



Don't Fear the Reaper

THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAS TRASHED, FUNERAL pyres in the distance burning against a raw pink sky. Half the street was in rubble, from Thompkins all the way to Main. The high school was gone. The Video Mart had collapsed into firing positions for the few remaining snipers. Dead soldiers lay under timbers, under scrap metal, under each other. Other soldiers had gotten up again and were walking in circles, looking for something to hurt.

Something to eat.

Nick Sole crouched behind a wall, totally strapped. Steel pipe, survival knife, bone-handled revolver.

Problem was, the revolver only had two bullets left.

And a Swarm had just turned down the street.

Moving slow, but not slow enough.

Nick rechecked his supplies.

Food? Not much.

Medicine? Gone.

Synthetic adrenaline?

He'd shot himself in the thigh with a hypo right after the last plane crash. A USWAY Air 767. Just fell out of the sky, broke in two pieces, took out half a strip mall and everything from the parking lot to the river.

Lost a lot of good people on that plane.

Or maybe they were all Swarm, so screw 'em.

Hard to know where you stood these days.

Unless you were standing on a neck.

Either way, he and Amanda needed to move. They'd just done a recon of the Boxxmart by the interstate. Other people'd had the same idea. The guns were already looted, down to peashooter target pistols that wouldn't drop a Girl Scout, let alone a hungry Lurker. The propane was gone. The first-aid kits were gone. Even the flat-screen TVs were gone. What were they going to plug them into, a Lurker's ass? The only food left was a bag of Blowritos (nutritive value: zero) and a few sticks of beef jerky — not to mention the walking beef jerky Amanda had had to waste her last hollow-points on.

"You ready?" she asked, tying a strip of dirty cloth around an open leg wound. She had a slash across her face, the shaft of an arrow embedded in her shoulder, and dried blood caked in her hair.

No complaints.

No crying.

Totally ready for action.

Amanda, his little sister, looking more thirty-nine than nine years old in the diesel-heavy light.

“I had a hundred more like her, we might actually hold this city,” the lieutenant who’d commanded their neighborhood had said — just before he’d been dragged, screaming, into a sewer. Nick, on the other hand, was appreciated mostly for his ability to carry crates of ammo and open canned food quickly.

“They’re getting closer?” Amanda said in her raspy little whisper. “We can’t stay here?”

The Swarm was definitely louder, beginning to feed off itself. The first ones had made it over the Prius Barricade, a makeshift wall some long-ago jarheads had built and then died on.

“I know.”

Amanda pushed her thick glasses back up her nose, one lens cracked in three places. She spoke with a slight lisp, her voice barely audible above the groans and explosions. “I love you? Nick?”

“Me too, A-dog.”

“Okay? Enough sap? I take frontal? You flank?”

Amanda clambered up onto the jagged brick, knelt in her prairie dress, knee-high athletic socks covered in someone

else's blood, and shouldered her rocket launcher. She popped up the sight, closed one eye, and stuck her tongue out in concentration.

Nick went around the side, through a crack in the fence, and ran hard for the Quickie Slurp across the street. As usual—busy thinking about Petal when he should have been pure commando—he didn't see the Lurker coming. It reached from the cab of a totaled Hummer—a muscled orderly of some sort, wearing a stethoscope and blue scrubs. Luckily it was still strapped in. Nick went with a few front kicks, made the thing eat serious boot, then wedged its head in the door before slamming it shut.

Good old Detroit steel.

There was a spurt, and then there was a *fwooom*.

Amanda's RPG, as always, was right on the mark. It exploded in the main Swarm, concussion to plume. Lurker parts rained down like a late summer squall. Amanda did a front flip off the berm, then stepped nimbly between the remains of a National Guard unit, picking up gear and ammo as she went. In her thrift-store dress and long black hair, she looked like tiny Demi Moore playing tiny Dorothy, just two ruby shoes and a killer tornado away from waking up in Oz.

"What are you waiting for? Run?"

Nick backed toward the Quickie Slurp, scanned the lot, and opened the door.

A friendly welcome bell rang.

Just as something growled and leaped over the register.

A Lurker chick.

All in leather.

Tight and low-cut, sleeved with tats, from hula girls to thrash bands and back. Seriously a Victoria's Gossip model, blond hair waving in the wind.

Except that she was also wearing the kind of two-toned blood mask you could only get from burying your face deeply into another person, a demarcation line just below the eyes, the spot where teeth could reach no farther.

"Hi," Nick said, thumbing back his gun's hammer.

The Lurker chick laughed, teeth claggy with flesh, and rushed forward, pushing him to the ground.

Totally skipping the foreplay.

Nick managed to get off a shot, which missed, embedding itself in a package of olive loaf even the looters wouldn't touch.

The gun slid across the floor.

He would have screamed, but there was no time.

No air.

No chance.

She sank her teeth into his shoulder.

Then cheek.

Then neck.

His health rating plummeted.

Nick Sole, Totally Fuct.

Amanda was already more than six hundred thousand points ahead, and with yet another Maximum Outwit plus

Severe Gouging, there was no chance at all he could catch her, even if he cleared the entire next level by himself. Through a red-tinged screen, Nick watched his sister sprint across the street, eat a glazed ham that had been sitting on the sidewalk, collect a string of gold coins suspended above a burning school bus, and then pocket double-bonus energy points for finding a gassed-up chain saw.

She pulled the ripcord and held it over her head, the motor howling with bad intent.

Nick dropped the extra controller. Amanda paused her Palmbot. The screen blinked: *S.W.A.R.M. II: What Lurks at Midnight*. CONTINUE? Y/N.

“Sorry? Nick? You lose?”

“I know,” he said, smiling at his sister instead of her avatar. “Again.”

“What a surprise?”

Nick ran three fingers through his close-cropped hair, tightened his red Chuck Taylors, and then crawled out from under the kitchen table. The clock above the sink said seven thirty. It was dark already. He had a little less than an hour to make his shift.

“Done saving the world?” the Dude asked, spooning Salisbury steak from the metal tray in front of him.

“Hardly.”

“You see Miss Sparkle under there?”

Miss Sparkle was the cat. Gender never determined,

despite the name. It'd slunk off into the night, without so much as a final meow.

"I don't think so."

"She'll be back," the Dude said, talking mostly to his watch. "Everything comes home eventually."

Nick poured Amanda a bowl of cereal and slid it under the table with his foot. Then he made himself a sandwich, white on white, hold the meat, hold the condiments.

Mostly because there wasn't any meat. Or condiments.

Or anything else in the fridge, except pickle water and crusty foil.

The Dude's philosophy on groceries was pretty much The Dude Has Other Concerns. Which mostly meant lubing up with a tube of SPF 2 after breakfast and crashing on the rubber lawn chair in the driveway. Even in the winter, he was deeply tanned, prominently veined, sporting a pink polo shirt and a headful of silver dadlocks. Suits and ties and wing tips sat moldering in boxes in the front room, where'd they'd been since the day he retired.

"What's for dessert?"

"Jell-O."

The Dude frowned, addressing his spoon: "Again?"

Nick jiggled a double portion into a large white Tupperware, slipped a paper towel into his father's collar, and then checked his phone.

There were three blinking messages.

All of them to Petal.

All of them unsent.

6:14 P.M.: *Hey Pet-l, u wanna hng out 2night?*

6:55 P.M.: *Wht r u up 2 l8tr?*

7:12 P.M.: *I wuz thinkng aftr wrk we cld talk.*

Nick Sole, texturbating.

Pathetic.

Not that he was ever smooth, but he knew enough to slouch around the hallway all enigmatic, nodding and yawning, like, “Oh, hey, what’s up?”

You liked a girl, she liked you.

Or not.

Get a number, get a name, get shot down.

Whatever.

But Petal Gazes was a whole other universe, a different orbit, a brighter sun. She was a tenth straight espresso, pure feedback, wet-toe-in-socket beautiful.

At least to him.

Which went against Nick’s long-standing policy: Never Want Anything.

Treeless Christmas? Eggless Easter? Toastless morning?

Fine.

It saved big on the disappointment factor.

But now he really, *really* wanted something.

Petal Gazes.

Staring across a crowded lunchroom.

Holding hands on the way to French class.

Skipping class and Frenching in the janitor's closet.

But somehow he couldn't pull the trigger on a text.

The Dude's favorite show ended. Laugh track rolled from the TV in waves. There were commercials for cars, cars, cars, beer, and cars. Then a newsbreak, special report. A camera panned along desolate farmland, showing close-ups of a row of cows. They stared off into the middle distance, expressions grotesquely frozen. A voice-over began, saying they'd all been torn to pieces.

"Detectives are tight lipped, as you might imagine. There is some suggestion that this incident has the look of an unlucky accident, though they're not ruling out the possibility of a frat prank gone bad. Back to you, Troy."

"Not cool," the Dude said, reaching into his yellow fanny pack for a Cherokee Spirit. "I dig cows."

"You dig steak," Nick said.

The Dude spun the stove dial and leaned over to light his smoke. An errant dadlock hung in the flame and began to smolder. "And your point is?"

Nick snapped the burner off. The whole room smelled like scorched hair.

"Um, yuk?" Amanda said from under the table.

"My point is, I'm late for work."

The Dude shrugged, crossed his tan legs, and blew out a concentric plume. "Say hello to Captain Fuld."

Nick found his rubber boots by the sink and rubber apron

by the stairs and stuffed them into the black Hefty bag that served as his duffle. It was the Dude who had gotten him the job in the first place, called in a favor with his old boss, the same one who'd "retired" him. Management Dude now so far in the rearview that he and his Jamaican-flag board shorts were officially insulated from the irony.

Or the need to go postal.

Which would at least have earned him some respect.

"I'll do that," Nick said, and then poked his head under the table, where Amanda sat cross-legged, her dark, straight hair parted severely in the center. "Later, gator."

She didn't look up from her Palmbot, racing a stock car with a gun turret though the streets of Paris, tongue jutting from the corner of her mouth.

"After a while, chocodile," Nick said, trying again.

The Arc de Triomphe took rocket fire, collapsed, crushed unwary tourists. Amanda lowered a pinkie into her cereal bowl and then slowly licked off the milk.

"See ya, wouldn't want to be ya."

No response.

"He who smelt it dealt it."

Nothing.

"Betta check yo'self before you wreck yo'self."

Bingo.

Amanda finally looked up, dark eyes focusing behind round glasses, and answered in Amandaranto, the raspy whisper she preferred to enunciation.

“Nick? You’re going? Where? Nick? Don’t?”

“I got the night shift, A-dog.”

“But? Nick? Why?”

It was a good question. The answer mostly being that the Dude insisted on rent. Said it was a Total Character Builder. But also that they flat needed the cash, since Amanda dry-swallowed five hundred bucks worth of Asperger’s meds a month.

Weird thing was, Amanda didn’t have Asperger’s.

But she did have something. The doctors at the clinic were sure of it. They just weren’t *insured* of it. Until the expensive tests were covered, the Dude decided if it wasn’t the Ass Burger, Asperger’s was close enough.

The Dude blamed the government.

The Dude blamed the Illuminati.

The Dude blamed excessive fluoride.

Nick didn’t blame anyone. He put his stock in earbuds and rode the tinnitus train every chance he got.

Tune the kitchen out; tune Metallica in.

Distortion, unlike Zoloft, actually worked.

Amanda, for her part, pretty much just hunkered beneath furniture, hugged her knees, and mainlined multiplayer action.

And Mom?

Well, Mom’s picture watched from the mantel, framed in fool’s gold, with a look on her face like, “Now you kids get why I split?”

Yeah, Nick got it.

Had gotten it a long time ago.

“You know why,” he finally answered.

Amanda’s little face was impassive, purple lipped in the half-light.

“I do? Nick?”

“Yeah, you do.”

She nodded, then leaned over and stuck something in his hand. It was a folded piece of construction paper. Inside was a quarter. A shiny new one, the kind with one of the fifty states on the back. Delaware. Underneath, it said *Happy Brithday*.

Nick laughed. “You so spelled that wrong on purpose.”

Amanda ignored him, pressed buttons, chest-bursting an alien.

“For starters, *brithday* has two y’s at the end.”

Amanda ignored him, pressed buttons, tased an anti-union protester.

“Here’s an interesting fact: Delaware has the second-smallest square footage of any state.”

Amanda ignored him, pressed buttons, grand-thefted an auto.

“Okay, don’t wait up.”

The Dude raised his arm for a high five as Nick straightened from under the table. Nick was going to let it hang, wanted to let it hang, *needed* to let it hang.

And then couldn’t.

He gripped his father's palm.

"Awesome," the Dude said, lighting another smoke.

Nick slammed the porch door.

Trudged to his Celica.

Key, ignition, combustion.

The radio squalled — some news station, pretty much the same routine, except this wasn't cows: "More carnage . . . grievous internal injuries . . . absolutely no motive . . . Dog bites and rabies speculated . . . Police are rounding up local bikers for questioning."

Bikers?

He popped in a tape.

Yeah, a tape. Total old school.

The pounding metal hooves of the first Muttonchopper album thrashed out of stock tweeters — pure fuzz.

Loud. Rude. Righteous.

NICK SOLE, A MAN WITH A PLAN:

1. Jab Dolby Bass Boost™ button.
2. Listen to car whine.
3. Fail to give a shit about blinking engine light.
4. Put it in first gear.
5. Fail to buckle up.
6. Redline, pop clutch.
7. Spray gravel onto (unmowed) lawn.
8. Fail to signal.

9. Hit street at forty, easy.
10. Fail to give way to oncoming LeBaron, causing
(a) squeal, (b) horn, (c) finger.
11. Gas, gas, gas.
12. Fail to yield to pedestrian(s).
13. Right on red, despite sign that reads NO RIGHT
ON RED.
14. Radio even louder.
15. Press quarter so hard into palm it leaves imprint.
16. Achieve cruising speed, wind in hair.
17. Fail to fail.
18. Entrance ramp, merge, fast lane.
19. Go, baby.
20. Just go.



Lying on the Killing Floor

HUGE HALOGENS BURNED ORANGE, AN OVAL of sallow light from poles that spanned the enormous lot. In the middle was a structure, essentially a corrugated metal barn, rusted, pitted, oily. Its waffled sheet metal grinned and flexed in the wind. Bolted to an enormous concrete post was a sign with the company name, Rebozzo AviraCulture, dwarfed by a much larger sign that said NO TRESPASSING.

Fancy name, Nick thought, for a chicken factory.

For a hot-wing abattoir.

For a paycheck slaughterhouse.

At the end of the service road was a guardhouse manned by Officer Danny Sorrel, three hundred pounds of stress and sweat, a dude who'd graduated two years before Nick. The guys on the chicken line all called him Rent-A-Knob. Danny

Sorrel's job was twofold: (1) check IDs, (2) raise the gate. But Danny took his duties seriously. He thought terrorists were everywhere, hunkered in backseats, folded into trunks, lurking in the rye — all busy hating us for our freedom. Also our poultry.

"Purpose?" Sorrell snapped as soon as Nick rolled down the window and turned off Mortis Trigger midchorus.

"To make my shift on time."

"Date of birth?"

"Hard to see how that's relevant."

"ID number?"

"Same as it was last night, Danny. There a problem?"

Danny Sorrel narrowed his eyes and dropped the hard-ass act for a second. He pointed to his police scanner. "You listen to the news today, Sole? There's major weirdness going on. Blood in the streets, man. I mean, dang, it makes me glad we're *behind* a fence, you know?"

Nick remembered the news cutaway he'd heard on the radio. "What, you mean that biker routine?"

Danny Sorrel leaned in closer. "It's not bikers! Get your head in the game, Sole. Don't buy what's being sold by the lamestream press! Cops don't ever sound the way they sound tonight. Scared. Cashing in pensions and moving north. It's ominous and shit."

A row of idling pickup trucks behind Nick began to lay on their horns, first one and then the rest joining in, like dogs in a cul-de-sac. Danny Sorrel handed Nick back his ID. "Happy

birthday,” he said, and then raised the gate. Nick looked over, surprised, about to say, “Hey, thanks,” when Sorrell waved him through with a big fat middle finger.

The main gate was surrounded by smokers getting in a last puff as the day shift came off the line—a circle of grumbling men, pale and dazed, with thermoses and metal lunch boxes, callused hands cupping balls, deeply bored. At the far end was a row of huge chrome tankers where the dipping sauce was stored, the pride of Rebozzo AviraCulture: “You’ll Come for the Meat, but You’ll Stay for the Sauce.”

Nick had worked at Rebozzo’s for three years and was pretty sure he had never come for the meat.

“Mr. Sole!”

Jett Ballou, wearing a trench coat, sweats, and fingerless gloves, walked over and held out his knuckles.

Nick bumped them. “Mr. Ballou.”

Next to Jett was a girl who was often next to Jett.

Petal Gazes.

A shock to the system, every single time.

If only because Nick couldn’t understand why she worked at Rebozzo’s instead of behind a nice clean counter blending smoothies or selling perfume or folding tank tops.

Nick Sole, Mall Human Resources.

“Hey,” he said, looking at his feet.

“Hey,” Petal answered. She was thin, with a shock of white hair that hung over half her face. The other side of her head was shaved, highlighting eyes so large and blue they made

her look half anime. She wore a black hoodie with BAUHAUS written on the front in duct tape, American flag cowboy boots, and a Carhartt jacket three sizes too big.

In other words: exactly, down to the inch, down to the atom, in every possible way, the girl Nick had been dreaming of since he'd first discovered himself in the bathtub at age eleven.

Half punk, half shy, smart as hell.

Weird, but not trying to be.

Funny, but never making jokes.

Lips offset in a kiss-me pout.

"So what's the word?" Ballou asked.

"Same old same old," Nick answered, thinking about his unsent texts.

Why didn't he just ask Petal out?

Why didn't he have any balls at all?

Why did he always fall for girls who looked like they just stepped out of graphic novels about sexy apocalypses?

"I dig your earring," he finally said.

It was a gold hoop with a long white feather hanging from it.

Petal blushed. "Actually, it's kind of a joke. You know, working here? A *feather*?"

Shit.

"Yeah, I get it. Totally."

"Obviously," Ballou said.

Petal turned away, unhooked the earring, and slipped it into her pocket. Jett stretched and yawned, pretending to soak in the night air. The shift horn went off. Rolling gates slammed shut around the parking lot. A belch of smoke wafted from one of the exhaust vents. The line of workers seemed to sag in unison.

“It smells,” Petal said, wrinkling her nose.

“Worse than usual?” Nick asked, stepping downwind. Reeking like beaks at school was a given, no matter how much he scrubbed. He spent all day through classes hoping no sudden movement would punch a hole in his fog of Irish Spring and flipping off kids who made faces in pump-action Nikes their moms had paid three hundred cash for.

But shift funk was something else entirely.

“It’s me,” Ballou said. “Max Body Spray. Ocean Cinnamon. Just bought it.”

“Gross,” Petal said.

“Seriously,” Nick said.

“Shaddup,” said a guy in a hard hat behind them as the line began to move. “The three of you.”

“Sorry,” Nick said.

“Sorry,” Petal said.

“Eat me,” Ballou said.

People began to push forward. Nick untangled his earbuds as they laid their stuff on the X-ray belt. In a second Petal was going to walk away. He couldn’t let her walk away. Yet

again. He needed a good line. Something easy and smooth, a joke or part of a lyric. But he had nothing. His mind was a shiny Scrabble tile, a total reflective blank, like the Dude after a major wake-and-bake. Grinning at the wall.

Moron.

“Nick?” Petal said, snapping her fingers.

They stopped in front of the men’s locker room.

“Yeah?”

She reached up and slid her arms around his shoulders.

Pulling him into a full-on hug.

White hair against his cheek.

Tiptoe, sigh, thigh against thigh.

Workers streamed around them, making comments, whistling, slapping his back.

It was the third-best thing he’d ever felt, transported to some place where paychecks didn’t even exist — a frayed plug, pure current, the smell of scrubbed vanilla and musty jacket and shocking pink.

“Happy birthday,” she whispered, then let go and hurried off toward the packing department.

“Terrific,” Ballou said drily as the final siren went off.

Nick changed in record time, a massive shit eater of a grin on his face.

“Ready to toil, son?” Ballou asked, now all in white, sneakers to shower cap.

Nick felt unusually suave in his antibacterial slippers and

hairnet, sporting the same Guns N' Roses T-shirt for God knows how many shifts, Axl smelling even worse than he probably did in person.

“You know it, kid,” he said as they headed out onto the killing floor.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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