

THE AGE OF SORROW

by Nancy Kilpatrick

Nancy Kilpatrick is the author of the Blood vampire series, which includes the novels *Child of the Night*, *Near Death*, *Reborn*, *Bloodflower*, and a fifth volume which is currently in progress. She is also the author of the non-fiction book *The Goli Bible*, and with Nancy Holder, she edited her eighth horror anthology, *Outsiders*. She's a prolific author of short fiction as well, with recent sales to the anthologies *Blood Lite*, *Monsters Noir*, and *Moonsbane Monsters: Vampires and Moonsbane Monsters: Zombies*. Her work has been a finalist for several awards, and she won the Arthur Ellis Award for best short story in 1992. Nancy was a guest of honor at the 2007 World Horror Convention. She lives in Montréal, Québec.

This story came about as a result of Kilpatrick asking herself how a woman would deal with being the only human survivor in a world overrun by zombies. "Would she do anything differently than a man would? Would she be blasting zombies right, left and center 24/7?" Kilpatrick asks. "I've never been a proponent of the helpless female standing and shrieking as the zombies come for her. I don't know any women like that."

Grief had taken hold of her long ago. Long before the cataclysm. Long before everything had disintegrated: the planet; its people; her life. Hope for the future.

She crouched at the top of the hill, turning her head slowly from side to side, seeing only what the UV aviator goggles allowed her to view, scanning 180 degrees of verdant landscape, watching. Always watching. This valley had once been prime farmland, teeming with crops, and quietly nestled in it twin villages alive with quaint houses, one school that catered to the children of the entire population, a church each for the two big branches of Christianity, a synagogue, and a mosque. The two church steeples poked above the foliage, their crosses glinting in the afternoon sun, and she remembered reading what Joseph Campbell had said: you can tell what a culture values by its tallest buildings. She wondered if that applied to the beings who now dwelled in the villages.

There must still be fields for soccer and softball, the hospital, the shops that the populace had supported, although she hadn't visited the villages in months and couldn't be certain. Here and there a house was partially visible—she

could just make out the pastel clapboard walls, splashes of color on this oh-so-green canvas of life that now flowed down the hills like lava. Over the last few years the plants had grown at an unnatural pace, devouring everything in their wake: the homes, the fields, the people. No, not the people. They had managed anyway. For a while.

Despite it all, she could not view this land so far from the place of her birth as anything but lush, the green vibrant shades ranging from yellow-tinged to near black. The sun, despite the thick layer of ozone which trapped its rays, managed to give the plants what they needed. They weren't suffering from any "greenhouse effect" but seemed to flourish and propagate. It was just humanity that had fared badly in all this.

She knew she should head back. Even if a freak storm didn't crop up, sunset wasn't far off. And there was plenty to do. Always. The crops she tended religiously that provided her only fresh food needed watering. She should examine that weakness in the fence, figure out the strongest repair possible with the materials she had on hand so that she didn't need to go to either of the villages. There were fruits and vegetables to harvest, cook and put up, which meant gathering wood that had to be gotten out here, where it wasn't safe when darkness set in. Her life had become all work, everything geared towards survival. "Of the fittest," she said aloud for some reason, her voice sounding odd, the words ringing strangely in her ears. It had been so long since she'd heard herself speak.

But inertia had hold of her. She knew she was about mid-cycle, her most fertile time, halfway between periods—scant though they were now. Energy was not especially low during ovulation, just not high, and she felt a lack of focus. That would change within two weeks, when the flow began. But that would be later. Today she just wanted to sit and stare into the infinity of the horizon. "Slouching towards menopause," she had written in her journal. Now, slouching, lounging, slacking off, literally or figuratively, all of that was a rarity in her life. There was too much to do, all the time, every day, and in the night the never-ending battle with loneliness and despair. And terror.

She pulled the glasses down for a second, hoping the hat brim could protect her eyes, but she could not help a quick glance at the sun, a brilliant orange, heading down the hazy sky, and tried to recall its precise color when it had been yellow. She could not. It was as if the sun had always been the color of a pumpkin. As if everything in nature had always been this way. She fixed the glasses back over her eyes and willed herself to stand, to get moving, but her body refused to be pushed. Just a few more minutes. I've got a few minutes to spare, she assured herself.

Suddenly the bells at one of the churches began to ring, just as they did automatically every Sunday morning, afternoon and evening. Then the bells of the other church answered, the two playing back and forth. The sound reverberated around the valley, through her, washing away worries and fear, leaving her mellow, and remembering.

Church bells had rung the morning she and Gary married. A happy sound, full of the promise of a history yet to be lived. I was so young, she thought. So naive. Now, it seemed as if she had always been her current age, forty. But then, on that day, at twenty, and Gary twenty-one, she had trusted him with her future; had trusted him to not betray her; to not betray them.

The house, the bills, a pregnancy that ended in an abortion because they were too young, he said, and she had agreed, yes, they were too young, with plenty of time ahead. A job that held her interest while she finished law school, then clerking at a prestigious firm until they hired her and she moved up the ranks of corporate law. A job she ultimately detested, now that she was honest with herself on a full-time basis. But back then, she tolerated it all, even the loss of the child she had not birthed. She tolerated it because of Gary, in the name of their love.

A lot of good that did her now. Gary. Her profession. Her childless life, and now it was too late for children. Not chronologically, although forty pushed it, but in all the other ways that made conceiving impossible, especially the circumstances of her life.

The choices we make, she thought grimly, as the last bell tolled. Those roads not taken. One road leads to another and that to another and eventually those choices have moved you down a path of no return. Why hadn't someone told her? Why hadn't her mother said this is how it is before she died? *Decide here, now, and go this way or that; some choices are irreversible.* But her mother was a liberal thinker, an early feminist. Someone who believed possibilities defined life and allowed it to constantly evolve. And her father? She had never gotten a fix on him. And after her parents divorced, he became a ghost. The man whose sperm had helped form her was friendly enough. He bought her things. Paid for her education. Walked her down the aisle. But if she went blind she couldn't pick him out of a crowd. Not his voice, his scent, his touch.

All the wrong choices, she thought. Me. Gary. My parents. Everybody on the planet. The earth reeked with wrong choices. And now there were just two choices: Live or Die.

Her gloomy reverie broke when she caught movement in the distance. She pulled the goggles down to her neck; the sun had set. The sky had grayed fast, without her noticing. Startled, she jumped to her feet, starting to the west, watching the figure that looked male coming through the trees quickly. She spun in a circle and saw movement in most directions. Nearly surrounded, she had to hurry.

She raced down the mound, tearing through the high green towards the compound, a bootlace untying en route. She ripped off her gloves and threw them aside so she could get to the key hanging around her neck and pulled the rope over her head as she ran.

Tonight they were moving swiftly and she had just reached the gate when she heard rustling behind her. She didn't dare take the time to look. Her hand trembled as she forced the large key into the huge padlock, yanked it open,

pulled it from the bar and got herself inside and the door locked just as the first of them reached the gate.

The stench of rot forced her back. The solar yard light that increased illumination with the darkness allowed her to see this one all too clearly. A face no longer recognizable, living decay. His bloated blue fingers pushed their way through the chain links, reaching out for her.

All around the compound they gathered, aligning their dull eyes, the light of life missing, with the openings of the links. Her stomach lurched and her heart hammered. Three years and she had not gotten used to the sight of them and imagined she never would.

What flesh had not thoroughly corrupted or fallen away was bilious and left her gagging. They made sounds, low, moany noises that reminded her of sick or hurt animals. At one time, when it all began, she had felt sorry for them, imagining they were in pain. But that was early on. Back when she did not, could not believe that they wanted her dead. But now she believed.

She forced herself to turn, commanded herself to not look at any of them. The fence needing repair filled her thoughts, but she knew it could not be breeched. Not tonight, not next week. It was just her constant worrying, something to focus on. How she had to be, always alert, never able to rest, the price of survival.

Despite the sounds that filled the air with their groans and shufflings and the squishy noises of flesh no longer alive pressing against other dead flesh or metal or grass underfoot, she managed to walk to the well and with trembling hands began lowering the metal bucket. It dropped down into the water with a splash and although it was too dark now to see to the bottom, through the rope she held she could feel the bucket submerge. She turned the crank to hoist it up. When the pail reached the top she grabbed it to the ledge, untied it, locked the carbon filter on top and hauled it, water sloshed over the sides, to the vegetable garden where she moistened one row of plants. Above her the sky had turned slate and no stars shown through the thick cloud cover. *The moon goddess is not making her presence known tonight, she thought. Artemis the huntress. Nothing worth hunting anymore.*

The numbers of them had grown until they were two and three deep around the fence in places. Every day she thanked whatever deities still cared about this poor planet for the fact that this disease first rotted the brain of the afflicted, otherwise they would long ago have taken to using tools and breeching her barrier. Tonight their presence seemed to turn the air from warm to hot, or at least *she* felt hot.

A flash memory, the day one of them touched her. Putrid flesh clamping onto her shoulder, cool puffy fingers curling around her, grabbing on, trying to hold her back, trying to absorb her warm life through her T-shirt. Panicked, she broke free and ran as fast as she could, snagging a shovel for protection as she went, racing until the breath burned her lungs and her vision blurred. And still it pursued her until she found safety in an abandoned store, bolting

the door, watching it pawing the glass to get at her, unable to think clearly enough to shatter the glass, which told her a lot.

The news had declared this outbreak another super bug, spread by physical contact. Unresponsive to antibiotics. Not to worry, the man on Channel 7 said, a serum was being developed. All would be well. But she had felt its touch through thin fabric, watched its face close up all through the night until the first rays of the sun forced it to take refuge from the impending light which must hurt its rotting skin. By morning she knew that all would not be well. Things would never be right again. After that experience, she had changed.

Fueled by mounting terror, she booked a flight, just wanting to get as far away from the horrors as possible. An article had identified a few spots on the planet as trouble free; the more isolated, the scientist said, the better. He named New Zealand as the safest place on Earth. He was wrong.

Muscles trembling, she hefted another pail of water to the garden. The lettuce looked wilted, so she gave each plant extra liquid, hoping they would perk up. The growing season here extended all year, although last summer the heat had been almost unbearable and much of her crop burned. She lost forty pounds over four months and had been forced to go into the villages and raid gardens, and cupboards for tinned food, and stock up on all the vitamins she could get her hands on. Now she took a handful of those plus the brown seaweed extract she'd been swallowing for the last half decade to detoxify her body of radiation fallout. One good thing about no more humans on the planet: no more politicians dropping bombs on one another.

The garden had been, like so much in the last few years, a learning experience. Come this summer she planned to add a UV filter to the shade over the plants for the hottest part of the day. Thank god the well was artesian and would, theoretically, last forever. Not that she would. And there were no heirs to take her place. Fortunately.

The things outside the gate continued to moan and groan and produce squishy sounds. Sometimes she thought she heard her name, but that couldn't be. They were no longer living beings, not living in the way she was. Flesh and organs and bone decomposing, they moved by instinct, and the instinct the nearly dead seemed to possess directed them towards the living of which she was, to her knowledge, the last in this region. Perhaps in this country. The world. She had no way of knowing.

She finished the watering, sprayed organic pesticide on the plants, and then did a final visual check of the compound. Everything in order. An acre was not too much to manage, and from the front yard she could see every inch of the property but for what lay behind the mound. She had macheted the vines and scrub that grew wildly and regularly mowed the grass with an old hand mower she'd found on one of the farms, flattening everything but the garden. Facing the mound, she walked to her right, stopping two feet from the fence and at her approach the sounds from the cool bodies increased in volume like

insects swarming. She could see one side of the back fence. None of them were at that corner, where repairs were needed. She reminded herself that the damage wasn't urgent. Still, knowing that a weakness existed made her nervous. Not nervous enough to go there, in the darkness of night, which would draw attention to that area. And to her. She couldn't do anything to fix it now, and a sudden pain as her ovary struggled to expel an egg into her fallopian tubes turned her away from the yard and towards the house.

On the way she plucked four lettuce leaves, picked a ripe tomato, a yellow pepper, and with the Army knife she always carried in a sheath around her belt she sliced off one small head of a broccoli, all of it going into a basket which she carried in one hand. With the other hand she hefted the last pail of water. Carefully she headed down the two steps and inside, closing and locking the door after her, which drowned out most of the din that unnerved her still, and stood, back resting for a moment against the wooden barrier, happy for contact with even the inanimate.

Finally she pushed herself away, dropped the basket on the table and set the pail by the sink, took off the goggles and her hat and began to roll up her shirt sleeves. As an afterthought she removed her shirt but left the cotton tank top on. Immediately her body temperature lowered.

She crossed the room to the wall under the one window and checked the bank of batteries charged by eight 75 Watt solar panels on the roof. A flip of a switch cranked up the air filtering system from low—where she kept it when she went out—to high. The fully charged batteries meant she could waste a few amps to enjoy a bit of music as she ate. Something soothing. She flipped through the CDs and found Pachelbel's *Canon*, then changed her mind—too gloomy. Maybe Delibes' *Lakme*. Something lighter, that spoke of hope. Of springtime. Springtime.

As the music played, she scrubbed all of the vegetables thoroughly in the carbon-filtered water. Likely it did nothing much for the pollutants in the air still circling the earth, but then she wasn't certain what to do about them. She pulled a chopping knife from the rack and started on the pepper, gutting it, setting the seeds aside to dry, her mind wandering to a springtime only five years ago. The last one where she had seen Gary alive.

How could life have seemed so ordinary? she wondered. She rinsed and sliced into the tomato, the pungent smell reaching her nostrils, and added it and the pepper to the lettuce she washed and tore into bite-size pieces.

Spring, the weather beautifully mild, the scent of lilac in the air, the scent of hope. She and Gary met for lunch at a small café downtown, near the campus where he taught. She told the receptionist she'd be gone for an hour and a half but when she was seated Gary said he had to get back to the college and could only stay thirty minutes.

They sat on the terrace and ordered—both had salads and café lattes—and she remembered gazing at the young people, semi-stripped for the mild temperature. They all looked so healthy and happy. Nothing like a twenty-year-old

body, she thought, although at thirty-five she wasn't in bad shape at all, thanks to a daily jog before work.

She recalled looking over Gary's shoulder as he munched on Caesar salad and seeing her reflection in the restaurant's window: chestnut hair, large dark eyes, an oval face with few signs of wrinkles, nothing that tri-monthly derma-abrasions and a bit of Botox couldn't fix.

She glanced at Gary and saw him not watching her but staring at those same bodies. It was only a fragment of time, and yet in that split second she knew he had been unfaithful.

He felt her look and his handsome face closed around the emotion. "How's your day?" he asked.

She put down her fork. "Who is she?"

"She?" He looked uncomfortable. "You'll have to be more precise than that or—"

"The one you're fucking. What's her name?"

He opened his mouth, his expression guarded, his eyes haughty, but she locked onto him, a human laser, and said, "Don't bother lying. Just tell me." Her voice, remarkably calm to her own ears, must have put him at ease.

"Her name is Eileen."

"A student?"

"First year."

"I suppose she came to discuss a paper or project."

"A project. Not a very good one. I gave her direction."

They could have been talking about the city's plans for revamping the waterfront, or a new movie to be seen. Suddenly, she couldn't bear it, the strain of the last fifteen years. Without a word, she picked up her bag and stood.

"Wait, look—"

But before he could say more she was out of earshot. My life is a facade, she thought. Years and years of ignoring truth. In those moments of that perfect spring day she knew that she had barely loved him when she was twenty and now did not love him at all. At least in the way that mattered between a woman and a man. The most hurtful part was that she knew it was mutual.

She ran for an hour, but she could not have said what streets, or even what district. Her ringtone—nineteen notes of *The Flower Duet*—played again and again until she pulled the cellphone from her purse and tossed it into a trash can, then, when the shoulder bag grew annoying, she pitched it as well.

Sometime later she showed up at the front door, without keys. Darkness had set in. The trees and grass and the other homes on the street looked stunned. And she saw everything as if for the first time.

She rang the bell and he let her in, moving away from the door as she passed him, not wanting a fight, but neither did she. Apparently the relationship was not worth fighting for. She climbed the stairs, suddenly exhausted, and entered their bedroom to find his matching suitcases on the bed, both three-quarters packed.

Slowly she removed her clothes and let them drop to the floor then ran a bath and sank into a hot tub, a glass of Beaujolais in her hand, and fell asleep. When she woke, the water was cold, tinted with the undrunk wine as if it had been blood that spilled. The house was tomb silent. His suitcases were gone. She found a note on the dresser: something about being sorry, and wishing her a nice life. She had ripped it into tiny pieces and flushed it down the toilet.

She cut up the broccoli raw and added it to the salad. A small bottle of olive oil sat on the floor in the coolest part of the kitchen area and she opened it to add a few drops to the vegetables, then pushed the cork back in. For a moment she stood looking at the salad, then covered the bowl with an elasticized net to keep insects out, turned and walked to the couch that doubled as a bed in this one-room house and fell onto it, exhausted. Always exhausted. Always unable to sleep.

Why was all this coming back to her now? It felt like the disease of memory crept through her mind and heart, hiding, surging to the fore when she least expected it and did not want it.

She glanced around the room helplessly. She had positioned the couch so that from here she could see every corner, and the door. One room. Convenient. Life condensed. Half buried in the earth like a grave, the design geared to keeping the heat down. And a small *Alice Through the Looking Glass* door behind the couch, but it only locked from the other side. The tunnel led through the dirt mound and would bring her 100 feet outside the compound should this house be invaded.

One high-pitched, sharp laugh erupted from her. The idea was absurdity itself. If the compound was invaded, she would have no home. Outside the compound, where could she escape to? She had watched the villagers succumb until none were left uninfected. And if any were whole she had not come across them in the last year. But she had been making fewer and fewer trips into the villages because seeing these creatures cowering from the light became too much. Besides, most of the supplies she needed she already had, stored in a small shed just outside the door—canned goods, ammunition for the one rifle stationed next to the couch, and the handgun she carried in a holster around her waist—weapons she had only fired in practice and was not sure she could actually use on these formerly living humans.

While there was still gas in the pumps and a couple of functioning vehicles left in the villages, she had already brought up many bottles of water, in case the well ran dry. Clothing, shoes, sheets and towels and kitchen equipment. Propane tanks, although she rarely cooked meals anymore. Over time she had learned through books how to use the solar panels. Getting them from the hardware store to the compound had been one thing, hauling them to the roof had been another. And the heavy batteries had tested her physical strength and ingenuity even more. Batteries to store the raw energy, a converter to turn it into something useful which then powered what had become a decreasing need for energy. With no TV broadcasts, no radio, no phones, no Internet, no contact

with the outside world but for a CB radio that she left on but had stopped sending out messages from months ago, she only needed lighting and music to get by. Get by. That's what she was doing, getting by. Barely. "Everything the female survivalist needs," she said aloud, hearing her voice, the sound in the stillness so alien to her ears it brought tears to her eyes.

Why was she alive when others were not? How had this nightmarish existence come upon her? Maybe she really had died and gone to hell and this was it. The Dante book she had read in her youth with the lovely Doré etchings described hell but she knew there were many more than nine levels.

When the bacterial infections began, they rampaged through chronic care facilities, then hospitals in general, schools, workplaces, anywhere and everywhere human beings had physical contact with one another. At the same time, the ozone layer altered sufficiently that the icebergs at the North Pole melted, raising the sea level, turning what had been frozen tundra into almost pastoral terrain. Then the Antarctic ice began breaking off in large chunks and microorganisms trapped in the ice at both poles were released. Scientists learned that some lifeforms could lie in wait for millennia.

Mars became the norm, day to day reality on the news, thousands killed here and there, weaponry of all types deployed and the "limited nuclear war" became reality. Suddenly the air was not just polluted with smog but radioactive dust circled with the altered jet streams. Soil and water turned toxic, and multinationals focused their resources on cleaning out the poisons so that food could still be grown and water drunk, but only by citizens wealthy enough to pay for purification. The masses could not. Brand new immune-system diseases soared.

With enormous loss of life, human society began to disintegrate: garbage piled up; transportation came to a halt; medication ran out; electrical and cellular services died and depending on the season, people froze or burned to death, unless they were preyed upon by other human beings.

Her mind scanned the hellish reality she had witnessed over five short years, descending circle by circle. And all the while humanity tried to adapt. Her heart felt heavy; the naivety, the stupidity, the complacency. The men in power said it would all be alright in the end. But it wasn't alright. It would never be alright again. And just when things couldn't get worse, they did: the new plague spread rapidly, and suddenly the dying could not die.

But by then she was in New Zealand, traveling aimlessly. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do but sit back and watch the apocalypse unfold. *Wait your turn*, she told herself, but her turn had not come.

In truth, New Zealand, and some of the other isolated islands in this region were the last to go. Although this country was not spared the nuclear fallout, they did manage to stem the flow of visitors and immigrants and eventually movement by their own citizens—nobody went in or out. But by then it was too late. For humanity, for Gary's plea with her to come home to him in that last phone call. Everything was always too late.

She picked up the journal she had been keeping, the latest one, atop a pile of five large books, one per year since she had arrived here, chronicling the deterioration and her own existence. Writing helped keep her sane, even though some days took up barely half a page, filled with mundane details of gardening, eating, defecating. Other entries analyzed the politics, or the science as she understood it—and with all the time in the world and all the books and magazines and newspapers in the library she had learned quite a bit. But the worst entries, the ones that made her cringe, were those where she saw her emotions sprayed on the page as if they were her blood. Tortured by loneliness and despair, she could barely re-read those. Because despite all that she had learned, and all that she understood, as far as she knew, she was the last person alive on the planet. Every attempt with the CB had met with dead air.

"Dante had no idea!" she mumbled, her voice almost an echo in her ears. The circles of hell were infinite.

Suicidal thoughts nearly overwhelmed her more times than she could count, and she did not yet know why she still lived, unscathed by the new plague, unaltered by the deadly air. But answers, like everything else, were in short supply, and she'd long ago stopped her obsessive reading and wondering about why she seemed immune to what affected others. Diseases that should have killed everyone, if only the others could die.

But they could not die. They hid from daylight and wandered aimlessly at night. No, not aimlessly. They always found their way to her compound. She wondered if they sought her out for a connection to life when they possessed little resembling that. The walking dead, her only companions. And the worst part was, some were not as decayed. Some she recognized still: Joe who used to run the butcher shop, Lucy from the pharmacy, Ned and his wife Sarah who farmed just outside the villages and ran a fruit and vegetable stand... The memory of their faces as they had been overlapped with how they were now moved a wave of hysteria up from her gut that caught in her throat and suddenly she found herself sobbing uncontrollably.

This fit lasted only seconds. Her last eruption had been about six months ago.

She picked up the pen and began writing, trying to convey in words the feelings that washed through her like waves in a storm. She could never get over how quickly the illnesses overtook the living. One day she had gone into the chemist's and Lucy had been fine. The next day she had dark circles beneath her eyes and sneezed uncontrollably. The third day Bill, the owner, said she was "Out with a sniffle." The next night Lucy was spotted walking the streets at midnight, her skin mottled, her eyes bearing an opaque sheen. People tried to talk with her, to help her, but she seemed incapable of speech, only incoherent mutterings and soft moans. And those that she touched came down with the sickness.

Lucy was the first local to go. As the numbers of the undead increased, people packed up their families and fled the villages, as many as could get away. She

had no idea where they went, where they could go.

She found this house and when the grocery store and the hardware shop were abandoned she began stocking up, building the fence, securing her world. And then they came. Those who were left. Dozens from villages that once had claimed a combined population of 10,000. Every night they swarmed from their homes and headed to hers. A macabre ritual. *Maybe they're as lonely as I am*, she wrote. *I'm half dead in a different way. Maybe it's a strange, symbiotic curse and we need each other. If I cease to survive, will they? If they disappear tomorrow, will I still exist? How Zen, she wrote. How perfectly, horribly Zen.*

Suddenly she felt heavy, tired, and her eyes would not stay open. She sank down to a full recline, telling herself that if she fell asleep now she would be up in the middle of the night, but not heeding the warning.

In a dream that she knows to be a dream she walks over fields covered with wildflowers under a yellow sun crossing a blue sky with few clouds. The cool earth beneath her feet, the sweet scent of lilac in the air, a mild and warm breeze blows her skirt and her hair... She closes her eyes and feels heat penetrate to her bones, warning her, even as she thinks: *the sun is too strong!*

A sound jolts her and she spins around to see a man coming towards her. He is dressed in blue jeans, a t-shirt and his body is muscular. With hair the color of the sun and eyes that she can see as he hears are blue as the sky, he is as alive as the day. *As real as nature that heals and cleanses itself, over time.*

Suddenly the man is Gary, and he stops before her and reaches out to cup her chin. *His touch is electric. It is as if her body is nothing but electrical current as sparks explode throughout her, sending signals to her brain, her heart, her genitals. She quivers, hungry for this, fearful of it at the same time. Without opening his mouth he says to her "Don't worry! This was meant to be."*

How? she wonders. "Are you dead?" she asks.

He smiles and pulls her to him, kissing her full on the lips, and she tastes his familiar tongue inside her mouth, moving, probing. An image flashes through her of dark unwholesomeness. An invasion.

She jerked awake, her body covered with sweat. She sat up abruptly and felt chilly, as if the temperature had plummeted. She grabbed the blanket from the foot of the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders, still shivering.

Disoriented, she looked around the darkened room, lit only by one 15 Watt coiled fluorescent that she kept lit over the kitchen table to stave off the demons of darkness. But the demons had gotten through, again.

She stood on shaky legs, feeling her cool forehead, and then headed to a cupboard where she kept a first aid bag. She placed the thermometer under her tongue and walked to the one window while she waited, moving the bar that held the thick wooden shutters so she could open them and look out.

Darkness filled the night. And silence. Nothing. Once her eyes adjusted, she scanned the periphery of the fence to the gate, as far as the window would let her see. They had gone, at least from the area within her view.

A full moon hung in the sky as if pasted there on top of the blackness. She

squinted at the orb, struggling to see the face that she had seen as a child, but the thickened atmosphere blurred details.

When she pulled out the thermometer and read it under the lamp she saw that her temperature was normal. She did not feel sick. A glance in the mirror by the door showed a too-thin face, haggard, but she had accepted that. She looked weary but bright-eyed. Absently she smoothed back her short hair, running fingers through it like a comb. I'm alright, she thought, feeling both relief and despair that she was not sick. "You're ovulating," she told her image. The serious image looked back at her with an expression that said: So? What does it matter? "Soon you'll get old and die," she said. The image did not reply. Old and die. Would she, *could* she die? Or was her destiny that of the undead, the ones who were sick but unable to get well, unable to die, caught in a balance of the battle of microorganisms that kept them in a terrible, stasis. That kept them walking endlessly, feebly, helplessly, unable to give themselves wholeheartedly to entropy. Weak, mindless, incapable of using tools—"Isn't that what defines us as human?" she challenged her image. But the image, as always, did not long to respond.

Suddenly, in anger, she threw off the blanket, stalked to the couch, grabbed the rifle, and unbolted the door. The night air felt cooler, and the cold wind of a storm snapped at her. Tonight she wanted change. Something would die. One of them. Or her. It didn't matter. This couldn't go on!

Aware of the insanity of her thinking, she would not stop herself. She stormed to the fence and strode along the periphery. Soon she was passing the side of the vegetable garden, the side of the mound then reached the back of the dirt mound that enclosed her house, her prison. Nothing. No one. Where were they? Had they fled in despair? Had an alien ship come down and taken them all away? Did the balance of power finally fall to one side and the life-destroying organisms win and they at long last died? Tonight of all nights she wanted to find out. She wanted to stare into one of those hideous faces, to confront this half-being, to find a way to send it to oblivion. Maybe that was the way to go. Get over her aversion and shoot them in the head, one by one, until there were no more. Then she could walk free! What would it matter if that left her alone? She was alone now, totally. Thoroughly. The world she remembered had receded like a long-ago dream barely recalled.

She passed the weakness in the fence and saw that it had not been breached. Nothing had been breached, just her psyche.

Her quick strides brought her around to the other side of the mound, then back into what she deemed the front yard. Not one of the not-quite-dead. Frustrated, she stepped outside of the glow of the yard light and glared up at the impassive moon. Suddenly she gave in to an impulse of a different sort: snapping her head further back, letting the glow of the other-worldly light freeze her face, she howled like an animal. Wailed over and over into the impending storm until the sounds turned to shrieking. She dropped the rifle. Out of her control, her body staggered around the yard, arms protecting her solar plexus,

screaming, sobbing, blind with the impossibility of despair. She only stopped when she slammed against the fence and crumpled to the ground, her back braced against the chain link, her body curled into a fetal position.

Out of her mind with grief, it took time to realize that something was different. She felt a burning at the back of her neck. The hotness moved along her flesh from side to side and at first she did not know what caused it. But then she did. Cold, so intense it felt hot, comforting, caressing her skin. Behind her, close, she heard breathing. Wet breathing. And while her mind warned her that she should be frightened, at the closeness, the touch, another part of her ached for more. She sat up, pressing her back against the fence. More fingers touched her, caressing her as a lover would, as Gary had. Their foul odor entered her nostrils as flowers. Lilies. She reached back over her shoulder; flesh met flesh. And as the rain blew from every direction, for the first time in a long time her sorrow evaporated into the wind.

BITTER GROUNDS

by Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman is the best-selling author of *American Gods*, *Coroline*, and *Amansi Boys*, among many other novels. He's also the writer of the popular *Sandman* comic book series, and has done work in television and film. His television projects include the BBC miniseries *Neverwhere*, which he later adapted into a novel, and a script for *Babylon 5*; in the realm of film, he co-wrote the screenplays for the films *MirrorMask* and *Beowulf*, and wrote the English-language screenplay of Hayao Miyazaki's anime film *Princess Mononoke*. His novel *Stardust* was made into a film in 2007.

Gaiman has won most if not all of the major awards the SF, fantasy, and horror genres have to offer, including 3 Hugos, 2 Nebulas, the World Fantasy Award, 4 Bram Stoker Awards, and 11 Locus Awards.

"Bitter Grounds" originally appeared in the Caribbean fantasy anthology *Mojito: Conjure Stories*. On his blog, which can be found at journal.neilgaiman.com, Gaiman says that he suspects that the ideal reader of this story "reads it once, goes 'hmp...,' and then, a week or so later, with the story sort of itching in the back of her head, goes back to read it again, and finds that it's topographically reconfigured into a completely different story."

1

"Come back early or never come"

In every way that counted, I was dead. Inside somewhere maybe I was screaming and weeping and howling like an animal, but that was another person deep inside, another person who had no access to the face and lips and mouth and head, so on the surface I just shrugged and smiled and kept moving. If I could have physically passed away, just let it all go, like that, without doing anything, stepped out of life as easily as walking through a door, I would have. But I was going to sleep at night and waking in the morning, disappointed to be there and resigned to existence.

Sometimes I telephoned her. I let the phone ring once, maybe even twice, before I hung up.

The me who was screaming was so far inside nobody knew he was even there