

## Wicked Life of the Undead

Robert L. Brown

All eyes were suddenly on Luther who dropped one of the large powder containers back into the earth a few feet from the location where he picked it up. The ditch accepted it back into a resting spot. Powder flew up from the crusty tops of the batteries and he was covered with a light dust, his rusty, scraggly beard, his red sweaty flannel shirt, his filthy coveralls all collected their share of the dried acid.

Then Shorty spoke up, still chiseling at the corroded tin casings that had separated the individual cells at one time. My eyes gazed down into the sulfuric pit at this stubby man with his dirty beret and short interlaced beard. He continued to chisel and chatter, the hammer against the cold steel tool, its tip parting small bits of the connected metal, his words blending in. The rusted tin was hard to separate but Shorty knew this task well, it was done every couple of years when the battery ran low and needed to be moved within the pit to find new life in its new earth spot. He chiseled as though he knew this would only be a temporary fix, that next summer he and Luther would be at it again, but he chiseled nonetheless.

There was no shade in the pit, only the promises of shade from the spindly arms of the dead oak in the middle of the open area behind them and their pit. Three old cars surrounded its base, its four foot diameter testimony to its proud heritage before progress had killed it. The rust on the old road warriors was heavy now, barely able to adhere without falling to the dusty earth below.

The grass had long since gone away from the circular opening behind the house, except for a few tall weeds nothing lived in the opening. Even the rodents abandoned this hideout years ago, no one could figure it out.

Just to the right of the pit being restructured was the phone room, the reason for all of the toil. The pit actually seemed to go right under the corner of the room itself. No one knew for sure how this contraption worked, only that it worked by using the juice produced by the earthworks. How much energy was made, nobody knew that either but it was enough to power up the old handset. The glass of the side window of the room was bumpy from what sand remained in its makings and it reflected the heat of the midday sun that beat down on the pit workers, Luther and Shorty. I could see them in the glass with the dead opening behind them, Luther always and Shorty when he moved down toward the phone room on occasion. It seemed to me that this whole place was dead--and why not, progress had brought in the phone system but it was those damn batteries and their dried acid that stunk like rotting flesh. This was progress alright. Even the wooden side of the phone room drooped towards the pit, the pit somehow sucking it into two foot depth.

The old shed to the left of the opening was in bad disrepair. Its lath sheathing was decayed and even nails could not hold it back from the never-ending battle against sag. Weeds grew nearly up to its eaves, the rusting underbelly of the metal roof seemed to beacon them but they probably sought shelter for their withering leaves from the sweltering heat of the sun.

Shorty kept on pounding the hammer against the butt end of the cold chisel. Luther dug below each corner of the battery cell until it was loosened from its tomb, then he could pick it up and drop it a couple of feet from its place within the pit. Sometimes the sound of the weeds stretching for freedom was loudest of all.

It would take a long time to finish the job of parting and then moving the ten or so cells. Then the rotten wooden top could be put back on the pit, after a few nails were put into its frame.

Luther moved another cell then loudly proclaimed that it was about to come back to life. Shorty and I met in gaze and he shrugged off Luther's cry as that of an old mindless drunk. He still had three or four more cells to separate and even if life was suddenly back into the cells, it would not be enough to power the phone, but Luther seemed happy about it. Shorty knew that he would not be able to contain Luther's celebration but also that Luther would work all the harder knowing that their drudgery was going to be fruitful.

Luther seemed stunned by the sudden rush of juice through the cells of the battery. Even the air smelled like something burning, an eery salty smell. Luther was probably right, the cells had come back to life but Shorty kept on chiseling. Now the danger came, moving the remaining cells into position next to the live ones would be risky business. They could both be shocked if they didn't drop each remaining cell into position without the tin casing ends together. They both knew this but they kept on prying and parting the fused metal hoping to quickly loosen up the next cell all the while knowing that it was burned into the earth.

In the window of the phone room I vaguely could make out the image of fingers grasping the crank on the side of the box. The fingernails struck me as odd--long and twisting like the colored glass in a crystal paperweight I once saw. The hand turned the crank around a few times, I could hear the bells inside of the unit chiming. A wickedly long chin came up close to the speaker of the box but suddenly pulled away and another hand slammed the transmitting device into its brass holder-- not working yet. Not enough juice-- not enough life around here. As the sun beat down on my flannel shirt, its heat seemed to melt my flesh beneath it, and I suddenly realized that this place was Hell. How could Shorty and Luther have made a living here? Did they sometimes think that they might have done something else or had the acid done its job on them too? I knew

when I had found a place that I did not want to stay in and this was it, but my being here somehow added life to the setting. Even the old man inside knew it when I came around. Maybe he thought I was responsible for the renewed life in his beloved battery or maybe he just knew that I didn't hinder Shorty or Luther as they worked. My blue jeans seemed to contain the sun's heat and I sweated beneath them but I knew how hot it must seem to Shorty, chiseling away at those holey and rusty cell walls. He sweated little that I could see but every drop was being soaked up by the cloud of dust in the pit. His face was covered with white clots of acid and dark spots of earth. Life for him must be misery now.

Luther at least got a few breaks from his toil. He pried up on the casings hoping that Shorty's last hit had been the one that finally busted the cell walls loose. He could rest a little between his heavy lifting and moving of the cells but he knew that dropping the tubs into place was a skill that only his hand could accomplish, and that made him proud to be there.

This is how I left them, the two grunts, working at that battery. I knew that they were going to be alright. Luther knew his job well enough and soon the pit would be covered up again. I turned to go and realized how important Luther's skill really was. Life or death--it all depended on Luther's judgement. How absurd and wicked this thought struck me. This dirty, sweaty man really held the life of Shorty, the old man, and the phone in his hands. Nothing else mattered, the opening was already dead, the oak was gone, only the battery lived here in this place. Was it Hell? Was it Luther's place to control, this burning spot on Earth? He was such a soft-spoken soul, could he be capable of evil? He only looked and smelled wicked, I thought, all the time wondering if my own life somehow mirrored Shorty's or the old man's. But I was truly alive, I could feel the heat, could they? I saw the need for repairs, did they even care? Somewhere there was an answer but I knew that this was not the place to find it, this land of the lifeless, this whirlpool of death.

## 23

### Cornfield Review