



Z-motors

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By
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The temperature topped 120 degrees in the shop, but the excessive heat didn't bother the mechanics at Z-motors or the owner, Dean Zyla, who wore his usual suit and tie. From his chair in the service office, he watched his men working in the shop bays through a large plate-glass window. Mrs. Miller's Ford Taurus was lifted up on a hoist in Bay One. It appeared that his mechanics were looking over her car's exhaust system.

The car was in for an oil change. Aside from the standard up-sells of brake and cooling system flushes, they seemed to be looking for something else to sell her...

A mechanic suddenly ripped off the muffler with his bare hands, literally bare, clear down to his bones, and held it up to his left eye as if it were a telescope.

Zyla was about to get up and give the idiot hell when another mechanic peeled the left front tire off its rim. The escaping air made a *whoosh-boom* sound that rattled the window. Another mechanic tore the driver's door off its hinges and tossed it into a nearby junk pile.

"Damn!" Zyla's mechanics were out of control, no doubt because they were stuck working during their lunch hour. However, that was no excuse to wreck Mrs. Miller's car.

Zyla wriggled his lanky frame from the chair and stormed toward the steel shop door, but suddenly remembered the security system. Under the counter, he felt for the system's switch.

With a click, a projector beamed a computer-generated image of a clean and modern repair shop in the window glass, just in case somebody entered the office while he was out there bitch-slapping his employees.

He shoved open the steel door and charged into the shop. “What the hell’s the matter with you bozos? You got shit for brains?”

A half-dozen mechanics turned toward him, an ugly bunch: glazed over eyes, faces rotted down to the molars, ratty hair, and bony limbs. They wore a tattered mismatch of filthy slacks and shirts. Some walked around barefoot, a definite OSHA violation. Others wore ragged tennis shoes and grungy, unlaced boots. He let them wear their own clothes at work because it saved him a ton of money on uniform expenses.

“Can’t you bone-heads do anything right?”

The sounds of a crash and cracking glass made everyone turn to look at Mrs. Miller’s car. A mechanic had slammed a sledgehammer into the windshield. The others grunted, the only sound that ever came out of their choppy-toothed mouths.

Zyla stomped up to the bean-brain holding the crumpled muffler. “Look at what you did. It’s ruined!” He whacked him upside his sunken left temple, and then turned to the dimwit who’d ripped off the door. “How are you going to explain *this* to Mrs. Miller?”

The mechanics looked at each other with bewilderment in their round eyeballs. There wasn’t a brain cell working among them.

“Morons!”

Zyla would have to break the bad news to Mrs. Miller himself. As he headed toward the customer waiting lounge, his stomach grumbled for lunch. Mrs. Miller had picked a bad time to stop in Rolling Oaks, Colorado. She was headed to Denver for the Christmas holiday, and having clipped a coupon from her local newspaper, she’d decided to cash in on a free oil change along the way.

Didn’t she know...? Nothing in life was free. Zyla choked down a chuckle and entered the waiting room. “Mrs. Miller.”

Sweating profusely, the porky old broad looked up from the magazine she was reading. Impatience slanted her bushy eyebrows. “What’s taking so long? You said it would only be ten minutes.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but we found a problem. You need a brake fluid flush for sixty-four-

ninety-five, a radiator flush for thirty-nine-ninety-five, plus antifreeze, and a transmission flush. The fluid is really dirty.”

Her expression scrunched to outrage. “Just because I’m a woman, you think you can rip me off?”

“You also need a new door, a new windshield, a new tire, and a new muffler.”

She gasped with incredulity. “Those things were fine when I came in here.”

“Come see for yourself.” He motioned her to follow him.

She waddled behind. “It’s hotter than hell in here.”

“We like it that way, ma’am.” He opened the steel door and ushered her into the shop.

When she saw her damaged car, she staggered like she was going to faint. “My car! What have you done?”

“It was an accident.”

“You’re going to pay for this!”

What a bitch! Zyla feigned shock at her reaction and put his hand over his heart. “Are you saying that you’re unhappy with our service?”

“Damn right I’m unhappy.” She wagged a fat finger at Zyla. “I’m going to sue you and your mechanics. Where are they?” She looked around, all puffed up. “I want their names.”

The mechanics were huddled off to the side, their backs to Mrs. Miller, as if they were afraid of her.

“Ma’am,” Zyla said, “we have a company policy when it comes to unhappy customers.”

As if on cue, the mechanics turned around, gnarly faces scowling and choppy teeth gnashing as they shuffled toward her, stiff-armed and drooling.

“We *eat* them!” Zyla shouted.

The mechanics piled on her like a pack of wild dogs. Shredded clothing flew through the air. Blood splattered the wall. Within seconds, they were gnawing on a gory mound of meat and flesh and fighting over strands of pink, slimy intestines.

Zyla left them to eat their lunch and retreated to his service office. His wife, Shannon, had come in with a serving platter. She wore a maroon-sequined dress and matching high heels. Blonde hair flowed over bare white shoulders, most elegantly, but her red lipstick was smeared all around her mouth.

He kissed her cheek. “You’re just in time for lunch.”

“I heard you were having trouble with a customer.” She set the platter on the desk, along with a meat cleaver and two serving spoons. “Did your mechanics screw up again?”

“I’m going to put a *Help Wanted* ad in the paper.” He sat at the desk. “See if I can get someone smart enough to fix a car without breaking it worse.”

Shannon set a crystal candelabrum next to the platter, struck a match, and lit two candles. “A smart mechanic is hard to find.”

“A mechanic with half a brain will be better than what we’ve got.”

“Oh, baby,” she swooned, blowing out the match with puckered red lips. “I can’t wait to see who applies for the job.”

“Now, smoochkins,” Zyla said. “No snacking on the hired help.”

A blood-soaked mechanic shuffled in holding a plump head by its tangle of hair. He plopped it down on the platter. Mrs. Miller’s wide eyes stared out blankly. Mascara ran down her wrinkled cheeks like black tears. The roaches and maggots in Zyla’s stomach writhed in anticipation. He grabbed the meat cleaver and cracked open the skull. “If she had been nice to us, we could have worked things out.” He set down the cleaver and licked blood from his fingers. “Still, there’s nothing like fresh brains for lunch.”

Shannon spooned gray-matter goo from the split-open cranium. “Beats McDonald’s any day.”

HELP WANTED. Modern, high-tech auto repair shop needs qualified Master Mechanic.

Jim Lowry leaned back in his chair at the breakfast table and closed the newspaper classifieds. Excitement pumped through him like hot oil in a new engine. He’d been unemployed since gasoline hit five bucks a gallon. People weren’t driving as much as they used to. Newer cars didn’t break down as often. As a result, layoffs in the auto repair industry had hit all-time highs. He was working at a Denver dealership when he got the pink-slip axe.

He figured he could get a job at a tire shop or in some lube pit somewhere, but that kind of work was beneath his dignity. He was a highly trained Master Mechanic and deserved the best job in the world. This opening at Z-motors sounded like the perfect position for him.

“An auto repair shop on Route 6 is hiring,” he said to his wife, Nichole. “In Rolling Oaks.”

Wearing a robe and slippers, she flipped eggs in the frying pan. “A three-hour commute each way? We can’t afford the gas.”

She was right. The high price of fuel was enough to throw a wrench in the works. Their gas-guzzling Ford Explorer would digest a big portion of his paycheck, unless... “How about we drive out there, look over the town, and check out the shop? Maybe we could move there.”

Thirteen-year-old Kelli charged into the kitchen, schoolbooks clutched to her chest. “Move? Move where?”

Kelli wore her usual baggy black pants with chrome loops and chains and a lacy black blouse. Jim hated her purple hair.

“What’s he talkin’ about, Mom?”

“Rolling Oaks, honey.”

“No!” She slammed her books on the table. The dishes jumped. “That’s a million miles away. What about my friends?”

“Your friends are freaks,” Jim said.

“They are not!”

Nichole brought fried eggs to the table. “There’s a job opportunity in Rolling Oaks, Kelli. We need the money.”

“I’m not going!”

“Fine,” Jim said. “You get a job...I’ll stay home and dress like a freak.”

“I don’t want a job.”

“Well, I do,” Jim said. “So it’s settled. You’re going.”

As a punishing sun beat down on the Colorado plains, a Ford Explorer sped along a winding two-lane highway. At the wheel, Jim Lowry watched his gas gauge quiver on empty.

Kelli piped up from the back seat. “You can’t make me live out here.” She swept her hand to the vast open land beyond her window. “It’s empty.”

“We haven’t decided yet, honey.” Riding shotgun, Nichole traced Highway 6 on the GPS. “Only eight miles to go.” She inhaled, drawing Jim’s attention to her breasts, which stretched the cotton confinement of her Grateful Dead t-shirt very nicely.

The Ford bucked, jerking his eyes back to the problem at hand. He tapped the fuel gauge, hoping it was off a little in his favor. “We may run out of gas.” He reached for the air

conditioning switch to turn it off, but Nichole blocked his hand.

“Don’t you dare! It’s too hot...”

“It’ll save gas.” He pushed her hand back and shut off the A/C.

“You should’ve filled the tank before we left.”

“My credit card is maxed out. I bought what I could.”

“You should’ve used my card,” she said.

“We will, to get gas in Rolling Oaks.”

“Why didn’t we buy a Honda?”

“Mom,” Kelli interrupted. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Hold it a little longer, honey.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Nichole fanned her face with her hand. “I hate this heat.”

“Goddamned global warming!” It was almost Christmas. No snow. No rain. It was hot enough to raise the dead.

Kelli whined. “We’re gonna get stuck out here in the middle of nowhere, thanks to Dad.”

“Don’t you want him to get the job, honey?”

“I want to go to the bathroom.”

A dust devil swirled down the main road leading into a quaint town of cracker-box houses, small business, and rustic parks. *Population 2200* read the *Welcome to Rolling Oaks* sign, but the streets were deserted. The lifelessness gave Jim the creepy crawlies behind his ears. “Where is everybody?”

Nichole surveyed the barren town. “This is spooky.”

Kelli said, “I see someone.”

Jim spotted the guy too, on the sidewalk up ahead, an old farmhand by the way he was dressed: ragged coveralls, soiled t-shirt, tattered straw hat. He must’ve been wrestling pigs, he looked that dirty. And he must’ve been drunk because he stepped into the road without looking.

“Son of a bitch!” Jim slammed on the brakes. The Explorer ground to a halt just a gopher’s hair from hitting the idiot.

With glassy eyes and a deadpan look, the man stared at Jim over the hood.

Nichole shrunk low in her seat. “What’s wrong with him?”

Jim laid on the horn. "Hey, buddy! Move it!"

The commotion attracted the attention of other stone-faced townsfolk who appeared in doorways and behind windowpanes, their white-rimmed eyes staring out from dark sockets.

"These people don't look well," Nichole said.

"Or friendly," Jim added.

"And you think my friends are freaks, Dad."

The man shuffled across the road with a limp. The other citizens of Rolling Oaks stepped back and out of sight.

"Maybe this wasn't a good idea," Nichole whispered. "We should go home."

Jim saw the sign for Z-motors just down the block on the right. They were so close. He needed that job. Maybe his boss would give him an advance so they could get by until payday.

"We're not going back now," he said, beating down his own case of the willies.

At the sign, he turned right onto a gravel road that skirted an old graveyard surrounded by tall fences. It looked like the place was in horrid disrepair. Headstones were crooked and fallen over, and there were mounds of dirt everywhere, like robbers had been digging up the graves.

The shop was right next to the graveyard. Just the thought of working so close to dead people sprouted gooseflesh on Jim's arms.

He pulled up to a closed gate in front of Z-motors. As he scanned the towering chain-link fence, a cold dread leached into his chest. Security was one thing, but on top of the tall fence, anti-intruder barbed wire slanted inward, as if designed to keep people in and not to keep burglars out.

And instead of Z-motors being a high-tech, modern facility like the *Help Wanted* ad said, the place looked like a junkyard. Rows of wrecked cars stacked three and four vehicles high took up much of the parking area. A four-bay garage sat off to the left, its gray paint faded and peeling. More disturbing than that, the doors were shut. The business looked closed.

Jim shuddered. "I don't like the looks of this dump."

"We've come all the way out here for nothing?" Nichole huffed. "What a waste of gas."

"I have to go to the bathroom," Kelli said.

Nichole wiped sweat from her forehead. "What are we going to do now?"

"Go back, I guess." Jim put the transmission into reverse.

The gate suddenly lurched, and with a clanking noise, began to slide open. An eerie

feeling of being watched sent a chill up his backbone. He shared a worried look with Nichole.

“Turn around, Jim,” she hissed through clenched teeth.

“It appears they have good security.” He hoped to belie her fears, and his own.

“Let’s go home anyway.”

He spotted a gas pump in front of the shop. His gas gauge read past empty. “We won’t get far without gas.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Kelli reminded him.

“Okay. A quick pit stop, then we’re out of here.” He put the transmission in drive and accelerated through the open gate. The engine coughed and bucked; it was running on fumes.

The gate clattered shut behind him. He’d never heard of keeping an entrance gate closed during business hours. He felt trapped and isolated from the rest of the world. Anxiety coiled in his chest like a tightly wound clock spring.

As he coaxed the starving Ford toward the gas pump, he saw a lanky man exit the garage door marked *OFFICE*. The man had to be baking in that suit and tie. His bald cranium seemed overly large for his narrow face, and his powder-white cheeks made him look freaky.

Reaching the gas pump, the Ford sputtered and died. Jim climbed out. Sweltering heat swallowed him like quicksand. “I need gas,” he shouted to the approaching man.

“That old pump hasn’t worked in years,” the man said and pointed down the road. “Nearest station is another mile that way.” He extended a bony hand to Jim. “Name’s Dean, Dean Zyla. I own Z-motors.”

“Just the man I came to see. I’m Jim Lowry.” He shook Zyla’s hand. It felt as cold and clammy as a handful of chicken giblets. Holding eye contact with him was like being mentally raped, as if Zyla could read Jim’s mind and feel his anxiety. Jim let go of the hand quickly and wiped his palm on the side of his pants. “I came about the job, but now I don’t know...”

“We still have an opening.”

Jim scanned the shambled area. “This isn’t what I had in mind.”

“I have applications inside.”

“No thanks...”

“Mr. Zyla,” Nichole said, joining them. “My daughter needs to use your restroom.” Kellie waddled around the back of the Ford with her knees cinched together.

Zyla glanced at her and licked his lips. “We have a very clean restroom. No one ever uses

it. Follow me.”

Angst tightened the clock spring in Jim’s chest, but they’d come a long way and needed a break, so he nodded to Nichole and Kelli to go ahead.

Inside the garage, oppressive heat made the air hard to breathe. Jim figured the air-conditioning system was on the fritz.

He scanned the service office. A large, well-organized desk sat behind a tidy counter. A blond woman wearing a white satin dress and smeared red lipstick sat at the desk. She set a napkin over a platter in front of her and proceeded to gather up two big spoons and a butcher knife.

“We just finished eating,” Zyla explained. “My wife, Shannon, and I have lunch together every day.”

“I gotta go, Mom,” Kelli said, doing the potty dance.

Zyla gestured to an unmarked door. “Restroom’s right in there, cupcake.”

“Thanks, mister.” She rushed to the door, went inside, and shut it behind her.

“What a delightful daughter you have,” Zyla said.

Jim didn’t like the leer in the bald man’s eyes. Maybe he’d never seen purple hair before, way out here in the boonies.

Zyla handed him an employment application. “What have you got to lose?” He presented a pen. “Don’t forget to include your social security number.”

Nichole sat in a folding chair by the restroom door and fanned air on her face with her hands.

Taking the pen, Jim got a glimpse of the shop beyond the plate-glass window. There were four hydraulic lifts, all with cars hoisted up on them, which was a good sign of a busy shop. The work area was brightly lit. Big toolboxes were parked along the far wall: *Snap On* and *MAC*, along with diagnostic machines for engine tune-ups and emissions testing: *Allen* and *Sun*. All the work benches looked clean and orderly.

A mechanic, bent under a hood, wore a spotless blue uniform and a NAPA ball cap. Jim’s heart thrummed with unexpected excitement. This was the kind of shop that deserved his Master-Mechanic status. He only wished it wasn’t so goddamned hot.

Glancing at the application, he saw the usual things: Name: Address, Education, Work history, *Fantasies*. The clock spring in his chest gave him a jolt. “Fantasies?” He stabbed Zyla

with a sharp glare. “Why do you want to know my fantasies?”

Zyla’s gray gaze landed on Jim, head tilted as if he were admiring a fine work of art. “Some companies want to know your skill level. They test you for things, you know, round peg in the round hole, how fast you can stack quarters. I’m interested in what’s going on in your brain.” He licked his front teeth.

Shannon spoke up. “We like brains.”

Nichole said, “Just write something, Jim, and don’t take all day doing it. I’m burning up.”

“See,” Zyla said. “She understands.”

Clenching his jaw, Jim filled out the job application. Under *Fantasies* he wrote: *Earn a million dollars a year.*

Zyla read it and chuckled. “You’re a smart guy.” He burped. “Congratulations. You can start work right away.”

Elation sang out in his head, *I got the job — I got the job*, but tamping down his exuberance, he asked, “What’s the pay?”

“Five thousand a month.”

“Wow!” Jim felt dizzy. He could put up with a lot from freaky Zyla, and even this heat, for that kind of money. Or was his new boss overstating the pay to get a Master Mechanic onboard? “I want to talk to your employees to hear what they have to say about working for you.”

Zyla’s white cheeks flushed. “Talk to my employees?”

“Yes.”

“Oh...” Zyla stepped back and frowned. “I don’t think you should.”

There was something fishy about the sudden apprehension in his tone of voice. “Do you want me to work here or not?”

“If you insist.” Zyla cracked a smile. “Go right through that door.” He pointed to a steel door next to the plate-glass window. The sign above the doorframe read: *INSURANCE REGULATIONS PROHIBIT CUSTOMERS IN THE SHOP AREA.*

That rule didn’t apply to Jim. He wasn’t a customer. Turning to Nichole, he announced, “I won’t be long.”

He twisted the knob and pushed through the door. Shock hit him like a two-by-four bashed upside his head. He’d stepped into a totally different shop than he’d seen through the

office window.

Wrecked cars were parked helter-skelter in a dingy work area. Dilapidated diagnostic machines sat crooked on broken casters. Trashed toolboxes with bent drawers and spilled tools were all covered with grease and grime. Piles of junk parts littered the floor.

Confusion wracked his mind. How could he have been so mistaken? He turned to go back, to rewind, to regroup, but the door slammed shut in his face. He tried the doorknob. It was locked. He saw no button or lever to unlock it. Was that Zyla's way of keeping his employees on the job, to lock them in? No, more likely, the door was just stuck. He yanked and yanked on the knob but the door held solid as if it were welded shut.

"What the hell?"

He turned to summon the mechanics for help, but when he saw them, he bit his tongue so he wouldn't scream. They were dirty, unkempt, shade-tree mechanics. Their clothes were so ragged, they looked like they'd been run over by a truck and dragged through a used oil dump. They didn't look like the mechanic he'd seen earlier through the window. How was that possible? A trick of lights and mirrors? Did Zyla want to give his customers a false sense of professionalism?

What kind of scam was he running?

With his brain teetering on the brink of panic, Jim stood stoic in the stifling heat and watched the mechanics work. One guy grunted and ripped the hood off a car with his bare hands. The side of his face showed exposed meat and molars, and his right eyeball dangled from its socket. Jim's stomach clawed up to his throat. Somebody should call 911. The mechanic had obviously suffered a serious on-the-job injury. Didn't Zyla have workers compensation insurance?

A couple other men used their bare fists to bust out car windows and dent the fenders. No wonder there were so many junk cars outside.

Another guy beat an engine block with a sledgehammer. Banging and grunting sounds reverberated through the garage. These guys had to be the worst mechanics in the world. No way could he work with them. Not for a million bucks a year.

Turning back to the locked door, he frantically twisted and jerked on the doorknob. It still wouldn't budge. Through the plate-glass window he could see Nichole still sitting in the chair, guarding the restroom door. He pounded on the glass with an open palm. "Nichole. The door is

locked!”

The banging and grunting noises in the shop ceased.

Jim held his breath and looked back at the mechanics, his heart seizing. He didn’t mean to interrupt their work, even if they were doing sloppy work.

They grunted, gathered together, and started shuffling toward him, stiff-legged, like their feet hurt. No wonder. They weren’t wearing OSHA approved steel-toed boots. They appeared to be in a daze as if they were under the control of a remote intelligence, a single, maniacal mind, willing them to move in Jim’s direction. The closer they came, the more he could smell their B.O. They stunk like rotten meat. And they were salivating like hungry hyenas.

Hot bile retched up Jim’s esophagus. He swallowed hard and remembered the graveyard he’d driven past: the canted headstones and mounds of dirt.

Reality hit him like a dart between the eyeballs. The mechanics came from the graveyard next door. Global warming had raised them from the dead. Zyla had put them to work. He’d found a source of cheap labor the government couldn’t deport.

Now everything made sense. The Z in Z-motors didn’t stand for Zyla. It stood for Zombies. And in order for Zyla to control the zombies, he too must have been a zombie. He’d risen from that same graveyard next door, but he wasn’t one of the flesh-eating zombies. He was a brain-eating zombie, the most dangerous kind because he could blend into society, own a business, and infect an entire town...

The zombies were only steps away, bony arms outstretched and hands grasping at him. He pressed his back to the closed door. Urine made a warm spot in his pants and trickled down his trembling legs.

Fight or flight. There had to be a way out. He saw nothing but dark corners and deep shadows. Flight was out of the question. He’d have to fight. He grabbed up an old battery off the floor and flung it at the nearest zombie. It bashed the guy’s face so hard that teeth flew out of his mouth like Chiclets. The blow knocked him back a step, but he quickly rebounded and continued groping forward.

Terror lit fires in Jim’s bloodstream. His frantic heart pounded hard. He banged and banged on the door, every bit of his sanity drained. “Nichole! Help me!”

The door opened a crack. “What’s the matter, Jim?”

“Thank God!” He threw his body into the small gap.

A zombie grabbed his left leg, started pulling him back into the shop. He clung to the doorknob with one hand and to Nichole's arm with the other. "Pull! Pull! Don't let go of me!"

Her face wrenched in terror. "Jim! What's happening?"

Pain shot up his leg like a blast from a howitzer. A zombie had sunk his teeth into Jim's leg as if it were a Christmas turkey drumstick. "It's biting me!" Jim screamed. "It's biting me."

He kicked and squirmed in the zombie's bear-trap jaws. The other zombies were getting closer. They'd soon be eating a Christmas feast, a la cart Jim. He spotted Zyla standing behind the counter with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Help us!" Jim begged.

Nichole screamed like a maniac while she pulled on Jim's arm. The zombie wouldn't let go of Jim's leg. He felt like a tug-of-war rope. With his free foot, he kicked the zombie in the forehead with enough force to snap his neck and rip his teeth from the leg, tearing out a chunk of flesh.

Jim screamed.

The sacrificial offering sprang him free long enough for Nichole to pull him into the service office. They tumbled to a heap on the floor.

But the door was still open.

The zombies were still coming.

"Shut the door," Jim managed through gritted teeth.

Nichole scrambled to her feet and reached the door just in time and slammed it shut.

The crazed mechanics banged on the door.

"You're hurt!" Nichole knelt next to him.

"It's bad," he said, braving a look at his shredded pants, the jagged wound, and the blood leaking out. "God damn that hurts."

"You're going to need a tetanus shot."

"I'm thinking...rabies shot," he stammered.

She tore a strip of cloth from the midsection of her Grateful Dead t-shirt and tied it around his leg. "Can you walk?"

"I can run if I have to."

She helped him to his feet.

A quick glance to the window revealed the pristine shop he'd seen earlier. He didn't

know how Zyla did it, but he wasn't going to get away with it. Jim was going straight to the cops.

Zyla leaned on the counter. "I see my mechanics like you well enough."

"Well enough to eat me!" Jim clenched a fist but hesitated slugging the zombie boss. "I don't want this job after all."

Zyla glanced down at Jim's wounded leg and smiled. "Paydays are on Friday."

"You can't pay me enough to work in this dump." He turned to Nichole. "Where's Kelli?"

Color drained from Nichole's face. "The restroom. She's been in there a long time." Nichole rushed to the door her daughter had gone through earlier and shouted, "Kelli! Come on, honey." She knuckle-rapped on the door. "We're leaving!"

No answer.

Dread stabbed Jim in the chest. "Kelli!" He staggered to the door. "I'm coming in."

No answer.

He tried the knob. The door opened a crack. He paused, not relishing the thought of seeing Kelli on the toilet with her pants down to her knees and a scowl on her face directed at him for disturbing her. "Kelli?" he called out one final time.

No answer.

He shoved open the door, revealing a long hallway illuminated by a single flickering ceiling bulb. Hot air billowed out like the cough of a blast furnace. Confusion seized him. *Where was the restroom?* "Kelli!"

Shuffling down the hall like a zombie himself, he felt dizzy from the pain screaming up his leg and pooling in the back of his eyeballs.

Nichole ran behind him, shouting, "Kelli! Where are you?"

Zyla appeared in the hallway. "I need you to fill out your W-4 form, Jim Lowry. How many dependants will you be claiming?"

Jim found another closed door. It could have been a closet or an office, but he was betting on it being a restroom. "Kelli!" He bashed in the door.

A rat squeaked and scurried behind a shit-clogged toilet. The stench was enough to drive him back into the hallway. Zyla called this a clean restroom? No wonder nobody ever used it.

Zyla was only a few steps away. Nichole screamed at him, "What have you done with my

daughter?”

“We offer health insurance benefits for the entire family.”

Jim took Nichole’s hand and pulled her along. “Forget about him. We have to find Kelli.”

Hobbling, he reached another closed steel door. The sign above it read: *INSURANCE REGULATIONS PROHIBIT CUSTOMERS IN THE SHOP AREA*. He started to turn the knob.

Nichole stopped him. “We can’t go in there...those mechanics...those zombies are in there.”

Jim steeled himself against the fear of what he’d face inside. “Kelli might be in there too.”

Zyla strode up. “I need you to sign our Material Safety Data Sheets, too. Safety first, Jim.”

Pushing open the shop door, Jim wished he’d never read that *Help Wanted* ad. “Kelli!”

His daughter was right. They should’ve stayed home. But he was going find her, and somehow they were going to escape Z-motors, even if the Ford was out of gas and the fences were topped with barbed wire. He was going to find a way to save his family.

“Kelli!”

The zombie mechanics took notice, grunted, and started staggering toward them. Jim wished he’d brought a shotgun to this job interview from hell. *Boom! There goes a head. Boom! There goes an arm. Boom, boom! Two legs. Boom! Another head.*

“Kelli,” Nichole shouted. “Are you in here?”

Jim spotted another door, behind the zombies, in the corner. A sign read *Parts Department*. Kelli could be hiding in there, but getting to her would require some fancy footwork to negotiate all the junk strewn on the floor.

The zombies were getting closer.

Zyla was closing in, too, from behind. “I need you to fill out an I-9 form. You have to prove you’re an American citizen.”

He grabbed Nichole’s arm so they wouldn’t get separated and headed in a direction that would take them around the zombies’ left flank. Hobbling and pulling her along, he zigzagged left and right through the junk piles.

The zombie mechanics changed direction and shambled after him. Rounding an engine block, he slipped on an oil spill and fell, taking Nichole to the floor with him. “Shit!”

His head began spinning in a euphoric whirl: warm, peaceful, and happy, like he was suddenly on a merry-go-round ride.

Nichole screamed.

She was staring at her hands.

They were dripping... Blood!

He hadn't slipped in a puddle of oil. He'd slipped in a puddle of blood. And there, floating in the red goo, were tufts of purple hair. It was Kelli's blood!

"No, God, no!"

He saw her in his mind's eye, searching the dingy hallway for the restroom, finding the clogged toilet, and then frantically trying doors in search of a usable place to pee. Completely oblivious to the danger, she'd opened the steel door and called out to the mechanics, "Is there a ladies room somewhere?" They'd gathered around her, slurped her up and down with hungry eyes, and groped her body with bony fingers, testing the quality and texture of her young flesh. She'd shoved them back and screamed... She ran, got tripped up by all the junk on the floor, and fell. They pounced...

The zombies had eaten Kelli!

Jim's tortured mind swirled in a whirlpool of confusion. *Kelli? Who's Kelli?*

Whoever she was, her blood was smeared on his forearms, his elbows, and his hands. Its coppery perfume filled his head with blissful wonder. He felt dizzy and high and drunk on the aortic aroma.

"Nichole!" His voice seemed to echo away, like down a long tunnel. "Run! Save yourself!"

She was kneeling in the blood, all blurry and tilted. "I'm not leaving you, Jim." She yanked on his arm and forced him up on wobbly legs. "We've got to go...to go...to go..."

Her voice echoed in Jim's skull. *Got to go? Go where?* He couldn't leave. He finally got a job. He had work to do.

Stepping forward, he noticed the zombie bite wound on his leg didn't hurt anymore. How magical. How wonderful. The next steps he took felt stiff and forced, his joints seizing as if rigor mortis was setting in.

A deep voice in his head said, "*Kill her.*"

The voice sounded familiar.

“Kill her!”

It was Dean Zyla’s voice.

“Bring her brain to me!”

Jim heard him clearly and wanted to please him. He had to please him, for he was the true Master Mechanic.

Nichole shouted, “Watch out, Jim, the zombies are right behind you.” She tugged on his arm. “Come on!”

He held her back. He wanted to say *I love you*, but all he uttered was a guttural grunt. An ungodly hunger churned in his belly. *I want to eat you.*

He pulled her down to the floor, down into the pool of blood. Her screaming sounded like a symphony to his ears. The euphoria in his head was building, climbing, billowing up to a fiery hot mental orgasm.

He welcomed the sensation. He loved it. He craved it. He had to have more.

With a powerful swipe of his hand, he ripped off Nichole’s Grateful Dead t-shirt. Her luscious round breasts bobbed before him.

“Jim! Don’t! Have you gone mad? Jim! Jim!”

Who’s Jim?

Salivating, he bent over a plump breast and chomped off the nipple. It tasted sweet, like the cherry on top of an ice-cream sundae, gushing hot fudge.

As the symphony of screams played on in his head, Jim’s new coworkers gathered around. They dropped to their bony knees, and everyone ate lunch together.

He had the best job in the world.

About the Author



There's nothing mundane in the writing world of Terry Wright. Tension, conflict and suspense propel his readers through the pages as if they were on fire. Published in Science Fiction and Supernatural, his mastery of the action thriller has won him International acclaim as an accomplished screenplay writer. A longtime member of the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers, he runs their annual Colorado Gold Writing Contest. Terry lives near Denver with his wife, Bobette.

Terry invites you to visit his Website at www.terrywrightbooks.com where you'll find more information on his short stories, novels, and screenplays.

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