

PERISHABLES

By Michael G. Williams

Book One of the Withrow Chronicles

Winner of the 2012 Laine Cunningham Award

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To Michael K., for bringing me back from the land of the dead.

Part I

The Vampire

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 all the time. 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 bright t-shirt with a picture of a cracked out kitten on the front. It was the sort of too-normal thing I liked to use to blend in but leave people a little wobbly at the same time.

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."

"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 a new manuscript."

“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 Sawyier, 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 Surret 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 fellows 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 a kitten 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.

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