

BLOCK PARTY

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July 4th, 8:33 a.m.

Sick and tired of being sick and tired, Bob paused for a moment at the top of the stepladder, braced himself against the furnace outside, then climbed through the hole in the ceiling. The summer sun almost forced him back down the hole as soon as he stood up. Even this early, the heat was nearly intolerable.

“Sheeee-it! It’s Bob! G’ mornin’, Bob!” Frank yelled from the roof of his house across the street, his rail-thin frame sticking up like a second television antenna.

“Hey, Frank,” Bob answered from his own roof without much enthusiasm. “How’s it goin’?” *Guess you’re about out of food, huh?* Bob was thinking. *Maybe you should’ve stocked up with more food and less hooch, Frankie.*

“Same as yesterday, bubba! Pretty shitty! You?”

“Not too bad, I guess. Still here and still breathin’. Hey, wait a minute, okay?” Bob wandered over to the edge of the roof, yawned, scratched his scraggly beard, scratched his crotch, then raised his rifle to take aim at something behind Old Man Gormly’s hedge.

BOOM! A corpse, its head shattered by the blast from the .30-06, fell out from the bushes to lay face-up beneath the bright morning sun. It looked to Bob like it used to be a mailman. What was left of its tattered clothing might have been dark blue once. Now it was stained almost black, ripped in several places to expose raw, jagged wounds in the greenish-gray flesh underneath. The heavy leather mailbag still draped around the corpse’s neck had been gnawed as thoroughly as its owner.

“Hey, Bob!” Frank yelled again, louder this time as he pushed up the brim of his tattered Stetson, “Know what, Brother Bob? I don’t think I’m gonna go to work today!” Frank’s braying laugh echoed up and down the street, sounding like a sick donkey coughing through a megaphone.

That was the morning wakeup call. Across the neighborhood, people peered through slits in boarded-up windows to greet a new day and the crackle and thunder of gunfire began rippling up and down the street, drowning out Frank’s laughter. It was the quickest way to find out who was still among the living: the living fought back. Buildings occupied by the dead were as quiet as a warehouse on a Sunday morning. And up and down the street, a few more of the dead folks toppled over once and for all.

The corpses didn’t seem to notice when one of their pustulent buddies bit the Big One, but then again, they didn’t seem to notice much of anything except feeding time. There were more of the dead folks this morning – every occupied house seemed to have at least

four or five pawing at the windows and doors. The neighborhood smelled like road kill already, and it would only get worse as the temperature continued to rise.

Bob and Frank, watching from their respective roofs, half-heartedly cheered on the few brave souls who came outside to thin the ranks of the dead. A few considerate folks even wasted some of the cadavers in their neighbors' yards. Bob could appreciate their good intentions, but then again, they weren't shooting toward him. Yet. *Crazy sons of bitches*, he thought. *It's a wonder we're not all dead and stumbling around.* And it was a wonder anyone even tried anymore. The last time they'd all gone outside to gang up on the dead, maybe three weeks ago, they'd lost five, and only two of those were nailed by the dead folks. The other three were shot by accident. *What did they used to call it? Friendly fire? Yeah, right. Mighty neighborly.*

"Hey, Bob! Check this out!" Frank interrupted Bob's grim musings, shouting like Old Saint Nick had stopped by early this year. "Hey, bubba! Look'ee here! Look'ee what I got me! YEEEEEEHAW!" *Ziiiiiiiiip!*

Ziiiiiiiiip?

Bob heard Frank rip his zipper open and had to force himself to turn around and look. No telling what the idiot would do next. *Christ*, Bob swore to himself, *how the hell can that skinny jackass always be this cheerful?*

He squinted at the object of Frank's affection – a corpse was trying valiantly to fly up onto Frank's roof. But not just any corpse. It looked like...a midget? A midget zombie? Now that was something you didn't see every day, even nowadays when folks didn't stay *decently* dead once they'd passed on. The corpse frantically flailed its stubby arms, staggering from foot to foot. Bob wondered if it used to be a circus clown. He couldn't say for sure, because it was completely naked - it might've been an ugly hairy kid for all Bob could tell. Frank, even less Politically Correct than Bob, was amusing himself by pissing in the midget corpse's face. That seemed to confuse the hell out of it, because it sat down suddenly in the knee-high grass of Frank's front yard and started trying to eat the coiled garden hose lying by the front porch.

Frank was really hard up for entertainment, and started laughing so hard he slipped, sat down on his own ass with a mighty *Oof!* and started sliding off the roof. Bob got ready to waste Frank's new yard ornament just in case Frank landed too close to it, but stopped when Frank skidded to a stop at the rusty gutter. The dead dwarf was oblivious as the gutter tore away from the roof and disappeared into Frank's crop of weeds. It looked to Bob like the sheet metal gutter gashed the corpse's shoulder, but the corpse didn't seem to notice that either.

Frank scrambled to his feet and started tucking away his Trouser Trout, still giggling at the short zombie as it dropped the water hose in apparent disgust. *BOOM!* A bullet ricocheted off the side of his house, narrowly missing the midget corpse. Frank fell on his ass again, but stayed seated this time, his boots dangling off the edge of his roof. He

squinted into the morning sun, and noticed a rifle barrel withdrawing through the boards covering the Ramirez's bathroom window.

"Jose! You sumbitch! Cut it out!" Frank screamed. "That's *mine!*"

"Fuck you, *cabron!*" Jose yelled back from behind his barricaded window. "I'm shooting that *maldito* bastard!"

"Oh the hell you will, you stupid fuck!" Frank was livid now. He even managed to get the midget corpse's attention again. It resumed hopping up and down, reaching for Frank's boots with the desperation of a drowning swimmer reaching for a life preserver.

But good ol' Frank was concentrating on Jose. Or Jose's bathroom window, to be precise. They hadn't had much to say to each other since the block party last Independence Day when Jose's wife, Maria, and Frank had started making eyes at each other.

About the time Frank sighted his rusty Marlin 30.30 on Jose's window, the midget zombie farted explosively from all the activity, venting the gas that had built up inside whatever was left of its intestines. That got everyone's attention.

"Hey, Frankie!" Old Man Gormly shouted from his screened-in porch, "That lil' turd sounds just like you! BWAHAHAHAHAHAAA!"

Two corpses still lurking behind Gormly's hedge immediately bounced off the porch's wire mesh screen like giant blue-green mosquitoes, and that shut the fat-assed old geezer up pretty fast for a few seconds. Gormly froze, then fell completely out of his porch swing.

"GAWD JEEZIZ!" Gormly screamed, scrambling for his scattergun. The two corpses battered frantically at the screen, stretching it inward.

Bob, in a rare mood of sharing, wasted those two as well, figuring that by the time Gormly finished scrambling around for his shootin' iron he'd be a goner. Old Man Gormly was going to have to be more careful in days to come - his screen couldn't take much more of the pounding. One of these mornings the dead folks were just going to walk right onto Gormly's porch and introduce themselves up close and personal. *Then* the crotchety old fart would be wandering around the neighborhood making himself a *real* nuisance. And *that* was the only reason Bob had bothered to give the near-sighted old bastard a hand the last couple of weeks.

"Much obliged, Bobby!" Gormly yelled, ignoring the steady stream of curses Frank was directing at him. He was just as oblivious to the condition of his porch screen.

"Yeah, yeah," Bob muttered. "Fuck you, you crazy son of a bitch." He slowly climbed down the ladder into his garage, leaving Frank to play with his new stumpy buddy - he'd

begun pelting it with empty beer cans, his harsh, rasping cackle echoing off the barricaded houses in counterpoint to the intermittent gunfire. *Nice to know that some people are doing okay these days*, Bob thought, *'cause I'm sure as hell not.*

July 4th, 12:30 p.m.

Bob walked slowly through his house, dodging crates of canned food, scattered tools, and piles of unwashed clothes, checking and rechecking the boards that sealed the windows and doors. The power had been off and on for about a month, then last week it went off and stayed off. With the windows boarded over and the lights no longer working, his home was more like a cave than a house. Bob coughed in the musty, stale air, but he'd stopped giving a shit about the steadily accumulating odors a long time ago. Water was at a premium these days so there just wasn't enough to waste on extravagances like a bath or laundry even if he'd been so inclined. What little water that trickled from the faucets was as brown as Rio Grande mud and just about as bitter, but if you let it sit in the sink long enough, the grit settled out. Better than nothing at all. They'd lost several neighbors to thirst already.

There were really two ways thirst could kill you these days, Bob had decided a while back. Either you stayed behind your barricades, like the Taylors, and died alone, or you made a run for it like the Johnsons and the Barkers and died as dinner guests of the dead folks. In the end, all three families had ended up pretty much the same. As far as anyone knew, the Taylors were still inside their place, but they'd apparently done such a good job of sealing themselves *in* that their corpses couldn't get *out*. Hell, no one had even known that they'd given up their ghosts until their crowd of dead groupies had shambled off to pester the Gormlys. The Johnsons had done a *little* better – Eddie had made it two blocks up the road before he lost control of his truck while trying to dodge a crowd of dead folks. He crashed into a tree in someone's front yard and that was pretty much that. Ed and June made it maybe twenty feet from the truck before the crowd of hungry corpses dragged them down in a slow motion storm of teeth and nails. There were so many of the dead that everyone was surprised when the former Reverend and Mrs. Johnson had shown up the next day for Sunday visitation. Bob had almost been sorry to shoot them – he'd always liked the "Revvin' Reverend", and June had been a real looker before she went all gray and glassy-eyed and gnawed.

Seemed like the Barker kid might've made it out alive - the last time anyone had seen him, he was running up the street and making a lot of shambling acquaintances while his parents and baby sisters were reduced to gnawed bones and shreds of gristle less than fifty feet from their front door. *At least he's not blasting that damned ol' punk rock music anymore*, Bob had thought at the time. *So maybe this isn't such a bad thing after all.* Bob figured his taste in music was plenty broad – he liked both kinds: Country and Western. He'd never had any use for that longhaired Satanic electric guitar crap. But still, sometimes, late at night, listening to the dead folks scratch at his windows, Bob wondered if he should've gone outside to help the Barkers. *Could've just put them folks outta their misery if nothing else*, he'd think. But then he'd remember what an uptight asshole Barker had been and what an uptight, frigid bitch his wife had been, and what

nasty spoiled little brats the girls would have *turned out* to be. Then he'd stop wondering. Besides, anyone stupid enough to try and leave on foot didn't *deserve* any better. At least, that's what he kept telling himself. And if you tell yourself something enough times, you might start to believe it.

No man is an island, but ol' Bob was pretty damned close after his first month of living with the dead.

Sometimes he thought about the first corpse that wandered into his neighborhood. Everyone had been watching the Emergency Broadcasts, but nothing unusual was happening, at least not in *their* neighborhood. What happened in Southside was Southside's business, not Northside's. Even so, most of the neighbors had stocked up on food and emergency supplies. They'd boarded up their windows and barricaded their doors just like the advisories recommended. Some folks even tried to keep up their normal routine of work and play, but the curfews and checkpoints quickly put a stop to that. A couple of families tried to leave the city, but were turned back at gunpoint by *soldiers*. So they waited in their homes and watched the news broadcasts of the world going to hell in a hand basket.

Bob and Cranston were helping Gormly board up his windows when they heard the first scream from the Barker's backyard. The girls found the filthy, deathly pale man crouched over the still-twitching remains of their beagle's disemboweled body. The mouthful of puppy liver dropped into his lap as he lurched to its feet and started after them. Cranston and Frank got there first. They tackled the "crazy sumbitch" and tried to hold him down while Rita Barker called the police. Frank was in high gear – he punched and kicked and whooped and punched some more, but by the time he started to get tired, it had become obvious even to him that the police weren't coming. Cranston was getting tired too. He lost his grip for a second, and the "madman", who had neither flinched nor tried to defend himself the entire time, twisted his neck at an impossible angle and bit a bloody chunk out of Cranston's chest. The pale man sat down hard enough to bounce and had just started to stand again when Rita, wild-eyed and still screaming for the police, put a pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. With crystal clarity Bob remembered seeing splinters of the man's skull embedded in the wall of the Barker's house, standing out in stark contrast to the black and maroon blood that seemed to be *everywhere...*

Cranston was the second of the "living dead" that Bob had seen – Cranston'd done the change, whatever it was, in a pool of his own blood in the backseat of Frank's Mustang Fastback as they screeched into the university hospital parking lot less than an hour later. Frank skidded to a stop just short of a group of doctors and nurses that were approaching slowly through the maze of empty cars. "Must be one helluva fucking mess in there," Frank had said quietly, looking at the bloodstains covering the staff's scrubs and lab coats. By that time, Bob was struggling to hold Cranston away from him, trying to convince himself that his buddy hadn't bled to death fifteen minutes earlier. When the first of the too-pale nurses stumbled against Frank's window and started trying to chew her way in, they realized that the medical staff had gone the way of Cranston. Bob

kicked open the door and shoved Cranston out onto the pavement as Frank sped away. As far as Bob knew, Cranston was still out there somewhere...

A loud *thump* followed immediately by blinding light, a loud voice, and a wash of cool air jarred Bob back to the present. For a moment, he was sure the dead folks had managed to pry one of the doors open, but when the *thump* gave way to a soft *hum*, Bob wasn't so sure. Then it hit him - the electricity was back on. Air Conditioning! At least for a while.

Bob ran for the kitchen and started boiling the rainwater he had collected from the leaking roof last night – hot food had become a novelty - then checked the TV. He wasn't sure what he expected to see on the tube, but he was sorely disappointed with what *was* showing. Same fat, bald guy in the same dirty, wrinkled suit, still babbling about the emergency as if no one would know if he didn't tell 'em. The same mandatory evacuation order was still rolling across the bottom of the screen. *Sure*, Bob thought, *we'll just pack right up and ask the new neighbors to give us a ten-minute head start.*

He changed channels and got an unexpected treat – the camera was unmanned, vaguely pointed at the three corpses chowing down on the early morning weatherman. *Jeeze*, Bob thought, laughing in quiet disgust, *they'll show anything on television these days.* Bob watched until the corpses lost interest and exited, stage left. The weatherman followed shortly thereafter, climbing laboriously to his feet and lurching off to do whatever it was that dead weathermen did. Eat the sports announcer, probably. Bob wished the dead weatherman would eat the fat guy in the dirty suit from the other channel.

Nothing else was on except, amazingly enough, the Home Bargain Channel *En Espanol!*, so Bob flipped back to the fat announcer. He was still alive and still making his pleas to the viewing public to get stupid and leave their homes. And *now* the fat man was saying that it was *illegal* for them to stay in their homes while the image cut away to a shot of police and soldiers rounding folks up and putting them in trucks and trailers for “relocation.” Bob decided to tell the announcer to piss off, so he tried the phone. It still wasn't working. *Can't have everything*, Bob said to himself, *but at least you've got air conditioning. And plenty of ammo if the cops show up to try to make you leave.*

He crammed a tape into the VCR and got ready to do *anything* besides listen to Frank and Gormly and Ramirez arguing about shooting the midget corpse, or watch the moron on the television endlessly repeating the same warnings...or remember. Bob grabbed the grimy remote and thumbed the PLAY button. Moments later, a steely-eyed Clint Eastwood was facing down a horde of Mexican *banditos* played by scruffy Italians. Bob flopped into his battered recliner, braced his equally battered boots against the floor, and pushed back hard. Rusty joints screeched like fingernails on a blackboard as the E-Z Boy Recliner King extended to its full length, settling into place with a final chorus of popping springs. Comfortable at last, Bob melted into the chair to enjoy the movie.

July 4th, 6:15 p.m.

Bob woke gradually, fighting all the way. In his dream, the Bud Lite girls had just doffed their bikinis and the fireworks were starting to go off... The noise didn't die down, so Bob staggered to his feet ready to shoot whichever son of a bitch had interrupted his nap: he'd always liked fireworks.

He paused in the garage to check the tires of his half-heartedly maintained 1971 Chevy pickup truck, then climbed the stepladder he'd set up under the hole in the ceiling. Halfway up the ladder Bob paused to recheck the stock of supplies he'd carefully hoarded in the crawlspace between the ceiling and the roof – water, ammunition, food, a precious bottle of aspirin, toilet paper – the stuff of Civilization.

Outside he could hear the steadily increasing crackle of gunshots. For a moment it sounded like firecrackers. The last time anyone had been able to get to a store had been about a week ago and there was no knowing when or if anyone would be able to again. Bob reminded himself to go easier on the bullets. Some of the neighbors must be getting pretty low by now judging from the level of gunfire.

The day hadn't gotten any cooler, and the sun was still blazing unmercifully from a clear blue sky. Bob squinted at the scene being played out below him. Most of the dead were on the move for some reason, a shambling, rotting mob converging on the street and heading east. The members of this impromptu parade were falling over right and left under a barrage of bullets from houses on both sides of the street.

Over the sounds of their moans and grunts and the nearly continuous boom of rifles and shotguns, Bob heard a truck maybe a block or two over. The driver must've been crazier than Frank, because he was shouting something over a loudspeaker. Bob's neighbors gradually ceased firing, but were still causing a hell of a lot more noise than the cavalcade of corpses lurching off to find the source of the amplified voice. The living babbled excitedly, making it impossible to hear what the voice was saying. Bob hoped it was damned important.

The folks that had escape holes were scrambling onto their own roofs. The rest were peeking out from behind their barricades or craning their heads to peek over reinforced fences. Bob strained to make out the words, then the wind shifted and the voice grew louder.

“...not approach this vehicle. This U.S. Army vehicle is loaded with explosives. No acercarse esta coche. Do not approach this vehicle. This vehicle will be guided by remote control to the parking lot of North Star Mall, then the explosives will be detonated. No acercarse esta coche. Do not approach...” The voice faded again, drowned out by the shouts of some neighbors for others to “shut the fuck up and listen!” Then one voice rose over the others.

“Hey! HEY! Get back over here you bow-legged asshole!” Frank demanded. He started screaming incoherently at his midget corpse as it joined the great Exodus heading toward the voice from the truck. Frank managed to bounce several more empty beer cans and a

couple of bricks off of the corpse, but it didn't seem to notice. Looked like he'd have to find something else to do with his time. Bob couldn't help but think how much the stumpy corpse resembled Frank's ex-wife. Seemed like Frank had screamed exactly the same thing at Mazzy when *she* marched out of the house and into the sunset last year. But Bob just couldn't find any sympathy for ol' Frank because he was too excited about what he'd just heard. He inhaled deeply, the scorching summer air tinged with the smells of death and smoke and gunpowder. *Perfect*, Bob thought. He couldn't wait for the show.

In the distance, columns of smoke from unchecked fires climbed lazily into the brilliant blue sky. Down the block, a Molotov cocktail exploded in the midst of the Zombie Parade, sending a horde of flaming corpses scattering into yards on both sides of the street and igniting an abandoned car in the process. Decently dead bodies littered the yards and streets. The corpses that didn't follow the truck resumed their ceaseless attempts to gain access to the survivors' homes. Gormly was still taunting Frank, and Jose was screaming at both of them. Up and down the street, the survivors were making a racket that would no doubt draw corpses from miles around to their block, but Bob smiled all the same and sat down to wait for the explosion.

He'd have fireworks this 4th of July after all.