

A Dying Business

by Andy Zach

He was dead. At least, his business was. And without his business, his wife would leave him and take their new baby. Then he might as well be dead.

His dad had run the Elysium Fields Mortuary for thirty years and had made a killing at it. The first and only mortuary in their small town of Hillvale, everyone got buried there. He charged normal prices, he was friendly, and he helped their community. His dad said to him when he was a teen, "Irving, after you get your college degree, go to mortuary school, and when you come out, I'll hire you and then turn the business over to you. You'll be set for life."

Irv had no other plans. He liked this cute blonde Shelley in high school, and she liked him. So he learned the business, got his degree in psychological counseling, and came back and married her. Just as he promised, his dad turned Elysium Fields over to him after a few years and retired to Florida with his mom.

The first years had been great. People were dying to be his customers. He and Shelley remodeled his parents' old house, went on vacations around the world, had his and her luxury cars. Shelley had their son, Nathan. Then the bottom dropped out of his business.

Rather than dying normally, people were taking zombie blood. Lung cancer? Gone. Heart disease? Cleared up. Severe accidents? Limbs grew back. Most people then took the vaccine to remove the zombie disease, because who wants to be a zombie with glowing red eyes? But they were still alive and healthy.

Irv researched the zombie disease during his many idle moments waiting for customers. No one knew how long people with zombiism lived. Zombie turkeys, squirrels, and corgis lived

past their normal life span. Humans near death came back as zombies and started living like twenty-year-olds.

All that Irv had left was a trickle of people who died suddenly or who refused the zombie treatment. Irv rejoiced that the prejudice against zombies was so strong, or he'd be bankrupt.

To make matters worse, the zombies had organized themselves. Their leader, Diane Newby, also known as "the undead mother-in-law" started the Society Promoting Equality with Zombies, or SPEwZ. They fought for zombie rights and to make zombies normal and accepted. SPEwZ also collected zombie blood donations and repackaged it in one-dose injectors, Zom-B Pens. These they sold worldwide, making tons of money.

Irv seethed. He called the SPEwZ helpline to give them a piece of his mind, 1-800-ZOMBIES.

"Hello, SPEwZ Inc. How can I help you?" said a pleasant-voiced woman.

"Let me talk to your boss," Irv growled.

"One moment. I'll transfer you to Diane Newby."

Good. He would get right to the top.

"How may I help you, Mr..." came a strong alto voice.

"Isling. Irving Isling. Mrs. Newby, let me give you—"

"Interesting initials," Mrs. Newby interrupted. "Sorry. You were saying?"

"Mrs. Newby—"

"Call me Diane. There's no need to be formal with me."

"I'm the owner of Elysium Fields Mortuary, and your organization is killing me!"

"I'm sorry, but isn't it better to have people alive than dead?"

"Not for me! My father built this business over thirty years ago, and it's about ready to go under—all because of you zombies."

"Hey, we didn't ask to become zombies. We just want to be treated like any other American."

"That's fine, but don't go around selling your zombie blood and keeping people alive unnaturally."

"How bloodthirsty! If you were near death, wouldn't you want a new lease on life?"

"Well, yeah. But still, you're driving me out of business."

"That's the great American way. One business dies, and another rises to take its place. Adapt. Don't be an old fuddy-duddy."

"Fuddy-duddy? I don't even know what that means. I'm only twenty-six."

"It means you're a stick-in-the-mud. Inflexible. Stubborn. Now I'm forty-nine and leading the zombie "craze"..~~eraze~~

"I *have* been called stubborn. Mostly by my wife."

"Hop on board the zombie train. We're leaving the station. We can barely meet the demand for zombie blood. There are new zombie businesses popping up daily."

"Like what?"

"Just today, here in SPEwZ headquarters in Gary, Indiana, we put out a job offer for a zombie counselor. People need time to adjust to the new zombie lifestyle and reassurance they're as normal as anyone else."

"Hmmp. How is anyone with glowing red eyes normal?"

"Eyes can always be covered with contact lenses."

"I do have a degree in consoling. Do I just replace my mortuary with a consoling business?"

"Why not both? People will always need to be buried and deal with grief. Even zombies can die."

"So I do have hope. Do I just add a zombie-consoling shingle to my mortuary?"

"Of course. I'll even route zombies we know to you."

"We're pretty sparsely populated here in Hillvale. The town population is just five hundred."

"Let me do a query on our zombie database. Okay, there are one hundred and seventy-five within a radius of twenty miles."

"That's way more than I thought!"

"I can't send you their contact information without violating their privacy, but I can tell them about your consoling business. What will you call it?"

"Um, Elysium Fields Consoling?"

"Got it. I'll send out the email today to everyone within a hundred miles. That's over a thousand zombies."

"Thanks, Diane. I called to read you the riot act, and you helped me."

"That's what we do here at SPEwZ: help zombies and help people who help zombies."

Irv asked the town printer to make some *Elysium Fields Consoling* signs. He set up a small conference room in their mortuary as an office and mounted a sign on the door, under the foyer sign, and on the outside sign.

The next day he had five emails asking for help adjusting to zombie life. He called each person and scheduled them to come in. One could come that afternoon, a Mrs. Persimmon.

A large luxury car pulled up into his otherwise empty parking lot. A wizened little old lady came out of the huge car, barely able to see over the open door. Then she flipped the door closed with a solid THUNK Irv could hear through the window of his air-conditioned office.

Holding her large black handbag in one hand, her eyes hidden behind huge dark glasses, she skipped—*skipped*—from her car to the front door of Elysium Fields.

Irv closed his mouth and hurried to greet her. The door flew open before he reached it.

"Mrs. Persimmon?"

"Right as rain, sonny." She cackled, looking up at him with a wide grin.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Irv Isling, director and counselor."

"So you're not a zombie? How will you be able to help me?" She took off her dark glasses and put them in her purse. Her red eyes glowed at Irv with skepticism.

"Um, no, but I do have training in helping people adjust to trauma in their lives."

"Well, being a zombie's a picnic. It's other people that give me grief."

"Come into my office and we can talk about it."

"I don't know about that. Why should I pay you if you don't know what I'm going through?"

"If I can't help you, I'll say so and there'll be no charge."

"Okay then. I can't beat that."

When they were seated, Irv said, "Tell me your story from the beginning. Take as long as you'd like." This was an approach Irv took with grief counseling, getting people to talk about their loved ones.

"When I got my stroke, I couldn't walk or take care of myself anymore. My kids wanted to put me in a nursing home. I thought I'd try this zombie blood thing instead. When my shot came in the mail, I got my home nursing assistant to give it to me. That was the start."

"What happened after that?"

"I popped right out of bed and straightened up the house. I had plenty of energy left, so I mowed the lawn and finished up by playing hopscotch on my driveway. I haven't done that for seventy-eight years. I felt like a young girl again. But that was the start of my problems."

"My neighbors called my kids, and they came over and fussed over me. I was glad they were concerned, and I thanked them. Then we had a fight. They still wanted me to go into a nursing home, and I refused. In fact, I revoked their power of attorney. That really ticked them off. My son tried to drag me off." Mrs. Persimmon chuckled. "That didn't turn out well for him."

"What do you mean?"

"I turned him over my knee and spanked him. I hadn't done that for over sixty years. But now my kids aren't talking to me, and they're threatening legal action. Dumb kids. I've got *way* better lawyers than they do and more money."

"What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to be reconciled to my kids, but they're in a huff and not listening. I don't think they like zombies either. They want me to take the vaccine. There's no way that'll happen. I like roller-skating around my neighborhood like I did as a girl. Did you know these new-fangled inline skates are *lots* better than the clip-ons I had as a kid?"

"No, I didn't. Let me think a minute. You need to meet at a neutral place. Is there a nice restaurant where you can meet as a family and have a meal and discussion?"

"Yes. We can go to Pierre's. We were just there celebrating their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary and my ninetieth birthday, before my stroke. Everyone loves it. I can get a private room again."

"Good. See if you can just tell them what you've told me. Tell them how much you love feeling like a young girl again. Tell them how much you love them and want to spend time with them, not in a nursing home. Don't argue or yell or fight."

"Sonny, you talk sense. I don't know why I didn't think of that. Probably because they stirred up my dander and I wasn't thinking straight. I'll do that. But I want you to come, in case a fight breaks out. Then you can mediate."

"Uh, okay, if it fits my schedule."

"Let's see what we can work out," Mrs. Persimmon reached into her purse and pulled out a golden tablet. She rapidly punched buttons, and then a face appeared.

"Hi Amanda, it's your granny."

"Hi, Grandma. You're looking great!"

"Thanks, honey. Can you and Trevor make it to Pierre's for supper this Friday? It's my treat."

"We'd love to!"

"Great. Now see if you can get your mom and dad to come too. I'd invite them, but they're not talking to me. Tell them it's my treat and there'll be no fighting. I've even hired a counselor to reconcile us."

"I'll try, Grandma, but they're pretty sore at you."

"Tell them I'm dropping my legal action if they stop theirs."

"I'll do the best I can."

"Don't worry, honey. You're the apple of your dad's eye, and he'll do whatever you want."

"Don't I wish!"

"Trust me on this. That's why I called you."

"I will, Grandma."

"Thanks, honey. I've gotta go. Toodles!"

"Bye."

Turning to Irv, Mrs. Persimmon said, "Now I made it for Friday evening. Can you come?"

"Usually I spend Fridays with my wife and son eating out."

"Great! Bring them along."

"My son's only a year and a half. He might be disruptive."

"That's a good disruption. My son William and his wife, Wendy, love kids. We're all very experienced."

"What about Pierre's? I don't know if a luxury restaurant is the right place for an eighteen-month-old baby."

"No problem. We have a private room, and they'll do whatever I say."

"If you're game, then I'm game."

"Good. Now, how much do I owe you?"

"This first session was free, like I told you."

"You've been a big help, and I want to pay you."

"My normal rate is thirty-five dollars an hour, but you don't have to pay, Mrs. Persimmon."

"Nonsense. A man is worth his hire." She told out a thick wallet from her purse and riffled through the bills. "Hmmm. Nothing smaller than a hundred."

"I've got change."

"Don't bother. Keep the change." She handed him a Franklin.

"I feel I ought to pay for my meal now at Pierre's."

"Nah. I eat there every week and get way better discounts than anyone else. It's been nice talking with you, Irv." She bounced up and vigorously shook his hand.

"See you Friday!" she called as she skipped out the door.

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Irv and Shelley left Pierre's late Friday, carrying Nathan in his car seat.

Irv sighed. "Nathan's asleep. That makes the whole evening perfect, as far as I'm concerned."

"You and Mrs. Persimmon really seemed to hit it off," Shelley said.

"I just gave her the least amount of guidance, and she ran with it. Her son responded reasonably."

"I think Nathan put everyone in a good mood. Nothing like a cute toddler. And the food was good."

"Wrong. The food was *great*. I can hardly wait for my next counseling session."

"When is that?"

"Monday. Mr. Klikkitat."

"Odd name."

"Yeah. I'll find out what he's like Monday."

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Mr. Klikkitat was middle-aged and pudgy, with glowing red eyes. He sat in Irv's office.

"How can I help you, Mr. Klikkitat?"

He sighed. "Make my family accept me as a zombie."

"Start from the beginning."

"I was morbidly obese, over five hundred pounds. My doctor said I was sure to die of heart disease. In desperation, I tried zombie blood. In a year and a half, I've lost three hundred pounds. My family's been harassing me to get the vaccine and 'clear up' my red eyes, now that my heart is healthy again and I'm at a normal weight."

"How do you feel about getting the vaccine?"

"Terrible. I don't like being pressured into things, and I love how good I've felt as a zombie. Why can't we just get along?"

"That's the question, isn't it? Have you tried contact lenses?"

"Uh, no. My eyesight is fine."

"You can get colored contact lenses to hide your red eyes."

"I'll try that! I won't mention them and let them assume I took the vaccine. Thanks, Mr. Isling!" Mr. Klikkitat rose and vigorously shook Irv's hand.

The other zombie counseling customers also successfully overcame their difficulties. Irv found zombies to be good people with positive attitudes. Although he only had one funeral that week, he covered his expenses and a little bit more. If his counseling business picked up a little more, he'd be back to his old income level.

Sunday night his father called.

"Irv?"

"Hi, Dad. I'm glad to hear from you."

"What's this I hear about you helping zombies?"

"Oh, I just put my counseling degree to use, to fill in idle time between funerals."

"You realize they're our enemy, right?"

"Uh, no, they're just regular people trying to cope with life."

"They're destroying the funeral home business! How much is the business down since they came along?"

"About sixty percent."

"Our gross margin was only fifty percent. No wonder you looked for other sources of income. But you chose badly. I heard from my friends in the National Funeral and Mortuary Association that they're going after you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean they want you to stop your zombie counseling. They can be very persuasive. They might threaten to kick you out of the NFMA and revoke your license."

"Oh, c'mon, Dad. They're conservative businessmen. They wouldn't be that extreme."

"Because they're conservative businessmen they'll kick you out. They can't have anyone undermining their business. Your business. Our business, that I gave you. Do you want to destroy everything I've given you?"

"No, Dad. I'm just adapting to changing times. Zombies are the new thing, the new medical treatment. They can still die, so they'll come our way eventually."

"I doubt the NFMA will agree. Zombies are killing the mortuary business. I've warned you, Irv. You're an adult and business owner. I wash my hands of this now. Goodbye."

Dad hung up. His own father, Icabod Isling, founder of Elysium Fields Mortuary, hung up on him.

The next day two burly men in black suits and dark glasses visited him.

"Mr. Irving Isling?" asked the taller one. His hair brushed the doorframe to Irv's office.

"Yes?"

"Is it true you've been counseling zombies in your funeral home?" asked the shorter, but wider, one. He appeared to be refrigerator-sized.

"I provide counseling services to everyone. I am a licensed counselor, as well as a funeral home director."

"Everyone, including zombies?" continued the shorter one. His voice was deep but quiet.

"Yes, and non-zombies too."

"We urge you not to console zombies anymore," said the taller one. He didn't say "Or else," but Irv heard it in his tone.

"Why not?" Irv began to feel belligerent. "Who are you anyway?"

"We're your friends," said the brick wall "friend." "We're trying to protect you from harm."

"What kind of harm? Are you threatening me? Maybe I should call the police."

"You do that," said the door scraper. "We have inside information from the NFMA that they may revoke your license. We're trying to help you."

"Is the NFMA trying to threaten me? I'll fight them in court. I just passed the state inspection. All my fees are paid."

"NFMA recently passed a bylaw that any zombie support services are unprofessional conduct. They will revoke your license and file charges with the state attorney general."

"Charges? On what grounds?"

"Unprofessional disposal of dead bodies. All zombies are considered dead bodies."

"You play too many video games. Real-life zombies are alive, not dead bodies."

"You have been warned. Goodbye." They turned and left.

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Driving home from work, Irv got a call. Turning on his hands-free speaker, he said, "Irv Isling, Elysium Fields Mortuary."

"Mr. Isling, this is the National Funeral and Mortuary Association."

"What can I do for the NFMA?"

"We regret to inform you that we have revoked your membership and funeral license. We have already done this through the state attorney general."

"You can't! I pay my taxes and my fees. I've done nothing wrong."

"Your unsanitary handling of dead bodies is unacceptable. We have photos and videos of you shaking hands with zombies."

"I'll fight you in the courts!"

"The law is on our side. Unclean working conditions are grounds for license revocation."

"Over my dead body!" Irv swung his car off the busy highway into a side road so he could park and rant safely. Sadly, he didn't notice the oncoming truck.

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Irv awoke in cold, chilly darkness. The still, stale air had a hint formaldehyde. Where was he? He reached out and touched cold walls, a stone ceiling just above his face, and a hard, metal surface below him. A shelf? No, it was a *drawer*. In horrified certainty, he reached toward the oppressive ceiling and *pushed* toward his feet. Straining, he shoved the heavy mortuary drawer out, from the inside.

Outside, he realized all he wore was a light burial gown, the kind his mortuary used to cover newly delivered bodies. Turning on the light, he saw it heavily splotted with ochre. Blood. His blood.

He scurried to the bin where his mortuary disposed of the loved ones' clothing. It just contained his suit, torn and clotted with blood.

Aghast, he ran into the bathroom, took off the gown, and examined himself in the mirror. No injuries. No scars. Everything was normal. But his eyes glowed red back at him.

He was a zombie!

He put his burial gown back on and then his suit pants. He opened the heavy mortuary door and immediately heard weeping. The age-old sound of grief eased his beating heart. He wondered whose funeral or visitation was underway, or was a visitor seeking burial advice?

Wait. His home was de-licensed. He wasn't there. What was going on?

He walked into the visitation room and saw his wife weeping with Mrs. Persimmon and Mr. Klikkitat.

"There, there, honey. Get it all out. You'll feel better," Mrs. Persimmon murmured.

"Hi, Shelley. Why are you crying?" Irv said.

"Irv!" she gasped. She stood still, mouth agape.

"What's the matter?"

"You're dead! I saw your poor body after the truck hit you. I laid you in the slab myself. But you're a zombie now. How did that happen?"

Mr. Klikkitat pulled out an injector marked *Zom-B-Pen* and said, "I guess these things work."