

## MY DEAD HEART

I WASN'T EXPECTING A PARADE. I arrived home from my months on the road to an empty, or nearly empty, trailer. The screen door whisked shut behind me, drawing the attention of my cat, Gamera, whose tail stopped in mid-switch as he regarded me with active disgust.

"Hi, kitty," I said, and stooped to pet him. He hissed, bearing teeth as his paw lashed out and laid open three perfectly symmetrical scratches on the back of my wrist before he bounded off into the kitchenette, probably to seek a higher perch from where he could launch a new and more devastating attack on me. And all I wanted was to make friends.

I lifted my slashed hand and waited for the blood to well up in the cuts, but of course the blood never arrived. That spring dried up months ago.

"Quite a welcome," I said. But it was no less than I expected, no less than I deserved. A smarter person than I am would have never returned, except for holidays and birthdays. A smarter person than I am would have kept walking. But a smarter person—a dead one, anyway—wouldn't fall in love.

I dropped my backpack on the floor and sat in the kitchen chair facing the door, slouching as though fatigued from my long trip. The truth is that the dead don't get tired, although some have told me that their "lives" are like a constant state of being tired. I don't feel that way. I may not move quickly, but once I'm moving I can go forever, like some relentless machine composed of dry veins and dead flesh. I can't evade the claws of the cat, but I don't feel any pain from the scratches I receive even though they will never heal. We are all the sum of our scars, a wise man I met on the road told me, and he was still among the living.

I've been on the road these past months talking to people about rights for the undead. My travels have taken me to many parts of the country, some strange, some so normal they seemed strange. I went to the nation's capital and found sympathetic ears, and now there are a few legal rights and protections for "my" people that there weren't before. Time will tell if any of those rights are upheld or any of those protections enforced. Already I have heard of retaliatory strikes against the dead around the country, many in places that I had visited just days before. But my part, on that larger stage, is over for the moment. I returned home because of unfinished business. I returned home for the truth. The truth, or so I am told, has the power to set you free.

I don't know how long I sat before my mother came home; my relation to time hasn't been the same since the car crash that killed me. My mother, Faith, is a nurse at the hospital, working all sorts of shifts. Recently she's become a sort of midwife to the dead; she wrote me an e-mail while I was on the road telling me that the hospital has her counsel the recently returned and their grief-stricken families. It is a job she is ideally suited for.

Her eyes found me the moment she walked through the door, as though every day or night that she comes home from work she has expected to find me here. She looks as though she is seeing a ghost, but a ghost that she's been waiting for years to arrive.

"Tommy," she said, already crying.

Turns out I can move at nearly human speed when I put my mind to it. I tell myself that I may not be able to feel the scratches and the scars, but I can feel her hug.

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