

## Stone Fruit

Many others have told this story better than I ever could, so I'll stick to what I know:

It started in spring, two years ago. Homes near graveyards noticed first as winter thawed. Light, uneven thumps from below the ground. Gas companies were called, and then geologists, biologists, paranormalists, all manner of experts toting bulky instruments. There was little to do above but send for the gravediggers. As far as I know, there was no "first-body." It happened all over the North Atlantic at once, Nova Scotia to Maryland, in a thousand sleepy towns with as many sloping, shady graveyards. Relatively anonymous gravesites were always picked first. In those innumerable towns that lay some distant claim to the Revolutionary War, it was generally a soldier of the times, or a local drunk. Less often, simply an unmarked patch of grass that exhibited a relatively benign pounding.

I cannot tell you how it felt to shovel out the packed dirt from above a coffin, or to watch. I always imagine it in the cemetery near my home, moss-carpeted and pastoral. A local priest would be there, and the Imam and at least one Pandit, alongside a hunch-backed gravedigger and maybe a news crew. The atmosphere would be modest; sun would drown out the gravity of the gravestones, greying their blacks with overexposure. Fat fluffy clouds would loll above. The soil would be wet and yielding, as it always is in spring. The holy men would shuffle their feet as the spade struck. After so many days of noise, and the numerous claims by experts that it had to be something, or rather, some things, moving down there, I can imagine only minor surprise when the ground was finally cleared, the coffin opened up, and the corpse, worm-eaten and in rags, adjusted its sockets to the sun attempted, feebly, to climb out of its tomb.

Of course, it happened in cities too. In Brooklyn and Boston, in the gray industrial wastes of North Jersey and under empty lots in Annapolis. But I was abroad, and heard only from afar, so I can only picture it home.

Eventually, overwhelmed by compassion at the dead thing's futile, stumbling tries, the religious men provided the corpse a ladder and it climbed up, taking no notice of the people. They stood hushed as it lurched over to an old oak and slowly began to climb. It climbed like a child does, no, like a dog does, scraggling desperately for purchase. Maybe a gasp when it falls the first time. By the fourth or fifth, it is routine: the surprisingly light thump, and the quick (though altogether unthreatening) reapproach. Finally, after what must've been a pitifully long time, it accomplished its goal, sat in the mottled sun on a thick branch, leaned back, and smiled a rot-tooth smile.

And so it happened everywhere. It was happening still when I got back. The dead only wanted to be happy. Not the dead, that term stopped getting used after we realized they were not zombies, they wanted no flesh, nor were they returned for some cosmic judgement. Now, people say "invee", like invalid. It popped up somewhere online and it stuck. Rolls off the tongue.

Organizations were formed for the liberation of invees, the tearing up of graveyards. It goes without saying not every corpse is affected, some may be too deteriorated and some, though fresh, must be altogether uninterested in more (or different) living. However, the invees are harmless and cute, and most were freed in a matter of weeks by concerned citizens.

Some flocked to the beaches, walking straight into the dark Atlantic to laugh big, silent laughs as they floated in the waves and were nibbled by fish. Others, to the woods, to take long sojourns sleeping under the stars, on mostly flat Mid-Atlantic hills like the barrows of a lost tribe. It became clear that they aren't interested in the living, nor do they care for each other. Each one, following some deep inner

compass, went straight to some easy joy. They couldn't speak (maybe a few excited grunts) nor recognize anyone. At first, people opted for custody, trying to regain their parents in their new, child-like state, but as soon as the escapes started, and the total disinterest was noticed, that movement mostly died. Better to let the dead be dead, and sun on the sand, or stumble at catching tadpoles. One has become a well-loved attraction in Asbury Park for befriending and playing with seagulls.

Were we worried about diseases? Safety? Absolutely. But still, what can you say to a man who's just seen his dear deceased grandpa lurch out of the grave, only to immediately plop down with a rather empty-headed smile and twirl a daisy in half-gone hands? Plus, scientists claim they're relatively sterile and benign ("no more dangerous than deer" is the refrain), and besides a dropped limb once in a while, hardly leave a trace.

My father, dug up that summer (my mother waited for me to return), set out immediately towards the myriad orchards where stone fruits – sweet Jersey peaches and plums – swelled to bursting ripeness. He moved through the trees grinning, merely looking at the branches of fruit, eyeing their weight and curve. Every few hours, he held one in his hands, and, looking satisfied and full, left it to rest on a stump for some wandering chipmunk. I followed him for about a week, trying to make sense of his movements, pondering over sitting him down at the table for Thanksgiving (maybe with some rope) but decided to let him be.

No one has been able to track what fixes so firmly the love of an innee on a singular thing, nor how that activity is determined. My father, as far as I know, never went to an orchard living, besides to pick apples with me and my sister when we were in children, but even then, it always seemed a cosmetic, seasonal thing. Certainly nothing to settle on for eternity.

There are rumors of innees elsewhere, across the US and abroad. They say Kashmir has so many buried dead who so love living, it's returned to a pleasure-land, an Eden of corpses swimming in the lakes and basking on the mountainsides. Darker stories too, every once in a while, surface, of a great rebirth of famine-corpses from Mao's Great Leap, eager for revenge. I discount most of them (the meanest thing I've seen an innee do is pull gently on the tail of a house-cat). I discount the origin-stories too, that it's climate change, or some harbinger of apocalypse, that these reanimates are wandering the countryside, committed each to a particularly small and childlike pleasure. It just happened, as things do.

I don't worry much about my dad anymore, about his stumblings on or what draws him so totally to sweet fruit. I have a Yoko Ono meditation app. It tells me: "Make a list of 100 unrelated things."

There are traps some people set, hoping to lure their loved ones back. Elaborate guesses at what their secret, motivating joy could be. An old woman here spent about \$1.5 million on a hokey faux-beach, complete with wave pool and palm trees to lure back her (innee) husband, who loved to swim. My mother, some chilly summer nights, leaves out a few particularly plump summer peaches, the kind that melt to sweet butter on the tongue. They never fall for it, I know. They're happy out there, they have no need for home. When I ask my mom why she keeps doing it, she kisses me and says "for the squirrels."

Religions don't know what to make of it. I don't know if they should. Talks abound about church membership plummeting. Some claim the simplicity of the innees means it is not reanimation at all, not the dead rising, but rather, other souls (perhaps of animals? Of children?) taking their bodies. If there is a successful cult based on this theory, on anything to do with the innees, I don't know about it. They seem too simple, too single-minded and soft-hearted, to be implicated in any grand, metaphysical view.

The government is still passing laws for the protection of invees. That as long as they don't hurt anyone (which none have done yet) or destroy any property, they should be allowed to go about the business. The legislation is largely based on protections already enacted for endangered animals. The public supports it. A few kids, playing pranks on invees for Instagram views, have already been fined and generally scorned, in person and online.

I saw my dad the other day. I was out for a week in Maine, driving along the coast to a new client, and there he was, stumbling alongside the road. I slowed down and drove next to him for a while. He never looked over; one of the first disappointments of the invees' rise was that they never so much as look straight at the living. After a few minutes, he veered into a blueberry patch. I drove away, thinking of his sallow cheeks, pock-marked by age, then decay, and his still surprisingly deft fingers (they never bruised a fruit while I watched him) covered in bright purple juice.

I hardly used to dream, and when I did, I never remembered it. Sometimes, in the dry-mouth morning I'd try and grasp the last receding ebb of the rare vision (always so vivid it seemed a new world, possessing colors beyond those I'm able to see), but they never came back beyond dim intimations, black shapes moving in the back of my head, behind my eyes. The night I saw him, I dreamed I was a grey rabbit in a stretch of country not unlike my own. I was nibbling a dandelion stem when a mother fox and cubs approached. It locked its blue eyes with mine and turned away, cubs nipping at its heels.

I have dreams often now. Sometimes of swimming with whales in the Pacific, their dark masses like gathering stormclouds, or of ornately decorated cottages in towns I've never known. Once, of my bedroom door slowly opening, and a deep smell of earth, of cornhusks and loam, like a rain-swollen river, spilling through. They come most thickly with the last strokes of August, when wet heat lifts the first fall rot from the swamps all over New Jersey, and the rich, fecund smell of decomposition fills the air, stirred gently by the fireflies.