

# The Earth Bleeds

Short Tale 1:

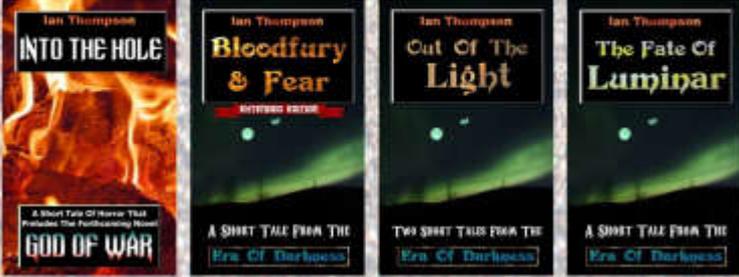
## *Zombie Horde*

By

Ian Thompson

*(Free Sample via The Independent Author Network)*

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## Introduction

Ten years from now...

It began with our world literally *bleeding*. The mysterious substance that seeped to the surface of the Earth killed millions... and reanimated the dead into ravenous, feral abominations.

**The Earth Bleeds** is a new series of short tales and full-length novels. Whereas the novels will primarily tell their stories in a chronological order – from the earliest appearances of *Earth's Blood* through the apocalypse which follows – the short tales are free to tell stories from any period. Gradually, the nature of *Earth's Blood*, the reason for its appearance and the consequences to our planet will be revealed.

I hope you enjoy the journey.

Ian Thompson  
July 2017

## Zombie Horde

*Hiding in the darkness, I heard the sickening sound of teeth crunching through a human skull...*

That's part of the nightmare I have suffered every night for years. It's a memory from the very first zombie attack I witnessed. In the dream, I can feel my confusion, fear, tears and icy sweat. My entire body trembles and the broken lines of a prayer escape my lips. The panicked screams ring in my ears. Horror consumes me utterly...

Some people are torn with disbelief at how the dead began to rise four years ago. My own disbelief was how the dead came back stronger. In a common-sense reality, dead tissue should be weak due to decomposition; the sinews should snap like old string; the muscles should disintegrate; the bones should break easily... In our hellish world, the rotting cadavers were stronger than they had been in life. I'd seen a reanimated little old lady tear a man's arm off as if it was plucking a feather from a bird. What made them so impossibly strong and tenacious? And why hadn't they rotted to oblivion during the last four years?

There was a much bigger question, of course. One which overshadowed the rising dead and their strength... What the hell had made the Earth *bleed* before the dead rose?

\* \* \*

If you had to travel outside the perceived safety of a camp, you never went out after dark. Night was the worst time to encounter the undead.

Their eyes are pure white and faintly luminous in the dark. Many people believe this means the creatures have some kind of night-vision. Whatever the case, whereas a human being is hampered by darkness, the undead can hunt their prey in pitch blackness. Other senses they might possess could add to this advantage – they may be able to trace a target keenly by scent, sound and motion, or maybe even detect them by supernatural means.

My team had been sent out on a salvaging trip. We'd left camp shortly after sunrise, with an estimated four-hour journey to a big auto scrap yard on the outskirts of Naderville. The job was easy and we'd done similar ones a hundred times before. Get there; find the spares we needed and scrounge around for any useful tools or other supplies; be back on the road by early afternoon; be home four hours before nightfall. It should have gone smoothly. But on that day, Fate took our plan by the balls and squeezed hard.

There were five of us in the truck. The twins were in the front, Bob driving and Shaun riding shotgun. These two had been just twelve years old when the apocalypse hit our world, so most of their memories were from after 'EB1', the first year in which the Earth bled. They were skinny, medium-height and grim-faced; they had learnt very quickly and had established themselves as engineers and electricians. Both had black greasy hair hanging down over their shoulders – neither had yet grown a speck of stubble on their faces. Bob was the louder, smarter and more forceful of the pair, making him the natural leader of our team. Shaun was quieter and nervous, and had little experience of fighting the undead.

The eight-wheel truck was well-protected. On the front was an armoured shield akin to a snowplough scoop, designed for pushing through crowds. Every window was heavily grilled. The rear section of the truck had originally been flat, but had been converted into a huge steel cage, and a tarpaulin roof had been added in case of rain. If it came to a fight, the people in the rear could fire through the cage bars, safely beyond the reach of zombie attackers.

Marie, Miguel and I had chosen to remain in the cage. There was a long seat fixed behind the driver's cab, facing to the rear, with seatbelts for safety. I occupied an outside position; Marie was in the middle and Miguel was on the far side. All of us were grateful for the fresh air the cage offered – and grateful not to be victims of the twins' legendary flatulence in the front of the vehicle.

Marie was a forty-year old woman whose grey hair and lined face suggested she was fifteen years older. Like the rest of us, she had seen and done things during the last four years which would age anybody. She was tough, pleasant and talkative. Despite our circumstances, the woman always dressed smartly and kept herself scrupulously clean. Marie could handle any weapon, person or situation at least as well as any male member of our camp. Better still, nothing frightened her. She said all the fear had been scared out of her long ago. It was rumoured Marie had once been a teacher – however, she had never discussed her past with me.

Miguel was half-Mexican and half-Greek, yet possessed none of the good humour or pride of those peoples. He was a sour son-of-a-bitch: scruffy, unwashed, miserable and complained

constantly. His favourite phrase was *'but is it really worth the effort?'*. Miguel told people that before the world went to shit, he had been an IT manager, fashion designer, movie director or had worked in the stock market; no one believed a word he said. The only reason Miguel volunteered for our trips outside the comparative safety of the camp, was to see if he could find himself some booze, drugs or porn.

I made up the team with a complex mixture of charm, wit and steely determination. Okay, I'm making that stuff up. My name's Edgar and on that day I was in my thirty-third year. Earlier in my life I had been a writer and artist for one of the major comic companies. When I reached a height of success and income, I decided to try alcohol poisoning for a few years. I'd drifted in and out of rehab for some time... but I'd been sober for ten years exactly when the dead rose. Yeah, my reward for sobriety was a shiny gold medallion and the zombie apocalypse. I have wondered whether drinking myself to death might have been a better option.

After surviving for a while on my own during EB1, I had met members of the camp where I now lived. I had thrown myself into doing whatever I could to help the encampment and its thousand-odd lost souls – from learning to fight and kill, to apocalyptic first aid, to basic mechanics, manual labour... and, of course, foraging in the wilds outside the camp.

People jokingly call me Big Ed. Not just because I'm tall, at six foot six, but because I have a large, squarish head. Think Boris Karloff's Frankenstein monster, minus the scars and bolts, and you wouldn't be far off. I started to go bald at twenty – by thirty-three I had a little dark brown fringe left over the ears and at the top of my neck. My beard isn't for fashion, rather because none of the men at the camp shave – the blades we have are put to better use. And speaking of fashion, my clothing also matched the average person at the camp – heavy, well-worn and patched; and, like most things we possessed, the black leather jacket I owned was found during one of our salvaging expeditions. Each of us also wore strong gloves, though these would not save fingers from the power of a zombie's bite.

We were all armed to the teeth. Pistols holstered at our waists. Survival knives strapped to our legs. Automatic rifles carried ready for use. Miscellaneous, personal favourites were also borne for quick action – my own being a razor-sharp machete.

Oddly, when trouble hit, all our weapons were useless against it.

\* \* \*

For someone who had driven many times along roads during the pre-EB years, a road trip was always surreal and haunting.

The quiet outside the truck struck you first. It wasn't the pleasant calm I remembered from journeys along empty country roads, it was a chilling absence of sound. No traffic, birds or distant mechanical roars from farm vehicles; none of the occasional zooming sounds from aircraft rushing across the sky; no hums from power lines running parallel to the tarmac. The speed of the truck obscured the sound of the breeze blowing across fields or through trees – only the noise of bad weather would penetrate our steel-encased environment. And the day was clear and cloudless, offering no respite from the near-silence of the world of the dead.

Everything we saw told a fragment of a story. A car abandoned and now turning to rust: *the two front doors hanging open, suggesting the occupants had fled on foot after the car came to a halt*. An area of the road streaked with tyre rubber, stained with old blood and littered with pieces of bone: *had a vehicle slammed through an undead horde here – or even through a group of pleading, living humans?* A bus had careered off the road and hit a great oak fast enough to concertina the front third of the vehicle: *had the driver swerved to avoid a group of zombies on the road?* Two dozen cars and a tanker merged together in a crumpled mass at a major junction: *most likely, some of the drivers had been speeding in panic to escape whatever was behind them...*

And I also glimpsed, occasionally, in patches of rough ground, in open fields and muddy banks... seepages of Earth's Blood. Even in areas of shade, this dark red liquid seemed to reflect and gleam. The nature of the substance gave it an uncanny, almost mottled look. It would be easy to imagine hundreds of rubies floating in the blood. Could there be solid or semi-solid material inside the fluid? I had no idea and I prayed I would never to get close enough to find out. All I knew was, the Earth's Blood never dried up and never lost its colour.

The smells of the country roads were very much different from my old memories too. A little of the freshness remained, but tinged with scents that were either unnatural or deeply unpleasant. Most of these smells were variations of rot. Since there was nobody to care for the patches of woodland we passed, infected or dead trees and vegetation decayed and stank. Acres of crops had been left in fields, deteriorating over time, becoming blighted and overgrown by weeds. And, wherever the

undead had found a victim – be it human, animal or bird – the ragged, gnawed flesh was left on the ground to putrefy... For, although the zombies hunted for food and tried to eat their prey, they could not digest it. In their insane, feral state, the creatures could mimic devouring – but they couldn't swallow, and the chewed flesh dropped from their jaws. It was as if Nature had left them the biological imperative to feed, whilst denying them the ability to do so.

The worst odour we occasionally caught a drift of, was of the zombies themselves. Not only did the long-arisen dead reek of putrefaction, they also had a sharp, acidic stench – chemical and artificial. This second smell was of whatever substance kept the cadavers from falling apart completely. Combined, the stench was appalling and twisted your guts. A rule of thumb was, the stronger the stench, the greater the number of undead. *So, if you found yourself choking on the stink, you were hopelessly surrounded...*

\* \* \*

Two hours into our journey, we had our first sighting of the undead.

There were six of them walking along the side of a highway, travelling in the same direction as us. Even over the distance of two hundred yards, it would have been impossible for the twin brothers to mistake the zombies for living humans. They moved with awkward, jerky motions – *I'd heard it described as 'like robots with rusted joints'* – and their heads wavered above their necks in the manner of those bobble-head toys people used to have. The creatures showed less coordination than simple animals: I had seen zombies blunder into barbed wire and become hopelessly trapped; walk over cliff-edges and shatter their bodies; and wade into quicksand. Only fire would turn back the living dead – the threat of it overcame their low intellect and dominant hunting instinct.

“Got six on the left,” Bob yelled from the driving seat. “No threat.”

I twisted around and peered out of the cage-wall beside me. After a while, the half-dozen creatures came into view. They were what we called ‘long-dead’ – shoes worn apart away by years of endless walking, clothing disintegrated into ragged scraps, and every aberration of the zombie infection present. All were bald, their hair, any beards and body hair having been lost. Each had a cobalt-blue tinge to their skins, even the tallest zombie which had originally had much darker skin. Some people suggest this is due to de-oxygenated blood, others say it's a result of the noxious chemicals inside them. I don't care – I just know it makes them look truly grotesque.

The infection mutates the corpse's bones over years, enlarging, strengthening and deforming the skeletons. My rear-view of the six walking dead showed this as jutting lumps from shoulders, shoulder blades, arms, legs and hips. For the most part, there was no pattern or symmetry to the protrusions – for instance, one undead had a back-curving hook projecting from an elbow; another's left foot had distorted so much, the thing had a lopsided gait; another had what looked like a fin sticking out of the back of its head...

There were three aberrations that all older zombies possessed. Most blatant was the loss of the creatures' entire digestive system (and possibly even more organs). Beneath the ribcage, each zombie narrowed to just the width of its spine, which was loosely wrapped in skin; only to widen at the hip-line until it extended back akin to a living person. The second change I could see from behind was the extension of the zombies' fingers, in the shape of sharp bones grown from their fingertips, creating vicious claws. The final change the undead would all have shared was out of my sight, and I wasn't disappointed. *I didn't want to see their faces.*

From a distance of two hundred yards, we could hear the cries of the undead drifting on the breeze. It was an undulating, awful moaning – a sound I hated. The moaning always made me imagine that there was a piece of human soul trapped inside each zombie, howling in mourning at its suffering or pleading for release... When the zombies detected our approach, a chilling clacking erupted from them. The crisp, sharp snapping noises sent a tingle of dread through me. I turned back in my seat and stopped looking.

Bob hit them with the truck a few seconds later. He used the nearest edge of the vehicle's front scoop like a giant knife. Amid a brief crunching, ripping eruption of noise, the half-dozen monstrosities were torn apart.

Our driver wasn't being vicious or wreaking revenge – he was following a modern-day rule-of-the-road. If you could kill any of those bastards safely, you did. It might mean saving the life of someone who could meet the creatures later. And it helped to whittle-down the numbers of the undead...

Although you could argue that since there were seven billion more of the creatures on our world, ‘whittling-down’ was a hopeless effort.

\* \* \*

Akin to most people, I'd ignored the first reports of a strange crimson substance rising up from the Earth. I mentally pigeon-holed it alongside UFO's, aurora borealis, Bigfoot and similar stuff – labelled as *'interesting, but I don't have time to learn more'*. Part of me also suspected the whole thing was a hoax anyway. Stuff that rises from deep inside the Earth is called magma, and it's damned hot! The idea of 'blood' seeping up to the surface here, there and eventually virtually everywhere, just seemed ridiculous.

Rumours about the dangers of Earth's Blood sounded like more crazy conspiracy theories: Touching the liquid in its concentrated form was utterly lethal, they said. Soon after rising, the Earth's Blood gave off toxins which polluted air and water – these were deadly to one in three people... *How could any of this be true?* I finally believed everything when I saw rows of filled body-bags on TV and governments began to release statistics on death tolls...

Two months after the first reports, the world was in chaos. *Zombies – actual, fucking real, undead monsters* – were all over the news. And, apparently, all over the world. Scientists were telling us the Earth's Blood had contained some kind of virus: not only did it kill, but it brought the dead back as mutating, flesh-hungry beasts... Weeks later, the situation grew even worse. It was found that anyone who died from any cause at all – even if not directly exposed to Earth's Blood or a zombie attack – turned into an undead monster. Mankind had encountered the most hideous version of eternal life imaginable.

Civilisation crumbled amid a disorientated panic.

Of course, there was good news. I was finally off the booze.

\* \* \*

Three hours into our outward journey, Miguel gave Marie and me an announcement.

"I need to pee."

"Knock yourself out," Marie replied sarcastically.

He worked at his seat-belt with increasing haste. I heard him utter, "Man, my bladder must be swollen to the size of a freaking beach ball."

"Thanks for sharing," I told him as he freed himself.

Miguel stood and headed for the back of the truck, using the open-legged walk of a horse-rider who has been too long in the saddle. I glanced at Marie and we smiled together. She shook her head.

Our companion made it to the rear of the truck's cage and leaned against the bars while he fought his zipper. A stream of obscenities left his lips, growing higher in pitch all the time.

"He's gonna piss himself," Marie groaned. "Then come back and sit next to me dripping and stinking. Well, stinking even more."

"Yeah. Can things get any worse?"

That's one of those questions you should never ask. In our case, we'd have the answer in under a minute and it wouldn't be good.

We had recently driven through the outskirts of a small town. Bob had kept us to the widest and least cluttered streets. Over the last half-hour, we had observed hundreds of ruined homes – from burnt-out wrecks to abandoned, now-overgrown buildings – and woven between scattered vehicle-hulks. Our only sight of the undead had been in a distant garden... and a long-ago flattened corpse on the road, which still wriggled with unlife. Returning to open road again, we had a large forest to our right and a mixture of wild foliage and isolated buildings on our left. The last sign had given directions to Newbury's Farm and its 'delicious organic strawberries'.

"Ah... God..." Miguel cried. "Yessss... Ah, man... So good."

Luckily, the roar of the truck's engine meant we didn't hear more than Miguel's voice.

Seconds later, the vehicle gave a sudden lurch. I recall thinking we'd hit a bump in the road and wondering how it would affect Miguel's aim... I'd been wrong. The lurch wasn't caused by a rise in the road, rather by a section of road crumbling beneath the weight of our hurtling vehicle. A drain cutting underneath it had collapsed like a booby-trap...

Miguel's ecstatic commentary became a wild yelp of surprise.

The truck's two front wheels dropped down into the crumbling hole. In front of them, the great metal scoop speared into the tarmac beyond the suddenly-appearing trench...

Bob, unable to guess what was happening, mistook the collapse: he believed the front driver's side tyre had blown. He turned the wheel hard – trying to drive into the spin he was anticipating... His

action transformed a crash into a catastrophe. As the front wheels descended into the trench, the truck arced sideways. The rear tyres were jolted off the road and the vehicle started to heave over onto its right side—

A storm of destroyed tarmac exploded over the scoop even while it crumpled, tore and splintered—

Marie and I slammed hard into the back of our makeshift seats and then slewed sideways as the truck overturned—

Miguel, unrestrained by a seatbelt, flew sideways through the air to smash face-first into the left side of our protective cage. When the truck spun over and its rear end rose, his flight continued from the back of the cage to the front. During this journey, his face was drawn across the steel bars – the cage wall becoming a massive cheese grater. I caught glimpses of him: tufts of ripped hair and bits of bloody flesh flying free. One of his ears bounced on my knees before vanishing in the confusion. Miguel's scream was ended by his bone-shattering thud into the front left corner of the cage...

There was no time to react to his loss. The truck was still in motion. Marie and I were being hurled about in our restraints. All around us, metal screamed, thudded and snapped. No doubt our own screams added to the chaos... The twisted vehicle slapped down on its right side. Dirt and loose tarmac fragments flew up at us in a savage hail...

The truck didn't stop. It flipped over onto its roof, more of it distorting and disintegrating in the process. Our tarpaulin rain-cover shredded away like paper. I gave a momentary prayer that the cage wouldn't crumple and flatten us – and it appeared my prayer was answered. Still, the tumbling continued. We were off the road and a couple of small trees were struck as the truck crashed over onto its left side, onto its wheels and onto the right side again. Trunks snapped; branches thrust through the cage walls; loose leaves hazed all around us...

Our vehicle tried for one final flip of motion, attempting to arc over and turn upside down. It shifted, teetered and finally crashed back onto its right side.

My vision was swimming and sparks flew through it. Somewhere in the haze I saw Marie's eyes looking at mine.

"No way..." I blurted out, "...am I letting Bob drive on the way back."

*End Of Sample*

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