

Double dead: *adj.* Meat that comes from an animal that has died of disease. Does not pass the necessary sanitary standards.

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TOMES OF THE DEAD

Double Dead

CHUCK WENDIG



ABADDON
BOOKS

PART ONE
PREDATOR



CHAPTER ONE

The Vampire Awakens

THE BLOOD CRAWLED through tight channels and shunted cracks like a rat in a maze. It descended through shattered concrete. It crept down a length of rusty pipe.

Eventually it found an opening and dangled free in darkness before becoming unmoored and falling through shadow.

The first drop landed on the man's nose. Which did nothing.

The second dotted the flaky, cracked flesh of his forehead.

That also did nothing.

But the third drop. The third drop was the magic drop, tumbling out of darkness and falling upon his desiccated lips, from there easing down into his frozen, arthritic maw, moving past rotten teeth and touching the dark dry nub that once was a tongue.

When the blood touched that blackened stub, it came alive with a sharp sound: the sound of a spoon back cracking the surface of crème brûlée.

The tongue twitched. Swatches of crispy tongue-flesh fell

away like flakes of char. Then the tongue did more than twitch: it flapped, flailed, seeking, needing.

The mouth widened.

The drops of blood from above became a steadier flow. The tongue shot out from the mouth, extended far, too far, *impossibly* far—and like a child catching snowflakes, it caught the blood.

It wasn't long before the blackened tongue was blackened no more. Now it was pink, bright, stained with red.

The mouth opened wider as the blood now fell in an unsteady rain.

THE SOUND OF an animal's cries and the coppersy, greasy taste on Coburn's tongue cut down through his dreams like a machete: he reached for them, the animal's cries mingling with a child's cries, the memory of wallpaper and linoleum soon replaced with a wall of darkness and the feel of stone beneath the island of Manhattan.

He lurched forward. His spine cracking, his bones brittle as sticks.

Blood fell from above. He cupped his hands—around his mouth so hard to move, the fingers like the stiff legs of dead bugs—and made sure not to miss a single drop of the sweet stuff. He was a junkie, a blood junkie, a Noo-Yawk *vampire* who thrived on this stuff and he hadn't had it in—well, he didn't know how long, but judging by the condition of his body, it had been a long fucking time.

What fell in his mouth wasn't enough. Not nearly. He needed more. Would kill to have it—and had in the past, many times, too many times to count.

He tried to speak, but found his voice lost in the dead puckered flesh of his throat, his vocal cords naught but withered strings.

Coburn needed the blood.

And so he decided to climb.

* * *

COBURN MOVED LIKE a spider. Fingers mooring in the cracks of broken cement and crumbling brick, hauling himself up while still craning his neck so as not to miss any drop from the tiny waterfall of blood. When he found its source—the end of a rusted sewer pipe—he nursed on it like a baby.

It still wasn't enough.

Coburn pried his mouth from the blood—a task that borrowed from his last vestiges of will, a task that set off alarms and screams from the monster inside his head: *Go back, you're going to miss it, you need it, you fucking ape you can't exist without it, you're a moron, you deserve to die—to die for real this time, to die for good.* And yet he persevered despite the cat-calls of his own worst survival instincts, letting the human mind—the one with reason and sense and the ability to see beyond a few drops of blood—take over from the reptilian fiend that wrenched at the puppet strings.

He swung out, using what little strength his dead body still possessed, and swung along pipe after pipe, a nightmarish subterranean jungle gym.

Then: he smelled it.

A faint breeze from above.

On it, the scent of blood. And a curious smell of rot.

Echoing down through the hole again came the animal's cries, a kind of panicked bleating. Coburn hoisted himself through the hole, his mouth wet with blood, his jaw tight with hunger.

TO HIS HUMAN mind, nothing here made sense. It was like that old game: *One of these things is not like the other, one of these things does not belong.* But it wasn't just one thing. It was a metric shitload of things. It was *all* things.

Coburn hoisted himself up into an old movie theater that tickled the back of his memory somewhere behind the wall of hunger that dominated him. The theater lay in ruins—the ceiling was half-caved in, the scent of dust and mold sat heavy in the air. Scorch marks crept up the walls, blasted across the

floor in a sooty asterisk. The screen itself hung in tatters. Rows of seats had fallen to disrepair.

But the thing that really twisted the noodle was the deer.

And the two men eating it.

The beast was a whitetail buck. Not standing, so much as leaning against the broken row of seats, its head thrashing, the creature crying out some sound between a child's whimper and a beastly grunt. One man slumped against the creature's haunches, biting into it the way another man might bite lustily into an apple. The other stood at the front, pawing at the whitetail's face, fruitlessly snapping at the thing's neck—but the animal, alive but weakened, kept jerking its head away from the attacker's mouth.

Coburn didn't understand one lick of what was going on.

And frankly, he didn't give a shit.

Because *sweet goddamn* was he hungry.

He moved to feed. The deer no longer interested him. The blood of beasts was functional, but barely.

The blood of men, however, was king.

Coburn, his skin still tight, his bones and muscles still uncertain, stepped up atop a row of seats and almost fell—but he quickly regained his balance and walked across the seat-tops toward his prey.

He came first to the man chowing down on the deer's ass, wrapped his hands around the fool's skull and snapped the head back with a sharp, wet crack.

The smell hit him in the face like a thrown brick.

Rot. Decay. The sour stink of a wound gone bad.

We don't drink from the sick, said that horrible little voice inside Coburn's head, but really, hell with that voice, and so he bit down anyway.

Black blood as thick as motor oil filled his mouth. It tasted of pus and of pain, but worst of all it tasted *worthless*.

See, humans possess a spark of something. Coburn didn't care to ruminate on what that spark was: the divine, the soul, a glimmer of sentience, a social security number, whatever. Fact was, *life* was bright and alive inside every man, woman

and child, and that glory dwelled—nay, *thrived*—in the blood. It was why the blood of a human was infinitely better than that of a beast: animals had an ember, a spark, but only a fraction of the total fire.

The blood of man offered the whole package. Life in claret sweetness.

This blood had none of that. It was dead. Inert. Diseased.

Black as tar and worthless as baby shit.

Coburn's head snapped back, recoiling with the disappointment of a starving man who'd just bit into a plastic fruit. His victim struggled, hissing, the hole in his throat gurgling and bubbling.

The man turned and lunged for Coburn with long, yellowed nails. His face was half-caved in, calling to mind a rotten pumpkin. A gobbet of super-fresh venison sat flat on the dead man's tongue, the meat thick with tufts of deer hair.

The man was dead.

Dead-dead. Not 'dead' like Coburn was dead.

But real dead. Double dead.

Shit.

The vampire had little time to parse. The gurgling corpse lunged at Coburn, letting go of the deer. He wrapped his hands around Coburn's throat and turned the tables: Coburn thought he'd be doing the feeding, but this dead sonofabitch was hungry, too. And strong.

That was when things went sideways.

The deer, sensing opportunity, kicked out with its back legs. A hoof caught Coburn's rotting assailant in the temple, going through the fucker's head like a broomstick through a block of softened butter. Whatever bullshit facsimile of life managed to animate him before was now gone, and the hands around Coburn's throat went slack.

The whitetail was none too happy about this and continued to thrash. It bucked its head and drove one of its antler points through the chin of the other feeder trying to get a taste up front.

Coburn backpedaled, almost tripped over a seat as the deer panicked. He watched, equal parts starving and stymied, as

the deer struggled—it had stuck its attackers at both ends. Antler under one’s chin, foot through the other’s head.

And it couldn’t get free.

It was then that Coburn’s veins tightened. His dead heart stirred: not with life, but with a hollow paroxysm of *need* and *want*.

He stood.

He reached out.

He pressed his fingertips together, forming them to a single point.

Then Coburn corkscrewed his hand fast—faster than any human could manage—into the deer’s side, up under the ribcage, and grabbed hold of the creature’s heart and crushed it like it was a pomegranate.

The vampire removed his fingers, licked them clean, then pressed his face tight against the hole and drank. It tasted of grass and musk and animal stink but he didn’t care, because at least it wasn’t black blood, dead blood, *useless* blood.

The blood filled his throat, and for a moment, all was right in the world.



CHAPTER TWO

The Vampire Reflects

SITTING SLUMPED UP against a deer corpse, framed by two rotting pumpkin-heads, his mouth rimmed with gluey red, Coburn had time to reflect.

His first reach for memory was a stunted attempt: in the shadow of his own mind he found only broken pieces, like a photograph sliced into ribbons by a razor blade. He saw a flash of blonde hair: pigtails twisting, evading his grasp. The sound of a television announcer: *gonna be a rilly big shoe*. A shadow crawling in through the window. Then, time shifted, leapt forward suddenly, showcasing another flurry of images: a camping hatchet, an upturned middle finger, a bearded man, a gout of flame.

Didn't make any sense, and whenever he tried to look deeper, those images turned to roaches and scattered from the light.

But beyond those...

Blood. Excess. A woman laughing. A woman screaming. Limousines that stank of money and leather, and dark alleys

that smelled like rotten garlic and stinking curry. The stars and moon above, always dark, never the sun, the provenance and kingdom of Coburn the vampire. These were the images he knew. These came back to him comfortably. Like a warm blanket felt for in the dark.

It was a life—or an unlife, or whatever it was you cared to call it—bloating to the gills with the most wonderful of sins: gluttony and lust and revenge and all those glorious transgressions. An existence of endless pleasure.

And now, this.

Waking up in a ruined movie theater. Feasting on a dead deer. Attacked by—what? Homeless degenerates? Meth-addled plague victim freakshows who were too stupid or too jacked to know that they were a hair's breadth from death?

“Ain't exactly the—” His throat crackled. He coughed, and *ptoo*-ed a bloody wad of whitetail fur out of his dead throat. “Ain't exactly the Four Seasons.”

Coburn stood. Walked over to a faux-gilded movie poster frame. The poster within was no longer recognizable, covered as it was with rampant mold, but the glass was still surprisingly intact. The vampire examined his reflection.

He didn't look so hot. Cheekbones, sunken. Eyes, too. His skin had started to soften—but some of it still lay cracked, like the skin around his eyes or the flesh betwixt each finger. His hair, once slicked back and lacquered to his skull, was now a hot, frizzled mess. Hell, all his roguish good looks had been run through the gauntlet. Coburn's lips curled into a sneer below his crooked nose.

His time below had ruined a perfectly good thing.

He swatted a fly away from his head, and in doing so, called to attention a curious fact.

“I'm missing a fucking finger,” Coburn said, not sure who he was talking to. Did he always talk to himself? Or had his time underground tweaked his psyche? He didn't know and didn't care, and was instead more interested in his hand.

He held up his right hand, waggled all of his fingers except the middle one. That finger dead-ended in a shriveled stump.

It would regrow. Eventually. Once he had some *real* blood sitting in his gut and churning through his dead heart. The deer blood wouldn't do it. Not strong enough stuff—like light beer or wine coolers, it was a thinned-down version of the real thing. Worse, it wouldn't last long. Give it a couple of nights and he'd be back to starving, and when starvation was on the line, reason and higher thinking were out the window. Go without for too long and it was back to the crispy body, the muscles-gone-rigid.

Which meant it was time to hit the town. Would be easy pickings in this city: it always was. Head down to Times Square or Penn Station, wait for some tourist drunk off the newest Broadway fiasco, sweep them up, do a little of that *voodoo-that-you-do-so-well*, and drink them dry in an alley or a restroom. Then Coburn could clean up a little, because damn if he wasn't nasty-looking.

At least he still had his leather coat—a ratty, weathered thing worn by David Johansen of the New York Dolls, Christmas Eve, 1971. Band's first performance. And his boots: pair of derby swirl Fluevogs with soles that read: 'Resists alkali, water, acid, fatigue, and Satan.'

He looked back over the theater. Tried to remember how he got there. Something moved in the back of his thoughts, like a moth fluttering against a darkened window. But it refused to be pinned.

Coburn would remember. It would just take time.

And blood. It always took blood.

He marched toward the theater's front double doors and threw them open, ready to step into the bright lights, big city, and feast like a fucking king.

THE AVERAGE VAMPIRE had the nose of a pregnant woman: the olfactory sense was dialed up to 11, then the knob was broken off. Truth be told, *all* of a vampire's senses were ratcheted up, but right now the one that mattered most was smell.

The city stank of death.

A crowd gathered outside, as it always did here in the Big Apple. But this crowd wasn't like any other crowd.

This crowd was not alive.

A woman with a missing nose and hair like the tail of a dead horse dragged a broken foot, the bones jutting awkwardly from ruined flesh, a clutch purse still in hand.

A man in construction gear stumbled around in circles, his fat belly bloated with foul gases, his skin marred with the purple striations of death. With a rotten hand—literally rotten, so rotten it was just a mush of meat with bleached finger bones sticking out—he scratched divots in his cheek.

A little boy, his lower half just a squid's beard of guts and meaty fringe, dragged himself across an open manhole, then fell down into the dark.

And it wasn't just them. Dozens right here. Hundreds down the street in every direction. The city, thick with them.

The air, fat with flies.

The city lay dark and still but for the shuffling and mumbling of the damned. No power anywhere. No car horns. No music playing. Coburn couldn't smell food cooking, couldn't feel the subterranean rumble of the subway, couldn't even hear the scurrying of the rats or the fluttering of pigeon wings.

Only the swarm of flies and the slow dance of the dead.

The construction worker pivoted his head toward Coburn. His lower jaw unhinged—not like a snake's jaw but rather like a jaw whose tendons had long turned to mush—and he hissed.

Coburn pirouetted back inside, gently shut the door behind him.

As he closed the door, one final realization crossed his mind.

The city no longer offered a bounty of expected smells: burger grease, exhaust, cologne. But that wasn't the troubling omission.

Coburn couldn't smell blood, either.

No life, no blood.

No blood, no food.

That was not good news.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuck Wendig is a novelist, screenwriter and self-described 'penmonkey.' He sold his first story when he was 18. After working in the computer and role-playing game industries he began scripting TV and film projects, including a horror film script which won him a place at the prestigious *Sundance Screenwriter Lab* 2010.

He's written too much. He should probably stop. Give him a wide berth, as he might be drunk and untrustworthy. He currently lives in the wilds of Pennsylvantucky with wife, dog, and newborn progeny.

Double Dead is Chuck's first novel. His second novel, *Blackbirds*, is due out with Angry Robot Books in May 2012.

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