

Summary: All Starsky wanted to do was enjoy forever with his wonderfully weird writer--not think about eternity. Eternity shouldn't have anything to do with forever, but what Hutch wanted, he sometimes got, and what he wanted now was an eternity plan. All Starsky wanted was forever and a lot of cookies.

Sequel to [*When I Was Sheriff of Beavertooth County*](#).

Sixth in the [*Golden Boy*](#) series.

Categories: Slash

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Warnings: Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

As Soon As Forever Is Through

by **Mary Louise Fisher**

"I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." -- W. Allen

My left butt cheek felt like it was falling asleep. The lady in the pink and purple pantsuit droned on about why Peaceful Rest should be my first choice as a forwarding address. (She could give you an eyewitness account of standing next to Oswald when he shot Kennedy and still put you to sleep.) The tall blond guy sitting next to me raised his hand and asked his third intelligent question of the evening. They say there's no such thing as forever. My guess is that they never attended a Preplanning seminar. (They never fell for someone like Hutch either.)

Let me tell you, I never pictured spending my life with a man. My occasional misty daydream involved a warm domestic scene with marriage and kids. It was a faceless fantasy to visit when I needed to reassure myself that someday I'd settle down. But there was this guy I worked with named Hutch. He was there for me, in ways I never even knew I needed. I bonded with him in a very close friendship. And the train of my life jumped onto another track and never went straight again. Eventually it passed through Out Junction, pulled into Together Station, and stopped its wheel-spinning in a place called Forever.

Maybe it was the way he acted so cool, calm and collected. Maybe it was the feeling I had that there was fire under that ice. Maybe it was the fact that he was the ultimate goy. He gave good Relationship, is all I know. And now I was in so deep, I was never getting out. Like George Jessel said: Marriage is a mistake every man should make.

You know, he started it. He talked to me first. (If I hadn't been on my knees giving that soda machine a gynecological exam because it had devoured my last dime and he hadn't come around the corner and seen me, he probably wouldn't have spoken to me, bought me a Coke, and loaned me twenty bucks until payday.) But he made the first contact.

Maybe I had a part in it, too. I liked to touch the back of his neck when we were in the car together. It was personal and private. (I could get some skin that way and still just remain his very, very, close friend.) He told me later that it affected him in ways he wasn't ready to deal with at the time. He even wrote about it: "The weight of his hand against the back of my neck/Forces an awareness of his body heat/Ice might melt under the pressure of that caress! Curious and confused/I welcome his persistent presence."

I saw John Blame touch him on the back of the neck like that. John was my role model and a big reason why I became a cop. At the time of his murder, I found out that he was a closeted gay. I never knew. John was gay and he touched Hutch like I did. Maybe it was fatherly, but I don't think so. And after John's death, I tried not to think about what it all meant for a long time. (I just kept reaching over and touching my partner whenever I could.)

You know, there are closets and there are closets. We were in a closet built for two for years. We worked together on special assignments in Robbery/Homicide and spent 80% of our time together. We practically lived together in my car, with all the stakeouts we were assigned to. Take my word for it, there is nothing exotic, exciting, or entertaining about a stakeout. You park somewhere and you wait for something to happen or for someone to show up. Then the next day you do it all over again. And the next and the next. If it was a daytime park-and-wait, it was usually hot to heat stroke in the car, screaming bladders, and boredom. If it was at night, it was 'why the hell didn't I bring my jacket,' hanging it out the window, and boredom.

In between, it was at least eight hours in a confined space with a guy you could learn to hate for his elephant-sized bladder, his complete aversion to card tricks, sports trivia questions, movie star impressions, knock-knock jokes, and his ability to sit quietly for hours. There was something strange about the way he could sit so still for so long without saying a word. He wasn't mad, he wasn't moody, he wasn't nodding off, he was just sitting. Silently. During the day, we could read the newspaper out loud to each other, which was okay. But after sunset it not only got dark, it got quiet.

"Knock-knock."

"Starsk, we really don't have to talk all the time."

"I know. But it feels weird sitting here without saying a word."

"Uh-huh."

"Hey, ever hear my Cagney impression?"

"Many times."

"You dirty rat."

"It sounds like Bogart," he said.

"How about this? Play it again, Sam."

"Sounds like Cagney."

"Yeah, like you can do better."

"I have no desire to do impressions. But if I did, I'd work harder on making Cagney and Bogart sound like who they are instead of each other."

If that was supposed to shut me up, it did. For about ten minutes. "Do you know where the Dodgers came from originally?"

"Brooklyn."

"Did I ever tell you about the time Vinnie Marzetti and me snuck into a Dodgers game?"

"I."

"'Aye'? What is that? Pirate talk?"

"Vinnie and I. Not Vinnie and me."

"Oh. Did I ever tell you about the time Vinnie and I snuck into a game?"

"Several times."

"How about the time Frankie Markovich and I snuck into a game?"

"Once."

"Want to hear it again?"

"Not really."

"Okay."

Then he told me to knock off the knock-knock jokes. So we sat in the dark together in the silence of the tomb. After almost an hour of that, I was ready to bolt out of the car screaming, 'Somebody say something!' "What are you doing?"

"Sitting here with you, in this stinking car in claustrophobic conditions, waiting for this turkey to show up, who hasn't shown up for the last ten nights. Okay?"

"I know that. But what are you doing?"

"God," he said. "I'm thinking."

"About what?"

"Things."

"What things?"

"Just... things."

"Yeah, okay." After it got to the point where I could hear myself breathing, I had to open my mouth. "Hey, Hutch?"

"What?"

"Knock-knock."

But you know something? He wasn't thinking, he was writing... in his head. (And here I thought you needed a pen and paper.) He was in a literary closet; he never outed himself as a writer to me. So who knew? If I had known, maybe it might have influenced my later head-first fall into love. Now I share a life with someone who stares off into space, hears the voices of characters, and disappears for days when he has a deadline due. I ended up serving a life sentence with the weird and wonderful Hutch (with absolutely no desire for parole). I also ended up sitting in a room full of future corpses hearing more than I ever wanted to know about preparing for the inevitable. And why? I'll tell you why.

We can't agree about where to go when it's time to not be around anymore. My plan, like I told him, was that I would go first. Problem solved. Because like the sands of an hourglass so are the days of our lives and someday I'll be down to my last grain. The man upstairs running the Life Lottery will pick my number. The fat lady will sing and the song will be dedicated to me.

So I'll see you on the other side, babe. I'll haunt you, if I can. Not too many tears, sweetheart, you know how red your eyes get. Plus all that nose-blowing is bad for your sinuses. Jerk off once in awhile and think of me. See ya later, alligator. The End.

But, no! That would be too easy. Which is why in our usually happy, 90%-of- the-time-in-love, shared domestic bliss, the Death Debate hung around like a relative who was invited for a short visit a long time ago and never left. It lurked in the shadowy corners of my home like a zombie just waiting to drag its sorry ass in and ruin an evening with its unwelcome presence.

It was Wednesday. The Wilkins case was moving along like a turtle with arthritis. The delay today involved a juror feeling sick when the autopsy photos got passed around. (Hey, she should have been there. It's a lot worse close-up.) So they adjourned early and I was hanging up my coat and tie on the back of a kitchen chair around four.

When I walked into the living room, Hutch was on his hands and knees smack dab in the middle of our new Persian rug. (Uncle Al got it for us wholesale from his friend, Abdul, which just goes to show that when it comes to making a buck, Jews and Muslims can get along.) He was finishing up his workout doing the yoga Dog position. His old white wrestling leotard-thing was damp with perspiration. The seam down the middle of his crack was frayed and starting to come apart. If anything ever looked like an invitation to dance, I'd say this was it. (Want to bark like a dog, baby?)

"Aren't you home early?" he said as he looked over his shoulder.

"Can you see me?" I pulled my shirt over my head.

"Yes."

"I'm home early." I got rid of the shoes and socks.

"I've still got a few more positions to do."

"You bet you do."

He twisted like a pretzel and sat down hard on his ass. "Hold it!" He pointed his index finger at me. Down came my pants and underwear.

"You hold it," I said and pointed to my growing hard-on. Then I stepped out of my pants and got down on the floor with him.

"Can I just finish here?"

"Nope." I started wrestling him on to his side.

"You're going to rip it. Let me just--"

"Too late." I finished opening the ripped seam with my left hand.

"Don't you ever take no for an answer?"

I replied by wedging the length of my dick in the crack of his ass. "Want to hear all about my day?" I said in his ear. "Or get off?"

"What do you think?" He turned on his stomach. I flattened him to the floor as I rubbed off on him. I humped him good, riding his ass with real enthusiasm and emotion. "I'm getting carpet burns," he panted. I rolled off. We finished by jerking each other off to the sound of some New Age wind-chimey music.

"Good workout," I told him as I slapped his ass and got up off the floor.

"You're paying for a new one, mister," he said as he looked at the remains of his exercise outfit.

"Yeah? See you in small claims court. Can't wait to hear you explain how it got ripped." He saluted me with his middle finger. "So, what's to eat?"

"Two words."

"To go?"

"Lentil soup."

"Yum, can't wait." I could wait. (Forever.)

That night we were sitting together on the brown napa leather sofa in my multimedia center. (Hutch calls it the den. Whatever. All I know is that he made me put the big screen TV with the sixteen surround-sound speakers, dual DVD and five disc CD changer in the room farthest away from his office because he says it's too loud. He's a writer, did I mention that? But let's not go there.) I was semi-sort of watching NASCAR, waiting for a fiery crash, or a fatality or two. I had a bottle of Corona with lime in one hand and *Baseball Weekly* in the other, wondering whatever

happened to the fine art of pitching. My partner was reading a book about death imagery in nineteenth century literature. (There's no accounting for taste.) He was also sipping grapefruit juice on the rocks with a splash of vodka in it. (Like I said.) When suddenly, without warning, he let the zombie in.

"What if I go first?" he said. "What if you have to take care of things for me?"

"It ain't going to happen," I told him, ignoring the zombie who was standing right behind me.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Are you terminal?" I put the paper down and started my interrogation.

"Of course not."

"Taking vitamins and getting fiber daily?"

"Yes."

"Exercising and watching your weight?"

"Yes."

"I don't do any of that shit. So I'm definitely going first. You can follow a couple of days later, if you want."

"Starsky, you have to tell me what you want done."

When my partner called me by my last name and the zombie was in the room tapping me on the shoulder and asking if it could sit down and watch NASCAR with me, I had to get tough. "I don't care. You decide!" I emphasized my point by spilling beer down the front of my new LA Lakers shirt. "You make all the decisions around here anyway."

"I don't make all the decisions." He shut the book, shut up, and went over to the exercise bike. Meanwhile, the zombie schlepped off into its corner. I finally got a little peace and some ESPN. (Did I mention the satellite dish I want to get? It practically pays for itself. That's something else we are currently debating. See what you get when you move in with the captain of the high school debating team? Interesting interruptions in your pursuit of sports information and down time. But I was in a forever kind of thing with him, so I accommodated his need to think he was going to change my mind by endless debating. We could save our breath and any future ill will regarding Relationship issues if he would just agree with me in the first place. (It's been over twenty years now and so far it hasn't happened.)

I finished my second Lite beer and a small bag of baked nacho chips. (I was health-conscious even if he didn't think so.) The night was a nice lull in my busy schedule. The cars just kept going round and round, round and round, going nowhere fast. I was getting sleepy.

"Ready for bed, babe?" I got a lot of air for an answer as he whirred along on his personal

mission to outlive me. I figured he didn't hear me. "Ready!"

"I can hear you. And the answer is no."

"I'll wait." I liked going to bed at the same time; something usually happened. We might be pushing fifty, but the heat was still on.

"Don't bother." He got off the bike, wiped his face with a towel, put on his reading glasses and sat down with his book.

"You can read in bed, if you want to finish the chapter," I said in my understanding way.

"I'll finish it here, thanks." He sat ramrod straight on the sofa.

I got behind him and started rubbing his shoulders. I worked a hand up the back of his neck.

"How about holding me instead of the book?" I whispered in subtle seductive sexiness. (I was tenderness itself.)

"Not while this is unresolved between us."

"Shit." I stopped rubbing his neck. "Don't start with me." I used both hands to apply pressure to his shoulders. "I got to be in court tomorrow and I need to get some rest."

"Get some. Good night." He kept reading.

"I already told you I'm going first." I squeezed my hands.

"How do you know?" He tried to shrug them off.

"Because I'm going to go hang myself from the shower curtain rod if you don't drop it."

"There's some rope with the camping equipment. Want some?"

I threw my hands up in the air, came around the sofa and stood in front of the coffee table. "All I'm saying is, you can't expect me to do what you're asking me to do if you go first. That's all I'm saying."

"If you loved me, you would."

"If I loved you? 'If?' How can you say 'if' I loved you. I love you. You know I love you. Don't you?"

"I guess," he said to his book.

"You 'guess'? That's nice talk. That makes me feel secure and appreciated."

"I'm sorry." He looked at me.

"You ought to be. Doubting my love. You're my world."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Fuck, no. I am not dumping your ashes in the lake."

"Spread, dummy, not dump."

"Same thing, sweetheart. End of subject. Case closed."

"Fine. And how about if I just stick a bone up your ass when the time comes and have the dogs drag you away?"

"Suits me." I yawned. "Let's call it a night."

"No." He went back to his book.

"No?"

"You heard me."

I heard him, but I wasn't going to cave. I had to take a stand; my backbone wasn't jelly yet. "Put the book down. Get your butt up. And come to bed. Now." Since he seemed to be ignoring my order, I decided that it was time for a serious threat. "Do I need to go get the plaque? Because I can go into the kitchen and take it off the wall and shove it under your nose, if you need to be reminded of its sacred content," I told him.

"You don't need to do that, Lieutenant. I know the law."

"Coming to bed?"

"Meet you in the bedroom, after I shower," he said with a catlike smile.

Finally! I won the round. He'd had me on the ropes a couple times, I admit. But my forcefulness and take-charge attitude convinced him that giving in to the alpha male was best for the partnership. I stretched out in the bed and waited for him in keen anticipation. Making up with him was always good -- very, very good. (Maybe I'd keep up the dominance routine and play it a little rough for awhile. He'd probably get off on that big-time and want to do me.) You know, bringing in the plaque was a stroke of genius. My mother gave it to us for a housewarming gift years ago. It has good advice on it. (Bad poetry, but good advice.) It says: "If it's night and you fight, It can keep, You need sleep. Kiss and make up. Say good night. In morning light, you'll forget the fight."

He came in about twenty minutes later with a towel around his waist and a sleeping bag under his arm. He laid it on the bed, got in, zipped up and kissed the air in my general direction and said, "Good night."

"Anyone ever tell you that you got a stubborn streak a mile wide?" Silence was his answer. I sighed, patted his ass and said, "I'm sorry." (For what I really didn't know, but it seemed like a

smart move.) "So what do you think?"

"About what?"

"Finishing what we started this afternoon?"

"You have a snowball's chance in hell."

"Yeah, okay. It doesn't hurt to ask. Love you."

"Back at you."

The demands of my mother's housewarming gift were met. Pretty soon his breathing was real regular and he was cruising into sleep. Me, I'm remembering why I don't like zombies.

It all had to do with a movie I saw when I was eleven or twelve. It was called *Zombieland*. None of the gang could go with me that Saturday, so I went myself. The movie sucked. (Even at that age, I'd seen enough movies to know a Grade B from Grade Z.) This beautiful girl washes up on an island inhabited by a mad scientist, his handsome assistant, and some zombies. How she got there we never find out. But she looked good in her dress, which was shredded in all the right places. Plus she had a great set of boobs. She meets and falls in love with the assistant after knowing him for about two seconds. Then she spends the rest of her vacation on the island screaming like a banshee and running around in the jungle in high heels. She trips on vines and falls over twigs while the zombies chase her and the assistant tries to save her. The plot wasn't the only problem.

The real problem was that there was only one zombie and it looked like the mad scientist, Dr. Doomeyer, wearing a lot of white makeup and a fright wig. Maybe the actor playing the doctor was going for the challenge of performing a dual role. Maybe they had no budget to speak of. All I know is that during the whole movie, and it seemed to go on forever, you never saw the doc and the zombie in the same place at the same time. But maybe that's what the title meant. One island, one zombie.

I got up before it was all the way over and went into the lobby for a treat. I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out three cents and some lint. (There went that second box of Crackerjacks.) A man was in the lobby sipping on a soda. He came over to me and wanted to know if I needed any money. I was wise to that. That you say no, even if you need the money. So, I declined. He said, "Sure?" I said, "Yeah."

Then I went back in and sat down. By then the action had come to a fever pitch. The guy and the girl on the screen were hugging big time. "We'll get out of this, darling. I'll save you," he tells her over and over. (He's macho and also limited to two lines of dialogue.) He's also desperately trying to barricade the door with 120 pounds of dead weight on his arm. While at the same time the zombie/mad scientist is trying to make the door look like steel (and not cardboard) as he overacts in his struggle to bash it in.

When all of a sudden the man from the lobby sat down next to me and touched my knee and whispered, "You sure you don't want some money, sonny?" All the time he's talking, he's moving his hand up my leg. I came out of my temporary paralysis, bolted over the seat in front of me and ran down the aisle. I barreled out of the fire exit and landed in an alley. Then ran like hell until I was clear of the movie house and heading for home. That's why I don't like zombies.

Now I was wide awake and wanted a snack. I tried to sleep, but all I could hear was my stomach saying, *cookiesandmilk, cookiesandmilk*. I figured the zombie was laying low. Hutch was zonked out and it seemed to be at his beck and call. I got up, went to the kitchen, and prepared to entertain myself.

For the milk part, it was whole cow juice, ice cold, straight out of the container. Hutch had his goat's milk lying in wait right in front, but I deftly avoided that trap. (I tasted it once by mistake. All I can say is, I feel sorry for baby goats.) For the 'and cookies' part of the evening's festivities, I went over to the cookie jar, twisted Yoda's head off and looked inside. He was in a generous mood as per the Cease Fire in the Kitchen Sector in the ongoing saga of the Cookie Wars.

The original Peace Accord -- drawn up in 1985 (and amended in 1987, 1991, 1996, 1999, and the year 2000) -- stipulated that: IF I wanted sweets and IF the cookie jar contained store-bought cookies and IF I considered them a treat and worth my time and IF it was something that I'd want to put in my mouth and swallow, THEN I didn't invade the territory of the homemade "best you have ever tasted" chocolate chip cookies. These were secured under heavy guard in a decorative tin that said Scottish Shortbread. It was cleverly concealed behind containers of oatmeal, wheat germ, and flax seed on the top shelf in the pantry. These "hidden" treats were supposedly off limits in a No Man's Land of cookies-for-company-only that I agreed not to infiltrate.

So I've been using guerilla warfare for years. I'd get in stealthily and quickly. I'd wait until he was in his office and then make my assault. I'd cover the sound of the tin opening by a coughing fit. He started worrying about all that hacking he was hearing and made me get a chest x-ray. After that I made sure he was out of the house before I went on a mission. Over time I perfected my technique. I always took an uneven number of cookies and varied the amount (three here, five there). I covered my tracks by rearranging the rows. I'd even break up one of the cookies to cover up any holes that remained. He never caught on.

Then I had my annual physical this year and my cholesterol was up. I went on a raid a couple nights after getting the numbers. And instead of cookies in the tin, I found a note. It said, 'NO!'

I'd come home from work and smell fresh-baked cookies. I'd be doled out two measly, slightly burnt rejects for dessert and that would be it. The rest were nowhere to be seen or found. Then he'd have people over and wow them with the cookies, which seemed to appear like manna from heaven whenever he needed them. One day, the truth hit me like a ton of bricks right on top of my dark curly head of hair (with those few strands of silvery gray that would make me look distinguished if the Grecian Formula stopped working). My partner was holding out on me!

A month ago, he went on a gay writers retreat in 'Frisco. I decided that I could live without the

fun of sitting in a room with a bunch of creative neurotics who thought the placement of every comma in every sentence was important. I stayed home. For entertainment, I had *The Lord of the Rings* Special Extended DVD Edition boxed set, the *Gay Guy's Guide to Sex, Lifestyle, and Fashion* (I was interested in the articles on improving your stamina without having to use a cock ring, new designs in butt plugs, fashion over forty, and getting your partner to do it, even when he says he's not in the mood) and twelve mint, vintage *Spiderman* comics to read once (and place in their special protective sleeves for posterity).

When I went to consult my favorite Jedi, Yoda had a bellyful of Graham crackers. Graham CRACKERS! Crackers are not cookies. The Cease-Fire agreement was null and void. The ex-hiding place was now a barren wasteland of negative feedback and stale crumbs. But I knew there had to be cookies around here somewhere. Hell, I'm a detective. I'd investigate.

Four hours later, after tearing the kitchen apart (and looking under the bed and in the linen closet and behind every book on the tall oak bookcase in his office -- how many damn books does one man need?), I sat down and regrouped. I realized that I needed to think like the mastermind who had come up with the new and improved hiding place.

If I was Hutch and I didn't want me to find any company cookies that might be around, what would I do? Where could I hide my stash, but easily retrieve it if I needed it? What would my attractive partner, a guy who thinks a salad is ham, cheese, turkey, Thousand Island dressing and a leaf of lettuce, avoid? What would a salami-for-breakfast sex symbol pass by? What would a carnivore ignore?

You got it. Vegetables. And since the clandestine "company" cache had a slight chill to them whenever they appeared, I'd say frozen vegetables. And there it was! A foil-wrapped container lurking behind bags of broccoli, Brussels sprouts, carrots, and peas. I made a quick mental picture of how things were stacked, noticed that they were arranged alphabetically and wondered if he would benefit from therapy. Then I lifted the container out. It was the motherlode! Five dozen freshly baked, perfectly formed homemade chocolate chip cookies and not a burnt one in the box.

The first dip into the vault, I only took three cookies. He was none the wiser. We even had company and he didn't notice. But now the problem was, I knew where they were and they tasted even better frozen. (I became a pro at creating new patterns in the rows so that he wouldn't notice my theft.)

Maybe this is how junkies get hooked and how embezzlers get started. You start with a little taste, a little dip in the till. Three cookies, no one's the wiser. You promise yourself never to do it again. You can control your addiction. And then he goes sailing with friends on Sunday. He leaves you alone with your craving and your desire (and your knowledge that he'll be gone all day). It's going to be a sports pig-out, not yard work or errands or unpaid labor around the house. And you totally lose control. (It's really all his fault, when you think of it.)

Now I knew what it was like for the habitual offender as I began to lie, cheat, and steal to conceal my crime. I could no longer rearrange rows to hide the theft. So I bought an identical, but slightly smaller, container to conceal the fact that a large number of cookies were now

missing. I even thought of paying someone to bake replacement cookies. Then I remembered that the cookies were some kind of secret fucking family recipe and he doesn't have it written down. (How secret can chocolate chip cookies be?)

So I went to the store. I read the backs of all the boxes and bags and learned more than I ever wanted to know about the things that go into baked goods. (What the hell is BHT, anyway?) Then I took a couple stiff drinks, worked up my nerve, and called his mother. I told her that my mother would love to have her recipe for those delicious cookies. And she said, give me her number, I'll call her. I sure will, I said, just as soon as she's back from her cruise. Now I was lying about my mother's whereabouts. Where would it all end? (And how could I explain that out of five dozen cookies, there were exactly nine cookies left?)

And here I was thinking of embezzling again. And with the boss right in the office. I'd have to settle for Yoda's goodies. They were diet cookies pretending to be Oreos. They look just like my favorite sandwich cookie, but taste just like crap in comparison. There's something missing. I think it's the flavor. I bit into a cookie and took a big slug of milk. These were not dippers. But they tasted okay as slush.

While I was sitting there I got to thinking that actually zombies are misunderstood. They didn't plan on being that way, something just happened. Kind of like how I ended up in a gay relationship. I wasn't planning on it. I just happened to meet this beautiful man. I fell in love. I wanted him. When I asked him if he ever thought of me that way, he said he did. When I put the moves on him, he let me. (After he made sure I'd read *The Joy Of Gay Sex* cover to cover, written a ten-page book report, and taken an entrance exam.) I made a commitment to him because he was the best thing I'd ever found and I couldn't imagine living my life without him. And he really and truly loved me. It was like Aretha Franklin sang: "You said I do. I said I will." So now I'm in the life forever. (Plus, you can't rehabilitate a butt fucker.)

You know, it might even be cool to be a zombie. You could do nothing -- park yourself in front of the TV and just veg out. Kind of like some of the citizens we encountered around town during the late 60's and early 70's, when Hutch and I were working the streets as cops. Plus you could go to the mall. That's a proven fact. If you've ever been in a shopping mall the day after Christmas, you've seen them: zoned out, glassy-eyed human beings, shuffling along, staring straight ahead with shopping bags in their hands, trying to return things, searching for sales -- mindless and possessed.

Now being a vampire would be a drag. I mean, what if you didn't like the taste of blood? Plus, when you were shape-shifting what if you turned into a cockroach, followed some cute little roachy babe into the motel, and realized that you were never getting out? I think it would be better to be a zombie, if I had to choose. I'd already be dead, so I'd never have to engage in the Death Debate with my partner. I could just go to the mall whenever I got the urge to roam.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a cold hand touched my shoulder. "Jee-zus! What are you trying to do, get my life insurance early?"

"Sorry. I woke up and you weren't there."

"I'm in the kitchen."

"No shit, Sherlock." He ran his fingers through my hair. "What do you think of these new low-fat cookies? Good, huh?"

"Delicious," I lied.

"They must be. I just filled Yoda."

"He was in a generous mood."

"Well, tell him to save some for me next time."

"Gotcha. You're not going to rewind, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know you. You never let things go. And I'm too tired right now to debate with you."

"And too full of cookies?"

"That too."

"Come to bed?"

"Not if you're sleeping in that condom."

"I'm not. Come to bed, honey." Then he took me by my sticky paw and led me back to bed.

I got up later than usual because he let me sleep in. I followed the smell of coffee into the kitchen. The Oldies channel was tuned in and the song, "The Monster Mash," was playing. The chef was setting me up with a smallish plate of bagels, lox, and cream cheese.

"Morning," he said. "Love you."

"Back at you, sweetheart."

I sat down and spied half a cherry Danish right next to my Yankees coffee mug. Life was good. (Even if the portions had gotten smaller.) Lady, our golden retriever, was gnawing on a great big soup bone. Diego Garcia, our sometimes cat (sometimes he's here, sometimes he's not), was making like a pussycat rubbing on Hutch's legs. We both knew it was all about getting some of the lox and not real affection on his part, but it was a good act.

Hutch sat down with me and started nibbling off my plate. I liked seeing him put real food in his mouth. (Man can't live on oatmeal, boiled eggs, and dry toast alone.) I gave him half of the half of Danish because he was being such a good boy.

"I gave Lady the bone instead of saving it for your funeral."

"Thanks."

"You working late tonight?"

"Yeah, probably. Depends how much crap has piled up after court."

"Who's defending?"

"Hoppin' Harry," I said over a mouthful of bagel.

"He's not a big fan of yours, is he?"

"He usually hates my guts."

"And all because he can't shake you when you're on the stand. Isn't that a shame?"

"Yeah, a real tearjerker." I pointed to my cup for a warm-up.

"You were really in control during Richie Stone's murder trial last year. Harry was jumping around the courtroom trying to distract you. You looked so dignified and serious. The way you used your reading glasses for a prop was a nice touch."

"I saw that on *Law and Order*."

"Remember how you pissed off Stationary Stan that time?"

"You mean during the Reynolds trial when he planted himself in front of me like a great big fat wall and I kept leaning out around him to make eye contact with the jury?"

"Yeah. He lost points with that jury. They felt sorry for poor Lieutenant Starsky, who was only trying to do his job. Brilliant testifying, buddy."

"Hey, I had a great teacher." I squeezed his hand. "You know that?" I meant it. I learned a lot from watching him on the stand all those years we were in Homicide together. Juries warmed up to him; he was soft-spoken, serious, and sincere. (Plus, the fact that he was easy on the eye and an advertisement for the Aryan race didn't hurt.) A case can be lost in the courtroom if you aren't prepared. He was a stainless steel fist covered by a white velvet glove.

"Want the sports page?" (Did I want the sports page? Did Diego want lox?) He handed me the paper, noshed off my plate and waited for me to make my pronouncements and predictions. My biggest concern at the time was whether the New Jersey Nets were going to make the playoffs. I have an affinity for those East Coast underdogs. "Starsk, want to go out tomorrow night?"

"Whatever your heart desires." He smiled at me, turned in his chair, and listened to the radio. Somebody was yapping about being considerate of your loved ones, when the time came. I went back to the sports page, innocent and unaware, like a curly haired bug caught in a blond spider's web.

"I'm glad you asked that," said the facilitator. The people in the audience all nodded their approval as my partner was designated teacher's pet. Was I surprised? Hutch felt like he had an obligation to help the teacher. When I was cutting class, he was cleaning erasers. While I excelled at recess, he skipped a grade. When the truant officer and I were going steady, he was doing research for extra credit. How the hell do you do better than an 'A'? At my house, a 'C' was cause for celebration. But he can't help it; over-achievement is his handicap: valedictorian, graduated summa cum laude, class president, author, Hutchinson, K. PHD (OCD).

And after spending time with his family, I'd say it's genetic. They view making a tossed salad as some kind of culinary Olympic event. A short walk in the woods becomes a twenty-mile hike. And a friendly game of Scrabble? A word of advice: never play teams against Hutch and his mother; they will bust your balls with their erudition and verbiage. How did I know that they were in training to reclaim their Lost Limb Lake Family Championship title from the Swensons?

"And now, I'll turn the podium over to Mr. Lawrence, whose topic for the evening is Living Wills." The lady wearing the fashion 'don't' finally gave up the limelight.

A little old guy wearing a lemon yellow and lime green just-got-off-the-golf-course-outfit came up. The smell of his aftershave wafted out over the audience. (Why is it that men in the 65-100 age group always smell alike? It's that Old Guy Cologne and Aftershave gift set smell. The grandkids give the same cheap shit year after year. He pretends to be thrilled when he unwraps it. Then he sticks it under the sink along with the twelve other sets he's already got. Why don't they ask him what he wants? Or surprise him with a subscription to Playboy or a gift certificate for some video rentals at Slick Willie's Adult Emporium? Or, better yet, a body shampoo from the Asian Garden Massage Parlor?)

"Is this on?" He started hitting the mike with a gnarly old claw. We got some good Pete Townshend feedback in reply. (I didn't need my left eardrum anyway.) "My topic for the evening is Living Wills." Mr. Lawrence stared at the huge pile of index cards that he had in his hands. "These seem to be out of order. Just a minute." He shuffled, rearranged, restacked, and redealt. (It was going to be a long night.) "Ahem..." He cleared the golf course dust out of his throat and finally got started. "My topic for the evening is Living Wills." The audience sat up in eager anticipation of this cheerful topic.

About midway through this spellbinding speech, I slipped my cell phone out and pretended to retrieve messages. I was having one of my best games of Tetras ever when my partner nearly broke three of my ribs giving me his idea of a subtle suggestion to pay attention. "Ow."

"Shh," he whispered and peered at me parentally over his glasses. I think he wears them in public to look more literary and intellectual than me. All he needed was a Perry Como sweater and a Fred MacMurray pipe to complete his desired image of middle-aged author. Hell, they should have seen him the other night, when we did it. All he was wearing was those glasses (and me on the end of his dick).

"And so therefore in conclusion and so on and so forth..." Mr. Lawrence finally buried the subject and laid it to rest.

Next, there was a drawing for a single in the new Shady Nook section of Peaceful Rest, right next to the multi-faith chapel and not far from the Memory Garden, which was brand-new and ready to welcome pet residents. A little old blue-haired lady won. Her husband looked pleased; after sixty years they were finally taking separate vacations.

Then we were invited to partake of refreshment, which turned out to be a real letdown.

"You call this food?" I asked him as we stood in line.

"I wasn't the caterer."

"Yeah, you just signed us up for this on a Friday night during the NBA playoffs."

"That's why God created VCRs." He handed me a Styrofoam cup of watery-looking tea.

"I like my sports fresh," I told him as I bit into a dry-looking cookie shaped like a windmill.

"Attention, attention!" the facilitator squawked into the mike. (It was a small room; why did they need amplification? I could hear fine. Then I looked around me and noticed the average age was one hundred and three. Enough said.) "We'll be starting the second part of our interesting discussion very soon. So finish up those goodies and take your seat." It was kind of like an "Attention, K-Mart shoppers," but without the Blue Light Special. Then it dawned on me. Part Two?

"I thought this was over," I said. He was drinking a glass of water, probably to wash all that delicious refreshment down. Then he poured another glass. I knew it wasn't for me. (I only drink water if I'm taking a pill or trying to swim.) I knew that this was one of his delaying tactics to keep from answering. "Yes or no. Isn't this over yet?"

"Not exactly."

"I've got the second half of the game to watch."

"There's a topic I'm interested in."

I looked at him. I know him. I've been with him forever, some of the time as police partners, some of it as lovers, all of it as friends. I know when he's ready to spring the trap, especially if I'm already standing in the middle of it. "And what is this interesting topic?" I asked. (As if I didn't know.)

"Cremation?"

"That's it. I'm out of here." I grabbed a handful of cookies and stalked out.

When I got outside and turned around to give him a piece of my mind about how he should know better than to trick me into taking him out on a date to a Preplanning seminar, he wasn't there. I looked through the glass doors to see if he was standing there looking up at the ceiling trying to get inspiration for a really sincere apology and he wasn't in the foyer.

I went back in. He wasn't in the hall. I peeked in the rest room. No Hutch. (The guy with the prostate problem who'd been sitting in our row was there, though.) That meant one of two things. Either there was a back door to this place and my partner had left and was hitchhiking home, too afraid to face my wrath, or he was in his seat listening to the benefits of being turned into a piece of toast after his demise.

There was no back door.

I sat down on a green vinyl chair with only the comfort of a half-dozen building-shaped cookies. (Who in their right mind would ever invent a windmill cookie? Besides the Dutch, I mean. I asked Stuyvesant in Corrections once if the windmill cookie was an ethnic specialty. He looked at me like I was nuts. I just wondered, I told him. I mean, my people had the bagel, the blintz, and kugel. Was there maybe a homemade version of the windmill cookie that his mother made? His mother made great apple pie, he said as he backed away from me with an anxious look on this face.) How did it come to this?

Did a red-blooded, hard-working police lieutenant, who unselfishly gave up a New Jersey Nets game (which was to be his just reward for successfully outmaneuvering Hoppin' Harry's courtroom aerobics); who generously planned to treat his cherished, honored, and conniving life partner to a night on the town; who has been aching-balled, frustratingly faithful, and at times celibate and/or masturbatory (I'll let the Catholics argue that one) when his significant other was on a writing tangent, deserve this?

Now here I was in the hallway of mortality waiting for what seemed like forever. Was the zombie in the shadows at home somehow pulling the strings of my existence like the puppet master in that movie where he shrinks people down into doll slaves? (He wasn't really a zombie, but come to think of it, he looked a lot like the mad scientist/zombie in *Zombieland*. I'd have to look that up in my *Bad Film Reference Companion* at home.)

Look, I'm a homicide detective. It's not like death is a mystery to me. I see it every day. When I was shot in 1979, I came as close as you can get without being planted six feet under. I accept my own mortality. I really don't need a blueprint for my inevitable future. Why plan? It's going to get here someday soon enough with or without my help. (And I'm not parking the thought of his exit in my brain, no way, no how.)

The thing is, before I was living and loving with him, our remains were our people's problem. He belonged to them then. Now, he's mine. And I'm not giving him back, dead or alive. (And I'm not taking his remains on a one-way flight back to Minnesota. Do I buy the urn a seat or what? Or am I supposed to pack it? What if they lose my luggage and he ends up in Orlando instead? He hates Disney World. Should I fly him First Class because there's more leg room and he's got long legs? Only he wouldn't have legs anymore, so it wouldn't matter. Do you see what I mean? Or do I save money and send him parcel post? He's very frugal; he'd like that. But he wouldn't like waiting around for me to pick him up at the post office if I was detained. Would they put him in the dead letter section if I mailed him and was delayed, do you think? I can't deal with it. I really can't. Ignoring it is the only answer.) We're doing this life stretch together, forever. That's all I know or care about.

The seminar finally ended. Hutch came over to me with a bunch of brochures. "That was very informative," he said to the back of my head as he followed me out.

Instead of opening his side of the car first, I went around to the driver's side and got in. I let him stand there awhile just to teach him a lesson. I looked up to see how he was taking my instruction. He had his nose in one of the pamphlets and was reading by the light of the mercury vapor light in the parking lot. I flipped the lock and he got in.

"David, I want to apologize for upsetting you. It was insensitive of me to forget about what happened to some of your relatives during the second World War."

"Apology accepted." (He was right about some of my anti-oven feelings, but not all of it. Still, if we could bury the subject once and for all, fine with me.)

"What I was thinking of was--"

"Making nice and giving me a blowjob?"

"Not really."

"After the funeral tonight turned out to be, I'd say you owe me."

"Okay. Where and when?"

"Right here. Right now."

"Can we at least pull into the shadows and wait for the parking lot to empty?"

"Can I take it out before I drive over there?"

"You're really bad, you know that?"

"Want to touch it?"

"Yes."

The last taillight was pulling out when I cut the engine. He moved closer to me and started pumping me with his hand. We kissed. I snaked my tongue into his mouth and he moaned. This was going to be good.

"Starsk?" he said, when we came up for air.

"Yeah, babe."

"How would you feel about me giving my body to forensic science, so that they can study the effects of the elements on decomposition?"

I answered him by grabbing the back of his neck, pulling his head down, and cramming my dick in his mouth. At least he couldn't nag me with his mouth full.

You know, Kafka said that the meaning of life is that it stops. Me, I think that before the merry-go-round shuts down, you should take a couple spins. Live a little! Because life is short and forever is a long, long time.

Especially at my house. I'll never hear the end of it if Hutch finds out that five dozen cookies are now MIA. (The last nine cookies looked lonely, so I put them out of their misery last night.) Listen. If anyone has a clue about how to make "Aunt Ingrid's Incredible Chocolate Chip Cookies," contact me. Immediately! (What the hell is emulsifier, anyway?)