

The Rotting Dead
by
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It was not the first dead body the three of us had ever seen, but it sure was the ugliest. The unfortunate man had died flat on his back like he had been laid out on a gurney in a morgue, except he was on the ground in a forest. It was near impossible to tell the man's age, his head and body were grotesquely bloated, almost a caricature of a man. His skin was grey and blotchy with what appeared to be black and blue bruising. I'm sure the words murder victim moved to the front of each one of our thoughts.

The three of us had set out for an afternoon hike to check along the perimeter of some land Tom was thinking of investing in. We weren't five minutes into the hike when Jared spotted the body.

We didn't know it was a dead body right away. No, at first, we figured it was just another city person out for the day, enjoying some time in the country, lying on the forest floor. They came out to these parts every now and again to enjoy some peace before returning to the hustle and bustle of the city and their jobs. Usually they weren't wearing their business suits but the world was made up of all types. When we were a few feet away from the body, it was obvious the man would not be returning to his job in the city.

The dead man's belly had ballooned so much buttons had popped off his shirt, exposing an outie bellybutton propped on top of his bloated discolored belly, like a fat black cherry on top of a giant scoop of chocolate-marbled ice cream. The seams of the suit jacket's arms and shoulders were stretched to the point of bursting apart. The dead man's head puffed out from the shirt collar like a muffin top, the collar button holding firmly in place due to the constricting necktie still noosed around the dead man's neck.

Jared wondered aloud if perhaps the man suffered an allergic reaction to something, maybe a bee sting, and it caused his body to swell suddenly and rapidly, thus his own tie strangling him to death. Not having a reason to dispute or anything to add, Tom and I said nothing and, for the moment, simply continued our distanced observation of the body.

The dead man's hands were puffed up nearly twice the size of the sleeves they squished out of. The fingers on the one hand we could see were almost completely swallowed up by the fatness of the hand. His ashen grey skin was mottled with apparent black and blue bruising, but the bruises seemed to move and change shapes, like they were actually a fluid beneath the dead man's skin and something was swimming around in it. Even his lips were bloated, puffed shut like

a collagen injection accident. He died with his eyes open and his eyeballs, white with death, bulged from their sockets.

Based on the condition of the body, bloated from what was probably gas build up from his own internal decomposition, we guessed the man had died a few days earlier.

However, that initial assessment did not take into account we were in the middle of the fall season in the middle of a forest. No leaves covered the body. No animals had mutilated the corpse. From what we could see from where we stood, not even a snail crawled on the dead flesh, telling us the man had died recently.

Recent or not, we needed to let the proper authorities know this man's body was here.

We agreed Jared would drive back to his farm to call the sheriff, while Tom and I stayed with the body.

Tom walked up to the body and nudged it with his foot. The moment he touched the dead man's arm, the man we thought was a corpse seized Tom's leg and bit into it, shaking his head side to side like a shark trying to saw off a hunk of flesh from its caught prey.

Tom howled a dreadful scream of agony and fear-filled disbelief and fell to the ground, kicking at the man while trying to pull himself away. I grabbed the man around his neck and tried to pull him off Tom, to no avail. I stood and gave the man a hard kick to the side of the head. The force knocked the man away from Tom, but a large mouthful of flesh and muscle from Tom's leg tore away at the same time.

Jared had found a thick tree branch that he swung like a baseball bat at the man's head. I grabbed Tom's arm to drag him away from the madman. Even with Tom's screams of agony, I heard the crunch of the man's skull caving in. When I looked, instead of spraying blood, I saw a grey cloud of rotten dust blast out of the man's smashed head, stinking the area like rotten eggs. As though a pressure cap had been removed, the corpse's body deflated, farting noxious fumes and grey dust out of its crushed skull, bleeding black tar into the ground. A cross breeze carried the dust and most of the stink away from Tom and I. Jared looked like he had fallen into the ashes of a fire pit.

Despite a crushed head, the man's corpse did not lay still. It did not try to rise and attack, but it did continue to spasm and twitch.

Keeping the twitching corpse in my sight, I turned the rest of my attention to Tom and his wounded leg. He was starting to become lucid again, the initial shock having worn off, but the disbelief in his eyes remained and was probably mirrored in my own.

Tom had a chunk of his leg torn out by what may have been a madman, but may also have been a reanimated corpse. The bloated body that had torn a chunk

out of Tom's leg had quite possibly been a dead human being who became undead and attacked. Tom may have been bit by a zombie.

If the late night zombie movies were, for some reason, even a little bit true, we knew what happened to people who were bit by zombies. They became infected, then they became sick, then dead, then undead for eternity as part of a man-sized flesh-eating disease. This was not a secret for us, we had seen it played out that way dozens of times in movies.

Jared knew what happened to people who were bit by zombies and I saw it in his eyes as he wiped the grey ash off his face and blew it out of his nostrils while staring at the wound on Tom's leg.

I could also tell from the desperation and terror in Tom's eyes, face and entire being that he was definitely aware of his possible fate.

As unbelievable as it was, we accepted the possible reality without hesitation because, whether he had been attacked by a madman with a rotten brain or a zombie, Tom was badly injured and needed medical help.

I wrapped my arms around Tom's chest, my arms under his, and Jared lifted his legs, being cautious with the injured one but also moving with the urgency required. We started to move fast towards Jared's truck, parked five minutes away from where we were but it may as well have been five hours.

Jared sneezed loudly and dropped Tom's legs, my momentum further jamming his legs into the ground, causing me to stumble and also drop him.

Tom gave out a yelp when he hit the ground but bit his tongue to stop the profanities he wanted to let loose.

Jared doubled over and violently retched, throwing up a puddle of black bile filled with thin white worms that burrowed and disappeared into the earth almost as soon as they touched the ground.

Jared turned to me. Blood was streaming out of his nose; tears out of his eyes. With everyone focused on Tom's leg wound and wondering if it was infected and would turn Tom into a zombie, none of us had considered that someone other than the person who was bit might be the first to turn into a homicidal flesh-hungry zombie.

In the two seconds it took my brain to register that something was horribly wrong with Jared, he threw himself on top of Tom and ripped Tom's throat out with his teeth. Tom wanted to scream but the only sound from him were the wet whooshes of his dying breaths through the hole where his vocal cords had been. Whether or not the wound on Tom's leg was infected and would have caused him to become a zombie, I never found out, and I never gave it another thought.

Jared was eating Tom's dying body, tearing off flesh and sinew, ripping out tendons and gore, sucking up the blood. The sounds of Jared feasting were the only

sounds I heard. There were no birds, no wind, no rustling of leaves to dilute the horrible sounds of Jared murdering Tom. I turned towards the truck and I ran.

I ran hard and I ran fast. I ran until my legs felt like they were being eaten inside out by acid. I ran until my lungs felt like they had burning matches in them and once again found reason to wish I had been born with a healthy set. I ran until I was throwing open the door of Jared's truck and the horror of my friend Jared's corpse eating my friend Tom's corpse was some distance behind me.

I pulled myself up into the cab. I knew the keys weren't in the truck because I knew the keys were in Jared's pocket. What I wanted was the gun in the truck's glove box and the tire iron under the driver's seat. With weapons in hand, I went back to get the keys.

Jared was on all fours like a dog, face first in his blood feast, and never once looked up as I approached. I aimed the gun right at the center of the top of Jared's skull and pulled the trigger.

From the angle I fired, the bullet smashed directly into the top of Jared's head and could very well have traveled down the spine, smashing vertebrae along the way, exiting through his ass, that's how perfect a shot it was. But for all my perfect shooting, Jared did not miss a beat and kept right on tearing into Tom's corpse.

So, I pulled the trigger again.

And again.

Each bullet smashed another hole into the top of Jared's head, but not only did they not stop him, they did not even slow him down. Jared finally took notice that I was there, but I wasn't sure I had wanted him to notice. He slowly stood, strings of blood-dripping chewed meat hanging from between his teeth.

Jared had become so filled with the flesh and blood of Tom, he looked like he was smuggling water balloons around his waist beneath his shirt. He started shuffling his massive size slowly towards me.

I pointed the gun straight at Jared's face to see if a bullet directly between his dead eyes would drop him. The same moment I was pulling the trigger, Tom's mutilated corpse jumped to its feet, startling me and putting me off balance. I don't know where the gun was pointing when it fired but the bullet missed Jared.

While Jared's movements were slowed from being weighed down with a gut full of Tom, Tom's half-eaten corpse weighed much less than Tom ever did and moved very fast.

Tom jumped at me, lunging with his mouth wide open to tear at my flesh. However, instead of flesh for his effort, he caught the pointed end of the tire iron through his mouth and he fell, driving the point out the back of his head. I took hold of the pointed end of the tire iron and pulled it all the way through his head until the tire iron's bent end wedged against his jaw. Holding the tire iron with both

hands, I leaned back with my full weight, twisting Tom's head around, using his spine as the pivot point. With a lot of his neck tendons destroyed by Jared, there was little resistance and the section of spine just below Tom's skull separated from the rest of his spine. Tom's head now faced backwards. He still gnashed his mouth, his teeth smashing against each other hungry for flesh to chew, but his body was no longer capable of chasing prey, and he laid there a quadriplegic zombie.

I stepped on his head and pulled out the tire iron.

With tire iron and gun in hand, I turned my sights to Jared. Though I found it hard to look into his dead white eyes, I raised the gun to once more attempt a fatal shot but once more I wasted a bullet when Jared dropped to the ground and began eating Tom's undead corpse.

The keys were still in Jared's pocket and I needed them. I needed the keys to get help. I needed the keys to warn people. I needed the keys to survive. When the ground beneath my feet bulged and I heard what sounded like the earth's stomach growl with hunger, I forgot all about the keys.

Suddenly, Jared's bloated body stood up in a handstand and started to lift off the ground, head down, ass up, arms and legs dangling.

It wasn't levitation I was seeing.

A worm the thickness of my arm had shoved itself down Jared's throat, impaling him upside down. I could see the contents of Jared's bloated stomach being sucked into the worm's body and down into the earth. Once his bloated water balloon stomach was sucked back to normal size by the worm, Jared's body began to grow again but it wasn't just his stomach that was ballooning out of shape.

I could see any part of Jared's body not constricted by clothing begin to stretch and fill up with the same inky bruising that was beneath the skin of the dead man the three of us had happened across. The worm was filling Jared's body with what I'd call spores but could have been bacteria or something else that would bust out of the bloated body and turn other people into flesh-eating and blood-hungry monsters.

With a snap that sounded like the crack of a bullwhip, the worm launched Jared's disease-filled corpse into the air, over the tree tops and towards the direction of the town, and then the worm quickly disappeared back into the earth.

Afraid to move from where I stood, I wondered if zombies were a biological weapon the worm used as a means of survival, perhaps even domination. Like a chess game, Jared's spore-filled undead corpse could be used as a pawn in the King Worm's game of global conquest. If Jared's infected body landed in or even near town, the body could smash open and blow the fatal spores into the town's air. If those spores were breathed in by the oblivious townsfolk and the sickness took over their minds like I had seen happen so quickly to Jared, then the townsfolk would start killing and eating each other in a horrific massacre. Once the killing

produced a herd of fat zombies, the worm would move in to the fertile feeding grounds, continuing the cycle.

If all we as people did was take up arms against the zombie onslaught, wrongly assuming they were the extent of the problem, then all humanity would literally become worm food. Once people did figure out the bigger picture and mobilized to counter the attack, it could be too late.

I accepted my mind was inventing mad theories to try to understand what was happening, mostly so I could make decisions to give myself some chance of surviving. The true reality was, I had no idea what was happening. Though I hoped for some simple explanation, like I was experiencing hallucinations caused by my own mental breakdown, I would not be so lucky.

I knew going to town to warn people would be suicide if Jared's body had landed in it. If the body did not land in the town, people would have thought I was talking crazy but at least I would have warned them. With the truck keys still in Jared's pocket, however, it was all a moot point. Even if I managed to get to town on foot, if the town had been infected, by the time I arrived everyone would either have killed or been killed or both.

From an offensive viewpoint, the further out the worm could send zombies to gorge themselves on humans, each other and maybe even animals, the further out the worm could extend its feeding grounds, being able to attack denser populations. Infected cities would be like a nest of spiderlings hatched in a sealed jar, forced to feed on each other until only a few fat spiders were left, themselves only existing to feed the worm.

Going to town would be pointless, I realized that, so I came up with a plan B. I would find the monster that caused the death of my two friends and kill it. With purpose, I had a clear goal I could focus on and with focus, I could perhaps stay sane.

What I saw next shattered that focus so blindingly fast I felt the last threads of sanity slipping out of my grip.

Dozens of zombies were walking through the forest, heading in my direction. I knew they were zombies by the way their bloated stomachs sloshed side to side with each step. As they got closer, I saw the blood on their faces and shirts. I recognized some of them from before they were undead monsters stuffed full of murder and cannibalism. When alive, they were some of the farmers and families and employees who had worked the land in the area, growing crops of corn and tobacco. They would have been out working their fields today, kicking up a bunch of dust with their tractors and tools. If the spores had somehow been in the fields, entire families could have breathed them in.

The worm broke out from beneath the earth and shoved itself down the throat of one of the approaching zombies, a woman in her thirties. Within ten

seconds, the worm emptied the zombie's stomach, stuffed it full of spores, and launched the undead bomb back towards the town. Before the worm disappeared beneath the forest bed, another worm appeared and stabbed itself down the throat of a middle aged male zombie and, for the first time, I saw there was more than one worm.

Everything I had known of the world only minutes before had been obliterated. For the second time in my life, I had been born into a violent world I knew nothing about, except in this world, undead people wanted to eat me and giant worms living underground wanted to eat what the undead people ate. What any of that had to do with who I was and the life I lived moments before, I was unable to make a connection. If either rhyme or reason explained this Hell that had spilled into my little piece of Heaven, I was not blessed with the epiphany or gifted with the insight. I could only rely on my gut's instinct.

After having killed and eaten kin, friends and possibly animal stock, zombies were making a trek to feed the worms. A possibility dawned on me that the whole phenomenon of zombies and giant worms, the entire infestation may have only just begun. The worms had not reached the farms yet, so the zombies were coming to them.

The forest floor began to bulge and tremble.

Dozens of worms, with opened round mouths lined with tiny teeth like sandpaper, pushed out from beneath the soil. They had no eyes, nose or ears that I could see. Their mouths opened and closed, gulping air like the nose of a dog sniffing the crotch of a stranger. Whether or not the worms posed a threat to me directly or if their undead food sources were their weapon of choice, I really did not want to find out.

As it turned out, what I did or did not want concerned the worms in no way, whatsoever.

The mouth of the worm closest to me stretched wide and the worm burst out from beneath the forest floor, launching straight at my face. I was out of shape, I was out of breath, but I moved out of the way faster than I had ever moved in my life. Falling to my left, I dodged the worm with its fist-size lamprey mouth. I emptied the gun's clip into the monster, but should have saved a bullet for myself.

Had I simply moved out of the way, without the added action movie gunfire, I would have seen the bloated zombie that had snuck up behind me unnoticed. Granted, the blind worm would have smashed straight into my face and seriously wounded me, maybe even killed me, if I hadn't moved but the truth was, if I had noticed the zombie the worm was actually targeting, probably by sense of smell, I would not have shot the worm because by shooting the worm, I suddenly became the center of attention for every unholy abomination in the immediate vicinity.

Worms exploded from the earth, coming at me from all directions. They bit into the flesh of my arms, my legs, the back of my head. They picked me off the ground, lifted me up into the air, over the tree tops, and higher, like they were offering my body as a sacrifice to the sun god.

I knew my life would soon be over.

My rapid ascent to the clouds suddenly stopped and I found myself as close to Heaven as I would ever get. I was tipped upright, like a crucified man, the worms intertwined like rope to create the thick and spiny stalk that became my cross and nails. From my vantage point hundreds of feet in the air, as the worms scraped their teeth across my flesh, slowly eating me alive, I gazed upon the world and saw swaths of death being cut across the land.

Instead of feeling like I was dying, I felt like I was a lost splinter who had been found and was once again becoming part of the Whole. I began to understand the worms were all part of the same beast, roots growing from a single savage seed. Beneath the surface of the world, an ancient evil had awakened and started to reclaim the world one soul at a time. I knew that once I had been drained of my blood, my essence and my soul, I would be filled with nothing but the purpose of the Whole, and I would no longer exist. I was becoming an eye for the beast, connected by an optic nerve of giant worms hundreds of feet long. I felt my memories breaking apart and fading to black but before I was gone forever, completely consumed by the beast, I locked onto a thought that I carried across the threshold:

As far as this eye could see, and this eye could see as far and as clear as all the eyes of the beast could see, once upon a time the dead would have seen the end of war, but that time was gone and that world did not exist anymore.

The End

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