

SPARKS FLY UPWARD

by Lisa Morton

Lisa Morton is a horror author and screenwriter. Her short fiction has appeared in a number of anthologies, including *Mondo Zombie*, *Dark Delicacies*, *Dark Terrors 6*, *The Museum of Horrors*, and *Horrors! 365 Scary Stories*, among others. Her work has also appeared in magazines such as *Cemetery Dance*, including her story “Tested,” which won the Bram Stoker Award. In addition to her fiction writing, Morton has also authored two books of non-fiction—*The Halloween Encyclopedia* and *The Cinema of Tsui Hark*—and edited the recently released *A Hallowe’en Anthology: Literary and Historical Writings Over the Centuries*.

Morton feels that many writers who have tackled the theme of zombies have fallen into a trap trying to “out-taboo” each other with extreme sex. So when it came time to write a zombie story of her own, she asked herself what taboos were left that could be dealt with in a zombie tale. “My answer was political ones,” Morton said. “It’s hard to imagine a more heated political topic than abortion, and when I thought of combining that with a tale of survivors carefully rationing out their resources, it all fell into place.”

*My breath is corrupt, my days are extinct,
the graves are ready for me.*

Job 17:1

*Blessed and holy is he that hath part in
the first resurrection...*

Revelations 20:6

June 16

Tomorrow marks one year ago that the Colony was begun here, and I think just about everyone is busy preparing for a big celebration. We just had our first real harvest two weeks ago, so there’ll be plenty of good things to eat, and as for drink—well, the product of George’s still is a little extreme for most tastes, so Tom and a few of the boys made a foray outside yesterday for some real liquor.

Of course I was worried when Tom told me he was going (and not even for something really vital, just booze), but he said it wasn’t so bad. The road was

almost totally clear for the first five miles after they left the safety of the Colony, and even most of Philipsville, the pint-sized town where they raided a liquor store, was deserted. Tom said he shot one in the liquor store cellar when he went down there to check on the good wines; it was an old woman, probably the one-time shopkeeper's wife locked away. Unfortunately, she'd clawed most of the good bottles off to smash on the floor. Tom took what was left, and an unopened case of good burgundy he found untouched in a corner. There are 131 adults in the Colony, and he figured he'd have a bottle for every two on Anniversary Day.

It's been two weeks since any of the deadheads have been spotted near the Colony walls, and Pedro Quintero, our top marksman, picked that one off with one shot straight through the head from the east tower. It would be easy to fool ourselves into thinking the situation is finally mending... easy and dangerous, because it's not. The lack of deadheads seen around here lately proves only one thing: That Doc Freeman was right in picking this location, away from the cities and highways.

Of course Doc Freeman was right—he's right about everything. He said we should go this far north because the south would only keep getting hotter, and sure enough it's been in the 80s here for over a week now. I don't want to think what it is down in L.A. now—probably 120, and that's in the shade.

Tomorrow will be a tribute to Doc Freeman as much as an anniversary celebration. If it hadn't been for him... well, I suppose Tom and little Jessie and I would be wandering around out there with the rest of them right now, dead for a year but still hungry. Always hungry.

It's funny, but before all the shit came down, Doc Freeman was just an eccentric old college professor teaching agricultural sciences and preaching survival. Tom always believed Freeman had been thinking about cutting out anyway, even before the whole zombie thing, because of the rising temperatures. He told his students that agriculture in most parts of the U.S. was already a thing of the past, and it would all be moving up to Canada soon.

When the deadheads came (Doc Freeman argued, as did a lot of other environmentalists, that they were caused by the holes in the ozone layer, too), it was the most natural thing in the world, I guess, for him to assemble a band of followers and head north. He'd chosen the site for the Colony, set up policy and government, designed the layout of fields, houses and fences, and even assigned each of us a job, according to what we were best at. It had all been scary at first, of course—especially with 3-year-old Jessie—but we all kind of fell into place. I even discovered I was a talented horticulturist—Doc says the best after him—and in some ways this new life is better than the old one.

Of course there are a lot of things we all miss—ice cream, uncalloused hands, t.v. Del still scans the shortwave radio, hoping he'll pick something up on it. In a year, he has only once, and that transmission ended with the sound of gunshots.

So we accept our place in the world—and the fact that it may be the last place. Tomorrow we do more than accept it, we celebrate it.

I wish I knew exactly how to feel.

June 17

Well, the big day has come and gone.

Tom is beside me, snoring in a blissful alcoholic oblivion. Tomorrow he'll be in the fields again, so he's earned this.

Jessie is in her room next door, exhausted from all the games she played and sweets she ate. Tom actually let me use a precious hour of videotape to record her today.

And yet I wasn't the only one crying when Doc Freeman got up and made his speech about how his projections show that if we continue at our present excellent rate, we'll be able to expand the colony in three years. Expand it carefully, he added. Meaning that in three years there'll be probably forty or fifty couples—like Tom and I—begging for the precious right to increase our family.

I know Doc is right, that we must remember the lessons of the old world and not outgrow our capacity to produce, to sustain that new growth... but somehow it seems wrong to deny new life when we're surrounded by so much death.

Especially when the new life is in me.

June 24

I've missed two now, and so I felt certain enough to go see Dale Oldfield. He examined me as best he could (he's an excellent G.P., but his equipment is still limited), and he concluded I'd guessed right.

I am pregnant.

Between the two of us we figured it at about six weeks along. Dale thanked me for not trying to hide it, then told me he would have to report it to Doc Freeman. I asked only that Tom and I be allowed to be there when he did. He agreed, and we decided on tomorrow afternoon.

I went home and told Tom. At first he was thrilled—and then he remembered where we were.

I told Tom we'd be seeing Doc Freeman tomorrow about it, and he became obsessed with the idea that he'd somehow convince Doc to let us have the baby.

I couldn't stand to hear him torture himself that way, so I read stories to Jessie and held her until we both fell asleep in her narrow child-sized bed.

June 25

We saw Doc Freeman today. Dale Oldfield confirmed the situation, then gracefully excused himself, saying he'd be in his little shack-cum-office when we needed him.

Doc Freeman poured all three of us a shot of his private stock of Jim Beam, then he began the apologies. Tom tried to argue him out of it, saying a birth would be good for morale, and we could certainly handle just one more in the Colony... but Doc told him quietly that, unlike many of the young couples, we already had a child and couldn't expect special treatment. Tom finally gave in, admitting Doc was right—and I'd never loved him more than I did then, seeing his pain and regret.

He went with me to tell Dale we'd be needing his services next week, and Dale

just nodded, his head hung low, not meeting our eyes.

Afterwards, in our own bungalow, Tom and I argued for hours. We both got crazy, talking about leaving the Colony, building our own little fortress somewhere, even overthrowing Doc Freeman... but I think we both knew it was all fantasy. Doc Freeman had been right again—we did have Jessie, and maybe in a few more years the time would be right for another child.

But not now.

July 2

Tomorrow is the day set for us to do it.

God, I wish there was another way. Unfortunately, even after performing a D&C three times in the last year, Dale still has never had the clinic's equipment moved to the Colony. It's ironic that we can send out an expedition for booze, but not one for medical equipment. Doc Freeman says that's because the equipment is a lot bigger than the booze, and the Colony's only truck has been down basically since we got here.

So tomorrow Tom, Dale and I will make the 18-mile drive to Silver Creek, the nearest town big enough to have had a family planning clinic. Dale, who has keys to the clinic, assures me the only dangerous part will be getting from the car to the doors of the clinic. They can't get inside, he tells me, so we'll be safe—until we have to leave again, that is.

Funny... when he's telling me about danger, he only talks about deadheads. He never mentions the abortion.

July 3

I didn't sleep much last night. Tom held me but even he dozed off for a while. It's morning as I write this, and I hear Jessie starting to awaken. After I get her up, I'll try to tell her mommy and daddy have to leave for a while, and nice Mrs. Oldfield will watch her. She'll cry, but hopefully not because she understands what's really going on.

It's later now—Jessie's taken care of, and Dale's got the jeep ready to go. Tom and I check our supplies again: An automatic .38 with full magazine, an Uzi with extra clips, a hunting rifle with scope and plenty of ammo, three machetes and the little wooden box. Dale's also got his shotgun and a Walther PPK that he says makes him feel like James Bond. Everyone teases him about it, telling him things like the difference is that Bond's villains were all alive to begin with. Dale always glowers and shuts up.

It's time to go.

We climbed into the jeep. Tom asked why I was bringing you (diary) along, and I told him it was my security blanket and rabbit's foot. He shut up and Dale gunned the engine. We had to stop three times on the way out to exchange hugs and good luck wishes with people who ran up from the fields when we went by.

We're about 15 miles out now, and it's been the way Tom said—quiet. After the gates swung open and we pulled onto the dusty road, it must've been 10 minutes before we saw the first deadhead. It was lumbering slowly across a sere field, still fifty yards from the road as we whipped by.

A few miles later there was a small pack of three in the road, but they were spaced wide apart. Dale drove around two of them; they clawed in vain at the jeep, but we were doing 60 and they just scraped their fingers. The third one was harder to drive around—there were car wrecks on either side of the road—so Dale just whomped into him. He flew over the welded cage at the front of the jeep and landed somewhere off to the side of the road. We barely felt it.

We'd just reached the outskirts of Silver Creek when Dale slowed down and cleared his throat. Then he said, Listen, Sarah, there's something you ought to know about the clinic. He asked me if I'd talked to any of the others he'd already escorted out here.

Of course I had, but they had only assured me of Dale's skilled, painless technique, and that they'd be there if I needed to talk. None of them had said much about the clinic itself.

I said this to Dale, and he asked me something strange.

He asked if I was religious.

Tom and I looked at each other, then Tom asked Dale what he was getting at.

Dale stammered through something about how the deadheads tend to go back to places that were important to them, like their homes or shopping malls or schools.

We nodded—everyone knew that—and Dale asked if we'd ever heard of Operation SoulSave.

I swear I literally tasted something bad in my mouth. How could I forget? The fundamentalists who used to stand around outside abortion clinics and shout insults and threats at people who went in. I was with a friend once—a very young friend—when it happened to her.

Then I realized what he was saying. I couldn't believe it. I tried to ask him, but my words just tripped all over each other. He nodded and told us.

They're still here.

Most of Silver Creek was empty. We saw some of them inside dusty old storefronts, gazing at us stupidly as we drove by, but they probably hadn't fed in well over a year and were pretty sluggish. Either that, or they'd just been that way in life—staring slack-jawed as it passed them by.

That wasn't the case, however, with the group before the clinic.

There must have been 20 of them, massed solidly before the locked doors. As we drove towards them, I saw their clothes, once prim and starched, now stained with all those fluids they'd long ago feared or detested. One still held up a sign (I realized a few seconds later he had taped it to his wrist as he died) which read **OPERATION SOULSAVE—SAVE A SOUL FOR CHRIST!** Several sported the obligatory **ABORTION IS MURDER** t-shirts, now tattered and discolored.

Their leader was the Priest. I remembered him from before, when he'd been on all the news programs, spouting his vicious rhetoric while his flock chanted behind him. Of course, he looked different now—somebody had snacked on his trapezius, so his Roman Collar was covered in dried gore and hung askew, and his head (he was also missing a considerable patch of scalp on that same side) canted strangely at an odd angle.

I saw Dale eyeing them and muttering something under his breath. I asked him what it was so I could write it down: *Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.* He said it was from the Bible. I was surprised; I didn't know Dale read the Bible.

Tom responded with a quote from one of the more contemporary prophets: *I used to be disgusted, now I try to be amused.* Then he asked Dale what we were going to do. Dale, who was practiced in this, said he'd drive around the building once, which would draw most of them away from the front long enough for us to get in. They wouldn't bother the jeep when we weren't in it.

Dale headed for the next corner. Tom pulled the .38 and held it, and I remembered.

I was thinking about the time I had to go to a different clinic with my friend Julie. It was before I started you, diary; in fact, I started you about the time Julie disappeared with most of the rest of the world. So I've never written any of this down before.

Julie had gotten pregnant from her boyfriend Sean, who split when she told him. Abortions were legal then (this was a long time ago), but could be costly, and Julie, who was still going to college (as I was), had no money. She went to her parents, but they threw her out of the house. She thought about having the baby and putting it up for adoption, but she had no health insurance, wouldn't be able to afford the actual birth, and regarded overpopulation as the end of the world. This, obviously, was before the deadheads arrived and clarified *that* issue.

So I'd lent her the money, and agreed to go with her to the clinic. She made the appointment, worried about it so much she didn't sleep the night before, almost backed out twice on the drive there—and all so she could be confronted by the fine Christian citizens of Operation SoulSave.

They had seated themselves on either side of the walkway leading into the clinic. Even though it was in another state and time, they wore the same t-shirts and held the same signs. They were mainly male, or women in clothes so tight they seemed life-threatening. They all had vacuous smiles on their faces, that gave way to cruel snarls of contempt whenever anyone went into or out of the clinic doors.

Julie took one look at them and didn't want to leave the car. I told her we'd be late, and she said it didn't matter.

We'd talked about the morality of abortion already, and had agreed that it was obvious that the unformed, early fetus was only an extension of the mother's body, and as such each woman had the right to make her own decision. I reminded Julie of this as she sat shivering in the car, and she'd said that wasn't why she didn't want to go past them.

She was afraid of *them*. She said they seemed like a mindless horde, capable of any violence they were directed to commit.

She'd had no idea how right she was.

We drove slowly around one corner. Sure enough, they stumbled after us. Then Dale threw it into fourth, and we screeched the rest of the way around the block.

When we got back to the main entrance, there were only five or six still there, not including one that dragged itself around on two partially eaten legs. Tom handed me the Uzi, while he took the .38 and cradled the box. Dale opted for a machete (I didn't want to have to see him use it minutes before he operated on *me*).

We sprinted from car to door. Tom shot two right between the eyes. I raised the Uzi, forgetting its rapid-fire design, and ripped one of them completely apart. I felt my stomach turn over as I saw some stale gray stuff splatter the doors. Dale just kept running, shouldering the last two aside. One rebounded and grabbed his left arm. He whirled and brought the machete down, severing the thing's hand, then kicking it away. He pried the dead hand from his arm, threw it aside, and told us to cover him while he unlocked the door.

As he fiddled with the keys, Tom shot the two Dale had barreled through. Then the .38 jammed. He began to fieldstrip it, and I looked nervously down the street, where the ones we'd tricked were shambling back, led by the gruesome Priest. Suddenly I felt something on my ankle. I looked down to see the legless one had dragged itself up the steps, and was bringing its gaping maw to bear on my lower calf. I freaked out and grabbed the Walther from Dale's holster; I think I was screaming as I fired into the zombie's peeling head. It died and let go, thick brown liquid draining onto its SAVE A SOUL—CLOSE A CLINIC t-shirt.

Then Dale had the doors open and we were in.

Later, Tom told me he had to pry the pistol from my fingers while Dale started up the generator and got things ready.

Then before I knew it Dale was there, in gloves and mask, saying he was ready.

I don't remember much of the actual operation, except that I asked Tom to wait outside—and the sound. The horrible sound the whole time we were in there:

Them, pounding on the doors, slow heavy thuds, relentless, unmerciful.

Dale was, as I've said before, an excellent doctor, and it was over soon. He made sure I didn't see what he put into the tiny wooden box Tom had carried in, and I didn't ask. The box, which had been beautifully crafted by Rudy V., would be taken back to the Colony and buried there.

There was one thing I had to ask, though, as morbid a thought as it was. I had to know if—I had to be sure Dale had—God, I can't even write it.

But he knew what I was asking, and as he stripped off the gloves he told me I didn't have to worry. None of the ones aborted had ever come back. The rest of us had to be cremated or have the brain destroyed upon death, or we'd resurrect.

How ironic, I thought, that this was how we would finally lay to rest the Great Debate. They weren't human enough to come back. Abortion isn't murder.

Getting out would be harder than getting in, but Dale had it all down. Tom would crawl out a side window, drawing them away from Dale and me. Dale would lock the front door while Tom and I covered him, then we'd all head for the jeep. I was, of course, still weak, and Tom didn't want to leave my side, but Dale told him it was the safest way, and he'd be sure I was okay. Tom reluctantly agreed.

It went down without mishap. They were slow and easily confused, and by the time they saw two of us on the stoop and one by the jeep, they didn't know which way to turn. Tom shot a couple who were in our way. Once Dale had the doors locked, he pocketed the keys, took the Uzi from me, and I carried the little coffin as we ran for the jeep.

Once we were inside, Dale started it up and pulled away. They were already hammering on the sides, clawing the welded cage, drooling a yellowish bile. One wouldn't let go as we drove off, and it got dragged fifty feet before its fingers tore off. Tom actually shouted something at it.

Dale was ready to speed out of town when I asked him to stop the jeep and go back. He stopped, then both he and Tom turned to stare at me, as openmouthed as any deadhead. They asked why, and I just handed Tom our box, took the rifle, got out and started walking back.

They ran up on either side of me, Tom saying I was still delirious from the operation, Dale arguing I could start hemorrhaging seriously. I ignored them both as I saw the deadheads at the end of the street staggering forward now.

I had to wipe tears out of my eyes—I didn't even know I was crying—as I raised the rifle and sighted on the first one. I fired, and saw it flung backwards to lie unmoving in the street, truly finally dead. Tom and Dale both tried to take the rifle from me, but I shrugged them off and fired again. Tom argued we were done here, and there was no point in wasting ammo on these fuckers, but I told him I had to. Then I told him—told them both—why.

After that they left me alone until all the deadheads were gone but one—the Priest. My arms were shaking so bad I almost couldn't hold the gun steady, but he was close—thirty feet away now—and hard to miss. My first shot blew part of his neck—and whatever was left of the Collar—away, but the last one brought him down.

I dropped the gun, and Tom and Dale had to carry me back to the jeep.

But now I'm at home in bed, and Dale says I'm physically okay. I miss the child I'll never know, a pain which far outweighs the physical discomfort, but Jessie is here, and she hugs me a long time before Tom sends her to bed.

Now I'm smiling as I think of that street, and write this. Because I know that none of the women who come after me will have to endure more than the horror of giving up part of themselves.