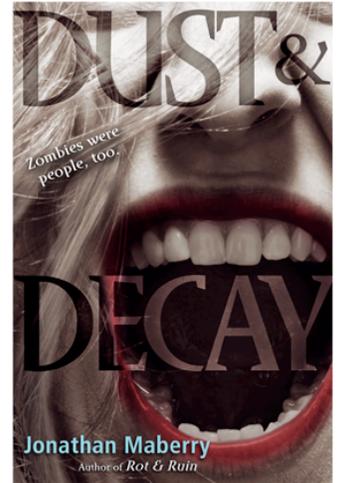




Bonus content from  
**DUST & DECAY**  
The follow up to **Rot & Ruin**  
By Jonathan Maberry  
**IN THE LAND OF  
THE DEAD**



(1)

The Fence

The teenager sat on a folding chair and stared through the fence at the zombie.

He was there most mornings. Sometimes in the afternoons, too.

At first the fence guards tried to chase him away.

“What the heck are you doing there, kid?” growled one, a new guard who didn’t know who he was. The guard had come along the fence, a shotgun open at the breech crooked over one arm, a wad of pink chewing gums in his open mouth. When the kid did not move or even look at him, the guard came and stood right in front of him, blocking out the sun, blocking eye-contact with the dead thing on the other side of the chain-link fence. “Hey? You deaf or dead?” the guard demanded.

Only then did the teenager raise his eyes to the big guard with the polished steel shotgun. He had dark green eyes and brown hair, and the sunlight revealed streaks of red in his dark hair. A good looking kid, fit and lean; the kind of kid the guard thought should be fishing for trout up at the stream or trying to lay some lumber on a breaking ball down at McGoran Field. He didn't look like the morbid kind of teen he sometimes met here at the fence; the kind who dressed in rags and painted their faces gray and pretended to be zoms. The Gonnz, they called themselves. No, this kid looked like any other teenager from town.

"You okay?" the guard asked, his tone still sharp.

The teen did not say a word. He simply stared into the guard's eyes.

"You got to be careful around zoms, kid. They bite."

Something flicked through the kid's eyes; an emotion or reaction that the guard could not identify.

The guard was tough, big chested and grizzled-faced, a former trade route rider who had recently moved to Mountainside from Haven. The guard was used to staring down other people. He was that kind of man. He'd been out in the Ruin, he'd fought zoms, killed more than a few. No boy had ever stared him down, not even when the guard had *been* a boy. He met the boy's stare and stood his ground.

But it was the guard whose eyes broke contact first and slid away.

Before he did, the man's stern face changed, the harsh lines of his scowl softening into an uncertain frown. As he broke eye-contact, he tried to hide it by pretending to turn and look at the zombie the kid had been staring at.

"What's so special about this one?" demanded the guard. "You know her?"

The zombie was dressed in the tattered rags of a party dress. Most people who worked the fence or ran the trade routes were pretty good at guessing how old a person had been before they'd zommed out, and this one looked to have been forty or fifty. A middle aged woman dressed for some event. Maybe a graduation, maybe a wedding. The relentless California suns and fourteen brutal winters had bleached her rags to a paleness in which only the ghosts of wildflowers could still be seen. The dress must have been vibrant and pretty once. Expensive, too.

The guard turned back to the kid on the chair.

"Who was she?" he asked, and much of the gruffness was gone from his voice. He suddenly thought he knew and he didn't want to know. "She your mom, kid?"

The teenager stood up and moved his chair a few feet to the left so that he had a clear view of the dead woman in the party dress.

"Hey," said the guard. "Did you hear me? I asked--."

"No," said the kid. "She's not my mother."

The guard's frown deepened. "Aunt?"

"No."

"Someone from your family--?"

"I don't know her," said the teen.

The guard looked from the boy to the zom and back again.

"Then what's she to you?"

The teen didn't answer. He sat down on his chair and rested his elbows on his thighs and looked through the fence. The zombie in the faded party dress shuffled clumsily through the tall grass, ignoring the guard and turning his dusty eyes on the boy.

She stopped a foot from the fence; her arms hung limply at her sides, fingers twitching every once in a while. Her mouth opened and closed as if trying to speak. Or chewing on some imagined meal.

“Geez, kid...haven’t you ever seen a zom before?” asked the guard.

The teenager nodded. “One or two.”

“So, what’s the fascination?”

The boy almost smiled. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Minutes passed slowly. Flies crawled over the zombies face. Sun-drowsy bees droned by, looking for flowers in the shade of the guard tower a hundred yards along the fence line. Five crows settled on the top bar of the fence and cawed to each other in their own ancient language.

The boy and the zombie stared at each other as if the guard, the fence and the rest of the world did not exist.

“You shouldn’t be out here,” the guard said. “Ain’t safe.”

After a long, thoughtful moment, the teen said, “I know.”

“There’s been a lot of trouble lately, and not just with the zoms.”

The teen nodded.

“Bunch of bounty hunters got themselves killed up in the hills last month.”

Another nod.

“Charlie Pink-eye and the Motor City Hammer. Their whole crew. Got ambushed. Someone killed the whole bunch of them.”

“Yes,” said the boy, “I heard.”

“If you heard, then you know it ain’t safe out there. Weird stuff happening out in the Ruin, too. Zoms are all stirred up. People bee seeing stuff. Wild animals and such, stuff nobody’s seen for years, and I’m not talking about wolves and bears. There’s talk about animals out of old zoos and circuses from before First Night. Tigers and lions and-  
-.”

The boy took a breath and exhaled it slowly and audibly. He turned to look at the guard. “Is there a town law about sitting here?”

“Probably,” the guard said bluntly. “Especially for underage--.”

“I’m not underage,” said the boy. “I’m fifteen.”

“Fifteen? Then how come you’re here all the time? Shouldn’t you be working, earning your ration dollars?”

Another ghost of a smile flitted over the teen’s mouth. “I *am* working.”

“Gimme a break. You’re just loafing out here.”

The teen shrugged.

“Okay,” said the guard in a challenging tone, “what kind of job are you *working* at, sitting out here looking at zoms all day?”

The boy’s eyes burned with green fire. Cold and distant. “I’m a zombie hunter,” he said.

That made the guard laugh. “Oh really?”

“Really. An apprentice, but, yeah...that’s what I do.”

“*You’re* a bounty hunter? That’s what you’re trying to tell me? That’s what I’m supposed to believe?”

The teen shrugged. “Believe what you want.”

The guard gave a big braying laugh. “And who are you supposed to be apprenticing to?”

The cold green eyes were steady and unblinking. “My brother,” he said.

“Yeah? And who’s your brother?”

“Tom Imura,” said the boy.

The mocking grin froze on the guard’s face and then slowly, slowly, it drained away. The guard’s eyes flicked from the teen to the red zone that separated the fence line and the broad green fields that flanked them from the town.

“Tom Imura?” echoed the guard in a small voice. “You’re Tom Imura’s kid brother...?”

“Yes,” said Benny Imura. “My brother told me to come down here. He told me to do what I’m doing. Do you want me to go tell him that you said I couldn’t?”

It wasn’t said as a threat. Benny never raised his voice, never changed his expression. The guard stood near him, looking down at him, his mouth now working silently in an unconscious parody of the zombie.

“I’d like to be left alone,” said Benny. “It that’s not breaking any rules.”

“Um...no. No, that’s fine,” said the guard. He unconsciously backed away from Benny and his beefy shoulders bumped lightly against the chain link fence.

Instantly the zombie lunged at him, thrusting her withered fingers through the links, clawing at the guard’s shirt, biting at the chain-links with rotted gray teeth.

The guard cried out in alarm and tried to simultaneously pull himself away and close the shotgun breech; but before he could do either, Benny was out of his chair.

Benny grabbed the guard’s shirt with both hands and yanked him forward, away from the

fence, away from the twisting pale fingers. As the guard staggered forward his weight crashed toward Benny, but the teenager pivoted his hips and shoved the guard away from him so that the man staggered several yards toward the red zone. The shotgun fell to the grass with a muffled thud.

The moment seemed to freeze in place. The guard lay shocked and wide-eyed on the ground near the shotgun; the zom stood erect and motionless, her hunting frenzy stilled without prey to attack. Benny Imura stood between them, legs planted wide, arms wide, palms pointing calmly out toward guard and zom.

The guard looked up at the teenager as Benny slowly lowered his arms.

“You have to be careful around them,” said the boy, “they bite.”

Then Benny offered his hand to the guard and helped him up. He didn't touch the fallen shotgun, leaving it to the guard. Once he was up and dusted off, the guard checked the shotgun barrels and gave Benny a long, considering glare.

“I ought to chase you the heck out of here,” he said.

“Because zoms are dangerous,” asked Benny, and now there was definitely wry humor in his eyes. Humor and something else that the guard at first could not identify. Some bigger emotion.

“Yeah, yeah, very funny.”

They regarded each other for half a minute of silence, and then the guard chuckled and smiled. A small, rueful smile. Benny's smile was slower in coming, and smaller. But it was there.

And it was then that the guard identified the other emotion that hid behind the kid's green eyes. It was sadness. A vast and terrible sadness.

“You were out there,” asked the guard quietly. “Weren’t you?”

Benny nodded.

“In the Ruin?”

Another nod.

“With Tom?”

“When all that stuff happened to Charlie and the Hammer?”

One more nod, slower than the others.

The guard cleared his throat. He glanced at the chair, which had fallen over when Benny rushed in to save him from the zom. Without another word, the guard bent to pick up the chair. He righted it, glanced at the fence and the zom, then moved the chair back about six inches.

Benny watched him do it.

“You, um...you can never be too careful,” mumbled the guard. “You know?”

“Yeah,” said Benny. “I know.”

The fence guard stepped back and took a breath. He gave Benny a brief nod, and then turned and trudged along the fence line the way he’d come, his head lowered in troubled thought, shotgun crooked over his arm.

After a while, Benny sat down on his chair and stared through the fence at the zombie.

The bounty hunter's name was Solomon Jones. He was medium height, built like a wrestler, and bald as an egg, with chocolate brown skin and a small goatee shot through with streaks of white. The handles of a pair of machetes rose above his shoulders from where they hung in slings across his back.

He crouched on the gnarled limb of an ancient elm, completely hidden by the deep shadows of the forest's leafy canopy.

Solomon had once been a writer in the days before First Night. Now he was sure that there was no one alive who knew him as anything but a bounty hunter. He was a killer of the dead. There were no publishing houses anymore, no bookstores. And the only printing presses—old hand-crank jobs—were used to make bounty flyers, Zombie Cards, pamphlets of town rules, and religious tracts. No one printed novels anymore, it was too costly; and besides, there were millions of them lying unused in empty houses, deserted stores and warehouses. Traders brought them by the wagonload and they were as valuable to the people in the towns as food and water. The books were escape hatches, doorways out of the apocalypse.

He wished that he had the time and opportunity to write. Not anymore. Now he hunted in the Rot & Ruin, working bounty jobs on the zoms, guarding trade wagons, taking the occasional clean-out job. It was physical work. Horrible work.

Killing the dead.

The concept was absurd. It was so wild he wouldn't have put it in one of his novels. His readers would think he'd gone nuts.

Killing the already killed.

There was no phrasing in English—or any other language—that permitted a statement like that to make sense.

And yet...

He crouched on the tree limb watching a spectacle unfold below him that was more real than anything he had ever put on the page, and yet even after all these years he felt that it was *not* real. That it, and he, were fantasies in the fevered dream of some madman.

But the firmness of the limb under his feet was real. The sweat that trickled down the sides of his face was real. The weight of the weapons strapped across his back and holstered at his hip. All real.

As was the madness below.

Zoms.

Not one or two of them. Not even the rare pack of half a dozen. Below him, shambling along the grass-choked country road, or staggering through the brush on the verge, were dozens of them. Many dozens.

He had rarely seen so many of them at once, and never moving with such purpose, such apparent focus. But...why? They were not following any prey. The woodland road wound through the forest, fed by a larger road that came west through farmlands. Beyond those farms was the vastness of the Yosemite National Forest, and beyond that...the rest of America. The rest of the Rot & Ruin.

These zoms were coming from the east.

Coming in packs. Flocking like decaying birds.

Heading west.

Heading toward the line of small towns that huddled against the protection of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, here in Mariposa County and further north. The small towns in which lived virtually everyone who was still alive. The last of humanity. Twenty-eight thousand people, give or take. All that was left of seven billion.

For fourteen years the zombies had followed a simple pattern. They hunted what they saw, and when there was no prey they simply stood still. Like rotting tombstones to mark the place of their death.

Why were these zoms on the move?

What was drawing them toward the towns? Surely they could not smell the living flesh so many miles away. That was impossible, even in an age of impossible things. And with the dense forest and towering mountains the zoms could not see the towns. What was drawing them?

Solomon did not move as the horde of the dead passed below him. He could handle himself against a small pack. He'd done it. More than once. But this was an army of the dead.

What was drawing them?

As he chewed on that, another thought occurred to him. Another question. An ugly, terrible question, and he rose slightly and looked out over the tops of the trees that covered the mountain slope down toward the farmlands.

Perhaps the question was not what was drawing them. Perhaps it was more frightening than that.

Maybe it was...

“What’s chasing them?” he murmured aloud.

Was there something out there in east that was driving all of these zoms westward?

If so...dear God, what could it be?

Solomon Jones swallowed a throat that had gone suddenly dry. Below him the last of the zoms lurched past.

He waited five more minutes, and then he dropped to the ground, landing in a tense crouch, eyes cutting left and right, looking for stragglers.

But the forest had become deathly quiet.

There was a bounty job waiting to be finished, but that was up north. However Solomon turned to the southwest. He had to tell someone about this. People had to know. The *right* people.

He nodded to himself and set out at a run through the forest.

Looking for Tom Imura.

(3)

Girls

Lou Chong wondered if throwing himself off of the guard tower would be better than going home. If he jumped over the rail, the worst that could happen would be a crushing impact on the ground after which he'd be devoured by zoms.

"You are a total chicken," observed Benny Imura, who was sitting on a wooden crate in the far corner of the tower.

"Obviously," agreed Chong. "What's your point?"

Benny shook his head. “Dude, it’s so easy. She *lives* at your house. You see her every day. All you have to do is *say* something to her.”

“Really,” replied Chong as he folded his arms and leaned against the rail. “That’s all I have to do. I go up to a girl who is a year older than me; a girl who has lived alone for years doing nothing but killing zombies and rogue bounty hunters; a girl who knows more ways to kill me than I know how to die; a girl who fought in the zombie pits at Gameland when she was eleven; a girl—I might add—who is skilled with every kind of lethal weapon from handguns to swords...you want me to go up to that girl and just ask her to the summer dance? That’s what you think is easy.”

“Sure.”

“So, I was right all along. You *are* brain dead.”

“Hey, I--.”

“I mean, are you trying to get me killed?”

“You have to admit that she’s hot.”

Chong cocked his head to one side. “No, I don’t think ‘hot’ is really adequate, do you?”

“And we both know that she doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

“She’s never had a boyfriend,” corrected Chong. “Because she is a feral zombie killer. She’s killed everyone who ever tried to get near her.”

“She didn’t kill me.”

“Hope springs eternal,” murmured Chong.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” demanded Benny.

Chong began ticking items off on his fingers. “Being beaten viciously about the head and shoulders. Comprehensive humiliation. Thrusting of sharp objects through my flesh...”

Benny made loud clucking sounds.

Chong stared at him through narrowed eyes. “I said I was afraid of Lilah,” he said evenly. “I never said I was afraid of you. In fact, some recreational Benny-maiming might take the edge off the day.”

“Ha! I’m a professional zombie hunter now. My body is a weapon, my arms are spears my legs are swords.”

He faked a kick at Chong, but the motion knocked Benny off his crate and he crashed down onto the tower floor.

“Yes, a living weapon. I see,” observed Chong dryly.

Benny came off the floor and tackled him and they wrestled from one end of the guard tower to the other, making loud fighting sounds like they had in old comic books. “POW!” and “KRUNCH!”

Chong was pretending to bash Benny’s head against the fence when the shift supervisor bellowed up at them. “What the bloody ‘ell you two monkeybangers doing up there? Do I have to come up and teach you how to act like adults?”

“We’re not adults,” Benny yelled, but before the words could get out Chong clamped a hand around his mouth. All that escaped was a muffled nothing.

“Sorry!” Chong called down through the ladder hole. “There...um...was a wasp up here and we were trying to swat it and--.”

“Yeah, yeah,” growled the supervisor. “Whatever you two delinquents are doing – *don’t.*”

He stalked away and the boys peered over the edge of the tower to watch him go.

“Thanks for getting me in trouble,” complained Chong.

“Happy to help.”

They got to their feet and Chong dug a couple of apples out of his backpack which hung on a wooden peg. He and Benny ate them noisily as they watched the cloud shadows sweep with dark majesty across the field of tall grass and silent zoms.

After a long time, Chong asked, “How are things with you and Nix?”

Benny took his time with that. “She’s going through some stuff. Her mom. Getting kidnapped. The fight. She’s...”

He let his words drift away with the clouds.

Beside him, Chong nodded. He had not been with Benny and Tom when the brothers had gone out hunting for the men who had murdered Nix’s mother and kidnapped her. Chong had stayed in Mountainside and spent a lot of time with Morgie Mitchell, who had been badly injured trying to protect Nix. Morgie had a skull fracture and concussion and was unconscious for four long, terrible days. All that time, Chong sat beside Morgie’s hospital bed and read to him. Adventure stories from old books. The Mortal Instruments, Harry Potter, The Maze Runner. Books Chong knew that Morgie liked.

The stories filled the air of still air of the hospital room, but Morgie slept through most of it, and when he finally woke up he said that he couldn’t remember anything from the last ten days. All of it was a blank, he insisted.

Chong looked in Morgie's eyes when he asked if his friend truly did not remember the bounty hunters taking Nix. Morgie swore that he did not, but there was a frightened, furtive look in his eyes that made Chong wonder.

"Benny?" Chong asked after a few moments.

"Yeah."

"About Nix. You falling in love?"

Benny didn't answer. Chong nodded to himself.

A few minutes later, Benny asked, "Chong?"

"Um hm?"

"What about you and Lilah. You falling in love with her?"

Chong sighed. "I don't know."

"You think she likes you?"

"Not a chance."

They thought about that. "She's been alone most of her life," said Benny. "She only knows about people 'cause she's read a million books."

"I know. We talk about books all the time."

"There's a lot of romantic stuff in books."

"Uh huh."

Benny said, "Learning about that stuff in books isn't the same as *knowing* it, you know that, right?"

"Not being actually stupid, yes."

"Give her time."

"Yeah." Chong cut a look at him. "Nix, too."

“Oh yeah.”

They stood side by side and watched the late afternoon shadows creep out from under the trees, hiding one by one the hundreds of living dead who stood like silent sentinels in the field beyond the fence.

(3)

Swords

Benny Imura screamed like a ten year old girl.

He dodged, too, and the sword missed him by inches. Then he froze as the affect-echo of his shriek rolled back to him after bouncing off the line of trees. He looked around at the faces. Nix Riley, Morgie Mitchell, Lilah, Tom, Chong. All staring at him.

“Wow,” said Chong, “that was manly.”

Benny flushed a brilliant crimson and brought his wooden sword up in a defensive posture.

“I didn’t hit you,” said Nix Riley, who stood five feet away, the tip of her wooden sword pointing to the grass between them. Her pretty, freckled face glowed with effort and intensity. The wooden *bokken* and the insanely fast and accurate way she handled it were totally at odds with her short stature and curly ponytail. “No need to cry.”

“I am not crying,” growled Benny. “That was my *kiai*.”

“Your ‘kiai’,” echoed Chong. A smile trembled on his lips. “That’s the spirit shout that’s supposed to strike fear into the hearts of your enemies. You’re going with a little girl scream?”

“It wasn’t a scream,” insisted Benny. “It was a high-pitched yell.”

“Uh huh,” said Chong.

“A hunting call.”

“Right,” said Nix.

“Like eagles use.”

“Sure,” said Tom.

“It was a battle cry--.”

“Dude,” said Morgie, who sat on the bench, his shaved head still bandaged. “You screamed like a little girl. I’m kind of embarrassed to know you.”

“No,” said Lilah before Benny could reply. The Lost Girl, with her snow white hair and feral eyes, stood leaning on her spear. “Not like a little girl.”

“Ha!” declared Benny. “You see? I told you it was a--.”

“It was like a pig,” said Lilah.

Benny whirled toward her. “No it wasn’t--.”

“A little pig,” she said. “They squeal like that when you try to catch them.”

Benny turned away from her and saw this information register on the faces of each of the others. Even Tom was losing the battle to hide a smile.

“It’s a war cry,” Benny said between gritted teeth.

“The war cry of a ferocious piglet,” suggested Nix.

Benny raised his sword and waited for Nix to do the same.

Tom called, “*Hajime!*” The Japanese command to begin.

Instantly both wooden swords flashed out and there was a shark *klak!* as blade met blade. Nix attacked with a flurry of overhand and lateral cuts, and Benny shifted in a

circle, taking many small steps in order to keep his feet balanced and in constant contact with the ground. The blades slithered and crunched and *tokked* over and over again as they moved. Benny ignored Morgie's constant oinking sounds or the fake eagle cries from Chong.

Nix was incredibly good with a sword even though she had been training only as long as Benny –five short weeks. Benny was a reasonably good athlete, but better at baseball and wrestling than swordplay. Nix was a natural, and in the instant after Tom started each match her face underwent a change from the smiling, freckly girl that Benny loved to something *else*. Infinitely more intense, incredibly focused. And ferocious. Even though she lacked Lilah's years of experience, Nix was every bit as aggressive.

It impressed Benny.

But it also scared him.

Her attack never faltered. She never backed off. Her sword flashed and moved in a blur and it was all Benny could do to defend himself. Tom had taught him how to deal with aggression: evade and protect, then look for a lull and attack. But Nix never paused; there was no lull.

Gradually the catcalls and jokes from the others faded as the duel went on. And on.

Benny lost count of how many strikes he blocked; and the only attacks he managed were weak counter-attacks intended to prevent a combination. He gave ground constantly.

Then Benny saw something that absolutely chilled him. Something that almost made him forget to block.

It was Nix's mouth. Her lips.

As she fought, with every strike of her sword, her lips formed a word.

A name.

Charlie.

The name of the man who had killed Nix's mother.

Charlie Pink-eye.

With sickening clarity Benny realized that Nix was not sparring with him; she wasn't playing. She was *fighting*.

There was a wildness in her green eyes that scared Benny. It pierced his heart with all of the force of an arrow.

"Nix," he said, but his voice was lost in the sound of wood battering against wood. When he looked into her eyes he was sure—absolutely positive—that Nix was not seeing him. Not a chance. She was somewhere else entirely. Maybe in her house on that horrible night, when nothing she could do was enough to save her mother. Or out in the Ruin as a helpless prisoner of Charlie, the Hammer and their men. Or in the bounty hunters' camp during the battle. Nix had wanted to strike Charlie down herself, but events had gone a different way. Nix had been robbed of that moment.

Of that *closure*.

Benny's arms began to tremble from the effort of blocking the attacks, but Nix's blows were every bit as sure and strong.

*Does she know?* He wondered. *Where is her head right now?*

"Nix," he said again, louder and he could hear concern and maybe even a little panic in his own voice.

The sword kept coming, faster and harder. Benny didn't dare risk anything but defense. If he tried to simply step back, Nix's *bokken* would crush his skull.

"Nix!" This time he shouted it.

Her mouth formed the hated name. Over and over again.

"*Nix!*"

There was a blur of movement and a flash of silver and Nix's sword suddenly jerked to a stop in mid-strike, the edge slamming to a stop against a metal pole.

With another sharp cry, Benny staggered back and fell hard on his butt.

He stared at the tableau.

Lilah stood between him and Nix, her spear held high and held in a wide grip. Nix's sword had met the shaft of that spear and stopped there. And then Tom was there, stepping in quickly and gently to take the *bokken* from Nix's hands. Nix barely noticed either of them. Instead she stared at Benny, who sat splay-legged on the grass.

Across the yard, Chong and Morgie stared with open mouths and unblinking eyes, all jokes forgotten.

Nix's eyes blazed with weird lights for a heartbeat longer.

Then she blinked. Instantly confused by what she was seeing. What she was doing.

"W-what--?" she murmured as if someone had asked her a question. A half-smile wavered on her lips. "What?"

Tom cleared his throat. "Okay," he said softly, "let's call it a day, okay? Pie and iced tea?"

Nix turned looked at her hands. They were flushed red from holding the sword with such force. Then she looked at Benny, who still sat on the grass.

“I’m...” But that was all she got out; her face immediately crumpled into a wince of pain as the first heavy sobs broke from her chest. She whirled and ran out of the yard and up the path toward town.

Benny flung his sword away and scrambled to his feet to run after her, but Tom blocked him with a hand to his chest.

“Don’t,” he said.

“I have to,” insisted Benny.

“What’s going on?” demanded Morgie, getting heavily to his feet. Chong did, too, and even though he said nothing his intelligent eyes were cutting from Benny to Tom to Nix’s diminishing figure.

Benny pushed Tom’s hand away and headed for the gate; but Lilah moved faster. She thrust her spear into Benny’s hand, vaulted the rail like a gazelle and raced after Nix faster than Benny ever could.

“Hey!” Benny yelled.

Tom rested his hand on Benny’s shoulder. “No, kiddo. Let them go.”

Morgie and Chong came up to stand with them and the four of them watched the figures dwindle in the distance.

“What’s going on?” Morgie asked again, but there was less force in his question this time. When Benny glanced at him, he saw understanding blossoming in his friend’s eyes. Chong was already there.

They watched the road for a long time even though there was nothing to see.

Chong said, "On First Night, everybody saw someone they love die."

Tom nodded.

"That's why the whole town is like the way it is, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Tom. "They used to call it post-traumatic stress disorder. Now...it's just the way things are. Everyone has been damaged by grief and most people think there's no escape."

"Is there?" asked Benny.

Tom sighed. "For my generation? I don't know. Maybe not. Most of the adults have given up hope."

"I meant...for Nix," said Benny. "Is she always going to be like this? I mean...it wasn't zoms who killed her mom. It was Charlie and he's dead."

"I don't know," said Tom. "Everything in this town reminds Nix of her mom. Everything always will."

"That's why she wants to leave," said Morgie, and they all turned to look at him. "I know she says it's 'cause she wants to find that plane you guys saw, but that ain't it. She don't want to be *here* anymore. I don't think she can be here."

The comment was so unlike Morgie that they all stared at him. Morgie scratched at the edge of his bandage and kept looking down the road. After a while, Tom nodded.

"I know exactly how she feels," he said, and without further comment walked slowly back to the house.

The three boys stood at the wooden fence for long minutes.

"This is all going to change," murmured Morgie. "Ain't it?"

Benny and Chong didn't look at him.

“Nix. Tom. Us. All of it’s over, ain’t it?”

Chong opened the garden gate. “I’d better get home. I have work in the morning.”

They watched him walk along the path under the summer trees.

After a moment, Morgie sighed and followed.

Benny Imura stood at the open fence, pulled in so many directions at once that all he could do was stand there.

Then he turned around, crossed the yard and picked up his sword. The handle was cool from lying in the grass and he adjusted his hold on it, feeling the balance.

He went over to the old car tire Tom had hung on a rope from a tree. When he was little he swung on that tire, but he wasn’t that little kid anymore.

With a whistle and thud he swung the sword and hit the tire. It was an awkward hit, poorly executed because his arms ached and his mind was splintered. He stepped back, took a breath, and swung again.

A more solid hit this time, but still not right.

He swung again. And again. Not letting up, not dropping the sword even when the ache in his arms turned to fire. He couldn’t. To do that would allow him to be weak; it would keep his skills at too low a level. And he could not afford that. He could not risk that.

As much as he hated the thought, Benny Imura knew for sure that he would need to use that sword the right way. The *real* way. The way a fighter would. The way a zombie hunter would.

And...he would probably need it soon. The world seemed to be spinning him in that direction.

As he struck and struck and struck, he did not mouth the name of their enemy. He did not say 'Charlie'. Instead Benny mouthed a different word. One that tapped a different source of power than the well of hate from which Nix drank. He struck and struck and struck for what he thought and hoped was a better purpose. A cleaner one.

"Nix," he breathed, as he trained to fight the monsters he knew lived in his world.  
"Nix."

It put power into every single blow.

TO BE CONTINUED IN

## DUST & DECAY

By

Jonathan Maberry

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