

Perishables

Part I: The Vampire



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When the zombies came, I was at a potluck for my neighborhood association.

Odd, isn't it? For all sorts of reasons, not just that I'm a vampire.

It's true, though, being there when the zombies showed up. I was ten minutes' walk from my place, down at the Reinholdts' five-bed, four-bath McMansion. Gods, but I hate that house. When they moved in we didn't have a neighborhood association to stop them from constructing that vinyl-sided monstrosity and no sooner had they dropped the last box in their front hall than they'd begun agitating to start one so they could make sure their place stayed the biggest house in the entire development.

Typical mortals.

Some of the more bothered types went and talked to lawyers or talked to the city or, in the case of Mr. Jones-Magnum - the only person who's been here so long even I have cause to fear his attentions - talked to the city in the presence of a lawyer and, eventually, everyone who cared shoved their hands in their pockets and slunk back up their drives in silent resignation. The Reinholdts knew how the game was played and immediately began campaigning for Best Neighbors Ever. With gift baskets and mown lawns and good candy on Halloween they whittled away just enough of the resentment against them that they got a neighborhood association started without being its first victims. By New Year 2002 it was a done deal: Franklin Not Frank Reinholdt was elected chair of the neighborhood association, with a three-member rotating board to keep the Reinholdts on a leash. Thus began their benevolent dictatorship of our neighborhood.

The neighborhood association's authority, I should note, does not extend to my yard. Oh, technically it does but Mary Lou Reinholdt always somehow seems to flinch when she tries to look me in the eye on my own turf. Every once in a while she'll come around and try to tell me one thing or another through the screen door but she always makes it fast and leaves faster. Franklin Not Frank won't even show up. He can't handle it. He's a wuss. The deal is, one of the rules imposed on the Reinholdts - really on Mary Lou, because we all know Franklin Not Frank is not the brains in that operation - is that whenever the neighborhood association considers a new restriction affecting a current homeowner's existing property then the homeowner has to be notified before the measure can be considered. The first time I actually met Mary Lou Reinholdt was for that very reason about four months after the association started.

Thirty minutes after sunset I'd heard a ring at my doorbell. I remember it took me a minute to figure out that it was, in fact, the doorbell. No one had rung my doorbell in years,

not even on Halloween. I turn the lights on like anybody else but eventually my place acquired whatever psychic stain puts people of a mind to ignore it and move on. My guess is, I turn the porch lights on a little too late and I leave them on a *lot* too late and I'm never out mowing my lawn and people notice the little stuff like that. People don't notice the house that always stays the same so it fades into the background and they eventually learn to ignore the house where the dogs yap all day and the kids are always screaming but they notice the house that has a vibe of being just slightly off. A house that feels and looks too empty stands out like an open grave.

Anyway, the doorbell rang so I walked downstairs and peeked out the peephole and I could see Mary Lou standing there on the front porch with her lips pursed and her eyebrows knit together. She looked just as pissed as all get-out, like *how dare I not answer her*, and I figured she was a missionary or some other kind of low-life. I flung my door open so hard the hinges squealed and at the same time hit the whole bank of switches in the foyer so that the porch, front hall, front stairs and walkway were all suddenly flooded with the brightest, whitest light possible.

A vampire never gets tired of seeing surprise in a human's eyes.

"Mister..." She fumbled for a moment, and I made a show of studying her face while she did. I wanted to remember her but I also wanted her, whoever she was, to *know* that I remembered her.

"Surrett." I leaned my frame against the door and the floor creaked under me. I'll say it, I'm not afraid to: I'm a great big fat guy. I'm middling tall, about six feet if I remember correctly, but I weigh in somewhere around three fifty. I'd been out the night before, and just woke up, so I was in my black trench coat and wearing the boots that give me a little lift and my thick black hair was pointed eighteen directions at once because I hadn't hit the shower yet and she just stared and stammered.

"M... Mister..."

"Surrett," I said again. "Withrow Surrett. And I don't want no damn Bibles or newsletters or what-the-hell-ever, so get the *hell* off my land." I slammed the door shut and flipped all the lights back off with a smoothly reversed pinwheel sweep of the same arm. Mary Lou was left standing there just as blind as a bat. I could still see her out there as I stomped upstairs to get out of my club clothes and into something more reasonable, like the bath, and I smiled to myself because I could smell that she was a little bit afraid.

That's how I came to be a member of the neighborhood association's board. It was early. Some people were probably just getting home from work. Others were probably out

on their porches enjoying the April evening. By whatever means, from whatever place, someone heard that exchange and the next month I got a note stuck in the screen door by an anonymous neighbor: a resolution to restrict the weight of dogs allowed as pets in the neighborhood had failed, and I had been elected to the association's board in absentia.

The dog thing was probably what Mary Lou came by to talk about. I've got a Doberman named Smiles. He weighs 150 pounds because I feed him some of my own blood once a week. When I have to go to town on my own, or when I leave him out front for the day to guard the place, I leave him on a chain that's too big for a large man to grasp in one hand because that's the only chain Smiles hasn't broken yet.

That got my attention, so I took the position on the board. What the hell, you know? Even we – *especially* we – can act on a whim and that was mine in that moment.

Being on the board turned out to be pretty low-impact. Once every six months I went to a potluck at the Reinholdts' damned house and we'd have a semblance of a meeting. I'd walk Smiles up there - no lead, I'd hate to see the leash that would work on him if he needed one - and drop him off in the Reinholdts' fenced back yard. He would spend the entire evening sitting on their back porch watching me through their series of French doors, ignoring their Jack Russell named "Killer". Killer usually just barked until he passed out.

The night the zombies showed up was the night of our spring meeting. It promised to be a pretty dull affair. The autumn meetings are always the ones where somebody gets pissed because their neighbor isn't raking enough for their liking or otherwise shit in the donuts and somebody needs to throw a hissy fit over it. Spring, on the other hand, is easy-going. Spring is when they're all dusting off that old landscaping software and talking about maybe *this* year they'll actually build those garden beds. It's a time when they imagine everything will be exactly the way each of them, individually, wants things to be always. As such, it usually involves nothing more fraught than a lot of sitting around munching on stale cheese balls and avoiding Franklin Not Frank's "world-famous" jellied beef loaf.

Don't ask. I don't even know what jellied beef loaf *is*. I asked one time and all I got in return was, "Oh, eh.... heh heh... think of it as a kind of *sausage*." Franklin has this weird vocal tic he only displays when I directly question something. It always starts with this half-hearted chuckle and then he avoids giving me a straight answer.

That particular spring it was remarkably warm - global warming has finally caught up with us, I guess - and we'd not had a single flake of snow the whole winter. Raleigh isn't exactly in the Alps but we're used to seeing a *little* winter weather. Not so that year, and

we'd spent the first half of March with daytime highs in the 80's. As it was warm the night of the meeting I'd made do with some old jeans and a stained t-shirt from the '82 World's Fair. You remember, the rainbow waterslide kind of logo thing with the flame icon at the far end and 1982 WORLD'S FAIR on the near end of the slide?

Come to think of it, maybe you don't remember. Oh well. It was a fun time. Got to see the Budweiser horses, the Clydesdales. You've probably seen the ads.

Me and Smiles went up the street at an easy pace. I was bringing homemade biscuits and a batch of ambrosia salad. I love to cook, though I'm not particularly good at it. What tends to surprise most of my fellow kind is that I also love to eat. Most of us can't keep food down, our bodies reject it outright and it just comes back out, but my maker was a smarter one than most so she made me eat early and often to teach me how to keep it in long enough to fool folks. I was, as you might expect, not one to shy away from an ample meal in life and so I was glad to take up eating as a hobby in unlife. I might never lose another ounce of weight in all the time I spend on this earth but at least I can eat for hours and never *gain* an ounce, either. It's a small comfort, but with us every sensation counts.

When I got to the Reinholdts' place, I skipped ringing the doorbell and just walked Smiles right on around to the fenced back yard. The moment my hand touched the latch on their gate, Killer went ballistic.

Mary Lou knew by the sound that I must have arrived and came out on the back porch to greet us. She took one look at Killer and her shoulders sagged in a quiet sigh. For the first time in a long time I thought I detected something human in Mary Lou's body language but then the Stepford programming kicked back in and she smiled as best she could. "Withrow," she said, trying to purr and coming out sounding wrong. "So glad you could make it. I'm sure you're very busy with your manuscriptsw."

"Oh yes," I responded, the ambrosia and the plate of biscuits cradled in my arms. Smiles sat by my feet and sniffed the air audibly in Mary Lou's direction. "Been working on some new stuff."

"That's nice," she intoned, and then she turned and walked back inside, leaving the doors hanging open. She couldn't even handle that much small talk with me. It was nothing new.

A thought sometimes occurred to me in those moments when Mary Lou so visibly bristled at interaction with me: what if it wasn't just that I'd pissed her off that time on my porch? What if Mary Lou was one of those people who can just *tell* when something isn't right? What if every time I spoke she got those tingles up her spine that said, *That thing is*

not a human being? There are vampires who believe that sort of sixth sense is out there, in folks whose great-great-great-grandfathers lived in one of our towns and somewhere along the line figured things out and now, generations later, they have scattered descendants who can simply *tell*, through some genetic memory or otherwise inherited gift, that something isn't right about us.

Me, I don't know what to think about that. I don't explicitly consider it impossible – I'm a *vampire*, I know a human being having something like a gut feeling about us is way down the list of crazy-ass things that can happen – but I've never known anyone for whom the possibility was a real concern. Mary Lou had made me start to give it more thought, though, and for all that my presence clearly made her a little unhappy I have to say the feeling was mutual.

About the manuscript thing - I'm a painter. Officially, my "grandfather" was the painter. *Officially*, I'm just an heir who releases the occasional found work and burns the proceeds to fund an utterly failed attempt at a career as a novelist. It's a shitty cover if you care what people think, but I don't care what people think. Mostly. Sometimes I care a lot. Pride is usually what gets us in the end, all of us, human or otherwise.

The rest of the board was there already and Franklin was busy talking sports with Kathy Sams and Herb Watanabe. Franklin isn't a sports buff, and neither is Herb beyond the usual water-cooler talk, but Kathy can't get her head out of it. Kathy played on the women's basketball team for one of the local colleges, back in the day, and she's a bigger sports nut than anyone you can think of. When I walked in she was busy haranguing Herb and Franklin over their picks for an office pool on the basketball tournament.

"Why the hell did you put Montana in as going to the Sweets? Have you ever watched Montana play? Every year they field the ten guys in the whole state who are over six feet and not busy throwing bales of hay across a field somewhere. This year they just got lucky!"

That's what I heard come from the living room. Herb Watanabe was trying to respond but Kathy was fed up with trying to explain it to him. Kathy officially considered the rest of us, who ranged from Herb, in the office pool because letting the boss take a few bucks from him was a way to fit in, to me, who couldn't care less without bursting a vessel from the effort, to be lost causes. There was, she had said one time over dessert, something wrong with people who are so disconnected from their communities. Kathy's team in college had been good - very good - but this was before ESPN was giving a damn about women's sports. I don't have to be a sports fan to know that women get a lot more

coverage these days, and that's a good thing, but Kathy was pretty bitter. She'd won a national championship but no one she met ever recognized her name

Kathy and Herb had become, over time, the only reasons I didn't walk from the board once the novelty of sticking it to the Reinholdts wore off. Well, OK, that's not true. The reason I didn't walk was because I still enjoyed sticking it to them even after it wasn't new anymore. Eventually I would've gotten tired of that, though. Probably. Kathy and Herb, on the other hand, they're good folks. They joined the board in part, I have come to realize, because they wanted to keep an eye on busybodies like the Reinholdts but in part because they also thought the HOA thing had potential. They were just people like anybody else, suspended in mid-air between a healthy dislike for pointless bureaucracy and sincere optimism about their efforts. I genuinely had no problem with them once I got to know them. I didn't exactly start sending them fruit baskets every Christmas but I had no reason to distrust them and couldn't manufacture a good reason to ignore them if I saw them out when I was walking Smiles, so I guess I have to say I liked them.

Dinner itself was the usual fare. We'd all brought a side dish and Mary Lou had done up a roast. Franklin had his jellied beef loaf out on the table and as usual everyone was kind of avoiding taking more than the amount exactly necessary for the sake of politeness. Conversation wound around the others' jobs - Herb is an architect, Kathy a programmer, Franklin does advertising jingles and Mary Lou is a property manager. Herb talked about how no one cares about good design, and the conversation briefly brushed up against how people these days just like to live in the biggest box they can squeeze onto a quarter-acre lot, but Kathy caught Mary Lou looking uncomfortable and so she steered us away into asking about Franklin's latest work. He'd supervised auditions for a campaign selling candy bars, and that was his big victory of the last six months: kids all over the country were humming a tune he'd picked for them whenever they stuck a dollar in a snack machine at school. Everyone stayed politely distant from probing me about my "professional" life, until Franklin said what he always says.

"Your grandfather was also an artist, wasn't he?"

I shrugged. "He certainly was."

"Quite a gifted landscape artist in his day," Franklin said to the others, as though he had to explain it to them every six months or they'd forget. I always hate this part of our conversations. Normally I sit there and let it happen around me but that night, for some reason, I spoke up.

"He worked in a lot of themes," I said without looking up from my plate. "Landscape was just to pay the rent."

"Oh," Franklin replied, trying to save face, "I didn't mean to imply that his art was limited, it's just that landscape is what he's known for."

"I didn't know anyone was known for landscape," Mary Lou said over her glass of blush. She smiled at me, and I looked up to meet her eyes. Mary Lou had a funny look on her face, and I thought again of that mythical sixth sense.

"John Turner," I said around a mouthful of broiled pork. "18th and 19th century. Hans Heysen, Monet, lots of well-known artists had or have landscapes as some of their best-known work. And it's still quite popular. There's Paul Sawyer, in Kentucky. Let's see, Kurt Jackson, he does mixed media sea-front stuff. Very impressive. Lots of stuff of Cornwall; he also does some photography." I shrugged and sat straighter in my chair, set my fork down on the plate, took a loud gulp of meat. "Landscape is a very respected theme, still, even if some people consider it 'fuddy-duddy.'" I stopped. I was starting to get pissed off, and my tone was showing it. I take a finished piece - one I've been careful to make using an aged canvas, a supply of paints it's hard to find anymore, timeline-appropriate brushes, all the things needed to produce a work that's effectively been counterfeited even though I really am Withrow Surrett and I really did paint it myself - and show it to a curator or a dealer and they check the signature and then they cluck their tongues and say something about how I was lucky to find it because surely there must not be many unknown works by my "grandfather" left and then they look at me like I'm the world's worst leech, like they can't believe I value my supposed ancestry so little as to place a high price on it.

Mary Lou arched her eyebrows and made an 'o' with her mouth. "I had no idea," she said. Everyone else chewed in silence. She made a little 'mm' noise to indicate she wasn't finished, like she'd just realized that perhaps she should clarify her statement. "I mean, I had no idea you were such an avid student of art, being a writer yourself."

"Well," I replied, "Fiction is an art."

"Yes," Mary Lou replied, so completely and blissfully tactful that no one could ever accuse her of trying to draw me out. "But there's a reason they call it 'arts *and letters*,' isn't there? I mean, there's an art to writing, yes, but they're not the same *thing*." She lifted an elbow to point it at her husband, gesturing casually with the same arm holding up her glass of wine. "It's not like writing *music*, or, say, painting."

I know what bait smells like, and I didn't bite even though I was definitely in the mood for it. Instead I just shrugged again. "Maybe so. I wouldn't know." Saying that was

hard - the part of me that starved in a one-room apartment over an appliance store in Asheville for five years while I learned that landscapes are so important to the history of so many artists because landscapes will sit still long enough for you to practice your craft, to learn, to experiment, to compare the results of one technique with another, to learn the little inner cues that tell you when you're doing something right, when you should just keep working and not over-think it for a little bit because you've got that vibe; that part of me wanted to throw something. The part of me that has to maintain a public life just normal enough to go as unnoticed as possible, though, that part of me had to ride herd on everything else inside and it won.

Mary Lou was clearly trying to come up with something she could say in response to that non-reply, something that would cement her conversational victory, but I cut her off at the pass by jamming my fork into the sliver of jellied beef loaf I'd gotten and shoving the whole thing in my mouth.

No one had ever seen anyone else actually eat the jellied beef loaf before. Shocked silence descended on the table, and even Mary Lou's pupils dilated a hair's breadth when she saw me do it.

I chewed, and chewed, and chewed. Jellied beef loaf, it turns out, *is* a kind of sausage. Note the careful use of that phrase, though. Imagine taking deviled ham and stuffing it into a sausage skin, then baking it or frying it. It doesn't turn hard, but it's not complete mush. It tastes of salt and bland flesh, so there's nothing remarkable there. It's just meat-flavored *stuff* you put in your mouth and you chew. I was chewing a *lot* of it at once, and I chewed with merciless slowness. Chew. Chew.

Chew.

Franklin was watching to see what I thought, whereas Mary Lou and Kathy and Herb looked like they were waiting for me to topple over dead.

I swallowed the slice, raised both eyebrows slowly, and then lifted my hands over the table. I was very careful to give the impression that I was either going to reach for other food or I was going to try to cover my mouth before projectile vomiting. I let that second or three stretch out, and then I reached for the plate with the rest of the jellied beef loaf on it, carved a generous length of it and lifted it onto my plate.

"Delicious, Franklin." I nodded at him, and then smiled. "I had no idea."

I picked up the entire severed portion, one long and greasy tube of dull beige-pink, and bit it off like a candy bar. "Mmmmm," I said, tonelessly, still smiling. I took another elaborately slow bite. "Yes," I went on, rolling it around my palate, pausing to let the bouquet express itself, then jawing it again. "Delicious."

After that, Kathy eventually picked back up the mantle of conversation and wore that yoke through the rest of dinner. She tried to talk about the artistic side of programming - elegant designs, smooth operations, helpful commenting - and tried to use that to tie into writing in an attempt to build a bridge between me and Mary Lou. Herb helped her out as best he could, and over time it turned into Franklin and Herb and Kathy talking about how corporate structures obscure the creative efforts of the individuals in their employ, no matter how creative any one of them is, even if every individual in the organization is trying to be creative. As they turned into the Bad Luck Club, grousing convivially about the hardships of cubicle farms, Mary Lou kept watching me eat as I finished off the rest of the plate of jellied beef loaf. If Mary Lou was onto me, if she wanted to watch me for whatever it was that raised the hair on the back of her neck, I was happy to give her something innocuously bizarre: a taste for jellied beef loaf. I even smeared some on a biscuit and ate it like pâté to keep her on her toes. I smiled the entire time.

Franklin had just asked Herb and Kathy if they were ready for him to bring out dessert and they had made the appropriate noises about how it was too much but they'd love to try a little when I realized two things: Herb and Kathy were lovers and that I'd just heard a car accident in the distance.

I doubt it will surprise you to learn that vampires have remarkably keen senses. I heard screeching tires and a car horn and then the distinctive tin can crunch of metal against an obstacle and I could tell from the sound that it was probably three blocks away.

No one else had heard it at first, so when I looked up and around towards the windows at the front of the house and the street beyond the others all started in surprise.

"Hear something?" Kathy asked. The slight tremor in her voice told me she and Herb and Franklin had grown weary spending the last fifteen minutes walking on eggs. She was jumpy.

I looked at her for a moment and nodded towards the window. "Thought I heard something, but it could just be my imagination." The others looked towards the windows, too, even Mary Lou, and then I heard the horn again.

"Was that a car?" Franklin looked out in that general direction.

"I..." I paused, considered, went on. "I'd swear I heard a car accident just a second ago." I set down the last of the current biscuit. "But, you know, it could be anything." I looked the other direction at the French doors off the dining room and Smiles was still sitting there watching me. He's a pretty good gauge of when weird stuff's going down, but he can also be misleading. His only job is to protect me. If people are dead in the street he

doesn't really give a damn unless I'm one of them. Killer, on the other hand, forgot Smiles just long enough to run to the fence and start yapping his head off.

The car horn sounded again, closer this time, and then headlights splayed against the front of the house. The horn was more insistent than before, and Franklin walked to the front windows to survey what he could see beyond the shrubs they'd placed there for privacy. "Someone's just pulled up in the drive," he announced.

I knew that something very bad was about to happen because from outside I could hear Smiles start to growl.

I wasn't going to start crazy paranoia talk out of the blue so I sat at the table and watched the living room and foyer. Franklin stood in the bay windows, watching the car in the driveway, and narrated for us as the guy got out of his car and ran up the front walk to the door.

"What's he look like," Mary Lou asked, and Franklin shrugged at her in the dramatic, both hands out to the side, both shoulders pumping up and down way of an actor on stage.

"He's just some guy," Franklin said, but it was cut off by the doorbell ringing frantically: RING-A-RING RING-A-RING RING-A-RING, and then the guy started beating on the front door and shouting something we couldn't make out.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" Mary Lou had stood from the table and was trying to shout over the noise, Franklin looking back at her uncertainly. His hand hadn't moved from the blinds; he hadn't moved from the window. "*Answer it,*" Mary Lou shouted, and Franklin took two hesitating steps to the door. In those few seconds, the guy's shouts had become less complicated and more coherent. Whatever he was yelling before was just a muffled jumble of syllables, but now it was easy to make out: *Help me, there's been an accident,* he was saying. *Help me, please; I need to call the police.*

Kathy and Herb were still sitting at the table with me, and I noticed that they had briefly touched hands under the table, both looking to the other for reassurance. Definitely lovers. They weren't going to do anything, and it didn't look like Franklin would either. I started to stand up, my napkin falling out of my lap and into the middle of my plate, but Mary Lou had already made for the door. The guy was still tap-dancing on the doorbell so I couldn't make out what Mary Lou said to her husband as she went by him but it was ugly and her face was set as hard as an anvil. With one twist of the knob and a practiced sweep of her other hand she'd undone the dead bolt and yanked the front door open. The stylized, decorative ukulele on the back of it - tiny, with three strings instead of four, little wooden spheres suspended on twine such that they would bang against the strings when the door

opened - twanged a wild chord and the others all jumped a little in anticipation of what they might see.

The stranger on their doorstep was, in fact, just some guy. He was in his late 20's or early 30's, dressed in khaki slacks and a solid-color oxford button-up. His close-cropped black hair and his coffee-colored skin cooperated to make him look a little younger than he might actually be, and his wide, red eyes and choked speech indicated that whatever had happened out there, he had just now started sobbing over it. His head was turned away from the house, in the direction he'd come, but when the door opened he whipped back around and stared at Mary Lou, lips quivering, for a long moment before he said anything.

"Holy fuck," he mumbled, his voice strangled and high-pitched. "Oh, god, we have to call an ambulance, I just ran some guy over in the street." Other than his voice reaching for the top end of the scale and shaking wildly, he sounded pretty together. Shock, I figured. Turned out I was right, because he interrupted Mary Lou when she started to say something in response: "But..." He shook his head at her and she was quiet. "But then it happened *again*," he said.

We all blinked at once.

"Franklin." Mary Lou was very calm. "Go and get the telephone and call 911." Franklin was quick to obey, and disappeared into the kitchen immediately. Mary Lou had never taken her eyes off the kid at the door, and this time he let her talk. "Now," she said, voice even, "Tell me exactly what happened so that we can help you." She reached out and took the kid's elbow and led him out of the doorway, into the foyer, and closed and locked the door behind him. He sank into an armless chair between two large, fake plants - a chair I'm pretty sure Mary Lou would only let someone use in the event of an emergency, so the kid at least had that going for him - and took two deep, ragged breaths. "Actually, first," Mary Lou added, "Have you checked on either of them? Do they need first aid?"

The kid shook his head and his eyes went wild all of a sudden, his pupils wide like saucers and the whites bulging out at me. Trust me when I say that I know the look of mortal terror on a human being. This was *that*, and everyone in the room recognized it from firsthand experience or from ancestral memory.

It's interesting, actually, there's been research done on this. There is an evolutionary advantage in people looking all crazy when they're real scared. One article about it said, basically, that it's how cavemen knew when someone was coming up behind them. Bottom line, when one person sees another person do that - eyes wide, pupils dilated, whites of their eyes just all over the place - it produces fear in the observer as well as the observed. It triggers the fight-or-flight mechanism.

It does not trigger that in vampires because a lot of the basic human instincts simply shut down after the Big Bite. That doesn't mean it gives us a warm fuzzy, though. In the movies, it's always Dracula running around with that stupid grin, his fangs hanging out like a TV antenna got stuck in his windpipe, people screaming up and down the countryside. It isn't like that for us, not really. We - well, the smart ones, anyway - try to avoid creating fear as much as possible. Fear gets people talking. Fear makes it hard to keep something secret and it makes people overreact. When humans start shuffling around and looking to each other for guidance we start hoping they've got their torches and pitchforks well out of reach. Fear makes people do *crazy* things.

"No, they don't need first aid," the kid said, shaking his head. I wondered what the hell was taking Franklin so long with 911. "No, they..." The kid threw his hands up to his face and pushed back the skin around his eyes. "They're dead," he mumbled. "And... they *look* dead. They look... *really* dead." We were sitting in silence, and then the kid went on after a second or two. "They look like they've been dead a *long, long time*."

Kathy and Herb both held their breath, and Mary Lou wrinkled up her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"I mean they were corpses," he said after a second. "I mean there were corpses in the street."

"Dead bodies in the *street*?" The Mary Lou Reinholdt that asked this question was not one human being concerned for another; she was the wife of the president of the London Towne neighborhood association.

"Dead bodies... walking around," the kid said, and then he turned to one side and puked his guts out all over one of Mary Lou's plastic plants.

Franklin chose that moment to emerge from the kitchen. "I called 911; they said the police would be here soon." He looked at all of us, looked at the kid trying to wipe his mouth on his sleeve, looked back at Mary Lou. "They said they were already close by, so it would be quick?" Franklin's expression was one of confusion and bewilderment. Mary Lou looked down at the stranger, then up at Franklin and made a motion with one hand, against her other arm. I realized she was trying to mime injecting something. She thought the kid was drug-addled.

"OK," she said to him, taking a step back, and Franklin doing the same, very casually. "So what's your name?"

"Jeremy," he coughed.

"Jeremy," Mary Lou said very gently, "We've called the police, and they're on their way to help. In the meantime, I think if we go outside and look again you're going to find

that you've imagined something very terrible and it's shaken you up very badly." Mary folded her hands together in front of her. "Do you want to go outside and check?"

Jeremy looked at her with his red-rimmed eyes and then looked over to the door and shook his head violently. "No way, lady, no way," he panted. "No way am I going back out there."

"Well, Jeremy, that's up to you." Mary Lou was 110% condescension. "I'm going to go see, and I'll be right back." Before anyone could say anything - though Franklin did at least open his mouth for just a moment - she'd whipped the front door back open and gone out, pulling it shut behind her.

Kathy and Herb were looking intently at one another, both hands still clasped under the corner of the dining room table, and I could hear Smiles growling again outside. Killer was barking his stupid little walnut of a brain out. No one noticed as I slipped in perfect silence out the French doors onto the back porch. I may be a lumbering fat-ass but any vampire worth his salt at least knows his way around some gauzy curtains and a simple door latch.

The back yard was silent for a moment when I stepped outside - Killer ceased his yapping just long enough to look at me, and Smiles' growl stopped as soon as I was in his presence again. For those few seconds I closed my eyes and opened my ears and let my senses roll out across the yard, then over the fence and into the adjacent lots, on out across the neighborhood. I could hear televisions in several houses, a cough that sounded like it wouldn't get better anytime soon - had to be Old Lady Jenkins, the one with all the in-home care - a couple of radios tuned to a local call-in request show.

I could hear soft footsteps on grass, someone shifting their feet back and forth.

I could hear shuffling, shoes scuffing against asphalt as though a drunken man were staggering down the street.

And another.

And another.

Very softly, I could hear Mary Lou praying under her breath.

I opened my eyes, and the night was gone. Darkness is no enemy of mine, and these old eyes can slice right through it. Smiles was watching me, waiting patiently for a command. I signaled him to stay and went out the gate to the front yard.

Mary Lou was standing at the curb, on the grass, looking one way and then another and shifting her weight between her feet. Her lips were moving but I don't think she was

exactly in charge of what was coming out. Fight or flight is not an instinct many people are really at home with anymore in their insulated little lives.

I strode up and cleared my throat from about six feet back. Mary Lou whipped around with wide eyes, took a moment to recognize me, then turned back and looked mutely up the street. I took two more steps to stand beside her, and followed her gaze.

Three corpses in their one-time Sunday best were staggering mindlessly in small circles in the middle of the street. They were probably thirty, maybe forty feet away. If they had noticed us yet they didn't have much in the way of showing it. They just turned and turned and turned again, arms stiff by their sides, hands clenching and unclenching reflexively.

You'll not mind I don't describe their faces.

"Whu..." Mary Lou was outside the mind of someone who could form words for the moment.

It is said that there are stranger things in heaven and earth, et cetera, and they ain't kidding. I know the world holds some esoteric and arcane shit because I'm one of those things myself but I had never seen the dead literally walk. I mean, we've all seen the movies, right? I have, anyway. Shit, for a solid three decades all I had to watch at night were old movies on UHF channels. These fellas weren't exactly *Night of the Living Dead* and weren't exactly *Frankenstein*. No one could confuse them for a mutant or a junkie on a bad batch. They were dead things, plain and simple, walking around. They did not moan, they did not hiss or howl, they just turned in slow circles, around and around, their eyes locked in front of them.

"Go inside," I said to Mary, very softly. "Just go inside. Lock the door behind you."

She still wasn't very capable of listening and just stood there. I started to get antsy – surely they would notice us eventually, right? Surely they would sense we were here: smell us or hear us or see us or something. They were dead, yeah, but in the movies that's always how it happens, right? Someone screams and then the zombies all stop what they're doing, turn slowly and charge. I really didn't want to be in that scene of the movie. I always hated those parts the worst, when some idiot loses their shit and gets everyone else killed.

I put my hand around Mary Lou's chin and turned her head so that she looked me in the eye. With all the force of personality I could muster, I bored my mind into hers and said, very distinctly, "Go inside and lock the door and let no one inside." There's a reason why the Count always gets what he wants when he's alone with somebody in the vampire flicks. Mary foggily turned around and started stumbling back towards her front door.

I watched her go, checking over my shoulder to see if the three walkers up the road had heard us or anything, and as she neared the front door she reached for the knob. The door opened before she got there, though, and Franklin Not Frank poked his head out.

"EVERYTHING OKAY OUT HERE?" he called to me, unnecessarily loudly. He was scared and wanted to demonstrate to everyone that everything was precisely OK out here.

I heard the scuffling in the street stop, and turned around to look. None of the walkers were looking at me, but they had turned towards the house, and the front door, and the source of the shout. They started shuffling towards the house and their stiff arms started to twitch.

I will kill that man before they do, I swear to God, I thought. What I said, however, was yelled over my shoulder. "Get her in there and shut that fucking door!"

"Well, there's no need for," Franklin started to say, but Mary was still under my orders and she shoved him back inside, followed after him, shut the door calmly – absently – behind herself, and I heard the deadbolt slam home. That was something, at least.

The walkers were making achingly slow progress – in five seconds they got about as many feet – and so I clicked my cheeks twice. Smiles jumped the Reinholdts' fence from a sitting start and bounded up to my side. "Guard," I said, and Smiles braced himself on all fours, eyes on the lead walker, a growl starting to climb the stairs way down in the bottom of his chest.

Picture the scene for a moment, if you will: a suburban McMansion squats on an otherwise '60s-ish street. The house itself is mammoth and beige and appears to have been dispensed from a machine designed to manufacture the word "dull" made manifest. A morbidly obese guy in blue jeans and an '82 World's Fair t-shirt is standing there with his arms crossed over his chest. A Rottweiler two sizes too big is standing next to him, ready for a fight. A droplet of pink foam is at one corner of the dog's mouth. It growls deeply, like a bone saw dropped three octaves. There are three obviously dead people in black suits walking towards them. Their arms twitch. Their hands clutch at the air. Their faces are expressionless because their faces aren't really there anymore. In the distance, a small dog is working its heart out to sustain a crescendo of barking. A man is shouting questions inside the house behind them. The walkers come painfully slowly down the street, shoes dragging, one of them barely able to walk for what appears to be a crushed hip – he's injured in a way that for a living thing might spell death but he's still moving under his own power.

They approach to twenty feet.

They approach to fifteen.

The fat man draws a breath.

I was, I want to note, ready to fight. I would have killed all three of them – again, I guess – right out in the street in front of God and the neighborhood association's executive board and everybody. I could answer their questions later. I could come up with a story about a martial arts class I'd signed up for, a home gym I'd bought, some semi-plausible reason why a guy who looks like me would know that much about hand-to-hand combat. I drew one great breath and flexed every muscle in my body and heard my heart jerk in my chest so that it said THA-DUP, very loudly, and old blood started to push through my veins. Blood does many things for my kind. Hearing a heartbeat, even our own fake one, can do wonders for morale.

The lead walker got within ten feet of me and I kicked out one leg so that I was standing with my feet spread, one forward of the other, hands open, arms bent at the elbow. I was ready to pounce, and Smiles had shifted his weight so that his front was crouching and his ass was in the air, ready to do the same. His growl was a powerful and steady grating, and I started to growl, myself, the two of us ready to kill.

The lead walker got within five feet of me and stopped suddenly, then wheeled and started shuffling more quickly in the other direction.

I blinked, and Smiles' growl ceased for a moment.

The leader stumbled right past the other two, got about ten feet, and then started doing circles again.

The other two likewise got within five feet of us, spun around and headed in other directions.

I relaxed for a moment, and watched them. Smiles wasn't going to move until I gave him another command, so I stepped gingerly around to my right and forward in a great arc, keeping about ten feet between me and the lead walker.

Then I stepped within five feet of him, and he tore off – as best he could – in the opposite direction.

I tried it again with one of the other two and got the same results.

The walking dead, I realized, were afraid of me.

One of the ones I'd spooked made the mistake of staggering within a couple of feet of Smiles and my old dog was quick to react: he had the guy's throat in his teeth before I could make a sound and two seconds later Smiles was standing on its chest. I heard bones snap and the walker's head popped clean off, rolling a few feet before bumping against the curb.

The body was limp under Smiles, and he stood there growling at the corpse's head where it came to rest.

So they feared me, but not my dog.

I thought about this just long enough to realize it before a phrase I hate to think on over-much came to mind, unbidden: "food chain."

I gave Smiles the command to heel, as anxious as he was to go after the other two walkers, and I gave the fear and revulsion I felt for these things a few seconds to subside. Deep breaths are calming even when your lungs are just for show. I let their aimless, stumbling presence in the street settle into my view. I did my best to calm myself and then I opened up my senses again and let them wash out over the neighborhood.

Televisions and radios were still playing in other houses. Either the neighborhood didn't know about these things yet or it was too late for those folks. They weren't my primary concern, anyway; I wanted to know if there were more of them. I could hear the two nearby, of course, and I could hear Smiles' accelerated breath, and I could hear voices inside Franklin and Mary Lou's house – sounded like they were still doing some arguing in there.

Underneath it all, I could still hear scuffling feet, farther away, old dress shoes dragged across asphalt in all directions. The neighborhood was full of these things, I'd have guessed a dozen or more, and I needed to decide now whether to deal with them myself or wait for help to arrive.

My reverie was broken when I heard glass shatter around the back of the house, and the two walkers in the street stopped and turned in that direction. Two seconds later, screams erupted from inside, and I sicced Smiles on one of the walkers while I ran down another. With a single punch I popped the head and neck off of mine and Smiles had taken the other one out at the knees.

"Here," I commanded, and Smiles let go of it to come bounding after me. All three and a half bucks of me were moving as fast as I could make them go, and in a flash I had kicked the front door in with one foot and was stepping inside with the other. Smiles shot past and dug his claws into the hardwoods to stop a few feet in front of me, eyes forward. I glanced around to see what the hell was happening. Kathy and Herb were in each other's arms in the middle of the living room and Mary Lou and Franklin and the new kid, Jeremy, were pressed against the stairs, cowering.

A walker was standing in the dining room, its feet hung in those gauzy drapes on the French doors. What was left of Killer, I am not terribly sad to say, was clutched in one hand and the walker was reaching forward with the other, fingers twitching, clawing at the air to try to pull free of those drapes. Everyone was screaming all at once. I grimaced and slammed the door shut behind me.

“STAY,” I bellowed, as Smiles shook his flanks, about to lunge. I strode forward, shoved Kathy and Herb down behind the coffee table, walked around the couch into the dining room and stopped at the other end of the table from the walker.

Its eyes fell on me and it snarled.

You ever watched two dogs that were playing all of a sudden get into a real fight? They're just having a normal time and then one growls the wrong way and the other answers, instinctively?

I bent a little at the knees, clenched my fists and did something I should never have done in front of another living being: my lips curled out of the way so that my fangs could drop down and I growled, long and low, and every light flickered for a moment and every shadow got just a little darker.

All the screaming stopped, like a switch, and Smiles started barking as I leapt, knowing the walker would just try to run if I got closer, knocking the table to one side and going straight for that one outstretched arm. I grabbed it near the elbow in both hands, the walker emitting something like a strangled scream. With one long, arced motion I had wrenched it free of the drapes, gotten it airborne and brought its back down over one knee with an unmistakable splintering sound. On the rebound I caught its neck in my hands, planted my shoe against its spine and tugged hard until I heard that pop I'd heard outside. I hefted the head back through the broken glass of the door and threw the body after it.

I turned back around and everyone was staring at me.

“You're gonna want to theal thethe windowth,” I said.

Everyone was silent and pale – even Jeremy, whose skin had gone from creamed coffee to a sick beige – and I checked myself.

I was lisping.

My fangs were still out.

The next twenty minutes were filled with busy silence, except for my voice. I'd withdrawn my fangs the moment I'd realized I was still showing them, and then started barking orders. People who are in the early stages of shock just want to be told what to do, and I took full advantage of that. Kathy and Herb got the food off the table and then lifted it

up into place in front of the broken back door. Franklin and Mary Lou told me their kids were out of town for a school trip and wouldn't be back for two more days. I then put them on door-fixing duty. When I kicked it open I'd blown the deadbolt out and across the room, so I had them digging a little bathroom throw-bolt out of a cabinet and affixing it to the front door for all the good it would do.

Jeremy, the new kid, was useless. He'd seen too much in too short a time. Between hitting a couple of them with his car and all this jazz in the house he'd gone catatonic. I didn't hassle him, didn't even try to give him a job to keep him occupied. Instead I stood in the middle of the living room, where I could keep an eye on my newest soldiers, and flipped my cell phone open.

Vampires are, as a rule, fairly solitary creatures. Still, like in any subgroup, there is a culture of sorts. We don't totally get in each other's business, we don't do a lot of socializing, but a hierarchy always asserts itself in any given place where there's more than one of us. Here, I'm at the top of that hierarchy. I make the rules and I enforce the rules.

As the local boss I have to have a couple of lieutenants, biters who can help me keep a sense of what's going on around town. Seth is the best of these: a taciturn punk who's never shown much interest in discussing his life story. He keeps his nose clean and tells me when there's trouble, like if someone's come around from other parts and doesn't keep their business tidy, that sort of thing, and that's really the best I can hope for from any of us. The most valuable thing one vampire can offer another is to leave them the hell alone and not make any trouble.

Seth's the bartender at a club downtown. The owner's a lush, too drunk to notice that Seth's looked twenty-five for the last fifteen years. They have a deal worked out about Seth sending a friend – some kid he pays on the side – to take care of receiving deliveries during the day. The lush doesn't care who signs for the packages, and Seth makes sure the place's inventory doesn't go missing, and everybody's nice and happy.

I dialed Seth, knowing he'd be serving the tail end of the office drunks and getting ready for the start of the college-kid rush. His phone rang twice, and then he snapped it open:

“I could use a hand if you're bored,” he said, voice low.

“You at work?”

“Along with a few customers, yeah.”

“I take it you're boxed in?”

"Don't tell me this shit's happening all the way up in the suburbs," Seth said. We were both silent for a few seconds. If it was happening here, and it was happening downtown, it was everywhere.

"I've got my hands full, too," I whispered into the phone. "I can't come lend a hand. I was hoping you would do that for me, actually."

"Are you safe?"

I paused. What answer did the 2nd in command want to hear?

"Eh," I replied. "How are the cops?"

"We saw a bunch, lots of sirens and speeding earlier. Haven't seen anything in a while. The scanner's pretty quiet."

"It'll take them a while to get here, I take it."

"Probably."

I sighed, and then said, "Keep safe."

"Yeah."

We hung up at the same time.

I watched over the others as they worked. It took them a while to dig up that lock and manage to get it on the door. They fumbled with it, swore at it, wiped rivulets of sweat from their brow as they did so. Kathy and Herb, meanwhile, were moving more furniture into place to barricade the French doors in the dining room. It wasn't perfect, but nothing ever is. This was the best we could do.

After that, I gave a few quiet but equally stern orders for them to get the food up, check what was still edible, then put it away in the fridge and the freezer. The power was on and we didn't have any idea how long they would be trapped here so I wanted them maximizing the use of what resources they had. I went through the pantry and did a quick inventory check - typical suburbanite fair, lots of prepared foods and almost nothing raw or that really required heat to be eaten. If they had a can-opener, and they did, they could live for weeks on the stores of their massive walk-in. I was a little jealous and a little disgusted all at the same time. My ultra-frugal mother would have died if she'd lived to see it.

And finally, after forty five minutes or maybe an hour, when it was getting on towards eleven and there wasn't a whole lot I could think of to make them do, they sat down wearily in the living room and broke into obvious couples and just held each other in silence.

"I'm gonna step out front for a smoke," I said, my voice quiet. "You slide this new lock behind me and only let me and Smiles back in, alright?" Franklin nodded absently, so I

walked out with Smiles at my side and dug a bent cigarette out of my pocket and lit it. The little bolt lock clacked behind me and I let out the first drag in a long, slow stream through my nose. So far so good, but I knew as sure as anything that sooner or later, and probably sooner, one of them was going to ask the obvious question: what the fuck am I?

Of course, the sooner the cops got here, the better. Then I could just leave and blame any questions on the obvious craziness of the whole night. "You must've been seeing things," is something I have said on more than one occasion and it's worked. Sometimes I've had to put a little oomph behind it, a little hoodoo, but it doesn't exactly work like that on crowds. I'd never been in a situation like this before: up close and personal, with a bunch of my neighbors, in a stressful situation in which I am the only one capable of really defending myself?

They are fucked, I thought.

I got through one smoke and then lit another. What? It's not like I'm going to die of cancer, is it? As I worked on the second, Smiles was sitting alert by my side, sniffing the air, and I closed my eyes to let my ears go walking. I could hear more walkers, in the distance - more than I'd heard before. I wondered where they were coming from, what had made them? This is the South and we have graveyards *everywhere*. There were probably thousands - hundreds of thousands, maybe millions - of potential walkers within a hundred miles of Raleigh. How long would this last? What was tomorrow night going to be like? These are the sorts of things I was thinking to myself, and finally I finished my second butt and let my mind come back to the here and now.

Well, I thought, *No time like the present to make a better world.* With that, I set off up the front path. "I'll be back in a few," I called over my shoulder, loud, so they'd hear me inside. No point being subtle given what I was going to do.

I was going to clean up the neighborhood.

The first walkers I ran into were standing in the front yard of the house next door. It took me and Smiles all of ten seconds to dispatch them. I then strode up to the front door and rang the bell, hammering on the door with my other hand, calling out. No answer. The lights were on, and I peeked through the blinds in the front to see the sliding glass door at the back of the house, shattered, a drape torn down from in front of it. There were corpses inside, but fresh ones, not moving. OK, so there was already a body count. I beat on the door again, got nothing, then kicked it in so hard the hinges snapped and it flew across the entryway. That got something's attention, but it was a walker. I took him out fast, annoyed that I was having to do a little crab-walk to cut them off as soon as I got close enough to make them run the other direction.

I moved across the street, checked that house and started working my way out across the neighborhood in a spiral.

By midnight I'd gone a two-house-wide circle around the Reinholdts, and swung back by. They didn't answer when I called to them from the door but I caught the whole crew - Kathy, Herb, Mary Lou and Franklin but not Jeremy - watching me from the living room window as I left again to continue my patrol.

Our neighborhood was built a few decades ago, but it's grown again here and there over the years. The way I figured, I had a couple hundred houses to check, the pool and clubhouse, the playground and a small city park that backed up against the back of our development. It would keep me busy at least and it would keep me from being around the Reinholdts' place to answer any questions.

I figured they were probably suspicious of me by now - scared, shocked, the usual. They were probably debating what to do about me. I didn't mind giving them some time to work that out in my absence.

While I was out working my way through the neighborhood I called 911 a few more times. I never got an answer, just a 'please wait and your call will be answered' message. I didn't even know 911 could *do* that. I checked in with Seth and he was getting the same, though he'd seen more cops out since we'd spoken the first time. It sounded to him like they were doing the same thing I was doing - just trying to make a sweep and kill as many as they could find, then turn around and do it again. Every time he saw a siren, he heard gunfire. He and his clientele were holed up at the bar, biding their time. They didn't have much in the way of food but they had a whole bar's worth of liquor and that was all the drunks really cared about.

By the time I'd gone door-to-door through the whole neighborhood it was three in the morning. I hoped the crew back at the Reinholdts' place was asleep by now. On the other hand, how could they sleep? I hoped most of all that none of them had decided to try to run for it. Any one of them on his or her own would be dead meat in front of a walker.

As for the neighborhood, it wasn't pretty. Most people were either not answering or their house had obviously been intruded upon. A few people were willing to call out to me from upstairs windows, but only a very few. Most of those were willing enough to exchange a few quiet words, ask if I'd seen the cops, all the predictable stuff, but some of them just shouted at me to get away, stay away, leave them alone. They were scared shitless and I was a stranger to most of them. I'm sure they'd all seen the name on my mailbox but very,

very few of these people had ever seen *me* despite my having lived here since the '60s and most of these people not even having been born then.

At the last house, which was another collection of victims, I tore open their garage door and dug a can of yellow paint and a brush out of a cabinet. Wielding that, I started to work backwards through the neighborhood, marking houses as I went. The city park and the clubhouse and the pool could take care of themselves. For now, I had houses to mark. If the occupants had been unresponsive and I'd confirmed a corpse inside, I painted a big X on the front door. If there were living people inside, I painted "OK" in big letters. On most houses I painted a question mark.

It took me three more hours to work my way back to the Reinholdts. Surely by now they'd have settled on how to handle me or they'd all be asleep. Either way, I figured I'd at least gotten to skip the melodrama. I found a few new walkers on the way back, and that told me that wherever they were coming from, there were still more coming.

It was just before 6:00 AM when Smiles and I walked back up the front walk of the Reinholdts' house. The sky was just starting to turn blue instead of black on the eastern edge, and I knew it wasn't going to be long before I had to get inside. My house was just a few minutes' walk and these walkers were nothing to me. I could have gotten to my house on time if I'd had to wade knee-deep through them the whole way there.

To tell the truth, a part of me wanted to do just that. The same part of me that pulled at its chain when the walker in their dining room groaned at me, the part that made me just sweep the table aside and pull its head off with my bare hands, that part of me wanted to turn around and go home and say fuck it, they can all die. On the other hand, a part of me felt a tiny little twinge of guilt for having left them here rather than take them with me - though of course that would have been a terrible mistake. Guilt rarely listens to reason, though, so I set down the can of paint, raised my right hand and knocked hard on the front door.

"It's Withrow. I'm back."

It was quiet inside, and I started to worry, so I knocked again. I called out louder. "I've been around the neighborhood. I've cleaned up the ones I could find out in the open. I've checked in with everybody who'd answer the door. C'mon, I just want to make sure you're OK and then I'm going home."

Still silent.

I looked down at Smiles and he was busy watching behind us, sniffing the air again. I took that as a good sign, but still, I had to know for sure. I clicked my cheeks at him and

the two of us went around back to the barricaded French doors. I clambered over them and into the dining room.

Mary Lou was sitting on the couch, an enormous handgun across her lap. The others were sound asleep, snoring to beat the band, huddled in the middle of the floor. I was kind of surprised that I hadn't woken them but I also noticed a prescription bottle on the coffee table: sleeping pills, a brand I've seen advertised on TV. Vampires are real good at knowing when someone's alive and someone isn't, and when they're in a bad way, and I could also tell that none of them were breathing heavily or laboriously. They hadn't tried to do anything stupid, they'd just made sure they could sleep, except for Mary Lou: awake, exhausted but alert, standing guard over them. I'd bet in an instant that she was the one who'd organized them and made them get some rest.

"What are you?" she said, very quietly. For a second I was afraid the gun was meant for me, but she didn't put a hand on it. She just had it sitting nearby, her hands together in her lap, fingers intertwined to keep from fidgeting. She didn't even look at me.

"You know what I am," I sighed and eased into a recliner. Smiles padded around the sleepers in the floor, climbed into my lap and put his head down on my arm. "The real question, of course, is whether you're going to do anything about it."

"When you left," Mary Lou said, "We were terrified. We sat up talking about it for a long time."

"I figured as much."

"You went off and gave us time to talk about you?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. What'd you decide?"

"They..." She nodded at the sleepers, stifled a yawn, gulped out of a big mug of coffee. "Didn't decide anything. They're useless." She sighed quietly. I arched my eyebrows. She still wasn't looking at me, and there were tears in her eyes, but there was a hardness there that hadn't been present when she knocked at my door all those months ago. "No, they talked and talked and talked. No one would say it, of course, so they just talked around it."

"The 'v' word," I murmured.

She nodded, still staring out the window.

"Lots of 'is it safe to have someone like him in the neighborhood,' lots of starting to ask the obvious questions and then stopping because no one wanted to be the one to say it."

I drew a breath and said, "What are the obvious questions? Pretend I don't know."

"Oh," She rubbed her eyes. "You know, what does he eat? Does he turn other people into... what *he* is when he does it. What's he going to do to us now that we know? All that stuff."

I nodded, and stroked the fur behind Smiles ears. He made a little browr of pleasure and snuggled in.

"Oh, and of course they think your dog is Satanic."

I smiled a little, but I meant what I said. "I don't advise anyone try to mess with my dog."

"Typical," she sighed. "Where did you grow up? It had to be in the country, with an accent and an attitude like that."

"I don't generally like to discuss my life," I replied. Also, the small talk was a way to avoid something, and I couldn't tell what it was.

"OK," she said, and she lifted one shoulder in an exhausted shrug. "We sat in silence for a few moments, and then I patted Smiles to get him to stand up and climb down off my lap. "Looks like you've got things under control," I said. "I'm gonna go home." Mary Lou didn't seem interested in responding at first.

"You didn't ask what *I* had decided to do about you," she said as I stood.

I sat back down. "That's true."

"You don't care what I think?"

I opened my mouth to reply with: *It doesn't matter what you think*, but I stopped. Now probably wasn't the time. Instead I remained neutral. "What did you decide?" I asked.

"At first I wanted you gone. I wanted you out of our neighborhood. I wanted to call the cops and tell them... I don't know. Yesterday if I'd called them and told them a vampire lives in my neighborhood, you wouldn't be the one they took away. Now? Everything is different now, isn't it? Assuming there are even cops to call." She rubbed her eyes again. "Then I realized that I was terrified - not terrified *of* you, though that was true at first. No, what scared me was something altogether different. I was scared that you wouldn't come back, that we would be on our own. I could herd them into submission on the easy stuff - convince them to make themselves sleep rather than have to sit up all night listening to them go over and over and over what to do with you. But I'm not sure I can pick up this gun and shoot one of those... things. You know, if it tried to come in the back door or something? Franklin is here, and I suppose if it threatened him then I'd have to but I don't *know*. All I know is that they run from you. I watched the one in the dining room try to do it. I watched the ones in the neighbor's yard do it. You went out for hours, on foot, unarmed, and you came back without a scratch. You've knocked on every door in the

neighborhood. You've killed how many of those things? Don't actually answer that. You did it without a thought. I'm sure I could tuck you away in a midnight movie definition if I needed to, just like I can with the things outside, but that's not the point. The point is that I was scared you wouldn't come back."

"I appreciate your concern," I said quietly. "But you don't need to worry about me."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking about you," she sighed.

The silence in the house, other than the snoring, was heavy. The silence out in the street was heavy. Usually, when I'd be bedding down right about now, I'd already be hearing a few cars: the paper delivery, the first early-risers headed out to beat the morning traffic. All of that was absent. All I could hear outside, now, were birds. It occurred to me none of us had tried to turn on the news, see what the hell was happening. It was like the second we saw *them* everything went out the window: all normalcy, all reason. Now Mary Lou wanted me to stick around and protect them when she was the one who'd managed to put them together, get them talking, get them to *sleep*, loaded a gun and sat up all night watching over them. She didn't need me. She just needed to keep doing what she was doing.

"I've got my own house to worry about," I finally said. "And others to think about."

She swung her eyes around at me at last. "Others like you?"

"I..." I rubbed my eyes. The clock said 6:07. I had fifteen minutes to get back home. "No. But people, all the same."

"You're lying," she said quietly. "There have to be others like you. I imagine you all know each other. I bet you all know all about each other, keep an eye on each other. You'd want to know if each other were in trouble. You took a call earlier. I bet that was one of them. Are they here? Do they know whether this is everywhere? I imagine it is. It must be, or the police would have come by now."

I chewed my thumbnail for a moment. "It's here and it's downtown and that's all I know. I need to get home. Turn on CNN and see for yourself."

Mary Lou blinked at that suggestion, then reached over and picked up the remote. A click, and the TV came on; another, and she had muted it, turned on the closed captioning. She turned to a local station - now would be the early newscast - and a disheveled redhead woman who wasn't the usual anchor was talking into the camera. Behind her right shoulder there were scenes of fires, of emergency crews, of a National Guard truck rolling down Capitol Boulevard. The shot cut to some police officers gunning down an advancing wave of walkers but the station had, in its eternal propriety, blurred them so we wouldn't have to look at those not-faces. The captioning read:

I REPEAT, POLICE ARE WORKING THEIR WAY THROUGH THE CITY AND EXPECT TODAY TO REACH THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN EXTREMITIES OF CITY LIMITS. IF THEY KNOCK AT YOUR DOOR, PLEASE CALL OUT CLEARLY TO ANSWER THEM. THEY WILL HAVE SOME EMERGENCY SUPPLIES ON HAND, INCLUDING FIRST AID MATERIALS. IF YOU DO NOT ANSWER, THEY MAY ENTER TO SEARCH FOR HOSTILE AGENTS.

"House to house?" I said, surprised. "Goddamn, that can't be legal."

"You just did it."

I glared at Mary Lou for a second. "I ain't the police."

She looked back at me, and raised both eyebrows in disbelief. "That makes it better?"

"I did it because I care," I said.

"You care so much you'll leave me here by myself?"

"Oh, Mary Lou," I said, because I had finally had it with just that tiny bit, "Get over it. You've got a gun the size of a Howitzer and four grown people to help. The five of you might shit your pants when you do it but you could take one of those things in two seconds if you worked together. I may be strong and fast and tough but I'm no five adults who are high on adrenaline. You are going to be fine. Just..." I spread my hands in frustration. Had people really gotten that weak? Were they that timid? Was I like this, sixty years ago? "Just get the fuck over it, already."

"Easy for you to say," she snapped, her eyes hard, her lips thin and tight. "They *run* from you. They didn't eat your *dog*. They didn't walk out in front of your *car*. They didn't break down your back *door*. Oh, yes," and now she was practically hissing, "It's very easy indeed for you to say. What's a few more monsters when you're one yourself?"

My eyes widened, just a little. I realized Smiles had awakened, and was watching her in silence. She looked at me, then at him, then threw her hands up and let them flop down on the couch beside her. "Oh, yes, very easy; very easy, indeed. Maybe they were right. Maybe your dog *is* Satanic. Maybe *you're* a demon. Fuck if I know. All I know is what I see on *Buffy*. Maybe you're just cowards. Maybe you're all just terrible cowards, slinking through the shadows and *feeding* off what you can, scurrying off the second the light gets shined on what you are, like cockroaches with thumbs." She turned back to the TV, where the warning about the house-to-house searches was being repeated. "Well go, then. Go and have a lot of fun when the cops show up at your house today and they call out and you're... I don't know, in your coffin? Buried in the earth? Who knows? Go right ahead and let them knock your goddamn door in when you don't answer and let them shoot your dog and tag you as just another corpse because if you can just walk away from five people who want

your help - who need your help *and* want your help and how often does someone like *you* hear that *anyway* - then I don't know what you are and I don't *want* to know." She reached up and brushed a tear aside, and then punched the pillow beside her on the couch.

None of what she said was what kept me from stomping out in a blind rage and taking a door with me so they'd all learn what happened when they pissed me off. It was that TV news broadcast, and those words being repeated every thirty seconds or so in big, block letters in the closed captioning: IF YOU DO NOT ANSWER, THEY MAY ENTER.

If the cops came in and found me during the day, either I'd never wake up and they'd think I was a body and when I came to I'd have a whole mess of questions to answer; or Smiles would kill them; or I'd wake up and likely kill them in confusion. Day sleep is not like normal people sleep. It's like hitting a brick wall. You close your eyes and you're just *out*.

Mary Lou, for all her self-righteousness, was right. I'd never make it if the cops came into my house and I knew myself that when they knocked I'd never answer.

"I'll stay," I said heavily. "But I have to have a dark room. Really dark. I don't mean dim, I mean pitch black, preferably a closet or an interior bathroom where I can stuff a bunch of shit under the door. It has to happen in the next ten minutes or I'll set this whole house on fire when the sun catches me." It was the most direct discussion of the nature of my biological state that I'd had with anyone since the night my maker turned me free.

Mary Lou was staring at me, kind of stunned I'd actually agreed or said all that or anything. I realized instantly that she hadn't really blamed me and she didn't really want a vampire as her benevolent protector. She was just angry, and sick of it, and scared, and I was there to be yelled at. But after a few seconds she set the gun on the coffee table and nodded. "OK. Let's get you in the guest bath. It's going to be cramped."

"Any port in a storm," I sighed. "But do not, no matter what, open the door during the day. Trust me."

"Alright," she said. "I can make sure that doesn't happen."

"Smiles is going to keep watch outside the door." We were walking up the steps and she grabbed some towels out of a linen closet, handing them to me. "It's what he does. Nothing in the world will change it. I'm not even sure *I* could get him not to. So, nobody comes near the bathroom. He'll go for anybody he perceives as a threat to me and he knows during the day that I'm vulnerable."

Mary Lou nodded, opened the door of the guest bath and gestured for me to enter. I started towards the door but she looked puzzled and said, "So why didn't he go for me when I was yelling at you?"

"We're... bonded." I said. "It's complicated. Bottom line, he didn't do anything because I didn't feel threatened."

She looked blank for a moment, so I said it: "I could take you, gun and all, if I had to. OK? Your curiosity satisfied now?" Then I signaled Smiles to sit in the hallway, eased into the bathroom, closed the door, stuffed two towels under it and settled into the tub. Before I'd even rested my head against the tile the day sleep had me and I was gone.

My eyes snapped open the moment the sun dipped behind the horizon and the last of its light left the world.

My sleep was uneasy. When I'm at home, I can sleep well past sunset if I let myself. I was always a deep sleeper, and some of that quality remained after the big flush. These were unusual surroundings, though, uncomfortable and cold and quiet in a way other than the usual quiet of my own home. The hum of the central air was different, the white noise of electronics. As soon as my eyes opened and I remembered why I was in someone else's bathroom I rose and rubbed my eyes and clicked my cheeks. Smiles barked once in response from the other side of the door.

So far, so good.

I smoothed my hair down as best I could, poked around in the drawers and cabinets and found a little bottle of mouthwash. I swigged it, spat it in the sink and splashed some water on my face. Then I yanked the towels out from under the door and opened it. Smiles licked my fingers and panted happily, and I listened down the hall, down the stairs, to check for indicators of how the day had gone.

Nothing.

I walked out into the hall, to the top of the stairs, put my hand on the railing and started to descend. There was a quiet gasp from the living room. I guessed at least one of them had managed to survive the day.

When I got to the bottom they were all awake and alert; they were even eating leftovers from the night before. Mary Lou looked at me for a long second, then at the others, and I followed her gaze. They were all staring at me like they'd seen a ghost.

"I told them what you did on your patrol," Mary Lou said. "The cops figured out your code pretty quickly. They said..." She paused, and cleared her throat. "We're the best-organized neighborhood they've seen so far. They were very grateful."

There was something in the tone of her voice when she said 'grateful,' and after a second I got it: the cops were grateful, Mary Lou was grateful, but someone wasn't and she was trying to rebuke them like a mother in front of company.

"The rest of you want me out." I stated it as an epilogue to her update. Kathy and Herb wouldn't look at me. Franklin looked to Mary Lou then back. I met his gaze. "You, specifically, want me out. Fair enough. It's your house."

"Well, uh... heh heh..." Franklin did that same little verbal tic again. "It's not that we aren't gra--"

I didn't let him finish. "You're glad to be alive but scared that I'm more dangerous than anything I might have saved you from. You don't know what I am and that terrifies you. Well, welcome to the human fucking race," I said. "Ain't nothing new that hasn't scared us shitless. Trust me. I remember a lot more of this world than you do."

"I can't believe you'd say 'us,'" Kathy murmured.

I glanced at her then looked back at Mary Lou. "Fuck this," I said. "I appreciate the use of your bathroom. I appreciate you doing like I asked and not messing with me during the day. I appreciate the food from last night, and now I'm going the fuck home because I don't appreciate being talked to like that."

"I'll see you out," Mary Lou said. She stood up and walked to the front door, threw back the makeshift bolt I'd had them put on, turned the knob and walked out ahead of me. I pulled the door shut behind me.

"Give me a cigarette," she said.

I raised one eyebrow, then nodded at her. She'd changed clothes, taken a shower, done her hair, put on makeup. Mary Lou was getting back to normal real fucking fast compared to the rest of the sad sacks in there. Jeremy was still catatonic and the rest were barely moving. I held out my pack, open, and then lit her cig and followed it with one of my own.

"They gonna do me any harm?" I asked.

Mary Lou laughed quietly, under her breath. "I thought you could take them," she said.

"That I can," I replied, "does not in fact mean that I *want* to."

"OK. That's something." She wouldn't look me in the eye but that had made her think.

We smoked in silence for a minute, then I said, "So what's the state of things?"

"The news has no idea what these things are. I mean, everybody knows, but no one's going to come out and say *zombies*. I watched a little Fox for a laugh. They think it's an elaborate terrorist attack. It was contained to just a few places as far as they can tell. The city's mostly been swept clean. They said on the six o'clock news that most of them were found in graveyards, obviously, but that they hadn't gone anywhere. They were hostile

but not... purposeful. The estimated toll is pretty high, but it's not like half the city is gone." Mary Lou nodded her head towards the back of the neighborhood. "It turns out the park back there used to be a graveyard."

"And the contractors didn't move the bodies they got paid to move," I finished for her. "Happens all the time."

Mary Lou nodded, shrugged. "Nothing's open, the governor and president declared states of emergency, no one is going to work, no one should go anywhere except for emergency supplies, that kind of thing." She shrugged half-heartedly. "It's starting to sound less like an attack by the walking dead and more like a really bad hurricane." She laughed suddenly and shook her head. "It's fucked up. Can you believe they handled zombies better than they handled Katrina?"

"Fuck yes I can," I said. "A bunch of white folks in suburbia? The government's quick to help us, I'm sure." I sighed, and stubbed out my cigarette on her front step, then lit another. "That's good, though, that people are thinking of it that way. The sooner people just file this away in their brains as something bizarre but temporary, the sooner we can get back to normal."

Mary Lou finished her own cigarette in silence then put it out very delicately and, while she was doing so, picked up the butt of mine and stuck them in her pocket. "I'll take them in," she said. So here she was, even making sure I didn't litter in her yard. I guessed she'd be okay after all. "But," she went on, "About going back to normal..."

I nodded and stuck my thumb towards the inside of her house. "They're all still wiggled out."

"Yeah."

"About me."

She nodded.

"I can fix it, you know." I sighed and rubbed my free hand through my hair.

"That would be a good thing," Mary Lou said.

"Alright. I'll need to see each of them one by one, and they'll need to go straight home when I'm done with them."

"Including Franklin," she said. At first I thought she was asking me not to put her husband in a more agreeable frame of mind, but she wasn't. She was requesting that I be sure to include him.

I nodded. "And you?"

"No," she said. "That's the other condition. I'll put them out here on the stoop with you, one at a time, and I'll keep them busy so the rest don't notice, and in return you let me remember."

I chewed my thumbnail, blew smoke through my nose, and then nodded. "OK."

She went back inside and sent Ken out first. He walked out carrying a broom. I had no idea how she'd convinced him to go sweep her front step, but I had folded myself into the corner behind the front door, the porch lights off, and when he stepped out I reached around, gripped his shoulders, spun him, looked him deep in his terrified eyes and made it all better again. A minute later he was walking down the street, entirely certain that we had all spent the night and the day hiding and protecting one another, that I had gone out and checked on a few houses, yes, and that I had slept all day because I'd been up all night on guard duty but that there was nothing remarkable about me at all.

Then Kathy.

Then Franklin, whom I ordered to go upstairs and go to sleep.

Then the new kid, Jeremy, who was starting to come out of the catatonic state and looked terrified of all of us. I sent him back inside to go to sleep, too.

And then I walked back in the front door. Mary Lou was standing there with the gun and she shook her head when I started to reach for her shoulder. "This wasn't the deal," she said. "You said you wouldn't mess with my head."

"I lied."

"I'll shoot you."

"Won't matter, except it'll be a shame to lose this t-shirt after all these years."

"I'll shoot the dog."

I cocked my head at her and made a pfffft noise. "Won't matter except it'll piss him off real bad."

I pushed some blood around so that the world slowed down, reached out in a blur too fast for her to see and took the gun from Mary Lou's hands, shoving it between the cushions of the couch. From her perspective, I knew, the gun would simply have disappeared in a flash of movement of my left arm.

She gasped, and her eyes started to water up, and she shook her head. "Please," she said. "Don't mess with me. Not my mind. Not that."

I spread my hands out to either side. "The way of the world, Mary Lou. It's got to be done."

"Will I forget you?"

"No, just certain information."

"Will I think of you differently? Will I wake up tomorrow thinking you're a swell guy or will I still be allowed to think you're a deadbeat snob and a bully?"

I blinked. "That's what you think?"

Mary Lou cleared her throat.

I sighed and crossed my arms. "Ask me a question," I said.

She blinked and sniffled and looked confused. "What?"

"Ask me anything you want to know. You knew I was an odd duck before any of this happened. You had a sense that something wasn't right over dinner. You felt it for the first time when you knocked at my door that time, years ago. You've been thinking about this, and you've probably got questions. So ask one."

Mary Lou blinked again and drew a couple of short breaths. It was just me and her again, everyone else gone about the business I had assigned them after rearranging their minds to my advantage.

"Are you your grandfather? Are you the painter?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, obviously, and that's so obvious it doesn't fucking count. Ask me a real question."

She laughed all of a sudden and rubbed her hand across her face, looking around. "Uh..." She paused, and said, "Will you paint a portrait of our family?"

"No," I said. "Too easy to fingerprint as mine. It would be a chronological idiosyncrasy. We don't allow those. Again, too obvious." I leaned my fat ass against the back of her couch. Smiles was snuffling happily around the parquet floor in the entryway.

Mary Lou thought for a few seconds, then drew herself up and looked me in the eye. "When you drove away the one in the dining room, and when you made me come back inside, and when you went out around the neighborhood and checked every house; did you do that for our good, for theirs? Or did you do that to protect your... turf?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes I did."

I reached out to take her jaw in my left hand and force her eyes to mine but she stepped back. "One more question." I paused. "Don't you want a friend?"

I blinked at her and smiled just a tad - the corners of my mouth twisted up, ever so slightly, my eyes half-lidded. "Come on," I replied. "Let's take a walk."

It took us ten minutes to walk to my house, neither of us speaking the entire way. Smiles trotted along next to us, sniffing the curb and growling at the tracks of a downed walker here or there. Mary Lou was calm but clearly wary of being out and about. There

weren't any problems, though, and in the distance we could see the occasional blue and red flash of a patrol car's lights.

We went up the front steps and onto my porch in the dark, her hand on my arm so she wouldn't stumble, and I unlocked the front door, had her wait while I disarmed the security system, and then I hit that bank of light switches with that same sweeping motion so that the yard and the house were lit up like the 4th of July.

"Come in," I said over my shoulder. Smiles was home again, and glad of it, and he bounded into the kitchen and practically dove into his bowl and started crunching happily.

Me, I went on my usual circuit of the downstairs - left into the dining room, on into the kitchen, a glance out the sliding glass door, then to the right, crossing the end of the front hall, into the den, then right again into the sitting room. Everything was exactly as I'd left it. There were, I noted, a couple of bloody handprints on the sliding glass door. I pay good money for bulletproof glass, though, and no walker was going to get through there with a couple of slaps and what gumption it could muster. It had moved on, I imagined, to some easier target.

I had very consciously left Mary Lou behind to absorb things at her own pace. My place is nothing particularly special - I tend to keep myself in comfort, but I'm not extravagant and my house is one of the oldest in the neighborhood. She peeked into the dining room, starting off at first just following me, but in the kitchen she stopped and watched Smiles eat his chow for a few moments, then looked out onto the back deck. I watched her note the handprints also. Then she glanced into the sitting room and walked into the den. Her eyes were not on my furniture, or the carpet, or the general decor - the furniture and carpet were new ten years ago and decor is Standard American Suburban, neutral walls, neutral carpet, earth-toned couch and matching chair and a sturdy wooden coffee table. The TV is big, but not fancy. It, too, was new ten years ago.

The thing she was looking at, or at least I thought so at first, was that everywhere on the walls I'd put up my own art: landscapes and portraiture and a few impressionistic pieces I'd done over the years, a few examples of cubist knock-off, that kind of thing. As far as I was concerned, this art was all the equivalent of the everyday china - not special, not the kind you mention in the will, but nice enough to look at. I wondered if she were impressed, or horrified, or annoyed, or what? I stood in the doorway, having returned from my cursory downstairs sweep, and watched her as she stood in the center of the den and turned in a circle and looked it all up and down, every wall.

"Where are the pictures?" she asked.

"Pictures?"

"Photos. You know. Friends... family?" Mary Lou cleared her throat. "It seems lonely." She paused again. "Generic."

"This from a woman with a modern marvel squatting on top of a quarter-acre lot."

"What do you mean by that?" Her voice was immediately defensive, and I sighed in reply.

"I don't keep photos around."

"So that part's true?"

"I don't follow you."

Mary Lou had the decency to blush a little. "That part of the movies? You can't have your picture taken?"

I frowned. My patience was wearing thin. Mary Lou had not gotten the point. I decided to deliver it myself, and in a motion had crossed the eight feet between us and wrapped one fat hand around her throat, leaning in close. "I do not keep photos because that sort of life is over for me," I whispered. "Get this, Mary Lou Reinholdt. You wanted to know if I wanted a friend? You thought I would bring you here and we'd have tea and cookies and play patty-cake and then you'd leave and I'd let you remember everything and you'd get to pretend you'd done me a favor?"

Mary made a squeaking noise and I relaxed my grip very slightly so she could breathe. Then I pulled her a centimeter closer.

"Mary Lou," I whispered, "Let me be clear: I don't *want* a friend. Friendship does not mean the same thing to me as it does to you. Kindness has a different definition for me than it does for you. You want to come here and make nice and try to integrate *me* into *your* view of how your safe little world works. You don't like that you relied on me for your safety earlier, that for a moment you people weren't in control, that you were *weak*, and so you want to be able to just file me away as a friendly weirdo." I turned my head and spat blood-foam against the window that overlooked the fenced back yard. "It isn't like that, Mary Lou. I am *different*. I am *me*. I wanted you to come here to see that. Yes, I have a couch and cable TV and a dog but my dog is part devil and my couch is only ever going to have one worn spot on it and I don't keep photos of my friends around because we don't exactly take beach trips together. My life is not *like* yours." I started walking towards the kitchen, dragging her with me, and turned her so she could see the refrigerator. I hooked the door handle with one thumb and tugged it open.

"You see that?" I asked. "Top shelf: food and drink. The three shelves under that?" I paused. "Those are blood bags, Mary Lou. I am a different kind of creature. I *will not* be domesticated. I *can not* be domesticated." Her eyes were wide and she was producing little

gasping noises again, so I let go altogether save for one turn of her shoulder to point her at the sliding glass door. I pointed one finger at the bloody handprints. "Those were made by an animal, and you don't *like* animals. You don't like Smiles because somewhere deep in your lizard brain you have a fear reaction to him. You don't like me because you get the same case of the willies when I'm around. When you saw those first couple of walkers out in the street, you froze because they were outwardly Other. But me?" I met her eyes with mine as she turned to look at me in abject terror. "I have a *face*, and I have eyes, and I can join you for dinner and make nice conversation if I need to, and that's *worse* for you, somehow. But rather than just accept that, rather than accept that I've lived in this neighborhood for fifty years without bothering anybody in it, rather than just let me be me and you be you and go our separate ways, you have to *try* to be *friends*. Well, save it for the status-conscious gay Republican who moves in down the street one day, or the black couple that feel uncomfortable around a bunch of crackers like us. Save it for whatever inescapably different people - emphasis on *people*, Mary Lou - move in here one day. Don't waste it on me. Don't try to put me on a leash or box me up the way you did with Smiles." Again, I leaned in close, and whispered into her ear: "And don't think you can sit there in your living room with your big-ass gun and some *moxie* and best me like some mindless *thing*. We are different animals altogether - them and me, and me and you. We're as far apart as you are from them, Mary Lou, and I want you to know that, to remember that deep down somewhere, maybe in a recurring nightmare, maybe in a chill that runs up your spine the next time we have a neighborhood association meeting and I walk in the room, however your subconscious chooses to tuck it away, just remember that."

I paused to draw one more long breath.

"You were impressed that I went out among them and fought back last night because you have never been invaded. I moved out here fifty years ago, way outside of town, to get away from you animals only to have a bunch of *other* hermits show up out of nowhere. Then the developers invaded and built houses all around us and paved the streets and put in streetlights. Then *you* showed up and invaded the *invaders*. Now the city is trying to move in on *you* by running sewer lines and annexing us. Last night was just one more wave in a series for me, Mary Lou. It simply happened to be a lot more *honest* than the previous ones."

She was digging her fingers into the edge of the counter on the island in the middle of my kitchen, behind her back, trying to fight the urge to cower against it. I stood back and looked her in the eye. "You arrogant piece of shit," she said, and I confess I respected her for it.

Then I reached into her mind and made her forget.

Fifteen minutes later she was asleep in her bed, next to her husband. I'd walked her back - she would later remember this as an adventurous and slightly terrifying jaunt we'd taken together to see whether my house was safe - and made sure she was inside. Their kids would be home the next day, assuming the cops and the Guard lifted the travel restrictions in and out of the city. I let myself out the front door, locking the knob and pulling it shut behind me. Smiles and I had a spring in our step as we went up the street.

I could see the flicker of TVs in some of the houses, including some with my big, yellow X's on the doors; TVs were still on where their owners had died. Life goes on, even with a corpse on the couch. There were lights in some of the ones without the X's, too, and from those I could hear quiet voices, the sounds of normalcy struggling for a foothold in the face of something bizarre and inexplicable and inescapable.

I rounded the curve where West End met Buckingham and turned right up the sidewalk towards my own house. A cop standing next to a police cruiser swung around at the sound of my footsteps and shined his flashlight in my face, bright. I tossed a hand up to block my eyes and said, "Goddamn!" He took the light out of my face and shined it at Smiles, then dropped the beam to the ground and leaned into the radio on his shoulder.

"S4 to S3, encounter, investigating."

A squawk answered, and the cop stepped forward. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Just headed to my house," I said. "I live up this street. Spent last night and today with some folks from the neighborhood."

The cop eyed us both, then nodded, gesturing with the flashlight. "I'll radio you ahead. Please go directly home. If you need emergency supplies, a Red Cross van will be through this development at noon tomorrow."

"Thanks, but I'm all stocked up," I replied, and I turned to go back the way I had been headed.

"S4 to S3," the cop said into his radio, "Had a live one, provided direction, over." An affirmative crackle put the cop back in his normal, watchful pose.

A live one, I thought. I heard that cop's voice over and over again in my head as I walked the rest of the way home: A live one, he'd said.

A live one.

Powdered Ambrosia

Ambrosia Salad has been around since the late 19th century and is a Southern staple on the church social and family reunion circuits. Withrow has eaten mountains of the stuff over the decades and one can find a million recipes online. Its component parts might be hard to find in the event of a full-scale zombie apocalypse but with a little creativity one can produce a passable variant. Better living through science!

- 1 package spray-dried full-fat powdered heavy cream
- 1 package spray-dried full-fat coconut milk
- 1 can shaved coconut (optional)
- 1 can (8oz) fruit cocktail, drained of water/syrup
- 1 can (8oz) pineapple chunks, drained
- 1 can (11oz) mandarin oranges, drained
- 1 jar or tin of ground nutmeg
- 1 jar or tin of ground cinnamon

All of these ingredients have one major advantage: they can be found in the warehouse of any restaurant supplier, a business to which most people won't think to turn in desperation. The powdered heavy cream and coconut milk in particular will almost always *only* be findable on the shelves of a commercial wholesaler.

Prepare a significant quantity of heavy cream using the liquid from the canned fruit instead of water but otherwise as per package directions. If you mix the powdered coconut milk directly into the resulting cream it will sweeten the cream and give it body without needing to find sugar. Whisk the cream (or mixture) vigorously for several minutes until it becomes frothy and starts to stiffen. If you have powered tools available, use a hand mixer or stand mixer. Your cream should approach the consistency of dessert topping.

Mix in the drained, canned fruit and stir to distribute evenly. Sprinkle a couple of tablespoons of nutmeg and cinnamon on top and stir again to incorporate it. Top with shaved coconut and consume immediately. Due to the fat content of the powdered cream this could go rancid in a few hours if left unrefrigerated.