

TWO

I sighed, told them I'd be right in and hung up. Resigned to my fate, I entered a sumptuous gray anteroom that could have been deep within a monochromed Buckingham Palace, where I changed masks for the next performance. My eyes were drawn to a painting that dominated the room, a simple work of seascape swells tumbling darkly on a beach. I saw myself in the tidal foam, shuttling back and forth. I'd been floating on the surface of things for a long time, unaware of what went on underneath, living a connected jumble of bubble worlds that added up only to foam. Behind me were the dreaded double doors that led to the boardroom, some artist's vision of the Doors to Hell: massive, dreadfully ornate, hewn from the scarred planks of some doomed vessel. As I got closer, carved faces in the wood shouted warnings. Or were they screaming? With otherworldly effort, I put my hand on the handle. It was warm to the touch. I pulled...

And there they were: my brooding, luxurious zombies, otherwise known as senior management. They weren't really

zombies, of course, though it was oftentimes difficult to tell. This over-serious assemblage represented the banker side of my mental/parental proxy, buttoned-down in gray and blue, though they lacked that peculiar nudist-mock that once shone from my parents' eyes.

I'd sat through the same intolerable Monday staff meeting every week for the past three billion years, well before the earth had cooled and lichens began breaking rocks into soil. Meetings were part of the courtly drama, and I was required to participate at a regal distance, attended by attendants of crystal and china, silver carafes of royal water and imperial coffee. Every meeting was the same. Every instant occupied the same internal and external agendas, the same exhilarations of meaningless acquisition painted on the same drab masks, aging kids wearing their parents' clothes, drinking imported water with wedges of faded lime that somehow made more tangible the grip of water molecules on crystal tumblers. My focus concentrated on the water glasses, avoiding my employees; the glasses were equally transparent, but somehow more refreshing. I often stared at the crystal-hemmed water during meetings. I found it the surest way to detect living vibrations pulsing through the building, oscillations that betrayed a world alive, somewhere, and by catching life's echo, perhaps I was alive somewhere, too.

My lead corporate attorneys, Mr. Dust and Mr. Ash (I could never remember their real names) waited for me to get comfortably ensconced before starting in on the first agenda item: the all-important merger. I immediately tuned them out, while everyone else in the room seemed to stiffen. Odd, I

couldn't figure out what the big deal was. It was yet another in an endless string of mergers and acquisitions, piling on more and more chunks of concrete and flesh onto an increasingly illusory world we were all compelled to divide and conquer. The attorneys' words washed over me, tinny and gray, distant. I caught some staffers sneaking peeks at me during a presentation. I knew what they were thinking: I had it all. I was one others feared, hated, envied, the list went on and on. And all I ever did was sit like a Sphinx and watch water in the glasses, saying nothing, being nothing, inert and functionless. How could I possibly deserve all this? How, indeed. That Monday morning, I sat in the board room, the bored room, bored out of my mind, the meeting going on unchecked around me like a glacier around an outcrop of granite. An assistant rose to get something, an eraser for the whiteboard, and left a cabinet door ajar. I caught the movement as the door popped back open, slightly. I lost myself in its sliver of darkness, abandoned the merger talk and turned my head sideways. At an angle, the cabinet door looked just like the lid of a huge coffin, blackness within expanding as I watched. I found myself within, dipping, soaring the nothingness of an infinite coffin...

A thick set of documents slapped onto the table before me. I blinked away the memory of freedom, confronted by a 200-slide sourpoint presentation. I sighed and thumbed through the stack. It detailed some enormous project - probably the merger everyone was so anxious about. A final stack of documents was laid down gingerly on top of the previous mound, something apparently just for me. I could see the blank lines above my

name, places that required my signature highlighted in yellow, making it easier for me to sign here, sign there. I glanced back at the cabinet door, still ajar. And something inside me clicked. It was so simple:

My monster didn't need me anymore.

I'd outgrown it. Indeed, I didn't need any of this... this *life*. Hell, it wasn't life, at all. It wasn't even human. Whatever it was, I was free of it. I suddenly realized in that Monday meeting, at that moment, surrounded by those dour Monday faces and cooling cups of coffee, that what I wanted was the one thing I didn't have: freedom. From the monster, from who I'd become. But a question remained: would my creation let me go?

I surveyed the gray beings seated around the long, boardroom table. Saw them blah-blahing about expenditures and timelines and deliverables, listening to chipmunk conference calls sped up one-and-a-half-times so they could listen to more of them in a day. Would these creatures let me go? Something made me look at them more closely.

Their faces betrayed a tense consensus. Something was wrong. They'd been feverishly pushing some deal through, some special merger that I'd been repressing, and only now did I realize why: my corporation was dying. And as it was still private, I held the only vote. My staff only required my final signature, some ink on paper. They didn't need *me*. They did fine without my Sphinxian input, most days. So, I decided, in that meeting, at that moment - 10:42 a.m. - that I was through, finished. This was C. Stillman Fuller's last day as factotum totem. The realization smacked into me like a bus-load of Shriners: this was my last

meeting. *MY LAST MEETING!*

I was free! I wanted to dance on the table. I didn't have to listen to this dreck anymore. No more banal small-talk. No more flaccid moans of "Happy Birthday" set to an automatic calendar. No more office politics, backstabbing, quasi-ethical wrangling, legal ramifications, negotiations, tax implications, millions of email to digest, plastic plants, inhuman hum and tumble. The door to my cell just popped open. The guards smiled at me, gave me a new suit, twenty bucks and pointed down a long road that led... somewhere, anywhere that was human.

But I knew I couldn't get off that easy.

Somewhere within my skull's gray-matter prison, my internal SuperBanker warden took charge, tabled my application for parole and tossed me back into my cell. And the act of separating me from my sudden, newfound freedom broke my sanity with an audible CRACK. I looked around the room, wondering if anyone had heard my mind snap.

The shockwave tore through the water in the glasses on the table, echoing down the marbled halls, elevator shafts, streets, sewers. But that was only the beginning. Halfway through a report on projected legal expenditures for The Merger, my gaze was torn from the rippling water in the glasses, as something extraordinary was happening at the head of the table. Mr. Dust and Mr. Ash were making a case for something, but their words made no sense. I was just thinking this not uncommon for attorneys when they began to shimmy and vibrate, their features blurring. Whatever it was, it looked uncomfortable. Then it got worse. And worser still. Something overly odd and frightening

was happening to Mr. Dust and Mr. Ash. Even if I could've remembered their real names, it wouldn't have stopped their noses from suddenly sloughing off their faces and impacting the table with wet, double PLOPs. Weirder still, no one else noticed.

The rest of my staff sat oblivious, nervous grins plastered on their faces. Hell, I could conjure countless meetings where absolutely nothing happened, where a nose falling from a face would have been welcome - nay, celebrated. Prophets would have wept. Ribbons cut. Shiny new hulls kicked into the ocean. But this nose-dive novelty was just a sample of what was to come.

As I began to pay attention to them for the first time in years, Mr. Dust and Mr. Ash got excited and started talking faster, exacerbating their extreme exfoliation. I watched in horror as the remainder of their face flesh melted to reveal bloody animated skulls that hovered and chittered before me, beady eyes still alive within sticky heads, jawbones splattering color onto the boardroom's monochromed canvas. I rubbed my eyes. *Had I ingested some hallucinogen?* I looked at my water glass. It was dry, empty, a crystal, oblong desert. Hadn't it been full a second ago? And hadn't I, in fact, filled it? I grabbed the glass and tossed water into it from a silver jug, pounding the liquid down my throat like some crazed desert nomad. Then again, this was how it seemed to me. For all I knew, to those in the meeting, I'd barely moved. They ignored me, not reacting in the least.

Alas, the water had no effect on stopping the degradation of Mr. Dust's and Mr. Ash's lurid presentation. The remaining flesh from their bones tumbled onto the carpet, making com-

ical sounds through their clothes. I watched in horror as the rest of my staff followed suit, one after another, attorneys and CPAs alike, until I was flanked by no less than twenty of the Living Dead - each smoking ruin clad in elegant, blood-streaked Italian wool, talking and operating as before. Brooding, luxurious zombies, indeed.

I laughed then - and stopped, instantly cognizant of the dead things around me, of the corporate monster's shroud sewn into my flesh. One of my dead staffers looked at a bloody watch. Yes, it was time. I shoved myself from the table and stood, unsteady... and the zombies all arose to devour me. I fled, screaming.

Calls of "Will you be returning today, Mr. Fuller?" and "You need to sign this, Mr. Fuller!" rang in my ears as I sought a way out. Beyond the boardroom, Discorporate America flailed in jargoned mayhem: headless supervisors and eyeless mail clerks in gray cubicles dealt gruesome action-items to the living; walking corpses from marketing sought bite-sized deliverables from victims in accounting; executives dripping gore got brain-dumps from severed department heads desperate for face-time, while a walking autopsy from networking ripped out the throat of some attorney who couldn't print. Up and down the cubes, ghouls chomped through skulls to gain precious mindshare. When I appeared, they grunted in shocked surprise, blood dripping from their rotting mandibles.

"Heads-up! The boss."

They stared at me.

A long moment passed while the living and the dead

regarded one another. I thought for a second that they might change back and everything would be okay. Yes, we'd put this zombie thing behind us, get a drink and laugh, hahaha, this wasn't really happening, they don't really want to eat me. They just want to be friends, just want me to become... one of them.

Mr. Dust and Mr. Ash suddenly appeared, my red-skulled Brutus and Cassius, frantic at my escape. Seeing me, they lurched forward, unsigned contracts flapping in their bloody clutches.

"Mr. Fuller!"

"Mr. Fuller, wait!"

I fled anew, the fiend syndicate close at my heels, chanting my name over and over as if this cheap mantra might hold sway over my retreat. I threw myself into an empty elevator and repeatedly punched the button for the ground floor. The dead made one final push, but the doors closed on their grisly presentation, my living interment. So much for freedom. Then again, I suppose madness is a kind of freedom.

I'd always suspected I'd one day go mad. Perhaps I'd been insane all along, operating the smooth levers of a functional madness, looking for a way back to my blessed little town of Bedford Falls. Richest guy in town. Hello you wonderful old building and loan. But wasn't real insanity supposed to be a slow, progressive dip? Coming up on me in gentle, lapping waves? But this was sudden freaking immersion. A toss in the deep end.

Going down, the elevator stopped and took on a load of bloodthirsty zombies. I shrank into the corner and shut my eyes,

awaiting the painful *bites* I knew would come... but nothing happened. I opened an eye. The dead ignored me. Zombie constituents came and went on their fiendish missions, paying me little or no notice as the elevator paused at floor after floor, doors opening and closing on terrible gore and butchery. I closed my eyes and played the meeting's events back, searching my mind for a cause. I couldn't remember what had happened. I'd been thinking about something when all hell opened up. But why weren't these elevator zombies trying to eat me?

An awful little laugh brought me back. I knew that sound. I opened my eyes to see a blonde from Human Resources on the floor of the elevator, her pale face smeared with blood. The one with the trendy little black glasses and machine-gun laugh, she and a dreadlocked zombie bike messenger were tugging awful things from the headless body of what looked to have once been a man in a black sweater. I choked back nausea.

The elevator dinged.

"Nineteen," a voice said.

The dead messenger dropped the body to the floor.

"This is me," he said, jumping past two preening zombie women who entered the elevator, resplendent in red-spattered chiffon. One toted a woman's forearm ending in a torn red stump, its graceful hand a clean, delicate trophy.

"She was just the *tastiest treat*," one of the chiffon zombies oozed, gesturing with the dead hand, a diamond ring on one finger. "And she'd just got engaged! Ha ha." She waggled the hand playfully and used it to punch the ground-floor button repeatedly. The doors closed... but were suddenly pried apart by

powerful dead hands. The dread-zombie messenger poked his head in and rushed at me, growling. I screamed and flinched. He ignored me and grabbed his bag off the floor. Everyone gave me quizzical looks.

"Damn bag," he said. "See ya, Kelly."

"Bye."

The doors closed and the elevator was mostly silent, marred only by the gnawing of Machine-gun Kelly. I noticed an intricately gift-wrapped package on the floor of the elevator, silvery paper covered with black-and-white smiley faces and thick red steaks. I looked more closely at the head on the floor. It belonged to the guy from the Whateveritis Department - probably Marketing, as he was dressed in black and wore tiny black glasses from the Roaring Nineties. Everyone in marketing dressed this expensively subdued way, in a cultish effort to encourage the bull market's return - or as a way to show off that they had jobs. I recalled that he was the one who brought his lunch wrapped as an origami package every day: sometimes it was Channuka, sometimes Christmas paper, or handmade rice papyrus with little Yodas and bunnies, or old sports pages from the Thirties. His was an exultant, wrapped-city existence sympathetic to the season, Mr. Life-of-the-Party. I couldn't remember the last time I felt that way, if ever. My stomach lurched as the zombies dined, but there was something else to my revulsion. I should have been horrified - I was. But I was also curious. Why weren't they trying to devour me, when my executive staff had seemed so keen on it?

My stomach rumbled.

Watching the elevator zombies eat, I caught myself wondering what human flesh was like. *Maybe just a little bite...*

"Mr. Fuller!"

I froze.

Machine-gun Kelly eyeballed me through her black glasses and reached toward me, smiling her bloody smile and wiggling some dark, wet organ. My stomach rumbled and lurched as she dangled it, getting red droplets on my shoes.

"Want it? Best part."

One of the chiffon zombies spoke from the floor: "Mmm, there's a good piece down here."

I grinned politely, shook my head. Kelly shrugged.

"Suit yourself," she said, and chomped on her trophy.

I closed my eyes.

The elevator dinged: ground floor. The doors opened and I hustled to an espresso gulag in a corner of the building, trying hard not to come into contact with slimy throngs of the dead milling about the building's lobby. Outside, a summer shower shellacked the pavement, the air thick with heat and moisture, making it feel like the inside of a whale's stomach. Zombie smokers slouched near the glass front doors, smoke pouring from chests and cheeks. I made myself look away, and up at black clouds fighting blue sky, not watching where I was going. A bloody skeleton in a suit ran into me and growled, "Watch where yer goin, fuckface!" He shoved my fuckface into a brass plaque on the wall of the building. I stepped back, rubbing my nose, eyes focusing on the words engraved into the smudged brass:

The C. Stillman Fuller Building

A fat zombie paparazzo with three cameras around his decayed neck popped from a doorway and snapped three quick pictures of me, his flash blinding. "Thanks!" he said, and ran off. This happened all too frequently, usually when I had the dumbest look possible on my face. Later results would prove it.

Once inside the espresso gulag, I stood trembling in line with other city zombies. I placed a hand over my eyes, unable to look at the dead anymore. Strangely, I noticed a few other zombies doing the same thing.

"Peekaboo! What can I get you?" the zombie clerk asked, smirking. I could see the green gum he was chewing through his ripped face, grinding between white molars. "Yo! Guy-with-hand-on-face! Whaddaya want?!"

"Two large coffees," I said. Sounded like I was being strangled.

"Two large coffees for the Invisible Man!"

I paid, hands shaking, while someone got my coffee. The clerk took my money and ignored me, as did everyone else. Zombies here didn't want to eat me, either. Why not? Wasn't I a tasty treat? I flinched as the cadaverous clerk reached toward me with the cups. I took them and grimaced, eyes clenched nearly shut.

Espresso gulags are good places to hide, be anonymous. They've become so ubiquitous that those within were almost invisible, like drunks in a bar. I took my coffee and sat shaking in

an overstuffed purple chair next to the window, and used the rich smell of coffee as an existential smelling salt against the dead mobbing the hot and rainy streets outside. I watched as they laughed, choked and howled on blood-slick cellphones just like normal people, huddling under awnings from the harmless summer downpour that seemed almost... pink? Ignoring the elements, I chugged one entire cup of coffee, the scalding heat a soothing reminder that I was still alive, but reason had either left me, or returned as a bad B-movie. I sat communing with my coffee, and the fear retreated. In a way, people seemed pretty much the same as they had before - except now everyone was dead. Yes, it was just another Day of the Dead in Manhattan. I watched as zombies hot and cold, angry and ecstatic greeted one another, admiring and loathing and ignoring each others' lifestyles, clothing, and accoutrements. Inside the gulag, a surly zombie dipped a donut into some guy's head resting on the table, both of them reading *The Times* book section. The donut guy turned a page and the head growled: "Slow down!" I chuckled, then laughed, louder and louder, until it became uncontrollable. I wheezed and coughed as my larynx swelled shut, wary zombies shifting away. The head on the table gave me a frightened look. I crushed a fist into my mouth to squelch the sound, and recalled seeing an untold number of crazy people do this in the city, just like the hand-over-the-eyes bit. I wondered again if others saw the same things I did.

My Bentley mooted all points, pulling up outside. Ferryman, my driver, adeptly hogged the entire white zone. Someone upstairs must have alerted him to my departure. He sat

passively behind the wheel, looking much as he had that morning, until he turned and showed one eye dangling from its socket. He saw me, somehow, and waved. I waved back and forced back a laugh. Taking a deep breath, I gauged the zombie threat around me. No one seemed to care. Standing, I put my hand back over my eyes and sidled out of the gulag toward the black car like a billionaire crab. Despite my hand on my face, Ferryman saw me coming and nodded, paying little attention to the caffeinated fury of other black-clad zombie drivers who coveted his parking space. He jumped out and held open my door while his dead-eye pendulum swung back and forth, ticking off the seconds.

"Morning, sir."

I said nothing and sidled into the car, feeling... nothing. I was numb, though the air conditioning did feel wonderful. Ferryman slid behind the wheel.

"Where to, sir?"

"Home." *Back to the vault.*

Puzzled by my break of routine, Ferryman hardly showed it. He usually saw me at 8:30 each morning, 11:30 for lunch, and finally at 5:00, when all errant Chief Executive Officers went home. I'd have gathered my coat and empty briefcase by then, and abandoned my office for the Long Walk, usually the hardest thing I did all day.

Every day for the past 20 years, I'd walked the Long Walk at workday's end, scuttling past faceless employees slaving overtime. I'd see them chugging cold coffee and diet soda in their