Head Count

Roger Zelazny

Opening scene: Viet Nam. Soldiers asking one of their number to show it to them again. The guy unhooks a small bag from his ammo belt and opens it, withdrawing a partly mummified right hand. Someone suggests he get rid of the thing, that it’s sick carrying around some VC’s hand he’d cut off. The reply, “How many American boys you think that hand’s pulled the trigger on?”

Scene: Same guy, bearded now, older, scruffily dressed, lurching across a blustery Times Square, carrying a bottle in a brown paper bag. Seats himself on a bench. Takes a drink, realizes it’s the last, places it on the ground beneath the bench. Starts asking passersby, “Got a buck for something to eat?”

Finally, a big man slows. When he’s braced for a buck, he says, “How’d you like to make a twenty?”

“What’s the catch?”

“I need someone to help me move something. It’s slightly illegal.”

“That’ll cost you fifty.”

“Okay.”

“In advance.”

The guy pays him.

“Come on. My car’s not far off.”

The vet follows him.

In car: “Where we headed?”

“Upstate.”

“How far?”

“Not very.” Fade.

Later, country road, trees passing:

“Just how the hell far is not very?”

Driver looks around, pulls over. “Okay. We get out here.”

They do. Driver pulls a gun.

“Hands behind your back.”

He handcuffs him and forces him into the trunk. Drives on.

Evening: The car enters a secluded estate. Twelve other people⁠—men and women, mostly young⁠—are present. The vet is removed from the trunk and taken into a chapel where he is stripped and tied to an altar. Inverted crucifix. Pentagram on floor. Circle. The 13 people don robes and commence a Satanic-seeming ritual, culminating in each one’s coming forward and stabbing him, catching his blood in a small chalice and drinking some. Closeups of each face, mouth, drinking. Afterwards, the big man who had found him carries his body out to a river and tosses it in. Fade.

He is not dead, however, and the coldness of the river while inducing hypothermia also saves his life by slowing his bodily functions, as he is spotted downriver shortly thereafter, fished out and taken to a hospital. Flat-line brain function, machine maintenance. He remains in a coma for several years.

One day he awakens. Asked if he remembers what happened, he says, “No.” But he is seeing flashbacks to the faces of the people drinking his blood. Fade.

Later, clean-shaven, sober, neatly but casually dressed, wearing mirrorshades, camera at belt, he’s sitting on the same bench where the big guy had found him, watching the passersby. Time passes. Spring to summer. Gray skies, bright ones, changing window displays in stores, peoples’ clothing shifting from cool to warm-weather wear.

One day the big guy, older now, passes again. The vet follows the man. Finally, watching him day after day, he sees him meet with one of the others⁠—whom he also begins following. There are others. He takes pictures, of house and apartment fronts, auto license tags. He follows others, in-city and elsewhere, against many landscapes and skylines. The people have changed⁠—one’s a priest now, a woman’s a surgeon, the big guy proves to be a cop. Each time he sees one a flashback to that face, younger, occurs, drinking his blood.

Night. Parking garage or dark stretch of street. Man walking. One of Them. The vet emerges from between two cars or out of a doorway, wearing dark clothing (face blackened, also?) Draws from behind his belt a length of piano wire attached to two wooden handles. Slips behind his quarry, catches him about the neck with the wire, pulls, tightens, turns, jerks. Decapitation follows. He raises the head by the hair and places it within a plastic trash can liner he has with him. From a pocket he removes a piece of blue chalk and sketches a pentagram about the body. Fade.

Several more such incidents follow. The tabloids pick them up as Satanist ritual killings. In the meantime, the vet, having tracked most of them now, decides to go after the cop. His first mistake. The guy hears him an instant before he strikes and succeeds in fighting him off, getting a look at him in the process.

Flashback to the ritual. The cop recalls the face of that early victim he thought dead. He calls, and gets together with, the others. Tells them what he’s discovered. It becomes apparent that they’ve all mellowed, that what they did years ago was on the order of a youthful indiscretion. They have, mainly, grown apart; they no longer get together for anything like that early ritual. Nothing had ever (apparently) really come of the rites they’d performed in those days. Most of them are reputable professional people now. They’re suddenly scared that this guy isn’t human, that he’s a back-from-the-dead avenger. Or that perhaps the guy is possessed by the demon they’d invoked at the time of the ritual. The cop scoffs at this, says that the guy is tough, but that he did hurt him, did fight him off.

They aren’t about to take this to the police, but try to handle it themselves. The cop trains the nine remaining people in stakeout techniques and has them all on pistol ranges and is teaching them the rudiments of unarmed combat. He has them taking turns then⁠—half of them watching the other half at all times.

The vet spots one of the stakeouts, though, and takes out both his intended victim and the other. This time he leaves a clue, however⁠—blood, skin and hair beneath a victim’s fingernails, a bloody thumbprint on a windshield. The cop begins hanging around a friend in Homicide who’s assigned to the cases, learning that the thumbprint leads to a military record. No current address for the guy, though.

The vet gets two more of them before another lead turns up. In the time before they connect him with the vanished coma case he was, he kills another, leaving five. They finally track him to a gallery where he works as a caretaker, having a small apartment in the rear. Pursuit and combat amid objets d’arte and mirrors. He takes them out one by one, except for the big cop. The cop, severely injured, finally kills him with a long piece of broken glass from one of the shattered cases, there in the vet’s room, where he has all of the heads he’s collected mounted on sticks at various levels.

Notes

This short tale may have been an outline for an episode of The Twilight Zone, but no script was made from it. The undated manuscript was found with other material from the late 1980s.

VC means Viet Cong, a Vietnamese supporting the National Liberation Front of the former South Vietnam. Braced means confronted. Objets d’art are items of artistic merit⁠—paintings, statues, etc.