

# **My Zombie Body**

*by* Mario Lurig

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FIRST EDITION

The aftertaste was always unpleasant. God, only unpleasant? A few short weeks ago, Jarad would have opted for “repugnant”, “putrid”, or just “unthinkable”. Had he devolved to the point where the consumption of human grey matter is simply... unpleasant? Jarad figured he'd never become accustomed to it. He'd eaten brains multiple times before, yet the craving never seemed to subside. Though his body constantly told his brain that it would bring him ultimate satisfaction, he always felt the urge to gag and expunge the contents from his throat. Of course, no matter how much he wanted it, it never happened that way.

The spongy bits sank unfettered down his throat. Being undead was a lonely existence. His body had a mind of its own, and it wasn't bothering to listen to him at all.

Three weeks had passed since this intruder took over his body. At least, that's the way he tried to look at it; glass half full and all. On that day he began his fight to take back the Alamo, single-handedly, but one hour after the final massacre. It wasn't a fight he expected to win, but what else could Jarad do? He was forced to live through things he did, night by night, like a running commentary of his own life as it happened.

*Not so much, not so much at once!* His mouth filled with a large handful of undetermined matter. The latest victim, which Jarad referred to as a midnight snack, was a portly fellow probably in his late 20's. Why the victim insisted on fighting off Jarad and the others by himself was beyond comprehension, as well as how he managed to last so long. Most of the town had either fled or unwittingly joined the converted. This poor sap wanted to make a name for himself it seemed, and now he was just a disgusting snack.

A dozen or so fellow converted wandered in the area around Jarad, when the unlucky victim presented himself as a beacon of opportunity. “Come on you shambling bastards, I've got something for you,” the guy exclaimed, brandishing a classic Louisville Slugger baseball bat with both of his hands. *A lefty. Go figure.* His

fatal mistake was not rushing up to each individual converted, but rather waiting for all of them to close within a few paces of him. People always assumed that just because converted walk a little slowly, that they could handle them, even at close range. The victim might as well have been wielding a spork.

He swung the bat towards Jarad's old school friend, Michael Davis, toppling him with a solid in-field double to his skull. Michael crumbled on the ground motionless for a few seconds.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi... Jarad counted to 7 before Michael started moving again. *Faster than usual*, Jarad made a mental note of it. Jarad use to play games, counting how many steps up a flight of stairs, the number of squares of sidewalk between his apartment and the convenience store down the road, or the number of seconds between cell phone calls. This last game filled him with the most pride. Back during a semester of college, cell phone ownership exploded through the new adult population. He found himself walking around campus on the first day of classes, counting the number of seconds between passing a person sending a text message or engaging in a phone call. An entire day on campus and he never made it beyond 32 Mississippi.

A back swing struck a converted moving up on the victim's left side, sending it back a few feet and giving Michael a little more time to compose himself. Michael's head flopped back as he slowly brought his shoulders, back, and legs into a more manageable position; knees in front rather than twisted below his body.

"You stupid pieces of shit, I'll fucking kill all of you," he paused for a moment, considering the ludicrousness of his statement before continuing, "... again!" *Attaboy, keep hope alive.*

A hand wrapped around the neck of the victim from behind, five good fingers, a thumb, and a... *what the hell is that? A sixth finger? It's kind of just dangling off the hand, like a loose tube of skin waiting to be filled with the bones and muscles that give its existence some level of purpose. It was probably not an effect of being converted. At least the guy fits in a bit more now; if anyone else cared what his new body looked like.*

The fingers closed around the victims neck with the strength of a hydraulic piston slowly crushing a car in a scrap yard; he barely knew what was happening. As the hand began crushing his windpipe, Michael recovered enough to swing around and wrap both of his arms around the victim's weight bearing leg, drawing his body and mouth closer to the meaty calf, criss-crossing his arms between the victim's legs.

When one of these feedings occurred , what happened next became rather predictable. If the victim had brought a knife or something that could sever a hand, an arm, or a head; he could separate the body part from the converted. By choosing a blunt object, the victim was only able to slow them down, unless he bashed the converted repeatedly in the same location. Of course, if there was only one attacker, it would be infinitely easier, but while the converted don't travel in packs deliberately, it's been long enough since it started that the numbers were starting to heavily favor the converted. There were always a few here and there, and speedy travel was not a trait one would attribute to a converted; even a fresh one.

Jarad arrived at the victim a few minutes after the body stopped breathing and the heart was removed by a brutal gouge to his chest. Jarad still felt nauseous over the whole ordeal. He never understood how doctors, nurses, and surgeons became use to the sight of the human body from the inside out. Intense nausea for a normal person is typically relieved by vomiting. It's a release valve for the queasy feelings and intense gag reflex, feeling the bile and stomach contents creep higher and higher up the esophagus. Now imagine the same feeling with your jaw wired shut, unable to open the valve and release the feeling. This is Jarad's least favorite moment, because it lasts for as long as the feeding continues. He wants to stop, he tries to stop, but all he can manage to feel is nauseous and eerily satisfied.

The feeding continued till there was little left of the victim, strewn around the area. Jarad felt relieved that the nausea was subsiding,

but he was left with the next worst thing for him: the mess. He found it ridiculous how determined the zombies were to tear the victim apart and gorge on every aspect of his being, and yet there wasn't a scavenger in the group. Discarded parts lay everywhere: half-eaten, partially chewed, just torn and dropped. He never felt full, so he didn't understand why they.... he, would stop.

*Come on Michael, just finish it. Pick that up and finish it. It's everywhere, and I obviously can't do it. Maybe I can, maybe... no, I'm too exhausted, I can't do it. Maybe if I keep walking I'll just stride past it, and since I never look back, it'll just disappear. Just keep walking.*

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The sun was almost down behind the mountains by the time the feeding completed. The lumbering converted moved upwind of their most recent victim. Jarad continued down a street called Madison, in a mostly abandoned suburb north of Denver. The street declined slightly as he continued, improving his pace to an almost normal rate. It was more of a controlled fall with each step, with his minor injuries not providing a major impedance. Jarad was clueless about his final destination, convinced that the streets would start getting more crowded as time went on. The night always brought out a few more of his new friends, typically the most grotesque and wounded, who seemed bothered, if only a little, by the sunlight on their exposed innards.

A converted who managed to go into a building for the day usually took numerous nights to find their way back out. It wasn't simply a matter of opening a door, going inside, grabbing a beer from the fridge, and sitting down for some re-runs of classic television shows. That required too much intelligence, which a disconnected mind could not communicate to the body. Common sense was knocking, but nobody was home. A few days ago Jarad noticed a converted through a window, trying to cross from the kitchen to the living room. There was a half-wall between the two rooms that spanned about three quarters of the width of the rooms. This guy, or girl, he wasn't quite sure, just didn't understand. They placed

two hands over the top of the wall, but the legs were securely anchored on the ground, trying to push through the wall. Jarad had no idea how long they were stuck, but he swore that if he found himself in the same predicament, he would figure out a way to look down and hope his body would just figure it out.

The darkening sky closed in quickly. Without artificial light on the streets, in the homes, or from cars long since abandoned, the moon was the only source of light over the his body's chosen path. Before becoming converted, a lot of theories circulated about the experience of being a converted, and the new powers that they immediately gained. No need to sleep, super strength, infrared night vision; the list was immense. While it was true that the body never slept, the rest of the rumors lacked a factual base.

Super strength was an estimation based upon the damage a converted could do to a victim with his or her bare hands and slow movements. Realistically, a converted didn't become stronger at all, but rather lacked any doubt about its ability to accomplish something. It could almost be called 'relentless determination'. Of course, that suggests that there is some sort of will driving the behavior, which would be inaccurate at best. Just like the hand closing around the recent victim's throat, it wasn't notably stronger, just lacking any of the triggers that would stop a living person's hand from applying pressure till the opposing force, the throat in this case, relented. If it was true super strength, then concrete walls, lamp posts, and large trees would not cause such a fantastic display of stupidity and ignorance.

Jarad hoped that the rumor about night vision was true when he realized there was no turning back from becoming one of the converted, but as the night took over the town, he faced the stark reminder of his visual acuity: near-sighted and horrible at night. No, it wasn't night vision that Jarad gained, but simply an affinity to meander at night through the world. When you walk slow enough, the hazards of the path are much less of a problem. Occasionally Jarad would walk around a victim's body or pothole,

stepping over it by dragging a foot along the top, amazingly keeping his balance; one of the pleasant surprises. Rock solid balance on one leg, even when dragging a foot into a new position. His balance and movements were graceful, even for a converted. For now, the world had fully succumbed to night again with the moon behind the clouds, close to the horizon, leaving Jarad at a loss of where his body was headed.

Jarad felt tired, which meant an uncomfortable few hours between sleeping and being wide awake. When in college, Jarad attended numerous lectures that were less than stimulating. He had trouble staying awake and found himself nodding off for brief moments, typically accompanied with slow forward flops of his head and quick jerks back up, startling him awake. That feeling was similar to sleep as a converted and just as uncomfortable. The only distinction was that the head flop never occurred, but the restlessness and loss of his sense of time remained constantly present.

*Twenty-seven, twenty-eight... twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine.* For a moment, Jarad thought his eyes blinked. While the living would find this a relief and even a requirement, it was a shock to Jarad. *That didn't just happen. Did I just blink? Blink damn it, blink!* He fully awoke again, practically yelling at himself. Jarad relaxed, sure that his mind was playing games with him again. It seemed to happen quite frequently, especially when night fell after a long day spent wandering in the streets under the sun. He had once sworn that a rabbit crossed his path and just moved too fast, too far away to clearly see it. For days he tried to remember, slowing it down with each memory, hoping the image would become clearer. A pair of eyes, a bushy tail, the large awkward feet, anything. Eventually, he accepted the event as a bit of sun glare off of glass or a mirror somewhere outside of his body's field of view. He was near a house that day, wandering across a lawn, strangely still green. The rabbit from his memory darted from behind the corner of the house and launched itself quickly across the lawn, disappearing behind a



small bush. Why a rabbit didn't draw any attention from his body remained unclear. If it was a glancing light ray, it would make more sense, so he convinced himself of that explanation.

*Thirty-three, thirty...* sleep was exhausting. All the counting helped, and yet the sheep started morphing from a cute and cuddly version to a freshly shaved body with various bits missing; a likely affect of what he was forced to watch as he crossed the world by foot day after day in slow, lethargic steps. He nodded off a few more times before his body suddenly stopped in place.

*I wish I could see something. What the hell is going on? Is there something in the way? Maybe I bumped into someone, or something. I'm going to be that converted at the half-wall, in the middle of the street. How embarrassing.* There was a slight breeze that Jarad thought was a little bit cooler than usual, but he found it nearly impossible to tell. Half of the time Jarad just guessed: pretending the world was full of sensory input, like when he still lived. His body stopped, and within a few moments something began creeping into his peripheral view.

*Holy shit, is that Michael? He's still going, so why am I still stuck? Come on, think this through, snap out of it, wake up! What's the plan. Focus.*

There was a slight moan, breaking the silence of the night air. *Michael, is that you? You've never made a noise before. That sound was really nearby, I think.* Jarad was getting frustrated, but as he roused from his half-sleep, he found his mind more alert. Michael continued to lumber past Jarad as his body stood still, unwavering in the breeze.

*This is ridiculous. It doesn't matter why it happened, but at least now I can sleep better standing still, without the constant shuffle. He started to picture the mutant sheep, the count starting from the beginning once again. One, two, three...*

He managed to sleep well, considering, and woke again as the night started to fade. He was standing still, stuck he supposed, and had no clue as to what caused the atypical stillness. His wonder

didn't last long however, as a step forward broke his concentration, leading him forward again without a bump or stumble. He never stopped before except for feeding, so this was a new experience. Jarad felt empowered by the new mystery; something to occupy his mind beyond the daily grind of nothingness.

The sun broke over the horizon behind Jarad, flooding the street with new light and new information. He was convinced his body was still on Madison. A few converted scattered out in front of him, wandering in the same unpredictable direction. To his right he noticed one of them slowly turning toward a house. There was 150 feet between the converted and its desire, so Jarad figured the converted had a few uncomfortable minutes or even hours before it could move out of the sun. *Is there a mind in there, enduring the rays of sunlight and deciding to move into the shade, or is it simply a matter of instinct: a moth to a flame.* Jarad's fear of being trapped in a house was suppressed by his desire to not find out.

The street resembled every other cookie cutter neighborhood in the suburbs nowadays. A two car garage, one car left in the driveway and garage doors left wide open, tire marks streaking out of the garage and down the driveway, created by residents rushing to leave their home and escape from the growing number of converted that multiplied on a daily basis. The lawns in this area were still in good shape, considering they were abandoned without a second thought. *Automatic sprinkler systems.* Along the left side of the street, one house had sprinklers spraying the yard in the early morning light. Good weather and a bit of rain in the past week did wonders for the larger plants and vibrant grasses required in each of the neighborhoods. A few lawns overgrew, trying to crowd out the dandelions that spread their seeds without apology and with each gust of wind. Those were the lawns in the best shape, naturally dealing with their invaders. People were not as gifted in this regard.

When it began about two months past, the media barely included it as a footnote on the evening news' ticker. Fox news was noted as

saying, "Man becomes cannibal, loses ability to speak." That was as much attention as the first converted received, at least until things started getting unpredictable.

One of the largest hospitals in Arkansas housed the outbreak. It started when a nurse was bitten by John Doe, later identified as patient zero. The bite created a deep wound that the nurse treated herself after the attack. Being a new nurse however, she hadn't reported it to her superiors for fear of a reprimand. Nobody noticed her wound until hours later when she collapsed while waiting for an ambulance, dead, in the middle of the emergency room. The doctors attempted to revive her, but after 30 minutes of CPR and a few defibrillator shocks to the heart, she was declared dead at 6:32pm on the ER floor. Orderlies quickly wheeled her body down to the morgue and placed it in the center of the room, awaiting her family's arrival to identify the body; a formality for the doctors and nurses who worked with her. By the time she died, patient zero had drawn additional attention and was restrained after repeated swipes at the doctors and nurses which saw to his care.

What wasn't revealed till much later were some of the strange discrepancies the doctors found. Some pundits stipulated that the doctors were holding back information, even from each other, in an effort to bolster his or her own research and reputations, as well as increase future paychecks. "Doctors reveal there were warning signs." The status of patient zero revealed critical clues to understanding the unique situation. A faint heartbeat, blood draws like molasses, and an unusual attraction towards human flesh, resulting in self-mutilation and consumption. With the nurse now pronounced dead, patient zero wasn't alone in his struggle, and the population explosion of converted was on the horizon.

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As Jarad shambled down the road, he wondered if there would be anything of interest occurring today. The attack yesterday was the biggest event all week, and otherwise he continued to wander in the neighborhood with limited visual stimulation; only the other

converted that meandered in front of him to keep his interest. The experience resembled watching one's life pass in slow-motion, making one anxious for anything that is different than the day before, pleasant or otherwise. A hill even managed to offer some relief from the day-to-day, giving way at its crest to a vista of the Rocky Mountains, a view that Jarad heavily underappreciated before now. Even severe weather would be a welcome addition to the daily grind that was life inside his own body. The rain gave him something to focus on, and though limited, sometimes he swore he could feel the rain drops landing on his skin.

Sensory deprivation was a fact of life for Jarad, and he sometimes pretended he was an astronaut on an extended mission to Mars. NASA studied sensory deprivation almost as much as inmates in solitary confinement practiced it. Scientists' worries always focused on the mental health of the subject after they were stripped of everything people typically take for granted: The smell of fresh cut grass, the feeling of water running over the back of a hand, the tickling sensation in the nose just prior to a sneeze. Without all of the additional sensory input for the brain, it begins to fill in the gaps by fabricating reality. Hallucinations were common and depression was typical. True sensory deprivation was difficult for the living, since many of the smaller sensory moments were triggered by minor environmental causes. As a converted, it was unavoidable, as minor stimulus never reached the brain. It would drive Jarad crazy if he didn't try and occupy himself in other ways.

Jarad pretended that he was on a solo trip to Mars for the last half of a year; two-thirds of the trip had been completed. By this point, space didn't offer much amusement. Communication with Earth was delayed to the point of frustration, and he had already read every book on-board, twice. He imagined lying in a bed, staring out of a small window into the vastness of space, yet severely limited in his view. His body spent so much time in the recycled air and controlled environment that all of the nuances of the whirring and hissing machines had become commonplace. He hadn't felt an itch

in weeks, nor the desire to scratch one. This was the closest analogy he could devise to match his current existence, yet still lacking a sense of adventure or purpose.

Jarad's solitary confinement was his own body, and he expected another long day ahead of him. He started off the day like every other: counting the converted that walked with him, or at least the ones he could see. Today's count was seven, with one new since yesterday, probably a recent half-wall escapee. The new one wore a business suit, with tears visible in its jacket; common among the converted. Jarad could see a tear in the underarm and a split beginning to form at the top of its back, just below the collar. Amazingly, its pants remained unscathed. Typically a collection of small snags, tears, and rips around the base of the pant legs could be spotted, from being snagged on an object, the fabric giving way as the body's movement continued unhindered. The suit looked of high quality, so Jarad thought this converted was originally well-to-do. Jarad wondered what its life may have been like before its transformation.

*He's about six foot one, decent build, good hair, and nice clothes. Thirty-five, maybe forty; hard to tell from behind. HEY! TURN AROUND! LOOK AT ME! Yeah, that didn't work. So let's see... maybe a wife, working retail and 2 or 3 kids in day care. I wonder if they were converted too? An entire family. That would be rich! A seven year old girl, chomping on the right knee while daddy breaks off an arm and mommy goes straight in for the brain, a no-nonsense kinda girl. Would she try and feed her kids? Would the maternal instinct survive at all in the behavior? No way. Mommy would be selfish, goal oriented, feeding for herself; damn the kids. They probably wouldn't travel together. Why would they? Maybe they ran away, and daddy helped them the escape. He wasn't so lucky. Well, lucky enough to not be a victim in front of his family, but not lucky enough to escape with them. No, this guy is no hero. I bet he was bitten at work. Maybe he's a bank manager, who went out to calm down a restless customer visiting the bank and then being scratched, or bitten; somehow wounded. Being angry, he hits the woman... yeah, a crazy*

*woman walks in and he backhands her like a pimp to his misbehaving whore. His aggressive behavior working as a cover for his eventual conversion.*

*Yup, I'm convinced. He's an asshole. An asshole with good hair.*

Jarad lamented about his own body image. He wasn't perfect, generally average in a crowd and never one to stick out. He usually wore a standard pair of Levi's jeans, sneakers, a white undershirt, and a golf polo. He never played golf, but always thought he fit in better while wearing one. Jeans were a durable choice, though if they tore he would have little indication that it happened. A bit on the lanky side, Jarad was a single guy, just working a standard 9-5 as a paper salesman. He liked to tell people he sold security and efficiency to large companies, ensuring the growth and future of many Fortune 500 companies. Lies of course, but obscure enough that people didn't bother calling him on his bluff. He was embarrassed that at 33, he had done little he would consider noteworthy thus far in his life.

His generation was bombarded with images of young entrepreneurs making millions by the age of 23. There were internet bubbles, bursts, and rebirths, and each one drew the image that you weren't valuable unless you were young, internet famous, and attained more money than anyone else at that age. By 30, your life should be middle-class or better, on your way to having children, if you didn't have any already, and the only respectable jobs paid a grotesque amount of money for doing nothing. You went to college to create a future, but you wouldn't dare practice a vocation. White collar work was the only way to infamy and success among your peers. Nobody grew up to sell paper and office supplies to small businesses. You were either on top or others judged you as a failure. Welcome to mediocre, you'll be here for a while; get comfortable.

*I hope his wife is screwing some other run away, immediately drawn to a handsome stranger who protected her when her husband no longer could.*

*The circumstances of fear and security drawing two strangers together, in a passionate contortion of their bodies; a fleeting moment in the dark.*

Jarad's life resembled a movie, the stories he created for others always akin to bad screenplays done over and over throughout his film viewing history. He watched a lot of movies. At home. Alone. Jarad gravitated towards action films, usually films where, in the end, the hero gets the girl. He couldn't recollect the last one he watched that didn't end in that manner. He pictured himself in the film, the hero, rescuing the maiden in distress who cowered from some threat that only the hero was keenly capable of solving. This fascination led him into his current situation as one of the converted. It was a girl; it was always a girl.

**\*\* END PREVIEW \*\***