BREATHERS
A Zombie's Lament
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BROADWAY BOOKS
New York
I woke up on the floor in darkness.

Faint artificial light filters in through a window, which doesn't make sense because there aren't any windows in the wine cellar. But I'm not able to deal with that question until I figure out why I'm on my back in a pool of liquid that's seeping into my clothes.

That and I can hear Sammy Davis Jr. singing "Jingle Bells."

When I sit up, something rolls off of my body and onto the floor with a hard, hollow thunk. It's a bottle. In the faint light coming in through the window, I watch the bottle roll away across the floor until it comes to rest against the wall with a clang. It's an empty bottle of wine. And the wall isn't a wall but the base of the Whirlpool oven.

I'm in the kitchen.

On the digital LED display at the top of the range, the clock changes from 12:47 to 12:48.

My head is pounding. I don't know how many bottles of wine I've consumed, but I know I started drinking before lunch. The impetus for my wine binge is as clear to me as the
digital numbers of the oven clock, but I have no idea what
happened to the last twelve hours.

Or how I ended up in the kitchen.

Or what I’m sitting in.

Part of me doesn’t want to know. Part of me just wants to
believe that it’s nothing more than fermented grapes. That I
somehow managed to get out of the wine cellar and into
the kitchen and then passed out, dumping the contents of
the bottle of wine onto the floor. Except the front of my
clothes aren’t wet, only the back, and since the bottle
was on my chest when I woke up, I couldn’t have spilled
wine on the floor without soaking my shirt.

I put my hand down into the puddle, which is congealed
and sticky, then bring my hand up to my nose. It smells
sweet. At first I think it’s yogurt or strawberry preserves, until I put
my finger in my mouth.

It’s Baskin-Robbins strawberries and cream ice cream.
My father’s favorite. He keeps at least two quarts of it in
the freezer at all times. What I don’t understand is what it’s doing
on the kitchen floor. Then I turn around and stagger to my
feet and understand why.

Three quarts of Baskin-Robbins are smashed open, their
contents melted and spreading out across the floor. Surrounding
them are boxes of frozen vegetables, packages of frozen
meats, containers of frozen juice concentrate, and half a
dozen ice cube trays, their contents melted and mixed in with
the ice cream, forming a pool of defrosted frozen items.

Oh shit, I think. What the hell did I do?

Not that it really matters. My parents are going to ship
me off to a zoo when they get back from Palm Springs. Unless
they wake up in the morning and my father is upset enough
about what I’ve done to cancel their trip and ship me off to a
research facility out of spite.

I don’t know what I intended to accomplish by dumping
the entire contents of the freezer onto the kitchen floor, but I
figure it would probably be a good idea to try to put back what
I can and clean up the rest of it before my parents wake up.

But when I open the freezer, I discover there’s not any room.

My parents are in the freezer. I can see hands and legs and
feet and my father’s face staring out at me from the second
shelf. His head is in a large Ziploc freezer bag, as are the rest
of my parents’ body parts. Or most of them. When I open the
refrigerator, my parents are in there, too.

All the wine I’ve drunk is suddenly trying to find its way
back into the bottle and I barely make it to the sink before I
throw up. Actually, it’s more like reverse drinking. Just wine
and a little stomach acid. But no chunks of Mom or Dad.

Our relationship wasn’t always like this.

Sure, there were the standard growing pains and disagree-
ments most parents and sons encounter.

Hormones.

Independence.

Latent Oedipal desires.

But when your only son reanimates from the dead, it cre-
ates an entirely new dynamic that your average parents just
aren’t prepared to handle.

After all, it’s not like there’s a handbook for dealing with
spontaneous resurrection. That’s the technical term for zom-
bies you hear thrown around by experts on talk shows and
news programs, as if they know what it’s like to be a reani-
mated corpse. They have no idea of the emotional fallout from
a rapidly digesting pancreas. Or how hard it is to keep your
tissues from liquefying.

My father was a de facto expert. And by “de facto,” I mean
he was the only one who considered himself an expert on
anything.
Plumbing.

Politics.

Personal hygiene.

"You know, Andrew, you can get rid of those blackheads by using olive oil and vinegar."

He actually believed this. Fortunately, he let Mom do the cooking. Otherwise, I would have been the only kid in my school eating arugula salad with sliced pears, Asiago cheese, and a benzoyl peroxide dressing.

Don’t get me wrong. My dad wasn’t an idiot. He just always thought he was right, even when he had no idea what he was talking about. He would have made a great politician.

However, I do have to give my father props for his choice in refrigerators. My mom wanted one of those Whirlpool side-by-side models, but my father insisted on an Amana bottom freezer. Said it was more energy efficient, drawing cold air down instead of up. He also claimed it provided better use of shelf space.

While my parents’ heads and most of their limbs are tucked away inside the freezer, their bodies from hip to shoulder are stuffed into the refrigerator. Had it been a side-by-side model, I never would have been able to fit their torsos on the shelves. Thanks Dad.

On the CD player in the living room, Dean Martin is singing “Auld Lang Syne.”

Staring at my parents stuffed into the Amana bottom freezer, their torsos crammed between the mayonnaise and the leftover Thanksgiving turkey, their heads sealed in Ziploc bags, I’m overcome with a surreal sense of disbelief. From the expression on my father’s face, it appears he’s just as surprised as me.

Maybe none of this would have come to pass had my fa-
Chapter 2

Two months before I find my parents in the Amana bottom freezer, I'm at the Soquel Community Center, sitting in a semicircle of chairs that's open toward a petite, fifty-two-year-old woman who looks like my third-grade teacher. Except my third-grade teacher never ended up on the wrong end of a twelve-gauge, pump-action Mossberg.

On the freestanding chalkboard behind her, written in block letters, is the proclamation:

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Upper- and lowercase letters probably would have softened the message, but the petite woman, the group moderator, a gunshot victim named Helen, is just trying to make us feel better.

"Rita, would you like to start tonight?" asks Helen.

Rita's face is a pale moon hovering in the black hood of her sweatshirt. She has on a black turtleneck and black pants. The only color she's wearing is on her lips, which are Eternal Red.

Rita slit her wrists and then her throat on her twenty-third birthday. That was less than a month ago. Most of the time she wears gloves and turtlenecks to hide the stitches. Sometimes she wears hooded sweatshirts. Other times she wears scarves. On bad days, she wears all three. Tonight she left the scarf at home, so at least she's not feeling morose.

Rita licks her lips—sucks on them, actually, removing most of her lipstick. From her pocket she produces a black cylinder and applies another coat, smacking her lips together. It's either an oral fetish or she needs a fix.

"I still feel alone most of the time," says Rita. "Once in a while, I can almost imagine none of this ever happened. Then I look in the mirror and the hopelessness comes flooding back."

Five other heads nod in understanding. Carl is the lone dissenter.

"You don't agree, Carl?" asks Helen.

Carl was stabbed seven times, twice in the face, by two teenagers who stole his wallet and used his credit cards to buy seven hundred dollars' worth of online pornography.

"No," says Carl. "I agree with her completely. She is hopeless."

"That's nice," says Naomi, lighting up a cigarette. Half African American, half Japanese, Naomi could still pass for a model if it weren't for her empty eye socket and the way the right side of her face sags. "Why don't you just rip open her stitches while you're at it?"

"I'll leave that to your husband," says Carl.

Naomi's husband came home after a bad day of golf and took out his frustrations on her with a Titleist four-iron.

"He's no longer my husband," says Naomi.

"Technically, no," says Carl. "But then technically, none of us should be here."

"And yet we are here," says Helen. "So why don't we focus on that."

In addition to Helen, Rita, Naomi, and Carl, the other members of the group include Tom, a thirty-eight-year-old dog
trainer who nearly lost his right arm along with the left half of his face to a pair of Presa Canarios, and Jerry, a twenty-one-year-old car crash victim. Like me.

Because of our similar experiences, Jerry feels a connection with me, so he sits next to me at every meeting. I don't feel anything but lost, and Jerry, who listens to rap music and still wears his pants halfway down his ass, annoys me, so tonight I made sure to sit at the end of the semicircle next to Naomi.

"We're all survivors," says Helen, who then stands up and walks over to the chalkboard. "I want you all to remember that. I know it's hard dealing with the threats and the name-calling and the expired food products thrown at you, but you survived for a reason."

At times Helen reminds me of Mary Poppins—always cheerful and full of advice that works for characters who live in movies, fairy tales, or the Playboy Mansion. But I have to admit, without the support group I'd probably never leave my parents' wine cellar. Still, I think we need to come up with a name other than Undead Anonymous. After all, when you're undead, you're about as anonymous as a transvestite with a five o'clock shadow.

At least we don't get any support group imposters crashing our meetings, trying to pick up vulnerable women. That would be sick. Interesting, but sick.

Helen finishes writing another of her messages on the chalkboard and turns to face us. Beneath YOU ARE NOT ALONE, she's written the words:

I AM A SURVIVOR.

"Whenever you're feeling lost or hopeless, I want you all to say this out loud. 'I am a survivor!' Say it with me now."

By the time the meeting breaks up, it's dark outside. The end of October is more than two weeks away, but less than a month into autumn and it's already pitch black before Jeopardy.

I never liked autumn. Even before the accident I hated the weather growing cold and the changing of the leaves. Now it's a visual reminder of how my own life has grown cold. Lately I'm beginning to think there's just an endless autumn threatening an eternal winter.

I'm getting melancholy again.

Helen advocates the buddy system when we leave our meetings, though Carl says he doesn't need anyone to hold his hand and heads for home on his own. Jerry, Helen, Rita, and I all live in the same direction, so we break off one way while Naomi and Tom head the other. Most nights, Jerry buddies up with me and talks incessantly about his accident and how he needs to get laid and how he wonders what it would be like to be dead. I wonder about that, too. More so when I have to pair up with Jerry.

"Dude, that car was awesome," says Jerry. "Cherry red with a beast for an engine and a killer sound system. You should have seen it."

I know the story by heart. A fifth of Jack Daniel's, half a dozen bong hits, no seat belt, a utility pole, and bad judgment on a right-hand turn sent Jerry through the windshield of his cherry red 1974 Charger and skidding along River Street head first, scraping away a chunk of his scalp. I've heard the story so many times that I can almost believe it happened to me. Except my accident was worse. Jerry was alone in his car.

My wife was asleep in the passenger seat and, unlike me, she never woke up.

For the first two months after the accident, all I could think about was Rachel—the smell of her hair, the taste of her lips, the warmth of her body next to me at night. I wallowed in my suffering, consumed with anguish and self-pity. That
and I had to deal with the smell of my decomposing scalp, the taste of formaldehyde in the back of my throat, and my own cold, decaying body. It was enough to make me want to take a gasoline shower and set myself on fire.

If you've never woken up from a car accident to discover that your wife is dead and you're an animated, rotting corpse, then you probably wouldn't understand.

Helen says that even though we've all lost more than our share, we need to keep our faith in the path that lies ahead of us. She says we need to let go of the past before we can embrace our future. I'm still working on that. Right now, the past is all I have and the future looks about as promising as the new fall lineup on CBS.

I used to wish Rachel would have reanimated with me so I wouldn't have to go through this alone, but eventually I realized she was better off dead. I'd thank God for small favors, but I doubted his existence before this happened and I haven't exactly changed my mind. Losing your wife in a car accident is enough to challenge the faith of even the most devout believer. But when you're a skeptic to begin with, being able to smell your own rotting flesh tends to put the kibosh on your belief in a divine power.

That's one of the biggest problems about coming back from the dead. The smell never quite goes away.

I reanimated within forty-eight hours after my death, before putrefaction and after I'd been embalmed. Upon reanimation, the process of decomposition slows down to a rate about half as slow as natural hair growth. However, for those of us who were fortunate enough to have been embalmed, formaldehyde is the magic elixir that slows decomposition down to an almost imperceptible pace, enabling the undead to maintain some sense of pride. The stigma of being a zomb-

e is bad enough, but for those who reanimated prior to being embalmed, it's disheartening when your hair, nails, and teeth become detached. And it's downright embarrassing to be walking down the street and suddenly have one of your main body cavities burst open.

If you consume enough formaldehyde, you can keep the decomposition of your body and your internal organs at bay. Even if you can't get hold of the industrial-strength concentrated stuff, formaldehyde can be found in lipstick, makeup, fingernail polish, toothpaste, mouthwash, deodorant, antiperspirant, bubble bath, bath oil, shampoo, and soft drinks.

Rita gets most of her formaldehyde from lipstick and fingernail polish, while Jerry prefers his fix from a can of carbonated soda. Personally, I try to stay away from the soda. Bad for the teeth. I get most of my supplements from shampoo and toothpaste. Occasionally, however, I like a helping of Alberto VO5 Conditioner.

"...so then the next thing I know, I'm like, totally road surfing on my face," says Jerry. "Road rash city."

Jerry's been droning on about his accident the entire way home, while ahead of us, Rita and Helen walk in a blissful silence. It's times like this that make me wish I'd nearly lost both of my ears.

"Dude," says Jerry. "You wanna touch my brain?"

The last thing I want to do is touch Jerry's brain, but it's hard to write No thanks with one hand on a dry erase board hanging around your neck while you're shuffling along on a broken ankle. So I just shake my head and hope he doesn't start talking about his permanent erection.

The four of us make our way through empty parking lots, past stores closed up for the night and distant homes where warm lights glow behind curtained windows. A few of the
houses have decorations up already, skeletons and ghosts and witches on broomsticks. Pumpkins not yet carved sit on doorsteps and porches. The cold breath of autumn whispers through the trees.

Halloween is coming, which seems more fitting than in years past. After all, it's not like I need a costume anymore.

Chapter 3

Highway 17 is a four-lane roller coaster of asphalt connecting Silicon Valley to the Pacific Ocean through the Santa Cruz Mountains. The highway is divided by a concrete barrier, with gaps that allow cars to make left turns onto secondary roads. On rare occasions, a vehicle veers into oncoming traffic through one of these gaps, causing a fatal head-on collision. On even rarer occasions, in the early hours of a star-filled July morning, a driver falls asleep on his way home from a dinner party and his 2001 VW Passat drifts through one of these gaps into the northbound lanes and hits an embankment on the opposite shoulder at just the right angle, launching the car nearly twenty feet off the ground and into the trunk of a three-hundred-year-old redwood tree at more than sixty miles per hour.

Even Hollywood couldn't re-create my accident and make it look unstaged. Of course in a movie, the lead actor would somehow manage to walk away from the car with his body intact.

Maybe not Mel Gibson or Bruce Willis, but Brad Pitt, definitely.

I don't remember the accident. I didn't see any bright light
or hear any ethereal voices, but then this isn't exactly heaven. I just remember darkness, endless and close, like a membrane.

The next thing I know, I'm stumbling along the shoulder of Old San Jose Road, dragging my left foot behind me and wondering what day it is and where I'm coming from and why my left arm doesn't work. Then a pickup truck drives past and a rotten tomato explodes against the side of my face. Two teenagers are riding in the back of the truck. One of them has his pants pulled down and his bare ass pointed my way, while the second one throws another tomato at me and yells:

"Go back to your grave, you fuckin' freak!"

At first I think they're just being kids, throwing rotten tomatoes at people for kicks. Denial is one of the first hurdles zombies have to overcome. Then I stagger up to Bill's Groceries and catch a glimpse of myself in the front window.

My left ankle is twisted at an obscene angle. My left arm is useless—the bones pulverized from the shoulder to the elbow, ending in a twisted claw that used to be my left hand, while my left ear is mangled and my face looks like a jigsaw puzzle.

As I stare at my hazy reflection, dressed in a black suit and tie and looking like I just walked off the set of a George Romero film, a six-year-old girl walks out the door, drops her frozen fudge bar when she sees me, and runs off screaming.

Not exactly one of the top ten moments of my life.

Except this isn't life anymore. And it's not death, either. It's not even in between. It's more like a bad spin-off from a successful sitcom that the network refuses to cancel.

From my injuries, I figure I've been in a horrible accident and lost consciousness and wandered away without any recollection of what happened. Which isn't too far from the truth. Except I've lost consciousness for three days. And instead of wandering away from the accident, I've wandered away from my coffin less than twenty-four hours before my funeral.

I don't know any of this at the time. I just think I need help, so I go into Bill's Groceries to ask if I can use the phone. Before I can get more than one foot inside the door, Bill's wife comes at me with a broom and a spray can of Lysol disinfectant and shoos me away.

I wander off, confused, with rotten pieces of tomato clinging to my face as I stagger toward town, looking for help. A quarter mile away, I come to a park. There are two pay phones over by the restrooms, so I lurch my way up the sidewalk, dragging my left foot behind me, ignoring the screams of children as they scatter in front of me like the Red Sea parting for Moses. Though I suppose Lazarus would make a more appropriate biblical reference.

Still unaware that my injuries aren't causing me any discomfort, I reach the pay phone and remove the receiver, cradling it between my right ear and shoulder as I dial 9-1-1 with my right index finger. Seconds later, an operator is on the line asking me what my emergency is.

I don't know what I want to say or how I want to say it, so I just decide to open up my mouth and say the first thing that comes into my mind. Except there's one problem.

My mouth is sewn shut.

Frequently, prior to the embalming process, the mouth is sewn shut to keep it from dropping open. A curved needle enters the nostril, comes out behind the teeth, and then goes around and around until the jaws are sutured shut. But since I think I'm still among the living, I don't understand why I can't open my mouth. So I thrash my right arm around, make a lot of grunting noises, and stagger toward an old man and his wife who run away like Olympic sprinters.

When I hear the sirens and turn to see the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's car pull into the parking lot, I think I'm finally going to get some help. When I see the white Animal
Control van pull up moments later, it occurs to me that I might be in danger. Not from them, but mountain lion sightings are common in Santa Cruz County, so I turn around, my eyes wide, wondering when this bizarre nightmare I've awoken into will end.

Confused, scared, and overloaded, I don't hear the approaching footsteps behind me. The next thing I know, I have one snare around my arms and torso, another around both legs, and a third around my throat. The Animal Control officers guide me into the back of the van, while the sheriff's deputies assure the growing crowd of onlookers that everything is under control.

I spent two days in a cage at the SPCA until my parents finally came to pick me up. The stigma of claiming your undead son and bringing him home to live with you can wreak havoc on your social status, so I can't exactly blame them for not rushing out to claim me. But one more day and I might have been a crash test dummy.

The normal holding time for a stray zombie without identification is seventy-two hours. Seven days with ID. For stray cats and dogs, it's the reverse. But without regular formaldehyde fixes, most fresh zombies start to spoil within three days.

After the requisite holding period, unclaimed zombies get turned over to the county and salvaged for body parts or sold off for medical experiments. The SPCA is working to save more of us by soliciting zombie foster volunteers and implementing a companion zombie program, but those ideas haven't caught on yet. And since the majority of SPCA funding comes from private donations earmarked for animal programs, the accommodations for zombies at the shelter are pretty limited.

My stay at the SPCA wasn't as bad as you might think, once I got over the initial shock. They gave me a bowl of fresh water and some kibble, along with my own litter box and a few squeaky toys to chew on. They even gave me a pair of dull children's scissors to cut out the mortician's stitches so I could open my mouth.

When we got home, my parents set me up with a mattress in the wine cellar. They didn't say much. Mom cried a lot and covered her nose and mouth with a towel to keep from gagging on the smell, while my father kept asking me why I couldn't have stayed dead like a normal son.

My mother spoke to me once, asked me what I wanted. I tried to answer, but the words came out in a croak and a screech. My vocal cords were so badly damaged in the accident that I can't talk, so I have to wear a dry erase board around my neck to communicate.

While my mother at least makes a pretense of understanding how difficult this has been for me, my father complains about the smell and the stigma and the expense of supporting a zombie. He even asked me once what I intend to do with myself.

As if I have some kind of an answer. It's not like I reanimated with a five-year plan. And no one exactly prepped me on How to Be a Zombie. It's a big adjustment, harder than you might imagine. After all, I still have the same basic hopes and desires I had when I was alive, but now they're unattainable. I may as well wish for wings.

On more than one occasion I've heard my parents discussing me, with my father suggesting that I find my own place to live. Some kind of zombie shelter. I've even heard him mention the idea of sending me to a zombie zoo. My mother tries to explain that I need support and that I'm just going through a period of adjustment.
"Like puberty," she says.
She assures me my father will come around and that if I believe in myself enough, everything will work itself out.
She says this with a straight face.
For a moment I believe her. Then I go to take a Pine-Sol bath and I look in the mirror and I see the jigsaw puzzle that was once my face and I wonder if my mother has lost her mind.
Either that or she's on Valium again.

Chapter 4

Andy?

It's eight thirty in the morning and I'm drinking a bottle of 1998 Chateau Montelena Cabernet Sauvignon and watching *SpongeBob SquarePants* on Nickelodeon. Occasionally I flip the channel to the two cable PBS feeds and watch *Sesame Street* or *Barney and Friends*. I'd rather watch *Leave It to Beaver*, but we don't get TV Land.

"Andy?"

I feel like I'm six years old again, staying home from school and watching TV in bed while my mom makes me Cream of Wheat with sliced bananas and cinnamon toast. Except instead of comic book hero posters spread across my wall, I have bottles of wine.

And my mother isn't making me breakfast.

And my heart is no longer pumping blood through my veins.

"Andy?"

I've been living in my parents' wine cellar for nearly three months and my mother still calls out for me expecting an answer.

With a sigh, I turn off the television and get up from my