

Family

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I hear my Dad stumble through the front door and collide with the coffee table sending empty wine bottles skittering across the floor. He's drunk again but for once he doesn't swear. I know what's coming next: the argument with my step-mom, the fighting – she drinks in the house while he goes to his usual sports bar – followed by my little sister crawling into my bed so she feels safe. If it hadn't been for her I'd have runaway years ago but I stay to protect her until she's old enough to come with me. I fold my pillow over my ears, trying to enjoy the last few seconds of calm before the inevitable storm which happens around this time almost every night. Tonight it doesn't; there's no yelling, no sound of my Dad lashing out. I'm just beginning to wonder what's going on when the silence is shattered by an ear-piercing scream. I know from the pitch it's my sister, Sally, and I leap from my bed, grabbing the baseball bat I've kept behind my bedroom door since the night my Dad slapped me around. As I'd nursed my split lip and black eye I'd decided I was never going to let him hit me ever again without giving him back a lot worse than I got. That was five years ago and he'd yet to try it. I think he could see from the way I looked at him that it wasn't worth the trouble, not when there were others he could take it out on who he knew wouldn't fight back.

I enter the narrow corridor linking all the rooms in our apartment and find Sally standing at the entrance to my Dad's bedroom staring open-mouthed. She must have been on her way to my room when something stopped her in her tracks. My step-mom had passed out the sofa at nine and as usual we'd carried her through and dumped her on their bed so I can't understand what Sally's so transfixed by. There are noises coming from the room but they don't sound like anything I've heard before. I tiptoe over to Sally, the baseball bat loosely held in my right hand, put my arm around her to try to steer her away and glance into the room. Instantly I freeze. My Dad's on top of my step-mom, biting at her neck; tearing at her with his teeth. Blood's spraying all across the white sheets and the magnolia walls, and for some reason the first thought that enters my head is that she'll be real mad when she sees the mess. Then I think this is bad, even for him. Sally whimpers as I draw her to me and this seems to get my Dad's attention. He stops gnawing on my step-mom and turns to face us. That's when I see his eyes for the first time. They're burning with something I've never seen before; not even when he's at his worst. A

second later he's on his feet and racing towards us. I don't think, I just take a step forward and swing the bat. I feel it connect with his head and even though he's my Dad, it feels good. Everything I've been bottling up since my mother died, and I realised what a mean drunk my father really was, comes bubbling to the surface; the time he beat my step-mom so badly she couldn't get out of bed for three days; the fact I feel trapped in my own personal hell, unable to grow as a person, to become the adult I so much want to be while I'm still under the same roof as him. I put all of it into swinging the bat again and again until he stops moving. Only then do I realise what I've done.

He lies motionless on the floor, half in the bedroom, half out of it. I glance from his body to that of my step-mom. She's pale and still, and I know she's dead. Suddenly her arm trembles. Maybe it's more of a twitch but it's definitely movement. Given how much blood she's lost, I know she can't still be alive but she's moving. I crouch down and examine my Dad's lifeless body. His eyes are open and I can see the whites are a deep red; not the blood-shot red of when he was drunk or hung-over but something all together different. Hesitantly, I reach out and touch him then quickly draw back in surprise: his skin's cold; not just cool but as cold as ice. Then my step-mom sits up and slowly turns towards us. That's when I grab Sally's hand and run.

I don't know where we're going, I just know we need to get out of here. I race down the stairs of our apartment building and within seconds we're out on the street. It's dark, but all around us I can see shadows moving. My brain's spinning, trying to process what I've just done; trying to work out what's going on all around me. Then I realise Sally's crying. I crouch down so I can look her in the eye, 'Look I don't know what's happening but no matter what, I'll keep you safe,' I tell her, 'I promise.' I try to pull her towards me, to hug her but she resists.

She sniffs and wipes her eyes with the sleeve of her pyjamas, 'You killed Dad!'

'I had no choice, you saw what he did to her. He'd have done the same to us.'

'But you killed him!'

I understand why Sally's upset; She loves him and she's too young to really realise what a drunk he is, or rather was, and how crappy this made our lives. It's partly my fault, I try to keep as much of it from her as I can, and make sure that he never hits her the way he hits Macy, that's my step mom's name. Well, that was her name. Suddenly Sally's eyes widen as she stares at something over my left shoulder and she screams again. I hear a noise behind me, a sort of low guttural groan and spin round to find Macy staggering towards us. The gaping wound on her neck is dripping blood onto her pink nightdress and her eyes now look red and empty like my Dad's. Still not quite knowing what's happening, I pull Sally behind me and lift the baseball bat. Macy's eyes seem to stare straight through me and her head lolls slightly to one side but she seems to know we're there because she's moving faster now. I

wait until she's within reach and swing the bat. She goes down and instantly I feel sorry. She wasn't a bad person, not really, she'd just made some poor choices in life – the main one being marrying my Dad. I don't think he even told her he had two kids before she moved in and found us there but she always did her best. It's just that her best wasn't much good.

A movement catches my eye and my head whips round. There, shuffling out of the darkness and into the pool of light cast by the nearest street lamp, are three people. I stare at them in disbelief: one has half his face missing and the other two have blood-stains on their clothes and around their mouths. Like Macy, they're lurching towards us, arms out-stretched, quickening their pace with every step. I glance round and see another two coming from the opposite direction. I know we'll soon be surrounded but I can't see a way to escape. All I can do is try to keep Sally behind me and raise the bat in readiness. Just before I can take my first swing there's the squeal of tyres and the people staggering towards us are gone, replaced by a black car. Not needing to be asked twice, I pull the back door open; I push Sally in before throwing myself after her. Almost as soon as my feet leave the ground I feel the car accelerating away. It swings to the left and there's a dull thud as it hits something before bumping over it. I struggle to sit up and strap Sally in. While I do so, I call out to the driver 'D'you know what's going on?'

'Zombies!'

'What d'you mean zombies?'

'You know,' he looks at me for a second but I'm busy trying to deal with Sally, 'The dead come back to life, walkers, flesh-eaters ...' There's something familiar about his voice but I can't quite put my finger on what.

I interrupt him, 'But zombies don't exist!'

'They mightn't have done before but they sure do now. I don't know why but they're everywhere. That's why I'm getting out of here.'

Only then do I get a chance to check the driver out properly at and my heart drops.

I stare at the back of his head, 'You!'

He glances in the rear-view mirror, 'Yeah, me.'

There's an awkward silence. I've known Nick since before I can remember. When we were little we played together all the time because his Mom was friends with mine, but she stopped coming around after Mom died. I still saw Nick at school but as we'd grown up, we'd grown apart. I'd been so embarrassed when last year, completely out of the blue, he'd asked me to the prom. I don't know what possessed him because I'd worked so hard to become one of the cool kids and he'd grown up to be a geek, he must have known there was no way I could possibly go with him. I'd felt so sorry for him

when he'd had to slink away back to his locker as my friends sniggered but there was nothing I could do about it.

Now sitting there behind him in his car after he'd just saved my life, I figure I should say something, 'I could have handled them myself you know.' I can't work out why I said that; it's so not true and we both know it.

Nick smiles at me, a sad look in his eyes, 'You don't have to do everything yourself you know, you're allowed to let other people help you.'

I get the feeling he's not just talking about tonight and I look at him curiously.

He keeps his eyes on the road as he carries on, 'I know about your Dad. I've known for years, even before that night. I heard my Mom talking about him but no matter what I tried, you never let me help you.'

That's when I remember something I haven't thought about in years. The night my Dad hit me I'd run away and it was Nick's house I'd run to. I'd knocked on his bedroom window and he'd let me in. I didn't tell him what had happened but he could see the state I was in. He cleaned me up and then just hugged me as I cried. When I woke in the morning I felt embarrassed both about what my Dad had done and about the fact that I'd fallen asleep in Nick's arms. I'd snuck out and walked home because I didn't know where else to go. My Dad was still asleep, passed out on the sofa in the living room. I found Sally curled up in my bed – she was the only one in the house who even realised I'd been gone all night. After that I'd never felt comfortable with Nick again. Outside of my family, he was the only one who was aware of what my Dad was really like and I couldn't bare to be around someone who knew my darkest secret.

Trying not to blush at the memory, I glance out the window.

'You want me to drop you off somewhere or you want to come with me?' I turn to find Nick looking at me expectantly. Sally's doing the same.

I think about this for a moment. I've got friends, lots of them, but none of them are real friends. If any of them ever found out what my life was really like at home, none of them would speak to me again. They'd think I was too weird, too abnormal; they wouldn't realise I was the same person they'd always known. It's so unfair, it's not my fault my Dad was a vicious drunk; I didn't choose him. That's when I realise that ever since my Mom died I've felt alone. I've pushed away anyone who really cared about me, I've put up barriers and specifically chosen to hang out with people who are so shallow they wouldn't notice I never asked them round to my house or that I had to look after Sally all the time. Then I realise Nick knows about me, the real me, about how screwed up my life is. He knows all this and he still likes me. This gives me a warm feeling inside.

I glance at him, noticing for the first time that he's not bad looking really, 'Where you heading?'

'My uncle's place. He's got a farm out in the country. He's got guns and stuff there.' He flicks the steering wheel to the right and ploughs through a pair of zombies that are shambling down the middle of the road. 'I figure it's as safe as anywhere is now.'

I've never been out of the city before, or at least not as far as I can remember. There are some memories with my Mom that might have been on a beach but I can never see them clearly – there's too many others in the way, bad ones. For some reason the thought of leaving the city excites me. I guess it's because I've wanted to leave for so long and now it's actually happening.

Nick slams on the brakes, 'Oh, ffff...'. He glances at Sally and stops himself. '... Flip!'

Ahead there's a solid mass of people all shuffling towards us. Even over the sound of the engine I can hear them moaning and groaning. Sally clings to me, terrified by the sight, and starts to cry again.

I look at Nick, 'What're you going to do?'

'I don't know. Let me think for a minute.'

'I know, take a left up that alley there.' Whenever my Dad drove drunk, and that was a lot, he always kept off the main streets; choosing the back alleys instead. He said it was because they were safer but as I got older I realised it was so that he didn't get stopped by the cops. On the plus side, it means I know them better than the back of my own hand and I know the one up ahead will take us safely round the people, or rather zombies, that are blocking the street. Without questioning it, Nick does as I tell him. I guide him between the tall tenement buildings and back onto the street about a mile further on. As we rejoin it, I twist round and stare in the direction we just came. I can see the mass of zombies off in the distance, still staggering forwards and I know we're clear of them.

We're out of the city now and the car's racing through the night. Despite everything, Sally's fallen asleep in the back seat and I've climbed into the front alongside Nick. We haven't seen a zombie since the suburbs; in fact we haven't seen any one else on the road. It's like the three of us are the only people left in the world. Nick's got a CD on, something quiet and mellow I haven't heard before, and I've got the passenger window open: I'm playing with the air that's streaming past. It smells different from city air: cleaner, almost crisp. All around us there's darkness while above our heads are stars; millions of them. I can't believe how many there are. I've always known they were up there but I've never seen so many before because of all the lights in the city. Nick sees me staring up at them and grins. He seems to know

what's going through my head and he starts telling me about them. 'See those ones there; they make up a constellation called Orion, and the ones over there that look like the letter W, that's Cassiopeia.'

'Cassiopeia?' I know the name from somewhere but I can't quite place it.

'Yeah, she was an ancient Greek queen who boasted about how pretty she was and the gods punished her by making her sacrifice her daughter, Andromeda, to a sea monster but Perseus saved her because he was in love with her. They're up there too. That's Perseus over there and that's Andromeda there.'

I try to follow where he's pointing; I can't make out which stars he's talking about but somehow it's nice to know they are up there, immortalised forever. Nick doesn't seem to notice I don't know which stars he's talking about, 'See that bright star there in the middle of Andromeda, it's 97 light years away. That means the light we're seeing now left there at the start of the last century.' He glances at me as if trying to judge what I'm thinking. He must be able to see I'm interested because he carries on. 'But that's nothing. See that star there, that's Deneb, it takes the light from it more than a thousand years to get here. The light we're seeing left there more than five hundred years before Columbus discovered America, then there's...'

'Nick,' I interrupt, 'Where'd you learn all that stuff?'

'Don't know, I just sort of picked it up. I find it interesting. I guess my Dad told me a lot of it and the rest I got from books.'

I thought about this for a few seconds. All my Dad had ever taught me was never to wake him when he had a hang-over and to keep out of his way when he was drunk. At that moment, I feel both angry and sad, and then for some reason I miss him and I start to cry.

Nick puts his hand on my shoulder, just for a second to let me know he understands and then puts it back on the wheel. I pull myself together and wipe away the tears before clearing my throat. 'So where d'you think the zombies came from?'

He looks at me, 'I don't know. I was out on the roof trying to see the meteor shower and I saw Mr. Lafferty from next door staggering up the street, only he died last week. I know because Mom went to his funeral on Monday. I went inside and told her but she wouldn't believe me. I wish she had because the next thing I know Mr. Lafferty crashed through the front door and grabbed her by the hair and sank his teeth deep into the back of her neck. It was horrible, there was blood everywhere and she was screaming like I've never heard anyone scream before. Dad tried to stop him but he couldn't. I wanted to stay and help but Dad told me to take the car and go. I think that's the only reason I got out alive. The last thing I saw was Dad hitting Mr. Lafferty over the head with a frying pan but he was bleeding a lot and I could tell he wasn't going to survive for long.'

There's sadness in his voice and I think about what he's just said. That's the difference between our Dads: When the dead started walking his saved his life; mine tried to kill me. It takes me a second to realise there's tears running down Nick's face. Knowing he'll be embarrassed if I mention it, I stare out the window for a couple of minutes. When I turn back to him, the tears are gone but his eyes are still red. 'How long will it be 'till we get to the farm?'

'About an hour.' His voice breaks and he tries to cover it up by clearing his throat.

'You think we'll be safe there?'

'We should be, it's in the middle of nowhere. There's no one around for miles.'

'What about your uncle?'

He shifts uncomfortably in the driver's seat 'He's ... errr ... away on business.'

I figure that's a lie but I don't push him further on it. Instead I ask another question, one that's been eating away at me ever since it first popped into my head. 'Nick,' I hesitate for a moment, 'Do you think everyone who's dead has come back? Or only some of them?'

He seems to know what I'm thinking and avoids looking at me. 'I don't know but it's probably only people who've died recently. None of the ones I've seen were rotting or anything like that. They all seemed ... you know ... fresh.'

Despite its gruesomeness that makes me happy. I don't want my Mom to have come back as one of them.

I turn towards Nick, 'But what about my Dad?'

'What d'you mean?'

'When my Dad came home tonight, he was one of them. He killed my step-mom and he tried to attack us. I had to bash his head in with that just to stop him.' I point to the baseball bat in the back seat. It seems weird to be telling someone what I did but I know Nick will understand 'He didn't die or at least I don't think he did. How did he become one of them?'

'I guess he must have been attacked and got bitten. I think it might have started with dead people but when they bite live people, I think they infect them with something and then they turn into zombies too.'

That certainly explained what went on with my step-mom.

I think about all that's happened in the last few hours and try to work out how I'm feeling. As I'm figuring it out something odd strikes me. The dead might have risen and taken over the world but I've finally got the escape I've dreamed of for years. It doesn't matter that my Dad and my step-mom are dead or that they tried to kill me, what matters is that I've finally broken free. I know life isn't going to be easy now the world's changed but I've survived this long and now I've got out I know I can keep going, no matter what. I glance first at Nick and then at Sally. They are my family now and despite all that's happened, I'm happier

than I've been for a very long time. It might have taken the world coming to an end but finally I realise that your family doesn't have to be the one you were born into, it can also be the people you choose it to be.