

THE HUNGER

Tom Larsen pressed himself deeper into the shadows of the corner, careful not to upset the pyramid of discarded cans of paint and thinner balanced precariously in front of him. An old tarp, stiff with splatters of paint and pulled over his head finished his effort at concealment. Yet the thunderous knocking of his heart as it tried to escape the protective cage of his ribs vied with the stuttering gasp of his breath as to which would be the first to give away his position and set the monsters upon him.

A nearby moan told him that this particular group was close, just around the corner and getting ready to pass by his hiding place. He peeked from under the tarp and saw them coming, a ragtag collection of dead and putrefying humanity that refused the grave and instead chose to hunt and feast upon the living remnants of their kind. They shambled past, some missing or dragging limbs, but all covered in blood and gore in various stages of congealing. The smell was vile, yet the sight of the zombies was so much worse. Yes, that's what they were, thought Tom as he watched them shuffle past. *Zombies.*

An occasional low moan escaped the group, there were at least 15 of them of various ages and sex, but an errant titter sent the hairs on the back of Tom's neck standing straight up and he covered his mouth before a moan or cry of his own could escape from between his lips. He watched in horrid fascination as they slowly walked past his hiding place, his attention drawn to the last one as she stumbled past. He could see right away that she had been attractive once, her amber hair; filthy now, was pulled back on her head in an untidy bun. She wore a painter's smock covered in colorful splashes of paint mixed with the reddish-brown of dried blood. Her glasses sat askew on her once-pretty face and loose strands of her hair did little to obscure the large wound to her throat. Tom felt a brief twinge of pity as he guessed her age as between 22 and 25 years. Too young, Tom thought, as tears thankfully obscured his vision. Too young.

The crowd of dead things left his hiding place behind as they continued their mindless search for victims and Tom slowly exhaled a breath that he hadn't realized he had been holding. He clutched the bag of supplies he'd scrounged up to his chest and quietly left his hiding place behind the paint cans and scampered back up the old concrete and steel stairs he had come down only about an hour before.

The building itself had been built in the 1930s as a brewery right on the city's crowded waterfront. A huge red brick and mortar stronghold, it had once employed many of the hard working immigrants that had just moved into the surrounding neighborhood. After the second world war it's walls were filled to bursting with returning military men that not only worked within the building's familiar and noisome confines but who also happened to be its products best customers. The 1960's saw profits fall as the newer generation moved away from the old neighborhood and the remaining workers fought to be unionized. In the 1970's the brewery closed for good and the building was abandoned.

In the late 1990's, various individuals that branded themselves as artists moved in and turned many of the old, dust-filled rooms into art studios and apartments. They lived there, with no heat or running water until 2004 when the city tried to evict them as

squatters. The city lost the ensuing lawsuits brought about by various arts groups and civil liberty organizations, and by 2010 other young men and women that saw this as an exciting and trendy circumstance then moved into the tired neighborhoods around the old building and saw a renaissance of sorts take place as new restaurants, businesses, and quaint shops sprouted up all over. More artists moved into the building and wrote grants that paid for heat and running water. So the old brewery was resurrected as a place of creativity, art and hope... until a few years later when the dead starting coming back to life.

It was in this building that Tom Larsen now made his home. He ran up the stairs as fast and as quietly as he could, his eyes wide with fear and his breath coming in pained gasps. Once he was behind the door to his room he knew that he'd be safe... and there it was. It was a massive fire door – six inches of solid oak covered in steel plate. It rested on steel wheels and could only be opened by pulling on a thick rope wound through a series of pulleys until it slid aside wide enough to let him in. Tom set down his precious bag and grabbed the rope with sweat-slicked hands, his head and eyes constantly moving as he tried to see in all directions at once while also keeping track of the door's ponderously slow progress. Finally, the door opened wide enough for him to squeeze through and after snatching up his meager bag of supplies he let himself in and used the same pulley system to shut the door.

He tossed the bag onto a nearby worktable and sagged against a wall, willing his heart to slow its frantic beating and his breathing to resume some sort of normalcy. Once he felt better he walked over to the table and dumped the bag's contents onto its surface. Tom smiled at his haul: 2 ½ bottles of water, a protein bar, a tiny box of raisins, and a half-filled package of trail-mix. He'd explored the building several times since making his home here and it was he that had set up the little hideaways behind piles of cans of paint and paint thinner after he noticed that the dead things couldn't smell him past the fumes. He'd run into the walking dead before, but never so many at once and never so close. He shuddered, opened a bottle of water, and walked over to the large floor-to-ceiling windows that took up an entire wall of the room.

The wire-filled panes were yellowed with age and grime, but Tom could still see the river sparkling not too far off. A tugboat bobbed far out in the waves and several sailboats were still moored in their slips, their long white masts waving for him to join them. The boats were indeed the reason he'd come to the waterfront in the first place. He had hoped to take one and flee the hordes of the undead, maybe just stay out in the deep water returning to land only occasionally to forage for supplies, or maybe even take to the ocean and find someplace where the dead stayed dead... if there were still such a place left in the world.

Tom's eyes slid down, away from the promise of the waving sailboat masts and closer to the building he now inhabited, to the mindless, shuffling, *hungry* swarms of undead that clogged the sidewalks and that milled around the weather beaten shacks and buildings of the waterfront. There were hundreds, no thousands of them, and try as he might he couldn't get past them and make it to the boats. He had tried so hard! So he wound up here, safe for the most part; as safe as anyone could be in this new world, with his salvation tantalizingly close and yet totally inaccessible. He sighed and stepped around one of the five wooden easels that had been strategically placed in front of the windows. The two farthest from him lay broken on the concrete floor while the three

nearest him still stood sentinel to whatever sunset or landscape had captured the artist's imagination, their partially finished artworks reverently covered by dusty white sheets. Tom had curiously peeked at the paintings all over the building as well as those here under the sheets several times but being far from an artist he was unmoved by the colorful examples of Abstract Expressionism, Impressionism, Cubo-Futurism and Post-modernism, among others, that occupied the space. He dipped a dirty finger into some still-wet but tacky feeling paint that spotted a palette on a nearby counter, a can filled with different types of brushes stood close by as if waiting for the artist's return. Tom absently rubbed the oily paint in his fingers as his eyes once again strayed to the scene outside of the windows. So close, Tom thought, so close...

A sound at the fire door immediately caught his attention and Tom nearly stumbled over one of the easels in his haste to get there. He collided with the wall next to the door, his palms and face pressed tightly to the rough cinderblock as he stared wide-eyed at the heavy red door. He'd been here for months and he had yet to see or hear any of the dead things on this upper floor of the building. However, he could hear one of them on the other side of the door now, as it shuffled and scraped and moaned in the mindless way those creatures did.

These creatures can't operate the ropes that would open the door, can they? Tom thought desperately in an attempt to blunt his growing fear. His question became moot a moment later when the enormous door began to slide open in a series of noisy jerks and wrenches that Tom was sure would alert every zombie in the building on his existence and whereabouts. Tom's hand darted out to grab at the door and stop its motion, but he pulled it back in alarm just as quickly when the creature on the other side growled. Tom's hand coiled into a fist and he struck at the wall in horror and frustration, how did it know he was here? Why was it attacking him now?

Tom ducked and pushed away from the wall as the creature opened the door just wide enough to wildly stab its arm into the room. Tom backed away from the flailing arm and watched in growing dismay when it retreated from the room and the gap in the doorway widened to the sound of the ropes in their pulleys screaming like the damned.

Tom continued to back away, his eyes growing even wider when the zombie squeezed itself through the door's narrow opening and stumbled into the room. It was the girl from earlier, the one with the crooked glasses, and she was anything but pretty.

The creature lurched toward him and Tom backpedaled away, the heel of his foot meeting with the leg of one of the easels and tripping him. Tom fell to the unyielding concrete floor, and as he fell his hands reached out for purchase, with the left one grabbing and pulling the sheet off of one of the paintings. Tom hit the floor hard and just before he lost consciousness, he had time to see the sheet he had pulled from the easel fall across his face and gratefully block from view the hideous face of the zombie, its gore-blackened mouth opened wide, as it descended upon him.

Tom didn't know how long he'd been out, but his head hurt like hell. He briefly wondered if this was what it felt like to be a zombie, then dismissed the thought almost as quickly as he had it. He was alive. He knew he was alive. So what had happened?

He heard a soft grunt followed by a muffled tapping and swishing sound, and he slowly and carefully lifted a corner of the sheet from his face. It was the zombie, and she was painting. Tom couldn't believe what he was seeing! The zombie was repeatedly jabbing a paintbrush into the half-congealed blobs of paint on a nearby palette and then

thrusting and rubbing it clumsily onto the large canvas in front of her. The zombie was so engrossed in what she was doing that she didn't notice Tom slowly rise from the floor and make his way toward the door. Just as he passed her however, she suddenly turned and hissed at him, frightening him into hastier flight. Before he squeezed his way out of the door however, he turned back and saw the creature turn back toward the painting and continue her ungainly attempt at finishing the work begun there. Maybe, Tom mused, as he quietly made his way down the stairs and out of the building, it was she that had begun that particular painting and a portion of her ruined mind brought her back to the thing she loved most. Tom dodged the roving gangs of the undead as he made his way toward the marina and his possible escape, and he couldn't help but think about how some hungers are more powerful than others.

The End