

The Vampire

When the zombies came, I was at a potluck for my neighborhood association.

Anti-climactic, isn't it?

It's true, though. I was five doors down from my place at the Reinholdts' five-bed, four-bath McMansion. Our neighborhood was outside city limits when they built their house four years ago. We didn't have a neighborhood association yet to stop them from throwing up that vinyl-sided monstrosity prior to their arrival, and no sooner had they dropped the last box in their front hall than they'd begun agitating to start one so they could make sure their place stayed the biggest house in the entire development.

Typical.

Some of the nosier types had gone ahead and talked to lawyers and talked to the city and - in the case of Mr. Jones-Magnum - had talked to the city in the presence of his lawyer and, eventually, everyone who cared had shoved their hands in their pockets and slunk back up their drives in silent resignation to the fact of that behemoth squatting on a half acre between a late '70s split-level and a tall, narrow colonial with four columns squeezed onto a porch too small for them, dwarfing both. The Reinholdts immediately began campaigning for Best Neighbors Ever; their son started a lawn-mowing business in the summers that undercut by half the kids who'd done it the year before; their daughter would practice the piano with the windows open in the spring so that a light, melodic tinkling could float pleasantly through the night air. With gift baskets and mown lawns and dinner music and holiday cards they whittled away just enough of the resentment against them that finally two thirds of the neighborhood hated them for it but were willing to vote to start a neighborhood association to lay down some ground rules. The city was going to annex us any day now, we knew this, and so they'd argued effectively that a neighborhood association would give us "united voice" with which to argue anything with the city. By New Year's 2002, Franklin Not Frank Reinholdt was elected chair of the neighborhood association and his wife sent out invitations for a Valentine's party for the neighborhood kids (to give the parents time to themselves, her invitation

discreetly suggested) and so began the Reinholdts' benevolent dictatorship of our neighborhood.

Their authority, I should note, did not extend to my yard. Oh, technically it did, but Mary Lou Reinholdt always somehow seemed to flinch when she looked me in the eye, the closed screen door between us every time she came knocking after dark. Franklin Not Frank wouldn't even show up. He's a wuss. The deal is, one of the rules imposed on the Reinholdts was that whenever the neighborhood association considered a new restriction that might affect a current homeowner's existing property - say, a restriction against trees too near the street when everyone knows it's just about getting rid of John Lewis' big old ugly dead Sweetgum - then the homeowner has to be notified before the measure can be considered. So the first time I actually met Mary Lou Reinholdt was about four months after the association started. Thirty minutes after sunset, I'd heard a ring at my doorbell. I remember it took me a minute to figure out that it was, in fact, the doorbell. No one had rung my doorbell in years.

I'd peeked out the peephole and seen Mary Lou standing there on the front porch with her lips pursed and her eyebrows knit together and she looked just as pissed as all get-out, like *how dare I not answer her*, and thinking she was a missionary or other low-life I'd flung my door open so hard the hinges squealed and at the same time hit the whole bank of light switches in the foyer so that the porch, front hall, front stairs and walkway were all suddenly flooded with the brightest, whitest light possible.

Mary Lou Reinholdt nearly shat her shorts over it.

"Mister..." She fumbled for a moment, and I crawled all over her face with my eyes. I wanted to remember her. I wanted to remember her for sometime when I might run across her again; sometime when I might be hungry. Remember, though, that at this point I thought she was just another door-to-door freeloader.

"Surrett." I leaned my frame - I'll say it, I'm not afraid to: I'm a fat guy. I'm middlingly tall, about six feet if I remember correctly, but I weigh in somewhere around three fifty. That's just the way it was back then. We didn't have South Beach or Atkins or whatever, and I wouldn't have tried them anyway. I was a kid, a young teenager, during dubya-dubya-two. My mom was very serious about the war effort. She hoarded her

ration stamps, and if we didn't have at least twice as many as we'd need for something, she didn't buy it. *What*, she would say sternly, *If someone really needs these to beat the Nips?* And that was that. In her world-view, our boys were Over There fighting the Nazis and the Japs with nothing but boots and gravel to eat and letting us have it way too damn easy in the meantime because they were just too polite to us. Obsessed with the possibility that a bottle of ketchup would make the difference once our tanks were rolling towards Berlin, we lived on scraps the whole time. My family was by no means poor - quite the opposite - but we were deeply stingy. And so, when I turned 18 in 1946 and went three hundred miles away to attend college, I ate everything in sight. I packed on the pounds and kept going.

Or maybe my metabolism is just geared that way.

Was geared, I guess.

Whatever. It's all ancient history.

So, as I was saying, there I was, looming on the other side of an old-fashioned screen door and all the lights were on and I was in my black trenchcoat and wearing the boots that give me a little lift and my hair was pointed eighteen directions at once because I hadn't hit the shower yet that night and she just stared and stammered.

"M...Mister..."

"Surrett," I slurred. "Withrow Surrett. And I don't want no damn Bibles or newsletters or what-the-*hell*-ever, so get the *hell* off my land." I slammed the door shut and flipped all the lights back off with one sweep of my right hand, leaving Mary Lou blind as a bat on my porch. I could still see her out there as I stomped upstairs to get out of my club clothes and into something more reasonable, like the bath.

And that's how I came to be a member of the neighborhood association's board. It was early. Some people were probably just getting home from work. Some were probably out on their porches enjoying the April evening. Either way, someone heard that exchange and the next month I got a note stuck in the screen door by an anonymous neighbor: a resolution to restrict the weight of dogs allowed as pets in the neighborhood had failed, and I had been elected to the association's board in absentia.

The dog thing was probably what Mary Lou came by to talk about. I've got a doberman named Smiles. He weighs 150 pounds because I feed him some of my own blood once a week. When I have to go to town on my own, or when I leave him out front for the day to guard the place, I leave him on a chain that's too big for a big man to grasp with one fist.

It's the only chain he hasn't broken yet.

They'd tried to mess with my *dog*, they had. And for that, I'd decided, they would dearly pay.

No, I did not kill them. I know not to shit where I eat - and vice versa.

But I did take the position on the board. That meant once every six months I went to a potluck at their house. They have a little Jack Russell named Killer. I'd walk Smiles up there (no leash - I'd hate to see the leash that would work on him if he needed one) and drop him off in the Reinholdt's fenced back yard. He would spend the entire evening sitting on their back porch watching me through their series of french doors, ignoring the Jack Russell. That's probably good, because the Jack Russell usually passed out in self-defense.

At any rate, yeah, the night the zombies came. Sorry, I'm a rambler. Just wait, before this is over I'll probably be off on some bullshit head-trip about trade relations with Mongolia.

So anyway, the night the zombies showed up was the night of our Spring meeting. It promised to be a pretty dull affair. The autumn meetings are always the ones where somebody gets KO'd (and thus PO'd) about one damn thing or another. Someone isn't raking enough for someone else's liking or otherwise shit in each other's donuts. Spring is easy-going. Spring is when they're all dusting off that old landscaping software and talking about maybe, just maybe *this* year they'll actually build those garden beds, or whatever. Spring is a time when they imagine everything will be exactly the way each of them, individually, wants things to be all the time. Spring is the meeting that's cake.

As such, it usually involves a lot of sitting around munching on stale cheese balls and avoiding Franklin Not Frank's "world-famous" jellied beef loaf.

Don't ask. I don't even know what jellied beef loaf *is*. I asked one time and all I got in return was, "Oh, eh.... heh heh... think of it as a kind of sausage." Franklin has this weird vocal tic he only displays when I directly question something. It always starts with this half-hearted chuckle and then he avoids giving me a straight answer.

This particular spring it was remarkably warm - global warming has finally caught up with us, I guess - and we'd not had a single flake of snow the whole winter. Raleigh isn't exactly in the Alps, I realize, but we're used to seeing a *little* winter weather. Not so this year, and we'd spent the first half of March with daytime highs in the 80's. As it was warm the night of the meeting I'd made do with some old jeans and a stained t-shirt from the '82 World's Fair - you remember, the rainbow waterslide kind of logo thing with the flame icon at the far end and 1982 WORLD'S FAIR on the near end of the slide?

Come to think of it, maybe you don't remember. Oh well. It was a fun time, though. Got to see the Budweiser horses. Clydesdales.

Me and Smiles went up the street at an easy pace. I was bringing homemade biscuits and a cherry pie. I love to cook, though I'm not particularly good at it. What tends to surprise most of my fellow kind is that I also love to eat. Most of us can't keep food down - it just comes right back out, our bodies reject it outright - but my maker was a smarter one than most and she made me eat early, all the time, to teach me how to keep it back long enough to fool folks. I was, as you might recall, not one to shy away from an ample meal and so I was glad to take up eating as a hobby. I might never lose another ounce of weight again in my life but these days I can eat for hours and never *gain* an ounce, either. It's a small comfort, but you take what you can get.

When we got to the Reinholdts' place, I skipped ringing the doorbell and just walked Smiles right on around to the fenced back yard. The moment my hand touched the latch on their gate, Killer went ballistic. When I opened the gate and he saw me and Smiles standing there, Killer went down in a melodramatic heap. Killer missed his calling as a soap star.

Mary Lou knew by this series of events that I must have arrived and came out on the back porch to greet us. She took one look at Killer, on his back and panting on the ground, then sighed very quietly. For the first time in a long time I thought I'd detected something human in Mary Lou's body language but then the Stepford programming

kicked back in and she smiled as best she could. “Withrow,” she said, trying to purr and coming out sounding wrong. “So glad you could make it. I’m sure you’re very busy.”

“Oh yes,” I responded, the pie and the plate of biscuits cradled in my arms. Smiles sat by my feet and sniffed the air audibly in Mary Lou’s direction. “Been working on some new stuff.”

“That’s nice,” she intoned, and then she turned and walked back inside, leaving the doors hanging open. She couldn’t even handle that much small-talk with me.

A thought occurred to me in that moment which had never occurred to me before. What if it wasn’t just that I’d pissed her off that time on my porch? What if Mary Lou was one of those people who can just *tell* when something isn’t right? What if every time I spoke she got those tingles up her spine that said *That thing is not a human being*? There are vampires who believe that there are people with that sort of sixth sense, folks whose great-great-great-grandpappies lived in one of our towns and somewhere along the line figured things out and now, generations later, they have scattered descendants who can simply *tell*, somehow, through some genetic memory or some otherwise inherited gift, that something isn’t quite right about us.

Me, I don’t really buy it. Well, I should be more clear: I think anything is possible, and as such it occurs to me that someone being able to tell I’m not quite right is way the fuck down the list of what sort of weird shit probably happens in the world. So, it wouldn’t surprise me, but neither am I going to spend a lot of time dwelling on it. I’ve got shit to do, you know?

About the manuscript thing - I’m a painter. Officially, my *grandfather* was the painter. *Officially*, I’m just an heir who releases the occasional “found work” and uses the cash to fund an utterly failed attempt at a career as a novelist. It’s a shitty cover if you care what people think, but I don’t care what people think.

Smiles took his position on the porch, sitting down with his back to the rest of the yard, ears up, watching me inside the house after I went inside behind Mary Lou. The rest of the board was there already, and Franklin was busy talking sports with Kathy Sams and Herb Watanabe. Franklin isn’t a sports buff, and neither is Herb beyond the

usual water-cooler talk, but Kathy can't get her head out of it. Kathy played on the women's basketball team for one of the local colleges, back in the day, and she's a bigger sports nut than anyone you can think of. When I walked in she was busy haranguing Herb and Franklin over their picks for an office pool on the basketball tournament.

Why the hell did you put Montana in as going to the Sweets? Have you ever watched Montana play? Every year they field the ten guys in the whole state who are over six feet and not busy throwing bales of hay across a field somewhere. This year they just got lucky! That's what I heard come from the living room. Herb Watanabe was trying to respond but Kathy was fed up with trying to explain it to him. Kathy officially considered the rest of us, who ranged from Herb, in the office pool because letting the boss take a few bucks from you every March was a way to fit in, to me, who couldn't care less without passing out from the effort, to be lost causes. There was, she had said one time over dessert, something wrong with people who are so disconnected from their communities. Kathy's team in college had been good - very good - but this was before ESPN was giving a shit about women's sports. I don't have to be a sports fan to know that women get a lot more coverage these days, and that's a good thing, but Kathy was pretty bitter. She'd won a national championship but no one she met ever recognized her name. If it came down to it, I'd probably be bitter, too.

That said, Kathy and Herb were the only reasons I didn't walk from the board the second I got elected. Well, OK, that's not true. The reason I didn't walk was because I took pleasure in watching Mary Lou and Franklin squirm when I was in their home. Eventually I would have gotten tired of that, though. Kathy and Herb, they're good folks. They joined the board in part, I have come to realize, because they wanted to keep an eye on busybodies like the Reinholdts but in part because they also thought the HOA thing had potential. They were just people, like anybody else, with what seemed a healthy dislike for pointless bureaucracy coupled with a twinge of sincere optimism and I genuinely had no problem with them once I got to know them. I didn't exactly start sending them fruit baskets every Christmas, but I had no reason to distrust them and couldn't manufacture a good reason to ignore them if I saw them out when I was walking Smiles, so I guess I have to say I liked them.

Dinner itself was the usual fare. We'd all brought a side dish and Mary Lou had done up a roast. Franklin had his jellied beef loaf out on the table and as usual everyone was kind of avoiding taking more than that exactly necessary for the sake of politeness. Conversation wound around the others' jobs - Herb is an architect, Kathy a programmer, Franklin does advertising jingles and Mary Lou is a property manager. Herb talked about how no one cares about good design, and the conversation briefly brushed up against how people these days just like to live in big boxes, the biggest box they can squeeze onto a quarter-acre lot, but Kathy caught Mary Lou looking uncomfortable and so she steered us away into asking about Franklin's latest work. He'd supervised auditions for a campaign selling candy bars, and that was his big victory of the last six months, that kids all over the country were humming a tune he'd picked for them whenever they stuck a dollar in a snack machine at school. Everyone stayed politely distant from probing me about my "professional" life, until Franklin said what he always says:

"Your grandfather was also an artist, wasn't he?"

I shrugged. "He certainly was."

"Quite a gifted landscape artist in his day," Franklin said to the others, as though he had to explain it to them every six months or they'd forget. I always hate this part of our conversations.

"He worked in a lot of themes," I said without looking up from my hunk of roast. "Landscape was just to pay the rent."

"Oh," Franklin replied, trying to save face, "I didn't mean to imply that his art was limited, it's just that landscape is what he's know for."

"I didn't know anyone was known for landscape," Mary Lou said over her glass of blush. She smiled at me, and I looked up to meet her eyes. Mary Lou had a funny look on her face, and I thought again of that mythical sixth sense.

"John Turner," I said around a mouthful of broiled pork. "18th and 19th century. Hans Heysen, Monet, lots of well-known artists had or have landscapes as some of their best-known work. And it's still quite popular. There's Paul Sawyier, in Kentucky. Let's see, Kurt Jackson, he does mixed media sea-front stuff. Very impressive. Lots of stuff of Cornwall, he also does some photography." I shrugged and sat straighter in my chair, set my fork down on the plate, took a loud gulp of meat. "Landscape is a very re-

spected theme, still, even if some people consider it ‘fuddy-duddy.’” I stopped. I was starting to get pissed off, and my tone was showing it. The thing I hate most about being what I am is that I can’t take credit for my own work anymore. I take a finished canvas - one I’ve been careful to make using an aged canvas, a supply of paints it’s hard to find anymore, one that’s effectively been counterfeited even though I really am Withrow Surrett and I really did paint it myself - and show it to a curator or a dealer and they check the signature and then they cluck their tongues and say something about how I’m lucky to find it because surely there must not be many unknown works by my “grandfather” left and then they look at me like I’m the world’s worst leach, like they can’t believe I value my supposed ancestry so little as to place a high price on it.

Mary Lou arched her eyebrows and made an ‘o’ with her mouth. “I had no idea,” she said. Everyone else chewed in silence. She made a little ‘mm’ noise to indicate she wasn’t finished, like she’d just realized that perhaps she should clarify her statement. “I mean, I had no idea you were such an avid student of art, being a writer yourself.”

“Well,” I replied, “Fiction is an art.”

“Yes,” Mary Lou replied, so completely and blissfully tactful that no one could ever accuse her of trying to draw me out. “But there’s a reason they call it ‘arts and *letters*,’ isn’t there? I mean, there’s an art to writing, yes, but they’re not the same *thing*.” She lifted an elbow to point it at her husband, gesturing casually with the same arm holding up her glass of wine. “It’s not like writing *music*, or, say, painting.”

I know what bait smells like, and I didn’t bite. Instead I just shrugged again. “Maybe so. I wouldn’t know.” Saying that was hard - the part of me that starved in a one-room apartment over an appliance store in Asheville for five years while I learned that landscapes are so important to the history of so many artists, in part, because landscapes will sit still long enough for you to practice your craft, to learn, to experiment, to compare the results of one technique with another, to learn the little inner clues that tell you when you’re doing something right, when you should just keep working and keep working and not over-think it for a little bit because you’ve got that vibe, that part of me wanted to throw something. The part of me that has to maintain a public life just normal

enough to go as unnoticed as possible, though, that part of me had to ride herd on everything else inside and it won.

Mary Lou was clearly trying to come up with something she could say in response to that non-reply, something that would cement her conversational victory, but I cut her off at the pass by jamming my fork into the slide of jellied beef loaf I'd gotten and shoving the whole thing in my mouth.

No one had ever seen anyone else actually eat the jellied beef loaf before.

Shocked silence descended on the table, and even Mary Lou's pupils dilated a hair's breadth when she saw me do it.

I chewed, and chewed, and chewed. Jellied beef loaf, it turns out, *is* a kind of sausage. Note the careful use of that phrase, though. Imagine taking deviled ham and stuffing it into a sausage skin, then baking it or frying it. It doesn't turn hard, but it's not complete mush. It just tastes of salt and meat, so there's nothing remarkable there. It's just meat-flavored *stuff* you put in your mouth and you chew. I was chewing a *lot* of it at once, and I chewed with merciless slowness: chew. Chew.

Chew.

Franklin was watching to see what I thought, whereas Mary Lou and Kathy and Herb looked like they were waiting for me to topple over dead.

I swallowed the slice, raised both eyebrows slowly, and then lifted my hands over the table. I was very careful to give the impression that I was either going to reach for other food or I was going to try to cover my mouth before projectile vomiting. I let that second or three stretch out, and then I reached for the plate with the rest of the jellied beef loaf on it, carving a generous length of it and lifting it onto my plate.

"Delicious, Franklin." I nodded at him, and then smiled. "I had no idea."

I lifted the entire length, one long and greasy tube of what I wouldn't feed a dog in a *hard* year, and bit it off like a candy bar. "Mmmmm," I said, tonelessly, still smiling. I bit off another length. "Yes," I went on, rolling it around my palate. "Delicious."

After that, Kathy eventually picked back up the mantle of conversation and wore that yoke through the rest of dinner. She tried to talk about the artistic side of programming - elegant designs, smooth operations, helpful commenting - and tried to

use that to tie into writing in an attempt to build a bridge between me and Mary Lou. Herb helped her out as best he could, and over time it turned into Franklin and Herb and Kathy talking about how corporate structures obscure the creative efforts of the individuals in their employ, no matter how creative any one of them is, even if every individual in the organization is trying to be creative. As they turned into the Bad Luck Club, grousing convivially about the hardships of cubicle farms, Mary Lou kept watching me eat as I finished off the rest of the plate of jellied beef loaf - an absolute first at a homeowners association board meeting and something I suspected was worthy of front page headlines. If Mary Lou was onto me, if she wanted to watch me for whatever it was that raised the hair on the back of her neck, I was happy to give her something innocuously bizarre: a taste for jellied beef loaf. I even smeared some on a biscuit and ate it like a sandwich just to keep her interested.

Franklin had just asked Herb and Kathy if they were ready for him to bring out dessert, and they had made the appropriate noises about how it was too much but they'd love to try a little when I realized two things: Herb and Kathy were lovers, having an affair on the side, and that I'd just heard a car accident in the distance.

I doubt it will surprise you to learn that vampires have remarkably keen senses. I heard screeching tires and a car horn and then the distinctive tin-can crunch of metal against an obstacle and I could tell from the sound that it was probably three blocks away.

No one else had heard it at first, so when I looked up and around towards the windows at the front of the house and the street beyond the others had started in surprise.

"Hear something?" Kathy asked. The slight tremor in her voice told me she and Herb and Franklin had grown weary from spending the last fifteen minutes walking on egg shells. She was jumpy.

I looked at her for a moment, then nodded towards the window. "Thought I heard something, but it could just be my imagination." The others looked towards the windows, too, even Mary Lou, and then I heard the horn again."

"Was that a car?" Franklin's a musician, so of course he's got an ear for recognizing sounds.

“I...” I paused, then went on. “I’d swear I heard a car accident just a second ago.” I set the last of the biscuit down on my plate. “But, you know, it could be anything.” I looked the other direction at the french doors off the dining room and Smiles was still sitting there watching over me. He’s a pretty good gauge of when weird stuff’s going down, but he can also be misleading. His only job is to protect me. If people are laying dead in the street, he doesn’t really give a shit unless I’m one of them.

Killer, however, had come around sometime during dinner and apparently forgot Smiles long enough to come out of whatever hole he’d dug himself and run to the fence and start yapping his head off.

The car horn sounded again, closer this time, and then headlights splayed against the front of the house. The horn was more insistent this time, and Franklin walked to the front windows to survey what he could beyond the shrubs they’d placed there for privacy. “Someone’s just pulled up in the drive,” he announced.