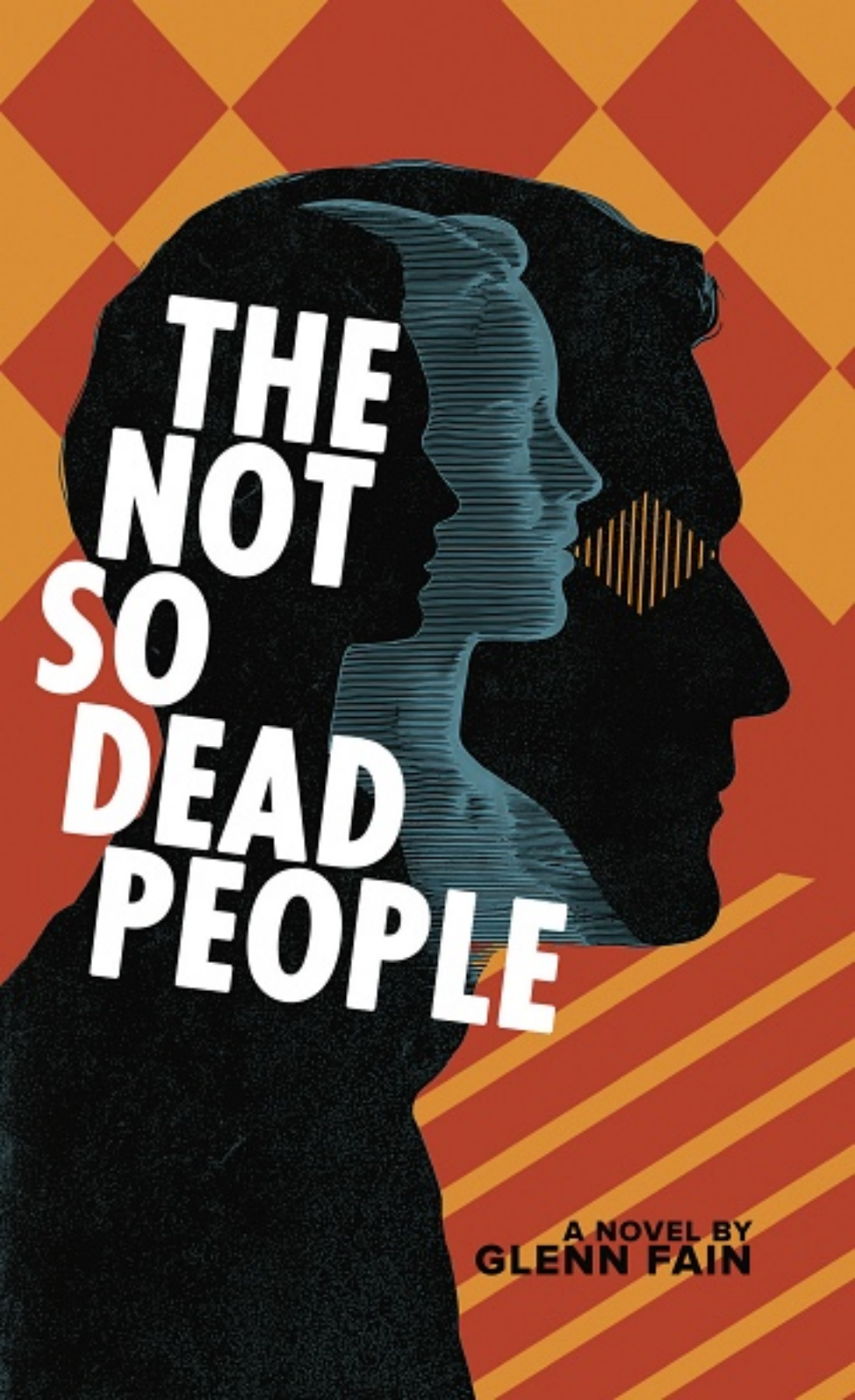


THE NOT SO DEAD PEOPLE is a wryly observed, meditative descent through identity, memory, and the quiet horror of resurrection. Blending dystopian noir with metaphysical dread, it asks what we owe the dead—and what they might remember of us.

The Not So Dead People
By Glenn Fain

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THE NOT SO DEAD PEOPLE

A NOVEL BY
GLENN FAIN

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Prologue: Susan's Journal Entry

Today is Wednesday, October 6th, 2041. I'm writing this journals entry from the confines of a prison cell where they have taken me. There are well over a hundred cells here, two surgical rooms, a huge kitchen where our meals are cooked, and a counseling room where Dr. George Maylord, the prison supervisor, enjoys interrogating us. Only twenty cells are currently occupied, but every day brings new prisoners. They've given me this journal to record my experiences. I am grateful for this act of kindness, because it helps to write things down, to organize my thoughts.

On Monday, September 30th, in the early hours of the morning, I died. Three days later, I awoke, my senses registering a cold darkness. It took me a few seconds to realize who I was. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a name rang out. Susan, my name is Susan, I thought, although I knew that wasn't entirely accurate.

I tried to sit up, but my head banged on a metallic substance. The noise was loud and jarred me even more awake. Yes, I thought, I'm Susan, but I'm simultaneously something else. Susan has gone away. I watched her go, float off into a distant light and disappear.

Am I in a coffin? I thought. I felt with my hands to try to figure out the contours of this freezer-like

contraption that held me. Coffin-like, yes, but larger than a coffin. There was more room inside than I imagined a coffin would have. A part of me was surprised that I wasn't scared. Susan would have been scared. But I'm not Susan anymore, am I?

I banged on the ceiling with a closed fist and hollered out for someone to let me go. "Open up!" I said as loudly as I could. "Let me out!"

A minute must have passed before a door near my feet rattled open and let in a bright light that hurt my eyes. It reminded me of the light Susan, the other Susan, entered and disappeared into when she left this world. I was wheeled out into this light. As it enveloped me, it felt as if I was being born again. Two men stood above me, staring, expressions of horror on both their faces. The older man wore pale blue scrubs. The younger was dressed more casually, in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt.

"Thank you," I said. Hearing me speak, the two men stumbled backward as if struck by a fierce blow. "The room's warmth feels good on my skin," I added. "Do you mind if I get up? I feel a need to stretch my legs."

Only with great effort was I able to stand. I realized I hadn't used my legs in a long time; it was difficult to move them. The two men stood with their backs against the far wall and continued to stare relentlessly at me. One held a long knife, the other a steel hammer. The light reflected off their weapons as if they were holding miniature stars between their fingers.

"Are you really alive?" the older man said. I guessed he must be the one in charge. He had a slight Southern accent, and I could easily imagine him looking at me with kind eyes under different circumstances. "I swear

you were dead three days ago. You were put in the wrong freezer by mistake. Otherwise, you would have already been taken away.” The man gave a sharp look to his younger assistant. “Did you put her in there?” he asked him.

The question startled him out of his reverie. “I think so,” he said. He thought about it some more. “Yeah, I did. I’m sorry.”

I paced back and forth, attempting to get my body moving again like I knew it should. The two men watched with great apprehension. The older man eventually picked up a telephone receiver hanging on the wall. He said, “Get me the director of the hospital. Now! It’s an emergency.” Thirty seconds passed. He said, “Director? You better get down here. We have something of an emergency. No, I can’t tell you what it is. You have to see this for yourself.”

It was all coming back to me as if I was speed reading the pages of a book or watching my life on a movie screen. Susan, the woman I was, had died three days ago from the latest mutation of the virus. She died, and I woke up in her place.

I was Susan, but then again, I was someone entirely different.

Chapter 1

The day after Halloween, about fifty of us are getting ready for sleep. We're rummaging in our bags, laying out blankets, sheets, and pillows while children clutch their stuffed animals. Hypnotic baroque music plays softly from the speakers. In the dim light of the electric candles in the chandeliers, everyone appears translucent and only half-real. A part of me expects to be jolted awake any second to find myself dreaming.

Next to an old man in an empty corner, I lay out my ragged sleeping bag. The man stinks, but the odor is lost in the general miasmatic haze. Years earlier, the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, was turned into a homeless shelter. Half church, half shelter, it attempts to satisfy the needs of both the physical and the spiritual. Father Nathan Gallagher, who runs the place, does a marvelous job. This is my first time sleeping here in thirty days.

After I squeeze inside the sleeping bag, I open my book and attempt to read, but can't concentrate. My mind is in perpetual replay, going over and over what Randy told me earlier today. In my imagination, I keep seeing dead bodies coming to life, skeletons marching down the street in perfect regimental formation, the not so dead people taking over the world.

Until the music stops and the chandeliers grow dim, I play back the conversation with Randy.

At noon earlier today, after our free lunch, it was obvious he was freaked out by something, so I begged him to confide in me. I wish I had minded my own business, but I can never seem to do that. I'm always poking and prying at the people around me, trying to get in their heads, looking for answers. Call it a fatal flaw of my trade. Although I haven't practiced for many years, by profession I'm a psychologist. Years ago, I had a private practice, but, well, let's just say the world took care of that.

We were in the chapel, where I am now. The pews were back in place, lined up neatly in rows. Someone was playing the gargantuan organ that sits in the back of the altar. The organ has always struck me with its beauty. It resembles a golden throne, at least fifty feet high, surrounded by a beautiful blue intricate mandala. The organ music filled up the chapel as if every air molecule was being charged with extra life.

Randy, after stealthy looks to the left and the right, led me to the edge of the first pew where it was most wrapped in shadow. Directly in front of us was a statue of Jesus on the cross, arms outstretched, face tilted with his half-shut eyes towards the ground, simultaneously in agony yet also serene. To the right of him, the Virgin Mary was holding the baby Jesus in her arms, gazing at Jesus with love and adoration. Both statues are larger than life and intimidating. At the time, in the state I was in, I feared they'd wake up and start moving around.

Leaning in towards me, Randy whispered, "Are we alone?"

Except for the organ player, as far as I could tell, the place was empty. "Yeah," I said. "You're making me nervous."

The Not So Dead People

Randy was usually a mellow guy, serene, one of the members of The New Religion that sprang up in the ashes of the post-virus world. Their dominant characteristic is the unnatural calmness of their members. That he was so freaked out was freaking me out even more.

When Randy was finally satisfied no one would overhear our conversation, he began his story, his wild eyes boring into mine.

He said, "You can't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you. This is for your ears only, friend. If word of this gets out..." His voice trailed off, his eyes closed and opened, his hands knotted into fists. "You think things are fucked up now? Oh man, we haven't even begun."

"Shit, Randy, you're scaring me. Your warning is making things worse."

"You want to know what has upset me so much? How familiar are you with Couch Park?"

Couch Park is three blocks north of the cathedral. It used to be a small dog park, only a few acres, housing a children's playground, grass for people to lounge on, tall trees to sit under. In the summer, even after the virus first hit, women would lie on the grass in bikinis reading and working on their tans while dogs ran around chasing balls. People sat on park benches passing joints back and forth. It was a peaceful, joyous place.

Over the years, in warmer weather, I've slept in Couch Park on and off, but back in August, it had gotten shady. A radical homeless encampment had taken over, and people like me weren't welcome anymore. They let me stay the night but made sure I was out by morning. They had that us against them mentality, which is one of humanity's greatest flaws.

They made the act of simply living much more of a burden than necessary. Every interaction with them was a challenge, a confrontation, exhausting and totally unnecessary.

"I know it reasonably well," I said. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened to the park, just the people. What's wrong with them is they know what I know. If I tell you, what's wrong with them will be wrong with you too. If you have a conscience, with knowledge comes responsibility. Tell me, Sam, do you really want this?"

I thought about it for a few seconds longer. His words didn't faze me, although they should have. The truth is, I would have found out eventually, so I guess in the greater scheme of things, it didn't really matter. But knowing this still pissed me off.

With a firmness in my voice I didn't feel, I said, "I want to know."

He was disappointed, but told his story anyway.

"Renee and her partner Dave run the Couch Park encampment. They're the leaders. Renee is the true decision-maker of the two, but Dave is no slouch either. I've known them both for many years. Although they aren't members of The New Religion, they still respect me. They're dabblers. We believe in many of the same things.

"Two days ago they sought me out, agitated and disturbed. They wanted me to look at something, they thought I might be able to help. 'What's it about?' I asked. 'Dead bodies,' they said. 'Dead bodies that aren't as dead as we thought.' They laughed at that, but it wasn't a merry kind of laughter. It was the kind of laughter that I've heard only from the crazed and

demented. It was the laughter from the part of us that lives in chaos. I told them I wasn't a scientist, so what help could I possibly give? They said they had someone with a science background. What they wanted was a man in touch with the spirit. They needed a holy man, and I was as close as they were going to get."

I smiled, amused at the suggestion of Randy as some holy man. I guess, in his own weird way, he is, but I wasn't about to tell him that. His ego was large enough.

"That was kind of them. Quite the flatterers, eh?"

Randy frowns. "You don't think I'm a holy man?"

"It's not that, but...." Before I could say anything else, he laughed.

"I'm no holy man. Fuck that. I'm a bit more in touch with the holy zeitgeist than most, but holy man? No way."

"Does this mean you're going to shave the beard and get a haircut?"

With his long beard and bushy hair flowing past his shoulders, eyes that look like he permanently sees visions, it's as if Randy walked right out of the Old Testament. His hair is so white it glows, every pigment of color removed. He told me one morning after a spiritual apocalypse (his phrase), the color of his hair had changed from red to white overnight. "That's when God spoke to me," he said. I've often tried to get him to tell me what God said, but he has always refused. "Some things we keep to ourselves," was all he would say. These holy rollers are all the same: they tell us nothing.

He wasn't amused at my wisecrack. "Where was I? And no more interruptions, please. I'm trying to establish a mood here. You're not helping."

“Sorry for interrupting. One of my many flaws. You were talking about Renee and Dave looking for a holy man.”

“Thanks. They wanted a holy man, and I was the only one they could think of. How could I say no? We walked to the park. They took me to an area deep inside, surrounded by a barbed wire fence. ‘What are you hiding in here?’ I asked. ‘We’re not hiding anything,’ they said. ‘We’re keeping something in we don’t want to get out.’ Creepiness and bad vibes everywhere. Renee and Dave alone were bad enough, but the entire camp population was the same way. Freaked out. A part of me wanted to leave, get the hell out of there, but I’m the holy man, I had a job to do. God knows what this job was, but I was the man to do it. That’s what I told myself.”

I couldn’t tell if he was kidding or not. I think he was.

“With the guard standing by, they opened the gate to the inner enclosure, and I walked through the barbed wire. It surrounded a bunch of tents strung together, creating a thirty-foot-long canopy, resembling a building. This canopy was surrounded by barbed wire too, with another armed guard standing outside. So, it was two levels of barbed wire surrounding this one tent-like building.

“My heart wasn’t doing good things at this point. I meditate a lot, I’m a reasonably relaxed guy even under the direst of circumstances. I have what’s called strong mental resiliency, but I wasn’t doing too well, I couldn’t begin to imagine what they were guarding in there. And the vibes were bad, as if some invisible wall of fear was all around me. Renee propped open the tent

building, and Dave and I stepped in, Renee right behind.

“The inside of the tent was dark, lit only by a few candles. I stood there for close to a minute waiting for my eyes to adjust, the scene slowly coming into view. The place smelled strange. I was in the morgue last year identifying a friend, and that’s what the odor reminded me of, that same disturbing stench of death combined with formaldehyde. Did they have dead bodies here? I asked myself. I remembered what they had said earlier, that the dead weren’t as dead as they had thought.”

Randy stared at the Jesus statue, then turned towards the Virgin Mary. His lips moved, but I couldn’t make out any words. The New Religion people aren’t Christians, but they believe in similar icons.

“My eyes finally adjusted, and I was able to make out three people sitting on lawn chairs watching me. They were just sitting there with blank expressions on their faces. Two men and one woman, all of them old, in their sixties or seventies. They were dressed funny, in rumpled clothes that didn’t quite fit. I turned towards Renee and Dave with a questioning look. They nodded at me encouragingly, the fear in their eyes stronger than ever, and said to look closer. I did, and that’s when I noticed they were pale, super pale, alabaster white. It was as if a pigment of color had never graced their flesh. They made albinos look tan. Their skin was the color of my hair. Capeesh?”

Capeesh, I said to myself, but no words came out.

“They watched me with their blank expressions while I moved closer and examined their eyes. All of them had blue eyes, the color of pictures I’ve seen of the waters in the Caribbean, but the blue in their eyes

was swirling around and around in a circular motion, like clothes in a washing machine. There were black lines inside the blue, making their eyes resemble a kaleidoscope.

"Then they did something that made me jump back. They all smiled, all at the same time. It sounds innocuous, but believe me, it wasn't. Their smiles were seriously creepy, conveying amusement, cruelty, and perhaps I imagined this, but I thought of executioners when I saw them. The smiles also seemed unnatural and forced, as if it was something they had trained themselves to do and couldn't quite pull off. I looked questioningly at Dave and Renee. 'Who are they?' I croaked. 'Dead people,' Renee said. 'They died five days ago.'"

I shot out of my seat as if propelled by an invisible force. "Dead people?" This is what I was talking about earlier when I mentioned dead bodies coming to life. Not good.

"Sssshhhh," Randy said. He gently pushed me back down. "We don't want anyone else to hear this."

"I don't want to hear this."

He smiled at me sadly. "You asked, I warned. Remember?"

It was then I noticed the organ music had stopped. When did it go silent? I didn't know. My eyes raced around the chapel. A few people had entered while we were talking, but had sat in the back, too far away to hear anything.

"Yeah, you warned me, but dead people?" I whispered it this time. "You gotta be kidding me."

"I wish I was. We left the company of the charming trio and moved to one of the picnic tables. I was shaking, and not just on the inside. My entire body

shook. They lit up cigarettes and offered me one. I gave up smoking years ago, but I've found a cigarette every now and then is good for the soul."

"Of course," I said. "We can't be too straight. That'll kill us even faster. It's common sense." I was a pretty good shrink, back in the day.

"They explained they had heard strange rumors about bodies in the morgue coming back to life. They thought it was crazy until they found out the government had changed their policies and were shipping bodies to a special facility north of here and burning them instead of burying them like they used to. I bet if the sky was ever clear, we could even see the smoke."

The morgue has bad memories for me. I worked there years ago and had nightmares for weeks afterward. Earlier this morning I had gone to the hospital to look for a job. I lucked out, if you can call it luck, and was offered weekends at the morgue for a month. The previous guy had called in a few minutes before I walked in the door and said he quit, mentioning something about zombies. Steve, the human resources guy, thought he was drunk. Despite my desperation, I hadn't planned on taking the job and instead told Steve I'd think about it and call him back later this afternoon if I was interested. At the time, I didn't want to burn any bridges by giving him a final answer. But after what Randy had told me, the job at the morgue sounded like a godsend. I wanted to find out what was going on. Bodies in the morgue coming back to life? Scary as hell, but worth investigating.

Everything strange and off-kilter has always fascinated me. It's why I got into psychology in the first place, to explore the dark places of the mind and the

soul. Yeah, it sounds a bit pompous, I know, but it's basically true.

"I wasn't planning on taking the morgue job, but now I think I must."

"Take the job. That's a great in for us. Find out everything you can."

"I will," I said. "I'll call Steve back later today and tell him I'll be in tomorrow morning. Father Gallagher will let me use his phone."

The days of cell phones are long gone. During the second civil war, terrorists destroyed the cell phone infrastructure, and it's never been built up again, at least not in any large capacity. The only people with cell phones these days are the very wealthy, the only ones capable of paying the high access fees.

"Good." He looked at me with proud benevolence, mixed with a new sadness in his eyes. "I hope you don't regret it. Where was I in the story?" he asked.

I had to think about it for a few seconds. Too many things were running around my head. "Burning bodies."

"Yes, burning bodies, but they also said something else. They heard they don't burn all the bodies. Some they keep alive up there, in a prison, to study. Sick, isn't it?"

"That's what I call an understatement. They're intentionally keeping these things alive?"

"It sounds like a strong possibility. After Renee and Dave heard about the burning bodies and the possible prison, they thought there might be something to the bizarre rumors of dead bodies coming to life, so they came up with a plan and hijacked one of the trucks delivering the bodies to the facility up north. In the truck, they found the three I had the pleasure of

meeting. They were dead when they found them. Average corpses, nothing spectacular to them at all. They guessed they had been dead already around twenty-four hours. Two days later, they woke up.”

“Holy shit! They woke up? Vampires? Zombies?”

Randy shrugged. “I have no idea. They don’t, either. What they do know is that these three people were dead for around seventy-two hours, and now they’re alive. Technically alive.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re different.”

“How are they different?”

He ignored my question. “Feeling much better after the cigarette (it did great things for my nerves), we went back to the inner sanctuary of the dead.”

I winced. “You’re not helping, calling it that. You know this, right? You’re creeping yourself out even more. Not to mention me.”

“Probably, but I can’t help myself. Anyway, no interruptions. Didn’t I say that earlier?”

“You did, but I also said it was one of my many flaws. I interrupt while you creep yourself out. Why don’t we both attempt to refrain from indulging our flaws?”

“Sure, anything you say if you’ll let me tell this story.” He stretched out his neck muscles by rolling his head back and forth. He cracked his knuckles. It sounded as if the knots in his body were slowly coming loose. “I feel better already. Thanks, I mean it. It’s good getting this out of my system. Now I have someone to share the pain with. You lucky dog, you.”

“Any time, man.”

“We returned to the not so dead people. Does calling them ‘not so dead people’ make you feel better?”

“Better than the inner sanctuary of the dead. Anything is better than that.”

“Good. The three not so dead people were sitting on the lawn chairs like they were before, wearing the same blank expressions I initially saw. This time, I tried talking to them. I grabbed an empty chair and set it in front of them. I sat down in it, leaned back and crossed my legs, pretending everything was wonderful. ‘Hello,’ I said. ‘Hello,’ they echoed back in normal voices, their facial expressions disturbingly blank. If you didn’t look at them too closely, you’d think they were just three elderly people sitting there harmlessly minding their own business. Perhaps they had a form of dementia, but essentially normal. But here they were, a miracle, resurrected from the dead, every religion’s holy grail. If you want to get someone’s attention, what you do is die and then wake up a few days later. People will create religions around you in no time with millions of fanatical followers.”

“A neat trick if you can do it.”

“‘How do you feel?’ I asked them. ‘We’re great,’ the woman said. ‘Couldn’t be better.’ I asked, ‘Are you still, uh....’ I wasn’t sure how to phrase the question, so was a bit clumsy asking it. ‘Are you still yourselves?’ The woman answered again. She seemed to be the spokesman for the trio. ‘We’re ourselves,’ she said. ‘And we aren’t ourselves. You want to see something neat?’ She turned to the two men. ‘Go ahead, show him what we can do.’

“The two men looked at each other. One of them reached into his pants pocket and took out a pocket

knife. He rolled the sleeve of his left arm up and proceeded to cut himself with it, vertically down his arm, parallel to one of his veins, strong enough that blood began flowing out. He then said to watch and held out his arm. After a few seconds, the blood stopped flowing, and the wound began healing itself. A minute later, it was as if he hadn't cut himself at all."

"Freaky," I said.

"It was disconcerting. I asked him if he had ever tried to cut one of the veins. He said he hadn't gone that far yet. He wasn't sure if his body would be able to heal that kind of wound. Anything minor that threatened his life, like blood flow, would heal instantly. One of the women at the camp was also a certified nurse. She confirmed that the three elderly people, although they still appeared old superficially, had the bodies of men and women in their prime. After regaining what composure I had lost from the display of healing, I asked them what they wanted. 'You died and were born again,' I said. 'What do you want in this life? Why have you returned from the dead? Are you miracles?'

"They turned to each other and laughed at the miracle question. The woman spoke again: 'We're no miracle. We were sick, that's all, and now we're not. The virus animates us. We can feel it running through our bodies, we can even feel it in our heads.' They all tapped their heads at the same time. 'It's alive,' she said. 'We're alive. We're more alive than you.' At that, they all laughed. Their laughter was as awkward and unnatural as their smiles. It was forced and made them look more grotesque. All human emotion seemed alien to them."

"Do you know what she meant by more alive than you?"

"I can guess," Randy said. "So can you. We can all guess. That's easy."

"Easy for you, maybe. You were there."

"I think she was saying that she's more alive than me because of their healing properties, and that they defied death. We all basically have one foot in the grave. They put both feet in the grave before crawling out again, victorious. That's my guess as to what she meant, but maybe I'm wrong. Anyway, I had had enough of the three not so dead people, so I got out of there and haven't been back since. Come on, let's go outside. Perhaps telling you the story here in this holy place was a bad idea."

Jesus and the Virgin Mary appeared to be hovering right above us, having moved closer. I said, "It feels like sacrilege, doesn't it? We thought no one was here to listen in on our conversation. Maybe we were wrong."

If Jesus and the Virgin Mary had heard us, I wonder what they thought of Randy's story.

They're probably as freaked out as I am.

Until the dead began to wake
Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary
Never thought life was particularly scary

Chapter 2

I'm jolted out of my reveries when the lights go out and the music stops. I had gotten so lost in the memories that I'm surprised by the closed book resting heavy on my chest. It's Roberto Bolano's 2666, monstrously long and dull in parts, but, despite itself, it's beautifully written and engaging and helps pass the time. I have a tiny flashlight to read by, but I know I can't concentrate on the book. Instead, I lie there and think and listen to the rustlings of the bodies around me as they settle and get comfortable, gradually receding into stillness and sleep.

Eventually, the only sound I can hear is the omnipresent buzzing of the air filtration system. This is supposed to help keep us safe. Whether it's nothing more than a fancy placebo device, I have no idea, but I'm glad for its comforting existence. Although there hadn't been a new virus or mutation in three years, a month ago people began getting sick and dying again. None of us were delusional enough to imagine the age of the virus was over, but we did tend to think of ourselves as immune, especially those of us over thirty. We had survived this long, hadn't we? The virus—any virus—wasn't about to kill us now.

My mom believed she was immune, but she died last week from the latest virus. We never did figure out how she caught it. Her death made me rethink my own mortality, that maybe I wasn't so immune after all. I'm

now not nearly as comfortable being around people as I once was.

The latest virus appears to be a virulent one, worse than anything we've seen in decades. People are scared. A few people here are even wearing masks, which is a rare sight these days except at healthcare facilities like hospitals. Many years earlier the experts realized things like masks weren't helping much, so people gradually stopped wearing them. Social distancing has become the norm and is now so ingrained in us that we keep a distance from each other at all times without thinking about it. Our sense of space is so well-developed that when someone unexpectedly gets too close, we can literally feel it like a slap in the face.

That's what keeps us safe here, the air purifier and the social distancing. But how safe are we, really? Look at my poor mother...but it hurts too much to think about her. Something more pleasant is required. Assuming I can find anything.

There's Keri, whom I met this morning. She looked so pretty and fragile, sitting on a park bench reading Dr. Seuss's *Cat in the Hat* to her kid Eric. She's on the opposite side of the chapel, with the women. They separate the sexes here. I turn my head in what I guess is her direction, but all I can make out is a sea of dull, hazy, formless bodies.

Some people say we're always alone when asleep, even when the love of our life sleeps beside us. They've never spent months sleeping in a large room with fifty other people. It sounds strange, but everyone's psyche intrudes on everyone else's. They slip in past the barriers our minds have erected, and our dreams become fluid and merge into one another freely. I'm

sure our minds haven't always been this porous. My guess is that this is one of the many symptoms of the virus. It's literally changing our brains in fundamental ways. Perhaps it's simple evolution, and if it is, I pray it's in the right direction.

I close my eyes and think of Keri and her fragile beauty. As I do, my mind drifts towards her.

I imagine she's lying on her back like me, staring up at the ceiling, eyes still open. Instead of a sleeping bag, she's resting on pillows and blankets with a thick, colorful quilt over her. She's worried about the future, worried about her son Eric and how they're going to survive. Father Gallagher has been kind, but she can't stay here forever. In a normal world, she'd be working, with Eric in school, but a normal life like that is impossible now. Why did her husband have to die? Why is the world so very brutal and unfair?

I reach out to her with more intensity, focusing my thoughts like a laser beam. I feel her smooth, dark hair, the warm softness of the skin on her face, I touch her lithe body.

She's lying next to me now, warm and solid. My sleeping bag has magically gotten larger, there's room enough inside for two. Our foreheads touch, and we kiss. Before I know what's going on, our clothes have vanished and we're lying in each other's arms, bare skin rubbing against each other's. She's warm and soft with faint traces of a perfume or shampoo I can't recognize. I can feel her in my arms, and she's oh so real, oh so solid. I'm on top of her, inside her, hands on the side of her head, staring into her brown eyes that stare back at me in pleasant surprise.

We're both lost in another world, a better world, a world of pure energy, but an energy that we can touch

and feel. I move lower, spread her legs wide with my hands, I taste her. She's then on top of me, her face close to mine, our eyes practically joined. We disappear into each other and become one, just one ball of energy spinning around and around on the floor inside the sleeping bag.

When we're spent, I hold her tight in my arms, her back towards me, nestled up against her. I can feel the bones of her back and hear the beating of her heart. Her soft, warm breath hums gently as it goes in and out of her.

We fall asleep like this, safely ensconced in our tight cocoon.

....

At 7:00 am the lights turn on and the music starts; the same baroque music from last night, but livelier and more energetic. Morning music. We all pick ourselves up from the hard floor and begin gathering our things together. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I roll up my sleeping bag and walk over to Keri. After the life-like fantasies of last night, the thought of talking with her makes me nervous, but it's something I have to do. In a weird way, it's like the morning after, waking up with a woman after making love with her for the first time. When you were making love, you may have been drunk and crazed and metaphorically in another world, now you're exhausted, drained, with a mild to full-blown hangover.

"Hello Keri," I say, trying to get her attention. She's kneeling in front of Eric, fiddling with his shirt, being a mother. They both turn toward me, and I greet him too. "I hope you both slept well last night."

The Not So Dead People

Keri has short, dark hair and pale skin. She's so skinny her hips are barely visible. Her big brown eyes seem to have a perpetually wary look to them. She's waif-like and reminds me of a pixie, fragile and easily damaged. Her face is so striking that my eyes want to linger on her features longer than I know I should. The last thing I want to do is make her uncomfortable.

I search her eyes for any indication that things are different between us, that perhaps she felt what I did, that in some way we really made love together in another world, but all I see in her eyes is sadness and exhaustion and the struggle inside at facing another difficult day. It breaks my heart. I wonder if I'm going mad, or maybe I'm there already, fully delusional.

"Sam, right?" she says without much enthusiasm. I nod, and my heart droops a few more notches. I want to disappear under a large rock, crawl under it to be with the bugs and the other unwanted vermin. We belong there together. She barely even knows my name. "We're alright. It's hard to sleep on this floor, but I'm getting used to it."

"How long has it been?"

"About two weeks. Ever since..." Instead of continuing, she shakes her head and focuses again on Eric, looking him over intently. When she's satisfied, she stands up.

I want to ask her about everything, but instead, I only say, "I'm going to work today, in the morgue. Lucky me, eh?"

Keri looks as if she's going to cry, and I kick myself for my stupidity. I should have left out the morgue part. I wonder if she had to visit her dead husband there?

Not meeting her eyes, I say, "I'll see you later."

With an aching loneliness, I make my way to the locker room to drop off my stuff.

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This is Portland's rainy season. It's been raining for months. Not always rain; it's probably more accurate to say a wet fog has covered the entire city since September. We've had three months of this, and today is no different. Just another gray, wet day. The rain is falling only sporadically, which is a relief.

With the hood of my jacket over my head, I walk and can't stop thinking about how much of an idiot I was to believe my fantasies had some reality to them. The energy was intense and palpable, yes, but if she didn't feel it too, it was nothing more than a hallucination. She not only barely knows I exist, she isn't even sure of my name. I kick myself for hoping that with her I'd somehow connect. But I can't get that mingling of energy out of my head. Could it have been real without her being aware of it? Perhaps it was her unconscious reaching out to me?

I'm the one reaching, I firmly tell myself. In my desperate, insatiable hope for love and connection, I'm trying to believe something that isn't there. Stop it, I tell myself. Forget about it. She barely knows you exist. For once in your life, don't be a fool.

My morgue job is in the Good Samaritan Medical Hospital, twelve blocks north of the cathedral. It's the largest hospital in Northwest Portland, so huge that it takes up entire blocks. It's where the people who have no money go. There's a smaller, private hospital north of the Good Samaritan that serves the very wealthy. I've never been in there. My guess is they check the level of your bank account at the door.

Instead of going to the hospital directly, I make a slight detour to check out Couch Park. I want to take a look at it, but after what Randy told me yesterday, I have no plans to enter. Even on the best of days, it would likely be unpleasant. Ever since the homelessness problem took off decades ago, most parks have become the personal fiefdoms of homeless gangs. Government forces periodically raid and drive them out, but like bed bugs or cockroaches, they always return.

When I get close, I'm surprised to see a tall, barbed wire fence surrounding the entire park. The gaps in the fence are so small that only a small child could fit through. The wire is attached to poles at least fifteen feet high. The south entrance is barred, except for a small, locked gate that swings open and closed. All of this is new; it wasn't here in August when I was here last. If I remember correctly, Randy mentioned the barbed wire on the inside, but not on the outside like this.

Inside the fence is a large homeless encampment, full of tents, people milling around carrying plates and coffee mugs, sitting on park benches eating and drinking. There's something about how they carry themselves and the expressions on their faces that tells me how nervous they are. I'm not sure what precisely it is that unsettles me so much until I realize it's their lack of animation. Their facial expressions are blank, and they walk around stiffly like robots. I've seen people terrified before. These people are terrified. They look like they've seen something they wish they hadn't. Doom envelopes them like a second skin. It's so palpable and strong I can feel it from here.

I move closer to get a better look. That's when I notice the giant yellow canopy in the center of the park, also fenced off with barbed wire. This must be where the not so dead people are being held. A man with a stern face stands in front of it, pacing back and forth as if he's guarding the structure. While I examine the canopy as best I can, a large, bulky man leans across the fence and gets as close to me as he can. He's tall and muscular with short spiky hair. He has apparently been watching me.

"What do you want?" he asks in an accusing, authoritative voice. His hands are at his side, bulged into loose fists. He's menacing in a ridiculous way that reminds me of old movies. He's like a cartoon character; despite his ferocity, I want to laugh.

I take a step back and hold up my hands. This guy scares me, but I know as long as I don't try to get inside the fence, he's not going to do anything. He's merely the troll guarding the bridge.

"Relax," I say. "I'm just checking things out. Last time I was here, there wasn't any fence. It got my interest, that's all."

His posture relaxes as he realizes I'm no threat. But he's still a bully, so needs to act like one. In a still threatening tone, he says, "The fence came up two weeks ago. There were too many stragglers without anything to offer." We stare at each other. "You better leave," he says. "You're not wanted here."

"Good luck," I say, although I'm not sure why.

The hospital is a fifteen-minute walk north of the park. I walk down 21st Avenue. Years ago, before the first virus hit, this was one of the busiest, most vibrant parts of Northwest Portland. People came here to eat, drink, and be merry. There were packed restaurants

and bars all up and down this street, two theaters with movies and plays, a concert hall. Now, except for the rare restaurant, bar, and shop, it's practically dead and has been for decades.

I pass boarded-up stores and restaurants. A few people stand around on the sidewalk with everything they own in shopping carts. A New Religion woman with dreadlocks down to her waist sits on the sidewalk outside the internet cafe, a cardboard sign beside her. Written on it in a black Sharpie is, "The end is near, but let's rejoice while we still can!" There are a few dollar bills in her begging bowl. The unrelenting optimism of The New Religion people makes me simultaneously miserable and hopeful.

A guy in torn clothes, a colorful bandana wrapped around his head, runs past screaming that the devil is chasing him. I nimbly step out of the way to avoid him running into me. I look for a guy in red with horns, but no one is following him. Welcome to 21st Avenue crazy.

A large group of people are at the entrance to the hospital. Most of them appear to be patients, a few are wheeling carts with intravenous fluids attached to them, some are smoking cigarettes. One of the security guards drags a disheveled-looking old man out into the street. The man wails, doing his best to escape the grasp of the guard, but he's helpless. Everyone pretends to ignore them.

When I get close to the entrance, I put on my mask. Hospitals are the only facilities left that require them. I nod at the well-armed security guard. He looks me over but doesn't hassle me when I walk in.

Two months ago, I got a job here as a janitor that lasted four weeks. That's how I was able to pay for the furnished room I was living in before I ran out of

money and moved back into the church. The hospital is all about unskilled temporary work, usually one-month stints.

I like hospitals. Sure, they're places of sickness and death, but they're also houses of miracles, healing, and new life. Every other day, some incurable patient is miraculously cured and skips out of the hospital. Babies are still being born, even in the age of the virus. Despite all the misery, there's always hope, always some success to celebrate. And this hospital is so huge it's like a small town that's perpetually awake, open for business twenty-four hours a day. When I worked here, I hardly ever left, sleeping most nights on an out-of-the-way couch on one of the top floors. It was marvelous.

The waiting room is packed with people of all ages and colors. Although I like hospitals in general, waiting rooms like this one depress me. The desperation level is so high I can taste it, the air so thick it's hard to breathe, especially with the mask covering my mouth and nose.

I wade through the masses of people until I reach the frazzled receptionist. I hand her my ID and tell her I'm here to work in the morgue. She looks me up on her computer before giving me a form to fill out. That task accomplished, she hands me a temporary employee ID stamped with today's date. I hang it around my neck and enter the main part of the hospital, through a large glass door with another security guard standing beside it.

The contrast between the madness of the waiting room and the quiet in here is jarring. The main hospital is dim as if it's lit by night lights only. It smells of old people and death, with that musty smell in the air no

amount of fans or air freshener can ever remove. There are wails of anguish somewhere in a distant room, followed by soothing voices. And then a troubled silence.

I know this hospital well, having sporadically over the years swept and mopped every nook and cranny. I wander around for a few minutes, taking in the sights.

“Out of the way!” Two nurses are racing straight towards me, coming fast, wheeling a bearded guy covered to his chin in a white sheet. I step aside just in time. While I watch them disappear into a room down the hallway, a young woman in her late teens passes by holding a baby that’s so young I think it must have just been born. The girl looks radiant, cradling the baby to her breasts, whispering something to it.

I get to the elevator and press B. The morgue is in the basement, deep in the bowels of the hospital. It has its own entrance, but they want us to go through the hospital and enter that way. The other entrance is more of a drop-off and pick-up station for the bodies that die elsewhere and are then brought here. Muzak is playing, a Beatles tune that sounds familiar. I concentrate and finally place it as “Let it Be.” That makes me smile.

Fifteen seconds later, the elevator door opens. I walk down a dark hall, lit by only a few lightbulbs here and there on the ceiling. My steps echo loudly as I walk, the noise banging against the floor, walls, and ceiling. The air has a musky dampness to it, and the air is so thick I move my mask away from my mouth and take a deep breath. The odor is strange and causes my nose to itch. I pass a few desolate rooms that are empty laboratories, and keep on walking.

Steps come towards me from ahead. Soon an old man limps slowly in my direction. It’s Joseph. Years

ago, I worked the night shift down here and met him. He must be in his early seventies by now, short with thick gray hair and a gray mustache. There's something wrong with his leg; when he walks, he drags it behind him as if he's walking a dog.

Besides the medical examiners, he was the only full-time morgue employee, always working the night shift from midnight to eight. His skin is so pale that he can easily pass for one of the corpses. I enjoyed imagining him falling asleep and being mistaken for a dead body by a sleepy pathologist.

"Joseph," I say. "Good morning."

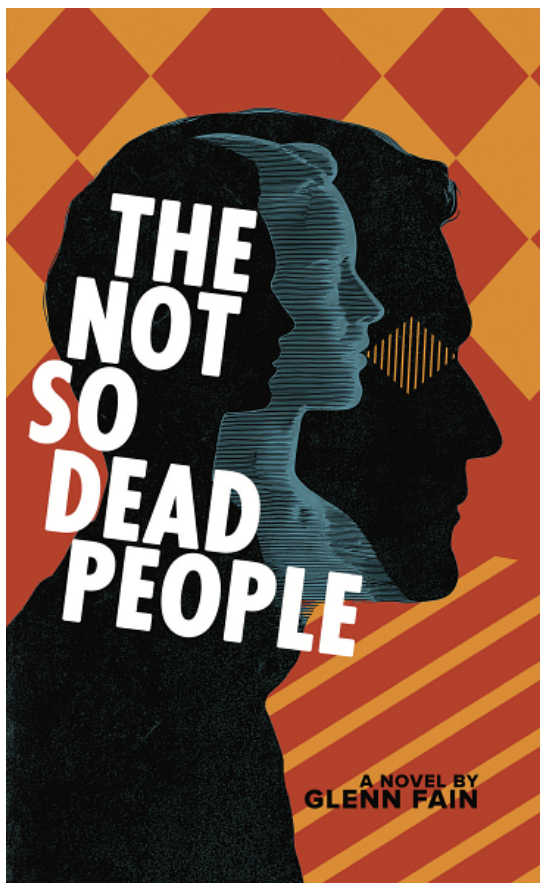
He recognizes me and smiles. "Two ships passing in the night," he says. "Just like old times. Good luck."

"Thanks. How is it in there?"

"A wild party, but it's BYOB. The booze ran out a few hours ago." He chuckles as if he has just told a marvelous joke, and then with a wave of his hand he hobbles off.

He's in an infernally good mood. Maybe he really is drinking beer in there.

When there's a party in the morgue,
It's always good cheer and prancing,
Especially when the dead start dancing



THE NOT SO DEAD PEOPLE is a wryly observed, meditative descent through identity, memory, and the quiet horror of resurrection. Blending dystopian noir with metaphysical dread, it asks what we owe the dead—and what they might remember of us.

The Not So Dead People
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