

And We Are Laid To Waste

by Jonathan Harrell

August 14

I remember the smell of fresh air. The feeling of clean air in your lungs. I haven't had that feeling in quite some time now. I guess few people have.

To say that this job is difficult is to commit the most egregious sin of understatement. I've lost sleep, sure, but then who hasn't been losing sleep for the last year?

I got this job six months ago. It's only the third job I've had in my life. I don't know when the work will run out, but at the rate we're going I can only hope that we'll see the end of it soon.

I used to be a teacher, of all things. After I graduated near the top of my class from Brownsville University, I didn't want to wait and play the field, like many of my classmates were planning to do. I rushed back home to Edinburgh, where my parents waited with open arms for me to move back into my old room. My mom had called me two weeks before graduation and told me that Mr. Hitchins, my old high school history teacher, was retiring, and that he was wondering if I would be interested in the position. Things were starting to click for me. That was twelve years ago now. Eleven years of paradise. One year of hell.

Today, I recognized one of the shells. Deshea Johnson. He was in my classroom two years ago, an uncommitted student more interested in the young women sitting around him and in the revitalized basketball program in our school. He had no time for history. If he had known then that he would be on today's load, I'm

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sure he would have had much more fun while he had the chance. Hell, the same could be said for all of us, both the living and the dead. The rest of them don't think at all.

I recognized young Deshea by his driver's license photo at first. The face on the shell was misshapen, distorted by the small caliber round that had undoubtedly ricocheted inside of his skull. He could have been anybody, for all I knew. But when I found his wallet inside of a stained and torn pair of jeans, I couldn't help but look. We don't find many wallets these days. I don't know if people have stopped carrying them, or if the theft problem has gotten worse since I moved to the compound. All I can remember is that when I saw the wallet, it just felt important to me to find out who this young man was. I wish I hadn't looked.

It's my job, along with Carlos and Joshua and the rest of the crew, to check the shells before we process them. If there is jewelry, it gets collected. If there is a form of identification like a driver's license or social security card, it gets collected. Everything else gets processed. "Processed with extreme prejudice," as Carlos would say. Shoes, coats, hats, all of it gets processed without exception, because of the potential for microbial transference. I'm sure that some of the other guys pocket a little of the jewelry here and there, but I never have. It would feel too morbid. Not to mention unethical, of course. But I'm sure not all of the other guys have that particular moral dilemma when it comes to making a quick buck. Gold and silver are still forms of currency, after all. The Almighty Dollar is worth less than a square of toilet paper these days, but gold still trades for anything. It's amazing to me, because what good is the gold? Are these people planning on hoarding it up until all of this blows over? That's awful goddamn optimistic of them, if you ask me.

Sorry, I just get wound up when I think about what the Norms are up to. The "normal" folks. Those who are seemingly unchanged by the state of the world around them, who act like it's business as

usual, looking out for their own best interests and trying to take advantage of everyone else. I just can't see how people can go on being selfish after all we've been through. It's like after the two towers went down in New York all those years ago. Even though I was a kid, I still remember how everyone, everywhere, was kind to one another. We held doors for strangers, we smiled and said "Good Morning" as we passed on the sidewalk. I don't remember anyone going crazy and robbing people at gunpoint, killing those who resisted, after 9/11. But then, this is a whole different ballgame, isn't it? It's not a terrorist attack that we're dealing with. That was the first thing that was checked out, you know. I refuse to believe that even the most callous terrorist would do something like this anyway, because it could really, truly mean the end of the world, and then who would you blow up for your beliefs if everyone is dead?

Meanwhile, the shells keep coming. The trucks come in, the trucks go out, and the shells keep piling up.

August 21

I can't seem to stop coughing. I think I've got the flu. Isn't that hilarious? After all of this, the flu is still going around. At least I've got my sense of humor. The guys keep making jokes about it, too. "He's got the bug, man, he's got it!" They're joking, really, but it's only a matter of time before one of us really gets it, and that would be bad, indeed.

There weren't very many shells on today's loads, though. Maybe I won't have nightmares tonight. I was on jar duty today with Carlos. He hates jar duty, and says he'd rather be inspecting the shells. I understand, but I don't feel the same way. Jar duty doesn't bother me so much, but then I haven't been doing it as long as he has. He's not looking so good, either. I'm a little worried about him. But then, I'm worried about everything these days. I'm sure he'll be fine. He

says his wife is starting to get better, starting to put the miscarriage behind her. He needs to be there for her. I should know, right?

I miss Rachel. It's been nine months since she died. It's been maybe seven months since she had her own date with the jar. I'm still not over it, I know. If there were any therapists left in the world, I'd make an appointment with one tomorrow. Well, if there were any non-military therapists left, anyway. I can't trust the Army docs, I just can't. They look at you like they're expecting you to go crazy and start killing people at any moment. I keep my appointments with them, though, because not going to see them is even worse. If you missed even a couple of appointments, I'm sure they would have you removed from the job. And if you're off the job, then you're off the compound. And we all know if you're off the compound, then you're as good as dead. It's just a matter of time out there, and you'll get killed, too. I understand the Army's vigilance, though. Those of us working the shell line are sitting on top of a wealth of biological weaponry, in a sense. If you go crazy on the line, the guards would probably shoot you dead without thinking twice about it.

Maybe I'll feel better tomorrow. It seems like I've been coughing my lungs up for the past couple days. It's hard enough to breathe in the Haz-Mat suit as it is, but this wet, hacking cough is making it almost impossible to get a deep breath. I guess I could always take off the respirator. Ha ha. I bet the guards would put a rifle round through my skull before I get it completely off of my face. I can just tough it out. Things can't really get much worse at this point. What's a little cough?

September 4

The line was full today. It's been full all week. Shells lined the conveyor belt almost head to toe. We don't keep track of our

production numbers, of course, because that would just be too goddamn morbid. But if I had to guess, I'd say we burned three thousand bodies this week alone. Maybe more than that. And it's only Thursday.

Shit, I just called them bodies, didn't I? I meant shells. I meant to say shells. Don't call them bodies. Maybe it's getting to me. I've just been so tired. So tired. I can't sleep anymore, so I volunteered to go on the third shift. I mean, I'm just staying awake all night as it is, I might as well do something productive. What's sad is that we have to have a third shift. It used to be just a Monday to Friday operation, working maybe ten hours a day. Recently, it's been a twenty-four seven production. We have more shells to process than we have time to do it in. Sometimes it feels like too much. I keep thinking that it will slow back down, that surely there can't be that many left. The Army reps keep telling us that it is almost completely under control now. The radio says the same thing. Well, the few stations that are still on the air say that, anyway. I don't know, though. Some days I feel like we're all being lied to. That maybe it's not under control at all, that they're just telling us that so that we won't freak out or anything. I guess that's understandable.

I noticed today that I haven't seen the sun in weeks. I don't know if it's from all of the smoke, or if God really has turned his back on us. I'm sure we'd know if the sun went out, but I haven't seen any honest-to-goodness sunshine in quite a while. It lends a real gloom to the already too-serious situation we are in. Rumor has it that rations might get cut back a little starting next week. The compound is still waiting for a shipment of meals and medicine and clothing. It's already two days late. I'm sure it'll be here soon, but I guess the compound leaders are planning for the worst. It's a persistent trait amongst these Army types.

Thinking about my impending rations cut is making me miss things that I haven't had in ages. I can't remember the last time I tasted a beer. Rachel used to hate beer, but she always brought some home for me when she went to the market. I loved that about her. She'd always think of little things like that. Things like reminding me to trim my toenails, and buying me new pairs of underwear. Things that guys don't normally think about until their wives or girlfriends remind them of it. Not that I could buy beer for myself now anyway. I doubt the Annheuser-Busch plant is still in business, if you know what I mean. Even if it was available, the compound has a strict No Alcohol policy. Wouldn't want someone getting tanked and releasing the virus on the unsuspecting citizens within the walls, would we?

September 15

I'm just so tired. There were so many of the shells today, I don't think I even stopped to look at any of their faces. I stopped saying a prayer for each one of them several months ago. I used to think that if I couldn't bury them with dignity, I could at least cremate them with compassion. I'm sure that the dead don't care. They're all damned anyway. The compound chaplain really can't say with any degree of certainty whether the infected still have souls. He wants us to believe that their souls are taken to heaven or hell when they die, and that what remains is just a biological shell (more of that Army-Approved terminology, because heaven forbid we call them what they are) that is void of a soul. Because the alternative is just too horrible to imagine. Can you picture your soul being trapped in a body that no longer does what you tell it to, but is driven only by instinct and hunger? I can, and it keeps me awake all day, when I'm supposed to be sleeping in between my shifts at the jar.

I work the jar exclusively now. The foreman used to alternate us all. Work the dump site one week, work the inspection line one

week, and then work the jar for a week. Then we would have a week off. That was back when there were more of us on the job, though, and there were far, far fewer shells to burn.

I don't mind the jar so much anymore. I guess if you do something long enough, you'll get used to it, no matter how horrible it is. Not everybody was able to adapt to it, though. About a month after I started the job, this huge guy who looked to be about fifty walked in to the lunchroom, got his lunch pail out of his locker and just sat down with this sad look on his face. Nobody talks much in the lunchroom, we all seem to save the humor for the production line. But looking at this guy's face, we were all dead silent. And then he just started crying. These huge, grief-filled sobs just poured out of him for at least half an hour before the foreman was alerted. The foreman and a guard walked him out and gave him a two-week leave of absence, but the guy never came back. I don't know if he packed up and left, or if he was told to make room for someone who would work, but I do know that I never saw him again. After he was gone, a couple of the guys started talking about him. He had been on jar duty for that week, and apparently he couldn't take it anymore. I understand, but it doesn't bother me like that.

The jar is what we call the cremation tank. It's made of temperature resistant safety glass and steel. Actually, "jar" is a bit of a misnomer, because it's more like a box: roughly eight feet long, four feet wide and three feet deep. It's pretty big, as far as boxes go. Actually, it's not quite big enough, ha ha. I once had a shell that was too big to fit in it fully.

I was working the jar on the day shift a couple of months ago, and this big, big bastard rolled down the conveyor to me. He was absolutely enormous. When he rolled in front of me, I checked him out. His right arm was gone, and one of his eyes was missing from where the guy working the dump site that day had spiked him, but all in all, he was in really great shape for a corpse, if you'll pardon

the expression. His shirt was in tatters, and all I could see were his man-tits and a huge gut, his skin mottled with grey. I worked the crane arm to lift him over the box, and dropped him into it. His back went most of the way into it and then wedged against the sides, stopping him from dropping the rest of the way into the box. I knew I was going to have trouble with this one, but I wasn't expecting him to get stuck in the damn jar like that. I figured maybe the crane arm would have a little trouble lifting him, but no, his fat ass just wouldn't go in the jar. I tried using the crane to push him further into it, but he was stuck pretty good. I tried closing the steel lid on him, but of course that wouldn't work. It was like trying to pack your entire wardrobe into a small suitcase. The foreman at the time, Jerry, noticed from his booth up top and came down to see for himself. We spent a good few minutes laughing. Jerry actually went down the line and told some of the other guys to come look at it. We were all laughing so hard I thought we'd never stop. I had tears in my eyes from it. Jerry came up with the solution, though.

I pulled the fat shell with the crane out and we cut him up into chunks that would actually fit in the jar. We burned him piece by piece.

As funny as it seemed at the time, all I can see are the grey, dry hunks of his flesh burning, and I don't laugh about it anymore.

September 20

The compound was compromised last night while I was at work. That's the official terminology, but what it really means is that some of THEM got in. It was only two or three of them, from what I understand, but that is two or three too many. One of the guards must have fallen asleep, and they got past the perimeter security somehow. No injuries, though. That's the important thing now. It's hard enough to sleep as it is. I don't know how I'd ever be able to

close my eyes again if I knew that someone within the compound got infected. I just can't imagine what would happen. Likely, word would come down from Army command that all civilians would need to be strip-searched and given an on-the-spot physical. Or they would just shoot us in the head and feed us to the jar. It'll all amount to the same in the end.

I feel like I'm going crazy. I don't know how anyone can be so tired but still make his body move. Jesus, it's almost like I'm one of THEM already. Moving without thinking, never resting, constantly hungry. Oh yeah, our rations got cut again this week. Did I tell you? Now we are short three meals per week instead of just one. Word is that we still have enough for several months, but I don't know how long we can all hold out like this. There are maybe three hundred people here in the compound. How could we possibly have enough food for three hundred people for the next several months? And why aren't we being sent more supplies? The obvious answer is that the Fort Bragg compound, which is where our supplies come from, has been taken or abandoned. Or maybe there was a helicopter malfunction that they're working on getting fixed, and the supplies will be on the way soon. Who knows?

The line for the jar has slowed down considerably for the past couple of days. It's a good thing, too, because if the pace had kept up, I'm sure we would be cremating most of the population of the Eastern US. There can't be that many left in the world, can there? There just can't. I wonder how the rest of the US is handling this. Shit, I wonder how the rest of the world is handling it. I know Spain is almost completely gone, it's been gone for months now. The virus started in Madrid. Still no word officially as to how it got started, but they do know somehow that it came from Madrid. Paris is probably gone. It's a shame, too. Rachel always wanted to go to Paris. It's just as well. If she can't have it, no one else should get to, I guess.

September 22

The guard that fell asleep on duty two days ago has shot himself. Apparently he couldn't take the guilt that came with his lapse in vigilance. Army counselors are standing by to answer any questions and to help us deal with grief.

I find myself wondering if he really committed suicide, or if he was helped along by his commanding officer.

Carlos told me last night that he and his wife were leaving. A transport to South Carolina was supposed to leave this morning, and that he and Brenda would be on it. She's pregnant again, he told me. He looked terrified. I'm terrified for him. I hope they make it. I hope they get on that transport. Things aren't going to get any better here, that's almost guaranteed.

October 3

We received word today that our front line will run out of ammunition in approximately one week. We are all encouraged to help fortify the perimeter to ensure that nothing can get in or out. Right now, the compound isn't surrounded, but according to one of the officers, "we are experiencing some pressure toward our south perimeter." He sounds like a meteorologist talking about a cold front, and I can't help but laugh. I'm starting to worry that I'm going a little insane. Last time I met with a counselor, he gave me a few sleeping pills. I'm not sure they're actually sleeping pills, though. They make my fingers tingle.

And still, we have no supplies. If this keeps up, we'll run out of rations, and then we won't have to worry about THEM eating us, because we'll be all too happy to take a bite out of each other.

There's more of that Army sanctioned jargon again. THEM. Why can't we just use the "Z-Word" and get it over with? If I didn't still value my meager excuse for a life, I'd ask the counselor. When someone dies, we call them the dead. When they die a second time, they are shells. When they are reanimated, we call them the infected. Call a spade a spade, guys. If it looks like a duck, and smells like a duck, and walks like a duck, then it's probably a fucking ZOMBIE, wouldn't you say?

The line was pretty slow today. I guess nobody wanted to waste the ammo to make sure we had plenty of work to do. It's just as well, I guess. We're short four guys now. Carlos left a couple of weeks ago, and three guys from the dump crew just never showed up on Tuesday. It's a shame. They did a good job. It seems that the dump crew has the worst turnover now, since I took on the jar by myself. It's the dump crew's responsibility to back the trucks up to the dump site, pull out the shells one by one, and spike them in the head to make sure they are no longer a threat. It's a tough job, usually favored by the young guys looking to work out some aggression. I never liked doing it, really, but most people feel that way about the jar.

It's my job to burn them. It's my job to watch the lid close on the jar, to check the filter on the ventilator, to pull the lever slowly, triggering the electromagnet that conducts the electricity through the graphite rods lining the box's bottom.

It's part of the job to watch the shell get completely cremated. We have to be sure that nothing remains, not even a single tooth. The fire is insanely hot and makes it hard to breathe, even in my air-conditioned Haz-Mat suit. Having to clean out the remains is a tough chore, because sometimes the really decayed ones don't turn completely into loose ash, but kind of turn into a lump of coal. But the worst part is having to watch the shell burn. I have to watch it burn completely.

October 12

Oh, god, I can't go on like this. I keep seeing her face every time I close my eyes. Every time I goddamn BLINK I keep seeing her blank, dead eyes looking back at me. Oh, I have been crying for an hour. I never thought I'd see her again, but I wish I had been right. Oh, god, oh, god...

Only one body came today on the line.

It was my mother.

October 23

Not much to do. All radio broadcasts have stopped, even the Army sanctioned broadcast message telling us all to "Stay indoors, Do not approach strangers, Do not attempt to search for loved ones."

No supplies now. We have hardly any food reserves left. Apparently, the dumbfuck cunt that spread word around that we had several months' worth of food was lying his ass off to keep us from revolting, I guess.

The guards now have guns with no bullets. They're relying on bayonets to keep us safe from the impending hordes. It's a joke. I came here all those months ago because they promised to keep me safe and fed, and all I had to do was make sure the zombie bodies got cremated. Lies, lies. I'm not safe, because we've had two break-ins this past week. I'm not fed because we're running out of food, and I keep giving mine to the little Petersen girl because she looks like she's starving to death. I think her father's beating her. If I still

had my backbone, I'd confront him. Way I see it, it won't matter for much longer.

It won't matter if you are a good, upstanding man who misses his wife and had to lower his own mother's body into the jar, a man who hasn't slept in months, who wants to die to be at peace but is too scared to take his own life.

It won't matter if you are a horrible person who lies to the compound's residents about how much food is left, or if you're a guard who's fallen asleep and let the bad things in, or if you're a man who abuses his own children and takes their food.

It won't matter at all, because soon it will all be over.

God will lower us in the jar, and we will be laid to waste.

