

# Reality is Worse than the Dream

by Michael J. Hollows

The wood cracked and splintered under my feet as I slipped again. The twin ends of the plank crumbled and fell as I chocked back a start of fear. I had thought I was safe up here, away from them, but I had been too confident, too complacent, too slow. Nothing was safe any more, they would always find me, no matter how much I ran.

I pushed myself up from my hands and knees and carefully propelled myself across, as the distant groaning grew louder.

Always the groaning. Why did they do that? They were dead, or undead, at least that's what we'd been told. So why did they always groan? What kind of long-dead body function created that horrible keening noise that haunted my thoughts. Even when there were none of them around, I could still hear the sound, a phantom image pressing into my skull.

Jessica was calling to me from the window, screaming at me to hurry up. I reached for her hand, but I was too far away. I looked down at the ground and my vision swam, I never did like heights. This was a stupid idea.

'Run, John. Run you fool!'

She never understood, I was too weak. With a grunt I pushed against the wooden boards and ran further, but I was too slow. With a sickening jolt, the boards cracked again and all resistance disappeared.

Time slowed interminably. I saw it all, even though it happened in an instant.

I was falling.

The wind, slow as it passed me, hummed in my ears and I expected any moment

now to fall into the grasping, clawing hands of those groaning beasts. Jessica screamed again.

I tried to right myself, but the distance was too small and I hit the ground with a thump that knocked the wind from my lungs. My back burnt with pain and I felt like blacking out, but I had to get up, to run.

I could feel the broken, bloody finger nails about to claw at my skin and I shuddered, my back eliciting another jolt of pain.

Nothing happened.

Did I dare open my eyes? The moans were too distant, and as I opened my eyes and my vision returned to normal, pushing back the pain, I was alone.

'Bloody, bastard zombies,' I raged, daring to shout the words that everyone left unspoken. The movement made my head throb in pain and my vision swam again. I looked up to the window and Jessica was gone, I hadn't noticed the cessation of her screaming, my world was a sea of pain and terrible noises, one less didn't make much difference.

The problem now, is that the shelter would presume me dead, and no one would come looking for me. Why bother? I would have to try and find my own way back.

It was her damned idea to climb over the roofs, even though I warned her. I may not be good with heights, but that wasn't the point. In this part of town, after all the rain fall, the planks we'd placed were rotting. She was light, she could get across, and I wasn't. Now I was here, lying on my arse, seconds away from doom.

I pushed myself up from the concrete and looked around for any signs of life, or unlife for that matter. I was in an alleyway between two buildings. Neither had any access, just a wall of impenetrable red-brown brick. To get anywhere I would have to

leave the alley and go out into a more open area. The prospect didn't exactly excite me. For the time being I was safe here, but I couldn't stay in the alley indefinitely. For a start I would need food soon. That was what had brought us out on this insane foray. A foolish idea, we were pretty set as we were. We just got greedy.

I tested my legs to see how much mobility I had and everything hurt. Pain shot up my spine and down my legs, but I would be dead if I stayed here much longer. I looked around the alley to see if there was anything to use as a weapon, but couldn't see anything. I searched under some boxes, wet and mulching, and pushed things around until an iron bar rolled free with a clang.

It wasn't much, and it wasn't my particular weapon of choice, but it would do in a bind and I was in a bind. I hefted it, testing the weight and took a few practice swings. The trick was to remove the head and I was fairly confident I could put enough force behind it.

I moved towards the end of the alley and it presented me with a view of the town. It had once been fairly prosperous, but now the houses and shops were boarded up, or ransacked. Family cars lay haphazardly, with their windows smashed and bodywork dented.

The undead milled around the ruined landscape, shuffling along with no sense of direction or purpose. They hadn't noticed me yet, so I edged my way out, around the corner of the end terrace. I took careful footsteps, despite being dead, their hearing was ridiculously sensitive. I swear they could hear you breathing from a few metres away.

I took another step and an unnoticed can skittered away, clanging against an overturned bin.

Damn!

I had been too busy watching the zombies to pay attention to where I put my feet.

The nearest zombie, once a young man, wearing the remains of a black t-shirt and jeans, tilted its head in my direction and snarled as it saw me. I couldn't think of it as a he anymore, that snarl was something feral, animal, dead.

It started shuffling in my direction, bringing with it that horrible groaning, keening sound, and the stench of putrefying flesh and decay. The smell made me want to gag and I dry-retched as it came closer.

Others spotted me as soon as the first one had and joined the attack.

The way to my right was clear, and I could flee, but I was rooted to the spot, terrified and indecisive. All I could do was bring up the iron bar and wave it threateningly at my attackers. They didn't notice, and didn't care, I was just food to them. That insatiable urge to snack on human flesh. What brought that about? And was it just humans?

I swung the iron bar at the first zombie, the one that snarled in me in that unfriendly way, and its head snapped back with a sickening crunch. It didn't cry out or scream in pain, but kept stumbling on in my direction. I smacked it again, feeling encouraged by the weight of the bar. The blow finally removed its head. I expected blood to spurt from the wound, but it had none left. The stench of decay grew stronger, and the body tottered where it stood, but the beast finally collapsed to the ground, really dead this time.

I swung and another skull cracked, and another, but still they came. With each attack I grew more tired, and they wouldn't stop, nothing fazed them. They just had that urge to destroy. I should have run, but now I was pinned. I was trying to move, but they kept catching up with me. I was always too slow.

The wave of zombies lightened slightly as another fell at my feet. The putrid smell of necrotising flesh abated slightly and was replaced by a more familiar perfume. It was a heady scent of rose petals and honey. I had no idea why it reminded me of those things, but it always did.

I swung the iron bar in fury and another zombie collapsed. I turned and tried to run away, but on the backswing the bar got caught on something. I yanked and it stayed firmly stuck. I looked back at it and a pale hand, with signs of dying flesh, gripped it.

It had my weapon!

It was unexpected, but I could easily drop it and continue my escape. Something kept me there. This beast barely made a sound, compared to the others, only a faint mumble. I looked up into its face, a dead face, but one I knew well.

Jessica's face.

Everything finally added up, with a sense of understanding that sucked the blood from my limbs with a feeling like I'd been punched in the stomach. She had been alone after I fell; had she tried to save me, or had she fled. Either way, she had become one of them. It made me feel sick.

Her grip on the bar was tight, a remainder of her will. She hadn't yet fully turned.

But I turned and ran, leaving her with the bar, and with them. There was nothing I could do for her now except to run and to remember her.

Always running.