

DEAD THINGS

by Matt Darst



Chapter Eight: The Reluctant Doctor

Ian stirs early the next morning, or, at least, he thinks it's early, as he somewhat doubts he slept at all. He was preoccupied with a world of new ideas, and they danced about his head like a jam jar full of fireflies. He's confused, almost overwhelmed to be privy to such information, but, at the same time, he finds it invigorating.

The ritual begins again. First, he starts down to the lavatory—a hole three-feet deep fifty paces downwind carved out by Burt the night before. Then, he brushes his teeth with a scentless baking powder mixture. This he follows with a weak, non-scented deodorant.

Soon, however, he will need a proper bath, as will they all.

He glimpses Wright across the campsite. He stares, maybe a tad too long, and she catches him. She blinks, maybe, and then turns to business again. She stoops down to wake the Hestons.

Ian walks the perimeter of the camp quietly avoiding waking Jessica.

She's curled in the fetal position, and she whimpers slightly as Ian passes. Nightmares, too? Perhaps Ian will talk to her today.

He approaches Van. Van is slumbering front to back with the blonde, spooning (although he's sure Van would rather fork), arms about her to keep off the chill, a puddle of dirty drool pooled about his cheek. Ian considers "accidentally" tripping over the couple, but instead angles toward the camp's makeshift latrine. He

DEAD THINGS

is in better spirits today, and he will not allow his jealousy to further eat away at him.

Today Wright decides to change the pairings. She decides Ian will be point. She instructs him to stay to the edge, to be overly cautious. He is overjoyed to be anywhere, even if alone, other than behind the Hestons.

Wright is pleased that he is pleased, but she has other reasons, personal reasons, for this modification. Her discussion with Ian stirred a scrap of something buried, some remnant of who she used to be, a person who probed rather than accepted the status quo. *What are they, really? Why are they here?* Early on it didn't matter. Everyone was just trying to survive. But it's eighteen years out, and it is time for people to start caring, regardless of the church's position. Wright wants answers, and she decides to create her own opportunity to test some ideas and do a little recognizance.

Wright teams with Dr. Heston for the day. They exchange formalities for an hour before Wright surreptitiously digs into his past...

Heston wasn't always a doctor.

No, his first love is animals. Not people.

He completed veterinary school at the University of Illinois twenty years before. Two years later, when the epidemic hit, he was working in an emergency animal clinic in southern Illinois. Just months later, the event was pandemic, infecting with 100% communicability, and killing—so to speak—with 100% certainty.

The medical community was hit hard. Safety protocols could not reduce the likelihood of transmission. The disease spread too quickly, replicating and taking over the host in mere hours or less.

It decimated staff, filled emergency rooms, and overwhelmed those brave souls who remained at their posts. There weren't resources or grant funding to study the pathology or infectivity—ingress to the host, survival in the host, and spread.

And spread it did. Crossing the globe in just one spin on its axis.

So containment, rather than treatment, became the operative word. And veterinarians, like Heston, were pressed into service to fill the void left by the early responders, like EMTs, nurses, and physicians.

Does Dr. Heston mind questions about his work?

"Not at all," Heston replies with a wink, "And please, call me Neil." He's happy for a respite from his wife and their bickering.

Wright obliges. "Neil, do you have a hypothesis about the origins of the walking dead?"

Heston chokes. He can't believe she's asked *that* question. To speculate is heresy, but he finds himself compelled to answer. "Of course, it must be off the record."

"Of course," Wright grants.

The subject matter is taboo, so Heston chooses his words carefully to protect himself. "*Some* in the medical community speculated that a pathogen might be involved. *They* suspected a virus."

DEAD THINGS

But his response begs additional questions, and Wright sees her opportunity to push the envelope just a little further. She needs to give him an out, though. “Tell me more about what *those* practitioners said.”

Heston sighs. He’s wanted to tell his story—confess his sins—for years.

Heston and a team of local veterinarians accompanied the Illinois National Guard into Kentucky. Guard units were dispatched across borders upon orders of the President himself to the nearest urban centers. Heston volunteered to assist in Louisville.

He could never have known the horror that awaited him at Baptist Hospital East.

He could never have known that he would never see home again.

Utter chaos greeted their unit at the hospital’s doors. The sick and dying all over Louisville were being deposited there. But the hospital was largely abandoned by administrators. Staff failed to report to their shifts. Those who did bore witness to the bedlam and soon decided to flee for their homes. Only a handful of nurses, and maybe a doctor or a resident, remained at their posts.

The National Guard unit was led by a young lieutenant, a man maybe just nineteen years of age, who had just finished officer training two weeks earlier in North Carolina. He was a nice kid. Heston can’t remember his name—Clayton or something—but he

was green. Real green. Everyone with any experience was off fighting Al Qa'eda in Husaybeh, insurgents in Mosul, Taliban in Kabul, and pirates off the coast of Baraawe and Haradheere. No one with any real experience stayed home.

The driveway to the emergency room was already full of prospective patients, crying and rocking and holding open wounds. The waiting room—a fitting name, as everyone was waiting and no one was being attended to—was worse.

The lieutenant took one look at the emergency room, and he ordered the troops to establish a triage center. These people needed attention. Fast.

It was a noble thought. But the officer didn't think properly about containment. He didn't follow the protocols for dealing with a biohazard. He didn't secure the facility.

Heston had dealt with contagion before, albeit with dogs and cats. The reality is the methods for dealing with people are very similar to dealing with animals: assess the risk, establish a quarantine, observe the infected, and, if necessary...

Heston chose not to think of the last step, at least not yet.

Assess the risk.

Three-quarters of the patients waiting for aide were victims of massive bites, human bites. They recounted stories of friends, family members, and neighbors complaining of bites days or hours earlier. Then they recounted stories of those same friends, same family members, and same neighbors in turn biting them. Some were ill with fevers and intense migraines. Others

DEAD THINGS

lapsed into unconsciousness. Some seemed to be in the early stages of kidney and renal failure.

None of the military or medical personnel had ever witnessed rabies, but Heston had.

There are generally three vectors for transmission of a communicable disease: intermediary organisms, like fleas or mosquitoes, contaminated food or water, or close proximity.

Close proximity, like bites.

Biting can be a form of host manipulation, the modification of behavior by a parasite or pathogen. Biting is an assured way to spread contagion.

He saw rabies first hand, usually farm hounds coming into contact with a rabid bat or raccoon. Rabies is a virus. It finds a home in the salivary glands of its victims. The host can't swallow, its mouth froths with contagious saliva.

But that's not the trick. This is: the virus needs to spread, and it has evolved to ensure this. Rabies infects the brain, inducing tension and, ultimately, violent behavior, including biting. With each bite, the microbe proliferates.

Oddly enough, rabies even may have given birth to the werewolf myth.

Unfortunately, rabies is 100% fatal unless treated within 24 hours by a vaccine, a series of painful shots. It can only be detected if the host is caught and its head removed so the brain can be tested.

Establish a quarantine.

Heston approached the lieutenant as he supervised his work from the top of an armored personnel carrier. The officer nodded with self-satisfaction as his soldiers

ushered the wounded into tidy little groups. "Lieutenant, I need to have a word."

The lieutenant looked peeved, but he jumped from the carrier in two bounds and ushered Heston to the rear of the vehicle. "Shouldn't you be in there, assisting the wounded?"

Yes, Heston should, and he would, if this kid took the right precautions. "We need to set up a quarantine. We need to secure this facility."

The lieutenant frowned. He wasn't the smartest cadet, but he was smart enough to realize that fact. He set aside his pride. "What do you need, Doctor?"

Doctor. The title stuck with Heston at that point. He would never be known as anything but a doctor. He would never again care for animals. He would never again do the work he truly loved.

Heston ordered another level of triage, isolating those bitten from the rest, starting in the waiting area where patients waited...impatiently. "Separate anyone with a bite," he directed a sergeant. "Anyone with a scratch. Make sure no one leaves. No one infected can leave. Detain anyone who resists."

Infected. He said it. It had been just an assumption...until he gave it voice.

Observe the infected.

Heston moved quickly through the emergency room, the lieutenant and a dozen guardsmen in tow. It was empty, not an anesthesiologist, nurse practitioner, intern, or doctor to be found.

They entered the elevator, Heston pushing the button marked "two." The second floor, the intensive care unit. The entrance to Hell.

DEAD THINGS

Before the elevator doors opened, they could already smell the death. The stench made them cover their mouths; it made them gag.

The doors opened.

The lieutenant had never witnessed—not in all of his manuals and textbooks, not in all of his war games—anarchy and torment of this magnitude.

The ICU was completely full, its hallway cluttered and clogged with gurneys and by people....dead people. Dead people, patients and medical staff, shambling about, gnawing and tearing at other people who were already dead or would be dead soon.

One of the soldiers retched.

One of the monsters heard him.

It went for the lieutenant, sinking its teeth into his left hand between the forefinger and the thumb before being beaten off him by the Guardsmen. It reeled five or six feet and found its balance, and it came at them again.

Heston furiously pressed buttons. The first floor button. The button to close the doors, the button with the arrows pointing to each other.

The thing gasped as it approached, eyes wide and eager. The soldiers laid down suppressing fire to no avail. The bullets tore into the creature's chest and gut, but still it drew nearer. Its odor choked Heston. It groped for them.

And the elevator doors closed.

When the doors opened again, Heston half expected to see the creature waiting for them. But the elevator had successfully descended to the first floor. Heston punched the elevator alarm to hold it in place. The creatures would have to take the stairs.

They went to work immediately, closing off the wings, chaining the stairwells. Patients worsening in the waiting area were escorted to the emergency room. They were given beds. That's all Heston and his team could do.

When patients started to die and come back to life in the ER, when the screaming started as the creatures attacked those who were dying, Heston came to a conclusion: The bites were fatal. No, worse than fatal.

Assess the risk, establish a quarantine, observe the infected, and, if necessary...

Euthanize.

Anyone suspected of an infection was permitted to enter the hospital. All others were escorted out. Then the doors were locked.

The lieutenant had one question for Heston: "Am I going to become one of those things?"

Probably.

The lieutenant shook his head. He razed the building. Then he raised his pistol. It was in his mouth in a flash. His brains were on the pavement in another.

Why is Heston telling Wright all this? He doesn't know. Maybe he needs to talk to someone about science. Hard science.

The church doesn't just frown upon science, it vigorously dissuades it and anything approaching it. The practice of medicine isn't allowed to move beyond traditional treatments. The church doesn't believe in R&D. Electron microscopes, and other tools with the

DEAD THINGS

potential to unlock the secrets of life, are illegal, and those who wield them or seek to find alternative answers are criminals.

Or maybe he thinks it just doesn't matter. They will likely die out here. Why not share what he knows? And if he dies and Wright lives, maybe he's left a trace of himself—or what was his living self—for posterity's sake.

Or maybe Heston feels guilty. On that fateful day eighteen years ago, he provided dozens with a release from death, but he stole the life from dozens more. Maybe it's an opportunity to confess his sins to someone who might actually care, someone other than the pastor in the church who pinned a medal on his chest and printed an M.D. on his letterhead.

Because in hindsight, there was no need to execute the few who suffered from the rakes of monster fingernails but showed no signs of mauling. Of course, Heston didn't know that scratches weren't a vector.

He didn't learn more about transmission until his future wife was attacked later that year.

Ms. Heston (nee Brodie) was assaulted at a retreat on the banks of the Ohio River. A ghoul dragged itself from the depths and scored her arm deep with a swiping paw. She was brought to the ER, where Heston was the attending physician. He took one look into her beautiful, frightened eyes and made the decision right then and there to break protocols.

He secreted her away in the empty oncology wing, strapped her to a gurney and sedated her. He hooked her to an IV and pumped her full of antibiotics. He

watched over her for hours, biding his time stroking her face, whispering to her, “Everything will be okay.”

The hours became days and still the wound did not fester nor did her vitals change.

Three days later, he released her with strict orders to visit him daily for the next seven days. She stopped by unannounced on day eight. Again on days nine and ten. They made a date and the rest fell into place.

It’s no matter. His lack of data then is hard to square with the deaths of so many innocents at Baptist East, many of them children.

Wright is not jarred by Heston’s story. Everyone has a story, and she expected a microbe. She expected it to exploit the host. She even expected transmission through a bite.

But it can’t be that simple. If it was that simple, the story would be over.

There are too many unanswered questions.

Which microbe?

How does it exploit the host?

And, most important, how does transmission through a bite explain the potential reanimation of those who died naturally?

Wright starts asking. Which microbe? “Are we dealing with a parasitic virus, a protozoa, or a bacterium?”

Heston shakes his head. Possibly one of the above. Possibly more than one. Possibly something else altogether.

He thinks back to his veterinary practice, remembers CTVT—canine transmissible venereal

DEAD THINGS

tumors—a sexually transmitted disease in dogs. It is a tumor not spread by a virus like HPV, but by transmission of the cancerous cells *themselves*. It is a parasitic cancer caused by the mutated cells of a single dog that died 2,500 years ago. It is the longest living mammalian cell line known. The condition could be caused by something similar or very different, but equally unusual. Who knows?

Heston has not reduced the options. He's increased them. Strike one, Wright thinks. "Well, then, how does it exploit the host?"

Diseases have unique methods of taking advantage of their hosts. Heston cites various examples of host manipulation.

Malaria incapacitates so completely the infected are powerless to swat the mosquitoes that feed on them and propagate the disease.

Guinea worm larvae ingested in stagnant water reproduce in the small intestine and then burrow toward the host's lower extremities, erupting in painful blisters. The infected seek to sooth the pain finding relief by soaking in water and allowing the worms to begin their life cycle anew.

Cholera causes diarrhea, both a symptom and a mode of transmission when fecal matter infects water supplies. Wright is all too aware of the impact. Most of the survivors are.

But Heston thinks that this microbe takes host manipulation to an elevated, but not unprecedented, plane.

"Not unprecedented?" Wright asks.

“Correct,” Heston says. “Zombification occurs every day in nature.”

There it was. Heston said it. The “Z” word, banned by the church-state.

Governments ban words all the time. George Carlin skewered the FCC, the Supreme Court, and the media, for illegalizing seven “dirty words.”

But this prohibition is different. It is collective, pervading everything from the media to water cooler conversation. It is broad, going beyond the mere word to the concept. Much like China’s bans on discussions of the Falun Gong and of Tibetan Independence, the ban is enforced and enforced strictly. Persons convicted of violations are dealt with ruthlessly.

But, in truth, Heston knew of zombies in nature long before the human outbreak.

He knows of grasshoppers forced to drown themselves in ponds by parasitic hairworms that devour their hosts and control their brains with proteins. The hairworms eat everything but the head, legs, and exoskeleton. After successfully coercing suicide, the worms eject and spread their seed.

He recalls a wasp that lays its eggs in spiders. The larva feed off the spiders and control their brains, like the hairworms do the grasshoppers. Here, though, the invader enslaves the spider, compelling it to abandon its daily web-making and to construct a cradle. There, the surrogate mother sits, allowing itself to be consumed as the larva begin their transformation into wasps.

DEAD THINGS

And the protozoa toxoplasmosis targets cats using mice as the delivery system. The protozoa manipulates mice, making them take risks, risks that ensure they'll be devoured. Infected mice don't fear cat urine. Infected mice don't hide along the edge of a wall. They cross rooms in plain sight.

Heston has some vague ideas about this microbe, but nothing proven, nothing firm.

She senses Heston's hesitation. Strike two. For now.

A frustrated Wright asks her third question. "So, how is the plague transmitted?" She assumes there are two vectors. One must allow transmission through a bite, while the other must reanimate those who died naturally. "What do you think?"

Heston sighs. "There are plenty of ways to explain transmission. Too many ways, really. But here's your mistake, I think: the theories of transmission need not be mutually exclusive."

Wright cocks her head.

"Necroanthrophagism"—a term coined by Heston before the rise of the church, meaning, literally, the dead eating their own species—"might be triggered by intimate contact with a revenant, through direct passage of the microbe, superinfection, or the transmission of a deadly bacterial infection. Or it may be initiated by the natural death process of a previously infected host—something lying dormant, possibly even incorporated into the human genome."

In those bitten, direct infection of a pathogen seems the obvious answer, and the obvious answer is usually the right one. Heston subscribes to this theory, but

there are other possibilities that have yet to be ruled out.

Superinfection, or reinfection, is well documented. A terrible disease called auto immune disease syndrome, or AIDS (or God's Revenge, depending on who one asks), as historical now as the Black Death, the Plague of Galen, and the Spanish Flu, was triggered by a virus called HIV. The Centers for Disease Control confirmed that re-infection with a second strain of HIV after a primary infection could exacerbate the initial infection. Higher viral loads and viral escape result from re-infection, a possible explanation for why someone dies so quickly following a bite.

Wright understands. "So most of us may already be infected with one strain, the strain that causes us to return from the brink of a natural death, but a second strain passed through a bite might bring about that death more quickly."

Heston nods. But he has another theory, something he calls the "Komodo Dragon Theory." Here, the infection is again innate, but there is no proximal transmission. The Komodo Dragon—the largest of the reptiles and a true dragon—kills its prey effectively, if not expeditiously. It bites its victims, but the bite itself is rarely immediately fatal. The dragon is not venomous, but it is extremely toxic. Its mouth is so full of bacteria a single bite will lead to infection. Untreated, the slightest nibble is fatal. Always. The dragon needs eat only once per month, so it has the luxury of patiently tracking goats or the occasional human through the jungle over days or weeks and eating the carrion.

DEAD THINGS

Imagine a revenant, deep in the throes of decomposition, bacteria running rampant in its mouth. Imagine those bacteria are poisonous and drug-resistant, and they've been introduced into a human's bloodstream through a ragged bite. Sepsis and death aren't just likely, they're assured. Imagine the inherent pathogen taking hold. Imagine the dead walking.

The relationship, the dance between bacterium and pathogen, may be even more complex. It may be symbiotic. The bacterium living in the host's mouth and the pathogen may gain mutual advantage. If the pathogen causing necroanthrophagism is somehow intrinsic, perhaps it uses the bacteria as a trigger. Bacteria are passed to others via a bite, causing death (or something like death) and unleashing virulence.

"It is not so crazy," says the former veterinarian. He remembers the aquarium in the wood-paneled waiting room of the animal hospital. It was designed to calm the frayed nerves of anguished pet owners. It was the home of a little orange clownfish. Safeguarded by a layer of mucus, it would hide among the tentacles of a poisonous anemone. In the wild, they protect each other from predators. The clown guards the anemone, chasing off hungry scavengers, and the anemone's stingers shelter the clown from larger fish. Mutual advantage.

"And what benefit would the bacterium derive?" Wright wonders.

Heston has an idea. "Maybe behavioral changes caused by the pathogen, like masticating and biting, help transmit the bacteria. Maybe the pathogen keeps non-symbiotic bacteria in check by inhibiting their proliferation through competition. Or, maybe it attacks

them outright.” But he is quick to point out, “There are lots of maybes.”

“So, if we’re already infected, how did we get it?”

“Again, I don’t know,” Heston says. “For instance, the disease could be airborne, infecting most people and hiding in the hypothalamus or in the nervous system like chicken pox or herpes.”

“So,” Wright concludes, “the disease might be biding its time, waiting for our immune system to grow weak, waiting for the early stages of death, to present itself.”

“It could, in theory. The process of reanimation might allow it to avoid competition from other pathogens, too. When a host dies, so do the pathogens within it. Maybe it is hardy enough to outlast them. This, too, might allow it to enter the brain, nullifying the barrier effect.” Heston nods to himself. This is an option he had not thought about before. “Again, a number of maybes. Unfortunately, there’s no way to prove or disprove any of these theories.”

“Strike three,” Wright mumbles.

But Heston is still talking. He’s frustrated. “There’s no known culture. So there’s no way to isolate the pathogen, no way to test blood or tissue. So we can’t even begin to treat or cure. And we never will as long as the church has its way.”

Oops. Heston realizes he’s said too much. He shouldn’t have said that last bit. He shouldn’t have criticized the church. The inquisitors use moles to ferret out independent thought. He should really be questioning Wright’s motives.

“But maybe we are simply witnessing God’s will,” Heston says, backing off. “I need not remind you God

DEAD THINGS

hasn't been adverse to using the occasional plague to get His point across."

Wright thinks Heston's covering his ass. She's right.

Heston doesn't think it's God's will. But he also doesn't believe the plague's manifestation strictly supports Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest. Evolution is more than that, especially on a cellular level. Evolution can be driven by cooperation, interaction, and shared benefit, too. To paraphrase Carl Sagan, life populated the globe less through combat and more through networking. But he says nothing of this to Wright.

"You know," Heston says, "the Church concluded this is not a medical event—"

Wright interrupts. "Please don't play coy, Doctor. I'm not a spy. If I was, I would have stopped talking to you an hour ago."

"Okay, I'll accept that you're not a spy," Heston says. "But did you stop to wonder if I am?"

Chapter Nine: Shopping Mall or Shopping Maul?

After lunch, Wright takes point. She thinks about Dr. Heston and their talk. She knows moles. Hell, Captain Richard King was probably a mole. Heston, however, is not an operative. But she gets his point.

Being a little cautious, being safe, isn't necessarily a negative. She needs to be a little less eager and show some patience. Be smart, she thinks.

Despite her desire to trust Ian and Heston, the truth is the only person here she can truly trust is herself. She needs to remember that, especially with the others.

Be safe.

Their conversation was anything but that. It didn't just dance on the line of treason. It hurdled past it with all the grace and speed of a comet.

Still, be safe.

But if she is so committed to safety, why has she led the group out of the woods? She hadn't even noticed that she had steered the party back, back toward the highway. The signs warn that the mall is just an exit away.

Their lives are in her hands. They head back into the woods.

As the billboard states, the Kecksburg Mall has everything—food courts, sporting goods, lingerie, watches, leather purses, luggage, high-heeled shoes, jewelry, DVDs, cell phones, televisions, memorabilia, comics—yes, everything...

DEAD THINGS

And nothing. Nothing necessary. Nothing justifying the risk.

Wright hopes none of her troupe saw the sign. Otherwise, she'll get questions. Why don't we go there? Won't there be food? Might there be survivors?

She doesn't have to rehearse her responses. They would come in rapid fire succession. No. No. Hell, no.

The mall will be crawling with them if, as Wright suspects, the creatures are driven by memory and habit. In her experience, there is something more than instinct that drives these monsters. Her experiences were horrifying...

Within a week of the plague, she and her family were rescued by a fledgling militia, locals armed to the teeth. They blasted their way out of Oldham County, burning everything in their wake. They moved quickly toward Louisville, picking up other random survivors like ticks on a deer.

The Macaroni Grill sat a mile outside of the city. That's where she saw the state troopers. Twenty or more of them, along with a few former customers, all "turned sour," as one of the rednecks said, like bad milk. All of them victims of the contagion, all trying to tear their way into the restaurant.

The Macaroni Grill wasn't exactly Zagat rated, but one rule exists in life and death: cops always know where to get good food. And they had returned to their favorite restaurant, obsessed with filling their bloating bellies, not with pasta or filet mignon, but with the employees and patrons who had locked themselves inside.

The fighting was short but brutal. The militia rescued ten people that afternoon. They lost four. A net gain of six, plus some revolvers, shotguns, and ammo.

There are no survivors to save in the mall. There can't be. There are likely hundreds, if not thousands, of revenants in and around the shopping center. So they will stick to the trees, safe in the knowledge that they will never truly know.

Jolene Heston yearns for a spa day.

Her husband wants to pet his dogs again, a blue tick named Oscar and a golden retriever named Brooke.

Anne pines for her mother's homemade ice cream.

Now Anne prods Jessica. It's her turn to tell those gathered around the campfire what she misses the most.

Jessica's answer is easy: toilet paper.

"Me, too! Me, too!" Ms. Heston chimes. She holds her hand above her head and gives Jessica an awkward high-five. They laugh.

Dr. Heston stokes the fire. He says he remembers a time in his life, a time when he was a bachelor prior to meeting his wife, when a roll of toilet paper would last more than a day, more than an hour.

Ms. Heston rolls her eyes. She says that if he doesn't watch it, she'll see to it he has all the toilet paper he could ever need. They continue laughing.

Dr. Heston wants to change the subject. He looks to Burt for help. "What about you? What do you long for?"

DEAD THINGS

Burt doesn't hesitate. He grieves for his Spiderman 129, wherein the web-slinger fights the Punisher. If it hadn't been blown from the plane, he would have traded it to a clandestine dealer on Padre Island, known only by the uninspired moniker "The Dealer," for DC Comic's Superman number 10. Superman 10 is a real prize. Only 200 copies were printed back in 1939. The Dealer has two.

Van yawns. They are all tired of hearing Burt carp about Spiderman 129. "Anything else?" Van asks.

Yes. Burt also misses his collection of graphic novels.

"Graphic novels?" Van asks dubiously. "Don't you mean comics? Albeit, really long comics?"

Burt cracks a smile. "I guess I do."

"Why comics?" asks Anne.

For Burt, comics, as well as science fiction and fantasy, are an escape. "They let me transport myself to a place where there's something better, more freedom..." Burt hesitates. That sounded critical. He shifts gears. "They're also an inspiration. There are still good people willing to do good things in the world."

Jessica asks, "Who is your favorite superhero?"

"Easy," says Burt, "Superman. He's the best."

"What?" Van demands. "The Man of Steel?" His voice drips with sarcasm. "I mean, the tights are bad enough. But the whole Superman premise is pretty cheesy. Batman, at least, was more realistic."

"They *are* called superheroes, after all," Burt defends. "Comics aren't meant to be entirely realistic."

“Sure,” Van accepts, “but you can only suspend disbelief for so long. There should at least be some basic recognition of the laws of physics.”

“Plus, Superman’s kind of gay,” Dr. Heston chides.

“Neil!” Ms. Heston lectures, sternly.

“Well, he is,” Heston grumbles to himself.

Burt ignores Heston. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, he likes men,” Heston replies.

There’s snickering about the fire.

“No,” Burt groans. “I was talking to Van.”

Van clarifies. “Well, for instance, Superman is incredibly ripped. In all the cartoons—”

“Comics,” Burt corrects.

“Yeah, right, comics,” Van continues. “In all of the comics, Superman is huge, a mountain of muscle.”

A confused Burt says, “A lot of superheroes are muscular.”

Van says, “Right, but they’re muscular because they work out. Superman was born with superhuman strength, so answer this: how does he get that big? Nothing could provide enough resistance. Really, he shouldn’t be any bigger than, say...Ian.”

Ian shakes his head. Van is such an ass.

But he’s not done. “What’s that planet he’s from again? Klingon?”

“Krypton,” Burt replies, flatly.

“Yeah, right, Krypton. And the gravity’s, like, what? Ten times our own?”

Burt thinks it’s seventeen. Seventeen-point-eight, to be exact.

“Okay,” Van allows, “seventeen. That means he’s got to be doing three hours of curls twice a day using freight

DEAD THINGS

trains as weight just to put on muscle, right? Wrong. He's not, because that's too conspicuous. Plus, his schedule's not going to allow for it. The guy's fighting bad guys all over the world—"

"And some off-world," Ian adds.

"Right!" Van persists, "outer space baddies, too. And then he's got this job reporting on stocks and restaurant closings and crap at least a couple hours a day, assuming he's not a shitty reporter."

"But this guy's not winning any Pulitzer," Ian inserts.

"No way," Van maintains. "Not with all that gallivanting around. Let's be honest, he can play the 'exclusive interview with Superman' angle only so long before it gets tired, or people figure out Peter Parker is actually Superman."

"It's Clark Kent," Burt amends, peevishly. "Clark Kent is Superman's alter ego."

But Ian is talking over him. "It would be better if he worked for a television station." To Van he says, "What if he had an interview show?"

Van agrees. "With cousins dating their pets and that stuff. That's perfect. You know, I bet women would gobble that eye candy up, especially the 24- to 35-year-old bracket."

"So would the gay demographic," Dr. Heston quips.

"He's not gay," Burt sniffs to himself. He is outside the conversation. It has taken on a life of its own, and it carries on around him.

"Oh," Ian exclaims, "here's a story they should cover: Ghost Payroller on Staff at Daily Bugle."

Burt shakes his head. It's the Daily Planet. Spiderman worked for the Daily Bugle.

Ian is still talking. "Think of it. He clocks in and then disappears for hours to take care of his private affairs."

"Since when is saving Earth a private affair?" a frustrated Burt inquires.

"It's a private affair if he's doing it on the company's dime," Ian scoffs. "Anyway, half the time he's saving his chick from some danger of her own making."

"Oh, yeah," Dr. Heston says, "Barbara is always getting into trouble."

Burt's jaw clenches. Lois Lane. Not Barbara.

"At best," Ian argues, "Superman is unethical. At worst, his behavior borders on the illegal. Think of the advertisers and readers he's defrauding. How much of every paper sold is going to fund that?"

Van nods. "Talk about giving a whole new meaning to 'Man of Steal!' At least Batman does it with his own money."

Burt leans back, dejected.

Wright realizes the sharks are circling and that this morale-building exercise has gone awry. She needs to put a stop to it.

More importantly, Wright realizes she, too, may soon find herself in an uncomfortable position. Soon the question will be posed to her: just what do you miss?

Family? A popular restaurant? A guilty pleasure? Shopping? What?

Wright would have to lie. How could she answer, "Nothing," even if it's the truth, even if she doesn't miss a thing?

DEAD THINGS

Or so she thinks.

Yet there is a tug at her subconscious. It says that “nothing” is not entirely accurate. She does miss something. She recognizes the void. But returning home will not fill it. It is a hole that can’t be filled with food, sex, alcohol, or money—although she has tried them in countless combinations. Her loss is something greater, intangible, but precious still.

Burt looks exhausted. So is Wright. “Okay, everyone, lights out. Time to extinguish the fire.”

Van protests. He didn’t get a turn to talk about what he misses. “Too bad. Lights out,” Wright repeats stiffly.

Good, Ian thinks. Ian misses something deeper too, but it’s something he’s been missing since he was little. Tonight he will dream about his father again as he does nearly every night.

Chapter Ten: History Derailed

It is a brisk November morning, eighteen years earlier. Peter Sumner blows into his hands. His breath lingers before him, specter-like, dancing about his fingers. He stamps his feet, looks toward the end of the Addison elevated platform. No train yet.

His morning routine: shower, kiss his wife and young son goodbye, and board the train. The Chicago Transit Authority picks him up less than a block from Wrigley Field. From there it submerges underground, and deposits him in the Jackson subway station, steps from his office.

The CTA is universally maligned. Riders complain that it is dirty, inconvenient, and, as a rule, late. But, with gas prices and parking taxes soaring, there is little choice for thousands but to take it.

The CTA is a monopoly. It has no competition. As such, commuters aren't really customers. They are hostages, and their relationship with their captors is love/hate. It's textbook Stockholm syndrome.

Peter can relate to the CTA, though. He has been an attorney for the city for ten years, the Department of Revenue, no less. The only thing people can stomach less than a lawyer is a lawyer enforcing parking and tax codes. In terms of public sentiment, hatred towards Peter's department easily surpasses the CTA, Hillary Clinton, and French émigrés combined.

There are stereotypes that befall most professions. Usually, those stereotypes can be summarized by a single question. For cops: "Have you ever shot anyone?" The question is as loaded as a cop's revolver. It assumes

DEAD THINGS

not only that the use of force may be required, but that there is a propensity toward it. For Peter, the question he is asked dozens of times from people as disparate as drunken Cubs fans to dignitaries: "Can you get me out of my parking tickets?"

The question offends Peter because it supposes that there is still corruption in Chicago, and that, as a public employee, he is inclined to partake in it. Also, it just plain lacks originality.

Peter does not believe Chicago government is a broken system managed by dysfunctional people. He works with too many bright people with innovative ideas and a genuine love for the city to ever think that. But he cannot deny that there are rotten apples. Even if they have not spoiled the bunch, the rotten apples seem to be the ones that residents consistently eat with distaste.

Peter wants to change perceptions, so he lobbies to do so and gets carte blanche. It isn't hard. With scandal after scandal tracking across the covers of the papers like a sports ticker each day, the Mayor needs a win.

A bureaucratic monster stands ugly and glaring before him. He meets with various personnel, and is pummeled by excuses.

"We don't make widgets."

"We don't have customers."

"This is how we've always done it." This last offered by Tommy Rails, a procurement manager. Rails is a rotten apple, lacking the skills to properly supervise and the intelligence to realize those skills are nonexistent.

But Peter is up for the challenge. Ninety-six percent of all problems result from breakdowns in processes.

Peter studies processes like a boy with a magnifying glass, transforming them, filling in gaps, removing redundancies, and establishing best practices.

But four percent of problems are people, people like Rails. More and more, Peter's magnifying glass sweeps over Rails and his cronies. It draws them into relief. Soon it will bring light, and with that, heat. Peter will fry them like the bugs they are.

But not today. Rails staged a protest, calling in sick. It is a coordinated strike. Nearly twenty percent of the staff called in as well. The absences trouble Peter. Several supervisors participate in Rails' blue flu, including a few of Peter's acolytes.

Besides, Rails' story isn't even plausible. After all, who stays home because of a bite, especially one from his teenage daughter?

Right there, Peter decides on his next crusade: combating chronic absenteeism.

Peter's peers like to say Peter is "in the zone." The reality: Peter is never outside the metaphoric zone. His mind is a constant hive of activity, and he lives with a constant, pulsating buzz that, despite its deafening silence, drowns out interpersonal stimuli.

Peter is trapped in the zone.

There is an otherness, an apartness, that prohibits him from really engaging his fellow man. He lacks the ability to empathize.

That's not to say Peter doesn't have feelings. He can feel anger, happiness, the full range of emotions. He just doesn't feel them toward *people*.

But he's a good faker. He's faked it for nearly thirty years. He's done everything people would expect,

DEAD THINGS

basically everything his father had done before him. He went to college, courted and married his wife, got a job, got a car, got a house. He goes to neighbor's barbecues, holds Super Bowl parties, laughs at his boss' horrible jokes. He takes up smoking with his co-workers even though he hates it. Years ago he even considered having an affair. Not because he was attracted to the woman, but because he thought it was the normal thing to do.

In short, Peter Sumner goes through the motions.

At least he used to.

Almost four years ago something changed. His son was born. As soon as Peter held Ian in his arms, looking upon his helpless face, he felt his icy heart break and warmth pass through him in waves. Peter learned what it was to love unconditionally.

The train approaches, gliding on three rails, the electrified third supplying power to the locomotive. Touch the third rail, and you cook. Signs warn of this in English and Spanish, alerting travelers and vagrants alike.

The train pulls into the stop, an automated yet polite voice alerting commuters who may have been confused, that this stop is, indeed, Addison. "This is a Red Line train to the Loop."

One by one, the passenger cars noisily pass Peter, the rising sun reflecting off the windows. Despite the glare, he can tell that this morning, like most, the train is nearly full.

The train halts, and Peter makes his way to the door of the lead car. Before entering, he notices four or five people lying across seats, forcing fellow passengers to stand. Peter approaches the door, but stops in his

tracks. He's assaulted by a horrible smell clearly emanating from the car.

The homeless, he thinks, wincing.

He threads his way back through the throng, his briefcase angled to open a path before him. He makes his way back to the centerline of the platform, and jogs to the car directly aft. He squeezes on just as the doors slide shut.

"Excuse me," he says, moving past the passengers blocking the doors. This is Peter's pet peeve: ignorant passengers who fail to clear the car's entrance, prohibiting others from coming and going, especially when there's plenty of room in the center.

Peter starts towards the car's front. "Pardon me," he begs again, slipping between businessmen and students. He is awkward with his bag and his heavy jacket, and he breaks a sweat as he approaches the emergency door. Fortunately, the area is clear. Peter leans thankfully against the door, his lower back resting against the horizontal handle.

True to routine, he drops his briefcase to his feet and sinks both into his copy of the Tribune and anonymity.

"Next stop, Belmont," a disembodied recording announces. "Doors open on the right in the direction of travel."

Peter loosens his tie, the brown and gray stripes wrinkling. He runs his sleeve across his forehead. Since work began to repair the tracks and replace the train stations on the line, the commute has become even more unbearable.

DEAD THINGS

At Belmont, passengers impede each other's progress off and on the train.

An elderly woman presses against Peter apologetically, and he looks with disdain at a seated teen who fails to offer his chair. The teen does not make eye contact with her or Peter. He's withdrawn into the world of his gaming system.

The future of America, Peter thinks gloomily. The train proceeds.

"I love that I can just, you know, veg out with him, you know?" a young woman brays into a cell phone. "It's just so nice to not have to say anything. We can just be quiet and not have to think, you know? We don't even have to talk. Hello? Can you hear me?"

Peter considers telling this twenty-something to use her "inside voice." But his way is to avoid public attention. So he keeps to himself, knowing that the tunnel, the subway, will soon silence her phone. But not soon enough.

"Hello?" she bellows. "Oh my God, I thought I had lost you!"

"Fullerton," the mechanized voice announces. "Change for the purple and brown line trains at Fullerton. Doors closing."

Peter turns to page five, an article about a prison riot in Mississippi orchestrated by some nut job named Ira Ridge. The prisoners have control of a cell block. It's day three, and negotiations have broken down. The warden and several guards are feared dead...

Then he hears it: something like a muffled scream over the clickity-clack din of the wheels grinding against ancient rails. He surveys the cabin.

No one returns his gaze. They are all like him, eyes down, their heads plugged with ear buds, totally ignorant of each other's existence. No one stirs.

Perhaps, Peter thinks, *a squeaky brake-pad*. He starts to read his newspaper again.

A muted male voice cries again. "Help." It's unmistakable.

Peter snaps to attention, dropping the Trib to his side. Still the other passengers do not move.

Then the pounding starts...

...from behind him.

Peter whips about and stares out the rectangular window of the emergency exit. About two feet separate his car from the lead. A narrow catwalk guarded by ropes of thick chain forms a causeway. During a crisis, passengers should use the emergency doors to move forward from car to car until able to safely disembark.

The sun's shimmer on the window bounces his image back. He looks intently for several seconds, trying to identify the source of the noise. A flicker of a shadow skips across the window as the train passes a tree, briefly allowing Peter to peer into the illuminated cabin.

There is movement.

Lots of movement.

Peter's face moves in, closer to the window. He cups a hand over his brow, almost presses his nose against the glass.

Again, just his mirror image, perhaps a shadow on the other side of the reflective pane.

Then, another flicker, silhouettes of a number of people, bodies all seemingly crowding into the rear of

DEAD THINGS

the passenger car. They are trying to push past each other toward the exit, toward Peter.

The scene is wiped away by the sun again. The effect is like a strobe light, the view outside Peter's window rapidly alternating between a stark reflection and a panorama of commuters. They seem to move in slow motion as they struggle.

Peter feels G-forces press him against the door. The train starts a gradual dive, a twenty degree descent that takes it into the subway's mouth.

The stifled screaming of one voice becomes several, the pounding of fists more intense.

As the train dips into the darkness, the light of day disappears.

"What the..." Peter mouths as he peers into the forward car.

The forward cabin is fully illuminated, but his view is obscured by hands and faces pushed against the window.

They're trying to get out, Peter realizes.

He sees their desperation. They can't get out because they are pressed against the door and the door opens in. Is there a fire?

And then the blood.

Not a trickle.

Not a smatter.

A shower...a fountain.

The window goes red, opaque, except for the streaks of fists pounding on the glass.

He thinks he sees someone—one of the homeless?—biting...

Peter gulps hard.

...biting into the face of a middle-aged man. The man flails his arms and screams, his hands striking the window casing. The homeless man pulls him down to the floor.

Peter's mouth goes agape, his eyes wide.

He spins, finds his fellow passengers sedate. They don't know, so he tells them,

"There's a problem in the next car!"

Seated and standing alike, the passengers stare at him with contempt. How dare this lunatic interrupt the isolation of their morning commute?

The intercom breaks in. It is not the pleasant sounding recording. It is the voice of the conductor, full of desperation. "Passengers, there's trouble in the front car!" He breathes heavily over the intercom as if he's winded.

Now the passengers in Peter's car start to look worried, and they all try to look past him trying to determine just what he knows.

A man with dark, slicked-back hair removes an ear bud. "What did he say?"

Peter does not have time to answer. The conductor's plaintive shriek cracks over the intercom, and the train lurches forward. The passengers yelp as they're tossed backwards. Peter bounces like popcorn, goes to his hands and knees. He's lucky. The man with the slick hair catapults deep into the car. He lands somewhere twenty feet or more back, legs kicking in the air. Others are knocked out of their seats or into the laps of fellow passengers. They are a jar of shaken beetles, appendages tangled, wrestling with one another to get free.

DEAD THINGS

The train whirs. It is speeding up, building momentum. As it races forward, it rocks to and fro violently. The lights flash, the train losing and then gaining contact with the electrified third rail.

Train stations fly past. North Avenue. Clark and Division.

We are going to crash, Peter thinks.

He crawls back toward the front of the car and pulls himself halfway under a seat. He wraps his arm at the elbow around the supports.

Grand Street Station. "This is Grand," the automated voice coos. Really?

And a moment later, the locomotive does just what Peter predicted. It strikes the caboose of the train just leaving Grand Street Station.

The collision lasts less than a full second. But to those there, it happens in slow motion, edited like an action sequence in a Will Smith movie. The events could be dissected, specifically:

The front of the train implodes, aluminum flowering at the impact site;

In a chain reaction, the second car, Peter's car, collides with the first, the former popping off the rails to the left and striking a subterranean wall, windows exploding;

The rear of the second car spins to the right, angling upward, the third car slamming it, pushing it over the platform's edge, throwing sparks, and scattering commuters like dandelion seeds in a strong wind;

The third car burrows beneath the second, driving the latter into the ceiling, mortar and rebar raining down; and

The fourth, fifth, and sixth cars pancake, bending and twisting like molten toothpaste, sealing off the northern portion of the tube.

Peter slowly comes to. He sits up against the end of the car, shards of glass rolling down the front of his shirt. His ears ring, just as they had done when he was a teen shooting his twenty-gauge on his grandfather's farm in Kentucky. He smells the ozone of an electrical fire, and he struggles to see through the midst of smoke that quickly fills the car.

The car sits on a 35 degree angle. No one moves. Despite some distant crying and weak groans for help, no one really makes a sound. A small fire erupts in the rear.

Peter tries to stand, falters, catches himself. He winces and raises a hand to his crown. It feels wet, stings at his touch. Subdural hemotoma, he thinks.

He reaches forward for a hand grip, white hot pain shooting up the inside of his left arm. His teeth clench. Muscle tear, he reasons. He squeezes his arm at his elbow, pulling it to his waist.

He hobbles toward the center of the cabin, the main entry, until—

He remembers the face of a man...before it was ripped from his skull.

Peter stops dead in his tracks and glances over his shoulder toward the emergency exit.

There's a fire inside that car, too, yet larger, and growing out of control. Dark shadows bounce in the red

DEAD THINGS

and orange light, lurching across a canvas of sprayed blood and fractured glass. Their heads move in violent nodding motions, their hands jerking wildly about their faces.

Peter freezes.

My God. They are eating, tugging, and pulling at...each other.

He takes a step back, bile rising in his throat.

That's when one of them hesitates. He diverts his attention to Peter, focusing on him, turning his head slightly like a dog in thought. Then he growls and rushes the emergency exit.

"Fuck!" Peter exclaims, the crazed man banging on the exit.

The man hits the door with force, pressing his face against the window and twisting from side to side for a better view of Peter. The man snarls, blood flowing from his lips, and he charges the glass of the exit with his shoulder.

Spider web cracks appear, expanding as the man hurtles at it again and again. That psycho is going to break his skull wide open!

Peter sets off towards the main exit again and hesitates. There are more of them, more of them feeding on the commuters. If he runs from the car, they'll be on the platform—and him—in seconds.

So he races the other direction, quickly diving to his left and out a broken window.

BUY Dead Things at:

<http://deadthingsthenovel.com>

