

*Rendezvous*

*On*

*Zombi*

*Island*©

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This is an original short story and has  
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**Rain struck as Jack Deauchamp raced up the beach. A warm, tropical rain, patting the fat leaves of the mangroves and soaking his shirt. Just five minutes before, a Portuguese steamer had put him off at the docks. He'd grabbed his luggage and started running to try and beat the downpour. Well, he hadn't made it. So much for his grand arrival on San Ysidro.**

**The trail in front of him turned to mud and sucked at his boots. Waist-high elephant grass cut his arms. After about a hundred feet he had to stop and put down the heavy wooden box he carried, reminding himself civilization couldn't be far.**

**Then he heard it: rustling from the grass to his left.**

**A ragged shape broke free. Jack reached for the Colt New Service tucked in his belt, but not before the figure collided with him. He fell backwards. The wooden box slammed against his spine. He rolled, feeling sharp nails tearing for his face, and clenched his hand into a fist. Smack. The hook sent his attacker reeling.**

**He regained his feet and saw who it was. A woman. Her wild eyes regarded him from under a clump of coarse black hair.**

**"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I came all the way from America. My father is, was, Jean Deauchamp, and his--"**

**She spat. Her lips curled, and she uttered a single word.**

**"Judgment."**

**That she spoke English, and not French or a dialect of Portuguese, shocked him more than anything else. But before he could respond, she whirled and disappeared**

**back into the brush.**

**He decided not to follow.**

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**The island boasted one town, a collection of tin-roofed buildings and a church at the intersection of two dirt roads. A few scraggly chickens wandered around. Otherwise, San Ysidro looked deserted. Jack checked the constable's office first, then the saloon, and found no occupants. None of the doors he tried were locked.**

**All the while, the slate-gray sky continued to dump rain. He needed a place to dry off, to think. Down one road he found a white frame house and knocked on the front door. When no one answered, he let himself in.**

**"Hello?" he called out. No reply. Only the steady drumming against the roof.**

**There was a kerosene stove in the front room. He lit this, and by the reddish-orange glow stripped off his wet clothes. He took his valise out of the wooden box and changed into a dry shirt and pants.**

**The kitchen held nothing more than empty cans and a single, overripe mango. He swallowed his disappointment as he ate the fruit. His journey to San Ysidro was supposed to have been a homecoming of sorts, and he'd consoled himself while aboard the pitching Portuguese boat with thoughts of roast pork, rum, and maybe even a chance encounter with a dusky, dark-eyed island girl . . .**

**The memory of the ragged woman's nails made him shudder. He laid his Colt revolver atop the table in front of him. Outside, the storm clouds continued to heave and the sky darkened with night's approach.**

**He'd found a place to sleep, at least. And he did have something to pass the time. A bottle of rye, packed in his valise. He took a glass from the cupboard and poured himself a generous slug.**

**He was downing his second when someone knocked on the door.**

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**His first thought was that he'd imagined the sound, and he froze, glass still raised. The stove quietly hissed. Rain pattered.**

**He must've imagined it. The whiskey--**

**The knock came again. It echoed through the room, ominous as a struck gong.**

**He snatched up the pistol and leveled it at the door. "Who's there?" he said, surprised at the hoarseness in his voice.**

**Nothing.**

**He got up. Unlocked the door. Yanked it open.**

**A slender man stood there. That was Jack's guess, anyways, because in the failing light all he could make out was a long overcoat, the collar pulled up, a slouch hat with the brim pulled down, a scarf, and leather gloves. Shadow completely swallowed the man's face. In his left hand he gripped a sugarcane-knife with a blade almost two feet long. The metal was black and rusted, but the edges held a mirror-bright sheen.**

**Jack took one look at the machete and stepped backwards. He cocked the hammer on the Colt.**

**"May I come in?" the man said.**

**Something about that voice. It seemed to resonate from everywhere at once, and not just the shadowed gap between scarf and hat where a mouth would be. Jack couldn't place the accent.**

**"Look mister," he said. "A couple hours ago some lady tried to gouge my eyes out, so if you're coming in keep that meat-cleaver at your side. Raise it one inch and I'll show you how the barrel of this thing can dance. Got me?"**

**"Fair enough."**

**He backed up and the man followed him inside.**

**"Now shut the door behind you. Lock it."**

**Jack led him to the table and pulled up an extra chair. After they'd both sat, he carefully placed the revolver on the table--not so far away that he couldn't grab and shoot in one motion, but not so close as to make his new companion nervous. The man saw that and nodded. He let his machete clank against the floorboards.**

**Jack extended his hand. "Name's Jack."**

**They shook. The man's grip felt rock-firm, at odds with his narrow shoulders and the billowy fit of his coat. Jack tried to peer through the shadows covering his face, but the stove's glow wasn't strong enough.**

**"I suppose you've got a name, too?"**

**"A few, actually."**

**"Well, how about I call you Slim? And now that we're being civil, let me take that wet coat and hat and find someplace to dry them."**

**Slim shook his head. "You don't strike me as squeamish, Jack, but I'm dressed this way for a reason. I have a rare tropical disease that attacks the skin. It's not contagious, I assure you, but my appearance might be, ah, unsettling."**

**"Suit yourself. Want a drink?"**

**"Thank you, no."**

**They sat and looked at each other while the wind began to howl.**

**"I'm going to guess you're not from here," Jack said.**

**"Yes. And from your accent, and that mysterious wooden box over there, I'd guess the same thing. American, right? Can I ask what brings you to this island?"**

**"Family business."**

**"Ah."**

**"Oh hell, it's not like it's a secret. I'm a Deauchamp. My family's been running the sugarcane plantation here since Portugal ceded San Ysidro to France. . ."**

**Jack found himself telling the whole story. How his father had died of a heart-**

**attack during a visit to the plantation several months ago. And how he'd eventually received a letter to come and help settle some legal matters, as well as collect his father's remains.**

**"I know it sounds grisly," he said, "but there shouldn't be much left of him now except bones. That's what the box is for. His wish was to be buried in the family plot, back in Louisiana."**

**"Nothing grisly about it. I'm familiar with the tradition."**

**Jack sighed. "But when I get here, I find the island deserted. Except for that crazy woman I told you about."**

**"And me."**

**"And you."**

**Thunder growled someplace far off. The wind began to gust and caused the rain to slant sideways, crashing against the windows. Jack thought the sound oddly soothing. The stranger made small-talk, revealing nothing of himself, and Jack found the drone of his voice soothing, too. In fact, he was beginning to nod off in his chair. He knew he should stay awake and at least try to find out what had happened to the townspeople. But his eyelids felt weighted with lead sinkers. Even when the thunder boomed directly overhead, he caught himself drooping in the chair.**

**A bolt crashed near the house. A zig-zag of white, lighting the room with a burst brighter than phosphorus. And still, he couldn't penetrate the darkness screening Slim's face.**

**He awoke with a jolt, almost falling out of the chair.**

**Slim was gone. The front door of the house lay open, and morning sunlight speared in through the frame and windows. The sky outside glowed a velvet blue.**

**He could almost believe last night's encounter was a dream. Except for that door. But dreams or not, he still had a job to do. He slung the box over his shoulder and tucked the gun in his belt. No breakfast, which meant he'd be making the three mile walk to the plantation on an empty stomach.**

**Just as he was stepping off the porch, a leather-gloved hand seized his wrist.**

**"One moment," said Slim.**

**He'd stepped around the side of the house, moving so quickly he seemed to suddenly appear. The machete was belted at his waist.**

**"You told me why you're here," he said, "and now I've got to warn you. Don't go to the plantation, Jack. Turn around and head back to the docks. Take the next boat that shows up, and never, ever, set foot on San Ysidro again."**

**"But why?"**

**"Something . . . unnatural has happened here."**

**Jack shook off the hard grip. "I know how to defend myself."**

**"It's not your physical safety that concerns me most. There are some things men, even strong-willed ones like yourself, are not meant to see."**

**"You're being cryptic."**

**Slim nodded, the bill of his slouch hat moving up and down. Under the blazing sunlight, the shadowed space was darker than ever. "It's my nature."**

**"I'm going. You can consider me warned."**

**"Very well."**

**Jack strode away at a good pace. In moments, Slim was alongside.**

**"What, you're coming with me?" Jack said. "Can't follow your own advice, can you?"**

**Slim's hand closed around the machete's hilt. "I, too, have business at the plantation."**

**They walked in silence, the only noise the rhythmic squish of their boots or a bird's occasional call. The sun rose high and burned off the light fog veiling the road. Houses gave way to shacks, and the shacks thinned out among vast fields of sugarcane. Head-high stalks rippled towards the horizon.**

**Half an hour out, the plants changed. The stalks became twisted and shorter, yet still weirdly vigorous. At their tips hung a gnarled, black fruit Jack had never seen before. He plucked one.**

**"What is this? The shape . . . it almost looks like a human body, curling in on itself."**

**Slim slapped the fruit out of his hand. Before Jack could stop him, he ground the thing under his boot with a squelch.**

**"An abomination," Slim said, and offered nothing more.**

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**By the time the white stone of the three-storied plantation house rose above the stalks, Jack's clothes were drenched in sweat from collar to socks. If anything, he felt wetter than the previous night. He wiped his face and stared at the old colonial structure. Seeing it didn't inspire nostalgia. He remembered the huge tropical spiders that seemed to lurk in every corner of his childhood room.**

**Slim touched his shoulder. "Look," he said, motioning towards the fields west of the house. At least a hundred people labored among the plants there. Dark-skinned San Ysidrians, of Portuguese and French Haitian stock, stooping and scything, going about the familiar motions of sugarcane harvest. Except they weren't harvesting sugarcane. They were gathering basketfuls of the black fruit. And there was something odd about the stiff, lumbering way they moved. Jack wondered if they were drunk.**

**Then the smell hit him.**

**It felt like getting punched in the nose; a combination of gangrene and the sweet-foul odor of rotting meat. Jack gave thanks for his empty stomach.**

**"What--what's wrong with them?" he said.**

**"You're about to see."**

**Four workers had broken off from the main group and were lurching towards them. All men, dressed in tattered clothing and walking in perfect unison, swaying from side to side with each step. No expression on their slack faces. Each carried a tool that was also a weapon; a mattock, a spade, a sickle, and a pick-axe.**

**"We can outrun them," Jack said.**

**"No. They won't tire."**

**"What do you mean?"**

**Slim drew his machete with a rasp.**

**The four men fanned out in a semi-circle as they closed. Jack called a warning, and got no response. He drew the Colt New Service and aimed at the closest worker, the one armed with a sickle. Again, no response. At ten paces he couldn't wait any more and his finger mashed the trigger. The big Colt bucked, thundered, and a forty-four caliber hole appeared in the shreds of cloth covering the man's chest.**

**He kept coming.**

**Eight paces. Jack worked the hammer and fired again. Another hole. Six paces. His hands shook as he cocked and squeezed. This time the bullet found the man's neck, gouging a chunk of flesh. Four paces. Jack saw why he wasn't stopping. His shirt flopped open, and there was a gaping, rot-chased space where a stomach should be. Above that floated a lattice of yellow ribs.**

**The sickle rose and slashed down. Jack leapt backwards, avoiding the blade by inches--and felt something pierce the back of his head with tremendous force. The blow whirled him sideways. He staggered, fell to his knees. Through a sheet of white-hot pain he saw the worker armed with the pick-axe. His assailant must've come from behind while he'd been busy firing. Bright blood smeared one end of the pick.**

**His blood, he realized, as the whiteness overtook his vision.**

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**He was dead, he knew. There'd be no surviving a wound like that.**

**And yet, his eyes opened. He stared up at the dazzling blue sky.**

**He lay on his side. Sounds echoed somewhere off to his left: the clang of metal striking something hard, like chopping wood. After awhile the sound died away and there was only the rustle of the wind through the stalks.**

**Slim hunched over him. A sticky, dark ooze peppered his coat. He leaned close, and Jack figured this would be his best opportunity to try and peer into his face. All he saw was blackness. Utter blackness. It seemed to engulf him for a moment, like he was staring up into a starless night sky instead of the day. The moment passed.**

**Slim helped him to his feet.**

**Jack felt the back of his head for the wound. Nothing. His fingers rubbed away a little blood, but there was no pick-axe sized hole underneath.**

**"I don't understand it," he said. "I should've been killed."**

**Slim shook his head. "I saw the *zombi* swing and strike you, but it was only the side of the pick. It cut into your scalp, that's all."**

**"I could've sworn I felt it go in."**

**"Blows to the head can be like that."**

**"Wait--you called that thing a zombie . . ." His voice trailed off as he looked around.**

**Pieces of bodies lay scattered everywhere. Torsos, limbs, heads, oozing the same dark ichor that was spattered over Slim's coat. Four bodies in all. One of the severed arms still moved, flexing and un-flexing itself like a muscular snake.**

**"I warned you," Slim said. "Remember that."**

**Jack barely heard him. "The Walking Dead. I've been to Haiti, listened to the stories of *voudon* and black magic, but this . . . I just can't believe it."**

**"The proof's right here."**

**"How's such a thing possible?"**

**"Not how," Slim said, "but who. The answer lies there." He pointed his machete at the plantation house. "Knowing what you face now, do you still wish to go?"**

**Jack looked out at the fields where the ragged *zombis* went about their work, shuffling and blank-eyed. Oblivious to all else. He felt real fear touch his gut, not only at the prospect of being attacked again, but the possibility that he could end up like**

**them, trapped in a horrible existence.**

**Then he looked at the wooden box he'd dropped.**

**"I have an obligation," he said.**

**Slim dug through the remains and came up with the spade. It had a square head, and sharp edges along the sides. He handed it to Jack. "Your gun is likely to be useless, but the Dead can still be hacked apart with a strong arm."**

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**The front doors had been thrown open, and the muddy prints of countless feet fouled the fine carpets and marble floor. Most of the furniture had been smashed into kindling-sized pieces.**

**"Looks deserted," Jack said. "Let's try upstairs."**

**"Wait. Do you hear that?"**

**He strained his ears and caught a far-off, hollow sound. Someone was singing. "That's coming from below. The cellar, it seems like."**

**"How appropriate."**

**Jack led them through the dining room, the kitchen, and finally an open archway with stone steps going down. He could see the steady glow of lamplight somewhere near the bottom. More singing rose as they mounted the steps, and it was the loneliest voice Jack had ever heard. He made out a couple words in French.**

**"Sounds drunk, whoever he is," he whispered.**

**They reached the bottom. Dusty wine racks stretched from dirt floor to ceiling. A man sprawled on a low couch in the room's center, surrounded by a forest of bottles. He looked to be in his late forties, wearing a linen suit and gold-rimmed spectacles. Dried gore caked his otherwise immaculate sleeves. As Jack watched, the man hefted a wine bottle and tried to guzzle and sing at the same time. There was something familiar about his features.**

**"Dr. Michaud . . .?" Jack said.**

**The man's head snapped up. Yes, this was the same physician his father had hired years ago, to look after the plantation workers. His narrow eyes took several moments to focus.**

**"Jack Deauchamp," he said at last, the comprehension flowing back into his face. "You must've received the letter."**

**"About a month ago. But it took time to find a boat."**

**Michaud nodded, looking first at Slim and then the shovel in Jack's hands. "What's that for? Don't tell me you spent the morning working."**

**"Doctor, are you aware that there are dead people walking outside?"**

**"What? Oh, yes. Quite aware. There's a couple down here, as well." He snapped his fingers. The shadows behind the couch stirred and two *zombis* stepped into the lamplight's glow. One was tall and carried itself with an erect, almost regal posture; the other was stooped and muscled like a blacksmith. Both wore servants' uniforms.**

**"I don't know how you two got past the sentries," Michaud said, "but I suppose it's just as well, me watching you die personally."**

**Jack gripped the shovel tight. "What are you talking about?"**

**"Isn't it obvious? I've taken over here. The entire island, in fact. When your father came to visit, he reacted strongly to my . . . improvements in worker productivity. No vision, I tell you. And stubborn. So I had him killed."**

**Michaud smiled. Jack lunged forward, but Slim held him back. "Not yet," he whispered, digging his fingers into Jack's arm so hard they felt like metal clamps.**

**"I invited you here," Michaud continued, "to finish off the last of the Deauchamp line. I didn't want any legal barriers in taking over the estate, though now, I confess, the point is moot. There is no more law on San Ysidro. Most of the population has either been co-opted by my *zombis* or hides in remote corners of the island, starving to death."**

**Slim spoke: "You're the one responsible. You've animated all these wretches yourself."**

**"With my own hands, yes," Michaud said. "But I wouldn't call them 'wretches.' They're walking miracles, in their own way. An old Gullah woman I befriended taught me the secret. She gave me a handful of Black Amaranth seeds, the plants you've no doubt seen growing in the fields around here. They're the key."**

**He'd been grinning as he talked, his eyes blazing like a zealot's, but in the next moment all expression drained from his face. His head drooped. "Still," he said, his voice distant, "still, it bothers me . . . the only living thing, surrounded by dead flesh . . ."**

and when I wake sometimes, I find them staring at me with their blank faces. I wonder . . ."

"Now," Slim said. He let go of Jack and hauled the machete from its' sheath.

Michaud laughed, a horrible croaking sound. He jerked his head towards Jack and Slim. The two *zombis* started moving, reaching out with claw-like hands.

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Jack saw Slim leap towards the stooped *zombi*. But then the tall one was almost on top of him, grabbing for his throat. He hefted the shovel and thrust it like a spear. The dead man toppled backwards. He rushed past it, thinking to reach the couch and the supine Dr. Michaud.

He didn't make it.

He got two steps and felt a sudden pressure on the back of his calf, as the fallen *zombi* grabbed him. Pulled with incredible strength, Jack fell to the ground and his attacker wrestled atop him. He tried to swing the shovel but couldn't get any leverage. Dead fingers locked around his throat.

He looked up and all the breath seemed to empty from his chest. Because he recognized the shriveled, rotting features floating above him. So much like his own.

"Jean," he said, with what voice he had left, "it's me, your son . . ."

No response. Other than the dirt-crusting hands clutching tighter.

**Tighter.**

**And then Michaud's screams filled the room.**

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**The pressure on his throat slackened. Jack pushed and his dead father slid off him with no resistance. He rose to his feet, gasping air, and saw Michaud on the couch, still screaming, one hand clutched to his chest and the other pointing. Jack turned to follow the outstretched finger.**

**He might've started screaming himself, if he had the breath.**

**Slim's hat must've been knocked off in the struggle with the big *zombi*. The well-muscled torso of the latter lay at his feet, twitching, its' limbs no longer attached. Slim-**

**Slim was a skeleton.**

**Or his head, at least, because that was the only part visible poking above the scarf and coat. A grinning skull. And as Jack watched, the ground starting a lazy spin beneath his feet, the coat fell away, and the scarf, and the gloves, and there could be no doubt what Slim was, who he was, because a pair of giant raven's wings unfurled from behind his back, the feathers darker than the black space between stars, and the machete twisted and elongated like a living thing, becoming a scythe with an ebony haft.**

**A hot, dry smell flooded the room, like the ash from a thousand pyres.**

**A bell tolled someplace far off.**

**The empty eye-sockets swiveled to meet him. "I'm sorry, Jack, that you had to see this. The disguise was for your sake. But now, as we've both learned the separate truths that brought us here. . ."**

**He--it--turned back to Michaud, and the voice that hissed from its' empty throat lost all traces of human warmth. "You have tampered with a natural order set down from the beginning of time. You have stolen and cheated from me what is rightfully mine--the souls of the dead, who long for eternal release."**

**Michaud howled. He turned paste-white and fell from his couch, to land with a crash among empty wine bottles. The glass shattered and cut his skin.**

**"And now you'll pay."**

**Jack wanted to faint, to lie down until his body stopped reeling. But he knew to linger in this place would cost him his mind, or what was left of it. So he ran. He bolted up the cellar's steps, leaving the wooden box and his father's remains behind. Out of the terrible house. Out into terrible sunlight and the fields of Black Amaranth, where the bodies of the *zombis* lay scattered like cordwood, inert. Broken perhaps, like their master's will.**

**Michaud's screams followed him down the road.**

**And even as he ran a cold realization struck him. The pick-axe. It had pierced his brain, surely, but hadn't killed him, hadn't left a scratch. *Because the Angel of Death had been alongside him the whole time, and simply refused to claim his life.***

**The End**