

“Through the Fog Came Death”

By Ray Dillon

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The end came slowly. It rolled in with a fog through the forest that lined the shore, its tendrils wrapping around the trunks of thin trees, reluctantly breaking off like a ghost's grasp. It came slowly, but it was an incessant force.

On the grey beach, a destitute man with new hope in his eyes lay against salt-dried logs looking up towards the sky beyond the fog. He watched clouds change shape and remembered his mother. His bottle was empty and for the first time in months he didn't care. He wanted it to be empty. It was the proper time for it. He thought he might take a nap in the cool air, with the scent of the sea in his nose one last time, and then finally get on the road.

As his eyes drifted closed and sleep began to take him, he stared out where the ocean would be, the fog all around him now, and he thought he saw his mother walking towards him.

From the sky, an old man turned the rickety aircraft around and headed for home. He saw the wall of the fog coming in from the ocean. He had been watching a young couple walking on the beach. The couple stopped for just a brief moment giving him time to snap one last picture, then they turned and ran. The young man pulled the wife along with a hard grip on her hand. The old pilot felt their panic in his own chest. He leaned forward to see and bumped the controls, rocking the plane violently. He regained control, but the two were gone and the fog had taken the beach. The last weak rays of the grey sunshine faded away and the world grew instantly colder.

A boy bounced a ball against the corner of his room. His goal was the orange window shape on his carpet created by the midday sun. When it faded away, he got to his knees and scooted towards his window. Upon looking out, he saw the tips of other houses and pine trees beyond that, protruding from the thickest fog he'd ever seen. He could barely see the street a few blocks away, but heard a few muffled honks from cars followed by the vague crashing pop of what he thought must be a wreck. He saw a few people running out of gaps in the fog. That's when he called for his father.

His father did not reply. He didn't come into his room wordlessly, tying his tie, frustrated with the interruption as he normally would. The boy called again. Still nothing. He got to his feet and slowly creaked along the old wood flooring to the hallway stairs. Over the railing he could not see anything. The fog had entered the house.

The stubborn man could barely see his hands in front of his face, but was not going to stop. This was his day off, after all. Weather be damned. He lifted the heavy stones and laid them perfectly in place, the new walkway about halfway done. He heard the screech, the crash, the screams. He just didn't care today. Then, he heard the shuffling noise growing in his ears. He heard the low gurgle, like the final percolations of late night

coffee, brewed to fight sleep, and his stomach turned at the thought. His nose became sensitive and he picked up on the faint sour on the ocean air. He stopped placing the stones and looked down the small street. It had no curbs. At the end of the yard, there was some gravel that he always felt made it look like a trailer park instead of a gated beach side community with million dollar homes. He blinked a few times to focus his dry contact lenses. Blurred grey figures, barely visible through the fog, walked up the street.

The father was down the street when visibility went. A sprinting man nearly knocked him down and he dropped the mail into a gutter. He knelt down to pick it all up. The shuffling sound grew in his ears. Then the sound of someone struggling and a choked noise that turned into a shrill squeal and was cutoff altogether in a sound like tearing weeds from wet soil. The man jumped to his feet and spun around to see a shadowy figure in the edge of the fog holding his limp neighbor in its arms. It was dripping. All over it was dripping. It sunk its face into his neighbor's neck pulled upward shooting a stream of red into the fog.

The clatter of the background was now filling his ears as the father ran faster and faster back to his home. Screams were all around him. There were gunshots and screeching tires. The loudest sound was the deafening percussion in his ears, his heartbeat. His son was still at home and he could no longer see where he was going.

The boy sat on the stairs and slowly scooted himself down, one thump at a time. His heart stumbled as he heard the gurgle. He couldn't see anything, but knew the sound was coming from the kitchen. He thought that if he could just keep going at an angle from the stairs he could be outside. He'd never felt so scared of their new house by the sea. He'd loved it, but deep inside him was an instinct screaming at his legs to move. It was now grey in the house, the fog filling completely. An acrid odor, like spoiled vegetables drifted on the ashen haze so consuming he could taste it and it churned his stomach. Dread scattered up his back like spiders and clutched his heart. The scuffling, sloshing sounds were coming right for him.

The fog broke enough to see a beast of a man, rotted so thoroughly that raw muscle showed and even bone protruded. His eyes were missing and the sockets were filled with mud and seaweed. He dripped. From everywhere he dripped. The smell of mildewed fleshed and seawater made the boy sick and vomit moved up his throat. The bloated and discolored hand of the dead man moved for the boy, the nails long and jagged as if he'd crawled from the ocean floor. Its mouth opened wide as it stumbled onto the boy, limbs jerking unnaturally, trying to remember how they once functioned. The gap in its face which could have once held a smile now showed only teeth, the lips and one side of the face was decayed and the legs of a small sea creature wriggled out of its maw. More liquid and rancid sea foam burbled from inside and poured onto the boy's legs as he fell back on the stairs.

The panicked and angry yell of a man emanated from somewhere outside of the house and a splat of wood hitting flesh. The father stumbled into the door, blind, and heaving breath. He called for his son. Hands were on him from behind and teeth nearly caught the

flesh of his shoulder, but he swung the log and another wet crack was released. The boy choked down his fear long enough to whimper for his father, who ran forward for the voice. He crashed into the back of the decayed man and felt the cold swamp beneath the drenched tatters of clothing. He grasped the thing, fingers popping through the putrid flesh of its back. He pushed hard and the dead man fell to the ground and skidded, unable to break its fall. It was at once invisible in the fog.

More of these walking corpses were coming in the house, their gurgles and waterlogged steps relentlessly creeping from all sides. The man felt for his son and the boy felt for his father. They grasped hands and the man pulled him close, squeezing him too hard.

Listening to the sickening sounds of the creatures. He led his son down a hallway and to the bathroom. With the door locked and secured, they stayed there but a moment when the sounds of the dead carried down the hallway to them and the creatures began to thump against the door. They moaned with anguish and hunger. The father broke out a paint-sealed window he'd been meaning to fix and cleared the shards of glass. He lifted his son out and helped him down the side of the house as the squish of the bloated palms increased against the bathroom door. He followed his son into the yard and tuned his ears. There were sounds all around them now; fewer were living and natural.

The father carried his son over his shoulders and ran carefully to the sidewalk. Walking corpses appeared, and quickly taking note of them, lunged, and then faded back into the fog as the man evaded. A car came into view and the man saw that it was burning from the engine and the front end was wrapped around a pole that disappeared into the fog overhead. The man continued running away from the ocean towards higher grounds. When they passed a sign detailing old Bruin road leading to the highway, and the sounds of the creatures were no longer there, he put his son down to check for wounds. He seemed physically fine, though his breathing was very shallow and his eyes were wide. He wouldn't respond when the father tried to talk to him. He looked back down towards the street and saw the hazy shadows shambling in the fog towards them. A truck blared its horn as it fired past them. The drivers were looking ahead, holding guns, and didn't seem to see the rotted thing rise in the bed of the truck and reach for them. The truck swerved ahead of the father and flew off the road and out of sight. He picked up his son and continued up the hill.

The man told the boy that he wasn't going to let anything happen to him and that he loved him. The boy came out of his shock and asked what was happening, but the man had no answers for him. The boy asked where his mother was and the father didn't say anything, he just kept running, but he could read his father's eyes. He wrapped his arms around his father's neck and cried softly.

The man made it to the top of the hill, where cars were driving furiously on the highway. They were above the fog now, and a saturated orange light was glinting on the sides of the cars as they passed. No one stopped for them. The fog lifted a few minutes later, going out faster than it came in. The father looked down the road, back at the town, their home. As the fog was blown off, the horror was unveiled. Bodies lay heaped in puddles

of blood on the streets. Cars were flipped on both sides, some on fire, stricken during escape.

What stopped the man's heart, though, were the numbers of the walking dead. Thousands upon thousands of these monsters from the depths of the sea marched towards the highway. Unendingly, more were coming up out of the sea. A few stranded victims screamed from the middle of the chaos and their cries were quickly torn from them as the things ate from their throats. The fog that brought them was gone, but it did not take them with it.

Death was there and the end would come slowly for all.