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Generation Dead

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

PHOEBE AND HER FRIENDS HELD THEIR breath as the dead girl in the plaid skirt walked past their table in the lunchroom. Her motion kicked up a cool trailing breeze that seemed to settle on the skin and catch in their hair. As they watched her go by, Phoebe could almost tell what everyone was thinking. Everyone, that is, except for the dead girl.

Across from her, Margi shook her head, her silver teardrop earrings dancing among the bright pink spikes of her hair. "Even I don't wear skirts that short," she said before sipping her milk.

"Thank God for that," Adam said from two seats away.

Phoebe risked a glance back at the girl and her long, bluish-white legs. Fluorescent lights were kind to the dead, making them look like they had been carved from veinless blocks of pure white marble. The girl went to the farthest table and sat

down alone, and without any food, the way the dead always did during lunch.

Sometimes Phoebe used to joke that she possessed psychic powers. Not useful ones like being able to tell when small children have fallen into wells or anything; more like being able to foresee what her mother was making for dinner or how many bangles Margi was going to wear on her arms that day. She thought her "powers," if that's what they were, were more tele*pathetic* than telepathic.

Phoebe knew as soon as she saw her that the dead girl in the short skirt would get Margi rolling on a whole host of zombie-related topics, none of which she really wanted to discuss.

"I heard that Tommy Williams's eye fell out in homeroom," Margi said, on cue. "I heard that he sneezed or something, and there it went, *splat*, on his desk."

Phoebe swallowed and placed her egg salad sandwich back atop the wax paper wrapping it came in.

"Zombies don't sneeze," Adam said around a mouthful of meatball sub. "Zombies don't breathe, so they can't sneeze."

The girls lowered their heads and looked around to see who was in earshot of Adam's booming voice. *Zombie* was a word you just didn't say in public anymore, even if you were the center on the football team.

Air hissed through Margi's teeth. "You aren't supposed to call them zombies, Adam."

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Zombies, dead heads, corpsicles. What's the difference? They don't care. They don't have feelings to hurt."

Phoebe wondered if Tommy Williams and the girl in the plaid skirt really didn't have any feelings. The scientists weren't clear on that point yet.

She tried to imagine how she would feel losing an eye, especially losing an eye in public. And in homeroom, no less.

"You could be expelled for saying things like that, Adam," Margi was saying. "You know you're supposed to call them *living impaired.*"

Adam snorted, his mouth full of milk. Ten years ago a milk snort would have been the height of biological grotesquerie at Oakvale High. Today it seemed kind of lame next to losing an eye in homeroom.

"Living impaired," Adam commented after recovering. "I think you two are living impaired. They're just dead."

He stood up, his huge body casting a long shadow over their uneaten lunches, and brought his empty tray to the conveyor system that took all of the dishes and garbage away. Phoebe just looked at her beautiful egg salad sandwich and wished that she had any desire left to eat it.

Phoebe's locker popped open on her third try. She figured that her inability to remember the three-digit combination did not bode well for her impending algebra class, which was always right after lunch. Her stomach rumbled, and she tried to tell herself that the spikes of hunger would give her mind an alert sharpness, like a lynx in winter between successful hunts.

Yeah right, she thought.

Tommy Williams was in her algebra class.

The door to her locker shook with a metallic vibrating sound. Inside were pictures of bands like the Creeps, the Killdeaths, Seraphim Shade, the Rosedales, Slipknot, and the Misfits; bands that dressed like the living dead before there were any dead actually living. There was a picture of her, Margi, and Colette in happier times, all gothed up in black fabrics, eyeliner, and boots outside the Cineplex in Winford, ready to be first in line for the premier of some vitally important horror movie she couldn't even remember. Phoebe, the tallest, was in the middle, her long black hair hiding one side of her naturally pale face, and her visible eye closed as she laughed at whatever vulgar comment Margi had just made. Colette had done her eyes like an Egyptian princess, with a single thick line of makeup at each corner. Colette and Margi were also laughing.

There was also a picture of her dog, Gargoyle. Gar was a Welsh terrier and not half as frightening as his name would suggest.

A mirror was on the door opposite the shelf where Phoebe's algebra book lay. On her mouth was a streak of smeared violet lipstick. Her long hair, normally jet-black, shiny, spiky, and tousled, now just looked dull, flat, and messy.

She thought she looked scared.

The lipstick smear was the only flaw that seemed fixable, so she rubbed it away before walking toward Mrs. Rodriguez's class down at the end of the hallway. She arrived there the same time as Tommy Williams, whose eyes, she was relieved to see, were still fixed within their sockets. He gazed at her with the blank stare of the living impaired.

Phoebe felt like cold feathers were dancing along her spine. The stare was bottomless. It made her think that she could fall forever into his eyes, or that he could see through to the very heart of her. Could he see her wondering if his eye had popped out in homeroom?

Tommy motioned for her to precede him into the room.

She held her breath as he lifted his arm, realizing it only because another one of her essential life functions had ceased, namely her heartbeat. She smiled at him. It was a reflex; courtesy was not very common in the halls of Oakvale High. She stepped into the room, and as she did, she was almost certain that Tommy was trying to smile back at her. Wasn't there a faint upturn of the lips at one corner of his mouth, or the briefest flash of light in the flat undead eyes?

She took her seat, breathing again, heart beating again. Not only beating but beating *fast*.

She didn't know much about Tommy Williams. She knew that he'd come to Oakvale High last May, just a few weeks before school had let out. Oakvale was starting to get a reputation for having a good living impaired program, good enough that families with living impaired kids were moving to Oakvale from the surrounding area. Phoebe's father had pointed out an article in the *Winford Bulletin* that said Oakvale High's living impaired population had doubled in a year. There were at least seven in her class of about a hundred and twenty.

Algebra was not a subject that Phoebe struggled with; she usually completed the next day's assignment while Mrs.

Rodriguez started to probe for answers among her slower, struggling classmates. Algebra was a class that she could drift in and out of in the way music from a car passing will drift into an open bedroom window.

She wondered how Tommy Williams had died.

She looked at the back of his head, at his gray-blond hair, and her thoughts drifted, again, to the topic of death. They started with the mundane—Do living impaired people need to get haircuts? (The answer: Yes. Both hair and fingernails can grow after true death as well as in living impairment.) And proceeded to the philosophically complex—What is it like to be dead? What is it like to be living impaired?

These questions had preoccupied Phoebe when she was a young girl, long before the world had heard of the living impaired. She looked out the window and tried to think of the time before dead teens began to pick themselves off of mortuary slabs and sick beds. It hadn't been all that long ago; she was fourteen when she saw the first footage of a zombie—of a *living impaired* person—sitting stiffly between his parents on some CNN talk show. Her parents always made her leave the room when the Dallas Jones video came on. That video was the Zapruder film of their generation, as it showed Dallas, the original zombie, die and come back to "life."

A dog trailing a broken leash ran across the field opposite the classroom window, and Phoebe wondered why living impairment seemed to be a phenomenon exclusive to teenagers. American teenagers, specifically. Dogs didn't come back. Neither did monkeys or goldfish, or old people, or small

children. Apparently, neither did teenagers in Uzbekistan, Burkina Faso, Sweden, or Papua New Guinea, for some reason. But kids from Oklahoma, Rockaway Beach, The Big Apple, Arkansas, or The Big Easy all bore at least a chance of winding up living impaired, as long as they croaked during the delicate teen years. The newest Frankenstein Formula theory was that a certain mixture of teenage hormones and fast food preservatives set up the proper conditions for living impairment. The medical community was still testing the theory, having begrudgingly let go of fluorocarbons and brain patterns rewired by a lifetime of first-person shooter games.

Outside, the dog lifted a matted hind leg on a bike rack where a number of bicycles were chained. Do the dead go to the bathroom? They didn't eat or drink, so the answer would seem to be no.

Mrs. Rodriguez then did a strange thing, strange enough to interrupt Phoebe's train of thought. She called on Tommy for the answer to a problem even though his pale hand wasn't raised.

Tommy looked up from his papers. There was a pause that sucked the air out of the classroom; there was always a pause like that when the dead were called on.

The dead could think, and they could communicate. They could reason, and once in a blue moon, one might even initiate a conversation. But they did so very, very *slowly* . . . a question, even one as simple as the one from Mrs. Rodriguez, could take a living impaired person ten minutes to process, and another five to respond.

Phoebe covertly tried to gauge the reaction of her classmates. Some were suddenly absorbed in their textbooks, doing anything to avoid the reality—or unreality—that the dead kid represented. Others, like Pete Martinsburg, who was taking Algebra One for the second time and who was normally only interested in football and girls, were rapt with attention. Pete was looking at Tommy with the same expression of manic glee that he wore when he'd tripped Norm Lathrop and sent him sprawling into a bank of big rubber garbage cans in the lunchroom last week.

"One hundred and seventy-four," Tommy said, his voice halting and without inflection. No one hearing his voice could tell if Tommy thought his answer was wrong or right, so most of the class looked at Mrs. Rodriguez for her reaction.

She looked pleased. "That is correct, Thomas."

Phoebe noted that she always called the living impaired kids by their formal first names. It wasn't something she did with the "normal" kids. Pete Martinsburg was just "Pete" when she called his name, which was often, and usually to reprimand him. Phoebe was secretly thrilled to see the leer smacked off of Pete's face.

Mrs. Rodriguez went on with the class like it was no big deal to call on a dead kid. For the most part, the rest of the class reacted the same way.

But Phoebe noticed that Tommy did not go back to looking at his papers. His head remained high for the remainder of the class.

* * *

Margi was waiting for her at the door after algebra.

"How did you get here so quickly?" Phoebe asked. Margi took her arm and pulled her aside.

"Sshh. I've mastered the art of bilocation; I'm really heading off to our English class right now."

Phoebe laughed. "Me too. Let's go."

"Hold on," Margi said. "I want to see that living impaired kid for a minute."

"Whoever told you about the eye thing was yanking your chain. He still has both," Phoebe whispered, and then Tommy walked out of the classroom, the last one to leave.

"I've got something even bigger. I heard he signed up for football tryouts. He's supposed to start practice tomorrow."

Phoebe looked at her friend, wondering just how it was that Margi always knew what was going on with the dead kids.

"Don't look at me like that, Pheebes. I overheard Coach Konrathy arguing with Principal Kim. He wasn't going to let the dead kid try out, but Kim is making him."

"Really?"

"Really. Can you imagine that? Playing with a living-dead kid? Having to shower with one of them? Brrrr."

Did the dead have to shower? They weren't rotting corpses like in all the movies, and they didn't sweat, either. Phoebe didn't think they smelled like anything; at least they didn't smell like anything dead.

"He looks like he could play," Phoebe said, watching him make his patient way down the hall.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's built for it."

"Phoebe," Margi said, making a face. *"Ick."*

"He is. He's really, you know, sort of handsome."

"Yeah, if he wasn't, like, *dead,"* Margi said. "Double ick. Come on, we have to get to class."

"What about bilocation?"

"I can't do it when someone is asking me a bunch of questions. Let's go."

Phoebe made one stop after the final bell before she went out to the bus. Adam was methodically stacking books in his locker, lifting half the stack with one big hand.

"Hey," she said, "I hear that a corpsicle is going out for your precious football team."

"Yeah?" he said, not looking up from his task. "Whatever. As long as he can play."

Phoebe smiled. She thought it was cute the way Adam tried to be all gruff around her. She wondered if he even knew he was doing it.

"Listen," she said, "would you be able to give me a lift home tomorrow? I want to stay and get some work done in the library."

"Sure, as long as you can wait until practice is over," he said, pushing his locker closed. "And as long as the STD doesn't take away my driving privileges."

STD was Adam's term of endearment for his stepdad, who he got along with about as well as he did with Winford Academy's defensive line.

"Great," she said. "See you. I've got to catch my bus."

Adam nodded. If he really did have an opinion one way or another about playing football with the living impaired he didn't show it. Adam had matured a lot over the summer. Maybe it was the karate.

"Is Daffy coming?"

Phoebe laughed. Adam was more mature around everyone other than Daffy, his nickname for Margi. "I don't think so."

"Okay. See you."

"Later." She watched him walk away. She'd known Adam since she'd moved next door to him years ago, but he was different now—in the way he walked, in the way he talked, in the way his face had slimmed down to reveal a strong, angular jawline. His upper half, always big, had broadened out into a wide V from his narrow waist. Phoebe smiled to herself. If it *was* the karate, it was a good thing.

She almost missed her bus home. Colette was already sitting alone and staring ahead out the windshield. Phoebe saw her, and the familiar pang of sadness and shame flared inside her chest.

Phoebe had grown up with Colette Beauvoir, at least until Colette stopped growing when she drowned in Oxoboxo Lake the previous summer. Colette would be fifteen forever, and yet she was not the same fifteen she used to be. Phoebe had tried to talk to her—once—but the experience had been so disturbing that she'd never tried again. That was months ago. Margi was even worse; she would get up from her seat and leave if Colette entered the room. As gabby as Margi was, she

couldn't even bear to discuss what happened to Colette.

The dead always sat alone. The school dismissed them five minutes early so that they would have time to shuffle out to the buses. Every school day since Colette died, Phoebe would pass her sitting there all alone and wonder if she remembered the fun they used to have listening to Colette's brother's old Cure and Dead Kennedys records in the basement.

"Colette." It was the first word Phoebe had said to her since the one failed conversation. The memory of her tears still felt fresh in Phoebe's mind.

Colette turned, and Phoebe liked to think that it was the sound of her name and not just sound that caused her to turn. She regarded Phoebe with a fixed blank stare. Phoebe considered sliding into the seat next to the dead girl. Her mouth opened to say—what? How sorry she was? How much she missed her?

She lost her nerve and moved toward the back of the bus, where Margi was, whatever words she'd hoped to say caught in her throat. Colette's head turned back slowly, like a door on a rusty hinge.

Margi was engrossed in her iPod, or at least she was pretending to be. Colette was like a dark spot on the sun to Margi; she never spoke about her or even acknowledged that she existed.

"Did you hear that the bass player for Grave Mistake died?" she said. "Heart attack after overdosing on heroin."

"Oh?" Phoebe said, wiping her eye. "You think he'll come back?"

Margi shook her head. "I think he's too old, like twenty-two or twenty-three."

"That's unfortunate," Phoebe said. "I guess we'll know in a couple days."

Tommy Williams was the last one on the bus. There were plenty of open seats.

Tommy stopped at Colette's seat. He looked at her, and then he sat down beside her.

That's weird, Phoebe thought. She was going to say so to Margi, but Margi was intent on her iPod and trying furiously not to notice anything about their dead friend.