

A M A N D A E A R L

*Z O M B I E W A L K*

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You can fool people into thinking you're alive by mimicking what they do: eat, sleep, drink, watch television. Talk about politics or sports. Pretend you care about the war. You have to be careful though. The minute you walk in rain minus raincoat or don't ooh and ah over chocolate, they suspect something is awry.

I guess I'm a good actor; no one has ever caught on to the fact that I've been dead for years. All my life, almost. Maybe since fourth grade, when my parents moved us to the city. I used to dream I could fly. When we moved, my dreams ended.

I didn't really know I wasn't alive then. But there were clues. Heather's older brother in the tree house. His hand on my thigh; the boy who put a knife to my throat, my father's kiss: rigor mortis.

Most people assume someone has to be buried or burnt up to prove she's really dead. I've thought about that. Coffins or conflagrations. The blue flame heating my bones, the smell of burning hair and skin or the dark earth, a pine box, everlasting silence. Nothing moving but worms. Something to look forward to, maybe.

Yesterday my co-workers asked me to lunch to celebrate one of their generic milestones. Could have been a wedding, a baby shower or a retirement party for all I know. I thought they'd given up asking me long ago. Of course I said no. It's confusing why they asked. I figure maybe the boss insisted. I've learned no one does anything without an agenda.

I don't know what my agenda is. I never figured it out. I did learn I don't need the ritual of box or barbecue to be dead, though, and people are easy to fool. I ride the bus to work every day, letting the motion rock my body into a simulation of awareness. I make this last all day somehow. Nodding when I'm supposed to agree and putting mayonnaise on my hamburger as if I could still taste anything.

Alive people like Suburus, the Wheel of Fortune, retirement savings plans, suburban bungalows, electric juicers and GAP tee shirts. They go to Florida to lie on beaches and anaesthetize themselves with giant margaritas. They laugh and cry in the right places at the movies.

I float outside all of that. Not above it. But not inside it either. I did try to put my feet on the ground at various times. But I've learned it hurts. You notice things. Stupid things too, like the way crows fly at the same time every day to some unknown destination or some dumb line from a poem. And you start to expect people to notice you. To care about you.

It's safer to stay dead. You can watch everything that way. I saw a woman yesterday, sitting on a bench. She suddenly burst into tears; I gave her a tissue. This is where her daughter used to live, she told me. I looked around and didn't see any house. Some homeless woman was killed recently. I remember seeing her wandering around the neighbourhood. She had long red hair, used to busk at this corner, sang really well, played guitar. The woman crying was her mother.

This sort of thing would make me sad and frustrated at how helpless I was, if I were alive. The truth is there's nothing I can do for this mother and there was nothing I

could do for her daughter either. No one ever gave a rat's ass about that red headed busker, except her mother, who waited too late.

Red had a beautiful voice though. Music is the hardest thing of all to hear when you're alive. It's too good. It gives you hope that everything isn't messed up.

But people don't notice anything. You can hear a guy playing electric guitar, so exquisite it would make you cry, or make love or drink till the bed does flip-flops, just to feel alive to that moment. To keep it inside you and hold on to it. But it doesn't stay, you end up having to walk the same old lousy pavement and listen to some asshole complaining about property taxes or something.

There's this thing called Zombie Walk. The most popular one is out in BC. People dress in black and walk all over the city, riding the Sky Train and then going to graveyards. They encourage corpses in all stages of decay. Sounds perfect for me.

I've thought of moving out there. To the ocean. I was born on an island. Maybe an island is a good place to live when you're dead. Land that isn't touching other land.

Winter's coming. The cold keeps everyone off the streets. Walking's good then. The air is sharp on your skin. You remove your coat sometimes. Let the freezing rain fall on your neck and down along your spine, flowing like cold tears from your eyes. Then everything turns to ice.

Have you ever seen a river with its thin layer of ice on top? You can still see everything beneath. Brown, shriveled up leaves that fell in the autumn are suspended in the season before everything turned to ice. And then the snow falls and covers it all up.

It's too crowded here, too close. People breathe on you. They touch you when you don't want them to. Back when you were alive, you did ask not to be touched. It didn't work. He kept touching you. You learned to play dead. Pretty soon you weren't playing anymore. You just were. Dead. You're not sure you'd know how to live now even if you wanted to.