

THE DEAD

by Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick is the author of the novels *Bones of the Earth*, *Griffin's Egg*, *In the Drift*, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, *Jack Faust*, *Stations of the Tide*, *Vacuum Flowers*, and *The Dragons of Babel*. His short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Analog*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and in numerous anthologies, and has been collected in *Cigar-Box Faust*, *A Geography of Unknown Lands*, *Gravity's Angels*, *Moon Dogs*, *Puck Aleshire's Abecedary*, *Tales of Old Earth*, and *The Dog Said Bow-Wow*. He is the winner of numerous awards, including the Hugo, Nebula, Sturgeon, Locus, and World Fantasy awards.

This story, which was a finalist for both the Hugo and Nebula awards, first appeared in *Starlight 1*. Here, the zombies are not a menace but a commodity: luxury goods to be bought and sold on the free market. Besides zombies, it also features cold-blooded businessmen; it's hard to say which is more frightening.

Three boy zombies in matching red jackets bussed our table, bringing water, lighting candles, brushing away the crumbs between courses. Their eyes were dark, attentive, lifeless; their hands and faces so white as to be faintly luminous in the hushed light. I thought it in bad taste, but "This is Manhattan," Courtney said. "A certain studied offensiveness is fashionable here."

The blond brought menus and waited for our order.

We both ordered pheasant. "An excellent choice," the boy said in a clear, emotionless voice. He went away and came back a minute later with the freshly strangled birds, holding them up for our approval. He couldn't have been more than eleven when he died and his skin was of that sort connoisseurs call "milk glass," smooth, without blemish, and all but translucent. He must have cost a fortune.

As the boy was turning away, I impulsively touched his shoulder. He turned back. "What's your name, son?" I asked.

"Timothy." He might have been telling me the *spécialité de maison*. The boy waited a breath to see if more was expected of him, then left.

Courtney gazed after him. "How lovely he would look," she murmured, "nude. Standing in the moonlight by a cliff. Definitely a cliff. Perhaps the very one where he met his death."

"He wouldn't look very lovely if he'd fallen off a cliff."

“Oh, don’t be unpleasant.”

The wine steward brought our bottle. “Chateau La Tour ’17.” I raised an eyebrow. The steward had the sort of old and complex face that Rembrandt would have enjoyed painting. He poured with pulseless ease and then dissolved into the gloom. “Good lord, Courtney, you *seduced* me on cheaper.”

She flushed, not happily. Courtney had a better career going than I. She out-powered me. We both knew who was smarter, better connected, more likely to end up in a corner office with the historically significant antique desk. The only edge I had was that I was a male in a seller’s market. It was enough.

“This is a business dinner, Donald,” she said, “nothing more.”

I favored her with an expression of polite disbelief I knew from experience she’d find infuriating. And, digging into my pheasant, murmured, “Of course.” We didn’t say much of consequence until dessert, when I finally asked, “So what’s Loeb-Soffner up to these days?”

“Structuring a corporate expansion. Jim’s putting together the financial side of the package, and I’m doing personnel. You’re being headhunted, Donald.” She favored me with that feral little flash of teeth she made when she saw something she wanted. Courtney wasn’t a beautiful woman, far from it. But there was that fierceness to her, that sense of something primal being held under tight and precarious control that made her hot as hot to me. “You’re talented, you’re thuggish, and you’re not too tightly nailed to your present position. Those are all qualities we’re looking for.”

She dumped her purse on the table, took out a single folded sheet of paper. “These are the terms I’m offering.” She placed it by my plate, attacked her torte with gusto.

I unfolded the paper. “This is a lateral transfer.”

“Unlimited opportunity for advancement,” she said with her mouth full, “if you’ve got the stuff.”

“Mmm.” I did a line-by-line of the benefits, all comparable to what I was getting now. My current salary to the dollar—Ms. Soffner was showing off. And the stock options. “This can’t be right. Not for a lateral.”

There was that grin again, like a glimpse of shark in murky waters. “I knew you’d like it. We’re going over the top with the options because we need your answer right away—tonight preferably. Tomorrow at the latest. No negotiations. We have to put the package together fast. There’s going to be a shitstorm of publicity when this comes out. We want to have everything nailed down, present the fundies and bleeding hearts with a *fait accompli*.”

“My God, Courtney, what kind of monster do you have hold of now?”

“The biggest one in the world. Bigger than Apple. Bigger than Home Virtual. Bigger than HIVac-IV,” she said with relish. “Have you ever heard of Koestler Biological?”

I put my fork down.

“Koestler? You’re peddling corpses now?”

“Please. Postanthropic biological resources.” She said it lightly, with just the right

touch of irony. Still, I thought I detected a certain discomfort with the nature of her client's product.

"There's no money in it." I waved a hand toward our attentive waitstaff. "These guys must be—what?—maybe two percent of the annual turnover? Zombies are luxury goods: servants, reactor cleanups, Hollywood stunt deaths, exotic services"—we both knew what I meant—"a few hundred a year, maybe, tops. There's not the demand. The revulsion factor is too great."

"There's been a technological breakthrough." Courtney leaned forward. "They can install the infrasystem and controllers and offer the product for the factory-floor cost of a new subcompact. That's way below the economic threshold for blue-collar labor.

"Look at it from the viewpoint of a typical factory owner. He's already downsized to the bone and labor costs are bleeding him dry. How can he compete in a dwindling consumer market? Now let's imagine he buys into the program." She took out her Mont Blanc and began scribbling figures on the tablecloth. "No benefits. No liability suits. No sick pay. No pilferage. We're talking about cutting labor costs by at least two-thirds. Minimum! That's irresistible, I don't care how big your revulsion factor is. We project we can move five hundred thousand units in the first year."

"Five hundred thousand," I said. "That's crazy. Where the hell are you going to get the raw material for—?"

"Africa."

"Oh, God, Courtney." I was struck wordless by the cynicism it took to even consider turning the sub-Saharan tragedy to a profit, by the sheer, raw evil of channeling hard currency to the pocket Hitlers who ran the camps. Courtney only smiled and gave that quick little flip of her head that meant she was accessing the time on an optic chip.