



DO US PART

by

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TAGLINE:

When Jack Pearce's wife Catherine succumbs to a lone zombie attack, Jack has to reassess his marriage and the unusual job he's honour bound to see to the end...

Catherine Pearce: Smartphone Recording 020417 - 22:01

"My dear, dear darling, sweet Jack, I'm so sorry. I was alone. It was dark. I had an armful of kindling and I didn't register the moan behind me fast enough. Jesus... I'm a mess. I know I'm compromised. Ironic, huh? Adrenalin's dulling what I know will be agony soon but for now there are more important issues at hand than flailing around on the back lawn. Those daffodils look tired. Jesus, that hurts... Jack, I can help you. I'm going to the restraining wall in the lab. All I'm thinking is how disappointed you're going to be... I can feel it, Jack. It's coming. Oh God..."

After Catherine turned, some things actually stayed the same. Jack was not a man to abandon either his professional responsibilities or his emotional needs even after losing his wife. He certainly wasn't going to miss a whole day's work so that he might grieve. What he did for a living was *for* the living and all the more important for that. The research on the re-animated dead was desperately needed. Jack's government department was initiated to discover how the necrotic upheaval had first manifested. It was hoped that from this information, the smallest conception of a cure might be advanced. The turn rate was far lower than anyone had predicted (all those films and TV programmes tended to skew people's perceptions of the potential devastation

caused by the re-animated). This wasn't to say that the numbers weren't continuing to tell a horrifying story, but it was one that Jack's team was anxious to stop dead, as it were, in its stumbling, relentless tracks.

Jack was at the prow of his ship and couldn't afford the time to go below deck. His colleagues would probably be shocked to see him so soon after his loss. Their surprise was an emotional leftover, a vestige from the status quo before the troubles started. At its heart, it was sympathy, but Jack would push his colleagues' concerns aside and press on. He had an inkling of pride in the self-delusion that momentous events could not personally affect him. If he showed his resolve in the face of the most appalling loss, his stock as leader would surely rise. Of course, his colleagues saw a heartless, cold and potentially brittle man but as long as they were able to function under his direction it mattered little to Jack or his employees what anyone thought of anyone else.

It was crucially important, however, to regard the re-animated as diseased or physically corrupted human beings. Once they were relegated to horrors beneath contempt, heads with bullet invitations or virus spreading biters, any efforts to reverse their condition would be as seeds falling on rock. The re-animates were on the same statistical line as rabies cases in the 70s. They had become a fact of life despite their inherent biological paradox. Given enough time and indifference, even the impossible can become mundane. Jack had to be flint in the centre of the capricious storm of his work. He fooled himself into thinking that he didn't know what sacrifice meant and steered his mind away from the concept whenever his conscience glanced in its direction. As he sliced into the tissue of the problem, there were no screams to remind him that humanity was perched on a precipice. Outbreaks were rare but the public voice was demanding an end to the isolated flurries of psychotic cannibals that did two things extremely well – defy conventional biology and replicate by delivery of viral saliva.

A short, unassuming man whose expertise was primate genetics, Jack Pearce was an unlikely saviour. The brain-dead cadavers of the first chimpanzees and gorillas afflicted with re-animation had been shipped to him.

To say each had been examined, tested, dissected, scanned, prodded and probed was an understatement. There was little left of once strong, muscular bodies that had lived, died and then, to a Zairean ranger's horror, returned to an aggressive, undead state. The viral transmission crossed primate species with a terrible ease. From the rainforests of Africa, a small human re-animate wave had gathered momentum. There was never a tipping point because an attack was not a quiet, subtle or easily unnoticed event. The wave had only managed to spread from those of a core group who'd been bitten but lasted long enough to survive a flight off the continent. Governments poured resources into finding an answer. Jack had a reputation in his own department for being unfailingly consistent. The passing of his wife had stoked his fires of detection, the heat probably helping to numb him to the inevitable emotional fall out that he was staving off. But Jack was not a man to go to pieces.

Despite the great weight of expectation on his shoulders, he still allowed his open mind to wrestle with the more intractable issues of his romantic relationship. He admitted to himself that despite her change, he still loved his wife. How was this love maintained, nurtured even, when it stopped being reciprocated? Was it a chemical process that reduced a logical and methodical man to childish infatuation? Or was there a neurological aspect, one he was not qualified to prove one way or the other? There was a third option. Love could be a physical ache, an urge, a desire to touch, to feel, to penetrate or be penetrated. Even in her re-animated state, Catherine's attractions did not escape her erstwhile husband. She did not repel him though by rights she should have. He'd washed her of course, very carefully while she pulled against restraints but her body was secreting fluids that gave even Jack pause. Taking in the air near her took an act of great will. Open sores were dotted all over her, erupting from bruises as dead tissue collided with hard edges in the course of seeking food. Her wrists chafed at the handcuffs despite the Lycra scarves Jack had wound around her arms to prevent abrasion.

Honesty forced Jack to acknowledge that even now his physical attraction was not dormant. He wasn't certain if he would ever act on that desire. He'd

need a few more props to keep her toothy business end nullified. With a subtle shake of his head, Jack banished such thoughts. Love was a two way street not a one-way necrophilic gratification. Jack wasn't a monster even if his wife now was. An electronic ping from the hallway commanded Jack's immediate attention. He snatched up his smartphone and read the message. Work beckoned despite the text bearing more words of condolence.

Jack looked deeply into his wife's eyes. The Catherine he knew wasn't there anymore. The once emerald green irises were now milky pale and necrotic, ocular fluid had oozed into the whites and produced a miasma of graduated shades that looked like the result of an infant's hand painting. The eyes were unnaturally bulbous and held not a single trace of recognition. Catherine had always taken a great deal of care with her appearance. As her pre-bitten self, she would be doubly mortified to see how she appeared now. Her pupils dilated and contracted at what might have once been a heartbeat's rate. Jack shifted uncomfortably. He always relied on Catherine's eyes to reveal what she was thinking. Not any more.

Slowly Jack's fingers moved comb-like through Catherine's hair. The once lustrous, auburn candyfloss cloud was now an insipid mass of dank and lifeless knots. Lovingly, he teased the worst ones apart imagining that his wife would somehow feel what he was doing and that the effort was born from an abiding love despite her recent death. Jack was still surprised at its smell. Carefully, he buried his nose into Catherine's hair and took a lungful. Cinnamon. How could the scent from that overpriced shampoo ordered from the US still be lingering? This ought to be highlighted in their marketing, he mused before extricating his face.

Jack cocked his head slightly to one side. He moved his right hand to Catherine's left breast. He felt the pleasing weight of it, its yield to his gentle caress. The nipple had long since given up being responsive and in this state, it had a compacted sadness all of its own. Surprisingly there was very little discolouration and only the faintest lines visible where bikini straps once clung. Her breast was still a thing of beauty and Jack marvelled at the power contained in the female physiology, dead or alive.

The tube carriage slowed down. Jack was suddenly aware that he'd reached his destination. He gathered up Catherine's breast, eyes and hair and carefully wrapped them back up in a large, blood flecked compress. He sealed this in a clear plastic box and dropped it into his briefcase. Snapping it shut, he walked out on to the platform. He was sure there was going to be a breakthrough today. He could feel it.