

# The Ties That Bind

(Sample chapter from *Undead In The U.S.A.*)

by Peter H. Gilmore

“You stupid cunt!”

“Don’t talk to me that way,” said Alice, pulling herself free from her fiancé’s embrace, sickened by his beery breath. They had been necking in front of a primitively painted mural on a bricked-up building on Tenth Avenue. In primary colors it depicted four hands of differing skin pigments reaching for a glowing Earth. Crude, faded lettering above proclaimed, “Brotherhood, the Final Frontier.” Yeah, right. She had just suggested, rather undiplomatically, that they should spend less time with his moronic friends.

“Goddamn bitch. Don’t ever say that about my friends again.” Jack swayed toward Alice, waving his little bottle of Budweiser like an aspergillum and spattering her.

“Jerk!” She tried to wipe the yeasty foam from her thin summer blouse. “You make me sit around for hours in Mulligan’s with your worthless buddies while you shoot the breeze like a bunch of old farts in a rest home, boring me to tears. You even pay for most of the drinks. Then you spill beer on me! Christ! My mother’ll give me the third degree when I waltz in after two in the morning smelling like this.” The claustrophobic intimacy of the summer night’s humid, sticky air increased her irritation.

Jack’s alcohol-fuddled brain was having trouble following the gist of the argument. “Don’t put down my pals. You knew we were goin’ out for a coupla brews tonight and you never complained before. Besides,” and here his voice softened insinuatingly, “why don’t we just cuddle up again like we was doin’ before you shot your mouth off?”

With a defiant toss of her head, Alice pitched back the limp strands of dark, sweat drenched, hair that clung to her forehead. “I’m sick to death of hanging out with that bunch of zeros, being the only woman and having to listen to all that bullshit. Those assholes couldn’t score with Twelfth Avenue hookers, even if they had a hundred bucks to spend.”

“Al’s got a wife, you idiot.”

“Yeah, but that dishrag just sits home with her two snot-nosed brats watching soap operas. When she’s around she only talks about baby food and potty training. What a waste!”

“Well who the fuck you think you are, Miss High and Mighty? Typing’s not good enough. You’ve got to do word processing, well kiss my ass! Those goddamn night courses make you think you’re a friggin’ princess or somethin’.” With his free hand he hitched up his cutoff sweat-shorts, the NYPD logo on them only a faded ghost, but his substantial gut kept them from going far. “Maybe you think I’m no good, too!”

A blast of salsa signaled the approach down the avenue of two lanky male Hispanics wearing muscle shirts and matching bright yellow shorts; one danced while the other carried the suitcase-sized ghetto blaster, walking to the beat and sucking on a joint. The dancer nimbly snatched the joint from his partner without missing a step. Thoughts of Jack as a gray-haired court officer gave Alice a black feeling in the pit of her stomach, but it was quickly dismissed by memories of his affection. She waited for the Latino intrusion to pass before continuing. “I love you, honey, but why can’t we spend

more time together like we used to? We had great times going to the movies and out to dinner, just the two of us. Why can't it still be that way?"

Jack stumbled and leaned heavily against the mural, swigging from his bottle and dribbling on his t-shirt, adding new dark patches to those under his armpits and in the center of his chest. "Aw come on, honey; Timmy, Jimbo, Bobby, and Al are sweet fellas, stand up buddies and, besides, they like you."

"They never include me in the conversation. They only like to stare at my tits!"

"Well, you sure got a great pair, honey." Jack burped, then giggled and pawed out at her. The four hands of the mural seemed to reach out, following his example.

Alice slapped Jack's surprised face.

"You bastard," she said through gritted teeth as he encircled her with his sweaty, hairy arms. She struggled as one arm cinched her waist while the other hand kneaded her shapely rump through the thin fabric of her shorts. His bristly, damp cheek scratched her face as he sought to cover her lips with his own. As he tried to force his brew-stinking tongue down her throat, hairs from his close-clipped mustache tickled up her nose; she raked his face with her pink-lacquered nails, drawing blood.

Jack howled in pain and released her, bringing his hands up to cradle his wounded face, sloshing beer on the rising welts. "You whore! You goddamn cunt!" he growled, staggering forward.

Alice was too stunned to move as his hand viciously arced out and slapped her a stinging blow to the face. She could barely see, as tears welled up and she began to run to her home building on the next block. Jack tripped over the undone laces of his battered Nikes and fell to the sidewalk, scraping his knees on the abrasive concrete sidewalk as Alice made her getaway.

"Cunt! Whore! Bitch!" he shouted at her retreating figure; she dashed up the steps of her apartment building while he heaved himself to his feet. His bleary eyes watched her as she disappeared through the glass doors to the lighted lobby of the high-rise project. He half-heartedly threw his bottle after her. It hit the steps and shattered with an ineffectual tinkle.

Jack turned his back on the building and began to trudge up Tenth Avenue towards his apartment on 56<sup>th</sup> Street. His face stung, his bladder ached and the humidity made it hard to breathe. He looked up at the clouds covering the nearly full moon and wished that the rain would come and break this heat spell. As he came abreast of the mural, he leaned against a dented green dumpster and stared at the image. His blurred vision made the hands appear to gesture at him mockingly. Muttering curses at Alice, he wedged down the waistband of his shorts to free his penis and began pissing noisily against the mutely waving hands, ignoring the warm droplets that splattered his bare shins. "Take that, you bastards," he mumbled as he trickled to a stop. As he shook off, a deep, well-modulated voice said, "She deserved it."

Jack let the waistband snap back up and turned to confront the intruder—couldn't a man take a piss in peace anymore? "What the hell do you want?"

The stranger, well over six feet tall and broad as a barn door, smiled. "I saw your altercation and I'm on your side." His teeth gleamed amid a bushy black mustache and thick goatee, reflecting the orange street lamp's glow. Brawny forearms protruded from the rolled-up sleeves of his black shirt; open to the navel, it revealed a dense mat of dark hair covering the pale skin of his well-developed pecs. Despite the heat and humidity, no sweat sheen was visible on his skin. He ran a ham-sized hand

through his closely cropped hair, saying, “Women are all ingrates. They’re nothing but trouble. But we still need them.”

Jack’s hostility drained away as he gazed into the stranger’s dark eyes; they radiated understanding and sympathy. He felt a sense of friendship and even security from this massive man, even though they had just met. A strange feeling of vague recognition welled up inside, making him feel dizzy. Was this guy a pro football player, or maybe some wrestler who he’d seen on the tube? Jack stumbled and the man reached out and caught him, easily supporting Jack’s overweight 5’ 10” frame with one hand.

“You look like a brother in need. Lean on me and we’ll walk to your home.” The mellow voice was velvety and left no room for disagreement, even though his upper-crust manner of speech began didn’t sit right.

Jack felt like a child as the man held him steady with a large, but refreshingly cool and dry arm around his shoulders. He let himself be led up the avenue. Jack thought: What am I doing? What if this guy was, like, a fag or something? “Thanks, but I think I can make it myself.”

“Nonsense. You need help and I shall give it. Why else are we put here except to fulfill each other’s needs?”

Jack felt more than a twinge of alarm through his drunk haze. Maybe this guy wants to fuck me? He tried to shrug off the arm but was constrained like an infant.

Their gazes met and Jack felt his knees turn to water. His foggy memory matched a face from his past to the features of this giant. His father. The resemblance now seemed very close, he thought, though his parent was not nearly as large. The man’s eyes seemed to look deep within Jack, plucking out the key feelings from the welter of emotions that surged up, and then vibrate with empathy. Jack felt he should confess his love for his dad, the joy of the fishing trips and the black hatred for the drunken binges of violence against both his mother and himself. It was the curse of alcohol that took both his parents away in an accident on the L.I.E. late one rainy spring night, six years ago. He also realized that he was beginning to follow in his father’s footsteps. Tonight wasn’t the first time that he had struck Alice after having too much to drink. And he was using his buddies to avoid her, just as his father had done to his family.

The dark-eyed man held him by the shoulders and pierced him with a look. “You’ve suffered greatly, son. Don’t hold back; let it out and you’ll feel much better.”

Jack collapsed into his arms, tears streaming down his face as he began to sob. “I love her and never want to hurt her again. She’s all I’ve got left now.”

The big man held Jack gently and steered him into a side street, patting his back. The dark eyes drew the long-suppressed feelings from him and hungrily swallowed them in their pitch-black depths.

Jack felt all his hidden frustrations, disappointments, hostilities and pain pulled from him in a great catharsis; the feelings were yanked out one after another like a string of handkerchiefs from a magician’s pocket. Jack had reached the center of his labyrinth of confused emotions. He whimpered. “Please forgive me, Daddy. I didn’t mean it when I wished you were dead that night. I’m sorry... I love you... say you forgive me... please say you forgive me!”

The big man looked at Jack, infinite compassion in his ancient eyes. As he cradled the crying man, bringing his lips down next to his ear, he whispered in his compelling voice, “I forgive you, my son. Rest now, all will be well.”

Jack didn’t even feel the unnecessary tightening of the man’s grip nor the stinging as twin fangs pierced the artery of his throat, for he was still deep within his childhood, happy at last. The humid air became impossible to breathe. Warm drops finally fell from the sky, mingling with the salty drops streaming from Jack’s eyes and the even saltier red stream from his throat, which had already begun to stain his shirt. Through the tears, he gazed past the big man’s closeness to the darkened doorway of a nearby abandoned tenement. In a vision, his mother and father with smiling faces stepped from the shadows, reaching for him.

A last surge of resistance welled up as Jack’s mind reminded him that his parents were indeed long gone and that he was being bitten by this massive bastard faggot.

“Get *offa* me, you fuck!” Jack lashed out, pushing the man back, who then moved forward with an unnatural swiftness that sent flashes of terror through Jack’s fogged nerves. As he closed in, Jack struck out with his best right hook, all 250 of his pounds behind the blow, and connected with a sickening crunch, smashing his fingers on his seducer-turned-assailant’s fanged mouth. “Jesus Christ!” His fingers were both broken and lacerated with the force of the blow, and he couldn’t tell if the blood that streamed down the chin of this demonic, hateful visage—eerily like that of his father in a rage—was from his bitten neck, his slashed fingers, or from the monster’s own split lip. Before another thought could arrange itself in his fading consciousness, the giant scooped him up in a crushing embrace, raking his fangs ever more deeply into Jack’s ravaged neck. He died with a shudder, the ghostly sound of his life’s-blood being greedily sucked from his neck ringing in his ears.

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Alice was completely exhausted. She still hadn’t gotten over the trauma of Jack’s death and the funeral three days before. She and her mother had just returned from visiting her Aunt Tess in a shabby little town in upstate New York. Her mother assumed that Alice should be kept occupied so as not to brood over Jack, never realizing that the has-been resort town called Greenwood Lake would only darken her spirits.

Alice switched on the aging air conditioner, which wheezed to life with a cool gust. She collapsed onto her bed, kicking off her shoes in a gesture of defiance. The damned humidity was stifling. It was getting late but she didn’t want to sleep; a vision of the past few days would not let go.

She had been summoned by the police to identify the body; some kids had found it on the afternoon following their fight. Jack lay upon the slab, eyes closed, his head at an odd angle—it had been practically torn off. The pale lips, which had been such a joy to kiss, were set in an attitude of peace. This wasn’t Jack. Oh yes, it was his body, but Jack wasn’t in it. It looked both alien and familiar, more an object than a being. The curling golden chest hairs now grew from a pasty gray background so unlike the warm beige flesh she’d caressed. She saw him in her mind’s eye, lying in the ditch beside a mound of garbage packed with sharp metallic edges; his body had fallen or been flung over the fence down a steep embankment to the old railroad tracks that ran between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, beneath the West Side to where the old slaughterhouses had reigned in the original Hell’s Kitchen. His clothes had been soaked by the night’s heavy rainfall, which had darkened the blond hair and washed most of the blood away. The police called it a freak accident and she was too upset to care.

It was also not Jack that had lain in the white satin interior of the silver-gray box, clad in a seldom-worn blue dress uniform. All Jack's friends had come to Barrett's to view the mannequin stand-in; Bobby, Jimbo, Timmy. Al was there with the dishrag but thank God the brats were absent. Alice felt numb as she stood over the casket. When she kneeled with her mother, she studied the body's neck for stitch marks while her mother prayed. The morticians had done a good job; nothing showed, though it looked like he had a mouthful of something.

She'd felt detached and empty at the funeral in New Jersey. The white marble stones and obelisks of the Fairview necropolis, though soot-smudged, gleamed under the bright sun while the gray granite markers hinted perhaps at possible impurity in those beneath. Jack's friends looked uncomfortable in their dress uniforms. The nasal wailing of the bagpipes made it seem utterly endless. At least the pudgy, sweating priest had cut short his droning.

It didn't phase her to leave behind the earthly remains as she and her mother went to a post-interment lunch at a tacky Jersey diner. She stared at her spinach salad, which grew browner under her listless gaze, and could only get down a cup of oily-surfaced coffee. Then she dashed to the ladies room to sick-up into the yellow stained bowl. The astringent odor of industrial disinfectant stung her nostrils as she wiped her face with pink toilet tissue that came apart in tatters and clung to her cheeks like flayed flesh.

Glad that the ritual ordeal was finally over, Alice heaved herself off the bed to turn up the air conditioner to full—screw Con Ed. The benediction of coolness embraced her as she began to remove her blouse. Her nipples puckered. Automatically, she drew the blinds before she stripped; there was no building nearby which afforded a view of her 28<sup>th</sup> floor window, but in New York, you never knew.

She eased back onto the bed, sheets already feeling cooler, clad only in her panties, clutching a picture of herself and Jack taken last year at Seaside Heights boardwalk. Their hair was mussed by the sea breezes and they looked with love into each other's eyes. That was Jack. His spirit could be seen in that picture, making a two-dimensional image more real than his corpse.

Was there really a bright future in the offing for them before his death? The night of the fight she would have sworn there wasn't. She had seen the short temper and his tendency to erupt into violence when angry. And his resentment for her trying to better herself through education—she had only wanted to get a better paying job, but his fragile male ego was threatened and she saw how it could have stifled her in years to come. But she had loved him.

In the five years they had together, they had often felt as if they were the only two people who understood the world. He seemed to reciprocate the love she gave to him, sometimes with a desperate intensity that Alice found frightening. But in the last year they had found a coldness between them. The forces of attraction and repulsion cancelled each other out to leave emptiness. She cried for an unknown future that would never be.

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Alice was awakened from her first decent rest in several days to find her air conditioner turned to low and a light sheet draped over her. The picture was placed back on her bureau. The digital clock's orange numerals read 3:12 a.m. She realized that her mom must have tucked her in, just like when she'd been a little girl.

Suddenly, a sharp rapping came from the glass pane of her window. Alice gasped; her heart froze and her throat constricted. She thought she must be dreaming—her skin felt like roaches were scuttling

over it. The knocking was repeated, with much greater intensity. Her pulse booming in her ears, she stared at the window, which now began to rattle.

“Alice, won’t you let me in, honey?” came a gasping croak. She began to shudder violently. “It’s me, honey. It’s Jack.”

She knew this was a dream. How could anyone be outside of a window 28 floors up? Alice drew the sheet around her, rolled over and screwed her eyes shut. I’ll laugh at myself in the morning, she thought. She actually jumped when the banging came again.

“Alice...honey...I just want to apologize for the fight. Please let me in. I *love* you, honey.” The voice was wheezing as if it couldn’t get enough air to form the words.

This time, she decided that she would have to look, to confront this fear and banish it. Alice cast off her cover with a flourish, strode to the window and threw open the blinds...and dead eyes stared her in the face. Now she knew what it meant to be paralyzed with fear. It was the un-Jack that had been found in a culvert and laid to rest in Fairview that muggy afternoon. The funeral makeup was gone, revealing the gaping wound in the throat. From the corners of Jack’s mouth hung the broken strands of sutures that had held it closed. Two glinting canines protruded over his lower lip, dripping pus-like drool. His uniform was torn and covered with mud. The white dress shirt had come untucked, dirt clods clung to his collar insignia, and she could see his belly gleaming like a full moon with its hair-ringed navel-crater at the center. Somehow, inexplicably, she laughed a short, hollow laugh that frightened her even more.

“Honey, please let me in so’s I can apologize,” he wheezed.

“Apologize from there—apologize from right there, Jack!” She giggled again, putting one hand to her mouth. She watched the open flap of skin at his throat waggle as Jack talked. Its boneless movement perversely reminded her of Jack’s bouncy, limp prick as it looked when he used to strut naked around his apartment after a bout of their sweet coupling. His eyes drew her back. They did not seem so empty anymore. In a way, this was Jack again; in an awful, terrifying way.

“Please, honey...*please!*” he murmured, a hint of the old tenderness coloring the distorted tones. Though there was something about how the word ‘honey’ came gurgling up through the torn throat...

Alice’s thoughts were a whirl. Was this a dream? Was her life at stake? She felt riveted by fascination, repulsed by fear, and slightly hysterical. But this was Jack. Jack who loved her...who hit her.

“Alice...I love you, always!” whispered Jack as tears of blood oozed from his lambent eyes. “Let’s be together again, baby, just like you wanted. Just the two of us!” Deep within her, a spark caught tinder and burst into flame. Icy fingers trailed sharp nails down her spine and Alice knew that she still loved him. Her mind embraced its damnation as her lips formed the phrase.

“Come in, Jack darling...I love you, too.”

Quickly, Alice unlatched the windowpane and drew it aside, startled by the blast of hot and sticky air, as well as the speed with which Jack entered the room. His cool hands stroked her shoulders and worked down to her breasts. Their icy touch erected her nipples and caused a shudder of pleasure to course through her body. Jack’s hands slid down to her waist and gently drew the panties to her feet. As he stood up, she kicked the panties aside and watched as he quickly shed his rumpled, mud-stained clothes. Rid of that uniform, Jack’s lumpy nude body looked even more himself. He was

already erect and wordlessly embraced her, the tip of his penis an insistent finger poking her belly. His gelid presence was a refreshing contrast from the sultry air that filled her room. She began to nibble his shoulder as he swept her from her feet to the bed. She spread her legs, a look of desperate need limning her face, and Jack's fingers delicately probed her wetness. With a smile that she had seen oft before, he mounted her, his cool member sliding home into her warm and waiting mound. As the rhythm began, she closed her eyes and felt very quickly a tingling begin in the arches of her feet which spread like an ice-blue flame up through her thighs and groin to catch in her belly, only to leap up her spine to the very crown of her head. She felt herself explode in a powerful orgasm, which masked the pain of the piercing of her jugular. The shudders of her limbs matched the throbbing pulse of her throat as she blissfully sank into oblivion. Her mind glowed with the renewed vision of a life together with her Jack, a future she would not let slip from her grasp again.

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Three days later, Jack eagerly helped her in the struggle to claw her way up through the loose packed, worm-riddled earth that covered her coffin. Since she last saw him he seemed to have lost the raggedness of his wounds, and he'd shed the uniform for civvies. They embraced, though she was self-conscious about her smudged appearance, and made their plans for the evening. Their needs were obvious and need not be mentioned, the hunger breeding mutual understanding. As both sped on foot through the exhaust fumes of the Lincoln Tunnel, faster than mere human eyes could see, she savored the scene that she knew would soon be enacted; the look of surprise that would bloom on the acne-scarred face of gangly Tina Minetti, the baby-sitter at Al's who'd drop the phone (she always gabbed all night at her employer's expense) as Jack smiled a toothy hello from the fourth floor window. Alice was even looking forward to seeing the two luscious brats who'd be pretending to sleep in their toy-cluttered room. After this appetizer, she and Jack would then be off to Mulligan's to await the exit of Jimbo, Timmy, Bobby, Al and the dishrag. Alice would now eagerly greet Jack's friends and offer to join them for a nightcap. This time, she gloated, the drinks would finally be on them.