

The Unknown Coming

By Zen J. Jackson

Gabriel clung to his rifle, devoted to eliminating the infectious disease killing his children. He promised his first born he would seek vengeance, once the boy never returned from sleep. All five of his babies now rested side by side, resembling a lifeless litter of puppies in the front yard of a twenty-acre farm. The enriched house, worn down from the years of love that existed, was now decorated in piles of fresh and compacted dirt. The calluses on Gabriel's hands made the fifth hole easy to dig, but he hesitated a sixth for his wife- even though her chest was no longer rising like it used to. Still, the determined farmer held his rifle against his heart in prayer. He could shoot *The Unknown* for good, protecting what was left of his family and livestock.

He called it *The Unknown*, not because it walked on all fours and trotted through the fertile land larger than any deer or werewolf, but because no matter how many bullets clashed with its vital organs; the Unknown rose back from its collision with the earth. After every blast the farmer unleashed, it still continued to approach his precious home marinating in death. The mysterious beast was unlike anything ever witnessed by any man before.

"What do you want, God dammit?" the farmer asked under his breath with his jaw clenched. "There's nothing more to take."

Gabriel remained planted on the porch, distracted from anything other than the Unknown and obsessed with the possibility of its final fall. He focused through the scope of his rifle, frozen, and ready to shoot. He jerked back after firing the weapon. The pigs squealed while the horses whinnied. Altogether like clockwork, he reloaded; grinding his teeth. His wife rocked back in forth, indoors by the fireplace. Her once golden skin was pale and thin, clinging to her cheekbones. Her nails were chewed down to their cuticles. Her hair, once full and wild looked like the straw fed to the animals instead, for the disease was quick to consume whatever stood in its path. Was it in the air? Was it in the food? Gabriel hadn't a moment to think. The Unknown was coming.

The farmer's wife waited while her husband tried to destroy the persistent monster that appeared from the horizon moments after the illness began to spread, and as the creature crept towards their darkened home, Gabriel would pull the trigger to stall the beast in its tracks. He buried his children in between. The farmer wished to tend to his wife, but the Unknown kept *coming*. He wanted desperately for it to die, so he could grieve his family in peace.

Gabriel let off another shot, hitting the Unknown between the eyes. It toppled into the soil like a seed tossed into a garden. The farmer waited, panting and with sweating palms, while

behind him, dry heaves and coughs echoed into a pail. The sounds attempted to pull his attention away from the monster, closing in, but Gabriel refused to give in. Even though he wanted to tell his wife that everything would be alright, he further invested into stalling the Unknown until the odds were in his favor.

The copper fur of the beast in the field emerged, reflecting the moon like a lighthouse alongside the seashore.

“Stay down, you bastard,” Gabriel said, releasing yet another bullet before the smoke from the previous shot could even clear.

He stunned the Unknown in its tread again. It was inching closer and appeared larger with each step it took. The farmer relaxed his grip from his rifle, stretching his appendages to regain sensation without letting go or resting the weapon. He refused to show any signs of weakness towards the very objects surrounding him; accompanied by a haunted shovel, three empty boxes of ammo, and a stuffed bear his dead children left behind. The toy was sitting upright, facing his direction.

Gabriel’s breathing grew heavier as his vendetta against the Unknown grew stronger. He swore somehow and in some way, this sickness surrounding him was at the mercy of the very thing advancing. Like a stone wall, the farmer pulled the trigger once more. The gun responded with a click.

He raised the back end of the firearm as if there were some sort of a mistake.

Click, click, click, said his rifle, and the farmer tried to defy his reality.

He was out of resistance. He tweaked around looking for more rounds, patting his pockets. His eyes glanced over to the two bullets sitting in the lap of the stuffed bear, staring back at him with wonder and innocence. Gabriel noticed its warm gaze before snapping back into panic. Knocking over the toy and crawling on his knees, he pounced upon the bullets; dropping them as soon as his paws could reach. He tried following after them, but they’d rolled off the edge of the porch.

Gabriel had no choice but to sprint down the steps where the Unknown was. The creature was standing upright on hind legs like a human with teeth oversized, causing drool to spill down its furry chest. It marched towards the front door, paying no mind to Gabriel; still immobilized. The farmer’s mouth hung wide while inhaling the sight of the Unknown and its towering height.

The hideous creature stepped hoof after hoof into the farmer’s home. It leaned over his wife. Gabriel trembled, but could not budge. Its cooked flesh was sizzling from the countless bullet holes, and the farmer realized the rifle was useless all along. He was like a little boy next to the Unknown.

Meanwhile, his wife’s coughing grew worse as she expelled burps of red mucus. She was now too withered to lean over into the pail beside her. When the children were first infected, like the Unknown, the symptoms started off small. They suffered from no more than a tickle in the throat, but it grew, affecting the entire body.

The tears Gabriel held back while burying his children began to finally release. The grave for his wife he dared not to dream of, now ornamented his heart and mind. The farmer, shaking, dropped his rifle with his head down. His wife's coughing stopped.

The front door creaked open. Gabriel was too afraid to look up. He felt warm breath beside him. He fell into a fetal position. The silence remained, but it was not the Unknown who stood alongside him. It was his wife.

"Honey, it's okay," she said. "I'm okay."

The Unknown was gone. Gabriel became a stuffed teddy bear, sitting upright with a blank stare and solid smile. With skin glowing, his wife smiled back. She helped her traumatized husband onto his feet.

"We're okay," she said.

Gabriel chuckled in relief. He held his wife with pleasure as the sun began to rise and the birds began to sing, but such a dreadful episode had taken a toll on the farmer. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. It was hot. He felt a tickle in the back of his throat. He coughed. He looked out into the distant dawn, searching for *The Unknown*.