



HANDED

SIX
ZOMBIE
TALES

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HANDED:
SIX ZOMBIE TALES

BY
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JOE AND ABEL IN THE FIELD OF REST

It was still dark when Joe suddenly sat up in bed, chest hitching, calling out, “Da?”

As he sat in the pre-dawn gloom, breath slowing, he focused on the house, on the bed, on himself, and remembered:

Da was gone. He’d died a year ago; his ashes now rested in the urn above the fireplace.

Before Joe could stop to really wonder what had awakened him, he heard it: a thud on the front door of the house, followed by another, and another. Something was outside, knocking against the steel-reinforced door with rhythmic determination.

For a moment, absurdly, Joe felt an urge to cry. Of course Da was long gone, replaced by the constant threat of *them*. Of course Joe was completely alone, in a house without electricity and only an inch of metal between him and something that thought of him as nothing but meat.

Joe briefly considered waiting until dawn; he thought the door would hold. But without a clock, he had no way of knowing how far off sunrise was, and there was still a small, nagging doubt tugging him away from sleep. So he slid from his cooling sheets, lit a propane lantern, made his way down the hallway and past the living room to the front door. Once there, he picked up the loaded rifle he always kept waiting.

He paused, listening, but heard no indication that there was more than a single one of them out there. This should be an easy in-and-out, then – he’d let the thing in, and then take it out.

Joe placed the lantern on the side entry table, checked the gun (even though he’d checked it just before bed, as he

did every night), and stepped back slightly from the door. He set his feet apart and reached forward, cautiously, carefully, knowing this would depend on timing. He finally took a deep breath, darted a hand forward and turned the lock and the doorknob, then leapt back, whipping up the rifle.

Almost immediately the door crashed in and a dead thing was grappling with Joe, too close to shoot, its flaking fingers reaching for him, jaw slack and venting a hungry howl. Joe tried to back away but hit a wall; he swung the rifle until the barrel was facing down and used it to hold his aggressor back. He gave a push and the gaping nightmare staggered back. Joe raised the rifle as a club, and it went off as the stock hit the dead man's head. He felt powder burn his leg, but he had no time to see if he'd been shot; instead he swung again, then changed his hold on the gun and drove the rifle's stock butt-first into the other's forehead. He felt bone crack beneath the blow, and all sound ceased. One more ramming and Joe stepped back as his attacker dropped, truly dead at last.

Joe smacked the gun into its head three more times to be sure.

Then he remembered the open door, swung the rifle around and grabbed the lantern. He saw one other figure outside and waited until it came closer; a single efficient shot and it went down. He looked at the corpse beneath him, kicked the stiff body out the door, then closed and barred it again.

Safe once more, Joe walked into the kitchen, intending to grab rags and water to clean, but instead he dropped into one of the old peeling chairs and let the gun fall from nerveless fingers.

"Da..." he whispered before slumping into the chair, too tired to do anymore.



In the morning, Joe ate his usual sparse breakfast of canned fruit, goat's milk and nuts, and then he opened the door carefully. He'd gotten started later than usual today, having decided to wait until the sun was completely up so he could spot any more of them.

Walkers.

When they'd first appeared six months ago, he hadn't known what to call them; he was a simple man and had no vocabulary to apply to reanimated corpses that sought to consume the living. He'd watched the first few days of the plague on the television, before the shows had stopped and power had followed. Joe and his father had been largely self-sufficient for years, selling crops from their little farm for the few necessities they didn't already have; after Da died, Joe had continued on the same way, growing corn and potatoes and walnuts, until the world had died, too.

Newly acquired by its own kind.

It had taken an accident to tell Joe how to stop them; one of the things had been bludgeoned by a heavy, swinging pulley in the barn, and it was the first one Joe had seen really die. After that he'd learned how to deal with them easily, with a single shot from his old rifle. He'd barricaded his house first; then, after losing all of his pigs and most of his goats, he'd fortified the barn to protect the remaining livestock. Joe had never been a reader, but a few cautious trips to the nearest library – empty now, forgotten, silent – had taught him how to put up stronger fencing, set up a hothouse, and cast his own bullets. Soon he'd fortified the entire farm, with a chain link boundary lifted from the nearest large hardware store and an extra supply of guns and ammo.

For the most part, he lived the way he'd always lived: tending crops and livestock until the sun set, eating a simple final meal before collapsing into bed, sleeping eight hours, and rising to start again.

Except now he was alone.

When Da had been alive, they had never spoken much, two taciturn men who spent their energies on work; but there had been *two* of them. It had been enough. Two was all Joe could remember; his mother had died when he was only four, and he no longer had any memory of her. Somehow, though, he thought she'd been worn out by this life, wrung out early and left to die a husk.

At least she hadn't come back.

Joe had never put much thought into the mechanics of why some came back and some didn't. He occasionally arose in the morning and saw a walker raking its dry fingers over his fence, and had some moment of dull shock when he realized he'd once known the fingers' owner.

Jenny from the convenience store...the pastor I used to see in the market...

After Joe got past the moment of surprise, he shot them in the head. And then he took their bodies to the Field of Rest.

That was what he called it, at least. In reality it was a pit he'd dug with the backhoe in the half-acre at the far northwest corner of the farm where nothing would grow; the land was stony and barren, not even good for grazing. One day Joe had used precious gallons of fuel (although he'd never regretted it) to dig the twenty-foot deep pit, three-dozen yards in diameter. From then on, he'd thrown the dead walkers into the pit, waiting until the bottom was lined with enough to shovel in a layer of dirt.

The Field of Rest was only ten feet deep now.

A quick scan of his fence today showed Joe where they'd broken through last night; they'd pushed in a section near the Field of Rest. He shot another walker near the perimeter (*I used to see her at the feed store, didn't I?*), then set to work repairing and strengthening the fence.

It was afternoon by the time he was done. Joe went back to the house to eat his small lunch (*almost out of the*

jerky), then released the three remaining goats from the barn and retrieved a wheelbarrow. He loaded up last night's two dead walkers and made his way out to the Field. It was a warm day late in May, and he was sweating by the time he reached the edge of the pit.

He set down the wheelbarrow, preparing to dump its contents, when he heard something scrabbling. Moaning.

A walker. In the pit.

Joe carefully leaned over the edge and saw it. Moving, at the bottom, scrabbling at the dirt wall just below him.

It was trapped, and he paused to examine it. He thought he knew it – young man, no more than 27 or 28, friendly, stout, bearded face (the beard now hung in tattered clumps from a decaying jaw), used to drive a truck, stopped at the pub every once in a while...

Strange name like something from the Bible – Abraham? No...Abel. That was it. Abel.

Joe realized this one must have entered with the rest last night and staggered into the pit. He saw that one leg indeed bent strangely, forcing the thing to support most of its dead weight on the remaining limb. It stared up at Joe and moaned softly, desperately clawing at the dirt walls in a futile attempt to climb.

Joe looked down at it thoughtfully. He'd left his rifle back in the house. He'd have to go back and get it. He'd have to aim carefully, since the shot would be a high angle from overhead and he didn't want to waste a bullet he couldn't retrieve.

"Abel..." Joe muttered.

The thing in the pit stopped mewling for a moment. It looked up at Joe, curiously...

...and in that moment, regardless of what would come after, Joe knew he wouldn't be putting a bullet into Abel's brain.

He dumped the dead walkers into the pit, watched idly as Abel turned away long enough to investigate. When

Abel realized the bodies were dead and decayed, he turned his attention back to Joe, renewing his efforts to reach something warm and vital.

The sun was limning the western horizon when Joe finally remembered the rest of his chores and left the Field – and Abel – behind.



Joe visited Abel every day for the next three weeks.

He didn't put much thought into what compelled him to look on the thing in the pit, whether it was curiosity or boredom or something else he wouldn't name. He just knew he found some value in sitting by the edge, looking down, eventually talking to the walker.

It began as idle thoughts, about the weather, or the food, or the crops. But before long Joe was unleashing entire monologues on his captive companion. He talked about his life, about how well he and Da had worked together, how they hadn't needed anyone else, how they'd taught themselves to do important and necessary things. Once or twice Joe started to talk about watching the cancer take Da, how it'd eaten him away until he'd been little more than taut skin over bones when he'd died, how he'd obeyed Da's wishes and had him cremated.

How he was glad now that he had.

Meanwhile, Abel grew weaker and weaker, down there on the dirt floor, until his bad leg would support him no longer and he slid to a sitting position on the floor, tattered fingertips still drawing runnels around him. He stared up at Joe, mirroring Joe's own hunger, and Joe felt a compassion he'd felt only once in his life, when as a child he'd rescued a lamb from an irrigation ditch.

When Joe shot more walkers outside the fence, he carted them to a far corner of the Field of Rest, unwilling to hurl them down atop Abel.

One morning he awoke to find one of the three remaining goats had died during the night. Whether from old age or sickness Joe didn't know, and he didn't think about it as he methodically butchered the goat, placing some of the meat in his homemade smoker to preserve, and carving a portion for his dinner that night. He'd eat well for a change.

After he'd cooked the goat steak, he walked to the Field of Rest, steaming plate in one hand and a bucket in the other. When he reached the edge he set both down and peered through dusk's gloom.

“Good evening, Abel. We're eating together tonight.”

With that he emptied the bucket – which contained the parts of the goat he couldn't eat – into the pit, and then sat down with his own plate.

Abel uttered a dry moan as he crept across the floor to clutch at the remains. Joe watched, enjoying his own repast, as Abel shoveled the pieces into his mouth. When Joe had gnawed his meat down to the bone, so had Abel, and they both finished, Joe sated and Abel renewed. Apparently the meal had given the walker fresh strength, because he stood again, limping on his shattered limb to the wall underneath Joe; but this time he simply stood and looked up, a small sound escaping from his decayed mouth.

“You're welcome, Abel,” Joe said, looking down into the pit and smiling.



A week after that, the weather turned hot and Joe sweated as he worked among his crops. Even though he had a hat and plenty of water, he could feel a few exposed parts burning beneath the cruel sun.

He heard a motor.

He froze, thinking perhaps it was merely an insect drone, but no – there it was, nearing. He spun and looked

past the fence where the road ran, and sure enough, he spotted the glint of metal approaching.

Numb, Joe stood where he was and watched a huge, black, boxy vehicle drive up. Someone had welded chicken wire over the windows, including the front, and Joe could see that some of the glass in the rear had been shattered.

The car's brakes suddenly squealed and it skidded to a stop just on the other side of the fence, perhaps a hundred feet from Joe. After a beat the driver's door was thrown back, and a tall, skinny young man leapt out. He took two, three steps toward Joe and stopped, peering.

They stared at each other for what seemed like hours, uncomprehending, each the first living human being the other had seen in weeks. Finally the driver broke the silence by calling out to Joe:

“Are you human?”

Joe blinked in surprise, tried to clear his throat, but it was suddenly too dry for words. He simply nodded.

“Do you have any spare food?”

Again, a silent nod. The driver's body relaxed and he gripped the car door to steady himself. Joe waved to his left and finally found his voice: “Gate's that way.”

The young man nodded, grinned at Joe, and then happily climbed back into his car. Joe began to trudge toward the gate, simply astonished.

Behind him, in the Field of Rest, Abel groaned.



His name was Harrison, Harrison Melcher, but everyone called him Sonny. He was 23 years old and had worked as a print model until everything had fallen apart. He'd been driving ever since, looking for survivors, food, anything, but fuel was getting harder to find and he knew he'd have to stop soon. He hadn't eaten in two days.

He said all this around mouthfuls of Joe's pickled vegetables and two baked potatoes and a small portion of goat jerky. Joe listened and just nodded or shook his head when asked questions, like whether he lived alone (a nod) and if he knew of other survivors (a shake) and if it was safe here (another nod).

By the time Sonny had finished eating, the sun was setting and he asked Joe if he could stay the night. He could stay in his car, which he'd been doing every night for the last month; he wouldn't impose.

In the end Joe offered him Da's room, despite the dust that had built up since Da had passed on. Sonny was nonetheless grateful, and fell asleep almost instantly.

Joe stayed up most of the night, his routine interrupted, his mind struggling to process the surprising flood of thoughts and emotions that swept through him. He sat at the kitchen table, sipping a cup of mulberry leaf tea and listening to the sound of Sonny's snoring. Da had snored, too, although it'd been louder than Sonny's. Probably because Sonny was younger.

Joe didn't really know. In fact, he suddenly became aware of just how little he knew about anyone else. So he listened carefully as Sonny talked more about himself the next day: about how he'd left home at 18, lived on the streets for 2 years before someone asked him to model, had just been starting to make some real money when all the shit hit. He talked about his lover Willum, who'd been attacked in front of Sonny's eyes one day; he talked about how he'd seen one camp of survivors behind barbed wire, but had moved on when he'd heard screaming from within. He talked about how he'd run out of food and ammunition at almost the same time, and how every store he'd stopped at in the last week had been stripped bare.

Joe listened to it all, and tried to process a life so different from his. He'd never had a job other than farming, enough money for a vacation, or a lover. Sonny was almost

like some mythical creature to him, something he could barely relate to as his own species.

Then Sonny asked if he could stay.

“I really don’t know where else to go,” he said, and Joe was uncomfortable as he saw tears stream down Sonny’s cheeks. “The cities are dead, the countryside’s dead, there’s no more gas or food...I could stay here with you. I can make myself useful. Teach me anything. I can learn to farm, we can grow twice as much together, right?”

He’d reached out then and touched Joe’s hand.

Joe had stared in mute disbelief. No one but Da had ever touched him before. It was a light touch, and quickly withdrawn, but it left Joe stunned, unable to reply or even move.

Sonny must have sensed Joe’s discomfort, because he abruptly wiped his eyes and stood, turning away. “Sorry, man...I know it’s a lot to ask...hey, if it’s okay, I’m just going for a walk.”

Sonny walked out of the kitchen, and Joe continued to sit, still looking down at his hand.

Could Sonny stay here? Could he become a part of Joe’s life? Joe knew he couldn’t replace Da, but perhaps he could help, they could work the farm together, and with Abel they could –

Joe stopped, realizing that he hadn’t factored in Abel yet.

Joe’s pondering was interrupted by the sound of running feet and panting. He looked up as Sonny burst into the kitchen, sweating, eyes wide. “Hey, man, you got one of *them* outside – one of the dead things – in some kind of pit out there –” Sonny waved an indiscriminate hand wildly in the air, indicating every direction at once.

Joe didn’t say anything.

Sonny took an anxious step forward. “I don’t have any ammo left, we’ve gotta shoot that thing –” His eyes darted around Joe’s house before they fixed on something:

The rifle. By the front door, where Joe always left it, loaded.

Sonny grabbed the rifle and ran from the house.

Joe was instantly on his feet, running after Sonny and the gun. Sonny was younger and in good shape, and he easily outdistanced Joe as they both raced for the Field of Rest. Sonny reached the edge of the hole easily 200 feet in front of Joe, and Joe could only watch, running in slow-motion dread, as Sonny pulled back the rifle's bolt, lifted the gun to his eye, and aimed down.

An incoherent shout from Joe startled Sonny into lowering the gun, and he watched in perplexity as Joe reached him, gasping for air. "What -?!"

Joe put a hand on the barrel. "You can't shoot Abel."

Sonny gazed at him in disbelief for a moment, and then burst into laughter. "He's fucking dead, don't you get that?! If you don't put a bullet in his head, he'll eventually dig his way out of there and turn you into a meal -"

Joe didn't answer, except to give a solid tug on the rifle, but Sonny didn't relinquish his grip.

"You're crazy."

Joe yanked harder on the gun, but this time Sonny stepped back and pulled the gun firmly away. "No way, man. No way am I giving you this gun."

In the pit, Abel looked up and cried out.

That was all Joe needed. He lunged for Sonny, barreling into him like a runaway bull. The action surprised Sonny, and although he was bigger than Joe he went down. They both fell to the rocky earth, grappling for the gun, hands pushing, feet kicking, the uneven surface jabbing them both as they rolled one way, then another. At one point the gun went off, and Joe couldn't tell if one of them had been hit. He drove his fingers into Sonny's eye sockets, and the other man screamed, involuntarily releasing his hold on both gun and Joe. Joe took advantage of the moment to scabble back, finding the gun, raising it and

cocking it as Sonny sat up, screaming, blood gushing down his face.

Joe pulled the trigger.



It was twilight before Joe finished, but he felt a surprising warmth flood through him, a serenity he thought he'd never known.

His full stomach protested slightly against the strange contents, but Joe had been surprised to find the taste reasonably pleasant. Below him, Abel still gnawed on an arm bone, dark blood smearing his ravaged face.

“You were right, Abel. It’s good.”

Abel finished eating and suddenly stopped to stare at the grisly bones he now held. Joe watched, peering through the gathering darkness, thinking that something had happened to Abel, something awakened in him Joe hadn’t seen before. Abel jabbed the pointed end of the bones into the earth, and created a sizable furrow as he pulled the bone towards him.

He looked up at Joe, and Joe thought he saw Abel smile.

Abel hauled himself to his unsteady feet and ambled to the side of the pit just below Joe. Joe bent over to watch as Abel, reinvigorated by his meal, determinedly jammed arm bones into the dirt, causing a sizable clod to fall. He did it again and again, and within a few moments several feet of the wall above him had crumbled. At this rate, Joe knew it wouldn’t be long until Abel would create enough of a pathway to crawl up, that soon he’d be out of the Field of Rest and back to the world’s surface.

Joe saw the rifle by his side, and for a second an image flashed in his head, an image of fighting Sonny for the gun, of the gun going off and Sonny falling back, dead. Murdered.

Joe's reverie was interrupted by the sound of more of the soil falling away below him. He looked up into the clear evening sky, and thought about how pleasant it would be to pass the warm night here, in the open, under the forgiving stars.

He lay back to wait.

ANGEL KILLER

Where I am:

In an SUV speeding south on the 5 freeway towards San Diego and the border. There's a suitcase full of cash in the rear, and a man in the passenger seat gushing blood from a bite wound in his right arm. My name's Angel Meyerson. The man's name is Rogelio Sanchez, but I call him Rogue, and I've been fucking him for the last three months. We just left my husband Bill to be eaten by the same dead shitbag that bit Rogue.

Oh, and according to the radio, the world is falling apart.



Where I was:

Three months ago, I was one more bored Valley housewife who got married too young. Bill Meyerson was fifteen years older than I was, and he was nothing much to look at – just a guy with too much beer gut and thinning hair. I was 18 when my dad brought him home one night; dad worked in construction (when he was sober enough to work, that is), and he'd met Bill on his latest job. Bill made cabinets and shit, but he was really good at it and they called him in for special projects, where some rich asshole wanted extras. Even I could see Bill wasn't like all the other guys who built things.

That first night Bill obviously wasn't thrilled to be hanging out with dad – who would be, he's an asshole – but the way he kept looking at me was why he came back. And I gave him something to look at, too. I wanted out of that

fucking dump, that run-down, two-bedroom duplex with peeling paint and cracked tiles and bars over the windows, buried in the worst part of the Valley because it was all we could afford. Dad and mom both drank too much, except mom didn't come into my room at night and put her stinking mouth all over me. I wanted out, but I sure as fuck wasn't going to college and I didn't want some job as a waitress or making burgers that wouldn't buy me anything but a corner in an apartment full of other waitresses and burger-flippers. Bill had a nice little three-bedroom house and an eye for me. He might as well have had "ticket" printed on his fucking forehead.

I showed up one day at the project he and my dad were working on. I made sure to avoid dad, but gave Bill a coy look until he sauntered over my way. Yes, he'd like to go out for coffee. He walked off the project and we went to a local restaurant, where I let him talk and tried to pretend he was fascinating. He wasn't; he was boring as three-day-old dog shit, but I didn't care. He was a better daddy than the one I had.

A week later I had him in bed. Two weeks later he asked me to marry him. Gee, that was hard.

Everything was fine for a year. He was dull but kind. The house was nice, with a yard out back and 800 stations on the big screen t.v. We even got a dog, a Chihuahua I named Bud after dad's favorite food group.

But then, after that year...I guess I got bored. The house started to close in. The sex irritated me. Even the dog seemed stupid.

And Bill...he had no ambition. He liked everything just how it was. Well, maybe not everything – he started to ask me more and more to clean up the house, be a good little wifey. I told him to hire a maid; he said we couldn't afford it. I told him we needed more money, then; he said maybe I could get a job.

I almost told him I already had a job – I fucked him for a living.

Here's the thing: Bill didn't work for himself. No, he was employed by an old guy named Anthony Cozzoli. Cozzoli had hired Bill for his carpentry business when Bill was only 20, but it didn't take long for him to realize that he had a gold mine in my husband. Bill was kind of a genius with tools; he didn't just make a cabinet, he made a cabinet that was also beautiful to look at, and soon Cozzoli's business was booming...all because of Bill. Cozzoli was sucking up money like a vacuum cleaner, but did he hand any of it off to Bill? No. He gave Bill a yearly "cost of living increase" in his salary and that was it. Meanwhile, the greedy old fuck had this huge safe stuffed full of money, because he didn't like banks. It was crazy; Cozzoli was so cheap that he kept the business in this nasty-ass industrial building he rented in a terrible area, and he had a fortune tucked away in that hellhole. It was a wonder he hadn't been robbed ten times over; there was no security on the building, and nobody around close enough to hear – or care about – a scream.

I started thinking about that. It wasn't right, Cozzoli making all that cash off Bill's talents. I told Bill to ask him for a bonus, but Bill was a fool – he just shrugged and mumbled something about Cozzoli being okay. "He's using you!" I shouted. Bill said maybe he'd think about starting his own business.

I didn't form a plan, though, until the night Bill got nostalgic. His dad had been gone for ten years, but I guess Bill missed him (which I found hard to understand – how many times had I wished my dad was fucking dead?). On his dad's birthday, Bill pulled out a box of stuff that had belonged to the old man. Dad had served in Vietnam, and Bill had some medals, old yellowed letters, photographs that were curling up on the edges...and a gun. A nice little pistol.

“Does it still work?” I asked.

Bill hefted it up. “I doubt it.”

“Have you ever tested it?”

“I’m afraid it’d blow up in my hand.”

But I finally got him to show it to a friend who knew about guns. His friend looked it over, cleaned it, said it seemed to be in good working order, and told us what kind of bullets it took. I went to a gun store and bought a box, then came home and followed directions from the internet on loading it. I took it out into the backyard, held my breath, and pulled the trigger. BOOM! It fired all right, throwing me back and leaving a nice big hole in Bud’s doghouse. Good thing he wasn’t in it.

It still worked. And it was unregistered. And I had ammo for it now.

It was time to start on Bill. I made fucking sure he knew that Cozzoli not cutting him in for a share of what he’d earned was bullshit. Cozzoli was sitting on a fortune in that safe, a fortune that should have been Bill’s.

“You may be right,” Bill admitted one night, after I’d brought him his seventh beer, “but what can I do about it?”

“You can take it back,” I said.

Bill stared at me for a moment, then asked, “How?”

“He’s robbed you all these years, so you rob him back one night –”

Bill cut me off, shaking his head. “Oh, no, No, no, no.”

“Nobody’ll even know it’s you. I’ll say you were here all night, at home with me. You wear a mask, go in with the gun when he’s got the safe open, take the money and get out –”

Bill got up and left the room.

This wasn’t going to be as easy as I’d hoped.



Three days later I met Rogue.

I was out shopping in the red Mini-Coop that Bill had bought me, and I ran over a nail somewhere. The tire started going down and I knew I'd have to get it fixed or changed, so I pulled into the next gas station. There was a young guy working there who said he could fix the tire...but the look he gave me told me maybe he wanted to fix more than that. He wasn't much older than me, he was wearing a sleeveless shirt that showed off his lean arms and a tattoo (a skull wearing a pirate hat with the word "Rogue" stenciled in a sword blade beneath), he had long gleaming black hair, and despite being covered with oil and grime, he was hot.

We chatted while he pulled the nail and patched the tire. Mundane shit: How I'd picked up the nail (I didn't know), where I lived (couple of miles away), if I liked that song playing on the radio right now (no, I thought it sucked; so did he).

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asked.

I held up my left hand, flashing my ring. "Married."

"That doesn't answer my question," he said, and his teeth were white when he grinned at me.

I knew right then that we'd end up in bed.



On the 5 around Buena Vista, I suddenly have to slam on the brakes – there's some kind of big pile-up on the freeway ahead, with fires and overturned cars but no ambulances or cops.

"Why we slowin' down?" Rogue asks from beside me. His speech is soft and slurred, and when I turn to look at him, his dark skin is gray, his eyes half-closed.

"Baby? You okay?"

"I don't think I'm gonna make it," he says, then his eyes close and he sags against the shoulder harness.

I stop completely in the middle of the freeway, and turn to him. “Rogue? Baby? Rogue, wake up -!”

He doesn’t answer.

I lean over and try to feel for a pulse, like they do in movies. I can’t find anything, but I’m not sure if that means Rogue’s dead, or I just don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.

WHAM! Something slaps against the glass outside, on the passenger window. I jump back and see this woman out there, but there’s something wrong with her – one ear’s been torn away, one eye gouged out, blood covers her head and neck and she’s left a big bloody handprint on my window, but what’s most wrong with her is the look in her single good eye. That look says getting to me is the only thing in the world that matters, and the way she’s pounding on the glass makes me think she’s about to do it, too.

“Get away, you crazy bitch!” I scream at her, but she doesn’t even flinch, just keeps slamming her hand on the window over and over. Then I look past her and see more people coming this way, and I can tell just by the way they move – all clumsy and stiff – that there’s something wrong with them, too. I slam the car into drive again, floor it, and speed around them. One fucker walks right in front of me and it’s too late to stop or swerve, so I hit him and he flies up and over the car. I spot an opening in the pile-up and head through it, and as I glance into my rearview mirror I see some of the people staggering after me, their arms outstretched as if they think they can still grab me. Then I’m doing sixty, eighty, ninety, and they’re lost behind me.

Fuckers.



Rogue and I started meeting a lot. I fucked him in cars, hotel rooms, the restroom at the gas station, even the bed I shared with Bill, boring, stupid Bill. I told Rogue all about

Bill and all the money Cozzoli had made off him, and Rogue said he thought Bill was a pussy.

Then Bill came home early one day and found us.

Truthfully, I wanted him to. I knew it was past five p.m., that Bill might be home any time, but I kept kissing Rogue, running my tongue around his body to drive him crazy, and he didn't even know what time it was. But I did.

Bill didn't get angry or scream. He just took one look, then walked out of the room, his shoulders sagging.

"Oh, shit, was that him?!" Rogue said.

I laughed.

Rogue shoved me. "Hey, what if he's goin' for that gun right now?"

I sighed and got out of bed. "He won't – he's a pussy, remember? But I should probably go talk to him."

"Fine. I'm goin'."

We both got dressed, then Rogue headed out the front door while I found Bill out in his garage workshop, turning a chair leg on his lathe. He didn't acknowledge me until I pulled the machine's plug from the wall. "Bill, we have to talk."

"Really? Doesn't look to me like you've done much talking today." He was trying to sound tough, but his eyes were wet.

"I feel...trapped here. He was a mistake, a bad one, and I'm sorry. But Bill...we're going nowhere."

"Then let's have a baby."

It wasn't the first time he'd brought that up, but fuck if I was going to let myself be tied down by a kid when I wasn't even a legal adult myself. That was not what I got away from my asshole parents for, to wipe snot away from some little brat's nose and change shit-filled diapers. No way. "Bill, kids are expensive. We don't have enough money for a kid."

“C’mon, Angel, we’ve got three bedrooms here, a nice yard for ‘em to play in, good schools just a few blocks away...”

“Bill, that school may be okay...but what about day care first? And then high school, and college? You’d want ‘em to have the best, right?”

He looked at me so earnestly I wanted to howl laughter. “That baby would have the best, because it’d be ours.”

What an idiot. This was fucking useless. I’d get Rogue to take Cozzoli’s money. We could get it and be in Mexico before anyone knew.

That was when Bill said, “All right, I’ll do it: I’ll take Cozzoli’s money. Tonight.”

Oh, shit. “Bill, shouldn’t you think this through more? I mean, there’s –”

He cut me off, pushing past me to head back into the house. “What’s to think through? I’ll take the goddamn money tonight, then you’ll be happy, right?”

I didn’t answer.

Bill went to a local sporting goods store to buy a ski mask, and I called Rogue. When I told him what Bill was planning, he didn’t hesitate to answer, “Fuck that. I’m not gonna let that fool take a shitload of money that should be ours. Here’s what we’re gonna do...”



Now Rogue’s dead. He’s in the seat beside me, and he hasn’t moved since we left the pile-up. On the radio, the Emergency Broadcast System is on, telling everyone to stay in their houses, lock the doors, draw the curtains, and turn off the lights. Apparently there’s been some kind of disaster – they don’t know what yet – that’s turning people into maniacs.

But I know they're not telling the truth, because Rogue has just opened his eyes. He has that same look the woman back in Buena Vista had – like nothing matters but getting at me. “Rogue...?”

He tries to lunge for me, but the safety harness holds him tight. I pull the SUV over to the shoulder before we crash, and I try to look him in the eye. “Rogue, it's me, Angel. Rogue? Can you hear me?”

But he's too busy trying to get me. His jaw is working, and I look at the bite mark on his arm, and I get it:

He wants to eat me.

Fortunately he's too stupid to figure out his seat buckle, so it holds him into the car as I get out, get away from him for a few seconds to think.

These people aren't sick. They're dead. They come back as...something else. Something that wants us as meat. And anybody they kill comes back, too.

I need a new plan.



Cozzoli went into his office every night about 8 p.m. to count his money. He was usually in there for about an hour. There was a lot to count.

The plan was that Bill would go into the shop wearing the ski mask, tie Cozzoli up, take the money, and return to the van, where I'd be waiting by the wheel. I'd be the getaway driver. If it all went according to plan, Cozzoli wouldn't even know (or at least be able to prove) that it was his own employee who'd robbed him.

We pulled up behind the shop at just after 8 p.m., next to Cozzoli's year-old Lexus. Bill didn't say a thing as he pulled on the ski mask and grabbed the gun. We'd brought an empty suitcase for the money, and he grabbed that from the back, then went in. I got behind the wheel and waited.

After maybe two minutes I heard gunshots.

Jesus – Bill had shot the old man.

Soon after that, he ran out, clutching the gun in one hand and the suitcase in the other. He hadn't sealed the suitcase well, and bills stuck out around the edges. He threw the suitcase and the gun in the back then ripped off the ski mask and went around to the passenger side.

“What happened? I heard shots.”

“Cozzoli recognized my voice. I had to shoot him.”

“God, Bill...”

He shouted and grabbed at the keys in the ignition. “Just GO!”

That was when Rogue pulled open the side passenger door and leveled his own gun on Bill. “You're not goin' anywhere, asshole. Except maybe to prison.”

Bill stared at him, dumbstruck, like he couldn't figure out any of it. Rogue gestured with the gun. “C'mon, fuckwad – out of the car.”

Bill turned to look at me, his expression disappointed as if I'd just gotten a “D” in school. “Bill, do what he says – get out of the fucking car NOW.”

He did, moving slowly, like he was too exhausted to function properly.

Rogue stood with his back to the building, holding the gun on Bill. Our plan had been to just drive off, leave him there...but Rogue was enjoying this. “So, Billyboy, how's it feel to know your wife set you up? Huh?”

Bill just stared.

I called to Rogue, “Just get in the car. Let's go...”

That was when Cozzoli staggered out of the building behind Rogue.

Bill hadn't shut the door when he'd come out, and Cozzoli came out kind of shuffling along, this blank look on his face – until he saw Rogue, then his face lit up with this wild intensity. Cozzoli moaned, and Rogue turned. When he saw the old man stumbling toward him, blood

staining his shirt front, he laughed. “Jesus, Bill, you can’t even fucking kill someone right!”

Rogue fired two bullets into Cozzoli’s chest.

It didn’t stop him. He jerked a little, but just from the impact. Rogue was about to fire again when Cozzoli grabbed his gun hand. The gun went off, the barrel pressed right against Cozzoli’s chest, and I saw an explosion of red as the bullet came out his back. Then Cozzoli bent down and bit a chunk out of Rogue’s arm.

Rogue staggered back. “MotherFUCKER!” He hit the side of the car, and I screamed at him.

“Rogue, get in!”

He heard me and scrambled up into the passenger seat, then tried to pull the door closed – but Cozzoli got it first. They wrestled over the door until I started up the car and popped it into gear so it lurched forward, pulling the door out of Cozzoli’s grasp. Rogue yanked it shut and locked it, screaming, “Go, go, go, GO!”

I peeled rubber backing away, but paused when the headlights fell on Cozzoli now lurching toward Bill, who just stood there, too worn out to do anything.

“What the fuck are you waiting for – GO!” Rogue screamed. But I was mesmerized by the sight of Bill’s boss, bleeding out from five gunshot wounds, grabbing the paralyzed Bill and sinking his teeth into my husband’s neck. When he came up with a chunk of red flesh in his teeth, though, I was done, and we were gone.

“What the fuck was that? What happened back there?!”

“I don’t...I don’t know...” I admit I was pretty shook up myself. It was all I could do to drive.

“Was the old man on fucking angel dust? How could he keep coming like that?”

I didn’t tell Rogue what I was already thinking: That the old man hadn’t been high. In fact, I didn’t think he’d been alive.

“Fuck!”

Rogue was looking down at the bite wound in his arm. It was pretty bad – blood was pouring out of a hole the size of a soap dish.

“We’re going to a hospital –”

“Are you crazy, Angel? We’ve got a suitcase full of a dead man’s cash in the back seat – we can’t go to a hospital.”

“Rogue, that’s bad...”

He pulled off his denim jacket and wrapped it around the wound. “Just find a drugstore, buy some stuff for it, and then keep going.”

“Okay.”

It was when I was leaving the drugstore fifteen minutes later that I realized something big was happening. There was a guy walking towards me across the parking lot as I came out of the store, but something about the way he was moving told me he was like Cozzoli...

Dead.

I ran the rest of the way to the SUV, threw the bag at Rogue, locked the doors and gunned the motor. Five minutes later we were on the freeway, hearing the first news reports, and knowing that something bigger had happened while we’d been waiting for my late husband to steal his boss’s money.



I stand by the side of the SUV, trying to figure out what to do about Rogue, when I notice the fires. The Orange County cities on the side of the 5 freeway are burning. I hear sirens, engines...

And screams. Whatever I’m going to do, I need to do it fast.

I consider grabbing the gun from the rear seat of the SUV, but I remember that it did fuck-all against Cozzoli, so

that won't work. I need to get Rogue out of that fucking car, and quick – and I can see more of them walking towards me now. Walking along a freeway like it's a sidewalk.

I have one big advantage: They're all slow. Rogue should be, too. I take a deep breath and put my plan into action: First I unlock the passenger side door and open it wide. He turns in his seat and reaches for me when I do. Then I run to the other side, lean across the driver's seat, undo Rogue's seat belt, and duck back out of the car, running to his side again. He follows me like a good dog, stumbling up out of the car.

“That's it, boy, c'mon, come and get me...”

I back away from the car for a few yards, let him shamble towards me, hear his moans and smell the stench of death coming off him – then I'm running again, swerving around him to head for the driver's side. I leap in, slam the doors and lock them, and get the engine started. By then Rogue is pounding on the passenger window, even pressing his face up against the glass as if he can gnaw right through it to get at me.

“Goodbye, Rogue,” I say, as I squeal away and leave him there. I don't look in the rearview mirror, I just go.

I'm not sure yet where I'm going. I've been scanning the radio stations, and it seems like this is widespread, even global. I've got a shitload of cash, but somehow I think it's about to become meaningless. Heading to Mexico seems pointless now. Maybe I can find somewhere to hole up in San Diego. I always liked it down there.

I'm not too worried about it. The idea of living in a world where I'm just seen as a piece of meat doesn't even seem all that different. If money doesn't buy me what I need, then I'll use whatever will. If there's a way to kill them, I'll find it.

I'm a survivor.

Fuck the world.

MANOBOT

The former gardener lumbered alone down the middle of Wilshire Boulevard. Of course there'd been no traffic for months; but some dim part of the gardener's mind wondered about the lack of any movement whatsoever. Except for the occasional roaming squads of those hunting his kind, he seemed to be completely alone.

It was hot today – August in L.A., after all – but he felt nothing as he made his way west; his body was no longer entirely human, and he neither sweated nor panted. They controlled all his autonomic functions.

He had neither purpose nor goal. He sought only to spread what he carried within him.

He passed the intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica. On his right, a once-famous fountain stood dry and silent. Had he still needed water (and had awareness to realize that), he might have rued the fountain's death. As it was, he simply trudged on.

A few blocks further on, he heard music.

It was coming from nearby – not from the trash-strewn shopping area on his left, but the residential streets on the right. He stepped around a wrecked limo sprawled across three lanes of traffic, and saw that there was some sort of barricade covering the entrance to the next street. The music came from there.

He walked toward it and saw a recently erected wall of solid brick and metal stretching across the length of the street, connecting to fences surrounding the end houses. The wall stood about seven feet tall, and had one barred gate set into the middle.

He didn't see the motion detectors he set off, but he heard the alarms. The music shut off.

The gardener froze at the sound of running feet. He knew the other, shrill noise meant danger, but he was held in place by the approach of living feet and voices.

He wanted – he *needed* – to get to them.

A young man’s head appeared over the top of the wall, and he whistled loudly as he spotted the gardener. “Yeah, we got one out here. Looks like a pretty good one – not too far gone. We can use it.”

Another voice answered, “Okay, I’ll get a bag ready.”

The gardener waited. He moaned once, wanting.

“You ready?” called one of those on the other side.

“Let’s do it.”

The boy popped up into view again above the wall, several yards to the side. “Hey, over here...that’s right, douchebag, this way, I’ve got what you want, come on...”

The gardener moved to follow – and missed the door popping open behind him, two other teens emerging with a large canvas sack that they expertly dropped down over him. He struggled briefly, then the sack was firmly tied around his midsection, encasing him, and he stopped.

“That shut him down easy,” one of the boys noted.

“Let’s get him inside,” said another. “Makes me nervous to be out here for long.”

“Pussy.”

The gardener let himself be pushed along; they had lowered most of his vital processes while breathing was difficult and sight impossible.

“What’s Dulac got planned for this one?” one of the boys asked.

“That new thing with the treadmill and the batteries.”

“Jesus. That’s never gonna work. I almost feel sorry for this asshole.”

“Don’t let Darren hear you say that, or you’ll be the one on the treadmill instead of Mr. Manobot here.”

The boys led the gardener for a few moments, down the street, through a gate, the surface under his feet changing from asphalt to grass to stone. Finally he was brought to a halt.

“Mr. Dulac – got a good one here for ya.”

He heard an adult voice. “Good job, boys. Get him fitted up and let’s put him to work.”

After a few seconds the bag was removed, but before the gardener could react, a heavy gag was tied over his mouth. “No biting for you, amigo.”

He was in a huge backyard that had been partially converted into a vegetable garden on one side and a work area on the other. He was led past a crystal clear pool and rows of tomatoes and bell peppers (his eyes lingered on them, attracted without understanding why) to a treadmill that was hooked up to wires and transformers and batteries. He tried to turn his head, to shake the gag loose or chew through it, but it wouldn’t move. He wouldn’t be able to bite them, and that was his reason for being.

“Look at him jerking his head – dickwad is still trying to get to us.”

One of his captors, a young man wearing a polo shirt and khakis, pushed him violently, and he stumbled onto a treadmill. His hands were wrestled into place near the rails on each side of the machine and were handcuffed there. He stood dumbly, until the boy in the polo shirt got on the machine behind him and started walking.

“Walk, ya fucker.”

The gardener stumbled and went down, and the metal restraints tore into his wrists. Blood flew and hit the ground nearby.

A boy in a sports jersey and baggy jeans leapt back in alarm. “Aw Jesus, Chuck, that was stupid.”

Chuck leapt off the treadmill, then gestured at the gardener. “Hey – he’s walking now, right?”

The boy in the jersey knelt by the spatter of blood with a kitchen blowtorch, cooking it until only a tiny, cracked black stain remained. “Can’t be too careful with this shit.”

The gardener kept walking, his brain not grasping why he didn’t seem to move. He didn’t feel the pain in his wrists, partly because his pain receptors no longer functioned, and partly because his wrists had already been repaired.

Nearby, he saw others like him, engaged in various tasks. A quartet were chained to some sort of large lever, pushing in an endless circle. Some had been trained to do slightly more complex tasks: One painted a wall, another tilled soil.

The gardener moaned softly; he wanted that job, not this meaningless activity. He’d been good at *that* once.

“Hey, check out his wrists...already healed over.”

The two boys who’d chained him to the treadmill examined his hands; Chuck whistled softly. “That never ceases to amaze me. No wonder they’re so hard to kill.”

“Yeah, and too bad we can’t make that work for us. We haven’t got a doctor. If we get sick, really sick...”

“Pussy.”

The boys wandered off.

The gardener kept walking. He had no sense of the passage of time, although at some point the sun vanished and the night grew cold, but his body temperature was simply adjusted so he didn’t notice.

In the large house behind him, he heard voices, glasses, music, laughter.

A girl appeared before him. She was maybe 16, wearing shorts and a t-shirt, drinking wine from a glass. She was already slightly drunk, her eyes unfocused as she looked up at him.

“So you’re the one they brought in today. I think that makes you number 73...or is it 74? I forget. Anyway,

of course we've had to put down 40 of them, so there's only about 30 left. I hate it when they have to kill one. The way they have to do it – putting on those suits, then carving the poor thing up and burning the pieces – it's terrible.”

He looked at her...and a soft whimper bubbled in his throat. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Hey, you almost...that was like you almost understood me. But you can't...right? You're as braindead as the rest...aren't you?”

He groaned again.

She gasped, then grinned. “Oh, *wow*. This is *so* cool. Okay, look – I promise not to tell Daddy, because he'd probably have the boys rip you up.”

From inside the house, an older woman's voice called, “Danielle – ?”

“Coming.” Danielle whispered to the gardener, “That's my stupid mother. She was nuts even before everything fell apart, but I better go answer her or she'll come out here. I'll see you tomorrow.”

The girl ran back to the house, and the gardener continued to walk.



Danielle came back the next night. And the next. And the next.

Usually she just sat cross-legged on the grass in front of him and talked. Sometimes she cried. Sometimes she asked him questions and pretended he'd responded, or decided that his incoherent noise was the answer she'd hoped for. But mostly she just talked.

She talked about how rich her family had been, and how her mother had been obsessed with her looks until she'd gone for some weird wrap treatment, and she'd come back from it changed – even colder, more distant. She talked about how quickly the world had fallen apart, after

the nanotechnology disaster that had started at Cedar Sinai with a doctor's desperate attempt to resurrect his dead wife, and had spread out from that single event like a butterfly's death altering history. She talked about how her father had used his money to barricade the neighborhood and seal them in, and how all the wealthy neighbors had been happy to go along with his plan, and how they'd decided to use infected victims as a labor force.

She thought her father was even crazier than her mother.

She asked the gardener what it felt like – living with tens of thousands of tiny nanobots in his body, constantly repairing him, shutting down unnecessary functions like memory and cognition, constantly looking for other humans to repair. She asked him how many others he'd infected, with a bite – a single drop of blood or saliva transferred into another body, a drop carrying hundreds of self-replicating nanobots. She told him that she couldn't watch when her dad told the others to destroy one of the infected; she knew they could only be killed by rendering so much damage that the nanobots couldn't repair them, but it still made her sick. She asked him if he remembered anything from before – where he'd been born (Mexico? El Salvador? America?), if he'd had a family, what he did.

Mostly he just stared and walked.

But occasionally some part of him not yet altered by *them* would tingle in recognition. When that happened, he made some sound deep in his throat, loud enough to escape the gag, and because of that she came back every night to talk to him.

She told him he was her best friend.

He kept walking.



Early one morning, before the others were up, as the sky just started to brighten, she came to him...with keys.

“I don’t think you’d hurt me if I unlock you. I hate seeing you chained up like that.”

He didn’t respond.

Danielle bit her lip, then walked toward him tentatively. His eyes followed her, but his head didn’t snap towards her, straining to bite.

She unlocked the right handcuff, pulled it away from his wrist, and then stepped back.

He almost lost his footing and immediately grabbed onto the railing.

Danielle stepped in front of him and said, “You’ll have to stop walking.”

He stared and kept walking.

“No,” she said, loudly this time. “You have to stop. Just go slower, then slower, and you’ll finally stop.” She even mimicked moving her feet slowly.

He watched – and his feet followed hers. The pace of the treadmill declined, and finally ceased altogether.

Danielle smiled and moved to his left side. “See? I knew you were smart.”

She unlocked the left cuff.

He lifted his hands away, flexing the fingers. He had no idea how long he’d held onto those railings, but there was a small pleasure in no longer having to.

He stepped cautiously forward. The treadmill started to roll under him again, but he adjusted his feet and stepped down onto the surrounding grass.

“You can take off your gag,” she told him.

He did. He wrenched the heavy thing away and threw it aside.

Danielle extended her bare arm. “Now you can bite me.”

The gardener stared at the offered flesh, but didn’t move.

She wiggled her arm. “Please. Do it. I want to be with you. I can’t stand these people any more. Bite me, and we’ll leave here together, and I won’t remember them.”

“Danielle -!”

It was a man’s voice, and Danielle and the gardener both turned to see her father, the former billionaire Darren Dulac, rushing into his yard with an automatic rifle in his arms. “Danielle, honey, get away from that thing –” He waved the sleek, black weapon to the right.

“No. Don’t kill him, Daddy. Please.”

A woman joined Dulac, a woman whose face somehow gleamed with unnatural youth, even while her expression was dead. “Danielle, listen to your father. Stay away from that thing.”

Danielle thrust her arm again toward the gardener. “Look at him – he won’t even bite me! You have to let him go.”

The gardener looked at all of them, and in that moment – whether it was the nanorobots controlling him, or his own vestige of conscience – he saw the situation about to unfold, and knew he had one chance:

He turned and began to walk out of the yard.

“See, Daddy? He just wants to leave.”

The gardener’s back was turned to all of them, and so he didn’t see Danielle’s mother rush forward and wrestle her daughter out of the way as Daddy shouldered the rifle and took aim.

The bullets tore into him, ripping parts of him out and tearing open his midsection and carving away parts of his head. The nanorobots inside him worked frantically for a few seconds, then began to fail as his bloodstream leaked out into the beautifully landscaped backyard.

He never felt any of it.

But the nanos in his head ensured that his sense continued to function for a few extra seconds, so he was aware even as he fell, landing with a thud on his left side.

One eye had been destroyed beyond repair, but the other still functioned, and he saw Danielle, her mouth opened in a silent scream, tear away from her mother's grasp and rush forward to him, kneel and lap at the blood on his face.

The last thing he saw was her blank expression.

GIRLWORLD

Stace looks out the Hummer's windshield at the dead things pressed up against the glass front of the supermarket, and she guns the engine. "You ready?"

Brittnay grips the sharpened length of lead pipe and grins. "Let's do it."

Popping the massive armored car into gear, Stace peels rubber as she accelerates across the parking lot. Beside her, Brittnay whoops and plants her feet firmly against the floorboard.

Stace hits the brakes at the same instant that the Hummer plows through the glass, sending shards and charcoal briquets and dry dog food and human body parts flying. The car slams to a halt against the checkout stands, and the two women, dressed in their homemade armor of football gear and heavy boots, are out instantly. Most of the zombies have either been thrown or mashed by the collision, and they're easy pickin's: Britt thrusts the pointed end of her metal spear through eye sockets and brains, while Stace opts for her beloved Louisville slugger. Stace wears a holstered .38 Police Revolver on one hip, but bullets are hard to come by, and she keeps it only for emergencies. They've gotten good at what they do, and she hasn't needed the gun for weeks. Glass crunches underfoot, gore spatters their plastic shoulder guards and helmets, blood runs down spear and bat.

Within seconds the zombies are done for, and the Hummer, wedged in the only smashed section of the storefront, effectively blocks any more from entering. Britt and Stace quickly reconnoiter the market with flashlights, but they're alone –

– and the market is fully stocked.

“Stace, will ya look at this place?”

Most of the markets they’ve found have been picked over. Most of them have doors swinging unlocked, shelves with nothing but moldering loaves of bread and produce that’s turned to toxic soup. But this one was sealed tight, nothing but a few undead clerks inside and plenty of canned goods.

Brittnay suddenly spots something that makes her whole face brighten. “Oh God – chocolate! There’s CHOCOLATE, Stace!”

She rushes to a candy stand by the nearest checkout counter, pulls down a chocolate bar, flings the wrapper aside, and bites off half of it. She’s reduced to speechless sounds of pure animal pleasure.

Stace pauses to drink in the sight of writhing, tall, blonde Brittnay (who could’ve been a model if her idiot dad had just had her teeth fixed), then walks up to her. “Give me some of that.”

Britt breaks off a square and puts it into Stace’s mouth...then they kiss, lips locked on the delectable ecstasy of cacao. The embrace moves from shared rich flavor to celebration to lust. Just when Stace’s hands are moving up under Britt’s shirt, they both hear another moaning sound, one made by neither of them, and they look up to see a line of half-a-dozen zombies lined up outside, pressed up against the remaining glass panels, one shredding itself as it tries to press between the Hummer’s side and deadly sharp glass remnants.

Britt tenses and starts to reach for her weapon of choice, but Stace holds her arm. “It’s okay, they can’t get in – at least not without ripping themselves to bits.”

Both women stare at the gaping, open-mouthed dead, whose hungry expressions somehow look angry. “Why are they always men?” asks Britt.

Stace presses up closer to Britt and pouts at the zombies. “I dunno...maybe the women are at home cleaning up the slime trails and caring for dead babies.”

They kiss again, this time boldly. They laugh as they start to strip, flaunting themselves to the desperate dead. Britt thrusts her ample naked chest out. “Hey, asshole, you want some of this?”

The nearest zombie – once a paunchy twentysomething, still wearing a tattered rock band’s t-shirt and long stringy hair – moans and renews his pounding on the glass. Stace and Britt howl at his efforts, and wrap their arms around each other, and Britt shrieks in delight when her girlfriend pretends to bite at the exposed flesh of her thighs. They wipe shattered glass from the top of one of the checkout stands, and in a few moments Britt is spread out between the register and the bagging area as Stace works on her.

Outside, the dead pound the glass in fury.



Later, they dress again, load up the Hummer with months’ worth of food and water (Britt gets her first taste of caviar, and promptly spits it out in disgust), and back the Hummer out. They decide to finish off the successful run with a little victory bloodletting, and after they pull out of the market’s destroyed front, they drive in a circle and plow down their audience, then step out to finish them off.

Stace misjudges the power of one blow with her bat, and cracks the wood against the asphalt. “Aw, shit!” she cries out, giving the truly dead dead man an angry kick, then tossing aside the splintered wood.

“I know you like the phallic symbolism, but Stace, really...those things are always gonna shatter on you.”

Stace flips her partner off, then walks to the back of the Hummer, opens a door, and reaches in to where there’s

a stack of at least two dozen genuine wooden baseball bats. “That’s why I keep plenty of ‘em on hand.” She walks up to the last mobile zombie, takes a swing, and feels a deep sense of satisfaction as its brains meet her wood and it drops. “Hoo-AH!”

“C’mon, slugger, let’s go. I’m driving.”

After Stace wipes the bat’s business end on one of the corpse’s legs, she climbs into the passenger side, gives Britt a quick peck, and settles back. “Take me anywhere, girlfriend.”



They drive through the town, trying to find the wealthiest part...but there doesn’t seem to be one. The sun’s down by the time they settle on a large house set back off the road, in a relatively dead-free ‘hood.

They pull up before it and honk the horn, watching the house carefully. When nothing appears at the front windows after a few minutes, they decide it’s safe. They shatter a pane of glass, crawl in with a few supplies, and barricade themselves in a master bedroom with cans and a six-pack and candles.

They’re both sound asleep by eleven, and Stace has the nightmares again.

Her bad dreams aren’t about being chased by hordes of famished dead clutching at her flesh...but are, instead, about the lives they once led:

She was a waitress in a greasy diner, spending her days dodging truckers with chaw-stained teeth reaching out to grope her ass. Britt was a dental assistant, staring into the open maws of shrieking brats while their mommies sat uselessly in the waiting room reading Cosmo. They met six months ago, when Stace, out shopping for the week’s groceries, caught Brittnay in the produce section clinically examining a cucumber. Brittnay had turned crimson, they’d

both giggled, then they'd gone out to a local bar, and when the redneck on the stool next to them had started to mutter, they'd gone home to Stace's place. They'd been together since.

Together in a dreary small town, bored and restless, hoping to save up enough money to move, but knowing they never would.

Then, three months ago, the world fell apart.

When the zombie epidemic first broke out, the government ordered everyone to "emergency relocation centers"...but Stace convinced Britt not to go, that they were better off on their own. Turned out she'd been right when she told Stace all it took was one mindless, panicked screamer to turn the entire center into an all-you-can-eat zombie buffet.

They hit the road, battling their way out of town with just their car and Stace's bat. They headed for the country, where they found an abandoned farmhouse that had a well-stocked cellar. They lived off the canned fruits and vegetables for six weeks, until they'd run out. Forced out by starvation and ennui, they'd returned to the town, only to find that it'd largely cleared out of both zombies and people.

The airwaves were dead. The internets were gone. They saw no other survivors.

And they realized they liked it.

They decided to live. They armed and armored themselves. They siphoned gas and drove to the nearest big city, where they found the Hummer and fought off zombies. They got better at it with each passing day – Stace's body, already pretty toned, got even more buff, and turned Britt on even more. They liked the excitement and the freedom. For the first time ever, the two women felt truly alive.

Except that every night Stace has nightmares...about how it used to be.



When they both wake up, the sun's shining past the dresser they've hauled across the master bedroom's window, and Stace finds Britt staring at her thoughtfully.

"There's something I want to do," Britt says.

And so The Mission is born.

At first Stace puts up a few halfhearted arguments – it's a long way from here, the freeways are virtually unusable, they probably won't even find what Britt's looking for – but she ends up giving in to Britt.

She always does.

And even though Stace isn't sure she's completely behind The Mission, as they leave the latest suburban house behind, she likes the renewed sense of purpose she feels smacking the zombie who staggers between them and the Hummer.

They try the interstate, and find it's better than they'd feared. They only have to backup and exit twice because of rusting pileups.

During the afternoon, Britt turns on the radio and hits the "Seek" button, not really expecting to find anything...

...and Stace slams a foot on the brake when music comes over one station. Loud, bouncy music, with a raucous female lead singer.

"Wait...I know this song," Stace says, leaning forward. "It's..."

"That was Le Tigre!" says a female disc jockey as the song ends. "Yes, you're tuned to station WGR LZ, where we play nothing but music we fuckin' like by bands like L7, Bikini Kill, and that one – Le Tigre..."

Britt and Stace stare at each other in astonishment. "Where the fuck are they?" Britt blurts out, as Stace shushes her.

“Just listen!”

They do. They sit there in the middle of the interstate for fifteen minutes, listening...but the deejay never gives the station’s location, not even a clue. Instead she talks about how the girls have taken over, and it’s their world now, and not even a bunch of dead fucks can stop them. Britt and Stace are glued to every word – until a pounding on the glass causes them both to jump, and they turn to see a zombie smearing up the passenger side window. Furious, Stace climbs out from behind the wheel. “We were LISTENING to that, asshole!”

WHACK! The asshole goes done. Stace wallops him for good measure until Britt clammers out and joins her. “Give it up, girlfriend.”

Stace lets herself be embraced, right there in the middle of the freeway. She imagines traffic gliding past, staring at them in envy and disgust. Well, and the straight guys would all have hard-ons.

They finally go back to the driving, and listen to the station for another half-hour, until they lose the reception.

“Well,” Stace says, “once we finish the first Mission, I say we make finding them our second.”

“You’re on,” says Britt.



They’re halfway to their destination when they spot a huge sporting goods store off the side of the freeway and decide to check it out.

There are a fair number of dead still wandering the parking lot, and they take out as many as they can, but they know they won’t have long inside the store. The doors are already smashed open, so there’ll be zombies inside, too.

“You sure about this?” Britt says, still in the Hummer, eyeing the store front warily.

“If it’s too thick, we’ll just hightail it.”

“It looks pretty cleaned out.”

Stace opens her door, determined. “Let’s just be sure, okay?”

Britt doesn’t seem convinced, but shrugs on her armor, grabs her spear, and follows Stace out of the car.

The inside of the store is relatively free of zombies, and they head for the gun counter first, but it’s almost completely empty, probably cleaned out in the first week of the epidemic. There’s literally nothing left but a couple of bb guns.

“I told you so,” Britt says.

Stace still wants to check the baseball section – she’s always looking for sluggers, and she’s pleased when she finds a display of genuine wooden bats.

“Aha –” she starts to say as she turns toward Britt – and breaks off when she sees the zombie two feet behind her girlfriend.

“Down!”

Simultaneously: Stace raises a bat, leaps forward, Britt ducks. The zombie, a grungy old man dressed in overalls, actually grabs Britt’s arm, then Stace swings. She takes out both a row of canned baseballs and the zombie’s head. Cans burst apart and bloodied leather-covered balls bounce everywhere. Stace ignores them to leap forward and whack the fucker’s head two, three, four times until she knows it’s done. Then she turns to Britt, still crouched against the side of the aisle.

“You okay?”

Britt lets out a held breath, rubs her arm, nods, then looks up at her savior. “God, I love you.”

Stace grins like a World Series champion.

She helps Britt up, holds up an armful of the bats. “Can you carry these?”

Britt nods. They load up. On the way out, Stace spots something in the boating section: A handheld shortwave radio that runs on batteries. She grabs it.

“What’s that for?” Britt asks.
“Never know what you’ll pick up.”



Late that afternoon they cruise through the state’s capital until they find a wealthy, gated community. The Hummer easily smashes through the unattended barricade, and they select a house bigger than most hotels to stay in. They clear the house of two zombies still dressed in expensive clothing and jewelry (“Shit,” Britt says, as she yanks her spear from another shattered skull, “they probably didn’t look much different alive”), and opt to spend the night in a second-floor bedroom that’s larger than both of their former apartments put together.

After sunset, Stace sprawls on the parking space-sized bed, going over the manual on the shortwave radio. Britt nestles up beside her, licks her ear, whispers crude suggestions, but gets no response.

“God damn, Stace, what is so interesting?”

Stace puts four AA batteries into the book-sized radio, turns it on, fiddles with the controls. “This thing supposedly gets signals from all over the world. Let’s see who’s still out there.”

Britt sighs and rolls away.

Stace begins to scan through frequencies. She picks up a faint signal once, something in French or maybe Italian, but it keeps fading in and out and she can’t tell if it’s a real human or an automated message. More frequencies, and she finds an obviously live human voice babbling away monotonously in some Slavic language.

“Well,” Stace says, “at least there are a few people still left in other parts of the world.”

“Great,” says Britt, already bored.

A few more frequencies and they pick up a signal that's crystal clear – and is transmitting a man speaking English.

The man has a trace of Southern drawl, so they know he's American; and because the signal is strong, he's probably in their part of the country. He's talking about a military base that's been turned into a survivors' camp.

"I know that base," Britt says.

Stace nods. "Me, too. It's probably about three, four hours from here."

They listen as the man continues: He says they're setting up fields to grow food, that they're well armed and completely secure, that they've got everything they need to start a safe new home. They're building houses. They've already got a general store, small hospital, library. A church. Families. Children.

Stace and Britt look at each other, uncertainly. At last Britt says, "The Mission still comes first."

"No question," Stace says. "No reason we can't do that first. But then..."

Britt doesn't answer. They turn off the radio and just hold each other on top of the satin bedspread.



When Stace wakes up in the morning, Britt is already dressed and strapping on her armor.

"You look ready for something."

Britt leaps over, kisses Stace, then says, "Today's the day. For The Mission. I figure we're only about two hours away."

So Stace lets Britt drive. The two hours pass quickly, and they pull into one more of the south's little impoverished towns, all dingy one-story houses that probably didn't look a lot better before the world went to

hell. There are still wheel-less cars on blocks in some of the front yards, along with overturned toys and kudzu.

Both women are quiet as Britt negotiates the streets. Stace notices Britt's hands shaking slightly, but she knows what The Mission means to her, so she says nothing.

They turn a corner, and are confronted with a row of burned-out shells. The fires have long since died, leaving a few blackened walls, jutting timbers.

"Oh, shit," mutters Britt.

"Yeah. This 'hood didn't fare so well, did it?"

Britt drives slowly now, her pale skin even whiter than usual. Her lips are moving, and Stace realizes she's counting off addresses, trying to find the one...

At the end of the block, a few houses are still standing. Britt spots them, and accelerates forward. "Yes!"

She squeals to a halt before one that looks no different from the others, at least to Stace's eyes, but Britt is virtually thrumming with excitement.

"So this is it?"

Britt can only nod, a tight single motion of her pretty head.

"Let's do it, then."

There are zombies around, already staggering towards them, so they check their gear a last time then leap from the Hummer.

Stace lays into a teenaged boy, then turns to an ancient old hag with missing lower jaw and a few strands of gray hair still fixed to a peeling scalp. Just as she's drawing back the slugger, she hears Britt:

"No, Stace – let me."

She watches, amused and impressed, as Britt leaps forward with great verve, impaling the old zombie and screaming out, "That's for all the times you screamed at us, Mrs. Layton!"

Then they see a fat middle-aged man in a wife-beater shirt and boxers. Stace asks, "Is that him?"

Grinning fiercely, Britt walks up to the approaching corpse. “No, that’s Larry Costner from across the street. He hit on me when I was 15.” Britt raises her pipe overhead, and bashes in Larry’s rotting skull. His belly bursts when he hits the ground, and Stace flinches from the noxious odors.

There are more of the dead staggering their way now from every direction, and Stace feels her stomach start to knot in dread. “Uh, Britt...maybe we should come back and finish The Mission later –”

“No. He’s here, I just know it!”

Britt starts toward the house, and Stace walks behind her, backwards, keeping a wary eye on zombies and Hummer; if they can’t reach the car, they’ll be well and truly fucked. She begins to wonder if she should kiss Britt with the bat, just a tap to knock her out, get her into the Hummer, get the fuck out of here before they die in this hellburb and live out their unlives with all the rest here.

“Britt...” she means it as a warning, but it comes out as a growl.

Britt doesn’t answer. She’s kicking in the front door and screaming. “Where are you?! Come out, fucker –”

Then Stace backs into Britt, who has stopped just outside the doorway. She risks a glance over one shoulder and sees a figure lumbering forward from inside the house. Another fat man, his shadowy bulk filling most of the entryway.

“Is that...?”

She feels Britt tense. “The Mission.” Then, raising the spear, Britt adds: “Hi, Dad.”

She starts to lift her weapon, but one of Dad’s massive hands comes down and stops her from raising it. The other hand clutches at Britt’s throat. Stace tries to whirl and swing, but she can’t get around Britt, who is trying to dance backward, and suddenly they both collide and fall.

Britt's on top of Stace; she starts to leap up, giving Stace enough room to turn and see the spear bury itself uselessly in Dad's chest. Britt's trying to pull it out, but Dad's reach is long enough to grab her hand and he pulls her towards him. Britt's fighting and shrieking, but he's bringing her in, mouth gaping hungrily, dead eyes fixed on her soft flesh, and now there are more of them, reaching for Stace, at least three, and she can't find the bat, and –

The pistol.

It's there, at her hip, and she draws and BANG BANG BANG, the three near her go down, each shot perfect. Then Stace, still sprawled back on the sidewalk, raises the gun toward Dad and shouts, "Britt, DOWN!"

Britt twists in Dad's grip and drops, and Stace fires – BANG! – and Dad falls back, really and finally dead, pulling Britt with him.

"Goddamn, let GO of me -!"

Stace glances back, and sees at least five more zombies approaching. She's only got two bullets left in the revolver, so she scrabbles forward and starts pulling at the corpse fingers clamped around Britt's wrist, and she hears a loud CRACK as she breaks the fingers, and finally Britt is free. Stace grabs her and pulls her to her feet.

"Can we go now?!"

They retrieve spear and bat and dash for the Hummer. Stace lays out a soccer mom with the slugger, and Britt does in a scabrous teenaged boy in an oversized sports jersey. Then they clamber into the safety of the heavy car, both panting, both covered in blood and bruises. After a few seconds they look at each other, and then Britt laughs. "God DAMN, that was sweet!"

Stace doesn't answer. She starts the engine and gets them out of there, trying to will her heart to stop racing...

...but it's hard when Britt is next to her in the Hummer.



They head back to their wealthy house from last night, and use the pool out back to bathe in. Later, holed up in the master bedroom with canned fruit and expensive booze and chocolate, Britt talks about Dad: About the beatings. About how he drove her mother out. About how she finally ran away at 16, and spent the last ten years dreaming about what she did today.

Stace listens to her, and strokes her, and at some point they pull out the shortwave radio again and find the man with the drawl calling survivors to their little settlement. He talks about families, about rebuilding, about getting the world going again. There's talk of peace, of order, of safety.

"Wow, they've really got something going there," says Britt.

And before she knows what she's saying, Stace says, "Yep. And let's leave 'em to it."

Britt turns to look at her. "Really?"

"Yeah. That sounds a lot like what we left behind, doesn't it?"

Britt nods. "I was thinking the same thing. And I know today was kind of stupid, but it was..."

Stace offers up the missing word. "Fun."

"Yeah." After a moment, Britt says, "If we ever get seriously bored, we can go find the girls running the radio station. I'll bet they can kick some ass."

"Sounds good."

They kiss then, and lose themselves in each other, and decide they can handle this new world on their own, thank you very much.

And that night, Stace's sleep is completely untroubled.

SPARKS FLY UPWARD

My breath is corrupt, my days are extinct, the graves are ready for me.

Job 17:1

Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection...

Revelations 20:6

June 16

Tomorrow marks one year ago that the Colony was begun here, and I think just about everyone is busy preparing for a big celebration. We just had our first real harvest two weeks ago, so there'll be plenty of good things to eat, and as for drink – well, the product of George's still is a little extreme for most tastes, so Tom and a few of the boys made a foray outside yesterday for some real liquor.

Of course I was worried when Tom told me he was going (and not even for something really vital, just booze), but he said it wasn't so bad. The road was almost totally clear for the first five miles after they left the safety of the Colony, and even most of Philipsville, the pint-sized town where they raided a liquor store, was deserted. Tom said he shot one in the liquor store cellar when he went down there to check on the good wines; it was an old woman, probably the one-time shopkeeper's wife locked away. Unfortunately, she'd clawed most of the good bottles off to smash on the floor. Tom took what was left, and an unopened case of burgundy he found untouched in a corner. There are 131 adults in the Colony, so he figured he'd have a bottle for every two on Anniversary Day.

It's been two weeks since any of the deadheads have been spotted near the Colony walls; Pedro Quintero, our top marksman, picked that one off with one shot straight through the head from the east tower. It would be easy to fool ourselves into thinking the situation is finally mending...easy and dangerous, because it's not. The lack of deadheads seen around here lately proves only one thing: that Doc Freeman was right in picking this location, away from the cities and highways.

Of course Doc Freeman was right; he's right about everything. He said we should go this far north because the south would only keep getting hotter, and sure enough it's been in the 80's here for over a week now. I don't want to think what it is down in L.A. now – probably 120, and that's in the shade.

Tomorrow will be a tribute to Doc Freeman as much as an anniversary celebration. If it hadn't been for him...well, I suppose Tom and little Jessie and I would be wandering around out there with the rest of them right now, dead for a year but still hungry. Always hungry.

It's funny, but before all the shit came down, Doc Freeman was just an eccentric old college professor teaching agricultural sciences and preaching survival. Tom always believed Freeman had been thinking about cutting out anyway, even before the whole zombie thing, because of the rising temperatures. He told his students that agriculture in most parts of the U.S. was already a thing of the past, and it would all be moving up to Canada soon.

When the deadheads came (Doc Freeman argued, as did a lot of other environmentalists, that they were caused by climate change, too), it was the most natural thing in the world, I guess, for him to assemble a band of followers and head north. He'd chosen the site for the Colony, set up policy and government, designed the layout of fields, houses and fences, and even assigned each of us a job, according to what we were best at. It had all been scary at

first, of course – especially with 3-year old Jessie – but we all kind of fell into place. I even discovered I was a talented horticulturist – Doc says the best after him – and in some ways this new life is better than the old one.

Of course there are a lot of things we all miss: ice cream, uncalloused hands, t.v. Del still scans the shortwave radio, hoping he'll pick something up on it. In a year, he has only once, and that transmission ended with the sound of gunshots.

So we accept our place in the world...and the fact that it may be the last place. Tomorrow we do more than accept it, we celebrate it.

I wish I knew exactly how to feel.

June 17

Well, the big day has come and gone.

Tom is beside me, snoring in a blissful alcoholic oblivion. Tomorrow he'll be in the fields again, so he's earned this.

Jessie is in her room next door, exhausted from all the games she played and sweets she ate. Tom actually let me use a precious hour of battery charge to record her today.

And yet I wasn't the only one crying when Doc Freeman got up and made his speech about how his projections show that if we continue at our present excellent rate, we'll be able to expand the colony in three years. Expand it carefully, he added. Meaning that in three years there'll be probably forty or fifty couples – like Tom and I – begging for the precious right to increase our family.

I know Doc is right, that we must remember the lessons of the old world and not outgrow our capacity to produce, to sustain that new growth...but somehow it seems wrong to deny new life when we're surrounded by so much death.

Especially when the new life is in me.

June 24

I've missed two now, so I felt certain enough to go see Dale Oldfield. He examined me as best he could (he's an excellent G.P., but his equipment is still limited), and he concluded I'd guessed right.

I am pregnant.

Between the two of us we figured it at about six weeks along. Dale thanked me for not trying to hide it, then told me he would have to report it to Doc Freeman. I asked only that Tom and I be allowed to be there when he did. He agreed, and we decided on tomorrow afternoon.

I went home and told Tom. At first he was thrilled...and then he remembered where we were.

I told Tom we'd be seeing Doc Freeman tomorrow about it; he became obsessed with the idea that he'd somehow convince Doc to let us have the baby.

I couldn't stand to hear him torture himself that way, so I read stories to Jessie and held her until we both fell asleep in her narrow child-sized bed.

June 25

We saw Doc Freeman today. Dale Oldfield confirmed the situation, and then gracefully excused himself, saying he'd be in his little shack-cum-office when we needed him.

Doc Freeman poured all three of us a shot of his private stock of Jim Beam; then he began the apologies. Tom tried to argue him out of it, saying a birth would be good for morale, and we could certainly handle just one more in the Colony...but Doc told him quietly that, unlike many of the young couples, we already had a child and couldn't expect special treatment. Tom finally gave in, admitting Doc was right – and I'd never loved him more than I did then, seeing his pain and regret.

He went with me to tell Dale we'd be needing his services next week, and Dale just nodded, his head hung low, not meeting our eyes.

Afterwards, in our own bungalow, Tom and I argued for hours. We both got crazy, talking about leaving the Colony, building our own little fortress somewhere, even overthrowing Doc Freeman...but I think we both knew it was all fantasy. Doc Freeman had been right again: we did have Jessie, and maybe in a few more years the time would be right for another child.

But not now.

July 2

Tomorrow is the day set for us to do it.

God, I wish there was another way. Unfortunately, even after performing a D&C three times in the last year, Dale still has never had the clinic's equipment moved to the Colony. It's ironic that we can send out an expedition for booze, but not one for medical equipment. Doc Freeman says that's because the equipment is a lot bigger than the booze, and the Colony's only truck has been down basically since we got here.

So tomorrow Tom, Dale and I will make the 18-mile drive to Silver Creek, the nearest town big enough to have had a family planning clinic. Dale, who has keys to the clinic, assures me the only dangerous part will be getting from the car to the doors of the clinic. They can't get inside, he tells me, so we'll be safe – until we have to leave again, that is.

Funny...when he's telling me about danger, he only talks about deadheads.

He never mentions the abortion.

July 3

I didn't sleep much last night. Tom held me but even he dozed off for a while. It's morning as I write this, and I

hear Jessie starting to awaken. After I get her up, I'll try to tell her mommy and daddy have to leave for a while, and nice Mrs. Oldfield will watch her. She'll cry, but hopefully not because she understands what's really going on.

.....

It's later now. Jessie's taken care of, and Dale's got the jeep ready to go. Tom and I check our supplies again: an automatic .38 with full magazine, an Uzi with extra clips, a hunting rifle with scope and plenty of ammo, three machetes and the little wooden box. Dale's also got his shotgun and a Walther PPK that he says makes him feel like James Bond. Everyone teases him about it, telling him things like the difference is that Bond's villains were all alive to begin with. Dale always glowers and shuts up.

It's time to go.

We climbed into the jeep. Tom asked why I was bringing you (diary) along, and I told him it was my security blanket and rabbit's foot. He shut up and Dale gunned the engine. We had to stop three times on the way out to exchange hugs and good luck wishes with people who ran up from the fields when we went by.

We're about 15 miles out now, and it's been the way Tom said – quiet. After the gates swung open and we pulled onto the dusty road, it must've been ten minutes before we saw the first deadhead. It was lumbering slowly across a sere field, still fifty yards from the road as we whipped by.

A few miles later there was a small pack of three in the road, but they were spaced wide apart. Dale drove around two of them; they clawed in vain at the jeep, but we were doing 60 and they just scraped their fingers. The third one was harder to drive around – there were car wrecks on either side of the road – so Dale just whomped into him. He flew over the welded cage at the front of the jeep and landed somewhere off to the side of the road. We barely felt it.

We'd just reached the outskirts of Silver Creek when Dale slowed down and cleared his throat. Then he said, Listen, Sarah, there's something you ought to know about the clinic. He asked me if I'd talked to any of the others he'd already escorted out here.

Of course I had, but they had only assured me of Dale's skilled, painless technique, and that they'd be there if I needed to talk. None of them had said much about the clinic itself.

I said this to Dale, and he asked me something strange. He asked if I was religious.

Tom and I looked at each other, then Tom asked Dale what he was getting at.

Dale stammered through something about how the deadheads tend to go back to places that were important to them, like their homes or shopping malls or schools.

We nodded – everyone knew that – and Dale asked if we'd ever heard of Operation SoulSave.

I swear I literally tasted something bad in my mouth. How could I forget? The fundamentalists who used to stand around outside abortion clinics and shout insults and threats at people who went in. I was with a friend once – a very young friend – when it happened to her.

Then I realized what he was saying. I couldn't believe it. I tried to ask him, but my words just tripped all over each other. He nodded and told us.

They're still here.



Most of Silver Creek was empty. We saw some of them inside dusty old storefronts, gazing at us stupidly as we drove by, but they probably hadn't fed in well over a year and were pretty sluggish. Either that, or they'd just been that way in life: staring slack-jawed as it passed them by.

That wasn't the case, however, with the group before the clinic.

There must have been 20 of them, massed solidly before the locked doors. As we drove towards them, I saw their clothes, once prim and starched, now stained with all those fluids they'd long ago feared or detested. One still held up a sign (I realized a few seconds later he had taped it to his wrist as he died) which read OPERATION SOULSAVE – SAVE A SOUL FOR CHRIST! Several sported the obligatory ABORTION IS MURDER t-shirts, now tattered and discolored.

Their leader was the Priest. I remembered him from before, when he'd been on all the news programs, spouting his vicious rhetoric while his flock chanted behind him. Of course, he looked different now: somebody had snacked on his trapezius, so his Roman Collar was covered in dried gore and hung askew, and his head (he was also missing a considerable patch of scalp on that same side) canted strangely at an odd angle.

I saw Dale eyeing them and muttering something under his breath. I asked him what it was so I could write it down: "Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward". He said it was from the Bible. I was surprised; I didn't know Dale read the Bible.

Tom responded with a quote from one of the more contemporary prophets: "I used to be disgusted, now I try to be amused". Then he asked Dale what we were going to do. Dale, who was practiced in this, said he'd drive around the building once, which would draw most of them away from the front long enough for us to get in. They wouldn't bother the jeep when we weren't in it.

Dale headed for the next corner. Tom pulled the .38 and held it, and I remembered.

I was thinking about the time I had to go to a different clinic with my friend Julie. It was before I started you, diary; in fact, I started you about the time Julie disappeared

with most of the rest of the world. So I've never written any of this down before.

Julie had gotten pregnant from her boyfriend Sean, who split when she told him. Abortions were legal then (this was a long time ago), but could be costly, and Julie, who was still going to college (as I was), had no money. She went to her parents, but they threw her out of the house. She thought about having the baby and putting it up for adoption, but she had no health insurance, wouldn't be able to afford the actual birth, and regarded overpopulation as the end of the world. This, obviously, was before the deadheads arrived and clarified that issue.

So I'd lent her the money, and agreed to go with her to the clinic. She made the appointment, worried about it so much she didn't sleep the night before, almost backed out twice on the drive there...and all so she could be confronted by the fine Christian citizens of Operation SoulSave.

They had seated themselves on either side of the walkway leading into the clinic. Even though it was in another state and time, they wore the same t-shirts and held the same signs. They were mainly male, or women in clothes so tight they seemed life-threatening. They all had vacuous smiles that gave way to cruel snarls of contempt whenever anyone went into or out of the clinic doors.

Julie took one look at them and didn't want to leave the car. I told her we'd be late, and she said it didn't matter.

We'd talked about the morality of abortion already, and had agreed that it was obvious that the unformed, early fetus was only an extension of the mother's body, and as such each woman had the right to make her own decision. I reminded Julie of this as she sat shivering in the car, and she'd said that wasn't why she didn't want to go past them.

She was afraid of them. She said they seemed like a mindless horde, capable of any violence they were directed to commit.

She'd had no idea how right she was.

We drove slowly around one corner. Sure enough, they stumbled after us. Then Dale threw it into fourth, and we screamed the rest of the way around the block.

When we got back to the main entrance, there were only five or six still there, not including one that dragged itself around on two partially-eaten legs. Tom handed me the Uzi, while he took the .38 and cradled the box. Dale opted for a machete (I didn't want to have to see him use it minutes before he operated on ME).

We sprinted from car to door. Tom shot two right between the eyes. I raised the Uzi, forgetting its rapid-fire design, and ripped one of them completely apart. I felt my stomach turn over as I saw some stale gray stuff splatter the doors. Dale just kept running, shouldering the last two aside. One rebounded and grabbed his left arm; he whirled and brought the machete down, severing the thing's hand, then kicking the deadhead away. He pried its hand from his arm, threw it aside, and told us to cover him while he unlocked the door.

As he fiddled with the keys, Tom shot the two Dale had barreled through.

The .38 jammed. He began to fieldstrip it. I looked nervously down the street, where the ones we'd tricked were shambling back, led by the gruesome Priest. Suddenly I felt something on my ankle. I looked down to see the legless one had dragged itself up the steps, and was bringing its gaping maw to bear on my lower calf. I freaked out and grabbed the Walther from Dale's holster; I think I was screaming as I fired into the zombie's peeling head. It died and let go, thick brown liquid draining onto its SAVE A SOUL – CLOSE A CLINIC t-shirt.

Then Dale had the doors open and we were in.

Later, Tom told me he had to pry the pistol from my fingers while Dale started up the generator and got things ready.

Then before I knew it Dale was there, in gloves and mask, saying he was ready.



I don't remember much of the actual operation, except that I asked Tom to wait outside... and the sound. The horrible sound the whole time we were in there:

Them, pounding on the doors, slow heavy thuds, relentless, unmerciful.

Dale was, as I've said before, an excellent doctor, and it was over soon. He made sure I didn't see what he put into the tiny wooden box Tom had carried in, and I didn't ask. The box, which had been beautifully crafted by Rudy V., would be taken back to the Colony and buried there.

There was one thing I had to ask, though, as morbid a thought as it was. I had to know if – I had to be sure Dale had – God, I can't even write it.

But he knew what I was asking, and as he stripped off the gloves he told me I didn't have to worry. None of the ones aborted had ever come back. The rest of us had to be cremated or have the brain destroyed upon death, or we'd resurrect.

How ironic, I thought, that this was how we would finally lay to rest the Great Debate. They weren't human enough to come back. Abortion isn't murder.



Getting out would be harder than getting in, but Dale had it all down. Tom would crawl out a side window, drawing them away from Dale and I. Dale would lock the front door while Tom and I covered him, then we'd all head for the jeep. I was, of course, still weak, and Tom didn't want to leave my side, but Dale told him it was the safest way, and he'd be sure I was okay. Tom reluctantly agreed.

It went down without fail. They were slow and easily confused, and by the time they saw two of us on the stoop and one by the jeep, they didn't know which way to turn. Tom shot a couple who were in our way. Once Dale had the doors locked, he pocketed the keys, took the Uzi from me, and I carried the little coffin as we ran for the jeep.

Once we were inside, Dale started it up and pulled away. They were already hammering on the sides, clawing the welded cage, drooling yellowish bile. One wouldn't let go as we drove off, and it got dragged fifty feet before its fingers tore off. Tom actually shouted something at it.

Dale was ready to speed out of town when I asked him to stop the jeep and go back. He hesitated, then both he and Tom turned to stare at me, as openmouthed as any deadhead. They asked why, and I just handed Tom our box, took the rifle, got out and started walking back.

They ran up on either side of me, Tom saying I was still delirious from the operation, Dale arguing I could start hemorrhaging seriously. I ignored them both as I saw the deadheads at the end of the street staggering forward now.

I had to wipe tears out of my eyes – I didn't even know I was crying – as I raised the rifle and sighted on the first one. I fired, and saw it flung backwards to lie unmoving in the street, truly finally dead. Tom and Dale both tried to take the rifle from me, but I shrugged them off and fired again. Tom argued we were done here, and there was no point in wasting ammo on these fuckers, but I told him I had to. Then I told him – told them both – why.

After that they left me alone until all the deadheads were gone but one – the Priest. My arms were shaking so bad I almost couldn't hold the gun steady, but he was close – thirty feet away now – and hard to miss. My first shot blew part of his neck – and whatever was left of the Collar – away, but the last one brought him down.

I dropped the gun, and Tom and Dale had to carry me back to the jeep.

But now I'm at home in bed, and Dale says I'm physically okay. I miss the child I'll never know, a pain which far outweighs the physical discomfort, but Jessie is here, and she hugs me a long time before Tom sends her to bed.

Now I'm smiling as I think of that street, and write this. Because I know that none of the women who come after me will have to endure more than the horror of giving up part of themselves.

ONE SHOT

After I got my vaccination, I felt safer.

Of course that didn't change the fact that I'd lost Jack.

We'd only been married for six months when the virus hit. I remember those first few anxious months barricaded away in our apartment, trying to be happy in a world that was anything but. We became news junkies. We explored delivery options. We ate our entire supply of canned goods and got by on whatever we could get after. Jack was usually the one who did our shopping runs; I was always nervous until he got home again. He'd be depressed because he'd only been able to get a few things we needed; the markets were running out of essentials. But we comforted each other, and we hung in there together.

At least it was never like it was in the movies; there was no mass collapse of society. There were even good things to come out of it: communities bonded together to protect themselves. We finally got to know all of our neighbors in the apartment complex; we learned which ones were dependable and would actually stick to their assigned shifts, and which ones were likeliest to endanger us all. I learned how to shoot, and the government kept us supplied with bullets. When I killed my first zombie, it was a strange experience: on the one hand, I was surprised with my own shooting skills and was proud for protecting myself and my group, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd just murdered someone's sister or wife or mother.

Things slowly eased up, though. Barricades built around cities worked, and smaller communities no longer had to adhere to such rigid protections. Enough people had died in the first wave that housing prices plummeted, and even though Jack was unemployed my job as an IT

specialist allowed us to buy a house, complete with its own nice backyard office. We couldn't possibly have afforded the place a year ago.

One day the government announced a vaccine. It wouldn't cure anyone who'd already been bitten by a zombie and turned, but it would protect the living; a bite would now be a treatable injury, not a death (and beyond) sentence.

We waited our turn. And waited.

One day Jack came to me and said it was time for him to contribute, that he could no longer in good conscience let me be the sole breadwinner. I agreed...until he told me he'd just taken a job with the newly formed City Patrol Corps. The CPC manned the barricades, took out approaching zombies, and disposed of the remains. I begged him not to take the job until he got vaccinated, but he told me that signing up with CPC would mean we'd *both* get jumped to the front of the vaccination line. His friend Armando was with the CPC, and said the work was easy and the pay was great.

He signed up. They gave him a day of training, told him the vaccine supply was still short but we'd get our shots next week. They threw him into the front lines.

He came home on his third day and rolled back his sleeve to show me the wound.

It wasn't deep, was barely bleeding...but he'd been surprised by a zombie that had come from *within* the city, quietly, marching up behind him when his partner was on a break. It had grabbed his arm and bitten him before he could do anything. He'd shot it, and then covered up the bite. Because, of course, if he'd admitted that, he would've been taken to a "quiet room" and shot in the head.

He'd come home, instead. He was already starting to feel feverish. He called and quit the job while he was still lucid.

I knew from all that news-watching we'd done that we had two days at the most until he turned. I also knew it was illegal *not* to report the bite.

I didn't care. I wasn't going to lose Jack, not this soon.

I tucked him into bed, ran to the bank, took out a substantial amount of cash, and then went to the hardware store. Twelve hours later, the backyard office was soundproofed and safe. My plan was simple: I'd keep Jack back there until they developed a way of curing zombification. I had no idea how I'd feed him, but I'd figure something out.

He died the following day. I dragged his body to the office, put a chain around his ankle for double safety, checked the boards over the windows and the lock on the door, and then I waited.

He turned an hour later. He was hungry when he awoke, looking pale and gaunt, and he lunged for me. The chain pulled him back and he started to wail. Alarmed, I slammed the door shut before any of the neighbors could hear. If I got caught, I was looking at a felony charge.

I kept him that way for a few weeks. I tried feeding him raw beef, but he slapped it aside and angrily and grabbed at me again...and again...and again. I began to wonder if I'd made a terrible mistake. In the meantime, I finally got my vaccination, so if I slipped up and he got to me, at least I'd survive.

Then my internet research began to lead me down a new rabbit hole: there was a lot of speculation about what would happen if a zombie received the vaccination. The government had made that completely illegal – it was just as big a crime as keeping a zombie – but they didn't say why. There were a lot of theories out there, but the most popular one was that it would return humanity to a zombie, but leave them with all of the rot and bodily damage they'd suffered. That might explain the criminal charge – even if

the victim survived all that agony, their resulting healthcare would drain resources *fast*.

I thought about that a lot. Jack hadn't been dead all that long; it was cold in the backyard office, so he hadn't suffered much rot yet. And his initial wound had been inconsequential.

I was willing to try it.

I had a friend who was a nurse; I told her my 85-year-old neighbor was bedridden but I could give her a vaccination. Hospitals and clinics were overwhelmed, so my friend didn't ask too many questions, just made sure I knew how to use a syringe.

I thought about the best way to do it. I'd have to distract him and be quick with the shot. Even though I'd been vaccinated, he could still kill me if I wasn't careful.

I came up with a plan. It was simple: I'd unlock the office door, let him come for me, then throw a steak into the corner. I knew he'd investigate. While his back was to me, I'd jab him, then step back and wait.

The plan actually worked. I got him the shot. I stood outside the door, waiting.

It didn't take long. The hunger faded from him. The expression of ravenous fury fell away. He dropped to the floor, the chain rattling. After a few minutes he looked up at me and called my name.

I began to cry. It was Jack, *my* Jack. I'd saved him.

He seemed weak, but I'd expected that. He said the chain was weighing him down. He wanted to get up and come back into the house. "Of course," I said, fishing the key to his handcuff out of a pocket. I had to wipe away tears as I unlocked him. He smelled bad, but I knew we could clean him up when he was inside.

As soon as the chain fell to the floor, he attacked. "I'm so sorry," he said, as he tore a chunk out of my shoulder, "but I have to do this."

I ran, made it to the house, locked all the doors. He's out there now, pounding on the sliding glass patio door, telling me he's sorry, that he loves me.

If anyone reads this, just know that there's a reason you shouldn't give the vaccine to a zombie: because it doesn't cure the hunger, but it brings back their minds. What I've just done *should* be a felony.

I just hope they let Jack live.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Morton is a screenwriter, author of non-fiction books, and award-winning prose writer whose work was described by the American Library Association's *Readers' Advisory Guide to Horror* as "consistently dark, unsettling, and frightening". She is the author of four novels and more than 150 short stories, a six-time winner of the Bram Stoker Award®, and a world-class Halloween expert. Her most recent books are the anthology *Weird Women: Classic Supernatural Fiction by Groundbreaking Female Writers 1852-1923* (co-edited with Leslie S. Klinger) and *Calling the Spirits: A History of Seances*; forthcoming in 2021 is the collection *Night Terrors & Other Tales* and *Weird Women 2*, and the weekly podcast *Spine Tinglers*. Lisa lives in the San Fernando Valley and online at www.lisamorton.com.