squatters, every one.

"Davey Connor showed up last night", Clay told Richard, who glanced up at Ray. Ray was about to commence with the blade and merely nodded, casually.

"Been awhile, ain't it?" Richard asked.

"Few years", Ray said, and hushed the customer by bringing the razor to his face. Ray really didn't want to

talk about it much. He wanted to get things straight in his mind first. There was too much to think about and he wasn't getting any good thinking done yet that morning. He kept up the small talk as best he could, assuring his friends that Davey was fine, nothing was wrong, that he'd come around to see them anytime now, that Ray was glad to have him, had given him the spare room for his own.

Topics soon turned to other matters, and after Richard had gone a few other customers appeared at sporadic intervals. The morning went by fairly quickly, and Ray knocked off at noon. By then he had already planned out his shopping expedition - the pharmacy, the thrift store, that should be enough. He moved slowly and considered his purchases carefully. Luckily it didn't amount to much, less than twenty dollars for a used but not too shabby wardrobe, as well as the make-up and bandages. It was going to take a few meals out of his week but he figured that was unavoidable. The kid didn't seem to have anybody else.

Four

Dave spent the day in the basement. For a long time he simply sat on the couch, staring at the small old television perched on its rickety plant stand. The room seemed fit for nothing; the dreariness of its darkness was matched by the ugliness of the furniture and the absence of anything of interest to look at. Above the couch there had been a ground level window at one time, but it had long since been filled in with cinder blocks and roughly painted over. The front wall was a garage door that would no longer open.

He could not clearly remember this room, although he must have seen it before. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the notion that there had been family gatherings here, dull holidays perhaps, with trays and paper plates and plastic cups. Now and then he heard the echoes of voices in his mind, which he linked to the idea of his mother and his father, whose names were Ray had just told him but now he couldn't recall them. He tried harder, closing his eyes as if that would help, but only shadows came.

There was a flash of a scene with a bicycle and a man with a narrow brown tie. The face of the man was a blur but his voice was harsh and bitter. Another image came along with that, of long grass freshly cut and smelling like heaven. He concentrated but the memories were vague and came rarely. It was troubling. After awhile he stood up, approached the tv and pushed enough buttons until the thing came alive. The screen was small, perhaps eleven inches, and the display was very fuzzy but there were people on it, and voices, and Dave sat back to observe.

The people were sitting around a table and chatting, two men and three women discussing anonymous personal problems. Someone was too fat and didn't like herself. Someone was afraid to tell somebody something. Another person had trouble with her teenage daughter. Now and then the audience was shown, a chorus of random people sitting in happy judgment. The stories were obscure to Dave, and he couldn't follow the details. He noted that every one had something to complain about and was looking for reassurance. They relaxed when they got that.

The act of speaking drew his attention, and now that he was alone he felt more confident to give it a try. He wanted to say to the people on the television, 'everything is going to be all right', but all he could manage, at first, was to push out a sound.

'Uh'.

That was progress. He had made the noise through his mouth, up from his throat. He repeated the steps he had taken until he could produce, as short bursts of exhalations a series of sounds. His body was struggling and the effort was intense. He felt, for the first time since awakening, some weariness, but that faded when he made the discovery of closing his lips while forcing out the noise, making the "p" sound.

He sounded like an infant babbling but as he sat observing the people on the tv he noticed the different sounds they were making and watched their lips move and after an hour or so was able to make words come out that sounded close to what they should, and this gave him a good feeling. The exercise of speaking was also teaching the muscles around his mouth how to move again. He could change the expression on his face a little bit more. Not much, but it was something. When he saw Ray again, he would be able to communicate better.

Ray came home in the middle of the afternoon, bearing his bundles, which he proudly unpacked in the downstairs room, handing each item over to Dave while explaining its purpose and his reasoning. He helped bandage up the wound, and showed Dave how to put the clothes on. He applied a little of the make-up to Dave's cheek and all the while Dave managed to grunt and make sounds and even a few words, such as "k" for okay, "ga" for "got it", and "no" for "no" in response to Ray's questions about food and water and whether he wanted any.

Soon Dave was looking almost human. The hand-me-down clothes from the thrift store suited him well enough. His face and hands were free of blood and dirt. The patches where his skin flaked off were covered up. Ray'd even thought to pick up an old fedora hat which didn't really go with anything Dave was wearing but covered up the spots on his head where a few clumps of hair had fallen out. Dave sat back on the couch and turned his head towards Ray and thought he wanted to say something but didn't know what that was.

Ray just stood there nodding.

"I don't know what it's all about" Ray said. "You being here, coming back like you say and all. Must be for some reason but darned if I know. You got any notion?"

"No", Dave replied in a rough exhalation. He shook his head and repeated the word.

"None of my business, I suppose", Ray went on. "You're a full grown man and all. I was thinking maybe you should see a doctor. What do you think?"

"No. Doc", Dave pushed out.

"No. Poy," he continued. Ray took that to mean "no point" and agreed.

"Not much they could do for you I guess. I mean, what could they do? Check your pulse? Wait, that gives me an idea", he said, and came back closer to Dave, grabbed his wrist and held his thumb over the artery there.

"Very weak", he said after a time, "Maybe twenty pulses a minute. Hardly a thing."

"Should've got some deodorant", he continued. "I forgot how bad you smell. Almost getting used to it, though. Still, you're going to need some if you ever go anywhere. You can use mine for now. Remind me."

He let go of Dave's hand and took a step back.

"Holy mackerel!", he declared. "You ain't hardly breathing are you? I mean, are you breathing?"

He came closer again and put his face up to Dave's.

"No, I guess you're not."

He clucked his tongue and backed away again.

"Not hardly human", he concluded. "Something else again. Like you were once a man, but now you're something else, the way a caterpillar become a moth."

Ray took a seat on the other chair in the room. The television was still on, but now it was showing some news program. A man was sitting behind a desk telling incomprehensible tales about far off places where events were ostensibly occurring.

"Never had a child of my own", Ray told him. "Of course you know that, or at least you did. Married. Long time. But no kids. Now it seems I got me a grown up alien baby to look after."

Dave glanced up from the tv and tried to force his face into a smile.

"Da", he said.

Five

Over the next few days, Clayton Jeffries kept pestering Ray about when Davey'd come around to visit. He was uneasy, worried that Ray's nephew was up to no good, and might bring trouble around his old friend. Partly this was Ray's fault, for he had a history of hinting about his nephew and the sort of people he ran around with. A lot of gossip concerning the boy had rattled about the barbershop for a number of years already.

There was the matter of whether young Dave would finish high school, and after that, whether he would ever go on to college. There were stories about girlfriends and parental disapproval of same. There were a few scrapes with the law that got mentioned, and re-mentioned, even though they generally concerned people Dave had known, and not the kid himself. There were general concerns about his limited career choices, given his basic lack of smarts and qualifications. It didn't help how his parents had passed on, medical bills chewing up what little savings they'd ever scraped together, leaving nothing at all for their son after both of them had gone. Dave had been removed from his childhood by the bank upon foreclosure.

And yet, he survived. He had stuff, even a car, and the old men in the shop spared no pains in gossiping as to how that was even possible. He had to be mixed up in something. There had to be unsavory characters. The truth was, they knew nothing about his circumstances. Even before his parents had died, his contact with his Uncle Ray and Aunt Melba had been sparse, sporadic and superficial. When Melba had gone on, Dave hadn't even bothered to come to the funeral, which had hurt Ray's feelings. The two of them were now all that was left of the family. Dave's life became a mystery to Ray, and maybe it would always remain that way.

Dave was spending his days in front of the television, practicing speech and trying to sort out the images and sounds it fed him. He made rapid improvement and by the weekend was able to talk in brief sentences, but he still didn't have much to say. As he told his uncle, it seemed to him that his very existence had only begun with that awakening underground. As to his seeking out Ray's house, it was as if his body had held on to certain memories, but these were disconnected, haphazard, and made no sense to him. He could not explain anything. He only knew that here he was, and that he was what he was, whatever that was.

At night he felt compelled to go out. As soon as the sunset completed, he felt it throughout his body, like an alarm had gone off, and his attention turned to the external world. He rose, moved up the stairs, through the front room and out the front door, down the steps and into the street. He did not feel the weather; warm or cold made no impression on him. He wore the jacket Ray had brought him, but he wore it all day and all night, without distinction. The same was true for the old felt hat. He sprayed on enough of Ray's barbershop cologne to cover up his scent, mostly.

Out in the world he followed rules he didn't think about. To avoid being seen. To stay away from light, whether streetlights or houselights. To avoid staring at things. To keep moving, to move at an even pace. To show no hesitation, no uncertainty. To walk upright, steady and calm. At any sudden movement, he would slide into the most darkness at hand, as smooth as a paranoid cat.

The first nights he stayed close to the waterfront, wandering around the abandoned warehouses, the old train depot, the empty shipyard. This area felt familiar, but the occasional truck roaring through startled him with its beams of light and clouds of exhaust. His instincts pushed him towards the hill, back up and into the park. He spent most of those times in the woods, getting to know his way around them, but for all of that exploring it didn't interest him to return to the place he'd arisen, nor would he have recognized it if he happened to stumble across it. That night was already gone. He was alert in the moment, and sometimes only the moment. In the middle of those zombie nights he was only aware of the dark and the noises around him and it felt as if nothing else had ever existed or ever would again.

The nights contrasted completely with the days; the utter lack of humanity versus the glut of it on the television screen. There he witnessed an appalling and endless scene of hustle and nerves, intensity and alarm, shrill self-importance and earnest pushiness. Perhaps if he had watched another channel, but he didn't know there was one; he saw the morning gossip shows, the local news and then the live afternoon talk shows, eight hours filled with random people and their problems.

He wasn't sure what he was supposed to make of it all. He grasped the concept of the weather forecast foremost; when they said it would rain and it rained, he took note. Nothing else seemed to be the least bit relevant to who or where he was. He figured they were talking to the wrong guy, and didn't know it. Ray had to explain to him one evening that the tv shows could be seen by anyone anywhere, not just him, and not just in that house and on that box. He lost interest after learning that, and kept the box turned off. Ray had brought home a magazine, and Dave found that more engaging. He had retained the language but lost all context. He would have to rebuild the meanings of the world for himself.

He was becoming more at ease in the nights. He began to venture further from the home base into the city, one block at a time, and carefully. Further north from the river were more residential areas, where it was quiet and mostly dark at night. In some of the neighborhoods, many of the street lamps were broken or faint, and there were no people out on the sidewalks. Traffic was scarce as well. Then suddenly he would come upon a wider street, with shops and many cars. He shied away from those, retreating back into the quieter roads. He suspected there was some sort of a plan guiding the arrangement of things in the town, and if he only knew it he could better arrange his outings. He asked Uncle Ray about it one day, and that led to his discovery of one of the most dangerous items he had yet encountered; Ray gave him a city bus map.

Six

Dave Connor wasn't the only one wandering those streets late at night, but while his excursions were largely aimless and meandering, Cookie Marquette was on a mission. It was a mission of a lifetime. Known by various names - the Dark Hunter, the Queen of the Night Brigade, the Force - Cookie was out there almost every night, seeking and invariably finding what she sought. She was a small person, short and slight but her lean build was strong and there was no one who would sensibly mess with her. From her fresh face, sparkling black eyes, and quick movements you could place her age anywhere from fifteen to forty-five, and your highest guess would still be ten years short.

She had never been uneasy about her essential transgender nature. Born Julie, and later known as Jim, it was easier to go by Cookie, a name she'd picked up on a ship's mess hall in the Navy, than to try and determine which of her aspects you were talking to. She was fluent in both female and male as needed. She kept her black hair short, always dressed in turtleneck, jeans and boots, and sometimes wore a railway engineer's cap for hoots. Her great-grandmother had stoked a steam engine in her day, and Cookie was ever proud of it.

She was legend in Spring Hill Lake, single-handedly establishing the Homegrown Mission soup kitchen that operated out of St. Filbert's Cathedral in the heart of the old waterfront neighborhood that once had been the center of the city, but now was mostly blighted and bereft of business. From there she squeezed out pennies from the powerful, and made the most of the little she had to work with. A firm, even staunch, non-believer, her decision to ally herself with the Church stemmed from the knowledge that while politicians come and go, the Church at least abides. She could count on its commitment more than that of any other institution or individual.

She had established a small staff of professionals and a cadre of volunteers to run the day-to-day operations of the kitchen and adjacent shelter, leaving her mostly free to pursue her real calling, hunting and gathering the lost and the needy. She patrolled at night since the hidden were more active then, and were easier to locate amid the sparser background field. She knew where they were apt to go, and when, and carried a large sack across her back, stuffed with fresh-baked loaves, containers of hot soup, newly knitted scarves, socks and sweaters, pencils and paper, items she knew from practice to be likely to come in handy in her task.

She rose from an early evening nap around midnight, put together her kit, and struck out into the dark, equipped also with a flashlight she kept taped to her wrist, and a switchblade tucked inside her belt. She carried no cash but lately had been convinced by friends to lug a cellphone around in case of emergency. She had rarely come across a situation she could not handle alone, but she didn't meddle where she didn't belong. She was not the law and would intervene only to protect an innocent.

Some called her Saint Cookie; they said it with derision and she knew it. She was no angel, only doing her job, according to her calling. Other people seemed to feel compelled to climb up corporate ladders. Still others had no idea at all but worked wherever they could. Some had a passion, for teaching, for medicine, for law. Cookie had a passion for concrete, immediate aid. It was the only thing that satisfied her. Some called her limited; she called herself 'practical'.

Cookie Marquette was something of a bloodhound at her work. When she caught the scent of her kind of prey, she hunted it down, and when she found it, she helped it if she could. It was very late one night when she first picked up a hint of Dave. It was the smell, of course, quite literally, the mixture of decaying flesh and eau de toilette. It was something entirely new to her nose and she detected it in a cold and blowsy wind. She could not tell the direction of its origin but she stopped in her tracks and sniffed, and sniffed again. It was out there, it was different, and it was on the move.

Seven

Lately he had begun to think, not just process information but to reflect on it, sift through it, put some things together. He had experienced enough of what he called 'the human world' to make some general conclusions. There was a lot of activity among them. They were very busy creatures. There was an energy, part excitement, part fear, a mixed-up sense of danger and caution, a lot of noise and lights. He was ultra-sensitive to both and tried to stay away from their sources. As he'd ventured further into the city, he'd found fewer safe places, fewer bushes, trees, empty spaces. He was more exposed out there, and found himself moving and reacting more quickly, as cars and trucks and buses roared by, as people emerged from buildings and vehicles and rushed along their way, as planes appeared overhead from nowhere, as dogs rushed out from yards and barked, baring their teeth and charging him.

The dogs were the only ones who seemed to take any notice of his presence. The pedestrians did not. They streamed past him, not more than glancing in his direction. The drivers of cars did not even do that. More than once he'd barely escaped collision. He separated out the objects in his line of sight between those that challenged and those that didn't. He had an instinct for self-preservation, but it was only instinct. There was no emotion to it. The only things he felt were ease and unease, and both only mildly.

The best thing he had found was to stand along the riverbank and watch the water slowly flow. This was something he could do for hours. It was where he was when Cookie Marquette decided to approach him. She had been keeping an eye on him the past few nights, always at a distance, always out of sight. She liked to keep track of all the people in her domain, and whenever new ones arrived, she scoped them out, sized them up, and either made her move or let them be.

This one was too intriguing. He was out there every night, all night it seemed, wandering about, doing nothing, going nowhere, never in a hurry, never with a pattern. What caught her attention was the way he'd vanish at the slightest disturbance, like a feral cat in the woods, keeping safe, and then, slowly, re-emerging when the flash and bang had passed. He reminded her of a wild horse. She had to tread lightly. She quietly crept to a spot upwind and downlight from where he stood, about twenty feet further on the path. She stood there quietly, without moving, for several minutes, until she was certain he hadn't noticed her. If he had, he would have fled. When she spoke, it was gently.

"They say the fishing's not like it used to be", she said. Dave was startled by her voice, and flinched, quickly glanced around for a tree or a bench to slip behind, but there was none. She went on right away, with the same even tone.

"Of course, nothing's like it used to be, am I right, or am I right, or am I right?", and she chuckled softly. She paused for only a few moments before continuing.

"I like to watch it go. You wonder how it never ends. Where's all the water come from anyway? Seems to go on forever, and why?"

"It's what it does", Dave spoke up. "It's what it is."

"You said a mouthful there", Cookie nodded. "I am what I am, I know that much for sure. Name's Cookie."

Dave did not reply. He had turned to look at her, as she had turned to face him too. They were both in the dark - the other was barely more than a shadow - but there was a calmness each sensed in the other. The night felt good and slow. After a long pause, Cookie asked him what his name was. Dave paused before replying.

"Ed", he told her. "Eddie."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Eddie". She turned toward the river again for fear of scaring him off. Getting a name out of someone was often a nervous event. They might feel they had given away too much. The people she came across, all too often, had little else they possessed besides their identity. It became even more precious to them.

"I carry this big old sack around", Cookie said. "Inside it there's all sorts of things a person might need. You be needing anything, Eddie? Clothes? Food? Anything at all?"

"I'm okay", Dave replied. "I don't need".

"There's two kinds of people", Cookie went on, as if used to that kind of answer. "Them that take and them that give. I'm the kind that gives. Are you?"

"Maybe", Eddie said after thinking it over a bit. "I don't know."

"Maybe you've got a family?", she asked. "Maybe you've got a job, a place to stay? You got somewhere? Some people?"

"I have a place", he said. "I'm okay", he repeated. Cookie nodded and considered for a while. She could only take a person at their word. She could offer, but she couldn't force. At the same time, she was always on the look out for the other side, people who could help as well as people who needed help. Those were the two kinds of people she had in mind.

"If you'd like", she said, "you could find out. What kind you are, I mean. We can always use a hand."

"I don't understand", Dave told her. She was confusing him. He didn't think she was dangerous but he didn't know what she wanted, and she seemed to want something. Like all the humans, he thought, needing and wanting all the time.

"I like to go around at night", she explained, "I look for people out here, people who are hungry, people who are cold. People who need a place to go or someone to talk to. I carry all this stuff just in case. I've got sweaters, coats, shoes. I've got bread and soup. You name it, I've probably got it. You could come around with me sometime if you wanted. I could show you. Then if you wanted to could help."

"Oh", Dave said. He didn't know there were people who did that. He had seen the others and wondered. Why were they not inside their homes? Why were they huddled beneath the bridges? Why were they looking in the trash cans? He had thought that they were doing what they wanted to do. Maybe it wasn't like that.

"I don't know", Dave said, and then added, to be polite, "I will think about it."

"Do that", Cookie said. "I've got to be on my way now. It was a pleasure meeting you. I hope to see you again soon."

"You too", said Dave, and he watched as Cookie heaved up her giant sack and flung it across her back, then made her way across the grass, back onto the boulevard and down towards the city lights. He felt relieved to be alone again. The effort to talk that much had been tiring, but he also felt a longing to talk some more to that person, that she was like a path that he would like to follow.

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