

Sick Day
By Randy Ulch

The morning sun rose over the suburban landscape like a watchful sentinel guarding its most precocious prize with jealous hands chasing away the darkness, leaving only the faint wisp of fog on the air. Cold, Crisp breezes danced with the trees as they changed their dresses for the coming winter ball. The streets were strewn with the contents of the sterile metal garbage cans waiting to be picked up and they lay in complete disarray as the morning dew nestled on the blades of grass and trash like hundreds of tiny diamonds, when a crash of metal, stone and plastic echoed off of the garage doors, a light pierced the early morning twilight from the house above, followed by a violent sneeze and silent small bandits ran to the bushes for cover.

“Russell.” She said, wiping her nose with a tissue. “Russell! Wake up; I think there is someone in the yard.”

Russell stirred from unconsciousness, blurry eyed and confused for a moment. “Wha-What is it?” He said while pulling the covers away from his face.

“Go see what is going on.” She pleaded, looking at him with sappy swollen eyes and a runny nose. Grace always played up the helpless housewife while at home. Russell could never really understand why a police officer who spent her working life being brave and in charge would revert to such a stereotype when not in the uniform, but he’d gotten used to it and dragged himself from bed, pausing to absently grab at a housecoat to cover his aching naked body before stumbling down the hall to the window overlooking the backyard. Standing at the window in a bright pink housecoat wrapped tightly around his muscular frame he surveyed the backyard; nothing appeared to be out of place until he caught a glimpse of a small grey form scurrying across the lawn towards the chain link fence and the woodlot beyond.

“Raccoons,” he said, his tone dripping with hot malice. They had struck again. Over the last three months they had been raiding the garbage all along his street and he’d been hit so bad last week that it took him an entire Saturday to clean up the mess they made; his only real day off from working at installing roadside interactive advertising signs and he spent it cleaning up two week old garbage and rotting food off of the back porch and garage floor. They had even gotten into the preserves and trashed twenty jars of tomato sauce, picked eggs and fruits his wife’s mother had canned for them. He was feeling like a bag of week old shit left out in the sun from this flu and had no rational patience for another round of man verses nature. Descending the carpeted stairs, Russell’s anger grew as he envisioned the mess he’d have to clean up yet again. Reaching the door that led to the garage he picked up a golf club and turned the handle, stepping inside expecting to surprise the early morning burglars.

“Fuck.” Escaped his lips as he surveyed the damage; they had managed to claw their way through the screen door, open the back door which he realized he hadn’t locked the night before and raid the cold storage again, jars of pickles and jam had met their end this time

and the empty recycling bin was tipped over on itself beside the beer fridge that had been opened, two beer bottles had been knocked to the cement floor and smashed, little paw prints in the sudsy splatter pattern betrayed the little bandits escape route out the way they had come in. Russell followed the prints to the back door and outside. They had also managed to tip over the bird bath onto the porch and the plaster basin had shattered into a hundred tiny pieces and the bottom of the bird feeder was ripped off and bird seed littered the porch with the shards of plaster. Russell carefully avoided the sharp shrapnel and followed the path of destruction around the side of the house and into the front lawn.

He caught his breath in his throat as he took in the sheer magnitude of destruction laid out before him. Garbage was strewn across not just his lawn, but the Lopez family's lawn and every other lawn up and down their side street. Every bag was ripped open, every can tipped over and all of the neighborhoods refuse lying out for everyone to see and smell. Anything even partially edible had been ransacked and everything else was left to blow in the wind. Russell's shoulders hunched and he walked back into his garage to grab the rake and shovel, in another hour the garbage truck would be making its way down his quiet suburban street and if he was lucky he could downgrade the destruction from an F5 to and F1.

As the garbage truck lumbered down the street like a medieval ogre, stopping every dozen feet for its human laborer to toss the bulging black bags into its yawning maw, Russell and his neighbors up and down the street worked to finish up tidying up the devastation left by the agents of invading nature before the man made beast of burden reached their stop. Russell had managed to clean up most of the garbage off of his lawn, a few wrappers drifted in the late fall wind, but he had to get ready for work and he'd already been teased relentlessly by Rene Lopez, his neighbor, for venturing out in his wife's evening best. The frilly pink house coat was stretched over his large frame, caked in mud at his shins and drenched in his sweat and parts of wrappers and other unidentifiable refuse; the tie firmly knotted to preserve what little pride he had left. All the while he was plotting on how he would exact the most painful revenge on the little bastards who had decided that this neighborhood was ripe for the picking. Finishing up just as the truck lumbered to a stop in front of him, he managed to pass the last garbage bag to the garbage man and nod with the last shred of masculine dignity he had left before retreating into the house to shower away his shame and embarrassment.

As he stepped inside the front door, Grace met him with a coffee, her short blonde hair pulled back into a tight pony tail. Her puffy eyes hidden behind make up and drugs; she had already showered and gotten dressed into the dark blue uniform of a street cop. All traces of feminine weakness erased from her façade and bearing, she still managed a thin smile, suppressing the glee that danced in her eyes at what was standing before her.

"Here you go Hun." She said with a slight lift in her tone, almost mocking the sad image he presented and glad that someone else felt as bad as she did.

“Thank you dear.” Russell replied with an appropriately lovingly intoned fuck you under his breath and he sipped at the cup, detecting a few extra ingredients added to sooth his sinus ache.

“When I catch those bastards I’m going to shoot them and skin them.” He said, venting some of his frustrations. “Maybe put their heads on pikes at the fence line to drive away any others who want to fuck with me.”

“Relax, it’s only their nature, Hun; it’s not like we can’t make it harder for them to get into the garage or the garbage if we really tried hard enough. I think it’s cute that they are smart enough to get into the garage.” Grace shared.

“You wouldn’t think they were cute if you were out on the front lawn at 5.30 in the morning in a pink frilly house coat raking up the neighbors shit while feeling like this.”

“Well, I might fill it out a bit better than you.” Grace joked as she kissed him on the forehead and put on her boots in the hall, sneaking a look at his butt as he walked into the kitchen. “I have to get going though; I hope your day at work goes better.”

“Thought you were going to call in sick again?” Russell asked.

“Can’t,” She replied as she put her jacket on. “No more sick days.”

“Yeah,” he replied, understanding her position, he felt like death warmed over but he knew if he didn’t go to work, he’d knock the crew back a week in productivity. “I’m going in too, but I might call it a short day, I still have to clean up the back porch and garage. The little buggers got into the beer.” Grace had to laugh at the image of the small gray burglars cracking open a bud and leaning back on the boxes in the garage while they slept. Russell scowled.

“Love you Hun,” she said as she laced up the boots. “Try and get better.”

“Can’t get worse,” he levied with a sarcastic smirk, draining the cup of coffee as he lumbered up the stairs, leaving his layer of pink frilly shame in a heap at the foot of the stairs. The monitor she had left on in the kitchen during breakfast showed a group of talking heads discussing the ramifications of the new viral outbreak in South Africa and that a few cases had already been reported in other countries around the world and a handful had been reported here; if this was going to be another H1N1 fiasco or if there was a credible threat and what the government was going to do to curb what they were already calling a viral pandemic. Grace tuned out what she saw as fear mongering and finished tying her boots as she heard the shower come to life, she made sure her uniform was proper in her reflection in the hall mirror and left, bolstered against her ailments and ready for the day after an amusing morning.

Russell navigated his truck through traffic with the skill of a master sailor, pushing his sailboat to the brink and cutting across the waves to win the race as he made for the warehouse where he was supposed to pick up the new sign; the Instant-Traffic report GPS helped, considering that he could barely concentrate beyond the immediate task of operating the steering wheel and gas and brake. He'd just finished struggling with the jumbo screen at the Arena for over three hours and was late for his next job. Glancing down at the electronic work order on the clipboard screen, he noticed that this sign was supposed to replace the old billboard over the on ramp to the parkway off of Lexington. There was an Twitter update on his Cell phone from Joe saying that they had just finished ripping down the old wooden board and were waiting for him to get the new sign they just shipped in from Japan. This one was supposed to be so high-tech-reliable that it wouldn't need the near constant maintenance that the fourteen other signs needed. Sometimes Russell felt like a doctor for a busy Midwestern Texas whore house instead of a Devry correspondence trained computer technician. He was hoping that these new signs would be less bitchy and actually stay working for longer than three days, then he and Joe could get working with the crew on the that major project over at the Shop NOW drive thru mall. They wanted fourteen interactive screens installed by the end of the month and everyone on Russell's crew had been spending so much time making sure that the other signs they had installed were working that they had not had the time to even start the installation.

He crossed under the elevated subway and pulled into the parking lot of the warehouse to the frantic waving of Miguel, the warehouse supervisor, who started yelling words in Spanish that Russell was sure, but not certain, were insults to his mothers honor or his machismo or something. He waved a subtle single finger salute to Miguel and brought his truck to a whirring shuddering stop inside the loading bay of the old sagging steel warehouse; Getting out and helping Miguel and Benny load the fifteen foot, two hundred pound sign onto the back of his truck as they struggled to drag it across the loading dock. He was late and they all knew they didn't have time to use the crane; man power in its most basic sense was the fastest way to get this job done. Struggling to lift the sign the three of them finally managed to get it on to the flatbed with a bit of swearing, sweating and one bruised knuckle. Once the sign was secure and he had tightened the straps to hold it down, Russell loaded the packed solar rolls and boxes of components. He had broken a sweat more from the cold symptoms than the effort and as he climbed back into the cab, he popped another instant relief capsule hoping the pounding headache would go away before his head exploded. Miguel waved him off dismissively as he scanned in the time of departure into his electronic clipboard and turned to enter the manifest office.

Pulling onto the parkway he thumbed the voice control on his steering wheel and began dictating to the cab of the truck the answers to the work order he had pulled up on his electronic clipboard, keeping the rest of his attention on the road ahead and around him. His Cell phone beeped with another Twitter, but if he grabbed for it while he was driving on the parkway, then the parkway cameras would catch him for sure and he'd have to fork over a three hundred dollar fine. The electronic heads up display's software wasn't compatible with his model of cell phone and he didn't want to have to pay for the upgrade so most times he just multi-tasked unless he was in a camera zone. Up ahead he

spotted the now naked pole that once held the old Quaker state billboard jutting up into the overcast sky and his business partner Joe standing with Mike and Doug. Djikendu, 'Ken' was sitting in the boom truck texting someone, probably his girlfriend. Russell pulled up beside the boom truck and let the whirly lights go and switched the electronic detour sign on so that other cars would know to go around their work site at the side of the on ramp.

"About time you got here, Rus." Joe bitched as he wiped sweat from his overweight brow; Russell guessed that everyone was coming down with this stupid flu. "We've been waiting for an hour."

"Half an Hour," Russell corrected him with a weak smile and started to release the straps on the sign. Mike jumped into the cab of the boom truck, scaring 'Ken' when he grabbed the controls for the boom crane and started maneuvering it over to the truck bed. 'Ken' put away his cell phone, rubbed his eyes and stepped out of the truck to help with the sign, trying to wipe the worried look off of his face.

"Besides, blame the guys at the Arena." He lied, shifting the blame while he wiped his nose on his sleeve. He'd felt behind the eight ball all day since the Raccoons had trashed his yard. "They didn't even have the right hook ups ready and I had to rewire them before I could put the sign up. I'm not a fucking electrician, what a waste of time."

"Whatever." Joe replied, as they both grabbed an end of the sign so that the crane could hook onto metal loop and lift it up. While they liked to banter back and forth normally, it was all business when the chips were down or they were not feeling well and they worked with the least amount of talking they could manage as everyone felt the pressure to finish the installation. Once the sign was suspended by the crane, they all went to work bolting parts to the sign and rolling out the solar panel material; all the while cars buzzed past them uncaring. 'Ken' started soldering the main wires from the solar panel to the sign while Joe and Russell made sure that everything was bolted together correctly, Joe used the electronic torque wrench to test the bolts and Russell looked for any weak spots in the metal or plastic. When they were satisfied that everything was in order, they waved at Mike to raise the boom crane while Doug guided the sign over to the pole with a rope.

Russell jumped the three feet from the edge of the parkway to the first pole rung and started to climb up to the moorings for the sign that Joe and Mike had already spot welded into place. He might feel like shit, but he was the only one on the crew who could program the sign and it wasn't a job you could phone in for. Doug used the rope to keep the sign steady as Mike moved the sign closer and closer to Russell. Russell signaled to Mike the distance to the moorings with one hand while holding on with the other. As the sign got close enough to mount on the moorings, Russell motioned for Mike to stop and he reached out, grabbing the sign and pulled it into position, confident it would slide into place without any hassle, Russell signaled for Mike to drop it and he untied the rope and guided the sign the last few inches until the magnetic clamps caught hold and the sign was secure. Russell let the rope fall to Doug as he climbed up to the junction box where the satellite uplink was housed and opened the weather door to start programming the

sign to receive wireless commands from his cell phone, the more he could do from down on the pavement without risking his life, the better. Once the screen on his cell phone showed a successful response from the sign's wireless and he could see a satellite uplink starting in the code window, he started to climb back down. As Russell reached the last rung and went to jump the gap to the parkway, he felt a wave of nausea overcome him and his vision spun. He felt his grip give way. If he fell it would probably kill him as the ground was forty feet below the parkway on ramp. Just as he drifted away from the pole, Joe and 'Ken' reached out to grab at his jacket and they pulled him onto the parkway.

"Holy fuck man," Joe yelled as he cradled Russell's head. "You okay?"
Russell was able to focus long enough to vomit up the coffee and muffin he'd had for breakfast and mumble an apology.

"Fuck. Help me with his legs; we'll put him in the truck." Russell heard Joe say before he blacked out. He came around in the truck as Joe was starting to pull out into traffic.

"What the hell?" He managed to get out.

"You passed out man; we were going to take you to the hospital." Joe explained.

"Nah, just take me home. It's just this stupid flu, I'll sleep it off and we can start the Shop NOW installation tomorrow." Russell leaned back in the seat and let his head swim a bit as he felt serious hunger pains, probably because he'd just evacuated the only nutrients he'd consumed in the last twenty four hours. As they drove away from the installation site, the sign had finished its upload of data and began to play the advertisements, starting with a new car ad from some foreign company trying to convince people that their new hybrid was tough enough to handle the worst terrain that North America could throw at it.

"Alright man," Joe said with a resigned sigh, "But we were worried about you back there, you were pretty out of it; and really fucking heavy by the way." He added to lighten the mood a bit and hide the concern he had for his business partner and friend. The drive through suburbia was quiet and when they arrived, Joe helped Russell out of the truck and up to his front door.

"Thanks man," Russell said as he started to gain back a bit of strength. "I hope you don't get sick like this too."

"No worries, I'm pretty sure you already infected me, you sick bastard, so I'll just make sure to take all of next week off and leave the work to you and Doug." Joe joked as he walked back to the truck.

"Asshole," Russell replied back to him and they both chuckled before waving goodbye.

Inside the house, Russell stumbled into the kitchen, he had managed to regain some strength, but the pounding headache only allowed him to focus on simple tasks. The monitor in the kitchen was still on and the talking heads were discussing the rise of some recent civil unrest in Africa in light of the viral flu outbreak and that they were upgrading this new flu virus to a full blown epidemic. 'No shit.' Russell thought to himself as he went into the garage to clean up the broken beer bottles and strewn garbage. Resurveying the damage with a slightly less groggy head Russell noticed a few details he had missed that morning. The Freezer had been propped open and they had gotten in and tore open all of the freezer bags. What wasn't carted off had de-thawed since then and started to smell up the garage. He also noticed that they had been scratching at the door to the kitchen, trying to turn the handle.

"Resourceful little fucks." Russell cursed to himself as he grabbed a couple of garbage bags and started taking the food out that was no longer any good to eat. After spending the better part of the day cleaning up around the house, Russell took some time to sit down and allow the exhaustion to set in. He turned on the TV after getting himself a nice large cup of Neocitran and collapsed into the leather couch. Flicking through the news stations everyone seemed to be talking about major civil disturbances and riots all over Africa, Europe and the major cities and how it meant that society was going from bad to worse. Russell switched to the local channel, desensitized to the suffering of others after years of dealing with the economic collapse and cronyism in local and federal government; he'd personally been left behind once by the collapse of the economy and had only clawed his way back by his own ingenuity alone. If the people were rioting, it was probably because they had good reason to and it really wasn't news to him except when the local channel came back from commercial and the news anchor was talking about a riot at the local mall and that police, ambulances and special tactics teams were called in for back up. He wasn't sure, but Grace would probably be there, dealing with the worst of the rioters. She would throw herself into the thick of it since the more people she arrested and tagged, the larger her weekly bonus would be.

The News Anchor was talking to a reporter outside the police perimeter and the reporter was going on about seeing a crazy old lady attack a man for no reason. The News Anchor cut away from the local reporter as she had another witness describe the bloody attack, to tell Russell and the audience that the Government was holding a press conference in relation to the recent major outbreaks of violent civil unrest. The Premier came on TV and began reading a prepared statement asking for calm and to listen to the police and other officials dealing with the situations across the Province and nation. He was issuing a province wide curfew and suspending the charter of rights until the issue was resolved and that the military would be used to support the understaffed private police forces that many cities had hired to cut down on their budgets. He then introduced the head of the provincial disease control office and stepped aside to let her speak. She was wearing a white lab coat over a brown power suit and began by explaining the facts that they knew about this new epidemic that was spreading around the world and that these flu like symptoms could lead to a virally induced psychotic state where the victim would react with ultra violent tendencies to those around them. She then went on to try and discount some of the perceived public panic over the disease and urged people to follow the

premier's advice. People should stay in their homes and avoid contact with large groups of people and wait for help to come to them, if they displayed flu like symptoms they should isolate and quarantine themselves from others until the appropriate vaccinations could be produced. Russell had drifted off into unconsciousness in the middle of the briefing and snored loudly during her public plea as drool pooled and then dripped down his face to mix with the mucus from his nose at the tip his chin and drip into his lap.

Russell awoke in the dead of night to the sound of a crash, his head no longer hurt and he barely had any sniffles but his head still spun and his muscles ached. The TV was showing a test pattern and blasting the ear piercing wail of technology devoid of any human hand. The crash had come from the garbage cans he had put in the backyard specifically to lure the raccoons back to his house. He stumbled to his feet and quickly got Grace's back up service revolver from the closet in the hall, loaded it and started to walk slowly to the door to the garage. In his fevered state he had concocted a plan to lure the pests in and shoot them dead so that they could never ruin anything ever again. Slowly and quietly opening the door, he stepped into the garage and walked to the back door he had left slightly ajar so that he could get a clear shot. The cans had been knocked over and the contents strewn across the back porch but Russell could not see any signs of the pint sized pests near the cans so he started to slowly shift his position without moving the door, hoping to catch sight of his quarry and squeeze a shot off. As he stood silently waiting, something shifted in the darkness and moved closer to the wrecked screen door. Russell was about to aim and shoot when he realized that it was bigger than a raccoon so he paused, reaching out with his hand to turn the porch light on. With the blast of orange light, Russell saw the familiar tan jacket of his neighbor's son, Kevin Lopez.

"Hey, Kevin," Russell yelled through the door, "What the hell are you doing?" Kevin lurched sideways, slipping on a garbage bag and fell into the cans again, sending them clattering onto the lawn. Sprawled in a heap under the half light, he looked horrible, like he had puked up some kind of red shit all down the front of him and he must have lost his glasses during his bender because his eyes were glassy and unfocused. When the only response was a beleaguered moan, Russell put the gun down on the washer and opened the screen door.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Kevin, I almost shot you." Russell said as he reached out to help Kevin to his feet. "Fuck man, if you're going to get plastered, the least you can do is collapse in your own fucking backyard, I'm not up to this shit right now. Come here; let me get you on your feet."

As Russell reached out for Kevin's arm, Kevin lunged at Russell's hand, losing his balance on a ripped bag of thawed perogies and falling on to the grass. "What the Fuck?" Russell stepped back, getting pissed off. "What the hell has gotten into man? Seriously, get the fuck off my lawn and go sleep it off, I am not in the mood for this teenage drama – I hate my life – shit."

Russell turned to start picking up the cans and put the garbage back when he was body checked into the brick wall, smashing his forehead against the edge of the brick. For a moment all he saw was stars and then a sharp pressure and white hot pain on his shoulder. Kevin was on top of him and had bitten into his shoulder and was clawing at his arms. Instinct kicked in and he threw his arm back, his elbow connecting with Kevin's head by the temple, a blow that should have sent him sprawling and possibly knocked him out, barely shifted his weight on Russell's back. In response, Kevin bit down harder and Russell screamed out in pain as flesh and muscle were separated and Kevin fell away from the flailing man with a gory mouth full of Russell's shoulder. Russell screamed out and started wildly kicking Kevin as hard as his muscles would let him, feeling bones give way under the force of each kick. Every profanity he could think of spewed from his mouth as he stomped on Kevin's frail form. Yet Kevin did not curl into a fetal position as most people who would have suffered the injuries Russell was inflicting, instead Kevin was attempting unsuccessfully to bite at Russell's leg and instead getting kicked in the face. Russell stumbled back into the garage, a trail of bright red blood following him and he grabbed at a sweater piled on top of the dryer to hold against his bleeding shoulder.

Kevin fumbled outside trying to right himself and crawled after Russell, ignoring the screen door and climbing through the ruined screen. Russell was finding it hard to focus and could feel his adrenaline racing and the hunger he'd forgotten about earlier raging. Kevin moved with alarming speed once he had all four limbs on the ground and he crawled in an alien manner as he seemed to ignore the shattered bones that Russell had just broken, his arm bending in an odd way but somehow still able to support the lithe Latino's weight. Russell backed into some boxes in the garage and fell backwards, slamming his head into the concrete as he slipped on his own blood. Kevin grabbed at Russell's leg and pulled it to his shattered mouth. Reeling from two head injuries so close together, Russell tried to pull his leg away feebly and flailed for some kind of weapon to use. He knocked the shovel and rake over, frantically grabbing at the wooden handle of the shovel as Kevin bit into his shin, broken teeth catching on his shin bone and scraping along the muscle. Russell had nothing left in him to scream out and instead just started hitting Kevin with the shovel, blow after blow raining down on his head and upper body while Kevin gnawed on his leg; the blinding pain somehow allowing him to focus with tunnel like vision on one goal, getting Kevin off of him.

Blood splattered the inside of the garage as Russell's blows cut Kevin's aorta and black arterial blood sprayed out like a gory fountain drink; part of Kevin's scalp had come off and stuck to the shovel as Russell rained more blows down on him. Only when Russell heard the crunch of the shovel embedding itself into the base of Kevin's skull did Kevin stop. Sobbing uncontrollably from a complex mash of emotions, Russell pulled his mangled leg from under Kevin's limp form and he started to scream a deep primordial scream that left him exhausted, weeping and lying in a pool of blood until he lost consciousness.

Moments or hours later, Russell came around and had the presence of mind to stand up. Ignoring the limp body and the gore encrusted garage, Russell checked himself over. The bleeding from his wounds had stopped and while he felt light headed he was able to limp into the kitchen; the hunger rising up inside him like a monster all its own. Raiding the fridge he grabbed mindlessly at anything he could shove down his throat. No time for heating or even grabbing utensils, he dug his hand into the cold meatloaf from three days ago and choked down each chunk, letting the container crash to the ground in front of him when it was empty and repeating the process with the next container. After emptying the fridge of everything he could conceivably consume, he moved on to the cupboard, nothing he ate seemed to quell the hunger pains completely and he was unable to focus on anything else. Exhausting the cupboards he collapsed into a mess on the floor, surrounded by the refuse of his binge. While the hunger still remained, it had subsided enough for Russell to regain a bit more presence of mind and situation.

He reached for the phone and tried calling his wife, but the phone returned the persistent beeping that told him the phone lines were down. Crawling to the front hall he fumbled for his cell phone and tried to dial out only to once again be rebuked by a no signal message blinking back at him. Not wanting to face the truth, Russell avoided the open garage door and instead pulled himself to his feet, he had made a greasy trail of blood from the garage door to the living room carpet and he felt repulsed with himself, so he tested his leg and found that he could put normal pressure on it and that his wounds did not even hurt anymore. His heart was racing and he could only focus on what was directly in front of him, but he was able to climb the stairs to the bathroom where he closed the door and started to examine the wound on his shoulder. It was encrusted with coagulated blood and fabric from his shirt and the flesh around the wound was grey and went white with pressure as if his blood had drained out of the skin and muscles, even though he was still able to move his arm normally. He felt sick to his stomach as he fingered the wound and watched his body's reaction in the mirror, the nausea brought on by his mind's inability to cope rather than any physiological issue. The wound on his shin was a similar story and even when he picked a piece of Kevin's tooth out of the wound, the blood pooled for a moment and congealed quickly. Russell reflexively threw up in the toilet and lay at its base for a few moments trying to collect his thoughts. He needed a shower. So he started to run the water, turning the hot water up to almost scalding to soothe his psyche; then he undressed and stepped into the stream. The water cascaded down around him, quickly turning the tub a dark crimson as it washed away the arterial splatter from his face and forearms. He let the warmth wash over him and cocoon him in its protective embrace, forgetting all of his troubles and worries, he drifted away.

He woke up collapsed in the tub with ice cold water splashing down on his naked body and he looked around confused, he had no idea what time it was or what day it was or why his wife had not made it home yet. Climbing out of the tub after turning the water off, Russell realized that he was not freezing; instead his skin was grayish white for a few moments until the blood started to flow back into his extremities and to the surface of his skin when it started to pink up again. The hunger had returned in full force and as Russell

thought about what he could eat in the kitchen he felt himself slipping away again and he lost consciousness.

He woke up to the familiar crash of garbage cans and felt the adrenaline rush through him as every muscle tensed and his senses hyper focused. He was still naked, but in the middle of the living room floor and his hands were stained dark brown. It was them, was all he could think about; those bastards had come back to raid his garbage. Russell's higher reasoning was consumed with revenge fantasies as he stealthily made his way across the carpet and into the destroyed kitchen. He paused at the door to the garage like a predator waiting for his prey and tipped his head to listen to the skittering of tiny clawed feet on concrete. They had raided the garbage bags and then had come into the garage to check out the smell of carrion and a small group of them were gnawing at the ravaged corpse lying in a heap just inside the door. They were different, bigger some how and they seemed to communicate with each other as one of the larger ones gave basic instructions with a lot of waving of its paws. Russell didn't care; he was focused only on catching the bandits and ripping them limb from limb, he was hungry; hungry for revenge and for far more. He waited for all five of them to come into the garage and then leapt from the doorway onto the corpse, grabbing frantically at the fur of two of them, lifting them into the air with an incredible amount of strength, as the others scattered in abject terror. Those he captured bit and clawed at him but he ignored the injuries they inflicted and used the only weapon he had left, his teeth, to bite into the soft bare underbelly of one of them and rip flesh away; all of his pent up rage and revenge lashing out in a brutally barbaric and primal display of raw power. They screeched in terror and pain and the uninjured raccoon flailed madly, twisting its body wildly to free itself from the monstrous grasp of the grey ghoulish form standing in the blood drenched garage. Its flailing freed it as it left a chunk of fur and skin still between Russell's blood encrusted fingers and it dropped to the ground and bolted out the wrecked screen door, terror filling its enlarged black eyes. Russell did not seem to care and instead stood holding the limp form of the intruder to his lips as he drank back the hot warm blood and gnawed at the flesh. All signs of the man who used to be Russell faded away as the ghoul dropped the mangled corpse and stumbled over the body that had been eaten away, large chunks of flesh missing from its arms and legs and its chest caved in. The shovel had been tossed aside, ignored and as the ghoul lumbered out of the garage, the discarded skull sat, partially eaten on top of the washer next to the long forgotten gun. The ghoul followed the Raccoons as they panicked and ran from cover to cover trying to escape from the horror of what used to be a man named Russell.