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SF MASTERWORKS

# I Am Legend

RICHARD MATHESON



## PART 1: JANUARY 1976

## CHAPTER ONE

On those cloudy days, Robert Neville was never sure when sunset came, and sometimes they were in the streets before he could get back.

If he had been more analytical, he might have calculated the approximate time of their arrival; but he still used the lifetime habit of judging nightfall by the sky, and on cloudy days that method didn't work. That was why he chose to stay near the house on those days.

He walked around the house in the dull gray of afternoon, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, trailing threadlike smoke over his shoulder. He checked each window to see if any of the boards had been loosened. After violent attacks, the planks were often split or partially pried off, and he had to replace them completely; a job he hated. Today only one plank was loose. Isn't that amazing? he thought.

In the back yard he checked the hothouse and the water tank. Sometimes the structure around the tank might be weakened or its rain catchers bent or broken off. Sometimes they would lob rocks over the high fence around the hothouse, and occasionally they would tear through the overhead net and he'd have to replace panes.

Both the tank and the hothouse were undamaged today.

He went to the house for a hammer and nails. As he pushed open the front door, he looked at the distorted reflection of himself in the cracked mirror he'd fastened to the door a month ago. In a few days, jagged pieces of the silver-backed

glass would start to fall off. Let 'em fall, he thought. It was the last damned mirror he'd put there; it wasn't worth it. He'd put garlic there instead. Garlic always worked.

He passed slowly through the dim silence of the living room, turned left into the small hallway, and left again into his bedroom.

Once the room had been warmly decorated, but that was in another time. Now it was a room entirely functional, and since Neville's bed and bureau took up so little space, he had converted one side of the room into a shop.

A long bench covered almost an entire wall, on its hardwood top a heavy band saw, a wood lathe, an emery wheel, and a vise. Above it, on the wall, were haphazard racks of the tools that Robert Neville used.

He took a hammer from the bench and picked out a few nails from one of the disordered bins. Then he went back outside and nailed the plank fast to the shutter. The unused nails he threw into the rubble next door.

For a while he stood on the front lawn looking up and down the silent length of Cimarron Street. He was a tall man, thirty-six, born of English-German stock, his features undistinguished except for the long, determined mouth and the bright blue of his eyes, which moved now over the charred ruins of the houses on each side of his. He'd burned them down to prevent *them* from jumping on his roof from the adjacent ones.

After a few minutes he took a long, slow breath and went back into the house. He tossed the hammer on the living-room couch, then lit another cigarette and had his midmorning drink.

Later he forced himself into the kitchen to grind up the five-day accumulation of garbage in the sink. He knew he should burn up the paper plates and utensils too, and dust the furniture and wash out the sinks and the bathtub and toilet, and change the sheets and pillowcase on his bed; but he didn't feel like it.

For he was a man and he was alone and these things had no importance to him.

It was almost noon. Robert Neville was in his hothouse collecting a basketful of garlic.

In the beginning it had made him sick to smell garlic in such quantity; his stomach had been in a state of constant turmoil. Now the smell was in his house and in his clothes, and sometimes he thought it was even in his flesh. He hardly noticed it at all.

When he had enough bulbs, he went back to the house and dumped them on the drainboard of the sink. As he flicked the wall switch, the light flickered, then flared into normal brilliance. A disgusted hiss passed his clenched teeth. The generator was at it again. He'd have to get out that damned manual again and check the wiring. And, if it were too much trouble to repair, he'd have to install a new generator.

Angrily he jerked a high-legged stool to the sink, got a knife, and sat down with an exhausted grunt.

First he separated the bulbs into the small, sickle-shaped cloves. Then he cut each pink, leathery clove in half, exposing the fleshy center buds. The air thickened with the musky, pungent odor. When it got too oppressive, he snapped on the air-conditioning unit and suction drew away the worst of it.

Now he reached over and took an icepick from its wall rack. He punched holes in each clove half, then strung them all together with wire until he had about twenty-five necklaces.

In the beginning he had hung these necklaces over the windows. But from a distance they'd thrown rocks until he'd been forced to cover the broken panes with plywood scraps. Finally one day he'd torn off the plywood and nailed up even rows of planks instead. It had made the house a gloomy sepulcher, but it was better than having rocks come flying into his rooms in a shower of splintered glass. And, once he had installed the three air-conditioning units, it wasn't too bad. A man could get used to anything if he had to.

When he was finished stringing the garlic cloves, he went

outside and nailed them over the window boarding, taking down the old strings, which had lost most of their potent smell.

He had to go through this process twice a week. Until he found something better, it was his first line of defense.

Defense? he often thought. For what?

All afternoon he made stakes.

He lathed them out of thick doweling, band-sawed into nine-inch lengths. These he held against the whirling emery stone until they were as sharp as daggers.

It was tiresome, monotonous work, and it filled the air with hot-smelling wood dust that settled in his pores and got into his lungs and made him cough.

Yet he never seemed to get ahead. No matter how many stakes he made, they were gone in no time at all. Doweling was getting harder to find, too. Eventually he'd have to lathe down rectangular lengths of wood. Won't *that* be fun? he thought irritably.

It was all very depressing and it made him resolve to find a better method of disposal. But how could he find it when they never gave him a chance to slow down and think?

As he lathed, he listened to records over the loudspeaker he'd set up in the bedroom – Beethoven's Third, Seventh, and Ninth symphonies. He was glad he'd learned early in life, from his mother, to appreciate this kind of music. It helped to fill the terrible void of hours.

From four o'clock on, his gaze kept shifting to the clock on the wall. He worked in silence, lips pressed into a hard line, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, his eyes staring at the bit as it gnawed away the wood and sent floury dust filtering down to the floor.

Four-fifteen. Four-thirty. It was a quarter to five.

In another hour they'd be at the house again, the filthy bastards. As soon as the light was gone.

He stood before the giant freezer, selecting his supper. His jaded eyes moved over the stacks of meats down to the frozen

vegetables, down to the breads and pastries, the fruits and ice cream.

He picked out two lamb chops, string beans, and a small box of orange sherbet. He picked the boxes from the freezer and pushed shut the door with his elbow.

Next he moved over to the uneven stacks of cans piled to the ceiling. He took down a can of tomato juice, then left the room that had once belonged to Kathy and now belonged to his stomach.

He moved slowly across the living room, looking at the mural that covered the back wall. It showed a cliff edge, sheering off to green-blue ocean that surged and broke over black rocks. Far up in the clear blue sky, white sea gulls floated on the wind, and over on the right a gnarled tree hung over the precipice, its dark branches etched against the sky.

Neville walked into the kitchen and dumped the groceries on the table, his eyes moving to the clock. Twenty minutes to six. Soon now.

He poured a little water into a small pan and clanked it down on a stove burner. Next he thawed out the chops and put them under the broiler. By this time the water was boiling and he dropped in the frozen string beans and covered them, thinking that it was probably the electric stove that was milking the generator.

At the table he sliced himself two pieces of bread and poured himself a glass of tomato juice. He sat down and looked at the red second hand as it swept slowly around the clock face. The bastards ought to be here soon.

After he'd finished his tomato juice, he walked to the front door and went out onto the porch. He stepped off onto the lawn and walked down to the sidewalk.

The sky was darkening and it was getting chilly. He looked up and down Cimarron Street, the cool breeze ruffling his blond hair. That's what was wrong with these cloudy days; you never knew when they were coming.

Oh, well, at least they were better than those damned dust

storms. With a shrug, he moved back across the lawn and into the house, locking and bolting the door behind him, sliding the thick bar into place. Then he went back into the kitchen, turned his chops, and switched off the heat under the string beans.

He was putting the food on his plate when he stopped and his eyes moved quickly to the clock. Six-twenty-five today. Ben Cortman was shouting.

‘Come out, Neville!’

Robert Neville sat down with a sigh and began to eat.

He sat in the living room, trying to read. He’d made himself a whisky and soda at his small bar and he held the cold glass as he read a physiology text. From the speaker over the hallway door, the music of Schönberg was playing loudly.

Not loudly enough, though. He still heard them outside, their murmuring and their walkings about and their cries, their snarling and fighting among themselves. Once in a while a rock or brick thudded off the house. Sometimes a dog barked.

And they were all there for the same thing.

Robert Neville closed his eyes a moment and held his lips in a tight line. Then he opened his eyes and lit another cigarette, letting the smoke go deep into his lungs.

He wished he’d had time to soundproof the house. It wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t that he had to listen to them. Even after five months, it got on his nerves.

He never looked at them any more. In the beginning he’d made a peephole in the front window and watched them. But then the women had seen him and had started striking vile postures in order to entice him out of the house. He didn’t want to look at that.

He put down his book and stared bleakly at the rug, hearing *Verklärte Nacht* play over the loud-speaker. He knew he could put plugs in his ears to shut off the sound of them, but that would shut off the music too, and he didn’t want to feel that they were forcing him into a shell.

He closed his eyes again. It was the women who made it so difficult, he thought, the women posing like lewd puppets in the night on the possibility that he’d see them and decide to come out.

A shudder ran through him. Every night it was the same. He’d be reading and listening to music. Then he’d start to think about soundproofing the house, then he’d think about the women.

Deep in his body, the knotting heat began again, and he pressed his lips together until they were white. He knew the feeling well and it enraged him that he couldn’t combat it. It grew and grew until he couldn’t sit still any more. Then he’d get up and pace the floor, fists bloodless at his sides. Maybe he’d set up the movie projector or eat something or have too much to drink or turn the music up so loud it hurt his ears. He had to do something when it got really bad.

He felt the muscles of his abdomen closing in like tightening coils. He picked up the book and tried to read, his lips forming each word slowly and painfully.

But in a moment the book was on his lap again. He looked at the bookcase across from him. All the knowledge in those books couldn’t put out the fires in him; all the words of centuries couldn’t end the wordless, mindless craving of his flesh.

The realization made him sick. It was an insult to a man. All right, it was a natural drive, but there was no outlet for it any more. They’d forced celibacy on him; he’d have to live with it. You have a mind, don’t you? he asked himself. Well, *use it!*

He reached over and turned the music still louder, then forced himself to read a whole page without pause. He read about blood cells being forced through membranes, about pale lymph carrying the wastes through tubes blocked by lymph nodes, about lymphocytes and phagocytic cells.

‘. . . to empty, in the left shoulder region, near the thorax, into a large vein of the blood circulating system.’

The book shut with a thud.

Why didn't they leave him alone? Did they think they could *all* have him? Were they so stupid they thought that? Why did they keep coming every night? After five months, you'd think they'd give up and try elsewhere.

He went over to the bar and made himself another drink. As he turned back to his chair he heard stones rattling down across the roof and landing with thuds in the shrubbery beside the house. Above the noises, he heard Ben Cortman shout as he always shouted.

'Come out, Neville!'

Someday I'll get that bastard, he thought as he took a big swallow of the bitter drink. Someday I'll knock a stake right through his goddamn chest. I'll make one a foot long for him, a special one with ribbons on it, the bastard.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he'd soundproof the house. His fingers drew into white-knuckled fists. He couldn't stand thinking about those women. If he didn't hear them, maybe he wouldn't think about them. Tomorrow. Tomorrow.

The music ended and he took a stack of records off the turntable and slid them back into their cardboard envelopes. Now he could hear them even more clearly outside. He reached for the first new record he could get and put it on the turntable and twisted the volume up to its highest point.

'The Year of the Plague,' by Roger Leie, filled his ears. Violins scraped and whined, tympani thudded like the beats of a dying heart, flutes played weird, atonal melodies.

With a stiffening of rage, he wrenched up the record and snapped it over his right knee. He'd meant to break it long ago. He walked on rigid legs to the kitchen and flung the pieces into the trash box. Then he stood in the dark kitchen, eyes tightly shut, teeth clenched, hands clamped over his ears. Leave me alone, leave me alone, *leave me alone!*

No use, you couldn't beat them at night. No use trying; it was their special time. He was acting very stupidly, trying to beat them. Should he watch a movie? No, he didn't feel like setting up the projector. He'd go to bed and put the plugs

in his ears. It was what he ended up doing every night, anyway.

Quickly, trying not to think at all, he went to the bedroom and undressed. He put on pajama bottoms and went into the bathroom. He never wore pajama tops; it was a habit he'd acquired in Panama during the war.

As he washed, he looked into the mirror at his broad chest, at the dark hair swirling around the nipples and down the center line of his chest. He looked at the ornate cross he'd had tattooed on his chest one night in Panama when he'd been drunk. What a fool I was in those days! he thought. Well, maybe that cross had saved his life.

He brushed his teeth carefully and used dental floss. He tried to take good care of his teeth because he was his own dentist now. Some things could go to pot, but not his health, he thought. Then why don't you stop pouring alcohol into yourself? he thought. Why don't you shut the hell up? he thought.

Now he went through the house, turning out lights. For a few minutes he looked at the mural and tried to believe it was really the ocean. But how could he believe it with all the bumpings and the scrapings, the howlings and snarlings and cries in the night?

He turned off the living-room lamp and went into the bedroom.

He made a sound of disgust when he saw that sawdust covered the bed. He brushed it off with snapping hand strokes, thinking that he'd better build a partition between the shop and the sleeping portion of the room. Better do this and better do that, he thought morosely. There were so many damned things to do, he'd never get to the real problem.

He jammed in his earplugs and a great silence engulfed him. He turned off the light and crawled in between the sheets. He looked at the radium-faced clock and saw that it was only a few minutes past ten. Just as well, he thought. This way I'll get an early start.

He lay there on the bed and took deep breaths of the