

THIS YEAR'S CLASS PICTURE

DAN SIMMONS



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SUBTERRANEAN PRESS 2016



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Electronic Edition

Electronic Edition ISBN
978-1-59606-761-5

Subterranean Press
PO Box 190106
Burton, MI 48519

subterraneanpress.com

Ms. Geiss watched her new student coming across the first-graders' playground from her vantage point on the balcony of the old school's belfry. She lowered the barrel of the Remington .30-06 until the child was centered in the crosshairs of the telescopic sight. The image was quite clear in the early morning light. It was a boy, not one she knew, and he looked to have been about nine or ten when he died. His green *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* t-shirt had been slashed down the center and there was a spattering of dried blood along the ragged cleft. Ms. Geiss could see the white gleam of an exposed rib. She hesitated, lifting her eye from the sight to watch the small figure lurch and stumble his way through the swing sets and around the jungle gym. His age was right, but she already had twenty-two students. More than that, she knew, and the class became difficult to manage. And today was class picture day and she did not need the extra aggravation. Plus, the child's appearance was on the borderline of what she would accept in her fourth grade...especially on class picture day.

You never had that luxury before the Tribulations, she chided herself. She put her eye back against the plastic sunhood of the sight and grimaced slightly as she thought of the children who had been "mainstreamed" into her elementary classes over the years: deaf children, blind children, borderline autistic children, children suffering from epilepsy and Down's syndrome and hyperactivity and sexual abuse and abandonment and dyslexia and *petit mal*

seizures...children dying of cancer and children dying of AIDS...

The dead child had crossed the shallow moat and was approaching the razor wire barriers that Ms. Geiss had strung around the school just where the first-graders' gravel playground adjoined the fourth-graders' paved basketball and four-square courts. She knew that the boy would keep coming and negotiate the wire no matter how many slices of flesh were torn from his body.

Sighing, already feeling tired even before the school day had formally begun, Ms. Geiss lowered the Remington, clicked on the safety, and started down the belfry ladder to go and greet her new student.

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She peered in her classroom door on the way to the supply closet on the second floor. The class was restless, daylight and hunger stirring them to tug against the chains and iron collars. Little Samantha Stewart, technically too young for fourth grade, had torn her dress almost off in her nighttime struggles. Sara and Sarah J. were tangled in each other's chains. Todd, the biggest of the bunch and the former class bully, had chewed away the rubber lining of his collar again. Ms. Geiss could see flecks of black rubber around Todd's white lips and knew that the metal collar had worn away the flesh of his neck almost to the bone. She would have to make a decision about Todd soon.

On the long bulletin board behind her desk, she could see the thirty-eight class pictures she had mounted there. Thirty-eight years. Thirty-eight class pictures, all taken in this school. Starting with the thirty-second year, the photographs became much smaller as they had gone from the large format cameras the photo studio had used to the school Polaroid that Ms. Geiss had rigged to continue the tradition. The classes were also smaller. In her thirty-fifth year there had been only five students in her fourth grade. Sarah J. and Todd had been in that class—alive, pink-skinned, thin and frightened looking, but healthy. In the thirty-sixth year there were no living children...but seven students. In the next-to-last photograph, there were sixteen faces. This year, today, she would have to set the camera to get all twenty-two children in the frame. *No, she thought, twenty-three with the new boy.*

Ms. Geiss shook her head and walked on to the supply closet. She had fifteen minutes before the school bell was programmed to ring.

Carrying the capture pole, pliers, police handcuffs, heavy gloves, and the rubber apron from the supply closet, Ms. Geiss hurried down the broad stairway to the first floor. At the front door she checked the video monitors to make sure that the outer courtyard, walkway, and fourth-grade playground were empty except for the new boy, tied on the apron, slung the Remington over her shoulder, pulled on the gloves, unbolted the steel-reinforced door, made sure the pliers and handcuffs were reachable in the big apron

pocket, lifted the capture pole, and stepped out to meet her new student.

The boy's t-shirt and jeans had been slashed even more by the razor wire. Tatters of bloodless flesh hung from his forearms. As Ms. Geiss moved out into the sunlight, he raised his dead face and dulled eyes in her direction. His teeth were yellow.

Ms. Geiss held her breath as the boy lurched and scrabbled in her direction. It was not because of his smell; she was used to the roadkill scent of the children. This new boy was a bit worse than most of her students, not quite as bad as Todd. His trousers were soaked with gasoline from wading the moat at the edge of the school ground and the gasoline smell drove away some of his stench. She found herself holding her breath because even after all these months...*years*, she realized...there was still a certain tension in meeting a new student.

The boy lurched the last fifteen feet toward her across the courtyard cement. Ms. Geiss steadied herself and raised the capture pole.

At one time the capture pole had been a seven-foot wood-and-brass rod for raising and lowering the tall upper windows in the old school. Ms. Geiss had modified it by mounting a heavy fishing reel wound about with heavy-duty baling wire, adding eyelets to guide the wire, and jury-rigging a device on the end to lock off the double-thick loop. She'd gotten the idea from watching old videos of *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. Whatshisname, the big,

handsome fellow who'd done all of the work...Jim...had used a similar device to catch rattlesnakes.

This poor child is more deadly than any rattlesnake, thought Ms. Geiss. And then she concentrated totally on the capture.

There were no problems. The child lunged. Ms. Geiss dropped the double loop of wire over his head, released the catch to tighten the noose, and locked it in. The wire sank deep into the boy's throat but was too thick to slice flesh. If he had been breathing, the noose would have strangled him, but that was no longer a concern.

Ms. Geiss took a step forward and the boy lurched, staggered, swung his arms, and went over backward, his head striking concrete with a sickening, soft-melon sound. The teacher checked over her shoulder to make sure the courtyard and playground were still clear, and then she pinned the flailing child, first with the extended capture pole, and then with her foot. The boy's fingernails scabbled against the thick leather of her high boot.

With a practiced motion, Ms. Geiss dropped the pole, secured the child's wrists with one gloved hand, handcuffed him with her free hand, and sat on his chest, tucking her print dress in as she did so. Ms. Geiss weighed one hundred and ninety-five pounds, and there was no question of the child escaping. With a critical eye she assessed his wounds: the chest wound had been the fatal one and it looked as if it had been administered by a meat cleaver or long knife; the other gashes, tears, bites, and a single bullet

wound high on the child's shoulder had all been added after he was dead.

Ms. Geiss nodded as if satisfied, pried back the wriggling child's lips as if inspecting a horse, and pulled his teeth with the pair of pliers. The boy made no outcry. She noticed that flies had lain eggs in the corner of his eyes and she made a mental note to take care of that during cleanup.

Shifting her weight only slightly, the teacher reversed position on the boy's chest, lifted his bound wrists, and efficiently pulled his fingernails off with the pliers. The only blood was in the dried and matted substance under his nails.

The child was snapping at her like an angry turtle, but his gums would never have penetrated skin, much less Ms. Geiss's rubber Wellingtons and the corduroy trousers she wore under the dress.

She glanced over her shoulder again. Months ago she had been surprised by five of them—all adults—who had come soundlessly through the wire while she had been watching the children at recess, and there had been only six cartridges in the Remington. One of the head shots had been a near miss; she had corrected her aim when the lurching man was only four feet from her, and the adrenaline of that encounter kept her vigilant.

The playground was empty. Ms. Geiss grunted, pulled the new boy to his feet with the wire noose, opened the door with one hand, and shoved him in ahead of her with

the pole. There would be just enough time for cleanup before the first bell rang.



The first thing on the morning's agenda was writing the schedule on the chalkboard. Ms. Geiss had always done that to show the children what they would be doing and learning that day.

The first thing on the written schedule was the Pledge of Allegiance. Ms. Geiss decided that she would go ahead with that and introduce the new boy after it. He sat now in the third from the last desk in the row closest to the windows. Ms. Geiss had taken the handcuffs off, clipped on the leg manacles that were bolted to the floor, run the waist chain around him, attached it to the long chain that ran the length of the desks, and set his iron collar in place. The boy had flailed at her, his dead eyes glimmering for a second with something that might have been hunger, but a child's arms were simply too short to do damage to an adult.

Even before the Tribulations, Ms. Geiss had smiled when she watched movies or television shows where children used judo or karate to flip adults around the room. From her many years' experience, she knew that simple laws of mechanics meant that a child's punch was usually harmless. They simply didn't have the mass, arm length, and leverage to do much damage. With the new boy's teeth

and claws pulled, Ms. Geiss could handle him without the capture pole or chains if she wished.

She did not so wish. She treated the children with the distance and respect for contamination she had shown her one HIV-positive child back before the Tribulations.

Pledge of Allegiance time. She looked at her class of twenty-three children. A few were standing and straining toward her, clanking their chains, but most were sprawled across the desks or leaning from their seats as if they could escape by crawling across the floor. Ms. Geiss shook her head and threw the large switch on her desk. The six twelve-volt batteries were arranged in series, their cable leads connected to the gang chain which ran from desk to desk. She actually saw sparks and smelled the ozone.

The electricity did not hurt them, of course. Nothing could hurt these children. But something in the voltage did galvanize them, much as Galvani's original experiments had activated frog legs into kicking even though the legs were separated from the frogs' bodies.

The students spasmed, twitched, and lurched upright with a great clanking of chains. They rose to their toes as if trying to rise above the voltage flowing into their lower bodies. Their hands splayed and curled spasmodically in front of their chests. Some opened their mouths as if screaming silently.

Ms. Geiss put her hand over her heart and faced the flag above the doorway. "I pledge allegiance to the flag," she began, "of the United States of America..."



She introduced the new boy as Michael. He had no identification on him, of course, and Ms. Geiss was sure that he had not attended this school before the Tribulations, but there were no other Michaels in the class and the boy looked as if he might have been a Michael. The class paid no attention to the introduction. Neither did Michael.

Mathematics was the first class after the Pledge. Ms. Geiss left the class alone long enough to go downstairs, check the row of video monitors, and get the learning rewards from the long row of open freezers in the downstairs hall. She had scavenged the freezers from the Safeway last year. Donnie had helped. Ms. Geiss blinked twice when she thought of Donnie, her friend and the former custodian. Donnie had helped with so many things... without him she could never have managed the work of processing the learning rewards out at the chicken nugget plant on the edge of town...or wiring the Radio Shack video cameras and monitors. If only Donnie hadn't stopped to help that truck filled with refugees that had broken down just off the Interstate...

Ms. Geiss shook off her reverie, adjusted the sling of the Remington, and carried the box of learning rewards to the teachers' lounge. She set the microwave for three minutes.

The smell of the heated nuggets set the students into clanking, lurching agitation when she entered the classroom. Ms. Geiss set the reward box on the table near her desk and went to the chalkboard to start the math lesson.

Thank God Donnie knew how to handle the chicken nugget processing equipment out at the plant, she thought as she wrote numerals from 0 to 10.

The children, of course, would not have eaten chicken nuggets. The children, as with all of those who had returned during the Tribulations, had a taste for only one thing.

Ms. Geiss glanced at the tray of heated nuggets. Against her will, the smell made her own mouth water. Somewhere in one of those freezer boxes, she knew, were the deep-fried and nugget-processed remains of Mister Delmonico, the former principal, as well as at least half the former staff of the elementary school. It had been Donnie who had realized that the spate of suicides in the small town should not go to waste; it had been Donnie who remembered the chicken nugget plant and the large freezers there. It had been Donnie who had seen how useful it would be to have some nuggets with one when encountering a wandering pack of the hungry undead. Donnie had said that it was like the way burglars brought a rare steak along to distract guard dogs.

But it had been Ms. Geiss who saw the potential of the nuggets as learning rewards. And in her humble opinion,

the overbearing Mr. Delmonico and the other lazy staff members had never served the cause of education as well as they were doing now.

“One,” said Ms. Geiss, pointing to the large numeral she had drawn on the board. She raised one finger. “Say ‘one.’”

Todd chewed at the new rubber ring Ms. Geiss had set in his collar. Kirsten tripped over her chain and went facedown on the desk. Little Samantha clawed at her own clothes. Justin, still chubby ten months after his death, gummed the plastic back of the seat in front of him. Megan lurched against the chains. Michael had twisted himself around until he was staring at the back of the room.

“One,” repeated Ms. Geiss, still pointing to the numeral on the chalkboard. “If you can’t say it, hold up *one* hand. One. One.”

John snapped his toothless gums in a wet, regular rhythm. Behind him, Abigail sat entirely motionless except for the slow in-and-out of her dry tongue. David batted his face over and over against the lid of his desk. Sara chewed on the white tips of bones protruding from her fingers while behind her, Sarah J. suddenly thrust her hand up, one finger striking her eye and staying there.

Ms. Geiss did not hesitate. “Very *good*, Sarah,” she said and hurried down the row between groping hands and smacking mouths. She popped the nugget in Sarah J.’s slack mouth and stepped back quickly.

“One!” said Ms. Geiss. “Sarah raised *one* finger.”

All the students were straining toward the nugget tray. Sarah J.'s finger was still embedded in her eye.

Ms. Geiss stepped back to the chalkboard. In her heart, she knew that the child's spasmodic reaction had been random. It did not matter, she told herself. Given enough time and positive reinforcement, the connections will be made. Look at Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan. And that was with a totally blind and deaf child who had had only a few months of language before the darkness descended on her. That one baby word—*wa-wa*—had allowed Helen, years later, to learn everything.

And these children had possessed *years* of language and thought before...

Before they died, completed Ms. Geiss. *Before their minds and memories and personalities unraveled like a skein of rotten thread.*

Ms. Geiss sighed and touched the next numeral. "Two," she said cheerily. "Anyone show me...show me any way you can...show me *two*."



After her own lunch and while the students were resting after their feeding time, Ms. Geiss continued with the bulldozing of houses.

At first she thought that isolating the school grounds with the moat and razor wire, lighting it with the

searchlights at night, and installing the video monitors had been enough. But *they* still got through.

Luckily, the town was small—fewer than three thousand—and it was almost forty miles to a real city. Now that the Tribulations had separated the quick and the dead, there were almost none of the former and few of the latter left in the area. A few cars filled with terrified living refugees roared through town, but most never left the Interstate and in recent months the sound of passing vehicles had all but stopped. A few of *them* filtered in—from the countryside, from the distant city, from their graves—and they were drawn to the generator-powered searchlights like moths to a flame, but the school's thick walls, steel-mesh screens, and warning devices always kept them out until morning. And in the morning, the Remington solved the problem.

Still, Ms. Geiss wanted a clearer field of fire—what Donnie had once called an “uncompromised killing zone.” She had reminded Donnie that the term “killing zone” was a misnomer, since they were not killing anything, merely returning the things to their natural state.

And so Ms. Geiss had driven out to the line shack near the unfinished section of the Interstate and come back with the dynamite, blasting caps, detonators, priming cord, and a Caterpillar D-7 bulldozer. Ms. Geiss had never driven a bulldozer, never exploded dynamite, but there were manuals at the line shack, and books in the Carnegie Library. Ms. Geiss had always been amazed at people's

ignorance of how much knowledge and useful information there was in books.

Now, with a half hour left in her lunch break, she entered the bulldozer's open-sided shelter, climbed up onto the wide seat of the D-7, disengaged the clutch lever, set the speed selector to neutral, pushed the governor control to the firewall, stood on the right steering wheel and locked it in position with a clamp, made sure that the gears were in neutral, and reached for the starter controls. She paused to make sure that the Remington .30-06 was secure in the clamp that had once held a fire extinguisher near her right hand. Visibility was better with the houses in a three-block radius of the school blown apart this way, but there were still too many foundations and heaps of rubble that the things could hide behind. She could see nothing moving.

Ms. Geiss set the transmission and compression levers to their correct settings, pushed the starting-engine clutch in, opened a fuel valve, set the choke, dropped the idling latch, clicked on the ignition switch, and pulled the lever that engaged the electric starter.

The D-7 roared into life, black diesel smoke blowing from the vertical exhaust pipe. Ms. Geiss adjusted the throttle, let the clutch out, and gave traction to just the right tread so that the massive 'dozer spun to its left and headed for the largest pile of rubble.

An adult corpse scabbled out of a collapsed basement on her right and clawed across bricks toward her. The thing's hair was matted back with white dust, its teeth

broken but sharp. One eye was gone. Ms. Geiss thought that she recognized it as Todd's stepfather—the drunkard who used to beat the boy every Friday night.

It raised its arms and came at her.

Ms. Geiss glanced at the Remington, decided against it. She gave traction to the left treads, swung the bulldozer smartly to the right, and lowered the big blade just as she opened the throttle up. The lower edge of the blade caught the staggering corpse just above its beltline. Ms. Geiss dropped the blade once, twice, stopping the third time only when the corpse was cut in half. The legs spasmed uselessly, but fingers clawed at steel and began pulling the upper half of the thing onto the blade.

Ms. Geiss pulled levers, got the machine in reverse, put it back in low gear, lowered the blade, and bulldozed half a ton of rubble over both halves of the twitching corpse as she shoved the mass of debris back into the basement. It took less than a minute to move another ton of rubble over the hole. Then she backed up, checked to make sure that no other things were around, and began filling in the basement in earnest.

When she was done, she stepped down and walked across the area; it was flat and smooth as a gravel parking lot. Todd's stepfather might still be twitching and clawing down there, at least his upper half, but with twelve tons of rubble packed and compacted over him, he wasn't going anywhere.

Ms. Geiss only wished that she could have done this to all the drunk and abusive fathers and stepfathers she'd known over the decades.

She mopped her face with a handkerchief and checked her watch. Three minutes until reading class began. Ms. Geiss surveyed the flattened city blocks, interrupted by only a few remaining piles of rubble or collapsed foundations. Another week and her field of fire would be uninterrupted. Stopping to catch her breath, feeling her sixty-plus years in the arthritic creak of her joints, Ms. Geiss climbed back aboard the D-7 to fire it up and park it in its shelter for the night.

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Ms. Geiss read aloud to her class. Each afternoon in the lull after her lunch and the students' feeding time, she read from books she knew that they had either read in their short lifetimes or had had read to them. She read from *Goodnight Moon*, *Pat the Bunny*, *Gorilla*, *Heidi*, *Bunnicula*, *Superfudge*, *Black Beauty*, *Richard Scarry's ABC Book*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Animal Sounds*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Peter Rabbit*, *Polar Express*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. And while Ms. Geiss read she watched for the slightest flicker of recognition, of interest...of life in those dead eyes.

And saw nothing.

As the weeks and months passed, Ms. Geiss read from the children's favorite series: *Curious George* books, and *Madeleine* books, and the *Black Stallion* series, *Ramona* books, the *Berenstain Bears*, and *Clifford* books, and—despite the fact that priggish, politically correct librarians had tried to remove them from the children's public library shelves not long before the Tribulations began—*The Bobbsey Twins* and *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*.

And the students did not respond.

On rainy days, days when the clouds hung low and Ms. Geiss's spirits hung lower, she would sometimes read to them from the Bible, or from her favorite Shakespeare plays—usually the comedies but occasionally *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet*—and sometimes she would read from her favorite poet, John Keats. But after the dance of words, after the last echo of beauty had faded, Ms. Geiss would look up and no intelligent gaze would be looking back. There would be only the dead eyes, the slack faces, the open mouths, the aimless, mindless stirrings, and the soft stench of rank flesh.

It was not too dissimilar from her years of teaching live children.

This afternoon Ms. Geiss read what she always thought of as their favorite, *Goodnight Moon*, enjoying as she went the lilt and litany of the small ceremony of the young rabbit's endless goodnights to everything in his room as he attempted to put off the inevitable moment of sleep. Ms. Geiss finished the little book and looked up quickly, trying,

as always, to catch the flicker in the eye, the animation in the muscles around mouth or eye.

Slackness. Vacuity. They had ears but did not hear.

Ms. Geiss sighed softly. "We'll do geography before recess," she said.

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The projected slides were brilliant in the darkened room. The Capitol dome in Washington. The St. Louis Arch. The Space Needle in Seattle. The World Trade Center.

"Hold up your hand when you see a city you know," said Ms. Geiss over the whirring of the projector's fan. "Make a motion when you see something familiar."

The Chicago Lakefront. Denver with mountains rising in the background. Bourbon Street and Mardi Gras time. The Golden Gate Bridge.

The slides clicked past in Kodachrome splendor. The children stirred sluggishly, just beginning to respond to the first stirrings of renewed hunger. No one raised a hand. No one seemed to notice the bright image of the Brooklyn Bridge on the screen.

New York, thought Ms. Geiss, remembering the September day twenty-seven years earlier when she had taken the photograph. The first invigorating breezes of autumn had made them wear sweaters as she and Mr. Farnham, the science coordinator she had met at the NEA convention, had walked across the pedestrian deck of the

Brooklyn Bridge. They had gone to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and then walked in Central Park. The rustle of every leaf had seemed audible and separate to Ms. Geiss's heightened senses on that perfect afternoon. They had almost kissed when he dropped her at the Hotel Barbizon that evening after dinner at the River Cafe. He had promised to call her. It was only months later that Ms. Geiss had heard from a teacher friend from Connecticut that Mr. Farnham was married, had been married for twenty years.

The children rustled their chains.

"Raise an arm if you recognize New York City from the pictures," said Ms. Geiss tiredly. No arm was raised into the bright beam of the projection lamp. Ms. Geiss tried to imagine New York City now, years after the onset of the Tribulations. Any survivors there would be food for the hundreds of thousands, the *millions* of flesh-hungry, unclean creatures that had inherited those filthy streets...

Ms. Geiss advanced rapidly through the remaining slides: San Diego, the Statue of Liberty, a bright curve of Hawaiian beach, Monhegan Island in the morning fog, Las Vegas at night...all places she had seen in her wonderful summers, all places she would never see again.

"That's all the geography for today," said Ms. Geiss and switched off the projector. The students seemed agitated in the darkness. "Recess time," said their teacher.

Ms. Geiss knew that they did not need exercise. Their dead muscles would not atrophy if they were not used. The brilliant spring daylight only made the children seem more obscene in their various stages of decomposition.

But Ms. Geiss could not imagine keeping fourth graders in class all day without a recess.

She led them outside, still attached to their four gang chains, and secured the ends of the chains to the iron rods she had driven into the gravel and asphalt playgrounds. The children lurched this way and that, finally coming to a stop, straining at the end of their tethers like small, scabrous, child-shaped balloons waiting for the Macy's parade to begin. No child paid attention to another. A few leaned in Ms. Geiss's direction, toothless gums smacking as if in anticipation, but the sight and sound of that was so common that Ms. Geiss felt neither threat nor alarm.

She wandered farther out across the fourth-graders' playground, threaded her way through the winding exit maze she had left in the razor wire, crossed the gravel expanse of the first-graders' playground, and stopped only when she reached the moat she had dug around the small city block the old school and its playgrounds occupied. Ms. Geiss called it a moat; the military-engineering manuals she had found in the stacks of the Carnegie Library called it a tank trap. But the specifications for a tank trap called for a ditch at least eight feet deep and thirty feet wide, with berms rising at an angle of 45 degrees. Ms. Geiss had used

the D-7 to dig a moat half that deep and wide, with the slowly eroding banks no greater than twenty degrees. However the dead would come at her, she thought, it was improbable that they would be driving tanks.

The gasoline was a touch she garnered from an old article on Iraqi defenses during the Gulf War. Finding the gasoline was no problem—Donnie had commandeered a large tanker truck to borrow gas from the underground Texaco tanks to power the generator he and she had set up in the school—but keeping the fuel in the moat from soaking into the soil had been a puzzler until Ms. Geiss had thought of the huge sheets of black poly left out at the highway department depot.

She looked down at the tepid moat of gasoline now, thinking how silly this self-defense measure had been...like the spotlights on the school, or the video cameras.

But it had kept her busy.

Like pretending to teach these poor lost souls? Ms. Geiss shook away the thought and walked back to the playground, raising her whistle to her lips to signify the end of recess. None of the students reacted to the whistle, but Ms. Geiss blew it anyway. It was tradition.

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She took them to the art room to shoot the pictures. She did not know why the studio used to take the pictures there—the color would have been infinitely better if they

had posed the children outside—but the photo had been taken in the art room for as long as anyone could remember, the students lined up—shortest in the front rows even though the front rows were kneeling—everyone posed under the huge ceramic map of the United States, each state made of fired, brown clay and set in place by some art class half a century or more ago. The corners of the ceramic states had curled up and out of alignment as if some seismic event was tearing the nation apart. Texas had fallen out eight or nine years ago and the pieces were glued in without great care, making the state look like a federation of smaller states.

Ms. Geiss had never liked Texas. She had been a girl when President Kennedy was killed in Texas, and in her opinion things had gone to hell in the country ever since then.

She led the children in by rows, slipped the end of their gang chains over the radiator, set a warmed pan of learning rewards on the floor between the camera and the class, checked to make sure the film pack she had put in that morning was advanced properly, set the timer, moved quickly to stand next to Todd—straining, as the other students were straining, to get at the nuggets—and tried to smile as the timer hissed and the shutter clicked.

She shot two more Polaroid pictures and only glanced at them before setting them in the pocket of her apron. Most of the children were facing front. That was good enough.

There were ten minutes left in the school day by the time she had the class tethered in their seats again, but Ms. Geiss could not bring herself to do a spelling list or to read aloud again or even to force crayons in their hands and set the butcher paper out. She sat and stared at them, feeling the fatigue and sense of uselessness as a heavy weight on her shoulders.

The students stared in her direction...or at least in the direction of the pan of cooling nuggets.

At three p.m. the dismissal bell rang, Ms. Geiss went up the wide aisles tossing nuggets to the children, and then she turned out the lights, bolted the door shut, and left the classroom for the day.

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It is morning and there is a richness of light Ms. Geiss has not noticed for years. As she moves to the chalkboard to write the class's assignments next to the schedule chalked there, she notices that she is much younger. She is wearing the dress she had worn the morning she and Mr. Farnham walked across the Brooklyn Bridge.

"Please get your reading books out," she says softly. "*Green Salad Seasons* group, bring your books and comprehension quiz sheets up front. *Mystery Sneaker*, I'll take a look at your vocabulary words when we're finished here. *Sprint*, please copy the Skillsbook assignment and be ready to come up front at ten-fifteen to answer questions.

Anyone who finishes early may get a Challenge Pack from the interest center.”

The children scatter quietly to their assigned tasks. The group at the front table read with Ms. Geiss and answer questions quietly while the other children work with that soft, almost subliminal hum that is the universal background noise of a good classroom.

While the *Green Salad Seasons* group writes answers to questions at the end of the story, Ms. Geiss walks among the other children.

Sara wears a kerchief in the form of a cap. The knots protrude like tiny rabbit ears. Normally Ms. Geiss does not allow caps or kerchiefs to be worn in the classroom, but Sara has undergone chemotherapy and has lost her hair. The class does not tease her about it, not even Todd.

Now Sara leans over her Skillsbook and squints at the questions there. Occasionally she chews at the eraser on the end of her pencil. She is nine years old. Her eyes are blue and her complexion is as milkily translucent as a shard of expensive porcelain. Her cheeks seem touched with a healthy blush, and it is only upon closer inspection that one can see that this is a soft pass of makeup that her mother has applied, that Sara is still pale and wan from her illness.

Ms. Geiss stops by the child’s desk. “Problem, Sara?”

“I don’t understand this.” Sara stabs a finger at a line of instructions. Her fingernails are as chewed as the eraser on her pencil.

“It says to find the proper prefix and put it before the word,” whispers Ms. Geiss. Up front, Kirsten is sharpening a pencil with a loud grinding. The class looks up as Kirsten blows shavings off into the waste basket, carefully inspects the point, and begins the grinding again.

“What’s a prefix?” Sara whispers back.

Ms. Geiss leans closer. The two are temporarily joined in a bond of conspiracy produced by their proximity and the hypnotic background hum of classroom activity. Ms. Geiss can feel the warmth from the girl’s cheek near hers.

“You remember what a prefix is,” says Ms. Geiss and proceeds to show the girl.

She returns to the front table just as *Green Salad Seasons*, her top group, leaves for their desks and *Sprint*, her small remedial group, comes forward. There are only six students in *Sprint* and four of them are boys.

“David,” she says, “can you tell me how the dolphin both helped and hurt the boy?”

David frowns as if in deep thought and chews on the wood of his pencil. His Skillsbook page is blank. “Todd,” says Ms. Geiss, “can you tell us?”

Todd turns fierce eyes in her direction. The boy always seems distracted, involved in some angry internal argument. “Tell you what?”

“Tell us how the dolphin both helped and hurt the boy?”

Todd begins to shrug but avoids the motion at the last moment. Ms. Geiss has broken him of that habit by patient and positive reinforcement—praise, extra classroom duties

if he can get through the day without shrugging, a Good Scholar Certificate to take home at the end of the week. "It saved him," says Todd.

"Very good," says Ms. Geiss with a smile. "Saved him from what?"

"From the shark," says Todd. His hair is uncombed and unwashed, his neck grubby, but his eyes are bright blue and angrily alive.

"And how did it almost hurt the boy?" asks Ms. Geiss, looking around the small group to see who should participate next.

"They're coming, Ms. Geiss," Todd says loudly.

She glances back at her biggest student, preparing to warn him about interrupting, but what she sees freezes her before she can speak.

Todd's eyes are suddenly vacuous, sunken, and clouded white. His skin has become the color and texture of a dead fish's belly. His teeth are gone and his gums are a desiccated blue. Todd opens his mouth wider and suddenly it is not a mouth at all, but just a hole excavated into a dead thing's face. The voice that emerges rises out of the thing's belly like a tinny recording echoing in some obscene doll.

"Quick, Ms. Geiss, they're coming to hurt us. Wake up!"

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Ms. Geiss sat up in bed, heart racing, gasping for breath. She found her glasses on her nightstand, set them

in place, and peered around the room.

Everything was in order. Bright light from the external spotlights came through the blinds in the tall window and painted white rectangles on the floor of the upstairs classroom she had modified as her bed-and-living room. Ms. Geiss listened hard over the pounding of her pulse but heard nothing unusual from the classroom below her. There were no noises from outside. The silent row of video monitors near her couch showed the empty hallways, the light-bathed courtyard, the empty playgrounds. The closest monitor showed the dark classroom: the students stood or sprawled or leaned or strained at chains. They were all accounted for.

Just a dream, Ms. Geiss told herself. Go back to sleep.

Instead she rose, pulled her quilted robe on over her flannel nightgown, tied her rubber apron on over that, stepped into her boots, lifted the Remington, found the bulky pair of night-vision goggles that Donnie had brought from the city surplus store, and went out to climb the wide ladder to the belfry.

Ms. Geiss stepped out onto the narrow platform that ran around the belfry. She could see in all four directions and only a bit of the east yard of the school was blocked by the front gable. The spotlights reached across the playgrounds and moat and illuminated the first rows of bulldozed rubble where surrounding houses had been. Nothing moved.

The teacher yawned and shook her head. The night air was chill; she could see her breath. *I'm getting too old to spook myself like this. There's more threat from the bands of refugees than from the adult dead things.*

She turned to go down the ladder, but at the last second paused by the junction box she and Donnie had rigged there. Sighing softly, she threw the switch that doused the spotlights and then fumbled with the night vision goggles. They were bulky, clumsy to fit on her head, and she could not wear her glasses under them. Also, she always felt like she looked like an idiot with the things on her head. Still, Donnie had risked a trip to the city to get them. She moved her glasses up on her forehead and tugged the goggles down.

She turned and froze. Things moved to the west, just beyond where the blaze of spotlights had reached. Pale blobs moved through the rubble there, rising out of basements and spider holes in the rubble-strewn lots. Ms. Geiss could tell that they were dead by the way they stumbled and rose again, faltering at obstacles but never failing to come on again. There were twenty...no, at least thirty tall forms moving toward the school.

She turned to the north. Another thirty or more figures moving there, almost to the street. To the east, more figures moving, already within a stone's throw of the moat. Still more to the south. There were more than a hundred of the dead approaching the school. Ms. Geiss tugged off the goggles and sat on the edge of the ladder, lowering her

head almost to her knees so that the black spots in her vision receded and she could breathe again.

They've never organized like this. Never come all at once.

She felt her heart lurch, shudder, and then commence pounding again.

I didn't think there were that many of the things left around here. How...

Part of her mind was screaming at her to quit theorizing and do something. *They're coming for the children!*

It made no sense. The dead ate only living flesh...or the flesh of things recently living. It should be *her* they were after. But the terrible conviction remained: *They want the children.*

Ms. Geiss had protected her children for thirty-eight years. She had protected them from the worst of life's sharp edges, allowing them to have the safest and most productive year she could provide. She had protected her children from each other, from the bullies and mean-spirited amongst themselves; she had protected them from callous, stupid administrators; she had shielded them from the vagaries of ill-formed curriculum and faddish district philosophies. Ms. Geiss had, as well as she was able, protected her fourth graders from the tyrannies of too-early adulthood and the vulgarities of a society all too content with the vulgar.

She had protected them—with all her faculties and force of will—from being beaten, kidnapped, emotionally abused or sexually molested by the monsters who had hidden in the form of parents, step-parents, uncles, and friendly strangers.

And now these dead things were coming for her children.

Ms. Geiss went down the ladder with her apron and quilted robe flapping.

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Ms. Geiss did not have any idea why there had been a flare pistol in the highway storage depot in the room next to where she had found the blasting caps, but she had appropriated the pistol. There had been only three flares, heavy things that looked like oversized shotgun shells. She had never fired one.

Now she hurried back to the belfry with the flare pistol in her hand and the three flares in her apron pocket. She had also grabbed four boxes of .30-06 cartridges.

Some of the dead things were still a hundred yards away from the playground, but others were already wading the moat.

Ms. Geiss extracted a flare from the apron, opened the pistol, and fumbled to set the cartridge in. She forced herself to stop and take a breath. The night goggles were

hanging around her neck, heavy as an albatross. *Where are my glasses? What did I do with my glasses?*

She reached up into her hair, pulled her bifocals down, took another breath, and dropped the flare cartridge into the pistol. She clicked the breech shut and threw the spotlight switch, flooding the playgrounds with white light.

A dozen or more of the things were across the moat. Scores more were almost to the street on each side.

Ms. Geiss raised the flare gun in both hands, shut her eyes, and squeezed the trigger. The flare arched too high and fell a dozen yards short of the moat. It burned redly on gravel. A naked corpse with exposed shinbones gleaming stepped over the flare and continued lurching toward the school. Ms. Geiss reloaded, lowered her aim, and fired toward the west.

This time the flare struck the banked mud on the far side of the moat and dropped out of sight. The red glare sizzled for a second and then faded. A dozen more pale forms waded the shallow barrier.

Ms. Geiss loaded the final flare. Suddenly there was a *woosh* like a wind from nowhere and a stretch of the western moat went up in flames. There was a lull and then the flames leaped north and south, turning the corner like a clever display of falling dominoes. Ms. Geiss moved to the east side of the belfry catwalk and watched as the fire leaped along the moat until the school was in the center of a giant rectangle of thirty-foot flames. Even from fifty yards

away she could feel the heat against her face. She dropped the flare gun into her large apron pocket.

The two dozen or so figures that had already crossed the moat lumbered across the playground. Several went down in the razor wire, but then ripped their way free and continued on.

Ms. Geiss looked at her hands. They were no longer shaking. Carefully she loaded the Remington until the magazine was full. Then she rigged the rifle's sling the way the books had shown, set her elbows firmly on the railing, took a deep breath, and set her eye to the telescopic sight. With the flames still burning, she would not have needed the searchlights. She found the first moving figure, set the crosshairs on its temple, and slowly squeezed the trigger. Then she moved her aim to the next form.

At the edge of the playground, the other things were crossing the moat despite the flames. It appeared that none had turned back. Incredibly, a few came through charred but intact; most emerged burning like fuel-primed torches, the flames shimmering around their forms in parallel waves of orange and black. They continued forward long after rotted clothes and rotted flesh had burned away almost to the bone. Even half-deafened by the report of the Remington, Ms. Geiss could hear the distant *pops* as cerebral fluid, superheated into steam by the burning corpse beneath it, exploded skulls like fragmentation grenades. Then the figure collapsed and added its pyre to the illumination.

Ms. Geiss shifted her aim, fired, checked over the sight to make sure the thing had gone down and stayed down, found another target, aimed, and fired again. After three shots she would shift along the balcony to a different quadrant, brace herself, and choose her targets. She reloaded five times.

When she was finished, there were over a hundred forms lying on the playground. Some were still burning. All were still.

But she could hear the crashing and rattling of steel mesh where more of the things had gotten through, especially on the east side of the school. The gable there had blocked her line of fire. Thirty or more of the things had gotten to the school and were tearing at window screens and the reinforced doors.

Ms. Geiss raised the collar of her robe and wiped her face. There was soot there from the smoke and she was surprised to see that her eyes were watering. Slung the Remington, Ms. Geiss went down the ladder and went to her room. Donnie's 9mm Browning automatic pistol was in the drawer where she had put it on the day she had cremated him. It was loaded. There were two additional magazines and a yellow box of additional cartridges in the drawer.

Ms. Geiss put the box and magazines in her apron pocket, hefted the pistol, and went down the wide stairway to the first floor.

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In the end, it was exhaustion that almost killed her.

She had fired all three of the magazines, reloaded once, and was sure that none of the things were left when she sat down on the front walk to rest.

The last corpse had been a tall man with a long beard. She had aimed the Browning from five feet away and put the last round through the thing's left eye. The thing had gone down as if its strings had been cut. Ms. Geiss collapsed herself, sitting heavily on the sidewalk, too exhausted and disgusted even to go back through the front door.

The flames in the moat had burned down below ground level. Smaller heaps added their smoke and glow to air already filled with a dark haze. A score of sprawled forms littered the front steps and sidewalk. Ms. Geiss wanted to weep but was too tired to do anything but lower her head and take deep, slow breaths, trying to filter out the stench of cooked carrion.

The bearded corpse in front of her lunged up and scabbled across the six feet of sidewalk to her, fingers clawing.

Ms. Geiss had time to think *The bullet struck bone, missed the brain* and the thing had batted away the Browning and forced her backward, pinning the slung rifle under her. Her glasses were knocked off her face as the

thing's cold fingers ripped at her. Its mouth began to descend, as if offering her a lipless, open-mouthed kiss.

Ms. Geiss's right hand was pinned but her left was free; she scrabbled in her apron pocket, scattering loose bullets, finding and discarding the pliers, finally emerging with something heavy in her grip.

The dead thing lunged to bite off her face, to chew its way through to her brain. Ms. Geiss set the cartoon-wide muzzle of the flare pistol in its maw, thumbed the hammer back, and squeezed the trigger.

« »

Most of the fires were out by sunrise, but the air smelled of smoke and corruption. Ms. Geiss shuffled her way down the hall, unbolted the classroom, and stood looking at the class.

The students were uncharacteristically quiet, as if they had somehow been aware of the night's events.

Ms. Geiss did not notice. Feeling exhaustion breaking over her like a wave, she fumbled with clasps, undid their neck and waist restraints, and led them outside by the gang chains. She pulled them through the gaps in the razor wire as if she were walking a pack of blind and awkward dogs.

At the edge of the playground she unlocked their iron collars, unclasped them from the gang chains, and dropped the chains in the gravel. The small forms stumbled about as if seeking the balance of the end of their tethers.

“School is out,” Ms. Geiss said tiredly. The rising sun threw long shadows and hurt her eyes. “Go away,” she whispered. “Go home.”

She did not look back as she trudged through the wire and into the school.

« »

For what seemed like a long while the teacher sat at her desk, too tired to move, too tired to go upstairs to sleep. The classroom seemed empty in a way that only empty classrooms could.

After a while, when the sunlight had crawled across the varnished wood floors almost to her desk, Ms. Geiss started to rise but her bulky apron got in her way. She took off the apron and emptied the pockets onto her desktop: pliers, a yellow cartridge box, the 9mm Browning she had retrieved, the handcuffs she had taken off Michael yesterday, more loose bullets, three Polaroid snapshots. Ms. Geiss glanced at the first snapshot and then sat down suddenly.

She raised the photograph into the light, inspected it carefully, and then did the same with the next two.

Todd was smiling at the camera. There was no doubt. It was not a grimace or a spasm or a random twitch of dead lips. Todd was staring right at the camera and smiling—showing only gums, it was true—but smiling.

Ms. Geiss looked more carefully and realized that Sara was also looking at the camera. In the first snapshot she

had been looking at the food nuggets, but in the second photograph...

There was a sliding, scraping sound in the hallway.

My God, I forgot to close the west door. Ms. Geiss carefully set the photographs down and lifted the Browning. The magazine was loaded, a round was racked in the chamber.

The scraping and sliding continued. Ms. Geiss set the pistol on her lap and waited.

Todd entered first. His face was as slack as ever, but his eyes held...something. Sara came in next. Kirsten and David came through a second later. One after the other, they shuffled into the room.

Ms. Geiss felt too tired to lift her arms. She knew that despite her musings on the ineffectuality of children's hands and arms as weapons, twenty-three of them would simply overwhelm her like an incoming tide. She did not have twenty-three cartridges left.

It did not matter. Ms. Geiss knew that she would never hurt these children. She set the pistol on the desk.

The children continued to struggle into the room. Sarah J. came through after Justin. Michael brought up the rear. All twenty-three were here. They milled and stumbled and jostled. There were no chains.

Ms. Geiss waited.

Todd found his seat first. He collapsed into it, then pulled himself upright. Other children tripped and bumped against one another, but eventually found their places.

Their eyes rolled, their gazes wandered, but all of them were looking approximately forward, more or less at Ms. Geiss.

Their teacher sat there for another long moment, saying nothing, thinking nothing, daring barely to breathe lest she shatter the moment and find it all illusion.

The moment did not shatter, but the morning bell did ring, echoing down the long halls of the school. The last teacher sat there one moment longer, gathering her strength and resisting the urge to cry.

Then Ms. Geiss rose, walked to the chalkboard, and in her best cursive script, began writing the schedule to show them what they would be doing and learning in the day ahead.