

American Zombie Beauty

By Philip Baruth

I'm dragging the slats I busted off the picnic table into the mud room, so I can nail them to the inside of the front door, when Grampa wanders out of his bedroom. He's got on the frayed green terrycloth robe he's been wearing most every day since I was in high school, winter or summer. The feet look like dinosaur feet sticking out from under the terrycloth hem, ancient velociraptor feet, just bone and yellow nail and liver spots. Before she died, my Gramma used to call the robe his "smoking jacket." Which was funny and true enough: Grampa saw some things that scared him bad over in Germany during the Big War, and he's chain-smoked ever since — chain-smoked like he thought if his butt went out, the Germans would take advantage of the dark and hit the beach. Ninety-seven years old and shaky hands, all right, but the old man never drops that butt.

In fact, he pokes it at me when I hoist the first board up to the door and commence whaling on it with the mallet. "Fuck you doing, boy?" he asks curiously, which is polite enough in Grampa-speak. "Fuck you hammering the door shut for?"

I wipe the sweat and grit off my forehead. I don't have a lot of minutes. "Because we might have some unwanted guests later, and if we let them in they'll eat us out of house and home."

I know he can't register sarcasm anymore. To him a straight face is just a face. But I've always been a wise-ass, even under serious pressure like this. "See what I'm saying, Gramps?" I mime a mouth with my hand. "Eat us out of house and home."

He watches the hand and nods automatically, and then — just like he was seventy or even eighty again — he grabs the end of the board I'm pulling on and sort of helps me wrestle it into place a little. I whale at it with the mallet, get it good and firm, and Grampa exhales like he's done a good morning's work.

"Now who's these guests," he asks then, with an air of getting to the bottom of things, and I can see that he truly has no idea, none at all. He's forgotten everything

we've told him over the last few months. His mind is just as empty of all of this as a really big open field after a really big fall of snow.

So I take one of the minutes I don't have, and I tell him again. I put my hand on his shoulder, real tight, get up close to his face so he can see this is as serious as it's ever going to get. "It's the Jerrys, Grampapa. Remember Susan and I told you about the Jerrys. Some reason they're moving south again, and they were in Waterbury around noon. Casper called from the store there. Killed his son Lucas before Casper could get the militia together. Killed him dead, Grampa. I don't think they'll come up the Mountain Road, but maybe they want to learn to ski. So we're not taking any chances."

I expect the mention of the Jerrys to make him recoil, the way a man in his right mind recoils from things that split your flesh and crack your spinal cord into nunchuks, things that want nothing more than to bust open your skull and lap daintily at your brains.

But Grampa hasn't been in his right mind for a long, long time.

Instead, he gives a crafty little smile and taps his index finger to his temple. "Not so dumb after all, your old Grandad. I told your Grandmother the Jerries would hit this country before they were through. Told her. They're still smarting from the two times we whipped their fascist heiney over there. And now they're bringing their beef over here. Damned if I wasn't right as rain, boy."

I turn away and haul up another long board. "Not those kind of Jerries, Gramps. Not your WWII Jerries. These are a different model altogether, believe me."

Grampa cinches his belt up tight on the robe, jams his cigarette between tight lips, and shakes his head grimly. "Different, my bony white ass," he spits, and then marches stiffly to the bay window to take up the watch. "A Jerry is a Jerry is a goddamned Jerry," he says with some dignity, then ashes his cigarette carefully on the windowsill. It's the only thing he does that's ever made my wife Susan want to put him in a Home.

"Now tell me what I'm looking for here, son," he calls over between blows of the hammer, and I can tell that in his mind, we're suddenly sharing a foxhole somewhere near the Rhine, instead of a ski bum's cabin in Vermont, way up the Mountain Road nearly to Stowe Resort, where the rich folk ski and then apres-ski. "Bastards changed their uniforms much since my day?"

Not much, I think, as I drive the last nail and test the door with my shoulder, if your Jerries were wearing tie-dye too.

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I still remember exactly how I felt the very first time I learned about how the AIDS retro-virus worked, back in the 1980's. I felt like I was in the middle of a pretty damn good game of soccer, and then the ref told me at the half that the goals had gotten mixed and I'd been scoring against myself the whole time. I mean, come on — *retro*? Some chick you couldn't even remember any more could be the death of you, ten years after the fact? You going to tell me that shit is *fair*? But eventually everyone reworked their sex lives around it, gay or straight, young or old, everyone started looking at each individual bareback coupling as a ten-year biological wedding contract. It became the new normal. And then along came the anti-retroviral cocktails, and that sharp sense of unfairness faded away with the remnants of the twentieth century.

Until the twenty-first century, and the Berkeley Rage.

Mid-summer 2012, and suddenly reports started pouring out of Berkeley, riots, killings, blood in the street, no one knew what was going on. The only thing we knew was that a lot of people had been killed in the street by a lot of other people, but no one knew if it was a gang thing or cult thing. Turned out it was a retro-viral thing: a forty-year retrovirus that had popped up in Northern California in the mid-70's and spread much like AIDS in the various free love communities back then.

But this virus, LDV, remained dormant for four full fucking decades, and then it multiplied and swarmed the brain of the infected. And it quickly impoverished their blood in some way that we still don't really understand, so that they actually stay alive — if you can call it that — by feeding on healthy blood and tissue. And they're not real good about taking no for an answer, suffice it to say. Seventeen National Guard troops got their heads opened by those first Berkeley Jerrys.

But, as tends to happen with anything retro-viral, it got a lot worse once experts understood the scope and the origin.

Most of the original transmission occurred at Grateful Dead Shows on both Coasts, during the 70's, and the 40-year clock on the virus was extremely exact — which meant that all the people infected at one show all turned Jerry at more or less the precise same time four decades later. So those infected at a 1972 Friday show at the Olde Renaissance Fair Grounds in Veneta, Oregon, all went Jerry exactly forty years later in 2012, no matter where they were by then.

And all the folks infected at the Saturday show in Veneta in 1972 all went Jerry the very next day in 2012. And so on.

And so on. If the early concert schedule of the Grateful Dead was the rootless dream of the 1960s, it played again as the endless nightmare of America forty years later. Literally speaking, every single 70's Dead show had its own specific correlated outbreak in the years after 2012.

American Zombie Beauty, sort of.

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I'm laying bricks against the basement door when my cell rings. Not really laying bricks so much as jamming them this way and that into the mess of concrete that I poured down the stairwell about an hour ago. Not so much poured it down the stairwell as ran the wheelbarrow full of concrete over the top step and let the whole mess settle as it would at the very bottom. Not a lot of finesse in the home improvement projects of the last thirty-six hours. But I get my cell out and up against my ear as I shovel around in the drying muck.

"I had to get off 89," Suzanne says, and I feel my heart waver, then go airy and drift up in my chest, trailing a tiny kite-string of pain. Because this is a woman I've been foolishly in love with for almost 12 years, almost married twice, almost had a baby with once. And she's not on 89 where she should be.

And if she's not on 89 she's either on Rte. 2 or the Mountain Road, and neither of those are roads where you want to be because they're small, lonely tracks through deep woods, without a street light or a gas station or a militia outpost for 25 miles either way. Route 2 is where you go if you want to pull off and make love in the back of a

Volkswagen Type 4, on a Navaho blanket with the hatch flung open and the constellations looking in, which is the way Suzanne and I started out back in the day.

“Jerries or Feds?” I ask, praying for Feds, for once.

“Both,” she says, and the phone starts to cut out. But then it sizzles back into life, and I hear her say, “ – backed up from the road block, shooting into the treeline, sniper rifles. Looked like 5 or 6 or more.”

“Suzanne,” I yell into the phone, “why didn’t you stay at the roadblock? Why didn’t you just stay there?”

Nothing.

“Suzanne, did you get the ammo and the food?” She wouldn’t have gone out at all today, given the reports of Jerry movement south out of Burlington, but we were down to the odd handful of bullets and the last bag of fresh pasta.

Her voice comes through faintly, faintly: “No, I never got that far.”

“Are you on the Mountain Road yet?”

Nothing again. But I figure maybe she can hear me so I yell, “Use the side door, Suzanne. *Side door*. It’s the only way into this place anymore, and we’ll keep it ready to open for you.”

More sizzle.

And then Suzanne, faint but coming through because she’s Suzanne and she’ll damn well move her voice through her phone and then the open air and then back down into my phone by sheer force of will if she has to, Suzanne shouts in this desperately thin little voice I can just barely hear: “ – minutes or so. Have the door open, Will. I’m going to have to run from the car. Don’t make me stand out there fiddling with my keys, okay? You know I hate that, Will, right?”

And then the voice is gone.

You have to know what she meant: Suzanne went to college in Boston, and one night real late she was fiddling with her keys outside her dorm in the dark and some really big silent bastard ran by and grabbed her purse, thinking the little cocktail strap over her shoulder would break. But it didn’t and for this space of few horrible seconds Suzanne had the feeling – sidewalk ripping her nylons, one hand twisted around into the

leather strap — that it wasn't the purse the attacker wanted at all. She had the sense that night that what the man wanted, really, was to haul her out of the Light forever and ever.

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We learned fast, as the bodies piled up and the government got stretched beyond its means. We learned fast once we realized we were all going to have to have take care of ourselves.

One, Jerry Garcia wasn't himself the origin of LDV — that was a teenage runaway from Stamford, Connecticut that the Centers for Disease Control call "Twirly Girl Alpha" — but he was one of the first, and researchers think his death-like coma in 1986 was an early manifestation of the virus. Ditto for his relapse in 1992.

Two, the Jerrys are pack-oriented, and they seek one another out and form up into tribes. They use tie-dye as a social signal, and the males are bearded, but you can't fool them by dressing the part, believe me. They can smell an imposter at 200 yards, smell the difference in the blood, not to mention that the real ones all tend to bite off and consume most of their own right middle finger — you're not a Jerry until you lose the finger Jerry lost, apparently.

And three, they can be wicked fast and they can move around just fine in full daylight and anyone who thinks that you're only going to run into them in a deserted shopping mall hasn't been sitting on a hot Burlington city bus in the late afternoon at the exact moment that an overweight woman with elaborate acrylic nails — a woman who happened to lose her virginity at the massive Summer Jam in Watkins Glen in 1973 — goes full-tilt Jerry.

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And because of that night in Boston, with the big Silent Bastard in the dark, one of the things Suzanne does that's always struck me as disarming and cute and more than a touch sad is she runs the last ten feet to the door at night, every door, even today, even if I'm with her, even if the porch light is on. Even if anything, she runs to the door.

So I jam the cell back in my shirt pocket and just fling the last few bricks at the mess before the door. I have in mind that I'll stand and turn and go leaping up the steps to get things ready for Suzanne's break for the cabin. But I've been leaned over at a cramped angle for the last twenty minutes, trying to avoid the drying concrete, and I've been moving heavy stone and concrete and wood for the last five hours. My muscles are shot.

And so when I turn to take the stairs three at a time, my right leg only manages 2.5 and my foot twists between stairs, and there's a brilliant searing sensation up my shin. I roll over and haul the leg out from where it's jammed, pain winking like white lights all around me in the stairwell.

It's covered with blood, the leg, and there's a little javelin of splintered stair running what looks like the length of my femur. I try to tug on the wood, but it's clear the huge splinter spread and repositioned once it entered the leg, like the seed of a foxtail, and it's not coming back out without a fight. So I figure I'll bring it upstairs with me.

Getting moving again is a tough undertaking, though. It takes a good thirty seconds, because my ankle seems lightly sprained too, or twisted at least, but I get myself upright, and I'm moving heavily up the stairs when Grampa's ancient face leans into the doorway above me.

"Germans in the dooryard, boy," he says tersely, but with just the tiniest audible hint of *I told you so*.

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There's a loft in the cabin, and at one end of the loft is a skylight – a cheap one, made out of a big bubble of streaky lucite, the edges of which some long-ago do-it-yourselfer slathered with heavy-duty glue and joined to a round hole in the roof. It's no small feat leveraging myself up into the loft with the dead leg, but once I do I drag our futon over below the skylight, and then I fold it triple and climb carefully on top.

My balance is shot, and I almost take a header before getting centered again. Then I pull out the hammer I've got stuck into my belt, and I give the lucite a serious rap that cracks it like an eggshell. A few more shots, and I've got a hole in the roof with a

three foot radius, like a crow's nest except that I can only just get my head and shoulders up above the wood.

It's enough, though. From this vantage point, I can see the entire plot of land around the cabin – not a yard so much as cleared forest, with stumps and pine needles and Suzanne's little rock gardens, and then taller weeds and grass and Purple Loose Strife down along the driveway that winds down half a mile or so to the Mountain Road.

It's there in the Loose Strife, which is to say in the rainwater in the ditch beside the drive, that I see the first couple of Jerrys. They're canny about some things, and dumb as dirt about others. So researchers have proven that they have the ability and the foresight to pack crude tools, like crowbars and knives, and bread and other dried food in their pockets. But water's beyond them: they'll drink it where it lies, but haven't the foggiest idea about how to move it from one place to another. So they're always parched, and swarm over fresh water.

The scientists at the CDC like to say it has to do with “asystematic retention” – as in Jerrys can remember how to deal with solids but not with liquids – but that starts you down this path of remembering that Jerrys are humans, with at least part of their human memory and identity still available in there somewhere, and you'd really rather not go there. Not if you have to shoot a bunch of them dead in the head.

I can see four of them, and I have a fleeting hope that it's just a beetle of Jerrys – three or four traveling alone – rather than a bus, which is eight or ten. But then a lot of little movements through the treeline sort of resolve themselves in partial flashes of color and sound, the way things do in the woods, and I forget to breathe.

Because it's not just a busload of Jerrys coming up the rise and onto the property.

It's an entire Further formation: 30 or more, moving where they will and doing what they will with what they find.

At the farthest reach of the cleared land, we have a big birdfeeder, the tall smooth chrome kind that squirrels can't breach. And a big-bellied Jerry takes a boot to it, and topples it over, so that the wooden feeder smashes into the ground, sending up a shower of birdseed and suet. Isn't 20 seconds before three or four Jerrys are fighting over the contents, pawing and cuffing at each other as they try to figure out if the suet is living tissue. Like Great White Sharks, they'll tear into just about anything organic, to see if it

nourishes their depleted blood. Great White Sharks in tie-dye. With matted hair and bloodshot eyes and small sores on their faces and hands.

That's when I hear the sound of the Subaru on the Mountain Road, down-shifting and braking for the driveway. We need muffler work, and when I hear Suzanne shoot onto the ruts of the drive from the smooth two-lane road I can tell how much time I have with absolute precision.

I have 25 to 30 seconds before she crests the rise and drives right into the big pack of Jerrys she can't see at the moment.

Thirty seconds before they have her in a place where she can't turn around, can't put it into reverse, where she suddenly can't move for the trees.

And that's when I hit the switch. Next to the skylight is a simple on/off switch I installed two weeks ago, a switch that runs down out of the loft to a cassette deck on the floor below. A cassette deck wired up to two huge Fender amps that now hang suspended by bungee cords from the eaves of the cabin, facing the drive. And on the cassette deck is a tape of a concert, a Grateful Dead concert, who the fuck knows which one, some tape Suzanne has had mouldering in the bottom of a box of cassettes since the time she switched over to compact discs in the '90s. There's no label on it anymore, but it's Dead music just the same.

For two weeks now, I've had the system wired up to blast it louder than the afterburner of an F-16, on the off chance that hearing the old riffs, the music of their purloined humanity, might reach them somehow.

How could it hurt, I thought. Can't make them any madder.

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And when the music blares out, and rolls down on them foraging and rampaging around in the dooryard, it *does* reach them, I swear to Christ.

They all more or less stop where they are – even one of them hauling what looks like the hindquarters of a dog, *fresh* hindquarters, blood a big dull smear down the front of his tie-dye – and they look up at the speakers dumbstruck. Like it's the Voice of God, demanding their attention.

And then, out of nowhere, they all start to do it: their Dead dancing thing.

Not sure if you've ever seen video of a Grateful Dead concert from back in the day, but all the women did these twirly hippy-girl dances, circling their freckled arms just as sweet and pretty as you please, peasant skirts snapping, and the men were all mostly good-natured, uncoordinated white boys with just enough of this or that in them to loosen up and enjoy themselves, and they all had a hell of a time dancing. Dance for hours, boys and girls, eyes closed, very deep grooves. It was a trance almost, by the look of it. If you ever wonder why the virus spread so easy among them at those concerts, you watch them dance. Like ballet and foreplay and kindergarten playtime all rolled into one.

Well, the Jerrys don't get that into it – can't any more. You can see that even from a distance, that there's something bolluxed up with their nervous system, so what they manage is more like a rolling walk, jerky little swing to the arms. The Jerry carrying the back end of the dog starts to fly it through the air, the way a little boy might fly a model airplane, just lost suddenly in the feel of it cutting the wind.

They're all still foraging for food, and they're all still parched with thirst, and driven by the madness in their blood, but they look contented almost down there in the driveway, boogie-taken, dream-swayed.

Doesn't last more than a minute.

Because that's when one of them gets a look at my head, sticking up out of the top of the cabin roof. And that female Jerry gives a loud, barking noise, and the heads swivel. From their perspective, it must look like a brain on a silver platter, like dinner is served, and suddenly they're all looking, and none of them are dancing anymore. Now that I think about it, they can almost certainly smell the blood still drying on my shin.

I shoulder the rifle I've had leaning up against the wall below the window.

Which is when Suzanne comes slinging dust and gravel up the rise in the Subaru.

It's like I knew it would be: they're around the car before she can do much of anything, except try a savage spin of the wheel that just takes her into a stand of maple she can't clear. And they begin to swarm.

By that time, though, I've got my rifle shouldered, and I take out Dog-Boy and a few others that are clustered on this side of the car. Really just clearing a path, more than anything. And then I pull the trigger, and it clicks, clicks again.

Empty as a fucking Halloween gourd.

Suzanne sees that I've poked her a hole, though, and as soon as the bodies slide away from the car, she slams the passenger door open and bolts for it, before any of the others can really react. She's only 5'4" but she runs five miles every couple of days to stay in shape, and she's so keyed up that she looks like a blur coming across the lawn.

But it's too good to be true, and something comes out from the moss behind the cabin. A genuinely large Jerry – bald except for a long, stringy fringe of hair full of leaves and burdocks – suddenly takes shape. He must have been loitering around under the eaves where I couldn't see him, and he's got an angle between Suzanne and the doorway. I can hear him growling or howling or whatever that sound is they make.

The noise isn't ear-splitting, but it's the sound of authentic insanity, and it makes the rest of the Jerrys go quiet.

This big one's not like the rest, you can tell that. No jerky movements, no misfiring synapses: he comes at her powerful and sure, arms circling for her, oddly cat-footed because he's big as a black bear.

"Suzanne!" I scream, but my clip is empty and by the time I hobble downstairs it'll be over, so there's not a thing in God's green earth I can do but watch. Like that night in Boston: she's got ten feet between her and the door, and some sick bastard is trying to haul her out of the Light for good.

But that was Boston then, when she was a cutesy college girl.

This is Vermont now: Suzanne jerks out the .22 pistol she carries when she does the shopping, and I hear the irate little bang of it, a surprised protest from the gutshot Jerry, followed almost immediately by the sound of the side door, slamming shut, being barred, double-bared, top and bottom.

She's inside, just like that, and I feel my heart beat again. "Suzanne!" I yell down to her, my voice cracking. "You okay, baby?"

"I'm okay," she yells back, and I hear her pistol firing through the little gunslot we've got cut into the side door. Then I hear her click on an empty chamber too. And just like that, everyone's out of ammo. We're inside a huge wooden box, under siege by a Fuurther of infected freaks, and we have no little iron things to stick into our guns. But she's in the cabin, where it's safe, and relief washes through me anyway.

Still, the relief is very short-lived, because I can do the math. There are at least 25 more Jerrys left than we have ammo, I'm sure of that, and eventually they'll find a way into the cabin. Which is when there's a tug on my sleeve, and I look down to see Grampa in his smoking jacket, handing me something round and dark and heavy for each hand. For a second I think he's handed me two metal bocce balls. I weigh them in my hands before deciding that they are, in fact, exactly what they appear to be: a pair of grenades. Green. With pins and shit.

"Jesus Christ. Are these things live?" I say.

He looks hurt. "Sure, they're live. I look like some weekend war re-enactment pussy to you?" He points to the hole in the roof. "You start feeding those bastards their lunch. I got three or four more of these babies hidden down in my room." He starts for the ladder with real enthusiasm, like he's just started a satisfying project that will occupy a run of Saturdays, like building a kit-car or a kayak in the garage.

I can't help but yell after him. "You mean everytime we've moved in the last ten years, you've packed along a half-dozen hand-grenades?"

He looks dumbfounded, then squints like maybe I'm just having fun with him.

A look like, *You mean you didn't?*

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Late that night, after we've used the Subaru to drag the bodies into a hole back in the woods, and rigged the last grenade to a trip-wire perimeter, and finally gotten Grampa off to sleep, Suzanne and I sit up even later in the loft, trying to clean the wood splinters out of my leg. When she's got it more or less clean, and doused with hydrogen peroxide, she bandages it tight and then comes up into my arms.

Never have I felt the same sense of blissful, all-consuming visceral satisfaction, in spite of the throbbing leg: Jerrys dead, Suzanne alive, futon warm, grenade primed.

For kicks, we're listening to the Dead cassette that had the Jerrys so briefly grooving. We've got it turned down low, low, so Grampa won't hear, so any rogue Jerry in the woods won't mistake it for a homecoming. It's a song called "Box of Rain," a live

version, a song I've always liked because it manages to be both melancholy and up-beat all at once, truthful in that way, unlike most pop music, that wants one or the other.

And then something morbid dawns on me: that we're listening to a concert tape, and that at that concert, very likely, the LDV virus was transmitted and forty years later there was chaos for whoever caught it. Blood and madness and chaos.

"Where'd you get this cassette," I murmur into Suzanne's hair.

There's a very slight pause. "I recorded it."

I take this in, feel a chill come creeping over my chest, all of the skin except the place where her hand rests. "You went to a Dead show? You never told me that, Suzanne. When?"

A longer pause, and I can see that suddenly we've bumped together into a place where she's wrestled alone, mentally, for months. Her voice comes then, but there's a catch in it, and it's inaudible. I feel warm tears welling against my chest. Finally, she turns to one side so she can say it. "It was 1986. Not like some major Dead lovefest from the '70's."

I can feel my body tense, top to bottom, as though the tensing is happening to someone else. No, 1986 is not like the 1970's, when the virus was everywhere at every concert. But thus far the Center For Disease Control can't say just how long LDV continued its initial retro-viral bloom. So far the mid-eighties are a crap shoot.

I don't have to ask.

She answers, because she loves me and she wouldn't hold out. "I know you want to know if I did it with anyone that night, Will. And I wish I could tell you, but I can't. I've racked my brain. I'd just broken up with Steve, a few months before, and I know I wasn't a nun back in those days. But that particular night, I honestly don't remember, Will. Maybe I did, maybe I didn't."

I pull her closer, tighter, because I love her and I'd never let her suspect that I don't. Even if she did do it, that doesn't mean she caught it. They know that LDV started was getting weaker each year after the seventies.

But it's suddenly here with us, in the bed, at least the possibility, the threat, the living ghost of the thing itself. Death. The Dead. All of it. No longer outside, beyond the perimeter, but maybe here, maybe now.

So we do what humans do when Death needs to be kept at bay.

When it's over, she holds my face right in front of hers, with both hands, tight.

We're an inch apart.

"You're my man," she whispers fiercely.

No tears now. All cried out. Just sad, serious Suzanne eyes.

"You're my woman," I whisper back, and I kiss her neck. No hesitation, and I'm proud of that, but I realize that if I'm proud of it, it means there's still a hesitation there inside somewhere, even if I'll never ever admit it out loud.

She goes to sleep first, and I can't help but lie there and watch over her in the dark, because it's my job. And although it's just gotten much harder, it remains my job, and always will. Loving her, watching out for her. Helping her fight the Jerrys, the silent bastards, the Dark.

Finally, I sleep too. Or sort of sleep.

Mostly I inch my way through dead dreams, to another land.