

ALONE

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As long as he could remember, John had seen the dead.

Not just a few here and there, like friendly Casper dead, stuck in a house for eternity for who-knows-why; or like the suddenly or recently dead, like a *Sixth Sense* unfinished-business-with-the-living dead. No, John saw the dead. *All* the dead. Or at least, he'd assumed it must be all of them. There were so many.

When he'd first realized that most people couldn't see the milling, shambling, stumbling, slithering hordes he could see, John had just assumed he had an unusually vivid imagination. That's what his mother had told him, anyway. It had never occurred to her that her son was really seeing Robert Marley and all his ilk, shuffling around like a herd of invisible George Romero zombies; surely, when her little boy mentioned the child hacking and wheezing from the pneumonia which had killed him in 1953, or the old lady begging him for help with her leg, not only incorporeal but also pitted and rotten to uselessness, he was just telling very creative, albeit disturbing, stories. He loved tales, after all, and liked nothing better than a good ghost story around the campfire, or a scary movie on Halloween. John, a good child, had taken her word on this unquestioningly; and by the time he grew old enough to know that being constantly surrounded by incorporeal rotting corpses wasn't even remotely normal, he knew better than to say anything about it.

Over time, he realized he wasn't really seeing *all* the dead. At least, the dead themselves didn't seem to think so, when they spoke to him. They didn't speak much; indeed, the vast majority said nothing at all. They groaned; moaned; screeched; screamed; a heinous, agonized misery whose sound had been the elevator music in the background of his entire life. He was so used to it that, when his younger brother had taken a tumble from his bicycle, broken his arm, and had a piece of ulna sticking out of his flesh, John still didn't truly realize how much pain the boy was in, although he'd screamed like he'd been put to the rack. It was just *noise* to him, like the wind or the singing of birds.

But sometimes, they would talk. Mutterings, mostly, lamentations on their misery, bemoaning the rotten, hideous flesh and pitiable, wretched spirits they were doomed to haul around a world that didn't realize they were there. "I hate this," he remembered one saying, repeatedly, with a jaw that flapped loosely, barely attached to his head. "I hate this, I hate this, I hate this." He'd only said one thing actually *to* John, though, after John had been watching him shuffle and mutter

for a few seconds. His face, putrid and pitted, one eye rotten out, and that jaw held to his head by only a few sinewy tendrils of decomposing skin, turned directly toward him, his single remaining eye wide and round, the eyelid long since rotten away.

"When?" the shade had said to him, voice labored and raspy, and John could feel the most horrifying, ineffable, unutterable sorrow he could imagine coursing toward him from that face. "When will it end?"

He'd seen that shade a few times since—the dead remained in the same general places, he'd noticed over the years—but he'd never spoken to John again. But that question haunted him, and continued to haunt him for all the rest of his days.

All were clearly looking for something. Many, among their crying and moaning, would ask after people or things. "My Ruth," said one old man, who spent most of his time by the side entrance of John's middle school. "My Ruth, my Ruth." He never found his Ruth, though. Indeed, none of the dead ever found anyone. They never stood with one another or spoke to one another; they were constantly moving, constantly sorrowing, and constantly and forever alone.

That—that the dead were alone—John knew for sure, for the dead had told him so themselves. An old lady was the first who told him this; indeed, she was the first of the dead John had ever really talked to. She did most of her eternal dance of sadness on the edge of the woods about a hundred yards from John's home. John had noticed her particularly because she stood out a bit from the herd there, the only one in her area who was using any words. She, like all the others, was a seeker, desperately seeking for someone called Henry, moaning his name now and then between cries and screams of sadness. John had approached her, for though hideous, she was less disgusting than most; he believed that he could see what she must have looked like in life, if he looked closely enough. And though occasionally, early on, he had tried to speak to the dead, none had ever answered him; but he decided to try this one, as well, and asked,

"Who's Henry?"

The shade stopped suddenly, as if confused, and looked about, seeming to look right through him whenever her black, bloodshot eyes did fall on his form. Her eyes darted about, and she gave the occasional moan as, for half a minute or so, she said nothing in response. But slowly, though she never looked right at him, he seemed to be calling up a response; and still slowly, laboriously, for the first time, one of the dead answered

him, with a voice as rough and torn as the endless torment its owner had to endure.

“My son,” she said. “Dead at one. My son, dead at one. Dead at one.” And then, suddenly, she wailed, a piercing wail whose incomprehensible sorrow cut him to his very core. “Dead at one! My son! How I hated him! How I hate him! Dead at one!”

It took John a moment to recover from this blow of pure misery, as well as the shock of one of the dead actually speaking to him, answering a question; and when he recovered, he said, “If he died, he should be with you. With the dead.”

She shook her head in short, spastic motions; jerkily, like a confused bird; then wailed again; and then, with another herculean effort, “Never find him. We never find each other. Alone—we are all alone—alone—forever—” And John could get no more response from her; she’d gone off, and though he tried more than once, she never spoke to him again.

He’d resumed talking to the shades after that, when he could; and though most were far too focused on their agonies to answer him, he did find a few more who would speak. Every single one was looking for something, sometimes something surprisingly trivial. One was wracked with more pain and misery than nearly any other of the hordes he had seen; yet he told John that all he needed, all he was seeking, was a drop of water. That’s even what he said, his voice so grated it was barely comprehensible, like his vocal chords were covered with sandpaper. “A drop,” he begged. “Please, a drop of water. Please.” This was in a neighbor’s back yard, at a party. John snuck back there a day or two later, when the neighbors were away, and tried everything he could to help. He sprinkled, poured, sprayed, even got out a hose and directed its full power at the shade. And though the shade wanted it, was drawn to it, couldn’t refuse to seek it, the closer he got to it the worse his agony, and the further away from it he truly was.

John gave up; he could tell from the wailing, and from the shade’s sudden inability to say anything even remotely comprehensible, that if he was changing the man’s situation at all, he was only making it worse.

One ghost, at the supermarket down the road, told him the shades couldn’t see. He’d asked her why she never looked at him when she spoke (he’d talked to her a few times, during various trips to that market), and she gasped and grated out her response in the usual labored manner of the dead. “I’m trying,” she told him. “I want to. It’s just—so dark—can’t see you. Can’t see—anything—”

She’d been young, and clearly very beautiful in life, though now she was hideous beyond words. He wondered what kind of world it was, where people could suffer so.

He’d asked some of them if everyone became a shade like them, broken and wretched, seeking hopelessly after what can’t ever be obtained, alone and miserable forever in the dark. Those who had answered had told him no, that not everyone faced this fate, but didn’t know or wouldn’t say anything more than that. And there were *so many* dead, everywhere, crowded

and numberless. He couldn’t see how death could have undone so many, that there were still others he couldn’t see.

When he’d been twenty-four, his grandfather had died. It had been a slow death, but not not unexpected, coming after years of renal and hepatic failure had exhausted the old man’s will to keep running the race of mortal life. The last bout had sent him home from the hospital, to die in relative peace, surrounded by the people who loved him. It seemed a peaceful way to die, and John was at his side to the end, wondering what he might see. He’d never seen anyone die, though he’d always been surrounded by the dead; and his grandfather had been a good man, taking care of his family, never hurting anyone, and generally making the world a better place. Or at least, so it seemed to John. But when his grandfather’s chest pulled in its last labored breath, then settled, John could already hear the grating rasp of the dead; and at the funeral, at the old man’s former home, there was his grandfather, like all the other slew of dead, gazing over his own casket, eyes darting back and forth as if confused in the dark, skin and bones ruined and soul in despair.

John’s heart was heavy, and when he found a quiet moment, late that night, he talked to his grandfather, the first time he’d been able to speak to a shade whom he had known in life. And though his face was broken and ruined, John could recognize him, clearly and distinctly: this was the man he had known.

“Grandpa,” he said; and the shade started, glance shooting around disjointedly in the way of all the dead.

“John,” the old man responded, his voice the gritty, labored exhalation John had come to know so well. “John, I’m so sorry. We—didn’t believe—what you saw—”

But John shook his head. “Grandpa, don’t be sorry. It’s crazy; no one would believe it. But can you talk?” He looked closely into his grandfather’s eyes, now blackened and bloodshot. “Can you see me?”

The old man wheezed, a miserable wheeze so charged with sorrow that, even with all his experience, John wondered whether he’d ever be the same again. “No,” he replied. “Can’t see—all alone now—all alone, forever, in the dark.” His eyes darted about. “But—it’s permitted—I can speak—for a time—”

“Why are you like this?” John didn’t waste any time; he knew how briefly most shades were able to speak. His grandfather stuttered deep in his throat before answering; and, almost as if he could see him, he looked at John, staring open and lidless directly into his eyes.

“Remember how short is life, and how long is the rest of time,” he rasped. “Remember how small you are, and how large is the rest of space. Remember how little you see, how little you know of all there is. Even you, who sees more than most. Remember that you, too, will die; and much sooner than you think.”

No shade had ever spoken at such length to him before, nor stared so consistently into his eyes.

“But Grandpa,” John said, “you were a good man, such a good man. We all loved you; you loved us. You took care of us. The world’s a better place because you were in it. Why are you suffering like this?”

John’s grandfather stared blinklessly directly into his eyes, and John, though frightened and desperate for an answer, couldn’t look away. His whole life, he’d been surrounded by nothing but misery, by huge, countless armies of wretched, wandering, decomposing corpses, miserable and manic and alone. The hopeless hordes had been his most constant companions, more constant than friends and family; and now, even his living family was passing away into that endless army of the dead, uniting what little happiness he’d known with the solaceless sorrow all around him. He needed to know; was there any hope? Was this miserable, lonely, eternal wandering his doom, and the doom of all men?

“Remember,” came the belabored reply, finally, as his grandfather croaked the words. “Remember how little you see,

how little you know, of all that is.” And then his face, already contorted and broken, convulsed with a wave of despair that could have washed mountains from the shore into the sea; a despair devoid of company and devoid of hope; a despair eternally empty; a despair eternally alone. And he gasped his final words:

“The horror!—the horror!”

John was knocked back by this cascade of misery, even physically; and when he’d regained his balance and looked back up at the shade of his grandfather, the old man was laboriously, painfully walking off, and never spoke, to John or to anyone else, again.

As long as he could remember, John had seen the dead. But the dead could offer him no comfort. And so, despairing now for himself as well as for all the dead that had always and would always surround him, John headed off into the remainder of time; he’d be dead a lot longer than living, and the future was lonely, and dark.

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