

OTIS

By: Kevin T. Custer

October 2020

Some time from now, where things have gotten a little out of hand...

A simple neighborhood, unremarkable in its plainness, rests quietly as the crickets and toads chirp and croak in the nearby creek.

When Otis was a child that nighttime orchestra would soothe him to sleep. His mind racing with anticipation for the start of the next day. Fishing, climbing trees, kicking a ball with his dog.

As an adult returning home there was always a warmth to the sound in the summer months, a heartbeat of his childhood. The sound of life at rest.

Yet tonight, the orchestra's seduction holds no influence on Otis. It falls on deaf ears, as sadly, for dear Otis, he is dead.

Well not completely dead anyway. You see he's become one of those 'shuffling deceased,' a decrepit dancer...a reanimated dead body. A zombie.

The terminology is always a bit dodgy but the word 'zombie' was first introduced widely in the early 20th century by the notable occultist, cannibal and journalist WB Seabrook who wrote a sensationalized account of a Haitian Voodoo ritual. Widely believed to be an evolution of traditions brought from Africa through the slave trade, Zombification was a magical means of control over life itself. A Bokor, or sorcerer, would reanimate the corpse and then would have control over that body's will, making it a personal slave.

None of this information really means much to Otis, now as a stumbling corpse, nor before as an endemic couch potato. His previous understanding of the concept was from video games, television and a handy sardonic field guide to surviving the zombie apocalypse: "How to Stay Un-Dead : A Pocket Guide"

"I've got this!" he once boasted at a BBQ with friends when he brought out his most recent ironic online purchase: A 29" Carbon Fiber Crossbow that delivers arrow speeds of 450 fps with a hard-hitting 180 ft. lbs. of kinetic energy on impact. He used it to hunt gophers in his yard.

Then the pandemic hit. A spreading virus, lockdowns, quarantines, the whole shebang. Familiar territory not just for Otis but for everyone going through their third 'once in a lifetime' viral outbreak.

It became old hat to be honest. After the first few days of your very first shelter-in-place where every day feels like a guilty pleasure snow day, save for the existential dread of the world seeming to crumble around you, one hits an inherent stride finding new levels of depression you can now operate on.

At this, living Otis, was a high achiever: showering once a week, ordering takeout 4-5 nights, putting on his 'good pajamas' for social video conferences after an exhausting 9-13hrs of work video calls he had that day. Losing himself in the endless social media scroll, a curated mix of social justice issues, recipes he'll save but never try, cuddly horse videos, echo chamber outrage politics and a bevy of other things that didn't concern or affect him but would still manage to elicit an emotional response.

But like many many more people than before, Otis was not so lucky this pandemic so as to get so lost in a world he was not living, a window to the world outside full of life and sorrow and offensive joy.

He passed pretty quickly. It was painful. But the pain had an expiration date...as did Otis.

Needless to say he did not live long enough to use his new crossbow on its intended targets.

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Otis doesn't mind much...There isn't much to mind really at this stage of Otis's brain decay. His brain does function but well below any limited understanding we have of brain function today. It gurgles with a feral urge, a protocol lodged deep within human evolution that says 'live' 'hunt' 'kill' ever goaded and manipulated by the virus's will.

A glowing spark of flaming red embers is his present mindset.

And yet here we are...at his childhood neighborhood, with the crickets and the toads at nighttime. Him shuffling the streets, bumping into refuse and garbage cans strewn across the ground while the crickets and toads do their thing, unobstructed by the human decline around them.

Why is he here? This stretches beyond happenstance, for his home is some 400 miles from where he was living when he died. The journey has been unkind to his body, natural decomposition multiplied by pests and birds plucking away at quality components of his complexion have rendered him rather devoid of the features one would associate with a healthy person.

His chest exposes his heart, which does beat, irregular at best and at a pace that is hard to track. If any scientists were left alive to study it, they would find dormant phases where the heart and whatever remaining body fluid are at rest until it becomes engulfed in an overdriven state for attack to replicate and spread the virus.

Viruses. What an elegantly ugly thing. Much like its current host, not exactly alive and not quite dead. Insipidly efficient and exclusively focussed on one thing: replication. High-jacking cells and multiplying into the millions. Nobody knows why they exist nor what role they serve in the ecosystem beyond duplication and decay.

There are millions upon millions of different strains, affecting all different types of organisms around the world from bacteria to plants to mammals. In fact, viruses are the most abundant biological entity on Earth. Did you know this? Delightful.

And all it took was for one, just one, to evolve a way to completely control all the cells in a host's body to spread itself. To make a personal slave out of humanity.

This neighborhood has long ago been pillaged, plucked and pilfered. Houses burned down, cars emptied of their gas and batteries, everything deemed of worth has been collected by those still with the ability to value anything. Like Otis, this neighborhood is a bit of a husk of its former identity.

He shuffles along at an inchworms pace, seemingly directionless until...he stops.

A boxy two story house stands before him, a corner blown out, with tire tracks leading into and away from the gaping hole. Otis sways while facing the house, gurgling through his exposed teeth.

The flaming red in his mind sparks brighter. But transparent wisps of blue begin to float amongst the flames.

Suddenly he jostles and shuffles toward the hole in the house, arms raised and mouth agape as if he were chasing fireflies in the night.

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He stumbles over the threshold of debris, both wood and bone crack at the impact, but he remains upright. The rags that were his clothes get caught on exposed boards and rip like toilet paper, the fibers worn from months in the elements. He drags his feet into the living room and pauses once more.

The blue sparks grow long tails, leaving gossamer tracks of their swirling journey in his brain. The flaming red glow diminishes ever so as the new sparks spiral around it.

This was Otis's childhood home.

It was more than an adequate home for a child to grow up in, more than enough room to run and play, privacy when desired and adjacent to activities of the living world. Yet as a late adolescent Otis couldn't wait to vacate and make a break for his own life. Only once having lived it, the setbacks, the challenges, the failures, did he then cherish returning.

Always a warm blanket of sorts to recollect himself and heal before heading out into the cold world of adulthood.

Yet now, there is no warmth left. No mother to sympathize with his tales of woe, nor a father to give sagely advice. There is Otis, dead, in a dead house, vacant save for the memories no one can recall.

And the crickets and toads outside, humming their familiar tune.

Otis turns in a strained attempt to survey the room. There's a family photo on the mantelpiece, a snapshot from their last holiday together. The smiles. Otis had cut his left hand trying to separate two frozen beef patties with a knife. His mother nearly fainted while his father handed him superglue to close the wound. The dog stole the blood covered patties after they slipped to the floor. Exasperated laughter ensued.

Otis lifts the remains of his hand to his face, mostly tendons and bones, yet a slip of skin remains where one can see a portion of the scar from the ill fated beef patty operation.

He straightens up. The sparks of blue grow, calming the red embers further, and his eyes flash subtly as if he's just walked into a bright room from the darkness.

He chuckles. Not a chuckle that you or I would recognize as warm and inviting, but the best approximation one could provide from one lacking a tongue, lips, several teeth and a nose. It was a dry gurgle. But a happy dry gurgle.

Otis's eyes narrow. They are able to focus and really see for the first time since the last thing he saw, which, I am grieved to say, is too harrowing to speak of here.

He scans the room with intention. A lump of a thing is on the ground in the corner...a tree. A Christmas tree. Dried out to mostly twigs. An ornament he received as a child near his foot broken in two. His mother's hand-sewn stocking still hanging from the fireplace.

He turns and sleigh bells jingle at his feet. He slowly looks down as if to prevent his head from falling off its perch and sees another stocking on the ground, with the letters O-T-I-S written on the top.

Otis leans over in a swaying manner as if he were spinning down a drain and picks up the stocking.

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O-T-I-S ...his mind is all alight...it's a feeling, Otis hasn't felt anything either physical nor emotional in all this time.

"Otis" he profoundly thinks to himself.

He looks down inside the stocking and there are cookies inside, in the shape of bones.

Suddenly there's a rustling outside, a twig breaks and brush shuffles. Otis stiffens and snaps his head up like a whip, the winnowing glowing red flame all consumed by blue explosively erupts snuffing out any spark that remained in his mind.

He drops the stocking, his fingers contort to claws and he erupts out of the house. His virus master beckons him: Hunt. Kill. Spread.

Outside Otis stops and turns to seek out his prey. Nothing. He groans goo and turns back toward the house when he is violently swept from his feet and lands on the ground creating a sharp CRACK that reverberates through the neighborhood causing the crickets and the toads to stop dead silent.

Otis lifts his torso up from the ground to look at his rotten feet, where a mangey bull terrier is tearing at his left shin.

He leans upward to claw at the dog who deftly dodges and hops with its hind quarters to pull and tug. Otis slips back to the ground at a yank and makes another lunge for the dog just as it shakes its head causing Otis's withered emaciated body to flop like a dirty blanket in the air.

A splitting creak CRACK snap and SLUSH pops his shin from his knee; Otis flops to his stomach while the dog retains the bone in its mouth and continues to shake its head violently.

Otis's brain is an inferno, he claws his way toward the dog as it growls and mouths Otis's former appendage.

But then - the dog stops. Otis swipes at its face but the pup avoids the strike and takes a few steps back, drops the bones and sniffs it. Not just a casual quick whiff to ensure what was in its mouth was edible, but a deep, voracious and immersive inhalation of memory. Like pouring over a childhood photo album, the dog sniffs the shin from end to end - recognition flashes across its filthy face and the dog instantly drops into a downward dog play pose, tail furiously wagging, barking with joy while avoiding the dreadful violent advances of Otis.

A click and a whistle emanates from a window across the street - a blur of color and burst of air zip straight into the back of Otis, pinning him to the ground.

The dog whines in shock and begins to bark at the window where the arrow came from.

A "YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEW buuuuullseye!" hollers through the street.

"Shhhhhh" another voice hisses, "We don't know if there are more!"

"Ahhh we're fine...Ottie'd find them, won't you boy?!"

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Otis, lacking the fine motor skills to either remove the arrow from his back or finagle his way off the ground, writhes helplessly like a fish snagged at the end of a hook.

Two people emerge from the house, one an older man holding a crossbow and the other a young woman with a flashlight darting around. They walk toward Otis and the dog.

“Good boy Otis, such a good boy!!” the man bellows.

Otis freezes at the word ‘Otis.’ The man approaches in his view, wraps the dog up in a bear hug and scratches behind its ears. The dog wiggles in duress.

“Just kill it so we can get back to sleep” the woman whispers.

“Alright just calm down,” the man grumbles as he pulls another arrow to rearm the crossbow.

A calmness overtakes Otis while the storm inside rages on. Otis. He called him Otis.

The dog whines and approaches Otis on the ground and carefully sniffs at him from afar.

“Otis! Get Back!” The woman shouts. Otis turns his head toward the woman and looks at her. The dog whines and barks again. Otis looks at the dog.

A burst of faded images froth into Otis’s slush of a brain: Fishing...fishing with his dog, climbing a tree while his dog barks at him from below, running in a field kicking a ball with his dog...Otis.

That stocking with the cookies...dog biscuits inside.

“This is Otis. The Dog. My dog.”

He begins to heave, his head is swelling, for all intensive purposes he is sobbing but lacks enough moisture in his body or tear ducts to properly communicate this fact.

“What in the world is it doing?” the woman asks horrified, bewildered and disgusted.

The red flurry in his mind is awash with light and blue and decomposed clarity...the relief is unspeakable. The pain unbearable.

Otis stretches his hand out upright toward Otis the dog. Otis cautiously approaches, sniffs and then licks the tip of the man’s deceased bony finger.

“Thank You, Otis.” he thinks to himself.

Just then another arrow erupts inside his skull - the light inside is suddenly snuffed out as the remaining red haze evacuates through the new hole in his head. His body wilts, coming to a final rest.

Otis the dog howls.

The crickets and toads find their cue and play one final number, a lament for the man that was Otis’s boy.