

FOLLOWED

by Will McIntosh

Will McIntosh's fiction has been published in *Strange Horizons*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Postscripts*, *Interzone*, and *Futurismic*. His story "Perfect Violet" was selected to appear in *Science Fiction: Best of the Year, 2008 Edition*. McIntosh is currently working on his first novel, *Soft Apocalypse*, based on the story of the same name published in *Interzone*.

McIntosh says that zombies are a way to face the existential terror we feel at the awareness of our own mortality. "I think people love zombie fiction because it explores that terror so directly—the dead are right there, in your face, and they're not 'undead' beings with supernatural powers and sexy lives, they're corpses," he says. "Corpses scare the shit out of us."

"Followed" is the result of a discussion McIntosh initiated in a graduate social psychology class he was teaching, in which he posed the question: If you knew you could save lives for \$100 each, how many would you save? "I pointed out that we probably can save lives for \$100 or less, and we don't," McIntosh says, "and each of us has to live with that knowledge, or rationalize it away, or sell our cars."

She came wandering down the sidewalk like any other corpse, her herky-jerky walk unmistakable among the fluid strides of the living. She was six or seven, Southeast Asian, maybe Indian, her ragged clothes caked in dried mud. Pedestrians cut a wide berth around her without noticing her at all.

I thought nothing of her, figured the person she followed had ditched her in a car, and she was catching up in that relentless way that corpses do. I was downtown, sitting outside Jittery Joe's Coffee Shop on a summer afternoon. There were still a few weeks before fall semester, so I was relaxed, in no hurry to get anywhere.

I returned to the manuscript I was reading, and didn't think another thing of the corpse until I noticed her in my peripheral vision, standing right in front of my table. I glanced up at her, turned, looked over my shoulder, then back at her. Then I realized. She was looking at *me* with that unfocused stare, with those big, lifeless brown eyes. As if she was claiming me. But that couldn't be. I waited for her to move on, but she just stood. I lifted my coffee halfway to my mouth, set it back down shakily.

The woman at the next table, dressed in a green hemp dress, her foot propped on an empty chair, looked at me over the top of her paperback with thinly veiled disdain. When I caught her eye she looked back down at the paperback.

I lurched to my feet, the metal chair screeching on the brick pavement, my barely touched coffee sloshing onto the table, and retreated down the sidewalk.

I ducked into the anonymity of my parked car and lingered there, tracking the corpse in my rear-view mirror as she lurched toward me. Maybe it was a mistake, a misunderstanding—maybe she'd walk right past me. My Volvo Green was a fuel-cell vehicle, dammit, the most efficient I could afford, not an energy pig like most corpse-magnets drove. How could I have hooked a corpse? I cracked my window, waited to see if she would pass.

I heard her little feet scuffing the pebbly pavement as she drew close. She stopped three feet from my door, turned and faced me. Her face was round and babyish, her chin a tiny knot under her slack, open mouth. She was so tiny.

I started the car and pulled out, almost hitting another car. As I drove off I saw my corpse in the side mirror, lurching down the sidewalk, patiently following whatever homing device the dead used to track those they had claimed.

Every few minutes I pulled back the curtain to see if she was coming. And then there she was, walking along the side of the road with her head down. She turned up my driveway, stubbed her toe on the thin lip of asphalt, stumbled, regained her tenuous balance. She struggled stiffly up the three steps to my front door and stopped. I dropped the curtain, got up and locked the dead bolt.

I phoned Jenna.

"I have a corpse," I said as soon as she answered.

"Oh my God, Peter," Jenna said. There was a long pause. "Are you sure?"

"Well Christ," I wailed, "she's standing on my fucking doorstep. I'm pretty sure she's mine."

"I don't understand. You don't deserve a corpse."

"I know. Jesus, I can't believe it. I just can't believe it."

Jenna consoled me by ticking off the evidence, all the ways I was not like other corpse-owners. Then she changed the subject. I wasn't in the mood to talk about university politics or how-was-your-day minutiae, so I got off the phone after making plans to have dinner with her.

I tried to distract myself by turning on the TV. I checked the stock market. The Dow was up almost three percent, the NASDAQ two. I switched to the news. The president was conducting a press conference in a field of newly constructed windmills, on her decision to pull out of the Kyoto III accord. "We're doing everything we can to curb global warming," she said to the cameras, "but we will not bow to foreign pressure. The American way of life is not negotiable." Blah, blah, blah. Even with the news cameras picking the best angles a few hundred of her corpses were visible, cordoned from her by a phalanx of blue-suited secret service agents. The corpse of an emaciated four- or five-year-old black boy, his distended belly bulging as if a kickball was hidden under his skin, wandered through a breach and

headed toward the president. He was swept up by an agent and returned to the crowd. But gently—the administration didn't want to give Amnesty International any more ammunition.

I tried to take solace in the president's corpses. She had eighty or ninety thousand, piled twenty deep around the White House gates, more arriving daily. I only had one.

I flipped through the channels. Strange how most TV shows depicted the world as corpseless. Nary a corpse to be seen on the sitcoms, cop shows, interactives—all those people, walking the streets, working, cutting up with friends, and not one of them followed by a corpse. Had there really been a time when there were no corpses? I could hardly imagine it anymore.

I pulled back the curtain, looked at her standing motionless in front of my door. I couldn't help myself. I wondered if there were clues on her to tell me who she was, or how she died. Some sort of evidence that the cosmic actuarial table that sent her to me had made an error.

I went to the door and opened it. She came in, her bare feet tracking dirt onto the hardwood floor.

"Look around," I said with a sweep of my hand, "I don't have that much stuff." I gave her a tour. "Solar power, fluorescent bulbs." I pointed out that all my furniture was used. She didn't look, only stared up at me. "I try to buy locally grown food. I voted for the One World party." Nothing. I scanned the room for more evidence.

"What did I do?" I asked her empty face. "Tell me what I did!"

She'd been a cute kid. I pictured her laughing, running, playing hop-scotch on the sidewalk like my sister used to. I pictured her drinking brown water out of a dirty metal cup, lying in bed, dying of typhoid or dysentery. Maybe her family couldn't afford a bed—maybe she'd died on a straw mat on the floor in the corner of a dirt hut. I let a familiar indignant anger rise in me at the injustice of it.

She was so completely silent standing there. Unmoving, not breathing. She's going to be with me for the rest of my life, I thought. How could I possibly stand that?

I sat in my recliner in the living room. She stood in front of me, at arm's length, and stared. I took a good look at her. Skinny legs with bony knees. Very brown feet. Long black hair littered with leaves and twigs. Her red, mud-caked shorts had a single front pocket. I reached over and, flinching at the stiff, cold feel of her flesh, felt around in her pocket with two fingers. There was something in it—I fished it out. It was a button, a shiny new button. Gunmetal grey with veins of teal snaking through it. I turned it over; it was cool and smooth, unmarked—the kind of thing a little girl might carry around if she didn't have any Barbies to play with.

I lifted her dirty hand by the wrist, turned it palm-up, put the button in her hand, closed her cold fingers over it, and gently lowered her hand back to her side. The button clattered to the hardwood floor.

"Is she there?" Jenna asked. I nodded. My corpse stood outside the restaurant door, staring in at me through the plate glass. I should have picked a restaurant

farther from my house so I could eat before she reached me. “Just ignore her,” Jenna whispered.

An elderly couple opened the door to leave, and my corpse came in, ignored. As much unseen as ignored—not like a lost dog but like a block of wood, or a wisp of autumn wind. She came and stood in front of me, staring, a pretty button tucked in her pocket. Jenna kept eating as if nothing had changed, though she examined my corpse out of the corner of her eye. I forked a half-spear of asparagus in lemon butter into my mouth, chewed and swallowed, felt it lodge in my throat.

Mine was not the only corpse in the establishment. There were about ten, actually. Two stood by the bar, their eyes in shadow under the dim light of stained-glass lamps, their filthy rags out of place among pressed pants, white shirts, polished wood and chrome. An attractive, well-dressed thirty-something couple had three of them hovering around their table, like their own personal wait-staff. One was an old, stooped Asian man, another a twelve-year-old black girl, the third a five-year-old who could have been my corpse’s long-lost sister. Jesus, they must be living like complete pigs to rack up so many corpses.

The door opened as another couple left. An infant corpse crawled in, her back foot just clearing the door as it closed. She was nude; her jerky crawl reminded me of a turtle’s. She made a grunting sound as she labored across the floor, stopped in front of the already well-attended couple, plopped onto her butt, stared up at the woman. The woman kept eating her paella, one of the restaurant’s specialties. The man said something and she laughed, covering her mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw my corpse glance down at my plate. I jerked my head around and looked at her intently. Her eyes were glazed and fixed on my face.

“What’s the matter?” Jenna said. “Don’t stare at her,” she hissed, as if I had picked my nose. “What? What is it?”

“I’d swear she just looked down at my plate,” I said.

“Do you want to split a dessert?” She asked.

I wondered if I had imagined that quick, furtive glance. Probably. “You go ahead and get one, I’m pretty full.” I put my fork down, my blackened salmon hardly touched.

When I got home I sat at the kitchen table and wrote a \$3000 check to the World Hunger Fund. I usually sent them \$50 or so. Three grand hurt, but I could afford it. Looking up, I was startled by a face staring in through the kitchen window. Her face. Until now she’d stood facing the windowless front door. Evidently she could learn. She stared, unblinking. She never blinked—I guess I’d noticed, but it hadn’t fully registered till now.

As I worked the check into an envelope I found myself holding it so my corpse could see it. I wondered, was the little girl still in there, aware of where she was and what was happening, or was she just an empty shell?

I tore up the check and wrote another, for \$10,000. That much I could not easily afford. I walked it to the mailbox. It was a beautiful night; the moon was full, the

crickets and cicadas deafening. Two houses down and across the street, the corpse of a tall, scrawny black man squatted, peering with one eye through the lighted crack of a drawn shade. My corpse came around the house, pushing through the waist-high grass and native weeds (another testament to my green sensitivities, another reason why this corpse was a mistake), and met me on the way back. She followed me to the front door. I closed it in her face.

I got up early the next morning after a mostly sleepless night. I pulled up the shade, and there was her little round face. She was just tall enough for her nose to be above the bottom of the window frame.

“Shit.” I thumped my forehead on the molding, fought back a hitching sob. I had really hoped I could buy her off.

“Get the hell away from me!” I shouted through the closed window before yanking the shade back down.

While I showered I pictured my corpse waiting patiently outside the window. Why couldn’t it have been a man—an old man with no teeth? Fall semester loomed. My first class was in five days. I couldn’t imagine teaching with a corpse staring at me.

None of the students had corpses, so mine was the only one in my 10 a.m. class. The students politely avoided looking at her, even though she stood barely three feet in front of me, her head craned to stare up at my face as I went over the syllabus.

My hands shook from exhaustion and nerves as I held the syllabus. I’d been a wreck the night before, had four or five drinks to staunch my anxiety, took forever to figure out what I would wear. I debated whether to dress down—a t-shirt and jeans—to demonstrate that I was just a regular guy, that I lived simply and didn’t really deserve a corpse. But would the students see through me, think I was being pretentious? I’d finally pulled out a pair of black jeans and my white shirt, the shirt I’d been wearing the day my corpse had shown up, actually. Smart casual, the sort of outfit I usually wore.

Things got worse as I started to lecture. I tend to pace back and forth as I talk, and as I did she shadowed me, taking two small, lurching steps for every one of mine. The scuff of her little feet on the linoleum floor set my teeth on edge. Bare feet scuffing on dirty floors made me nuts, the way some people go nuts at the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard, or the feel of cotton balls. I stopped pacing.

I kept losing my train of thought, stumbling over words. I made eye contact with one of my new students; she quickly looked down, pretending to take notes, though I hadn’t said anything important. I was barely saying anything coherent, let alone important.

Without realizing it I found myself looking right at my corpse, as if I were lecturing to her. She stared back. I forced myself to look away, at the blank white wall in the back of the room, realized I was pacing again, and she was pacing with me—scuff-scuff, scuff-scuff, jerking along like... like what? Like a dead child.

I let the class out early and headed to my office in a fog—exhausted, hung over,

wondering how I could possibly make it through my one o'clock class. She did her best to keep up—I could hear the scuffing behind me.

A surge of anger tore through me and I wheeled, pointed at her, opened my mouth to speak. Her gaze flickered to my chest for a split second, then back up. This time I'd seen it, there was no doubt. Her eyes had dropped and almost—not quite, but *almost*—focused.

"I saw that!" I said, stabbing my finger at her. I was in the hall outside my office, confronting a corpse. Jack popped his bald head out of his office, took in the scene, pulled his head back inside.

Embarrassed, I wheeled and headed into my office, leaving the door ajar, allowing her to follow. I stared down at her.

"Tell me what I did!" I shouted, leaning down and pushing my face close to hers. "I'm a good person! I don't deserve this!" I wanted her to focus, to look at me, to listen to what I was saying. I saw the little pinkish-grey dollop dangling from the back of her throat. Below that, darkness.

I yanked the onyx Buddha statue off my desk and hurled it over her head. It crashed into a bookshelf, shattering a framed picture of Yankee Stadium, scattering a half-dozen textbooks.

"Jesus! sYou okay?" Jack called. I hefted my computer monitor over my head and slammed it to the floor at her feet. It split partway, popping and sparking. Then Jack was on me; I hadn't seen him come in, but he was behind me and had his arms wrapped around my chest.

"Calm down, calm down!" he shouted.

I struggled, tried to yank free. I'm not sure what I would have done if I'd gotten free. I truly hope I wouldn't have brought the computer console down on her head. I gave a final, violent tug. My shirt ripped loudly.

"Shhhh, shhhh," Jack said into my ear. "You're okay, it's okay, shhhh." I started to cry. Jack held on until he felt me relax, then loosened his grip, kept his arms around me for a moment longer, let me go.

Jack and I didn't know each other very well; it added to the surreal feel as I stood in my demolished office, crying. Through a blur of tears I saw a button lying on the floor by my corpse's foot. In a daze I knelt and picked it up. It was her button—grey, with veins of teal. Unmistakable. How had it gotten out of her pocket?

"I think the shirt's a total loss," Jack said behind me a little sheepishly. I looked down at my shirt. There was a long tear along the seam under the arm, and the front was flapped open—three or four buttons had popped off.

I guess you never look at the buttons on a shirt, even if you button them a thousand times. The buttons on my white shirt were gunmetal grey, with veins of teal. Quite unique. They weren't as bright and new as my corpse's button, because they'd taken a few turns in the dryer.

Gently I lifted her hand and turned it over, ran my finger over her tiny palm, over the pads of her baby fingers. Rough. Not the fingers of a child who spent much time playing hopscotch.

"Is everyone all right?" Maggie, from down at the end of the hall, stood in my

doorway. Behind her two more of my colleagues craned their necks, trying to see what was happening. There was rarely excitement in our department; maybe an irate student once in a while, but never shattered glass or exploding computer monitors.

“Everything’s fine,” Jack said. He was a good guy, I realized. I was still down on my knees, staring at the button, my eyes red and tear-stained. The crowd dispersed, trailed by two corpses.

Jack squatted, put his arm around my shoulder. “You okay now?”

I nodded.

“I’m not gonna say I understand how you feel, but it must be awful.”

I nodded.

“If you ever want to talk, just knock.”

I nodded a third time. He patted my back and left.

It was nearly time for my one o’clock class. I kept a sweater in the bottom drawer of my desk for days when the a/c was cranked too high. I pulled the sweater over the ruined shirt, and, as my head popped through, I thought I caught my corpse glancing down at the button lying at her feet.

I stooped and retrieved the button, slipped it into her pocket, next to the other, shinier one.

I went around the corner to the bathroom, held the door open for my corpse when it started to swing shut on her. I washed my face and combed my hair, her watchful eyes reflected in the mirror.

I yanked a couple of paper towels from the dispenser, wet them under the faucet, knelt and wiped the worst of the dirt from my corpse’s chubby cheeks and forehead. I tried to comb some of the debris out of her hair, but it was hopelessly tangled. I shoved the comb into my back pocket and plucked the biggest chips out by hand. I glanced at my watch. Time for class.

After retrieving a stack of syllabi and the class roll from my office I headed into the airy central lobby, up the double flight of stairs, steadying myself with the silver metal handrail. Halfway up I turned and looked back. My corpse was struggling up the second step, her legs too small, and too stiff, to make the climb easily. I went back down, wrapped my arms around my corpse, and carried her up the stairs.