

## NOT UNTIL DEATH

By Jason Morrow

I never had more than one zombie at a time.

The first took me completely by surprise. Fitch had died in bed. Awaking to find him dead, I panicked, or dissociated, or did whatever it was I'd done. Instead of calling for help, I draped Fitch's arm over my shoulder and lay there crying. Hours passed.

And then Fitch came back.

My life had seemed real to me before that night. Fitch and I loved each other and we had friends. An aneurism took that.

Thinking about him all these years later, I pull into work. Late, I grab my lunchbox and

rush in, fumbling with the key card. After a few swipes it responds with a click and I push the door open. I snatch my water out of the lunchbox and punch in. My boss glances meaningfully at his watch and hands me a stack of orders. I walk past Shipping, eyes lingering over Tucker, and find an empty cart to use.

I say my good-mornings but it all seems artificial. A window seems to stand between me and everyone else. Had I felt like that before the power came over me? I can't remember. Sometimes I imagine that I'd raised the dead all along, that as a boy I'd revived puppies and frogs and bumblebees, and I can't tell if these are daydreams or vague memories.

"Morning Alan," I say.

Alan looks at me, reaching up to the top shelf for some product. His shirt lifts a little, showing a narrow line of skin. "Hey Josh," he says. He has a cart already half-filled with the bizarre things people order from us. Glasses that look like bug eyes, garage door decorations, make-your-own root beer kits. He's faster than me.

"Are you going tonight?" I ask.

"Yeah," Alan says, looking down. "You?"

"Yeah," I say, looking away. I take a deep breath. "I'm really sorry," I say. "I know he was your friend."

Alan says nothing. He looks like he hasn't gotten any sleep. Today we don't elbow each other or tell sex jokes in the aisles.

At nine the other Josh comes in. I hadn't looked at the clock lately and just happen to glance up and look directly into his face. Our eyes meet. He has huge, almost black eyes. His mouth and chin seem blocky, almost chiseled out of his long face. His lips are full and red, barely wider than his nose. A few days ago he buzzed his dark brown hair.

I catch my breath for a moment, then quickly look away and look busy.

My department sits right next to Josh 2's. Whenever anyone calls one of us we both look over. I once tried to seize the opportunity to change my name to the more mature "Joshua," just to avoid confusion, but it didn't stick. This morning I stay marginally focused on work until break comes.

In the break room I sit with Alan and KC. "So Jared rushes into the bathroom but she's in there throwing up," Alan is saying. "So he goes to the kitchen and just whips it out and goes in the sink!"

I smile and KC rolls his head on the table. His ugly rhinestoney hat falls off.

"That's when his friend's mom comes in and says, 'What are you doing to my dishes?!'"

"Wait wait wait," I say. "They were drinking with his mom home? In high school?"

"Yep," Alan says.

"You're going tonight, right?" KC asks. We all sober up.

"Yeah," I tell him.

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At home I make some instant miso soup and get in the shower. I put on my best dress shirt but have no suit jacket. This will be the first time I see anybody outside of work. I feel really bad about Jared but have to admit that I really want to see Alan outside of work. Would I see Josh Number 2 there? "Geez, Josh," I say to myself. "Give it a rest."

I drive to the funeral home and get out. Alan and KC stand outside, talking softly. I join them. We talk about work. I want to bring it back to Jared; this is his event, after all. But I can't think of any way to do this other than declaring it time to talk about him, so I get silent. KC and Alan trail off and we stand in awkward silence. I go in to sign the guestbook.

The room is a dusky pink someone must have deemed comforting. Sixty or more people crowded into the rows of folding seats. More gathered at the back of the room around posterboards covered in photos.

I look uncomfortably around at the family. People seem to cry more when young people die – especially when young attractive people die. His girlfriend looks vacant. Spotting a few coworkers, I nod hello. They look politely subdued. I wait until the person at the coffin moves aside so I can take his place. I kneel on the bar-thing in front of the casket.

Jared looks so young. He'd just graduated from high school a few years ago, hadn't he? A few years younger than me. He looks good, not overly made-up. I can't help but reach out and touch him, to feel the icy lifelessness of the skin. Otherwise one would almost think him alive.

As soon as I touch him I realize I shouldn't have. I snatch my fingers back and speed away from the coffin. I see Alan and KC just outside the door by the guestbook.

“His girlfriend looks like a wreck,” I say.

KC nods. Alan says, “My wife went over yesterday to check on her. We're kind of worried about her.”

Josh 2 comes in from outside, wearing a black suit and white shirt. He'd actually gone to school with Jared but the two had lost touch until working at the same building. Red rims his eyes. I lose track of the conversation. Josh is abnormally beautiful, like some creature from Faerie.

When I get home I fall into dreams of Josh 2 and Alan. We hang out in some kind of airport or something.

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“Josh!”

I sit bolt upright.

“Josh!”

Throwing on a robe, I dash to the door. Stomach twisting, I feel pretty sure I know the voice. I look through the peephole. Oh God.

I open the door to Jared. Pale and wet with rain, but looking healthy. He lunges at me and grabs me in a tight hug.

“Jared...” I say. I stand there for a full minute, wrapped in Jared’s cold embrace. I feel... nervous, but then relieved. I hug him back. “Do you want to come in?” I ask, completely lost for words. Jared nods.

I take him in, quickly closing and chaining the door. I lead him to the kitchen. “You shouldn’t be wet,” I say.

In the kitchen I help him out of his clothes. A Y-incision mars his torso but despite that he looks... worth seeing. I gently towel him off. The waxy makeup comes off, further revealing his pale skin. A touch of blond hair dusts the center of his chest.

“Why did you come here?”

Jared shrugs. “I had to see you.”

“How did you find me?”

Jared shrugs again. I shouldn’t have bothered asking, but it felt rude to not. I’ve given up asking how they get out of the funeral home, or how they get into my locked building. They don’t know.

I don’t know why he has a Y-incision. It’s not normal to remove organs just for embalming. Sad that I know such things. Maybe organ donation. None of us at work even know how he died; the family wouldn’t reveal it. Useless to ask Jared. He won’t answer.

Jared waits, naked, in the kitchen while I flick the temperature to near-zero and flip on the cooler. Tricked out refrigerants and a human-sized cooler increase the shelf life of the dead. I haven't had them on in a while. None of this is noticeable except for the cooler, which stands like a sarcophagus in the spare bedroom. Not that anyone comes over, anyway.

I make some tea. Jared doesn't want any. He prefers Jack, but I don't have any. He smiles broadly as he tells me stories about him and Alan, about the first meeting of Jared's girlfriend and Alan's wife's. Oh man. Jared's poor girlfriend. I ask him about Josh 2. "Man, I don't think I've seen him since that one party..." He describes a party that ended with him kneeling at a toilet, vomiting between a woman's legs. Josh the Second, meanwhile, played pool upstairs, naked.

I blink. "What did he look like?" I ask.

"Big!" Jared says. He stares at nothing and offers no other answer.

My heart pounds at the mere thought of it. If I was a bit younger, I'd probably have been at that party. We'd hung in similar crowds in high school; Josh and Jared might've been my friends. Before coolers and refrigerants, the walking dead and a gnawing sense of otherness took over my life.

"I won't see them again," he says, eyes haunted and dead.

I shudder. The dead have never shown such insight. They couldn't even answer the questions, "Why are you crying?" or "Are you all right?"

"How do you feel about me?" I ask, wanting to change the morbid subject. I receive the inevitable answer:

"I love you."

We make love. Later I lay in his arms. Questions circle. Is my power growing? Could my

power now work at this distance? Or had the merest touch at the wake done it? Never before had someone risen without me having cradled the body. Maybe it wasn't my power at all, but a strange phenomenon that followed me, God's little joke on Josh. Maybe this happened to everyone, but no one ever said.

Of course the first two risen dead had loved me. My boyfriend Fitch rose first and my cousin Karen second. But the homeless man I'd accidentally encountered in the street, whom I held tight in a fit of uncontrolled emotion, had no reason to love me after death, nor does Jared really. But they all have, unabashedly. Karen and the homeless man loved me platonically. Those I myself desired in life returned that desire after life.

I worm closer into Jared's room temperature body. This doesn't feel like coercion, what I do. They love me. I imagine colonies of insects and worms in the dirt under my apartment building, living out their lifespans and then returning to life beneath my unnatural presence.

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I awake. Jared sobs softly into the back of my neck, but quickly stops when he sees me awake. I touch the tears and stare at them on my fingertips. Little diamonds.

I put Jared into the cooler and ask him to stay until I get him, then go to work. All day I think only of Jared, even when Josh 2 comes to ask me a question and then laughs with me, putting his hand on my shoulder. I come home and open the cooler.

Jared stops crying.

"Why are you crying?" I ask softly. Jared stares with haunted eyes. He says nothing.

Tonight he responds to me, moves around, and shows affection, but doesn't volunteer any stories. He seems less present, or less functional. More like one of my usual "friends." With embalming and refrigeration, the dead look normal for a long time, but they only stay conscious

for a few days each.

The next night I ask Jared to run a bath. He won't last much longer and I want to experience him warm. I want to cry, but keep positive. Jared will die twice. This unnatural curse he's under will go away. It doesn't make me feel better.

I get candles from the hallway buffet and bring them into the bathroom. Jared sits in the fetal position up against the tub, crying into his knees. Again he can't give an explanation when I ask. I hug him close for a time. His strange torment, whatever it is, will end soon.

"Do you want to give me a foot massage?" I ask. The dead man nods, and means it. More than anything else, I want to break the tension and take the attention off of Jared's sad thoughts. I don't feel selfish asking because Jared truly wants to do anything to please me. With the living I can never ask for what I want.

I enjoy Jared, warm in the bath, and hope he feels the same.

The next day when I open the cooler, Jared doesn't respond. After kissing him farewell, I go to work. Everyone seems to have brightened some since the wake, but I've now lost him twice. How quickly people stop caring. Except for Alan, who still looks haunted. Alan is sweet. If ever I were to marry someone...

After work I burn the flesh off the bones in my fireplace – it sickens me, but hopefully just seems like burning steak to the neighbors. After that I break up the bones with a sledge hammer, putting the pieces into a trash bag. This I leave in a dumpster in an alley far from my apartment. The first time I did this I forgot to use gloves. So far as I know, none of the bags were found.

I wonder if word will ever make it back to work that Jared's body went missing from the funeral home. I wonder if it will make the news. If enough people connected with me wind up



disappearing from their funeral homes... I shake it out of my head. Hopefully this will never happen again.

I wonder if the funeral home will even tell the family, or if they'll just bury an empty box and call it a day.

Getting rid of Jared takes most of the night, and I show up to work the next morning feeling very tired. I can't take my eyes off of Josh 2. How beautiful and warm he looks. He and Jared occupy all of my thoughts. After work I find myself on a website buying a spy camera from China. It sits inside a ballpoint pen. On any other pen the button would extend or retract the tip, but on this pen a click of the button will take away other people's privacy. My God, I think, has my life come to this? I can only view the living through a window... through a pen?

I masturbate to the thought of catching a better look at Josh 2 by holding the pen over the side of the bathroom stall. Josh, and Alan, and Tucker, and...

Later in bed I pray for a quieting of my voyeurism, but who but a god of death would answer my prayers? My orgasm seemed to slay all desire, and I resolve not to use the pen when it comes. But by next morning, with Josh 2 picking up packages in curve-hugging sweatpants, the pen seems like my only way out of complete collapse.

It arrives five anxious days later. I install the software on my computer and charge it up overnight.

Next day, before first break, I see KC going into the bathroom. He isn't a goal of mine, but I'm curious enough. I set down my work and walk quickly to the bathroom. I get into the stall next to the urinal, and when I hear the telltale stream, I activate the pen and hold it shakily over the stall.

Later on Alan and I walk back from break together. Alan heads for the bathroom and I

follow a few seconds later, activating the pen in my pocket. I quickly slam the stall door and hold the pen over the side, then, while I can still hear the stream, I pretend to drop the pen under the stall wall to get a different angle.

The end of work couldn't have come fast enough. I race home and plug the pen in.

"Son of a bitch," I growl. Alan's penis is a vague gray shape. KC's isn't even visible in the dim video; a stream of urine seems to come out of the solid darkness of his body. Cursing, I look up the pen's model number on different websites. "Works only in well-lit conditions."

I soon find that the pen works fine in the break room. I can't get any nudity, of course, but I get Alan's smile at least, and a few snatches of witty conversation. KC grabs the pen from where it rests in front of me. "Nice pen," he says. "How much did you pay for it?"

"Forty," I answer.

KC whistles. I flush; I would never have paid that much for an actual pen but couldn't bring myself to lie.

After lunch I glance over Josh 2's way every few minutes. As soon as Tucker, Josh 2's partner in Shipping, walks away, I stride over to him.

"I want to ask a favor from you," I say. Josh 2 looks at me with large, warm brown eyes. "I'm in school to be a photographer," I lie. I still hate to lie, but apparently I'm willing. "Well, more of an amateur thing really, it's just a class, not really a major. Anyway, we have to do a photo shoot and none of my friends can help me in time and I really need a model. You have the right look for what I want to do. Do you think you could help me?" I heave a breath after all that.

"Um..." Josh 2 looks around like he wants someone to save him. "When?"

"Any afternoon this week after work," I tell him.

"Um, sure?" he says.

“Awesome, thanks a lot,” I say. “I’ll have beer and pizza.”

Two days later Josh 2 stands in my apartment. I’ve planned every detail at length. First I ask him to change into a swimsuit in my bedroom, where the pen rests in a cup aimed where he will stand to change. He’ll stand there because I intentionally covered the floor with boxes and books, leaving only a small area for him to change in.

When Josh 2 finishes changing I go in to collect my props, including the pen which now, hopefully, contains the true scope of his beauty. I try not to look at him too long. I never realized he had muscles. He’s really thin, but now I can see he’s also really sculpted. I take a second glance at the thin line of fuzz under his navel.

We go to my makeshift studio in the extra bedroom, bright green party tablecloths making a green-screen. The green-screen covers the human-sized cooler, taped firmly in place. I hope he won’t ask what’s under it.

I have him kneel and hold a pair of dumbbells over his head. His armpits are really hairy. He only has a dusting of hair across his chest. It doesn’t seem to match.

I also get him into a backbend pose, and have him lay down with his hands behind his head. Next he lies on his back and hugs his knees to his chest. His feet are so tiny. It seems somehow endearing next to his muscles.

Once I get my close-ups of all of my favorite body parts, except the ones hidden by the swimsuit, I grab the Egyptian clothes.

“Want another beer?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says. The can opens a moment later with a crack.

I help him put on the Egyptian kilt and dust his face with gold. I brush his cheek gently with the back of my fingers.

I step back and wrinkle my face. “Can you take the swimsuit off? It looks too bulky under the kilt.”

He does, looking me in the eye as he slips it down his legs and over his feet. He stands holding it uncertainly. I take it and toss it aside.

“All right, this might seem kind of weird, but I want to go for a light effect. This is your mark.” I activate the pen and tape it to the floor, pointing up. Then I drag over the hand-held carpenter’s light and put it next to the pen. “You do mixed martial arts, right?”

He smiles and laughs. “Most people call it MMA. But yeah.”

“Um, OK, so get into a deep horse stance - stand over the pen - face me. The light should produce some cool shadows.”

I turn off the overhead light. My heart beats loudly in my ears as he walks toward the pen and light but doesn’t squat down. I already have photographic reproductions of his astonishing body, which I hope includes a good view of him changing into the swimsuit, but now I want to try for his most intimate spot. Squat over the freaking pen, I repeat like a mantra in my head.

“What is it with you and that pen?” Josh asks.

“What do you mean?” I say back. I hide my shaking hands behind my back.

“I dunno. You’re always holding it at a funny angle. You even bring it into the bathroom with you. You’re always ... pointing it.” He looks down at it and I fear that a look of recognition will come over his eyes as he realizes it now points up at him. I should end this now.

“Lucky charm, I guess,” I say. “I dunno, it’s a writer thing.”

“You write?”

“Some,” I say. “I’m not published.”

He shrugs and squats over the pen. I reposition the light. I experimented last night,

proving that if I squatted over the pen with the light it recorded exactly the view I sought.

After snapping a few pictures, flooded with a relief that didn't seem to take away my shaking limbs or stampeding heart, I untape the pen and set it in a cup. "Can you change back into the swimsuit?" I ask. "I'll turn around." I turn around to give Josh some imagined privacy and flip on the overhead light. I see out of the corner of my eye that the pen has turned in the cup. Muttering, I try to nonchalantly step back to the table and rearrange it, then go back to where I'd stood. He has a look on his face as if to say, "What the...?"

Back to Josh 2, my heart pounds harder than before. Mistake, mistake, I tell myself. Why did I have to rearrange the pen? I hear fabric hit the floor, then footsteps, some clattering, and finally a muttered, "What is this?!"

Shaking like a rabbit, I make myself ask, "Is everything OK?"

"What is this red light?" he demands.

I turn around. Josh 2 stands, naked and utterly amazing, holding my pen. He had screwed the top off to reveal the USB port.

"It's a flash drive," I say. "And a pen. Cool huh?" Even terrified, my eyes trace him from head to toes. How can a person be so perfect?

"Bullshit," he says and dashes the pen against the wall.

He starts back to my bedroom, then stops, turns, and bends to pick up the pen. I finally get my view. Holy shit. It looks really good. But surprise and relief – and fear and awkwardness – go deeper than the momentary thrill I feel.

Pen in hand, Josh 2 stalks naked back to my bedroom. I follow him in, trying to think of anything to say.

"Turn around," he says, bending to get his clothes.

I open my mouth, giving up on convincing him that he misunderstood the pen's purpose, wanting only to plead forgiveness.

“Turn around!” he roars.

I spin about. Behind me, fabric rustles and change jingles in pockets. “You’re fucking lucky if I don’t call the cops,” he says, doing up his pants with a high pitched ziiiiip. “You’re getting fired at least.”

He brushes roughly past me, his shoulder knocking mine. I grab his wrist. “Please don’t tell,” I pant. Josh turns to look at me. “If you want, I’ll quit, just please don’t say anything.”

He yanks his hand out from my grasp. His face wrinkles up in disbelief. “You should have thought of that before you tried to film me!” He turns around and flings open my door. I grab for his wrist one more time.

He turns and punches me in the mouth. Shocked, I fall back into the piles of boxes littering the floor. My gums feel cut. Josh looks at me then drops his gaze. “I’m sor—” he starts to say.

“I love you,” I blurt when I only meant to say, “I’m sorry.”

“What is wrong with you?” he demands. He looks around the room as if searching for an answer. Finally he kicks me hard in the leg. Seeming to like it, he kicks me again.

“Stop it!” I yell. When Josh swings his foot again, I catch it and push, meaning to push him away. He falls back and hits his head against the doorframe with a loud crack.

I bolt over to him. Tears well in my eyes as I see how it will happen. My beautiful Josh will bleed to death, all that the poor man loves in his life fleeing him. He will awaken in a few hours, a thoughtless slave - physically perfect but dead – lost – on the inside, never able to explain why he cries. I will savor his loveliness, the noble sadness, as I mourn for the lost life.

And then I will bury the body to protect myself. No one will ever know what happened to him.

I leaned in to kiss his soft mouth. I haven't kissed a living man since Fitch. My mouth brushes gently against his still warm lips. Josh 2 opens his eyes. Cringing in disgust, he pushes me hard.

"You're OK!" I cry.

He punches me without restraint, then wraps his fingers around my neck. My face feels full and hot, bursting with blood. I claw at his hands.

As I fall into blackness I call out in my mind, "Josh, stay with me." I already forgive him for murdering me.

The world fades out and I have only the sense of falling. I carry out trains of thought that then snatch away into the void and I can't remember what I was just thinking about. I feel like this for some time.

I become aware of tears falling over me. Cold, achingly cold, and feeling bruised all over, I open my eyes. The most beautiful creature in all the world leans over me.

"Are you all right?" he asks me, eyes swollen.

I don't know how to answer the question.

"I thought that I... you look..." The questioner puts his fingers to my throat, then jerks them away. "You don't have a pulse!"

I say the only thing on my mind. "I love you."