



Night of the Yamping Dead

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Walsall town centre in the mid twenty-first century is a crumbling, mostly abandoned place. But life goes on, in places. So does death. But not taxes – there's nobody left to collect them. Even the police have moved out and set up in Bloxwich, where the locals have long since blown up all the canal bridges and dug a really, really deep moat all round the village centre. Behind the moat, the Blocco boys keep a careful watch on the Walsall Canal. Just to make sure none of the 'Yamping Dead' manage to float through and infect Bloxwich folk, you see. That's how they've survived.

The Yamping Dead, whom fans of dodgy horror movies immediately dubbed 'zombies', were actually victims of a plague they'd caught when, in the summer of 2020, someone had fly-tipped a load of fermenting offal from an unregistered abattoir into Barr Beacon Reservoir, and it had gotten into the Walsall water supply. The resulting epidemic took the Manor Hospital by storm; they just couldn't cope after the government had turned half the site back into a 'Workhouse for the Undeserving Poor', reducing sick bed capacity by fifty percent and raising the death rate to compensate.

Hundreds of fever victims died, but came back overnight, looking pale and moaning uncontrollably. Breaking out of the Manor and hiding in abandoned shops during the day, they'd soon gotten got their nickname from their habit of complaining constantly in a Walsall accent, usually about the price of food, the 'good old days' and the many supposed faults of Walsall Council. Being mostly from older generations, they'd lived their youth in happier, pre-austerity times, and hated all the negative changes in the town after the Council were forced to close all the libraries, the museums, the art gallery, the Walsall Hippo Theme Park and the last of the public toilets.

Walsall town centre had imploded, most shops closed, and with no police, no street cleaners, a derelict bus station and rats the size of fat Tory cats feeding on abandoned burger wrappers and the odd unwary beggar from Wolverhampton, those parts that hadn't been set fire to by poundshop looters and wishful-thinking property developers had quickly become no-go areas after dark. The Civic Centre was the final official building to close, and was long-abandoned, although the last Chief Executive was reputed to haunt the place. With no-one to control them, the Yamping Dead became a fact of Walsall life.

Now, apart from Asgard Games and that bookshop in Lower Hall Lane which nobody mentioned because nobody ever left it alive, all that was left occupied in the town centre was Cash Converters, a barricaded charity shop, the Old New Art Gallery and Tesco, the latter being the last

outpost of food retailing in the town. You still had to pay to park there, even though nobody could afford cars.

ASDA in George Street had shut when the Yamping Dead raided the store looking for frozen Brains faggots and had eaten the brains of the customers instead. Asgard lost most of their passing trade, but their regulars didn't mind having to pass through three steel-clad doors and take a blood test before setting up. Nobody played Zombie Dice anymore, though.

Sometimes, the gamers stayed till the early hours, drinking looted tinnies of Red Bull and talking about the days before Tipton had gone to war against the other fiefdoms of the Black Country when central government had shut down local democracy. Walsall had just surrounded the Ring Road with barbed wire and hunkered down for the duration.

I was at Asgard Games that final, fateful night when a hundred ex-patients of the Manor came staggering up George Street and headed down High Street for a night on the town. I hadn't even planned to be there, but I'd been invited by the manager, Vince, to head over from Blocco and demonstrate my new tabletop game prototype. I didn't have the heart to tell him it was a zombie game. At first, the gamers hadn't reacted well, but after a few bottles of blue pop and some orange chips smuggled in on the cut from the Republic of Dudley, they soon began to play. It was when the flames rose high across the road that the mood changed. ASDA was on fire.

I looked at Vince, he looked at his customers, and we all decided it was time to get the hell out of Dodge, so Vince sent the gamers upstairs for weapons. We headed for Town Wharf, where my narrowboat was moored. As we hit High Street, one of the yampers went for me, gums gnashing and carrying a Co-Op Bag for Life lashed to his zimmer frame with string. It sounded like he was trying to say "It's a cryin' shame, the price o' faggits 'n' paes these daes, it's not loik it wuz when we 'ad a proper market in Waersall yow know, guz back ter the 13th century!"

I sliced his bonce from his shoulders with my special ops katana, drop-kicking it as I ran, right into the shattered entrance of the Old Square. That was a mistake, as another wave of the Yamping Dead surged out from where they'd been sleeping on the remains of the massive sofas in Bright House. I legged it, sharpish.

By now, Vince and the gamers were down Digbeth, rushing onto The Bridge. They were immediately surrounded by huge, mutant rats who'd been flushed into the polluted Walsall Brook years ago by a local pet shop when they'd gone bust. The gamers made a brave stand on the steps of Sister Dora's statue, which was still, poignantly, wearing a Walsall F.C. scarf and woolly hat left there since the last time they'd won a match twenty years ago.

As I ran into Digbeth, the rats spotted me and I scrambled hastily onto an abandoned market stall. Meanwhile, the Sister Dora crew were busy shooting the heads off rats and blowing out bank windows. Everyone still hated bankers, even though they'd all left for Shanghai. Unfortunately, the lads with the grenades overshot, shattering the Walsall Hippo and setting fire to my precarious vantage point.

"Oy, stoppit yow lot!" I shouted. "Sorry mate, we wuz just 'avin' a larf," came the unconvincing reply. Thankfully, the others had finally picked off the rats below and I ran to join them. Just at that moment the 'zombies' staggering down Digbeth spotted our group looking back at them. With a cry of "We want Brainsss faggits!" they put on a burst of speed. The chase was on again.

Passing McDonald's, which was full of half-eaten customers clutching half-eaten burgers, we reached the burnt-out Poundland at Town End Bank, and were about to head into Gallery Square

when the dead caught up. I could hear them tutting loudly about “Ow cum the British Home Stores caff dow serve faggits ‘n’ paes no mower?” and “Weer’s Marks ‘n’ Sparks gone?” Well, Brexit was Brexit, after all.

“Time to mek one last stand, Stu,” Vince said, slapping me on the back. “Yow tek the guys ter safety an’ I’ll keep this lot busy while yow gets away.” He’d always wanted to be a hero, like in the games.

“Ok dude. We won’t forget you.”

He nodded, roared, and ran off down Park Street to head off the Yamping Dead outside Waterstones, which still had the last three books it had stocked in the window; two ghost-written celebrity biographies and a remaindered young adult book about sparkly vampires. Vince made his last stand and the rest of us ran into Gallery Square where, knocking on the door of the Old New Art Gallery, I handed one of the tie-dye uniformed guards a CD. She nodded, and the door slid shut. This place was the last refuge for Walsall culture. The local artists had occupied it and mounted massive Tannoy speakers at the top of the building, through which they played Abba classics and Justin Bieber albums to keep the zombies back at night.

Turning to the group, I gave them a choice: take refuge here or join the Blocco Boys and help me finish testing the game. After a minute’s conference, all elected to escape, and we headed over to my boat, the ‘Kiss My Ass’. Stepping aboard in relief, Sam turned to me, asking “You know, you never did tell us what the name of your new zombie game is, did you?”

I smiled in reply. “I just now thought of it, actually. ‘Night of the Yamping Dead’.” Everyone laughed, even the shambling, tattered horde now surrounding the gallery. As we headed out along the moonlit Walsall Canal I stood at the tiller and, turning back, signalled the gallery. The speakers high above rumbled in response, burning the air with ten thousand watts of Judas Priest. A hundred zombies clapped hands to their rotting ears in unison, and began to stagger away as fast as they couldn’t.

Some things never change.

THE END?