

Dead America

Luke Keioskie

Chapter I: Farewell, My Lovely

I used to be a homicide detective and even I've never seen this before. The corpse isn't moving. Sure, the Harlem and East Rivers meet here and run fast off Carl Schurz Park, and because the dead body's half in the water, half lying on the edge of the promenade, she's tugged by the current, making her rock gently. But that's all. She isn't moving. She's not Newly Dead. She's not a necro. She's really, truly dead.

Shit. The night was looking bright until now.

I toss my cigarette butt into the river and remember the day the dead came back to life. I was twelve years old when the TV started showing scenes of dead people getting up and walking around. Just like in the movies. Only these living dead didn't try to eat our brains. They didn't rampage the streets, killing and spreading some twisted disease, infecting and destroying civilisation. These weren't monsters. They were just like us. Hell, they were us; just the dead versions come back to life. They were as surprised by it all as the rest of us were.

Not her, though.

Her name is Cheryl Hampton, though just this morning her ashen faced father, Douglas Hampton III, had tearfully said she preferred to be called Cherry. There's a photo of Cherry in my jacket, where she's fresh faced, bright eyed, and living. Just another sorority girl with a NYU sweatshirt and a smile that would quicken even a dead man's heart. Her father, Douglas Hampton III, gave me the photo this morning with a solemn, "Find my girl," and a nice fat retainer for my services. I'm not made of stone so I took the money and the job. Now I have to call Mr Hampton and tell him his Cherry had been found and that she isn't undead like he'd feared or alive like

he'd hoped. And I'd probably have to give the money back, too. This just gets better and better.

The crime scene's a buzz of activity and apathy, your typical late night murder scene, where the cops are either moving quick to keep back the reporters on the edge of the recently set up floodlights or they're standing around longing for another cup o' joe to keep their eyes open. They barely pay attention to me – seems my years in Homicide grant me the look of a man who belongs at the scene of a murder – so I step off the promenade to get closer to the corpse of Cherry Hampton.

My camera clicks when I take a picture of her, the flash glaring accusingly. You gotta love cameras. They get smaller every year while the shit they see stays the same.

Cherry's naked except for a ragged coat. I lift the hair from her face with the end of a pen, take another picture. I wade into the water a little way, shiver at the cold, take one more. I put the camera away, shaking my head. I was too late finding you, Cherry. Too late to save you. Story of my life.

“What are you doing here, Faraday?”

There's Conroy, crime scene. A sour man, stick thin, droopy brown mouse of a moustache. I've worked with him in the past, back when I was a cop, back when I'd need his help matching a bullet to a gun or a boot print to a perp. He wasn't bad. A little twisted but not bad. One of those guys who takes their work home with them. I should know. I've seen his place. More body parts than the backroom of Madame Tussaud's. Twisted.

“Scanner told me where to find you,” I say to Conroy. “I've been working a missing girl case. Looks like I found her.”

Conroy smirks. Here it comes. “I heard you're not a cop anymore.”

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“I’m not.”

Conroy shrugs. He was expecting a little more from his barb but clearly his night hasn’t gone to plan either. Thankfully he doesn’t press it. Good. I don’t want to tell the story tonight. I want to hear his.

Conroy rubs his face wearily. “I wish *I* wasn’t a cop tonight.”

“Whatcha got?” It had been risky getting so close to the dead body – almost as a rule cops don’t like private investigators nosing around their crime scenes, especially if the PI used to be one of them – but Conroy looks like he needs a shoulder to cry on. Or someone to bounce a question off.

“White female, late teens. A laceration on her forehead indicates she may have fallen, though I’d have to take a closer look to be sure of the cause of death. Water in her lungs, but she could have been dumped. This close to Hell Gate, she could have floated all the way from Long Island Sound so it’s tough to say either way until I get inside and poke around. Mind you, at this hour she could have easily been dropped from where I’m standing.”

He’s right. Carl Schurz Park was popular by day, especially this summer with the high temps and humid weather, but at night, besides the occasional jogger or junkie, the place is deserted. Cherry’s killer could have easily taken East River Drive, parked, walked less than five minutes and dumped her in the river. Too easy. Well, easy considering Cherry didn’t relive. Nowadays it’s hard to dump a body. They usually sit up during the car trip.

“Any marks on her?”

“Only this,” Conroy says, lifting aside the edge of the dead girl’s coat and revealing a pale ankle. Etched into her skin like a brand is:

It's a number two, new by the looks of the scabby tissue. Homemade, as if she did it with pins and pen ink. Hampton hadn't mentioned his little angel had ink when I'd asked him for distinguishing marks. The tattoo could be a clue to who she belongs to. From what I'd heard of Cherry, she hadn't been kidnapped as Hampton thought. She was a runaway, and runaways didn't last long on the streets of New York without someone looking after them. The tattoo could mean she probably has a pimp. Or *had* one before she died.

I search the dead girl's coat and it looks institutional, flimsy like a hospital gown. No wallet, no cards, nothing. But tucked in an inside pocket, wedged like a discarded credit card receipt, is a crumpled matchbook for a Greenwich Village dive called THE CLOSET SKELETON. Cute. There were a lot of places like this in Manhattan now; trendy necro bars with too-clever names. It was the in thing this season. I palm the matches and Conroy is writing something on his clipboard and doesn't notice. That's good. Palming's never been my strong point.

"How long in the water?"

There's a shine in Conroy's eyes when he says, "Looks to be five, maybe six hours dead."

Ah. I was wondering what Conroy had been itching to say.

"No one's ever gone more than an hour since..." Conroy trails off.

"I know. I'm ex-homicide, remember?"

"What...what do you think, Faraday? How come she's not kicking?"

I can't answer and Conroy licks his lips, a dry sound. I'd always wondered about Conroy, about anyone working in forensic pathology really. They seemed to

have a sick fascination with the dead. Then again it doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out what the dead girl would mean to someone like Conroy. Not a lot of post mortem work is needed nowadays, since anyone who dies relives about ten minutes later knowing exactly what happened to them. Kind of defeats the purpose of boys like Conroy.

I don't know who first coined the term – there's been a lot of news, a lot of talking heads with a lot of theories. We call them the Newly Dead. Outside science, they're zombies, undead, necros, or even neccers if you're one of those black sheet wearing Life Supremacists. See, it wasn't just any old dead getting up and walking around. No stinking corpses reaching from graves. Shakespeare and Lincoln and Mick Jagger ain't running 'round. The Newly Dead are people who only just died. One expert traced the Reviving back to an exact date but no one could really agree since it happened across the world at basically the same time. I saw a chat show with Frankie Montz, the dead guy generally regarded by the media as the first American zombie.

Sorry. Dead American is the preferred term. A lot of lifism around these days. Have to watch what you say in America these days.

Frankie Montz had broken his neck after falling from a ladder while he was changing a light bulb. As his plump family wailed, he stood back up, climbed the ladder and finished the job. The story goes that when he stepped down, his wife was so shocked all she did was hand him the roast beef sandwich he'd sent her into the kitchen to fetch. Funny, isn't it? America's first necro is some rube from Wisconsin. At the end of the chat show Montz thanked God for giving him a second chance and the audience applauded.

“No second chance for Cherry,” I whisper, eyes on that blonde hair trailing in
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the murk, still somehow bold against the brown of the Hudson. “Or applause.”

“You say something, Detective?” Conroy asks.

Then, from behind us: “He ain’t a detective no more.”

I know the voice so I keep my eyes on Roosevelt Island and the shadow of the old lighthouse. I was wondering how long it would be before he showed up.

Detective Ray Gannon. My former partner and a grade A asshole.

A rough hand turns my shoulder and I’m hit with his deadman breath. He’s puffing from the walk, he never did keep in shape. For a moment I imagine him having a heart attack, right here in front of me. A comforting thought. But then he’d just get right back up anyway, reborn as an undead asshole instead of a living one. Then I’d never be rid of him.

Gannon and I go way back. Grew up in Brooklyn. Went to the same elementary, made fun of the same necro kids. Altar boys at St Dorothy’s. Chester A. Arthur High. Took his sister to the prom. She was easy.

Gannon was the one who was always going to cop school. He gets off on his own authority and he respects the law. I tagged along because I had nothing better to do and his dream seemed as good as any to follow. We walked a beat in Morningside where we saw our fair share of shit. Both went plain clothes at the same time, partners in Robbery, then Vice. Homicide was my choice. It sounded easy. And it was. The majority of victims remembered who killed them, and those that didn’t could usually give enough clues to go by. Until Gray Gary J, that is.

Oh, and Gannon fucked my wife, too. Did I mention that?

“Do yourself a favour, Faraday – fuck off. You’re contaminatin’ my crime scene.” Gannon always said that, *do yourself a favour*. From the red of his eyes the

favour would more likely be his than mine tonight. From the looks of Cherry, it’s not
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hard to guess why. The first person not to relive as Newly Dead washes up on his watch. The paperwork alone would drive a lesser man to drink.

“Under some pressure, Ray?” I push. “Those reporters up there should know by now that the girl hasn’t relived. Their telephotos can see it. I’d hate to be in your shoes...”

Gannon chews over what my words while he chews a toothpick. His one bad habit beside adultery used to be cigarettes. I'm guessing my ex-wife made him quit, same as she did to me with me. I started again the night she left.

I light a Death cigarette, puff. They’d made a comeback since the Reliving. Can’t imagine why. Gannon’s mind is working.

“How long?” he puts to Conroy, ignoring me.

“Five hours, maybe more,” the CSI says.

“Shit,” Gannon says.

I almost feel sorry for him. Almost. “Might be tough to get an interview out of her, Ray. Glad you're on the job and not me.”

“Fuck off, Faraday. Only real cops allowed.” He’s already turning away from me, pulling on a latex glove and hunkering down to give Cherry a look over. Bastard. A real cop, huh? If it wasn’t for him I’d still be a cop and probably still have my wife. Instead I’m a low rung private investigator and my wife’s in his bed. Asshole.

I can’t resist stabbing him in the back on the walk away. He makes a satisfying target. “If I see a real cop, I’ll let you know.”

Conroy shrugs as if to say he’s sorry and trails after Gannon, who’s already barking orders to get the complacent beat cops out of the way. Just like the old days, all right. Except I’m walking the other way.

There’s a crowd of lights lying in wait on the edge of John Finlay Walk,
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reporters and TV crews. Media jackals hoping for some titbits. Behind the cameras are scatterings of rubber necking necros and living night owls, their curiosity held back by the police tape. The living rub sleep from their eyes, yawn at the late hour. The necros whisper among themselves, looking towards the blue tarp Gannon cajoles two uniforms into holding up to cut off the view of the first person in twenty years who isn't the walking dead. Guess everyone's got questions tonight.

The microphones are thrust in my face before I've cleared the police tape.

"Detective! Detective!"

"What's happened here?"

"No comment," I say through gritted teeth.

I'm almost through the press of microphones when someone asks: "Faraday! Can you confirm the corpse is more than ten hours old?"

Fuck.

There she is. Dark blue suit looking freshly starched even this late at night, hair puffed like Diane Sawyer, botox keeping her dead face youthful. Well, as youthful as a necro can look, which is a lot with all the cosmetics and embalming products on the market today. She uses them all. Alison Kastle. Kastle with a K, as she always, always points out.

I met her when she covered Midtown South. Gannon and I did a few months on the beat out of there, chasing z-boys who'd wandered too far south from Harlem, rousting formalin junkies from the park behind New York Public Library, stuff like that. Kastle had been a living woman back then. Five years later, she's a talking corpse and I'm helping her fill out a statement about the Newly Dead greaseball who slit her throat for thirty bucks in change. I've never been able to get rid of her since.

"No comment, Kastle," I say, making a growl of her name. Not being a cop
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anymore doesn't change the fact that old habits die hard. I don't want to be the one who tells the world Cherry Hampton's not a necro.

But Kastle isn't looking for an answer from me. She already knows the answer, even as her question ripples through the crowd.

The necros blink at one another, speechless at the implications, while the reporters grab hold and rush to get it all on camera. Kastle with a K gives me a sardonic wave. Her suit seems to snap crisply as she readies for a live cross, her stitched up throat all but concealed by a silk scarf. The edge of her undead lips turn up, as if she's grinning at me. Grinning like a skull.

The headlines spread like Chinese whispers as I muscle through the cameras, swiping at the flash bulbs. But they don't want me anymore. Journalists, camera men, they move like a startled herd of cows, each one mewling at the others as they race to their vans. They need footage. They need experts. They know what this could mean.

I know what it could mean, too.

I remember when the president went on TV, John Ramsey this was, back when the Newly Dead first appeared. My dad called him *Johnny Death*. You can guess why. Johnny Death talked of tension, that was how he started. He was an old oil man and he talked about the thick, strong pipes that held a rig together, that kept the oil pumping, kept the whole dang fozzle of a thing running (his words, not mine). Johnny said those pipes only worked if they all pulled together for the greater good, you see what I'm saying? But sometimes the tension gets too much, he said and I remember him lacing his fingers together then snapping them away like a magician performing a trick. That's where the trouble starts, he said.

I don't know a thing about oil unless it's leaking from my Chevy but the gist
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of Johnny Death's metaphor is cut and dice. Tension. It's a killer.

And once the rest of the world hears that a person hasn't come back as a necro...well, if God is still up there, he's the only one who knows how bad it's really going to get.

Past the media there's more rubber-neckers, homeless bums, t-shirted slobs, people who have caught sight of the flashing lights and make it their private right to know whatever's going on. I thread my way through them, but a solid chest is in my way.

My way's blocked by a Frankenstein tough, a Newly Dead the size of Arnold Schwarzenegger's corpse. Armani suit tight across a barrel chest, wearing sunglasses at night 'cause he's future so bright. In his left ear is one of those radio receivers that look like an I-pod cord but God only knows what music a necro like this would listen to. I'm guessing it ain't Celine Dion.

"I believe the scruffy gentleman wishes to get through, brother," the dead Arnie rumbles.

A living guy standing beside the necro says, "Indeed. It is good to want things."

I do a double take. The two behemoths have the same suit, same glasses, same big-as-Arnie muscles, same radio cord. The pair even has the same face. Twins. The only difference is one's dead and one's living.

The night gets a little trippier, especially when I push past the living mountain and hear glass tinkle under his jacket. Unbelievably there's the faint whiff of chlorine. What's he got under there? The Arnie twins are too big to ask and besides, they're looking down at the pebbly beach where Cherry's body is being put on a

gurney. Just more people attracted by the lights. Hampton had said his little girl was
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studying to be an actress. Guess you got your audience, Cherry.

My Chevy's where I left it but I have to wait for a gaggle of Dead Japanese tourists to cross the street, easy to spot in their bright polyester and backpacks. They're taking photos of everything, hookers, dead drunks, telephone poles, and I have to laugh when they stumble dazedly, tripping over their own feet. Newly Dead are susceptible to bright light, makes them confused. Flashes are to undead what tear gas is to the living. Fucks with their synapses somehow. Trust Dead Japanese to still be taking pictures.

Is there a worst kind of walking corpse? Fucking neccer tourists.

Welcome to America. Land of undead and home of the grave.