

NOTHING BUT THE DEAD AND DYING

Chapter 1

I am quite enjoying the apocalypse. Not at all as dark and gloomy as expected. The sun is streaming in between the wooden slats that barricade my bedroom windows, the birds are tweeting in unrestrained cacophony outside, I just woke up after another glorious sleep-in and I am brimming with a strong sense of energy and contentment. If this were a Disney movie, I'd half expect those noisy birds to flitter inside and dress me.

I fold back my bedclothes, lean over to the window, draw back the curtain, and peek through the slats. The suburban streetscape beyond is as still and empty as always, the sky a vibrant and cloudless blue. This can only mean one thing.

Another beautiful day. The apocalypse just keeps getting better and better.

I shimmy out of bed and make my way to the kitchen. Flicking on a light to combat the gloom of a boarded up house, I pull together some breakfast materials. UHT milk in thimble containers scavenged from a catering supplier at Fairview's airport, and some wheat bricks that are trending towards the stale. I combine the two in a ceramic bowl, enjoy the faint scent of iron from the gloopy mass.

Bowl in hand, I saunter into the open space adjoining the kitchen. It is a small room with neat white walls and a glass door (barricaded) that leads out the back. I guess a real estate agent would call this a "meals" room, or perhaps a "living-slash-dining" (might even stretch to "fourth bedroom", depending on their ruthlessness). Most importantly for me, it is a room I have decorated myself; a glorious hodge-podge of knick-knacks and collectables that I have come across during my roving that remind me of the world as it was before. Bright blue Pokemon

figures, one slightly melted. Movie posters featuring celebrities I used to think were pretty cool, but are now probably just pretty cold. Lego. God Lego is awesome.

I take a seat at the neat wooden table in the room's centre and get to work on my breakfast. The meal is dry and bland, but sufficiently nourishing. Good solid chow, nothing fancy. As my spoon pings off the ceramic like irregular sonar in the silence, I smile, and idly mull the day ahead.

My mind first wanders to my guest, who is lying in the room adjacent to this one. I wonder if he has woken yet. During his first days here, I could always tell when he had risen, his loud, insufferable tantrums capable of waking the dead. But his ire and frustration have apparently eased since then, and now he often stays quiet even after I have started my day. To my ear this is one of those days, and I decide to leave him be, for now.

My first port of call, then, will be a little exercise. I finish my cereal, dump bowl and spoon in the sink and duck into the next room. Taking a well-worn place on my training mat, I begin my stretching routine. Standing, seated, supine, I pretzel my legs and A-frame my arms, reaching, twisting, elongating. With the same *oh, that's so good* release that a deep tissue massage might confer, my stiff morning body begins to make way for my alert daytime self, and with one final stretch and yawn (purely decorative), I welcome myself to another day.

The treadmill beckons next. I switch it on and run hard for a good part of the early morning, thumping through my paces. I vary the incline and speed at whim, and, after finishing my usual distance, decide to run a little further. It's not like I'm in a rush to be anywhere.

Following the run, I work my way through strengthening exercises: squats, push-ups, chin-ups, planks, dips; all manner of body resistance disciplines. I rarely lift weights, as I want to

avoid cultivating cumbersome bulk. With my lifestyle, agility is far more important: I need to be nimble, dexterous, *fast*. Lithe is lethal, I always say. (Well, I would, if there was someone to say it to.)

I finish my workout with some fight training. I practice set moves, then wail on a boxing bag for as long as my unprotected fists can take it. I unleash punches, kicks, elbows, knees, the bag jerking and tugging wildly as I dance around it. I'm feeling pretty good this morning. It really does feel like it is going to be a Good Day.

Daily training completed, I towel myself down and slip into a warm shower. There is probably no need for it (who'd know if I didn't?) but routine gets the better of me. I let my subconscious take over as I run through all the ablutions I regularly perform. I hum, sing a little. Nothing fancy, just mumbled old tunes I can't precisely place. As always, I finish with a cold stab of water, just to make sure I am here. Thankfully, I am.

There is no real reason to shave my lazy man's beard stubble, so I dress for the day (close-fitting black t-shirt, green cargo pants, sneakers) before stepping out my back door and into my garden. The day feels crisp and even, the sun not yet high or powerful enough to heat the air and the earth, but the sky is cerulean and smiling at me.

I stroll over to the rear of the garden and marvel at my small crop of vegetables. It surprises me how easily these little weeds grow if vaguely cared for. I developed the plot well before I truly needed it—seasons before Fairview's demise—but never had the time or inclination to make it thrive.

Now, seeking something fresh to supplement the canned, packaged, and processed food I subsist on, I spend time every day carefully cultivating each plant, and each pays me back with ample heartiness. Today I harvest some spinach, broccoli, carrots.

I guess it must be spring.

Returning indoors with my bounty, I decide it is time to check on my guest. After caching most of the vegetables in the refrigerator, I pull out a couple of items and walk over to my guest's door.

The door to his room is locked, and has been further reinforced on this side with some rather hefty lumber; modifications made after my guest's arrival. An aluminium ladder also stands in front of the door, leading into the roof cavity above my guest's room.

I can't hear anything from within, so I rung up the ladder and flick a switch to illuminate the small space. Peeking between the solid, tightly-spaced wooden beams that line the ceiling of my guest's holding cell, a smile slides onto my face.

"Morning, Bruce."

Bruce is already looking back up at me, eyes searching for my blues through the gaps in the beams. Bruce's room is lit only via the light in the roof cavity, Bruce having smashed the bulb in the roof of the cell itself. I move my head back and forth to piece together his image, never quite able to see him all at once.

"Looking great today, Bruce. Have you done something different with your hair patches?"

Bruce is a big grotesque, broad-shouldered and thick through the limbs. I am tallish myself, but he stands a full head taller than me. And it is a big head, sporting a round face, scraggly, patchy hair, and, like all grotesques, unhealed scabs and sores.

His eyes are thick and rheumy, but focus well enough. His clothes hang loosely on his frame, as though he was somehow once even larger than he is now. Casual clothes, but the colours and style are hard to determine under the grime he is covered in. He is not wearing shoes. Grotesques never are.

“New harvest today, my good man. We’ve got some broccoli, carrots, spinach, and your favourite: beef jerky!”

The beef jerky was a real find. I was ferreting around my old office (as much for the nostalgia kick as for sustenance) when I found a surprise hoard of great food. I guess whoever has plundered the prime food reservoirs—supermarkets, restaurants, houses—didn’t think of the ravenous office Joes and Janets I used to work with, most of whom kept packets of this and that in their desk, or sold chocolates to fund their children’s amateur sporting clubs. Clearly someone at my office had been a fan of beef jerky, as they had mounds of the stuff.

Now I have mounds of the stuff.

I slip Bruce his meal piece-by-piece through a gap in the beams before sitting back and relaxing against the far wall of the roof space. Usually I would write notes in one of the leather-bound notebooks I leave up here, detailing Bruce’s appearance, diet, behaviour, temperament, reactions. I see it as a kind of scientific log, though it is probably just a misguided attempt to come across as scholarly. Other days I’ll read to him or play music. Civilise the brute. Bruce seems to prefer those days.

Today, however, feels like a weekend. I have no idea what day it actually is, but it certainly feels like it should be a day off. So I just start chatting to Bruce. Without thinking about structure or reason, I begin reminiscing about my past, ambling through random events of my life.

I continue for a decent while, blabbering mainly about my childhood in Fairview, a little about my adult life, not very much about my solitary existence after Fairview's fall.

At some point I pick up a pad and pen and start doodling. I draw Bruce and myself in scenes from my past life. I'm not great at drawing, but Bruce appears to appreciate the effort. The drawings are childlike, with big-headed people on stick figure bodies living in square houses with triangular rooves. Maybe I am deliberately trying to capture the feel of my childhood with the juvenile art. Or maybe I'm just crap at drawing. Probably the latter.

I am partway through a story (and accompanying piece of art) involving my childhood self, pre-school and a watermelon when a noise stops me mid-sentence, snagging me from my self-indulgent monologue.

A chugging, dirty, mechanical noise, some way away. It takes me a moment to process the sound, put it in its correct context, because it doesn't belong in the Fairview I now inhabit. It is a relic of a past life, a life that no longer exists.

Traffic noise. A car. Travelling slowly, calmly, with no rush, panic or caution evident in the sound. From the whine of it I'd be guessing it has only a wee engine, probably some tinny import held together with duct tape and a coat hanger. Might even have fluffy dice hanging from the rear-view mirror and a stick figure family in the back window.

But all that is irrelevant, really. What makes the sound particularly remarkable is that I would swear it is coming this way.

Chapter 2

I drop my pad and pen (the latter slipping between the wooden slats and out of sight), shimmy down the ladder, whip past my breakfast table, and fly out the front door.

The still, clear morning has become a glorious, sunny day. Perfect driving weather, really. (I wonder if it *is* a Sunday.)

Battling the morning buzz of birds and insects, I inexplicably squint in order to better discern the direction of the sound, then start running down the street toward it.

I have vivid memories of traipsing down these same streets when I was younger, the distances made large and daunting by relativity and my child-sized frame. Walking home from school was a dreary marathon, even though the reality was probably just a few hundred steps. As I slowly grew, the streets shrank to match, until Fairview's paths and ways finally felt right, fitting around me like a cosy bed sock.

But recently, Fairview's suburbs changed. Its streets emptied of people, its houses became vacant, its cars went idle. Now, barren of life, the suburbs once again loom, seem hollow, and everything feels just that little bit further away. In a way, Fairview has become like a movie set, all style and no substance, two dimensional and flimsy.

Here's hoping I'm the hero of the movie.

The car's beetling little engine drones nearer, and I realise I am almost upon it—but I still can't see its metal form. It could be around the next corner or a street over, I can't be sure. The curling, tightly packed suburban streets carry sound peculiarly, with commotion from one street appearing to come from another direction entirely.

I reach a T-intersection and stop running, trying to pinpoint the current position of the car. Closer to the vehicle, the engine now sounds oddly irate, as though the driver is travelling at a high speed in a low gear. The noise is abysmal, and the driver is showing a total disregard for potentially lifesaving stealth. It makes me worry for the driver, and I wonder whether the car is damaged—or maybe it is just the driver’s brain.

Without warning, the car trundles clumsily into view, turning away from me around a nearby corner before tootling off down the street.

I dash towards the car, closing on it quickly. It is a small brown box-on-wheels, probably a Japanese brand, though the back end is heavily dented. There is no number plate. (I don’t know what I expected, really, some horrible personalised plate like APCLPS NOW or SUR5OR, perhaps.) I can make out a silhouette in the driver’s seat, but see no other passengers in the car. I start running harder.

I nearly reach the back of the vehicle when the driver sees me, and he baulks. I catch a flash of wide eyes in the rear-view mirror, and it is only now that I consider the driver’s point of view: an unkempt, manic-seeming man-thing appearing out of nowhere and running full pelt after their car.

The only sane conclusion the driver could draw is that I am a grotesque.

With a tyre chirrup, the car skips forward and shoots away from me. It hits high revs quickly, suggesting I was right about the gear. But the low end gives the car a nip of speed, taking it squealing around a corner and out of sight.

I take off after the car, not willing to let this person mistake me for a grote. Can’t they see I’m wearing shoes? When I think about it, probably not (the rear-view mirror doubtless

cuts me off mid-torso)—but do I really look that manic? I am a little offended by the mystery person's assumptions.

I round the corner just in time to see the vehicle turn once again. I know the street the car drove into, for I once had a childhood girlfriend who lived on that street. Michelle Cooper, a short blonde lass (though we were all short at the time) who was both quite intelligent and rumoured to be a wicked hand-holder. I never got to find out.

Again, that is all irrelevant. What the relationship has provided me with, however, is an intimate knowledge of her street. Most significantly, I know it is a dead end cul-de-sac. I've got them, trapped. Dinner is served.

Just kidding.

Some number of loping strides later, I round the corner to Michelle Cooper's street. It is exactly as I remember: only six houses a side, all neat little suburban places, with a turning circle at the far end to allow traffic reaching the dead end to retrace their steps. A park sits a little beyond the low lumber fence at the dead end, a simple little swing and seesaw number.

But I also notice the street is quiet, still, and, most surprisingly, empty. The jarring incongruity physically halts me, and I stall at the mouth of the short street.

After a few moments of nothing, I begin walking cautiously down the street, inspecting the houses either side. I'm loosely thinking about where I will find this person, how they will receive me. I reflect on my appearance, and come to the conclusion they (despite their original impression) must instantly perceive me as a fellow man rather than a grotesque abomination, with my clean, freshly laundered clothes and close (ish) shave a dead giveaway (pardon the pun).

I am snapped from my introspection by the emergence of a grotesque from a property at the end of the street. The thickset beast of average height simply strolls out into the street, looking this way and that—but not yet at me. Its chest is heaving, its shredded flannelette shirt and ragged chino pants dripping from its carcass-like body. I assume that, like me, it must have been drawn by the noise of the car. Like me, it must have come to pay due respects to the driver.

Maybe it already had.

The grotesque finally turns its lolling head in my direction, and spots me. Without pause or the appearance of thought, the ragged monster runs straight toward me.

Hunched over, disjointed, jerky, the grotesque moves like a poorly-played marionette. It is all but silent as it closes the distance between us disturbingly quickly, only the slapping of its bare feet on the asphalt warning of its charge.

“Morning, Joe”, I say politely, doffing an imaginary hat. Now, I don’t know its name is Joe, for I’ve never seen this grotesque before. But it looks like a Joe. Average, for its kind. And it pays to be polite to your neighbours. “Out for a morning jog, I see?”

And it is on me. Too late I try to sidestep its advance, my legs tired from the mad dash to meet the driver, not to mention my extended morning workout. The grotesque clips my leg with its own, and we are sent sprawling on the asphalt in opposite directions.

I am up immediately, but so is the grotesque. It comes at me again.

This time I kick the grote as it advances, the ball of my foot punching the crease of its hip, folding the grotesque forward headfirst. With an inelegant twist I step sideways to give myself some room, then slam the back of my knuckles into the grotesque’s temple.

It is an awkward move and not particularly powerful, but it does the job, sending the grotesque ground ward once again. I am rewarded with an audible crunch as the grotesque's face collides with the pavement.

I step back again to gain more space, to reassess the situation. If this were a movie, it would be at this moment that we both pause, eyes locked, the grotesque slowly rising on his haunches, emitting a guttural snarl, steam rising from it haunches. If this were real life, the grotesque would be broken on the ground, its face irreparable, the fight already over.

But this world is neither.

The grotesque's face is dented and oozing, but its intent is relentless. It launches itself from the ground spryly—like an upended spider—flying towards me without waste.

The grotesque's velocity catches me off guard and I am again caught flat-footed, knocked backwards to the ground.

I grab the grotesque's arms as I fall to mitigate its advantage, to keep the monster at a distance, and curl my chin to my chest and curve my back and shoulders so I can roll with the impact. But it is not enough. Momentum snaps the back of my head into the asphalt, and the grotesque is on top of me, held at bay only by the strength in my arms.

The grotesque's wasted limbs lack coordination, but if anything this aids it: thrashing and writhing the grotesque is hard to predict, difficult to counter. And despite its emaciation, its arms are strong—unnaturally strong—and slick with sweat or blood or some other foul liquid.

I feel my grip begin to loosen.

Drawing my knees in between us, I plant my feet on the grotesque's midriff for some extra leverage. The moment before I lose my grip, I yank the grotesques arms backwards, crunch

my stomach muscles and thrust out my legs, flinging the grote over my head and onto the ground behind me.

I am up off the ground in an instant—but my back is still to the grotesque.

Instead of whipping around and reengaging (which would risk a foolhardy turn directly into the grote's next onslaught) I start running *away* from the grotesque, straight up the street in the direction from which I had originally come.

After but a few steps, I hear the pursuit begin. The slapping is right behind me, ringing in my ears. (Then again, it could be a concussion.)

A police officer friend of mine once told me that there is no point chasing down a drug addict on foot. They have *legs*, she told me: they are fast and have endless stamina. They'll run flat out all day, even as their wasted body tells them to stop. They don't know how to stop. Grotesques are the same. Once aroused, they have no concept of ceasing. I've never seen one stop until I've stopped it.

And this Joe Grote behind me, almost sharing the same physical space were it not for the passing of brief moments of time, won't cease. I'd love to wax poetic and say I can feel its fetid breath on the nape of my neck, but that just isn't a realistic representation of what it feels like to be chased. And I have a lot of recent experience.

I forge ahead down the road, looking for something to aid me. The grotesque's slapping feet pursue, very close behind. I am fast—faster, even—but it is relentless.

At this juncture I'd like to point out that these fights usually go so much better than this.

My eyes search for an option, an out, a way to change the tempo of the game. The houses offer no solitude. The street no retreat.

I'll need something.

I see it ahead: a street sign, forward of me and off to one side of the road. The thin, shiny metal pole bears some street name at its peak as it stalwartly points the way. A guide for some, possible salvation for me. An improbable opportunity, but that may be my favourite kind. I'm an improbable kind of guy.

I dash straight towards the street sign, directly at it.

The slaps let me know the grotesque has followed my change of direction. I gauge the distance to the pole, knowing a half step wrong will undermine what might already be considered a rather optimistic plan.

But I think I have it right. Time to find out.

Two paces from collision, I step outside the line of the pole, travelling almost past it before I grab the stick of metal with both hands in an overhand grip.

I swing airborne, horizontal to the ground, tucking myself in to generate some centrifugal force. My hands loosen and slide as I whip around the pole.

One hundred and eighty degrees into my spin, I come face to face with the grote. Well, foot to face: I straighten my leg at the last second, the force flowing down through my foot and out into the side of the grote's head.

The grotesque is smacked headfirst to the ground, where its skull strikes a bowling ball-sized rock dug into the ground. (Turns out those annoying little boulders people place on

their front lawns to prevent others from parking have some public amenity after all.) I mentally thank the owners for their selfishness, slide off the post, and kneel to inspect the grote.

It won't be getting up again, this time. Its violent aspirations (much like its brains) are dashed.

The silence of suburban Fairview returns.

Chapter 3

Staring at the freshly minted corpse, I slow my breathing, centre myself. The grotesque lying crippled before me is an ugly jackal, made even more hideous by the cranial oozing I have inflicted upon it. There is blood on its head, arms and torso, but it is difficult to tell if that has come from our recent encounter or was present pre-combat.

Like a flock of birds panicked into flight, I suddenly recall why I am standing here, what drew me to this part of the suburb in the first place. I immediately take off back towards Marie Cooper's cul de sac, leaving the broken grotesque in the gutter to its own devices.

Returning to the street I was chased from but a bundle of seconds ago, I bolt up the road, flashing my head both ways in an attempt to try to figure out where the boxy brown import could have escaped to. Finally, there, on the same property the grotesque had just emerged from, I see an open garage, nestled darkly beside the last house before the park.

I sprint up the driveway and into the garage. My mind is filled only with the simple hope of reaching the driver in time to remedy whatever the grotesque has done to him. (Or her, I guess. I mean, it could have been a female driver, driving around in first gear and all.)

I find the boxy brown import sitting smugly in the garage, driver's door open, engine off but the bonnet still thrumming with energy and warmth. Aside from the car, however, the garage is uninteresting: a neatly stowed lawnmower dusted in dried lawn clippings, tools, cleaning and maintenance supplies, and the faded relics of the residents' previous lives.

But there is no sign of life. Or death.

The doorway from the garage to the house—a flimsy chipboard specimen—lies open, inviting me in. I RSVP by entering the house, which reveals itself to be a small, simply

adorned cottage. Sparsely furnished, dusty, slightly messy. There is some evidence children resided here, once. But the cottage's standout feature is its stillness: like the garage, the house, too, is empty of life, and again there is no sign of blood, a struggle, conflict.

It is a blank space. A washed out picture.

I find the door at the rear of the cottage is also open, but the overgrown backyard beyond it is just as lacking in non-plant life as the house. Perhaps the person I had hoped to find here escaped in this direction, through the brush and over the back fence, the back door left swinging in their wake. Or perhaps the grotesque entered the house through this portal, some bestial surprise on its mind at the ease of entry. But then, where is the driver?

I stand looking across the backyard, scanning the space fruitlessly, perturbed at my own frustration. I feel unrewarded and somehow hollow, my high expectations gone wanting.

I put precaution to one side, and call out: "*HEY!*"

My voice resonates, bounding around the yards and fences nearby. It swings around momentarily then falls flat. The world remains a picture of disinterest.

I wait, and wait some more. No-one and nothing answers my call.

Whoever it was that was driving the car is long gone.

Returning through the house to the front yard, I sit hunched on the front step. It is only at that point that I notice the front lawn. The grass is mown. Neat and trim, though a few of the blades now look like gangly teenagers, suggesting the lawn was clipped no longer than a week ago. It is definitely a post-apocalypse job, though, no doubt about that. I cock my head to one side. Who would have done such a thing? *Why* would they have done such a thing? My brain is too clouded to grasp any of the possible realities.

Although the day has warmed, the concrete step is shaded, and remains cool. A light breeze rustles the overgrown trees and lots, disturbing the grass debris in front of me. A bird pushes through a tree to my left.

I sit for some number of moments, mulling over the significance of what just occurred. But I don't find any. There is no outcome from this. One dead grotesque; one abandoned car; one neatly trimmed lawn that will again succumb to the rigors of neglect; one me, same as before.

The house opposite lies stoic, its heavy bricks and dead windows not offering any answers. Casting my eyes along the suburban street, I take in its wooliness, its dirtiness, its primitivism.

I breathe in deeply, exhale fully. A centring breath. Some might call it a sigh.

Before slinking back to my refuge, I check out the fuel gauge on the little brown car. There isn't enough to make driving it back to my place for the syphoned fuel worthwhile. Instead I stroll back to the grotesque's mangled corpse and decide to secrete it in a nearby house. At first I was never sure what to do with grotesque remains. It was with some surprise that I finally grasped that I should do *something*, that they didn't fade away after the points were awarded, or were comfortably panned off shot. They lie there, ended, unmoving, with only their sad, sunken skin remaining.

And they stink.

I've buried a few. More recently, I just drag them out of sight, tuck them away, forget about them. This morning's grotesque now lies in a bathtub in an anonymous house. (Some of it still remains on the street, but the crows will deal with that.)

Returning to my house, I slip inside, bolt the door, and check out my head wound. I wet a washer and dab at it. It stings a little, but someone once told me that if a wound stings it is healing. Guess it is healing then.

I pull the washer away and take a look: the blood is matted and slick, but not gushy (excuse the medical terminology). Looks like I'll survive. I grab some antiseptic liquid from a cupboard and clean the wound.

Now I can really feel it healing.

I take a quick shower, carefully avoiding my new head sore. Cleansed, I turn off the taps, get redressed, and return to my perch above Bruce's cell.

Bruce is hunkering down on one side of the cell, fidgeting with something, probably picking at some scab or another. He doesn't turn to acknowledge my presence, even when I begin regaling him with today's exploits.

"But when I got there, Bruce, they weren't. No sign of them, nothing at all. I found the car, but the driver had fled. Simply disappeared. Like magic. Evaporated in a puff of steam, maybe. Dissolved into the walls of the world. I must have missed them by seconds, truly—the engine was still warm! Oh well, I shouldn't begrudge them for it. I guess that is just the kind of skill someone needs to survive these days."

I'm leaning against the far wall of the alcove, head reclined, looking up at the dingy light bulb. Probably shouldn't be doing that. I close my eyes and the light is still there.

"It's bizarre, isn't it? Not that anything in this world isn't these days, but it's more than that, it's inverse bizarre—what was once so normal has become the rarity. In this strange

world, the prosaic has become the peculiar. I got so excited about a car driving past. A car! That used to happen every five seconds in the old currency.”

I sigh, relaxing further into my nook. Eyes open again, the bare light bulb has me entranced.

“I guess we’ll never know who was driving that car today, Bruce. Or who mowed that lawn. Or *why* they mowed that lawn. I can barely start to fathom it. Perhaps it was another survivor’s preparation for some elaborate defence mechanism. A trap of some sort: fire, or spikes, or sticky glue that traps grotesques to the ground like flypaper. Or maybe they were deliberately trying to attract grotesques with the noise. Or other survivors. It’s even possible it was just a frustrated show of defiance, some misguided attempt to establish some order in the face of all this chaos.”

I could buy that explanation. Not sure how much I’d pay, but it’d look great on my mantelpiece.

I peek into Bruce’s cell. Still fidgeting. Must be working through a thick one. I sink back against the wall one final time.

“There was a grotesque at the place by the time I got there. Looked a bit like you, actually, like a small version of you. Now hold on a second, Bruce! I’m not saying you all look alike or anything like that, it was just built like you, a big one, like you. Not tall, really, but boy was it fast. Faster than others I’ve come across. Really took me by surprise. Any chance you knew him? Now I’m not saying you all know each other or anything like that...”

I can sense Bruce has stopped fiddling with whatever doo-wop or thingy-me-jig he was playing with. I don't bother looking down. I just close my eyes and relax into the wall. The light remnants from the bulb float around inside my eyelids in orange multiples.

Probably shouldn't have stared at it for so long.

Chapter 4

I awaken some time later to the sounds of Bruce fussing and fiddling once again. As my eyes blink me back to reality, I note that the sunlight that previously brightened the edges of the roof tiles above my head has faded, suggesting it may already be night.

I must have been out of it for hours. I've heard that sleeping after a concussion can be dangerous, so I hope I haven't done any permanent damage. Or is it that you shouldn't eat thirty minutes before sustaining a head injury? Or have I mixed that up with something else?

I think I might indeed have a concussion.

Before I can ruminate on this important medical issue any further, my ears soon join me in the land of awake, and pass me an urgent message: the noises coming from below are more than just fidgeting, scratching, tossing and turning.

There is also heavy knocking and banging.

I sit upright and try to make sense of the sounds with my sleep and concussion addled brain. It is like a construction site, the dull wooden noises of hammering, scraping, sawing. Is that just all in my head?

No, it is coming from below me. From Bruce's cell.

This is not Bruce's aimless irate thumping, either. These are the sounds of considered renovations.

I am instantly alert. Swivelling my legs underneath me, I look down into Bruce's cell.

The danger is immediately clear (and present). Bruce has removed two of the heavy lumber planks that had barricaded his window and is looking at the world outside unimpeded for the first time in a long time. Bruce's substantial girth means the space he has created is not yet large enough for him to squeeze through, but it can't be far off.

I watch as Bruce picks up one of the freed planks of wood and jams into the gap he has created. With Olympian strength he starts yanking on one end the beam, trying to prise a third plank from its housing. Judging by the groaning noises the wood is emitting, it's working.

Then he stops. Maybe he heard me moving above him or perhaps he has some telepathic grotesque powers I'm not aware of, but he turns, tilts his head upwards, and looks at me.

Straight at me. Deep into my eyes, with the unfathomable orbs of a ghoul.

Then he simply returns to his task. The wooden planks groan again, the nails holding the planks to the wall squeak and slide. I should have bolted those damn boards in. I just never thought my panic room would be attacked from the *inside*.

I squat dumbfounded in the roof space. I really have no idea what to do here. Trapping Bruce in my panic room was largely luck, totally unplanned, and I never made any long term plans for the grotesque. He'd so swiftly become a fixture of my home—of my life—that there was no question that I'd keep him around, feed him, talk to him, even if he *is* a monster. He's kind of like family, in that way.

But now he is helping himself to the outside world, something I, as his pseudo-parent, should probably prevent from happening. If the family dog gets loose, the man of the house has the responsibility to catch it and tie it up once again. If it has gone feral, to put it down.

I guess I'm that man.

I'm down the ladder in a heartbeat, over to my tools chest. Relieve it of a crowbar.

Back at the door to Bruce's room, I swiftly set to prying off the internal planks. I've only removed one of the slats when I hear glass breaking from within. From here I can't see if Bruce slipped and broke the window while working the wood or if he has already begun to make good his escape, but it does force me to see the folly of my current plan. All I am doing now is creating a second option for the big grote. What I should be doing is plugging the hole he is creating, re-barricading the room from the outside.

I fling open the back door and run outside, but immediately see something horrific.

Bruce is already out.

There he is, standing in my back yard, his back to me, having just taken advantage of his makeshift point of egress. The soft, settling moonlight illuminates his broad back.

He must have heard me, for he turns, straightening himself as he does so.

My soul he is a big boy. Simply massive. And made even more menacing by the moonlight-cast shadows on his face and body.

Once again he takes my eyes with his own, holding them unflinchingly, before letting them drift down to the crowbar I still hold in my hand. I am sure I see thought in his eyes, calculation. Deliberation.

Then he turns, and shows me how his bulk is not necessarily a burden: in three steps he is up and over my back fence.

I give chase. Clearing the fence smoothly, I see Bruce crossing old Mrs Dudley's yard beyond. She had been such a gardening fanatic, but I see the post-apocalypse period of neglect has overwritten her hard work. Now her garden is as messy as her hair was during life.

Bruce has already pushed through the tangle, and clears another fence. I'm over the same fence moments after.

Two more yards, two more fences, and Bruce hits a pedestrian pathway that meanders its way between two properties and off through the suburb.

Bruce pivots as he hits the pathway, taking the option. A cloud drifts over the setting moon as he does so, spilling darkness over our chase scene.

I follow Bruce down the path, just able to make out his form through the black. Bruce's big strides keep him comfortably ahead of me, and if anything he is gaining a little space. The crowbar is slowing me down, but I am reticent to put it down. Bruce really is a *big* grotesque.

After who-knows-how-long of sprinting down the pedestrian path, Bruce begins to slip away. I am giving it everything I've got, but Bruce's form continues to bob in and out of the darkness, and I only catch sight of him when the clouds part briefly, giving me a scant glimpse of his large silhouette ahead.

Abruptly, the pedestrian path reaches its end, disgorging Bruce onto a well-lit arterial street. The orange glow from the street lights illuminates Bruce's shape, and I see I am not as far behind him as I had thought. I'm breathing in hard, sucking in the cool air and the earthy scents of an overgrown world.

Bruce picks a direction without giving any indication he vacillated in his choice, running straight down the centre of the street.

I hit the road at speed, turn, and continue the chase. I recognise the road, though am not overly familiar with the area. It is hard to believe we have travelled this far so swiftly.

Without warning, Bruce cuts off the road, straight into a yard without a front fence. He is momentarily out of my sight, disappearing beside a house.

I follow, but slow myself as I reach the house. Sensing this would be a great place for Bruce to stop, hide, and ambush me as I rush past, I approach the yard cautiously, eyes roving.

But I am wrong. I hear a noise over the back fence and realise Bruce has already moved on.

Nice move, Bruce. You've gained yourself some distance.

I vault the fence, landing in another yard, this one littered with the broken shadows of children's play equipment and discarded toys. Bruce must have accidentally caught one during his progress, giving rise to the noise that alerted me to his location.

But there is no Bruce.

Decision time. Option number one: stop, listen, try to discern his current location. Two: give chase in the direction I think he is most likely to have taken.

Three: give it up, head home, have a beer.

Well, I'm all out of beer, so I go with Number Two. I pick the most likely direction—straight out onto the street, as again no fence blocks the way—and take off.

I reach the street, look one way and then the other. There he is, making his way towards a bend in the road, taking the street's upward inclination comfortably with his long strides.

"Bruce!" I call out. "Wait up!"

I am once again dashing after my stray dog, running up and down streets darkened by night, but sporadically lit with orange glow. I am working up quite a sweat, but the night is cool enough to sustain me. Perfect chasing weather, really.

Bruce splits from the street, cuts across a parkland reserve. It isn't a particularly large park, with a few boulders, a children's play gym, and a place to kick a ball. In a single fluid move, Bruce takes a long step up onto a boulder, launching himself over a tall wooden fence bordering the park. He disappears over the other side.

It's another opportunity for an ambush. I picture it: Bruce lands and rolls clear on the other side, doubles back to the fence, grabbing me with his strong arms as I fly over the top, temporarily out of control. Crowbar neutralised. Me dead.

So I don't follow. Instead, I follow the fence around its base, skirting it all the way around to the front of the property. When I reach the point where the fence joins the street, Bruce suddenly cuts in front of me, emerging from the yard on the other side of the fence.

We are both taken by surprise, but I react more quickly, flashing out the crowbar at his ankle, attempting to trip him.

Bruce jumps the bar at the final moment and continues on up the street. He is a surprisingly nimble bugger, for a big grote.

Then, without notice or reason, he stops, but a few paces from me. Turning slowly, he latches his eyes on mine. Despite being milky with rheum, they are like hooks, those eyes, and I can't look away.

Bruce has stopped in the middle of the street, the orange streetlight glow like soft powdered snow on his body. He doesn't move, doesn't react, just stares at me, eyes delving into mine, perfectly motionless.

I see a light haze of steam emanating from his shoulders. The light turns it into a white-orange halo.

Bruce opens his mouth and moves his lips, revealing foul, decaying yellow teeth.

And he speaks.