

The Final Comeback

There are so many of us here. Someone is urinating in the corner. The smell spreads, faint and unmistakable.

I can't stand apocalyptic stories with an approaching doom that is obvious to everyone except the poor sods inhabiting the story. We readers wade through the going-through-the-motions phase, alongside oblivious protagonists who didn't get to see the back-cover blurb. They know nothing of the aliens with destructive tendencies, or the over-active tectonic plates, or the toothy, scaly things emerging from deep down under, ever so hungry.

The woman next to me is moaning wordlessly, just sounds, rocking back and forth, clutching her hair with white-knuckled hands. I pretend not to notice.

We get inevitably dragged alongside the flabbergasted, as they slowly figure it out, and get on with the program, start responding with some intelligence, until finally, all of us -- readers and story citizens alike -- can devote ourselves to the exciting business of figuring out what's next. Who's gonna survive? Who will save the day? (or not). And needless to say, what would the Big Transformations of our heroes be? Their personal grief, mashed into the faux-historical events, reverberating against the global disaster taking place? That's where the fun's at. But that first bit of slogging through the exposition takes too much time.

I don't have that kind of time to waste.

The dead have been coming back. It's been going on for a while now. Close to half a year. They have been coming back in reverse order of their dying, it seems. Estimates put it at 15 millions a day. Just people, no animals. It's weird that way. No one under the age of 10. Who knows why. We didn't get the instruction manual.

Honestly, it's not like it took us a long time to figure it out, what with that many people appearing all over the place. And instant twitter updated. And #shitmydeaddadsays. Very quickly the number-crunching folks put together projections and estimates. When will certain historical figures of importance emerge? Stalin is coming soon. And not long after, Hitler. In a matter of years, we'll get Genghis Khan and Caesar. Currently we're somewhere in the early 70's. Of course everyone is rather happy for some of the returning deads. Lennon. Elvis. They did the whole TV circuit circus, their voices quite passable. Then, they settled down and asked for peace and quiet.

I'm not sure where we're going. Westbound, most likely. We all heard rumors of the large tent-like facilities erected overnight.

Some historians are excited about the prospect of talking to the ancient dead from poorly documented times. It's not the same as time travel, but it's close enough. They'll probably be happy to talk, the dead. Share life journeys, experiences, moments of revelations, and such. Jesus, if he really was, Plato, Cleopatra.

We've stopped, but we aren't getting out, maybe a security check. They aren't telling us anything. There are no babies here, that's a small mercy. That woman is now nearly screaming, banging her head against the door. No one is stopping her.

The dead have been coming back. They don't eat, or drink, or shit. They also don't get horny. They do take up space, of course. They all seem to love nature and getting outdoors, watching wildlife, trees, the sea and the sky, for hours on end. So frigging boring. They do sleep at night. They seem to like nice soft beds for some reason. They do dream. I don't think they have nightmares.

They are not that hot to look at. But that's just a matter of what one is used to, really. They look the way they looked when they died. Slightly pale, a tad unappealing. The occasional dead has had a bloody moment of death, car accidents and such. At first it scared the living shit out of the living, but humans are so damn adaptable. We got used to the gory person around, just like we get a bit antsy, but mostly tolerate all that's different. Dwarfs, amputees, really old people. With morbid curiosity we let our eyes linger a bit too long, and make sure nothing shows on our faces.

I was sitting with my dad in the kitchen. He was picking his nose, thoroughly.

"Dad, that's disgusting."

"No it isn't, Steven. Actually, It's just a biological grooming instinct, rightfully so. Helps keep the nostrils functioning."

"It makes me feel disgust."

"That's just because there's a social construct around it, and you've internalized it. There's nothing inherently unsavoury about it, in and of itself. It's quite pleasurable. I bet you do it when there's no one around. Everyone does it. It doesn't hurt anyone."

"Ok, well, the social construct still stands."

"Why follow it? What do you get from abiding by this strange contract to not pick your nose in public?"

Many conversations with my dad were like that after he came back. I knew he was coming. I prepared a room for him. Got him some extra soft pillows and nice new linen. Mom should be around real soon. He seems happy about it, in a quiet sort of way. The dead version of my dad isn't lethargic, or apathetic. He is his own self. Same hobbies, doing his large jigsaw puzzles, same right-wing values. The difference is that he is just so annoyingly zen. No boozy angry outbursts. Just the nice guy he probably was before mom died. I don't remember, I was too young.

We finally arrive. We're shown off the buses, and towards what looks like a large pavilion. No one is protesting.

The dead have been coming back. They don't lie. They like to help others; family, friends, strangers. They shamelessly behave in ways that disregard our unspoken norms. They dance in the streets when they feel like it. They sometimes walk naked. They like body paints, colorful fabrics and juggle gyms. They are a bit like children, under the age of 10.

The truth is we let kids be that way, free and wild and themselves, as they explore their newly gifted bodies and minds . We let kids be, while we quietly preach to them how to start listening to voices of shame and guilt. How to stop being, stop hearing the inner voice telling them to run and scream and dance and climb and play. When we are done whispering, they are grown ups. Strapped in invisible straightjackets we all graduate into.

I wish I had someone's hand to hold. No kids. No wife. Never really cared for that. Dad's at home, waiting for mom. Waiting for me to come back. I look at the others and know a slight tinge of envy. All these families, walking slowly together, hugging, crying.

The dead have been coming back. In some places, people tried to lock them up. China, but other places, too. They walked right out of the prison cells and detention centres. They can walk through walls and get out of any bindings. They cannot be killed, they just reappear. Not that it wasn't tried at length. If they ever make the movie version (though, of course, they won't, since the dead don't like violent movies), now is the montage scene of all the ways we tried to annihilate them back into oblivion. Israeli defense contractors working into the small hours of the night in secret Mossad facilities, mass prayers in the mega churches of the Bible Belt, the more humane Scandinavian attempts of dropping them off like unwanted cargo in Antarctica. "If we can't kill them, let's just put them there," someone must have thought, in Norwegian. They walked back on the ocean floor. It'll be a horrid, outrageous, and admittedly funny montage. Doesn't matter. It all failed.

I find an empty seat, and slump down. The moaning woman must have followed me, realizing we're both here by ourselves. She sits next to me.

The dead have been coming back. I guess you can call them ghosts. But we can all see them, and hear them. They aren't translucent. They are strong. Not Hulk strong, but strong enough. The idiots that tried to rape Brittany Murphy found that out fast enough. She whipped them right into the walls. If it was in Texas, would she have been given the death sentence, I wonder. In NYC no one really bothered doing anything about it. Life, and death, just went on.

She grabs my hand. I stiffen, but don't pull back. I feel the grip relaxes. I slide my fingers into the gaps between hers. I feel the warmth of her palm, the slight stickiness of her fingers. We don't look at each other, but she stops moaning, at least. She is now singing quietly to herself. I can't tell what song it is.

The dead have been coming back. They started lobbying, eventually, for their own rights and Dead-focused services and benefits.

"The planet is big enough for us all," they explained. "There's 105 billion more of us coming. We can find a place for everyone to be peacefully."

"Be" is what they use instead of "live". I suppose it doesn't quite make sense for them to say "and live peacefully". There's no present-perfect for the act of being actively dead. The linguists are hashing it out. Even Chomsky. It's unclear if he's dead or not.

“The planet is dying because of the living. We all need earth. You need to stop procreating and consuming so much,” the dead say.

“You have no ambitions, you don’t have any goals. What’s the point of this ‘being’ for you?” I half asked, half scolded my dad.

“I am here. This is my now. I am in it, fully. What else would I want?”

“That’s very Buddhist blah blah of you,” I was trying to bait his Catholic sensibilities.

“Well, it’s the truth. Or a truth. To each his own. But yes, Nirvana is what we make it to be. A state of bliss. Eternal. No desires, no hopes, only contentment. I am here. Do what you will, but I don’t see how you’d regret it if you joined me.”

“I’d rather have my anxieties if I can hold on to my hopes.”

“Yes. I can see you would. I hear you. I simply offer a different way.”

I preferred the nose-picking conversations.

I realize I’m mindlessly harmonizing along with the woman, as we wait for the seats to fill up. It’s soothing. I suppose there will be much more of that in the future.

The dead have been coming back. “There’s a simple solution, for us all to be, for earth to survive. Join us. Die, and be like us,” they beckon.

We couldn’t lock them up, but they started locking us up. Did I mention? For our own good, they say. They are rather organized about it. They have their own apps for social media and lock-up logistics, and live people tracing. You have to prove you are dead to get access to the apps. We can’t. We tried. I mean, Steve Jobs helped design it. And Buffet helped with financing. He was one of the first to join the Choose Death bandwagon. As did Bill and Melinda. They dispersed the foundation just before. Those who commit suicide immediately rise up, jump the queue. No waiting in line for history to reverse itself at a pace of 450 million a month. They do like companionship, the dead. They spend time with family. But they prefer other dead people the most. “You are not kind enough,” they say. They like pets. There are no more dogs in the shelters.

Someone is getting up on stage. I think he used to be a famous late-night show host in the 80s. One of those dreadfully beloved-by-all people. He smiles at us.

The dead have been coming back. They outnumber us. RBG is running for president. They want resources to shift. They want less food grown, less agriculture. None, if they can help it. They want a lot of research on soft pillows. Not so much on cancer. They really want procreation to stop. “Children over ten are coming back. Just adopt one,” they suggest. They all like weed, which I find hilarious.

“How does it make you feel?” I ask my dad after he lights another joint.

“Even more connected to it all,” he answers.

“Good evening. I am sorry you are here against your will, but soon you will wonder why you’ve waited so long,” says Mr. Late-Night-Show.

It's the dead who are showing us what living should look like. They are kinder and wiser than the living. I suspect they deserve to inherit the earth. Not robots, or aliens, or zombies. Just ourselves, finally grown up. It takes dying to live free.

"We will now begin. I will be here with you. In peace. With Love." Her grip tightens. She lets out a small gasp. She brings her hand to her eye, my own hand locked in the grip with it, and wipes away tears and snot, I can feel the moisture.

The dead have been coming back. If I had more time, I'd write up this story properly. Tighten up the metaphors, clean up the contradictions, remove the nonsensical parts. I'd like to get my hero-self a proper journey. Make the crass bits a bit more subtle. I could maybe make it into a film script. Get Spielberg. He also Chose Death, I hear.

But time has run out.

"We have to kill you all," they say, "because, you see, really, what's the point of having both dead and living if the living are going to ruin it for everyone? Die, and you'll be right back here with us," they reason.

"It's going to be alright!" Late Night promises cheerfully. From above, I can hear the fizzle, as the gentle translucent gas swirls down towards us. I look at the woman, she looks at me. When we come back, I hope I will still want to ask her for her name, that I will still regret not having asked her earlier. We breathe in death.

I think I am happy.

The dead are back. They will show us how to live ever after.