

Night Wreck

by Elizabeth Kate Switaj

You were watching TV when it began. That much is obvious, since you have always watched TV on Thursday nights, and Thursday was when it began for everyone in Polisville. Around 11 PM, a train on its way to a Nevada landfill jumped the tracks. It's a secure landfill, and the contents of the cars are still classified, but the city authorities knew enough about it to start the emergency sirens.

Come to think of it, if you hadn't been watching TV, you probably wouldn't be alive. Moments before the locals started their emergency response, the feds took to the airwaves: they ordered the surrounding counties to evacuate, but everyone in Polisville was to shelter in place.

If you had gone outside too soon, you would have inhaled a deadly dose. If you hadn't reinsulated your home and added an extra seal to your double-paned windows, you might well have suffered a worse fate. I guess that means you should be grateful for rising energy costs. Even as it is, the doctors think that your teeth are too sharp, though they can't be sure since they don't have a baseline for comparison.

Indeed, no one knows for certain that any of the horrors of last night really happened, and you, at first, remained oblivious. You continued watching reruns of Friends, or perhaps the Star Trek marathon on channel two, as you waited for more official word. It didn't come. There would be no more official information before the all-clear signal. After a few hours, your phone rang. In fact, it rang on three occasions. The first two calls were from out-of-town relatives checking to see if you were OK. You must have told them that you were, since it was the third call that brought the news.

Maybe it was your sister, maybe it was your ex-wife, or maybe it was your drinking buddy Mark calling to warn you about the creatures that had surrounded his cabin. You would have heard shattering glass and shouting before the phone line went dead.

Some survivors have said zombies. Some have said vampires. What seems clear is that the symptoms of exposure to last night's chemicals include craving for blood, temporary rushes of adrenaline leading to instances of extreme strength, and the grinding of teeth until they turn into shark-sharp blades.

So your sister, Katrina, called and told you about them, about how the crash and leak had created them. You asked her to come over to your house where you could protect her, but she refused. She said the air might still be poisoned; she wasn't going to risk becoming a monster. Nothing you could say would persuade her.

You started getting out your guns and sharpening your hunting knives. You knew that the graying hippies at the house closest to yours would offer no resistance. Even the yuppies who had bought the house to the north, the opposite direction along the gravel road, might survive longer. City folk knew better than to let strangers inside; the hippies might very well open their doors to the monsters.

For such fools, you believed you had no obligation to risk your life. Somewhere along the line, however, you had heard that zombies and vampires--perhaps even werewolves--could transmit their disease with a bite. If a phone call could save the hippies and so reduce the number of enemies you would have to face, it would be worth it. Unfortunately, they did not heed your warning. They asked how they could know that any particular person had become a monster and scoffed when you told them just to look at them or try talking to them. They pointed out that there were many reasons--including some neurological disorders (they referenced specific ones, but the names meant nothing to you)--for a person to look or speak in a

strange way. Or not to speak at all. They said they would never refuse to open their door to someone in need.

They did not survive the night. You do not need to check the lists of identified victims or the other hospital beds. You simply know. What you don't know is that they died of bullet wounds. If you knew that, you would assume that they had been turned.

As for your sister, you believed you had a duty to defend her. She had only been twelve when your parents died, and she still didn't know you had been driving the truck. You hoped to God she didn't remember why you had run them over. Sometimes, you aren't sure yourself that it actually happened. Of course you saw them--and her--but these days it feels like a movie.

You certainly felt as if you were in a movie as you loaded up your shotgun. You wished you had silver bullets; you knew that, in movies, they killed monsters better. Of course, by now, someone has told you that you got your monsters mixed, but you were never one to pay close to attention to all that geek crap, were you?

Finally, you were ready. You got in the same rusty blue Chevy you used to kill your parents. Before you had gone a quarter of a mile, you discovered that you weren't prepared, at least not mentally. You hadn't thought that these monsters would be, no, would look like your friends and neighbors.

The first of them you saw shambling alongside the road was your drinking buddy's wife. She was always calling Mark on his cell and demanding that he come home early, so you didn't really mind putting a bullet through her head. You thought her body ran around a bit longer than it should have after that. You also thought about how seeing that would have made Mark throw up. The idea started to nauseate you, so you stopped thinking. The next one you were glad to kill.

When you passed the yuppies' house, you saw no lights on and none of their shiny SUVs in the driveway. Good. They had either stayed in the city or gotten the Hell out of town. You felt a small rush of affection for them for having the good sense to stay out of your way. You even shot the small shadows you saw skulking around the edge of their land: they were too small to be much of a real threat, but even something that size could cause property damage.

At the next house you came to, you realized that these were no ordinary monsters you faced. They had enough sense to barricade themselves in the house. They even had the TV on so they could monitor emergency messages. You ascertained all this while sitting outside, and then you said a small prayer to thank God for preserving you from notice, for you knew that if you did not exterminate these monsters, they would strike at all the evacuees.

You kicked down their door with enough surprise on your side that the monsters could not even scratch you. After you shot those in the front room in their heads, you headed to the back, the bedrooms, where you found out just how ruthless these monsters were. They had changed the small children, even the infants who could not make their way out of bed. They were mewling and rubbing their eyes, preparing for a desperate attack you did not let them launch. You even shot the babies; you had to. Who knew how fast monsters grew up?

You threw up on the nursery floor, splattering even the bright blue walls and the ABC toy chest with sour-smelling bile and half-digested hamburger. You stayed doubled over for a moment before summoning the strength to leave. You had to move on. You had ten more houses between you and your sister, and you knew that every one had been commandeered by monsters. You just knew. When you came to the other houses, you did not linger outside. You could not take the chance that the creatures would spot you. You

had to kill more infant monsters, but you never threw up again. You knew, after all, that you were doing the right thing.

You lingered, however, outside your sister's house. Two cars sat in the driveway: her yellow Chevy and a red Subaru station wagon. Because you did not recognize the Subaru, you knew it had to belong to the monsters. Only one light on the second floor was on.

Using the key your sister had given you for emergencies, you let yourself in quietly. As you neared the stairs, you began to fear that your heartbeat would give you away, so you began to hurry. Once you reached the second floor, you could hear faint moaning from the lit-up room. You knew there was a monster in there with your sister.

No more restraint. You ran down the hall and kicked in the door. On the bed, a monster stretched on top of your sister, turned around and roared. The roar sounded remarkably like speech, like "What the Hell?", but you knew that could not be. You shot the monster.

Then your sister rose from the bed. She ran screaming at you and pounded on your chest. You shot her point-blank in the head. You had no choice. She was becoming a monster.

The stress of killing what had been your sister and the ill effects of whatever you had breathed in while driving, overwhelmed you as you tried to leave. When emergency crews arrived, they found you unconscious on the porch. That's how you ended up here in the hospital. Frankly, it's a miracle you survived.

Now, if you could just sign this statement? Thanks.

No, it's not for the police. It's simply to make certain that everyone knows that what that train was carrying had nothing to do with last night's killings. Thank you again. You have no idea what a great service you've done for your country.

