

Zombie Granny

Blue Moon Investigations

by Steve Higgs, ...

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**Rochester High Street
Saturday 23rd October 1155hrs**

I was on my way back to the office when my phone rang. The car system picked it up, the screen advising that the caller was James, my newly employed and very LGBT admin assistant.

‘Good afternoon, James.’

‘Tempest, I have a client at the office, will you be long?’

‘About another five minutes. What sort of case is it?’ I was asking if he considered it a real case i.e. there was a crime to investigate or mystery to solve or was the case a questionable one. I got a lot of the latter. Just yesterday a rather well-spoken lady wanted me to help rid her of a plague of gnomes that were ruining her lawn. It’s *definitely* not moles she assured me. I didn’t take the case.

‘It is to do with the zombies.’ James continued, excitement in his voice. When I first met James, he was part of a vampire-wannabe cult and I was still trying to convince him that everything supernatural was a load of baloney.

‘James, we have been through this several times now. Do you remember what we agreed?’

‘Erm.’ He started. ‘That there are no genuine cases, because there is no supernatural or paranormal and all the creatures like werewolves and vampires and pixies do not exist.’

‘That’s right, James. That is the entire premise of the business for which you work.’

‘But isn’t there some actual evidence to support the notion that the zombie legend, which was spawned by slaves in Haiti as they were worked to death by the French colonists, has some scientific grounding. Also, is it not true that the tetrodotoxin poison from the pufferfish can, in sub-lethal doses be used to create a state of suspended animation whereupon the person can be controlled?’

I said nothing for a few seconds, ‘James, are you reading to me from Wikipedia?’

‘Little bit.’

‘Make some tea. I will be there soon.’ I was supposed to be a private investigator available for hire to solve crimes, but a young lady at the paper that ran my first advert had misread my business and I had been marketed as a paranormal investigator. The phone had been in a constant state of agitation ever since, so perhaps I should be grateful to her. I was, however, regularly asked to investigate stupid nonsense. A recent case I took on started with the client claiming that her neighbour was a shape shifter—it turned out he was a cross dresser and entitled to be left alone. Another one, that thankfully I was bright enough to turn down, was from a man that assured me he had been cursed by his ex-wife and his todger no longer worked. Occasionally there was a genuine crime beneath the strange circumstances, but the more regular explanation was that the client was daft.

This would be my first zombie case, but I should have seen it coming. The first report of a zombie attack had occurred three days ago in Sevenoaks, a large village with a postcode price-tag high enough to warrant Ferrari opening a dealership there. The zombies had appeared just after lunchtime on a Thursday. They had attacked several shoppers in the village centre. The television and radio had gone crazy with various experts giving their thoughts on what had caused the outbreak.

The second and third incidents had occurred the following day, one in Gillingham and one in Canterbury, but not simultaneously. In all three cases, the number of zombies appearing was limited to a handful, but they were still wreaking havoc. In each case the ensuing panic appeared to have caused several local businesses to catch fire. I had watched the news last night where footage taken on a teenager's phone had been played. In the clip, which lasted about thirty seconds, a little old lady with a perfectly set, pastel-pink perm and matching coat had lunged directly at the phone. Her facial features were contorted, her eyes were utterly deranged, and a deep, guttural sound emanated from the back of her throat.

The footage had gone viral within a few hours, so the world was now talking about *zombie grandma*. She had lunged for and bitten the arm of a pretty teenage-girl. The girl screamed, but then realised that nothing much was happening as the little old lady simply gnawed at the sleeve of her jacket. Another bystander, a boy, shoved the old lady away and she tripped, fell backwards and landed hard on the pavement behind her. The camera zoomed in on the girl's arm where a top set of dentures were embedded. The chap holding the camera had been laughing uncontrollably as the girl screamed in disgust and shook her arm.

On the floor, the old lady was now beginning to cry in pain and was no longer making zombie noises. The news report claimed that she had broken her hip in the fall. The police had arrested her, I think mostly because they did not know what else to do and she had gone to hospital, restrained, and accompanied by several police officers. The report went on to show the Police at the scene where a spokesperson was surrounded by continuous camera flashes which illuminated the early evening gloom. Reading from what I assumed was a hastily prepared statement, he advised the microphones positioned beneath his chin that several persons displaying, as yet, unexplained violent behaviour had been detained for their own safety and that of the general populace. Also, several people had been bitten and admitted to hospital. He refused to engage on many of the rapidly fired questions, which all carried the same theme of whether this was, in fact, the start of a zombie plague.

I had watched the news with greater attention than I had ever given it. I was firmly in the camp that there was no paranormal explanation to anything. Zombies fell into this classification, but the footage was compelling and difficult to argue with. When the first attack had been reported, I had immediately labelled it as a hoax, perpetrated by actors.

What else could it be?

Now though I was not so sure. If it was actors, then they were really committed to the role. I had just taken on an additional investigator, Amanda Harper. She was a police officer and was still working out her notice period before coming to the business full time. This meant I had someone who could tell me what the media would not, so I knew the police has set up several special holding areas where they were still keeping the zombies they had already rounded up. She was able to confirm that they remained violently aggressive and kept trying to bite anyone that came near them. They showed no interest in food or water or anything else, but the police had been able to take identification from a few of them so now knew they had an eclectic mix of people. It included a primary school teacher, a

lawyer, a truck driver, a single mum etcetera. Amanda had appeared genuinely scared when I spoke to her.

I parked around the back of my office and ran up the stairs to find James and an elderly gentleman sat in the two seats near the window that overlooks Rochester High Street. The client appeared to be at least seventy years old. He wore an ill-fitting grey suit that hung on his shrunken frame. His face was a map of thin, red lines surrounding sad and tired eyes. I introduced myself to quickly learn that he was the husband of the *zombie granny*.

The conversation was swift. The poor chap had not been allowed to see his wife nor speak with her since the incident. I understood that she was a key element to the police though. She was the only person who had been acting like a zombie and no longer was. He begged me to investigate what was going on and prove his wife was not a crazed creature lusting after human flesh and I accepted the case. He offered me his life savings, his house, whatever it took but I offered to do it for free. This was not something I had ever done before, but he looked like he had little money and I genuinely wanted to help.

The little old man departed, shuffling down the stairs from my office wearing a brave face. I sat down to arrange my thoughts.

James was hovering behind me. 'Do you have plans for the afternoon?' I asked. He only worked part time hours, six mornings a week.

'Actually, yes. I am seeing a hypnotist.' He paused, waiting for me to show signs of interest. When I did not, he pressed on anyway. 'So, I went to a show with some friends last week and I was hypnotised. Apparently, I have just the right type of mind for it...'

A bit weak and easily led then.

'...and I have been invited along to a special event today.' I continued to show no interest. 'No one else got invited.' His tone was pleading for me to make a comment.

I gave in and asked a question, 'Where is the event?'

He brightened instantly, 'Oh, it's just around the corner in The Casino Nightclub. I had better be off. I don't want to be late.' He grabbed his coat and scarf, bid me a pleasant weekend and headed out the door with a quick goodbye.

Amanda had emailed me a file last night which I had briefly inspected. The file listed the names of the zombies they had been able to identify thus far and provided interview notes from zombie grandma, whose real name was Edna Goodbridge. It also contained other notes they had been able to compile about the attacks, such as time and location of sightings, number of zombies involved and lots of other facts that did not seem all that helpful.

Edna had been treated for the pain and for her broken hip. Her age was recorded as seventy-two. The interview notes revealed almost nothing worthwhile. She had no memory of how she came to be in Sevenoaks. The previous evening, she gone out for dinner with friends in Rainham town centre and had no memory beyond that. There was a line towards the end of the notes that caught my attention. The hospital reported that there were some traces of an unknown drug in her blood. They had sent it off for analysis. I filed the information away for future reference.

I started to make notes. An hour of intense Google searches later and I knew a lot more about zombies than I ever had and knew just about everything the police knew about the zombie appearances during the last few days. I stared at the handwritten pages, flicked a couple of them and reluctantly admitted that it meant *nothing*.

I scratched my head and made a cup of tea. *Ok. Let's try this from a different angle. If the people acting as zombies are not actually zombies, but are also not consciously playing at being them, then what are they? How does a person arrive at a state where they believe they are a zombie when they are not?*

I was stood next to the window idly stirring my tea when a possibility just popped into my head: *hypnotism*.

Could that work?

Galvanised into action, I dumped the tea, grabbed my jacket and ran around the corner to the occult bookshop owned by Frank Decaux. Frank was a connoisseur of all the weird stuff that I knew nothing about. He would be able to offer a unique perspective on what might be happening.

Bursting through his door I startled him, and he dropped an armful of gear he was carrying. It spilled over the floor, so I bent to help him pick it up. The first item I touched had its label towards me.

Zombie repellent.

I held it up, 'Really, Frank?'

'I can barely keep it on the shelf, Tempest. All the apocalypse protection gear is in high demand at the moment.'

'Okay.' I said to end that line of conversation. 'I need to ask you about hypnotism and whether it could be used to transform an audience into a zombie army?'

He stared at me incredulously, I had his attention.

'Well...'

'The short version please.' I pleaded. Frank had a habit of telling the listener the history, back story, origin story, alternate theories and how much he was selling books related to the subject for.

'Well, a good hypnotist can make a person do anything. These are real zombies though, Tempest. You must see that.' Frank would believe a paranormal explanation first every time.

I ignored him. 'How long would the hypnotic state last?'

'Well, I believe it depends on the individual. Some people are very hard to hypnotise because they resist the commands, but others could be placed into a hypnotic state perpetually I suppose. Alternatively, they could be triggered to act in a certain way by use of a code word until they were given a different one to revert back to their normal selves.'

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but it died on my lips as a scream from outside pierced the peaceful Saturday lunchtime. Frank and I froze and stared at each other for a brief moment, then sprang into action. We dropped the goods we were holding and rushed to the window. In the street below ought to be a scene of people sitting peacefully in cafés while others with places to go passed by and tourists or visitors poked around in shops. Instead, we were witness to a scene where almost everyone was now stationary. In the café windows, the faces were all

looking out through the window rather than across the table at a companion. A base dread was forming a tight ball in my stomach. As I watched, I saw a man in the café get up from his seat and move towards the window to gain a better view. His seat tipped over backwards, but too distracted, he failed to even react as it slammed against the floor.

Then, like a switch being flipped, everyone started moving again. *In utter panic.*

I threw myself away from the window, across the bookstore and out into the street. The bookstore opened into a narrow side street so the main route through Rochester was to my left. In the aperture ahead of me, people were running by, all heading in the same direction. I reached the High Street and turned against the flow; towards the direction the people were running from.

Frank skidded to a halt behind me. I wanted to ask what he thought he was doing, but he had every right to be in the street with me. Despite the terror that gripped his face, I knew from recent experience that he had the heart of a lion. 'Ready?' I asked.

In answer, he showed me a back pack full of anti-zombie gear. The cans of zombie repellent surrounded several tubes of zombie bite relief cream, zombie armour, which was nothing more than shoulder pads, knee pads, and shin guards but spray painted black, some duct tape, heavy duty gloves and one item which I just had to take a closer look at. It was a small, black club with a handle, but it was the name written down the side in neon letters that had caught my attention

Zombie Twatting Stick.

I went to put it back, then changed my mind. I hefted it and swung it a couple of times. If I needed it, I assured myself. *Only* if I needed it.

Less than a minute had passed since we had heard the first scream and people were still charging down the street towards us.

'Get outta here.' A chap yelled to us as he went by us. I turned to see him go but we were already forgotten. Various screams, cries and questions regarding lost family members were audible over the general din.

I was angry. People were scared. This was my town, where I lived. It was no longer some report on television. I intended to find the people behind this mess and punch them. Hard.

Approaching down the street towards me were two people. I mentally reclassified them as zombies because I did not know what else I could call them. They were all classic-movie, shuffling feet, arms stretched out in front of them uttering a groaning, growling noise. One was a middle-aged man in a suit and tie, his slightly greying hair a little mussed and he had blood on his face. I could not tell if it was his or someone else's.

'Come on, Frank. Let's go introduce ourselves.' I suggested as I set off toward the pair.

He locked his eyes on us and drawled, 'Braiiinnns.'

His companion was a petite lady in her very early twenties or maybe younger. She wore no jacket against the cool October air and her stretchy top had been ripped so that her right, bra-clad boob poked out through the gap in the fabric.

She made a grab for a woman rushing by her and managed to snag her pony tail. Then she was all about trying to bite the poor woman.

Dashing forward, I used my zombie twatting stick to break the hot zombie chick's grip. Pony tail now free, the woman fled screaming and was gone. Frank meanwhile had pulled a can of anti-zombie spray from his backpack, fumbled to get the lid off and was spraying it at the zombie business guy in front of him.

It was silly string.

Having lost her prey, the hot zombie chick had turned her attention to me. However, she weighed less than I can bicep curl, so I was keeping her at bay with one arm while dragging her towards Frank and the pack of gear. I was going to have to deal with zombie business guy first though.

'Behave.' I instructed hot zombie chick as she tried yet again to bend her neck enough to bite my arm. Zombie business guy lunged at Frank, but there was now so much silly string on his face it was obscuring his vision. If it bothered him, he showed no sign and made no attempt to remove it. Frank side stepped neatly and extended a foot to trip him.

Zombie business guy pitched forward, arms flailing and crashed down in a heap next to the bag of gear. Frank pounced on his back, pulling a wicked looking blade from his belt.

'Woah!' I yelled, still struggling with hot zombie chick. Frank was lifting his arms, preparing to drive the knife into the back of the man's head.

'Cut off the head or destroy the brain. It is the only way to kill them.' His voice a panicked shout.

His arms reached the apex of the swing and plunged downwards. I shoved hot zombie chick away and kicked Frank directly in his rib-cage. The blade missed its intended target and struck the pavement where it lodged between two cobblestones. I snatched it from his grip.

'Frank, they may look like zombies, they are behaving like zombies, but they are just plain, vanilla people under some kind of hypnotic spell.'

He stared at me, shocked that I had hit him and his gaze incredulous because I had prevented his first zombie kill. 'Look,' I said, grabbing hot zombie chick again before she could resume trying to bite me. 'Do zombies have a pulse? Check his pulse.'

It was a simple instruction and Frank placed his left hand on zombie business dude's neck. His face flushed with shock as his fingers felt the steady pump of blood beneath warm skin.

He nodded at me, confirming he understood. 'Duct tape.' I said simply and scooped two rolls from the discarded backpack. A few moments later, our two zombies had their hands taped securely behind their backs, their ankles bound, and several laps of tape had been wound around their heads and across their mouths. We manoeuvred them into a recessed shop doorway and left them. They both continued shaking their heads and wriggling to get free.

While we had been binding them, I had explained my very loose theory to Frank. My hypothesis was that if a hypnotist could induce a state where they acted as zombies and would continue to do so until they were given a code word, or in the case of the zombie granny, given such a shock that they were brought back from their reverie, then that was what we were witnessing. I further hypothesised that the drug found in Edna's blood was going to be the tetrodotoxin stuff that James had been talking about earlier or some derivative thereof. This

was either how he got them into the state to induce such a deep hypnosis or how he kept them there. I was stretching, I knew it. However, it was the only idea I had. The only question that remained was *why?*

With our two zombies immobile and the crowd of people in the previously busy street now thinning, I hooked the backpack over my shoulder and set off down the road toward The Casino Nightclub where I hoped to find some answers. I did not ask Frank to come along, I had no wish to place him or anyone else in danger, but I expected he would follow me anyway. He did.

'Is there a plan?' He asked as we began to meet with smoke. I could not see the origin of it but remembered the news report saying that fires had been started at the previous zombie attack sites.

'The plan is...' I started to explain but I failed to finish as a zombie crashed through a store front window to my right and grabbed me. The zombie was a strong, athletic, twenty-something guy who was taller and heavier than me and had caught me by surprise. I went down underneath him, toppled by his momentum, my right arm and the zombie twatting stick it held pinned beneath me and my left arm in his grip. He bit into my shoulder. Even with three layers on it still hurt and I started to see the benefit of the zombie armour Frank had placed in the back pack.

I flipped and shoved him away and managed to slide my arm out from underneath me. Athlete zombie's teeth lost their purchase as I did, however he just lunged for my face and would have bitten a chunk right out of me had I not shoved the end of the twatting stick directly into his open mouth. Frank grabbed his shoulders in a bid to wrestle him away from me and between us we managed to get me out from beneath the man. I was still trying to avoid hurting him, convinced as I was that he was just some bloke that had been drugged and hypnotised.

'Grab the duct tape!' I yelled to Frank.

'We might need a plan B.' Frank said, lifting the pack and backing away.

I turned to see what he was looking at. Six more zombies coming right at us, shuffling and groaning and looking hungry.

Bugger.

My intention to avoid hurting anyone was looking doubtful. Accepting it, I rolled away from athlete zombie and kicked him hard in the side of the head as I went. Noble concept abandoned; my new plan was to survive.

'Frank, find a weapon. This is about to get real.' I shouted to psyche myself up.

I lifted the zombie twatting stick, ready to use it as Frank appeared beside me with a katana. 'Dammit Frank, No.' I screeched. 'These are fake, hypnotised zombies. You can't kill them. Injuries will be hard enough to explain to them when they come around. Put the sheath on it and bash them with it. Okay?'

'Yes. Yes, of course.' He mumbled, somewhat embarrassed by his own bravado. Then they were upon us. With weapons to hit them, they were easy enough to put down but there were more coming. The smoke swirled, shrouding us like a thick cloak, caught between the buildings on a breezeless day. In the last five minutes we had barely progressed down the road towards the Casino Nightclub and the lack of advancement was beginning to annoy me.

'We need to get to the nightclub, Frank. They don't move fast, so we are going to charge through them. Right?'

'Okay.' He replied, clearly nervous and trying hard to ignore it.

Not bothering to offer any further explanation, I steeled myself to charge through the line of zombies that came at us. I grabbed the shoulder of Frank's jacket, so I would not lose him, then broke into a sprint.

Then stopped.

Stumbling towards me from the smoke was James. There were maybe another ten zombies around him, some ahead, some behind but all coming towards us as we were the only people remaining in the street. Everyone else had fled. He was stumbling along in the group, arms out and groaning like the rest. Where the zombies' eyes were deranged though, his were just terrified. He spotted me and risked a wry smile.

He was faking!

The zombies were upon us again, so I hit the first one over the head as gently as one can with a wooden club, then ducked into the lunge of the next one and whacked him under the chin.

'James!' I yelled. 'Crouch down.'

He looked confused but obeyed the instruction. I still had one hand on Frank's jacket in fear of being split up. 'OK, Frank. Let's go!' I found myself yelling again. What can I say? It was an exciting situation.

At a charge, we closed the distance to James, knocking zombies over like pins as we went. It proved to be much, much easier than trying to knock them out without hurting them. Frank and I scooped an arm each without even slowing down and we were running down the road with James between us, his heels dragging along the concrete

More smoke swirled around us and I spotted fire behind a window as flames were licking at the woodwork inside. Sirens could be heard in the distance; police and fire brigade and probably paramedics. All were needed.

Suddenly, the smoke cleared, we were just metres from the Casino Nightclub entrance and there were no zombies in sight. I dragged James and Frank through the open door of the Victoria and Eagle pub to get us off the street. Checking that nobody, and no zombies were inside, I slammed the door behind us. It felt slightly safer for a moment.

'What is going on?' James asked between deep breaths.

Now that we had at least a few seconds to re-group I had questions for him. 'James did the hypnotist create the zombies?'

'Yeah! He did!' He replied, astounded. 'How did you know?'

'Lucky guess.' I said rather than waste time on conversation. 'Next question. How are you not affected?'

'Oh. Well, when we arrived, the chap had an assistant lady and she was handing out canapes. She was very insistent that everyone have one, but it smelled like fish and since I am a vegan, I faked putting it in my mouth and slipped it into my pocket instead. Here it is.' He announced producing a rather fancy, but now sadly battered blini looking object, with a leaf, a blob of something edible and a shake of spice over the top.

'Thank you.' I said, taking the canape and placing it into a little bag I had pulled from one of my many pockets. An investigator keeps things like that just in case evidence pops up. 'Then what?'

The Great Howsini asked everyone to sit and launched into his show. It was weird though, not like his usual act and I noticed that everyone around me had stopped moving. It was like they were unconscious, but their eyes were still wide open. The weirdest thing was that he was telling them all that they were the walking dead, the most terrifying zombie creatures that needed to feed on human flesh. I was scared because they were all starting to groan and make growling noises, so I played along. The assistant lady threw open the doors and he sent us all out to *kill, kill, kill*. That was what he said, "*Kill, kill, kill!*"

Right then. 'Gents you can come with me if you want, but you may be safer staying here. The Great Howsini is about to learn the error of his ways.' I was going to find this idiot and punch him in the pants. Bring zombies to my town, real or not and you pay for it. The problem being, that I had no idea how to find him.

'James do you have a picture of him, or can you describe him?' I was hoping he was going to be easy to spot and that I could catch him here. If not, I would catch up to him later, but by then the adrenalin would be out of my system, I would be thinking with more reason and would find it far harder to justify hurting him.

'No need really.' James said. 'That's him over there.' He pointed.

Across the street, a man in a suit that screamed *stage show act* with its sequinned seam up the trouser leg and overly long jacket tails, was carrying heavy sacks towards the car park. He was in his late thirties, a good fifty pounds overweight and had very little hair left. What there was formed a black ring around the sides and back of his scalp. The effect making his scalp look like a round mountain rising above particularly dark clouds. Behind him, a woman of similar age and figure was weighed down by more sacks. I pulled out my camera and started filming. Then, I handed it to James with the simple instruction to keep it rolling.

The Great Howsini's real name was Dave Gough. The lady was his wife, Brenda. She was a chemist. Once cornered, they had given in immediately and confessed their story to the police that had arrived on the scene moments later. I was getting to be known by the local police as my job had a habit of landing me in the vicinity of dubious events. But for once, they had skipped over the bit where they arrested me and had allowed me to remain at the scene. The Goughs were caught red-handed with bags of cash and goods stolen from shops, bars and restaurants that they had subsequently set ablaze in order to cover their tracks. Missing money and goods would be discovered at the other zombie attack sites when the ash was sifted.

James's original research into how to make a zombie had been bang on the money. Brenda was a chemist by trade and could legally obtain the tetrodotoxin which she had made it into a drug that would render a person ingesting it in a state of semi-suspended animation. Full of ego, she had bragged how deliciously complex it had been.

The police had departed with the Goughs in cuffs and we trudged wearily back through a desolated and partly destroyed Rochester High Street. We passed fire

brigade teams putting out fires and we paused at my office to lock up, and at Frank's bookshop, where we found the door wide open, but the contents unmolested.

I was bitten, battered, bruised and tired, but also somehow elated. It was time for a cold one and I was buying.

