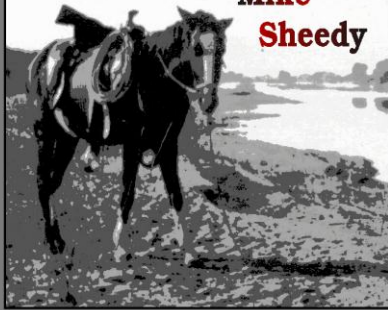


Grayscale

**The Living
the **Dead** and
the Double-Dead**

A zombie novel by

**Mike
Sheedy**



Collection

Chapter 9 of *The Living, the Dead, and the Double-Dead* appeared in a 2012 issue of *Tales of the Talisman*.

The print novel is available at [Amazon](#).
There's also a Kindle version at [Amazon](#).

This PDF is free to pass around, but you must have my permission to use its contents in any other way.

[Contact](#)

Copyright © Mike Sheedy
mikesheedy.com

The Piñata Man and The Rupture

Sometimes kids get bored and string up a zombie, so I didn't think there was anything strange when I found the man's body hanging from the tree. It was like a hundred others I'd seen. Kids call them piñatas and beat them with sticks until they get bored again and move on.

Hanging a zombie only kills it if the neck snaps, but the piñata treatment breaks legs and feet, so I always decap the bodies if they're still twitching. That's what I was planning to do with the one I came across that afternoon, but it didn't twitch after I cut it down. It hit the ground and lay still, like it was double-dead, and I was about to move on when I noticed something strange.

I rode ahead, stopped my herd and rode back. I dismounted and took a closer look at the dead man's neck, and sure enough there was bruising around the rope burn. The man had been alive at the time of the hanging. And his neck wasn't broken, so he wasn't double-dead.

I checked for I.D., but the one pocket in the man's faded blue coveralls that didn't have a hole in it was empty. He wasn't wearing any jewelry either—a ring or something that might be engraved with a name — and there was nothing on the ground around him to tell me who he was.

The ground showed hoofprints from several different horses, but one set of prints cut deeper into the dirt under the hanging branch than they did a few steps forward. Which meant the horse had been led out from beneath the dead man. A lynching. Or maybe a legal execution, but either way I thought I'd better look around some more, in case I ran into questions later.

There were some bushes on the other side of the tree, and I was studying them when I saw a flash of pink. I drew my pistol and said, "Whoever's

hiding in there, stand up or I fire.”

A young boy stood up. “Don’t shoot, mister.” He looked to be about nine or ten and was wearing blue coveralls that were as faded as the dead man’s.

“Tell the one in the pink to stand up too.”

“She is standing up.”

The boy came forward, parting the bushes, and he stepped out leading a little girl by the hand. She looked six or seven and was wearing an old red dress washed down to pink.

“Don’t shoot,” she said, “and don’t hurt our pa.”

I holstered my gun as they walked to the body on the ground. They stood looking down at it and I was glad I’d removed the rope when I examined the neck. I asked if they saw the hanging.

“No, sir” the boy said. “We got here afterwards. We followed the tracks from the farm.”

“So someone took your dad away from your farm?”

The boy nodded.

“Do you . . . did you live there alone with him?”

“No, sir” the girl said. “Our mama lives there, too. She couldn’t come on account of the baby, but she told us to find Pa.”

They’d found him all right, and I felt sorry for them. I introduced myself and learned the boy’s name was Bryce and the girl was Neechie. Their last name was Plimpton.

Bryce said, “Ma knew they were coming for Pa because yesterday he went to Mr. Burley’s to sell a hog.”

“So what’s wrong with that?”

“We don’t have a hog.”

“Oh. Your dad cheated Mr. Burley?”

“No, sir. He traded for some lye soap, and he said Mr. Burley got what he paid for.”

“But your father didn’t have a hog.”

“The soap was a lie too.”

It was late in the day so I decided to make camp. I covered the dead man with a blanket and told the kids to gather some firewood. They had the wood ready when I got back from hobbling my herd, and they'd built a ring of stones for a campfire. They were good kids—hard workers and polite—and I thought what a shame it was that their father was dead. A man who could raise kids like that couldn't be all bad.

I unsaddled my horses, and when the fire was going I skinned a rabbit and a squirrel I'd shot earlier. I spitted them and started them cooking. Normally that would have been all I ate, but the kids looked hungry so I opened two cans of beans and set them near the coals to heat.

We sat on a log near the fire while the food cooked, and I told stories about princesses and rainbows and a bunch of other fairy tale crap, but I'm not very good at that kind of thing and I couldn't hold the kids' attention. They kept fidgeting and sneaking glances at their father. The only time they seemed interested in what I was saying was when I made up a story about rutting unicorns and rabid elves.

Then it was time to eat and we fell to. We split the beans and I let them have the whole rabbit and half the squirrel. For dessert I opened a can of fruit cocktail. They split the fruit and I drank the syrup, then Bryce asked me to bring their father back.

"What?" I belched. "You mean sodbust?"

"Yes, sir. Bring him back and icepick him."

"I don't do that."

"Please," Neecie begged. "He's going to come back anyway."

She was right. Their father's neck wasn't broken, and when people die with a healthy brainstem they always come back. Always. Planting them just speeds up the process. The more contact you have with the earth the faster you come back.

Covered with dirt it takes about six hours, while lying out on the open ground takes twelve to twenty-four. Even if you're not touching the ground you'll come back sooner or later, just from the dust blowing through the air and settling on your body. That can take weeks.

"Will you?" Neechie asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

The kids went about cleaning up after the meal and that gave me time to think. Their father was going to come back anyway, whether I sod-busted or not, and if I didn't icepick him he'd come back mean. He wouldn't recognize his kids either, so they'd probably just stand around and let him attack them.

Bryce stoked the fire after they finished cleaning up, then he and his sister both sat beside me on the log and stared at me. They weren't being rude, just waiting for my decision. We sat for a minute or two and then Bryce asked me what made people come back as zombies.

"What'd your father tell you?"

"He said it was because of the scientists."

I said his father was probably right. Those were the last reports to come out on TV before the news stopped. The scientists claimed there was an accident with a ruptured tank at a bioweapons lab, but no one believed them. Not about it being an accident, at least. People said thousands of scientists and government types danced at their own piñata parties in the week after The Rupture.

The sun had set while we were eating, and the stars were coming out, so we all looked up at the sky and talked about stars and planets and outer space until Neechie asked me if that's where they came from.

"Where who came from?"

"The rutting unicorns."

"Oh, well, uh . . . it's getting late. I guess it's time for you two to turn in."

“Will you bring our pa back?” Bryce asked.

I knew I should, but I didn’t feel right about it. I decided to be honest with the kids.

“Wouldn’t it just cause problems if I brought him back? I mean, from what you told me it sounds like your mom already has enough trouble. And besides, she might not *want* your father back as a zombie.”

“But she does,” Bryce said. “When we left she said, ‘Bring that shiftless father of yours back dead or alive.’”

“Oh. Then I guess she knew how things were likely to turn out, if she said dead or alive. But why’d she call him shiftless?”

“Because he never did any work.”

Necie looked at Bryce and said, “He did so. He worked on his puzzles.”

“That wasn’t *real* work,” Bryce said. He looked at me. “He sat on the porch all day doing puzzles. Sometimes he said the words out loud.”

“He did crosswords?”

“Jigsaws. Ma didn’t like it when he said those words.”

I realized I’d been wrong about who’d been doing the good childrearing. It sounded like the mother took care of the kids and did everything else around the farm.

“Then I don’t understand why your mom wants your father back. He might not have done much work before, but he’d do even less now.”

“I thought that too,” Bryce said, “but Ma says he *can’t* duck the work if he’s a zombie. And we need a scarecrow. I have to spend most of my time in the garden shooing birds away, so we’re going to build a dog run and let Pa do the shooing. We already have the wire and chain, and I’m supposed to watch for a dog collar that’ll fit him.”

Necie yawned. It was almost dark, so I spread Jody’s bedroll on a smooth spot of ground. The kids stretched out on it and I laid a blanket

over them.

“Are you going to do it?” Bryce asked.

“I’ll do it. When you wake up in the morning you’ll have your father back. But he’s not going to recognize you.”

I began working on a shallow grave as soon as the kids drifted off to sleep. I used an empty tin can to dig because I don’t carry a shovel. Having a shovel or a grubbing hoe on you can get you branded a sodbuster. So I used a can and it took a half hour to do the burying. Then I spread out my bedroll in a way that would give me a good view of the grave in the firelight.

A couple of hours later I woke to the sound of the kids whimpering. They were just having bad dreams, so I pulled the blanket up to their chins, put some more wood on the fire and went back to sleep.

The next time I heard noise it was the kids’ father. He was laid out on his back, and when he sat up it was almost like the rope was still around his neck and someone was working him like a puppet. Dirt fell away from his body and when he opened his eyes the reflected firelight made them look like they were glowing.

The kids were still asleep. I got up and went to their father. I pushed him down so he was flat on his back again, and I put my knee in his chest and the heel of my hand on his forehead. He started to struggle and get that mean look on his face.

I’ve icepicked lots of zombies and I’m always amazed at how it transforms them. You drive the pick into one temple and they go from angry to surprised-looking, then you do the other temple and they get a little smile on their face, like they just caught a glimpse of Glory.

The next morning I fed the kids another can of fruit cocktail before I sent them off with their father. They each held one of his hands as they

led him away, and they were talking to him like he could understand.

Bryce said, "We need to watch for a big dog collar on the way home, Pa," and Neechie asked if he wanted to hear about the rutting unicorns from outer space.