

“Kids, dinner’s ready,” I called.

Grampy was already there, slouched in his usual spot at the end of the table. His teeth were beside his plate. Drool ran from his slack lips. I saw his tongue sliding over his puffy gums in anticipation. He garbled something interrogative at me.

I hadn’t been able to understand my father-in-law when he was alive. Nowadays, it was hopeless.

“What, Grampy?”

He rolled his eyes. They, like his teeth, were beside his plate. His spidery, bony fingers toyed with the murky orbs. They leaked a little, leaving snail-trails on the tablecloth. He made the questioning mumble again.

Caitlin had entered the dining room in time to hear him despite the headphones clamped to her ears. “He asked what’s for dinner,” she said, with the haughtiness that only a teenager could master.

“Take those things off,” I said, indicating the headphones.

She rolled her eyes, too, but at least Caitlin’s were still in their sockets. As she obeyed, I heard the perky percussive slam-bounce of the music. Life-metal. Typical. Kids had to rebel. When I was her age, the edgy your-parents-will-hate-it music was all about death and darkness and nihilism.

Davey came in from the backyard, so filthy he might have just clawed his way out of a muddy grave. I took one look and sent him straight to the sink to wash up.

“Aw, Mom!”

“Don’t ‘aw, Mom’ me, mister. Where’s Tess?”

In answer, I felt a small hand plucking at my skirt. I looked down at my youngest, my baby. Tess was dragging her stuffed rabbit by one tattered ear and had a thumb in her mouth.

“Where did you get that?” I asked, removing it. “Is this your father’s thumb?”

Tess wrinkled up her face and started to whimper. I relented, returning it to her. If it was Stuart’s thumb, he had no one to blame but himself for leaving it lying around. In almost twenty years of marriage, I hadn’t been able to break him of the habit of leaving his dirty socks all over the place, let alone body parts. Tess bit down happily, gnawing at the thick ivory-

yellow nail. She only had six teeth, but that still put her ahead of Grampy. I lifted her into her booster chair.

“Okay?” asked Davey, presenting his hands for my inspection. They were grey-green, the skin peeling, the scabs on his knuckles worn away to reveal bare bone, but they were clean.

“Good enough,” I said.

As I was dishing up the meal, Stuart arrived with his briefcase. His tie and the loose hanging flesh of his neck and trachea were pulled askew at the collar. He gave me a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, greeted his father, sat down and buried his nose in the newspaper. I saw that he was missing his right pinkie finger and half his index finger, but had both thumbs. Tess must have picked up her chew-toy outside. There were plenty of bits and pieces around the neighborhood, and that was just the way it was with a child as small as Tess. Anything she could pick up went right into her mouth. Marbles, pennies, bugs, dead mice . . . in it went.

“Brainloaf again?” groaned Davey as I set his plate before him. “We just *had* brainloaf.”

“Moth-errrr!” Caitlin repeated the eye-roll. “How many times do I have to tell you? I don’t eat that stuff anymore.”

“Caitlin, don’t be silly,” I said. “Eat your brain. It’s good for you.”

“I’m a vegetarian, remember?”

Stuart lowered his paper and peered at her. “Since when?”

“Since I decided it’s cruel and inhumane to prey upon living creatures,” she said. “If you listened, if anybody in this family cared about my feelings —”

“We could have Brain Helper,” Davey suggested, poking without enthusiasm at the steaming pink-brown slab. “I like Brain Helper.”

“We’re having this,” I said.

“What do you mean, cruel and inhumane?” Stuart asked Caitlin. “How do you expect to survive?”

“We don’t *need* to eat brains! There are alternatives!”

“Like cauliflower?” Davey snickered. “That at least *looks* like a brain.”

“Shut up, Davey.”

“Make me!”

“I’ve about had enough out of you, young lady,” Stuart said. “First that horrible music, and the way you dress, and now this!”

“What’s wrong with the way I dress?”

“Look at you! Susan, help me out here.”

I finished mashing Grampy’s brainloaf into a lumpy paste that he could spoon up, and moved on to cutting a slice into manageable pieces for Tess. “Well, Caitlin, your father does have a point. That pink makeup . . .”

“I like it. Don’t I have a right to express my individuality?”

“If all the kids are doing it, what’s individual about that?” Stuart asked.

“I knew you wouldn’t understand!” She pushed back from the table so hard that the splintery white end of her ulna jabbed out through her forearm. “Oh, great! See what you made me do?”

“You get back here and eat your dinner, young lady!” Stuart shouted after her as she stormed out.

“Stu, let her go,” I said.

“Are you going to let her do this to herself?”

“She’ll eat when she’s hungry.”

“But she’s already just skin and bones.”

I shrugged. “It’s not like she’ll starve to death.”

The rest of us ate our dinner. I saved Caitlin’s plate in the fridge for her, in case she changed her mind, but I didn’t hold out much hope. Teenagers could be so stubborn. I could always send a cold brainloaf sandwich to work in Stuart’s lunch, if he could be persuaded to brown-bag it instead of going out hunting downtown with his colleagues. Or, if there were enough leftovers, maybe Davey would get his way tomorrow night. I still had a box or two of Brain Helper in the cupboard.

Some things, even after the end of the world, never did change.

Here we were, all of us, still going about our daily domestic routines. Stuart went to the office. I took care of the house and the kids. Davey and Caitlin went to school and spent time with their friends. Tess toddled and played. Grampy mumbled about how much better it had been in the good old days.

“So how was work?” I asked, trying to coax Tess into drinking her bile from a big-girl cup instead of a bottle.

“Mr. Harris wants me to take over Don Foster’s job.”

“Really? Honey, that’s wonderful. But what happened to Don?”

“Shot in the head while walking to his car.”

“Here? In our neighborhood?”

Stu nodded.

I glanced at Davey, hoping he wouldn’t be paying attention to boring grown-up talk. But of course he was listening avidly.

“I’m sure it must have been an accident,” I said. What we’ll do to try and protect our children from the ugly truth . . .

Of course, it wasn’t like Davey hadn’t seen his share of ugliness. We all had. I had been right there when one of Caitlin’s teachers took a shotgun blast to the face while trying to haul someone out of a truck. Her head had blown apart in a curdled spray, splattering me with cold, sticky gobs. All three of the kids had seen Mr. Algiers, the postman, stalking down our street in stiff, jittery strides after someone had buried a hatchet haft-deep in the top of his skull. He had made it as far as our driveway before collapsing.

And then there was what had happened to Rex . . .

“Hope they get the one who did it,” Stuart said. “Get him and eat him up, struggling and raw, like we used to. Remember that, Davey-boy?”

“Yeah,” Davey said. “Can we go hunting this weekend, Dad? Can we?”

“We’ll see.”

“Oh, Stu, I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” I said. “Davey’s so young—”

“You can’t treat him like a child forever, Susan.”

He was wrong about that – they would *be* children forever – but I didn’t want to argue at the dinner table.

“I’ll make a casserole for Helen Foster,” I said by way of changing the subject. “It won’t be easy for her without Don.”

Shot in the head. It was the only way to really be

finished, of course. The zombie's worst nightmare. I was always worried that it would happen to Stu, and I'd be left alone with the kids and Grampy to take care of.

The ones I couldn't understand were the live ones who, when backed into a corner, put their own guns to their heads to make sure they wouldn't come back. They acted like it was a fate worse than death.

Like it was so terrible.

A person could get used to about anything, with enough time and a little practice.

All right, maybe it had been a little crazy there near the beginning. Everyone had gone kind of nuts then, living or dead. Riots. Massacres. Armed survivalists. Cities in flames. Martial law. Pockets of resistance. Shambling hoards. Chasing down screaming people and tearing hot, wet chunks out of them . . .

Things were better now. Almost back to normal. After all, we still had the things that mattered. We had each other. We had home, and family. Millions of others hadn't been so lucky.

After dinner, Stuart unstrapped Grampy from his chair and carried him into the living room to watch television. Not that there was much on these days that any of us cared to watch. The reruns were all painful reminders from before, and there just wasn't a lot in terms of programming aimed at the new demographic.

I sent Davey up to do his homework, and took Tess in for her bath. I could hear music from Caitlin's room. She was in there, sulking, with the door shut. Probably on the phone to one of her friends.

"Who's a clean girl?" I crooned as I washed Tess. I did it gently, so as not to rub off more than I had to, but as careful as I was the water soon became filmed with a greasy residue and shed scraps of skin.

Tess giggled and kicked and splashed. I poured baby shampoo into my cupped palm and lathered her fine blonde hair. Some suds ran down her face and into her eyes, but she didn't cry. Just as she never cried whenever I accidentally poked her with a diaper pin.

I dried her off and got her into a set of fuzzy yellow sleepers patterned with duckies. Combing her hair, I struck a tangle and pulled too hard without thinking. A patch of scalp the size of a quarter peeled away

from her skull.

"Oh, look at that," I said. "Sorry, sweetie. Mommy's clumsy today."

Davey had finished his homework by the time I carried Tess into their room. He was in his pajamas and had toys spread all over the floor.

"Mom, can I have a puppy?" he asked, looking up as I came in.

"No, dear, you should have eaten all of your dinner."

"I meant as a pet."

"Oh." I sat in the rocker, Tess cradled on my lap. "I don't think so, Davey."

"It wouldn't be like with Rex, I promise. We could get a real puppy. One like us."

"Animals aren't like us, Davey. You know that."

His lower lip stuck out. It was hanging by a flap and would probably fall off any day now. "Why aren't they?"

"Nobody knows," I said, beginning to rock. "They just aren't."

"I miss Rex. I didn't know he wouldn't come back. I was just hungry."

"I know." I smiled at him, my soothing-mommy smile. "I know, honey. Now go brush your teeth and get into bed. We've got a story to finish."

"Okay." He shuffled off.

As I rocked, I let my gaze roam the kids' bedroom. There was still a family photograph hanging on the wall. I had taken down and gotten rid of all the others, the framed pictures and the albums, but this one I kept forgetting.

I was surprised it didn't give Davey nightmares. Those faces . . . faces that were almost familiar . . . faces that were alive . . .

To think, that used to be my family.

Davey came back upset, with two teeth in his hand. He showed them to me as if afraid I might scold. "I was just brushing and they came out."

"That's all right. It happens." Tess had drifted off, and I lowered her into her crib. I smoothed the blanket tight over her bloated little tummy and tucked Mr.

Bun-Bun down beside her. “Into bed with you.”

Once he was in, I returned to the rocker and picked up a thick book from the bedside table. I flipped the colorful pages.

“Do you remember where we left off?” I asked.

“The big brain!” he said, bouncing on the mattress where he had originally died. “The big brain and the zombie godmother!”

I began to read, editing as I went.

* * *

The zombie godmother waved her magic bone, and the brain that Zombiella had brought from the kitchen grew into a carriage, with six giant graveyard rats for horses.

“Now you can go to the ball,” she said.

“But, Godmother!” Zombiella looked down at herself. “How can I go to the ball like this?”

The zombie godmother waved her bone again, and something wonderful happened. Zombiella’s soft pink skin turned dark with decay. Her cheeks sank in. Her glossy hair went stringy and dry. The smell of rotting meat rose around her like perfume. The ugly, raggedy clothes that Zombiella’s stepsisters made her wear turned into a long white shroud, with slippers carved from skulls and hairpins made from fingerbones.

“But be home by midnight,” the zombie godmother warned, “because at the stroke of twelve, the spell ends.”

Zombiella promised to be back in time. She climbed into the brain carriage, and off she went to the ball.

Prince Zombing’s castle was all aglow, and there was music, and a tremendous feast of fresh brains, and every zombie girl in the kingdom had come in hopes of being the one the prince chose to be his bride.

But when Zombiella walked in, Prince Zombing’s eyes popped right out of his head. Nobody recognized the beautiful green stranger in the long shroud and skull slippers. Not even Zombiella’s own jealous stepsisters and cruel stepmother.

Prince Zombing, once he put his eyes back in, would dance with no one else for the rest of the night. They were having such a wonderful time that before Zombiella knew it, the great clock began to strike twelve. She ran for the exit, and in her hurry, she tripped on the staircase. Her anklebones snapped, and one of her feet, still clad in its skull slipper, broke off. She couldn’t go back for it but had to hobble along on the stump until she got back to her brain carriage and the graveyard rats galloped away.

The last stroke of midnight echoed across the land, and the spell ended. The fine carriage turned back to a brain, the rats shrank to their normal size, and Zombiella’s shroud became dismal rags. Her heart started beating. Her skin tingled. She was alive again, horribly alive. Blood poured from the stump of her ankle.

On her one remaining foot, though, was a single skull slipper. Zombiella put it in her pocket and limped the rest of the way home.

She was just in time; her cruel stepmother and jealous stepsisters arrived, furious at the mysterious, nameless stranger who had so enchanted the prince. Zombiella smiled to herself and kept quiet, her skull slipper hidden safely away and wrapped up her stump in a big bundle of rags so no one would guess the truth.

Meanwhile, at the castle, Prince Zombing had found the severed foot on the stairs and swore that he would only marry the zombie girl whose foot it was. He sent his steward from house to house, carrying the foot on a velvet pillow, searching among every girl in the kingdom for its rightful owner.

Well, when Zombiella’s stepmother and stepsisters heard about this, they made a plan. The elder stepsister declared that she should get to try first, and as soon as the steward neared their house, she lopped off one of her feet with a cleaver. When he came to the door, she met him, hopping on one leg. The steward was overjoyed to have found the prince’s true love, but as soon as he tried to match the foot to the stump, he realized he had been tricked. You see, the foot on the pillow was a *right* foot, and the elder stepsister had foolishly cut off her *left* foot.

The steward was angry, but the second stepsister quickly chopped off *her* foot and hobbled out. So the steward tried again . . . but the second stepsister

was so eager and excited that she'd cut crooked, leaving most of her heel on. It was obvious that the foot wouldn't match her stump, either.

Really furious now, the steward was about to leave when Zombiella rushed forward and begged to be allowed to try.

"You?" her stepmother cried. "You, a living girl? Don't be ridiculous! The prince would never marry the likes of you!"

"Please, sir," Zombiella said to the steward.

"My orders did say *every* girl . . ."

Zombiella sat down and unwrapped her stump. She extended her leg, which ended in an ankle-stump that everyone could see looked like a match . . . except that her leg was pink and firm and alive, while the foot on the pillow was green and smelly, its zombie toes twitching.

The steward touched the foot to the stump, and it was a perfect fit. The rot spread quickly up Zombiella's leg, and in seconds she was revealed to be the mysterious zombie girl that the prince had fallen in love with.

But the cruel stepmother, understanding everything, knocked the steward away. She grabbed the foot, wrenched it off of Zombiella's ankle, and threw it in the fire. It went up in a sizzle of grease and smoke, leaving only the blackened skull slipper.

"You'll never prove it now!" she screamed in triumph.

As the steward was staring in horror at the burnt foot bones and wondering how in the world he would explain to the prince, Zombiella reached into her pocket and brought out the other, matching, skull slipper.

"Well," Zombiella said, "I do have this, the other slipper."

That was all the proof anyone could need, so Zombiella married Prince Zombing and they existed happily ever after.

* * *

Davey had gone all drowsy-eyed, but he struggled to stay awake. "Read another one, Mom."

"Tomorrow night."

"Pleeeeeease?"

"Tomorrow night," I repeated firmly.

"Which one?"

I flipped another page. "How about Brainsel and Deadel?"

"Yeah! With the scary live witch and the house made of brains?"

"That's the one."

"And they find their way through the woods by dropping brain crumbs?"

"Sounds like we don't need to read it if you know the whole story already."

"No, I want to!"

I closed the book and leaned over to give Davey a kiss. "All right, then. Good night, Davey."

"Good night, Mom."

He snuggled down in his bed and closed his eyes. I checked on Tess one last time. She was sleeping like the dead, not breathing, not moving, her little face peaceful, the thumb stuck securely in her mouth.

Leaving the kids' door ajar in case they woke in the night, I stood for a moment in the dim hall. The house was quiet. I could faintly hear the television downstairs, and Stu's occasional gargling chuckles. Maybe a rerun of *Fear Factor*; watching the squeamish living munch on cow eyeballs and rancid fish always amused him.

Caitlin's door was closed but there was a line of light beneath it. I rapped twice.

"What?"

"It's Mom."

"I told you, I'm not eating that stuff."

I opened the door. Her room was wallpapered in posters of actors and singing idols, a shrine to the hunks and hotties of a dead-and-gone world. Caitlin was sprawled on the rug with a pile of fashion magazines. Stu was right, she *was* skin and bones. Her efforts with makeup might have hidden her greenish pallor, but I knew from personal experience that cosmetics could only do so much.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," I said.

"Tell that to Dad."

"He's worried about you, that's all. So am I. We just want you to be happy."

“Like anybody really cares.”

“I care.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I know this is hard for you, honey. Nobody ever expected things to turn out this way. It’s not what you wanted. Believe me, it’s not what your father and I wanted for you. But it’s what we have. It’s what is. We all have to do the best we can to get along. At least we’re all still together.”

“So what?”

“So what?” I echoed. “So what, Caitlin? I’ll tell you so what. We still have each other. We’re still a family. That is the most important thing in the world.”

“Yeah.” She rolled over, away from me, her bones making a brittle rattling noise. “Whatever.”

“Someday, maybe you’ll understand how much you, and your father, and your brother and sister really mean to me,” I said.

“Give it *up*, Mom,” she said. “We’re dead. It doesn’t matter.”

“Caitlin –”

She clapped her headphones into place and turned the music back on, cranking it up loud.

I sighed. “When you’re ready,” I said, doubting that she would answer even if she could hear me, “we’ll talk.”

Teenagers. And Caitlin was going to be one forever.

I went into the room I shared with Stuart and sat down at my dressing table. The lights around the mirror showed my reflection with unflattering harshness. The waxy, mossy complexion. The patchy hair that clung to my skull like a bad wig. It had to go. The hairstyle didn’t suit me.

The festering scalp was glued in place by a clammy, gelatinous seal of half-dried blood and fluid. I peeled it away. It made a wet slurping noise as it parted company with my head. Grimacing, I dropped the wad of hair and skin onto the floor. It lay there in a heap, looking like roadkill.

Where it had been, my own hair was sweat-damp and matted down. I worked my fingers into it,

scratching, not caring that the green greasepaint on my fingers was rubbing off. I needed to redo my makeup anyway.

There was a pot of cold cream on the dressing table. I dunked a cloth into it and began scrubbing in slow circles over my cheeks, chin and brow. Hatefully healthy pink skin emerged.

Cosmetics could only do so much.

No amount of makeup, no matter how skillfully applied, was going to hide the truth much longer. I could douse myself in Charnel No. 5 from now until forever, but the slaughterhouse stench couldn’t conceal the fact that my limbs were whole, my flesh solid, my organs inside where they had always been.

Maybe if I lopped off a finger or two? Knocked out some teeth? Gouged out an eye? Or even take the big step, the final step?

Whatever I did, I knew I had to do it soon. Some of the neighbors had already been getting suspicious. Look at Don Foster. I’d hated having to shoot him, but what if he’d said something to Helen? How could I ever show my face in the supermarket again? What if the cruel gossip got back to the kids somehow?

I finished removing my makeup and changed into my nightgown. It was a skimpy little Victoria’s Secret number, lace and wisps of see-through silk, revealing almost everything. All that smooth, firm flesh . . .

It was a good thing Stu had always been a bit on the kinky side.

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