

Beau

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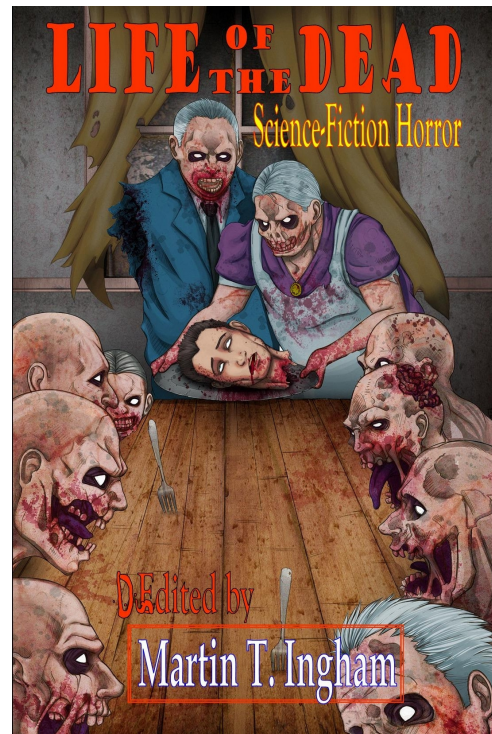
Beau never knew much about time. He knew that the sun went up and the sun went down. Between those times, They filled his bowl and gave him water. They played fetch and took him to the park. Sometimes She would rub his tummy while They watched television, and sometimes He let Beau ride in the car with the window down. Sometimes They left, but They later returned. Beau never worried because, although They did not look like him, They were his pack, and They would always come back for him.

So, the first day the sun rose, and his bowl remained empty, Beau became concerned. She always filled his bowl in the morning and He in the evening. It was quite unlike them to forget. Beau trotted all through the downstairs looking for Them, but found no sign. Though the sun was up, perhaps They were still sleeping. Yes, that was it. Beau would have to run into Their room, leap on the bed, and lick Their faces until They woke, went downstairs, and filled his bowl. Happy in this thought, Beau reached the top of the stairs as fast as his little legs would carry him and ran straight into the bedroom. He crouched and leapt for the bed, missing the first time as he normally did, but made it on the second.

The bed was empty. He sniffed the covers, and they smelled like Them. Perhaps They were hiding. Beau started digging into the bed, but no one sprung up to hug him. He spun in circles on the mattress, thinking. Had They returned last night? How long had his bowl been empty? He knew the sun was up and his tummy ached, but why were They not here to feed him? This was not right. He sat on the bed with a plop, tongue hanging from his mouth as he decided what next to do.

Cat sauntered into the room. If she was surprised by their absence, she gave no indication. Beau barked once to alert her to their problem, but she ignored him, leapt onto the windowsill, and began bathing herself. Maybe this was her fault, Beau thought. Perhaps she had finally done something to Them, as he often feared. He kept barking at her, desperate for her confession. She stared at him a moment, then continued swiping her paw over her head.

This was too much for Beau. He jumped from the bed and ran to the window. Unable to reach her, he stood on his hind legs and barked. Finally, he gave up and laid down on the floor, watching her. She would have to come down sometime. As she licked her side, she glanced out the window and froze. Her twitching tail slowed to a stop. She stared outside for a long time, longer than was natural even for her. Beau lifted his head. When she turned back, her look seemed... mournful.



Beau had known Cat his whole life, and this was not an acceptable expression for her. They were gone, his bowl was empty, and now Cat looked strange. Beau did not feel right. Something was not good, not good at all. His fur prickled the way it did before a thunderstorm or the time He hurt his hand in the kitchen, and She had to drive him away. Beau barked but felt no better. Cat looked at the wall, as if deciding something, then leapt to the floor. Beau followed her from the room. He wanted to know what her look meant, but she did not turn round again until she reached the front door. There, she shared another look. This look conveyed many things, all of which he did not like—apologies, farewells. Then she slipped out through the cat flap. Beau was never to see her again.

Shaken by Cat's sudden departure, Beau ran right back upstairs to the window which had so concerned her. He stood on his hind legs and tried to peek out, but he had never been quite tall enough to do this properly. He climbed onto the nearby chair, then reached his front paws towards the window until they could rest on the sill.

At first, nothing seemed remiss. The neighbor's car, parked across their front lawn, was all wet because Beau's favorite fire hydrant was spraying water up into the air. To Beau, the water looked strange and beautiful, and he realized he was thirsty as well as hungry. As he watched the water, another car smashed into the neighbor's. Beau winced but kept watching. A woman-stranger stumbled from the car, screaming and covered in hurt, as His hand had been when He hurt himself. Beau worried, as he did not like seeing people hurt. He barked, hoping to alert someone, and wagged his tail when he saw the neighbor stumble from her home. She would help. She approached the woman slowly, and the woman-stranger kept screaming. When the neighbor reached her, she held the woman-stranger down and bared her teeth. Beau's stumpy tail stopped wagging as the neighbor gnawed on the woman-stranger the way he did his favorite bone. This was not how people behaved. Beau whimpered and removed himself from the window.

Things were more than wrong, but he did not know why or what to do. He jumped onto the floor and ran in circles before flying downstairs to the cat flap. He knew he should help the stranger-woman, but he could not leave as Cat had. The one time he'd tried to fit through her flap, he'd gotten stuck. They'd had to take him to the vet because his tummy got all scratched and hurt. He knew better than to try again. He ran to the other door behind which the car lived. He pawed at it, but it would not open. He ran back to the room with the television and leapt onto the couch. He looked out the windows, but there were only more people covered in hurt. Though they were only people, they scared him. They seemed sick and made odd noises. They felt like danger, and Beau knew he did not want them to find him.

He ran back upstairs and leapt onto the bed in one great jump—They would have been so proud of him had They seen—and dug at the covers. If he scratched enough, dug deep enough, he would find Them, and They would know what to do. So he dug and spun and scraped the covers aside and, when that didn't work, he shook the pillows and kicked them off the bed and kept digging and digging until, finally, he was out of breath. He sat there, panting, listening to the noises from outside—sirens and screaming—and Beau trembled as he did in a storm. So, like a storm, he crawled under the bed, put his nose between his paws and waited for it pass.

* * *

It did not pass.

The sun went up and down many times since Cat departed, but They never returned and danger never left. Beau spent most of his days on Their bed, waiting to hear the garage door open and the car return home, and Them calling his name. But, once the sirens died, the only sounds Beau heard were of other dogs barking and the creatures moaning. He knew these creatures sort of looked like people, and he always liked people, but they were not people. Despite the other dogs calling to him, he stopped looking outside because the sight of the creatures frightened him. The smells, also, were worse by the windows—smells like the rotting birds Cat used to leave under the porch. Each day, they grew stronger.

The only thing Beau did other than sleep on the bed (and relieve himself in the corner of the room downstairs) was eat. Feeding himself had been easy at first. After Cat left, Beau decided she wouldn't need her food. He managed to climb onto the stool, scramble up on the counter where They kept her dishes, and filled his tummy. The more of her food that he ate, the more food spilled down into the dish. His bowl never did that. It made him so happy, he ate and ate and ate until the bowl tired of him and stopped refilling itself. His tummy felt full for awhile, then upset for a little, then empty again.

Though he sniffed all the cabinets, he could not find more food, and the sun went up and down a few times before he braved Their cupboard. He knew he was not supposed to go through Their food, but his tummy grew more empty. After Them, the thing he loved most was food, and They were not here for him to love. He nosed open the door and reached all the delightful treats They had denied him. But these meals were as short lived as his legs because he could not reach past the bottom shelf.

At the very top, where he could not reach, sat a bag of his food. He could recognize that bag anywhere. When he didn't feel like sleeping on or under the bed or listening to the creatures outside, he would sit in front of the cupboard, staring up at his bag. His mouth would water as he imagined what it would taste like to bite through the soft paper and crunch the delicious lamb and kibble bits between his teeth. These thoughts, though, did not fill his tummy, and only made him thirsty. The water in the toilets, which had never interested him before, now seemed a delicacy, but that, too, was getting harder to find.

This was how time passed sun up after sun down. Though They did not return, Beau knew that even if he could leave, he would not. He knew that, one day, They would return because, as he would never leave Them, so They would never leave him. He would not be like Cat, no matter how hungry or thirsty he became.

* * *

When Beau first heard the scratching, he thought maybe it was Cat. He rose and flopped down from the bed. He'd been moving slower lately, now that the food was gone and most of the water had vanished. His tummy ached as he took the stairs one at a time, but he paid it little mind. That pain was normal now.

This scratching, though, surprised Beau because for several sun ups and sun downs, the world outside had been quiet. Even the creatures seemed to have migrated, leaving Beau alone in the quiet. Even he did not bark, as breaking the quiet felt strange.

He stuck his nose through the cat flap and sniffed. He heard the scratching again, coming from the place where the car slept, and made his way there. Yes, there was definitely something behind that door, but he could not tell what. It did not sound like Them, but he could not be sure. Beau found his voice and barked once, then twice. The noise stopped. He thought he'd scared it away, but it then sounded again, closer to the door. Beau took a step back but did not run. He would defend Home, as was his job.

The handle turned, and the door swung open. Someone tumbled into the doorway and, slow as Beau, started to right himself. Beau recognized His jacket straightaway and wagged his tail once. Then he stopped.

It looked like Him, yes, but it did not smell like Him. It smelled different. Wrong, like the creatures, and Beau backed away as Not-Him staggered into the kitchen. Beau kept his distance, but Not-Him ignored him. It touched the counters and cabinets, as if searching for something with blind eyes, and moved stiffly, as if afraid of falling. Beau rubbed his nose with his paw, trying to rid the smell, but it remained. It could not be Him, Beau thought, as he stared at its hurt tummy and too-tight skin. No, it could not be.

And yet, it wore clothes like His and the face—what was left—looked like His, and it went and sat in His chair, though it couldn't make the television work. It sat there several minutes, staring at the room as if trying to figure out what it was used for. Beau waited in the hall and watched it for a long time. Not-Him did not move, and neither did Beau, until it reached

down and picked up one of Beau's tennis balls.

Beau couldn't help it. It had been so long since They had played with him. He barked, and it noticed him. Suddenly, Beau was afraid for, until now, his presence had not concerned Not-Him. It looked at Beau for a long time. With its mouth hanging open, Beau could see what looked like pieces of raw meat stuck between its broken teeth. Beau whimpered and stepped back. Then, Not-Him stretched out its arm and dropped the ball. Its milky eyes stared at Beau.

Beau cautiously approached and picked up the ball between his teeth. Not-Him remained still. Very gently, Beau rested his front paws on the edge of the chair and dropped the ball into Not-Him's lap. Then he sat and waited. Not-Him looked at the ball, then at Beau, and dropped the ball again. Beau retrieved it and Not-Him dropped the ball again. And again. And again. And with every throw, Beau forgot the smell and the hurt. The danger disappeared, and he waited eagerly for the ball. And Beau knew now that this was Him because this was how He and She made Beau feel, as if the world were perfect.

The ball rolled down the hall, and Beau chased it, forgetting his empty tummy and weak legs until he slipped on the smooth floor. With the ball just out of reach, Beau remembered how very tired and hungry and thirsty he was. He wanted to return the ball, but this seemed beyond him now. The danger crept back in. Would he no longer want Beau if Beau could not fetch?

Slowly, He got out of the chair and shuffled to the kitchen. Beau found the strength to follow and lumbered towards Him as He picked up Beau's bowl and turned on the faucet. Water spluttered then poured out and filled the bowl. He set the bowl on the ground but left the faucet running. Water spilled all over the floor, and Beau drank eagerly. It tasted like stale eggs, but it was water. So grateful was Beau that he didn't notice He had moved to the cupboard until the bag of dog food fell to the floor beside him. It first startled Beau. It could not be, could it? He sniffed the paper. His mouth watered. Beau tore into the bag and devoured the food. It was better than he imagined. This—this was happiness.

As he ate, he felt a cold hand pat him on the head. And then it didn't matter where They had been or for how long because at least He was back, He had filled Beau's bowl, and He gave Beau water, and everything would be all right now. The world was okay now.

The bag was half-empty when Home filled with voices Beau did not recognize. People-strangers rushed in. They were not hurt and did not smell as He did, but Beau did not approve. No one could come into Home without Their permission. Beau barked and growled, but the people-strangers stared only at Him. One lifted a dark toy that released a loud bang. Beau jumped as He fell, a new hurt to His head. Beau whimpered and pawed but He—with a treat in his hand—never moved again.

Beau growled at the people-strangers as they went through Their cabinets and Their things. Only when he began to bark in earnest did the stranger-people look at him. They spoke to each other, but Beau only understood a few words like *catch*, *dog*, *food*. The one with the bad toy bent down and tried to coax Beau forward. Beau lunged and bit him on the hand. They shouted and grabbed for him, but Beau ran out the door, through the car's room, into the street, and on. He ran as far and as fast as his body told him to go, until Home was long out of sight.

Beau soon found others like himself and made a new pack. He learned to avoid the stranger-people and developed Cat's taste for birds and mice. Most times, the creatures ignored him. But, every time he saw one, he remembered Them. And he knew They had been special because, unlike the others of his pack, They had once more returned to him, as he always knew They would.

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