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PLUM HOLLOW

There is nothing unusual about the town of Plum Hollow, except perhaps the plums, which are unusually tasty. There are, however, whisperings here and there that the house atop the hill is haunted. Such a notion is just plain silly though, because as everyone knows, in order for a house to be haunted it must be occupied by ghosts. One of the occupants of the house atop the hill is a young boy named Junior. Junior may not be like other kids in town – he doesn’t ride a bike, brush his teeth, or play soccer – but he’s certainly no ghost. Quite the contrary, Junior is a zombie.

Now, you might at this very moment be thinking to yourself, “Hold up, zombies aren’t real!” As a matter of fact, they are. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is

Roachard N. Scarafaggio – Roan for short – and I’m a cockroach. Mind you, a cockroach who can talk, read, write, and even play the world’s smallest violin. Junior is my best friend, and one of the few people, living or dead, with whom I interact. I certainly don’t go introducing myself to normal folk. “Why?” you ask. Well, how would you respond if a cockroach walked up to you, tapped you on the shoulder, and asked how your day was going? I’ll tell you how you’d respond: by squishing it! Though I have eschewed many of my former cockroachy ways, my sense of paranoia is still fully intact, and if you startle me by suddenly turning on the lights I will promptly scurry out of sight. But if you wish to make pleasant conversation and promise not to squish me, I will certainly oblige.

Now, you might at this very moment be doubting me yet again, thinking to yourself, “Cockroaches can’t talk!” A reasonable assumption, but have you ever tried initiating a conversation with a cockroach? I thought not. Were there no talking cockroaches there would be no one to recount the story I’m about to tell. And were there no zombies, there would be no story to tell at all. And so, by the very fact that there *is* a story to be told, zombies do exist, and none was ever so remarkable as my friend Junior, who wanted nothing more in this world than to be a normal boy.

Still need proof? Follow me then, if you will, down the streets of Plum Hollow, whose Victorian homes and quaint little Main Street shops give the sense of entering a bygone era, traveling forward in space, but backward in time. You’ll find it’s not for naught the town is called Plum

Hollow. Cast a stone in any direction and you're liable to hit a plum tree. And the townsfolk embrace their eponymous fruit, its plump lavender flesh adorning everything from waffles to hamburgers. I even once saw a man eating a deep-fried plum on a stick whilst drinking a plum soda... but I digress.

Should you find yourself here in springtime you're sure to be enchanted by blooming plum trees, their pink blossoms like cotton candy. However, our story doesn't take place in the spring, but in autumn, when their almond-shaped leaves have turned from green to yellow, copper, and deepest red, covering the streets in a patchwork quilt of foliage. They have given the last of their sweet fruit for the season, and in shedding their leaves, are preparing for a long winter's sleep.

At the end of Perth Street we approach a wrought-iron gate. Behind the gate, up the hill a ways, an old plum tree stands in front of the house atop the hill, its branches twisted and mangled with age. It did not bear any fruit this year. Hanging precariously from the skinny tip of a long stem is the last of this tree's autumn foliage. With a cool gust of afternoon breeze the red leaf breaks free from its hold on the branch and begins a slow descent to its final resting place below, fluttering and turning as it falls. The leaf does not reach the ground, however, but comes to an abrupt stop and rests atop a gravestone which simply reads "Jr." At the base of this stone lay many of this leaf's siblings, surrounding a hole in the ground about a foot wide. Leading away from this hole is a pair of muddy footprints.

There, you see? Muddy footprints leading away from a hole in a grave are very telling I should think, but perhaps further proof is required for those of a particularly skeptical nature. Come then, let us follow and investigate the source of these footprints, which made little effort to wipe clean before traipsing across the covered patio and into the house. We enter the grand room, whose walls are bedecked in purple fleur-de-lis wallpaper, faded and peeling with age. Two sets of stairs on either side of the room wind up to the second floor. Onward and upward, my welcome guests, if your wits allow. But tread lightly as you ascend! The stairs creak, and you don't want to wake the skeleton in the closet on the second floor. If you do, he will numb your mind with misremembered tales of yesteryear, comment glibly on how burdensome having flesh is, or worst of all, share one of his truly horrendous skeleton jokes. Mama says everyone has skeletons in their closet, I just hope other people's aren't as annoying as ours.

Passing the great-grandfather clock it chimes four times, the dark ring of the chimes reverberating slowly down to nothing in the quiet, empty house. It's late afternoon, when zombies are supposed to be asleep in their graves... but not Junior. He's grown restless of late and has taken to sneaking out of his grave during the day while his parents sleep in their graves next to his – you see, Junior's parents are zombies as well.

Following the muddy footprints up a second, narrower stairwell, we arrive at a door, the door to the highest room in the house. This small attic room is Junior's sanctuary. Used toys and boxes clutter the floor, along with a severely

deteriorated mattress, and a mini black and white TV. A dusty broken-down dresser with a drawer missing sits directly beneath a small round window on the far side of the room. There, sitting in the round window sill, is a boy, looking longingly out the window onto the town of Plum Hollow. His skin pale blue, his clothes tattered and dirty, and his long black hair knotted from spending who knows how long underground. This is Junior. On any given day you might find Junior sitting in this spot, watching children play from the highest room in the house. And so he was one cool autumn afternoon not long ago, but on that particular day it wasn't just Junior's skin that was blue.

"They look like they're having so much fun," he said with a sigh.

I perched on his shoulder to take in the view, which is nothing short of spectacular. You can see all of Plum Hollow from up here, as well as the vast expanse of plum trees surrounding. And on very clear days, when the conditions are just right, you can just make out the waters of the Eidolon Sea. But Junior's eyes were not on the orchards or the sea; it was a group of children playing soccer in a nearby field that commanded his attention.

I glanced up at his colorless sunken eyes fixed on the soccer field below. "You know, Junior, your parents will ground you if they find out you were out of your grave during the day... again," I said as non-disapproving as I could muster.

"Ground me? *Psht!* What difference does it make? I'm *grounded* all day every day! I just like watching them play,

that's all." Junior continued to gaze out the window until after the sun had set.