

EGG SALAD ZOMBIES

By Mike Marcus

Billy Lauer frantically waved his hand in the air, nearly shaking himself out of his seat trying to get Mrs. Dyson's attention. The fifth-grade teacher was droning on about multiplying decimals but Billy needed her for something much more important.

“Mrs. Dyson,” Billy finally called out when his teacher hadn’t noticed him, her attention focused on the lesson.

“Yes, Mr. Lauer,” the teacher responded with an exasperated sigh. “Why do I think your question has nothing to do with decimals?”

Raven Coldwell, Billy's best friend, laughed from her seat directly behind him.

“Mrs. Dyson, we need to turn on the heat lamps for Barbara and Johnny. It’s too cold in the classroom for them,” Billy said, pointing to the thermometers attached to the tanks containing the classroom pets. Barbara, a yellow Leopard gecko with dark spots, and Johnny, a Chilean Rose tarantula, lived in glass fish tanks along the wall near Billy's desk.

“They’re fine. It’s only October and not that cold yet. Pay attention to the lesson, please. There will be a quiz on this tomorrow,” the grey-haired woman replied from her desk without getting up to look at the thermometers. The tiny teacher, kneeling on her chair behind her desk, turned her attention back to her lesson.

Billy tried to focus on his workbook, but a moment later he was staring at the nearby glass fish tanks. Barbara lay still on a fake log in her tank and in his, Johnny was burrowed into the sand. If Billy stared hard enough, he could almost see the temperature dropping on the thermometers and imagined both the gecko and tarantula shivering.

Billy's hand shot into the air again, waving wildly for his teacher's attention. The fourteen other fifth graders in the classroom giggled, distracting Helen Dyson from her lesson. She looked up mid-sentence, her eyes settling on Billy, propped up in his seat, right arm waving in the air like a flag.

"What is it now, Mr. Lauer?"

"You said taking care of Barbara and Johnny were our responsibility, and every class you've taught at Romero Elementary School over the past 30 years always took good care of the classroom pets," he recounted.

The teacher, only a couple years from retirement, nodded her head, knowing exactly where the conversation was going and accepting that her math lesson was done for the day.

"Yes, Billy. That is correct."

Billy smiled. "And you said Barbara and Johnny must be kept at the correct temperature, because they don't have fur and can't keep themselves warm or cool. We do it for them with the lamps."

The teacher nodded again and pulled a hall pass from her desk drawer, writing Billy's name on it.

"So, if the thermometers say the tanks are too cold, don't we need to turn the heat lamps on for them?" Billy asked. "We don't want to be the first fifth graders to not take care of the classroom pets."

Mrs. Dyson held up the hall pass. "Yes, though I wish you would have waited until the end of the lesson, or during lunch, to bring it to my attention," she said. "Tell Fritz we need the heat lamps. He was supposed to put new bulbs in them for us."

Billy spun in his seat and gave Raven a grin before hurrying to the front of the room and taking the blue slip of paper from Mrs. Dyson. She held it out of his reach for a moment. "To Fritz's supply room and back. No detours or dawdling," she said. "If he's not there, come straight back and we'll take care of this during lunch."

Billy nodded and Mrs. Dyson handed him the hall pass, her attention back on her lesson before Billy was out the door.

After a brief stop at the water fountain, a swing through the boy's restroom, and a detour through the school library to see if Mrs. Landis had any new books, Billy wandered down the far hallway past the first and second grade classrooms toward the cafeteria. Romero Elementary School was a big circle, with the school office and gym near the bus drop off in front, the cafeteria down the long hallway to the right and the library in the back. It reminded Billy of photos of the Pentagon, though he didn't think the Pentagon required hall passes.

Fritz's supply closet was next to the cafeteria. The old school janitor always wore a blue jumpsuit and big dark framed glasses that make him look like a bug. His brown hair was thin and wispy and he walked with limp, dragging his right leg behind him, his boot squeaking against the linoleum floor tiles. Even during the coldest

winter days, the janitor was always sweaty and wiping his face with a dirty red handkerchief.

Billy knocked on the heavy metal door, waited a minute, and knocked again before pulling it open. The supply closet was empty except for metal shelves filled with rolls of toilet paper, paper towels, and cleaning supplies. Fritz's yellow mop bucket stood in the corner filled with dirty grey water, the mop hanging upside down on a hook on the wall, its nasty grey head dripping like wet, dirty hair.

Most days, Fritz was somewhere in the school pushing the mop bucket around, one wobbly wheel squeaking, though Billy couldn't remember seeing him mopping except for when a kid blew chunks in the hallway. Raven swore Fritz never changed the water in the bucket, and it carried in it the remnants from every kid who'd ever thrown up in the school. From the smell of mop bucket, Billy thought she might be right.

Billy looked for the heat lamps but didn't see them. He checked the six rusted filing cabinets in the back of the supply closet but each drawer was locked, leaving him to wonder what the janitor kept that was so important that it was hidden in locked cabinets. The fifth-grader left the closet, closing the door behind him, about to return to his classroom when he heard Fritz's voice in the cafeteria.

Wandering the hallway with a hall pass was one thing, but entering the cafeteria kitchen was a different matter altogether, even if he heard Fritz back there.

The cafeteria kitchen was ruled by one person and one person alone – Mrs. Von Deubel.

The lunch lady never let a student go hungry, but didn't tolerate shenanigans. There was no joking or playing around in the lunch line. She ran the cafeteria like a drill sergeant, a wooden spoon always in her hand. Many a student, and the occasional gym teacher, caught a whack across the knuckles with that spoon when they reached for something without permission. Get in, get your food, sit down, and eat. Mrs. Von Deubel ruled with an iron fist over student and teacher alike.

Billy took a deep breath and tiptoed into the cafeteria, certain he heard Fritz's voice in the kitchen laughing with Mrs. Von Deubel. If Fritz was there maybe the lunch lady wouldn't overreact to Billy's presence in the kitchen.

The fifth-grader stepped past the steam table that kept lunches warm, entering the no man's land where no student he knew had dared to venture.

"This is the moment we've waited for, Fritz," Mrs. Von Deubel said, chopping onions with a long, sharp knife. "We've tolerated these children for too long. Too many years we've fed them and cleaned up after them. Too long we've been forgotten, living in the shadows except for when they need us. Our time has come."

The short lunch lady, standing on an overturned apple crate, held up a Ziplock bag of black mushrooms.

"What are those?" Fritz asked, peering at the baggie through his thick glasses.

Mrs. Von Deubel cackled, dumping the baggie onto the cutting board. "These are Dead Man's Finger Mushrooms, you fool. My cousin, Brunhilde, harvested them for me," she said, chopping the mushrooms. Tiny clouds of green spores rose from the mushrooms as the knife pierced their skin. "They grow on newly dug graves in the Black Forest and are harvested only under a full blood moon on Friday the 13th."

"What will they do to the kids? Will it make them fall asleep forever, or turn them into werewolves? Maybe it will make their arms and legs fall off and their eyes pop out of their head?" Fritz asked as she diced the mushrooms into tiny pieces.

"I already told you, you nit-wit," she said, stopping and pointing the knife at him. "The mushrooms are for the adults. They don't affect children. Adults who eat them turn into blood thirsty ghouls focused on one thing – eating children."

Fritz hopped from foot-to-foot laughing and clapping his hands. "Eat the children! Excellent! I hope they spread their brains on toast like spray cheese!"

Fritz paused, a look of confusion falling across his face. "But that's only the kids here. What about all the kids not here?"

The lunch lady smiled, revealing brown, rotted teeth, and tugged the long, curly, dark hairs dangling from her chin. "That's the wonderful thing. Once the kids here are gone, my child-eating zombies will go out into the world and bite everyone they meet, infecting them as well. It will spread until every adult in the world is infected and all the children are gone!"

Fritz returned to giggling and clapping his long-fingered, oversized hands. "How do we infect the teachers?"

"That's the easy part," she said, scraping the mushrooms into the large vat of diced egg, mayonnaise, onions, and celery. "First, they feast on my egg salad. Then, they feast on the students!"

Billy gasped, covering his mouth with his hands, terrified they would hear him. Dead Man's Finger Mushrooms? Zombie teachers? The lunch lady is a witch and the janitor is her henchman?

Billy backed out of the kitchen, careful not to bump into anything that would alert Mrs. Von Deubel or Fritz of his presence. He was almost out of the cafeteria when he slipped on a blob of old meat loaf gravy on the floor and fell backwards, knocking over a plastic water jug. The empty blue water container bounced and clanged against the steam table.

"Did you hear something?" the lunch lady said. Billy could hear her sniffing, like a bloodhound trying to catch the scent of a raccoon.

"Just us laughing," Fritz replied.

"No, you fool. There was something else. And I smell something... it smells like... watermelon bubblegum."

Billy clamped his mouth shut, one hand plastered over his lips. He'd been chewing watermelon bubblegum that morning in class, but stuck the chewed wad of gum under his desk to save for later.

"A child... I smell a child," Ms. Von Deubel growled. "Find them. They could ruin everything!"

Billy scrambled to his feet, racing out of the cafeteria and down the hallway, never slowing to look back, but hurried to his classroom, running to the closed door breathless and sweaty.

Mrs. Dyson swung the door open and Billy fell into the classroom, stumbling and falling to the floor while the rest of the class laughed.

"Billy, what is going on?" Mrs. Dyson demanded, taking him by the arm and helping him to his feet. "Why were you running in the hallway?"

Billy wheezed, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. He pulled his asthma inhaler from his pocket and took two deep puffs. "Close...the...door...."

"You tell me right now what is happening. What did you do?" she asked, stepping into the hallway, and looking in the direction from which Billy had been running.

"Please... close... lock... the door," Billy panted.

Mrs. Dyson stepped back into the classroom and closed the door behind her. Billy lunged and flipped the lock, the rest of the class silently watching.

If Mrs. Dyson had remained in the hallway a minute longer, she would have seen Fritz round the corner at the far end of the hallway, searching for the child who smelled like watermelon bubblegum.

"What's the meaning of this, Billy? Where are the warming lamps you were supposed to get from Fritz?"

Bill shoved the inhaler back in his pocket. "Fritz was in the cafeteria kitchen, with Mrs. Von Deubel. They were laughing and she put poison mushrooms in the egg salad, Mrs. Dyson," he rattled off quickly. "She's a witch. She's going to turn the grown-ups into zombies to attack the kids."

Mrs. Dyson stood up straight, all 4-foot-11-and three-quarters inches of her, and stared Billy in the eye. “That’s quite enough, Mr. Lauer. You’ve had enough fun for today. You scared the bejeezus out of your classmates with your antics, and now you call Mrs. Von Deubel a witch? She’s one of the sweetest ladies I’ve ever known and adores the children at Romero Elementary School. Back to your seat and I don’t want to hear another word out of you today.”

“But, Mrs. Dyson, I’m telling you the truth. I saw her cut up the mushrooms. She said her cousin, Brunhilde, sent them to her. She’s a witch and she poisoned the egg salad!”

“Enough. Back to your seat. You’re on recess detention, and if you keep it up, you’ll be on detention for the week.”

Billy slinked back to his seat.

“She didn’t believe me,” he whispered to himself, pulling the clump of watermelon gum from beneath the desk where he’d stashed it earlier and shoving it back into his mouth, ignoring the bit of lint stuck to it.

Raven leaned forward “You did once try to convince the class that there’s a sea monster living in the Allegheny River, and that your neighbor, Mr. Canis, was a werewolf but it turned out he was just hairy,” Raven said. “But tell me about the mushrooms. What did they look like?”

Billy glanced at his friend over his shoulder, not wanting to get caught talking and suffer a week’s worth of detention. Nothing was worse during nice weather than being stuck inside cleaning chalkboards or reshelfing library books when everyone else was outside playing kickball.

"I didn't see them really well, they were in a baggie," he said, turning forward in his seat but whispering for Raven to hear him. Her mom had a big garden and grew all sorts of vegetables, herbs, and flowers, so Billy wasn't surprised she wanted to know more about the mushrooms. "They were black and long, like fingers. And I think there were red and white marks on them."

Raven was quiet for a moment, then tapped Billy on the shoulder, handing him a folded piece of paper. He took it quickly, before Mrs. Dyson could see, and opened it.

"Did it look like this?" was written in Raven's cursive, full of curly-ques. Beneath was a drawing of a black mushroom with what looked like a skeleton face, its eyes dots of red crayon.

Billy spun in his seat nodding. "That's them. I saw a couple on the cutting board before she chopped them up."

"Those are Dead Man's Fingers," Raven muttered. "This is bad."

"You have to tell Mrs. Dyson. She'll believe you." While Billy was the class clown and liked to tell fantastic stories, Raven was studious, always completing her work on time, never causing disruptions, and helpful in the classroom.

Raven pushed her purple-streaked black hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ears, and cleaned her silver framed glasses. She put her glasses back on and looked concerned. "I read about these in one of my mom's books. They do exactly what you said. If someone eats even the smallest part, they lose their mind and turn into zombies with only one thing on their mind - to eat people. If they bite someone, it infects them, too."

“Zombies,” Billy whispered, awestruck.

“Zombies,” Raven confirmed.

“There has to be a cure, something other than shooting them in the head, like in the movies and video games and stuff,” Billy said.

“Mr. Lauer. That’s a week of recess detention. Miss Coldwell, recess detention today,” Mrs. Dyson called out, exasperated, and writing their names on chalkboard behind her desk.

Billy whispered, “Sorry,” and turned back toward the front of the classroom.

The next hour dragged by for Billy and Raven, the clock hands slowly creeping closer to lunch time. Finally, the bell rang and while the rest of the class surged out the door carrying their lunch bags or counting their lunch money, the two kids stood in front of Mrs. Dyson’s desk, awaiting orders for their recess detention immediately after lunch.

“Mrs. Landis had an order of new books for the library arrive this morning that need unboxed and put away,” she said, perched on her chair, staring down on the two kids. “After lunch, report to the library to assist her.”

Billy and Raven nodded and as they were leaving, Mrs. Dyson called out to them. “I’m going to be a few minutes late for lunch. Let Mrs. Von Deubel know I’m coming and want a double-serving of her egg salad. I always look forward to it.”

Billy groaned as he and Raven followed the crowd to the cafeteria. Romero Elementary School was small, with each grade having a single classroom and one

big cafeteria in which they all ate together. Most of the teachers ate at a head table in the cafeteria, or took their lunch back to their classroom.

"This is great," Raven said, truly excited as the two walked toward the cafeteria.

"What do you mean? How is this great?" Billy asked, a shiver running down his spine as they approached the cafeteria.

"We have to go to the library after lunch. You distract Mrs. Landis and I'll get on the computer. I know there's an antidote for Dead Man's Fingers, I just don't remember what it is," she said. "I wonder, if we survive this, if I can get a couple of the mushrooms to give to Mom. I don't think she's ever seen them before."

"Great. If we survive," Billy moaned. "I'm not hungry. Do we have to go to the cafeteria?"

Raven stopped, looked at him as though she were thinking through a plan, then nodded. "We do. We need to see who is eating the poisoned egg salad. If we can make a cure, we don't want to miss anyone and have them get out of the school and start infecting other people."

The two kids joined the rest of the fifth graders at their table, though neither opened their lunches. Raven pulled a pen from her pocket and started a list of each teacher who came out of the lunch line with egg salad. By the time lunch was over, the list included nearly every teacher, including Mrs. Dyson, who had a big bowl of it, Mr. Skinner, the principal, and Mr. Fletcher, the gym teacher.

"If he gets sick, he's going to be a tough one to stop," Raven said as Mr. Fletcher finished his third egg salad sandwich. Mr. Fletcher, also known as "Flexin' Fletcher"

because he was constantly showing off his muscular arms to the younger teachers, was more than six feet tall and weighed 250 pounds. When he didn't have a class, he was in his private weight room off the gym, working out. Rumor was on weekends he was a masked professional wrestler using the name "Clobber McNasty."

"First, we need the antidote," Billy said as he and Raven packed up their lunch bags. While the rest of the students ran outside, Mrs. Dyson was waiting for them at the front of the cafeteria.

"I let Mrs. Landis know that you two were coming, and I better get a good report," she said, looking at the kids with disappointment, then gave them a small smile. "You two are perhaps the brightest students in your class, if only you could focus. Do well this afternoon and we'll see if we can't make some of those other detention days disappear."

"Hello? Mrs. Landis?" Raven called out as they entered the library, the walls covered with bookshelves. Neat rows of tables and chairs filled the middle of the room. The door to the librarian's office was slightly open and they could hear music coming from the small office.

Billy knocked on the door and pushed it open the rest of the way. Four big cartons of books stood against a filing cabinet, but there was no sign of the librarian. A lunch tray sat in the middle of her desk with a half-eaten egg salad sandwich, an open carton of orange juice, and an unopened carton of milk.

"Oh, no," Raven said, pointing at the tray.

"How quickly does the mushroom take effect?" Billy asked, looking back into library, afraid Mrs. Landis was infected and sneaking up on them. "Is it right away?"

Raven shook her head. "I don't know. I don't remember."

Billy nodded to the four library computers along the wall outside Mrs. Landis's office. "You start looking online for whatever you can find about the mushrooms," he said, picking up a field hockey stick leaning against the wall inside the librarian's office door. In addition to being the elementary school librarian, Mrs. Landis coached the girls' field hockey team at Vincent Price High School down the street. "I'll make sure she isn't hiding in here somewhere."

Raven ran to the computer and pulled up Google, hoping the websites she needed weren't blocked. She didn't know how long until the mushrooms turned the adults into zombies, but knew it wasn't long. She laughed as Billy stepped out of Mrs. Landis' office, wearing field hockey goalie equipment, including the gloves and helmet.

"I'm glad she keeps this stuff in her office instead of the girls' locker room at the high school," Billy said, stalking across the library to check behind the old card catalog and filing cabinets. "Ugh, this equipment stinks. I bet you it's never been washed. It's almost as bad as Fritz's mop bucket. Any luck yet?"

Raven shook her head. "No. But I think I can get to the website I need."

"Well hurry. If she's already turned, I don't know much use this equipment will be," Billy said before pausing. "Wait - the people who get turned into zombies by the mushroom – are they fast zombies or slow zombies? Like 28 Days Later, or Night of the Living Dead?"

Raven punched away at the keyboard, ignoring Billy's question, but also unsure of the answer. She really hoped it wasn't fast zombies.

Billy crossed the library, the field hockey stick held at the ready. "Mrs. Landis? Are you back here? Hello, Mrs. Landis..."

He froze when he saw the librarian's feet sticking out from between the filing cabinets and the non-fiction section lining the wall. Ironically, she'd fallen at section 791 in the Dewey Decimal System, her right hand on the shelf with the book, "Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide."

"Mrs. Landis, are you okay?" Billy asked, hoping she'd get up and say she was fine but more afraid she was going to leap to her feet, snarling and drooling. He wasn't that fast to start with, and would be even slower wearing all the goal keeper gear.

"Gggrrrrrrrggghhhhh," she groaned, her face turned away from Billy and against the short blue carpet. "Rrrgguuuuuhhhhh."

Billy backed away slowly, glancing over at Raven at the computer. She was hunched over, typing furiously at the keyboard. "Raven... I hope you have something...."

Mrs. Landis leapt to her feet. Her eyes were bulging and bloodshot, her nose twisted where it had broken when she fell to the floor. A stream of bright red blood ran from her nose, dripping down over her lips. Her mouth was frozen in a snarl, her teeth bigger and sharper than Billy remembered, more like a shark than a librarian. She charged forward, hands outstretched, her fingers like claws tipped with sharp, crimson fingernails.

Oh, crap. It's fast zombies, Billy thought, backing up and raising the field hockey stick in front of himself, wishing it was a lightsaber.

"Mrs. Landis, please, don't make me use this," he said, continuing to back up.

The librarian ran at him and Billy stumbled, tripping over a chair leg and landing flat on his back, the back of the field hockey helmet smacking into the table leg and stunning him. He kept hold of the field hockey stick and raised it across his chest as Mrs. Landis leapt on him, growling and snapping her teeth, bloody drool running from her mouth and dripping through the helmet's face mask.

Billy pushed the stick against her like he was doing a bench press, pushing her away from him. Twice her teeth clicked off the goalie mask and her sharp fingernails scratched against the shoulder pads and chest protector.

"RAVEN!!!! HELP!!!" Billy screamed, trying to throw the teacher off, his arms already shaking.

Orange juice splashed down over Billy as the carton struck Mrs. Landis in the face. She looked up, growling and snarling at Raven. "Billy, now!" Raven shouted.

Billy pushed hard, catching the librarian in the ribs with the field hockey stick, and pushing her off him. He tried to get to his feet and escape but her hands were tangled in the goalie gear straps and he landed on top of her.

"Great idea!" Raven yelled, running across the library. "Hold her still."

"Idea? I fell on top of her," Billy yelled. "Get me loose before she bites me!"

Billy fought against the zombie librarian as Raven ripped open the top of the milk carton and poured it over Mrs. Landis' face, the milk filling her mouth and forcing her to swallow to breathe.

"Are you trying to drown her?" Billy asked. "I thought there was a cure."

"There is. Shut up and watch. Keep her pinned to the floor."

Raven poured the last of the milk over Mrs. Landis's face, trying to get as much as possible in her mouth. A moment later, the librarian stopped struggling. Instead of growling and trying to bite, she started making noises like she was going to throw up. Billy climbed off her as she clutched her stomach and rolled on her side, her flowing skirt wrapped around her legs.

Buuurrrrrpppppppp. Mrs. Landis released a massive burp that stunk of old egg salad and spoiled milk. She belched twice more, green clouds of noxious gas coming from her mouth each time.

"Those are the mushroom spores. It's working," Raven said. "The cure is Vitamin D, like in milk. It will make them sick at first, but if we get them to drink some milk, they should be okay."

Mrs. Landis rose to her knees, her forehead down on the carpet. She burped again, her face nearly as green as the vapors coming from her nose and mouth, then let loose a massive fart that ruffled her skirt like a flag.

"Oh, god, that stinks," Billy said, waving a hand in front of his face and stepping back from the librarian, who continued to burp and fart as the mushroom spores escaped her body. She burped twice more, wiped her sweaty face with one hand, and rose to her feet, leaning on a library table.

“What happened? Billy, why are you dressed like that? And what is the awful smell?” she asked. Her face had returned to normal, though she was pale and sweaty, like she had a fever.

Before they could answer her questions, the recess bell rang and the kids poured back into the hallways, returning to their classrooms.

“Why haven’t the other teachers turned into zombies yet?” Billy asked, looking to Raven.

She shook her head. “I don’t know, unless... Mrs. Landis, did you get your lunch early?”

The librarian wobbled on her feet. “Yes. I’d heard you two would be here during recess. I was having my sandwich and doing the crossword in the newspaper when...when... I don’t know. I don’t know what happened next until a few moments ago.”

“That’s why,” Raven said. “But it means the teachers are probably going to start changing at any time, and they are all back in their classrooms.”

“Yeah, with the kids who don’t know what’s happening,” Billy said.

“What’s going on?” Mrs. Landis asked. “I don’t understand.”

Billy pulled off the goalie helmet. “Mrs. Von Deubel poisoned the egg salad. I saw her do it but Mrs. Dyson didn’t believe me,” he said. “It’s some kind of mushroom, and it turns adults who eat it into bloodthirsty zombies.”

"I...I...I was a zombie?" Mrs. Landis asked, wiping the bloody drool that still ran from her chin. "Ow, my nose hurts. I tried to eat you, didn't I?"

Children's screams echoed down the hallway. Billy picked up the field hockey stick and helmet. "It's okay. Don't worry about it. We've got a school full of kids with almost all the teachers turning into zombies. Raven, what's the plan?"

Raven chewed her fingernail. "I don't know.... There's so many of them...."

"Hey, you can do this," Billy said. "You believed me and figured out the cure. We need to get the zombie teachers to drink milk, but all they want at this point is brains. How do we help them?"

Raven pulled the purple scrunchie from her wrist and tied her hair back in a ponytail. Billy smiled. He'd seen her do this before during baseball and field hockey games, and when she did, she was all business.

"We need more help. Get the other fifth graders to distract the zombie teachers. They should bring the kids here. The library is probably the safest room in the school because we can block the doors. Mrs. Landis and I will go to the cafeteria and get all the milk we can," Raven said, sounding like an Army general commanding her troops.

"What if the teachers get out of the building?" Mrs. Landis asked, returning from her office with two more field hockey sticks, handing one to Raven.

Raven looked at Billy, doubt creeping across her face. "I don't know. If they bite other adults, they'll be infected, too."

"We need to lock down the school," Mrs. Landis said. "There's an alarm in the school office that locks all the doors and calls the police. No one gets in or out until the police arrive. I can press that alarm when we go to the cafeteria."

Raven gave Billy a hug. "Be careful."

"You, too."

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Getting the fifth graders to help was easier than Billy expected. When he arrived at his classroom, Sam, Ella, and Danielle had already subdued Mrs. Dyson. A few minutes after they returned from recess, they realized something was wrong when their teacher fell to the floor and started shaking, then jumped to her feet and attacked the kids in the front row of seats.

Sam had recently received his Boy Scout badge in knot tying, and Ella and Danielle each had lacrosse sticks with them for practice after school. While Ella and Danielle pinned Mrs. Dyson to the floor, Sam used three old jump ropes to bind her hands and feet. The teacher was still snapping her teeth and growling at students while she wriggled on the floor, but she was no longer a threat if the jump ropes held.

Billy gave the orders and the fifth graders leapt into action. They paired up and armed themselves with baseball bats or field hockey and lacrosse sticks from the classroom closet, and swept through the hallways, directing the kids to the library.

Billy, still clad in the field hockey goalie equipment, watched as his classmates take charge, running from classroom to classroom and pushing infected teachers into closets or tying them to chairs with jump ropes and extension cords.

As Billy guided a group of first graders toward the library, the lockdown alarm blared through the hallways as every door leading outside the school clanked shut, the locks engaging. The zombie teachers couldn't escape Romero Elementary School, but at the same time, neither could the kids.

Billy looked down the hallway toward the cafeteria and school office and wondered how Raven and Mrs. Landis were doing.

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Mr. Skinner, the school principal, was short and stocky and always wore pants that were too short and showed off his socks. Today, they were black with tacos and sombreros on them, text down the side proclaiming "Taco Tuesday" even though it was Thursday.

When Raven and Mrs. Landis arrived in the school office, Mr. Skinner was only interested in brain tacos. The school principal had egg salad on this tie and drool running from his mouth onto his shirt. He was trapped in the office, unable to figure out how to turn the doorhandle.

"At least the zombie fungus seems to make them dumber, even if they are fast," Raven said, pointing through the window at Mr. Skinner and Ms. Goodfellow, one of the school secretaries. Her blonde hair, usually in a tight bun at the back of her neck, dangled in front of her face, her crazed blue bloodshot eyes staring at Raven and Mrs. Landis. "Where's the alarm button?"

Mrs. Landis sighed. "Right behind Mr. Skinner."

The big red button was on the wall just outside the door to his private office on the other side of the secretary desks.

"I don't know how we can get to the alarm without being attacked," Raven whispered, peeking behind her down the hallway. Kids from the first and second grade classrooms were rushing toward the library, guarded by her classmates. "We have to keep the teachers in the building."

Mrs. Landis kicked off her low heels. "I'll distract them. As soon as you can, hit that button. It will lock the doors and send the alarm to the police for help."

Before Raven could ask how the librarian was going to distract her zombie colleagues, Mrs. Landis threw the door wide open and ran at Ms. Goodfellow, cross-checking the secretary with the field hockey stick and turning toward Mr. Skinner. The principal growled and gnashed his teeth, claw-like hands reaching for Mrs. Landis as she approached him, Ms. Goodfellow hot on her tail.

Raven watched in awe as Mrs. Landis, the mild-mannered librarian who usually wore bright pink lipstick and nail polish, attacked the principal, barreling into him, smashing him with her field hockey stick, and knocking him backward. He was several inches taller and at least a hundred pounds heavier than she was, but she lowered her shoulder into his flabby midsection and pushed him back into his office. Ms. Goodfellow followed, clawing, and scratching at Mrs. Landis' thick, wool sweater.

Mrs. Landis spun, releasing the principal and dodging Ms. Goodfellow, holding the crazed secretary at bay until the two zombies were trapped in Mr. Skinner's office. Mrs. Landis kicked the door closed behind her, locking herself in with the two bloodthirsty zombies.

Raven ran to the alarm and punched the button. Fire alarms sounded around the school, followed by the heavy clunk of doors locking. Mrs. Landis stood at the door to Mr. Skinner's office, the two zombies ignoring her and clawing at the window looking out over the office.

"Mrs. Landis, come on, we can get you out of there," Raven cried, tears running down her cheeks.

"It's okay, dear," the librarian said, holding her wrist up to the window so Raven could see the bite mark. During the scrum, one of the two zombies had bitten her, reinfecting her with the mushroom spores.

"I'll be back. I'm going to get the milk and you'll be okay," Raven yelled as Mrs. Landis's eyes grew bloodshot, her hands turning to claws as the zombie spores took hold, her mouth twisting into a bloodthirsty sneer. A moment later, the librarian was gone, replaced by another mindless brain-hungry zombie.

"I promise, I'll be back," Raven cried.

Raven picked up her field hockey stick and stopped at the secretary's desk, grabbing a sharp letter opener before running from the office, heading for the cafeteria. She scratched at the wooden field hockey stick with the letter opener as she ran.

Aside from the fire alarms screeching, the cafeteria was quiet. Raven wasn't sure what she expected. Zombie teachers roamed the hallways, searching for students, groaning, and drooling, occasionally bumping into each other, and lashing out with clawed fingers and teeth. Mr. O'Reilly, the art teacher, had a nasty, bleeding

gash across his cheek from Mrs. Templeton after he bumped into her in the hallway and she turned, swinging a clawed hand at his face.

Milk. I've got to get to the milk, Raven thought, scurrying through the maze of cafeteria tables and toward the kitchen. The milk was stored in the big, walk-in refrigerator in the back of the kitchen, next to the walk-in freezer. She'd seen the milk being unloaded before when she was getting ice for Sam after he got hit in the eye with a softball during gym.

Raven stayed low and moved as fast as she could, praying her shoes wouldn't squeak on the kitchen's tile floor.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mrs. Von Deubel growled from the door to her office just off the kitchen. The lunch lady wasn't wearing her usual pink shirt and pants but wore a black cloak, the peaked hood covering long, grey tangled hair. She looked even older than usual, her eyes bulging, her nose long and hooked with a massive, hairy wart on it.

"Umm...I....I...." Raven mumbled, searching for an answer. She'd believed Billy when he said Mrs. Von Deubel was a witch but had no idea she looked like this. The cafeteria lady had turned into an evil hag from a Grimm fairy tale.

"Get her!" the witch cried, cackling as Fritz stepped from behind Raven and grabbed her, pinning her arms to her sides. Her field hockey stick fell to the floor.

"Why are you doing this?" Raven yelled at the witch, struggling against Fritz's grip. Despite his small size, the old man was strong.

"Why? Why? I'm doing this because I hate children, that's why," Mrs. Von Deubel cried out. "Children are the problem with this world. You've pushed my sisters into ovens and laughed as they baked alive. You melted my cousin with a bucket of water. You dropped a house on my auntie and stole her shoes. You snuck into my sister's garden and swiped her magical beans. And when you do bad things, you blame us. How many witches have burned at the stake because naughty children made up stories about the old lady who lives at the end of the lane? That's why, my darling, that's why."

Mrs. Von Deubel pointed at the walk-in freezer with her wooden spoon. "Put her in the freezer, Fritz. After a few hours in there she'll be a nice frozen popsicle for our zombies after they finish with her friends."

Fritz turned to push Raven toward the freezer, let out a grunt, and fell to the floor, releasing her. Raven spun around to find Billy holding his field hockey stick like a baseball bat after clobbering the janitor in the back of the head.

"Run!" he yelled, pushing Raven out of the way as Mrs. Von Deubel pointed the handle of her wooden spoon at them, a bolt of blue lightning crashing across the room and striking Billy in the chest, freezing him in place. He was awake and breathing, his eyes wild and afraid, but he couldn't move. The lights in the kitchen flickered from the sudden flow of electricity through the air.

"I'll just have to do it myself," the witch cackled, turning her attention to Raven, and raising her spoon. Electricity crackled in the air as she delivered another lightning bolt toward the two fifth graders.

Rather than freezing Raven as it had Billy, the blue bolt of electricity froze in the air, held at bay by the field hockey stick the girl snatched from where she dropped it.

Runes and symbols carved into the field hockey stick glowed orange in the kitchen's dim light, pulsing with magic as Raven caught the witch's lightning bolt and threw it back at her. The electricity struck the metal door jam, bubbling and burning off the paint and exploding the cinderblocks around it.

Mrs. Von Deubel stared at the girl, shocked by the sudden turn of events. Somehow the girl's field hockey stick had been imbued with magical power. Not only was it powerful, but the girl knew how to wield it.

Raven grinned at the witch. "Surprised? My mom and aunties taught me a few things, just in case."

"Stupid girl. You know nothing," Mrs. Von Deubel scoffed, stepping out of the office doorway, and raising her spoon wand. Orange fire erupted from it, growing, and expanding until a snake of flame swirled through the air, hissing and spitting fireballs at Raven. The girl sidestepped the attacks, swatting the fireballs back toward the witch like batting practice.

"We'll see about that," Raven said, swinging her field hockey stick around her head, the nearby sink full of dirty dishwater soaring across the kitchen, splashing the witch but not extinguishing the snake.

Mrs. Von Deubel laughed at Raven's attempt to stop her, sneered at the girl, and muttered a spell, her magic growing as the snake grew stronger. The kitchen fire sprinklers rained down over them, steaming as the water hit the snake. The witch

raised her wand, her eyes glowing with angry magic when the metal cart slammed into her side, nearly knocking her off her feet.

Billy pushed the heavy cart as hard as he could, trying to ignore the magical battle between Raven and the witch. Mrs. Von Deubel fell onto the low cart and the fire snake dissolved, the sprinklers extinguishing it as the witch was distracted. Billy shoved the cart toward the walk-in freezer.

Raven swung her field hockey stick and the freezer door swung open just as the cart arrived. Billy dumped the stunned witch into the freezer as Raven threw Fritz in as well before slamming the door closed. Raven pressed her field hockey stick to the door and electricity sparked and glowed, welding the door closed.

“That should hold them for a little while,” Raven said, her field hockey stick smoking.

“Um, when were you going to tell me that you’re a witch?” Billy asked. “That might have been useful information when all of this started. That was some real Harry Potter shit.”

“Sorry. It’s been a family secret for a long time. Please don’t tell anyone,” she replied. “I’m not supposed to do magic outside of the house.”

Billy gave her a fist bump. “Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me. Besides, I think your mom will agree this was an emergency. Has your field hockey stick always been enchanted?”

Raven gave him a small smile. “It helps a little on faceoffs and penalty shots. Let’s get the milk and get back to the library.”

Billy pulled open the door to the walk-in refrigerator, laughing at Mrs. Von Deubel's screams of anger in the adjoining freezer. Dozens of plastic milkcrates were stacked against the wall, filled with hundreds of pints of plain, chocolate, and strawberry milk, plus more than a dozen gallons jugs.

"I'm glad we have so much milk, but I don't know how we're going to get them to drink it," Raven said, beginning to load crates onto the cart.

"Leave that to me. I've got a plan."

#

A headcount confirmed all students were secure in the library, as well as the handful of teachers who hadn't eaten the poisoned egg salad.

"We should just wait for the police to arrive," Mr. Jenkins, a fourth and fifth grade social studies teacher argued. He'd brought a salami and onion sandwich for lunch instead of the egg salad, and everyone could still smell it on his breath. "They are trained and equipped to handle situations like this."

"Zombies? They are trained and equipped to deal with zombies?" Mrs. Porter asked.

Billy stepped into the middle of the argument while the students gathered by grade around the room. It was Sam's idea to keep them all together, plus, the kids were accustomed to it from normal fire drills.

"We can't just wait for the police to kick down the door," Billy said. "Once they realize it's zombies, the police will go all Walking Dead and start shooting them in the

head. Do you want to stand by and watch them get shot, knowing we could have helped them?"

"So, what's the plan?" Mrs. Porter asked. "How are you going to get them to drink milk when all they want to do is bite?"

Billy smiled and called out to the fifth graders working in the storage room. "Heavy artillery."

Six fifth-graders outfitted in HydroSoaker water blasters stepped out of the room like a squad of commandos. The heavy-duty, pressure-driven squirt guns were connected to backpack tanks.

"Each one carries 2 gallons and can fire a stream of milk 10 yards at full pressure," Billy said. "We used them in science class last year and they've been sitting in the closet ever since. We also have fifteen of the regular HydroSoaker blasters with the small tanks that can be switched out."

"This is insane," Mr. Jenkins mumbled, wiping his sweaty, bald head. "We should just wait here. It's safe here."

"I think Mr. Jenkins should stay here and look after the little kids," Raven said, picking up one of the blasters and loading a dozen pints of milk into her backpack. "We're not forcing anyone to go out there. But we can't let the police shoot the teachers just because we're too afraid to help."

Billy was glad to see Raven tie her field hockey stick into the straps of her backpack. She couldn't use it in front of anyone else without revealing her secret, but if things went bad, she'd be their best hope to get back to the library.

The fifth-graders with the water blasters divided into two squads, followed by fourth-graders with refills and backpacks filled with pints of milk they would lob over the front line like grenades. Raven and Billy stayed together, planning to rescue Mrs. Landis a second time. The route also led them past the gym, where they expected to run into Mr. Fletcher, the muscular, hairy gym teacher who'd eaten three big egg salad sandwiches.

The students cleared the classrooms one by one, advancing through the hallways and not letting any zombie slip through their dragnet. As the zombies growled and bit at the students, the blasters delivered streams of milk, soaking the zombies and forcing them to drink the spray hitting them in the face. The fourth graders threw opened pints of milk over the front line, splashing the zombies and getting their attention, turning them toward the blasters.

Each zombie they came across was soaked and drank enough milk to overcome the mushroom spores polluting their minds. As the teachers fell to the floor, shocked by the mushroom spores, third graders delivered pints of milk to them to drink to finish the cure. The kids wore clips over their noses to block out the stink of rancid milk and egg salad burps and farts from the recovering teachers. The hallway echoed with monstrous farts and belches from teachers spread across the floor.

Billy and Raven's squad checked the gym for Mr. Fletcher, but when they couldn't find him, they moved on to the school offices. A few minutes later, Mrs. Landis, Mr. Skinner, and Ms. Goodfellow were all on the principal's office floor, soaked in milk, complaining of the smell from their poisoned egg salad farts, and starting to return to themselves.

Four local police cars lined the sidewalk, red and blue lights flashing as the police officers waited for back up, their guns at the ready. They hadn't received any word from inside the school, but also hadn't heard any noises that made them think there was an emergency requiring them to rush inside without back-up.

The rest of the fourth and fifth graders arrived at the school office after clearing their hallway, rejoining Billy and Raven's squad.

"All good?" Billy asked.

Sam nodded. "Mr. Abernathy gave us a hard time because his wig slid down over his face, but Anna used a lacrosse stick to pull it away and we got him good," Sam said. "We gave all of the teachers more milk to drink as they recovered, just in case."

"Good thinking," Raven replied. "I guess we should let the police in now."

"We haven't found Mr. Fletcher," Billy said. "He's the one I'm most worried about. He was a monster even before the egg salad. Mrs. Von Deubel and Fritz should still be trapped in the kitchen freezer."

Mrs. Landis, recovered from her second zombie infection, entered the security system passcode and the school doors unlocked and swung upon. The police aimed their guns at the door, unsure what was coming out when the fourth and fifth graders exited, led by Principal Skinner.

"What happened here?" one of the officers asked, putting away his gun.

"I...I... I don't know," Mr. Skinner said, confused and drinking the pint of chocolate milk one of the students pushed into his hand.

"The lunch lady poisoned the egg salad at lunch," Billy said, walking to the front of the students, his HydroSoaker over his shoulder like a soldier returning from a mission. "It turned the teachers into zombies, but we took care of it."

The deputy removed his sunglasses and looked doubtfully at the kids, still carrying the water blasters. "Zombies? Really?"

Screams echoed from the school entrance and kids scrambled away as Mr. Fletcher, the gym teacher, roared and grabbed the nearest student, Anna, a second grader with blonde pigtails wearing a Power Puff Girls t-shirt. He was even bigger than Billy remembered, wearing too-short gym shorts and a Romero Elementary School tank top.

The police were stunned, staring wide-eyed at the massive zombie gym teacher as he picked up Anna and opened his mouth to bite. His bloodshot eyes bulged, and his mouth was filled with razor-sharp teeth.

Six sprays of milk splashed Mr. Fletcher in the face as the fifth-graders circled around him. He sputtered and shook his head, trying to avoid the milk like a dog getting sprayed in the face by a hose, all the while growling and raising his free arm to try to ward off the milk but refusing to drop Anna.

One by one the milk sprays fell to a trickle as the backpacks ran out of ammunition. "Someone do something!" one of the teachers screamed. The police were still confused, looking at each other for some direction.

Pints of milk rained down on the gym teacher as the fourth-graders launched the last of their supply, though he didn't seem to be drinking enough to affect him. The zombie gym teacher turned his attention back to Anna and opened his mouth wide,

big, vicious teeth preparing to chew into her throat when the second grader pulled a pint of strawberry milk from her backpack and shoved it into his mouth.

“Suck on that!” she yelled, kicking him in stomach as the zombie teacher’s teeth bit through the container and his mouth was flooded with pink milk, forcing him to drink.

Fletcher wobbled on his feet, farting a massive cloud of green gas from beneath his shorts as his New Balance tennis shoes slid on the milk-wet sidewalk. Anna elbowed him in the stomach, making him release her as he was overcome by belches and farts as the milk worked its magic against the mushroom spores. The gym teacher let loose one last massive fart before falling into the shrubs.

“Get him some more milk, stat!” Sam yelled. “He needs at least a quart to make sure he’s cured.”

#

Mrs. Von Deubel and Fritz were gone, but there was enough leftover egg salad to prove what occurred that day at Romero Elementary School. The weld along the door that initially held them failed under the magical onslaught from inside the freezer.

Billy and Raven were questioned by the police for hours while the Haz-Mat team collected the egg salad, which had congealed in its pan into the shape of a skull.

“How did you get Mrs. Von Deubel into the freezer?” one detective asked. “You said she was a witch and her spoon was her wand?”

The two kids looked at each other, their parents both standing nearby. Raven's mom looked at her nervously.

"Well...." Raven started, trying to find an answer.

"I distracted her," Billy said, jumping in. "I hit her with the cart and Raven tripped her with a field hockey stick. That's how we got her into the freezer."

"Yeah, like Billy said, that's how we did it."

Raven's mother looked a little more relaxed as the interview continued, the kids keeping the story away from any discussion of Raven's powers or her magical field hockey stick.

Principal Skinner, sipping another pint of chocolate milk, ended the interview.

"I think everyone needs to go home," he said. "It's been a long day, and I have to hire a new lunch lady and janitor who hopefully won't try to kill everyone."

Billy raised his hand. "Mr. Skinner?"

The principal looked to the tired, sweaty, milk-soaked fifth-grader who led the charge against the zombies.

"Are we still having the Halloween party at the end of the month?"

Principal Skinner laughed. "Sure. But no zombie costumes. And I promise we'll never serve egg salad in the cafeteria ever again."

The End