

The Overpass

By John Lemut

I lost track of the days. Once I fled the colo, I started walking west again. The colo seemed like the perfect refuge; I kept thinking of it as a technology-age fortress. But things had started to fall apart even before the attack; it would've been time to move along soon enough anyway.

It would be days between encounters with another person. I wasn't so lucky with zombies; I'd usually run across at least one a day. You have to put them down. If you don't they'll just follow you at their leisure, moaning all the way, attracting more as they go.

I found myself traipsing through a large forest. I'd walk until I felt tired, foraging whatever I could to supplement the few provisions I was able to save, and then crash for maybe an hour of uneasy sleep at a time. There's no quick and easy way to fortify your position in the woods. I took chances, just plopping down against a tree or in some brush. But you can usually hear them coming. Even with their throat ripped out, they make plenty of noise shuffling through the underbrush. Not always, though, hence the uneasy sleep.

At least a couple weeks after I escaped the colo I emerged from the forest and began following a six-lane road. The Mississippi was between me and the colo, so I guessed I was in Missouri. Just as night was falling, I saw dirty smoke in the distance. As I got a little closer, I made out a highway overpass with a few fires dotted

along its length. Zombies freeze if it gets cold enough, but they can't make fire. I've heard they're actually afraid of it. With so many fires going, either I was coming up on the aftermath of some awful accident or struggle, or there were people up there.

As I approached the overpass, I stepped lightly and tried to stay out of direct sight. When I got within a couple hundred feet, I could hear fires popping, voices...and an occasional laugh. I was so enthusiastic at hearing more than just one or two voices, I ran parallel to the overpass so I could climb the embankment and get on the roadway. I hopped the guardrail and slowed to a jog when my soles hit road. Silhouettes were scattered across both sides of the roadway – there must have been a dozen people. I smiled, raised my hand to wave, and just as I was about to open my mouth to greet them, I tripped and fell right on my face with a grunt.

Glass smashed from ahead of me and the voices fell silent. I had a mental image of a startled person dropping their Mason jar full of moonshine. A moment later, I lifted my head and saw one of the silhouettes running toward me. He had a long axe in his hands. When he got a bit closer, I hear him say "Thunder" with some urgency every few steps. I rolled onto my back and sat up, gingerly touching my face. I had left behind some face skin on the pavement.

I realized I was moaning – clearly not appropriate. It took me another moment to shake off the fall and make myself speak: "Wait! I'm a *person!*"

I tried to get up, only to stumble and fall on my ass. I put my hands out and begged the approaching man with the axe to stop. He didn't slow; he was now screaming one syllable with every step, rhythmically: "Thunder! Thunder! Thunder!"

I tried to reach for my own weapon, but one end of it was pressed against the roadway, pushing it

against the harness I used to attach it to my pack, keeping it firmly and uselessly on my back. I glimpsed past the axe maniac and saw three others now running toward me. They were yelling, too.

The axe man was very close now and shifted his grip on the axe to swing it. I rolled to my right, got to my feet and freed my weapon in one quick move as the axe man ran past. He never swung, just charged past where I had been sitting. My four and a half pound weapon was in my tense grip, ready to swing or jab.

The axe man stopped and turned back toward me, his axe held loosely down at his side. He was puffing from the run, but was otherwise calm. He spoke: "I say 'thunder,' you say..."

"...What?"

The others reached us, and I turned toward them quickly: two men and a woman. None held a weapon. I lowered mine slowly. The woman yelled, "Tim, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"Oh relax. I wasn't going to kill him once he spoke," the axe man said. "But he didn't answer the challenge properly." Tim turned back to me with a half-smile and scolded, "When I say 'thunder,' you say 'flash.' Thunder – flash. Get it?"

I was so confused and filled with adrenaline I couldn't speak. One of the other men said to me, "Hey, guy, just relax. We're friends. Tim's trying to be cute. It's some old World War II code the Americans used."

Tim held his ground: "Bullshit cute. The Allies used to say 'thunder' as a challenge to identify friendlies. The response, 'flash,' kept you alive, because if you said anything else, you'd get shot."

The woman shot back, "Zombies can't talk. You don't need a secret code."

The bickering calmed my nerves a bit and I finally said something: "Shouldn't 'flash' come first? I mean, first you see lightning...then you hear thunder."

Tim started walking back to the fires and muttered loudly enough so I could hear, "I should have just killed this smartass." The woman and the man who hadn't spoken followed him. She continued scolding Tim.

"I'm Baines," the remaining man said with his hand out.

I shook it and asked, "World War II, huh? Wasn't that like a century ago?"

"Yeah, just about ninety years. Come on," Baines motioned toward his camp, "let's get warm. Tim! Get back here and rig the trip line."

* * *

Baines brought me close to a fire, introduced me to a few people whose names I forgot as soon as I heard them, and had someone take a look at my face. As this "nurse" tended to me, I fell asleep and stayed asleep for nearly a day. They could have lied; it could have been three days. I hadn't slept so well since my early days at Camp Perry.

I woke up with a blanket over me, the sun was ready to set, and I had to piss badly. When Baines saw me moving, he came over and led me to a row of three portable toilets. I climbed inside the one that was UNOCCUPIED and emptied my bladder. Even though the light was fading, I could see the road running twenty-five feet beneath the overpass; the base of the portable toilet was broken away as well as the roadway directly under it. They even cut away the rebar. As I zipped up, I thought it was a pretty smart setup.

Baines was waiting a respectful distance away from the toilets and offered a quick tour of the camp. "It's a pretty simple set up. We have the three shitters set up here, on the outskirts, for privacy and the smell. Then we have our wood and other main supply stores;

we each take what we need – and only what we need – and we all pitch in to restock. Past that, we have a few hovels, or shacks, if you will, on this side. The other side is pretty much all hovels with some areas for fires and commiserating.

“There are three planks set up to cross back and forth across the two sides – it’s only a couple feet, but when you’re carrying wood, the planks make a world of difference. We set up trip lines some distance from the camp as you found out,” Baines pointed to my face. “A zombie starts walking up the road, it triggers the alarm system, gives us plenty of time to react. When a trip line gets tripped, it drops glass bottles or tin cans to the road right in the middle of camp so we hear: glass for the south lines, cans for the north. They get tripped all the time. So far we’ve been lucky and it’s only been one or two zombies at a time, easy enough to take care of. I imagine you know this already, but zombies don’t notice things like trip lines, and even if they did, they can’t pick up their feet.

“In the event of an emergency, you know, fire, tornado, cabin decompression, uh...multiple zombie attack, that kind of thing, we can pull the planks to keep the zombies on one side, or just to split up their numbers. We also have easy egress using the road if a large group comes from the north or the south. If things get totally fucked and we get zombies all around us, we have four rope ladders off every side of the overpass we can deploy and climb down.

“A couple miles to the north there’s a small town, mostly empty. There’s a larger town to the south about four miles: less empty, but better supplies. There’s a clean river and lots of farmland not far to the west and a forest with plenty of wildlife to the east.

“We have twenty-three people here right now: thirteen men, seven women and three kids – that’s people under the age of thirteen. You’d be twenty-four,

that is if we agree you can stay... and you want to.” We walked as my tour, safety lecture, and quasi-invitation to stay went on. By the end, we were at the northeast corner of the camp, the opposite end and side from where we began. I was invited to sit by a fire burning in a steel drum where five men and women were already seated; Baines joined them. As I sat, I tried to remember the last time I saw so many living people in one place.

I decided it was in Indiana before I found the colo. They were heading east, a group of seven. Nobody goes east. “Have you been bitten?” It was the oldest looking man around the fire who asked me accusingly.

I had been through this drill before. I wished I had been stricter about it on more than one occasion. I stood, stripped to my underwear, and slowly turned around with my arms out to the sides. Some places want you to strip completely, but these people were too modest or naïve to insist. Satisfied grunts told me I could dress.

“What are you carrying?” Tim asked me this. I hadn’t noticed he was around the fire until he spoke.

He meant weapons. People only cared about weapons now. “Aside from the steel on my back, I have a nine milimeter pistol. No ammo.”

“What can you do?” Baines asked.

“I can tie a noose,” I said absentmindedly. Expressions ranging from slight amusement to fear flickered in the firelight. “I can do anything.”

“Do you want to stay?” A woman who had a small face and an even smaller voice asked this. She looked kind, like somebody’s mother. I tried to imagine her making breakfast for her kids on a weekend in a kitchen with a stove and a refrigerator. I had some trouble seeing it.

I knew the question was coming, but I hadn’t actually stopped to think about it. After an

unintentionally long pause I told them, "I'll stay for a while."

Baines stood up. "We have to talk first. Why don't you head down there," he pointed toward the other end of the overpass, "and get yourself something to eat. There's some raccoon being grilled. It's not too bad." Baines gave a smile that was really more of a grimace.

I easily walked away, led by my stomach.

Baines was right, the raccoon was okay. While I gnawed on a leg bone that the cook handed me from a raccoon on a spit, one of the three children in the camp was peeking at me from behind the nearest pieced together shack. I gauged his age at eight. His left ear was deformed, probably from birth. It was withered and smaller than his other ear, but it stuck out farther. If that was the extent of his deformities, he should count himself lucky.

I found myself staring at the child, trancelike, when Tim sat down next to me. I was seated on a small crate, so for him to fit, Tim practically sat on my lap. Even then, only half his weight was over the box. "How's the 'coon?"

"Just fine."

Tim breathed in deeply through a badly congested nose and out his mouth with a sigh. "Well...you can stay. It wasn't unanimous, but you got my vote."

I nodded, tossed the leg bone over the side of the overpass, and stood up quickly. Tim was unprepared for the move. Most of his weight not centered over the crate caused it to tip, spilling him to the pavement. He rolled once and started to laugh when the suddenness wore off.

I stood over him and extended my hand to help him up. "Good stuff," he said when he was on his feet. "So, you said you have a pistol. Can you shoot?"

“I’m decent from up to fifty feet, but hitting a zombie in the head with a pistol shot isn’t easy. I never had the discipline to keep or properly shoot a rifle, but I can hold my own. Bullets being so scarce, I’ve been using the steel for a while now. No reloading.”

“Speaking of ‘the steel,’ I only saw it briefly when you were about to attack—”

“Defend,” I corrected.

“—me with it. Mind if I take a look?”

I unfastened the simple harness and pulled the steel off my pack like a ninja drawing his katana, but this was no sword. Tim took it from me and almost dropped it. “That’s fuckin’ heavy. What the hell do you carry this for?”

“This is the best thing I’ve found yet. It’s called a ‘Fubar.’ It’s only a foot and a half long, which is nice, being so compact, but the heft makes even half-hearted swings count. On one end you have a pry bar which I’ve stabbed through more than one zombie’s head. I also use it to force doors, and as a lever...great for prying up manhole covers. The other end I use more frequently. On one side there’s a hammer head, also excellent for killing zombies, cracks their skulls like an egg. You can break through a brick wall with it, given enough time. On the other side there’s that double-tiered jaw system with teeth. That longer one will go into a zombie like a syringe—nice and easy—plus, it’s perfect for pulling stuff loose: wires, boards, rebar, you name it.”

“You should have been a salesman,” Tim said, taking a couple practice swings and thrusts.

The cook walked up to me and demanded, “Where’s that bone.” It was not a question.

I pointed off the edge of the overpass. He got very close to me. “I’m going to make raccoon stock. You ever had raccoon stock?” I shook my head, but kept my eyes fixed on his. Tim held my weapon impotently out of reach. “It’s delicious. But I need raccoon bones to

make raccoon stock. You do that again and I'll send you over the side to fetch it."

He was right; I was wasting food. "It won't happen again."

The cook stormed back to his fire. Tim came close and stood by my side. "I'm glad we didn't let him vote."

"How is the raccoon stock?" I asked.

The reply came without hesitation: "It's delicious." Tim handed my steel back to me. "You're on duty tonight. Baines and I'll be watching. We want to make sure you can handle yourself. Remember, cans mean north and glass means south," Tim pointed so there was no confusion. "Leave the bodies until light and re-rig the line as soon as you can."

* * *

I sat in the middle of the camp, equal distance from either trip line. Baines and Tim were each at an end of camp watching an approach in case I totally dropped the ball. Perhaps they thought I would fall to my death as I went to meet the threat.

It was a long night, partly because although I was surrounded by people, they avoided me. I spotted the other two children running in and out of a shack, one boy and one girl. They would toss small sticks inside the shack, then go inside and throw them back outside. It sounded like they were keeping score, but I couldn't decipher the rules. They both looked older than the boy with the bad ear who had disappeared.

I tried to count the camp's inhabitants, but found it rather difficult. People would move from one fire to another constantly, and from a distance I couldn't make out much more than silhouettes. I would have sworn there were more than twenty-three of them.

Breaking glass instantly hushed everyone. As I got up I was very impressed by the group's quick reaction. Glass meant south, and I could tell from the direction of the sound that the line for the side I wasn't on had been tripped. I jumped up on the middle plank to cross to the other side of the overpass and felt it bow a little under my weight. I passed some of the supplies storage and the smaller grouping of hovels; one was actually a canvas tent in pretty decent shape. I saw Tim, mostly hidden, crouched between two of the makeshift structures, his axe laid across his arms, ready to pounce if something happened to me.

"Hi, Tim," I called as I ran past.

The zombie squirmed on the ground and I realized it had tripped at almost the exact spot where I had taken a digger the night before. It had been a woman once. It stood by putting its palms on the pavement and shuffling its feet toward the hands. When it straightened its body, it lost its balance and stumbled, but managed to remain upright.

I slowed to a trot. It was wearing a faded, torn, and stained argyle sweater and a cross hanging from a thin gold necklace around its neck. I wondered how that happened, like an unbent piece of straw driven through a tree by a tornado. It had shoulder-length hair that may have been blonde once with a few twigs stuck in it. Its face was mostly unmarred and quite clean. What did she do before all this? Librarian? Accountant?

It finally noticed me and moaned. In stride, I swung my steel from below and hit it under the jaw with the flat side of the hammer/jaws end. The zombie left its feet and fell flat on its back like it slipped on ice. Bits of its tacky blood and flesh rained down on it a moment later. Its jaw was shattered, and it was disoriented; the feet still moving like it was walking. I stood to one side of its head and swung in a high,

exaggerated arc, planting the longer jaw right in the middle of its forehead. It stopped moving. Finally dead.

Her hazel eyes stayed open, looking at me, seeing nothing.

Tim came up to me as I was working the steel free. Sometimes it gets caught. I put my foot on its face and choked my grip closer to the steel's head. It popped loose and dripped.

"How lavish," he said dryly. "And you didn't say 'thunder.'"

I felt a little giddy. "Do I get the job, mister?"

"Rig the line back up and continue your watch. The night's not over yet."

The night was over. There were no more disturbances. The people in the camp were a little less cold to me. I saw Tim and Baines walking around, no longer watching over my shoulder. I guess I proved myself. I caught the little boy with the bad ear peeking at me again, but he vanished once I took notice of him.

The cook placed a bowl in my hands and walked away without a word. I tasted it. "It's delicious," I said. Someone laughed briefly.

* * *

The next day I worked with three others. We limbed dead or felled trees and dragged the trunks back to the overpass. We bucked the trunks, split the logs, and took turns hauling small batches up to the overpass in a heavy-duty canvas tarp using a double pulley system.

The day after, that I went back and forth to the river filling and hauling a variety of containers on a wagon. The bridge over the river was in awful shape. It looked barely passable, like it survived a botched demolition attempt, probably an effort to keep zombies

on one side of the river. Too bad they were already everywhere before the failed endeavor.

The day after that I took a dip in the river, set some lines for fish, and then picked mostly corn and soybeans from the farms.

The day after that I went back to the forest to check and set some traps. I flung my steel at a rabbit, but just missed it.

That was the way it went; those were the main jobs the able-bodied rotated. Less fun were jobs like covering the shit piles beneath the toilets with dirt and grass; or body removal which was, thankfully, limited to no more than a few each day. I also took a lot of shifts on night watch and found out that they usually have two people on watch at all times. Most attacks happened at night, although the days were far from quiet. Occasionally Baines or someone else in camp would share a watch with me, but typically, Tim and I would team up. We would sit on opposite sides of the overpass near enough where we could converse.

“I miss potato chips,” he said one evening. “A couple years back I was living in a commune in Michigan, even smaller than this one.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

“No. No, I’m from New York. Haven’t been back there since before the city was abandoned. But at this commune, there were a dozen of us – give or take. There was this one old lady who liked to make potato chips – what she called potato chips. I don’t know what it was: maybe her potatoes weren’t cut thin enough, or maybe her oil never got hot enough, but her chips were soggy and gross. I mean, all you need to make a fucking potato chip is potatoes, vegetable oil, and salt.”

“Maybe you remember potato chips differently than they actually were.”

“I remember them distinctly. I’d pull that bag open and look inside for a whole chip I could pop in my

mouth in one bite. Potatoes don't have much in the way of flavor, but the texture of a fresh, crisp chip and the saltiness and the slight greasiness from the oil...man, that was like perfection. What do you miss?"

"Nothing," I told him.

"Nothing?"

"Can I tell you the secret to happiness?"

"Yeah, sure."

"The secret to being happy is not caring about anything. Do what you have to do. Gather food, build a fire, kill a zombie, but beyond that who gives a shit?"

"You don't seem happy."

"Happier than you are."

"Don't you have a plan? You can't be pointlessly travelling around."

I was facing west. "I'm going that way. I imagine someday I'll reach PNW if I don't get killed, but I'm in no hurry."

"What's PNW?"

"The Pacific Northwest, you know, Washington, Oregon, British Columbia? I figure the climate is good enough. Most of that area is forest, which means fewer people, fewer zombies, and survival will be that much easier. It doesn't tend to get too cold for too long unless you're up in the mountains. And the mountains are a perfect refuge from zombies. It's very rainy, so fresh water won't be a problem. It's as close to paradise as I can get."

"I never thought I'd hear anyone call Portland a paradise."

"You've been there?"

"I was in the Army when all this started. We were deployed to Portland to provide disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. It seemed like we had to redraw our defense lines daily. Always fucking back. We weren't there for more than a month before pulling

out for some other soon-to-be overrun urban area. The story was the same everywhere.”

Tim added: “Oh, and it doesn’t rain so much as it mists.”

Baines walked up to me. I never saw him carrying a weapon. “Quiet night so far.” Overpass small talk. “Listen, you’ve been with us a few weeks now, things are working out pretty good, yes?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Well, now that you’re really with us, it’s time to let you in on our contingency plan. If we ever lose this overpass, we have a fallback position. There’s another overpass six miles to the west, past the river. There’s nothing there yet; we’d start from scratch.”

“Good to know.”

“Yeah. Tomorrow we go to town. Are you in?”

“Sure.”

“What about you, Tim?”

“North or south?”

“South.”

“I hate that shitburg.” Tim chewed his lip. “Yeah... fuck it.”

Cans clinked and clattered on the ground: trouble from the north. “My turn,” I said, already on my feet.

“Bullshit, it’s my turn,” Tim yelled. We both ran north on the overpass. Once we got clear of the camp, I could see my side was safe. I leapt onto the concrete side guard and jumped down to the other side’s roadway in stride. Tim and I were now neck and neck; I considered tripping him, but assumed he’d fall on his axe and decided to just push him. I shoved his shoulder and ruined his rhythm sending him veering off to the left.

The zombie must not have fallen, because it was already a fair distance past the trip line. Clouds obscured the stars and moon; all I could see was a dark shape, but I clearly heard a gurgling moan.

“Thunder!” Tim yelled from only a couple steps behind me. I became worried about Tim’s position so close to me and decided to give him this one. I changed direction slightly and slammed my steel’s broadside into the midsection of the zombie, doubling it over as I ran past to safety. I turned just in time to see Tim’s overhead chop split the back of the zombie’s cranium open. It dropped to the road with a squishy thump, limbs bent awkwardly beneath it.

Tim’s axe was stuck. He muttered numerous permutations of “fuck” as he pried it loose. He looked up at me and smiled, “You fucker.”

I had to laugh. Thick blood slowly pooled near our feet.

* * *

I took up residence in one of the shacks on the shitter side of the overpass. Apparently that was where the outcast—or at least the newer members of the group—were put. I heard the fellow that had my shack before me left one day and didn’t come back until he was a zombie, at which point he was no longer welcome. It wasn’t much, but it was sturdy, roomy enough for an honest-to-goodness twin mattress plus my gear, and the roof didn’t leak...which was good because it was raining.

“Are we still going into town?” I asked Baines who was looking south through binoculars.

“No reason not to.” He didn’t stop surveying the distance. “Having second thoughts?”

“No, I just wanted to know if I should wear my church clothes.” I walked away before he could engage me in that conversation. I found Tim just exiting his shack. He was wearing full rain gear, hood already up.

“Hey, new guy!”

“Hey. Where’d you get the sauna suit?”

“Ha ha. Gander Mountain, back in Illinois. There were dozens on the shelf; I couldn’t believe it. You’re going to need one of these when you get to Oregon.”

“I doubt it.” I examined him a little closer. “I don’t think that hood’s a good idea. Your peripheries are limited, and with the rain you’re not going to be able to hear so well.”

“Well, I don’t want crotch rot, so I’ll take the chance. This suit keeps you dry *and* it breathes. By the way, I heard that’s how this whole zombie thing started: crotch rot.”

Six of us were going: Baines, Tim, the cook, the woman and the silent man I met upon my arrival – Jess and Charles—and me. Each of us pulled a small wagon.

Baines explained during the trek how they were searching the town. “After you’re done taking what you’re taking from a building, mark on the front door if anything useful is left inside: X for nothing, T for tools, F for food, C for clothes, M for medicine, V for anything else that doesn’t fit in the other categories. Here’s our wish list.” He handed out black markers and small pieces of paper with the scrawling script of a doctor: bullets, *Playboys* (I assumed this was a generic term for any skin mag), food, nails/screws, rope, fuel, alcohol, pills...

As soon as the town was in view we had to put down a couple zombies that came out of an overgrown field. Through the rain and haze I could see a few zombies stumbling around the town’s main street. “Second thoughts,” I muttered to Baines.

“It’ll be okay,” Baines reassured us all. “Just make sure when we leave, none follow us. Split up. Take an unsearched house. Fill your wagon. Try to stay out of sight as much as possible. Put ‘em down quiet.” Baines didn’t wait for responses; he began

walking east to enter town from a side. “Meet back here,” he called over his shoulder.

Tim and I circled west together. The river, or a branch of it, curved eastward south of the overpass. The western edge of the town was built close to it and the ground was considerably sloppier.

“Shit! I knew I should have worn my galoshes,” Tim whined. We quietly agreed to split up when we reached a peaceful side road.

I passed a couple houses with marked front doors before arriving at a small stone cottage-style house with no door markings. The cottage was set back a ways from the street, and there were green, leafy vines growing up one side of the house that had begun to encroach on the front. The windows were intact and the door was closed.

I peered through the large picture window in the front and saw a mess of upturned furniture, scattered and broken décor, and no bodies – prone or otherwise. The door was unlocked. I shut it behind me and, from my position in the living room, took note of the heavy, moldy smell and the sound of rain dripping somewhere deeper inside. I began a quick search to ensure I was alone. At the back of the living room was a short hallway leading to two bedrooms and a bathroom on the left and the kitchen on the right. A third bedroom was set directly off the kitchen, and opposite that, a small entryway led to the basement and the back yard. The main floor was clear. I wedged a chair under the doorknob to the back entryway and began the search for supplies.

The house appeared to have already been hastily picked over. I scavenged a couple mold-free blankets, but that was about it. The source of the leak was in the biggest bedroom. Most of the ceiling had fallen in, and water was readily dripping from a small hole in the roof to the bedroom’s badly warped floor. I stood on the bed

and jumped a couple times to get a look into the tall attic. I saw a number of boxes that didn't look like they'd been disturbed. The attic access was in the hallway; I used another kitchen chair to stand on, pushed aside the access panel with my steel, and pulled myself up.

I plopped down with my feet dangling out the attic hatch. The body laying four feet from me scared a small, girl-like shriek from me even though I almost immediately recognized the body as dead-dead. The bullet wound that removed a large chunk of the back of his skull was undeniable proof. He stank, but not as badly as I would have guessed. He must have been at peace for quite some time.

Miscellaneous supplies, cans and boxes of food, and numerous candles told me this guy had been staying in the attic for weeks, maybe months. A knotted rope lying beside him betrayed his secretive method of attic comings and goings. His pistol was still clutched in his left hand. I smiled when I identified it as an M9A1, the same model as mine, Marine Corps issue 9mm. The bite taken from his forearm explained the suicide.

I began to sweat bullets from the attic's high humidity as my eyes seized on five boxes of 9mm ammunition and three extra magazines. I licked sweat off my upper lip and collected several cans of food, two dozen MRE's, half a bottle of Wild Turkey bourbon, one partial and five full boxes of ammo (277 bullets), the three fully loaded mags, and one M9A1 in desperate need of cleaning.

I loaded those goods into a duffel and quietly placed them in the wagon outside while smacking myself in the head for not bringing my own pistol. I wouldn't chance the weapon from the attic before it was cleaned, but I trusted the ammunition.

The glass-blocked windows let in little light that only cast murky shadows into the basement. The open staircase groaned as I descended it. I expected dead hands to shoot out from between the stair treads and grab my ankles. Low hanging pipes and the large, sooty furnace in the middle of the floor obstructed my view. The air was refreshing: cooler and drier. I walked softly and listened hard but couldn't hear anything beyond the dripping on the floor above my head and my own heart beating so forcefully it made my chest ache.

The basement was a bust for zombies and useful supplies. I hauled ass upstairs – two at a time – the sixth stair split under my weight. My left leg went through; I grabbed onto the railing with my right hand and tried to find purchase with my right foot. With my perch stable, I pulled my left leg free and climbed up to the landing carefully. I had deep, bloody scratches embedded with splinters on both sides of my calf. I grit my teeth and pulled out the largest pieces. I smacked myself in the head for being a moron.

My leg ached, but I was able to put weight on it and walk with a slight limp. I drew a big X on the front door and pulled my wagon behind me down the street. The rainfall had intensified and I was feeling miserable. Visibility was down to less than a block. I longed for rain gear instead of the thoroughly soaked long sleeve t-shirt and freshly torn cargo pants I wore.

I spotted Tim coming out of a ranch house a short way up the street. He wasn't paying attention to his surroundings. I approached him as he was marking the door; his axe was just out of reach, leaning against the house's siding. "What's the 'F' stand for?"

"Fu-uck!"

"Not food?"

"You scared the shit out of me." He rested against the door with a hand on his chest. A moment later he saw my wagon. "Ooh, what'dya get?"

I told him.

“I bet that nine’ll fire real nice once you pretty it up.”

“I already have one. It’s yours if you want it.”

Tim’s thanks were interrupted by a scream. “I think that’s Jess,” he cried, vaulting the porch rail.

He sprinted toward the center of town with me on his heels. Two blocks closer to the main drag we saw Jess and Charles fighting off a half dozen zombies in a tight space between a small grocery store and a church. She didn’t hold a weapon, must’ve lost it, and all Charles had was a bat he was unable to swing properly because of the confined space and insistent zombies.

Tim ordered me to approach from the alley’s other end, so by the time I ran around the building and reached the group, he’d already taken down two zombies with his axe. I jabbed at the closest zombie with the pry bar end of my steel and caught it in the eye. I let it fall and my steel slipped from its eye socket. I changed my grip and swung upwards catching a zombie that had turned toward me under the chin. The jaw end of the steel penetrated through the flesh, sticking into the zombie’s mouth like another tongue as it worked its jaws in a futile attempt to bite me. Since I came nowhere near the brain, my swing did no more damage than if I had cut off one of its arms.

I yanked back toward myself and tore the mandible from its skull. I flipped the steel in my hand and cracked the zombie with the hammer head once to put it on the ground and again to fully break through the parietal bone and destroy the brain.

When I looked up, Tim was chopping the head off his third zombie kill and Charles had finally gotten the last one on the ground. He frantically beat its head into a paste with his bat.

Jess hugged herself and cried. I was about to assure her we were okay when I noticed blood trickling

through her fingers. I yanked her hand away to expose a bite mark on her left triceps. "She's been bitten," I said loud enough for Tim to hear.

"Let me see," Tim pushed past Charles and took a close look at Jess' wound.

I figured the way he followed her around, Charles would argue the bite wasn't deep, which it was, or he would say he was sure she'd be okay, which she wouldn't. I figured Jess would wail and beg for mercy, which she wouldn't get.

To her credit, she stood there sobbing, but allowed Tim and me to examine her and decide her fate. To his credit, Charles stayed quiet; he actually kept an eye out for encroaching zombies.

Tim pulled me aside and we agreed on a plan in seconds. He moved Jess away from the wall and put her in a blood choke. Ten seconds later she was out. Five seconds later Tim released his grip, lowered her to the ground, and stepped away. I caved in her skull.

Charles refused to come back with us and took off to the south following the river bank. The withdrawal from town was slow going. Tim and I were each left pulling two wagons back; we tied pairs together, like a double semi-trailer.

Twice, Tim had to sprint a short distance and take out a zombie in danger of giving our position away. My leg pain steadily escalated to nearly debilitating by the time we reached the rally point. The cook and Baines were waiting.

"Jess was bitten; she's dead. Chuck took off; there was no reasoning with him," Tim reported.

Baines contemplated this. I thought we could have reasoned Charles unconscious and dragged him back with us. "Let's head out," was Baines' only response.

Later that night, Tim and I were determined to empty the bottle of Wild Turkey in my shack after the

supplies pilfered from town were stowed. There were no other 9mms in the camp. I split the ammo with Tim and gave him two of the three extra magazines. He gathered a rudimentary cleaning kit: an old toothbrush he modified to fit down the barrel, a rag, and some unused motor oil. He swore it would work.

I was skeptical, and also concerned about a drunk cleaning a handgun. The words 'PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT' flashed in my head. "I'd kill for some ice," I complained after a belt of whiskey. "My balls itch."

"Rain gear'll keep you dry." Tim was looking down the barrel with one eye closed. "Let me know when you start getting a fever – start turning into a zombie."

I skipped Tim in the rotation and had another swig. "I killed that girl," I confessed through a whiskey face.

"I killed her, too," Tim said without emotion. "It wasn't just you."

"Jess." I may not have said that out loud.

"We slept together. It was just after I joined up with Baines' little troupe here. We fucked in that same church back in town she and Chuck were coming out of when they got attacked."

"They weren't leaving the store?" I could have sworn only the grocery store had a door to the alley.

"No, man, they were getting a little privacy in the church. That's one thing this place lacks: alone time." This pistol was disassembled in its six parts, spread out across my mattress, clip emptied. Tim cleaned each part meticulously.

"Were the two of you a regular thing?"

"No, just that one time. I think she wanted more – why she was so... fucking annoying." He was jabbing the brush down the barrel with force like he was tamping a musket.

I wasn't even passing the bottle anymore. Tim didn't mind. "You'll kill me, won't you?"

"Pass me the Turkey." He did mind. He took a drink, looked at me, and took another. "We set her free. I'd do the same for you." He continued his cleaning. The recoil spring shot out of his grasp but he caught it on the way down.

"I'll kill you," I told him. He knew what I meant.

The bottle was almost gone. Tim reassembled the weapon and ran through a function check on muscle memory. "It'll fire. No doubt." He ejected the magazine and reloaded the wiped down rounds. He inserted the clip, chambered a round, and flicked the safety lever to SAFE. "Fuck Charles," Tim grumbled, getting up and stumbling out of my shack.

A minute later a gunshot snapped me out of a ten-second sleep. "Fuckin' works!" Tim yelled.

* * *

I woke up slowly, hoping my head only ached that much in my dreams. It didn't. The bottle was nestled in the crook of my arm. An ounce or two sloshed around way at the bottom. It was still dark; I really hated not being able to simply know what time it was.

I shot straight up in bed when I felt I wasn't alone. "Who's that?"

A light came on. "Do you believe this thing still works?" My visitor held a small flashlight. "It's rechargeable. Squeeze the lever here on the side a few times and you have light for a few minutes. Pretty remarkable the stuff they used to come up with, isn't it?" He was sitting on my pack near the foot of the mattress. His snake pendant caught the light.

"Is that a cat?"

"It is." The small flashlight was shaped like a cartoonish black cat. The eyes were the light source.

“Are you following me?”

“You should be following me.”

“When did you get here?”

“Long enough ago know you snore.”

“How’d you get past the security?”

“I stepped over it. It’s just a string, buddy,” he laughed. “You’d have to be a goddamned fool to trip over it.”

“What do you want?”

“Do you feel safe here? Personally, I wouldn’t. You know they transmigrate in groups sometimes. There’s no telling how long you can be protected here. No...if I were you, I’d keep going west. That’s the direction I find myself aimed as well, actually. I’ve always preferred to travel with an adjunct. Perhaps you and I could travel together?”

“We don’t work well together. Remember Camp Perry?”

“I remember that you can tie one hell of a noose.” He laughed again. “The things we did!”

I shook my head.

“Well, you keep that.” He set the cat between my feet and slunk to the doorway. “And remember what I told you when you left Perry. Be seeing you.”

* * *

I hid the flashlight in my pack. There was no denying it happened, but I made myself ignore the confrontation. I focused on splitting wood, hauling water, catching fish, picking corn, snaring rabbits, and keeping my leg clean. After a few days, two women passed through camp. They weren’t interested in staying, which Tim reckoned was fine seeing as they were lesbians.

I declined a security shift one night after a day on wood duty which prompted a diatribe from the guy who

wanted me to take his place. His name was Mark. The only times he spoke to me were when he wanted me to take his security shifts. I understood; I had not turned down a shift up to that point, and he was probably looking forward to playing with himself.

I went to my shack and fell asleep.

I never tried to be quiet when killing a zombie. I figured if there's a zombie presence, the more people who were aware, the more people you had for defense if things started getting heavy. Others kept it quiet, like killing a zombie was somehow immoral. I imagine that's how things went so wrong so quickly.

The cans didn't wake me up, and as it turned out, neither did the glass bottles. The screaming did – several people screaming. I rolled out of bed, tucked my pistol and the spare magazine into my pants, and grabbed the steel.

While the overpass camp had never been especially tidy, there was an overall organizational plan. A cursory glimpse of the camp showed how easily that was ruined. At least three fire barrels had been overturned; the spilled contents had set a few shacks on the other side of the overpass ablaze. Sections of stacked firewood on my side had been knocked loose; cords of wood were strewn across the roadway. The staggering lurch of zombies was easy to spot. There were so many.

Hands roughly grabbed my upper shoulders. I lost my balance and fell to the ground; the weight of my attacker followed. The smell was instantly nauseating and telltale of the immortal danger in which I suddenly found myself.

I could not fathom how zombies had gotten so deep in our camp before the screams woke me.

The gurgling of the zombie's moan was so close to my ear that I lost my grip on my steel when I fell, it lay several feet in front of my face. An intense pain tore

through my torso, radiating from the back of my neck where it bit me. I screamed and bucked wildly, throwing the zombie off my back. I leapt up and pulled the pistol from my waistband, wincing at the tender spot on my hip where I fell on it.

I thumbed the safety to FIRE and shot it in the face. I ignored an intense urge to dismember the body, and instead gingerly touched the stinging wound on my neck. My fingers came back wet and warm with my blood. I didn't have a large chunk of flesh missing, but nevertheless I was now operating on a timer.

In six to twelve hours the fever would start, followed by severe vomiting and diarrhea. Those symptoms would continue and would soon enough contain blood. Then my brain would begin to malfunction, sending erratic signals to my limbs. Then those signals would stop and I would be unable to walk, use my arms, or even turn my head. Soon after, my brain would stop telling my heart to beat and my lungs to work. Then I'd die.

And unless someone did the right thing and stuck something through my brain, I would get up several minutes later.

I instantly decided to do something with my final hours. I grabbed my steel off the ground and turned back to the camp. Moaners outnumbered screamers four to one. I remembered what Baines said when I first came to the overpass. The first plank was near my shack. I pushed it toward the other side and left go when my end was clear of concrete. It tipped and fell through the narrow space between the two sides. Three zombies came at me from between shacks. I drew my handgun and started firing. The closest went down with one shot off-center of its forehead. I caught the second in the neck and it didn't even flinch. 9mms lack stopping power. My kingdom for a .45.

I tensed my grip; my next shot went wide, but actually caught the third zombie, smashing the bridge of its nose and dropping it. The second zombie was now so close to me when I shot it, bits of skull and flesh spattered on me.

The second plank in the center of the camp was harder to get to because of all the loose firewood. I rushed and lost my footing several times; fortunately I didn't break or sprain an ankle. More zombies were trying to get at me, but could not get through the wood obstacle course. I let the second plank fall and more carefully made my way to the third.

I spotted the cook by the portable toilets, closer to the last plank. He was stepping around in a circle confused about the safest way to go. Zombies approached him from both directions and there were even more on the other side of the overpass.

"Knock that plank down!" I yelled at him.

He turned to one of the toilets and began rocking it. Soon, he tipped it over and sat on the ground with his legs through the hole in the concrete. It looked like he was lowering himself gingerly into a hot tub until he screamed in pain: jagged concrete and sharp rebar was poking and slicing his skin. Then he disappeared. I continued my way over to the last plank and pushed it down. I ran to the overturned toilet, but couldn't see to the road below. The cook's screaming continued.

I looked toward my shack. I hadn't searched the few shacks on this side, but nearly all the residents lived on the other side. I played the numbers and hopped sides, landing next to two zombies munching on Mark's intestines, oblivious to my sudden presence. I used my hammer end twice to abruptly end their meal, and once again to make sure Mark never got up.

A third of the shacks were on fire, the flames wild enough to threaten the rest. Twenty feet away, I witnessed Baines stab a zombie through the temple

with what appeared to be a railroad spike, evidently his weapon of choice. Gunshots identical to mine called my attention to Tim helping ward off zombies, giving a small group the time to climb down one of the rope ladders. The small-faced woman who only identified herself as Missus Cooper was near another rope ladder still lying on the roadway. She was shielding the two older children from a pair of particularly putrid zombies with a bit of wood.

I went to her and tossed the ladder over the side. I pulled the woman back from the zombies and commanded, “Get them down!” I turned to face the zombies that had moved too close. I swung my steel, and the head of one zombie completely collapsed from the blow, rotten brain matter leaked from the large hole I created.

I hooked the other zombie behind its neck with the jaws of my steel. I muscled it to the edge of the overpass and sent it over the side with a final yank. I turned to help the woman while also keeping watch for more zombies. We lifted the girl over the side and she grabbed onto the rungs. Shadowy shapes below grabbed the boy who had just reached the ground. He screamed – his voice would never deepen.

The girl stared down at her friend in utter horror. I knocked on her head to get her attention. “When you get within their reach, jump off as far as you can and run,” I ordered. She descended immediately. If she lived she would be one to keep around.

My short lapse in attention allowed a zombie to get close and sink its teeth into Missus Cooper’s cheek. She screamed with a volume I wouldn’t have guessed possible for her. I cross-checked them with my steel, pushing them both over the side. They fell past the little girl, barely missing her. Neither of them moved after they hit the ground.

Baines was no longer visible. I worked my way toward Tim, shooting at zombies coming from behind me and mauling the ones ahead of me, suddenly very aware of the possibility of stray bullets doing unintended damage to what survivors remained. Tim worked his way back to meet me halfway.

“Hey, new guy.” Tim was winded. It was a busy night.

“I can’t see anything.” The smoke was getting thick. “Anyone else to save?”

“No, I think we got everyone down. Well, everyone not dead.”

“I gotta get my pack. You go down, head west with the survivors. I’ll catch up.”

“Fuck your pack! Let’s go *fucking now!*”

“Get out of here.”

I sprinted across the road and hurdled the safety barriers. There were still zombies on the other side, but they were spread out and far fewer in number. Both my magazines were empty. I avoided them when I could, knocked them in the head when I had to, but didn’t stop to make sure I put them down for good.

I tore open the door to my shack and stopped dead in my tracks. The little boy with the bad ear was sitting cross-legged on my mattress. He was naked, coated in blood, and playing with the cat flashlight. It may have been a trick of the light, but his penis appeared to be forked. His eyes darted up at me – the irises were thin slits.

“They’re an army,” he said in a calm, nearly adult voice.

There was no bump on my head when I woke up face down on my mattress. I reasoned that I fainted. It was uncomfortably hot in my shack. I hesitated before snatching up the flashlight and stowing it in my pack.

I momentarily stood in awe of the scene outside. The entire overpass appeared to be on fire. All the

firewood on my side had ignited; every shack except mine was a torch with flames licking the sky fifteen feet high. There were still a couple zombies walking about as calmly as ever. They were pillars of conflagration – clearly fire did not scare them.

I watched with a modest amount of relief as one succumbed to the combustion and fell still.

One of the rope ladders was directly next to my shack, still not deployed. I tossed it over the side and followed it down.

Baines' mangled corpse lay near me. He must have fallen off the overpass after getting bit. It futilely tried reaching me, unable to move anything other than its head due to a visibly broken spine. I avoided it and left it to hopefully die of exposure.

I quickly searched under the overpass for other survivors. There were none.

I smelled the cook before I heard its moans. It was caked in feces from falling feet first into our waste. I pictured zombies descending upon the cook as he tried to extricate himself from the mound of shit.

I squared off with it. I could see bits of corn in the waste covering the approaching zombie. I simply swung my steel's pointed jaw and buried it in an ear while avoiding the spatter of crap and blood. I took an extra moment freeing the steel without using my foot as a counterweight.

I ran six miles west to the fallback overpass. I quickly and mercilessly destroyed all zombies on the trail of the other survivors as I caught up with them. I stopped counting at seventeen.

The river crossed my path at a little more than the halfway point. I stopped to splash some water on my neck. I was still bleeding. I washed my steel and then traversed the damaged bridge with little issue.

There were only three other survivors at the other overpass: Tim, the little girl, and Frank – a larger,

older man with whom I had ever only shared three words.

“Motherfucker, you made it!” Tim yelled when he saw me hiking up the embankment.

“Tim, come meet me over here,” I nearly whispered. He walked to my position. I handed him my steel. “I got bit.”

Tim’s face fell.

I got down on my knees facing east. The sun was about to break the horizon; the smoke from the overpass hung in the air and nearly glowed – I thought time stopped.

Tim’s feet crunched on some loose gravel as he positioned himself behind me. I shuddered uncontrollably. He was still for a moment and then I heard his footing shift.

I braced for his swing.

I felt his nose breath on my neck. “Uh...new guy? These aren’t bite marks.” Tim touched the wound and I winced. “They’re scratches.”

“Scratches?”

“Yeah, they’re deep, but they’re scratches. You should clean this with some alcohol or... I’m gonna have to pee on you.”

I stood up. “No.”

“Pee’s sterile.”

“Yours isn’t.”

“Do you want the little girl to pee on you?” He clapped me on the shoulder and handed back my steel. “Come on. I’ll take the first watch. You get some rest.”

We walked toward the others. “Do you think she’d be into peeing on me?”

Tim giggled. “If you still feel okay by midday, I’ll feel good about proclaiming you uninfected.”

* * *

My sleep was uneasy. I dreamt.

I slung my pack over my shoulder as I prepared to leave Camp Perry.

“Deserter,” he called me. He hid his snake pendant inside his shirt. The others weren’t ready to see it, to understand it, he told me once.

“Don’t go. You’re safe with me. You will not be safe out there. They’re an army! They’re my army!”

Tim shook me awake. “How do you feel?”

“Okay.”

“Your watch.” Tim got on the ground and balled his rain gear under his head. “So far, so good. Just don’t fuckin’ eat me while I’m sleeping.”

I faced south. Fantasies of carrying the little girl off while she slept to live with me somewhere in the southwest desert, Mexico, or Chile ran through my head. We could find a little deserted tropical island, eat coconuts, and run around naked until one of us died of old age.

I looked to the north, checking for intruders. I looked down at her sleeping form, curled up in a fetal ball.

I grabbed my pack and walked south off the overpass. I stood still for a long time before turning right, compelled to go west.

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