

**I Fell in Love
with a Zombie**

SEAN KENNEDY

I

WHEN the world as we knew it ended, it didn't happen the way we expected it to. There was no meteor strike or rapid ocean rising due to global warming or melting polar ice caps. It was a lot closer to those pandemic scares, the ones that we always worried about but that never eventuated. Except that this one actually did. One day the news was reporting that cases of swine flu were starting to cross from Mexico into the United States, and then other cases began to surface in other countries as travelers brought it back home with them as holiday souvenirs you didn't have to pay for.

As I watched footage of people buying surgical masks and walking the streets like there was a Michael Jackson lookalike convention in town, I turned to my boyfriend Mike and said, "If this thing is as bad as they say, that flimsy piece of material isn't going to do any good."

"You are such a pessimist," he replied. "How often have we been threatened with these viruses? Nothing ever comes of them."

Mike. I don't even want to think about him, but I still do. Ironic that he should be the one to fall to the virus, when he thought it was just a scare.

I don't know how many survivors there are. But there are less than there used to be. You can tell who they are if you see them on the streets; they just have that haunted

look on their faces that suggests they're ready to run. You can't stay static now. You have to be a nomad.

If you want to keep living.

And boy, do I want to live.

I always thought that if the apocalypse came, I'd rather die straightaway than have to eke out some kind of survival in a nightmarish world without the benefits of the mod-cons I loved. But when the apocalypse came, I fought tooth and nail to keep living.

Literally. Survivors had to become fighters.

I didn't really think the flu was as bad as they said. But then people started dying. First in the hundreds; then in the thousands. Panic started gripping the nation. Borders were closed; other countries refused to help in case they came down with the illness as well. Bodies were buried quickly, to try and defuse contamination.

But something weird began happening.

There were a number of those who were infected, and died, who *came alive* again after a day or so. But they didn't come back the same. Doctors hypothesized that brain damage from lack of air while they were "dead" caused the lack of speech, the stumbling gait, the dead look in the eyes. What they couldn't account for was their strength, which came in fits and starts. They were uncontrollable, and tended to kill people who got too close to them.

For the better want of a name, they were called "zombies". That only contributed to the panic, even though they were really nothing like movie zombies. They didn't want to eat our brains; they tended to raid garbage cans,

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homes, and stores. That's why nowhere was safe: the zombies would break in anywhere, and if you got in their way, you likely wouldn't survive.

By the time this became public knowledge, though, Mike was dead. He had gotten sick; I didn't. Now that I know what I know, I have to hope that he actually died... that he wasn't a zombie. Because then that means he would have been alive when he was cremated—

Like I said, I don't want to think about it.

The cities are now mostly deserted. I think I'm one of the last ones left in this city; survivors seem to head for the country, where they think they'll be safer. The zombies are everywhere, though. The best thing to do is just keep moving. They'll eventually come across you if you stay in the one place too long.

At the moment, I'm in a high-rise apartment complex on the outskirts of the city. I've holed up on the top floor, with a pair of binoculars I stole from a sports store. I keep a vigilant watch, making sure nothing enters the lobby, which I tried to barricade as best I could. I figured it would give me at least a week. I sleep at night; for some reason, the zombies move less at night. Maybe there's something human left within their addled brains, who knows?

I don't know what happened to my family. The last time I got to speak to my mother, she was worried because my father was in bed sick and she wasn't starting to feel that well herself. Nobody could get hold of my brother; he and his wife weren't answering their home phone or their cells. And by that stage, nobody liked taking to the streets to check up

on anybody. That would come later, when you began to get paranoid and thought you were the only person left alive.

I had seen my first zombie when I emerged from my house a week after the television stations stopped broadcasting. I had run out of food, and was desperate. I tore through my house looking for anything that resembled a weapon; all I found was Mike's old baseball bat. It would have to do.

As I removed the furniture shoved against my front door and stepped out onto the street, I was disturbed by how *normal* everything seemed. The birds still sung and flew about, the houses looked remarkably the same, and cars were still parked in driveways and on the street.

But there was a smell. And it was unmistakable. The smell of rotting bodies.

When I turned the corner, I found my first corpse. And I knew him. Pat Devon, the owner of the 7-Eleven just farther down the street. I couldn't look at him for long, even to try and figure out how he died; the smell was just too bad. I could feel the bile rising in my throat, but I swallowed it back down. Food was too rare to waste.

And then I heard the footsteps.

It was such an alien sound, one I hadn't heard for so long. And because it seemed so out of the ordinary, it filled me with absolute terror.

I slowly turned around.

He was about two blocks away, but because the street was so quiet, the sound was carrying the distance easily. And he wasn't human. At least, not human as I used to

know it. I could tell by his stagger and the way his hands hung limply by his sides.

My first zombie. Sighted in person.

He moaned, long and drawn out. Immediately, I worried for my brain. After all, I had seen zombie movies my whole life, and that isn't something you can shake easily. No matter how often they had said on the news before they stopped broadcasting that the zombies weren't movie zombies, I still thought they possibly hungered for brains.

I started to back away slowly. And of course, tripped over my own feet.

The metal baseball bat dropped to the concrete, the sound ringing, echoing, bouncing off the houses and buildings around me. I painfully got to my feet and picked it up.

The zombie had stopped groaning.

He had zeroed in on me instead.

There had been a report on *Dateline* on scientists hypothesizing about what made the zombies tick. They could change from shuffling, clumsy dead things in one moment to frenetic attack machines that would put sharks to shame in the next. *It could be a current in the brain that switches on, one had said. It taps into the need for violence, it has to get rid of this pent-up energy somehow. We don't know why.*

Conspiracy theorists claimed that it was a form of germ warfare, perhaps of military origin.

But none of that was going through my mind when my life was at stake.

Gone was the lurching. He still moved bizarrely, but at a greatly increased speed. I started to run, but his footfalls were rapidly getting closer behind me. Out of breath from weeks of being housebound, I knew I wasn't going to make it to safety.

So I stopped and turned.

He didn't even pause, his desire to do damage was so strong.

I gripped the bat in my hand, hoping I was holding it correctly. Mike was the jock, not me. The only sports I ever deigned to watch with him were the Super Bowl and the Olympics. I was covered in sweat, and my breathing was hoarse. But the zombie's was louder.

Stupidly, I found myself yelling, "You want my brains, motherfucker?"

My voice was loud, hoarse and jubilant. It sounded a little rusty, as it had been a while since I had spoken. I liked hearing myself again.

"Come and get them!"

As he neared me, so close I could smell the unwashed state of his clothes and the skin beneath them, I struck with the bat. It was just a glancing blow off his shoulder, but it deterred him for a brief moment. So I struck him again, aiming for the head. He hissed, and moaned again, his eyes glazed with anger. My shoulder twinged as I hit him across the jaw, and I yelled with disgust as I heard the crunch of bone.

He fell to the ground, and it was my chance. I hit him again. And again. And again. His moaning became a

burbling as blood filled his mouth. The red, viscous agent was flying through the air with each blow. But I couldn't stop. Not until he was dead for good.

When his skull was opened, and I could see gray matter.

That was when he stopped moving, and no more sound came from him.

The street was silent again.

His blood began to pool on the sidewalk, and I stepped back. The bat was gleaming with his blood and flecks of brain. The bile rose in my throat again, and this time I couldn't hold back but heaved where I stood, my vomit becoming part of the small river I had created.

I couldn't believe I had killed someone.

Logically, I knew it was in self-defense. It was either him or me. So why did I feel like shit?

I wanted someone to talk to, someone to tell me everything would be okay. But I knew even if there was someone there to tell me that, it would be a lie anyway.

Was this what my life was going to be from now on?

It was enough to make me wish I had died with everybody else.

But back to the present. As darkness fell, I shook myself back to some semblance of normality and made my way to my old 7-Eleven. The store was almost pitch-black; the power had finally gone out three days ago. I stayed close to the front just in case there was something lurking in the darkness and I needed to make an escape. With my bag bulging, I left and made my way home, making an effort not

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to look at the now-decaying zombie corpse that lay on the ground. The corpse that was there because of me.

Back at the apartment complex, I barricaded myself back in, opened a can of baked beans, and ate them cold. I then wrapped myself in blankets in the small fort I had made myself in the dining room and tried to sleep.

II

I DECIDED to move on the next morning. I knew I couldn't stay there forever.

Part of me wanted to try and find out if there were any other humans left in the city, but I guessed that there weren't that many in my vicinity. After all, when I had killed the zombie, I had yelled enough to alert anyone to my presence, and nobody had come running.

It made me wonder: if I had been the one holed up in my house and heard someone yelling, would I have left my little sanctuary to investigate? I really wasn't sure.

It was time to find new pastures. If I didn't get some scenery, I would go crazy.

So I made my way back to my house for the final time. It was painful walking back in; I expected, or maybe just hoped, Mike would be sitting there waiting for me, wondering where I had been. The house was empty, yet everything reminded me of his absence.

I had to pack as light as possible. Food and water were necessary, until I could do another food run. I had to allow myself a small measure of sentimentality: a picture of my family, and a picture of Mike which I stuck in my wallet. I couldn't allow myself to forget them; I stupidly felt like it would be losing my own humanity. And if that happened, I might as well be a zombie myself.

II

There was also a book. Mike had bought it for a laugh. Neither of us had guessed that one of us would need it in the future. *The Survival Handbook*. It had tips on how to gather fresh water, survive a fall from an aircraft if your parachute didn't open—you know, all that everyday stuff. I figured it wouldn't hurt, although now I wished Mike had bought *The Zombie Survival Handbook* instead.

But the book had paid for itself already. Because now, in theory, I knew how to boost a car.

Logic dictated that if the zombies tended to rest at night, it would be better for me to travel at night. But I was nervous about driving in the dark with no streetlights, especially when there would be any number of obstacles in my path: bodies, abandoned cars, accidents. It would just be my luck to crash the car and lie in pain until I starved to death or a zombie stumbled along and put me out of my misery.

I hoped zombies were late sleepers, took one last look around my house, saying goodbye to all my familiar things, and walked out the door. I hoped maybe one day I could return, but shrugged it off. Even if things got better, I would want to start life somewhere new, where memories of Mike, my family and my friends wouldn't haunt me everywhere I turned.

I knew my own gas tank was empty, so I headed across the street to where the Davisons lived. They were a responsible yuppie family, with a double income and two kids. They had also been the first to die on our street. I was home from work, looking after Mike, when I saw the ambulance arrive and cart their bodies away, sealed up in hazmat bags.

Anyway. They would surely have a full tank. They were that kind of people.

I picked up a strip of wood from their garden and used it to wedge the window down. I didn't want to smash it with a rock—the thought of driving with an exposed window where anything could reach in to grab me or attempt to gain entrance left me cold. After some banging, I got the window down far enough to unlock the door. I climbed in, locked it again, and rolled up the window. I opened the book in my lap and found the section on hotwiring.

I pulled out the screwdriver I had packed last night, knowing that I needed it from skimming through the chapter. Nothing like preparation. I removed the access cover from beneath the steering wheel, and felt around until I found the wiring. I pulled the harness down, stripped the red wires, and twisted them together. I then stripped the brown wire and touched it to the red.

The car roared into life, and I quickly pumped the gas so it wouldn't stall.

"Thanks, book," I said happily. Now that the car was making noise, it was time to put the pedal to the metal. I checked the fuel gage; it was at three quarters. *Thank you, Davisons—rest in peace.*

I roared out of their driveway. Time to put home behind me, and take to the road.

As I turned the corner, scene of my own private carnage, I was surprised to see the corpse was surrounded. By other zombies. Did this mean they had intelligence of some sort?

That they knew one of their numbers had been killed by a human who was still in the area?

Well, good thing I was leaving, because my cover was now blown.

They swung around to face me as one. I revved the engine as if I were a bull facing down a matador. And there it was again, that change in them as they went from shuffling cadavers to angry predators.

The tires spun, burning rubber, as I kicked the accelerator and held it down as far as it could go. The car lurched forward at breakneck speed. The zombies didn't even try to get out of the way as I mowed through them. There was a sickening bump as one of them disappeared under the wheels and a crash as one flew over the bonnet and hit the windshield. Blood sprayed the glass, and it began thumping with its fist, trying to break it and get through at me. A crack appeared, and I knew the windshield would be shattered if the zombie continued to punch at it. I took a corner sharply, and the zombie toppled over and hit the road. I looked back in the rearview mirror, and saw it lying behind me and rapidly becoming a speck in the distance.

Only then did I allow myself to breathe a sigh of relief. And headed for the highway.

III

I TURNED on the radio and set it to automatic scan, hoping that I could pick up something, anybody, anything. All that it picked up was static.

I couldn't be the only person left in the country. Too bad *The Survival Handbook* didn't have a chapter on flying 747s so I could escape. Surely some country would take pity on me and give me refugee status.

Guess I still believed in pipe dreams.

The Davisons had shit taste in music. I pawed through their CDs and grimaced. Whitney Houston—obviously hers. Creed? Why they weren't using that as a coaster, I don't know.

Then I found The Wiggles. And my hand just hovered over the case.

Jackson. He was five. And Maddie was seven. I wondered how often their parents had to listen to this CD, the songs getting stuck in their head until they were going to bed at night with "Hot Potato" lulling them to sleep.

I couldn't think like that.

I slammed the console shut and concentrated fully on the road again. Occasionally I would have to swerve to avoid a car parked on the highway, and tried not to think about the story of the occupants.

Small towns had become ghost towns. Once again, nobody ever came out of their houses or businesses to investigate the sound of a car driving through. At a truck stop, I managed to stock up on food and moved on quickly, as the sound of the wind through the empty streets unnerved me.

But I eventually ran out of gas. The Davisons' SUV stuttered out on a long, unbroken road. I managed to coax the car on until I saw another car in the distance, stopped on the side of the highway. I slung my backpack over my shoulders, held my bat, and walked toward it.

I was relieved to find there were no corpses in it. It was also unlocked; someone was making my job easy for me.

Until I tried to hotwire it, and the fuel gauge registered as barely above empty.

"Damn it," I hissed. Looked like I was footing it until I found another car to try.

I slammed the door in a temper.

"You're alive."

I jumped, yelped, and generally made a fool out of myself as I swung around with my bat at the ready.

The man on the other side of the road jumped back, even though I was nowhere near him. "Hey, watch it!"

I sized him up. He was probably only a couple of years younger than me: cute, but a little grizzled. He looked like he had been hiding out just as badly as I had.

"You're not a zombie," I said.

“Neither are you.”

“I thought I was the only one.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Where *did* you come from?” I asked. It was like he had appeared out of nowhere.

He pointed up the hill next to the highway. “There’s a house. I’m hiding out there for the moment.”

“By yourself?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yeah. Don’t think anything funny.”

I realized that what I said could be misconstrued; he probably thought I was out to rob him and take whatever he had. “I’m not. It’s just... you’re the first person I’ve seen. I was just hoping there were more of us.”

He shrugged. “There probably are. I mean, we both thought we were alone, and here we are.”

I nodded. “Here we are.”

“So there must be more. We can’t be the only ones.”

“Fuck, I hope so.”

He gave a short laugh. “Me too. What’s your name?”

It had been so long since I had said it out loud. “Jay.”

And even longer since I had heard someone say it. “Jay. I’m Richard.”

I shook his hand, and he was lucky that when I felt human contact again I didn’t sweep him up into a bear hug. So I dropped his hand almost immediately.

“Do you want a coffee?” Richard asked.

I could only laugh. “You’re asking me if I want coffee?”

“It’s what civilized people do, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Sure. I could do coffee.”

Four weeks ago, I would never have been so reckless. But four weeks ago, the world was normal. The flu wasn’t even mentioned in news reports. But now, following a stranger back to his house for coffee seemed fine. Even if the house wasn’t his own, and was just one he was squatting in.

We trekked up the hill, and as we came over the crest of it, I could see the farmhouse only a short distance away. “It’s nice,” I said, trying not to breathe too heavily.

Richard shrugged. “I like it.” He looked back at me. “You want to put that bat away? It makes me nervous.”

“What if zombies come along?”

He gave a short laugh. “Haven’t seen any around here in a while. That’s why I’m staying on for now.”

“Guess zombies don’t like to walk,” I murmured.

“Well, this place *is* out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yeah, it’s very *In Cold Blood*.”

He obviously didn’t like the allusion. “Please put away the bat.”

I complied, stashing it in my backpack, the end poking out, as we reached the front door.

“I heard you trying to start the car,” Richard said as we walked in. “That’s why I came down. It was the first sign of human life I had heard since a helicopter flew overhead six days ago.”

“Six days?” I asked, having a quick look around the lounge we were in. It was normal, farm-like. Utilitarian. Richard looked too bohemian to belong there.

He nodded, and led me into the kitchen. “Have a seat.”

I took one of the chairs at the large table as he began lighting the wood stove.

“Sometimes I think of the stupidest things,” he said suddenly. “Like what I’ll do when the matches run out.”

“We’ll have to learn all the old skills again,” I replied. “Or really stock up.”

“I don’t even know where the closest stores to here are,” he said. “But this is a farmhouse. There are plenty of supplies for now.”

“I came from the city,” I told him. “I could have just kept moving from house to house, but there were too many zombies.”

“You’ve seen a zombie?”

“I’ve *killed* a zombie.” I said, knowing I sounded like I was bragging. “More than one, actually.” I mean, I probably *had* killed those ones that went under the car as I escaped.

Richard gave a small whistle, setting a saucepan of water on the stove before coming over to sit across from me.

I remembered what he had said before, and couldn’t believe that I had forgotten it so easily. “Hey, you said you saw a helicopter six days ago?”

He nodded.

“So there are other people out there besides us.”

“Probably not *out* there, but *below* there.”

“Huh?”

“They’re military,” he said, as if I were stupid for not automatically getting it. “You know they have all those crazy underground installations in case of nuclear or viral warfare. They’re probably in them now, trying to figure out some way of killing the zombies, and then they’ll show their yellow asses again.” He jumped up to see if the water was boiling.

“Right,” I said, for lack of anything else to say.

He sloshed the water into mugs, and stirred them. “No milk to offer you.”

I’d gotten used to having my coffee black. “It’s okay.”

He set the mug before me and sat back down. “Of course, private citizens like us are just left to fend for ourselves.”

I sipped at my coffee. “And we’re doing a bang-up job.”

“I don’t know. I think I’m doing okay.”

I shrugged.

Richard stared at me for a while, and although his gaze felt uncomfortable, I looked back at him. His expression felt a little predatory.

“So,” he finally said. “Wanna fuck?”

Beautiful pick-up line. Maybe I’d known it was leading up to this. Even contemplating it made me feel like I was cheating on Mike, despite the fact that he was dead. But I wanted to be touched, to remind myself what it felt like to be human. To be touched by another human.

So I said, “Okay.”

“I have condoms,” he reassured me.

I nodded. “Good.”

“Drink your coffee.”

It was surreal. But I did. He finished before me, and disappeared behind the counter, emerging with a box of condoms. I wondered how many he was hoping to use.

“Finished?”

I took my last sip. “Yeah.”

“Just leave it there.”

He led me back into the lounge. As I stood there, wondering where the bedroom was, he pulled his shirt over his head. I guess he didn’t want to take me to bed. His torso was taut; his ribs were beginning to show.

“Come on,” he instructed me.

I pulled off my jacket, and was taking off my shirt as he unbuckled his pants. I closed my eyes briefly and sent a silent apology to Mike for my weakness. When I opened them again, Richard was pulling down his boxers. His cock was already hard, straining toward his stomach. I walked over to him, and took it in hand. I leaned in to kiss him, but he moved his head.

“I’m not gay,” he told me.

“Oh?” Funny, it *seemed* like he was letting me give him a hand job at that moment.

“Just letting you know. So you don’t get the wrong idea.”

“I wasn’t expecting an engagement.”

“Still, this just is what it is. Is that going to be a problem?”

I hated myself for doing it, but I shook my head. Guess I was just that desperate. And my own cock was betraying me, straining against my briefs.

That seemed to be enough permission for him. He yanked down my briefs, taking control from that moment on. They were still twisted around my ankles as he guided me to the floor. He manipulated me like a doll, turning me over so that I was on all fours, my ass pointed up in the air for him to do whatever he wanted to do to it.

I heard him rip the foil of the packet, and the snap of the latex as he rolled it down his shaft.

He wasn’t kidding when he said he wasn’t gay. He didn’t try to prepare me. One second the blunt head of his cock was against my cheeks, and then he was pushing in roughly. I cried out, but he didn’t stop, just letting himself sink in farther before he began to pump.

It was painful. Every now and again he hit my prostate and it made my cock jerk, although not in the good way that it could have been doing so. The room was filled with the sounds of my grunts that were trying not to be cries, the slap of his balls against my ass cheeks, and his own grunts of desire. Or what I assumed to be desire of some sort. I think I was little more than a hole to be filled to him at that point of time.

My ass felt like it was on fire, but it sounded like he was getting close. Balancing on one hand, I stroked myself to a

perfunctory orgasm, if only to relieve the hardness of my cock. Richard sagged against my back, his chest sweaty, as he came. By that point I just wanted him off me. And I didn't want any more condoms in that packet to get used on me, either.

It was a relief when he pulled out. He didn't bother tying the condom off; he just threw it into the fireplace.

He began pulling his clothes back on. "Thanks."

I grunted, non-committal, and fell back on my ass, as my briefs were still bunched around my legs. I pulled them back up and grimaced at the sight of my cum gleaming on the hard wood floor.

"Do you want a cigarette?" Richard asked.

I nodded, just for something to do. He fumbled around in his jean pockets as I began dressing. He lit it for me, and I took it off him. The first drag made me want to choke, but I managed to restrain it. I still couldn't help but look at his lips, wishing I could kiss him, just to remind myself what a kiss felt like. But even if he had been into that, there would have been no tenderness to it, just like our fucking. I was better off without it.

Richard sat on the couch and looked at me. "You can make yourself another coffee if you want. It's the one thing I have plenty of."

It would get me out of this room, which was making me feel sick. "You want one?"

"Sure."

I went into the kitchen, and ran the tap. The farm must have had a tank. I splashed my face, and leaned against the sink for support. I wanted to throw up, but wouldn't let myself.

Sorry, Mike.

Sorry, me.

I heard a snore coming from the lounge. I smiled to myself, relieved for small mercies. I grabbed my backpack, and crept out through the lounge to the front door. I had one last look at Richard, the only human whose existence I knew of for now, and knew I couldn't stay. Fuck, I didn't even know if Richard wanted me to stay. Was sharing his supplies worth having a warm body to fuck?

I didn't want to find out.

I was back on the road, walking, and was long gone before he would have woken up.

IV

FOR the next week, I did nothing but travel, taking car after car until the gas ran out. At some point, I would have to find out how to work a gas pump manually. I had tried my luck at a couple of stations, but without the computer functioning, they remained locked.

My current system seemed to be working for the moment, anyway.

I hadn't seen any other people since my disastrous hour with Richard. I was actually glad about that. I still wasn't happy with what I'd done, and what I'd allowed to be done to me. Maybe the human race *was* doomed, if we were the only example specimens left after the apocalypse.

Now that Richard had told me about the helicopter, I kept an eye on the skies. But I never saw anything except the occasional bird.

In a town called Berryville I saw a dog—a golden lab—that I tried to call over to me. It seemed only fitting that we travel the roads together, and the company would have been nice. But it shied away from me, obviously out of some self-defense mechanism. The zombies hadn't only attacked humans, and animals had learnt to keep their distance from humans as well as we had.

We went our separate ways, but I think I was more upset about it than the dog was.

From Berryville to Central Orion, there was nothing to be seen in the streets of the towns or the roads in between them. The signs on the highway announced the next town to be Drake, and that set off a reminder in my head.

Drake. That was where Dave had moved.

Dave had been the guy who got away. The guy I had willingly *given* away.

You know when you're young and stupid, and you do something you'll regret for the rest of your life? That even in your final moments, you'll think, *I wish I had done that differently?*

That was Dave.

We started going out just after I finished college, and we were together for three years. I was happy, he was happy, and together, life was good. So what caused us to break up?

His job was transferred to Drake. He asked me to come with him, but like I said, I was young and stupid. Oh, and selfish. Really, really selfish. I didn't want to move from the city to a small country town, even if it did look as charming as a movie set decorated to look like a picture-perfect small country town.

My mind strayed to science fiction movies and tales of alternate timelines. If I had stayed with Dave, and moved to Drake, would the virus have somehow never happened? Would we just be living our lives, unaware of the catastrophe that we had averted? Would our relationship be the butterfly that should have never been crushed under the clumsy time-traveling scientist's foot?

I wished I were in an alternate dimension. Anywhere but here.

And that was when karma got me good. The car suddenly shuddered beneath me, and rolled to a stop. No matter how many times I turned the ignition or banged the steering wheel with my fists in frustration, the car remained dead. I would have to hoof it from here, at least until I found another car.

But I didn't like the look of the darkening sky. Maybe it would be safer to find somewhere to hole myself up for the night.

A fleeting thought concerning Richard passed through me; I wondered how long he would have let me stay if I hadn't run off while he was sleeping. I could have probably gotten a night out of him at least. Probably would have had to let him fuck me a couple of times more, though.

At this point of time, I didn't know if it would have been worth it.

I threw open the driver door and slung my bag over my shoulder. It was time to find a new home.

I debated whether to try and find food, but decided I could go hungry. Twilight was definitely upon me now, and although that was usually a safer time to walk the streets, I was too tired to start a search now.

I trotted up the path of a house that was set a little distance off the road, thinking that as it was more work to get to, I would be safer. However, when I opened the door, the smell was like a punch in the face. There had to be a body in there, maybe even more than one. There was no way I could stay there.

Panic was starting to set in. Human instinct was to hide from the dark, and I liked to be barricaded up way before this time. I was stupid to have traveled so far. I should have stopped in the last town, but thinking about Dave had probably made me push on in some stupid haze.

Yeah, blame it on the dead guy.

The next house was no better. I could smell the bodies before I even reached the porch. If each house in this street turned out to be like this, I would probably have to put up with the smell. Maybe I would even get so used to it I wouldn't even smell it after a while.

After all, I had become used to so many other things I had never guessed myself capable of.

I walked back out into the street, and froze.

A moan came from behind me.

Don't look, don't look, don't look....

I looked.

The zombie was one of the grosser specimens I had seen. Dried blood crusted along the bottom of its mouth, and its skin... well, let's just say Kermit would have had a partner to duet "It Ain't Easy Being Green" with. I knew the flesh wasn't decaying, so fuck knows what it had been crawling through.

She opened her mouth and moaned again.

I took a step back. "Look, I'll go my way, and you go yours. And we'll both be happy, yeah?"

You can't reason with a zombie.

Her moan became a scream, and she lunged at me.

I turned and ran. I knew it was useless, but the instinctual nature of fight or flight handed down by the cavemen came out in me. The blood was pounding in my ears, and I could taste the copper in the back of my throat as I struggled for breath out of exercise and fear.

She was right behind me, ready for the kill. No clumsy shuffling for her now that she had zeroed in on me. This might be it; the moment when there would finally be an end to my story.

Would that be such a bad thing?

I guess deep down I thought it was, or why else would I be running?

I was yanked back; she had grabbed onto my backpack. I fell, tumbling head over ass, and looked up to see her looming over me. She smiled, and a thin thread of blood ran from her cracked lips.

She lunged down to grab me, but I rolled away. I still wasn't fast enough, though. She had a hold on me, grabbing me by the right leg.

Don't let her bite you. Don't let her touch your skin....

Truth be told, I had no idea how the virus got transmitted. It must have been airborne, or else Mike wouldn't have gotten sick, because he had never had any contact with a zombie. But Mike hadn't become a zombie either, so maybe zombies were created by bite or touch or contact with their blood? All I knew is it wouldn't be a great idea to have direct contact with them.

So I kicked at her, and she stumbled back.

I got to my feet and took off again. I had to try and get a little distance between us, and then I would have to choose a house, regardless of whether it had bodies or not inside it, and barricade myself up.

As I rounded the corner, all hopes were dashed.

A group of zombies were shuffling in my direction.

This is it.

There was no way I could get out of this one. I was lucky I had survived this long, really.

Five of them were after me now. It was mere seconds before one of them raced around me and shoved me back into the arms of those behind me. I fell to the road again, and they started pawing at me. Above their moans I could hear my screams. I wasn't going to go out silently.

I was still trying to protect myself from their attack when one of them went flying back in the air. The other zombies looked around in surprise, slack-jawed. It was almost amusing until one of their heads burst off their neck and landed at my feet in a shower of blood. The remaining zombies left me alone to face down whatever it was that was attacking *them*. I scrambled away, accidentally kicking the decapitated head. It went rolling for a few feet, its tongue obscenely flapping out of its mouth.

It was a war zone. I couldn't help but watch with some interest; if there had been innocent human victims involved, I would have looked away, but I had no sympathy for those who had just tried to kill me.

I gaped: it was another zombie that had come to my rescue. Once again, I was expecting something from the

movies: maybe a zombie slayer, or a self-made vigilante fighter. But no, it was a zombie. He was a bloody blur as he ripped through the other zombies, tearing them apart as they tried to get at him with little success. Already sickened by the head that had almost landed in my lap, I had to turn and vomit when I saw an arm ripped off one of the zombies and used to beat their own skull open.

When I looked up again, it was all over. One lone zombie stood amongst strewn body parts, panting heavily. He dropped the arm he was holding and groaned.

Had he done this so he could have the pleasure of killing me all to himself? That would have to be the most psychopathic zombie in existence. Lucky me to have strayed across his path.

He groaned again, and turned slightly so he could look at me directly. He was covered in so much blood that I couldn't even tell what color his clothes had been originally.

His groaning continued, but this time it sounded like a word.

A very familiar word.

"Jaaaaaayyyy..."

My sweat turned so cold I thought my body would shatter, as if it had been exposed to liquid nitrogen. I got to my feet, shakily, and tried to look past the blood, and at the zombie's features.

"Jaaaaaayyyy..."

It couldn't be. No, this was wrong. On every level.

Yet it was him.

The zombie was Dave.

V

OH DAVE. Not you.

At least Mike had been spared this particularly cruel fate. But to know Dave had been turned, and had been living in such a way... and for myself to now be witness to it, well, I just wondered how much more of all this I could take before I ended up going insane. Surely it was too much for any person to bear?

Dave took a tentative step forward, and I couldn't help but step away. I felt the hardness of a fence at my back. I was trapped no matter which way you looked at the situation.

Dave moaned my name again. I wanted to block my ears, yell at him to stop, do anything to not have to hear that sense of humanity that still remained within him. It seemed perverse, this one speck of normalcy in a body so radically changed.

So I did the one thing I thought could stop him.

"Dave," I whispered.

Even crueler was the fact that his eyes seemed to light up with a spark of recognition. He responded to his name. Perhaps it was the first time he had heard it in weeks; or maybe it was some innate response, like a dog knowing its name even though it doesn't understand human language.

I couldn't believe I was thinking of him as an animal. This was Dave... the man I had shared my bed with for three years.

We had shared so much more than that. He had known everything there was about me. He was the first guy to tell me he loved me. He was the first guy that I had ever told I loved him back. How could I look at what was before me now, and reconcile it with the man I remembered?

He moved toward me again, and I flinched. And amazingly, he froze as if he didn't want to frighten me.

"Dave," I said. "Are you in there?"

It was a stupid question to ask, but I didn't know what else to say. But he *knew* me, he remembered me, so maybe he remembered his past and everything that happened before his... illness.

But if I was hoping for him to suddenly regain his speech or some form of other advanced communication skills, it was too much to wish for. He just tilted his head slightly, his mouth twitching as if he was trying to say something.

But all that came out was the one word he could say. "Jaaaaay."

"Great, you know my name," I said, already becoming impatient. "What about yours? Do you remember who *you* are?"

Again, that delay in response, as if it took a great amount of effort to speak, or moan, or whatever he could possibly do.

The tip of his tongue even appeared at the edge of his mouth, as if he were concentrating, even though that wasn't a characteristic he had ever displayed when we were together.

“Daaaaave.”

There *was* a part of him in there, no matter how small.

Which was further evidence that what we had called “zombies” weren't zombies at all. There was obviously something that had happened to them, but they weren't mindless. They were still human.

I retched, but there was nothing left in my stomach. That zombie I had killed... I had killed a person. Not a *thing*. Sure, it was in self-defense, but it didn't make me feel any better.

Unless Dave was the exception to the rule. He certainly acted differently to the other zombies I had encountered.

I felt his hand upon my shoulder.

I couldn't look up. I didn't know what I could say. In fact, I was creeped out. Because even though it was Dave, he wasn't fully all there. He wasn't exactly the Dave I had known.

He moaned my name again.

Don't do this to me. I can't handle it.

But the survivor instinct kicks in. As much as I would have liked to lie down on the pavement and just give up, I wasn't going to. I had to look up. I had to accept this, and whatever else was going to come my way. If I had been a more spiritual person, I probably would have divined that I

had survived for a reason, that my life had some purpose in this new world. Bitterly, I wondered if my purpose was to just get fucked by guys like Richard and have my brain fucked over by situations like this one where I discovered an ex that had been zombified.

I lifted my head and looked back up at Dave. It wasn't exactly a look of concern on his face, but his hand on my shoulder seemed to symbolize that feeling.

"I better find shelter," I finally said. "In case more come along."

I was now being the dog that had rejected my company earlier, and in this reversal of roles, Dave had become me. I readjusted the bag on my back and began walking away.

"Jaaaaaaay."

This was my chance to keep walking, to put all this new knowledge behind me and pretend it had never happened so that it would just become one more nightmare causing me to wake me up in a cold sweat like so many others had since the virus began.

But that simple act, the calling of my name, caused me to turn around.

"What do you suggest, Dave?"

It wasn't fair to ask him such a question, as it wasn't likely he could give any kind of coherent response.

Instead, he turned away and began shuffling down the street.

Oh. I was being abandoned again. Did he just want to get the last word in? That was so fucking like Dave.

Then he turned, and saw that I wasn't following him. He grunted, and jerked his arm.

"All you had to do was say so," I said, and for the first time in weeks, I couldn't help but smile.

So this was what my life had become.

VI

DAVE was leading me somewhere. He moved with a purpose. We didn't walk for very long; only a couple of streets from where the zombie massacre had occurred. He stopped outside a two-story cottage that looked like it had seen better days, like us all. He looked back at me, as if he was seeking my opinion.

"Uh, it's nice," I assured him. "Better than some of my past digs, that's for sure."

Seemingly satisfied, he hobbled up the steps of the porch. The front door wasn't barricaded; I guess if you were a zombie, you didn't have to worry about other zombies breaking the door down to kill you.

But why *didn't* Dave want to kill me? This was not a normal thing. One of the last news reports I had seen showed a mother getting killed by her fifteen-year-old zombie son. Obviously emotional bonds didn't stop you from killing as a zombie, and quite frankly, if they had, Dave might have been *more* inclined to harm me. After all, I was the one who had broken us up.

There were too many questions and no way of knowing if they would ever be answered. Inside the house, I only felt much safer once I had pulled some furniture across the door, even though it seemed I had my own personal bodyguard now.

When I turned around, Dave was watching me.

“Sorry,” I said, realizing I sounded quite nervous. “Just making myself feel at home. And, well, this makes me feel safe.”

He continued looking at me.

“Whose house is this?” I asked. “Is it yours?”

He nodded toward the lounge room. I walked in, surprised at how clean and orderly it seemed. Did he bring out the duster every now and again just in case there was company?

I headed for the coffee table, on which there was a collection of framed photographs. I picked up the largest. It was Dave, with a guy who I didn’t know. They had their arms around each other, obviously a couple. It seemed to have been taken at a party. They looked happy.

I heard Dave enter behind me. “This is your house,” I said.

He grunted.

I pointed at the other man in the photo. “Where is he? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Dave shuffled over to the window and pulled the blinds open. I squinted out into the last rays of the disappearing sun at a small yard. There was a pleasant looking flowerbed, and to the left of it—

—what looked exactly like a fresh grave.

I stumbled back. Of course, my immediate thought was that Dave killed his partner. Can you blame me, after

everything that had happened to the world as I knew it? But reason prevailed. Dave was different—he had saved me. He wouldn't have *buried* his partner if he had killed him in a zombie rage. To bury someone was an act of grieving.

“I'm sorry.”

He grunted again. I was already getting used to his method of communicating. The grunts were expressed with different tones behind them. This one had pain behind it—genuine emotion.

“I lost my partner as well,” I told him. “His name was Mike.”

Dave raised his hand and pointed at the mantelpiece above the fire. On it, I found a man's wallet with a watch laid across the top. In the wallet behind the clear plastic was a driver's license for the man in the photo. His name was Eric Walshman.

“Eric,” I said.

Dave grunted in agreement.

I closed the wallet, and set the watch back upon it. Seeing Dave's partner as he was in the past, along with the stark reminder in the back yard of where he had ended up, only made me think of Mike even more. “So many people gone,” I said. “I don't even know what happened to my parents in the end. I can only—”

I was about to say that I could only hope they hadn't become zombies. Which wouldn't have been very tactful of me seeing I was now a guest of one.

“—guess,” I finished lamely.

Dave watched me, as if he were a therapist waiting for me to unload.

Strangely, it worked. “Mike got sick not long after everything started. And before we really had time to think about it, he died. The Center for Disease Control was still working at the time, and like a good citizen, I reported his death.” I had to pause to take a deep breath, because the emotion I had felt at the time and become numb to afterward was threatening to take hold again. “They came to take his body away. I stupidly thought I would have to arrange a funeral, a service, all that stuff. I didn’t know they were taking his body to be burnt in a mass grave along with all the others who had the virus.”

I looked up at Dave. “At least you didn’t allow them to take Eric.”

I wished he had more of a vocabulary so he could tell me what his story was. Had things already degenerated so much by then that the government was in hiding and the citizens were left to fend for themselves? Was Eric buried in the backyard because there was nobody to dispose of him? Had Dave started to turn by then?

I felt a hand on my shoulder and realized that Dave had crossed the room. He was comforting me, or at least trying to. I gave him a weak smile. “Thanks. But shit happens, right? We’re all in the same boat now.”

He gave a dismissive groan.

“Okay, some of us are in worse boats than others. Yours, for example, is leaking and on fire, with a meteor heading for it.”

His answering groan sounded close to a laugh.

In the silence that followed, I had one more question to ask.

“Were you happy, Dave?”

He nodded.

I looked back out at the rough grave. “Yeah. So was I.”

VII

ZOMBIES still like to sleep in beds. At least, Dave did. I didn't actually think they needed sleep, but I heard him snore through the night. Some habits never got broken.

When I had found the guest bedroom, I had debated on whether to close the door or not. In the end, I decided not to. It seemed comforting to have another presence in the same house as me. For the first time in weeks, I wasn't alone. And no, I couldn't count Richard within all of that.

It was the best I had slept in ages. Knowing Dave was on the other side of the wall and knowing his prowess in fighting his fellow zombies must have had a subconscious effect on me, making me finally able to rest without being on edge and alert for any trouble. I probably even snored myself.

In fact, I was so calm when I woke in the morning I had a hard on. I'd almost forgotten what that felt like. I silently pleased myself, and felt much better about it than my fuck of shame with Richard. Lying there with my spunk rapidly cooling on my stomach, I felt horny enough to do it again. But I heard Dave moving around downstairs, so I cleaned myself up and got dressed.

"Good morning," I said cheerfully as I entered the kitchen. And I *was* cheerful, funny enough.

Dave nodded at me. He was standing near the kitchen window, a saucepan in his hand.

“You eat?” I asked stupidly, before I could stop myself.

He looked as if he wanted to brain me with the pot.

“Sorry.”

With trembling hands, he placed the pot upon the woodstove.

“What’s for breakfast?” I asked. “Boiled brains?”

Dave’s head shot up, and he glared at me.

I burst out laughing. “Sorry, sorry! Have you lost your sense of humor?”

Dave grunted an affirmation that he must have.

“So all the... others. They eat normal food as well?”

Dave nodded. He sat across from me at the table. A crust of dirt flaked off his arm and fell onto the surface. He caught me looking at it, and stared at the wall over my head.

“Is it hard to clean yourself?”

He held out his hands to me, and I saw that even though he remained still, his hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

“I can help you,” I told him. “After coffee.”

He didn’t say anything.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Maybe it would make you feel more... human.”

Dave got to his feet and lurched back toward the stove.

I pushed my chair out and followed him. “Let me.”

He groaned, a more pissed-off yodel that he was perfectly capable of doing this and that he had been doing it long before I had reentered his life.

“You’re always such a pain about letting me do things for you,” I spat, pushing him away from the stove.

We both froze. I was speaking in the present, as if we had slipped through a crack in time and were revisiting a scene from our relationship and the time of cohabitation.

Finally, I said, “Guess nothing’s changed.”

Sulkily, he made his way back to the table; I started preparing coffee.

I carefully poured the hot water into the mugs and watched the chemistry of the granules turning the water dark and releasing that aroma which always managed to perk me up in the mornings. I placed a mug before Dave and sat back down.

“Does feel like old times, though,” I said, eager to fill the silence. “Remember when you made us get that bread oven, and you always made a fresh loaf to bake overnight? Then in the morning, you would make us BLTs and cut the bread so thick it was like we had half a loaf each. Those sandwiches were so thick you could have used them as doorstops.”

I could see his lips turn into a smile around the rim of his mug.

“Don’t suppose you still have it, do you?”

He shook his head.

“Doesn’t matter anyway. No power. Unless we find a generator.”

What was I saying? I was talking like my staying here was a sure thing, and that I was moving in for keeps. Dave may have just taken pity on me, giving me shelter for a couple of nights, and I was ready to start hemming curtains and plumping cushions.

“You ready for that bath?” I asked.

VIII

IT TOOK me close to an hour to boil enough water to make a hot bath for him. I wiped the sweat off my brow and turned to face him in the small bathroom. “Okay, big boy. Get those clothes off. I think we’ll have to burn them.”

I was only joking. He was wearing different clothes from yesterday. I don’t know what use it was, seeing his body was still in need of cleaning.

He stared at me.

“Don’t be shy. I’m going to have to wash you, so I’m going to see you naked anyway. And for fuck’s sake, we’ve had sex. I’ve seen every bit of you before, and from every different angle. I’ve seen bits of you that your mother never even saw.”

At least, I hope she hadn’t.

“Are you scared I’m going to find you irresistible? Sorry, you look like you’ve seen better days.”

My faux belligerence helped him break out of his funk. He started undressing. I looked away at first to give him the privacy he seemed to need, but as it started taking so long, I gave up and said, “Here, otherwise the water will get cold.”

Funny how familiar this action seemed, standing before Dave and helping him out of his clothes. He allowed himself to be pulled and poked at like a mannequin about to go in a

display window. I hid my distaste well at the stale and musty aroma his body seemed to give off. Not the zombie smell of decayed flesh, just somebody who hadn't bathed in a while. I wonder how people ever procreated before showers, or during wartime, and figured that they probably got used to it.

And after all, weren't we in some kind of war now?

Levels of tenderness increased the more flesh that was bared. When he stood before me only in briefs, I hesitated. Dave looked down at me; his expressions were harder to read than his grunts. I shrugged inwardly and gently pulled him down. Now that he was fully naked, I could feel my body responding. Not in a sexual way—I hate to sound so prissy, but the dirt and the grime quelled any arousal. But it was like my body had become one pure sense memory, awakening to the remembrances of Dave's own body and what it used to inspire within me.

I shook it off. "In the tub."

He complied, and sank down beneath the water. I poured in a liberal amount of ghastly looking bubble bath. It was the kind of stuff given to you in a basket at Christmas time by someone who didn't know your tastes very well. As it was unopened, I could tell that it wasn't exactly to Dave's liking either. Was it an eccentric aunt? Maybe Eric's mother? An office gift from the Secret Santa pool?

I found a washcloth beneath the sink. "Lean forward," I told him, lathering up the cloth with soap.

I started with his back. The dirt came away with only slight exertion. His skin was flushed from the heat of the

water and the pressure of the cloth. As I got near his neck, I uncovered the row of freckles that spread across his shoulders. I used to drive him crazy by kissing them one by one. He thought it took too long, but I liked to mark them with my lips, the voice in my head repeating to itself *mine mine mine*.

Dave grunted, wondering why I had stopped.

“Sorry,” I murmured, and began washing him again. I picked up his left arm, and scrubbed it clean. As I got to his fingers, he intertwined them with mine briefly. I ran my thumb over the back of his hand, and then dropped it so I could start on the right arm. I felt warm, and it wasn’t from the steam building up in the bathroom. The more I cleaned him, the more it seemed that the Dave I had known was coming back to me. It’s the understatement of the year to say it was confusing for me.

“I’m just going to start on your hair, now.”

I took the bottle of shampoo off the shelf above the tub. I squeezed practically half of the bottle over his dark hair. “Close your eyes,” I told him as if I were speaking to a kid who needed to be reminded that shampoo could sting. I laughed. “Was I always this bossy?”

Dave gave a strangled chuckle. It was an unsettling noise, but I guess no more so than his present pattern of speech.

I lathered his hair and began massaging his scalp. He sagged against the back of the tub, which made it a bit more difficult for me, but he seemed to be relaxing, so I just put up with it. The suds were turning gray, which was gross, but

at least I knew I was getting him clean. I picked up a mug I had brought upstairs with me and began rinsing the soap out.

“That must feel better,” I said.

He grunted in agreement.

I moved on to his chest. Another familiar object. Those lush pink nipples nestled amongst fine brown hairs that spread across the skin and ran down to his navel. Both stiffened against the roughness of the cloth, and Dave closed his eyes for a moment.

“You’re looking a lot more like yourself,” I said, and he had no idea of the weight behind what I was saying. “Maybe tomorrow I could shave that beard.”

He nodded.

His legs were next. He always thought they were chicken-legs, but they were amazingly strong and could wrap around me like a vice when I was on top, or be startlingly flexible when I was beneath him. I used to be surprised at the inventive positions he could get himself into while he fucked me to high heaven.

I tried to drive those thoughts out of my mind as the cloth crossed over his thighs. Here was the elephant in the room—no pun intended—that I couldn’t avoid. “Well,” I said lightly. “Home base. Don’t be nervous. I’ve touched it before.”

Dave looked at me. He didn’t grunt, but his eyes were downcast. As if he was embarrassed.

“Hey,” I said softly. “I know I’m being stupid, but you know I just do that, right? It’s okay.”

And I reached below the water again, and when my hands touched his groin, I almost pulled them out straightaway. He was hard. Guess the zombie virus didn't affect *every* part of the body.

Was that why he was being so quiet?

"You should have seen me this morning," I said casually. "Funny how things can be so normal and still be the same old shit when everything else around us has changed."

Dave grunted.

It just proved we knew nothing about this virus. Could zombies breed? Did they still produce sperm? I couldn't believe I was thinking so much about zombie spunk. But this was Dave, and I wanted to know just how much of him still was in there. He *was* still Dave, I could tell. But it was like motor functions were screwy—how could simple things we took for granted like walking be so jerky and puppet-like but then shift into sleek killing mode?

And why did Dave still think like Dave, while other zombies seemed to be driven more by basic needs?

I was no scientist, but I was starting to wish I had been one. If we could find the answers, then maybe we could stop this.

I helped Dave up, and rinsed him over with fresh water. Once I had him dried and in fresh clothes, you wouldn't have been able to tell just by looking at him that he was a zombie. He smelled good, too. I was starting to feel that old pull in my chest again.

Mike, I thought. I'm so sorry, but can you blame me? I knew him. And I miss you. And I'm lonely. And scared. It's like what I knew about you both has merged into him.

"You look good spruced up," I told him.

His mouth opened and closed again, and he squinted, concentrating. "Ffff... annnks."

It was the first legible word I had heard from him besides my name. And damn if I didn't feel like I could start crying.

But I just grinned at him and said, "You're welcome."

IX

WAS he actually relearning everything? Did the virus wipe out part of their memory while enhancing other parts of the body? Could Dave learn to speak again?

I hoped so. I was starting to get sick of the sound of my own voice.

We spent the next week or so in his house, and we lived pretty comfortably. Dave went foraging for food every day but made me stay behind. Although he obviously couldn't articulate it, I knew he meant that it was safer for him to go alone because he usually ran into some of his zombie brethren. And they would smell the stink of human on me. But not on him, no matter how clean he now was.

I shaved his beard, and the illusion of the old Dave was complete. Of course, it *was* an illusion.

But an illusion can fool you if you let it. Old feelings were being reawakened in me, even though the rational part of my brain outlined all the reasons why and how it was a bad thing. But the heart is an entirely different organ to the mind, and it likes to flip it the bird every so often and tell it to never darken its doorstep again.

There were moments I could almost fool myself that our lives were normal. Then I would hear a groan from stage left and look out onto the street (carefully shielding myself with the curtains) and see a zombie lurching across my line of

vision. Or I would say something to Dave, and instead of a conversation, I would get a series of grunts. I would think of how nice it would be to meet up with friends and have a real coffee somewhere, and remember that they were all most likely dead.

I came to rely upon Dave's presence. When he was out finding food, I was nervous in the house by myself. I would only calm down when I heard him coming up the steps of the porch, and would check that it really was him. I began to read aloud in the evenings; Dave had pushed a book at me one night, and I realized that he couldn't make out the words. We stuck to more lighthearted books; our lives were tragic enough without delving into other peoples' miseries.

Our sense of peace didn't last long. After about a week, I was waiting at home for Dave to return when I heard somebody fly up the steps so fast I was sure it wasn't a zombie.

But it was Dave, in that frenetic hyper-active mode the zombies could go into when they were on the prowl. Except this time, Dave was the intended victim.

His fellow zombies must have finally intuited that he wasn't the same as them, and they had attacked. He was covered in scratches and blood was running freely as he entered the hall and started barricading the door. It was useless to speak to him; it was pretty obvious what was going down.

Through the glass of the door, I could see shapes racing up the path. Bodies began throwing themselves against the door, and once they realized there was some sort of

makeshift barrier, there was the smashing of windows from within the lounge as they found an easier entrance.

We had to leave everything behind. I grabbed Dave's hand and we ran for it. Down the hall, out the back door, over Eric's grave and toward the fence. Dave easily crossed it as if he was a pole-vaulter, and I was left behind. I could hear commotion within the house; it wouldn't be long before they knew where we had headed. Panting wildly, I scaled the fence, but my feet tangled at the top of it and I fell heavily to the yard on the other side. Dave was waiting for me, but I had to help myself up.

"Come on," I whispered, still trying to catch my breath. "We need a car."

We ran to the garage of his neighbor's house through a side gate. I didn't leave the garage door open, as I wanted to keep us hidden for as long as we could. Thankfully, the driver's door was unlocked, and I jumped in, unlocking the passenger's side for Dave. I fiddled beneath the dash, slicing my fingers open, as I had to rip the wires apart rather than using my normal scissors and screwdriver. I prayed the battery wasn't dead, as a struggling motor would let our attackers know exactly where we were.

It didn't turn over immediately when I activated the ignition, but I pumped the gas and it lethargically spat into life.

"Hold on," I commanded, and threw the car into reverse.

We smashed through the garage door, leaving a car-sized hole. The tires squealed on the road; rubber burned when I threw the car into gear as we were still moving.

Zombies appeared on either side of us, trying to claw their way through the doors and windows to get at us. The back window exploded as a fist came through it, and I felt flying glass cut my neck.

I screamed in fury and hit the pedal. The car tore forward, bringing zombies down around it. Others gave chase, but even with the added burst of their adrenaline, we soon left them behind.

In the car, there was nothing but the sound of the engine and our panicked breathing.

I couldn't speak. But I noticed that Dave's body was now coming down from its zombie-fight mode. Eventually I said, more so to reassure myself, "We're okay. We're okay."

I don't think either of us felt okay, though. Dave had left his house behind, every possession he had ever owned. He had even left Eric behind; no longer would he feel him near.

And me? My only physical remnant of Mike, a picture I had carried ever since this had begun, was still in my wallet. In my backpack, back at Dave's house. As was the only photo I had of my family.

There would be no going back now.

Dave was the only link I had to my previous life, and I was his.

At least we had each other. But that wasn't much comfort right at that moment, as I felt overwhelmed by what our lives had become and would seem to be from this moment on.

X

WE CHANGED cars two towns away from Drake, where there seemed to be nothing alive at all. We were getting low on gas, and I wanted to put as much distance between us and Drake as possible.

I wanted an armored tank, but had to settle upon another SUV.

Dave obviously couldn't drive, so it was all up to me to get us from one place to another. I was beginning to wonder what we would do once we ran out of land to travel upon. Could I learn to navigate a boat, and get us out of here for good? Could we become political refugees and be taken in somewhere the virus hadn't spread?

Maybe if it was just me. But no country, no matter how sympathetic, would let in a confirmed zombie. There was no way we could pass Dave off as Rain Man; all they would have to do is threaten him or agitate him and he would go into fight mode. The gig would be up within minutes. And what then?

Death, most likely. To protect everybody else in that land.

The obvious answer would be to leave Dave behind. But it was a moot point; I didn't know how to sail a boat.

Plus, I was already starting to believe that I would find it impossible to abandon him. He had saved my life, many

times over. And I wanted him in it, no matter how little or much time we had left.

I wish I knew whether he thought the same. I suspected as much, but confirmation would be nice.

Funny how in the face of little else emotions can ramp up so fast and so intensely.

The SUV got us across state lines, but as we rounded a corner, there was a four car-pile up that was strewn across both sides of the road. We were going so fast that even when I threw on the brakes I knew we were going to make it five. There was that sickening sound of tires screeching combined with metal crunching against metal. I could see the car before me crush like an accordion as the mighty force of the stolen SUV tore through it. Both Dave and I were flung forward, and to be honest, I think I blacked out for a moment, because the next thing I knew, my head was on the steering wheel and Dave was shaking me.

“M’okay,” I slurred. “You?”

He groaned, and my head was too fuzzy to get the specifics of his tone. I winced, and then wrinkled my nose as a strong odor suddenly came to me.

Gas.

“Shit, we’ve got to get out of here!” I yelled.

My door was wedged within that of the car we had crashed into, but Dave’s was free. He jumped out, and I scrambled after him. One of the cars was on fire and we ran, Dave stumbling along while dragging one foot heavily.

The explosion knocked us down to the ground as the cars went up as one, a dirty orange bloom of fire reaching

toward the sky. I could feel the heat on my back from where I lay face down on the slag of the road. I looked over at Dave; he seemed fine.

“One day,” I said, “we’ll find a place free of zombies, and we won’t have to move anymore, and we won’t ever be in this situation again.”

Dave grunted with tired hope. I helped him up.

Looking around us, I pointed out a farmhouse in the distance, a stark relief against the rather flat landscape. “We can probably crash there for the night. Hopefully there’s no other guests. And where there’s a farm, there has to be some kind of vehicle.”

I chuckled at the thought of us having to drive to the next town on a tractor. Dave looked at me, maybe wanting to know the joke, but I just shrugged and started walking.

It was a warm day, and I stripped off my jacket and tied it around my waist. I was sweating by the time we reached the dirt road that led the way to the farmhouse.

And we weren’t alone.

A man was coming down that road toward us. Dave groaned.

The stranger was walking normally, however, and a dog was following him. I could tell it was an older dog as it struggled behind its owner and didn’t rush at us, barking to protect him.

Then I saw that he was carrying a rifle.

“Stay behind me,” I instructed Dave. “He’s not a zombie. No offense, but zombies don’t carry guns.”

I didn't want the man to shoot first and ask questions later. Especially when he figured out just what exactly my traveling companion was.

The man raised his rifle. He was older than us, probably in his sixties. He was grizzled, and wore a blue sweat-stained trucker's hat that shielded his eyes. "You just stay right there!" he yelled.

What made me wary was how nervous he was. A nervous trigger finger could spell our doom.

I held up my hands, intuitive knowledge learnt from years of watching cop shows on television. "We mean you no harm!"

"Oh yeah?" the farmer cried. "Is it you two responsible for that up there?" He jerked the gun to point beyond us.

I looked back; smoke was drifting across the sky, and orange flames could still be seen licking the remains of the cars.

"Yes," I admitted. "We didn't see the pile-up until it was too late. We crashed."

"It's the end of days," the farmer said, "and there's still damage being done."

Great. A religious whackjob. But then, was he wrong? It certainly felt like the end of the world, there was no denying that.

"We didn't know there was anybody here," I said calmly, my hands still in the air. "We were just coming—"

"To steal from me!" The gun was waving wildly.

The sweat just wouldn't stop pouring off me. "Not to steal! We didn't even know there was anybody here. There are so few people left—"

"Well, those who are left keep using my farm as a thoroughfare," the farmer spat.

Wait, what? "You've seen others?"

The dog sat its heavy rump on the ground, panting. The farmer didn't take the gun sight off us.

"Crazy convoy of hippies. Have huge plans of barricading a big city and starting a new civilization. Some of them claimed they were from the government. Pretty uncoordinated for a government, if you ask me."

"How many?" I asked.

"'Bout fifty. They said there were more, though. Coming from other directions. They can all keep each other."

"Did they say what city?"

His eyes narrowed. "You ask too many questions. Just like them. Get off my land!"

As his tone became more hysterical, I could feel Dave becoming more agitated behind me. I felt sorry for the old man, though. Maybe being left alone had caused him to become more unhinged. This could have been me if I had stayed in my house and never moved on.

"Okay," I said soothingly. "We're going!"

"Get!" he screamed.

Dave growled.

The man jumped back, the sudden realization of what Dave was crossing his features. As he jumped, the gun went off and a bullet kicked the dirt at my feet. I yelled out, only in fear because I hadn't actually been hit. But this only increased Dave's anger.

"You're with one of... *them!*" the farmer hissed.

"He's not like the others!" I said, stepping backward until I felt Dave against my back so I knew exactly where he was. "I promise you!"

"It's unnatural! What has this world come to?"

"I don't know!" I said honestly.

"What next? Are you like one of those animal nuts? Are you People for the Ethical Treatment of Zombies?"

Now he was a comedian?

"Look, we're going. Just calm down."

"Don't you tell me what to do!"

Dave growled and reached around me. I held him back, but it was getting impossible. "Dave! No! Let's just go!"

There must have been something in the way I was looking at Dave, or the way Dave was trying to defend me, but it signaled our closeness.

"Fuck me," our friend said. "A fag, and a fag zombie. You're like the high end of unnatural." He trained the gun back on us. "The world has been cleansed, boys! But I guess I have to tie up some loose ends!"

"He'll kill you before you kill us," I warned him. "Just put the gun down, and we'll go on our way, and you can just go back to your house. There's no need for this!"

“Too late for that—”

Dave shoved me aside, and I sprawled in the dirt. I heard the gun go off again, but straightaway there was the bloodcurdling scream from the farmer. The gun fell in the dirt before me, splattered in blood. I could see the dog stagger to its feet, and I didn't want it to get in the killing zone.

“Here!” I commanded it.

It lurched forward, but stopped when a fine arc of blood hit its coat. Confused, it looked up. The screams had become gurgles, and the body thumped to the ground. The farmer stared at me with his open, but unseeing, eyes. The remains of his throat continued to lose blood and stain the sand around him.

I just lay there. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to acknowledge what happened. But, the dog—

“Dave,” I croaked.

I could hear him panting, but he wasn't moving. I watched the dog warily, but it remained where it was.

“Dave.”

He moaned my name and moved toward me.

I stood, and surveyed the carnage around us. Dave was covered in blood, and strips of skin were beneath his fingernails. Unlike the last time I saw him kill, I didn't vomit. I picked up the gun and began walking up to the farmhouse.

“Let's get you cleaned up.”

I whistled at the dog, and it started following us at its slow pace.

XI

I FELT weirder about being in the farmer's house than any other house I had invaded in the weeks after the virus. Probably because his body was still lying on the dirt track, and I had interacted with him before he died. Oh, and contributed to his murder. Nobody deserved that fate, but neither did we. Neither did the zombies. We should all be living our lives as we had been, the apocalypse being something only watched in movies or threatened by zealots.

The dog grew quickly accustomed to our presence. I found out she was a female, and she was nameless, as she didn't have a collar. There was nothing in the house like vet bills to let us know, so I ended up calling her Harriet. The new name seemed to confuse her, but she took it in her stride.

The farmhouse actually had warm water, thanks to a generator. Unfortunately, it only seemed to be connected to the water heater and not the rest of the power. But warm water at the twist of a tap was a luxury.

But they were things that were found out later. As soon as we first stepped into the farmhouse, I tried hard to ignore the pictures on the wall, obviously of the farmer and his wife taken decades before. There was nobody else in the house; he must have been a widower. That only added to my guilt.

I had to get Dave cleaned up. We found the bathroom and stripped him down. I shoved the bloody clothes in the hamper, knowing we'd never touch them again. Once Dave was underneath the shower was when we discovered the water was warm. Dave groaned in pleasure, even as the water ran pink at his feet.

The lure of a warm shower was too much for me. I stripped out of my clothes, and threw them in the hamper as well. The farmer surely would have clothes we could take.

But something made me stop before I pushed the curtain aside fully. I looked down at the blood swirling around the drain, made innocuous and innocently pink by the water. My old fears of contagion returned. What was I doing? Was I setting myself up for unnecessary risk?

I tried to think logically. I had been exposed to zombie blood a few times now, thanks to the death and destruction wrought by them and upon them. Nothing had changed me—and I knew from experience that the zombies had changed quickly when all this had started. If I had been infected, I would have been like Dave long before now.

Was it something in my blood that made me resistant?

I had no idea, and maybe I would never know. But I figured I was safe by now.

I pulled the curtain aside, and the plastic hooks striking the railing were loud, even above the noise of the shower.

“Shove over,” I said to Dave.

He looked at me with surprise, then down at me. It was the first time he had seen me naked in years. I felt a little self-conscious, knowing that I now had a little bit of belly

where before there was none and my chest definitely wasn't as defined as it used to be. My gym pass had been given up long ago.

But there was a glimmer in his eyes, something new that I hadn't seen in the time we had been reunited. It looked a hell of a lot like desire.

I felt something shift against my hip; looking down, I saw his cock at half-mast, grazing my skin.

The heat from the shower wasn't the only heat that was building. I had to drive away all the thoughts in my head that were telling me to get out, to not take this moment any further, but I had to know. I took Dave's face in my hands and peered into his eyes. If they were truly the windows into the soul, they should tell me what I had to know.

"Dave," I whispered, not even knowing if I could be heard above the sound of the streaming water. "Are you really in there?"

His movements were still jerky as his hands traveled up my back and pulled me against him. Flush against his chest, I didn't, and couldn't, move away as his lips closed over mine.

It was all the answer I needed. Dave might not be well, but whatever this virus had done to him and to all the others who had been affected, they were all still themselves. There was still love, and desire, and need. I parted my lips to let him in, to reclaim him.

Mike couldn't help but cross my mind. Neither of us could have ever foreseen this, though, and I hoped he

forgave me for everything I was doing within such a short time from his death.

I ran my hand down Dave's chest, my thumb rubbing his nipple. Dave had always liked that, and his response to it only served to remind me that he was still the Dave I had known.

I wasn't ready for full intimacy; my experience with Richard had made me shy of it for now. But I took us both in hand, and Dave shuddered against me as I brought us to a quick and shared climax.

I continued to hold him until the water grew cold.

XII

BY DEFAULT, the farmhouse turned into a new home. There didn't seem to be any zombies in the immediate area, as the farmer's continued presence in the one place for so long seemed to attest.

It turned out his name was Fred Huegel. A bill for grain stuck to the fridge told us that.

I buried his body. I didn't want to see Fred lying face-down every day from the sitting room window, and I thought he deserved a proper resting place despite the fact he had tried to kill us. Harriet accompanied me while Dave watched from the window.

In our second week in the farmhouse, a helicopter flew over the grounds. The thumping of the blades was such a foreign sound that we didn't even know what it was at first, and by the time I realized and ran outside, it was long gone.

Maybe it was for the best. Who knew what they would have done to Dave?

We had settled back into an easy coupledness. We may not have been the most traditional of couples, but he was starting to remember a few more words, although it seemed to take a lot out of him. Maybe there was some way back from this. As we lay in bed together at night, he slept soundly while I lay awake and tried to figure out how I could make him better.

“Maybe we should move on again,” I said to him one morning.

He looked at me as if he thought it was the stupidest idea ever.

“I know we’re comfortable here,” I told him. “But remember what Fred said? There are people out there, who are banding together. Some from the government. Maybe we should find them.”

Dave concentrated hard. I could see him trying to find the word, but I was impatient.

“Because maybe if we do, they’re trying to figure out how to fix things. Maybe even a cure.”

It was a long shot. Maybe their idea of a cure was eradication of the problem. But I had to believe in something, and finding Dave had taught me that. I had been bitter and lost until he saved me, but something had brought us back together after all these years. Was it just coincidence that had led me to Drake? That Dave should still be there, and be the one who seemed to have that little more of a spark than other zombies? That he saved me?

There had to be more to everything.

I kissed him. “I know it’s dangerous. But I wouldn’t do this to us if I didn’t think there was a chance.”

This time, he kissed me. It was his way of assenting.

“We don’t have to go straight away,” I said. “We can hide out here for a while.”

After all, we had supplies. We had fuel. We had each other.

But in the end, the decision was made for us. Over a week later, we were lying in bed. Harriet was at the foot of it, as she found it too difficult with her age to get upon the blankets. I had rigged her a basket with an entrance at floor level so she wouldn't have to climb that high. I was drifting off to sleep, listening to her snuffling, when the room was suddenly bathed with light.

Squinting, I was considering bizarre theories such as the return of the helicopter, now floating outside our window and shining its beams in, but I quickly realized the bedroom light was on.

We had power.

I could hear the static of white noise coming from a radio somewhere. But when we went downstairs the television was also on, broadcasting to an empty room.

"How the hell did the power come back?" I asked, rhetorically, seeing as Dave couldn't answer and I had no idea what was going on.

I was about to turn off the TV when the static switched to a black screen with a card that said *Stand by for broadcast*.

"What the fuck," I breathed.

But I was excited. This was the first word we had had from the outside world that it still existed. Power, television... was our world coming back to us?

I felt Dave shuffle behind me and sit down. Harriet came beside me, and I scratched her ears.

The card disappeared, and a woman with honey-colored skin appeared.

“Hello,” she said, clearly and pleasantly. “I am Teresa Albano. This is a message for the survivors of this nation. We offer hope, in letting you know that although our situation was tough for some time, we are now regrouping and forming a provisional government. We have set up a home base in the city of Arkana—”

Dave moaned excitedly, reminding me that Arkana was not that far from where we were. That was obviously why we had power now.

“—and we invite all surviving citizens to join us there. We have restored power, and the city is barricaded to protect us from the threat of those affected by the virus. We are also working on a solution for the catastrophe that has befallen us. Arkana is the first step to restoring our country to the glory it was before. We hope you will join us here. This message will be repeated every hour on the hour, on all television and radio frequencies. For those who are listening, good luck, and keep your spirits high.”

Teresa smiled at us, and the card telling us to stand by returned.

I turned to look at Dave. “She said *all* citizens.”

Dave groaned, but he didn’t sound very optimistic.

“We can’t stay here forever,” I reminded him. “What if we just give it a try? If it goes bad, we just move on. We’re going to have to move on eventually anyway.”

Dave’s arm shook as he reached out to me.

I walked over to him and took his hand. “We’re in this together.”

He grunted his agreement.

EPILOGUE

WE LOADED up Fred's dusty old station wagon the next morning with food, fuel canisters, and Harriet's bed. Even though it would be a short drive to Arkana, we had to be prepared just in case we were met with hostility. We needed enough provisions to get us a safe distance beyond our hopeful safe harbor if it came to that.

I helped Harriet into the back seat, and she took to her bed with her tail wagging happily. I shut the door and looked at Dave. He was leaning against the front passenger door, seemingly apprehensive.

"Ready?" I asked.

He nodded slowly.

"Hey," I said, taking him into my arms. "No matter what happens, I'm with you. No matter where it ends up taking us. Now let's see where we're going."

He pulled back, and I smiled at him reassuringly. I hope I got it across, because I was just as nervous.

The exhaust backfired as we drove down the track away from the farmhouse, over the patch where Fred would now lie for the rest of time. I hoped our future would be somewhat more cheery.

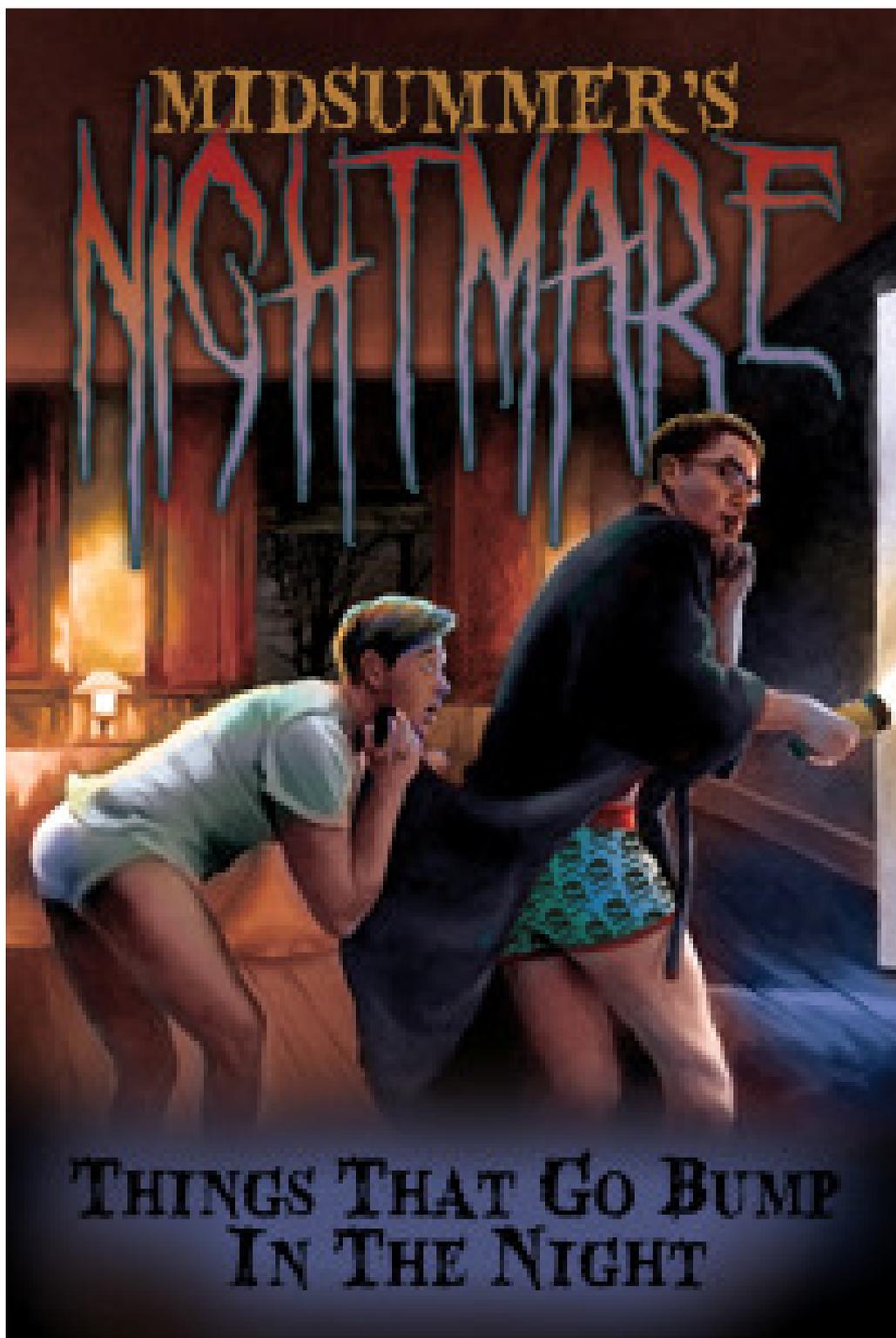
Back on the open road, the car struggled to reach the speed limit. The road stretched out, as long and as empty as

it had been before. But now there was hope. It was better than what we had before.

As my hand rested on the gear stick, Dave's rested upon it. It trembled slightly, but it gave me strength.

We drove on into the unknown, Harriet snoring gently from the back seat.

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