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We, the Dead

Don't overthink it.

That is the first and only rule. Let your arms go limp, drop your head, and stumble forward absentmindedly. Moaning helps. Be aimless but vicious. Remember that once you smell the scent of human brains, there can be no turning back. There can be no rest until that brain is in your mouth.

I, personally, have not eaten human brains. My wife did. She never told me how they tasted. Maybe I don't want to know. I want to be clear, we're not zombies. We just pretend to be. Anyway, this all began about a year ago.

Back then we lived on the fifth floor overlooking Division Street. When we listed our place on airbnb that one time, we were quick to point out its proximity to the Red Line, the Jewel grocery store, the lake, and less quick to point out our very loud Swedish neighbors (since killed off (RIP)).

I was a graphic designer for General Mills. Mostly my work focused on puzzles and mazes for the backs of cereal boxes like Cocoa Puffs and Cinnamon Toast Crunch. The trick was to make the mazes fun but not too complicated. A kid should start the day with a sense of accomplishment, I felt. Anyway, I lost that job when kids started being eaten. No kids equals no cereal and no cereal equals no demand for cereal puzzles.

My wife Kacie was working as a Meeting Planner for the American Dental Association. It paid fairly well and she seemed to like some of the people she worked with, but it wasn't her dream

job. Every third day, the door would close with a slam followed by a, “That’s it. That. Is. It.”

Then the keys would rattle across the counter and a diatribe about work would commence. “Are you listening to me?” she would ask so loud I could hear her through my noise-cancelling headphones.

But the keys and Kacie would always be gone the next morning. Anyway, *the outbreak*.

Theories differ on how it started. Some people say it started with contaminated water. Some say it was a mass terrorist attack gone-awry (or gone exactly according to plan). I should have followed the news more closely. Conflicting reports gave me a headache.

If there were to be zombies, I thought they would come all at once and probably at night, which would have been more dramatic I suppose. Don’t get me wrong, there’s been definite drama. Everyone that I know, even the most bleeding-heart pacifists, bought at least one gun, some even managed to get a hold of flamethrowers. But as the living population plummeted and every day echoed cries of, “OK, this is not normal,” it became normal. You just learned to live with the fact that we were in the zombie apocalypse wasteland we used to joke and make movies about.

When everything started really going down the tubes, most of the city fled to the country, out to where there were more chainsaws per capita. I don’t blame them. The country was the quickest to fortify and eventually it was hard to make it out there without the country firing back at you.

After the city emptied, Kacie and I really started to feel isolated.

Kacie’s parents lived near Rockville, not too far away, but Kacie wasn’t exactly on speaking terms with her mom after some pretty uncool political comments and, apparently, the zombie apocalypse wasn’t going to change that. Meanwhile my entire family were early goners. I’m sure they made it quick and polite. Somewhere out there was my undead Dad, still in his socks and crocs. I tried not to imagine it.

Long story short, we were holed up in our apartment, biding time, looting the local Jewel, flicking through old Instagram photos and pretending they were new, and just trying to live our lives.

On the day they came for us, I heard a scream from the street

below. Outside, a woman was trying to beat back a zombie with her free hand while digging into her purse with the other. From the purse she managed to pull a small handgun and shoot the zombie in the face. She missed every subsequent shot until her ammo was spent. I couldn't bear to watch the rest. The flimsy venetian blinds creaked as I twisted them closed.

After about a minute, despite myself, I peeked through the plastic.

As one might expect, the woman was being devoured. I sighed, not wanting to look anymore.

But there was another problem.

Rarely, if ever, was a zombie alone. Sometimes zombies came in small groups that Kacie jokingly referred to as 'book clubs'. Book clubs were lethal, but a manageable kind of lethal. I had seen a few book clubs on looting runs and evaded them with only a few nightmares and mild recurring panic attacks. But what I had never seen before was what Kacie called 'sororities'. Sororities, which could number thirty zombies or more, meant certain death/undead.

Below, stumbling around the corner from Wells and onto Division, was a sorority.

My wife was in the shower singing 'Spice Up Your Life'.

"Kacie!"

"Uh-uh?"

I banged on the door.

"Kacie!"

"I just got in here!"

The door was unlocked and I walked in. I saw my wife's silhouette through the opaque shower curtain, steam pluming above like the chimney of an old coal train. My wife always took insanely hot showers. So hot in fact that there was rarely any hot water left for me. We had had this discussion many times before. She always ignored me. But whatever. Now was not the time.

I threw back the curtain. Kacie turned around, slightly surprised.

Water cascaded down her face and she couldn't see my terrified expression through her matted hair. A small mischievous smile curled the side of her mouth.

"Oooh, welcome to the shower, babe."

She pushed back her hair and wiped her eyes free of soap. I

turned off the water.

“What?” she said with the force of a Naomi Osaka forehand. Her expression soured. “Is this about the water temp? I literally just got in here.”

“No. It’s not about that.”

There was a chorus of moaning undead from the street level. I stepped into the shower and closed the curtain, my bare feet immediately scorched by the pool of scalding water.

“Ow! How can anyone shower in water this hot?”

Kacie grunted, locked and loaded for an argument.

“It relaxes me.”

“Do you have like mutant skin?”

“Mutant skin?”

“This has got to be unhealthy on some level.”

“I didn’t ask you to come in here! I would never just barge in on my naked wife showering!”

Her logic confused me.

“*Your* naked wife?”

Kacie snorted out a laugh. Sometimes our marriage was like the bomb squad; cut one comment and the tension would defuse, cut another and everything would blow up.

Luckily, I’d cut the right chord.

Kacie put her hands on my shoulders and made her sexy face which involved both a pout and a single eyebrow raise.

“We can share the hot water you know?”

For a second I forgot what I came into the shower for. Was it for this?

A loud screeching came from somewhere near the front of the apartment complex.

Oh, *that’s* what it was.

The thought of approaching zombies cooled off our otherwise steamy encounter. I stepped out of the shower and ran to the front door, checking the bolt locks and sliding over our makeshift barricade. In the process, I scratched the floor terribly.

Sudden guilt and embarrassment rushed through my veins. *Our landlord would fine us, guests would see the scratch and judge us, Kacie would complain with every entrance, especially when she came home*

from work unhappy. These were the lingering thoughts of an old life. I was surprised I still felt them, especially now that no one cared anymore.

Kacie darted out of the shower with a towel on and ran for the bedroom.

“I think they—” I yelled back to her, then realizing my volume, softened to a yell-whisper. “I think they broke through the downstairs barricade.”

Kacie leaned out of the bedroom as she fumbled with the top button of her jeans. A red light flashed over the room. The alarm I had wired over the apartment foyer must have been tripped. I was no electrician and I felt a sudden flash of pride. ‘It actually worked!’ I thought.

There was moaning from the stairwell.

Kacie had thrown a shirt over her head but didn’t have time to get both arms successfully through her sleeves. She was frantic, rummaging through drawers, looking for something. In all my years knowing her, Kacie was never frantic.

Suddenly, I was terrified.

There was banging at our door.

Kacie threw up her arms and let them fall limp against her thighs. She shook her head and tousled her hair. The twisted wad of wet curls made her look deranged.

“I can’t believe this.”

Kacie walked into the bedroom and sat on the mattress.

“I can’t believe we’re going to die.”

“Shouldn’t we...”

The beginning of my sentence just hung there awkwardly.

It was a sorority. We didn’t have a gun. Or a flamethrower. Or an escape. But we were smarter than this! How could it end so pathetically? So painfully?

Kacie knew what I knew. She knew it as she looked out of our fifth story window.

“I don’t want to jump. I don’t want to die that way. I’ll see how bad it is once they start trying to eat me and then I’ll make a decision.”

The barricade shook with force.

Kacie kicked at the loose clothes she had pulled from the drawers

in her frantic state. She picked up two masks from the ground and snorted out a laugh.

Both were zombie masks I bought as a joke, a prank I was going to pull after my friend Imran invited us over for a dinner party. I thought we should show up at his front door wearing the masks and give him a good spook. But I chickened out. The outbreak was still pretty fresh at that point and the prank was ultimately too dark for me.

But I kept the masks. After Imran's dinner party, Kacie and I went home and got into bed. It had been a fun, bottomless party and Kacie crawled up to me with one of the zombie masks on.

"If a horde of zombies come, we should just bend in," she slurred.

"Bend?" I said laughing.

"B-lend. Blend in. Like they did in that scene from *Shaun of the Dead*. You remember that?"

I agreed it was a good idea. We practised our best zombie moans that night.

Now, a sober Kacie was throwing me one of the masks.

"I can't think of anything else," she said as she wiped tears out of her eyes. Then she put hers on. It was grotesque and awful and I wondered if I'd ever see her real face again.

I followed suit, breathing in the mildewy rubber.

"So what's the plan?" I asked.

"Be dead."

The door to the apartment broke. The bureau barricade fell over. The horde climbed over the wreckage and my wife and I just stood there wearing zombie masks. We just stood there.

Kacie moaned and pretended to be after something. For a second I was frightened by just how much she had committed to her performance in the face of such horror.

Zombies entered the bedroom. And I just stood there, resigning myself to what was once an absurd but now completely normal death.

I moaned.

And the horde nudged into me and stumbled aimlessly and I just stood there not caring anymore about anything.

The next twenty-four hours unfolded in a surreal non-state. I moaned and doddered along with the sorority as we scavenged through the empty streets for humans. If there was screaming or eating or decaying, I didn't pay attention to it. I just followed.

There wasn't much time to think about Kacie. I was aware of her there next to me and tried to stay close. But every time there was a flicker of worry, or the desire to ask her a question or see her face, I felt as though the scent of my brain was showing. I don't know. I couldn't think. We both couldn't.

More time passed. How much I don't know. The sorority joined another sorority and then another. We drifted from place to place. Without escape, our diets became pretty gross. Don't think. Don't think.

The only corner of my mind I allowed for thought was just trying to stagger close enough to Kacie, the only zombie in the obviously fake zombie mask. Despite the mask, Kacie was a brilliant zombie. She showed no signs of thought, her moaning was guttural, her stumbling uncanny. I couldn't wonder about how she did these things, or what she was thinking of our situation in general.

But at some point I couldn't resist a single small thought. As much as I tried to bat it away, the thought gnawed at me: Was Kacie still... *Kacie*?

But it was impossible to ask her anything. We were stuck. If I started to think any more about it, the other zombies would pounce. Don't think. Don't think.

Anyway, a year has passed.

Of all the places we saw, of all the things we did, I'm embarrassed to admit I don't remember any of them. We must have left the city and made it deep into the rural countryside, past smoldering strip-malls and vacant houses. More and more commonly, humans were scarce.

But today, as we hobbled outside of an abandoned donut shop, a man in black cowboy hat came flying at us on a white motorcycle. Around the tires were large chains, used for riding on snow I assumed. But it wasn't winter, dummy, so it must have been for some other reason. As soon as he started riding over the bodies of the zombies in front of us did I put two and two together. Here was a human

jazzing for some zombie whoop-ass.

Soon enough, with a loud “Yee-haw!” the man on the motorcycle turned to reveal a small sidecar in which rode a skinny little girl in a trucker’s hat, spraying the horde with shotgun blast after shotgun blast.

I had gotten used to seeing this kind of thing. Especially the implications it brought with it. To be afraid of dying was to think. And I couldn’t care less about myself anymore.

But as they rode away, the girl delivered a final random shot. Next to me, I sensed a woman zombie fall.

That is when I heard a noise that had not registered in my brain for a long time: a scream of life.

I turned to see that on the ground next to me lay a woman wearing a zombie mask over her face. She was grabbing her stomach where the shotgun blast had taken a piece of her with it.

“Take it off! Please take it off!” she cried.

Pain and instinct took over and I stopped my staggering and bent down and touched the face, touched the rubbery fake blood, and I moaned as I pulled it off.

Underneath was Kacie.

“Not mine. Yours dummy. I want to see your face.”

I trembled as I lifted my mask. As soon as I did, a look came over her. A look of recognition maybe, or regret, or love. She looked like she wanted to say to something. But the words never came and the rosiness left her cheeks and she was gone.

I never thought I’d have it in me to know someone as well as I knew Kacie. My memory isn’t very good, I jumble up stories most of the time, forget who I was with, how much time I put in the parking meter. But with Kacie, it was like I had a whole other brain.

And I remember meeting her. I had mentioned to my cousin Frances that I needed to get rid of a couch. She told me that her friend from college was in need of one.

“Do you mind if I ask her? She lives not too far, in Lincoln Park.”

So my cousin’s friend from college and her roommate Kacie came over. Without introducing herself, Kacie looked at the couch and said, “Sweet couch dude.”

Sweet couch dude.

As she lay there bleeding, I bent down and sensed the other zombies coming towards me. They knew the dead was living, that the woman lying on the ground beneath me was human.

What if I hadn't said anything about the couch to my cousin? It wasn't an important detail in the conversation. I remember I didn't even know why I mentioned it. I was just going to get my neighbor to help me move it to the curb. And what if my cousin hadn't remembered to let her friend know? And what if my cousin's friend's roommate didn't decide to come with her? How was it that the love of my life needed a couch right when I was giving one away? How and why and how?

They were closing in.

I had watched Kacie. Watched her become so many things. Listened as she untangled life, both hers and my own.

So I bent down and bit my wife. I bit into her face to let the others know she was not dead. She could never be.

Tonight, when the time is right, I will bury my wife. And in the morning I will walk on, my arms limp and my head hung, as I begin again my search for the living.