

A DYING BREED

by Carrie Richerson

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I can live with ghosts. This part of the Texas Hill Country has ghosts thicker than fleas on an ol' yaller dog. Conquistadores slaughtered for god and gold here; the Comanche returned the favor. Tonkawa practiced their ritual cannibalism along these creeks; Anglos answered with their own atrocities. To the south, the martyrs of the Alamo mission still haunt old San Antonio de Bexar. After the unpleasantness between the northern and southern states, freed blacks moved here from Dixie and farmed the river bottoms in the only cash crop they knew -- cotton -- until they and the land wore out. The attentive, midnight ear hears war whoops and Rebel yells mingle with the strains of old spirituals.

The ghosts carry their histories upon their bowed backs and ask nothing of the living. I can live with them in peace. But the dead have never rested easy in this sun-drenched, heat-struck land -- and nowadays, they don't seem to be resting at all....

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Angelina and I had been going over the week's arrest stats, in preparation for my appearance the next day before the board of county commissioners. Fewer people reside in our entire county than in some of San Antonio's suburbs, but that doesn't mean we don't have a problem with crime. Vandalism and driving-while-intoxicated arrests were way up over last year, and drugs were starting to be a serious concern. Domestic disturbance calls were on the rise, too.

Everyone seemed to be on a short fuse. Just the previous month, a local businessman had engaged in an old-fashioned shootout on the main street of the county seat with his wife's lover. Both were lousy shots and only managed to inflict painful but non-life-threatening wounds, despite firing off a total of fifteen rounds between them. It was a miracle that someone wasn't killed.

A miracle that my department had nothing to do with, since none of us were anywhere around at the time. It is simply not possible to give adequate law enforcement coverage to an entire county with only four people and one working patrol car. I would take the arrest stats and an impassioned plea for more money to the commissioners' court the next day, but it wouldn't do any good. I already knew what I would hear: times are tough for everyone, tax rate too high already, no extra money in the budget. The same excuses I'd heard for the last three years.

Angelina and I were crammed into the microscopic cubicle that functions as my office; the only way we could both fit on the same side of the desk to review the booking log was for Angelina to kneel on top. That blocked my view of the door, so I didn't see our visitor enter. The first I knew of something wrong was Kyle's voice going up in that stuttering squeak he does when he gets excited or angry.

That sound has set my teeth on edge since Kyle was a baby nursing at my breast. I suppose it always will. But this time he was alternating it with some sort of gagging moan. It sounded serious, but imagination failed me. It couldn't be an escape; we had only one prisoner, a DWI still sleeping it off. Besides, the only thing the county commissioners had agreed to spend good money on was a set of primo locks for our two cells. My fifty-year-old joints could scream at me tomorrow. I threw myself over the desk and out of the cubicle.

I didn't draw my gun. Experience has taught me to be wary of such a facile solution to problems. It's a good thing, too: the temptation to put a bullet into the thing standing just inside the front door was overwhelming. The part of me that said, "Shoot!" shoved up hard against the part that said, "Run!" -- and both were immobilized by the part that said, "Pray."

My mind refused to accept the sight of the decomposed body standing before me, but the smell was another matter. It was God-awful -- that vicious, rotten tang that even a novice can't mistake. Kyle's noises had changed to the sound of vomiting. I didn't blame him, but I needed something I could deal with. "Kyle, stop that right now! Angelina, get out here and make Kyle clean up his mess!" Angie had managed to extricate herself from the tangle in my office. She edged up to the front desk, never taking her gun off our visitor, and bent over the retching Kyle. I heard a sharp slap, and a string of quiet Spanish profanity that would blister paint. Kyle shut up. Angie can keep him in line. Me, I'm only his mother.

This had to be a dream or some sort of horrid practical joke, and I must look just as silly as I felt. I tried to think of a reasonable response to an unreasonable situation. I opened my mouth, to say I don't know what, but the apparition beat me to it.

"Sheriff Webster." The sound was a dry whisper that went right to my knee joints and gnawed. The fleshless jaws moved a little, but I swear I don't know how it made sound: it had no lips, no

tongue -- no lungs, for godsakes. The vacant orbits regarded me blankly. Any minute, I thought, Angelina and Kyle are going to bolt and leave me here with this -- thing. Hell, I might even go with them.

Instead, I found myself answering it. "I'm Sheriff Webster, yes." And, inanely, "How can I help you?"

Shreds of dry flesh rustled as the corpse made a faint motion -- something that rang a familiar chord, but there was no time to follow the thought -- with its hands. I felt like joining Kyle in his adoration of the floor tiles. The whisper came again. "Arrest the man who killed me."

This just had to be a dream. Or maybe one of those new-fangled "Candid Camera" rip-offs. Hollywood special effects can do anything these days. I was probably exchanging pleasantries with latex and invisible wires. What could I do but play along? "Come into my office and tell me about it."

As I passed the front desk I leaned over to address my deputies. "Angelina, get your notepad. Kyle, get that mess cleaned up and get back on the radio. Both of you -- if you so much as breathe a word of this to anybody, I will personally line you up against that wall and shoot you. Do you understand me?"

They nodded, wide-eyed. Angelina whispered, "Doris, is that thing for real?"

"I don't know, Angie. Now get a move on." She crossed herself, and Kyle looked ready to heave again. I fixed him with a glare that made him change his mind and turn back to the radio monitor.

I sat down behind my desk as the walking affront to gastric stability edged into the office and lowered itself gingerly into the other chair. That left no room in the office for Angelina; she took up station in the doorway behind the thing. She must have been thinking along the same lines I had been: I saw her wave her hand through the air above it, feeling for wires. Nothing.

If it was fake, it was a beautiful job. Adult male, exact age and race unknown (I can do some field forensics, but I'm not that good), in an advanced state of decomposition. All the internal organs were gone, but some stringy remnants of muscle and skin clung to the bones. Some black hair remaining on shreds of scalp. Dead several months, at least, but it would take a pathologist to tell exactly how long.

Multiple traumatic fractures of all the long bones, several broken ribs, palmar bones crushed. Probable cause of death: the entire left side of the skull was shattered. Dark emptiness yawned within. Buried without benefit of shroud or coffin, and recently exhumed: dirt dusted the parchment skin and filled the floors of the orbits, and a dessicated millipede was wound into one of the shoulder joints. I shivered. Entirely too realistic for my taste.

"Don't you recognize me, Sheriff?" There was a plaintive note to the dry rasp this time.

Recognize it? "I'm sorry, I don't." How could I put this? "There isn't, uh, much left of your face. Who are you?" This conversation was growing more unbelievable by the minute.

"I am -- I was -- Jesse Carmody, Mrs. Webster."

Oh, my God. Suddenly I did believe, and with no more evidence than that -- because no one, no one would have the supremely bad taste to make such a joke about Jesse. Certainly not to me.

Jesse had been my daughter's boyfriend throughout high school. They had met when Tamara had offered to tutor him in math in the ninth grade. Many a night I'd sat in my kitchen with this young man, drinking coffee and listening to his plans for the future. He was going to work hard, save his money, go to college, make something of himself. The recitation of those bright hopes for the future always drew to a close with Jesse and Tamara sharing promises of eternal loyalty, and those special smiles kids in love give one another -- while I smiled a totally different kind into my coffee.

Some nights Tamara still cried herself to sleep in my arms.

He'd been missing for six months now, and we had all just hoped he had run away to the city. That wasn't Jesse's style, but his father was a drinker with a hot temper and had admitted to having a yelling fight with the boy the night he disappeared. I'd never suspected Hector Carmody of harming Jesse, though; until now, there had never even been any reason to suspect foul play.

So Jesse was dead, and what sat before me was all that remained of his promise and his dreams. A great sadness filled me. And a great pity, too -- for it must be lonely indeed to be dead, and rotted, and to walk again among the living. Impulsively I reached out to touch his hand. The knuckles were cold and dry under my fingers. "I'm so sorry, Jesse. Who did this to you?"

He gave us the name: Robert Englethorpe, a local rancher. The quiet, pleasant, loner type that no one ever suspects of wickedness -- until it's too late. I swore. The son-of-a-bitch was a deacon in my church.

Jesse waited for me to fish out a tape for our decrepit recorder, then gave us the details. He'd gone for a long walk after the fight with his dad. Englethorpe had passed him on the road, then turned around to offer him a ride. When Jesse told him of the fight, Englethorpe offered to let

Jesse stay at his ranch until his dad cooled down. Jesse had accepted the offer of help from a neighbor without hesitation.

The specifics of torture and violation were even more chilling when recited in that passionless whisper. Angelina wept silently over her notepad. She had never served on a big-city police force, had never had her nose rubbed in this sort of sickness, as I had. I had left Houston when I couldn't stand it anymore, and moved to a sleepy country town. But no place is immune, and a sleepy surface can simply camouflage the virulence underneath. I felt very old, very tired, listening to Jesse.

In the end, Englethorpe had beaten his victim to death with an axe handle, then sodomized him with the same instrument. Somehow it made it worse that Jesse knew every degradation Englethorpe had inflicted on his body, even after his death. "He hurt me so bad, Mrs. Webster, I was grateful when he finally killed me." How could a mere whisper convey that much pain?

I had to know. "Jesse, how it is that you are here?"

He seemed to struggle for words. "A dispensation, they said. For a little time, they said. For justice." The way he said the word justice made my neck hair stand up.

"Who said, Jesse?"

He made a confused gesture. Something he couldn't answer? Or wouldn't? Maybe I really didn't want to know.

My bottom desk drawer was the only one with a lock. It was the safest place I could think of to store such a bizarre and momentous tape recording. When I opened the drawer a half-full bottle of rye rolled with a clunk from one side to the other. I have never craved a drink so intensely as I did at that moment. My hand was shaking as I closed the drawer, but I don't think Angelina saw. I refuse to speculate upon what the former Jesse Carmody might have seen.

It was my call to make. It didn't take me long to make my decision. I could spend the rest of the afternoon tracking down the county judge and trying to convince him I had enough probable cause for a search warrant for Englethorpe's ranch. Or I could go get the bastard right then. This crime's aftermath was too bizarre to keep it a secret for long, and if Englethorpe heard a rumor of Jesse's reappearance, he'd bolt. Maybe later I could make a case for hot pursuit.

Angelina loaded the heavy artillery while Kyle called George, out patrolling in our one official vehicle, and told him where to meet us. But not why. Broadcasting that over the police band would be like issuing an invitation. I told Jesse I wanted him to wait for us at the station, and that I was going to lock the front door. "I really don't think anyone else should see you yet. I hope you understand."

He nodded. "My parents?"

My stomach twisted. "It's not going to be easy on them, but I know they'll want to talk to you." Oh God, what would I tell Tamara?

Our DWI was still snoring. Just before I went out the door, Jesse cocked that broken skull as if listening to something I couldn't hear, then spoke. "There are others. They will be waiting for you." A chill chased me out of the station.

The three of us crowded into my pickup. Kyle folded himself onto the floorboard; Angelina and I tried our best to look nonchalant as I drove slowly out of town. The ambulance chasers must have been engaged elsewhere; no one followed us.

George caught up with us as we turned onto the unpaved county road that ended at Englethorpe's place. I stopped for a moment to let Angelina transfer to the patrol car so she could explain things to George. I hoped he would believe her; I expected to have a hard enough time just managing Kyle.

We pulled to a stop at Englethorpe's gate and shut off the engines. I listened. The silence was broken only by the strident monotone of cicadas and the distant squawking of a scrub jay. To the northeast creamy white clouds were bubbling up into a potential thunderhead. Our blistered land was desperate for rain; I felt like a traitor as I wished the storm away. It would make finding and preserving evidence more difficult.

Englethorpe's ranch looked unkempt, but the drought had had that effect on even the best-maintained spreads this year. The hayfield was unmowed and the late-season feed corn unharvested. The lodged stalks rustled against one another in the occasional puff of air. It sounded like Jesse.

The house sat only a hundred feet from the gate; a barn and a loafing shed stood further away from the road. The curtains on the house were drawn and I couldn't see any lights inside. There was an old hulk up on blocks in the driveway and a battered red pickup parked behind it. An ancient Farmall tractor was parked in the loafing shed. The gate in front of us was closed with a heavy chain and sturdy padlock.

The red pickup matched the description Jesse had given us. I wondered if Englethorpe had heard us arrive, if he was watching from behind one of the curtains. I wondered if he would surrender peaceably, or if someone would get hurt. I wondered if I was doing the right thing.

George fetched boltcutters from the trunk of the patrol car and applied them to the chain. Angie caught the cut ends and eased them to the ground. The hinges bleated mournfully as George pushed the gate open just enough for the four of us to slip through. George and I took the two shotguns; Angie and Kyle drew their revolvers. Some instinct told me the house was vacant. I didn't want to waste time on it, but I didn't dare skip checking it out. I waved George and Angelina around to the back. Just as I started up the steps someone spoke behind me. "He is not in the house." The sibilant whisper was familiar by now. I slapped a hand over Kyle's mouth to keep him from screaming and turned around.

There were three of them, of various sexes, ages, and states of disrepair. As I watched, a fourth came striding slowly out of the cornfield. The cornfield. Of course.

My glare told Kyle he could join the ranks of the freshly dead if he squealed. I sent him around back to fetch George and Angelina. He could get his vomiting over with, quietly, before he returned. He was white to the gills, but he managed to keep it under control until he was out of sight.

The three of them caught up with me and my entourage of the dead a few yards into the cornfield. Dry stalks had been uprooted and tossed aside to form a small clearing, invisible from the edge of the plot. The dead and the living clumped at separate sides of the clearing. Perhaps the deceased regarded us with the same wonder, revulsion, and lack of understanding we felt for them. George was almost as white as Kyle. He must not have believed Angelina after all, but he held his ground like a Spartan when the crude grave at my feet began to open.

First a fissure spread along its center, as though an invisible hand had scooped a trough through the clods. Grains at the edge of the crack tumbled inside, then suddenly began to leap out again as the dirt started to flow and ripple away from the centerline. The five open trenches beside it were outlined with standing waves that looked like the result of the same process. The body that rose up from that hole, dirt cascading from its shoulders, was very fresh -- and very young.

At first I thought he was still alive. Then I saw the marks on his body, and he turned his ruined eyes toward me. I knelt so he wouldn't have to stare upward. Maybe it made a difference.

"Hello, son. What's your name?"

"Jeffrey. Jeffrey Thornton." Missing persons bulletin out of San Antonio, two days ago. "Are you a policewoman?"

"A kind of policewoman, Jeffrey. I'm a sheriff, and these are my deputies." He didn't react to the dead bodies standing about. "Do you know how you got here?"

"I was at the store with my mama. A man made me get in his car. He brought me here. He did things that hurt me." A thoughtful pause. "I'm dead now. Your face is wet."

"I know. I'll be okay in a minute." A dead little boy who missed his mama. I hugged him, very gently. "Do you know where this man is now?"

He turned and pointed. "He's in the barn. He has a lady in there now."

Oh Christ.

We stormed the barn like an assault team. I pumped two shotgun loads into the door at bar level, and George and Kyle threw an old feed trough through what was left of it. We hurtled inside -- and were just moments too late.

I don't know ... maybe if I'd believed sooner, or spent less time deposing Jesse, or less time comforting Jeffrey, or I've spent every night since then second-guessing myself, and I'll take my guilt to my grave. Along with the vision of Hell that Robert Englethorpe had created in that barn.

He leaped off her as we burst in. He must have slashed her throat just as he climaxed. I knew we were going to lose her when I saw how her head lolled on her neck; he'd damn near cut all the way through to the spine. But she was still conscious, for a last few seconds, and the look in her eyes as she struggled to scream past the blood and the froth....

Angelina headed for the victim; the rest of us bracketed Englethorpe. He was babbling, scrambling back into the shadows, trying to yank up his pants with one hand and waving that great bloody knife at us with the other. We were all yelling at him to drop it, but I'm sure he couldn't even understand what we were saying. Any moment someone was going to blow him away, and I didn't want that. No, not that.

Then little Jeffrey Thornton walked into the middle of the chaos, and Englethorpe just went to pieces. He threw the knife away, dropped to his knees, and crawled to my feet, crying and begging us to protect him. I wanted to kick him in the face. I turned away in disgust.

To see Kyle raise his service revolver and pull back the hammer. The click echoed like a gong in

the suddenly silent barn.

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Night. A street sweating with fog and fear. A body lies sprawled in the dim circle of light from a corner streetlamp. One arm is outflung; the hand lies in shadow. Something dark seeps from the chest to add to the stains of old sins on the sidewalk.

A young, uniformed police officer edges toward the body. Her weapon is fixed upon the still figure, but her hands are shaking. The revolver's barrel is hot; it fumes faintly in the wet air.

Question: How many guns can you count in this picture?

Answer: Every shooting, no matter how justified, has two victims.

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I blinked my way back to the choking stink of blood and fear-sweat and semen in the barn. In an instant it would be joined by the reek of burnt powder. We all wanted Englethorpe dead, but I couldn't let Kyle destroy himself like that. Angie was gathering herself to jump him. I waved her off as a horrible inspiration struck.

"Kyle, how would you like him to rise from the dead to accuse you of murder?"

For a long moment nothing changed. Then a tremor started in Kyle's hand and moved up his arm until his whole body vibrated. I reached for the gun, lowered the hammer, and took it away from him. Tears -- shame? rage? -- spilled down his cheeks. For the first time in far too long, I felt tenderness rather than exasperation. Surely he deserved at least as much of my compassion as what I had been handing out to dead folks lately. I thought about Jeffrey Thornton, and his mother, and hugged my son fiercely.

I sent him back to the front gate to fetch the patrol car. He would have to walk the gauntlet of the dead, but it was better than being in that barn. I helped George handcuff Englethorpe and shackle him to the stanchion of a hayrick. Then I forced myself to cross the bloody straw to where Angelina knelt by Englethorpe's last victim.

The woman was dead; nothing Angie could have done would have saved her. It did occur to me to wonder if, or how long, she would stay dead. We searched through the clothing scattered about, but didn't find anything to identify her. We did find a number of implements that Englethorpe had used on her.

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There were hours and hours of depressing, tedious details to complete after that. Angelina and George began identifying and interviewing the risen victims while I made some calls. San Antonio loaned us a portable crime lab and some investigators, and the FBI got into the act. Every last one of them had to have the fact of walking, talking dead people proved over and over again. And every last one of them freaked, in his or her own fashion, when confronted with the reality. One FBI asshole wanted to grab one of the dead and ship him off for an immediate autopsy. I managed to dissuade him, but I wondered how we would handle that later. A pathologist's report would be needed for Englethorpe's trial.

As soon as I could, I sent Kyle back to the station. We had left a jailed prisoner unattended far too long, and I wanted to know what Jesse was doing. Kyle was getting better at handling the new order of things. His voice was steady when he radioed that everything at the station was under control. Jesse was sitting in my office, waiting for no one knew what. Soon the world would have to know about his existence, and that of the other animated corpses we were working around at Englethorpe's ranch. The local and San Antonio press had sniffed something afoot from the amount of radio traffic. George was having to beat them off the crime scene with a stick.

The heavens withheld their mercy from the thirsty land. The storm clouds evaporated and blew away in ragged dark shreds. We worked on through the one-hundred-degree heat of the afternoon, while squadrons of confused buzzards circled overhead. Dozens of feet stomped the caliche soil into white dust that floated into the air, coated our clothes and contaminated our samples, gritted in our eyes, and left us all sneezing furiously. When I finally gave up, turned everything over to Angelina and George, and went back to the station, I caught hell from one of the county commissioners who had been trying to call me all day.

It was time to break the news. I managed to persuade him to call the other commissioners together for an emergency meeting at the station. It was quite a scene. Jesse was patient, whispery, and indubitably there. The only one who handled it well was the young mother of three who had won the last election by a fluke. Two of the good ol' boys fainted and a third had chest pains. We had to call the EMS in, so of course they got to see Jesse, too. The news was going to be all over the county in an eyeblink. I had to call Jesse's parents before they heard about it

through the grapevine. I called Tamara while I was at it.

There was no way we could guarantee Englethorpe's safety in our little jail. We transferred him to a high-security lock-up down in San Antonio. The county commissioners had recovered: they were already arguing about the cost of jailing him and of a heavy-duty murder trial.

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The flak fell pretty heavily on our county at first: screaming tabloid headlines, condescending reports in the national media of a mass hallucination in a Texas backwater, patronizing analyses by hoards of "experts." But within days, more of the dead were appearing in other towns and large cities. Soon it was happening all over the world.

Why now? Why in my jurisdiction? What made this little Texas county so special? These questions get lost in the larger mystery. Perhaps some threshold of mayhem was finally reached and whoever runs the cosmos decided to teach us a lesson. Or perhaps it is our own collective conscience that has brought our sins back to confront us.

Perhaps the restless dead have been with us for a long time, bony fingers plucking at our sleeves, pleading for our attention, a hearing, justice. Maybe we were just willfully blind and deaf, until now. But everyone deserves to be listened to, even if he is dead. Maybe especially if he is dead. On a blistering August day Kyle, Angie, George and I listened, and the world tilted into a new orbit.

And still it continues. Everywhere the dead make their slow, deliberate, terrifying ways to the local constabulary, to demand justice. Coffins exhume themselves, vaults and crypts spring open. The cremated are reconstituted as swirling clouds of gray ash and blackened bone. The remains display a tremendous physical integrity. In Atlanta, a religious zealot, convinced that the risen dead were instruments of Satan, broke through a police cordon and hacked one apart with an axe. It reassembled its scattered limbs while the police cuffed the attacker (who was charged with abuse of a corpse).

At first it was only victims of intentional murder whose killers were still alive and had never been charged or tried. Victims of crimes of passion, of rage, of lust, of greed. Victims of gang wars, of lynchings, of gay-bashings, of domestic violence. Victims of twisted schemes and twisted desires. Victims of terrorism by the planeload. Victims who could not possibly know the identity of their assailants rose with names, addresses, present locations, physical descriptions. There is never any explanation of the source of the information.

Once their stories are told they wait, impassive and implacable, in whatever hastily arranged quarters have been found for them, as a confounded legal system attempts to cope. They will not go away, not without the justice they demand. They will not waive charges or plea-bargain. Considering how slowly that legal machinery turns, some of them may be with us for years.

I hear a lot of places overseas -- Kampuchea, Armenia, Argentina -- are in chaos. In this country California's infamous Zodiac killer was finally identified; what a surprise that one turned out to be. And the body count was higher than any of the official estimates. Here in Texas, Henry Lee Lucas's toll turned out to be much lower than what he had boasted of, and lots higher than what he had confessed to. He was never tried for most of those murders, you know. When he heard that a delegation of his victims had shown up to visit him, he found a way to kill himself in his maximum security cell. After that the authorities had to put a suicide watch on a number of prisoners. But of course there are never enough guards to go around.

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We know no more about the nature of death, or after-death, than we did before they arrived. Scientists cannot explain the phenomenon, despite imaginative experiments and the stolid cooperation of their subjects. The dead do not change while they are among us; decomposition does not progress. They neither eat nor drink nor excrete. They do not sleep or chat. They never laugh. Perhaps they love. Do they envy the living? I don't know.

* * *

There have been riots, panics, demonstrations. And thousands of suicides. Some, the secret murderers among us, whose hidden crimes have now been exposed in the most literal fashion; but most, ordinary people who cannot bear what has happened to their loved ones. Mothers and fathers of murdered children, spouses and lovers. The funeral industry is having a banner year.

We are trying to live with the dead, and it is killing us. How is that for justice?

Jesse Carmody's mother is one who couldn't take it. She tried to kill herself with some Compound 1080 her husband had bought to poison coyotes; she's still in a psychiatric hospital down in San Antonio. Jesse's father is a changed, sobered man. He invited Jesse to stay at the house while

they waited for Englethorpe's trial. Someday maybe I'll have the courage to ask Hector Carmody what they talked about.

But Tamara, dear daughter, has set an example for us all. When she saw Jesse that first night, she marched right up to him, put her arms around him, and kissed his cold, bare cheek. Now she has become a lay visitor for our church, accompanying the minister to counsel those whose faith has been sorely tested by this development.

For every one who breaks, there is one who grows stronger. Kyle has been like the Rock of Gibraltar since that day. He and Angelina are going to be married this fall; they have enough faith in the future to plan to have kids.

I'm pretty proud of both my children.

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We shipped the body of Englethorpe's last victim down to the medical examiner in San Antonio for autopsy and circulated pictures throughout the States and Mexico. No one claimed the body. When the M.E. got tired of her taking up drawer space, he insisted we take her back. The county commissioners didn't want to spring for the cost of burying her, until I got ugly. She stayed in the ground for a while, then rose in time for the trial. We got an ID, and contacted her relatives. Then the commissioners complained that they had wasted the money for the burial!

Englethorpe's trial was less of a circus than I had expected. I don't know why he didn't plead guilty; the evidence against him was overwhelming. Maybe he really was insane, as his defense attorney claimed. That attorney was good, trying every trick in the book -- and making up a few new ones -- to cope with the unprecedented appearance of the alleged deceased victims to give testimony. He challenged that they weren't really dead (dead people don't walk and talk), that the dead couldn't be sworn because they weren't legally persons anymore, that their presence was too inflammatory.... You get the picture. The trial judge just decided to go with his instincts and to let the appeal courts take the heat.

I was one of the first prosecution witnesses to testify. Afterward I was allowed to sit in the courtroom and watch the rest of the show. I pitied Englethorpe. Not for his guilt -- his deeds were monstrous and unpardonable -- but for his fear. He was terrified of his victims, even though not one of them ever raised a finger -- bony, gristly, or rot-bloated -- against him. The pressure of their awful, vacant vision sent him into screaming hysterics. He had to be tranquilized or removed from the courtroom every day. The authorities put a double suicide watch on him throughout the trial.

When little Jeffrey Thornton took the stand and swore "So help me God," the whole courtroom sighed. The verdict, never in doubt, was handed down: guilty of capital murder. The sentence was also never in doubt: death by lethal injection.

The trial and sentence seemed to satisfy the requirements of the dead. They didn't wait around for the years of appeals. The victims made some final farewells, then they lay down and became what they had always been -- dead. And this time, gone forever. We hope.

We are an adaptable species. The world is slowly returning to normal -- a new normality, where the living rub shoulders with the dead as though they had always been among us. But there has been one major -- and, I hope, permanent -- change: There are, for obvious reasons, very few murders these days....

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The other day I drove out to Englethorpe's ranch again. There was a large "For Sale" sign on the gate, but I doubt the place will sell. The real estate market is in the doldrums now; there are abandoned ranches like Englethorpe's all over the county.

A dutiful realtor had shuttered and locked the house. The vehicles and farm equipment had all been sold at auction, for pittances. There wasn't much left of the cornfield. The investigators had torn it apart looking for more bodies. I completed the job the wind and sun had started on the police seal on the barn door and went inside.

The ghosts muttered and fussed in the shadows, but I'll take them over the risen dead any day. No one had bothered to clean up. The straw around Englethorpe's "workbench" was black and tarry-looking in the dim light. It looked just as it had on that hot summer day so long ago. A little dustier, perhaps. Older and tired, for sure. Just like me.

I didn't bother to replace the seal on the door when I left.

* * *

I'm sitting in my study, working my way through a bottle of middlin' earnest rye and scribbling in my journal. The drought has broken at last; the sound of the rain is sweet. I wonder if the

dead can appreciate it?

We will have to modify that old saw about death and taxes.

As a species aware of its own mortality we have always hated and feared death, but it has also been a comfort to us. It offered the promise of resolution, of an end to striving; a way to wipe the slate clean, put down the chalk, and stop trying to solve the unsolvable problem -- forever.

We didn't know how much we would miss death, until it was taken away from us.

In all my long career in law enforcement, I have only had to use deadly force once. I have always had regrets, of course; but I thought then, and still think now, that the shooting was justified -- and so did my superiors. But what if the cosmic authorities do not share that view?

Last week, in California, an accident victim rose from the dead to accuse someone of negligence. In New York today a suicide rose to accuse her mother of indifference. The dead seem to be growing more restive, less tolerant of the excuses made by the living.

I do not think that I could face the boy whose life I took.

So the level in the bottle declines, and I contemplate my service revolver, gleaming bluey in the pool of lamplight. I am tempted, very tempted, to take the coward's way out.

But what if I don't stay dead?

END