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Opening extract from

Memoirs of a Neurotic Zombie Escape from Camp

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1

In Which I Say Goodbye to Seventh Grade

It was the last day of seventh grade and everyone at school was excited for summer, except for me.

I've always preferred the structure of school to the chaos of summer. Besides being hot and sticky, July and August are family road-trip months. Each year, Dad piles us into the minivan and hurls us down a potholed interstate for enforced family fun. But he's more focused on 'making good time' than having a good time. To be honest, it's misery on wheels. Mom frets about her patients, Amanda stays glued to her phone, and I get carsick.

Every time.

Cramming four humans (well, three humans plus a zombie) in a steel cage and hurtling down the highway at sixty-five miles per hour is not a recipe for anything but family friction, body odour, and vomit.

And besides, since coming back from the dead, I just don't have that much in common with my family unit any more. They're the living, and I'm . . . the living dead.

When you're a zombie, you don't fit in like you used to.*

At school, I just do my best to blend in. Thanks to all the make-up tips I found on YouTube, I now cover up my decomposing, grey skin. It may not look supple and vibrant, but at least it passes for tweenage and pubescent. And since I'd lied about faking my own death to hide out in the Witness Relocation Programme, Croxton Middle School welcomed me back as a pupil. Nobody except my family and two new best friends, Ernesto the cheeky chupacabra and Corina the vegan vampire, needed to know that death had actually relocated me to a dark grave for three months.

It felt good to be back in seventh grade, but now it was coming to a close – the last day of school.

'It all goes home or in the garbage,' shouted Mr Paulson, our gym teacher. He marched up and down the hallway,

* Yep, you heard me right. I am a zombie. If you're coming to this story without knowing that, I suggest you track down a copy of my first book, *Memoirs of a Neurotic Zombie*.

ordering us soon-to-be eighth graders to empty our lockers before his summer could start. I carefully cleaned out my locker, which was not only my depot for hand sanitisers (I just didn't trust the soap in the boy's room), but also my shrine to the best superhero of all time.

But not even NinjaMan could save me from the annual summer road trip.

As I delicately packed up my belongings (everything in its place!), I wondered where Dad would hijack us to this summer. He was obsessed with the Founding Fathers*, so I made a bet with Amanda that we'd schlep to Boston or Washington; maybe Philly if we were unlucky. Amanda's money was on Montana, convinced it was the one state in the union that didn't have reliable 3G coverage – thus cutting her off from the Croxton social scene for a season.

'A fate worse than death!' she'd declared at breakfast. 'Oh, sorry Adam,' she added hastily. 'But in the summer before high school, I've got to be available, accessible, and noticed.'

* My mother liked to remind him that America's founding 'fathers' simply signed a break-up letter to the King of England stating, 'It's not you, it's me,' and then fought a war about it. 'Hardly an example of good fatherhood,' she says.

As I carefully peeled the limited edition NinjaMan v Amphibulus poster off my locker door, I detected a slight whiff of grapefruit and toilet cleaner in the air. It instantly made me smile.

'Hey zom-boy, can I talk to you?'

I inhaled Corina's familiar (and comforting) scent of SPF 150 – 'the strongest sun protection a vampire could buy'. She was clad in black, like she'd just stepped off a goth runway.*

'You mean like . . . out loud?' I checked. 'At school, in front of other people?'

'Yeah, well.' She shrugged. 'Last day of school and all that – thought I'd make an exception.'

Sure we were friends. Sure we fought evil together. Sure I had a massive, unrequited† crush on her. But Corina Parker was something else. She was a vegan.‡

A vegan vampire.§

But despite worshipping Count Dracula, Corina had

* The kind used by beautiful models, not aeroplanes. Though her scent did have an intoxicating top note of jet fuel. Man, she was awesome!

† Unrequited, as in not returned. I liked her, like, a lot, and I think she tolerated me.

‡ A vegan is someone who doesn't eat any meat or anything that comes from an animal, so no dairy, milk, butter, or eggs.

§ And also generally no bloodsucking.

rejected her kind's ancient bloodsucking tradition. She avoided touching anything that comes from an animal (or person) with the notable exception of her very expensive leather jacket.

And since she never talked to me at school, I knew something was wrong.

'Did you get too much sun exposure today?' I asked.

I rummaged on the top shelf in the basket carefully labelled 'Outer Wear' for a wide-brimmed sun hat. Before dying I had very sensitive skin and always took protective measures. But one good thing about being dead is that skin cancer can't develop on dead skin. It's one of the few benefits to being a zombie.

'I don't need your hat or your charity,' she snapped.

'Is it a woman thing?' I whispered.

'Seriously?' she barked. 'Is that your assumption for *everything*?'

It really wasn't, but it's a shortcut I probably use too often. I don't understand girls. Females are a confusing species and by definition everything about them is a 'woman thing'. But this was something more. Something was troubling Corina.

'Fine,' she snapped. 'I just needed a friend and clearly knocked on the wrong door.'

'You didn't *even* knock,' I said.

She stomped off down the hall, the steel spikes of her black boots announcing her exit as she *click-clanked* away.

'Wait, Corina!' I called after her, abandoning my open locker.

'Meltzer,' called Mr Paulson, stepping in front of me. 'Is your locker vacated and ready for summer?'

I looked back. It wasn't. It was still midway through a very careful deconstruction. I had NinjaMan magnets to pack into bubble wrap, coloured pencils to put in order from lightest to darkest, and a set of spare clothes to remove and fold properly.

In truth, I was just getting started.

'Whatever's left in your locker feeds the landfill,' he warned.

I looked past the beefy gym teacher, which wasn't easy, to see Corina disappear around the corner towards the sixth-grade wing. She was clearly upset and, as she said, needed a friend.

All of my instincts were telling me to back up and pack up. I had cherished possessions in that locker, things that got me through the past few weeks of my re-entry into Croxton Middle School. But as much as I

wanted – no, needed – to clean it out properly, Corina needed me more.

I took one last look at my locker. 'You can junk it all.' I sighed. 'I gotta go.'

'Good man, Meltzer,' he said. 'Don't live in the past.'

I slipped around Mr Paulson and ran down the hallway, dodging the overflowing garbage cans and chattering seventh graders.

As I rounded the corner, I stopped and scanned the corridor of sixth graders. I spotted Ernesto, my backyard neighbour and Croxton's secret chupacabra.*

At school, Ernesto Ortega looked like a messy-haired Mexican who uses his sleeves as napkins, but underneath … he was a monster. He really wanted to be a werewolf but instead he was stuck as a hairless lizard-type creature with huge fangs and bulging black spheres for eyes.

Just then, human Nesto was eyeing something in his

* If you don't know what a chupacabra is, then what are you doing reading this sequel before you've read my first autobiography? If you've just forgotten, then see a doctor about memory loss, but I'll fill you in: chup-a-ca-bra is a scaly, lizard-like monster that comes out at night and eats rodents and destroys gardens. Like a werewolf but not as wolfy.

locker. He pulled out a mushy brown ball and held it up like a treasure.

'Nesto!' I shouted. 'Did you see Corina?'

'This apple's still good, right?' he asked. A worm oozed out of the skin as if to lay claim to the decayed fruit.

I pointed to the repulsive creature as a warning, but Nesto took it as an invitation.

'Lucky me,' he said, popping the entire bad apple into his mouth.

I looked away, disgusted, and scanned the hallway. Luckily the shrimpy sixth graders were a lot shorter than us in seventh grade and I spotted Corina's black bob at the end of the hall.

'C'mon,' I said. 'Something's wrong with Corina.'

Nesto and I ran to the end of the hallway where the corridor ended at the stage entrance to the auditorium. She was gone. But then I noticed the trapdoor in the ceiling was slightly open.

'The roof,' I said.

'Lift me up,' said Ernesto.

I looked down at his sneakers.

'Is that crusted-on poo?' I asked. 'Maybe you should lift me up.'

'You're bigger,' he said.

'Yes, I'm well fed on a diet that doesn't include worms.'

He growl-hissed at me. For a moment I thought he was about to transmutate into his lizard-like chupacabra alter ego. 'I need the protein, okay?'

'Okay, fine,' I relented. Nesto needed a steady supply of protein the way I needed a bottomless bottle of hand sanitiser. I cupped my hands together and Nesto stepped into them with his non-poo sneaker.

'Now lift me up,' he said. 'Whee!'

Nesto pulled on the door in the ceiling and a steep set of steps slid down.

He clambered up the steps, beckoning me to follow. I paused to consider whether to wash my hands.

But then I heard crying. It was Corina. She was sobbing upstairs and, for the first time in my life, I decided there was just no time for hygiene.

I climbed up the steps and out through another door to emerge onto the flat gravel roof. Corina sat with her legs dangling off the building, sniffling and sobbing all alone.

Nesto stood tentatively beside me, shifting awkwardly on the gravel-topped roof.

'Is it a woman thing?' he asked.

'Really? Is that your assumption for *everything*?' I huffed. 'Um, Corina,' I called, walking slowly towards the edge. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm hungry,' she sobbed.

'Me too,' said Nesto. 'You guys want to come over for quesadilla after school?'

'Not that kind of hungry,' she said.

'Nesto, the processed-cheese food product your mom uses, technically comes from an animal,' I said, 'and you know Corina's a vegan.'

Ernesto shrugged. 'You can just have plain tortilla if you want.'

'You guys don't understand,' she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. 'It's a different hunger, an *ancient* one.'

A few weeks ago, Corina had secretly slipped into the vampire stereotype and sucked human blood. So when she said she was hungry, I guessed it wasn't the kind of hunger that a Snickers could satisfy.

'You mean *vampire* hungry?' I asked. 'Don't you?'

She nodded slowly, as if she was ashamed. 'I need to feed.'

When I'd accidentally crushed* a guy called Crash to death, Corina stepped up so I wasn't guilty of murder. And by 'stepped up' I mean she actually bit into him, sucked his blood and turned him into a vampire.

That was a really big deal for her, and not just because she didn't administer a blood test before actually sucking his blood (which I must advise the reader to never, ever, ever try at home), but because she'd broken her ban.

Corina had joked a few times that she now had a taste for human blood, but was content to eat Pop Rocks† as her main foodstuff. Maybe she hadn't been joking.

I wondered if she could satisfy her hunger with animal protein. 'I know you're vegan, Corina, but animals are really tasty.'

'And legal,' added Nesto.

She shook her head. 'Being down there, in that hallway with all of those kids, I wanted to feed on them. I *needed* to feed.'

* Technically, Corina had pushed me, but this didn't feel like the time or place to bring up technicalities.

† Fizzy candy that goes pop in your mouth. The best!

Nesto took a fearful step back, clearly reconsidering his earlier invitation. 'Um,' he uttered, 'you know what, I didn't tell my mom about having anyone over after school. So probably best that we don't do snacks. 'Kay?'

Corina stood up, toes inching over the edge, and looked out across Croxton. The town was dominated by the spires of the university to the north and surrounded by cornfields as far as we could see. It was an island of academia in a sea of newly planted corn.

'This town's full of people, but all I see is food.'

I didn't want my best friend to become a mass murderer, or even worse, a bloodsucking cliché.

'Step away from the ledge,' interrupted a loud, tinny voice. It was the school principal, Mr Eriksen, standing below us and shouting into a megaphone. 'We've called your parents and it's all going to be okay.'

'You called my parents?' gasped Corina.

Mr Eriksen nodded proudly, forcing a big smile across his pale Swedish face.

Corina sighed and slapped her head into her hands. 'Then it's far from okay.'