

CAROLL BROWN

THE BORDERLANDS

I caught the zombie weeping in the middle aisle, between breakfast cereals and cookies, staring at an empty patch of moonlit wall near the ceiling. The broom rested lightly in his hands, cradled in his dead fingers with its bristles still

flared at the bottom, as though he had stopped his sweeping in mid-stroke.

That

lack of sound, the sudden hush, had drawn me down the stairs, as someone who lived by the sea would have been surprised one night if the waves had suddenly stopped their gentle shushing and broken in silence on the sand.

I had stopped my silent pacing in the hall above the store; an art that I had mastered out of necessity and long practice, I spaced my footfalls carefully to

thread the maze of loose boards that would wake Gwen, tell her instantly that I

was out of bed again. If she found me here she would yell, plead, sulk in silence, coerce me to return to bed, to sleep. To the visions that still came every night, and that I still could not bear.

So at night I walked, measuring over and over the corridor that ran the length of the building, from one end of the apartment to the top of the stairs that led

to the store below, until I collapsed from sheer exhaustion into utter darkness,

too tired to dream.

Until the night the broom stopped.

"Albert?"

I didn't realize at first that he was weeping, I'd never heard of such a thing,

and what could make a dead man weep? My first thought as I came down the stairs,

seeing him motionless and striped with light and shadow falling through the shuttered window, was that something was wrong, that perhaps he had simply shut

down, as sometimes they did, falling over in their tracks at their employers' feet, dropping their garden tools or the packages they were carrying, uncommon as such incidents were, it was the possibility of them that had kept from the zombies the right to drive.

But Albert was still standing, and it wasn't until I stepped closer that I saw the trails, silver ribbons in the moonlight, that ran down his cheeks.

"Albert, are you all right?"

His jaw hung slack, his shoulders slumped, and his gaze never wavered from that

spot high on the wall. I followed it with my own eyes, straining to see what he

was seeing, but whatever he watched was visible only to a zombie's eyes. I touched him lightly on the shoulder; I had never touched a zombie before, never

had to handle Albert in the year that he'd been working for me. The flesh of his arm was unnaturally soft and pliant, like dough, and I shuddered.

"Albert," I said, a little more harshly.

After a long moment he lowered his gaze, turning toward me, and for a brief instant I thought I saw something there, a fire in the emptiness, a spark of "life." But that wasn't possible, and he turned away from me, shuffling off down the aisle as the store filled again with the soft rasping of straw on linoleum.

In retrospect, it feels like it was that moment that the thought first entered my mind. It's not possible, of course; I didn't yet know what I later learned, hadn't yet discovered what Albert saw, what was to be seen through the eyes of the dead. But perhaps some premonition, some shiver of a guess, had already set my mind in motion.

And I noticed, as Albert walked away from me, that he had not stopped weeping.

Life has a way of pushing you in directions you never intended to go, of carrying you in its currents to whatever eddy or tidepool it chooses to deposit you. We had certainly never intended to own a corner grocery, my wife Gwendolyn and I. That was too "normal" for us, so damnably normal that I used to wake at night with knives in my stomach, the small but potent daggers of regret, cowardice, self-loathing. We had wanted adventure, high times and glamor. Unfortunately we were both dogged by an equally strong streak of reasonableness, a prudence that belied our years. When I finished school, working my way through as a stocker and then assistant manager at Brock's Groceries, we made plans to escape the city, settle someplace where adventure lurked around the corner (though you could still come home to a soft bed and a warm house at the end of the day). Colorado, maybe. Or Idaho.

Depressions have a way of changing plans.

When the time came, we just couldn't justify packing up for parts unknown without a job waiting, not in the state the country was in. The odds were against finding anything, and we had neither the savings to wait it out nor the passion to risk starvation. In the end, we settled.

I stayed on at Brock's, and Gwen at Swanson's department store, and we kept telling ourselves that one day we would just do it, just pack up and go, but right now we still owed on the car and couldn't afford to make the payments and insurance without a steady income. As soon as that was paid off, we'd head east, to the mountains.

Then came the furniture payments, and the credit card bills we'd racked up.

We bought Brock's the year I turned thirty. We'd thought long and hard, but in the end couldn't pass up the security; old man Brock offered it to me at a special price, seeing as how I'd been there thirteen years and basically running

it the last five. The bank considered me stable and gave me the loan.

And that was that. Roots. Foundations. We were stuck.

Then we told ourselves that we'd take great vacations, but we could never afford much help, and with both of us working full time and then some at the store it was impossible for us both to be off at the same time. Someday, we told each other. One of these days we'll hire some more help, promote Bobby to Assistant Manager, let him run the day-to-day, and then we'll be free to go whenever we want. Someday.

So of course, when they began offering the zombies, we snatched one up right away.

"Albert?"

The zombie turned toward Dr. Spaar, who checked a box on his clipboard and gave a nod that transformed into a shake of his head.

"I don't know what to tell you, Mr. Richards. In every test that I can run here, Albert checks out just fine. Motor control, homeostatic functions, sensory response, everything seems fine. I don't know what's wrong."

Albert faced front again, his eyes unblinking and locked on the wall, as if he were supremely interested in the six food groups as delineated by the FDA's poster. In fact, he probably couldn't even see the poster through his tears. Albert wept almost constantly now; it was why I had brought him to a doctor.

The second night I found him standing in the middle of the store, gazing up at nothing with overflowing eyes, I began to worry. After the first incident, I had made a perfunctory search for any information on weeping zombies, assuming it to be a rare but explicable phenomenon with highly technical causes, perhaps even something involuntary. I had been surprised to find absolutely nothing. Nothing in the local libraries, nothing in the free-access databases, no rumors among friends and acquaintances of anything of the sort that I had seen.

Perhaps, I thought, it was just an anomaly.

Two nights later I found him again in his state of . . . what, despair? Can a zombie feel despair, or any emotion? I had thought not, thought that had been a motivating factor behind the drive to hire them. They worked steadily, unemotionally, reliably; almost like robots in those stories. Not that anyone would mistreat them for it. After all, they were still people, just of a different sort. They had families, their living kin. They had everything the living had, except for one thing: they had no mind.

A week after the first incident, Albert came in weeping and nothing would make him stop. He still worked; he just wept while he did it. I thought it best to bring him for a checkup.

"The trouble is," Dr. Spaar was saying, "we just don't know enough about the brain still. Or about zombies. In many respects they're like coma patients: certain involuntary systems continue to function even though there's no EEG

activity. But obviously they're more than that. The zombie have consciousness, of a sort. They see, hear, touch, feel. But do they think Do they experience emotion? Is this sadness," he touched Albert's dam cheek, "or is this watering eyes? It would be helpful if they would speak t us, tell us what they're experiencing. Sometimes it's like treating an infant.

"Would speak?' I assumed they couldn't talk," I said.

Dr. Spaar just shrugged. "They don't, but not for any physical reason: not most of them anyway. Another one of the unanswered questions about zombies."

He smiled at me and shrugged again, gave Albert a pat on the shoulder. He didn't know, didn't particularly care. Nobody particularly cared about the dead. Unless it was one of theirs.

Karen was born on the Fourth of July, so that later I would tell her the whole country celebrated her birthday. Gwen, exhausted after thirty-seven hours of labor, collapsed into a well-deserved sleep, and I sat with our daughter for a time, until the doctors told me to put her down and leave her be, to go home for the night and get some sleep myself. Instead I lit sparklers and fireworks and danced through the streets like a madman.

She was the type of child that everyone, not just grandparents, calls "an angel," which meant she mostly took after Gwen. Physically, she was my wife in miniature, with the same small nose, the widely spaced green eyes, the hair just one brown tone shy of blonde. And her smile, the mischievous cocked-head grin.

Inside, she was Daddy's little gift, and she clung to me and followed me around the store as soon as she could move, first at a crawl and later in that perpetual run, half a step ahead of a fall forward, of the two-year-old. For a time I carried her in a rucksack on my back as I worked around the store, fearful of mischance and mischief, humming songs to her and feeling her small, warm breath on my neck. Gwen told me I looked like a Bolivian housewife, and besides the child would never learn to walk if her feet never touched the ground. I gave in, and turned her loose.

For months I still thought I felt her breath on my neck, and would smile.

Fortunately, the zombies had already begun appearing by that time, had been around long enough to have entered the work force. Mitchell, Albert's predecessor as general helper at the store, had been left as Bobby's sole help in the days we were gone, the almost two days of labor, of Gwen screaming with the delights of natural childbirth and me hovering and pacing and chain smoking the celebratory cigars I had bought. By all accounts they managed things quite well, to our pleasant surprise.

Even more surprising, as we discovered when Gwen returned to work and brought our daughter with her, Mitchell was. good with children. He handled Karen like a flower, hovering protectively nearby whenever we let her play on the floor in front of the cash register, and though initially images of Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster crowded my mind so that I vowed never to let the two of them near daisies or wells, Mitchell never raised a finger against her, never

even bumped her accidentally.

I learned later he'd had two daughters in life, both of whom he'd survived.

Something is happening in their brains; it's not raw pulp, I'm convinced of that. They tell us, for those who care, that they lack higher brain functions, that the brainstem and cerebellum still function for the most part, but the cerebrum and cortex are almost functionless. They have no memories, no real thought, just baseline comprehension and reaction; but Mitchell remembered his daughters, and saw in mine a reflection of them.

I know that look in his eye, recognize it in hindsight. I see it in the morning when I look in the mirror, written in the dark circles of sleeplessness. Loss, longing and delicate shades of madness.

And now I know why Albert weeps.

I drove him out to the small tract house that was his family's home. A cute little box of a place, identical to the rows upon rows of cute little boxes that surrounded it, all of which had sprung up in the forties and fifties, in the explosion of returning vets. They were old now and starting to collapse, the ones not kept up, but it said something to me that slapped-together houses of fifty years past looked better than "quality-built" homes erected ten years ago.

They didn't have a porch, just a concrete stoop that jutted out from the front door. Barbara Ann Davison sat on it, a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, talking with her husband Bill and a neighbor. I could hear her laughter as I drove up.

The neighbor glared darkly at me, muttering something to Barb and scurrying off as I opened the door for Albert.

"Hi, Mr. Richards." Barb nodded as we walked up. "Hello, Dad." I noticed she had to take a swig of beer before the second greeting.

Albert didn't acknowledge her, simply stepped past her and into the house beyond. She flinched as his arm brushed her shoulder.

"What brings you but here to the suburbs, Mr. Richards.?" Bill's voice boomed in false conviviality.

"Well, I wanted to bring his paycheck by --"

"Could've mailed it as usual," Barb said.

"-- and talk to you about something."

"Dad?"

I nodded.

For a long moment I wasn't sure what she might do. She stared at the cracked cement, the cigarette dangling between her fingers and the smoke rising in chaotic swirls. After a long while she sighed.

"Bill, go in and make sure Dad's okay, willya.?"

Bill nodded and patted his wife on the shoulder, following the zombie inside.  
We  
all knew zombies didn't need looking after.

I waited until Bill was well gone. "You've noticed it, too.?"

"The crying? Yeah, I've noticed it."

"What is it?"

She shook her head, refusing to look at me, staring off down the street of houses that seemed to reflect away in both directions infinitely, like two mirrors held facing each other.

"What do you think it is.?"

"No idea," she said. She gave a harsh, barking laugh. "Dad never was what you'd call a real happy person. Even when he was alive."

She lapsed again into silence.

"There's something you're not telling me," I said.

"Just thinking how to say it," she answered. "All these zombies and stuff, it's real hard to talk about. Oh, I expect you don't have much problem. He's just a guy that comes and works for you, stays with you five days a week, good worker once you get used to the sight of ligaments and muscles and shit hanging out of him. But that happens pretty quickly, doesn't it. He's just an employee. You ever had one of yours come back? Just when I get used to the idea that him and Morn are gone, gone for good and not just in Florida until May, just when I can say 'they're dead' without breaking up, he shows up." She looked away again; her eyes were dry, but a deep flush colored her cheeks, and her voice skipped along in breaths. "Like that. All gross, it still scares me to look at him. He doesn't talk, doesn't hold me close, just sits there staring. But what can I do? He's my dad."

"I'm sorry." It's pathetic and useless, and it's all I can say. She was right; I didn't know what it was like. Part of me wanted to ask her, "Isn't it better that he's here at all? He's still your dad, and aren't you grateful for a second chance? Not all of us got that, some of us would kill for that." But I had no right. Instead I just asked, "When did you first find him crying?"

"About two weeks ago. I woke up, middle of the night some time. Thought I heard a noise or something, so I get up and look down the hall. Dad usually sits in the chair in the living room at night, right where the hall empties out there, so I can see him when I look down the hall. Only he wasn't there. And I hear

this noise, like I left a window open and the wind's coming through. So I follow it.

"Dad's standing in the kitchen. Just standing there in the middle of the room, looking up by the ceiling. His arms are out, like he's reaching for something, and in the moonlight I can see he's crying. He's crying and I didn't even know they could cry, and he never cried once while he was alive, not that I saw. And he's making this sound, this whisper, I got up real close, and he just ignores me like I'm not there, so I can hear. And he's saying 'Maggie, Maggie,' over and over, looking up at the wall."

Barb's voice had become a thin scratch of sound; the effort to keep it steady made the veins in her neck rise in cords beneath the skin. I glanced up, and Bill stood behind her, inside the screen door. He looked as if he might cry himself; he wanted to come out, to comfort his wife, but she was not the type of woman who accepted such things, so Bill held his ground.

"Maggie was my mother's name," she finished, and finally she turned toward me, a flame in her eyes, a fire of grief like I'd seen in her father's eyes nights before. "How come she didn't come back, too, Mr. Richards? She was with him when they died. How come he came back alone?"

I didn't know, and I had no words of comfort, because I could feel my own grief overwhelming me, and a damnable hope and despair. I drove off quickly, leaving her alone on the stoop, watched over by the indistinct form of her husband, half-hidden by the screen and the shadows indoors.

Karen grew fine and strong and all the things a parent wishes for a child. Gwen and I, for the first time, I think, accepted our lot in life, the place we'd ended up. We might not have a life to sing about, but we had Karen, and she was more than compensation. Maybe, we told ourselves, when she's grown, when she's a young woman and leaving for her own life we'll think again of adventures and faraway places. For now, we have paradise here.

Five short years, half a decade of paradise, is too cruel. It would have been better, I screamed at night, never to have given us a taste of it at all, to have left us childless and bitter to the end of our days rather than . . .

A car. Like so many others every day, but it's always others. It's never our own. A car trying to beat a red light, failing, not even close, accelerating to squeeze through before the flow of traffic changed direction, failing.

Gwen and Karen, pulling into the intersection.

They were both belted, strapped in and secure, as well protected as they could be. Gwen had become quite fanatic about that, had even lobbied for stronger seat belt laws after Karen was born. You protect your own.

Sometimes it's not enough.

Gwen lived, to her great and utter despair. The car hit the passenger side. Karen's side. The cheap metal crumpled like paper. It drove inward, slamming into Karen, into her side and her head, the window shattering and spraying across her face.

They said she never felt a thing. I don't believe them. In my mind's eye I'm with her, and time slows so that every instant is an endless moment of recognition and fear: the sight, out of the corner of our eye, of the oncoming car, our mouth, opening in a high scream, the door bulging, reaching for us, the glass bending in, gleaming like a bubble before it pops, bursting over us; the long, clawing descent into darkness.

Five short years of Heaven before we were cast out. You learn sympathy for the devil.

The funeral was well attended, for Karen was a well-loved child, and a small sea of black-garbed children and adults covered the manicured lawn. Gwen stood beside me still as a stone, her face locked in an impassive gaze into the distance. Bruises marked her cheek and forehead, and when we were alone I'd seen her wince when she walked as the broken ribs ground at her, but this was all the damage the crash had caused her, physically. And that was her punishment, she had told me one night. We'd sat, huddled in each other's arms, and I'd been unable to stop my own endless torrent of grief and longing, and Gwen had watched in silence, dry-eyed. Shamed and raging, I had screamed at her, accused her of not loving our daughter, of not caring. I don't know how she didn't hate me. in that moment.

"This is my punishment," she'd said, touching the green and black stains on her face. "This is God laughing at me. He took my baby, and all he left me was this." In some odd way it would have been kinder to her if she'd suffered more, been more severely injured, participated more fully in Karen's death. Instead she'd been shut out entirely, left to live with it and unable to justify her own pristine condition.

I had held her then, and asked her forgiveness, and cried through the night.

And now her eyes were still dry and her mind was far away. I looked at the crowd, seeing faces I knew, those I didn't, all wrinkled in grief and pity as they gazed on her pathetically small casket and the minister spoke in solemn tones about resurrection and rebirth.

My eyes fell on Mitchell. He stood somberly, as he always did, and somewhere he had found a dark suit. It was moth-eaten, holed through in several spots, many years out of date and exuding an aura of dusty dinginess. It so perfectly belonged on a zombie that I almost laughed out loud.

And bit my tongue as my brain leapt to associations. Zombies, resurrection. Dear



God, it had never occurred to me before that moment. No one thinks of the dead,  
until it's one of theirs.

No one understood, no one could predict who would come back. Would Karen return  
to us in a few weeks' time? Would we see her little body shuffling blankly  
around our home, an empty husk, a flameless candle? Could we stand that? Could  
we live with our child, five years old and no love in her eyes, forever?

I don't remember the rest of the service.

I never told Gwen of my thoughts, and if similar ideas occurred to her, she  
never told me. We went about our lives in fear and hope.

When it was obvious Karen was not coming back, I sat up all night and cried. I  
don't know if they were tears of thanks or of despair, that I would truly  
never  
see my little girl again.

The zombie found me weeping in the moonlight, huddled behind the counter in  
the  
dark store. He never said a word, of course, never showed any emotion; he just  
reached out a hand to me, reached down and helped me to my feet.

July 18th. The day was always like this, always found me, by its last minutes,  
crying someplace. But it wasn't usually this bad, this overwhelming. She would  
have been twelve years old, I'd thought to myself, if seven years ago today  
Gwen  
had taken a different route, or the other driver had, or I'd held Gwen for  
five  
seconds longer at the door before they left, or Karen. Just as I'd thought, in  
years past, she'd be eleven today, ten today, if only, if only.

But this year there was Albert, who held his hand down to me and pulled me to  
my  
feet from behind the counter. When I looked at him, I could see he was weeping  
too.

What a pair we made! A middle-aged man and a dead man, standing in the night  
and  
weeping for our loves.

"Is that why you cry, Albert?" I said, brushing away my own tears and sniffing  
like a schoolboy, not really talking to him but simply giving voice to my  
morbid  
thoughts. "Because you'll never see Maggie again? Like I'll never see my  
little  
Karen?"

Albert turned away.

But there had been something there, something that froze the tears on my face  
and stopped me, suddenly. Something between derision and pity. From a zombie.

"Albert?" He had disappeared down the rows, and I glanced up and down them in  
the darkness, trying to find him, to know what that look meant.

I found him standing between the breakfast cereal and cookies, looking at a  
spot, hidden in darkness, high on the wall, weeping furiously.

"Albert, what are you seeing? Tell me, please."

His lips, I could see now as the moon slid through the window, were moving though no sound escaped from them. I leaned closer, straining with both eyes and ears, trying to decipher the movement of his mouth, and I recalled Barb's story of the day before. It was easy to see after that.

"Maggie," he whispered over and over. "Maggie, Maggie."

"What do you see, Albert? Dammit, tell me." My voice was a desperate whisper. "I have to know."

And, impossibly, he answered me. A zombie, a being that supposedly could not speak, who felt no emotion and did only what he was told, answered me, told me what he saw, what I think they all see. And now I knew why the zombie wept, and why all of them, as we would now if we followed them at night or into their private places, wept. Albert just couldn't control it as well as the others, couldn't keep it inside, the pain and despair and longing that sprang from the curse of the zombie, trapped between two worlds and seared into silence.

"Heaven," he said. "I see Heaven."

I stand in the dark. Albert's not with us anymore; no zombies are, not after what I learned about them. Not when I know the pain they're in. And yet. . .

So I'm alone in the dark, and the knife's blade glints coolly in the moonlight that falls in strips of light and darkness through the pulled blinds. I've left a note for Gwen, so she won't be surprised when she comes down to the store; she'll be shocked, angry, disgusted, alone, but she'll know what to expect, lying in the aisle between breakfast cereals and cookies.

Through the heart will be fastest, easiest, least messy. It needs to be quick, so that the brain shuts down automatically; I've read that much, at least, about zombies. People whose brains have been physically damaged never come back, and there's some evidence that lingering deaths are less likely to return. A gun would be quickest of all, I guess, but I can't leave Gwen with that.

The best of both worlds. I'll come back-- somehow, someday-- and so I'll still have Gwen, still have the sight of her that I've gloried in since the day we met. And when I can bring myself to look, with a zombie's sight, over the threshold, into Heaven or whatever you choose to call it, into the place that Albert looked and saw his Maggie, I'll see my Karen, my little girl. And I'll whisper her name at night, and weep in solitude so that Gwen will never see the tears on my cold cheeks, will never know and never be tempted to follow me to the borderlands.

I raise the knife, and I'm weeping already.