

# THE SKULL-FACED BOY

by David Barr Kirtley

David Barr Kirtley is the author of dozens of short stories. His work frequently appears in *Realms of Fantasy*, and he has also sold fiction to the magazines *Weird Tales* and *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, the podcasts *Escape Pod* and *Pseudopod*, and the anthologies *New Voices in Science Fiction* and *The Dragon Done It*. His story “Save Me Plz” was selected for inclusion in *Fantasy: The Best of the Year, 2008 Edition*.

Kirtley wrote this story during the summer of 2000, when he was on a horror-writing kick and wanted to try a zombie story. “I tend to identify with individuals who are looked down on and mistreated because they’re different,” he says, “so it was natural for me to start thinking about telling my story from the point of view of a zombie.”

The other inspiration was a falling out Kirtley had with one of his best friends a few months before he wrote the story. “I felt he was really mistreating his girlfriend and was just generally acting like a complete jerk,” Kirtley says. “And all of our friends were mindlessly going along with whatever he did and repeating whatever he said.”

Like the zombies in this story.

It was past midnight, and Jack and Dustin were driving along a twisted path through the woods. Jack was at the wheel. He was arguing with Dustin over Ashley.

Jack had always thought she had a pretty face—thin, arching eyebrows, a slightly upturned nose, a delicate chin. She’d dated Dustin in college for six months, until he got possessive and she got restless. Now, Jack thought, maybe she was interested in him.

But Dustin insisted, “She’ll give me another chance. Someday.”

“Not according to her,” Jack said, with a pointed look.

He turned his eyes back to the road, and in the light of the high beams he saw a man stumble into the path of the car. Without thinking, Jack swerved.

The car bounced violently, and then its left front side smashed into a tree. The steering column surged forward, like an ocean wave, and crushed Jack’s stomach.

Dustin wasn't wearing a seatbelt. He flew face-first through the windshield, rolled across the hood, and tumbled off onto the ground.

Jack awoke, disoriented.

A man was pounding on the side of the car, just beyond the driver's side window, which was cracked and foggy and opaque. Jack pushed at the door, which creaked open just enough for him to make out the man's face. The man stared at Jack, then turned and started to walk off.

Jack shouted, "Call for help."

But the man didn't respond. He wandered toward the woods.

"Hey!" Jack screamed. He brushed aside a blanket of shattered glass and released his seatbelt. He pushed his seat backward, slowly extricating his bleeding stomach from the steering column, then dragged himself out the door and onto the ground, and he crawled after the man, who continued to walk away.

Finally Jack found the strength to stand. He lurched to his feet, grabbed the man by the shirtfront, shoved him back against a tree, and demanded, "What's wrong with you? Get help." Jack glanced about desperately and added, "I have to find my friend."

The man gave a long and wordless moan. Jack stared at him. The man was very pale, with disheveled hair. His face was encrusted with dirt, and his teeth were twisted and rotten. His eyes were... oozing.

Suddenly Dustin's voice burst out, "He's dead."

Jack turned. Dustin stood there, his nose and cheeks torn away. Two giant white eyeballs filled the sockets of his freakishly visible skull. Scraps of flesh hung from his jaw. Jack screamed.

Dustin stumbled over to the wrecked car, to where one of its side-view mirrors hung loosely. He tore off the mirror and stared into it. For a long time, he neither moved nor spoke.

Finally he called out, "That man has come back from the dead. Look at him, Jack. He's dead, and so am I."

Jack shuddered and backed away from the man.

Dustin's eyeballs fixed on Jack's stomach.

Apprehensive, Jack looked down. He lifted his blood-drenched shirt to expose the mangled mess beneath.

"And so are you," Dustin said.

Jack and Dustin set out on foot. They climbed to the top of a high bluff and watched the bodies of dead men stumble through the grassy fields below. Dustin sat with his back turned, so that his ruined face was lost in shadows. He said, "It's everyone. Everyone who died is coming back."

The dead man who had caused the accident was following them. He stumbled from the trees and regarded Jack vacantly.

Jack approached the man and said, "Can you talk?"

The man paused a moment, as if trying to focus, then gave another inarticulate

groan. He wandered away.

Jack said to Dustin, “Why is he like that, and we aren’t?”

Dustin said, “He dug himself out of the ground. He’s been dead a long time—rotted flesh, rotted brains.”

“Are there others like us?” Jack said.

“I don’t know.” Dustin leapt to his feet and called out to the valley below, “Hey! Can you hear me? Can you understand what I’m saying?”

The warm and fetid air carried back only wails. Dustin shrugged.

He and Jack followed the road until they came to a small house with its lights on.

Jack suggested, “We can call for help.”

“What help?” Dustin said. “We’re past that.”

But he followed Jack toward the house, whose front door was open wide. They paused on the porch. They could see into the kitchen, where a woman stood clenching a baseball bat. A dead boy had backed her into a corner, and he shambled across the yellow linoleum toward her. Dry dirt tumbled from his sleeves and fell in a winding trail behind him.

He spoke, in a faint and quavering way: “Mom... help me.”

“Stay back,” she warned, her voice cracking. “Stay away from me. You’re dead. I know you’re dead.”

Jack started forward, but Dustin held out an arm to stop him.

“Mom,” the boy said. “What’s wrong? Don’t hurt me...”

“Stop it!” the woman shrieked, but her arms shuddered and she collapsed, sobbing. The boy fell upon her. He clawed at her hair, and she thrashed. He tore at her scalp with his teeth.

Jack cringed and turned away. The woman screamed, then gurgled, then was silent. When Jack looked again, he saw that Dustin was regarding the gruesome scene with fascination.

Jack growled, “What’s wrong with you? We could’ve stopped it.”

“We’re dead now,” Dustin said. “We help the dead, not them.” He gestured at the woman.

“You’re crazy,” Jack said.

Dustin ignored him. “I want to see this.”

“You—” Jack stopped as the woman rose, her head a cracked and bloody mess. She stepped clumsily forward.

She moaned.

“You’d be like her,” Dustin whispered. “Mindless... hungry. If that first one had gotten into the car, chewed up your head, before you rose.”

Jack strode into the kitchen, eased around the woman, the boy, and the blood-splattered floor, and stepped toward the phone.

“I’m calling home,” Jack said, lifting the receiver. “I have to call my dad. Tell him I’m—”

“What?” Dustin said darkly. “All right?”

Jack hesitated.

Dustin said, “Jack, you’re dead. You’re lost to him. He’ll never take you in.”

Jack paused a moment, then began to dial. Dustin turned and stepped out into the night. The phone rang once, and instantly someone answered.

“Jack?” It was his father’s voice.

“I’m coming home,” Jack said. “I... can’t stay on the line.” He hung up.

He snatched some keys off the counter and slipped from the house. He spotted Dustin, who had walked out into the fields among the great crowds of the dead and was shouting to them, “Can you understand me? If you can hear me, step forward. If you understand just that much.”

Jack circled the house, to where a car was parked. He took the car, and drove north for an hour, along Interstate 95, toward Waterville. He stared at his reflection in the rearview mirror. His face was jaundiced, discolored and sickly, but if he covered his gaping stomach then in dim light he might pass for living.

He pulled up in front of his house and got out of the car. In the front yard lay a dead man whose forehead had a bullet through it. Jack shuddered, and circled around back. The old wood steps creaked as he stepped onto the back porch and knocked. He hung back in the shadows. A curtain was drawn aside, and faces peered out.

From inside the house someone called: “Jack! It’s Jack.”

The door opened, and Jack’s father stood there, clutching a rifle. He stared, then gasped and dropped back, raising the gun.

Jack cowered and said quickly, “Dad. Listen. Please. I’m not like the others.” The rifle was now aimed straight at Jack’s forehead, and Jack stared into the depths of its barrel. Then the barrel slowly sank, as his father lowered the gun.

Finally his father said, “Come inside, son.”

Jack stepped into the house.

His father chained him to the rusty pipe that ran out of the side of the garage and into the ground, and said, “I’m sorry. It’s only for the night. It’s the only way they’ll let you stay here.” Nine people were holed up in the house—Jack’s father had taken in some vacationers.

Jack whispered sadly, “I understand.”

His father went back inside.

The moon was bright, and the garage cast a thick black shadow over Jack. All across the neighborhood, dogs were barking. The night seemed to go on forever, and Jack never slept. He supposed that he would never sleep again.

Days passed.

Several large groups arrived. Jack stayed out of sight, and most of the visitors departed, headed south. Those who stayed would sometimes let Jack inside, but they kept their distance from him, and always had weapons ready.

During the day the men went out, scavenging for food and ammunition, and at night they told stories of the dead men they’d destroyed. Then they would glance at Jack and fall silent.

He was chained up each night, weeks of that.

One day at dusk, Jack was sitting on a sofa in the living room when gunshots crackled outside. The residents brandished their weapons and took up positions by the windows.

Someone pounded on the front door. A gruff voice outside hollered, "Let us in! For God's sake, let us in. They're coming."

Jack's father, rifle at the ready, leapt forward and threw open the door. Two tall men in hunting gear rushed into the house, each of them carrying several guns. Jack's father slammed the door behind them.

One of the newcomers gasped, "We heard about this house. They said you'd take us in. We've got almost no bullets left."

Jack's father said, "It's my house, and you're—"

Then the newcomer spotted Jack and lurched wildly, falling back against the front wall and violently cocking a shotgun. The man screamed, "They're in the house!" and raised his weapon.

Jack's father leapt in front of the gun and yelled, "Don't shoot! That's my son. He won't hurt you."

The gun's barrel wove in tight circles as the newcomer sought a clear shot.

Jack called out, "Please! It's all right."

The newcomer glanced at his companion, who was now hunched in the corner and moaning, "Oh shit. Oh shit, it's in here with us."

Jack's father said firmly, "You can leave if you want."

There was a long, tense silence. Finally, the newcomer lowered his gun and said, "All right. We'll let it alone." He glared at Jack, and added, "But you stay the hell away from me."

The newcomer was named Sam, and his companion was Todd. Sam was bigger and louder, and leader of the two.

After things had settled down, Todd explained, "We joined up with a militia to hold Portland. But the dead, they..." He stopped and stared at the floor.

Sam said flatly, "It's not good down there. Not good at all."

Jack's father said, "Where did you hear about this house?"

"In Freeport," Todd said. "Some people had stayed here. There was a girl too. She had a note for your son." Todd fished an envelope out of his vest pocket. He glanced uneasily at Jack and said, "I guess that's him."

Sam grumbled, "Maybe that's not such a good idea."

Jack's father scowled and said, "Let him have it."

Todd shrugged and tossed the note out onto the table. Jack scooped up the note and opened it.

It was from Ashley, letting him know that she was all right and that he should join her if he wasn't safe. She gave the address where she was. Jack stuck the note into his pocket.

Sam's voice was shaky: "South of here there's this dead kid with no face. People call him the skull-faced boy. He's smart, he can talk, like that one there." Sam nodded at Jack.

### 336 • DAVID BARR KIRTLEY

Jack murmured, “Dustin.”

Todd said sharply, “What?”

Jack said, “He hurt his face like that. I saw it.”

Sam stared, horrified. “You know him?”

Jack realized that he’d said something wrong.

“Dustin was a friend from school,” Jack’s father explained. “He was with Jack the night this... all started.”

Todd’s voice was almost hysterical: “Sam! This is crazy. He’s one of them. One of the skull-faced boy’s—”

“Shut up!” Sam growled. “Just shut up.”

There was a long silence.

Jack’s father said, “Come on, son. Let’s go outside.”

Jack was chained up again. Then he crouched there in the shadow of the garage and listened to the voices that drifted out through the bright cracks in the boarded-up windows.

First came Jack’s father’s voice: “What’s this all about?”

End of  
Excerpt