

DOOM CITY

by

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He awakened with the memory of thunder in his bones.

The house was quiet. The alarm clock hadn't gone off. Late for work! he realised, struck by a bolt of desperate terror. But no, no ... wait a minute; he blinked the fog from his eyes and his mind gradually cleared too. He could still taste the onions in last night's meatloaf. Friday night was meatloaf night. Today was Saturday. No office work today, thank God. Ah, he thought, settle down ... settle down ...

Lord, what a nightmare he'd had! It was fading now, all jumbled up and incoherent but leaving its weird essence behind like a snakeskin. There'd been a thunderstorm last night – Brad was sure of that, because he'd awakened to see the garish white flash of it and to hear the gut-wrenching growl of a real boomer pounding at the bedroom wall. But whatever the nightmare had been, he couldn't recall it now; he felt dizzy and disorientated, like he'd just stepped off a carnival ride gone crazy. He did recall that he'd sat up and seen that lightning, so bright it had made his eyes buzz blue in the dark. And he remembered Sarah saying something too, but now he didn't know what it was ...

Damn, he thought as he stared across the bedroom at the window that looked down on Baylor Street. Damn, that light looks strange. Not like June at all. More like a white, winter light. Ghostly. Kind of made his eyes hurt a little.

Brad got out of bed and walked across the room. He pushed aside the white curtain and peered out, squinting.

What appeared to be a grey, faintly luminous fog hung in the trees and over the roofs of the houses on Baylor Street. It looked like the colour had been sucked out of everything, and the fog lay motionless for as far as he could see up and down the street. He looked up, trying to find the sun. It

was up there somewhere, burning like a dim bulb behind dirty cotton. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and Brad Forbes said, “Sarah? Honey? Take a look at this.”

She didn’t reply, nor did she stir. He glanced at her, saw the wave of her brown hair above the sheet that was pulled up over her like a shroud. “Sarah?” he said again, and took a step towards the bed.

And suddenly Brad remembered what she’d said last night, when he’d sat up in a sleepy daze to watch the lightning crackle.

I’m cold, I’m cold.

He grasped the edge of the sheet and pulled it back.

A skeleton with tendrils of brittle brown hair attached to its skull lay where his wife had been sleeping last night.

The skeleton was wearing Sarah’s pale blue night-gown, and what looked like dried-up pieces of tree bark – skin, he realised, yes ... her ... skin – lay all around, on and between the white bones. The teeth grinned, and from the bed there was the bittersweet odour of a damp graveyard.

“Oh ...” he whispered, and he stood staring down at what was left of his wife as his eyes began to bulge from their sockets and a pressure like his brain was about to explode grew in his head and blood trickled down from his lower lip where his teeth had pierced.

I’m cold, she’d said, in a voice that had sounded like a whimper of pain. I’m cold.

And then Brad heard himself moan, and he let go of the sheet and staggered back across the room, tripped over a pair of his tennis shoes and went down hard on the floor. The sheet settled back over the skeleton like a sigh.

Thunder rumbled outside, muffled by the fog. Brad stared at one skeletal foot that protruded from the lower end of the sheet, and he saw flakes of dried, dead flesh float down from it to the Sears deep-pile aqua-blue carpet.

He didn’t know how long he sat there, just staring. He thought he might have giggled, or sobbed, or made some combination of both. He almost threw up, and he wanted to curl up into a ball and go back to sleep again; he did close his eyes for a few seconds, but when he opened them again the skeleton of his wife was still lying in the bed and the sound of thunder was nearer.

And he might have sat there until Doomsday if the telephone beside the

bed hadn't started ringing.

Somehow, he was up and had the receiver in his hand. Tried not to look down at the brown-haired skull, and remember how beautiful his wife – a just twenty-eight years old, for God's sake! – had been.

"Hello," he said, in a dead voice.

There was no reply. Brad could hear circuits clicking and humming, deep in the wires.

"Hello?"

No answer. Except now there might have been – *might* have been – a soft, silken breathing.

"*Hello?*" Brad shrieked into the phone. "Say something, damn you!"

Another series of clicks; then a tinny, disembodied voice: "We're sorry, but we cannot place your call at this time. All lines are busy. Please hang up and try again later. Thank you. This is a recording ..."

He slammed the receiver back into its cradle, and the motion of the air made flakes of skin fly up from the skull's cheekbones.

Brad ran out of the bedroom, barefoot and in only his pyjama bottoms; he ran to the stairs, went down them screaming. "Help! Help me! Somebody!" He missed a step, slammed against the wall and caught the banister before he broke his neck. Still screaming for help, he burst through the front door and out into the yard where his feet crunched on dead leaves.

He stopped. The sound of his voice went echoing down Baylor Street. The air was still and wet, thick and stifling. He stared down at all the dead leaves around him, covering brown grass that had been green the day before. And then the wind suddenly moved, and more dead leaves swirled around him; he looked up, and saw bare grey branches where living oak trees had stood before he'd closed his eyes to sleep last night.

"HELP ME!" he screamed. "SOMEBODY PLEASE HELP ME!"

But there was no answer; not from the house where the Pates lived, not from the Walkers' house, not from the Crawfords' nor the Lehman's'. Nothing human moved on Baylor Street, and as he stood amid the falling leaves on the seventh day of June he felt something fall into his hair. He reached up, plucked it out and looked at what he held in his hand.

The skeleton of a bird, with a few colourless feathers sticking to the bones.

He shook it from his hand and frantically wiped his palm on his

pyjamas – and then he heard the telephone ringing again in his house.

He ran to the downstairs phone, back in the kitchen, picked up the receiver and said, “Help me! Please ... I’m on Baylor Street! Please help –”

He stopped babbling, because he heard the clicking circuits and a sound like searching wind, and down deep inside the wires there might have been a silken breathing.

He was silent too, and the silence stretched. Finally he could stand it no longer. “Who is this?” he asked, in a strained whisper. “Who’s on this phone?”

Click. BUZZZZZZ ...

Brad punched the O. Almost at once that same terrible voice came on the line : “We’re sorry, but we cannot place your call at –” He smashed his fist down on the phone’s two prongs, dialled 911. “We’re sorry, but we cannot –” His fist went down again; he dialled the number of the Pates next door, screwed up and stared twice more. “We’re sorry, but –” His fingers went down on about five numbers at once. “We’re sorry –”

He screamed and wrenched the telephone from the wall, threw it across the kitchen and it broke the window over the sink. Dead leaves began to drift in, and through the glass panes of the back door Brad saw something lying out in the fenced-in backyard. He went out there, his heart pounding and cold sweat beading on his face and chest.

Lying amid dead leaves, very close to its doghouse, was the skeleton of their collie, Socks. The dog looked as if it might have been stripped to the bone in mid-stride, and hunks of hair lay about the bones like snow.

In the roaring silence, Brad heard the upstairs phone begin to ring.

He ran.

Away from the house this time. Out through the backyard gate, up onto the Pates’ front porch. He hammered at the door, hollering for help until his voice was about to give out. Then he smashed a glass pane of the door with his fist and, heedless of the pain and blood, reached in and unsnapped the lock.

With his first step into the house, he smelled the graveyard reek. Like something had died a long time ago, and been mummified.

He found the skeletons in the master bedroom upstairs; they were clinging to each other. A third skeleton – Davy Pate, once a tow-headed twelve-year-old boy – lay in the bed in the room with posters of Prince and Quiet Riot tacked to the walls. In a fishtank on the far side of the room

there were little bones lying in the red gravel on the bottom.

It was clear to him then. Yes, very clear. He knew what had happened, and he almost sank to his knees in Davy Pate's mausoleum.

Death had come in the night. And stripped bare everyone and everything but him.

But if that were so ... then who – or *what* – had dialled the telephone? What had been listening on the other end? What ... oh dear God, what?

He didn't know, but he suddenly realised that he'd told whatever it was that he was still on Baylor Street. And maybe Death had missed him last night; maybe its scythe had cleaved everyone else and missed him, and now ... and now it knew he was still on Baylor Street, and it would be coming after him.

Brad fled the house, ran through the dead leaves that clogged the gutters of Baylor Street, and headed east towards the centre of town. The wind moved again, sluggishly and heavily; the wet fog shifted, and Brad could see that the sky had turned the colour of blood. Thunder boomed behind him like approaching footsteps, and tears of terror streamed down Brad's cheeks.

I'm cold, Sarah had whispered. *I'm cold*. And that was when the finger of Death had touched her, had missed Brad and gone roaming through the night. *I'm cold*, she'd said, and there would never be any warming her again.

He came to two cars smashed together in the street. Skeletons in clothes lay behind the steering wheels. Further on, the bones of a large dog were almost covered by leaves. Above him, the trees creaked and moaned as the wind picked up, ripping holes in the fog and showing the bloody sky through them.

It's the end of the world, he thought. Judgement Day. All the sinners and saints alike turned to bones overnight. Just me left alive. Just me, and Death knows I'm on Baylor Street.

"Mommy!"

The sobbing voice of a child pierced him, and he stopped in his tracks, skidding on leaves.

"Mommy!" the voice repeated, echoing and warped by the low-lying fog. *"Daddy! Somebody ... help me!"*

It was the voice of a little girl, crying somewhere nearby. Brad listened, trying to peg its direction. First he thought it was to the left, then to the

right. In front of him, behind him ... he couldn't be sure. "I'm here!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

The child didn't answer, but Brad could still hear her crying. "I'm not going to hurt you!" he called. "I'm standing right in the middle of a street! Come to me if you can!"

He waited. A flurry of brown, already-decaying leaves fell from overhead – and then he saw the figure of the little girl, hesitantly approaching him through the fog on his right. She had blond hair done up in pigtails with pale blue ribbons, and her pallid face was streaked with tears and distorted by terror; she was maybe five or six years old, wearing pink pyjamas and clasping a Smurf doll tightly in her arms. She stopped about fifteen feet away from him, her eyes red and swollen and maybe insane too.

"Daddy?" she whispered.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked, still shocked at hearing another voice and seeing someone else alive on this last day of the world. "What house?"

"Our house," she answered, her lower lip trembling. Her face looked like it was about to collapse. "Over there." She pointed through the fog at a shape with a roof, then her eyes came back to Brad.

"Anyone else alive?" Your mother or father?"

The little girl just stared.

"What's your name?"

"Kelly Burch," she answered dazedly. "My tel'phone number is ... is ... 633-6949. Could ... you help me find ... a p'liceman, please?"

It would be so easy, Brad thought, to curl up in the leaves on Baylor Street and let himself lose his mind; but if there was one little girl still left alive, then there might be other people too. Maybe this awful thing had only happened on Baylor Street ... or maybe only in this part of town; maybe it was a chemical spill, radiation, something unholy in the lightning, some kind of Army weapon that had backfired. Whatever it was, maybe its effects were only limited to a small part of town. Sure! he thought, and when he grinned the child abruptly took two steps back. "We're going to be all right," he told her. "I won't hurt you. I'm going to walk to Main Street. Do you want to go with me?"

She didn't reply, and Brad thought she'd truly gone over the edge but then her lips moved and she said, "I'm looking for ... for my Mommy and Daddy. They're gone." She caught back a sob, but new tears ran down her

cheeks. “They just ... they just ... left bones in their bed and they’re gone.”

“Come on.” He held out his hand to her. “Come with me, okay? Let’s see if we can find anybody else.”

Kelly didn’t come any closer. Her little knuckles were white where she gripped the smiling blue Smurf. Brad heard thunder roaring somewhere to the south, and electric-blue lightning scrawled across the crimson sky like a crack in time. Brad couldn’t wait any longer; he started walking again, stopped and looked back. Kelly stopped too, dead leaves snagged in her hair. “We’re going to be all right,” he told her again, and he heard how utterly ridiculous he sounded. Sarah was gone; beautiful Sarah was gone, and his life might as well be over. But no, no – he had to keep going, had to at least *try* to make some sense out of all this. He started off once more, east towards Main Street, and he didn’t look back but he knew Kelly was following about fifteen or twenty feet behind.

At the intersection of Baylor and Ashley Streets, a police car had smashed into an oak tree. The windshield was layered with leaves, but Brad saw the hunched-over, bony thing in the police uniform sitting behind the wheel. And the most terrible thing was that its skeletal hands were still gripping that wheel, trying to guide the car. Whatever had happened – radiation, chemicals or the Devil striding through the streets of his town – had taken place in an instant. These people had been stripped to bones in the blink of a cold eye, and again Brad felt himself balanced precariously on the edge of madness.

“Ask the p’liceman to find Mommy and Daddy!” Kelly called from behind him.

“There’s a police station on Main Street,” he told her. “That’s where we’re going to go. Okay?”

She didn’t answer, and Brad set off.

They passed silent houses. Near the intersection of Baylor and Hilliard, where the traffic light was still obediently blinking yellow, a skeleton in jogging gear lay sprawled on the ground. Its Nike sneakers were too small for Brad’s feet, too large for Kelly’s. They kept going, and Kelly cried for a few minutes but then she hugged her doll tighter and stared straight ahead with eyes swollen almost shut.

And then Brad heard it, and his heart pounded with fear again.

Off in the fog somewhere.

The sound of a phone ringing.

Brad stopped. The phone kept on ringing, its sound thin and insistent.

“Somebody’s calling,” Kelly said, and Brad realised she was standing right beside him. “My tel’phone number is 633-6949.”

He took a step forward. Another, and another. Through the fog ahead of him he could make out the shape of a payphone there on the corner of Dayton Street.

The telephone kept on ringing, demanding an answer.

Slowly, Brad approached the payphone. He stared at the receiver as if it might be a cobra rearing back to strike. He did not want to answer it, but his arm lifted and his hand reached towards that receiver, and he knew that if he heard that silken breathing and the metallic recorded voice on the other end he might start screaming and never be able to stop.

His hand closed around it. Started to lift it up.

“Hey, buddy!” someone said. “I wouldn’t answer that if I was you.”

Startled almost out of his skin, Brad whirled around.

A young man was sitting on the kerb across the street, smoking a cigarette, his legs stretched out before him. “I wouldn’t,” he cautioned.

Brad was oddly shocked by the sight of a flesh-and-blood man, as if he’d already forgotten what one looked like. The young man was maybe in his early twenties, wearing scruffy jeans and a dark green shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He had sandy-brown hair that hung to his shoulders, and he looked to have a couple of days’ growth of beard. He pulled on the cigarette and said, “Don’t pick it up, man. Doom City.”

“What?”

“I said ... Doom City.” The young man stood up; he was about six feet, thin and lanky. His workboots crunched leaves as he crossed the street, and Brad saw that he had a patch on the breast pocket of his shirt that identified him as a Sanitation Department workman. As the young man got closer, Kelly pressed her body against Brad’s legs and tried to hide behind the Smurf doll. “Let it ring,” the young man said. His eyes were pale green, deep-set and dazed. “If you were to pick that damned thing up ... Doom City.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because it is what it is. Somebody’s tryin’ to find all the strays. Tryin’ to run us all down and finish the job. Sweep us all into the gutter, man. Close the world over our heads. Doom City.” He blew a plume of smoke into the air that hung between them, unmoving.

“Who are you? Where’d you come from?”

“Name’s Neil Spencer. Folks call me Spence. I’m a ...” He paused for a few seconds, staring along Baylor Street. “I *used* to be a garbage man. ‘Til today, that is. ‘Til I got to work and found skeletons sitting in the garbage trucks. That was about three hours ago, I guess. I’ve been doin’ a lot of walkin’. Lot of pokin’ around.” His gaze rested on the little girl, then back to Brad. The payphone was still ringing, and Brad felt the scream kicking behind his teeth. “You’re the first two I’ve seen with skin,” Spence said. “I’ve been sittin’ over there for the last twenty minutes or so. Just waitin’ for the world to end, I guess.”

“What ... happened?” Brad asked. Tears burned his eyes. “My God ... my God ... what *happened*?”

“Somethin’ tore,” Spence said tonelessly. “Ripped open. Somethin’ won the fight, and I don’t think it was who the preachers said was gonna win. I don’t know ... maybe Death got tired of waitin’. Same thing happened to the dinosaurs. Maybe it’s happenin’ to people now.”

“There’s *got* to be other people somewhere!” Brad shouted. “We can’t be the only ones!”

“I don’t know about that.” Spence drew on his cigarette one last time and flicked the butt into the street. “All I know is, somethin’ came in the night and had a feast, and when it was done it licked the plate clean. Only it’s still hungry.” He nodded towards the ringing phone. “Wants to suck on a few more bones. Like I said, man ... Doom City. Doom City here, there and everywhere.”

The phone gave a final, shrilling shriek and went silent.

Brad heard the child crying again, and he put his hand on her head, stroked her hair to calm her. He realised he was doing it with his bloody hand. “We’ve ... we’ve got to go somewhere ... got to *do* something ...”

“Do what?” Spence asked laconically. “Go where? I’m open to suggestions, man.”

From the next block came the distant sound of a telephone ringing. Brad stood with his bloody hand on Kelly’s head, and he didn’t know what to say.

“I want to take you somewhere, my friend,” Spence told him. “Want to show you something real interestin’. Okay?”

Brad nodded, and he and the little girl followed Neil Spencer north along Dayton Street, past more silent houses and buildings.

Spence led them about four blocks to a Seven-Eleven store, where a skeleton in a yellow dress splashed with blue and purple flowers lolled

behind the cash register with a National Enquirer open on its jutting knees. “There you go,” Spence said softly. He plucked a pack of Luckies off the display of cigarettes and nodded towards the small TV set on the counter. “Take a look at that, and tell me what we ought to do.”

The TV set was on. It was a colour set, and Brad realised after a long, silent moment that the channel was tuned to one of those twenty-four-hour news networks. The picture showed two skeletons – one in a grey suit and the other in a wine-red dress – leaning crookedly over a newsdesk at centre camera; the woman had placed her hand on the man’s shoulder, and yellow sheets of the night’s news were scattered all over the desktop. Behind the two figures were three or four out-of-focus skeletons, frozen forever at their desks as well.

Spence lit another cigarette. An occasional spark of static shot across the unmoving TV picture. “Doom City,” Spence said. “Not only here, man. It’s everywhere. See?”

The telephone behind the counter suddenly started ringing, and Brad put his hands to his ears and screamed.

The phone’s ringing stopped.

Brad lowered his hands, his breathing as rough and hoarse as a trapped animal’s.

He looked down at Kelly Burch, and saw that she was smiling.

“It’s all right,” she said. “You don’t have to answer. I found you, didn’t I?”

Brad whispered, “*Wha –*”

The little girl giggled, and as she continued to giggle the laugh changed, grew in intensity and darkness, grew in power and evil until it became a triumphant roar that shook the windows of the Seven-Eleven store. “DOOM CITY!” the thing with pigtails shrieked, and as the mouth strained open the eyes became silver, cold and dead, and from that awful crater of a mouth shot a blinding bolt of blue-white lightning that hit Neil Spencer and seemed to spin him like a top, throwing him off his feet and headlong through the Seven-Eleven’s plate-glass window. He struck the pavement on his belly, and as he tried to get up again Brad Forbes saw that the flesh was dissolving from the young man’s bones, falling away in chunks like dried-up tree bark.

Spence made a garbled moaning sound, and Brad went through the store’s door with such force that he almost tore it from its hinges. His feet slivered with glass, Brad ran past Spence and saw the other man’s skull

grinning up at him as the body writhed and twitched.

“Can’t get away!” the thing behind him shouted. “Can’t! Can’t! Can’t!”

Brad looked back over his shoulder, and that was when he saw the lightning burst from her gaping mouth and hurtle through the broken window at him. He flung himself to the pavement, tried to crawl under a parked car.

Something hit him, covered him over like an ocean wave, and he heard the monster shout in a voice like the peal of thunder. He was blinded and stunned for a few seconds, but there was no pain ... just a needles-and-pins prickling settling deep into his bones.

Brad got up, started running again. And as he ran he saw the flesh falling from his hands, saw pieces drifting down from his face; fissures ran through his legs, and as the flesh fell away he saw his own bones underneath.

“DOOM CITY!” he heard the monster calling. “DOOM CITY!”

Brad stumbled; he was running on bones, and had left the flesh of his feet behind him on the pavement. He fell, began to tremble and contort.

“I’m cold,” he heard himself moan. “I’m cold ...”

She awakened with the memory of thunder in her bones.

The house was quiet. The alarm clock hadn’t gone off. Saturday, she realised. No work today. A rest day. But Lord, what a nightmare she’d had! It was fading now, all jumbled up and incoherent. There’d been thunderstorm last night – she remembered waking up, and seeing lightning flash. But whatever the nightmare had been, she couldn’t recall now; she thought she remembered Brad saying something too, but now she didn’t know what it was ...

That light ... so strange. Not like June light. More like ... yes, like winter light.

Sarah got out of bed and walked across the room. She pushed aside the white curtain and peered out, squinting.

A grey fog hung in the trees and over the roofs of the houses on Baylor Street. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and Sarah Forbes said, “Brad? Honey? Take a look at this.”

He didn’t reply, nor did he stir. She glanced at him, saw the wave of his dark hair above the sheet that was pulled up over him like a shroud. “Brad?” she said again, and took a step towards the bed.

And suddenly Sarah remembered what he'd said last night, when she'd sat up in a sleepy daze to watch the lightning crackle.

I'm cold, I'm cold.

She grasped the edge of the sheet and pulled it back.

The End