

THE LAST SUPPER

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Walter's mind was at one time rich with emotions other than hunger, but those feelings had long since fallen away. They'd dropped from his being like the flesh, now absent, that had once kept the wind from whistling through his cheeks.

Gone was happiness. Gone greed. Gone anger and love and joy.

Now there was but hunger, and hunger only.

As Walter, his joints as stiff as his brain, staggered through the deserted streets of what had been until recently one of the most heavily populated cities in the world, that hunger burned through him, becoming his entire reason for being.

Hunger had not been an issue for him at first. During the early weeks of his rebirth, there had been enough food for all. The streets had teemed with meat. The survivors hadn't all evacuated at once. There were always plenty of the foolish lingering, which meant that he had little competition for the hunt. Those initial weeks of his renewed time on Earth had been about as easy as that of a bear smacking salmon skyward from a boiling river during spawning season.

Those days were gone. Now, not even a faint whiff of food remained to tease him from a distance. The streets were filled with an army of the hungry, devourers who no longer had objects of desire upon which to fulfill their single purpose. For weeks, or maybe months, or perhaps even years—for Walter's sense of time had been burned away along with most of his sense of self—walking the streets was akin to wandering through a maze of mirrors and seeing reflected back nothing more than duplicates of who he was, of what he had become: a bag of soiled clothing and shredded flesh, animated by a dead, dead soul.

Staggering through a deserted square that lay in the former heart of the city, stumbling by shattered storefronts and overturned buses, he sought out flesh with a hunger grown so strong that it was less a conscious thought than a tropism born out of whatever affliction had brought him—and the rest of the human race—to this state. His senses, torn and ragged

though they were, reached out in search of fresh meat, as they had every day since he had been reborn.

Nothing.

No scent filled his sunken nose, no sound his remaining ear. Yet he surged forward, sweeping the city, borne fruitlessly ahead by a bloodlust beyond thought. Until this day, when what was left of his tongue grew moist with saliva.

Blood. Somewhere out there was blood. Something with a pulse still radiated life nearby.

Whatever called to him was barely alive itself, and hidden, and quiet, but from its refuge its essence rang like a shout. Drawn by the vibrations of its life force, he turned from the square onto a broad avenue and then onto a narrow side street, knocking aside any barriers blocking the path to his blood—*his* blood now. He righted an overturned trashcan (but his promised meal was not hidden there), kicked up soot as he walked through the remnants of an ancient bonfire (but no, nothing there, either), and moved forward until he arrived at a large black car with its roof split open, flipped over on one side against a light pole.

He pushed his way through a carpet of broken glass and peered down through what remained of the driver's side door. He touched the steering wheel and a charge of energizing bloodlust coursed through him. Though the wheel's leather skin had long ago peeled away, he could feel the blood that had blossomed there right after impact, still feel the throbbing of its vanished presence. But he knew, if he could be said to know anything, that ghostly blood could not alone have sounded the call that he had heard. The tug on his attention had to be more than that. Something was here, waiting for him.

Or hiding from him.

In the back of the tilted car, a rustling came from under shredded remnants of seat stuffing. Confused eyes peered out at him. Walter filled with a surge of lust, and dropped atop the creature. A dog yelped—only a dog, and not a man, a man whose scream would strengthen him—and exploded into frantic wriggling, but there was no way the animal could escape the steel cage of Walter's hands. Seeing the nature of his victim's species, the lust vanished. There was no longer anything appealing about this prey.

But his hunger remained.

The dog whimpered as Walter shifted his fingers to surround its neck and cradle its head in his hands. Its bright eyes pleaded and teased, but Walter had learned that the promise of satiation there was pointless. He slowly tightened

his grip anyway, and the animal split in two, its head popping off to drop at his feet. He held the oozing neck up to his lips, and drank.

The blood was warm. The blood was salty.

The blood was useless.

His hunger still raged, his needs unsatisfied. What he required could only be provided by the blood of human, not animal, intelligence. He let the dog fall, where it was immediately forgotten.

There had to be something more left on the face of the Earth.

Walter moved on, clumsy but determined, his hunger once more an all-consuming creature. It wasn't that he needed flesh to live. Its presence in his leaky stomach had never powered him. The strength of his desire was unrelated to any practical end.

He hungered, and so he needed to hunt. That was what he did. That was what he was.

He returned to endless days and nights spent walking the length and breadth of his island, but his prowling proved useless. Though he sniffed out the life of other dogs, and rats, and the last few surviving animals that had somehow not yet starved to death at the zoo, nothing human called to him. The city was empty.

One day, much later, he paused in the harbor and looked west toward the rest of his nation, a country that he had never seen in life. He listened for the call of something faint and distant, waited as the evidence of his senses washed over him. In an earlier time, he would have closed his eyes to focus, but his eyes no longer had lids to close.

The static of the city's life, quivering nearby, no longer rose up to distract him. There was no close cacophony muffling him from the rest of the continent, just a few remaining notes vibrating out from points west. He began to walk toward them, pulled by the memory of flesh.

He dragged his creaking body along the shoreline until he came to a bridge, and then he crossed it, picking his way past snapped cables, overturned cars, and rifts through which could be seen the raging river below. He had no map, and needed none, any more than a baby needed a map to her mother's breast or a flower needed a map to the sun.

Concrete canyons gave way to ones born of rock, and time passed, light and dark dancing to change places as they had since the beginning of time. Walter did not number the days they marked. The count did not matter. What mattered was

that the sounds he heard, the stray pulsings in the distance, increased in volume as he moved.

His trek was not an easy one. He was used to concrete jungles, not the forest primeval, and yet that is where he was forced to travel, for life, if it wanted to stay alive, kept far from highways, as well. As he slipped on wet leaves and tumbled over fallen logs, he could feel an occasional beacon snuffed out, as another life was silenced, another slab of meat digested. Walter was not the only one on the prowl, and somehow he knew that if he did not hurry, the hunt would soon be over for him forever. As weeks passed, he could hear what had once been a constant chorus diminish into a plaintive solo. As Walter could pick out no other competing song, perhaps it was the final solo.

Its pull grew yet stronger, and as the flames of its sensations flickered higher, rubbing his desire raw, he moved even more quickly, stumbling lamely through a hilly forest.

Until one stumble became more than just a stumble. His ankle caught on an exposed root, and he then felt himself falling. He fell against what appeared to be a carpet of leaves, which exploded and scattered when he hit them, allowing him to fall some more.

From the bottom of a well twice his height, he looked up to a small patch of sky and saw the first face in an eternity that was, amazingly, not like looking in a mirror. The flesh of the man's face was pink and red, and as he breathed, puffs of steam came from his lips.

Then those lips, surrounded by a beard, moved, and a rough voice, grown unused to forming the sounds of human speech, said wearily, "Hello."

Walter had not heard another's voice in a long while, and that last time it had been molded in a scream.

Seeing the man up there, looking smug and seeming to feel himself safe, filled Walter with rage; it was the first time in ages anything but pure hunger had filled him. He slammed his fists wildly against the muddy walls of his hole, unconsciously seeking a handhold that could bring him to the waiting feast above, but there was nothing he could grasp. As he struggled to tear out grips with which to climb, his flesh grew flayed against sharp stones and splintered roots. Yet he did not tire. He would have gone on forever like that, a furious engine of need, had not the man above begun dropping further words to him down below. They were not frightened words or angry words or begging words—the only sorts that Walter was lately used to hearing—so their tone confused him. He wasn't

sure what kind of words they were, and so he paused in his fury to listen.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” said the man, his head and shoulders taunting Walter in the slice of sky above. “We have a lot to talk about, you and I. Well . . . actually . . . I have a lot to talk about. All you have to do is listen. Which is good, because I have learned from others of your kind that all you are capable of doing is listening, and barely that.”

The man extended his arm over the hole. He rolled up his left sleeve, then used his right hand to remove a large knife from a scabbard strapped to one thigh.

“This should help you to listen,” he said.

Walter could understand none of the words. But even he understood what happened next. The blade sliced the flesh of the man’s inner forearm, and bright blood flowed across his skin, spilled into the crook of his elbow, and finally dripped in freefall. At the bottom of the pit, Walter tilted his head back like a man celebrating a spring rain, the stiff muscles in his neck creaking from the effort. He caught the short stream of drops on the back of his shredded throat.

“That’s all I can spare you for now,” the man said, pressing gauze against his voluntary wound and rolling his sleeve back down. “You don’t like to hear that, do you?”

Walter had no idea what he liked or didn’t like to hear. All he knew was the hunger. That brief taste had caused it to surge, multiplying the pain and power of his desire. He roared, flailing wildly again at the walls of his prison.

“If you can only shut up,” said the man, “you’ll get more. We need to come to an agreement, and then, only then, there’ll be more. Can you understand that?”

Walter responded by throwing himself against the earthen walls, but this response gained him nothing. As he battered his fists against the side of the pit, three of his fingers snapped off and dropped to the uneven floor. He struggled more frantically, and those body parts were ground beneath his feet like fat worms.

“This isn’t going to work,” muttered the man above, who began to weep. “I must have gone mad.”

He crumpled back out of Walter’s field of vision. Though Walter could still sense the brimming bag of meat above, its disappearance from his line of sight lowered his rage, and he subsided slightly. His hunger still overwhelmed him, but he was no longer overtaken by the mindless urge to flail. He howled without ceasing at the changing clouds above, at the sun and at the moon, until his captor reappeared—suddenly,

it seemed to him—and sat on the lip of the hole. The man let his feet dangle over the edge. Walter leaped as high as his dusty muscles would let him and tried to snatch the man's heels, but he could not reach them. He tried once again, still falling short. The man snorted. Or laughed. Or cried. Walter couldn't quite tell which.

"You can't kill me." The man peered down through his knees. "Well, you can, but you shouldn't. Because once you kill me, it might be all over. Can you understand that? It's been years since I saw another human being. Do you realize that? I may be it."

Walter growled in response and continued to batter against the sides of his prison.

"Damn," moaned the man. "What do I have to do to get your attention?"

Walter saw him bring out the knife again. The man looked at the line on his arm, which had now become a long, thin scab, and then gazed down into the pit, to where Walter's shed fingers lay crushed. The man shook his head. After a moment, he pulled his upper body back so that all Walter could see were dangling feet.

"This time," the man said, "I've got to do whatever it takes."

Walter heard a dull thud, one accompanied by a sharp intake of breath and a visible jerking of the man's legs. When the man leaned forward again, a handkerchief was wrapped around one hand. He used his good hand to dangle a bloody finger out over the pit.

"Listen to me now," the man said. Walter, frozen, stared at the offered digit. "I may be your last meal for the rest of your eternal life. I may be the last human left on Earth. Try to get that through your undead head."

The man let the finger drop.

Walter leaped and caught it in midair. He had it in his mouth before his feet hit the ground. He chewed so fiercely that he ate his lips away, and many of his teeth popped from their sockets. If the man were continuing to speak, Walter would never have known it, as the sounds of his feasting echoed deafeningly. Silence did not return until after the digit had been devoured, and only then did Walter look skyward again.

"I want to live," said the man. "I don't want this to be the end of the human race. We have to make some sort of peace, you and I. We have to reach some sort of an agreement. That's why I moved out here and filled these hills with pits like this one. I knew that your kind would eventually sweep out from

the cities and find me even here in the middle of nowhere, and I wanted to be ready for you.

“You have to tell the others. You have to let them know. Know that I’m the last. That if you just pluck me off the face of the Earth, there will be nothing left, only eternal hunger. Is that something you can understand? Is that something you can communicate to the others? If so, they’ll let me live. Let the human race live.”

What the man said was meaningless to Walter. He knew the word *hunger*, and plucked it from the forest of words being dropped on him. But that was about it. He could not comprehend the man’s message, could not possibly pass it on to others. In fact, as far as his consciousness allowed, there were no others. There was only Walter—Walter below and his food above. And the food was not getting any closer.

The man pulled his legs up from the hole, and for a moment it looked to Walter as if he were leaving, but, instead, there was another thud. Then the man poked his head into the pit, even closer this time, since he was lying on his stomach rather than sitting on the lip. The man brought his hands around to show another dangling finger. Walter leaped unsuccessfully, impatient for the flesh to be dropped.

“I can see that this is the only thing you will understand. Do you see now? If you eat me, it will all be over. Eternal hunger, with nothing more—*ever*—coming along to quench it. But if we can make a deal, I can help you feed for a long while. I can give you blood, and even some flesh from time to time.”

The man dropped his finger, and this time, Walter caught it directly in his mouth. His teeth began crunching on it immediately, but, unlike before, he did not take his eyes off his captor. Walter looked up at the blood soaking through the handkerchief in the man’s hand. The man noticed Walter’s gaze. Loosening the cloth, he dangled his damaged hand down into the pit and shook it. The discarded handkerchief slowly and softly lofted down. Walter caught the cloth and tossed it into his mouth. He sucked on the blooming stain, the corners of the handkerchief hanging out of his mouth and down his chin.

“Do we have a deal?” asked the man. His eyes were wide, and he was so caught up in his hope that he did not immediately pull back his extended hand. Filled with lust at the sight of the wet wounds hanging there, Walter ran to the wall and leaped up toward them, wedging his feet in the damp mud before the man could yank himself back. Walter’s remaining fingers intertwined with his captor’s remaining fingers, and

with his dead weight, Walter started pulling the man, sliding him forward so that more of his body hung over the edge.

“No! I’m the last man on Earth! You can’t do this! Without me, you’ll have nothing! Don’t you understand?”

But Walter did not understand, not really, and the man’s screaming and scrambling did little to slow his descent into the hole. Walter pulled him down mercilessly—for he had no mercy, only hunger—and at last, after far too long, the hunger was allowed to run free. Walter began with the man’s lips, silencing the urgent pleas. Then he gnawed his way deep into the man’s chest, cracking his ribs and burrowing into his heart. Walter’s face grew slick with blood as he gorged. It had been far too long since he’d fed this well, and even though he remained trapped at the bottom of a pit, he had no concern for tomorrow, no thought of putting anything aside for another day. He savored the flesh and sucked the bones, and then . . . then it was all gone, much too soon.

Momentarily sated, Walter looked up at clouds. He sniffed out the universe, listening for the pulse of the planet—and discovered in that instant that his jailer had been correct: He had been the last man on Earth. Walter could sense no blood moving in the world. No food remained.

All that existed for Walter now were a few square feet of ground, his dirt wall, and the sky above. Time passed. Walter could not say whether it passed quickly or slowly. He only knew that the opening above him regularly darkened and lightened again. During the days, his view was occasionally altered by a bird flitting by, and at night there was the occasional flash of a falling star. Hunger returned and was his constant companion, but there was no longer any point in raging.

Mud and leaves and the detritus of time slowly filled the pit. As he paced from side to side, Walter rose a little each day, his ascension so gradual as to be almost imperceptible. He never realized what was happening, merely found himself one day high enough to peer over the lip. Only then did he pull himself up to the surface and stand, seeing the world again for the first time in ages as something other than a tunnel-vision picture of the sky . . . though the difference didn’t really matter. For whether he was trapped in a hole or free to roam the land, nothing had changed. His only companion for now and forever more would be his hunger, and since he could no longer sense anything out there with which to quench it, it mattered little where he spent eternity.

Walter moved on without a destination.

Strangely, the sky now seemed filled with falling stars. And yet, they did not behave the way such things were meant to behave. Instead of vanishing quickly, as had the living human race, the bright spots crisscrossed the sky, like embers that refused to die. During the day, the stars still shone, another anomaly Walter no longer had the brain power to consider.

He wandered the world aimlessly, but only until the stars themselves were no longer wandering aimlessly. The stars were suddenly on the move in a purposeful manner, and as he gazed into the sky, he sensed where they were heading. With the flavor of the last man on Earth forever branded on his lips, he followed the path they made, moving back east across a country that was continuing to crumble, that was transforming from civilization into debris.

The bridge into the city, when he saw it again after what had been hundreds of years, had collapsed into the river. He had to pick his way over floating rubble, still bound together by cables, to move from shore to shore. He walked the city streets once more, watching the sky, until so many stars hung overhead that it seemed impossible to fit any more. Then their trajectories shifted, and they set about carving concentric circles in the sky. Walter's hunger positioned him beneath the heart of them. Others of his kind joined him.

As he watched, a single star dropped, pulling itself away from the carefully choreographed dance, becoming more than just a speck, gaining dimension as it fell. By the time it reached the buckled pavement on which Walter stood, it had grown into a globe several stories high. The fact that it floated there, sprouting legs on which it came to rest, had no effect on Walter. He sensed only dead machinery and felt nothing, not even curiosity. But when the outlines of a door appeared and then opened, that all changed. Walter could feel again the old familiar tingling that had been missing for so long.

A walkway eased its way out from the opening to touch the ground. A tall, attenuated creature walked down the ramp, followed by a hovering cylindrical machine half again as tall. The visitor, its two arms and two legs garbed in soft silver, stepped off the walkway into what, for it, was a new world. With alien eyes, it regarded Walter and his brethren.

Walter, agitated by a humanoid form stinking of the raw stuff of life, rushed forward—only to thud against the invisible wall surrounding the grounded star and its passenger. Flesh was close, so close, and Walter was enraged. He could not comprehend why his remaining teeth were not even then tearing the thing apart.

Walter roared, and his deafening anger was soon echoed by the keening of the other zombies that ringed the ship. The being removed a helmet, revealing a face that, though off in its proportions, contained all the right elements—eyes, nose, mouth—that signified humanity. This only served to fill Walter with a further fury.

The alien surveyed the crowd, looking at the crescent of the undead with all-too-human eyes. It then held a slender hand out toward Walter, who suddenly found himself able to surge forward, ahead of the others. Arms outstretched, he raced toward the flesh—*his* flesh—but stopped short in front of his meal, frozen as if encased in metal bands. Walter struggled to close that final gap, but could not.

Suddenly Walter found himself floating a few feet off the rubble. He tilted back, both alien and globe vanishing from his field of vision, to be replaced by the sky. He could see the moving stars pause in their flight. The alien stepped closer, and Walter was overcome by the need to open his mouth, to gnaw, to rend, but his body no longer followed the command of those needs. The metal cylinder, which had trailed closely behind the visitor, tilted on its side and floated to Walter's feet. It slid over Walter, engulfing him, encasing him from head to what remained of his toes. He was trapped once more. This time, he was unable to even bang against the sides of his prison.

The patch of metal before Walter's face cleared to transparency.

"Hello," the alien said, in a voice unused to forming the sounds of human speech. It leaned in close. "We have traveled a long way in search of our ancient cousins."

It waved its thin hands over the exterior of the cylinder, and sequential lights flashed, a rainbow coursing over Walter's mottled skin. He struggled to escape their glow, but, regardless of his rage, he moved in his mind only. When the colors ceased, that rage remained.

"How sad," said the alien. "Our cousins are still here, and yet . . . they are gone. They are all gone."

The words were meaningless to Walter, barely even heard over the angry urges in his head goading him to feed. Then the cylinder pulled away, and Walter found himself upright again, his muscles once more his own. He started to bound forward, but at the height of his leap, the strange creature waved its arms and Walter teleported back with the others. His momentum still carried him to complete his trajectory, and he slammed against the invisible shield.

The visitor walked back up the ramp, the cylinder floating by its side, and the metal path retracted back into the ship. The creature paused in the doorway. It was still looking toward Walter as the door closed and the force field died. Walter rushed the craft, but it rose effortlessly back into the sky before he could beat himself against its glittering sides.

The bright stars that had up until then formed circles in the sky vanished, but Walter barely noticed the emptiness above. So great was his lust for flesh that he was driven to return immediately to his hungry wandering, where he found nothing but that his hunger increased. His hunt through the rubble of humanity would prove fruitless, for his senses never again tingled to tease his immortal desire.

The sun and the moon continued to trade places, but no stars ever returned to move through the sky, and Walter's hunger, which left no room for any other emotions, never faded—at least not until, eons later, Earth's close and constant star expanded to fill his world with fire and finally erase his hunger forever.