

SANGUINARIA

Paul Hetzler

A sun-splash illuminated the window-box hyacinths, their blooms a lively red, precisely the color of the embalming fluid in the clear poly tubing that snaked up in loose coils from the pump under the workbench. Giardia Lambliia whistled as he worked, you are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy.

Now that the highly infectious alien virus had become widespread on the east coast, the dead were waking faster than the morticians and grave diggers could bury them. But today the score was two-zip: before lunch Giardia had managed to send a brace of bodies on to the churchyard for interment, with no escapees.

At the business end of the poly tubing was a gleaming double-aught-bore embalming needle, and he squinted at a flap of tissue from the previous cadaver stuck to its beveled tip, wiped it on his apron, and turned toward the next body with gusto. Then he startled, and buried the needle up to its stainless-steel hilt in his left pectoral muscle as the corpse sat bolt upright and asked, loudly and politely, for red wine. He was shocked. Usually they asked for white.

Giardia winced, hauled the needle from his chest and whipped the tubing onto the workbench with a clatter.

“Down, girl,” he said, and tried to force the body back into the casket. Not a girl really, she was his age, mid-twenties, and surprisingly strong. Her cheap blouse tore as she pushed against him, and he decided he wasn’t going to get the lid closed on this one. He wondered as he glimpsed a smooth brown breast through the rent fabric, if she consented to sleep with him, would it still be necrophilia?

But there was no reasoning with the dead. They didn’t want money or fame or sex. They’d dance with you, but you couldn’t sell them anything. Impervious to marketing and laws, they congested the streets. They drank and twirled until they at last floated away one by one in some kind of ecstasy, drifting on the breeze like so much dandelion fuzz. No one had yet determined whether they kept going up or if they sagged slowly into the Atlantic like tired birthday balloons.

“Red wine, please?” the young woman’s corpse repeated as she clambered from the box.

Giardia tried not to look this time—could the dead be offended anyway? “In the—” But his eyes again wandered to her bosom. “Cabinet. Downstairs. You’ll

see it.” Red was his preference as well. He watched her go for the stairs, continued looking in that direction long after the flopping of her toe tag and the swish of her stiff mortuary clothing died away. Who was she? The tag said ‘Doe,’ as so many bodies did, picked up where they collapsed jogging on the beach or going for coffee. But was it inconceivable her name really was Jane Doe?

A door slammed—Jane had gone out the main entrance downstairs. Giardia leaned against the workbench and watched her skip down the hill toward the avenue where taxis and buses backed up behind unauthorized parades.

It was unclear what statutes, if any, applied to dead pedestrians, and drivers seemed to avoid them out of reflex, though it wasn’t hard to tell who was really alive.

The living were the ones with furtive eyes and rigid muscles. Their surgical masks couldn’t disguise faces pinched from the strain of making their panicked appointments on time: lawyers, doctors, lawmakers, therapists, clergy—anyone who might protect them from the plague, or at least postpone it.

The dead were laughing and tipping, they had all the time in the world. At least a dozen were in the main intersection, He could see three children in school uniforms, a man whose gray flab hung in folds over his khaki boxers, an old woman in a wool skirt. As she spun, the woman whirled her walker inches above the heads of the children. The kids sipped from glasses of wine.

Two bottles of Sangria in hand, Jane pushed the cork in on one—she really was strong—and began chugging. She waded into the street. She twirled, arms out. She beamed. Giardia could see a red wine stain down her front as she revolved. He tried to keep track of her amongst all the others, but trucks and buses would block his view every time they passed, and when he could see again, she was farther down the street.

Some dancers were beginning to rise. The old woman snagged a utility line with her walker and set the traffic lights bobbing. Having smashed their wineglasses into the Hearth-N-Home storefront, the children held hands, slowly rotating as they ascended, legs outward like a triskelion, like skydivers before they deploy parachutes, except falling the opposite way.

Giardia pondered the whole dead business. Were there rules the dead had to live by? For example, did they have to twirl a certain number of times before they qualified to rise? And might it be possible, by twirling extra fast, to catch up with someone who had a head start? Were alcohol fumes involved in levitating?

They looked to be having such fun. If there were rules which governed their actions, he thought, they mustn't be laws of obligation. Maybe it was like the laws of physics, the laws for example that governed how materials combusted once they reached their autoignition temperature, they couldn't help it; it was just their nature.

Then he saw Jane among the floaters, so far away already. If it wasn't for that blotch of red that flashed with each spin on her axis he might not have known it was her. He watched the tiny sunspot pass her equator time and time again until she became just one in a sea of dead, illuminated by the crepuscular rays of an April sun.

Since it had become too dangerous for planes to fly, there were no more colored contrails to watch, but even more breathtaking were the bodies that scintillated in the sky like ice fog on a rosy February dawn, like twilight fireflies in a June meadow. As far as the eye could see, so many Tinker Bells sparkled, it was an ocean of fairy dust. He felt a wave of loneliness. Or maybe it was a wave of illness—he knew he'd had a serious exposure.

He clutched his wound with one hand, his head with the other. Yes, the fever was upon him already. He staggered, made it to Jane's casket and lay down inside. He hoped she had left him a few bottles of red.