

The Bus Stop
By Eugene Boria

Of course the bus was there. Its doors wide open; it practically invited him to make a run, dared him to make that mad dash, and promised that it would wait for him like Lucy, innocently offering the football to Charlie Brown.

Fuck that, he thought, *Salvatore Smith runs for nobody*.

He smiled to himself as he made his way to the front of the Q96 bus, where he would disembark and catch the M35 around the corner. He wheezed slightly as he maneuvered his ample frame over each tall step, then that last great big step to the curb. He knew that most – if not all – busses in New York City were equipped with hydraulics that lowered the front of the bus to allow the elderly to ascend and descend easily. He also knew that some sadistic bus drivers secretly delighted in watching grossly overweight people huff and puff over that last step. Apparently this driver was one of the sadistic variety. *So fuck you too, Mr. Bus driver*, he thought. Salvatore Smith, Smitty to his very few carefully selected friends, straightened his tie, tugged on the lapels of his jacket (the gesture made him look like what he actually was: a fat, balding salesman). He half turned and gave the driver the finger. The driver shrugged his shoulders and rolled his “I’ve seen it all” eyes while he leaned over to push the button that closed the door with a hydraulic whoosh. The bus pulled onto the street, speeding off in a cloud of dust, dry leaves, and hot exhaust.

Once he was away from the air-conditioned environment of the bus, Smitty was immediately assailed by the heat and high humidity of the morning air. This summer the city had been rocked by a record-breaking heat wave so that, even at 7 am, the temperatures had already reached the high eighties. Smitty considered the bus idling around the corner on Converse Street, still waiting for him. Other passengers had already made the connection, obviously smaller, faster passengers. The last of them had boarded as Smitty was saying his “goodbyes” to his friend the jaded bus driver. For a second he considered putting on some speed, actually running for that bus. He didn’t relish the idea of waiting thirty minutes for the next one. But it was so hot, and in his mind’s eye he

saw his three hundred some odd pound body running, huge rolls of fat bouncing up and down under his clothing, moving in slow motion like a pudgy six-million-dollar man, in front of all of those people. All of those eyes looking him over with either pity or disgust as, out of breath, disheveled, and dripping with sweat, he ambled his way to a seat.

And again I say, he silently announced, fuck that.

As if in response, the door closed with the hiss of escaping air and the bus pulled away, leaving Salvatore Smith standing at the intersection of Converse and Skyway Streets, the center of Cemetery Row.

Truth be told, Smitty didn't really mind the wait or the location. This was actually Smitty's favorite part of his morning commute, transferring to the M35 bus on this particular intersection situated right in the middle of four of the largest cemeteries in the city. If viewed on a map, Converse and Skyway streets neatly dissected one huge cemetery into four separate entities neat as pie. If you stood right on the intersecting point and turned in a circle, all you would see in any direction was empty blacktop lined on either side with a narrow cobblestone sidewalk and a six-foot high black wrought iron fence. When you looked down any of those streets and ignored your peripheral vision, tall oaks were visible above the fence and you could imagine yourself in a huge park, like Central Park in Manhattan. There was very little traffic on these streets, so for a while it was you, the birds, the trees and the squirrels that frolicked in them, all surrounded by the intermingling scents of newly mown grass, dried leaves, and a multitude of flowers. It was almost idealic.

Until you looked directly through the bars.

That's when you were confronted by row upon row of headstones, plaques, statues and low stone buildings. That's when you realized that you were literally surrounded by death.

Smitty noticed that some people were visibly unnerved at the notion. He'd watched his fellow passengers squirm alone or in quiet, huddled groups waiting

at this bus stop to connect with the M35 bus. He watched as people strenuously avoided their peripheral vision, alternately looking down the long road, waiting for a glint of sunlight reflected off of the windshield of a faraway bus; then a quick glance at the watch to confirm that the bus was indeed taking way too long; then furtive looks at the trees over the tops of the fences, the clouds in the sky, gum or dog shit on the ground, but never, by god, never directly through that black wrought-iron fence.

But it was exactly what lay (so to speak) on the other side of that fence that most intrigued Smitty. He hated most *living* people, relegating most to the status of *fuckwads*, his favorite term for anyone or anything that bothered him -- and that particular list was certainly long. Ages ago, a high school guidance counselor who had fancied himself an amateur psychiatrist (*but was still just a stupid high school counselor*, thought Smitty) had casually mentioned that the obesity might be an unconscious effort to push people away. Smitty had stared blankly at the *fuckwad* until he had cleared his throat and quietly slipped out of the classroom, muttering something about an appointment.

As a matter of fact, thin or stout, Smitty had little use for most people. In his years as a salesman, he had come to believe that most people could be broken down into very simple little groups: those who bought, and those who stole. The thieves were basically beneath his notice, the blacks, the towel heads, the porto ricans (all Hispanics were lumped into this one broad category for expediency's sake), all of those people who spent useless lives sucking on the government tit and expecting all good things to be handed to them on platters. Of course, the status of Jews as thieves went without saying.

The buyers were set apart along two lines, the rubes -- easy marks, good sales, fools -- and the plain old garden-variety *fuckwads*, people in some form of authority to tried to take whatever Smitty had earned. There was no lower person in Smitty's mind than a fuckwad.

Behind the black fence, however, now *those* people were harmless, their grief-giving days were over. All that remained, whether buyer or thief, fool or

fuckwad was a name, a set of dates, and a brief message, nicely set in rows for your reading pleasure while you waited for a bus.

Morales, who died in '77 and was apparently “beloved of many”;

Klein, deceased since '56, who was, by all accounts, a “loving husband”.

A new arrival, young Emily DeSoto, firmly ensconced “in our hearts”.

And Smitty’s all time favorite, a fellow by the name of John Camden Nash, who was -- according to his headstone, “born to rock”. This always prompted a silly running gag in Smitty’s head, *so what was he dying to do?* and anyone watching Smitty when that thought hit would see his hand come up to his face to hide a secret little smile, as he was doing now, although there was no one around watching.

His second smile of the day was interrupted, however, when he noticed a streak of brown out of the corner of his eyes. Smitty knew instinctively what that streak meant. Grey is for squirrel, but brown is for that tenacious New York denizen, the rat. Smitty’s eyes followed the direction that the streak had gone and settled on a particularly large brown sewer rat hightailing it across the grass behind the first row of headstones. Before Smitty could marvel at the size of this specimen (New Yorkers collect Big Rat stories the way east coast fishermen collect big fish stories), the rat was joined by another, then a third. And these rats were not just running, or frolicking like kittens, or furtively ferreting out food. These rodents were hauling ass, headed away from him, away from this intersection. Suddenly, without warning, Smitty was witnessing a mass exodus of rats from all over the cemetery, popping out of holes or squeezing their amazingly pliable bodies out from under headstones. Smitty raised his hands to his ears because of the sudden roar of a million claws skittering over stone and grass, thousands of rodent cries building to a crescendo that threatened to burst his eardrums like a child’s bubblegum. He was horrified to see hundreds of the brown shapes literally pouring out of the windows of several nearby mausoleums. As revolting as the sight was, (and Smitty was practically shitting with revulsion),

he was extremely thankful that none of the rats was running in *his* direction. The thought of all those rats running over his shoes...

What are they running from? The question startled him. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention and the first beads of nervous sweat form on his forehead. If the rats were running away from what they perceived to be a sinking ship, and they were running away from where he now stood...why, if you follow that logic, he was still standing on that ship.

Just as suddenly as they had appeared, the rats were gone and an uneasy calm settled on the intersection. For an instant, Smitty wondered if he had imagined the entire scenario, but he knew that that wasn't the case. He knew himself well enough to know that he lacked that kind of imagination. Everything had gone back to normal, except it *wasn't*. Something had changed in the atmosphere of this intersection where he waited for the M35 bus nearly every weekday for years. He thought, *It's so quiet*, and then he clearly heard Don Adams in his head say, "*too quiet*" and burst into hysterical, nervous giggles. He was still giggling to himself when he turned back around to face the fence, then the laugh was cut short with a strangled gurgle and Smitty felt as if someone punched him in the chest.

There was a hand on the ground in front of one the headstones.

No...it wasn't on the ground, it was sticking up out of the ground.

The fingernails were impossibly long, caked with dirt and jagged at the tips. The skin at the tips of the fingers was lacerated, almost pulled back like little rotten banana peels. And when the hand moved...

A scream started to escape from Smitty's mouth, threatening to raise in intensity like a teakettle's whistle but he snapped his mouth shut. The fuckin' thing had moved. It *moved*. He shook his head wildly, backing away from the fence. He peered up and down the street looking for hidden cameras or laughing teenagers. Because this *had* to be a joke. It had to be a joke and *this shit is not funny!* He inwardly raged, *I will sue the shit out of the fuckwads that pulled this*

on me! Salvatore Smith was no stranger to the practical joke. He'd been the victim of several doozies during his high school years. But now, goddamnit, he was an adult! This was one for the lawyers and HEADS WOULD ROLL!

But it hadn't been there before. He was sure of it. He violently pushed this thought away as he turned back to the hand, intending to look for the strings or wires that controlled the apparition. His body jerked and he and screamed again because it had been joined by others. There was now nearly a pair of hands before each headstone. And these were not idle hands, were they? No, these hands were very busy indeed.

Smitty's eyes felt like they were bulging out of his head. He was forgetting to blink or breath, and didn't care. The first head popped up in the third row and amid all of the thoughts racing through his head, running into each other like madly spinning tops, one clearly came through: *Tom Savini got it wrong in all of those living dead movies.* The creatures, (for now there were at least three pulling themselves up out of the earth, and so many hands still in view) were not covered in blood and gore. These were more like dried out husks, with the flesh pulled tight around the bones so that they looked less like zombies and more like white-skinned crack addicts with very poor coordination. The hair on those still had some was long and gray, covered in fresh topsoil. Worms wriggled in the tangled tresses. Savini, that special effects genius, had also misjudged their eyes. They were not rolled up into the back of the head like movie zombies; there was, if not actual intelligence, then at least a sort of simple animal cunning. And the eyes of these four, no...seven zombies with many more on the way, were fixed on Salvatore Smith.

Smitty was momentarily rooted where he stood, completely unable to turn away from the macabre scene – straight out of a horror movie -- being played out before his eyes. Holes and hands were appearing in front of every grave and just *how many graves were there in this cemetery?* He was afraid to turn around because he was suddenly certain that this scenario was being repeated in the cemetery behind him, across the street. His left hand and his bottom lip began to

tremble slightly; the beads of sweat on his brow became torrents that ran down the sides of his face. The zombies were, en masse, shambling towards the fence; eyes locked on Smitty, who now found himself the center of attention, the focal point of the zombie universe. Smitty's own eyes darted from creature to creature, absently noting the varying degrees of decomposition. Some of them were little more than bones being held together with thin strands of sinew. Then his gaze settled on one.

Emily DeSoto, recently deceased, freshly buried, and newly risen, was a ravishing beauty when viewed in comparison to her present company. At the very least, she was one of the few whose skin wasn't that sickening shade of mottled green and clinging to her bones. But she did have long dark hair instead of gray and almost perfect breasts that were clearly outlined in the tattered remains of the gown she'd worn in her casket. She shambled and swayed just like the rest of them -- if she had had any grace in life, she surely didn't have any now -- and walked into the wrought iron fence as if she hadn't seen it (and he supposed she hadn't). She was pressing her body against the fence, arms through the bars, hands hooked into claws reaching for him. Smitty watched the growing crowd at the fence with a strange kind of detachment that he vaguely recognized as the beginning of shock and he settled his gaze on Emily "In our hearts" DeSoto and something *clicked* in his mind. He raised his hand in front of his face so that her slack jawed face was obscured, and stared at her body, at her breasts pushing through the bars. "When you can't see those fucked up eyes, you're actually not too bad," he assessed, then quickly added, "For a dead bitch". And he giggled again, but there was an unsettling quality to this laugh; a high-pitched squeal that sounded like a small pig being slaughtered. Somewhere in the back of his mind he marveled that such a sound had come out of his mouth, and before he could examine that or even stop himself, he reached between her outstretched hands and gave her right breast a squeeze. He danced back before she could grab him and watched her mouth open and close, her teeth coming together like a green castanet. Smitty looked down at the hand that had fondled that dead flesh with a queer mixture of arousal and revulsion.

When he looked up again, there was another little mental *click* like tumblers in a lock. The shocked look left his face and was replaced by a kind of resolute grimace. He looked up and down Converse Street, now lined on both sides with outstretched hands as far as he could see. Between the fences there was nothing but empty Street. There were no gates on this side of the cemeteries so the throngs of undead could not easily reach him. The overwhelming need to run was slowly dissipating. The iron fence, though old and rusty in many places, was apparently holding...for now, yes, but maybe there was time. The bus would come. Things might be going to shit, but if the dead had just begun to rise -- and he could scarcely believe how fast this had all gone down -- then the bus was already on its way here and it would arrive in about ten minutes.

And the bottom line? This whole thing was wrong. Utterly and horribly wrong and fucking unfair. Smitty found that his blinding white terror of just a minute ago was being replaced by a dull rage. He hadn't wanted to squeeze that...woman's breast. He had never done anything even remotely similar in his life. He had been driven to that obscene act by the bizarre circumstances he found himself in and it wasn't his fault. He was only waiting for *a fucking bus!* It was not right that he should be subjected to this kind of...of...whatever this was.

I'm not gonna run, he thought, and then gathered his strength and shouted, "I am not going to fuckin' run from you!" He felt better immediately, as if his declaration had imbued him with power. That security was personified by the fence, which was the great barrier, the great separator. This side, sweet life and freedom, that side, lunch. He moved closer to grasping hands and gasping noises. "So Fuck! You!" he shouted at the nearest ghoul, showering him with spittle (the zombie, for his part, did not seem to mind). "Besides", he continued in lower, conspiratorial tones to that same spit-covered ghoul, "Salvatore Smith runs for no one". The zombie only opened his mouth wide in response. Smitty actually stopped short of rubbing his hands together like some cartoon villain, but he quickly covered his mouth with his hand (the hand that *hadn't* touched dead flesh) before that insane giggle could bubble up to the surface and that's when he saw a glint of gold in the midst of all of the grasping hands.

Smitty took a few steps back to get a better look and a surprised, “Oh!” escaped his lips. He smiled for the third time of the day, in recognition.

Standing relatively straight, pressing his entire body against the fence, was a tall zombie whose gray hair met up with his beard halfway down his head and together the tangled, matted strands continued almost to his belt buckle. On his right hand was the largest, gaudiest ring Smitty had ever seen. It was a gold scorpion, with its legs wrapped loosely around a finger that was little more than bone. The body of the scorpion was covered with diamond chips and the whole monstrosity took up the entire section of knuckle. Smitty looked beyond the ring to the rest of the zombie to inspect the entire picture. The shirt that this freak had been buried in had long since rotted mostly away, but his black leather vest was still intact, as were many of the patches stitched into it. Many of those patches were entirely obscured by the beard but some were clearly visible. There was the obligatory the peace sign, that goofy yellow happy face, and the marijuana leaf, High up on the left shoulder was a faded patch that depicted three letters: JCN.

This was the illustrious Mr. John Camden Nash, who was reputed to have been “born to rock”. Smitty didn’t have to ask what he was dying for now, did he?

A bite. Nash was dying for a quick bite.

There was no thought behind Smitty’s next action; no inner discussion or rumination. There was a kind of a mantra which began to play repetitiously in his head as if recorded on a loop, *not fair, not fair, not fair*. He stepped forward, reaching for the gold scorpion on a corpse’s hand. In that instant, he noticed two things almost simultaneously: First, out of the corner of his eye, he caught the distant glint of light reflected off of a windshield. He was afforded only the quickest of glances before his attention returned to the matter at hand and his fingers wrapped around the ring. He met the dead man’s gaze just as the hand that wore the ring clenched into tight fist, trapping Smitty’s fingers in a grip like a vise. The zombie’s free hand came up clutched Smitty’s wrist, squeezing, almost breaking skin. The corpse’s desiccated face now wore an expression of near

sublime satisfaction as he began to bring all of their hands slowly, inexorably close to his waiting mouth.

“No...nonono,” Smitty began to stammer, because this simply. Was. Not. Happening. He could hear the bus now, the whine of its engine rising above the gasps and moans of the undead multitude. Salvation was at hand, the end of this B movie nightmare, but the fucking hero was trapped! Smitty began to giggle again, a nervous twitter reminiscent of a hyena’s cackle. He tasted salt on his lips and realized with dawning horror that he had begun to cry, and still his hand was being drawn closer to the gaping maw and jagged, green, crusted teeth of a zombie, who’s eyes now positively sparkled.

Not fair! Not fair! Not fair! Smitty’s mind screamed repeatedly when his hand was only inches away from being bitten. The bus couldn’t be more than a block away now, but he was caught in this...this death-grip, of course. Smitty stopped giggling abruptly when the dead thing’s tongue, dry and cracked, swollen and yet so *long*, lolled out of it’s mouth and just grazed living flesh. Smitty screamed as the reality of the situation crashed in on him at the touch of that tongue. He began to thrash wildly, planting one foot against the bars of the fence for leverage. Other hands were coming through the bars, grabbing at his pants, his jacket, even his tie. He ignored them all, except for Nash, and stole another glance over his shoulder towards the street. The bus was moving well over the speed limit for city streets. It was approaching the intersection and showed no signs of slowing down at the stop sign on the corner.

*If I miss this bus...*He didn’t want to follow that thought to its natural conclusion, but of course he did. If the bus went by, he would go insane. His mind, already stretched to its limits, would snap like so much dried pasta and he would quietly allow himself to be dragged into the waiting arms and mouths of these....

With a final roar he pushed against the fence. He felt his clothing rip where fingernails that were talons tried to find purchase. Nash’s face and body slammed into the fence and his arm was pulled tight as a hangman’s rope as

Smitty threw all of his three hundred-some-odd pounds backwards. Suddenly there was an audible * pop * As the arm separated itself from the body at the shoulder and all at once, Smitty was flying towards the street as if shot from a cannon.

He caught himself right at the curb, his heels hanging halfway over the ledge of the sidewalk. The sound of the bus, its engine and sudden, ear-piercing horn, filled Smitty's entire world as he leaned precariously back into the street, pin wheeling his arms. He felt the heat of the bus's engine, felt its mass scant inches from the back of his head, felt the gusts of hot wind from its passing tug at his tattered clothing. Then he lost his battle with the laws of balance and gravity and fell, landing squarely on his very large posterior in the middle of Converse Street. He once again felt like he'd been punched solidly in the chest as the wind was knocked out of him, but the pain and indignity of the fall went unnoticed. The only thing Smitty was aware of was the screech of tires and the smell of rubber burning on asphalt as the bus came to a grinding halt thirty feet away.

Smitty blinked three times in rapid succession and struggled to his feet. He tried to cry out "Thank God!" but all that came out of his mouth was a gurgling moan. He had just struggled to his feet and begun to stagger toward the bus's door, which lay open and inviting before him, when he realized that the breath that had been knocked out of him in the fall had not returned. His chest felt *smaller*, like it was being pinched between God's fingers. The world began to swim in his vision and from somewhere very far away he could hear someone shouting for him to hurry, but he couldn't respond. His breath seemed to have decided that it liked where it was better than in his chest, because he couldn't catch it. His stagger became more pronounced; he was weaving like a punch-drunk fighter or like...

Like a zombie.

He looked up to the side view mirror of the bus. His vision was becoming increasingly blurry and dark around the edges, but he could still see the driver's face, pale and drawn, eyes wide as saucers and lips pursed in a surprised "oh!"

Smitty clutched his chest and helplessly, desperately, hoping that the driver would recognize the universal gesture for “heart attack”. But he was forced to watch silently as the driver frantically pulled the lever that closed the door and in a very familiar cloud of dust and hot exhaust, the bus sped away down that long street, shrinking as it went. It looked like it was being chased by shadows, but Smitty realized that that was only the darkening field of his own vision.

All at once, his legs refused to support his great weight. He collapsed in a heap in the middle of Converse Street, gasping, chest heaving breathlessly. Salvatore Smith, “Smitty” to very few people, none of which would ever know what happened to him if they ‘d ever spared him a second thought, had enough life left to contemplate the unfairness of the situation when the blackness overtook him and he knew no more.

...Until he arose twenty minutes later, hungrier than he’d ever been in his life.