

DEAD SERIOUS

Prologue

Looking around her, she could tell that something was wrong, very wrong. She searched her memory, but even that was a fog. It was like she was coming out of a drugged sleep in an unfamiliar place. Everything felt muddy and weird. She was in her own room, that at least was familiar, but the angle was all wrong. She couldn't figure out how, it felt like the whole scene had an alien feel to it, a sort of...house of mirrors. Looking around carefully, the tendrils of awareness slowly began to knit themselves together and she developed a hint of understanding. It would have taken much longer if she hadn't finally looked in the shadows at the far wall. That was when she fainted with fright.

Visions

Greg, Joseph and I were sitting at the local Pizza Hut. It was a a pretty sad looking place with fake paneling everywhere and cheap posters showing over-sized pictures of different pizzas...all dripping with cheese. Joseph, who's family had more dough, would never admit to going there. But the three of us had been friends since we'd started High School, and well, as a teenager you did what your friends did.

He was about average hight, but good looking enough that he had plenty of girls chasing him. We were lucky to have him in the gang as he was the only one on the team who had a truck. Most folks worked on the ranches or at one of the struggling businesses downtown and getting a vehicle for your kid was just not in the cards.

Greg on the other hand was your stereotypical basketball player. Tall and long-limbed with sinewy muscles that helped him get closer then any of us to the net. He had a temper on him but managed to keep it in check, most of the time. Today he was hungry, so this was definitely not one of those times.

"I can't believe how long that waitress is takin man." I was about to remind him that we could've stopped by his house so he could grab some

food, but then I thought better of it. Greg was the reason we'd come here in the first place. His parents always seemed to be arguing about one thing or another. I could see why he spent as little time at home as he could, but I still wished he didn't have to be so moody about it. Course it was easier for me since I'd eaten after practice. I was just getting a soda with those unlimited refills.

Joe and I just sat there slurping on our sodas and bragging about the game. It was way more fun hangin out with the guys then listenin to my parents or having to babysit my stupid brother. I was just about to lay on Greg to chill out when I noticed a pale waif of a woman walking down the hallway to the bathrooms. It was hard to see, but it looked like she walked into the men's room by mistake.

"Hey, you guys see that?" I was laughing to myself figuring we'd all get a chuckle when the chick came back out all frazzled.

"See what?" Greg was too busy scouting out for the waitress.

I was a little annoyed that neither of them had caught on to the object of my amusement. I followed Greg's gaze to see if the waitress was coming by. I didn't want to get interrupted.

"Well it was weird man. This chick..."

"Hey guys, check it out. That chick done walked into the boys room." The two of them busted up laughing, probably getting annoyed looks from the other diners.

As for me I whipped my head around only to be several seconds too late. All that I saw was the empty hallway and the drab lighting at the back. Both of them started making a big joke out of it. "Dude, I can't wait to see the look on that chick's face when she walks out tryin to pretend like nothin's wrong."

"Haha, maybe she went in there to meet some guy." Now they were both laughing pretty loud and we were all watchin the back to see when she would come back out.

"Holy crap!" I sucked in my breath. The same waify girl was walking down the hallway towards the bathrooms again. She wore a thin t-shirt that hung limply over her frame and her brown hair sat lifelessly over her shoulders. It was hard to see at this distance, but something nagged at my brain as I watched her. It was like some bad special effects where the

person in the frame didn't seem to quite fit in with the background.

"What's up du..." Joseph never finished his sentence. He quickly saw where the girl was going and now none of us were laughing anymore.

"Whoa. Did we really just see what I think we saw?" Greg was wearing a funny expression, somewhere between a snicker and a gasp.

"Man this is sooo Walking Dead territory." Joseph mused

"No way man. It's more like...um what was that one with Mulder and....?"

"Dude, that was X-files." I wanted to end that train of thought. It felt too close to the truth.

Our drinks forgotten, we all just sat in the booth staring at the weirdly lit hallway in the back. Now that I was looking more closely, I could see the thin woman slowly become visible and walk with a steady gait down the hallway beneath the ugly can lights. She didn't just look thin, she looked positively gaunt. Like the pictures of kids in Africa. But this time I caught the briefest peak at her eyes as she turned for barely a second to look at us before continuing to the bathrooms.

"Holy crap, you guys see that?" I was wide-eyed now.

"Yeah. Definately not Walking Dead man."

I smacked Greg over the back of his head. "Dude, I'm talking about the way she looked at us. Did you see that?"

"Naw man. But I bet the owners of this place could make a killing if they told everyone it was haunted." Joseph busted up laughing at the joke.

We watched a few more times as the strange woman appeared, walked down the hall, looked at me for a fraction of a second, and kept on towards the bathrooms. That freeky visual effect was nagging at me more and more. I couldn't wrap my brain around it, but neither would it let me go.

"I think you should go talk to her Alec." Greg looked seriously at me now.

I was yanked like a bungee jumper back to the table. Though at first he wasn't wholly serious, his gaze...and the suggestion he brought up sent the hair on my neck to standing straight up.

"What the hell makes you say that?" I was trying real hard now not to freak out, cause, well they'd never let me live it down if I did.

"Yea. You should talk to her. Didn't you say the chick was lookin at you?"

It wasn't surprising for Joe to join in. The more they could put the

pressure on me, the less chance either of them would have to man up to the dare. The damn cowards.

“The hell makes you two think that I gotta do it? Why don’t one of you guys go?” It was a desperate plea I knew. They had to both have been prepared for that one.

“Cause my dinner’s commin.” Greg looked back with that smirk that he typically used on Professor Schiller, when he had one of his usual smartass remarks.

“Come on. She’ll probably walk right through you....like Sunset Zone or whatever.”

“It’s Twilight Zone you doof.” I gave him a furious look both cause he knew it was a show that I loved and cause I clearly wasn’t gonna back outa this one.

My mind raced at supersonic speed trying to come up with any further argument that would get me out of this. I did my best to stare them both in the eyes and prove I wasn’t scared. But these, so called friends, just smirked back at me knowing they had me backed into a corner.

Courage

With bricks for feet, I slowly made my way down to that dreadful looking hallway. I must’a looked like a zombie myself at the rate I was going. In a desperate escape, I thought back to our basketball practice the day before. Coach Danhim was always trying to inspire us with some silly story or quote or whatever. We were lining up for practice when he walked the length of the team, looking each of us right in the eye.

“Remember men. The difference between the impossible and the possible lies in a man’s determination. If you don’t have determination, all the speed, and skill in the world wont do you a lick of good. I want you to think carefully about that.”

As I walked slowly towards the hallway that seemed to stretch out like chewing gum, I struggled to concentrate on determination. All that came to me was a scene from some movie where the beautiful girl turns out be a horrid monster that opens wide and chomps on some hapless guy’s throat. As I trudged slowly along, I noticed all kinds of details as I did my best to postpone the inevitable. I saw the cheap wallpaper, the ugly

yellow cones of light thrown down from the ceiling, the plastic-looking fake-wood panels on the walls. I saw how the light became brighter and less of a gross yellow-orange when I got closer to the bathroom doors. With trepidation dragging my shoulders down, I slowly wrenched open the door as if it were solid lead, and relished in the normalcy of the clean white bathroom. I gazed on the tiles, the porcelain sink, the smooth metal toilet stall panels and the unceasing fan humming away in the background. I almost started to convince myself that I'd just been imagining it. I even chuckled to myself for being such a wuss.

Then the door opened. But it wasn't the solid door that I had walked through only moments ago. I stared wide-eyed as there were briefly two doors. One solid door which stayed closed, and one that was translucent and swung open noiselessly. An instant later she walked in and began moving towards me. At first my feet were cemented to the floor and my mouth opened noiselessly. I think if she'd been hideous looking, I would've had a heart attack right then and there. But the strangest of all was how almost normal she looked. Her face was young and oval-shaped, attached by an elegant neck to her frail body. Her pale skin seemed to almost bleed into the room around her and I could faintly see features through her. The t-shirt hung from her shoulders like a blanket and the thin strands of clay-colored hair hung lifelessly around her face. Her eyes stared expressionlessly ahead as if she were staring at a TV set.

Finally as she continued to creep closer, I was shocked out of my stupor and began backing away. I felt like those deer who stare unblinking at the car headlights bearing down on them. When my back brushed against the toilet stall, I almost screamed out loud. I couldn't get any farther back and I just kept trying to convince myself that this was a dream. I dug my fingernails into my skin till they bled, telling myself that I should do something to wake myself up, that I'd be in my own bed soon. But nothing changed, and the figure kept getting closer.

I finally opened my mouth in terror when she actually bumped into me. For the first time there was an expression on her face. She seemed genuinely surprised, as if she'd never encountered solid matter before. She then shocked me even further when she spoke.

"You need to come with me." The voice was faint and emotionless. More

like some cheezy robot voice on a TV show. She said it in the same tone as I might use to tell mom that I was grabbing a snack from the fridge. For a long moment nothing happened as I just stared wide-eyed at what my mind told me was impossible.

“We don’t have much time. You need to come with me.” Again she spoke without any sense of urgency to back up her words.

“Wh...wh...wh..” Even though I was putting all the effort I could into forming the words, my mouth just stumbled and tripped over the jagged ground of my thoughts.

“Wh...what do you want?” I finally managed to blurt out.

“Hurry. You need to come with me.” Her hand was ice cold as she grabbed my wrist and began pulling me back towards the bathroom door. My mind screamed at me to pull back, to resist to the last of my strength. But again, my body refused to obey it’s commands. My limbs were limp spaghetti that barely supported me as I was propelled ungainly towards the door.

I didn’t know if I was being led toward a great adventure, or if I’d be seeing some skeleton in a black robe holding a scythe. But I managed to pull myself out of my shock enough to grab the door handle and pull open the door with my free hand before I smacked against it. As I did, I noticed her reach for a still closed door that wasn’t quite there, but wasn’t quite not there either, if you know what I mean.

A Mission

Where earlier, my forward progress had seemed to crawl at a snail’s pace, now it all sped by too fast for me to register. I faintly heard Greg and Joseph jabbering as I was led in bewilderment out of the restaurant. All I could make out was “don’t got the cajones yo” before I again had to grab the restaurant door to keep from being pulled against it. The frigid air outside felt twenty degrees colder than the time, an eternity ago, when we walked into the place. I knew for sure though, that this wasn’t the only reason my hair was standing straight up.

My confused mind couldn’t make heads or tails of what was going on. I was still scared out of my whits, but the shock of it all seemed to wrap me in a blanket of servility. It wasn’t until I saw her leading me straight

to the old suburban that we'd arrived in that my mind seemed to clear bit by bit.

"Wait! That's Joseph's truck. He's still in there with Greg." I could see where she was leading me, but I was utterly confused as to why.

She turned back for the barest of moments to reply. "The keys are in your jacket pocket."

With every step this was getting more and more unbelievable. Nothing was making the slightest sense. "Hey. Are you gonna tell me just who the hell you are?!"

Nevertheless, I felt inside my jacket and sure enough there was an unfamiliar set of keys. The strange girl let go of me and kind of drifted into the passenger seat of the cab. Least that was the best way I could describe it. I stared at the truck's door, which, like the door of the restaurant, had never opened.

Without her cold touch I began to regain my composure bit by bit. "Look. I am not gonna just steal my best friend's truck!" I said it as loud as I could in a desperate attempt to sound more confident than I felt.

Once again I was greeted with the barest of expressions as her face kinda poked through the window and her eyes bored holes in my face. "This is important."

"Yeah. I heard you say that before." I was starting to feel my oats again now with expansiveness of the outdoors. "Thing is, I don't know what this is. I don't know who you are. And I don't know what it is you want from me." I was feeling pretty good about myself by now as I stared down this, ...apparition, or whatever she was.

Her face never moved and her eyes were fiery as she answered with even greater intensity. "What I want from you...is your help in saving hundreds of thousands of lives."

Man, this really was starting to feel like some Friday night TV flick. I mean, what was with all the drama anyway?

"Alec. This is without question, the most important thing you will ever do in your life. But you have to move NOW.

I sat for another second or two, feeling tempted to just walk right back into the pizza joint and laugh it off with the guys. Eventually though, my ego won out. I mean it isn't every day that someone tells me I could save

thousands of people's lives. With a sigh, I wandered around to the cab. I hopped in and looked over to her "okay, where to babe?"

Not really expecting to get a rise out of her, I wasn't too surprised by her flat-toned response. "Turn out onto Rt 12 and go north."

With a shrug, I started the engine and looked carefully at Joe and Greg as I pulled out. I saw their eyes grow wide and Joseph started heading towards the door.

With a mixture of guilt and smugness, I pulled into traffic and headed north. By now traffic was light, so I looked over and asked where we were actually going. Her blank response made me wonder if I really was just talking to dead space.

"At the next light turn into the parking lot of that diner." she finally told me after five minutes of tense silence.

"So what. We're gonna solve world hunger by ordering a bunch of cheeseburgers for everyone?"

As I glanced over, I saw the same expressionless face and noticed that as my fear and awe began to ebb, it was being replaced with annoyance.

"Quite the opposite." was all she said.

I pulled into a space in the nearly empty parking lot and by now I almost wasn't surprised when she was soon walking beside me without the expected sound of the passenger door slamming shut.

As we entered, one of the waitresses almost jumped up, being obviously unhappy about working such a slow day.

"She can't see me." the strange chick said as she walked over to a booth at the end of a long line of them.

I looked helplessly at the waitress. "Um. Can I have that table?"

She must've seen a tip, cause she was all smiles as she answered. "Sure hon. Aint like we got a big crowd tonight."

The moment I sat down she looked at me with that same expressionless intensity again. "There's a key taped to the underside of this table. Take it and put it in your pocket."

"Now wait just a da..."

I was interrupted by the waitress who brought only one menu and was no longer smiling. I looked up at her with a shrug and thanked her. I said I'd take a coke for the moment. Despite the crazy waif sitting across from

me, I tried to look at the menu.

“We don’t have time for you to eat right now.” There almost seemed to be a hint of emotion in her voice as she said this, but it might just have been my imagination. Actually, until I felt the key under the table, I tried to convince myself that this whole crazy adventure was a hallucination....or something like it.

With a quick glance for the waitress I answered in a harsh whisper. “Look, I can’t just walk in here and sit at the table without ordering something. I’m not like you...I’m not...”

“Dead?”

It was a good thing I was sitting down, cause my legs quickly turned back into spaghetti. All of my angry retorts and frustrations dissolved into the air. “So...you really are. um..dead?”

I saw her eyes move to the side and heard the footsteps of the waitress. As she set down a coke with a little bit of the wrapper still on top of the straw she looked at me while holding a pad. “You know what you want hon?”

Though I’d been a little hungry when we walked in, the realization that this chick was really..dead winnowed my appetite down to nothing. I did my best to switch gears without seeming too crazy to the woman. “I just need a few more minutes to decide.”

The waitress smiled again, that kind of fake smile that said her mind was a mile away. “Alright. Just give a shout when you’re ready.” The waitress turned and went back to whatever she’d been doing before we arrived. In the meantime I was now able to focus back on this...ghost. “So you really are...dead?”

With the same emotionless voice she replied. “I was killed, or at least, I think so.”

Wow, now this was getting even more wacko. “You were killed? Really?” As the girl nodded her head, I wondered what kind of alternate reality I’d stepped into.

“Well, do you know by who?” I was aghast.

“I don’t know....but I have my suspicions.”

The seconds stretched out like taffy as I waited for something further.

“Well, are you gonna leave me hangin?”

“Finish your soda. We need to get moving.”

Man this chick was somethin else. My sympathy drained away along with the soda and I was again feeling pissed off by all this cloak & dagger shit.

“Look. You want my help, you tell me what you know. I can make this soda last for an hour if I want to.” From her scowl I could see that I finally had a bargaining chip. “And...just what do I call you anyway?”

Her Story

“Fine. My name is...was Nancy. My parents both died of cancer about a year ago. It hit them within 6 months of each other and that just felt too strange to me. So I wasn't too surprised at my dad's funeral when a woman pulled me aside to speak with me. Most people in the town knew her as the crazy old woman who just never seemed to, I don't know, fit in. She rode her horse everywhere and didn't have a car. She introduced herself as Annie, though I'd already heard her name whispered around town.

Annie told me that she didn't think my parents' deaths were a coincidence. And since I was taking classes in journalism, I encouraged her to go on thinking I could write something if it proved interesting enough. She told me that a slaughterhouse had opened a mile or so away the year before. We didn't really notice of course, cause we had the horses and they put out plenty of their own smell. Anyway she told me about some studies by a bunch of university brains that said the toxic gases from these slaughterhouses could give people diseases. It didn't make much sense to me at the time. But it was November by then so there wasn't much to be done out in the fields. I drove by the place one Saturday with my Dad's old car, but there was a big fence around it and 'private property' signs everywhere.

Since we'd just gotten an internet connection to help my mom sell her preserves online, I started doing some exploring there. It turns out that there actually were some studies done on the pollution coming from slaughterhouses and affecting people nearby.^(real fact) Scary stuff like Hydrogen Sulfide and stuff were giving people all kinds of diseases from messed up blood vessels to cancer, and stuff with their lungs.

I ended up making more trips to the woman's house and she told me

about a study by the United Nations that said that eating animals was causing so much damage that it was doing more bad stuff to the world than all the cars on the planet.^(real fact) None of what was going on made sense to me, so I started spending a bunch of time at the library too. Unfortunately though, it turned out to be worse than I could've imagined. I ended up turning my senior class research paper into a toxic gas comparison of all kinds of spots around town. There's a ton of stuff on the internet and it tied in perfectly with what I was studying. Anyway, the paper ended up impressing my teacher enough that he sent it to some folks at the community college. I got a letter from one of the professors there a few days later. The sum of it was that he wanted to meet with me to discuss my findings.

With rising hopes that he might have some clue as to what happened to my parents, I went over to see him that very day. The guy's office was filled with books and a bunch of charts on the wall. He seemed more than a little kooky. Had this wild hair and a cheap suit, kinda stuttered a bit. He stared at me with a kind of unreadable expression.

"Ms. Elmore, I must say that your research is very thorough. This paper ties in quite well with the recent UN study."

Yea, I heard about that, but what's this stuff all about?"

He looked down in a drawer and I heard shuffling papers for a long while before he handed one to me. The title said, 'Livestock's Long Shadow' and had this real creepy picture of a bull's shadow spreading over some funky-looking ground.

But then his expression got lower and real depressed-like. His shoulders sagged, and he seemed to age a few years right in front of me.

"Unfortunately, as much as it goes against my sense of justice, I urgently implore you to not share this research with others. I have no doubt that your work is thorough and well compiled. However this isn't Europe we're living in, this is Kentucky. Here the people with the most influence are the big commercial farms and livestock companies. You go up against them and you could find yourself in a whole heap of trouble. You're still young, you have your whole life ahead of you." He stared even more intently now. "Do yourself a big favor and let this one go."

I really couldn't believe he was saying this. I'd spent almost 5 months on

this and he was telling me to just drop it and let my parents deaths be for nothing.

I stared at him with fire sparking from my eyes. "Look mister. My parents both died inside of one year. If you think that I'm just gonna let them do stuff like this, you got another thing coming. If this stuff is really true, then it's my duty to spread the message."

So I posted the whole thing on the internet and sent a link to the science club, the environmental club, and anyone else in student politics that I thought would listen.

I didn't start to feel scared until I got email replies from each of them saying that the link didn't work. I went back to my blog and found that the thing was gone. The whole damn thing! Like it'd never even been written. There wasn't a single person I could think of that could do something like that.

The professor's words started repeating back to me and I wondered if I should start worrying about guys in dark suits and sunglasses. I blindly ignored those silly thoughts though. The next day I had a bunch of copies printed and sent them to Olkhert College, which was private, and also to a couple of newspapers. I hoped to get a better reception than the cowards in public schools.

I went to sleep that night, but when I woke up it felt like my room looked different. I couldn't figure it out for a long while. Guess my mind wasn't working right, if you know what I mean. It wasn't until I saw my own body kinda hanging over the edge of the bed that it finally sank in what had happened. There was a vile of pills by the side of the bed and a sheet of paper with a bunch of writing next to that."

"Man that sounds like some serious Steven King shit. Should I bring a tinfoil hat too?"

"Look, I'm not expecting you to believe me, just take the key and let's get back to my farm."

As ridiculous as it sounded, at least the....apparition/Nancy was willing to fess up. What did I have to lose after all? I threw \$1.50 on the table along with a generous tip and pointed to my cellphone as I apologized to the waitress and walked out the door followed by the girl.

"So where to now?" I asked as I climbed once again into the cab.

The Race

She answered with the same lack of expression. “Take hwy 32 southwest out of town till you get to Green Mountain Rd and follow that up from the valley.”

The rest of the ride was silence as I mulled over all she’d said. It was one thing to be reading about stuff like this in the comic books, but now this adventure was happening for real, with me smack in the middle. Hell I never asked for shit like this. I just wanted to play ball and hit on girls till I couldn’t put off college anymore.

The road was inky black and the headlights threw out a haunting glow over the road as it wound up into the hills. The whole trip was feeling like one of those old 50s horror movies you take a girl to in the hopes she’ll bury herself in your chest.

“Turn here.”

There were no road signs, so it was a good thing she was along to give directions. I followed the narrow curving road another mile or so before I saw the flashing lights of a police cruiser parked in front of an old and weathered ranch style house.

“Turn in there.”

“You’re not gonna get me in trouble with the cops are you?” I looked askance at her not really expecting a response anymore.

As we pulled in one of the cops turned to look at us and walked over to my side of the truck. His face was deadpan and very no-nonsense. “This is a closed investigation.” he glared at me and stood just outside the window. Clearly he wasn’t interested in hearing anything from me, even less the story I was tempted to tell him.

Then I noticed the girl walk over and grab his wrist. He didn’t even notice her, but began shaking violently for the better part of a minute as his eyes began to bulge. I watched with rapt attention as he seemed to split in two like the bathroom door had. Part of him collapsed to the ground and the other remained standing with the same expressionless stare that the girl held.

“Did you just fuckin kill that dude?!” I was incredulous. The only time I’d ever seen someone killed was on the TV.

“We don’t have much time. We need to get into the house before they show up.”

“What the? What did...before who...” She went to grab for my wrist and I yanked it back fast enough to break the sound barrier. I had a horrible visualization of following in the footsteps of the weird cop. I just stared at her. “What...in...the...hell...is...going...on?!”

She stared straight back with the same intensity she’d had back in the parking lot of the pizza place. “We...don’t...have...time. Now move it!” My mind felt split in two just like the cop. I was curious what all this incredibly important stuff was, but I was also wondering if prison time would be the cost of finding out.

Not really knowing what else to do, I wandered over to the house where I saw the cop’s partner, ostensibly, coming out the front door. He saw me and reached for a walkie talkie or whatever it was and I began to warn him about what had happened to the other cop when the ghost cop seemed to appear next to me and stared straight at his partner.

“You don’t need to call this one in.”

“What? The hell you talkin about Frank? These kids can’t be nosin around here. We’ve got a dead body in there. Besides sarge says a bunch o’ suits are headin by to take over this mess.”

The Frank apparition grabbed the wrist of the other cop and I was about to try warning him again, but he just stared at the other cop intensely.

“This kid is just grabbing some personal things for the family. They wont be any trouble. You can head on back to the station. I’ll keep an eye on them.”

Something invisible must’ve passed between the two of them cause the next thing I saw was the other cop nodding his head. “Alright Frank. You keep an eye on them. I’ll start writing up the report.”

“Good man.” was all the Frank apparition said.

Evidence

The girl led me through the house toward her bedroom. It was a nondescript place with nice couches, lots of books stacked in cheap Ikea bookcases, and a big old entertainment center with the usual stereo stuff. The bedroom was the only room that looked really lived in. There were

papers strewn about, an old desktop computer monitor, and a nicely made twin bed. Several shelves were filled with stuffed animals. The one thing that stood out like a Freshman at the senior prom was a black body bag on the floor next to the bed. After the incident with the cop, I wasn't the least bit interested in getting closer to that.

"There's a safe under a floorboard in the closet."

I didn't know what in the world was going on. Dead people, evil corporate dudes, hidden stashes of..who knew what, and a dead body to boot.

"So what, am I gonna find a treasure map too?"

"We don't have time for explanations or wisecracks. The suits that cop mentioned are probably on their way here and I can't stop all of them.

"LET'S GO!"

Her tone finally got me motivated and I found the loose boards in the floor of her closet. Underneath was one of those fireproof safes that people keep under the bed.

"Just grab it and let's get out of here."

I barely had a chance to look around. "That's it? We rushed all the way out here just for this?"

"Look, we're out of time." She grabbed my hand, and her icy grip cut through any further protests I could've made. Clutching the little box, we headed straight back to the truck. I tried my best to keep from throwing up as I passed the body of the cop next to the car door.

"Be sure to keep going up the road. Those are definitely the type of guys we don't want following us back to Annie's place."

"And who the hell is Annie?!" I was getting pretty tired of being this chick/apparition's lacky.

"I already told you, Annie's the woman who told me about the slaughterhouse and the toxic gases. She's got a backup of my data and a bunch of printouts."

The chick had me driving all over the back roads to the point where I didn't even know what county we were in anymore. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw a giant black SUV gaining on us with terrifying speed. My panicked brain tried to say something, but when I looked again in the mirror, there was just empty space.

“Take the next road and follow it to the second driveway.”

I did as she said and we ended up in a big grassy field that butted up against one of those cheap mobile homes that dotted the farms out here.

“There’s a shack over to the left.”

As I turned that way, the headlights passed over a large paddock and I saw the flash of an animal running away from the headlights. Then it came into view. It wasn’t so much a shack as a small barn measuring at least as large as the mobile home.

We made our way straight for the door and I noticed with continued awe that while my shoes quickly got soaked from grass, Nancy’s feet sort of drifted through the grass.

“You’ll need the key that we got from the diner.”

I still doubted it would do anything, but the lock worked with barely a squeak. The door on the other hand, made a horrid creaking sound and opened into a pitch black cave. I went to turn the headlights back on but the girl was a step ahead of me.

“No time for that. It’s over here.”

I yelled out a thesaurus of curses as my shin smacked against something hard.

“Oh yeah. Sorry, I forgot that was there.”

“You’re sorry! I was about to offer several more choice words when I felt her cold hand on my wrist.

“This way.” Her voice sounded almost compassionate which was as much a surprise to me as whatever I’d smacked into.

Led by her icy hand, I felt a box and a large stack of papers on what must’ve been a table.

“We don’t have time for much. Just the CPU and the papers for now.

They probably won’t come out this far, but Annie’s a little paranoid and we’d both feel better knowing they were somewhere else for the time being.”

I held the box and the papers and this time made it back to the door without further pain. We hopped into the truck and began winding back along the roads. I was still hopelessly lost and at the mercy of this strange girl until, with a sigh of relief, we made it back to Rt. 32.

As I turned onto the road, two large black SUVs turned onto the same

road from the highway which was surprising given there was nothing but empty countryside out here.

“Don’t look at them and make sure to turn right.”

“But that’ll take us out into the middle of nowhere.”

“Exactly.

I started to feel almost as paranoid as she sounded, but I did as she said and drove on out of town for half a dozen minutes. The inky black night was really creeping me out by now, knowing that I was sitting next to some dead chick. What if the zombie movies were true and she just wanted to get me away from town before attacking me.

“Nah, that’s ridiculous.” I quickly thought to myself. She could’ve done any number of things back at that woman Annie’s house. Still I breathed a huge sigh of relief when she finally indicated that we could turn around at a gas station and head back into town.

As I watched for traffic and made my turn, I struggled to keep my voice steady.

It took a few more minutes before I felt I could talk without sounding like a pipsqueek. “So after all this do I get to at least see all this junk that I risked getting thrown in jail for?”

“I guess that’s only fair.”

“Yea. I guess too.” my voice dripped with sarcasm.

Without further hesitation I pulled into the empty parking lot and turned on the dome light in the cabin. My eyes bulged wide as I glanced at the girl. Her hauntingly gaunt frame and shadowy face looked even more terrifying under the harsh cabin light. I thought by now I’d gotten to be okay with this crazy shit. But the way she looked really creeped me out. I quickly jumped out and went to get the stack of papers we’d thrown in the back seat.

Just like back at the pizza place, my feet gained 50 pounds just walking a couple feet back to the driver seat. “If you think this is weird for you, just imagine how it feels for me.” My expression must have been as transparent as she looked. My terror slowly morphed into guilt for treating her like some kind of circus act.

“Um...how exactly do you feel?” I was slightly relieved by now to change the subject.

“Well, you know how sometimes you sit in the lunchroom at school and nobody notices you, nobody sits next to you or nothin?”

“Well yeah.” We’d all been Freshman before.

“Now imagine that being your whole existence....all day, every day.” She looked at me seriously.

“So um, no one’s asked you out to a Grateful Dead concert, huh?” I tried to laugh, but nothing came out.

Revelation

Feeling her continued stare, I shifted my gaze down to the papers. They were filled with all kinds o’ weird facts, each one more ridiculous than the last.

“Wastewater from factory farms - largest source of water pollution for all inland waterways.” (real fact)

“One third of Earth’s land area devoted to livestock.” (real fact)

“Foods rich in animal products the highest cause of health-related death in the western world.” (real fact)

“Diesel exhaust blamed for 31,000 deaths last year.”(real fact) That last one just sounded over the top.

I held this last paper out accusingly. “Seriously? This shit can’t be true!”

“According to that newspaper and two scientific studies it is.”

“But that’s ridiculous” I cut in. “That’s like...” My math really sucked.

“Eighty-five people per day. And that’s just in Britain.”

I looked again at the sheet of paper. It was indeed from a British newspaper. “This is just in Britain? But that’s like...”

“One fifth the population here in the U.S.” for a dead girl, she was crazy smart.

“But that’s insane! If that many people were being killed, people’d be like..I don’t know, rioting in the streets or somethin.”

“Yeah, you’d think so.” Even her deadpan voice held a tinge of sadness.

“But nobody is.....so what’s the deal?”

“It gets blamed on lotsa other stuff. Genetics, asthma, cancer.. You know how the medical industry makes billions of dollars offa sick people.”

“Yeah um.....But this is like. Like conspiracy theory shit.” I thought back to the black SUV and the ‘suits.’

“People hold onto a lot of ideas even long after their proven wrong. Then of course there’s all the assholes making billions off of selling the stuff.” Somehow it felt weird to hear her curse....as if there was anything that could possibly make this more weird.

But what can we do about this? You’re not suggesting we go attack those guys in the SUV with guns.....are you?”

“Alec this isn’t a war or nothing, you watch too much TV. Try reading about the real world once in awhile.”

I looked at her accusingly. “Well I don’t know...you’re the one dragged me out here saying ‘it’s important’ and ‘we’re doing this to save lives.’ So don’t accuse me of laying on the dramatics.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m telling you that there a huge number of people making millions of dollars by causing this suffering. The only way to succeed against greed, is to stop the flow of wealth....to hit their profits.”

I didn’t know what she was getting at. “You mean rob them? I don’t even know who these people are.”

“Not literally rob them.” She reminded me of Stephanie in my Physics class who often got partnered with me despite being a dozen IQ points higher. “I mean cut the flow of wealth by not buying their poison.

“Well duh. Who in their right mind would buy poison? Geez.” It was hard to tell what kind of game this chick was playin.

“Really?” She skimmed one of the sheets and pointed near the bottom.

“Look at this.”

As I continued reading, the impossible happened and my jaw managed to sag even lower..

The Reunion

My head was a million light years away and spinning a wild orbit as we drove back. I looped back into the pizza place only to see Greg and Joseph running outside. If I was feeling disconcerted, they were positively livid.

“The fuck is wrong with you! That’s my goddamn truck yo!”

Greg was right behind him. “Hey, when the hell did my friend become a pickpocket?”

“Don’t ask me guys, ask the zombie.”

For once I wasn't the least surprised to see their eyeballs pop out of their faces.

"You..."

"First of all, I am not a zombie....just....dead I guess. Second, this was important."

"I don't..."

"You like..."

While I was finally over the shock of the whole thing, Greg and Jo were just getting started. It was nice to be the one with a cool head for a change. "Yeah, I been ridin around with a dead girl for...well however long it's been."

I knew I finally had them when I tossed the keys back to Joseph and watched him fumble for them like some dumbnut rookie.

Now leading a train of living and non-living people, I re-entered the pizza joint determined to finally get something to eat. But as I walked up to the order counter I heard a voice behind me.

"You're not going to want any of the food they serve at this place.

I was getting mighty frustrated with being led around by the nose. "Listen I skipped out on eating for the past..." From the corner of my eye, I saw the expressions of the two girls behind the counter and realized they probably didn't see her either. Thankfully I was saved by Greg.

"Come on man. We still have a table over there where we been waitin for yer slow ass."

Not a little furious, I allowed myself to be led over to the table.

"So really." Jo was still clearly pissed about his truck being lifted. "The hell happened that you needed to steel from a dude. Got a thing for dead chicks now?"

I could see daggers shoot out of the girl's eyes and I threw a hard punch at his bicep. But Greg reached with amazing speed and deflected it.

"Guys, guys. Let's just figure this shit out 'kay?"

I could understand Jo being pissed about his truck, but his comment had really struck a nerve, though I couldn't figure why right at the moment. So feeling not much less calmer. I went over the whole B-movie story for them, with only a few corrections from Nancy.

"Holy shit! You sayin this chick like offed a cop?"

“Dude her name is...er was Nancy.” I didn’t even know what words would apply to something like this.

“Seriously tho. Tha’ shit’s craycray.”

“You sayin these big scary dudes in a black SUV were gonna steal all this ‘secret evidence’,” he held his fingers in quotation marks. “And they’ gonna suppress the truth? Come on. That’s for those kooks writtin UFO stories.”

“Alec, can you pull out the sheets with the blue header on top?”

Barely had I done so when she looked at Jo with the same intensity she’d shown me earlier. “This is a study by the United Nations pointing out that cattle...the same cattle that give you the cheese for these pizzas, are responsible for 70% of the current rainforest destruction.^(real fact) Do you think people at the UN are wearing tinfoil hats?”

Greg snatched up the sheet. “No fuckin way man. The hell do cows have to do with the rainforest? Seriously, you two are sounding weirder and weirder by the second yo.

With the same deadpan expression, the Nancy ghost answered him.

“You’re welcome to read the article all the way.”

“What?! Thi’s bullshit.” I looked over and saw Jo shaking another piece of paper at us.

“What does that one say?” I didn’t really want to know more at this point, but my curiosity ended up speaking for me.

“Yo this one says that 400 million animals are killed each year by cars.^(real fact) Seriously! There is no way that could be true”

The dead chi...Nancy spoke in her indelibly creepy calm voice. “That’s only the animal remains which are found. It’s most likely a gross underestimate.”

“But how the fuck can people do shit like this?!” Greg blurted out. “I mean, there’d be rioting in the streets if...”

We were interrupted by one of the girls who’d been standing behind the counter. “Excuse me. But we must ask you to keep your conversation down. This is a family restaurant.” Her tone was polite, but with plenty of tension.

“Oh, we’re real sorry.” I apologized for us. “We’ll be leaving soon anyway.”

“Thank you.” She turned and headed back to the kitchen.

“They’re happy to serve this poison to kids, but they don’t want anyone to curse...how strange.”

I looked over at Nancy. “Yo, it’s not like anyone knows about this...like you said. Evil men in black suits are suppressing the truth.”

“Yeah, I mean like...didn’t they kill you to keep this quiet?”

“Alec, it’s not like any single one of us is gonna get people to realize this stuff. It’s gonna take a concerted effort.”

Jo looked at her suspiciously. “But how in the ...heck are you gonna reach people. Who’s gonna believe all this?” He pointed accusingly at the stack of papers. “Hell I don’t even believe it myself.”

Nancy didn’t look at any of us, but stared straight up at the ceiling. “Well, we can start with that one.”

We all followed her gaze, but couldn’t figure out what we were supposed to be seeing.

“What’ya mean ‘that one?’ Greg replied. Who’re you lookin at?”

“The one reading this story.” She replied in her usual monotone.

“Yer shittin me! Now you’re sayin that we’re all just characters in a story?”

“That’s right.” She looked back at us. There’s nothing that we can do from here, it’s all up to YOU.”