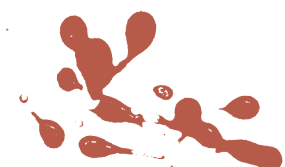




THE LIVING DEAD

GEORGE A. ROMERO
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A Tom Doherty Associates Book



New York

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously.

THE LIVING DEAD

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Within the early months of the twenty-first century, before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, hospitals, nursing homes, and police departments in the United States, except for rural outposts too remedial to be computer-equipped, were mandated to join the Vital Statistics Data Collection network. This cyber-system instantly downloaded all inputted information to a division of the Census Bureau known as the American Model of Lineage and Dimensions, or AMLD, often dubbed *A Matter of Life and Death* by those who, back then, could afford black humor. Be it either one—a birth or a death—the event was entered by a doctor, nurse, or registrar, who simply clicked a link that uploaded the statistic to the VSDC.

John Doe's VSDC case number, 129-46-9875, was recognized by the system twice on the night he died: October 23. It was initially and unremarkably input by St. Michael the Archangel, a Catholic hospital in San Diego, California. The second entry, the one that made the case notable, came three and a half hours later from the Medical Examiner's Office in San Diego County. It reached VSDC central computers at 10:36 p.m., Pacific standard time, but went unnoticed for another forty-eight hours, until a quiet, offish AMLD statistician named Etta Hoffmann found it while searching for abnormalities in recent files.

Hoffmann printed a hard copy of the record. Even then, she had a sense of foreboding about the systems upon which humans had come to depend.

No matter what program, typeface, or font size was originally used by an entrant, a default conversion was made, for the sake of standardization, by the VSDC system. John Doe's file was spat from an AMLD printer in a font called Simplified Arabic. Years after the launch of VSDC, there had been a Senate spat over whether it was appropriate for a government agency to adopt a typeface designated as "Arabic." The Democratic majority defeated

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the Republicans lobbying for Franklin Gothic. Upon prevailing, the Democrats indulged in satisfied winks and jolly backslaps.

None who survived the weeks after John Doe remembered this petty victory. It was but one of a million tiffs that had been tearing the country into pieces for generations. In the dark days to come, some former Congress members would wonder, if they'd only listened closer, if they might have heard America's tendons pinging apart like snapped piano wire and been able to do something to heal the wounds before the whole body politic had been ripped apart.

Thousands of files sharing similarities with 129-46-9875 were received during the three days following John Doe's death. Etta Hoffmann discovered John Doe's file while trying to determine the starting point of the phenomenon. The VSDC system did not organize entries by date and time; the original designers hadn't believed that function would be needed. Hoffmann and her coworkers had to search manually, and only later, when comparing the findings they'd thrown into a folder labeled *Origin*, did the time stamp on John Doe's dossier indicate it preceded all others. She was not 100 percent confident of it, but at some point, even she had to stop searching.

There were other, more pressing matters.

By the end of that third night following John Doe's death, only two men and two women remained at AMLD's Washington office, clicking, scribbling, and filing. The quartet pulled together adjacent desks and worked in ragged, lopsided shifts, none more tirelessly, or with such enviable composure, as Etta Hoffmann.

Hoffmann had always been AMLD's oddball. Every statistician forced to work with her presumed her personal life, like her work life, was full of leaden, blank-stare interactions.

Unlike Hoffmann, the other three lingerers had knowable reasons for staying. John Campbell's recent years had been traumatic—the death of a child, a divorce he hadn't wanted—and he had no one left to run to. Terry McAllister had gotten into government work with dreams of single-handedly saving the day; he wasn't going anywhere. Elizabeth O'Toole had a husband she feared, especially during stressful times, and the hope that this event could be her escape kept her bolted to her seat.

In addition, Terry McAllister and Elizabeth O'Toole were in love. Etta Hoffmann had figured that out some time before the crisis. She did not

understand this. Both were married to other people. That was something Hoffmann understood. Marriage revolved around legal documents, co-owning property, and joint tax returns. Love and lust, though, had always been illogical puzzles to Hoffmann. They made the afflicted unpredictable. She was wary of Terry McAllister and Elizabeth O'Toole and gave them additional space.

Etta Hoffmann's reason for staying? The others could only guess. Some at AMLD, miffed by Hoffmann's lack of emotion, believed her stupid. Those aware of the staggering volume of work she did speculated she was autistic. Others thought she was simply a bitch, though even that gendered slur was suspect. Besides her first name and choice of restroom, there was little evidence of how Hoffmann identified. Her features and body shape were inconclusive, and her baggy, unisex wardrobe offered few clues. Watercooler speculation was that Hoffmann was trans, or intersex, or maybe genderqueer.

A temp worker, under the influence of his English major, once referred to Etta Hoffmann as "the Poet" because she reminded him of Emily Dickinson, pale and serious, gazing into the depths of a computer screen as Dickinson had gazed down from a cloistered berth. Perhaps Hoffmann, as inscrutable as Dickinson, found in everyday monotony the same sort of vast morsels.

The nickname served to excuse Hoffmann's distant manner and deadpan replies. Such were the prerogatives of the Poet! Who could hope to understand the Poet's mind? It was fun for the whole office. It attributed sweeping, romantic notions to an androgynous, sweatpants-wearing co-worker who joylessly keyed data while drinking room-temperature water and eating uninspiring sandwiches assembled in what was undoubtedly the blandest kitchen in D.C.

During the three days after John Doe, the Poet proved herself the best of them all, stone-faced when others broke down, eyes quick and fingers nimble when others' heavy eyelids slid shut and their hands trembled too much to type. Hoffmann, the least inspiring person anyone had ever met, inspired the other three holdouts. They dumped cold water on their heads and slapped their cheeks. Powered by cheap coffee and adrenaline, they recorded what was happening so that future denizens might find evidence of the grand, complicated, flawed-but-sometimes-beautiful world that existed before the fall.

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Forty-eight hours later, five days after John Doe’s 129–46–9875 report, John Campbell, Terry McAllister, and Elizabeth O’Toole agreed that there was nothing more to be done. Although AMLD’s emergency power kept their office fully functional, the VSDC network was in collapse. The reports still dribbling in were little more than unanswerable cries for help. John Campbell shut down his computer, the black monitor reminding him of his lost child and lost wife, went home, and shot himself in the head. Elizabeth O’Toole began obsessively doing push-ups and sit-ups, preparation for an uncertain future. Terry McAllister, his dreams of heroism faded, made a final entry in his work log. It strayed from the usual facts and figures into something, should anyone ever find it, that might have read as gallows humor: “Happy Halloween.”

It was three days before that spooky holiday, three weeks before Thanksgiving, two months before Christmas. Millions of pieces of candy, instead of being doled out to trick-or-treating children, would become emergency rations for those too afraid to leave their homes. Those who bought Thanksgiving turkeys early would jealously hoard them instead of inviting loved ones over to share. Thousands of plane tickets, purchased to visit families for Christmas, would mold in in-boxes.

Terry McAllister and Elizabeth O’Toole did not shut off their computers as John Campbell had; the overheated hum sounded to them like breathing, albeit the strained gasps of hospice-bed bellows. Before they left for Terry McAllister’s apartment in Georgetown, Elizabeth O’Toole asked Etta Hoffmann to come with them. Terry McAllister had told Elizabeth O’Toole not to bother, but Elizabeth O’Toole did not want to leave the other woman alone. Terry McAllister was right. Hoffmann stared at Elizabeth O’Toole as if her coworker were speaking Vietnamese. The Poet showed no more emotion at this final appeal than when being handed a cube of cake at an office birthday party.

While Terry McAllister and Elizabeth O’Toole prepared to leave, they heard the dull *clack, clack, clack* of Hoffmann’s robotic typing. Elizabeth O’Toole decided that Hoffmann’s lifeless, dogged work ethic reminded her of the lifeless, dogged attackers described in the reports that had flooded into the office. Maybe Hoffmann, already so much like Them—even this early, *Them* and *They* had become the terms of choice—was the perfect one to understand, process, and respond to Their threat.

On the seventh day, inside Terry McAllister’s apartment, Elizabeth

O'Toole used her phone, which clung to a single bar of signal, to text her cousin, a priest in Indianapolis, to confess her sins. She added that she and a lover, who was not her husband, were going to try to get out of Washington. Because she had little time and battery to spare, the text was rife with misspellings. Elizabeth O'Toole wasn't watching when the phone died, so would never know if her confession had been sent or if it were one more unheard whimper at the end of the world. As she and Terry McAllister stepped from the blood-smeared foyer of the building onto a sidewalk scorched with gunpowder, with no plan other than to follow his hunch to "head north," Elizabeth O'Toole saw her final message everywhere she looked, the letters like carrion birds daggering the November sky.

I parobalgy wont see yu agaon so Absovlle me iff yuo can dfrom
where you are if it is legal8 bc I hae tried to make an act of contritiojn
but I cant mreember all the owrds and isnt that the scareiest thign of
all how lilttel I can remember alreyad like none of itever happened?
lieka ll of the life we evre lived wsa all a dream?



A Gray Murk

Luis Acocella was chasing white beans around his *caldo gallego* when the front window of Fabi's Spanish Palace exploded. As San Diego's assistant medical examiner, Luis was versed in all manners of glass contusions. He knew the meaty, grinding pocks left in cheeks by windshield safety glass, the chilling, swanlike beauty of a suicidal wrist slash performed with a chunk of broken mirror. Fabi's front window promised the latter, with its typhoon of translucent lancets catching glints from the cheap chandeliers before arrowing toward him like hornets.

Any other meal, eaten anywhere else, and Luis would have been half-dead to the world, scrolling through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Reddit. But *caldo gallego* was too messy, so his phone, for once, was stowed. At first, its absence kindled something like panic; his eyes kept flicking to the phone's rightful place on the tabletop, and his fingers twitched to scroll. In five minutes, however, he'd settled down and found the lack of sensory input intriguing. The piped-in mariachi music had ended and the staff hadn't gotten around to restarting it, and in its wake were the noises of real life: feet scuffling, people sighing, or laughing, or simply breathing.

Luis sat near the kitchen when he ate alone. He liked to scroll, like, comment, and post along to the comforting sizzle of kitchen sounds, and when he made an observation in Spanish, the Spanish-speaking staff became different people. The waitress would relax her neck and hips; the cooks would beam from the kitchen in a way that made Luis think, *Ah, now I'm going to get the goods*. It warmed him as much as any earthen bowl of *caldo gallego*. Language: it connected people. He wondered if his beloved phone might actually be counterproductive.

For all these reasons, Luis was too far from the window to be hurt by the detonating glass. He covered his face anyway and bailed from his chair. His

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instinct was good: concurrent with the deafening shatter was the chesty bellow of a gunshot.

It was 5:54 in the afternoon, early for Fabi's on a Thursday, and the other customers were protected by the tall-backed booths. No one in the restaurant had been injured; Luis knew that immediately. He'd lived long enough in San Diego—and excavated enough bullets in the course of his work—to know that rarely was one shot not met by several more.

He squatted under his table, eyes fixed to the sugar packets used to steady the table's gimpiest leg, and listened to a spray of gunshots, followed by a man's scream. There was a pause before the bubble-wrap rippling of police returning fire, too many shots for Luis to count. He heard a moist crunch—the chrome pop of one vehicle ramming another—and that was the end of it.

Luis stayed with the sugar packets. For how long, he wasn't sure. Time had a different quality when life was under threat; the seconds ticked by like little knife cuts into his flesh.

At last, he got up and dashed toward Fabi's door, glass scrunching under his heels, and plunged into the looser acoustics of a cool, violet California dusk. He unlocked his car and withdrew his emergency med kit. He'd heard a man scream, and that man might still be alive. Luis jogged along the line of parked cars until he reached Mission Bay Drive and the classic post-shooting tableaux of burned rubber on pavement, clouds of exhaust gone red and blue with swirling police lights, and abrupt gridlock beneath traffic lights blithely unaffected by the violence.

Maybe it was because of his phone-free dinner, but the next thing Luis noticed was the utter lack of reaction from pedestrians. Gunfire had ripped through the area only minutes ago. At least one car had been struck. Yet people had already returned to their gadgets, preferring bullets of information they could control with their flicking thumbs. Some took photos of the glut of police cruisers; a few framed them as selfies. They'd upload these pictures instantly, as Luis had uploaded so many of his own, proof of life in captioned boxes.

Hitting the street, Luis saw the perpetrator's vehicle, an old panel truck with south-of-the-border plates, its front fender interlocked with the side of a station wagon. The truck's passenger door was thrown open, and a man was perched on the edge of the seat. Luis knew a dead man when he saw one. The butt plate of a rusty Uzi was jammed against a chest black with

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blood, yet the corpse clung to the magazine as if unwilling to relinquish the behaviors that had driven him while alive.

The pedestrians had their gadgets, the shooter his Uzi. Luis wondered why, tonight, both tools looked so much alike.

There was movement in the cab, but the black-and-whites had the truck surrounded, and officers had guns pointed from behind SDPD cruisers. Dismissing the confrontation from his thoughts, Luis swept his gaze from curb to curb, searching for anyone who wasn't staring at a gadget. Ambulance sirens had intensified by the time he spotted what he was looking for. Luis trotted into the shadow of an overpass, where a man lay crumpled amid moist grime and the gleams of discarded snack bags and broken bottles.

The man was sixtysomething, and from his soggy clothing and sour odor, Luis judged him to be homeless, though he felt certain the streets hadn't been this man's home for long. There was a *T* shape to his shoulders and spine the lifelong destitute rarely had. Beneath the beard scruff were lips that, rather than draping over gums, rested upon a full set of teeth. Even his overgrown hair kept to combing contours. Most telling of all was the man's bedraggled clothing: a tailored suit, leather shoes, and a dress shirt, complete with one surviving cuff link. This man, Luis thought, had once been wealthy. He'd once had everything America had to offer.

Luis felt none of the serenity of his lab work as he set down his med kit, took the man by the wrists, and began articulating the limbs to get a better sense of the overall situation. He noted four bullet holes, all on the right side of the body. One high on a thigh, one high on the belly, one low on the shoulder, and the fourth low on the neck. He pushed aside the shirt collar and pressed his fingers through slippery blood to check for a pulse. By the temperature of the flesh alone, he knew he might be too late. He glanced at his watch. It was 6:07 p.m. Based on body temperature, death had likely occurred in the last couple of minutes. If Luis was filling out the standard paperwork, he would have given the ETD—estimated time of death—as 6:05 p.m.

Fuck—those extra minutes Luis had spent cowering under the table.

A detective was already hovering. He gruffly introduced himself as Detective Walker. He had the straight, sandy hair of fairy-tale princes and seemed as eager to get out of there as the pedestrians and motorists. He barked for a subordinate to string up police tape and then, after getting

since the Long Walk, but Henstrom, busy helper bee, made frequent visits to the proletariat, always accompanied by one of the guards, to find help in locking in the new world order. It was perhaps ironic, certainly tragic, that no one had helped more than Nishimura. He did not see himself having a choice, not if he hoped to get all the way to Buffalo one day to find Larry and the children.

Father Bill had carried out his promise to drop anchor, thereby establishing a nation, and his citizens applauded, certain that segregation from society was the key to future greatness. Anchoring was a big operation for a carrier, but thanks to archaic speaking tubes—a last-ditch redundancy Nishimura had never thought would have its day—Father Bill’s disciples were able to contact a bare-bones fo’c’sle crew still resisting ghoul incursion. With alarming speed, those distant sailors succumbed to the lore of the Long Walk, and Nishimura felt the boat’s movement shift from sideways drifting to a vertical riding of waves.

He wondered if they’d ever move again.

In the hours since, Nishimura had heard and felt Big Mama’s body systems being shut down, like a beloved matriarch being pulled off life support. The keyboard plinking of search radars, including SPS-48E, SPS-49(V)5, SPS-65(V)9, and SPS-67, ended their concert. The tick of the rotating Mk 23 Target Acquisition System stilled. The white fuzz of the WRL-1H warning/intercept receiver dissipated into nothing. Worst of all, the hum of the Mk 91 Fire Control System fell silent, despite the boat’s proven susceptibility to fire. Meanwhile, periodic rumbles made Nishimura suspect munitions were being dropped into the sea. *Olympia* was being stripped of her identity, a void that Father Bill was undoubtedly preparing to fill.

The pop of the 1MC came so late Nishimura confused it for the ladle clanging against the water bucket. He could see the outlines of the room’s other seven men perk up, moonlight gleaming from their eager eyes.

“O Lord, in the name of your only son, Jesus, bless the war in Afghanistan, O Lord, the war in Iraq, O Lord, the war in Syria, O Lord.” Father Bill laughed lightly. “You remember all that? When I used to take my turn giving daily prayers with my so-called colleagues, those men of false faiths who have fallen, I always included this plea for God to help us win our wars.

“Tonight, I am blessed to remove that devotion. War is at an end. That

includes the war we fought here on this ship, for it was never a war to begin with. The demons, we welcome Them. With open arms, we welcome Them.

“By joining with our demon halves, we *will* eliminate evil. I am seeking counsel from God on how best to achieve this, but for now, the demons require more lifeblood, which we are blessed to be able to give Them. Henceforth, I shall no longer call upon God to guide our bullets, for there are no more reasons to shoot.” The IMC crackled. “Unless it is to protect our temple from the unenlightened.”

The *unenlightened* were the belowdecks skulkers who had yet to offer themselves as lay priests to the Church of Father Bill. They could be hiding anywhere on the boat; Jacobo Leatherdale had proven that. Nishimura was too tired and thirsty to keep the memory at bay any longer.

How quickly had the parting of the Red Sea convinced Israelite detractors Moses was a prophet? The Long Walk, Father Bill’s miraculous trek across the flaming, ghoul-crowded flight deck, had accomplished as much just as rapidly. One of his first acts was to partition each day into five sections, each heralded by a prayer he broadcast throughout the ship: Morning, Midmorning, Midday, Evening, and Night. During these monologues, Nishimura had observed Leatherdale begin to crack. Finally, in the middle of Evening Prayer, Leatherdale had looked at his third handful of peanuts that day and snapped.

“All the food’s down below! We lock ourselves up here, we’re going to starve! What are we doing? What are any of us doing?”

He’s right, Nishimura said. No, he hadn’t said it. He’d only thought it. Because, unlike Leatherdale, he had the Nishimura Delay—careful or cowardly, you decide. Leatherdale raved at his fellow starving, stagnant sailors for fifteen or twenty seconds before breaking for the catwalk.

Jacobo Leatherdale was navy all the way, weight-trained, athletically fit, and Nishimura would have given him better than fifty-fifty odds of landing on the flight deck uninjured if he could have prepared his jump. But Leatherdale had melted down while Henstrom and a bodyguard were present, doling out peanuts and water. Henstrom said two words—*Stop him*—and several meteorological-level slugs scrambled in chase. Nishimura heard the *whomp* of flesh thrown to steel, the gobble of Leatherdale’s protests.

Before Leatherdale, Saint Karl knew that Father Bill’s refusal to contact the outside world left them open to the dangers of finite food and water,

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explosions from untended engines, and the complete lack of a labor structure to address those things.

After Leatherdale, Nishimura revised that list. Father Bill's reaction to the traitor did, in fact, help establish a labor structure. Labor, it turned out, worked rather smoothly when people at the bottom were terrified of people at the top.

Captured, Jacobo Leatherdale was dangled backward over the Pri-Fly catwalk, the railing pinched between calves and thighs duct-taped together. Trained to consider Pri-Fly as a holy place, the forty-one others crowded the catwalks to watch. Flanked by Henstrom and armed guards, Father Bill held the gold-plated crucifix with the broken staff and spoke in a trembling voice that Nishimura could not hear. The priest's closed-eyes ecstasy said enough.

Father Bill made the sign of the cross and took up a knife. He leaned over the railing and cut Leatherdale across the chest, making a long, wandering slit, which bled in five or six streams before painting his face red and splattering to the flight deck five stories below.

The deck inferno had died out, revealing an apocalyptic sight. The bright, sleek falcons of navy aircraft had been contorted to briars of charred metal, tarantulas dead on their backs. More upsetting were the seared skeletons of sailors, trceries of carbonized bone that atomized to ash with any decent wind. Leatherdale's red blood inseminated black embers; the afterbirth was raspberry jelly.

Despite this, the deck's quarter-mile length still flickered with activity. A few dozen dead sailors plodded aimlessly amid the ruins. *Demons*, Father Bill insisted, though Nishimura clung to *ghouls*—he'd take Chuck Corso as an oracle any day over Father Bill, though *Millennialists* might still be the most apt name. The ghouls appeared ignorant of one another, yet they never collided, instead orbiting like galactic bodies in search of absorbable matter.

Their disinterest changed with the onset of Jacobo Leatherdale's red rain. Nishimura registered the turning of twenty ghoulish faces, forty white eyes flashing like startled doves. As They gathered and reached for Leatherdale, They did so like infants for a rattle; when They tried to snatch the falling blood, They did so like toddlers chasing bubbles; when They kneeled to lick the blood from the sooty deck, They did so like children seeking candy, the picture of innocent craving.

Upside down, Leatherdale had no intention of going quietly. He screamed and contorted, geysering blood over a wider area, good news for the crowded ghouls. Father Bill placed the knife blade against the duct tape. Nishimura still could not hear him, but he knew it was a prayer from the rounding of the priest's lips: *O Lord* this, *O Lord* that.

"Amen!" Henstrom cried—Nishimura heard that, all right—and answers went up: *Amen!* and *Yes!* and even *Hallelujah!* Nishimura thought he might not be able to bear it, that he'd have to grab each one of these people by the collar and ask them what the hell they were doing. Then Father Bill sawed through the tape and Leatherdale dropped, a different kind of man overboard, landing with the gravelly crush of a pulverized back.

Leatherdale screamed. Thirteen ghouls took hold of him at once, and Nishimura did not believe he'd forget Their precise grips. Right foot. Left foot. Left knee. Right thigh. Groin. Right hand. Left arm. Left pectoral. Right armpit. Neck. Left ear. Inside of mouth. Into right eye.

Leatherdale screamed again, a plea to those he'd served alongside: "Shoot me! Shoot me!"

As if in response to a silent signal, the ghouls pulled, and Jacobo Leatherdale came apart. Arms snapped at elbows. Legs turned, and turned, and twisted off like shrimp tails. Ghoul hands plunged into his abdomen, grasped the pelvic bones, and pulled the bottom half of the body away. The skin and innards stretched like mozzarella. Suddenly, Leatherdale, perhaps five six in life, was thirty feet long, spread across the deck in chunks strung together by veins, nerves, intestines, and flesh.

Nishimura wanted the ensuing silence to be the beat taken before action: tossing the insane Father Bill to the ghouls. Instead, it was the silence Nishimura often felt inside churches, that smug belief that your god was the true God, and that because you had your butt in the right pew, you'd never be forced to walk a plank.

"Taps, taps, lights-out."

XO Bryce Peet's curt, robotic, but professional ten o'clock sign-off had been replaced by Henstrom's pushy cockiness. Nishimura swallowed, his throat tight and aching. Relief over having missed most of Father Bill's prayer was erased by the realization water was not forthcoming. Nishimura laid his head on the floor and tried to think. An emergency survival class, eons ago. Water conservation tips. Work at night, avoid sunburn, evade winds, limit food.

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He chuckled at that last one and thought he saw through the gloom the glare of suspicious eyes. Karl Nishimura might make for a good second sacrifice to the demons, those eyes said, a sacrifice that might get a guy promoted upward. Nothing Nishimura could do about that right now. He closed his eyes and coughed up spit to wet his throat. Conserve water, conserve energy, be thankful he could see the stars through a slice of window. He thought of that poor Red Serpents nugget who'd had the bolting incident and how everyone had considered it a big deal. If only they could have seen past the next wave.