

Generation Dead

Daniel Waters

EXERPT

Chapter One

Phoebe and her friends held their breath as the dead girl in the plaid skirt walked past their table in the lunchroom. Her motion kicked up a cool trailing breeze that seemed to settle on the skin and catch in their hair. As they watched her go by, Phoebe could almost tell what everyone was thinking. Everyone, that is, except for the dead girl.

Across from her, Margi shook her head, her silver teardrop earrings dancing among the bright pink spikes of her hair. “Even I don’t wear skirts that short,” she said before sipping her milk.

“Thank God for that,” Adam said from two seats away.

Phoebe risked a glance back at the girl and her long, bluish-white legs. Fluorescent lights were kind to the dead, making them look like they had been carved from veinless blocks of pure white marble. The girl went to the farthest table and sat down alone, and without any food, the way the dead always did during lunch.

Sometimes Phoebe used to joke that she possessed psychic powers. Not useful ones like being able to tell when small children have fallen into wells or anything; more like being able to foresee what her mother was making for dinner or how many bangles Margi was going to wear on her arms that day. She thought her “powers,” if that’s what they were, were more *telepathetic* than telepathic.

“I heard that Tommy Williams’s eye fell out in homeroom,” Margi said. “I heard that he sneezed or something, and there it went, *splat*, on his desk.”

Phoebe swallowed and placed her egg salad sandwich back atop the wax paper wrapping it came in.

“Zombies don’t sneeze,” Adam said around a mouthful of meatball sub. “Zombies don’t breathe, so they can’t sneeze.”

The girls lowered their heads and looked around to see who was in earshot of Adam’s booming voice. *Zombie* was a word you just didn’t say in public anymore, even if you were the center on the football team.

Air hissed through Margi’s teeth. “You aren’t supposed to call them zombies, Adam.”

He shrugged his massive shoulders. “Zombies, dead heads, corpsicles. What’s the difference? They don’t care. They don’t have feelings to hurt.”

Phoebe wondered if Tommy Williams and the girl in the plaid skirt really didn’t have any feelings. The scientists weren’t clear on that point yet.

She tried to imagine how she would feel losing an eye, especially losing an eye in public. And in homeroom, no less.

“You could be expelled for saying things like that, Adam,” Margi was saying. “You know you’re supposed to call them *living impaired*.”

Adam snorted, his mouth full of milk. Ten years ago a milk snort would have been the height of biological grotesquerie at Oakvale High. Today it seemed kind of lame next to losing an eye in homeroom.

“Living impaired,” Adam commented after recovering. “I think you two are living impaired. They’re just dead.”

He stood up, his huge body casting a long shadow over their uneaten lunches, and brought his empty tray to the conveyor system that took all of the dishes and garbage away. Phoebe just looked at her beautiful egg salad sandwich and wished that she had any desire left to eat it.

Phoebe's locker popped open on her third try. She figured that her inability to remember the three-digit combination did not bode well for her impending algebra class, which was always right after lunch. Her stomach rumbled, and she tried to tell herself that the spikes of hunger would give her mind an alert sharpness, like a lynx in winter between successful hunts.

Yeah right, she thought.

Tommy Williams was in her algebra class.

The door to her locker shook with a metallic vibrating sound. Inside were pictures of bands like the Creeps, the Killdeaths, Seraphim Shade, the Rosedales, Slipknot, and the Misfits; bands that dressed like the living dead before there were any dead actually living. There was a picture of her, Margi, and Colette in happier times, all gothed up in black fabrics, eye-liner, and boots outside the Cineplex in Winford, ready to be first in line for the premier of some vitally important horror movie she couldn't even remember. Phoebe, the tallest, was in the middle, her long black hair hiding one side of her naturally pale face, and her visible eye closed as she laughed at whatever vulgar comment Margi had just made. Colette had done her eyes like an Egyptian princess, with a single thick line of makeup at each corner. Colette and Margi were also laughing.

A mirror was on the door opposite the shelf where Phoebe's algebra book lay. On her mouth was a streak of smeared violet lipstick. Her long hair, normally jet-black, shiny, spiky, and tousled, now just looked dull, flat, and messy.

She thought she looked scared.

The lipstick smear was the only flaw that seemed fixable, so she rubbed it away before walking toward Mrs. Rodriguez's class down at the end of the hallway. She arrived there the same time as Tommy Williams, whose eyes, she was relieved to see, were still fixed within their sockets. He gazed at her with the blank stare of the living impaired.

Phoebe felt like cold feathers were dancing along her spine. The stare was bottomless. It made her think that she could fall forever into his eyes, or that he

could see through to the very heart of her. Could he see her wondering if his eye had popped out in homeroom?

Tommy motioned for her to precede him into the room.

She held her breath as he lifted his arm, realizing it only because another one of her essential life functions had ceased, namely her heartbeat. She smiled at him. It was a reflex; courtesy was not very common in the halls of Oakvale High. She stepped into the room, and as she did, she was almost certain that Tommy was trying to smile back at her. Wasn't there a faint upturn of the lips at one corner of his mouth, or the briefest flash of light in the flat undead eyes?

She took her seat, breathing again, heart beating again. Not only beating but beating *fast*.

She didn't know much about Tommy Williams. She knew that he'd come to Oakvale High last May, just a few weeks before school had let out. Oakvale was starting to get a reputation for having a good living impaired program, good enough that families with living impaired kids were moving to Oakvale from the surrounding area. Phoebe's father had pointed out an article in the *Winford Bulletin* that said Oakvale High's living impaired population had doubled in a year. There were at least seven in her class of about a hundred and twenty.

She looked at the back of Tommy's head, at his gray-blond hair, and her thoughts drifted, again, to the topic of death. They started with the mundane—Do living impaired people need to get haircuts? (The answer: Yes. Both hair and fingernails can grow after true death as well as in living impairment.) And proceeded to the philosophically complex—What is it like to be dead? What is it like to be living impaired?

A dog trailing a broken leash ran across the field opposite the classroom window, and Phoebe wondered why living impairment seemed to be a phenomenon exclusive to teenagers. American teenagers, specifically. Dogs didn't come back. Neither did monkeys or goldfish, or old people, or small children. Apparently, neither did teenagers in Uzbekistan, Burkina Faso, Sweden, or Papua New Guinea, for some reason. But kids from Oklahoma, Rockaway Beach, The Big Apple, Arkansas, or The Big Easy all bore at least a chance of winding up living impaired, as long as

they croaked during the delicate teen years. The newest Frankenstein Formula theory was that a certain mixture of teenage hormones and fast food preservatives set up the proper conditions for living impairment. The medical community was still testing the theory, having begrudgingly let go of fluorocarbons and brain patterns rewired by a lifetime of first-person shooter games.

Outside, the dog lifted a matted hind leg on a bike rack where a number of bicycles were chained. Do the dead go to the bathroom? They didn't eat or drink, so the answer would seem to be no.

Mrs. Rodriguez then did a strange thing, strange enough to interrupt Phoebe's train of thought. She called on Tommy for the answer to a problem even though his pale hand wasn't raised.

Tommy looked up from his papers. There was a pause that sucked the air out of the classroom; there was always a pause like that when the dead were called on.

The dead could think, and they could communicate. They could reason, and once in a blue moon, one might even initiate a conversation. But they did so very, very *slowly* . . . a question, even one as simple as the one from Mrs. Rodriguez, could take a living impaired person ten minutes to process, and another five to respond.

Phoebe covertly tried to gauge the reaction of her classmates. Some were suddenly absorbed in their textbooks, doing anything to avoid the reality—or unreality—that the dead kid represented. Others, like Pete Martinsburg, who was taking Algebra One for the second time and who was normally only interested in football and girls, were rapt with attention. Pete was looking at Tommy with the same expression of manic glee that he wore when he'd tripped Norm Lathrop and sent him sprawling into a bank of big rubber garbage cans in the lunchroom last week.

“One hundred and seventy-four,” Tommy said, his voice halting and without inflection. No one hearing his voice could tell if Tommy thought his answer was wrong or right, so most of the class looked at Mrs. Rodriguez for her reaction.

She looked pleased. “That is correct, Thomas.”

Mrs. Rodriguez went on with the class like it was no big deal to call on a dead kid. For the most part, the rest of the class reacted the same way.

But Phoebe noticed that Tommy did not go back to looking at his papers. His head remained high for the remainder of the class.