

Edward Ellis Jr.

Night

Midsummer. Doomsday. I'm strolling down Van Dyke, minding my own beeswax, when suddenly I spot the grim reaper standing in the doorway of an abandoned building, his head and face shrouded beneath a billowy black cowl. Scared shitless I take off—dodging cars, bowling down pedestrians, tripping repeatedly over my own feet. Several blocks away I stop to rest, but just as I catch my breath, like the legendary phoenix, he rises from the rotting remains of a dead rat.

Heart racing, I bolt in the opposite direction. I run three, four, five miles—clear across town, only to find that he's already there, scythe in hand, waiting for me. Turn a corner, there he is. Open a door, there he is. Behind every tree, around every bend, there he is, avatar of doom, his bated breath visible even in this sweltering heat. Realizing that resistance is futile, that there's no escape, I give up the ghost. Locked in his embrace I look up into his face. It's me!

Though dead I still possess all my faculties—vision, hearing, cognition. Following a cursory check of my vitals I'm tagged, bagged, and carted off to the basement of a large, non-descript building. Like discarded dolls, dead bodies are everywhere—stacked up on tables, slumped against the walls, hanging upside down from the ceiling like butchered beef. Still warm, I'm dumped onto a cold, hard slab and stripped naked. Performing the autopsy is a little old Asian man and his two assistants, guy and a girl. "I'll be damned," the guy remarks.

"What is it?"

"I know this dude."

"Really?"

"Stayed on Van Dyke. We used to ball together. Straight up square, didn't drink, smoke, cuss, nothing. He didn't even chew gum. Paperboy, choirboy, mama's boy. Real Goody Two-Shoes."

"I hate people like that."

"Yeah, me too. I don't see any wounds on him. No cuts, no bullet holes, nothing. How'd he die?"

"Says here heart attack."

"Heart attack? He was only 19."

"Something scared him, something he saw."

"Something like what?"

"I don't know. But whatever it was, it scared him to death."

This keen assessment comes from Lola—short, pretty, thick as a brick. Built like the number eight, yet another painful reminder that crime doesn't pay. Unable to move, I wince inwardly as she shoves a catheter

deep into my groin. Seconds later I feel the blood draining from my veins and listen in despair as the last few drops dribble into a rusty bucket.

“Open the chest.”

Without hesitation he places a large chisel in the center of my chest and raises his mallet. I flail my arms but they don't move. I scream but to no avail. Wham! Wham! Wham! With each crushing blow the chisel sinks deeper into my sternum, and despite being dead I feel each one. Afterwards he spreads my ribs, inserts his hand into my chest cavity and carefully removes my heart.

“Excellent. We'll get top dollar for his one.”

Top dollar? What the...? Wait a minute, this ain't no autopsy, and these aren't professionals. They're harvesters, bodysnatchers. They're stealing my organs! Help!! Help!! One after the other they disconnect and remove my lungs, liver and kidneys. They take my pancreas, eyes, spleen; veins, arteries, stomach. They even take my penis. “Won't be needing this no more,” Lola laughs. From somewhere behind me I hear the high-pitched whine of a rotary saw followed by the sickening screech of a dull blade slicing into my cranium. With a twist and a tug he peels my scalp and scoops out my brain.

“All right, that's a wrap, nice work. Run these over to Doc, he's waiting for 'em. Who we got next?”

“Black male, 15, multiple gunshots.”

“Drug dealer, gangbanger?”

“Honor student. Cops killed him.”

“God bless America. We ready? Okay, get him in here before he spoils. Let's go, chop chop!”

Stripped like a stolen Escalade, I lay down on that cold, hard, bloody slab shivering like a shorn sled dog. For a long as I can remember I've had the vague but unmistakable feeling that I was being watched, followed, stalked. I could feel it in my bones, the muffled footsteps of something trying to sneak up on me. I'd turn around but there'd be nothing there, just the lingering impression that fate was slowly gaining on me, little by little, moving in for the kill. Every hour, every episode, had nudged me closer to this, my destiny, until now, at the tender age of 19, suddenly I find myself standing on the precipice of doom, starting into the abyss, with no way out.