

MY DOLLY

BY DEREK NIKITAS

It was high time for me to fetch frozen Dolly from the butcher shop, but even in an ambulance the drive was rough, it being the Apocalypse out. This girl was too young to be called Dolly, just a teenager, but I named her Dolly because I liked the Golden Oldies, grassroots sheen of it. See, Dolly was dead, and along with the rest of her scrubbed memory, she lost whatever dull moniker her parents had imposed on her. It would be a new dawn for Dolly when I came to her rescue.

En route I kept the siren wailing. The sound bounced off the coastal pines, stripped bare of branches up to the top ten feet. The only cars left on this woodsy backroad were the few stalled in pine-straw beds, so it wasn't traffic but crickets and cicadas that impeded my progress.

Great hoards of them crackled in the air like static, kamikaze-bombing the windshield until it was framed with thick bug juice in the corners where the wipers couldn't reach. A million wings and limbs twitched in my sight line, and when the road curved, my back tires jackknifed across fresh slicks of crushed bugs on the pavement. There was no speed limit, since all the road signs were mucked with pestilence. I couldn't drive through these conditions without a permanent grimace, and my leather-gloved hands cramped from their grip on the steering wheel.

Milo's Specialty Meats was a clapboard roadside dive with gravel and dead bugs for a parking lot. This far out, the bug hoards receded a bit. I could even read the street signs, like the hurricane-evac-route marker, blue circle with white swirl icon, the eye of the storm. My coordinates were two miles inland, or thereabouts, as the Atlantic

was lately taking bigger breaths, sucking back beaches and piers, blowing down boardwalks.

I parked and flicked off the siren and threw on my beekeeper's hat, tucking the netting into the collar of my shirt. I'd dressed for the occasion in a dark blue blazer, light blue shirt, and a nice silk necktie. I'd shaved for the first time in weeks.

The sign in Milo's entranceway read CLOSED, but I knew I was welcome anytime. Driver's door open, a few stray cicadas attached themselves to my lapel and stared at me with their fire eyes. The woods sang the chorus of a thousand one-note lovesongs, so I whistled along as I pulled open the ambulance hatch doors.

A cold white mist billowed inside. The open boxes stacked along the floor beside the stretcher were filled with hundreds of dry-ice blocks. I inhaled the chilled, thin air. I grabbed the stretcher, slid it out while the rails unfolded and the wheels touched ground. A half dozen cicadas and crickets instantly polluted the sheet's pristine whiteness with their dull armored bodies. That incessant insect buzz burrowed inside me, deep in my chest, and turned almost pleasant, the hum of anticipation.

I pulled the stretcher across the lot, and it jostled over the rugged rock. The store's glass entrance did not give way when I shoved my shoulder against it, so I bellowed, "Milo!" He had to be inside the shop because his pickup was parked in the side yard. I rapped both fists against the glass and called him out again.

A cartoon pig was sketched in wax pencil on the display window. "I'll huff and I'll puff," I muttered, looking for a softball-sized rock to throw. I worried that Milo and his bearded Czech heifer of a wife had abandon their only livelihood on account of a few rainstorms and some insects, but they had electricity and generators, enough dried meat and imported beers to last months. They had nowhere better to go.

Over by the gutter spout I found a nice granite chunk and reared back, hoisting it over my shoulder like a quarterback plotting a twenty-yard pass. My best hurl didn't penetrate the glass, but it burst a spiderweb of cracks across the topmost pane in the entrance door.

A small helicopter of a bug buzzed past my ear. I heard a lock slide open, and there was Milo's furious wife filling up the doorway, filling

out an unflattering, sheer pink nightgown. She held one arm across her breasts to spare us both the shame.

“You break window, crazy fuckmother! Go away from here,” she told me.

“I’m here to get Dolly,” I said.

She eyeballed the stretcher, the ambulance. “Closed!” she grunted.

“Hold on—is Milo—”

“Closed!”

“My name is Renfroe. Milo told me to—”

“Closed for permanent! No meat!” She slammed the door shut to prove her point, and the top glass panel rained down in shards onto the cement slab below. After a moment, her face loomed in the horse door she’d created. Her hair was short on the sides, but six inches of tight black coils were piled on top, redolent of some particularly nasty wild mushroom. “Shit now!” she barked.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a money clip, wagged it at her. I tore off my beekeeper getup, showed her my sincerest expression, and said, “There’s a deceased girl in your meat locker, and I’m here to take her away from you. Milo and I arranged it, and I’ve got five hundred dollars right here for payment.”

“Milos, he is dead from heart attack. One week past.”

“By God, I’m sorry,” I said. Then, after a solemn few seconds I added, “Can I talk to him anyway?”

“He has no remember.”

The bugs were all over my face, in my hair. I squinted to keep them from landing in my eyes, but I held my ground and made a wide fan of that money so Grunta could get a good whiff of it. I forgot her name, but Grunta got the gist.

“You come help me fix hole,” Grunta demanded.

“Can you tell me, is the girl still here?”

“Fill hole now, headshit!”

I tossed my beekeeper bonnet onto the cot and scrambled inside, lugging the stretcher behind me. Close up, Grunta smelled like pepperoni. She pointed to a stack of plywood boards atop the empty glass case that once enshrined the choicest meats.

“I get hammer,” Grunta said. She waddled into the back room while I hoisted up a plywood slab large enough to cover the missing

pane. I pressed it against the opening and waited. A calico cat appeared from some hiding spot and leaped up onto the glass case. It was stalking a beetle, bobbing its head to the rhythm of the beetle's stumbling buzz. I made kissing sounds at it, but the cat ignored me, as cats are wont to do.

Grunta hurried back into the storefront with the hammer raised in striking position, a dozen nails jutting head-outward from her pursed lips. She fastened the board I held to the doorframe with nails she plucked from her mouth. The loose flesh on her arm seemed to pucker up nicely as she worked. She had to be two feet shorter than me, twice as big around.

"No bugs!" she coughed, expelling the last couple nails. She hammered a cricket that had landed on the wall beside a tacked-up poster of Prague's Charles Bridge and its promenade of life-size saint statues. "You here for dead girl in freezer?" Her nostrils flared when she spoke.

"Yes, Milo and I agreed to a five-hundred-dollar fee for—"

"Milos is dead! He remembers nothing. I say seven-fifty."

"I'm not in any position to argue," I said.

"Come here," she demanded. The cat stepped gingerly from the meat case onto her shoulder and crouched there, tail switching. The room we entered was made for slicing things apart. Huge knives and saws lined the walls, an empty cutting-board table below them, stained with dark splotches. Drains in the floor would wash it all away.

A raw smell I thought was Grunta became stronger back here, sweetly rank. On the far end of the butcher shop stood the meat-locker door with a handle like a horizontal tavern tap. I almost reached for that handle, eager to break the vacuum seal, but instead Grunta led me into a meager office with an antique turn-dial television set, a few open TV trays with stacks of papers on them, and a human corpse seated upright in a rocking chair, slowly rocking. Milo was the source of the smell, and it was sharp enough to make my poor pointless epiglottis spasm.

The look of him made my heart pound hard enough to prove it was still in use. His ugliness was bearable, but what he evoked was not: negative spaces, black holes in human shape, maddening blurs

to which your eyes refused focus, statues in flesh molded by some demon hand, oracles that announced with every twitch of their bones a vastness and darkness that no living brain could fathom. They could not be true but were. They attracted too many flies.

Grunta grabbed a plastic flyswatter from atop a paper pile and lashed at Milo's head with it. The cat on her shoulder rode out this violence like a rodeo cowboy.

I could hear the flies buzz, like in the poem by Dickinson, that creepy little Amherst goth who wrote a hundred hymnals to the Dead. The TV was muttering afternoon news: A California commune of three hundred souls had finally, after much preamble from their high priest, tossed themselves like lemmings into the deep molten canyon that, a few weeks earlier, an earthquake had ripped through downtown San Francisco. They'd leaped one by one screaming, each of them, "Mother Nature forgive us!" There had been no miracles to witness, no onset of the King.

Milo turned away from this broadcast and studied us both with the cool detachment that he must've reserved, in life, for fresh slabs of meat. His eyes were sunken and rheumy, and the skin on his face had tinted greenish, sagging so that his mouth arched downward like a Greek-tragedy mask. His hair, once a lush bloom of salt-and-pepper curls, was gone, and the flesh on his head seemed to have petrified into another layer of bone.

"Milos, this man come to see you," Grunta explained.

"Renfroe," I said. "We've talked a few times before," I said.

Milo winced and his mouth eased open, but he said nothing. Instead, he raised a liter bottle of vodka from between his legs and poured the last swill of it in the general direction of his mouth. Most of it trickled down his chin and seeped into the ring of moisture spreading downward from his undershirt collar. Beside the legs of his chair were other, empty liters of vodka, gin, Kentucky bourbon.

"Drunkard," Grunta complained, as her chin quivered.

"It kills some of their pain, the alcohol," I told her. "They crave it, I've noticed."

"Same as before dead for him, then."

"Does he speak to you?"

"At first," she said. "No more. He is quiet now."

In life, Milo would erupt with theatrical talk. He'd sweat and his face would grow ruddy. He despised his wife, harassed the young women who dared step into the store, wiggling sausages at them suggestively. There was always booze on his breath and a pistol under his cash register.

Made you wonder, but we'd all been musing lately on the Soul. You couldn't avoid wondering, in the presence of these walking, talking human shells. It was the reason I came back to Milo's Specialty Meats—for Dolly. Things were different. The universe had color and verve.

"Let me just pay you now—" I started, producing the chunk of money again.

Grunta snatched it out of my hands, the whole thousand bucks. She ran it under her nose to sniff it. It was real money and rather easily procured, though neither of us knew what it was worth anymore. Cash had become hardly more than memento. It was supposed to represent gold in a vault somewhere, sure, but gold was just a kind of rock.

"Uh, that's actually a thousand," I told her. "But I'll make you a deal."

Grunta pursed her lips. "What deal?"

"I'll give you the whole grand for Dolly and all the booze you have left."

"What is Dolly?"

"The dead girl."

Grunta shoved the money in her pocket. She scratched the cat under its chin, and the cat eased its eyes shut. I followed Grunta back into the butchery and watched her snap open the handle on the meat-locker door. The automatic light came on inside, a harsh medical white. Bags of anonymous meat cuts were stacked on plastic shelves; a half dozen long beef sides hung on a track like suits in a bedroom closet.

At the far end of the room was a packing crate made of cheap wood and nails, like a pauper's coffin. The girl inside it, I knew, was maybe nineteen or twenty, not more than a hundred pounds, barely five feet tall. She had less literal substance than the larger cuts of hooked meat around us, but this other flesh could not be revived like hers could.

The cat leaped down from her mistress's shoulder and skittered

out through the open freezer door. I asked Grunta for the biggest flathead screwdriver she could find.

When she brought it back she said, "What are you doing with this girl?"

"Awakening," I explained. I slipped past her into the freezer, too eager now to batten down for questioning. When I leaned down beside the crate, both knees on the cold floor, Grunta jabbed her index finger into my shoulder to get my attention. Her breath misted as she said, "Tell me why you need this girl."

"I want to know what it's like . . . to be dead. I want to ask her."

Grunta snorted. "Ask Milos. It is nothing. No remembering."

I shimmed the screwdriver head into the crease between the crate and its nailed-down lid, slapped the handle with the palm of my hand to wedge it in deeper. "I want to take her on a trip," I said. I shoved down on the handle, and the crate nails screeched as they lifted out of place.

"She might not wish to be with you."

"She can do whatever she wants," I said, "but I can keep her safe."

"What is *safe* meaning for a dead person, eh?" Grunta asked.

I didn't answer. I was breathing aerobically now. When the lid was loose enough, I slid my fingers between the nails. The cheap balsa wood crackled and buckled. Dolly was there, zipped inside a clear plastic bag that hazed my view of her. She was laying in a bed of ice packs, piled around her and sprinkled atop her limbs and her abdomen. I brushed aside those that covered her face and tugged with both hands at the zipper until it gave way.

There was Dolly's face—white lips, cyanotic skin, paper-thin eyelids curved shut over the rounded half-moons of her eyes. A sleeping beauty, though frost had matted her dark hair in unseemly, petrified clumps. That luster would return, I knew.

"Jesu," Grunta sighed. "You are not going to bugger this carcass?"

I stood up again, and I outsized her, screwdriver tight in my fist. I let Grunta listen to the way my teeth chattered together. I could see her eyes darting. She was wondering how she'd gotten herself alone in a freezer with a strange man and a corpse in a crate.

Behind her, dead Milo shuffled into the freezer doorway, mouth agape. He raised a limp hand to waist level and waved lazily at us. I offered the screwdriver back to Grunta, handle first.

“There are some sick people in the world,” I told her. “Especially now. See, before these troubles I was an emergency medical technician for the Port City area. When things began to go haywire, well, you can imagine the despair. People were afraid to die. People have always been afraid to die. But some people, they get so full of fear, so full of despair, they give up. Look at this.”

I unzipped the plastic bag all the way down to Dolly’s navel. She was naked as a newborn, modest breasts flattened almost boyish in her supine repose, but I paid only clinical attention. What I meant to show Grunta was to be found on both of Dolly’s forearms, but I lifted only the left, raised it carefully and overturned it to expose the inside length of her arm. A single purplish groove ran from her wrist to the crook of her arm, a foot-long deliberate gash. It was puckered, though the wound itself was bloodless now. Dolly’s fingers twitched as I held her hand. She was so utterly cold, my hands stung from the touch of her flesh.

I said, “Think of how lost she must have felt, to do this to herself. I don’t understand that kind of despair, but the minute I found her, I knew she’d be back. Heck, she herself must’ve known she’d be back. I had to help her.”

“You are the person who brings her here to my shop?”

I nodded. Milo stood now beside his wife, dumbstruck, but less than two weeks before he had agreed, for the price of a thousand dollars on deposit and five hundred on retrieval, to let me store the body of a suicide girl in his freezer. He was the only man I knew with cold storage large enough to keep her, the loose scruples to do it for cash, and the gusto to hold fort while everyone else in the county split the coast in fear of four horsemen.

I said, “She was one of the last emergency calls we got before they shut down local services. A security guard at the state university called it in. The school had been closed down for days, but somehow this girl sneaked herself into the library. They have private study carrels in the stacks, and he found her there with her sleeves rolled up and a razor blade. It was a mess when we arrived, though she’d only been dead for a few minutes. We were meant to bring her to the county morgue, but by then they’d already issued the incineration policy, and I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t let her be destroyed.”

Grunta was scratching herself in the neck with the screwdriver, unamused.

I said, “Anyway, I think she wanted to come back. She took her own life in a place she thought was private, where she wouldn’t be found before three hours lapsed.”

Grunta gestured at Milo with her thumb. “He took only one hour for return.”

“I’ve heard anywhere from one hour to a full day. Three hours is average.”

“And this—this freezing is to keep her from walking dead?”

“It was an experiment,” I said. “And I think it worked, mostly.”

Grunta sneered at me. “Milos lets you keep her here? He agrees to this?”

I didn’t know how to answer, but my silence told all. Grunta turned on her husband and shoved him one-handed. He croaked some awful sound and reeled backward against a suspended beef carcass. The meat swayed, and the hook to which it was impaled creaked from the strain, but it didn’t drop.

“You are lucky you are dead already,” she barked at him. “Villain!”

The freezer chill was making my nose run, so I headed back to the stretcher waiting in the entranceway. I enlisted Milo to help me lift Dolly out of the crate. He took her by the legs, and I got a grip on the plastic underneath her shoulders, hoping it wouldn’t rip midtransit. We slid her onto the cot, bag and all, and I stuffed a dozen ice packs inside the bag alongside her legs and across her stomach. I didn’t leer at where the gentle slope of her pubic bone was grazed by a soft chevron of manicured hair.

Grunta led me to a loading bay and heaved up the paneled door with one arm, swinging the other as a hint for me to get out quickly. “Hurry,” she said, “—the bugs.” I rolled the stretcher back to the ambulance with relative ease, locked it into place. The bugs were in my hair, crawling along the length of my jugular. I’d lost my beekeeper’s hat somewhere.

I worked quickly to load the alcohol I had also purchased—cases of imported Czech beer, five boxes of Russian vodka with the labels printed in Cyrillic. My coup was two entire cases stuffed with glass

flasks of dark-green absinthe, wormwood infused, smuggled incognito in Heineken boxes. Myself, I didn't drink much more than a glass of wine on special occasions, but I knew that Dolly would need all this painkiller to get by when she awoke.

Back on the road, an FM station aired the soundtrack of our foreshortened lives—the Doors, REM, Blue Oyster Cult. Christian radio had gone shrill, of course, overtaken most of the airwaves not reserved for hard news—and it was always hard. For once I was thrilled to still be alive and scheming. I was like an expectant father on his way to the hospital. I blared the siren and the lights for nobody else as I floored it back into the pestilence cloud. The bugs came at me in a green hail and popped and crackled on the windshield like a celebration.

Toward the coast, the end of the line was abrupt. Orange barrels and wood crossbeams blocked the road, topped with blinking yellow lights. The inbound lane had been breached, barrels tossed into the marshy ditches now drowned out by seawater, caught and bobbing with other garbage in the rushes. The road, broken and sand-strewn, pressed onward into the waves. A sturdy wooden welcome plaque remained, though it read only WELCOME TO. The rest was submerged in the sea, out of which peeked the upper floors of restaurants and vacation homes, windows half-submerged like the looming eyes of crocodiles. The boat storage lofts still held an armada of compartmentalized pleasure crafts, though the units on the lowest visible floor were vacant, their boats most likely floating empty and silent miles beyond these washed-out barrier islands.

The flash storms came daily and savagely, pushing in like hurricane feeder bands from the east in twisted airstreams. Even now the sky brewed purple on the horizon, and I had to hurry.

I cut the siren and the engine, popped open the door. I pulled out the stretcher and the rails unfolded, wheels touching pavement. Dolly slept the same as I'd left her—but I unzipped the bag and took her hand and laid it out across my own open palm and saw that her eyelids spasmed while I watched.

I pushed the stretcher on past the broken barrier, decked out in my jacket and tie and slacks—not the suit of a pallbearer, but rather of a preacher, a baptist. I'd never known God, but I felt him there in the briny air pushing off the sea, the front guard of the coming storm.

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His resistance was in the sand at my feet, mucking up the stretcher wheels. Dolly jostled as we moved over the rough ground, her small breasts quivering, and I looked away from them, out to sea.

A hundred yards out, five men stood on the balcony of a drowned-out restaurant. The place was four-star nautical kitsch—weathered wood siding and fishing nets and buoys. Its balcony had become a kind of dock on the raised waterline. The five shirtless men stood there in swim trunks and cutoff jeans, watching me.

I pushed Dolly to where the ocean undulated against the pavement. The road I walked had become like a boat launch angling down into the sea. The gulls circled and dived nearby, a few touching down on a massive gray hump. It was like a smooth boulder rising up from the shoals. It was, I realized, a dead beached whale. Truly dead. The baffling resurrections seemed a curse for humankind alone. Everything else that died was dead.

Thunder bashed on the horizon. The force of it seemed drawn up from the primordial deep that man had never conquered nor would. But here I was heedless, driving Dolly into the sea as the water drenched my shoes and soaked upward through my pant legs. It was lukewarm water, heated, so the hack radio scientist claimed, by the sudden spike in volcanic fuss along the midocean ridge, abyssal mountain ranges many leagues beyond the continental shelf.

After I waded waist-deep into the water, I moved alongside Dolly's body and unzipped the bag down to her toes, folded it behind her shoulders, and lifted her head into the crook of my arm. I wrapped my other arm around her hips. Her flesh was dimpled like plucked chicken skin, but I ignored the chill and slipped her into the water. The ice packs scattered and bobbed around us.

The nimbostratus front line had begun to eclipse the sun and lay its shadows like an early dusk. I freed Dolly from her baggage and held her naked above the water, one arm beneath her shoulders and the other behind the backs of her knees. She was stiff at first, but every second her body relaxed itself into my grasp. Her loosened knee joints lowered her bare feet down into the water. I waded out farther, my necktie draped modestly over her breasts.

The water came up to lap at my elbows and then to ease the burden of her weight from my arms. Lightning sputtered through the clouds,

gilding their purple masses. Traces of that electric rush drove into the sea current. It shivered up through my groin and fired into my throat and made me laugh like God had finally blurted the punchline.

My five-man Greek chorus had descended from their restaurant balcony onto a speedboat tied to the railings. One of them kept yanking the starter cord while the other four sat patiently in their seats. They were coming ashore ahead of the storm, skirting certain death. Or maybe they were already dead. Or they were live men coming for Dolly and me, eager to do whatever sick men do when laws no longer stifle their appetites.

I knelt into the oncoming waves and went under, kept my eyes open and felt that liquid-salt sting. I clenched her around the waist and pressed her chest against mine to keep her submerged where the amniotic warm could soften her chill. My lungs convulsed for air. My will dashed any whim I had to stay under and drown. My heart heaved blood through veins to remind me I was not yet together with the revenants.

I pressed my fingers to her face, wanting somehow to feel the moment of her consciousness, that current of thought trapped under ice, incubated. In my asphyxiating daze, I saw where two thousand miles north the frozen corpses of long-lost Arctic explorers now faced their eternal second consciousness without hope for motion, not until the ice caps melted off. I saw the bones of the decades-dead that hummed in their buried coffins but couldn't lift the lid, cursed instead to ruminate in that cramped and noiseless dark. I saw Ukrainian nuclear towns where cancers bred wild and where fetuses presumed to be stillborn were quickening again in their mothers' wombs. I saw African genocide fields of dead rising up like wheat at dawn, the burning pits spewing forth their charred offspring—

—and then I reared my head from the sea and breathed.

The five men had pattered their boat to within a few yards from us, two men at the fore peering down over the gunwale to catch sight of obstructions—street signs, the roofs of underwater houses. Behind them the dark skies brewed thicker shadow. The men were smoking cigarettes, so they were not among the dead. Unwelcome news for Dolly and me. One of them stood and pointed toward me and said “There!” A moment later, the boat veered more precisely toward us.

The waves rushed harder now. They slapped my face and worked

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to shove me off my feet and drag me away on a riptide. I stole more oxygen and dipped back underwater with Dolly. I brought her face within inches of mine to see her more clearly. All at once her body lurched and her legs scissored through the churning current.

I turned back toward shore. My shoes sought vainly for traction on the underwater pavement. Hardly five feet deep and the sea believed it could claim us. The backwash rushed against Dolly as I held her. She clutched at my jacket lapel. I didn't want to rise up and give those men a clear sign of my whereabouts.

I moved forward with each surge and held my ground as best I could. I kicked off one shoe and with a socked foot dug my toes into pavement cracks. When my lungs clenched for air again, I stood upright. My chin barely broke the surface, and panic hit. I was farther from shore than I'd been before.

An outward swell upended us. I was tumbling with her. Some impulse told my arms they had to fight, they had to let go, but even as she was sliding out of my grasp, I resisted.

Even Dolly kicked, flailed her arms. This was not the birth I had hoped for her. I screamed into the surf and got a windpipe full of saltwater for it. I coughed and gasped and thought, *Somebody's backyard pool, a hotel Jacuzzi, even a warm shower could've done the trick.* But like always, I'd overreached for the sake of the dramatic.

My arms clutched at nothing. Dolly gone. Lungs heaved. No breath. I spun and lost my sense of up, as the storm dark had draped down over.

Grips like fishhooks jammed under my armpits. I was caught and hoisted. I squeezed my fist with something inside it—flesh and bone that was, mercifully, Dolly's wrist. I had her, but someone else had me, lifting, a clamp along my gut so sudden I gagged away the water I had breathed. Hands pulling at my jacket, hands ushering me onto the speedboat deck. I sprawled across a thwart. The shirtless men dragged Dolly from the sea. She was onboard with the rest of us.

Above, spirals of gray churned inside the purple clouds like coiling, electric eels flashing their charges through the ether. The boat tossed and men bellowed, and the rain on my face brought stinging pain with its drive. I smelled smoke and gasoline and the acrid sweat of men who hadn't bathed in quite some time. One of them slapped

my face around. “You all right, buddy? You with us?” His bearded face blotted out the sky.

“All right,” I said, coughing. “The girl?”

The bearded man cringed at the rain bearing down on us. We were rushing toward shore, but the sea yet grabbed for us, crested over the hull, strived to capsize.

Someone said, “Jesus—”

And: “She’s not—she’s dead—she’s one of the Dead—”

I tried to sit upright, but something held me down against the cushioned thwart.

“Leave her alone!” My voice.

“Look at her wrists. She ain’t breathing. God, her eyes—”

Even with their shouting, the roar of the sea, and the boat engine, even with the constant thunder overhead—all that noise and still I heard something else coming on, like a lake of water coming to a boil.

“Aw, God,” somebody said, “hail.”

A surge of men’s bodies hit the deck not wide enough to hold us all. I reached out to where I saw the knuckled curve of Dolly’s spine. The wall of hail pummeled the boat and riddled the water surrounding us. It bashed into the wet naked flesh on the backs of these men. It punched rapid-fire against my shoulders, and the hardest hits were enough to knock my breath away. Each pellet was a hard-packed snowball bursting into slush against the pool of water on the floor of the boat. The men, hunched where they sat, laced their hands over the backs of their heads to guard their skulls from impact.

A wave crested white behind us as the boat scraped aground. The engine died with an electric snap. We lurched portward, aft end wrenched around toward the sea to catch the brunt of another raging wave and the slantwise barrage of frozen hail. The storm was bathed all in purple fog, and the lightning plunged its bright nervous membranes into the deep.

The boat upended and threw us all haphazard back into the surf. I was under, mouthful of water, someone’s foot stomped into my gut. But my hands found solid ground, and I crawled and breathed and squeezed out the salt in my eyes. Dolly, naked, was already scrambling ahead of me out of the water. She was like a mermaid testing land with the legs she had wished for. There were no welts where

the hail stones struck her, just the pale bluish cast of her back and rear and thighs. A tattoo was on her waistline, though I couldn't decipher it.

Our ambulance was ahead, but the tide had advanced in mere minutes to roil around the wheel wells. Hail pinged off the windshield and the hood and beat away the film of bug guts. Both my shoes were missing now. A hailstone grazed my cheek so sharply that I cried out, slapped my hand there, and found blood. Some of the other men were already crawling in the swash. They were lunging, desperate against the ice that would surely beat us all soon enough to death.

I rushed the land, howling like a beach-stormer off a landing craft. When I overcame Dolly, I grasped her by the elbow and yanked so abruptly that she almost collapsed on her uncertain legs.

One of the men ran beside us. He was wide open, unsuspecting. I swung my fist at his neck. He gagged and slapped his throat and buckled at the knees. I was feral, spittle at the mouth. Hail bashed my head, but it brought no pain. "Come on, come on, come on," I chanted.

We reached the ambulance, wrenched the passenger door open. Dolly's face—her bleached-out irises so dilated in surprise, so lively. The gape of her mouth was almost a smile.

No time left to circle around to the driver's door. The other men were upon us. I lunged through the cab and wrenched Dolly inside behind me. No strength left to pull her onto the seat, but she seemed to understand now, as she hoisted herself up from the wet ground. I was sprawled across the bench with Dolly on my legs, one hand to crank the starter key and the other to slap down the driver-door lock. The bearded man—he'd saved my life—was there at the window bashing with both fists, moaning God knows, blood slashed across his forehead.

I grabbed the gearshift underhanded and wrenched it into reverse. Still lying prone with Dolly's weight on me, I couldn't see through the windshield and my feet weren't within reach of the accelerator. So I slapped it with my palm instead. The ambulance revved backward out of the flood, a few more yards away from those desperate men, shirtless and bloody like biblical nomads.

I struggled into a proper driver's position, shifted back into forward.

Derek Nikitas

The men were dark blurs behind a windshield fogged and slushed and bug strewn, but I kicked the gas and their shapes leaped aside from the onrushing headlight beams. The most dogged of their posse reached out and grazed the driver's-side mirror. He kept firm hold of it as I spun a wide U-turn away from the raging sea.

It was the bearded man again, the persistent prophet, furry face against the glass and feet skating along on the ground. I was fixing to unroll the window and congratulate him, but the side mirror broke loose and the stowaway disembarked with it.

There was clear road ahead, and when I turned to Dolly, I saw that she was as ashamed as Eve after tasting the fruit, legs dawn up against her nakedness. Her chin shuddered from cold or fear as she gazed on me. I'd be a liar if I claimed she looked anything else but horrified.

But this is how we're born, naked and afraid.

"Happy birthday, Dolly," I said.

IN STORES 2/16/2010

THIS WINTER, HELL FREEZES OVER,
THE DEAD WALK THE EARTH, AND
THE LIVING FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL IN

THE NEW DEAD

A BLOCKBUSTER COLLECTION OF
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