



Sometimes We Ran

Stephen Drivick

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A Story From the Zombie Apocalypse

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To Mom for always telling me to take chances.

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Prologue

How It All Started

“It’s not the end of the world.”

Dennis Armstrong murmured to himself as he crossed into the ornate lobby of his Dallas hotel. He had just gotten in from a business trip to Paris, and he was beat. His flight had been diverted twice: once for a sick pilot, and another time for some trouble with the plane’s engines. Dennis spent two hours in the terminal of some out-of-the-way airport in Spain with a crazy lady running around screaming and attacking people. He even tried to calm her down, and all he got for his trouble was a gaping hole in his arm where she bit him. The large-breasted airport security lady had apologized profusely as she bandaged the wound. The urge to scratch under the bandage was driving him crazy, but he knew he had to leave it alone or it wouldn’t heal. Dennis would worry about it later. Right now, he just hoped the hotel still had his reservation.

It was all worth it though, because tomorrow Dennis was going to be a very rich man. He sold used computer parts to customers around the world. His business partner and best friend, Jeff, had come up with this great idea to take apart broken computers and resell the good components. They started the company last year, with Jeff as the technical guy and Dennis as the sales muscle. Dennis was really good at selling stuff. Whether it was cars or refrigerators or used computer parts, Dennis could always talk them into buying more.

The French deal had been very lucrative, but the upcoming Chinese deal was going to blow it out of the water. Dennis had convinced some Chinese businessmen to buy most of his stock at a considerable profit. With this deal, Dennis might be able to take the rest of the year off. All he had to do was impress them at tomorrow’s meeting and he was all set.

Right now though, all he wanted to do was lie down for a little sleep. He had started feeling sick on the plane and now, here in Dallas, he felt worse. Even now he could feel his sinuses closing up, and his throat was a little sore. He just needed a little sleep and aspirin, and then he would be good as new in the morning.

“Next?”

Dennis walked up to the hotel’s check-in desk with his credit card in hand. He handed the card to the cute brunette clerk who was smiling ear to ear. Dennis attempted some small talk. “Hey. How’s it going?”

“It’s going great,” she said with a little Texas drawl. “Okay Mr. Armstrong. We have a single room with a king-sized bed and no smoking. Right?”

“Right. Put it on my company credit card.” He noticed her name was Cindi.

Her shirt was unbuttoned at the top, showing her wonderful cleavage as she typed like a madman on the desk terminal. Dennis thought he might invite her back to his room for a little post-business-deal romp in the sack. It would have to be after the deal though.

Business before pleasure, you know.

Cindi, the bodacious hotel clerk, handed Dennis back his credit card. "Okay, Mr. Armstrong. Your room is 1021. It's on the tenth floor." She put the electronic keys in a small paper folder, wrote the number down, and then handed it to Dennis. "Do you need any help with your bags?"

"No, I can manage. Thanks." His attention turned to the flat-screen television hanging on the wall behind Cindi. It was tuned into one of the cable news channels. The Egyptians were at it again. The screen was plastered with horrible scenes of sand-colored tanks attacking buildings and stern-faced soldiers clashing with civilians on the streets of Cairo. It looked like a real mess.

Dennis started getting his bags together. "How long has that been going on in Egypt?" he asked Cindi.

The pretty hotel clerk looked at the screen. "Oh, the Egypt thing. It's been going on all day. Terrible stuff. There were even reports of people biting each other. Imagine that."

"Biting?" Dennis walked away, shaking his head and rubbing his own bite wound. He never heard of people biting each other in a civil war.

The ride up to the tenth floor was uneventful, but by the time Dennis got to his room, he knew he was sick. The general aches and pains in his tired body had become little swords of fire in his joints. His sinuses were now full and hurting, and his skin was warm and clammy with fever. He felt like death.

After two tries, Dennis finally got the key to work. He stepped inside the room, and found it adequate.

Usually, when Dennis got to his hotel room, he would crank the air conditioning, flick on the TV, and kick back and relax. However, all he wanted to do now was curl up on the king-sized bed, and go to sleep. The AC would stay off tonight. Even though Dennis was burning with a low-grade fever, he was chilled to the bone.

Dennis threw his bags on the floor, kicked off his expensive shoes, and sat on the bed. He was so cold all of a sudden. He pulled the comforter off the bed, and wrapped it around his shoulders. It warmed him up a little bit, but he still shivered. It was time for a little medicine.

Dennis got up off the bed, and moved stiffly towards his luggage on the floor. He extracted his sweat pants, a white undershirt, his toiletries, and a large bottle of aspirin. Dennis was going to change, and then get some sleep.

Dennis moved slowly to the bathroom. He felt like an old man as he walked. This flu was really killing him. A couple of times, he had to stop and steady himself when he felt dizzy. He made it to the bathroom, changed into his sweats and undershirt, and took some of the generic aspirin. He was even able to brush his teeth and swirl a little mouthwash to kill the horrible sick taste in his mouth. He spit, and then looked at himself in the mirror.

“Jesus Christ!”

Dennis looked horrible. His skin had an awful gray pallor, and his eyes had turned a little red. He touched his face, not believing the reflection looking back at him. In the harsh light of the tiny hotel bathroom, he looked like some sort of monster. Dennis then felt a sneeze coming on.

He grabbed a tissue just as the sneeze exploded from his nose and throat. As he sneezed, he felt something slide out his nose, and land in the tissue. It also dripped onto the counter, and into the sink. Dennis blew his nose, coughed a little, then pulled the tissue away from his face to see the damage.

The tissue was covered in blood.

Dennis yelped and put the tissue back to his nose. It was still bleeding lightly. He was beginning to panic. He tried to make himself walk out to the phone and call for help, but he couldn’t seem to make his legs work. Instead, he sat on the toilet lid with a tissue on his nose trying to stop the nosebleed.

After about fifteen minutes, the bleeding stopped. Dennis felt weak and very sick, but he thought he’d be okay. The worst seemed to be over. He dragged himself out of the bathroom and lay down on the bed. He was burning with fever, and his mind was fuzzy. It was hard to focus.

Dennis found the television remote, and turned on the rather large flat-screen in the room. He flipped around checking out all the channels. The crisis in Egypt dominated the news. The situation had gotten worse, and the military had now declared martial law. Some recorded footage showed bloodied civilians swarming a government outpost. The attackers were biting some of the soldiers. Egypt had gone to hell.

Dennis flipped around to some other channels. There was more weird news; China was in the grip of a huge blackout, some city in Russia was having a civil emergency, and in London there were reports of some maniac in a subway station who was biting people on the neck. The whole world had gone nuts.

Dennis flipped around till he found a boring old movie. It was just the thing to put him to sleep so he could rest. Before he went to dreamland, he decided to call his business partner Jeff, who was flying in tomorrow for the meeting. Dennis knew he was too sick to meet the Chinese guys.

It took all of Dennis’s strength to dial his cellphone. The numbers swam before his eyes. After about three tries, he finally dialed Jeff’s number. His voice mail picked up.

After the beep, Dennis left his message. “Yeah... hey Jeff. It’s Dennis. I’m in Dallas. Look, I... I, uh, I’m sick with some sort of flu. You’ll have to meet the Chinese guys by yourself tomorrow, okay? Just come up to room 1021 and get the sales presentation. You’ll do okay. The Chinese dudes like you. If I feel better, I’ll join you. Okay? Any uh, questions, just give me a call.” It took all of Dennis’s concentration to leave the message. His mind was so foggy. He felt truly awful, and was feeling worse by the minute. Dennis felt weak, stuffed up, and wrung out.

He was also consumed by hunger.

It wasn't a normal hunger. Dennis almost felt like he was starving. It was almost like he was dying. It clawed at him like a wild animal. Dennis had never felt anything quite like this. He was even salivating.

Dennis rolled over and tried to sleep. The fever had gotten worse, and he could taste blood in his mouth. "Just got to get some sleep. I'll be okay in the morning," Dennis said to himself, as he turned off the light. It would be the last words he ever spoke before drifting off into a deep, dreamless slumber.

Many hours later, Dennis was up and walking around the room. Except it wasn't quite Dennis anymore. He had died a few minutes after midnight. It had been a tortuous death, full of fever, low moaning, bleeding, and convulsions. After a few hours of suffering, he finally stopped breathing and laid quiet.

Dennis stayed dead for about eighteen minutes.

At about twenty minutes past midnight, the body that had formerly been Dennis rose from the king-sized bed and started walking around the hotel room. He shambled around making a low groaning sound. There was no pulse, no heartbeat, and very slow and shallow breathing.

He was hungry.

The dead body that had been Dennis walked around the room looking for a meal. The hunger began to consume him, so he started moaning louder. By this time, his eyes were glowing a sinister red.

It was now after eight o' clock in the morning, and the city was waking up. The sunlight streamed in through the open blinds, and filled the room with light. The intense, morning light hurt the creature's eyes. It turned away from the window and faced the door.

"Housekeeping!" A maid called out from the hallway. She had a heavy Russian accent. The walking corpse perked up its ears, and then lifted its head to catch a scent. It took a long sniff, and the maid's scent filled its nostrils. It could smell her flesh. It even caught a good whiff of her blood. It was a wonderful smell. Salty, a little like the ocean. The creature began to salivate in anticipation of some tasty meat.

The corpse that had formerly been Dennis Armstrong, star salesman, walked towards the door. It curled its lip up in a smirk, till it looked like a little smile. The meal was on the other side, just waiting to be eaten.

The lock beeped, and the handle started to turn. The maid was coming in. After all, the "Do Not Disturb" sign was not on the door. The creature waited for the right time to strike.

The maid opened the door, and walked in with her vacuum cleaner ready. She was looking down, getting her supplies out. "Housekeeping. I clean now," she said, looking up to speak to the hotel guest. She had been taught by management to look guests in the eye. The maid took one look at those cold, dead eyes and started to scream. She was cut short by teeth ripping into her throat. The creature pulled the limp body of the maid into the hotel room, and began to feed in peace.

The zombie apocalypse had come to the United States.

Chapter 1

Sightseeing

Of all the things you could find on the road during a zombie apocalypse, the undead kids were always the worst.

I mean, the regular undead and the dogs were bad enough, but the kid versions really messed with your head. I watched from my hiding place among the gas pumps as the little walking corpse shambled around the parking lot. She had been a little girl, really cute and adorable. Her dress, or what remained of her dress, was a little pink frilly job with lace at the neck. She dragged her right leg behind her. The foot was nearly chewed off, and the bones were exposed. Her chest cavity was pretty much gone, and her lower jaw was missing. The only sound she could make was a horrible gurgling sound, like someone was pouring milk down her throat as she was trying to scream.

What was she, seven, eight years old? Damn shame. She's never going to grow up, go to school, or dance at a prom.

Never going to bring home a boy that pisses off her Dad.

I noticed she was clutching a headless doll. It was blood stained and extremely filthy. I think that detail unsettled me most of all. Sometimes you see the dead walking around clutching the last thing they ever touched. It could be an empty gun from their last battle, or a steak knife, or even something as mundane as a coffee cup. The kids usually have a teddy bear or some other favorite toy in their cold, dead hands.

The headless doll was a new one. I'd never seen a zombie holding one before.

I watched for a few more minutes. She didn't notice me among the gas pumps, so I guess she was pretty far gone. Usually these zombies catch on to fresh meat pretty quick and come running for a quick meal.

I knew what I had to do. I knew I had to put her down before she drew more of her undead friends to the gas station. I drew my gun and stepped out from my hiding place to put the little bastard out of her misery. She noticed me and began that horrible noise they all make. It's usually a high pitched squeal, or a low, menacing growl. Without her lower jaw, though, it was more of a low gurgle that raised goose bumps on my arm. No matter how many of these things I put down, that sound still causes the little hairs on my neck to stand up.

Then there's the eyes. They are usually yellow or red. The yellows are more common, but it's the rare reds that could be a problem. They're more violent and hungry, and will attack on sight. With Red-Eyes, you shoot first and run away quickly.

And you better hit them in the head. It's the only way to put them down. Just like in the movies. Sometimes that doesn't even work on the first try.

One of her eyes was gone; the other was yellow. She raised the arm without the doll and started dragging herself over to me, very slowly.

Sometimes these things can be pretty fast. I recall an incident with one a few weeks ago. It was a soccer mom, I think. I stumbled on her in another parking lot somewhere long ago. For a minute, I thought she was a survivor, until I saw her dead, yellow eyes and the fresh blood on her designer clothes. She had been feeding. Her victim was a younger girl, a teenager. I hoped it wasn't her daughter. Maybe her meal had been part of her carpool or something.

She was one of the fast ones. As soon as she saw me, she made an unholy shriek and ran in my direction. I was ready, and took her out with my rifle. It took two shots. I missed on the first, and hit her in the shoulder. The second shot got her right between the eyes. She was going so fast, she actually ran for a few more steps before falling. I put a bullet in her last meal too, just in case.

The little girl zombie at the gas station wasn't going anywhere fast. She could barely move under her own power. Besides her mangled right foot, most of the bones and muscles in her legs and lower extremities were either broken or missing. As I approached, I circled around her to assess the situation. The best she could do was turn slightly and moan. She was too far gone to be able to chase me.

The back of her head was mostly gone as well. How the hell was she still walking around? Some of these things can be tough customers. I've seen a few with missing limbs crawling on the ground to find their next meal. Others had the skin mostly peeled from their bodies, their skeletons exposed like a realistic Halloween costume. Sometimes, they're burned or crushed beyond recognition, but still walking around and feeding. Then there were the dogs.

Nobody figured that dogs could turn. They ate infected meat from the ones walking around, and then they turned into undead dogs. The turned dogs were always bad news. They're a hell of a lot faster, and they work in groups. It's good old-fashioned nightmare fuel. You must always avoid the dogs.

I followed the little girl zombie for a few seconds, getting ready to blow her rotting brains out. I also looked around to see if she was alone. I didn't want any of her undead buddies sneaking up on me. It was just her and me in this former gas station. A long time ago, people would stop here on the way to work to gas up their cars and continue on with their ordinary lives. Mom and Dad would fill up their coffee cups with inexpensive brew and the kids would buy their sugary snacks. Now the only remaining cars are the stripped hulks abandoned here when the fuel ran out. The coffee and sugary snacks are long gone. Mom and Dad and the kids are dead, or walking around feeding on the living as one big happy zombie family.

It really hurts to think about the old world, before it all went bad.

The little girl zombie stumbled, and fell at my feet. She reached for me in hunger. It might have been my imagination, but I almost saw her begging me to kill her and put her out of her misery. I put the gun up to her head. I wanted to tell her it would be okay, and that her perpetual nightmare was finally over. They are never grateful. They're just animals, living only to feed. I pulled the trigger, and her head exploded like an overripe melon.

Scratch another Yellow-Eye.

I turned my attention to the gas station. I took a quick look around to see if there are any more nasty surprises inside. You can never be too careful. Not in this new world.

The building was clear. The place, a virtual time capsule, was frozen at the exact time the stuff hit the fan. All the gas was, of course, gone. Also gone was most of the food and water. What was left was either spoiled and useless or spread on the ground. The floor was a macabre mixture of smashed food, garbage, and dried blood. A few spent shotgun shells were scattered on the black-and-white tiled floor. This place must have been a war zone when everybody tried to find safety. I could almost see the throng of people trying to buy or steal anything that wasn't tied down. The first few days of the outbreak were pure hell. I didn't find much: a few unopened bottles of water and a few batteries. Everything else was useless. The register was crammed full of old twenty dollar bills. Maybe someone could use them as toilet paper.

I found a few unopened packages of beef jerky near the cash register. Beef jerky is not my favorite, but you can't pass up a meal when it presents itself. I bit off a sizable portion, and started to chew. The dried meat was salty and felt a little like shoe leather in my mouth. I ignored the horrible taste, and swallowed. It went down hard, but the nourishment was welcome. I threw a few packages in my backpack. It might come in handy someday. I finished my little snack, and then started poking around the counter looking for more goodies.

I heard a noise behind me. Without thinking, I turned around with my handgun already drawn. All these weeks on the road running from the undead have honed my skills to a fine point. The slightest noise gets me ready for battle.

It's only a cat. I've drawn my weapon on a skinny, little gray cat with a big round face trying to eat a bloated sugar doughnut on the floor. One of its paws was mangled beyond repair. Like me, this little guy has had to struggle a bit to survive.

So far, all the cats that I have encountered have been normal. I bent down, and extended my hand palm up to show that I was friendly. The cat would have nothing of it, and arched its back. It showed its teeth and howled a little bit. I guess it had gone a little feral.

Okay, little fella. I'll leave you alone. Just to show him I wasn't a bad guy, I ripped a few pieces of beef jerky into bite-sized chunks, and dropped them in front of the cat's nose. Hunger overcame fear, and it pounced on the small meal like a playful kitten. *Enjoy, little buddy. Maybe one day you can help me out of a jam.* I waved goodbye to my little feline companion, and walked outside into the fading sunlight.

I thought about staying the night here. My legs and back were aching, and I could use a nice long rest. However, the little girl zombie may not have been alone. I decided to walk on down the road. When it gets dark, I'll find a place to bed down and rest. You do not want to travel at night. Things get much worse at night.

As I walked away from the gas station, I noticed the sign. It said \$3.58/gallon for regular unleaded. Not a bad price for gas during an apocalypse.

Chapter 2

Another Day On the Road

Another bad thing about the end of the world: the dreams.

Cities burning. Long lines of the undead walking out of them. I am alone with a bow and arrow, trying to put them down. It's not working.

Slowly they approach. As they get closer, I recognize my Mom and sister. My Dad shows up as well, although he died long before the outbreak. I fire arrow after arrow, but they keep coming. I am running out of arrows and the situation is grim. Then I catch a glimpse of her.

It's Gia, the woman I married. Her face is nothing more than a skull, but it's her. I know the dress she's wearing and I smell her body spray. She always hated snooty perfume. She gets closer and closer. Her jaws open to take a bite as the other undead raise their voices in a shrill shriek of victory.

And then ...

I jump awake from the nightmare. I was back in the real world, covered in a thin film of sweat with my heart pounding in my chest. It's okay. It was only a dream. I got up and took a look around. The sun was just coming up. It was that between-time in the early morning; not quite light, but with the night and all its horrors fading away. Now I remember. After my little sightseeing tour of the gas station, I found this little sanctuary. I walked a few more miles down the road till the sun started going down, and then stopped here for a little rest. Like I said, you don't want to travel at night.

It was an automobile body shop. The doors to the service bays were sturdy and somewhat zombie-proof. It was a good place to stay the night. In one of the bays was a really slick American muscle car that was just about complete. It was a really nice car that even looked drivable. I thought about taking it, but what do I do about gas and oil? Not to mention it wasn't exactly subtle, painted bright orange and all. I bet the exhaust could wake the dead.

Wake the dead. That's a good one.

I opened the sturdy American-built steel door and sat inside. It even smelled new. This would have been a great car for a cruise-in or car show. Speeding down the road with your best girl at your side. Really sad. It's going to sit here, maybe forever, till it rusts back into the earth. I debated about taking this glorious machine out for a ride. (Hey, if you have to fight the undead, might as well do it in style.) The fact is, though, the car was a liability. The loud exhaust would attract too much attention from bad people, both living and dead. As a former car guy, I decided to try to slow down the ravages of Mother Nature. I rooted around the shop, found a tarp, and covered up the sleeping beast. Maybe someone in the future can put this dinosaur from a simpler time to good use.

My thoughts turned to breakfast. I grabbed my backpack and took an inventory. A couple cans of vegetables and assorted soups, the bags of beef jerky from the gas station last night, a couple of candy

bars, oatmeal cream pies, crackers, and a half jar of peanut butter were stuffed in my backpack. A few rolls of mints and a few bottles of water, too. It didn't seem like enough. I was going to have to find more. Easy-to-find foodstuffs were getting a little rare. Most of the ready made and canned foods was already used up. You could usually find more on the interstate, what with all the abandoned trucks and cars, but that's dangerous. The undead really liked the interstate, so food runs could be suicide.

I settled for crackers and peanut butter. A small meal, but it felt like Thanksgiving.

Actually, I was lucky. I had at least a little food to keep me going. There were reports of people resorting to dogs and cats after the food ran out. After that, people turned to rats and mice. After the rats and mice ran out, there were reports of cannibalism. That was mostly in the big cities. Kind of glad I didn't see any of that. I think I'd rather put a bullet in my brain than eat my neighbor.

After breakfast, I always tried to give my weapons a quick once-over. I looked over my handgun first. Clean and ready to go. To tell you the truth, I have no idea what kind of gun I have been using, but it has been flawless so far. I "liberated" it from a gun dealer along with a few boxes of hollow-point bullets. My rifle was next. Again, I do not know what type, but I believe it was some kind of semi-automatic. I took it off a dead policeman. Actually it was a mostly dead policeman. The ammunition is tougher to find, so I try to use the weapon sparingly. Clean and fully loaded, it's ready to go as well. I didn't know anything about guns before all this stuff happened, but I learned quick. If you don't learn quickly, you die out here.

Next are my edged weapons. I carry a large knife and a modern tomahawk. The tomahawk is all kinds of cool; hardened steel with a shiny chrome finish. It has a very sharp axe head, good for hacking and chopping. The other side comes to a sharp point, good for piercing soft, undead skulls. It's a great weapon. It's saved my life more times than I can count.

I also had a secret knife enclosed in a flap in the bottom of my backpack. It was a small folding job with a sharp blade and a cool carbon-fiber handle. I reached into my backpack, and felt the small lump in the bottom that reassured me it was still there.

It was my last chance, close-in weapon in case things got really bad. It could be shoved into a zombie's eyesocket or cut the throat of a living adversary. So far, it has never seen the light of day.

Time to go. It would be nice to stay in the body shop. It seems relatively safe and out of the way. The truth is, you have to keep moving or the undead will find you. I don't know how, but they always seem to find my nighttime hiding places no matter how secure they seem. You have to keep moving to survive. Even as I stood outside ready to start walking again, I saw a few scattered zombies in the distance walking up the road towards the shop. Looks like they found me again. I take care to try and get rid of all the evidence that someone camped here, and then hit the road.

It was really a nice morning. What month was it? October? I lost track of days long ago. The air was cool, with a faint wisp of dewy fog hanging over the grass. If it weren't for the zombies, it would have been a great day for a drive in the country. How long has it been since normal? Eight months, maybe. Somehow it seems longer. I remember sitting at my desk at home, working, when strange reports of group violence started coming up on the news. I mostly ignored them and continued to

work. I had a deadline, and my client was waiting. My wife Gia kept calling me, asking what we should do. I told her I didn't know what to do. Besides, it would probably blow over. Then the reports got even more serious.

The violence got worse, and then it spread. Suddenly the army got called out, and they began telling people to go to designated shelters like schools and hospitals. Then the world really turned upside down.

The designated shelters became zombie breeding grounds. One infected human could start an outbreak in the shelter. Large groups would then break out and roam the countryside looking for food. Things rapidly got out of control. Governments fell, cities burned, and the trappings of society quickly fell apart. After the Internet and power grid fell, it was panic time. The highways quickly clogged, and then became zombie buffets. It was pure hell. During all the chaos, Gia made one last call. She was going to try and leave work and go to a shelter. It was the last time I talked to her or any living person on my cellphone. I never saw her again. By the time I got to the shelter, it was empty. I only had time to collect a few supplies and weapons and get the hell out of town before it was overrun.

I hung around my hometown for a while looking for Gia, but I never found her. Then I walked around nearby towns for a few weeks looking for any normality. I found nothing but dead towns, hungry zombies, and desperate survivors.

One day, I started walking west. It was the only logical direction left. The other directions were all dead and gone. I've been walking ever since looking for a safe place and surviving day-to-day for Gia. Maybe she's alive somewhere, but I don't hold out much hope. She is probably dead or one of those things. After seeing what these things are like, I really hope she's dead.

Chapter 3

Claire

I walked for a few hours till I found another gas station. That's how I measured my walking. I go from gas station to gas station. Usually I find some useful stuff, but as I got further and further away from my hometown, the stations get emptier. I considered making a switch to supermarkets or mini malls for my distance markers.

My legs and feet were burning with dull pain. I didn't know if it was middle age, or the new boots I was wearing. It was my third, no, fourth pair since the outbreak. I carefully leaned my rifle against a nearby gas pump, and removed my right boot to relieve some of the pain. I had a really strange thought that my right foot was bigger than my left, or maybe the boot was a little smaller.

As I leaned against one of the gas pumps rubbing my aching foot, I began to miss my car again.

It was quite an automobile, a bright red sporty job with a convertible top and black interior. I fitted a performance exhaust, so it roared like a lion when I stepped on the gas. I don't know if it added a single horsepower, but that exhaust was pure sex. My poor car did not deserve its fate. I had to abandon it at the school/shelter when an army of the undead broke through the chain link fence to feed upon the survivors in the parking lot. I broke from the car and ran. I hope somebody somewhere is getting some use out of my abandoned car. Likely it's still sitting there as masses of zombies orbit it for a meal. Yeah, it deserved better than that. Gia loved that car. She looked real good in it, too. She loved to put the top down and take long rides on mountain roads. Her long red hair flowed in the breeze as we sped along burning expensive premium unleaded. I used to sit in the driver's seat and wonder how I got this beautiful creature to marry me. My goofy ass was able to snag this goddess. For God's sake, we met on an Internet dating site.

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I stopped them cold. You can't get too sentimental about the old days when things were normal. You get sentimental, you go soft, and then you give up. Then little girl zombies come in the night and eat your guts out.

I put my boot back on and turned my attention to the abandoned gas station. It was picked clean. The pumps were even stripped of all their parts. Why would anyone steal gas pump parts? I guess nothing made sense at the end. I stopped to ponder this thought, when something in the grass caught my eye. It turned out to be a silver plated revolver with rubber handles. It was pretty small, around a .38 caliber or so. Although not a great weapon against a crowd of undead, it might make a nice last resort weapon. When all hope is lost and the bad guys are closing in, it could serve as a good close-in gun. Or if things went real bad, a great way to end it all. I shivered at that thought.

I picked it up and saw that it was fairly clean and fully loaded. The former owner never fired a shot. I stuck it in one of the pockets of my cargo pants and started to walk on down the road. There were no bad guys at the gas station, for which I was thankful. The station had been a nice, refreshing

break. It might have been my imagination, but the numbers of the undead seemed to be dropping. The little girl zombie I offed last night was the first close encounter in a while. Most of the time, I saw small groups of two or three staggering on the road. The really large groups had evaporated. Maybe they're going away. Maybe things can start to get back to normal.

I wasn't finding too many survivors either. All the places I stopped at were empty. I sometimes found evidence of a survivor, but most of the time, the discarded belongings were covered in dust and mold from months of disuse. The last living person I encountered was another guy on the road who tried to take my stuff. It didn't end well. I was starting to think I was the last living being on earth.

Where was everybody? Maybe they were hiding, or trying to build a community somewhere. I wish I could find a friendly community or two. I was getting a little lonely.

So lonely in fact that I would talk to myself or other inanimate objects to occupy my mind. I also made up games like counting my steps as I walked, or making lists of objects in my mind to check off like road bingo. Anything to keep myself sane and walking. I didn't think I was crazy ...yet.

Sometimes though the post-zombie world can be too quiet. So quiet in fact, that you can actually hear your inner voice. At first, the voice encourages you to keep going. It says you're doing well, and everything will be okay. After a while, the voice starts to turn. It tells you all hope is lost. It tells you to lie down.

It tells you to give up. That little voice had been getting a little louder as of late.

Just keep walking. There's got to be people and safety somewhere. I kept telling myself that, over and over.

I walked a few more miles into the outskirts of a small town. My grip tightened on my rifle, and my senses went into overdrive. Small towns could be bad news. Large groups of undead and turned dogs sometimes congregated in small towns. Before you knew it, you were running for your life from a large group. It happened to me before, and it's not a pleasant experience.

An intersection appeared ahead of me, two state roads crossing on the outskirts of town. Beyond the intersection were brick buildings on either side of the road. When the town was younger the buildings were banks, clothing shops, and delis. Now, they were probably upscale shops and restaurants after a small-town urban renewal. I could make out new parking spots and potted trees lining the street. To my right was a busted-up shopping mall. To my left was a garage and junk yard. Plenty of places for old Mr. Zombie to hide and pounce.

The intersection itself was a scene of horror. Several cars were smashed together where the two roads intersected. Some of the cars were burned and gutted. A small sedan was flipped on its roof in the strip mall driveway to my right. There were even a couple of wrecked motorcycles. Even in this small town, panic gripped everybody. As I took in the destruction, I heard a familiar sound.

A low moan came from the road ahead of me. I couldn't see them yet, but I bet there was a baddie or two waiting for me in the intersection. I ducked behind a junked pick up on the left shoulder of the road near the edge of the salvage yard. It was time for my handy-dandy zombie spotting binoculars. I put them up to my eyes and peered through the polarized lenses. I turned the knurled knob, and two zombies appeared in focus before my eyes.

One was a big fat one. Honestly, he looked like the kind of guy you needed a forklift to move. He was easily over 500 pounds. Chubbsey-Wubbsey looked relatively intact and hungry. He had on a mechanic's shirt, so I assumed he was from the junkyard/service station. The other one was a little more dramatic. It looked like someone took the front side of his body and dragged it over a cheese grater. I could see his skull and ribs, but from the back he looked normal. He walked with a kind of bouncing gait, shaking his arms around. His head bobbed back and forth a little, too. He was wearing the last outfit he would ever wear: no shirt, jean shorts, and flip flops. He looked like he was headed to the beach. He was also making an ungodly noise somewhere between a scream and a laugh. I named him Jean Shorts.

As I scoped out the two baddies in the intersection, the binoculars suddenly went dark.

I dropped the glasses from my eyes just in time to see an ugly woman zombie standing in front of me, waiting to strike. I didn't have time to react. I fell backwards on the road, as she stood over me, preparing to battle me to the death. She leaned down to start her meal. As she lunged to take a bite and add me to her undead entourage, I worked my tomahawk out of its holster and drove it into her skull. She screeched and tried to get away.

Stupid! How could I be so stupid? I let my guard down. However, I didn't panic. Just don't let them bite you, and drive something into their soft, melon-like heads. These close encounters can be scary, but if you don't panic, you'll be okay. Still, the hand-to-hand combat left me a little shocked. I got to my feet, with my heart beating in my ears, and my breathing going full bore. I looked down at my new friend. She was still alive and kicking even with a hole in her head. I didn't drive the tomahawk all the way home.

She used to be an old woman. I guessed her age at about sixty to sixty-five years old. She had long, greasy hair down to the middle of her back. Her face was intact, but sunken and skeletal. There was a rope of pearls around her neck. Her eyes were bright red. I hated the red-eye ones. They seemed to be superhuman. Sometimes they wouldn't stay down.

This particular Red-Eye wasn't getting up any time soon. My tomahawk had done a pretty good job, but it wasn't complete. I pulled my handgun and finished her off; Now she was dead. I turned and started to collect my stuff. I located my binoculars and tomahawk and put them back on my person. That's when I heard more growling. I looked up to see another zombie standing on the cab of the wrecked pick-up, crouched and ready to pounce. This one had been a fifteen or sixteen-year-old boy. Very intact. He was wearing a concert T-shirt, jeans, and some fancy sneakers. The only problem I noted was a broken ankle. He looked like a formidable feeder. These Red-Eyes are the alphas of the zombie universe. I have seen these guys chase prey for miles. Sometimes they even worked together to get their meal. This young one had been the old woman's companion.

He launched off the pick-up in full zombie-attack mode.

With his broken ankle, he couldn't get a good leap. It was clumsy and avoidable. I moved aside, and he slammed into the ground face first. He got up quick, but I put him down with my gun. By this time, all the commotion with the two Red-Eyes had gotten the attention of Chubbsey-Wubbsey and Jean Shorts. They turned my way, and started coming slowly down the street. I wasn't going to fool around with these guys. I moved my rifle into the ready position, and took a defensive stance in

the middle of the street. The first contestant would be Fat Boy. One shot in the middle of his large, round face and he went down heavily in the middle of the road. Next, it was time to send Jean Shorts to hell. I paused for a minute. He was going to be tougher to hit, as he walked with a slight bounce in his step. He made a horrible sound, almost sounded like a maniacal laugh. It took two shots, but Jean Shorts went down. I took a quick scan around the area. All was quiet. Still I didn't let my guard down. That was a good way to get overrun. Doing my best Navy SEAL imitation, I approached the intersection. Still quiet. Then I heard something come up behind me. Knowing my luck, it was probably a dog or another Red-Eye.

Please don't let it be a dog.

To tell you the truth, I almost shot first, without looking. However, I paused with my finger off the trigger as I turned around to face my attacker.

"Don't shoot! Please don't shoot!"

It was human speech. I didn't lower my weapon. It was best not to let my guard down. Maybe these things have learned to talk.

It was a girl. She was about twenty to twenty-five years old. She was a little thing, about five-foot-nothing and about a hundred ten pounds or so. Short auburn hair with pink highlights framed her face. She was wearing a slightly-too-big denim jacket, a white blouse, and designer jeans. She was also a little dirty, and she smelled pretty bad. However, her eyes were clear. She was a survivor. At least, I hoped she was a survivor.

"Please don't shoot me," she said, stepping closer. She was crying now. She started to raise her hands. "Look, I'm okay, not a zombie. My name is Claire."

Curiosity got the better of me, and I went in for a closer look.