

Joe Williams
freerpgs@comcast.net

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Leftovers

by Joe Williams

“The Emergency Broadcasting System has gone off the air. I will continue to broadcast the most recent list of refugee camps for as long as I can. I warn you, I do not know how many of these camps are still open. This list has not been updated in three days. If you’ re safe where you are, I recommend you stay where you are until help arrives. But if you are injured and need help immediately, here is the latest list of shelters.” She began a familiar roster of schools, churches, and government buildings.

Donovan Albright, listening to the radio from the kitchen, mixed a packet of Tuna Helper on a propane camp stove. He loved listening to Kelly Success talk no matter what she said. He used to watch her on TV, every evening at eleven, back when they had electricity and there were still stations on the air.

But the radio worked, and Kelly, bless her, had switched mediums. Every two hours her voice came bubbling over the radio. He grinned, imagining her serious

expression as she delivered the evening news, a solemnity belied by the slight curve of her lip.

His wife Emma interrupted the radio. “It’s the end of the world,” she said. In the light of the lantern, she looked older than her thirty-one years. A triple layer of sweaters hid her figure. Her blond hair, washed once in the past week, hung lank from beneath a stocking cap. With water pressure at a trickle, bathing was a luxury they rarely indulged.

“Too bad it ended in December.” Donovan dumped a can of tuna into the noodles and reduced the flame to a simmer. “If the world was going to end, it should have ended in the summer, when it isn’t so cold.”

“We’d be better off dead.”

Donovan looked at his wife and frowned. She leaned with her elbows on the dining table, nose close to the radio, head in her hands. Her breath hung before her in ghostly puffs.

“I know there’s no heat, but we’ll make it through the winter. We’ve got enough food and water to last us.”

“What’s the point? In the spring, it’ll just be worse.”

Donovan covered the Tuna Helper, walked over to his wife, knelt at her side and put his arm around her. “We’ll be all right.” He gestured to the supplies stacked against the walls. “Everything we need is right here. It’s just like camping. And we’ll always have each other.”

Kelly Success finished the list of refugee camps and signed off. The radio hissed with static. Emma fiddled with the dial on the radio until she picked up a faint station. She turned up the volume.

“Sinner!” A man’s voice this time, with a southern accent. Probably a low-wattage transmitter in some garage. “We have been judged, my fellow sinners, judged for our crimes against Jesus! We will reap our punishment. We will suffer, my friends. Jesus has turned his back on us! We have been left behind! I confess I’ve been a sinner. I’ve stolen and I’ve bullied my neighbors. But I have found a way to escape this punishment, my friends. I have found a way to be with God. For what does the bible tell us? That a sinner shall die!”

Donovan turned off the radio.

Emma reached for the on switch, but he gently held her hand. “We don’t need to listen to that nonsense. A nice hot dinner and then we’ll go to bed. You’ll feel better in the morning. I promise.”

She didn’t resist as he lowered her hand to the table and covered her fingers with his.

A sharp noise, baffling in the first fog of consciousness, snapped Donovan awake. His eyes fluttered, his mind groped through darkness, his hand slipped on sheets slimy and moist. Under the down comforter, the stench of loosened bowels and relaxed bladder soaked him, permeated his pajamas and his skin.

He rolled over and shook his wife’s shoulder. “Emma.” Her head, all wrong. The blond hair red. The pillow flecked with colors: pink and red and bits of white bone. A mouth, red-lipped and gaping, on the side of her head where her ear should have been.

Cold metal nudged his ribs. He reached down, took the pistol from limp fingers.

“Emma!” He held the barrel to his temple; eyes squeezed shut, tears hot and helpless. “God damn it! God—”

Words caught in his throat. He wailed and held the pistol to his head, his index finger white on the trigger. What was the point, living without her? He belonged with her.

Do it, do it, do it.

He couldn't do it.

He flung the pistol across the room. It thudded against a stack of boxes, packets of powdered eggs, instant milk, military rations, and canned goods. The boxes lined the wall, enough food to last a month. And in the other rooms of their townhouse, more food and stacks of bottled water, juices, and crates of wine.

They could have lasted. They would have been safe here, together.

Alone, Donovan slumped in the living room on a couch surrounded by camping supplies. A gas lantern flickered on the coffee table. The down comforter, stained black with his wife's blood and pulpy with her brains, draped his shoulders. It smelled of Emma's insides. Her drying gore covered the white pallor of his face.

He stared at the floor, his dark eyes open and staring at nothing. Half-inch plywood, screwed in place, covered the windows. Night or day, there was no way to tell. He sat in a timeless cocoon, faced by a bleak future and too weak to force himself to do what his wife had done. The handgun still lay in the bedroom. He had kept it on his nightstand in case an intruder broke in, never expecting Emma to use it on herself.

What was he going to do without her?

A thump roused him. Wrapped in the stained comforter, he straightened and walked down the hall. Another thump. A shuffling sound. Hurrying now, Donovan trotted into the bedroom.

He braced himself against the doorjamb. The comforter slid off his shoulders,

piled itself around his feet.

Emma stood by the bed in her flannel nightgown. Had her injury been less fatal than it first looked?

No, he could see the small hole over her right temple, and when she turned, he saw the huge exit wound that blew out her left ear. The hole drip-drip-dripped.

Donovan stood rooted, his breath hitching in his lungs, unable to move. His eyesight grew gray. He'd heard the reports on the radio, but no words could have prepared him for this.

Emma trudged toward him. Her feet dragged across the floor, making a slow shuffling noise. Her mouth dropped open. Bloodless gums had withdrawn from her teeth, making them appear enormous.

Donovan slid to the floor next to the empty, bloodstained bed. Madness battered at the insides of his skull. Emma would do for him what he could not.

She stood over him. Hands gripped his shoulder, tight, an unbreakable grip. She lowered her voracious mouth. A swollen tongue lolled. She sniffed at the dried gore caking his hair. Her dead eyes shifted away. She let go and shuffled out the door.

Eyes closed, Donovan sat and sobbed. He remembered:

Emma dancing in her wedding dress, smiling, laughing at the best man's toast, interlocking her arm with his, sipping from a wineglass.

Hunger brought him out of his reverie. He ran his hand over his face, from eyes to chin, and found thick stubble. How long had he been sitting here? He plucked at his filthy pajamas. The stuff had turned to a hard crust.

Over the growling of his stomach he heard a faint scratching, the noise a mouse makes in the wall at midnight. Following the sound into the living room, he found

Emma by the window, scratching at the plywood.

She was still his wife, damn it. He had a responsibility to her, a promise to love her in sickness and in health. Nothing had to change. He could make this work.

He walked up behind her and gave her a hug. Under her nightgown she felt fatter than normal, her tummy taunt and swollen. He squeezed and she vented herself loudly, spraying him the rank gasses of decomposition.

A ravenous gurgle escaped Emma's half-open mouth. Her upper lip curled as she sniffed him. A pathetic groan, and after that no sound escaped her lips, not even a whisper of breath.

Donovan led her to the dining table and lowered her into a chair. She sat slumped, her head lolling and her mouth agape. Blood and excrement crusted her nightgown, stiffening it. A thread of red drool twisted and danced from the cracked cavity of her mouth.

"You look hungry." Donovan made them each a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, then joined her at the table. He placed a sandwich in front of her but she ignored it.

"You should eat."

Unblinking eyes rolled toward him. The loss of fluids had left her eyeballs flaccid and misshapen.

Donovan munched on his sandwich. "You look good. That bullet didn't damage your face all that much. We'll get you a hat and you won't even be able to tell the difference."

Emma exhaled the ripe stench of decay.

"I know things have changed," Donovan said around a mouthful of peanut butter.

“I know you’ re, well, different now. But that doesn’ t mean we can’ t stay together. We can make everything just like it was. Can’ t we?”

Donovan waited, his breath stuck in his throat. Emma merely stared at him with those flattened eyes. Whatever wisdom they contained, she intended to keep.

“Well, it was just a thought.” Donovan stood up and wiped his hands on the legs of his pajamas. He noticed the radio on the table and reached for it. “Why don’ t we find out if Kelly is on the air? You always enjoyed listening to her.”

The radio produced only static. For the next half-hour, Donovan sat in silence with his dead wife.

Finally, that voice, that wonderful, magical voice, came over the speaker. “This is Kelly Success with your hourly update. It’ s been three weeks since the dead rose from their graves. The government has fallen apart . . .”

The words receded and Donovan relished the sound of her voice as though it were music.

By the third day Emma no longer clawed at the boarded windows. She simply lay on the bed, unmoving, eyes open and staring. The cold helped slow the process but still she decomposed. With the windows boarded, the stench of rotting flesh filled the townhouse. Donovan’ s shirt and pants smelled of decayed meat, and when he kissed his wife, the stink entered his mouth and made him sick.

It saddened him to know she hungered for something he could not give her. She ate nothing, not the beef jerky he put on her plate nor the pepperoni sticks he waved under her nose. In his heart he knew what she needed, yet all he could offer her were sandwiches and soup. He felt trapped, doomed to continue this sad parody of normalcy

behind boarded windows.

He remembered:

Holding Emma's hands as they recited their wedding vows, their friends and family in the audience forgotten, the pastor forgotten, the whole world constricted to the beauty of the face smiling at him, drawing him through this most terrifying and wonderful day.

Yet he could not bring himself to follow where she now led, nor could he summon the courage to leave her. The thought of going alone into the world of the dead scared him more than the decaying flesh that shared his bed.

He grew to look forward to Kelly's broadcasts with a desperate anticipation. But the broadcasts came less frequently, until finally, on the sixth day, there was only one message.

"Our situation is desperate. The creatures at the gate can't get in, but then, as long as they're there, we can't get out. I beg you, if there's anyone left out there, we need your help. We're at the Council Crest radio tower. We're running low on food, and we need gas for the generator. If there's anyone out there, anyone left alive who can hear me, we need . . ."

Sunset Hills Memorial Park wasn't far from Council Crest, and most of the walking dead shambling across the lawn outside the radio tower must have come from there. Many looked like they'd been in the ground a long time. Donovan couldn't imagine how such rotten things could have dug their way out of six feet of earth.

Bloated and festering, they bore the unhealed wounds of their death. Donovan watched them from the safety of his minivan, trying to identify each by its wounds. That

one died from a fire, this one from a gunshot, those from a wasting cancer. And the elderly, so many elderly, white and wrinkled, eyes covered in cataracts, who could guess what had gone wrong inside of them? All were dressed for the grave, the poor in paper hospital gowns and the rich in their Sunday finest.

They milled about Council Crest Park, their attention centered on the radio antenna. The red tower rose higher than the encircling fir trees, its top lost in a winter mist that shaded the hilltop a phantom gray. A ten-foot chain-link fence, topped by a garland of razor wire, ringed both the radio tower and the squat, windowless broadcast station at its base.

The horde clung to the fence with worm-white fingers, rattling a gate fastened by a padlocked chain. The stink of them poisoned the park air.

Donovan parked his minivan on the road below the facility, where a walkway curved up to the tower. He tucked his pistol under his belt but left the shotgun in the back seat. He didn't think he'd need it, and he had enough to carry. In one arm he lifted a bag packed with canned foods, dried fruit, cereals, bottled juices and a selection of Twinkies. In the other hand he carried a gas can filled by siphoning fuel from a parked car. Fully loaded, he got out of his minivan and approached the cadaverous throng at the gate.

"Hello!" He shouted to the cinder block building. "Anyone home?"

The group near the gate set up a horrible moaning. They turned toward him, sunken eyes searching out the source of the sound. As they pressed around him, they looked confused. Their lips drew back from bloodstained teeth as they sniffed and snarled.

Even as Donovan held his ground, the ghastly crowd lost interest and returned to

the gate. He wondered if they were truly dead. Maybe they were somehow suspended between life and death, neither dead nor wholly alive, but trapped forever between possibilities.

Despite all the attention he got from those outside, he got no response at all from the building at the foot of the tower.

Discouraged, Donovan circled the fence, avoiding the people clinging to it (he insisted now on thinking of them as people, not vivified corpses), until he got to the back of the cinderblock bunker where he spotted, near a rack of machinery, a steel door. Rather than call out and excite those at the gate, he fished inside his grocery bag and found a can of Spaghetti-O' s. He threw the can over the fence, aiming at the door.

It whammed against the door. The people milling around the fence jolted at the sound, but didn' t come any closer.

Next went a can of chicken soup. Wham!

Donovan felt pretty good. Maybe he should' ve pursued a pitching career. He always was pretty good at little league.

Wham! A can of peaches.

The door opened a crack and shadows moved in the darkness beyond. A slim arm came out and picked up the can of peaches.

The door opened wider. Framed in the opening stood Kelly Success, her blond hair and blue eyes recognizable from television. She looked smaller in real life, more frightened. Her hair, normally puffed in a proud mane, was tied back in a lank ponytail. Without makeup, her face looked splotchy and average.

She scanned the gravel patch that stretched from the door to the fence. Collected the cans. She ignored Donovan like he was no different than the other people hanging

about the fence.

Donovan held up his bag. “Hey, Ms. Success.” He kept his voice lowered in a barely audible hiss so as not to agitate the others.

Kelly locked her stunning blue eyes on him. Her brows knitted in bewilderment.

Donovan rolled the top of the grocery bag tightly closed and tossed it over the fence. He held up the gas can, made sure the lid was secure and chucked it over. It landed with a thump on a mat of decayed leaves.

Kelly stepped away from the building, hugging her purple parka closed. “Who are you?”

The people at the gate started groaning. An old woman on the fringe shuffled along the fence, drawing closer. Her hospital gown flapped open behind her.

“I listen to you every day,” Donovan whispered, not wanting to excite the others too much. “I want you to stay on the air. That’s why I brought you the gas. For the generator.”

Kelly stopped on the other side of the chain link fence. She blinked and wrinkled her nose. “What’s that smell?”

At the sound of her voice, the old woman quickened her ungainly gait.

“It’s hard to find an open laundromat,” Donovan explained, embarrassed by the smell of corruption that clung to him. That’s what sleeping with his wife had done to him. He tucked his left hand into his pocket, not wanting Kelly to see his wedding ring.

“I’m surprised those things haven’t torn you apart,” Kelly said in amazement. “There’s too many at the gate for me to just let you in. But can you climb the fence? You might be better off with the barbed wire than with them.”

She looked past him at the old woman and several others closing in on both sides.

Donovan knew he could stay no longer. He backed away from the fence, his eyes fixed on Kelly's face. Even without her hair stylist, makeup and special lighting, she was the best thing he had seen in weeks and gloriously animated.

"I'll bring more food and gasoline tomorrow." Donovan edged away before the throng engulfed him. The old woman brushed past him on her way to the fence where Kelly stood. Soon, a crowd clustered against the wire links, their weight causing it to rattle and sag. Laden with supplies, Kelly retreated to her building. She stared at him in wonder as he walked unimpeded through the masses.

Donovan returned down the slope to his minivan and sat behind the steering wheel. He knew he should leave, but after seeing Kelly he found himself sitting and watching the radio tower. It couldn't hurt anything. His wife would never know. When he got home, she'd still be sitting at the table where he had left her.

Kelly had looked so vulnerable. Her voice, in person, had been much warmer than on the radio. He loved having her talk to him directly. And yet, she didn't even know his name. He had forgotten to tell her.

Donovan put the keys in the ignition and turned on the radio. Maybe, now that he'd given her more gasoline, she would be back on the air.

Kelly's voice came over the speakers. ". . . hope you're out there, somewhere, listening. Thank you for the supplies. But what we really need are weapons and a way out of here.

"Brent thinks a shotgun would work, but don't bother with anything smaller. All the police reports said handguns just punch holes in them. They recommended dismemberment or cremation, but burning them can be risky. You've got to reduce them to bones. So forget burning. Find a chain saw. That should do the trick.

“Whoever you are, our guardian angel, we’ ll be counting on you. Preston says--”

Donovan switched off the radio. Brent? Preston? How many men did Kelly have with her?

He sat for a moment longer, staring at the clumsy shapes lurching through the mist. He saw himself and Kelly fleeing the tower, racing out of the fog to his minivan and driving off. He saw her hand in his, so very warm, and she was smiling.

Donovan swung the minivan off the road and up the hill. He drove slowly along the fence, pushing people out of the way with the front bumper. The passenger side scraped the chain links until the length of the vehicle blocked the gate.

Satisfied, Donovan honked the horn.

People clustered around the vehicle. Their hands batted the windshield like white moths. Their blows rocked the van. They were much stronger than they appeared.

Donovan dared not honk again for fear the crowd would smash the windshield. He waited a few minutes for a response from the bunker. Getting none, he grabbed a heavy blanket from the back seat and slung the shotgun over his shoulder. He pushed the driver’ s door open, gently so as not to excite the multitude. He swung the blanket onto the roof of the minivan, then grabbed the luggage rack and muscled himself onto the roof. Standing there, he could easily reach the top of the fence. It was a simple matter to lay the blanket over the razor wire, climb over and drop to the gravel below.

He knocked on the front door of the radio station, heard the bolt turn in the lock. A man in a leather bomber jacket opened the door a crack. He recoiled from Donovan’ s smell and almost slammed the door shut.

“I brought weapons.” Donovan held out the shotgun before the man could close the door.

The black-haired man hesitated, his eyes going from the shotgun to the minivan parked at the gate. He never once looked at Donovan's face.

"Which one are you?" Donovan asked. "Preston or Brent?"

The man grinned. "Brent." He opened the door wide enough for Donovan to come in. "Here, let me take that." He lifted the shotgun from Donovan's hand and hurried down the hall. "Don't forget to lock the door."

Donovan did as he was told and followed Brent. The hall, which ran down the middle of the building, ended in a door with a red light over it, but Brent turned at the lunchroom.

Donovan stopped in the doorway. Even over his own stench, he could smell a musty odor. Obviously, the building was little used in normal times and the roof must have leaked. In the corner of the damp carpet, a cluster of pallid fungus sprouted.

The air was only a few degrees warmer than outside. A heavy-set man wearing tan cargo pants, a sweat-stained shirt and a heavy corduroy coat sat at a table littered with Twinkie wrappers. His mouth rhythmically masticated a pink Snowball.

Kelly wasn't there.

Donovan was about to turn away when the man eating the Snowball said, "Hey, you must be that hero Kelly's talking about. Thanks for the food, man. It was getting lean in here."

"You're welcome," Donovan said.

The heavy man got up, waddled toward Brent. "What'd you bring us this time? Woo-wee! A shotgun!"

"It's mine." Brent pumped the action, bringing a round into the chamber.

"You'll have to throw Twinkies."

“Here,” Donovan pulled the handgun from his belt. “You can use this.”

The heavy man held the pistol against his cheek, barrel pointed at the roof, and hummed the theme to James Bond. “Hey, do I look the part?”

Brent, busy checking the shotgun’s magazine, spared a moment to scowl at him. “Put it away, James Porker.”

“Where’s Kelly?” Donovan asked.

Brent glanced at him as though seeing him for the first time. “Wasting her time on the radio. Is that rig outside ready to go?”

Donovan left without answering. He went to the door at the end of the hall, and ignoring the sign that read, “Do not open while light is on,” he twisted the knob and went through.

Kelly sat at a control panel, her lips close to a microphone. She looked up as the door automatically closed behind Donovan.

Kelly threw a switch and pulled off her headphones, letting her blond ponytail fall free. She sat back in her chair and smiled crookedly at Donovan. “You amaze me. I ask for your help, and here you already are.”

Donovan shoved his hands in his pockets. “We didn’t really meet last time.”

“Right you are.” She stood, leaned across the control panel, and extended her hand. “You already know who I am. You are?”

Surprised, he drew his hands from his pockets. “Donovan.” He took her hand, felt its warmth run up his arm, making him tingle. “Donovan Albright.”

Her handshake lingered. “I don’t know how you got in here, but I’m glad you made it. I wanted to thank you for the food and drinks.”

“No problem.”

“Did you meet Brent and Preston?”

“Yes.”

“Preston is my technician. He normally runs the board. Brent, he’s a guy who needed a place to stay. I couldn’t leave him out there. This was the safest place I could think of. No windows, a strong gate. We brought enough food and water for two weeks, but Preston, he eats so much, and we never guessed this would keep going on for so long. What’s it like out there? As bad as I think?”

“It’s quiet, mostly. Not many cars on the street. A lot of people wandering around.”

“People?”

“You know. Like those people outside.”

“They’re dead, Donovan.”

“Dead? No, I don’t think so.”

“Dead. One hundred percent dead. Haven’t you listened to my reports? The dead are back, Donovan. Every last festering corpse has risen from its grave.”

Donovan shook his head. Dead people didn’t moan or scratch at windows. “They might have been dead before, but not anymore. And if they’re not dead, that makes them people, just like us.”

Kelly shuddered. “I hate dead things. When I was a girl, I couldn’t even get near my dead goldfish. My brother had to flush it for me. Christ, if I’d known the Rapture would be like this, I would’ve stayed in Sunday school.”

“The Rapture?”

“You know, like in the bible? The bible says when the last day comes, all the dead will rise to face their judgment. The worthy ones ascend to heaven to sit with God, or

strum harps, or play ring-toss with their halos. The rest are still here. With us.”

Donovan shook his head again. “Now you’re starting to sound like one of those religious nuts.”

“It’s not nuts. It’s fact. From what I understand, on Christmas Day half the people in the world vanished. They must’ve been the good ones, the ones God wanted in heaven. But what I don’t get is why God would want them. Some, I understand, like doctors and firemen and clergymen. But the rest? You know there are no politicians left? No movie stars? For crying out loud, I hear Bill Gates vanished! And here I am stuck in this corpse-filled world. What’d I do? I didn’t kill anybody. I didn’t steal anything. Okay, maybe I had a thing for a couple of married guys, but who hasn’t? God can’t expect us to follow every last one of his Ten Commandments. Just the important ones.”

Donovan loosened his collar, suddenly uncomfortable. He thought of his wife slumped at the dining table, listless and stiff. And here he was, talking to a woman who went for married men. Was he crazy? “What about Brent and Preston? What did they do?”

“Oh, Preston, that’s easy. He likes little boys. I don’t think he’s ever done anything to hurt anyone, but he has these magazines that would make you sick. And Brent? He’s an asshole.” She studied him for a moment. “What about you? Why are you here?”

“I’ve never had an affair, if that’s what you’re wondering. I pretty much went to work every day and made sure the bills were paid on time. Nothing wrong in that.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s not what we did that counts, but what we didn’t do. I was so busy paying the bills I never did the things I knew I was born to do. I went to

school to be a broadcast journalist. I never intended to get stuck as an anchor in a small market like this. I always thought I'd end up in DC helping to break the news, but instead I just read it from a teleprompter. And now, here I am, with the dead. A leftover.

“Maybe I'm not good enough to make it on a network. Maybe this is all I'm capable of. But it's not about living up to your potential, is it? It's about hungering for something more.”

In the silence that followed, Donovan tried to change the subject to something he could understand. “Is your name really Kelly Success?”

She laughed. “Of course not. I thought, if I was going to be a TV anchor, it sounded better than Kelly Sukut.”

Donovan Americanized it. “Suck it?”

“You can understand the problem. Anyway, that was back when a name mattered.”

“It's not that bad. We just need to figure out how to put things back together.”

“We can't put it back together. Everyone who knows how, hell, everyone who has the balls to try, is gone. And it looks like everyone who's been left behind has been turned into one of those zombies out there.” She looked at him with wonderment. “Except you.”

Donovan's face grew hot under her scrutiny. It made him feel special when all he really wanted was to be like everyone else.

A knock on the door startled him. “Hey you two! Zip up and move out!”

Donovan opened the studio door. In the hall, Brent cradled his shotgun and Preston stood by the front door, the pistol in one hand and a set of keys in the other.

Brent handed Kelly a heavy wrench the length of her forearm. “That’s what you get for being last.”

Kelly let the wrench hang at her side. “Brent, this is Donovan.”

“Yeah, we’ve met. You got the keys to that van outside?”

Donovan patted the front pocket of his jeans. “Yes.”

“Get them out and get ready to move. Preston, is the coast clear?”

Preston opened the door a notch, peeked out. “As clear as it’s going to get. There are zombies all around the van, but Donovan parked it good. They can’t get between the car and the gate. We’ll be able to step right in and there’s nothing those dead fucks can do.”

“And if they try anything . . .” Brent brandished his shotgun.

“I don’t know about this,” Kelly said, her face pale. “It’s safe here, and Donovan can bring us supplies. He has a way of moving among them.”

“That’s cuz he stinks like one of them.” Brent stabbed a finger at Kelly, dimpling her parka. “Look, I’m getting out. You can stay here if you want, but this place drives me crazy. There are other people out there, people who don’t listen to your damn radio show. We’re not the only ones left alive.”

Brent turned on Donovan. The muzzle of the shotgun hovered near his face. “I told you to get those keys out.”

“Okay.” He took the keys out of his pocket. Brent snatched them from his hand and walked away, heading for the front door.

“Sorry.” Kelly said to Donovan. “We better go with them or he really will leave us behind.”

“Are you sure you belong with him?”

“He’s alive, isn’t he? We’ve got to stick together.”

They clustered at the end of the hall around the door. “Let’s go,” Brent snapped.

Preston pushed open the door and they raced across the gravel to the gate. The mob outside immediately pressed against the minivan, claws outstretched, mouths agape with hungry moans.

Preston stopped to unlock the gate’s padlock. He fumbled with the pistol, and eventually set it down to work the key.

“Hurry up!” Brent shouldered his shotgun, couldn’t get a clear shot past the van, and lowered it again. He danced from foot to foot.

“Got it!” Preston jerked the padlock open. The chain slithered, rattling, to the gravel.

Brent hurled back the gate. “Get in! I’ll drive.”

Kelly grabbed Donovan’s hand. Her palm felt sweaty, her smile tentative.

“Easy as Christmas pie!” Preston, grinning over his shoulder, slid open the side door.

And the corpse inside, a coroner’s Y stitched across its chest, grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him headfirst into the back seat. Preston kicked. The cadaver lowered its mouth, bit into the left side of his neck where his pulse thrummed.

Preston screamed, his hands and legs flailing against the doorframe. The pistol lay forgotten on the ground.

Brent shoved the shotgun barrel into the back seat and fired. Kelly flinched at the blast. A load of twelve gauge shot ripped through the cadaver’s elbow, blowing off its forearm and tearing a dozen holes through Preston’s chest.

The cadaver, waxy and swollen from its embalming, twisted its head and ripped

loose a mouthful of meat from Preston's neck. The pudgy pedophile screamed sharp and shrill. Arterial blood sprayed the ceiling, hosed the cadaver's face with crimson. Its black tongue licked the gore as pale eyes widened with desire.

"Damn it!" Brent ripped open the front passenger door. The driver's door on the other side of the car hung open. Donovan had forgotten to close it when he climbed out.

A skeleton bound by strips of desiccated skin squirmed across the front seats, reaching for Brent.

Brent chambered a round, pressed cold metal to the gray skull and fired. Even headless, it wouldn't die. Ragged fingernails scratched blindly at Brent's leather jacket.

Brent leaned over, trying to reach the handle to close the driver's door. A young woman dressed in a nurse's uniform snapped at his fingers, driving him back. She pushed her way into the cab, crawling over the headless corpse, her sensible white shoes blocking the door.

Brent swore bitterly. He blasted another shot into the cab, not bothering to watch the damage it did, then scooped up the pistol. He cocked the shotgun one-handed, with an up-down motion like a mime jerking a rope. At the same time, he emptied the pistol into the cadaver that had killed Preston. It flopped onto its back, the bullets ripping open the Y incision in its chest. Internal organs spilled from its torso and slipped to the ground.

A rotten thing, long in the grave, held together more by its long coat than by its putrescent flesh, worked its way around the minivan, squeezing between the rear bumper and the edge of the gate. Patches of green mold covered its skin and clung to its coat.

“Kill it!” Kelly shoved the wrench at Donovan, her hands shaking. “Please, just kill it!”

Donovan didn't want her to get hurt. He took the wrench. “Get inside the studio.”

“But Brent . . .”

“He's not going anywhere. But you have to get out of here. Just open the back door when I knock.”

Kelly nodded. She glanced at Brent and the lines of her face collapsed in despair. She ran back to the studio.

The man crawling behind the minivan reeked of the grave. Donovan tossed the wrench aside. He would handle this his own way.

As the corpse struggled through the narrow gap, Donovan grabbed its long coat and pulled. The material felt slimy with decay. He wrestled with it, dragging the corpse from the breach and across the ground. The corpse didn't attack; it merely looked confused and struggled to get away.

At last Donovan got the coat off and stepped back to let the corpse get up.

Brent was screaming now, screaming with unrestrained madness. He slashed and clubbed with his spent shotgun. Preston, a huge chunk missing from his neck and buckshot painting his chest, pried his dead girth from the minivan. He joined the others in bringing Brent down.

The feeding began.

Donovan had seen enough. He carried the coat to the studio's back door and knocked out a little tune. Kelly opened the door, let him in, and secured it after him. They stood in a supply room, crowded by circuit boxes and the gas tank he had brought

earlier.

Kelly was white with shock. “Is Brent?”

“He’ ll be on his feet in a little while.” Donovan held up the long coat. “I brought this for you.”

Bits of decay dripped from the coat and she gagged at its smell. “Sweet thought, but no thanks.”

“Put it on.” Donovan held it out for her, but still she wouldn’ t get near it.

“I can’ t. It smells like one of them.” She cringed against the puttering generator. “I don’ t want to be like that.”

“Like what?” A shaft of anger raced through him. “Like me? Do I smell dead?”

Emma sitting at the dining table, waiting for dinner, head motionless, once hazel eyes covered by a milky film.

Donovan breathed deep, tried to clear his mind. “I’ m not asking you to sleep with me. I’ m just trying to get you out of here.”

“But that coat—”

“Look, Brent was right. Those people out there don’ t attack me because I smell like them. And if you put this on, you’ ll smell like them too. Then we can walk right out of here.”

Kelly stared at him, clearly dubious but needing a shred of hope. At last she nodded and allowed him to help her on with the coat, wearing it over her parka. She shivered at the touch of it.

He raised the collar to partially obscure her face.

“Is this really necessary?” she whimpered.

“They’ re attracted by smell and sound. So no more talking, okay? And breathe

through your mouth. It might help until you get used to the smell.”

Donovan unlocked the door and led Kelly toward the gate. The mist held a dozen crouching shapes chewing on meat torn from Brent’s carcass. The pieces of flesh scattered about the gravel quivered with unnatural life, but there wasn’t enough left of Brent to come back. Preston squatted by the gate, gnawing an arm that flexed and scrabbled at nothing.

Kelly gagged, began to speak. Donovan held a warning finger to his lips. He found Brent’s leather jacket, sopping with gore, and pulled the car keys from the pocket.

A decapitated, skeletal creature writhed across the front seats of the minivan. Donovan grabbed its arm and drew it out. He got in, slid across the putrid-soaked seats to the steering wheel. Brent’s shotgun had damaged the dashboard and peppered the upholstery. He hoped the van still ran.

Donovan closed the driver side door and locked it, then leaned over and helped Kelly into the passenger side.

Safe in the car, Donovan turned the key in the ignition. The minivan growled but wouldn’t start. He tried again. The engine caught, ran rough. He put his hand on the gearshift and hesitated.

A child, dead no more than a few days, stood in front of the minivan. The boy had only one arm. The other had been chewed off so recently it still dripped.

“Run him down,” Kelly whispered. Getting no reaction, she shouted, “Run him down!”

At the sound of her voice, the boy hissed at them. He pressed his body to the front grill.

Donovan looked at her in shock. “I can’t. It’s a child”

“It’s not a child! It’s a zombie! A dead thing!”

The walking dead shambled from the fog surrounding the radio tower. Fists pounded on the windshield, sending a spider web of cracks across it.

Donovan threw the minivan into gear and stepped on the accelerator. He tried to avoid hitting anyone, but they were too closely packed. He felt the van bounce over something and when he looked out the rear view mirror, he saw the one-armed child lying on the ground, his back snapped.

Donovan drove through the deserted city, weaving around abandoned cars. Kelly perched on her seat, hands gripping the dashboard, eyes wide with a jumble of fear and relief.

“My God,” she breathed at last. “There’s nothing left out here. Where will we go?”

Glancing at the woman next to him, Donovan felt the wrongness of it all. He couldn’t just run away with her. It was tempting, but even he could see he didn’t belong with her. She was too different and he could hardly understand her. She wasn’t the answer. Or was she?

He remembered marrying Emma, their vows, the way she licked the raspberry filling from his fingertips when he fed her a slice of wedding cake.

He firmed his grip on the steering wheel. “We’ll go back to my house. My wife is there. She’s desperate for a taste of something new.”

The next morning, when Donovan rolled out of bed, he discovered Emma already prowling the living room, restlessly scratching at the boarded windows. He smiled to see her so filled with life.

Later he'd take her out for a walk. Brent was probably right, there had to be other people hidden away behind boarded windows. With Emma's help, he would find them. They would be happy together.

But first: lunchtime.

Donovan dropped two plates on the table. Emma rushed over and greedily shoved her meal into her mouth.

Donovan picked up his sandwich. Between the slices of bread, something jiggled and dripped like strawberry jam. Leftovers, but he didn't mind. Donovan opened wide and took a hearty bite.

He licked his lips. It was just as good as last night, the sweet taste of Success.

The End