

DAWN ^{OF} THE DEBT



A SHORT STORY BY

KEVIN DAVID ANDERSON

DAWN ^{OF} THE DEBT

*WHEN THERE'S NO MORE CREDIT IN HELL
THE DEBTORS WILL WALK THE EARTH*



a short story by

KEVIN DAVID ANDERSON

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INTRODUCTION

The only thing I wish to accomplish in this introduction is to manage expectations. Yours, not mine. My expectations are carefully managed by a sophisticated regiment of beer, wine, pulp novels, comics, low budget horror films, and enough chocolate to keep Willy Wonka in business for decades. But enough about me, back to you. Now I know with a title like *Dawn of the Debt*, you might be expecting some Romeroesque, flesh-eating, marrow-sucking, head shooting, zombie action. I know I would. But in this short story, there is none of that. Not that there aren't any zombies in this story, there are. I'm not ballsy enough to write a zombie story, let alone an entire Zombie novel, with absolutely no zombies in it. I'm no Jeff Strand.

If this disappoints you I am sorry, truly, but you probably downloaded this for free, so I'm not losing sleep over it. If you did pay the whopping price of 99 cents and you want it

back feel free to hunt me down at any event, or convention, I attend and demand that 99 cent refund. I will not think you're a cheap, whiny, grudge-holding bastard at all. Not one bit. And, to help smooth things over, I'm including a couple of extra stories at the end of *Dawn of the Debt* that might satisfy those flesh-eating, marrow-sucking needs. The stories *The Interview* and *Twitching* are sneak peeks from my upcoming collection, *Night Sounds*, which has an introduction by podcaster and voice talent Jason Hill.

Did you notice that self-promoting plug? I bet you did. You're a smart cookie.

Dawn of the Debt is more a personal project attempting to take a deep dive into the pools of political science, sociology, economics, the humanities, and a lot of other classes you had to take in college. If you're interested in what inspired the story I've expanded on that in the Afterward section.

Thanks for reading.

Kevin

PS – Read *The Greatest Zombie Movie Ever*, by Jeff Strand. – It's a fantastically fun read. But no zombies.



DAWN OF THE DEBT

“What do you mean, reactivate her account?” Mr. Holcroft said, stepping closer to the doorframe with the assistance of a wooden cane.

Simon leaned forward on Holcroft’s front porch and dawned a practiced smile. He knew this was the tricky part. Getting a relative to accept the horror and futility of the situation required the cunning and tenacity of an investigative reporter.

“Your daughter accepted the terms of the loan, and without a Do Not Resuscitate Order on file, my hands are tied.” Simon held his wrists out as if they were bound selling the idea that he was as much a prisoner of the agreement as Holcroft’s daughter. “In the event of her death, before the loan is paid, AmeriCorp has the right, and the patriotic duty, to reactivate our fellow citizens so they can settle their liabilities. In this way, they ensure a healthy national economy, free of monetary obligations and can go into the next life with a clear financial conscience.”

“Look here, you vulture.” Holcroft raised his cane like a sword, but the threat wavered; he was too frail to hold it steady. “My daughter died serving her country, and I’ll be damned if

I'm gonna let you desecrate her memory.”

Simon glanced at his watch. He had about fifteen seconds to kill before the show across the street began.

“Mr. Holcroft, your country appreciates your daughter’s sacrifice. Her military service was commendable, but the financial decisions she made in her civilian life were not always wise, were they? Now, should the American taxpayers have to pay the bill for her—”

Simon broke off because the look in Mr. Holcroft’s eye told him that the front door across the street had finally opened. Showtime. Good debt collectors did their research, and Simon was a great debt collector.

The door swung wide held open by a frail woman, seemingly waiting for someone. She glanced across her dead lawn, the only brown and deceased landscape on the block, and gently threw Holcroft an exhausted-looking wave.

Holcroft responded with a warm smile, his anger buried underneath.

“A friend of yours?” Simon said, knowing damn well it was.

Holcroft didn’t respond, just kept staring at the delicate woman. A moment later a pale, gaunt figure shambled into view. The doting mother held a hand out to guide her dead son through the doorway. The walking corpse with loose fitting clothes, like a hastily assembled scarecrow, grotesquely dragged one foot. Sunlight illuminated his face, a bleached rotten apple with unfocused eyes.

“You people have ruined that poor family’s life,” Holcroft said just loud enough for Simon to hear.

Simon no longer had to fight the urge to turn away at the sight of the walking dead. In his line of work, they were as common as palm trees on Santa Monica Boulevard. He glanced across the street and tried to look as if he was witnessing this scene for the first time. The truth was, he had watched it unfold for the past week, marking the time, learning the details, and crafting the perfect background for his conversation with Holcroft.

The neighbor had lost her only son to an Ebola outbreak in Florida. Her son, a med student at UCLA, volunteered to work the crises with the World Health Organization. With the national defunding of FEMA, it had been the only organization to respond. He had only been working in the Miami quarantine zone for a month when he started showing symptoms. In another week he was dead. And before his parents had received their son's remains, AmeriCorp had filled the reanimate order to recoup the six-figure student loan debt.

"She was so proud of him," Holcroft said. "First doctor in the family."

"I can tell she loved him very much," Simon said watching the woman guide her son to the old Ford parked on the driveway. Then, unnoticed by Holcroft, Simon made a quick gesture with his hand to a man walking a Doberman down the street. The man nodded slightly then let go of the leash. The Doberman took off heading straight for the undead med student.

Simon summoned his best horrified expression as the trained dog tore into the decaying flesh. The corpse was pulled to the ground as the dog stood on its chest. The woman kicked at the animal tearing at her son's throat but missed, knocking her off balance. She grabbed the roof of the car and managed to stay on her feet, then began slapping at the animal with open palms. The Doberman either didn't notice or didn't care as it tore away copious amounts of dead flesh.

With another covert hand gesture from Simon, the dog owner moved in and began his scripted, rehearsed apologies.

"Horrible, dreadful," Simon said with such sincerity he almost convinced himself.

"Don't patronize me," Holcroft said. "Bloodsuckers like you don't give a damn about what they're going through."

Simon's man pulled the dog away, and the elderly woman was torn between scolding the man and his trained beast and holding a flap of skin onto her son's neck.

With aid from the dog owner, whose dog now sat dutifully a few feet away, the mother got her dead son to its feet and

began to move him back inside.

“After a visit to the restoration facility, he’ll be fine,” Simon said.

“Leaches, all of you. Now if you’re here to get me to sign something. Give you permission—”

“No, Mr. Holcroft, you misunderstand.” Simon feigned a look of sympathy. “We obtained a court order shortly after the funeral, and have already reactivated her. It took a few days and some expensive resources due to the nature of her injuries.” Simon waved a hand through the air. “But don’t worry yourself about all that. It will all be rolled into her current debt.”

“You didn’t...dear lord, you didn’t,” Holcroft stammered.

“Not me personally, Sir, I assure you.” Simon brought a hand to his chest. “I’m in collections and debt outsourcing. I help secure the unskilled employment for our debtors and manage their wages until the debt is repaid. And according to your daughter’s file, at minimum wage, working eighty hours a week, that’s all that the labor department allows, it will take sixteen years, four months and three weeks to completely repay what—”

“You betrayed us,” Holcroft cut him off, fire in the old man’s aged, watery eyes.

“Beg your pardon,” Simon recoiled, but only for show. “Betrayed who?”

“All of us. The whole damn country.” Holcroft’s voice rose, quivering. “You took the government’s money—the people’s blood and sweat— billions that were supposed to fix the national debt, create better health care, for God’s sakes you promised the best health care. But what did you do with it? You took our money, the tax payer’s money, and invested billions in this sick, Frankenstein, Russian technology, defiling our dead, creating this blasphemous zombie economy.”

Try as he might fathom it, Simon could not understand why these old folks, born in the previous century, just couldn’t accept the world the way it was now. Always living in the past.

“Mr. Holcroft, I was in middle school when all that

happened. But I learned, and sincerely believe, that death is no excuse to evade one's financial obligations, and our government has mandated this solution."

"It's not even our country anymore. It hasn't been since..."

Simon sighed and let a few beats of silence slither between them. Not much, just enough so he could analyze the moment. He liked to wait until futility, horror, and frustration, all converged to produce a sense of hopelessness. And he could see the willingness to fight visibly fleeting, the way the seventy-two-year-old Holcroft shrunk, shoulders slumping. It was time to make his move.

He brought up a hand in a peaceful gesture. "Look, sir, I didn't come here to argue or talk history. I wanted to know if you'd be interested in providing housing?"

Holcroft's head listed to the right, like a perplexed canine. "Wh...what?"

"For your daughter," Simon continued. "We find that the workers exhibit much more enthusiasm in their labors when they spend time with recognizable faces. Their family, Mr. Holcroft." Simon stepped to the side so that his car parked down the street was visible to the elderly man. He held one arm back, like a game show hostess unveiling a fabulous prize. "I can leave her with you today. She doesn't have to report to work until Monday."

Simon kept his gaze on Holcroft's face, watching the man take in the hunched over figure in the backseat. The pale, gravestone-colored skin was always unsettling, the drooling surely unpleasant, but it was the yellow-eyes that seemed to truly horrify those Simon visited. A side effect of the radioactive chemicals used in the reanimation process, they glinted like some nocturnal creature's eyeshine caught in oncoming headlights.

Holcroft took a step forward, hands shaking. "McKenzie, oh, my..."

"There will be some minor maintenance to perform daily, and you'll have to bring her in once a month to slow down

decomposition, but you'll find that she pretty much takes care of herself."

"Richard, who's at the door?" came an elderly female voice from inside the house. Holcroft spun around and grabbed the door handle.

"Don't come out here—I'll be with you in a minute, honey." He turned back to Simon, panic weaving through his wrinkled features. "Take her away, please. My wife can't see our baby like that." A tear welled up in the old man's eye. "My wife is ill."

Of course, Simon already knew that. He knew everything about the Holcrofts. A good collector does his research.

"Well, if that's what you want," Simon tried to sound disappointed. "But I must tell you Mr. Holcroft, the holding facilities, labor warehouses they are so crudely called, aren't the most comfortable of places, and to be honest there have been some abuses. Obviously, I'm horrified by the stories of this kind of thing, and I'm sure it is rare, but there are rumors of liberties being taken with some of the fresher, female reanimates."

"Richard, where are you?" came the voice again, from the other side of the door.

Holcroft reached back, opened the door a crack and yelled into the house, "Just a minute. I'll bring you some tea. Just wait in the kitchen." Then Holcroft closed the front door.

"Are you saying my little girl could be...violated?"

"She is hardly a little girl," Simon grinned. "Thirty-four when she died..." Simon pretended to back-peddle. "I fear I have painted a rather bleak picture of the warehouses. I've heard some nice things, as well. Some even have furniture now. A few couches, a love seat or two." Simon glanced back at his car, seeing yellow eyes, unblinking, looking out at nothing. "Not that they really care, most are content to stand all day, and all night. Kind of like cows."

"How much?" the old man mumbled.

Simon loved hearing those magic words so much that he often made people repeat them. "What was that, Mr.

Holcroft?”

“How much does my daughter owe?”

Simon knew that even if Holcroft liquidated everything the elderly couple had, retirement, property, savings, meager stocks, they still couldn't cover the balance. But he did know how much they could afford, at least before Mrs. Holcroft's Alzheimer's becomes too much for the old guy to manage, requiring full-time care. That expense alone would break the Holcrofts. Simon had to get their assets secured for AmeriCorp before the old lady lost her marbles.

Reaching into his coat pocket, Simon pulled out a thick fold of papers and held it out. “I've been authorized to make you this offer. If you agree to settle your daughter's debt, sign this payment plan, and give me a good faith down payment today, we will reduce the total amount due, to...” Simon pointed to a six-figure number on the first page.

Holcroft's eyes widened. “That's everything we have.”

Simon felt he had overplayed his hand, setting the number too high. He needed to remind Holcroft what was at stake. “Perhaps, I should go get your daughter, and we could go inside, sit down, and go over some of the details with your wife.”

“No,” Holcroft said. “No, just give me a minute to get my checkbook.”



Less than ten minutes later Simon walked to his car, stuffing a signed payment plan and a check inside his coat pocket.

“You will put her back now,” Holcroft said, stepping onto the sidewalk, but keeping a noticeable distance from Simon's car.

Simon opened the driver's side door. “Absolutely. Just as soon as your check clears,” Simon said, feeling no need to keep up the pleasantries any longer.

“You know, Mr. Simon, there is a special place in Hell reserved for people like you.”

“Good day, Mr. Holcroft,” Simon said, then swiftly got in his car, and fired up the engine. Pulling away from the curb, he glanced into the rearview mirror. In one half he could see Holcroft’s meager dwelling falling away into the distance, in the other, swaying with the motion of the car, was the haunting reflection of the gray figure in the backseat.

“News,” Simon said, the command aimed at the screen on the dashboard. The iTV came alive, RT news already in progress. “...and believes economic segregation seems to be fueling the Neo-Black Panther movement...”

“More than a decade after the sudden death of Senator Elizabeth Warren, the leading opponent to the highly successful Afterlife Debt Collection Act, conspiracy theorists have once again come forth to challenge the official cause of death, claiming new evidence. No details on what’s turned up are yet available. In response, the FBI will hold a press conference later today to release additional evidence reaffirming the Senator’s suicide...”

“In sports news, the Pfizer Rams will kick off their sixteenth season here in Los Angeles...”

Simon turned the volume down.

“Hands-free, and back to the office.” Simon took his hands off the steering wheel and reached in his coat pocket.

He pulled out Holcroft’s check and quickly did the calculations. Fifteen percent was his right off the top. Well, minus Gloria’s two percent, which reminded him. He glanced up again into the mirror, checking to make sure Holcroft’s house was far enough in the distance.

“Okay, Gloria. We’re clear,” Simon announced.

In the backseat, Gloria hunched forward, “Thank God.” She popped out the luminous yellow contacts. “Damn, these things sting.”

“The price of fame,” Simon said. “You went a little heavy on the makeup this time, don’t you think?”

Gloria shook her head and pulled off the tattered black

wig, one that perfectly matched the hair of the late McKenzie Holcroft. “Not at all. Didn’t you see how the old guy stared at me? Thought he was only seconds away from climbing in the backseat.”

Simon shook his head. “You worry too much.”

“So, is this McKenzie Holcroft scheduled for reanimation?”

“I don’t know, who cares?” Simon said with a shrug.

Gloria leaned back in the seat. “Just curious.”

“Hey, I got another one tomorrow,” Simon said. “A redhead, mid-forties, an Army medic, died in that terrorist attack on an Afghan hospital last month.”

“Didn’t hear about it. I don’t really keep up on current events,” Gloria said.

“Hardly makes the news anymore. The gig is yours if you want it.”

Gloria didn’t answer. After a few seconds of silence, Simon glanced at her in the rearview mirror. Her arms, covered in makeup and looking of decay, were folded, and her gaze was aimed outside, locked on nothing.

“Gloria?”

“I came out here to be an actress,” she muttered. “Not this shit show.”

“What’s eating you, girl?”

“I don’t know.” Gloria sat up, leaned forward. “What did you think about what the old guy said?”

Simon furrowed his brow. “Said about what?”

“Y’know, about there being a special place in Hell reserved for people like you?”

“Like us, babe.”

“Okay,” Gloria agreed, “Like us, then.”

“Well,” Simon snickered, tucking the check into his pocket. “I don’t believe in a supernatural hell, one with devils and demons and all that nonsense.”

“So, there’s no hell?”

“I didn’t say that,” Simon said. “You ever been to one of the reanimate warehouses?”

“God, no.”

“I have. Trust me that is hell,” Simon winced as if the image was painful. “Just pay your debts and leave this world with a clean slate. Hell is for the poor, babe.”



DAWN OF THE DEBT AFTERWORD

Although published in 2018 by B Cubed Press in a collection of stories attempting to predict what the post-Trump world might look like, called *After the Orange*, the idea for the story came to me during the Obama administration. When the financial industry caused the housing collapse in 2007 and 2008, it impacted me greatly. Not just financially but politically. I disagreed strongly with the massive public bailout of these monstrous institutions that had caused so much pain, heartache and economic upheaval in every part of the country. I wanted these institutions to fail, crumble to the ground, be destroyed, suffer like the millions of American families they had put out onto the street with their shortsightedness and unquenchable greed. But instead, the government decided that they were too big to fail. Their destruction, it was assumed, would cause greater financial pain the likes of which the country may not recover from. I never bought into that, and I still don't. If the ravenously self-

serving financial industry of the early 2000s had been allowed to crumble, something else would have risen up to take its place. Something new, maybe better, but we'll never know because billions of hard-earned taxpayer dollars were given to these institutions with very little oversight. CEOs got to keep their massive annual bonuses, and the big banks gobbled up the little banks – making them now even bigger than before. Think they were too big to fail then, well...

Anyway, getting back to the idea of the story, I started to wonder, what would greedy, scum sucking, Wallstreet types do with an unending flow of tax dollars. To me, looking through a horror lens, it was clear. They would finance scientific research that would foster the reanimation of the dead, to work off their debt and pay off those faulty mortgages and loans. And it would be sold to us by appealing to our sense of patriotism and civic duty. Every American should be able to go to the afterlife with a clean financial slate. Even more horrific, the threat of reanimating a loved one would be used by unscrupulous debt collectors to go after the financial livelihood of the living.

Hell is for the poor.

I was never able to sell the story. Who the heck wants to read a zombie story about finance and politics? Fast-forward to the 2016 election, when all the rules of politics, decency, and even truth were rewritten right before our unbelieving eyes. Now everything seems to be about politics. Even football. In the age of Orange, nothing seems too fantastic, too horrific, or unbelievable anymore. I've heard several of my author friends describe the current situation as if we are in an alternate timeline, moving further and further away from Earth prime. It does feel that way some days, and if I were to try and find a bright side...its great fuel for writing.



TWITCHING

THE FOOD CRISIS of the 21st century was a catastrophe years in the making. Overpopulated nations collapsed unable to feed the masses. Starvation brought civilized society to its knees and forced morality to be redefined.

It seems strange to say now, but I don't think there would be any humans left if the Zombies hadn't risen. When the holocaust of the undead had settled, pockets of survivors emerged from hiding. We looked around and saw the burning embers of a lost world, still smoldering to the sounds of our own hunger. With cattle gone and agriculture decimated, we had little choice.

I remember feasting on my first zombie over a decade ago. The things eyes kept staring at me even as I bit into its flailing arm like a drumstick. Swallowing was always the hardest part. Even severed Zombie flesh is alive, and you feel it traveling through you, twitching.



*Listen to a podcast version of this story on
The Drabblecast, episode 77, Produced by fans of The Drabblecast
Read by Clay Dugger*



THE INTERVIEW

“YOUR SON APPEARS to be quite exceptional, Mrs. Warren,” Dr. Ethridge said, looking up through wire-framed glasses, his index finger pointing at the test results in front of them. “He has the gift.”

Mrs. Warren leaned forward in her seat on the other side of the desk. “Ain’t my son.” She glanced to the side where seven-year-old Anthony sat on a leather couch, entranced by his Nintendo. “My sister’s kid. God rest her soul.”

Ethridge watched her make the sign of the cross, thin, withered fingers moving over her chest. Her face was drawn, eyes sunken. She looked as if she hadn’t slept in days.

“Perhaps your husband should join us,” Ethridge said, gesturing toward the door leading to the waiting room outside his office, where his assistant, Mrs. Anderson, sat. “I think you’ll both want to hear what this institute has to offer.”

She glanced back at the door. “Naw. I think he’s happier out there. Got eyes for your secretary, he has.”

Dr. Ethridge cleared his throat, trying to ignore Mrs. Warren's comment. Whatever the state of the Warrens' farm-life rural marriage was, it certainly wasn't any concern of his. The only thing at the moment that did concern him was the boy.

"Can I have some ice cream?" Andrew said, without looking up, his blond hair hanging over one eye.

"When we're done, Andy," Mrs. Warren said. She turned her tired gaze back to Ethridge, grimacing. "Can we get on with it, please?"

Ethridge pushed his glasses up. "Yes of course." He leaned forward, glancing down at the test results. "His scores are the highest I've seen. On all levels. Telekinesis, Remote Viewing—"

Mrs. Warren snickered. "Those tests are bullshit, doctor. Findin' stars and squiggly lines on the back of cards, bending spoons. He can do that nonsense in his sleep."

There was a crash outside in the waiting room. It sounded as if Mrs. Anderson had knocked her file organizer off the desk again. Second time this week.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Warren, you were saying."

"I've seen him lift a tractor and hurl it into the barn like it was nothin'."

"Can I get *chocolate* ice cream?" Andrew asked.

"In a few minutes," Mrs. Warren snapped.

"A tractor?" Ethridge sat forward in his seat.

"Not just big stuff, and not just out here." She leaned forward, placing a hand on the desk. "He can move folks' insides. Blood, organs, bone."

Ethridge removed his glasses. "What?"

"Didn't that secretary of yours tell you nothing?" She lowered her voice. "It's how he lost his parents."

"Can I get hot fudge on my ice cream?" Andrew said.

"Yes, in a minute," Mrs. Warren said, glancing back at the boy, then slowly turning back to Ethridge. "The doctor that works on the dead folk, the..."

"Coroner?"

“Yes. He couldn’t explain it.”

“Explain what, Mrs. Warren?”

“Why my sister and her husband’s hearts were turned completely ’round. Said it looked like they’d been spun like a child’s toy.”

Ethridge narrowed his eyes, not able to believe what he was hearing.

“We didn’t think nothin’ of it until Andy brought me a chicken from the barn for supper. Thought my husband had snapped its neck, but when I opened it up, it was like its gizzards had been put in a blender. They poured out like stew from a pot.”

Ethridge took a deep breath, sat back in his chair. He had seen this kind of irrational fear manifested before. The guardians of these unique children were often torn between loving them and fearing them. He brought his hands up behind his head. “This is exactly the kind of thing that we enable our students to deal with. Society’s misunderstanding of their gifts can cause all kinds of developmental problems.”

He sat forward, peered into her exhausted eyes. “I can give Andrew a better life here. A meaningful life. One that—”

“I don’t give a mule’s ass ‘bout what you can do for him,” Mrs. Warren said through clenched teeth, lips receding, revealing discolored gums.

Ethridge was caught off guard. “If it’s a matter of money—”

She slapped her hand on his desk. “We didn’t come here so you could help him. We’re here so you can help us.”

“Help you?” Ethridge said. “Mrs. Warren, you have me at a slight disadvantage.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Thought you were smart. Though you’d know how to fix this. People say you folks deal with this kind of stuff. That is why we come to ya’.”

“Mrs. Warren, what is going on?”

Impatience rippled across her features. “My husband and I died two days ago, and the boy won’t let us leave.”

“What?”

“He’s using those gifts, as you call ‘em, to hold our souls inside these rotting husks and it’s painful. Painful as hell.”

Eldridge chuckled. “Now, Mrs. Warren, please—”

“Go on,” she said, laying her arm out on the desk, palm up. “You is some kind of a doctor. Find a pulse.”

Better just humor her for a few minutes, he thought, until he figured out what to do. Ethridge sighed and reached for the woman’s wrist. His fingers instinctively recoiled as he touched her skin.

She was cold. Real cold.

Ethridge shrugged off his initial reaction, letting his logic once again guide his actions. He reached out and took her wrist, his fingers feeling for the rhythmic sensation of flowing blood.

“You know the dead can’t sleep, Doctor,” she said. “I’m so goddamn tired. Never been so tired.”

Ethridge wasn’t getting anything. He got up, moved around the desk, placed his hand on her neck. With his thumb, he pressed on her jugular.

Nothing.

Still refusing to believe, he leaned over, pressed the intercom button on the phone. “Mrs. Anderson, will you go down to the ward and get me a stethoscope?” He released the button and waited for a reply.

None came.

“Mrs. Anderson, I need you—” He suddenly broke off as the sensation of a dog sniffing at his crotch seized his attention. He looked down and saw Mrs. Warren drawing back, her nose still sniffing the air. “Mrs. Warren.”

“You wouldn’t believe what being dead makes you hunger for, Doctor.”

Ethridge stepped back, disgusted. The sooner he got the boy away from them, the better. He turned and moved toward the office door. He grasped the handle and swung it open. “Mrs. Anderson, I’ve been call...” His mouth dropped open, his eyes bulged.

Mrs. Anderson was sprawled on her desk, dead eyes staring

at the ceiling. Mr. Warren was using his hands like rib spreaders while his face sank into her exposed cavity. Ethridge could hear the sounds of chewing.

“I’ll make you a deal, Doctor.”

Ethridge spun around and found Mrs. Warren standing, her lifeless, hungry, stare boring into him.

“You get Andy to let us move on,” she said, “and I won’t eat you.”

Paralyzed by horror, Ethridge watched her walk toward him. His heart pounded, and he thought it would burst from his chest. Mrs. Warren reached out for him. He tried to raise his hands, but they remained at his side, useless.

She clutched his arms in her dead fingers and moved his stiff body out of the way. She then exited the office and joined her husband at the feast.

Ethridge staggered back, not knowing where his feet were taking him. His heels collided with the leather couch and he plopped down into it.

The beeping sounds from Andrew’s Nintendo were just a bit louder than the sounds of tearing flesh, snapping bone and chewing, resonating from the waiting room. He looked over at the boy, still peering intently into the glowing screen of the handheld video game.

Ethridge took a deep breath. When he breathed out, he was no longer a paralyzed idiot and once again a world-renowned parapsychologist.

“Andrew,” he began.

The boy continued playing.

“Andrew, are you doing something to your aunt and uncle?”

“I don’t want them to leave,” Andrew said, not looking up.

“And why is that?”

“Because everyone leaves me.” His forehead wrinkled. “My dog Skipper left, mom and dad left. They left me alone.”

“Tell you what,” Ethridge said. “Why don’t you live here with me and—”

“Why should I?”

He had never had to convince a child, it was always a parent or guardian that needed the persuading. "Because...because I have ice cream."

Andrew stopped playing and turned to look at him. "What flavors?"

"Oh, let me see. There is chocolate, vanilla, straw—"

"I like rocky road. Got that one?"

"Well, let's take a walk down to the cafeteria and see what we have. What do you say?"

Andrew stared at Ethridge, considering.

"Any progress, Doctor?" Mrs. Warren said, stepping back into the office. Her husband was on her heels. Both corpses glared at Ethridge, hands glistening with blood, chins dripping.

Dr. Ethridge hardened his tone and tried to appear firm. "Andrew, you have to let them go. Let them go right *now*."

Ethridge could hear the dead bodies of the Warrens shuffling forward, and he tried to tune it out. He stayed focused on the boy, eyes locked. Putting a hand on Andrew's shoulder, he said, "I'm not gonna leave you. I promise." He brushed the boy's wayward strand of hair from his eyes. "You can live here and have ice cream every day."

Andrew seemed to smile. It was the first expression Ethridge had seen in the boy.

"But first," Ethridge said, seeing the Warrens' shadow fall over the couch. "You must let them go."

Andrew sighed, like a kid being asked to clean his room. Then turned and faced his dead aunt and uncle. He blinked twice. "Go away."

The corpses stopped moving for an instant and just seemed to stand there like marionettes whose puppeteer had fallen asleep. Then they both slumped to the floor, their dead limbs intertwined as if in a farewell embrace. Mrs. Warren's tired eyes shuttered, then went still, her dead gaze locked on Ethridge.

Andrew hopped up, sticking the Nintendo in his pocket. Ethridge stood up slowly, eyes fixed on the bodies in his office.

"Can we go get some ice cream now?" Andrew grabbed Eldridge's hand.

The parapsychologist nodded, hoping to God that the cafeteria actually stocked some. Being a diabetic, he had never noticed. “Of course. There is a chance that they have run out. In which case we will just—”

“I hope not,” Andrew interrupted. “I haven’t had any since Auntie and Uncle ran out two days ago.” His expression became irritated. “And that really, really made me mad.”



*Listen to a podcast version of this story at
The Drabblecast, episode 59,
Read by Norm Sherman*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KEVIN DAVID ANDERSON

Kevin David Anderson debut novel, *Night of the Living Trekkies*, from *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* publisher Quirk Books, is a funny, offbeat Zombie novel that explores the pop culture carnage that ensues when the undead crash a Star Trek Convention. Publishers Weekly gave *Night of the Living Trekkies* a starred review, and the Washington Post listed it as one of the top five Zombie novels of 2010. In his follow up novel, *Night of the ZomBEEs*, Anderson dives into YA with a Zombie Comedy that mashes together James Bond fandom with Apiphobia – the fear of bees.

Anderson's short stories have appeared in more than sixty publications including the Bram Stoker nominated anthology, *The Beauty of Death* from Independent Legions Publishing. Many of his stories are available in audio on award-winning podcasts like The Drabblecast, Pseudopod, The DuneSteef,

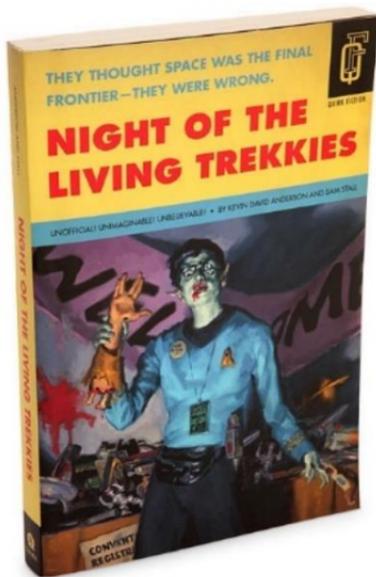
and more recently on the Horror Hill podcast on the Simple Scary Podcast Network.

With a lifelong passion for monsters, the walking dead, and all things that go bump in the night, Anderson was a guest at the first ever *Zombie Culture* convention, *ZomBcom* held in Seattle 2010, with other *Zombie/horror* genre icons like George A. Romero, Bruce Campbell, and Max Brooks. Anderson has twenty years of award-winning marketing experience and is an Active member of the HWA (Horror Writer Association). He currently lives and writes speculative fiction in Southern California. To learn more, please visit his website at KevinDavidAnderson.com

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS GUY KEVIN DAVID ANDERSON

Night of the Living Trekkies

Journey to the final frontier of sci-fi zombie horror!



Jim Pike was the world's biggest Star Trek fan—until two tours of duty in Afghanistan destroyed his faith in the human race. Now he sleepwalks through life as the assistant manager of a small hotel in downtown Houston. But when hundreds of Trekkies arrive in his lobby for a science-fiction convention, Jim finds himself surrounded by costumed

Klingons, Vulcans, and Ferengi—plus a strange virus that transforms its carriers into savage, flesh-eating zombies!

As bloody corpses stumble to life and the planet teeters on the brink of total apocalypse, Jim must deliver a ragtag crew of fanboys and fangirls to safety. Dressed in homemade uniforms and armed with prop phasers, their prime directive is to survive. But how long can they last in the ultimate no-win scenario?



Night of the ZomBEEs

A Zombie novel with real BUZZ!

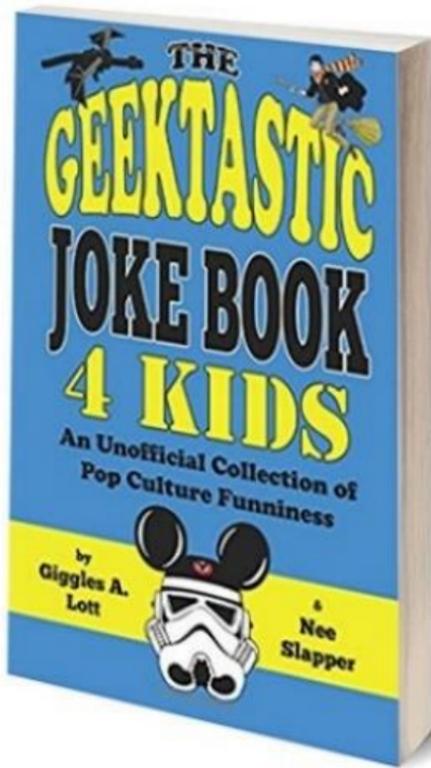
It's Founders Day in Honeywell Springs, a day residents dress up in black-and-yellow costumes to celebrate the insect that gave the town its prosperity, the Honey Bee. But when a mad scientist releases a contagious swarm of mutant bees, it turns

the townsfolk of Honeywell Springs into the walking dead, in bee costumes. It's thirteen-year-old Shaun Ripley's worst nightmare. Plagued with apiphobia, asthma, and panic attacks, Shaun must draw on his knowledge of his hero, James Bond, to stay alive. With his best friend, Toby, a fellow 007 enthusiast, and Sam, a bullying tomboy, Shaun must overcome his bee phobia and find a way to escape Honeywell Springs. Terrified, surrounded, and running out of time, the three must work together if they are to survive the Night of the ZomBEEs! Middle-grade comedy horror (for ages 12 and up)

Reviews

“*Night of the ZomBEEs* by Kevin David Anderson is one of the funniest zombie novels I have read in awhile. Anderson is no stranger to the satiric sci-fi/horror comedy having previously written *Night of the Living Trekkies*....*Night of the ZomBEEs* is an imaginative romp through both the zombie and mutated animal genres that succeeds on wit and imagination. Recommended for all zombie fans, adult and teens alike.” - **Marvin P. Vernon, BuyZombie.com & the Novel Pursuit Blog**

“*Night of the ZomBEEs* is geared towards a younger reader but has lots of pop culture gems in it for adults, especially for the zombie lover...worth checking out especially if you have younger readers in your home and you want to introduce them to the zombie genre. It's descriptive enough to add suspense and the gore isn't over the top; just the right amount of gross!” - **Kitty Pandemic from Pretty & Putrid, The Fashionista's Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse**



The Geektastic Joke Book 4 Kids

An Unofficial Collection of Pop Culture Funniness

These are the jokes you're looking for! The Geektastic Joke Book 4 Kids is a collection of geeky jokes from Star Wars, Disney, Superheroes, Minecraft, Monsters, the world of Harry Potter, Video Games, Dinosaurs, Doctor Who, Star Trek, The Hunger Games and so much more! From the pop culture minds of authors Giggles A. Lott and Nee Slapper this nerdy joke fest is full of humorous illustrations and cartoons perfect for kids (Ages 8-12 plus) that love to laugh and share jokes with friends.

Coming in 2019

Night Sounds - a collection of short stories that first appeared in podcast form, with an introduction by podcaster and voice talent, Jason Hill – Available April 2019

Midnight Men – a collection of stories featuring Dale and Earl, two road-weary overnight supernatural battling truckers, popularized in the short story *Green Eyes and Chili Dogs* - Available in October 2019

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