

Chapter 1 - Gary

"You know I love your mother. But your mother's a zombie. Who wants to see one zombie, let alone four of them?"

"Now that's not fair. Mom and Dad have adjusted to their zombiism very well. Mom still volunteers at church and bakes cookies and pies for the bake sales. Dad still works as an accountant at GM. There's nothing to worry about!"

"That covers Diane and George. I know them. I guess I'm ready for them. What about your brother and this new girlfriend of his? I don't think Don has said two whole sentences to me since I've known him!"

"He'd never get a word in edgewise, with you Ron. You said it yourself; you've had diarrhea of the mouth since you were born. He and his friend Maggie will be fine."

"Whatever you say, Karen," I knew when to surrender. I focused my eyes on the Indiana turnpike ahead.

"Hmmp!"

I glanced at Karen while I drove. Her arms were crossed under her breasts and she looked out the window, away from me. Trying to make peace, I said, "I thought we dodged a bullet when the zombie turkey plague just missed Gary Indiana. I never dreamt this zombie thing would hit our own family." I said in a carefully neutral tone.

"So far, it hasn't hit us hard. Life goes on as usual."

Great! At least she's talking to me. "As great as it can with glowing red eyes," I said with a big grin.

"I suppose. I hadn't really thought about how hard life would be, like that."

"I have no clue what that'd be like."

"Clueless from Toledo!"

"Clueless going to Gary." We laughed. "Remember our rehearsal dinner?" I said.

"Sure. That was six years ago. Hard to believe."

"Your Mom and I got along fine there. We dominated the conversation, as I recall. I hardly noticed the rest of your family. I do remember your Dad impressing me with his analytical mind. Did Don even talk? He's like a mute bivalve."

"Yes, a little, to me."

"Well, I don't remember anything. 'I only had eyes for you'," I warbled.

"Ha! Good thing I didn't hear you sing before I said 'I do'."

"I'm sure you did."

"I'm sure I wouldn't notice. I was too amazed I got to marry the 'Big Man on Campus', college graduate and internet marketer, Ron Yardley."

"So why did a beautiful girl like you marry a guy like me?"

"I still don't think I'm beautiful, just average. You're the good looking one!"

"Thank you, but you're wrong. You're the good looking one. I'm just average."

"We'll have to agree to disagree."

We settled into a companionable silence for ten miles or so. Then I said, "I know why I'm so reluctant to meet your family."

"Why?"

"I did some marketing for the *Midley Beacon* during the turkey apocalypse last Thanksgiving and then later for author Andy Zach's book about it, *Zombie Turkeys*. I saw a lot of bloody photos and videos and read too many gory details. I never liked the idea of pretend zombies, let alone real life ones. I was just glad we missed it in Toledo. Now I'm in the middle of it."

"Now Ron, meeting my family, even if they're zombies, doesn't put you in the middle of another zombie apocalypse."

"Yeah, you're right." That was the ultimate solution to any marital disagreement, I've found.

"What's Don's girl friend's name again?"

"Maggie. Maggie Unsicker. Mom said they were going to announce their engagement this weekend, for Valentine's Day. That's why we're going. Remember?"

"Of course. I wonder why so few people have turned zombie? First, there were zombie squirrels, then zombie rabbits, then zombie cows, and finally, a dozen people or so turned zombie."

"None of those zombies were really numerous like the turkeys were."

"Thank God for that! What does Maggie do, anyway? Besides play video games like Don, I mean."

"Maggie's a phlebotomist and a lab technician at Methodist Hospital in Gary."

"A what?"

"Phlebotomist. She takes blood samples from people and then runs lab tests on them."

As we pull up in their drive, I'm reassured by the sheer normality of their three-bedroom suburban home: Green yard, partially covered with snow, evergreen bushes, two car garage. There is no sign zombies live there. Of course, what sign could I expect? A skull and crossbones and 'Beware of Zombies'? Perhaps a biohazard sign?

Diane greets us at the door. "Hello, my love!" She hugged Karen. Karen barely flinched as she looked into her mother's bright, red eyes. But she grunted "Ugh!" at the force of her embrace.

"Ease up Mom."

"Oh, sorry."

"Hello Mom," I said, as I hugged her as hard I as could. She hugged me back twice as hard. "Ugh," I grunted too. Diane still had blonde-highlighted brown hair, as she did when I first met her. She'd gained a pound or two, though. She smelled of the body talc "White Linen". I recognized it because Karen and I bought it for her birthday last year, pre-zombie. And she still wore her cat's eye reading glasses on a chain around her neck.

Diane seated us on the living room sofa. "Suppers on. I have a nice pot roast for us tonight. Donnie and Maggie should be here soon. George!" She called. "The kids are here!"

A heavy tread down the stairs announced George Newby. His eyes shone red too, but while Diane was built like a middle-aged woman, George was a classic wide-body. His shoulders filled the stairway. You'd think he was a truck driver or a lineman, rather than an accountant.

"Hi, Karen. Hi, Ron." he rumbled. He hugged his daughter, like he held a baby bird, and shook my hand without hurting me in his bratwurst fingers. His bright red eyes looked squarely into mine.

"I'm so glad you made the trip. You can help us put to rest the ugly rumors that people with zombiism aren't human. It's just a disease. It's not even harmful," enthused Diane.

"Mom, we love you. You don't have to convince us." I said.

"Of course not. I know that. It's just that we've had people talking behind our backs at church and the public health officials trying to pressure us to get the treatment to eliminate the disease."

"Don't you want to get rid of it? I think the antibiotics for it are safe and effective."

"You'd think so, but we actually have never felt better in our lives! I have more energy than ever, and so does George--right George?"

"Yup."

"My arthritic aches and pains have completely disappeared and George's old football knee injury is all better too."

Looking out the window, George said, "Don and Maggie just pulled up."

Entering the room, Don looked like a smaller version of his Dad, with the same squat build. Maggie was also short and plump and attractive in a round sort of way.

I'm glad Karen got all the good-looking genes in the family, I thought to myself.

We sat down to dinner. The pot roast was delicious. Diane made it with caramelized onions and mushrooms, mixed with carrots and potatoes. Seeing four pairs of shining red eyes around the table twisted my stomach around the pot roast. I wrestled my stomach into submission and tried not to think about it.

For dessert, we had a New York style cheesecake, decorated with a big heart and "Be My Valentine" on the top. It was good but didn't make me feel any better about the zombie apocalypse dinner.

"We have the two old sweethearts, me and George, the recent sweethearts, Karen and Ron, and the new sweethearts, Don and Maggie!" Diane announced enthusiastically. She divided the cake into six equal sections.

"Oh, that's too much for me!" Karen exclaimed.

"OK, how about half?"

"That's fine."

Everyone else ate the big portion of cake. Diane noticed me watch her eat hers and commented, "Our appetite has really picked up recently. We're eating more, but not gaining weight."

"That alone gives us reason to stay zombie," Don spoke for the first time. Becoming a powerful zombie really brought Don out of his shell. I didn't expect him to speak at all.

"Yes, we were talking about people pressuring us to get treatment before you came."

"Over my dead body!" Don said fiercely and then laughed at the irony.

"That'd actually be pretty hard to do," Maggie said with a smile. Zombie jokes arose spontaneously around the Newby's dinner table.

"And now, you two, don't you have an announcement?" Diane looked at them expectantly.

Maggie looked at Don, raising her eyebrows in question. Or maybe, she meant, 'She's your mother.'

"What did you have in mind, Mom?" Don asked with a frown.

"Didn't you say you'd get engaged this weekend?"

"Yeah, we talked about it, but we don't see the point. We're happy living together."

"You *told* me you'd propose to Maggie this weekend!" Diane's outrage crept into her voice.

"Yeah, but I changed my mind."

"You *promised!*" Diane stood and yelled, "Don't lie to your mother!"

"We're adults," Don stood too. "We're allowed to change our minds. And don't yell at me like a little kid." Don stood too, glaring at his mother.

"You're adults, but you can't live in adultery. If you ever want to stay in our house, you *have* to get married!"

"We don't *have* to do anything! Let's go, Maggie." Don reached to take Maggie's hand, but Diane rushed to him and grabbed his other hand.

"No, you don't! You won't leave until we settle this and you agree to get married!"

"Don't be silly Mom. You can't stop me." He tried to push her away, but she clung burrlike to his arm.

"Don't make me angry!" she threatened.

Finally, with a convulsive fling, he pushed her across the room. The wallboard dented where she hit. Don looked startled by his own action.

George suddenly stood up, like a mountain rising from the sea. The chair shot out behind him, hitting another section of the dining room and cracking it.

"Don—" he began, firm as a stone.

"So you want to be rough, do you?" Diane's sudden soft tone was far more chilling than her yelling. Every eye, red and otherwise, focused on her. Diane's eyes narrowed. George stopped, waiting.

"You asked for it. You're not hurt anyway." Don said. He sounded nervous

"You're not too young to be spanked by your old Mom!" Diane yelled and leaped across the room with a single bound and grabbed Don's arm, the one he had pushed her with. With a bone-grinding wrench, she tore it out of its socket, surprising Don. Bright arterial blood jetted across the room. Using the arm as a club, she began beating Don in the head with his own arm.

"You!" Thunk! The arm hit his head.

"Will!" Crack! Don's nose broke.

"Propose!" Splat! The skin around the bicep of the severed arm split.

"You!" Whap! The bloody bicep hit his cheek.

"Will!" Squish! The bicep splashed off his head as it burst under the force of the blow.

"Get!" Ploop! Don's eye popped out as the humorous bone of his arm hit his face.

"Married!" Whack! His cheek split open.

"Before!" Bang! His arm bone split his scalp open

"You!" Shatter! Don's teeth broke as his own elbow hit him in the mouth.

"Leave!" Crunch! Don's throat collapsed.

"Here!" Crack! Another blow to the head broke Don's skull.

"Tonight!" Diane held the bloody arm threateningly, but Don lay supine on the floor.

"I'm glad that's settled," Diane sniffed. "Look at this mess! Let's all pitch in and clean it up, while Don grows a new arm." Diane tossed the old arm into the kitchen trash. "The mops and rags are in the kitchen, Maggie, Ron, Karen." No one argued with her.

I began breathing again as I wiped my face clean of splattered blood. It felt good to be doing something. As I mopped the laminate floor, I saw Don's arm socket had already skinned over and a new hand budded from it. As I mopped up the floor, I watched from the corner of my eye with morbid fascination, as it slowly lengthened to a full sized arm. My stomach wanted to be nauseated, but my brain felt too numb to react.

Looking up from my red-stained mop, I saw the others had cleared the table and wiped the spots of blood from the furniture and walls. George was busy spackling the wall cracks.

Diane again noticed my gaze. "Since we've become zombies, we're always breaking things," Diane commented. "We aren't fully used to our new strength. I think we should buy stock in the spackling company," she chuckled.

Looking down at her bosom, she said, "Oh my! Look at my reading glasses!" They were cracked and bloody. "That's the second pair I've broken."

"Maggie, I guess we'd better get married," Don said, rubbing his newly grown arm. All his other injuries had vanished. He didn't sound assertive anymore.

"It seems to be really important to your Mom," Maggie said. She made the sentence sound like an 'Amen' from a tent revival.

"I'm glad that's settled!" Diane said with a big grin. "When will it be?"

"The justice of the peace is open on Monday," George said.

"We'll be there," Don said. "I'll have to take time off work."

"Me too," said Maggie.

"We'll be there too. Our family needs to be together for these important life events. How about you?" Diane asked us.

"We need to work—" I began.

"But I'm sure we can take the time off!" Karen interrupted me. I didn't mind.

"Wonderful! How appropriate for Valentines' weekend!"

Somehow, we survived the rest of that evening without further incident. Later I talked with Karen as we got ready for bed, downstairs, in Donald's old room.

"So that's a normal zombie family?"

"This never happened before! And, I haven't heard about any other human zombies having a fight like that."

"Yeah, but that's my mother-in-law who went berserk. Just being around them scares me."

"She's always had a temper, but she's never been that violent."

"I wonder if the zombiism causes increased violence in people? It certainly does for turkeys and squirrels. Did you read the story about the zombie squirrel killing a hawk?"

"No! What happened?"

"The hawk nabbed the squirrel as hawks normally do, but in mid-air, the squirrel revived, ripped open the hawk's belly, bit off its leg, and fell a hundred feet to the ground, where it scampered away unharmed. It was captured on drone video."

"Oh! I begin to understand the countries that restrict US immigration and travel unless they've taken the anti-zombie antibiotic."

"Well, we're on the cutting edge of societal evolution. I don't know where this zombie condition will go, but I can see it making big changes."

"That's why it only exists in the US. No other nation would allow it. Here, people have freedom to be zombies."

"Even so, some are arguing the government should force people to be treated for it."

"What do you think, Ron? Should my parents, Don and Maggie, be forced to be cured of it?"

"I don't know. I don't know what to think. I'm still kind of shell shocked. Would you mind if I blogged for a while before I go to bed? That always helps me settle down and process the day's events."

"Of course. I know that. Good night!" We kissed.

I keep a daily blog, usually about my job and internet marketing, but also covering personal items. I wrote up the evening's events, but I disguised the zombie family. I just titled the post, "My Dinner with a Zombie Family". I didn't know how people would spin it, as pro- or anti- zombie. I just knew I felt better after I finished. I finally relaxed and went to sleep.

