

Me Talk Zombie Some Day  
©2011 Adam Altman  
NaNoWriMo 2011

Part One: "If you're reading this, then I'm already dead...."

My name is -- was -- Zachary P. Graves. There aren't any people who call me that anymore, not that I know of. They've long since forgotten about me, or if not forgotten, at the very least they've stopped using my name, those who know, those who saw what happened to me, they only speak in hushed whispers, afraid to speak my name in fear of somehow summoning me like Michael Keaton in *Beetlejuice* -- Beetlejuice! Beetlejuice! Beetlejuice! -- to descend upon them with all the fury and force of the horde, ruining their nights for the last time. Those who remember my name and still have the balls to utter it do so boldly, as if dared to do so, as if doing so proves some level of manhood that nobody in this blighted world should even care about anymore.

That's about as good an introduction as a man can get, especially if that man is literally falling apart at the seams, "held together," as Pa Ingalls used to say in *Little House*, "with spittle and daub." I don't think Pa ever thought that could refer to a human being. Or what's left of one, anyhow.

My name is -- was -- Zachary P. Graves and I am -- technically -- dead. I say technically because, really, and I think you'll agree, any man who can still scratch out his memoirs, any man who can do that still has some shot at life. Right? But, according to the Gooseman-Keane Act of 2017, any person who progressed through Stage IV of Westphail (the popular name for the H3N5P2 virus which did all *this*) is, for all practical and legal purposes, *dead*. Done. Extinct. Regardless if that person has been through DEI (Decapitation, Evisceration, Incineration) or is currently trying to break your door down so he can get inside and get a bite to eat, that person is dead. Once you hit Stage IV, your chances of going anywhere but a DEI Station are pretty slim especially now that every Tom, Dick & Harry, and their wives, mothers, kids and pets have been through Westphail Victim Pacification Training. In the beginning, it was easier. Nobody knew what to do with us.

But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

Yeah, I'm a fucking zombie, and yeah, I realize I'm just telling you a whole bunch of shit you already know. But, on the off chance that this document doesn't get toasted the second I do, that someone bothers reading it, that all you skin-so-soft living motherfuckers actually survive Westphail, figure out a way to keep from catching it yourselves, maybe even eradicate the virus itself, maybe having a record of someone who's been there, done that, and is currently wearing the t-shirt, maybe that would be helpful. To somebody.

And let's just get something out of the way right off the bat: this isn't going to have a happy ending. I keep thinking about the kid in *I Am Legend* -- the one who's got the future of mankind in his hand. I'm not that kid. I'm the only semi-intelligent Z around. I know this, because for fuck's sake, I've tried talking to every single one of the brain-gobbling slow-walking pusballs

that I've come across and you know what? They all say the same goddamn thing: "Garrr blurble skalkaska wurrrrtz." Know what that means? Jack and shit. Nothing. They're not talking. They're not vocalizing. It's just noise. Know what's hilarious? Scientists trying to come up with a Z lexicon. As if they're going to sit down to tea and have a conversation with them someday. Some pinhead in a lab coat is listening to tapes of Z noise saying, "Oh, this one here, he's saying he's lonely!" They're not lonely. They're not thinking. Everything you've read is true: the Zs have no more feelings. No more emotions. No more needs or desires. Everything has been burnt away by the virus. Written on top of all the things that made those people *people* is a burning impetus to feed. And you know what they eat. What we eat.

Shit. I guess I'm about to lose half my audience and the rest of you will no longer find me so sympathetic. Yeah. I've fed. In the early days, I broke through boarded up doors, dove through windows, tore screaming people apart. Ate their fucking brains. And you know what? I liked it. Hell, I loved it. And I'm sitting there, my new family numbering in the thousands, glassy-eyed, jaws working mechanically, I could see there was no joy, just that constant voice: eat eat eat eat eat. And I thought, *You guys are fucking missing out. This is fun!* But I don't hang out with those dudes much anymore. Not if I can help it. The horde, yeah, it's fun. It's a constant party, and I mean constant. But it attracts too much attention, not so subtle at all. And all that moaning. Ugh. The first time I felt the wind of shotgun pellets zinging by my face, that's when I thought, *This might not be the thing for me anymore.*

So, now, I hang out by myself for the most part. I travel a bit, mostly at night, mostly in the Quarantine Zone. It's the safest place for a guy like me, even if it's not too interesting. But you gotta do what you gotta do, at least that's what I hear. But, no more of those full-on frontal assaults on a barricaded position for me. I've never seen one fail, chalk that up to the Zs' superior numbers and lack of a central nervous system, but I've never seen one go down without a whole lot of Zs getting their heads blown off, or their arms severed, legs chopped, whatever. Yeah, they just keep on crawling, or limping, or shambling, or doing whatever they can, but can you imagine? For me? Losing an arm? Jesus. It's a pretty near thing already -- and I don't want to get too gross here -- but like I said, I'm pretty close to literally falling apart as it is. So I've retired from the angry-mob-raiding-the-barricaded-compound game. It's just not worth it. You guys are easy enough to pick off one by one as it is and frankly, I'm just not that hungry anymore. The voice -- the silky smoothest voice you've ever heard, the one that says "Feeeeeeeee" slow and low, again and again, drowning out all the other thoughts, the one that's made every person you know -- your best friends, your lovers, your family -- into these mindless, raging *things* that you don't recognize at all -- it's quieter now. It's just a whisper, really. Some days, I don't even hear it, and that's why I'm able to put these words down, get my thoughts together.

And that's why I'm here. Holed up in what's left of a food court in what's left of a first class, high end shopping mall in the northern suburbs of Chicago. We took this place over about a week ago, though, when I say "we" I really mean "they." I followed a pack of Zs about 1500 strong from Milwaukee down here. Milwaukee's done, by the way, if you were wondering. I mean seriously totally done. Looks like a warzone there, mostly because it was. Back in the early 2000s when zombies were hip and cool and everyone joked about the coming zombie apocalypse, nobody mentioned that the cities would turn to rubble. Z was made for gnawing through flesh, snapping bones, maybe busting down the occasional hastily boarded-up door, but

destroying cities? Nah. No way! I mean, Z don't got no heavy artillery, right? But Smoothie? Smoothie got artillery. Smoothie got bombs. And Smoothie looves to use them. Shelling and bombing the fuck out of his own city, civilians still living there, holed up in their houses, in their apartments. Smoothie probably killed more of his own than he got Z. I don't know how many Zs started up there in Milwaukee, only know what I hear on whatever bits and pieces of the news I can catch, from radios, or overheard from the few people I see here and there, and the media, even after all this shit has gone down, the media is still in the business of lying. So I've heard there were anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 Zs strolling through Milwaukee but most people were leaning towards the higher number. Me, I think that's bullshit. If there'd been 100,000 Zs, Milwaukee would probably still look pretty good, even if everybody was dead or undead. Instead, it's smoking, burnining still. Even if I write this, if I felt like poking my head out of my little hidey-hole I'd be able to see the plume of smoke up to the north, still spreading across the sky. I mean, I admit I only saw a little piece of the action, just one small sliver of the battle, but I just know in my gut -- what's left of it, har har -- that Z would have hit those artillery positions long before they could have done all that damage, before they could have reduced Milwaukee to a burning hole in the ground.

Before Milwaukee, we were up north, and it was getting cold. Zs are as incapable of disliking things as they are of liking things, but if there's one thing Z don't like, it's cold. Z isn't warm-blooded or cold-blooded. Z is no-blooded, and with no blood, when it gets cold enough, Z just freezes. I've seen 'em frozen solid, right in their tracks, arms stretched out, mouth frozen in mid-groan, fucking icicles hanging off their noses. You could snap their arms off, if you were of a mind to, and hell yeah, I was of a mind to, just had to see what that was like. I dunno if I've still got a little blood pumping in me or if it was just my good sense to grab a winter coat off a dead Smoothie, but the cold didn't bother me too much. Don't feel it anymore except everything's kinda slower, like walking through a pool of molasses. Anyway, I ain't frozen yet.

So somehow Z got it in his mind to head south. Some instinct still leftover from his days as a real live human being? Could he feel the rays of sun just barely reaching him from that direction? Who knows, but after a few days of trying to round them up, herd them that way, I'd had no luck. I had just about given up and was going to take off on my own when suddenly it was all, "Let's head South for the winter," and a mass, shuffling, shambling, groaning exodus set out for warmer climes. I was glad, too. I hate traveling alone. Walking down I94 with 1500 of the closest thing I have left to friends was just about the most fun I've had on a road trip since my buddy Phil and I borrowed a '78 Firebird and drove it to Ohio. Z makes a good traveling companion -- never has to stop to go to the bathroom, doesn't get bored, eats on the move. I actually saw one Z pull some idiot who had holed himself up in a burning wreck of a McDonald's right out the window. I was laughing my ass off -- he got himself a drive through snack.

When we got to Schaumburg -- largely unscathed and ignored during all the Z years -- and saw the mall, I figured it might be time to take a break from the road. I'm not a young Z anymore, I've got to admit it, and whatever's keeping me sane isn't doing quite as much of the age-defying thing that the other Zs get. I still feel things, just a little bit, and lately, it hasn't been as easy to move around as it used to be. My joints are stiffer, knees protest when I stand up. Fuck, getting old sucks almost as much as getting Westphail did. So, when we saw the mall -- when I saw the mall and all the rest of them saw, well, whatever the fuck it is they see, I'm not even sure

how that really works -- I saw a new home, yeah? I stood back and let the boys do what they do best. The first whiff of human flesh got them all in a tizzy. The moan started as a low, quiet rumbling, but soon climbed to a roar. If all the scientists hadn't convinced you that there was nothing even resembling an emotion left in those twisted walking corpses, you'd think that they were angry, excited, vengeful. And who's really to say that they weren't? Somewhere inside, maybe, there's still a scrap of something that remembers what it was like to be human and is pissed off about the shit cards they were dealt, right? I mean there's gotta be *something* in there. But me, I'm just hiding behind a surprisingly intact Ford Explorer -- Z doesn't go after cars, not unless there's something tasty in there, but, hell, people are people, and not all the looters and thieves got H5N3P53, and there weren't a lot of cars left that had all the windows intact -- watching. Waiting.

You could tell there were people inside -- hastily made signs, red paint smeared across sheets of plywood leaning up against the entrance announced a group of refugees hoping for government rescue. They'd taken to doing that, marking their hideouts on the off chance a National Guard regiment happened to be passing through and happened to feel like taking on a dozen or more hungry, whining mouths who were more likely to get the whole group killed than they were to be of any use to anybody down the road. The refugees -- some even called themselves survivors; I always thought that was a bit like counting their chickens before they were hatched -- didn't know what I knew: Uncle Sam had stopped giving a shit about rescue missions a long time before. But, what the hell, right? Z can't read, so what could it hurt? Except, you know, *I* can read. God, it was nasty, somehow worse than Milwaukee, which was just about the worst thing I've ever seen. And, I don't know, I mean, the virus did a number on me too, nearly killed everything in me that was human, made me numb to that kind of stuff -- like, I wouldn't think twice about stepping on a kitten's throat, you know? The word "cute" doesn't have a place in my vocabulary anymore -- but there was still that little thing, that little twinge, something sticking in the back of my throat, hiding behind that Explorer, waiting for my bros to do their thing. Something like, "Don't you feel sorry for all those poor folks who are getting ripped to shreds right now? Don't you remember when you used to be like them, afraid of the dark? Afraid of the unknown? Using every last resource at your disposal just to fight to live and breathe for one more day?" And I thought, *Yeah, I remember. I remember how much it sucked. And you know how kick ass it is to be the dominant life force on the planet?* And the voice, the sticking in my throat, the whatever, it was quiet, it was gone, because it knew I was right. We Zs might be a cancer on the face of the Earth, but, fuck, cancer was God's equalizer, and when man finally figured out how to cure it, God was all, "Here's something new, assholes." Blam. Westphail. And every poor bastard who went Stage IV with it was now on the next step of the evolutionary ladder, kicking ass and not even bothering to take names, because why would a name matter to Z? That's how badass Z is: he's beyond the need for names.

It took all of three hours for my undead army to clear the mall. First the shooting stopped -- a group of suburbanites is only going to have so much ammo, especially in the gun shy Chicago metropolitan area -- and then the screaming stopped. A lone Z emerged from the shattered glass and wood of a formerly-boarded up Macy's display window. He stumbled on a broken mannequin and took a tumble, tangled in broken plaster and lathe. I made my way across the parking lot and picked the poor guy up, put him back on his feet. He showed no gratitude --

the bastard! -- and kept shuffling off in the direction I'd pointed him.

"Hey, buddy!" I called after him, pointing over my shoulder at the mall. "Is it all good in there?"

He didn't respond. Not even a moan. You've heard of feeling lonely in a crowd, right? Try being with 1500 of your brethren and they don't even pay one bit of attention to you. That's how you know you're one of them, by the way -- they don't try to eat you. But anything they're not trying to eat? They just ignore it. So here I am, hanging out with all these ...things... and I still, I don't know, I still feel that urge to have basic interactions, there's still that thing inside me.

Look, in life, I wasn't a very social person. I'd rather have stayed home on a Friday night, maybe watch a little TV, some football, whatever. I was cool with not seeing a single person all weekend long. If I ordered food? I'd do it online, as little interaction as possible. But here, now, without the option for any real human contact? It's kind of a downer, really, rolling down the street with 1500 people, whatever, and nobody's talking? Everybody's focused on one thing, they've got their eyes on the prize, and that prize is more or less the total destruction of the human race. Yeah, it's kinda a bummer. But, hell, at least they let me hang out with them. Smoothies don't want me around anymore, and who can blame 'em? I'm a constant reminder of everything bad in the world, and, to be honest, a constant threat. They don't know when I might eat them.

So yeah, I'm the loneliest boy in the world, boo hoo.

Here is how my days go: First of all, I've lost all track of time, so the concept of "days" is a little iffy. Being a Z -- undead; life challenged; reanimated corpse; whatever -- means no more sleeping. We're beyond the need for that, which is nice in some ways, because I'm getting so much more done than I ever did before. Ever want a few more hours in your day? I've got them! But you know, staying up *all the time* gets a little tiresome. A lot tiresome. In order to keep sane, though, I try to break up the days a bit. You know, keep each one from running into the next. I fake a sleep cycle -- just an hour or two staring at a blank wall or I'll just lie down in what used to be a Taco Bell and count the holes in the ceiling tiles (4,983). Anything to give my mind a bit of a break, keep from thinking about the utter shit hole that the planet has become. I'd kill for some electricity here -- all those pretty gadgets, video games, all wrapped up nice. I guess they'd had some generators going here for a while; the former tenants had set up a couple consoles and giant TVs. Looks like they had a some game tournaments and whatnot. The leader boards are still posted. It's nice to think they had a few moments of fun before the unholy swarm of undead ended their pathetic lives. If that sounds bitter, it's because I am -- I never got a chance to play Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 6 and it looked like a good time. I wonder if they bothered with the zombie mode at all.

There's really not a whole shitload to do here. You'd think, what with it being a shopping mall that it'd just be a playground of fun times, but those that came before took care of all that, made sure there was not much for little old me to take pleasure in. Their final fuck you to the zombies that ruined their lives. Well, hell, I guess I deserved it, even if I didn't personally gouge any of their eyes out, or eat their livers or whatever. I still felt some personal responsibility. Not like I lead the horde to their doorstep, those guys are unleadable, unherdable, I told you that. And not like I could have stopped them, they're pretty unstoppable, I mean that's how they made their name, you know? Once they get that whiff of smoothie, it's on, there's no stopping until the last

one of you is dead and eaten. You know it's true. I'm not sure what would have happened if I'd tried to get in their way. Like I said, they pretty much just ignore me, or tolerate me, or whatever, and I can tell you exactly how effective me standing on a soap box, yelping something about peace and love, moving along, leaving these nice people be would have been. They'd have just gone about their business. So, I play in what's left of the mall, mostly staying in the food court, sometimes going to The Gap to pick through the clearance items, seeing if there's something left that fits me.

But look, I know this is all real interesting to you -- how Zach Graves got to Woodfield Mall, what he does with his time, what he's doing right now, scratching away at his notebook, hoping his pens don't run out of ink, waiting for someone to come find him, and end his miserable life, or save it, or whatever, it's all the same. How did it all go down? No, I know you're all wondering how it all came to this. How did the idea of people getting sick, dying, and then coming back from the dead become commonplace? How did society fall apart? *How did it all go down?*

Well, hold your damn horses. I'm getting to it.

## Part 2 - "The Cure is the Cause"

When they cured cancer in 2012, I was unemployed, living alone in rundown SRO in a crappy neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. Uptown had once been on its way up, but it thrived too late to sustain its growth. When the economy hit bottom, the new specialty boutiques, tiny restaurants, and bookstores that had seemed to appear one after the other week by week all suddenly were vacant. People might still be buying glass giraffe figurines in other parts of the city, but they weren't in Uptown. Those who could get out of their brand new mortgages on the newly rehabbed condos did. Those who couldn't left anyway, abandoning buildings left and right. I lost my job, which hadn't been much to speak of -- operating a card folding machine in a Hallmark printing factory -- due to gross misconduct, brought on by a recently discovered love for brown liquor. My meager savings were practically gone as well, thanks to a few bad investments and an epic, but ultimately disastrous, trip to Arlington Park race track. I had just barely been making rent at a relatively nice apartment in Edgewater and was considering swallowing my pride and asking my folks, who still lived in the area, if it was cool if I stayed in the guest room for a while, when I learned about an open room in the SRO. It was leased at a ridiculously low weekly rate that I couldn't afford to pass it up. I couldn't really afford to take it either, but the thought of moving back home was such that I felt I had no choice.

I sold most of my shit on eBay and Craigslist, gave away what I couldn't sell, and abandoned what I couldn't give away. I moved into the Maiden Arms Apartments with little more than a bag full of clothes and a pretty bad attitude. I realized I had hit bottom -- sequestered from most of my friends, all of my family, the rest of the world. I was spending most of my days just lying in the single bed, whose mattress was thinner than my outlook on life, staring at the ceiling, counting the holes in the tiles (4,983) and looking at the shapes the water stains made, as if they

were clouds in the sky that I rarely, if ever, ventured outside to see. It was a vain existence, pointless, and I had given up trying. Really, I had given up trying years before, if I had ever even really made an attempt at all. I couldn't say that losing my job, ending up in the SRO, ceasing most human contact was turning point in my life, nor was it the wake-up call or kick in the pants that it could have -- should have -- been. Somewhere along the lines I had lost the desire to make a difference, to make an impact, if I'd ever really had it at all to begin with.

When I heard the news -- CEDay: February 23rd, 2012 -- I was dumbfounded. Lying in bed, as usual, there was an uproar from outside. I peered through the grimy window and saw hundreds of people pouring out of the buildings. The usually quiet streets were filled with revelers. Revelers? In Uptown? The only time I'd seen this many people outside before was immediately after a drive-by shooting, when all the curious bystanders flock to the scene, cops hastily stringing yellow tape around the area, everyone trying to get a good look at the bodies. But this was nothing like those times. They were dancing. Singing. Cavorting. I grumbled, feeling like the Grinch as he observed the Whos down in Who-ville.

I slid out of bed, rummaged in my laundry bag for the least offensive t-shirt I could find and left my room for what must have been the first time in days. My next door neighbor was excitedly leaving his room, bounding down the stairs to join the merriment when I called to him.

"Hey..." I searched for his name. I had run into him in the hallway a few times and we had exchanged pleasantries. I hadn't wanted to give him the idea that I was looking for a friend, or even for an acquaintance, so I'd always cut our conversations short. He seemed like the type that could easily be cast as the annoying neighbor on some inexplicably popular sitcom. I didn't need someone just popping over to shoot the shit. "...Frank. What the fuck is going on?"

He looked up at me, a huge grin on his face. "Zach! Didn't you hear? They cured cancer! It's all over the news!"

"They *cured cancer*? Who they? What cancer?"

"I don't know -- some eggheads at Johns Hopkins. And all of it. They cured it all!"

"But -- you can't cure *all* cancer, there's just too many --" I stopped mid-protest. Frank wasn't listening. He sped down the steps, taking them two at a time, eager as hell to get out to the street.

Now, this news wasn't completely out of the blue. Reports had been circulating that some researchers had made some amazing discoveries about one particular group of cells that might be linked to one particular form of brain cancer. But that was a far cry from *curing all cancer*. I didn't trust the immediate reaction on any big event without hearing it from the source. Not since 9/11 when I heard, on the train, someone cry, "They blew up the Pentagon!" which immediately sent a shockwave through the train car. The truth of the matter wasn't altogether different, but it didn't paint an entirely accurate picture either. I walked, doubting that anything had happened at all, to my office, where I learned the whole truth.

This time, I considered the source even more warily -- Frank wasn't much of a credible witness, even with the hundred of people down in the street below who were obviously excited about *something*. Still, I had to know for myself. Not wanting to go outside, and not really believing that I'd find any answers out there anyway, I sat down hard on the bed, and turned on the radio.

"...this momentous occasion, its repercussions on science, medicine, the economy, human existence. Mankind is on the threshold of a golden age and we have slain the dragon that

guarded the door.”

I recognized the last line as an allusion to a quote from Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher and logician who was referring to religion, not cancer -- sure, it was easily reworked to be relevant, but.... These thoughts -- my annoyance at the misappropriation -- precluded all others, but it soon sunk in as I listened to report after report. Doctors at Johns Hopkins had performed treatments that had completely and safely eradicated a wide variety of cancer cells in human patients. Not only that, but they were on the brink of being able to prevent cancer from ever forming in the first place. *Ever. They cured cancer.*

My mouth hung open, I couldn't think of a thing to do. It felt like the world was a brand new place. I looked out the window, saw the sun in the sky, shining brightly, and even though it was February, it felt like it was actually warm outside, like maybe they had, while they were at it, found a cure for Chicago winter. Maybe they'd cured AIDS and leprosy, and the hunger problem and the obesity problem, and fuck it, the economy too. And I sank back in my bed because I realized that there was hope out there in the universe. And I also knew I wasn't going to do a damn thing with it. Because really, how was curing cancer going to make me make myself be a better person? Just because, what, there were a bunch of people out there who weren't going to die now? It was too late already for a bunch of people I knew, so fuck it. And I wasn't all that fond of people in general anyway, what good did it do me to know that there were going to be a lot fewer of them dying?

And part of me realized then -- this is not just me softening the scene with the benefit of hindsight, I really did think this back then, in my bed, in that crappy little room -- what a complete and total asshole I was being. Aside from, I don't know, landing a man on Mars, or creating cold fusion, this was the big leap for science. This was the pinnacle of human achievement and innovation and ingenuity. This was man working together to improve the world. And I was lying in bed, shitting all over it. Being a total dick. Being completely selfish, just like usual. But, that was the point, right? If curing cancer wasn't going to make me any less of a dick, just think about how little it was going to change the rest of the world. Politicians would still lie, cheat, and steal, and somehow manage to make the cancer curing a political issue. It would be a major factor in the next election. Somehow. And the drug companies, even if they gave the vaccine out for free, they'd still make a shit ton of money off the cure and anybody who ever donated even a penny to breast cancer research or brain cancer research or whatever? They'd never see a cent. How fucked up is that? All this public money going into research and development for a cure to something that potentially affects us all and these bastards were going to basically be printing money for themselves by packaging up the results. And the economy was still going to suck, and since people were going to be living a shit ton longer since cancer wasn't going to be around to weed them out, Social Security was going to be fucked again, and old folks homes would be overcrowded again, and how are we going to take care of the elderly, and how are we going to deal with an ever-increasing population? All these questions were racing around my head, and of course, I lay there thinking I was the only person who was asking them.

As it turns out, I wasn't. Because apparently, God was lying in his bed, doing the same damn thing.

Now, really, I'm not sure that I actually believe in God in any Judeo-Christian kind of way.



The image of the bearded, berobed, omniscient, omnipotent being who floats above us all, making shit happen, that doesn't ring true for me. I don't think there's a dude up there watching over everything, demanding worship, rewarding the good, and punishing the bad (or at least, allowing them to be punished.) I don't buy it. I never fully have.

But sometimes, shit happens that makes you wonder. Like when two years after *they cured cancer* this new thing comes around that turns everyone into fucking zombies. It's like God said, "Oh yeah? You know what cancer was for? It was for keeping me from doing this." Cancer was God's population control, making sure that no matter how much we fucked and made babies, that even when people were crying about an overpopulation crisis, God was just, "Don't worry, my children. Everything's cool." Because He knew cancer (along with our own stupidity, mostly automobile-related) would wipe out enough of us to even things out. It was one of his pressure release valves, a fail safe device, a constant, steady stream of dead folks to balance out the constant, steady stream of births. It didn't always work. Every so often, everything would get thrown out of wack, and there'd be a major event just to even the numbers. The whole Noah's Ark thing? That wasn't because the people were lost, or ignoring Him, or whatever. It was because there were too damn many of them. And that shit happened again and again: Sodom & Gomorrah, Pompeii... Shit, the atom bombs we dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All that was a quick and sudden score sheet adjustment.

And then there was cancer. And still, there was need for drastic action: floods, fires, hurricanes. But now, cancer was gone, and I was scared, wondering what the next big thing might be.

Don't get me wrong: I didn't put all this together that day. It took time. A lot of it didn't even come to me until after I'd been diagnosed with Westphail myself. And I didn't necessarily put God's name on it all either. You can think of it as a way of the universe putting things right by making everything very very wrong. But now, thinking back on it all, seeing what I've seen, for simplicity's sake, I'll just say that it was God. A pissed off, vengeful, angry God, smiting the fuck out of the people who dared to try to take his place.

When Westphail kicked off, when Hakim Tobias Gundersson, our very own Patient Zero, a Canadian citizen with Saudi Arabian and Swedish ancestry, took his first bite of human flesh at the Baker County Fair in Baker City, Oregon, all hell broke loose. Here's this dude, completely under the radar to everyone, no record, no history, no nothing who just appears out of nowhere, jumps on some dude and starts tearing him apart with his fucking teeth. Of course, immediately, everyone starts talking about how it's the goddamn Arabs, some terrorist plot. Can you imagine? Sleeper agents, or something, guys turned into cannibalistic killers set loose in the United States, just waiting for something to trigger them into going on a feeding frenzy? People were freaked out, rightfully so, and this was just the first one! Nobody knew what was going to come next, but everybody prepared for the worst. Gundersson didn't last long when he broke out: Thanks to the relaxed gun laws in Oregon, the five closest people around him were all packing heat. After a tense standoff while they watched as Hakim ate his victim, one of them had the smarts to start shooting. He put three bullets in a neat pattern in Gundersson's chest with his Baretta. Gundersson shrugged them off with less concern than if he'd been bitten by a mosquito. Another fair-goer, one who'd fortunately been up on his zombie lore, took careful aim and put a bullet through Gundersson's forehead, instantly ending the man's short-lived reign of terror. The fair

was immediately closed down, the CDC descended upon the place like a plague of locusts, and the 10 or so people who'd witnessed the event, along with anyone who might have come into contact with Gundersson, were all placed in quarantine. The eggheads couldn't figure much out, though, since the bullet that had stopped him from eating anybody else was of the highly illegal and controversial "dum dum" variety which expands upon impact with the goal of creating just as much chaos inside its victims as possible. The man's brain was more or less vaporized and the man's blood? Well, there wasn't any blood to speak of. No blood means no blood tests. No blood tests means no answers. No answers, of course, leads to more fear and speculation, and in that day and age (hell, in this day and age too, there are still people who think that the virus was spread by Osama Bin Laden's ghost or some shit) that means wild talk about terrorist plots. I didn't buy that, not one bit, especially when the outbreak spread and shit really hit the fan.

Surprisingly, it didn't hit Oregon again for a while. You'd think that you'd be able to pull out a map of Baker County, plot all the outbreak locations and you'd see a huge mass of red dots reaching out from the fairgrounds as the virus spread. The next documented case was on the other side of the world, almost exactly: Ghanzi, Botswana. A 32-year-old woman named Mosetsanagape Basadi had been complaining of flu-like symptoms: aches, nausea, fever. The usual shit. Nobody thought anything of it. Turns out, that's Stage I.

Stage II isn't much more on the surface, really. It only differentiates itself from Stage I by the addition of a runny nose. Yeah, it's a severely runny nose, one that doesn't ever seem to stop, but a little Day-Quil and some tissue, and you're still not all that concerned. It took a while before people realized this was something to get worried about. The scientists, they likened Stage II to the idea of rats streaming off a sinking ship. When your nose starts running and it just won't stop? That's the beginning of all your bodily fluids trying to *get the fuck out*. Westphail is so fucking scary even your snot doesn't want to stick around. It was towards the end of her Stage II that Basadi decided it might be more than just a severe head cold that she was experiencing and headed down the A3 road towards the airport and spoke with a nurse at Ghanzi Primary Hospital. She was admitted, and cared for as if it was just a run-of-the-mill, albeit severe, flu. Three days later, when all the mucous had left her body, Basadi progressed to Stage III.

If you think seeing all the mucous go is scary, imagine when the blood starts following. It starts as a trickle: just a bloody nose to follow days of the worst runny nose on record. And then, man oh man, it just starts to flow. The doctors at Ghanzi Primary threw up their hands in defeat, loaded Basadi into the back of an ambulance and drove her 400 miles up the A2 to Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone. The docs there didn't fare much better than they did down in Ghanzi. To be fair, nobody did very well with it at first, and the eight hours it took for Basadi to make the trip more or less was all it took for Stage III to turn into Stage IV.

At first, before the Gooseman-Keane act was passed, the end of Stage III was considered the end of life. Once all the blood is gone, yeah, people are pretty much dead. There's not much hope there! But that does discredit to Westphail's Stage IV, the mack daddy stage of all viruses everywhere. Ebola can't hold a candle to it. HIV trembles in fear at the mention of its name. During Stage IV, the virus, having evacuated all fluid from what is now little more than the husk of a former human being, having basically terraformed the body to suit its own dark little needs, Westphail invades the brain and, like Hitler did in Europe, Westphail takes the fuck over.

Now, like all good invasions, Westphail takes a minute or two to complete its occupation, during which time its victims appear merely asleep, or upon closer inspection, totally dead. When Basadi arrived at Princess Marina, she was pronounced DOA. Her mother, who had made the trip with her, wept and wrung her hands and made preparations to bring her daughter's body back to Ghanzi for burial. It's a lot easier to transport a dying person than a dead body in Botswana; the only viable option was to go by train to Lobatse where a cousin who had an old pickup truck would meet her to take her the rest of the way home. The arrangements took some time; the next train to Lobatse wasn't for another two days. The staff at Princess Marina allowed Leonor Basadi to stay in an unused room in the hospital, the kindness of their hearts bolstered by a general fear of allowing this woman who may have been exposed to what they were calling "Swegrootgriep" -- which pretty much translates to "Big Bad Flu" -- to leave the hospital and potentially infect the rest of the town. In fact, hospital administrators had sequestered anybody who'd been in the building and near either the body of the deceased or her mother while they tried to figure out just what the fuck was going on.

During this time, down in the morgue, the formerly quiet, inert, dead body of Miss Mosetsanagape Basadi was stirring. Nobody was there, and the Princess Marina Hospital has a surprising lack of security cameras for a facility its size, but you can pretty much piece together what was going on based on later events. She must have just rolled off the gurney, falling to the floor in a heap. Despite the persistence of the hospital staff, Lenora Basadi had refused to allow the doctors to perform an autopsy on her daughter. She couldn't bear the thought of Mosetsanagape's body being cut open, poked and prodded, examined. It was hard enough to think that her daughter, her beautiful baby, her youngest child, was dead, and from what had seemed to be a simple cold. No, the doctors would not touch her and she would be whole and lovely as she was laid to rest in the family plot. So the body was relatively intact, though, it is supposed that she broke her left arm and dislocated that shoulder as she landed on the floor. She probably stood up unsteadily at first, as if learning how to walk for the first time because she -- it -- was. The virus was in control now, and the virus had never done anything but float through the air, or flow through a blood stream. This was its first foray into bipedal locomotion. Can you imagine going from being invisible to the human eye to actually human-sized in the matter of two or three days? That is quite the phenomenal transformation! You can't help but be impressed with the sheer complexity and brilliance of this virus. Never before has something so small done so much to so many! And it just keeps going!

The door to the morgue had been left open, and Basadi stumbled through it, and then proceeded to wander the basement of the hospital, walking the hallways throughout the night, circling the floor again and again. Fortunately for the rest of the patients and staff, the basement was vacant and Westphail doesn't provide its victims with the wherewithal to contend with doors, nor a working knowledge of elevators. It wasn't until 7 the next morning when the coroner, a middle-aged man named Baruti Melesi, arrived for work that anybody knew something was amiss.

Melesi later told news reporters that he first had an inkling that something was wrong, not when he saw that Basadi's body was missing, but when he heard a low moan from the hallway some ten minutes after he sat at his desk adjacent to the morgue. He glanced up from his paperwork, a chill crawling down his spine and saw, through the window which, fortunately for

him, was reinforced with a mesh of wire, Basadi, or Basadi's body, or, as he put it, "a horrifying abomination which resembled Basadi, but whose face was twisted with evil." Melesi, whose colorful descriptions of the encounter made for good reading in the days that followed, even as terror gripped the world, uttered one phrase as he scrambled from his chair and shrunk against the wall behind it: "Unatombwa na farsi!" which, roughly translated, means "Fuck a horse!", an exclamation common amongst the Botswanan lower class. Melesi wasn't often given to cursing, having been "brought up better than that" according to his mother (who was sufficiently scandalized by this revelation that she gave her son a sharp slap across the cheek before taking him into her arms and sobbing once they were reunited.) That he was shaken and disturbed enough by Basadi's appearance to issue such an utterance gives testimony to how hideous she must have looked. Her body was relatively intact, as she hadn't been dead very long, and aside from her pale complexion and her left arm which hung limply at her side, on the surface, Basadi would have seemed more or less normal, save for the fact that when Melesi had left her the previous night, she had been, you know, *dead*. Plus, figure that Melesi was a coroner, a man who had seen *some serious shit*. He'd spent time in Angola, in Sudan, in Somalia. He was not unused to the dead. But when Basadi's head turned, and he saw her face, well, that was enough to make a cultured, well-raised man swear.

There was no long, tense stand off between Basadi and Melesi, though to the coroner, it initially felt as if the two stared at each other for a matter of minutes before anything happened. In reality (he later admitted) less than a second passed between Basadi seeing him and her springing into action. Basadi leapt at the window, bouncing back from it, seemingly unharmed. As Melesi watched, horrified and shocked, he still felt some measure of clinical detachment which caused him to wonder about the woman's dislocated shoulder which she now put into attempting to break the window. Again and again she smashed at it, and Melesi winced each time, thinking about how incredibly painful that must be, though Basadi did not seem to notice and no trace of pain crossed the woman's face.

"Yeye anaonekana kama yeye alikuwa na njaa," Meresi said. "She looked as if she were hungry." When interviewed by James Thrace and William Kipnis for their book *Path of a Virus: Mapping the Great Zombie Outbreak*, this was the only description he could give of her countenance, other than that it seemed that the devil himself had taken possession of her soul, a statement that further shocked Melesi's Badimo-practicing mother.

You can imagine, can't you, what it might do to a people who had gone their whole lives, as those who practice Badimo do, that your ancestors are actually walking amongst you, to see someone, recently very very dead to be *actually walking amongst them*, and, that, at least in this instance, this was decidedly *not a good thing*. It would be a complete and total mindfuck, to say the very least. If it had been Melesi's great-grandmother, one of his own relatives, out there in the hallway, it might well have been worse. According to Thrace and Kipnis, who had done extensive research on Melesi's family and the Badimo religion in order to paint a fuller picture of the impact this event might have had, this was a woman who had told him endless stories of the old days. She had impressed upon him the fact that in those times it was not unusual for a young man to toil in the fields alongside the spirits of his ancestors. These stories had terrified the young Melesi, though he would never admit it, had kept him up at night, sweating in his bed, imagining hordes of undead roaming the Earth. Even if they were not malevolent creatures -- as the one he

currently saw certainly was, banging and thrashing against his office window -- the idea was not a comfort to him. The very thought of confronting something so old, so ancient was a source of nightmares to the young boy. Even these sessions with his great-grandmother, who at 53 years old was by far the oldest woman in the small village in which Melesi was raised, made him uneasy. Her wrinkled face, her raspy voice, her weakened and brittle frame; Melesi wasn't completely certain that the woman wasn't dead already, leading him to ask his mother, quite often, "Unaweza kuona bibi pia, sahihi?" ("You see Great-grandmother too, right?") which would often lead to a slap as well.

As it was, confronted by a formerly dead woman who was currently using a broken and dislocated arm to try to do whatever she could to get at him, Melesi found himself thinking, "Great-grandmother was right." The glass began to crack, and finally shattered, falling to the floor in his office, the noise of which broke Melesi from his reverie. Basadi was still held at bay by the wire mesh which was, for the moment, holding strong. Her claw-like fingers poked through the holes in the mesh, pulling at the mesh which bent, but did not break. Melesi shook the fear and uncertainty from his head and slowly crept forward from the wall. His scientific and professional curiosity took over, pushing his terror momentarily aside and he approached the woman who was hell-bent upon ripping the mesh from the window frame.

"She looked at me as if I were a meal," Melesi told Thrace and Kipnis, keeping up with the food theme. "I've never seen a woman look like that." (It stands to note that the 48-year-old Melesi had been married since he was 18, and that statement caused quite a bit of tittering amongst late-night talk show hosts, back when such a creature still existed, many of whom made jokes about the nature of sex in marriage, anything for a joke in those early days.)

Melesi's curiosity was short-lived: a savage growl combined with a sudden and severe bend in the wire mesh put all thoughts of further examining Basadi in any detail, or for that matter, at all. He slowly backed off, and inched towards his office door, hoping that the mesh would hold Basadi's interest long enough for him to make an escape.

Indeed, in Basadi's current state, her spatial reasoning skills were not what they once were. All she knew -- all the virus in her head knew -- was that she could see Melesi through the window and that was the way to get him. He closed the office door behind him, slowly closing out the image of the savage woman who still tore at the mesh just around the corner from him now. He turned and ran for the stairwell, taking the steps two at a time, desperate to get to the lobby and warn others of the danger in the basement. He arrived just as the elevator doors were closing on the face of his assistant, Emily Bates. Melesi stuck his foot in between the doors, and after a moment of indecision, they opened again.

"Hutaki kwenda chini kuna," Melesi said. "You don't want to go down there."

Once again, fortune favored the hospital. With just one lone case, isolated in a closed area, there was ample opportunity to evacuate the building, an operation which took three hours. During that time, frantic calls flew back and forth between hospital administrators and the Minister of Health who in turn spoke at length with the President. It was decided that the Botswanan Defence Force should be called out to occupy the building and figure out what, exactly, was going on. Meanwhile, the President, a practicing Christian, but one, like most Botswana, who had Badimo in his family history, wondered exactly how far he should take this.

Was it the product of some hysterical overactive imagination? Judging from stories filtering out of the hospital, security staff had indeed observed the once-dead woman, the “tzombi” as they were referring to her.

All of this is part of the public record, written about again and again, the books crowding the shelves, seemingly coming out faster than could be written, printed, bound and shipped. People, like zombies, were hungry for details, their natural inability to turn away from gruesome stories, their fear of the unknown, their need to know everything, ate them up. Two weeks after the Marina Princess Hospital incident, 8 out of 10 of the books on the top of the New York Times’ Bestseller List were about the event and the subsequent outbreak (the other two were books about vampires.) Most were speculative, lacking the detailed research of Thrace & Kpinis’ work, some took a religious these-are-the-end-days approach, but they all sold like mad. Pundits, experts, quacks and lunatics took to the airwaves, all spouting their ideas. Some were sincere, well-thought-out, while others were just engineered to elicit the grandest response they could.

I read them all.

I was obsessed with the stories of Malesi and Basadi. Basadi, by the way, was put down before she could do any harm; but not without significant mess: a team of MOPP-suited UN-sanctioned Eco-Commandoes from Seal Team 8 stormed the basement with the intent of taking her alive; they were not successful. Ballistics reports say they ended up firing 53 rounds of various calibers in their attempt to bring her down. It’s amazing nobody was hurt. Well, nobody except for Basadi anyhow.

Three days later, scientists finally had their chance to look at a live one. Thomas Wayne Westphail, a 32-year-old Texas man who had been sentenced to death for the murder of a 9-year-old girl and was sitting on death row, went through Stage IV. He’d complained of a severe flu and had been moved to the infirmary of the Allan B. Polunsky Unit Supermax prison in West Livingston, Texas. Westphail was an incorrigible and difficult prisoner, so he had been handcuffed to the bed in the medical unit, a precaution which proved incredibly useful to the scientists, and most likely saved the lives of several of the staff in the building.

Westphail passed through Stage IV in the middle of the night, much like Basadi. The infirmary was empty save for him, and there was just a skeleton crew on duty, none of whom noticed the once-dead-to-the-world Westphail suddenly straining against the locked bracelet on his wrist.

At 6:30 that morning, the prison staff was surprised by the arrival of a FEMA team, some SpecOps types, and a half dozen Men in Black types along with a National Guard unit who’d been roused and dispatched from their garrison in Galveston. This last group formed a cordon around the prison, blocking it off from the rest of the world. Tower guards were now faced with the perplexing image of being guarded themselves -- men in camouflage with automatic weapons patrolled uneasily outside the walls. The FEMA team set up in a large RV-type vehicle directly outside the main entrance to the prison building. They were deadly efficient, getting their portable generator running, their quarantine space ready to receive, their MOPP suits on. The SpecOps made ready to storm the building, while the CIA spooks (for they were obviously CIA spooks) stood around and spoke into their cell phones and generally looked as if they were running the show but had nothing to do.

All this, and the staff still had no idea that anything was wrong. They’d only received word

that they were to stay the hell away from the infirmary at all costs. Even the warden was kept in the dark on the situation in his prison which caused him no end of consternation. He was used to knowing every detail in the unit, down to the smallest minutia. He petitioned the CIA spook who seemed to be in charge of all the rest for more information but was told at every turn that he was just better off not knowing and that he'd most likely find out on the evening news.

That didn't seem to be much of a possibility since the media had yet to show up, an oddity in and of itself since a giant convoy of FEMA, National Guard and the six black Ford Explorers which had transported the SpecOps and CIA agents wasn't an every day sight in Southeast Texas. Reporters had been stretched thin, first by the events in Oregon and then by Botswana -- rookie reporters found themselves strapped into business class seats flying to places they'd barely even heard of -- but eventually, someone, somewhere, made a phone call to News/Talk 550 over in Midland and they sent Howard Platt over to the prison who figured he was about to get the scoop of a lifetime but was disappointed when he was rudely greeted by a National Guardsman who, when Platt refused to back off, ominously reached for the handle of his M16, a gesture the National Guard insists is used only as a last resort, but which this particular guardsman had been just itching to make use of. It's a powerful sight to see: a man in the uniform of your own country, making as if he is about to site you with his semi-automatic rifle. It had the desired effect: Platt beat a hasty retreat to his car, where he called his boss at the station, Chip Harlan. Chip insisted Platt come back with a story which Platt was all too happy to provide from the comfort and safety of his own car. "For unknown reasons, the 5th National Guard Unit out of Galveston, Texas has cordoned off the Allan B. Polunsky Unit Supermax prison in West Livingston, Texas. I was unable to reach prison officials, National Guard officials, or anybody in the Department of Defense who was willing to comment on the situation. This is Howard Platt, in West Livingston, News/Talk 550."

Eventually, of course, word got out of what was going on. When the FEMA van containing Westphail, chained and muzzled not unlike Hannibal Lechter in *Silence of the Lambs*, exited the prison (surrounded by National Guard trucks, vans, and other vehicles) people started putting two and two together. Cell phone video, taken surreptitiously by prison guards who had a pretty good vantage point on the situation, clearly showed a body being wheeled out on a gurney, covered by a white sheet, and some of the better quality videos clearly showed that the body was moving. Despite their best efforts to suppress these videos, some still showed up on YouTube in the following days. The videos about the virus, of course, went viral.

While Westphail's body -- and I imagine he was still alive, or reanimated, or whatever you want to call it -- was being poked, prodded, and subjected to whatever tests the FEMA guys could come up with, cases were beginning to pop up around the world. During the next week, there were 23 documented cases of what had been identified as H5N3P53, a grossly mutated version of the H1N1 (and H1N2, H3N1, H3N2, and H2N3) flu viruses. It was the addition of a mutated P53 protein, normally a tumor suppressor. P53 (and the TP53 gene) had been an essential part of the cancer cure, and when a mutated version of it showed up in scientists' microscopes, there were a few who smirked and uttered a quiet, "I told you so," and went back to their work.

I uttered a "I told you so" of my own, but to be honest, I hadn't told anybody, and I was all by myself in my room. The presence of P53, I was certain, meant that in curing cancer, we

(they? I had nothing to do with it, but it had, in the intervening years, become one of those so-called "*l'accomplissement de la population*" -- an "accomplishment of the people") had unleashed something so much worse that we would have been better off just leaving well enough alone, quitting while we were ahead, or at the very least, not so very very far behind. I had been working on my theories, mostly in my head, sometimes in the bars when I found a couple coins to rub together. I tended to get drunk -- *very drunk* -- and espouse my ideas to whomever would listen. I received a lot of crazy looks, but I noticed that more and more, there were people who would quietly nod their heads, perhaps not ready to voice their agreement, but they were there and that was all I needed.

Groups on Facebook and Google+ sprang up, proving that even the face of a global epidemic that was causing people to die and then come back from the dead filled with an unquenchable thirst for human brains, people will still turn to the internet to voice their opinions, to loudly spout nonsense and drivel, proving that rule of internet interaction: Anonymity + Connectivity = Asshole. Ever true, even in the face of global disaster. Maybe especially because of global disaster. Religious nuts spoke of the wrath of God -- not because we had flown in the face of His Will by curing cancer (though there were those who, like me, made the connection between the cure and TP53) but because of the homosexuals and the liberals and the Negroes, but especially because of the homosexuals. In my mind, there's nothing less gay than a rotting, decaying, walking corpse hell bent on eating the brains of whatever it can find, but try telling that to the religious right. They just don't get it. The gay community took it in stride, as they often do, showing up at the Westboro Baptist Church protests with new signs that read "God Hates Zombies" and "I Support Zombie Marriage" to fly alongside the "God Hates Fags" signs that were so popular at those events.

The biggest problem seemed to be what to call the damned thing. Some were calling it the Gundersson Virus, named after Patient Zero. In Africa, it was known as Basadi Virus. But the name that really took off (as you well know) was Westphail.

There were those who thought that naming the virus after Thomas Wayne Westphail was morally and socially reprehensible. Certainly the parents of that 9 year old girl that Westphail killed weren't too psyched about the trend, having heard that man's name enough for one lifetime already, and when Doctor George Adams, the girl's father, contracted the virus himself, well I'm sure Abigail, George's wife wasn't fond of saying, "Yes, my husband has Westphail Virus." But, you can't fight a global trend like that, and for my part, I think that naming a virus that turns people into remorseless killers after a man who was, in life, a remorseless killer himself, well, that was more than appropriate. Debate raged on until Jon Stewart, Brian Williams, and Conan O'Brian all independently referred to the disease as Westphail Virus. Thus, the name was cemented in the public mind.

In the early days, when the infrastructure was still intact, when people still sat in their cozy apartments, in front of their computers, fun was still had. Westfails.com collected humorous images of zombies in awkward positions, accompanied by hilarious captions. Cracked.com updated every single one of their "What to do in a Zombie outbreak" and "7 Zombie photos you won't believe aren't Photoshopped" articles. TMZ started following celebrity zombies and reporting on their activities. George Clooney, the cast of The Jersey Shore, and Lady Gaga all featured heavily on the show. The late-night comedians made their jokes: "What's the



difference between President Romney and a Westphail victim? One's a brain-dead monster, hell bent on the destruction of the human race and the other's a zombie." Hilarious.

And still, I spent most of my time, as before, lying on the bed in that run-down room, still despairing of ever making a difference, still not caring enough to do anything about it. I'd found work: the DEI Units popping up around were offering opportunities to all the unemployed. You didn't need any experience or special training to operate them. Bodies were loaded in. You pressed a button. Blam. Instant Zombie Flambe. There was nothing to it. Didn't even need to get on a schedule, demand was so high. If you needed work, you just showed up, and if there was space for you, you got the gig for the day.

This was before things got too bad, mind you. People still, like I said, were arguing on the internet, watching late-night television, going to bars and getting drunk. At least, I know I was. And though a vaccine for H5N3P53 was being developed, news came out that H6N3P3 and H2N5P53 had been discovered and the scientists weren't able to come up with solutions for them all.

There was good news, however -- despite what popular culture had taught us, you couldn't be turned into a zombie by another zombie. Zombie bites were dangerous, to be sure, especially since once turned, there was enormous pain tolerance and a significant increase in overall strength, especially in the jaw. But, they were survivable. Once someone progressed through Stage III, they really weren't contagious anymore. The virus was firmly lodged in the brain, too busy controlling the body and finding food to spread itself anymore. The lack of bodily fluids meant that the only risk of infection from a zombie bite came from any blood or fluid that that zombie had happened to bite before. Public health notices went up which read "If a zombie bites you, it's as if you've been bitten by every person that zombie has bitten." That was all well and good, but really, if you need more motivation to avoid a zombie bite other than just the fact that, you know, you're being bitten by a goddamn zombie, then you've got problems, mister. Granted, it was a good idea to get tested for *everything* real quick if you happened to run into them.

But these things, all the public health warnings, all the DEI stations, all the vaccines, they were all around when there wasn't a huge risk. Outbreaks were contained, sporadic. There wasn't a huge epidemic. It was, in hindsight, the calm before a huge shitstorm of Biblical proportions. It wasn't that all those things went away and shit got bad, it was that once shit got bad, there was nothing that anybody could do except cut their losses and run as fast as possible in the opposite direction of the horde. Abandoned DEI stations, hospitals laying vacant, these were all common sights. And yeah, the members of the government had all pledged to protect us, but they were only human (the ones who hadn't turned already, that is) and they had more pressing needs: protecting themselves, protecting their families. When the Great Panic took hold, yeah, everything fell apart. All the infrastructure, the government, basic human services. Some countries handled it better than others. It wasn't necessarily the case that one government type was better than any other, but the difference between the people of various nations really shone through. Turns out that Swedes are a remarkably cooperative and capable group of people. I realize I'm stereotyping here, but what else can you say about a nation that rode out the Panic with all the creature comforts and conveniences that they'd enjoyed before it went down? In a post-Panic opinion poll Swedes came out on top when it came to general quality of life

items. Up and down the board, the Swedish people said that things were more or less just as hunky dory as they were before the zombie craze swept the globe.

Over here in the United States, however, people weren't so happy. You know how people get when their cable goes out for 5 minutes? When they can't get cell phone service? It was like that, times a billion. The constant bitching and moaning almost drowned out the growing moans of the brain-crazy zombie horde, which was steadily increasing as each day passed. It seemed like an hour wouldn't go by that you wouldn't hear that typical moan, the zombie symphony, followed closely by human screams and the unmistakable booming of a shotgun. People were getting smarter, getting more careful, getting better armed. But the cases of infection were becoming less contained.

Weirder even than the concept of zombies -- and mind you, the idea of people dying and then waking up as if nothing had happened other than the total loss of bodily fluids, the complete cessation of all vital organs and functions, along with the cultivation of a brand new hobby (i.e. brain connoisseur) was pretty fucking weird -- were what people called "ferals." Ferals were people -- actual living, breathing people -- who just couldn't take it anymore, just snapped under the strain of dealing with the reality of the walking dead and turned themselves into Zs. I know, crazy, right? But there were cases of this sort of thing happening even *before* there was a widespread zombie epidemic. And I'm not just talking about your cannibals or serial killers with weird dietary habits. There had been people who blanked out, went incoherent, started eating people. You have to look pretty deep into the history books for this shit, cuz the docs who got ahold of these ones had no idea where it came from or what it meant, so they didn't talk about it too much, but it happened.

But once it became widespread? It was like those ferals saw the zombie horder as a support group. A new opportunity to go out and be weird with a crowd. Like eating brains was suddenly socially acceptable, just so long as you didn't mind the risk of getting your head blown off by an angry villager, or say, getting incinerated in a DEI station. They must have figured that their risk of being eaten by a Z was just about the same either way, so why not go have some fun?

And some of them even lived amongst the Zs. I'm not kidding. I don't like hanging out with them and I *am* one, but these fools were so far gone, they managed to actually fool the Zs into thinking they were a Z too. People covering themselves in gore, guts, and blood somehow tricking zombies into passing them right on by. The joke was that these guys didn't have enough brains to interest a zombie anyhow, but it got people thinking that Z relied a lot on his sense of smell over all his other ones to tell the living apart from the dead. You don't have to be a genius to know that even the most hygiene-challenged living human being smells an awful lot better than a zombie that's just been rotting from the inside, rolling around in human muck for a couple of days.

And in a way, ferals were more dangerous than the real thing. First of all, it was a lot tougher to pull the trigger on a feral than it was on a Z. I don't know this from experience, but all accounts agreed that if you knew it was a feral attacking you, you might start thinking about capturing him rather than just putting him down, because maybe that poor soul could be rehabilitated. With Zs, once you got over the fact that maybe it's your sister or your best friend, you didn't give a shit because you knew they were gone and there was no bringing 'em back.

Also, ferals were crafty, something you didn't get with your normal, every day, run-of-the-mill Z. Say you're out in the middle of the woods in the middle of the night (and what the fuck are you doing out there? Haven't you heard there's been an outbreak of brain-eating flesh-munching psycho killer zombies? You should be at home with the door locked, the shotgun loaded, and your prayers said) and you hear that tell-tale moaning, and you think, "Oh shit, there's a zombie!" Well, at least you've got a chance. The zombie catches your scent, the moan rises to a louder groan, and yeah, the noise is going to attract any other Zs that are in the area and can hear it, so you're probably in for some shit, but at least you've got that warning. You can load that gun, run away, or even climb a tree. You've got a chance. But put yourself out in the woods with a feral Z-human-whatever and you're in for a treat because ferals still have enough human sense to hunt. Maybe they're not good at tracking, or concealment, or any of the other skills that our woodland brethren have cultivated over the centuries, but they're still gonna give it a try because no matter how much their minds have snapped, there's still real honest-to-goodness instinct carried down from the earliest *Homo sapiens* (and beyond) who had to hunt to survive. Sure, before all the zombie shit happened, you stood just as good a chance of being hunted and killed by some psychotic woodsman or Blair Witch or chupacabra, depending on which woods you lost yourself in, but now, well, camping just wasn't worth it. There were ferals that were sneaking up on people. *Sneaking up on them*. We're talking zombie-fucking-ninjas (or ninja-fucking-zombies, if you prefer) here. This news was what truly sent shivers up and down my spine.

The catastrophic moment -- the event that turned this whole thing from a "Oh, wow, this is another crazy pandemic but one which will eventually fade away and become just a chapter in human history books" kind of thing to a "Holy fuck, we're all going to die!" kind of thing -- took place at the CDC Headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. I remember hearing about it and thinking, "Wow! Just like in *The Walking Dead*!" But, I was disappointed to learn, the CDC HQ is nowhere near as cool looking as AMC made it out to be -- the building they used was just some performing arts center. The actual CDC campus consists of 13 buildings, many of which look like regular, run-of-the-mill office buildings. The most interesting shit happens, as with everywhere else government-related, deep underground: two miles underground, to be exact.

Besides making for a more secure environment, well-suited to ward off chemical, biological and nuclear threats, terrorists, direct military sieges, and nosy media types, having your labs that deep in the Earth allows you to save serious money on your energy bills. Warmed by the heat from the Earth's core, and using geothermal generators for electricity, the CDC was really one of the more environmentally friendly government agencies, God bless them. With a state of the art ventilation system, a dozen clean rooms, safeguards out the ass, fail safe devices for their fail safe devices, the CDC was one of the most secure buildings the United States had ever built, even boasting one of six safehouses scattered across the country for use in event of total devastation to house the President, his family, his staff, and other top-ranking government officials. Had the choice been made to actually move the President into this particular protective housing, untold numbers of staff would have been displaced, probably leading to the deaths of most of them. Fortunately for everyone at CDC HQ (and, if you'll forgive some political editorializing on my part) the rest of the nation, President Romney was mistaken for a zombie and killed by a member of the Paxton, Illinois Volunteer Zombie Protection Squad

during an ill-advised surprise visit to the town. The sniper who pulled the trigger was never identified but was memorialized in a statue, lovingly and painstakingly handcrafted by town artisans who did so at their own peril. Who carves a marble statue in the midst of a zombie insurrection? That's some serious dedication right there.

But I digress: On June 17th, 2018, some seriously bad shit happened. Keeping in mind that the CDC HQ was built to withstand a direct hit by a nuclear bomb, one can only appreciate the perfect storm of events that took place in order to bring each and every one of its fail safe devices down, leading to the mass dispersal of H5N3P53 virus which infected, all at once, nearly the entire population of Georgia.

First, at 7:35AM on June 15th, a group of about 25 Zs entered the city. Their origin is unknown, but most experts agree that they came from a trailer park located 15 miles southwest of Atlanta, the residents of which must have all eschewed every warning coming from the government, FEMA, and the CDC, leading them to all contract the virus at once. If only they had washed their hands more often, covered their mouths when they coughed, caught their sneezes! But, as a butterfly fluttering in Australia can often cause a Hurricane in Moscow, so too did a single sneeze bring down the CDC. Of course, I'm being dramatic here, but that's my right, right?

These 25 Zs normally wouldn't have been a problem, but they happened to tread on the ground that was, at that moment, being patrolled by Col. F. Lee Somerset of the Georgia National Guard. At 28, Somerset wasn't even the youngest Colonel in the guard, and as is usually the case in the military, his high rank at a young age had nothing to do with his competence or experience and everything to do with who he was and who he knew. Somerset's father, Glen Masterson Somerset -- yes, *the* Glen Masterson Somerset -- had gotten his son's appointment at a time when serving in the National Guard was the de facto choice for those wishing to avoid actual military duty while still having the distinction of having served on their resume. With enough whining and cajoling, favors pulled and bribes paid, the elder Somerset was able to secure the rank of Colonel for his son after a mere 28 days following his completion of basic training.

And this was the man they sent to defend Atlanta. Just as Lieutenant General John Bell Hood of the Confederate States Army did before him during the Civil War, Colonel Somerset would fail as well. One might suggest that Somerset did quite a bit worse than Hood did, what with the unnecessary discharge of more than 20 55mm HE rounds into the group of 25 Zs which could have easily been picked off at a safe distance by NG snipers (despite Somerset's incompetence, he did have under his command, Specialist First Class Wes Ruxin, winner of several marksman competitions. It is a further indictment against Somerset that when asked in a debriefing about his decision to use the HE as opposed to the skills of Ruxin and several other top-rated shooters at his disposal, he replied, "Who?")

The HE rounds had their desired effect, and how could they not? Each shell carved a small crater in the ground, completely dismembering whatever stood there before -- zombie, man, or beast. Friendly fire (for which Somerset was somehow never held accountable) caused the death of at least one civilian, and injured several more. It also destroyed the zombies.

An unintended side effect of the artillery strike was the destruction of a key section of the power grid that served the CDC headquarters building. As stated, the important bits in the

building were powered by geothermal generators, but much of the campus, including less important offices and outlying buildings were hooked up to regular old power lines, many of which Somerset had just caused to be blown to shit.

This caused all of the emergency generators in the CDC complex to kick in. Those in the offices effected only experienced a brief moment without power. Lights flickered, computer workstations rebooted, people looked at each other and shrugged. Power interruptions were more and more commonplace, even in this important government complex. Services were crumbling and another brief interruption in electrical power was nothing to get too concerned about.

Except that this one was. When the power kicked back in, a surge so great as to act as a kind of electrical hemorrhage ran through the system, shorting out critical components of the building's defense and maintenance systems. Alarm sirens that should have been sounding, causing fear, paranoia, panic, extreme mental duress, and monster headaches the likes of which have only been experienced by the most intensely dedicated weeknight drinkers failed to go off due to the fact their batteries had all been scavenged for use in the night shift janitor's Walkman. One by one, the lights went out. Doors that were meant to stay open suddenly shut. Doors that were meant to stay closed flew open. Computer screens went dark. Coke machines spat out can after can. The candy machine let loose its holy cargo: Snickers bars, Three Musketeers bars, and Twix bars all flew across the room.

The chaos penetrated all the way down to the third subbasement of the main building of the headquarters. This building housed all critical experiments, virus cultures, and vaccine prototypes, most of which were contained two or three floors below this one, however, someone had recently checked out a sample of a recently discovered strain of the virus (designated H12N33P53R29) and had brought it up to the 3rd subbasement the night before for testing which though it could have been performed in a lab on a lower level, it just wasn't all that comfortable down there. It should come to no surprise that even with just a cursory examination of the facility, one could easily tell that comfort levels fell off sharply as security levels rose. It was not uncommon for secure samples to be moved from lower levels of the building up to higher ones just so that one could listen to some music while working. Below sublevel three, electromagnetic interference from the geothermal generators rendered anything that wasn't specifically shielded and grounded useless meaning that the researchers' iPods, iPads, iPhones, iPurses, iGloves, iGlasses, and iBalls were completely inoperable. A distraction (sources disagree as to its nature: many believe the researcher simply got hungry, and went out; others have found evidence that leads them to believe a female researcher, with whom the man had had some romantic involvement, had called and that the two had taken the opportunity to have a rendezvous in a nearby supply closet; DNA retrieved from the supply closet was suggestive but inconclusive) caused the man to fail to return the sample to the secure storage space on the floor below. He didn't leave the innocent looking petri dish out in the open, but for all practical purposes, he may as well have.

Seismologists who still ply their trade agree that the earthquake that occurred 25 minutes after the shelling from Somerset's unit stopped would have happened regardless of whether or not the young colonel had made the decision to call in the explosive artillery. The Bremert Fault which runs parallel to Cattahoochee River was due for a quake, there was no denying it. *When* it

would have occurred is a matter of some debate with the more conservative of the earthquake nerds pinning it at anywhere from 10 to 25 years in the future, while the more renegade of the bunch saying it would have happened five minutes earlier had the bombing not happened to delay it.

"I'm not saying that Somerset is a hero per se," Dr. Ralph Pitimin, spokesman for the American Seismologic Association, said in a news conference three days later, "but, I would say that he is a man of distinguished courage or ability, who should be admired for his brave deeds and noble qualities. If his admittedly ill-advised decision to drop 30 tons of explosive ordnance on a civilian area that was only experiencing a zombie incursion that by any standards could only be described as miniscule had come any later, this earthquake, which would have measured 8.8 on the Richter Scale and occurred 10 minutes earlier, would have been completely devastating."

When one reporter, who had clearly done his homework, asked Dr. Pitimin how the earthquake which caused the wide dispersal of a virus which had previously been rather well contained could be called anything other than 'completely devastating' Pitimin responded:

"You, son," Pitimin started -- the reporter sneered; he was at least 20 years Pitimin's senior, "are falling into the trap of a logical fallacy known as *argumentum ad historium*. You can not say with any certainty what would have happened had certain events taken place differently or not at all. Therefore, by assuming that the earthquake would have happened even if Somerset had not shelled the outlying land, you are following fallacious reasoning. All that can be likely said is that again, while I am not calling Somerset a hero, I would have to say that he is a being of godlike prowess who might come to be honored as a divinity."

The reporter, wily veteran though he was, had never encountered such amazing double speak and question avoidance. Nevertheless, he dove back in.

"That's not at all what I'm saying. In fact, it seems that you are appealing to *argumentum ad historium* by saying that if Somerset *hadn't* shelled the land that the earthquake would have caused a complete disaster. What I am trying to say here is that the earthquake *was* in fact, a complete disaster."

"Look, Mister --" Pitimin started, acting as if he were searching his extensive memory for the reporter's name. The truth was that he had never bothered to learn any of the reporters' names even though he had spent the last ten years as the Association's spokesman and had given any number of press conferences, had allowed numerous reporters to buy him drinks and had slept with at least two of them and even more of their daughters.

"It's Caesura," the reporter started, for it was none other than Hitch Caesura, star reporter for the Atlanta Star-Tribune, the very man who had broken the story in the first place with his dogged investigation of Somerset's incompetence. His research into Somerset's background had lead to a three day front page report on the mishandling of the viral outbreak by the National Guard, the CDC, and the Atlanta Streets and Sanitation Division. "Hitch --"

Pitimin continued, not bothering to wait for Caesura to finish. "We could argue all day back and forth about who did what, but I don't see how that could possibly change the fact that while I'm not calling Somerset a hero, I would go so far as to suggest that in the Homeric period, Somerset would be considered a warrior-chieftan of special strength, courage, or ability. And that your reports, while well-written and wonderfully edited by the fine folks at the Star-Tribune, might be actually, in some way, giving comfort and aid to our enemy."

"Comfort and aid to the enemy?" Caesura asked incredulously. "The enemy is a viral! The virus can't read!"

Pitimin smiled wryly. "I didn't know you were an expert on the literacy of the Westphail virus, Mister...."

"It's Caesura."

"Yes, well, Mr. Reporter, I realize that you have done extensive research on this so-called viral outbreak" -- Pitimin used air-quotes to diminish the legitimacy of the words -- "but are you ready to stand here and insist to the world" -- a sweeping gesture to the cameras and microphones that filled the room, the bearers of which were now engaged in an intense game of ping-pong in an attempt to capture not only Pitimin's responses, but Caesura's as well. Other reporters who, moments before had been eagerly awaiting their turn to ask their own questions now scribbled frantically to record Caesura's queries. They knew that the conversation they were witness to was better than anything they could come up with. They knew when they were outmatched -- "that the Westphail virus can't, in fact, read?"

"Yes," Caesura responded. "Yes, I am."

Pitimin laughed sardonically, "Well then the rest of us can all relax tonight, can we not?" He threw his hands out to his sides, appealing to the reporters, to his aides, all of whom were taking steps to separate themselves from the obviously deranged man. Nobody wanted his name to appear in a caption under a photo of Pitimin lest their reputation be completely destroyed by association.

"I wouldn't suggest that any of us can relax anymore, not now that a rare and particularly destructive strain of Westphail has been unleashed upon the southeast United States due to the incompetence and nepotism of the Georgia National Guard and the subsequent earthquake which we came here to ask you about."

Pitimin was unfazed, the singular quality that made him perfect for the job of spokesman. His superiors had always been worried that his tendency to go off-script, and to speak in circles like a politician had made him something of a loose cannon. However, his complete and utter lack of shame when spouting gibberish and the fact that no reporter had ever, or seemingly could ever cause him to trip up gave them comfort.

"So, Mister...."

This third time, Caesura simply let Pitimin pretend to search for the name, refusing to give the man the opportunity to cut him off again. There was a tense staring match for a matter of minutes before Pitimin continued. "Mister... Mister. You have questions about the earthquake? Go ahead and ask them."

"I've already heard enough," Caesura said, putting his notebook into his satchel which lay at his side.

"Surely you'd like to stay and hear what the rest of these fine reporters -- your friends and colleagues -- have to say, wouldn't you?"

Caesura looked around the room. His journalistic brethren all shook their heads and shrugged. "I think they're done as well."

"Well then, if that will be all, I'll just sum up here and say that Colonel Somerset, while certainly not a hero, could definitely be called a large sandwich, usually consisting of a loaf of bread of longroll cut in half lengthwise and containing a variety of ingredients such as meat,

cheese, lettuce, and tomatoes. Good day to you all, gentlemen.”

The subsequent publication and broadcast of this interview, though tangential to the matter at hand, were viewed and read possibly more than any other press conference in the history of press conferences. Government sympathizers used the material as evidence that the media had gone bonkers, publishing anything they could no matter how irrelevant the content. Those who still had half a functioning brain left in their heads pointed to the reports as damning proof that the United States government had completely jumped the shark. There were many who believed -- and I counted myself amongst them -- that this had happened years before and that this was just another in a long string of events that proved that everyone who was running the country had gone completely insane.

The earthquake rocked the building to its foundation. Now, of course, the entire campus had been built to withstand such a shock, but somehow (perhaps with the addition of Somerset's intense shelling of the area, perhaps due to decreased funds given to the CDC which led to a lapse in maintenance) a crack formed in the shielding on the geothermal generators which caused some rather severe structural instability. This caused the building to shake more than it would during such a seismological event to the point that the very table on which the petri dish containing the virus culture began to shudder. The dish itself skittered across the surface of the table and teetered precariously on its edge. Tense moments (well, not so tense in that there was someone there watching as it happened -- the room was unoccupied -- but tense nonetheless) passed as the dish hung as if unsure whether to retreat to safety or just say “Fuck it!” and take the plunge. In the end, as we all know, the dish fell. The agar gel splattered out, flew in a high arc and, in a freak occurrence, serendipitous perhaps for the virus which grew on the gel, but damning for the rest of us, landed in an unsecured air intake vent.

Freed from its glass prison, the virus took the opportunity to float freely through the building's ventilation system which though it normally was quite good at containing and killing viruses such as this should they try to spread through the innards of the building, wasn't quite up to snuff that day due to the above mentioned power surges, artillery bombardments and earthquakes. Thus was it able to spread, and hide, and lay in wait.

When people returned to the building(s) they of course did a full scrub, especially when they discovered the upturned petri dish (amongst other things of that nature which had been knocked from their proper places) and nobody thought anything of it. But the air vent scrubbers failed to work, and by the time anybody noticed that the ventilation system was still marked as contaminated, it was too late. The virus worked its magic, infecting people left and right. And as this was a yet to be isolated culture, there was no test for it. The workers at the CDC were all swabbed and forced to wait for their test results before and after every shift, but the swabs could do no good, and detected nothing out of the ordinary.

But they were all dirty. Every single last one of them. And they went home to their wives and lovers and children and friends and since everybody thought that you could trust a CDC worker to be clean, nobody thought much of it when one of them sniffled or when one of them sneezed. And, over the weekend, the virus spread further, and finally, now, you could have a satisfying overlay for your map that showed a nice epicenter in Atlanta with tendrils reaching out



as the virus spread, evil fingers of red, heavy dots becoming splotches, pinpricks becoming gaping holes of infection.

That's when everything really went to hell, and it seemed to happen overnight. The government enacted martial law; those who had thought the Patriot Act was restrictive in the days after 9/11 really had something to cry about now. Moving around the city became difficult; traveling from one city to another became damn near impossible. Checkpoints stationed seemingly every three blocks made it tough just to go out for a cup of coffee.

Still, there was order. Even with the virus spreading at a seemingly unstoppable rate, there wasn't mass panic or chaos in the streets. Zombie outbreaks were becoming more common, but, for once, it looked like the government was at least handling it alright, so the times that Zs made themselves known, they were quickly put down and everybody went about their business, more or less. Those who had feared -- and those who had hoped for -- a mass zombie horde were disappointed.

Internationally, things were less intense. It seemed that, for the most part, the only place with a large infection rate was the United States. There were a few exceptions -- a mass outbreak in rural China; the Prime Minister of Australia spreading the virus to 30 shepherds during a meet and greet; the entire cast and crew of the German adult film *Riesigen Schwanz Stechende Partei* infected during the climactic orgy scene -- but otherwise it was generally calm on the global front.

Part 3: "I'm not feeling so well...."

When what starts as a simple head cold can turn into something that kills you and in turn causes you to start indiscriminately killing other people, you tend to get a little paranoid at the slightest sniffle. A runny nose will send you into a fit of panic. A bloody nose? Forget about it. Doctors offices and hospitals -- the ones who still operated, and there were a few of them, selfless souls still trying to contribute to the greater good -- were flooded now with people who had done little more than sneeze. A throat culture test was developed that gave results with 90% accuracy in five minutes. Those five minutes would seem a lifetime if you were waiting to get the news that you were four days away from becoming a cannibal destined to end up in a DEI station's rubbish bin. Those that could be cured were given their meds and sent on their way, but those that couldn't; well, that was a scene for sure.

I contracted H5N3P53 on April 19th, 2018. I know the day and I know the asshole that gave it to me. I was making a rare trip outside my room to the grocery store and some dickwad sneezed on me. That's right. Me, the one who had lived in his loner castle, a hermit in a cabin in the middle of the city, eschewing human contact, keeping everyone at arm's length, refusing to participate in society, in life, in anything, brought down by a single sneeze, from some douchebag named Tim Stimph. How do I know his name? Because Tim Stimph is just the kind of asshole that goes around saying shit like, "Do you know who I am? I'm Tim Stimph!" as if that means anything. And three years later, I ate that asshole's brain and stole his wallet.

I'm not even kidding. But, I'll get to that later.

I was at the grocery store, buying a six pack of beer to get me through the night. It was

going to be a hard night, I knew, because I had finished reading the only book I owned and there were nothing but reruns of Justin Bieber's sitcom on the only channel my television could pick up. Beer was the only thing that was going to carry me through. As I wandered through the grocery store towards the beer and wine section, I noticed a thin, pale, waste of a human being about my age wearing a White Sox hat, looking through the adult diaper section. I couldn't believe someone as young as I could be so incontinent as to need to wear Depends, but from the way he was looking at the packages and reading the sizing information, I was quite certain that he was buying them for himself and not for anyone else. Also, there were the poop stains on his pants. I snickered as I walked past, thinking, amongst other things, "What an asshole." Also, I was thinking, "This guy is a total waste of space. I wonder if he experiences oral incontinence as well. You know, diarrhea of the mouth and whatnot. I bet he does. I bet he never shuts up even when he knows everyone around him wants him to just shut the fuck up. But he never will." I don't know why I had such an immediate and negative reaction to this prick, but there it was, and I never second guess my first impressions because, more often than not, I'm 100% correct.

And, it turns out, my gut feeling was right once again.

Look, I don't think I can impress upon you nearly enough what a total reject, retard, dickface, snotnose, asswipe, fucknut, halfwit cockmunch this guy is. Was. Remember: I ate his motherfucking brain. And you know what? I think it made me stupider. In fact, I'm certain of it. Prior to that, I knew how to do differential calculus. Afterwards? Not a bit. Before I ate that jerkwad's brain, I could, with my eyes closed, field strip an M16 while I was being attacked by rabid dogs, my hair was on fire and my nuts were being squeezed by a 300 pound gorilla. Afterwards? Not even close. I know. I tried.

Look the point is that this Tim Stimpf fellow, this guy who, as I passed him in the ADULT DIAPER section of the grocery store, this guy was a complete and total waste of space (did I mention that yet? Do you realize that there is a finite amount of breathable air on this planet and that he used some of it up? Doesn't that just make you want to cry now that you know what a complete fuckface he was? I'm kidding, of course, about the finite amount of breathable air, but what if? I mean, seriously, *what if?*) And I'm not saying all this just because this dickhole went out in public with a fucking cold that turned out to be goddamn Westphail virus and that as I walked past the motherfucker, he MOTHERFUCKING SNEEZED ON ME.

Alright. Let me say that again. I'm not calling this Tim Stimpf fellow, formerly of Chicago, Illinois, a total and complete mistake in the chain of human history, a total stain on the planet because he gave me Westphail. What I'm saying is that even if Tim Stimpf had not given me the virus that subsequently made me turn into a zombie forever doomed to be chased down by smoothskin assholes everywhere, even if he had not done this, I would still be most assuredly certain that the whole world would have been much better off if his daddy had just sprayed him across his momma's face.

Whoa.

I'm sorry about that.

I might have gone too far.

But the guy 1) left his house; 2) with active Westphail; 3) to go somewhere *other than a hospital*; and 4) sneezed *right in my face*. Also, 5) he did not say, "Excuse me."

The reason that Tim Stimpf sneezed in my face, and I must admit some culpability for

this, is because, as I passed him (in the adult diaper section, remember?) I stopped. And turned. And stared at him.

Stimph was down on his knees, getting a good look at the Depends or the Oops I Crapped My Pants or whatever brand it was he was examining, and I was standing behind him, trying not to laugh out loud as I made all manner of obscene and rude gestures behind his back. So, when he had finally made his choice of adult Pampers for his incontinent ass, and stood up, and had to sneeze, and heard me finally break out in hysterical laughter, naturally, he turned towards me.

And blew at least a milliliter of Westphail infected snot into my face. And, I know this is super gross, but yeah, some of it went in my eyes, and my mouth. And that's how I got motherfucking Westphail Virus.

I staggered back, unable to believe what had just happened. Sneezing in public was more taboo than masturbating on a train anymore. It just wasn't done. You remember when, back in the day, if someone had a cold, you'd say something like, "Stay away from me! Don't get me sick!" because you just didn't want to feel like crap for three or four days? Yeah, I remember those days too. Now, of course, before the United States instituted total federal martial law and the states had some meaning, purpose, or power, some of them had passed laws actually making it illegal to cough or sneeze in public without a Level 2 MOPP suit properly worn and inspected.

So Stimph sneezed, and I caught the thing full on in my face and I know it sounds crazy, but I knew right away that I was infected. I could feel the damn germs doing their creepy crawly thing into my system, could feel them corrupting everything they touched, every cell in my body. The look of horror on my face must have been something fierce because Stimph said, in a voice which further confirmed for me his total worthlessness, "Chill out buddy. It's just a cold."

"Just a cold?" I shrieked. "Just a cold? Where have you been living? There's no such thing as just a cold anymore."

"Oh, fuck off," he said with a sneer. "I don't have the bug."

"Which bug are you talking about?" Despite my instincts and natural desire to get further away from Stimph, I pressed closer, jabbing my index finger into his chest. "Westphail 1? Five? Eight? Or is this just a simple case of East Amazon Kitten Flu? Or do you have North Polish Wombat Ague?"

I never thought I'd live in a day and age when every disease had a six-word name and was from somewhere I'd never been, nor would I ever go to visit.

"It's just a fucking cold," Stimph said, brushing my jabbing finger aside. I could tell that he wasn't used to someone standing up to him, or at least giving him a hard time, despite his diminutive stature and generally sickly and weak looking appearance. His first instinct was to try to bully me, either physically or verbally, but I could tell that he was scared. He started trying to spout some statistics, all of which were complete and utter bullshit, and even if they had been accurate would not in any way have backed up his argument in the slightest.

"Look. Buddy," I said, now just wanting to end the conversation and break contact with Captain Douchface, "I don't give a shit what you think you understood from what you think you read in People Magazine or whatever, but you obviously have me mistaken for someone who does care. Let me reiterate one thing: I do not. Care. One bit. At all. And so, I will take my leave of

you, Dr. Asswipe. And even though I'm certain you've doomed me to a short and miserable life of horrors, destined to be decapitated, eviscerated and incinerated; or experimented on by an army of scientists and physicians; or kept as a prize pet in some rich asshole's collection I'm going to do what maybe you should do with the meth sometime: I'm going to just walk away."

"But I'm not finished talking to you," Stimpf said. He looked as if he'd preferred it when my finger was jabbing his chest. It was probably the most positive human contact he'd had in a long time, and to be honest, it was the most positive human contact I'd had in a long time. Maybe I hated him so much because I recognized something in him. Perhaps I recognized in him the part of me that can be an insufferable bore, a complete mannerless prick. But then, that part of me doesn't exist. I just made it up. Fooled you.

I walked away, leaving Stimpf sputtering and stammering and shouting things like, "I'm Tim Stimpf, goddammit! You don't walk away from me!" with nobody to talk to, all by himself, nowhere to go.

The cold hit me in the morning. I woke up with the tell-tale tickle in my throat. In years past, I would have drowned myself and the cold in vitamin C, but diseases of 2018 just laughed at vitamin C. They loved that shit. They asked for seconds. Cold medicine wasn't much better. It used to just mask symptoms so you could get through the day. With these viruses, cold medicine actually made things worse. I saw a guy with H8N3~pt87 (a newer and rarer but less deadly strain of Westphail) on DayQuil who sneezed his own goddamn nose off. I'm not kidding. He covered his mouth and nose with a handkerchief, sneezed, and when he lowered his hand, his goddamned nose was gone from his face, sitting in the goddamned handkerchief in his hand. He freaked out. I freaked out. His mom freaked out. The whole situation was horrible and really put a damper on the mood of that evening. So, I stayed away from the C and the Quil, and headed out the door and right to the damned doctor.

The closest doctors to me worked out of a Catholic Church which had been converted to a medical center the summer before. The building swarmed with nuns who'd been pressed into duty as medical assistants and security personnel who eyed everyone that entered the church as a potential threat. The line was long, but there was plenty of reading material on hand to make the wait go by faster. I put on the supplied surgical mask, its inability to block the virus had already been proven in clinical trials, but in terms of having something for show, there was no equal. I settled in to wait while reading a six year old copy of Time Magazine. When they finally called my name, I had read it cover to cover. Twice.

"Right this way, Mr. Graves," said a pleasant young woman. The yellow and black HAZMAT suit she wore did its best to mask her curvy figure but failed; the hooded headpiece was similarly ineffective at hiding her beautiful features. I tried to make out if she wore a habit underneath the suit but couldn't.

"Thank you, Miss --" I made a show of reading the nameplate printed above her left breast; further excuse to stare. "Alcott. How are you today?"

I saw her frown through the plexiglass covering her face. "It's been a rough day," she admitted. "We've had seven positive cases. Three went right to DEI." She paused and collected herself. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be telling you that."

"No, it's alright," I said, though the news did little to calm my nerves. "I asked."

She sighed and shrugged, a gesture muted by the suit. "Still, I shouldn't--"

"Honestly," I said, "it's the new reality. The sooner we accept it, the better."

"I guess you're right, but it's easier to accept when you're not about to face testing." She shuddered and caught herself again. "Listen to me, going on and on like this."

She lead me into a makeshift examination room near what used to be the church altar and showed me to a gray folding chair next to a tray of medical instruments. A guard stood ominously behind the chair, a rifle slung across his back, his right hand resting on a pistol loosely carried in a holster on his hip. The visor on his helmet was tinted darkly; I couldn't discern whether there was a man in there or some sort of brand new security robot. He stood so still, it was impossible to tell. A pair of handcuffs seemed out of place amongst the swabs, scissors and other devices on the tray, but their import was not lost on me. If the test came back positive, I'd be wearing those in short order.

"The doctor will be with you shortly," said the woman.

"Oh, I hoped you'd be doing the swabbing," I said, imbuing my words with as much double meaning as I possibly could. Remarkably, even though I'd spent most of my days over the past several years just holed up in a fleabitten, run-down motel which catered to the lost and transient, I still hadn't lost my natural rapport with members of the fairer sex. Or at least, I thought I hadn't. Her face darkened visibly.

"Are you attempting to flirt with me, Mr. Graves?" she asked.

I hadn't realized I'd been so transparent. "Can you blame a guy for trying?"

Her hand disappeared into a pocket of the suit, coming back out with a string of rosary beads which she fingered nervously. "With a nun in a church that has been turned into a last bastion in the defense against the growing horde of the walking dead which threatens to destroy everything that God and man have created? While on the verge, yourself, of learning whether you are to join that horde? Yes, I can blame a guy for trying."

The guard behind the chair coughed, obviously trying to stifle a laugh. It must have been the funniest thing he'd heard all day if it caused him to break his stoic silence. At least now I knew there was something living and breathing inside that uniform.

"Sorry, sister. It was just a natural response to your obvious beauty." I reached out and touched her hand.

She sighed at me again, retracting her hand with disgust. "Which caused you to ignore my obvious unavailability?"

"Hey now, that wasn't so obvious. You guys should have a big white cross on the front of your HAZMATs or something. Or wear a halo or something. Come on now."

"Mr. Graves, you disgust me. If I weren't a nun, I'd probably be forced to slap you silly," she said. The security guy now gave up trying to stifle his laughs and guffawed, causing both of us to look at him in surprise. He gave a shrug, gestured for us to continue, and returned to his stance at attention. "Well," continued the nun, "I'm going to go now. Like I said, the doctor will be here shortly. Good luck."

"Luck?" I asked, displaying the string of rosary beads which I'd slipped from her grasp during the short moment our hands touched. She looked down at her empty hands in surprise. "Who needs luck when he's got God on his side?"

She snatched the beads from my hand and pivoted on her heel, left the examination

room. "I'll be praying for you."

"That's all I ever wanted, sister," I called after her.

Behind me, the security guard broke his silence. "Really dude?" he asked. "Really?"

I shrugged. I was incorrigible, I knew it, but it was how I stayed human, you know?

The doctor came, swabbed, and went. I waited. Like I said, those five minutes were an eternity, waiting to see what fate had in store for me. The guard knew his job, standing at the ready, probably expecting me to flip out if the test came back positive, probably hoping that I would, now, just so he'd have an excuse to get me in a headlock, cuff me up, shove me around, toss me right into the DEI station, push the button himself, just 'cause he didn't have the guts to hit on a hot chick, even if she was a nun. I sat there, quickly getting more and more pissed off at this asshole of a guard, all due to (I now freely admit) stuff that was being made up in my head. I had just stood up with the intention of giving him a piece of my mind when the doctor returned. The doc paused for a second, taking in the image of the security guard with his hand a little tighter on his gun, taking a step back from me, me, standing there, facing the guard, my right hand raised, my index finger extended, pointing accusingly at the guard. We turned to face the doctor who shrugged as if saying he'd seen far stranger than this.

"Test's negative," he said. "Get out of here."

He turned and left. The guard, though I couldn't see his face through the tinted visor on his mask, was obviously disappointed he wouldn't get a chance to run me through the wringer.

I shrugged. "Sorry, bub," I said. "Can't win 'em all."

I headed out of there, but didn't want to go home. I couldn't believe I'd come back negative, figured with my luck I must have contracted Westphail. Figured I should go find that Stimph guy and apologize to him for being so hard on him, I mean there was really no need to be so mean about a simple accident since it hadn't turned out to be full of zombie virus. I thought about seeking him out, maybe buying him a drink, and, like most of my endeavours, I figured it would be best to start out in a bar, get a drink in me, see what I could see.

I went to the nearest watering hole, a pub named The Whispering Gorilla. I'd been there a couple times before, but I was by no means a regular. Still, I recognized the bartender, a relatively genial fellow named Watson. As it was early on a Friday afternoon, the bar was empty and Watson sat in a stool with his feet up, reading the day's paper, dust floating through the air illuminated by a shaft of sunlight stabbing in through the window.

"Afternoon, Watson," I said, sliding into a bar stool next to him.

He looked up from his paper, surprised to have a customer so early. I had the feeling he was more annoyed than pleased to have something to do.

"Howdy," he said. I could tell he didn't recognize me, even though I had been served by him a few times, and had been somewhat vociferous during my visits, and had tipped him generously. His professional bartending demeanor kicked in, however. "How's it going today?"

"Real good," I said. "Don't got the Westphail. 'Bout to get drunk. Can't complain."

Watson rolled his eyes and put down his paper, but was maybe remembering that I gave him decent tips for each drink he served me and as this obviously wasn't a very lucrative shift, was willing to put up with me for whatever financial gain I might represent. "Sounds good. What

can I get ya?"

"Give me a Zombie Hunter," I said, for they had it on tap and it was a tasty dark ale, featuring Cascadian Hops, toasty English malts, a hint of dark bitter cherry, some citrusy orange notes and a whopping 8.7% ABV which was just enough to get me buzzed enough to get drunk enough to get on with my day.

"Coming right up." He poured the beer into its special glass, a large goblet with the distinctive Zombie Hunter logo which featured a heavily-tattooed man holding an AK-47 across both shoulders. I looked into his eyes, trying to get a read on the man, figure out what he was all about. The logo was based on an actual person -- a legend, perhaps, but there was some truth to it -- or an amalgam of actual people, young men who went out hunting down rogue zombies, trying to keep their communities safe, trying to protect the world from roving monsters who might eat their brains. I had briefly considered finding a gun, learning how to load, clean, maintain, and fire it, and then setting out to do this myself, but reality had set in, and I'd returned to my ways: not giving a shit about the rest of the world.

"That's good stuff," I said after taking a sip of the beer, nodding in the bartender's direction.

He nodded back. "Yep," he said. "I like it real well myself. That'll be 8 FilmBux Brought to you by Blockbuster."

I pulled an oblong, garishly colored bill from my wallet. Those of you reading this now live in a world beyond money, where everything has reverted back to a barter system, but perhaps some of you remember when the government auctioned the naming rights to the monetary system off to the highest bidder. Everyone was taken by surprise when Blockbuster Video came back from bankruptcy to win the honor. Most transactions took place using debit or credit cards and people avoided mentioning prices until it was absolutely necessary.

"Can I get change for 20 FilmBux Brought to you by Blockbuster?"

"Absolutely." He gave me change, and I left 2 singles on the bar for him.

"Thanks, mate," Watson said. He returned to his paper, but stayed on the other side of the bar. I twirled around on my stool. This wasn't the experience I'd been looking for when I headed away from the church. I idly wondered what the nun was up to. What was her name? Sister Alcott. Do nuns drink? I didn't know. Probably, right? Priests drink like fish, why not nuns?

I looked at Watson. Was Watson his first name? Or his last name? Or both? I decided not to ask. I figured I'd be disillusioned no matter what the answer was. I looked at the paper, the sections scattered out across the bar. "May I?" I asked.

"Go ahead," said the bartender.

I rooted through the paper, same old stuff, nothing interesting until I got to the sports section and then I read up on the latest exploits of my favorite local sporting teams including the Chicago Tyrannosaurus Rexes baseball team and the Chicago Baby Chipmunk hockey club. The 'Munks were well on their way to another Stanley Cup championship, which cheered me up on a daily basis. Reading about their exploits, even in the midst of the zombie outbreak, was always a comfort. I just hoped that they'd be able to finish the season before any of them were sidelined with Westphail. It had happened to several players on other teams and across many sports. When Derek Jeter turned up at Yankee Stadium after a long illness and started gnawing on Alex Rodriguez's arm, MLB officials were faced with an issue they were ill-equipped to deal

with; does the fact that one team's players had turned into zombies mean that they forfeit the game? Joe Buck, who was calling the game, waxed philosophical as the entire stadium erupted in panic.

"It just goes to show you," he said, "how small this game really is in comparison to the rest of the world."

His partner, the inimitable Tim McCarver, agreed. "Joe, at the end of the day, it's just a game. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the Jeter family in this, their time of need."

This had happened a couple years before, and still professional sports pressed on. They had to. They were our only source of release, and they were still huge money makers. Attendance had dropped, sure, as no sane person wanted to be packed into a giant crowd of people, where any of them could suddenly start feeling peckish and craving the taste of human brains. Fortunately, there had been very few outbreaks at sporting arenas, but still, the leagues mostly maintained attendance limits, and strict security procedures were followed at all times.

There were those who thought that in this great time of national (and global) strife, that sporting events should be forgotten, but I was not amongst them. I figured that as long as there were enough people to put out on the diamond, or to throw out on the ice, they should damn well play the games. What else did we have to do? Not playing wasn't going to help stop the zombies. And sports were a great distraction. Sure, they were just games, but that was exactly what was so great about them. They were just games. There was no speculation about the end of days, if God had a hand in the virus, what possible ramifications it all had, whether or not the entire thing was an Al-Qaeda plot. None of that. It was the only place where you had a chance to avoid the constant, unceasing talk. That's why when I wasn't holed up in my shitty little room, I was nose deep in the sports section, or had my eyes glued to a game. I had had enough of thinking. Enough of speculation. Enough of the constant noise that was buzzing about, around and behind everything in the world.

I prayed for peace.

I prayed for quiet.

"You don't look so good, friend," Watson said suddenly. I looked up from the paper which I'd only been pretending to read and realized he'd been staring at me for some time. The jubilation I'd felt at being given a zombie-free bill of health had given me adrenaline enough to make it to the bar and get that first beer, but it was wearing off, and when Watson commented on my appearance, I suddenly felt the full weight of the cold again.

"Yeah," I said, using humor to as a shield as I usually did, "I know. I never do."

"That's not what I mean." He took a step back, nervously. "You look really... not good."

I forced a chuckle. "Oh, that. Don't worry. Just came from the clinic. I'm clear." I produced a printout of the test results that had been provided me on my way out of the church. "See?"

Watson looked at the sheet skeptically but refused to come any closer. I slid it across the bar to him so he could get a better look. He examined the document, saw the official seal of the Department of Health in the lower right hand corner -- there had been stories of fake lab results going around -- then looked at the date, my name, the photo, the whole thing. He decided it was official enough and slid the paper back over to me. "Still, you might want to lay off the booze, yeah? Get some rest? Drink some OJ?"

"Eh, I dunno. Lotta time..." I was having trouble forming sentences; finding the right



words. "...booze all that helps. You know?"

Watson rolled his eyes again. He certainly knew an alcoholic when he saw one. "Maybe you should get out of here."

"Nahh," I slurred. "I'm good. Real good, you know? Make me...." I trailed off, I guess. Silence.

"What?" Watson asked.

I guess I blacked out, because I came to face down in the newspaper. Maybe he had a point. Maybe it was time to find my bed, get some good rest. Something in me, though, wanted more.

"Hot toddy," I managed.

"No, pal, you're done. Don't make me call the cops, alright?"

"It's just a cold. A iddy biddy cold. Nothing worry about. Right?" But I knew I was losing it, and I wasn't usually one to push this sort of thing. If I felt like crap, I felt like crap, and I'd rather take my lumps at home. Uncomfortable as it was there, I'd at least made myself a nest of sorts, and I knew I'd feel better being there. Still, there was something, inexplicably, making me want to stay.

"I'm just going to say this one more time, pal," Watson said. But then he stopped. I think he saw something in my eyes. He decided to take a different tack. "Hey, it's not that I don't appreciate your business and your company, Zach" -- he had seen my name on my lab result report, I guess. I remember being impressed that he knew my name -- "it's just that I'm worried about you. You might be clear of Westphail, but you look, no offense, like shit. And I don't think another drink is going to help you."

I'm not sure how I remember what Watson said to me that day, since at some point, everything became blurry, words and noises blending into a constant buzz in my head. It's entirely possible that my brain is just filling in the blanks, patching up the holes in my memory just so I can paint a more complete picture. I could just say that I passed out completely and woke up, confused and bewildered with no idea how I got there, and that's more or less true, but there are bits and pieces of memories, flashes of images that tell parts of the story. I know I protested mightily, and I know that Watson had seen something that made him scared of me, or very concerned for me at least. That I had somehow turned into something that put me in a position of power where he was no longer insisting that I leave because I was bothering him, but that he was suggesting I go because he was worried; either about my health or a threat to his own. I know I passed out a few times, sometimes for just a second or two, sometimes for a full minute, maybe more. That I spilled what was left of my beer, that I demanded a hot toddy, another beer, a bloody mary, a Balvenie on the rocks. That I knocked over bar stools. That Watson threatened to call the police and was deterred by my protests, but eventually his fear/concern outweighed anything I could have said to him and that the cops were called. I'm pretty sure that being overworked as they were, and rather loosely maintained what with all that was going on anyhow -- much of the police force had been dissolved as the world started to circle the drain; there was a greater focus on military policing, and "public safety" officers such as the guard at the church/medical center -- that they never showed up. Finally, I must have passed out completely, and Watson himself laid me over his shoulder -- he was not a big or burly man, his appearance apparently hid strength I didn't know he had -- closed up shop, and

taken me to my room. To his credit, he could have just dumped me in the gutter, or thrown me in the alley and been done with me, but he didn't. He saw me safely home, and I woke up the next day in my bed.

My initial confusion at appearing in my room without solid knowledge of how I'd gotten there served to stave off realization of the horrible condition in which I found myself. While I tried to figure out the events of the previous day (and even what day it currently was) I was able to ignore the pain and discomfort. This only lasted so long -- as I lost focus on putting together the puzzle that was my memory, the aches and pains of my cold set in. My head was on fire, all my joints ached, nausea tore at my stomach, and my sheets were soaked with sweat. Every noise from outside, and even just the creaking of the springs in the bed frame all set off alarm bells in my head. I had a feeling that actual alarm bells would kill me.

I tested my limbs, did something of a self-diagnostic, trying to check out what hurt and what didn't. The list of what hurt was lengthy; everything did, it seemed. I wish I could say now that I was exaggerating the extent of my pain, but truly it seemed like my very blood was angry, aflame, that its continued flowing through my veins was agony, like each droplet was saw-toothed, ripping holes as it went, taking out its ire on my nervous system. Movement caused increased blood flow, caused increased pain. I stifled a scream, couldn't let it go quite yet, didn't want to raise an alarm or risk the questioning curiosity of my neighbors, didn't want to be disturbed by the lack of care which I could only assume that they would show. It was the blessing and the curse that I felt in my status as loner, hermit, shut-in. But it's true: people are never around when you need them, always there when you don't, and there's just no in-between and nothing you can really do about it that doesn't make you look like a total asshole.

I managed to get myself up to a sitting position and immediately regretted it. Tipping my body upright caused an excess of snot which had been draining into my sinuses and pooling in my nostrils to flow freely down my face and onto the floor between my legs. I reached up with both hands to catch it; the sudden motion and the subsequent instability caused by my hands no longer supporting my frame caused me to tumble to the floor. The blow to my head caused me to see stars, maybe even black out yet again. I'm not sure how long I was out for this time, but when I opened my eyes, the sky, what little I could see of it from my window, which had been dark before, was now light. I didn't know how much I could assume from that -- light and dark happened quickly these days, for all I knew, from what I remembered.

My head was a bit cooler, but not so much that I wasn't tempted to simply cut it off to end the constant nagging fire coming from above my neck. The pounding, the aching, the everything, all combined into a roaring pain that demanded my constant attention. I managed to get to a sitting position again, this time more successfully; either the pain had subsided and my balance was better, or I was just getting used to it all, ready to have it as just a fact of life, a new reality, *the way things were*. But no, I'd had pain like that before, the aches and nags of aging that I had gotten used to and learned how to tone down, or tune out, and this was nothing like that, nothing that seemed like it was a roaring fire of pain and agony.

And my nose was running. Freely. The mucous ran like a river out of my nose, down my face, and onto the floor. And I could see, by the light coming through the window, that the snot was tinged with red. Tinged with red. Blood. All the fluid in my body was trying to evacuate. Flee the sinking ship. Get the fuck out. Dimly, my mind realized what was going on. I'd seen and

heard and read enough about the stages of Westphail to know that I had somehow jumped to Stage III. The virus was carving out space in my body to make room for whatever nefarious purposes it had in mind. I'd done so much reading and research that I'd become something of an expert on the subject and so I experienced a sort of clinical detachment of my own, a kind of out of body experience, hovering over my pathetic body: feet together, pointed back towards the bed; knees together; sitting back on my feet; body somehow upright, my hands outstretched towards the sky, towards my out-of-body floating mind's eye, appealing towards something I didn't even believe in, knowing there was no heaven, no help, no hope.

Even with all the reports I'd read -- the Wikipedia articles; the autopsies; the newspapers -- there were still surprises in store for me. Not one to make things boring, Westphail was a real champ at keeping everything interesting even as it was busy running its course. The runny/bloody nose was well documented, as was the bowel evacuation (details of which I am repressing for my readers' benefit; you're welcome) and the vomiting (like a fountain, I watched as my last two meals were violently ejected from my stomach) but nobody had ever mentioned the high-pitched ringing in the ears which was nearly drowning out the noises that all these other activities were making.

I felt strangely calm, thankful for the rational thoughts going through my heads, without which, I'd surely have been panicking up a storm, freaking out, knowing exactly what fate was about to befall me, screaming -- if I'd been able to, what with all the vomiting -- my head off. As it was, I felt surprise. *Nobody mentioned a high pitched ringing! I'll have to edit the Wikipedia page. Would this count as first hand research though? Would that make it an ineligible edit?* Not to get too deep into my thoughts, but I was so far gone and so deep in my head that I was, in another layer higher, examining the layer of my brain which was observing the war taking place in my body. *Look at me, being so calm. I'd make a great scientist. I missed my calling. Is there anybody else in the world who could be so rational and detached as they were going through this shit as I am?* Above all that, I will admit, there was another train of thought going: **FUCK FUCK FUCK HOW THE FUCK ARE YOU NOT FREAKING THE FUCK OUT? BE MORE CONCERNED.**

Conversation between the layers was limited, but there was some discourse, namely the other, calmer layers, telling the layer that was, to use its own words, "freaking the fuck out" to *calm the fuck down*. The scientific, rational layer was pissed that the freaking-out layer was making so much noise as to make its observations difficult to carry out. The self-conscious layer which was observing my rational observations adopted a somewhat more rational tone tapping into a heretofore unknown hippie-ish, peace-loving, flower-picking side of me. *Come on guys*, it said, *can't we all just get along?*

Explaining this all now; finally writing it all down in one clear narrative, I have discovered that I am unsure as to how much time elapsed between my coming to realize that Stage III was in full effect and when I went down into Stage IV. As I recall these events, and remember all the various tracks of thoughts that went through my head, all the inner dialogue that went on, it seems like it went on for hours, and yet the strongest memories I have tell me that it all happened in an instant. Had a movie been made of my life to that point, the long boring years leading up to this moment would have filled reel after reel of film while the sudden violent transformation from normal, unproductive human being to freak of nature would have taken place

in a series of tableaux, flashes of me at various stages; short, frantic images, hinting at the various disgusting moments which I was at that point experiencing, accompanied by some appropriate music like a moderately heavy Nine Inch Nails song or maybe that cover of “Mad World” that was so popular around ‘05.

Or it might have taken hours. Certainly to whatever part of me was still stuck in my body fully experiencing the agonizing transformation that was taking place it must have felt like hours. Whatever defense mechanisms kicked in to allow me to not be completely present did me a great service by shielding me from the pain and suffering. All those reports I’d been reading said that the average time for Stage III, start to finish, was 3.5 hours. Three point five fucking hours during which you can sit and watch every bit of your 6 quarts of blood (along with everything else you’ve been careful all your life to keep inside you) just run out over your hands and onto the floor. Maybe you’re lucky enough to be in a hospital or some well-equipped medical center and they can give you morphine, or a fucking Tylenol, or, since all your blood is leaving your body and these drugs will probably not work and will just as likely kill you (though perhaps that wouldn’t be such a bad thing) just clamp your jaw shut so you don’t deafen the entire neighborhood with your screams. My point is that if you’re lucky enough to be one of those places, at least someone’s going to be around to try to “make you comfortable” which is probably just a euphemism for making the people around you less uncomfortable.

Whatever. There was no stopwatch running. No way of knowing how long it took. No way of knowing how much I endured during that time. What I do know is that eventually it stopped. There wasn’t a gradual cessation, an ebbing of the flow. It just stopped. I looked down at myself and saw what a mess I’d become: covered in blood, snot, piss and shit, it was not a pretty picture as you can well imagine. I liked to keep a clean house and one of the great advantages I’d found when moving into my little shithole of a home was that when you only have one room, it’s pretty damn easy to keep your house tidy. What I saw made the neatnik inside me (what little left there was) cringe in embarrassment. The place was a mess. I remember thinking that it was pretty much a total loss and I’d have to start looking for a new place to live. The building manager probably wouldn’t want to have me around much longer after I’d ruined the joint anyhow.

An instant later I realized all these thoughts were moot as the Westphail virus that had so effectively turned me into a human-shaped husk eased me into Stage IV. One by one my systems shut down, like good ol’ Westy was done for the day and was flipping switch after switch. As it reached my brain, I felt my consciousness, which had comfortably resting in its remote vantage point, reeled in as if on a fishing line, down, down, down, back into my body.

My eyes snapped open.

“Oh fuck,” I said.

And then there was nothing.

Part Four: “Line? Oh yeah. Braaaaaaaains.”

“Braaaaains.”

If I thought that the ringing in my ears was bad, the voice that woke me up had it beat by far.

“Braaaaains.”

"What?" I asked.

"Braaaaaaaaaaains," the voice repeated.

"Sorry?"

"Braaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaains. Braaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaains," the voice said. It sounded annoyed. "Brains."

"Oh. Brains. I thought you were saying 'stains.'"

It might have just been the power of suggestion -- the room was covered in filth, stains that would, even with the power of modern cleaning supplies, never come out.

"Braaaaaaains."

"Yeah, I got it. It's....you're right. Brains."

"Braaaaaaains."

"Can I just.... Can I put you on hold for a second? I need to figure this out."

"Brains."

"Cool."

I was glad to have established some sort of rapport with the voice. I was so surprised to be conscious that I put aside entirely the fact that there was a voice in my head at all. I took a quick account of myself, another self-diagnostic, and was further surprised to find myself more or less intact, and more or less pain free.

I stood up, expecting joints and muscles to scream at me. Other than some stiffness which I figured must have come from being in a kneeling position for however long I was out, everything worked, maybe even worked a little bit better than before.

The mess on the floor -- and on the walls, the bed, the lone chair, even on the ceiling I discovered when I risked a glance upward -- was a disturbing mix of everything that had ever been inside me. And it was dry. It must have been a few days, I surmised, a few days of just kneeling there. Doing....what?

The voice chose that moment to add its two cents: "Braaaaains."

Right. Brains. Brains. Brains. When someone says a word enough, it starts to sound weird, like it's not spelled right, or it's pronounced some other way. Brains. I rolled the word around in my head, in my mouth, on my tongue. Brains. I tried saying it again.

"Brains."

"Braaaaains," the voice agreed.

The word was getting weird. Chewy. It sounded delicious. Like the best steak I'd ever had. Like the best meal my mom ever made. Brains. How could I get some brains? Maybe I should go out.

Here's a tip to all you folks out there if you ever have the fortune to find yourself turned into a zombie: avoid mirrors at all costs. Vampires are lucky: no reflection. They'll never see what hideous creatures they've become except in the eyes of the young girls they seduce (the unrealistically pretty vampires of *Twilight* notwithstanding.) We Zs are not so fortunate. If you step in front of a mirror, especially if you're not prepared for the sight, you're in for quite a shock. The shock of a lifetime, in fact!

Not only was I covered in the entirety of my bodily fluids (and, I noticed, but was unable to identify, quite a few solids as well) but I was also a heavily distorted version of my old self. I

wouldn't go so far as to say that I was a particularly handsome fellow before I had my bout with Westphail, but I was alright. All my bits were in the right places, the proportions were more or less pleasing. Nobody would mistake me for a model, but nobody would run screaming from me either.

Not anymore. Those days were gone. There was no way, without some serious surgical work, that I'd be able to walk the streets unnoticed. I guess that the virus had taken its toll. My face was shrunken, hollow, skeletal. My skin seemed loose on my bones. My lips pulled away from my mouth revealing a dark, seemingly rotting set of jagged teeth. Much of my hair had fallen out and what remained was patchy, sticky clumps. Despite the drastic change, I recognized the face that looked back at me from the mirror. I had seen it a million times on television, on web sites, in the paper, but never in person. It was the face of a zombie. The face of Z.

And there it was, staring back at me.

"Brains," said the voice appraisingly. *You don't look so good. How about some brains?*

"I don't know," I said. "I don't feel so bad. Still, maybe I should clean up a little before I go out in public."

"Brains." *How are you going to 'clean up a little?' You're a total fucking mess.*

"Yeah, I don't know. Maybe take a shower? Change clothes? I think I would really like to change my clothes."

"Brains." *You know what would help? Brains.*

And I knew the voice was right. Brains were where it was at. Brains were what it was all about. Brains were the new everything. If I wasn't careful, I might start....

Holy shit, I was a zombie.

"Brains." *You're taking it rather well. Why not reward yourself with a snack?*

"Well I'm obviously in shock! When this all sinks in, I'm definitely going to freak out!" I snapped.

"Brains." *No need to get snippy.*

Jesus, that voice could make me feel like an asshole. It said so much with just one word. I could hear the hurt in its voice. In the voice. "Sorry I snapped at you. I realize you're just doing your job....and trying to get me to do mine."

"Brains." *We're in this together, you and me.*

"Well, it looks like I've got some learning to do."

"Brains." *No shit, Sherlock. I've been trying to tell you.*

I sighed. Imagine being taken to task for your ignorance and arrogance by a virus, and a relatively new one at that. Though the components of Westphail had been around since the dawn of time (or so I assumed) they had not come together in this configuration until recently. And yet it had already amassed a body of knowledge rivalling the most learned academics that humanity had produced. I wondered if other Zs had had this crazy revelation, wondered if other Zs had this kind of clarity, wondered if other Zs had....

Everything I'd read about Zs before and after the outbreak of Westphail had told me that zombies were mindless automatons focused on one thing and one thing only. You've seen the movies, read the books, you know it. No matter where a zombie falls on the Mayers-Briggs personality scale, whether its a fast-walking zombie or the slow plodding type, a zombie borne of virus or a corpse reanimated via some sort of supernatural means, they all, to the very last one

of them, love them some...

"Brains." *Brains.*

And none of them seem to have existential crises like the one I was having.

"Brains." *Crisis schmis.*

It was more than a voice. It was a presence. Something riding on my shoulder, something at the back of my mind, at the base of my skull, trying to pull the strings, call the shots. It was a tickling, an urge, a threat, a calling.

"Brains." *I know things...*

It was a voice that sounded centuries old, centuries wise, centuries deep.

"Brains." *...incredible things...*

And it was irresistible...

"Brains." *...and you can know them too....*

...except that it wasn't.

"I think I could go for some mac and cheese."

"Brains?"

When you can't feel a thing, showering is an odd experience. Prior to this, numbness, to me, had meant tingling, a dull awareness that whatever body part was numb was still there, still a part of me. This was totally different. When I stepped into the shower, I could see the water coming down but there was no sensation of it actually hitting my body. Worried that I might be cooking off what was left of my apparently very fragile skin, I turned the temperature to a medium temperature that might have been uncomfortable in my former life but now was just simply safe.

Gingerly, I soaped up, not wanting to do anything stupid like scrub off my skin. Without blood to keep it, well, alive, my skin was easily damaged and prone to peeling. Careful to not cause any more damage, I lowered the water pressure and tried to remove what blood and gore I could. In my day, I'd been known to spend a long time in the shower, just standing there, spacing out, enjoying the hot water. Without the benefit or distraction of having a working nervous system, the shower was a short, business-like affair.

There was also the matter of the constant chatter of the voice in my head.

"Brains." *What is the point of this exercise?*

"Look, you're a virus. You have centuries of ancestors worrying about how they looked and smelled to guide your actions. I realize that beauty is just a social construct and it's all in the eye of the beholder and that maybe I should just accept and embrace who I am now, but it's still there, in the back of my head, that voice, right next to you, saying, 'You can not go out of the house looking like that.'"

"Brains." *We are who and what we are.*

"Exactly. And that's why I'm going to try to get some more of this blood off my face."

"Bra--"

I interrupted: "Don't worry. I'm not going to try to shave."

I stepped out of the shower and had another mirror experience. This one was considerably better than the first, though removing the blood and gore caused all my other problems to come into focus. The sunken cheeks, the hollow eyes, the skeletal face, the hair

loss. Before the shower, I had looked dead, but at least the total devastating mess on my face gave it some context. Now I just looked like I'd spent the better part of my life in a third-world Sally Struthers sponsored hellhole.

I dressed. I didn't figure I'd be coming back to the room -- the voice hinted at something of a permanent vacation about to go down -- so I put on my Sunday best: a three piece suit my father had purchased for me when it became evident -- to him, to me, to everyone -- that I would never have the money or desire to buy one on my own and so if he wanted me to come to a family event in anything other than jeans and a Slayer t-shirt, he'd have to take matters into his own hands. The suit was the only outfit that had any sentimental value for me anymore -- the Slayer t-shirts had been lost long before -- and I thought I might as well look my best.

Back in the mirror, the only thing missing was a hat.

"I wish I had a Fedora."

"Brains." *What about your Chicago Baby Chipmunks cap? You seem to have strong feelings about that one.*

"Good call, Westy," I said, truly impressed. The CBC hat was my favorite. "Can I call you Westy?"

"Brains."

Thus, properly attired, I did bid farewell to my apartment. I didn't pack anything -- Westy told me to travel light -- and I didn't own much that I gave a shit about anyhow. A couple books, a couple movies, no big deal. Some keepsakes? Ornaments? Trinkets of the past?

"Brains." *Those are pieces of your other life; of your other self. The love letters and doodads are nothing to fuss about. Zachary Graves is no longer.*

"I'm right here, bub," I said, mildly offended.

"Brains." *What we mean to say is that the old Zachary Graves is dead. You are the new and improved version.*

"Zach Graves 2.0. I like the sound of it."

I made to leave the apartment, but was interrupted, again, by Westy.

"Brains." *What is that?*

"What is what?" I asked.

"Brains." *That.* I could feel the voice somehow pointing. At the door.

"That is a door."

"Brains." *What does it do?*

"It.... Doesn't do anything. It sits there. It divides one space from another. Do you mean to tell me that you are this sentient virus of unknown age and origin; a virus that has toppled governments, destroyed nations, savaged mankind.... And you don't know what a door is?"

"Brains."

"Oh, Westy, Westy, Westy. It looks like we both have a lot to learn. *From each other.*" I didn't know if Westy could see or feel the giant shit-eating ironic grin on my face, but I put it there anyway. I wondered what the effect was like with my new face. With my old one, it worked pretty good.

After I taught Westy how to use a door and what stairs were all about, it had all sorts of



questions for me. We emerged on the street into the night; with my hat pulled low and the cover of darkness, I was able to make my way down the street unnoticed. Everywhere I went Westy was talking.

“Brains?” *What’s that flashing light?*

“Brains?” *What’s that noise?*

“Brains?” *What is a prostitute?*

It was like walking around the city with a three year old child in tow except that the child in question was a virus that caused people to turn into zombies. Adorable!

I tried to answer all its questions, but some of them -- mostly questions about fashion and lifestyle -- stumped even me. The virus was surprised that I wasn’t all-knowing, strange in that it had access to the vast expanses of my knowledge and should know exactly what I already knew and didn’t, but I didn’t mind. It was fun, like seeing things for the first time again through its -- through my -- eyes. *Look at the big buildings!*

The streets were emptier than they usually were; in fact, there wasn’t another soul around. Even late at night, this part of town remained pretty busy. With several night clubs, late-night bars, and music venues all in a three block radius there was plenty to do and see and people would come to do and see it. But not tonight. The windows of the bars and restaurants were dark; the marquees of the clubs were unlit and devoid of the names of bands that usually graced them; the liquor store was closed.

The liquor store *never* closed.

Even more telling than the closed stores and broken windows were the bodies. There were dead people *everywhere* it seemed. I guess I’d been sufficiently desensitized to mass carnage by the sheer number of violent movies and video games I’d consumed. There were bodies in cars, slumped over steering wheels; bodies in the street; bodies on the sidewalks. A body hung from a lamppost and I wondered off-handedly how it got up there. Many of the bodies seemed to have been ravaged by animals and I realized some sort of mass outbreak must have taken place. Others must have been unlucky enough to be caught in a crossfire -- even a cursory glance told me that a lot of the damage was military.

The streetscape itself had been changed, undoubtedly by those same military forces. Defensive positions had been carved out of concrete and asphalt. A tank stood unmanned and motionless in the middle of an intersection, its main gun pointed west. Looking in that direction, I could see smoke billowing out of a large crater that the tank had torn from an apartment building some three blocks distant. The battle must have been recent, and from the looks of things, hadn’t gone well for the human side of the combatants. I wondered if the tank was still operational and if it was, if I could manage to figure out how to drive it. Zombie with a tank! How could would that be?

As I took in my surroundings, something slowly dawned on me: this couldn’t have all happened during what I had assumed was a mere three days of being out of commission. When I’d gone back to my room, the neighborhood was a bit run down, but it was nowhere near as bad as all this.

“How long was I out?”

“Garrrrrrrrrrrrr.”

The voice -- no, it wasn’t a voice. It was just a guttural growl, a low moan, an angry,

hungry groan. And it hadn't come from inside my head; it came from the shadows, from a dark alley to my right. There was movement there: a slow, awkward shuffling. A figure emerged from the darkness. It was a Z, shambling out of the night. Slumping forward, arms slack at its sides, it lurched towards me.

It was instinctual fear that froze me in place. I'd never come face to face with a zombie before, never seen one this close (unless you count my own self examinations in the mirror) and though all the zombie preparedness videos and pamphlets had told me exactly what to do in case of a zombie encounter, the tips and tricks all left my head and I was rooted in place, unable to move.

It walked right past me and on down the street.

I stood there, in shock. I had just had a close encounter with a Z and it hadn't attacked me! I watched as it walked into the distance, just shuffling along, uttering the occasional growl, not a care in the world (save for the constant, never ending acquisition of brains.) So absorbed was I in my observations that I didn't notice the group of 30 more Zs which subsequently emerged from the alley and streamed around me as they followed the lone scout before them. They passed me close enough that some even bumped me as they went by. At the contact, they would utter the occasional grunt or groan but there was little reaction to my presence beyond that. They all seemed driven and focused on something at the end of the road, something beyond my sight or knowledge.

I realized that while some part of my brain that was still rooted in the past had felt fear, had caused me to mentally panic at the sight of the walking dead, I hadn't actually *felt* it. There was no chill up my spine. No goosebumps or hair standing on end. No physical fear response. And no emotional fear response either: my life hadn't flashed before my eyes, I hadn't begun bargaining with God for my life. Whether this was a product of my dead nervous system or that I had just known that the zombie wouldn't harm me in any way, I do not know. What I did know was that I was the best-dressed zombie in town.

And that made me smile.

"Westy. Seriously. How long was I out?"

"Brains." *You took some time. Longer than we expected.*

"Some time?" "We?" Can you elaborate?"

"Brains." *Three of your years have passed since we entered you.*

"Three years?" I managed to muster up some righteous indignation, just out of sheer habit. But I wasn't really feeling it. The thought depressed me -- if I couldn't work up a sweat getting angry about something, was there any point in living anymore? But then, I didn't really feel the depression anymore either.

"I'm like Dexter!"

"Brains?"

"He is...or was?... a character on TV." I sensed confusion. "Television. Little box. Moving pictures. That's not important right now. What is important is... well, I couldn't say this is important either, but it is the point, and that should count for something. Dexter is this guy who's got what he calls the 'Dark Passenger' riding with him, and it makes him kill people, but since Dexter has a conscience, he follows the code that his father showed him, and he only kills people who need killing, like serial killers and rapists and stuff. But his whole deal is that he's a

monster and he's pretending to be human and pretending to have feelings and whatnot. Like me!"

"Brains." *Except that you have no code to follow. You will kill the next living thing you see, eat its brains, and be done with it.*

"Well, we'll just see about that, Westy."

"Brains." *Indeed. Now, should we go find someone to eat?*

An idea formed in my head. I was like Dexter. I could go around eating the brains of every asshole that ever did me wrong. No, that's no good. That's just a mad dash for revenge. I could go around eating the brains of every asshole that ever did the world wrong. I could be a force of justice. I could be the flaming sword of God's archangel Gabriel. Right? He was the one that dished out vengeance? I had no idea. It didn't matter. I had purpose and focus, for the first time in my life. Turning into a Z might have been the best damn thing to ever happen to me.

"Brains." *I've been trying to tell you that. Now, who's first?*

I hadn't a clue where to start. "I bet all the bad guys are already dead or zombified anyway, huh? Probably not a whole lot of serial killers left in the world."

"Brains." *Just pretend the next living person you see is a serial killer.*

"Hah, Westy, it doesn't work like that. But, you're my dark passenger. It's your job to make me kill and my job to focus that into something productive. So, ok. How do we find someone who deserves to die?"

"Brains." *Next person you see. Doesn't matter if they 'deserve' to die or not. Everyone deserves to die. And you deserve to eat.*

Westy was good at his job. It was going to be tough to resist that urge to feed. It was pressing in my mind, harder and harder the longer I went without eating. Had to be like Dexter. Find a deserving victim. Find someone who didn't care about human life, didn't care about who he hurt, didn't care about.... I had it.

"Who's the one person we know of that obviously just doesn't give a shit about how he affects the rest of the world? Doesn't think about the consequences of his actions? Goes around just sneezing on people without even apologizing?" I cried out. It was like the *Shaft* theme song, but far less funky and not about the coolest guy to ever grace the silver screen. Who was it about? It was about "Motherfucking Tim Stimpf! That's who!"

"Brains?" *Who?*

"Oh you'll just love this, Westy," I said with a grin. "He's the guy who brought you into my life!"

What better way to start my rampage of justice, my righteous murder spree, my *saccage tuent-fou* as the French say than by taking out the bastard who turned me into this monster in the first place?

"Brains." *It's been three years. A lot has happened. You won't find him. Let's just go get the next person we see. Enough of this nonsense.*

"I know you're just doing your job. I respect the division of labor here, I really do. You're trying to get me going. And I don't know why I'm resisting. From what I can tell, I should be just another mindless, killing, eating machine. Hell, that's pretty much what I was before Stimpf sneezed on me. Minus the killing part. I think."

"Brains." *You're making things too complicated. Why not just let go? Relax? Everything*

*can be so easy if you just stop struggling.*

“Yeah, that’s what they always say about everything. Resisting just makes it worse. Just go towards the light. Everything will be fine. You know what? I’m done with that. I’ve been doing that my whole life, and now that I’m technically dead, it’s time I took a stand. It’s time I made things right. It’s time I killed the prick that made me turn into a zombie!”

*“Brains.” Whatever. As long as there’s some killing involved.*

I hadn’t the slightest idea how to go about finding Stimph. All my instincts had been shaped by the ubiquity of Google, Facebook, and smart phones. The availability of instant, almost effortless answers had been so prevalent that their absence made me feel stupid, helpless, lost.

I hadn’t ever invested in a smart phone. In fact, for the last several years, I hadn’t had a phone at all. There was nobody to call, no one to text, so I didn’t see the point. My pitiful finances didn’t allow for it anyhow, and there was no way I was going to trust one of those government-subsidized cell phones. I knew that the Feds could listen in on any conversation I had on any cell phone, but there was no point in making it easier for them. When I needed to know something, I just turned to the guy next to me at the bar. People love looking shit up for you at bars. It makes them feel important. Needed. “Can you settle a bet for me? How many people died in the London Beer Flood of 1814?” (8) “In what year did Alan Solomons leave law to pursue a professional rugby coaching career?” (2007) “Who had the highest points per game in the 2012 NBA Finals?” (That one’s a trick question -- the 2011 Finals never happened. The league disbanded in January.) People love helping out when it’s as simple as whipping out their phone (which they then get to show off -- how fast it is, how big the screen is, how sweet the 4D effects are) and looking something up and acting as judge in a dispute. People love being judgy.

So the lack of a pocket computer was nothing new to me, but what I found that I was missing was the certainty of someone next to me with one. As I thought about it, I realized I was also missing the alcohol that usually came along with it. I wondered if booze would have any effect on me anymore. I had a feeling that my body wouldn’t process alcohol in the same way anyhow. The thought of drinking something didn’t appear to me either. Unless it was blood. Blood sounded good.

When I didn’t have enough money to rent a bar stool, or on the odd occasion that I didn’t feel like getting drunk but did feel like going out, I got my information the way God intended us to: at the public library. I spent so much time there, using their computers or reading what few newspapers still bothered to publish print editions the librarians joked they would rename the branch after me. It wasn’t actually a branch of the library as it was the last remaining place within the city that had public internet access or papers or books. The others had all been closed due to lack of funds, lack of interest, or a sudden sharp rise in anti-book terrorism. I never fully understood the reason that men and women felt the need to blow themselves up amongst the stacks of books, but I think that it had something to do with the idea that book learning lead to science which lead to curing cancer which lead to the zombie outbreak. Or something like that. I was surprised that the city saw fit to keep one library open at all, but I was glad they did. I didn’t mind the metal detectors or security checkpoints (though some of the guards tended to be a little handsy.) I figured it was well worth the inconvenience.

But I surmised from the death and destruction around me that maintaining things like Google and Facebook might not be the first thing on the minds of those whose job that was. More important things, like preventing your transformation into, or death at the hands of, a zombie probably cropped up. Funny how your priorities can change, huh?

I had no way of knowing, though, so I walked on down to the library, or, more accurately, where the library used to be. It was gone. Completely vanished. There was a crater where a library once stood. This was beyond a lack of funding for routine maintenance. This was total devastation completely focused upon my former favorite daytime haunt.

"I bet Stimpf was behind this too," I said.

"Brains." *That's just ridiculous. What do you know about this Stimpf character? That he was buying adult diapers and he sneezed on you. And that's it.*

"Nah, I've got a feeling about this, Westy," I said. I didn't really. I didn't have much in the way of feelings about anything, to be honest, but he didn't need to know that; though maybe he already did. I wasn't sure how much he had access to my thought processes and individual ideas. I was afraid to ask.

"Brains." *Your instincts are flawed. You are wrong.*

I ignored him. "Tim Stimpf!" I yelled to the empty streets. "I will find you! You will pay for your sneezing, library-bombing ways if it's the last thing I do!"

It turned out to be a lot easier to find Tim Stimpf than either Westy or I thought it would be. Well, I found where he'd been, anyway. First, I went to the grocery store where he'd sneezed on me. In 2016, a law had been passed requiring all food vendors to get full name and address information from all customers in case a food-borne Westphail outbreak popped up. When I got to the store, the windows were broken and the store was dark, like all the rest of the stores I'd seen. The grocery store had been hit particularly hard by looters, of course, with everyone trying to stock up on necessities as they fled the city. The shelves were bare, the coolers empty. I even checked the registers, but even they had been emptied. It wasn't likely that American currency had much value anymore and it would probably be a very long time before it did again, if that time ever even came. But old habits died hard; even in the face of total annihilation, greed still ruled.

But I wasn't looking for food or money. I wanted those records. I made my way towards the back of the store to the manager's office. The door was locked; apparently nobody had thought there would be anything of value in there. The two way mirror which the manager used to spy on his customers and employees was still intact as well. I removed my jacket, wrapped it around my fist and punched through it. It broke with a satisfying smash.

"Shit, that was cool! I've never done that before!" I exclaimed as I shook the broken glass out of my jacket put it back on and climbed through the window into the office.

As I jumped to the floor from the window frame, I disturbed a huge cloud of flies which swarmed about my face and then streamed through the window. I feared the worst: a huge pile of decaying corpses strewn about. When I opened my eyes, I discovered that the office was a mess, and it wasn't just from the broken glass I had just sprayed all over the place. It also wasn't from looters or Zs or bodies or military action or any of the other messes I'd witnessed so far that day. This was just a straight up mess caused by an untidy, uncaring, unorganized office occupant. Apparently, the manager had a great love of fast food and a great disdain for any sort

of cleaning supplies, up to and including garbage bags. There was litter everywhere: half-eaten cheeseburgers molding in McDonald's cartons; spilled soda turned to hardened syrup deposits on the floor; stacks of pizza boxes came up to my waist. The place was a wreck and looked like it had been for longer than Westphail had been around.

"What a stench!" I exclaimed, then realized that the smell wasn't really bad at all. To my new zombie nose, I guess, it smelled like dinner. Fuck, I really didn't want to be attracted to rotting garbage. Not much I could do about that.

If the filth didn't assault my nose, it did assault my sense of orderliness. My poverty and inability to acquire mass quantities of consumer goods had done me one favor: it forced me to maintain a lifestyle that could be classified as spartan to say the very least. Not having a lot of things meant not having a lot of things to clean up, keep tidy, or take care of, and that had suited me just fine. This office was painful to be in, so I hastened to get in and out as fast as possible.

The computers were, of course, dead and useless. Even if the power had been out, I'm not sure I would have been able to see clearly through the film of grease on the monitor or make use of the crumb-filled keyboard enough to find any files on the machine. Fortunately for me, the manager (a placard on his desk read, "Rob Anise, Grocer") had apparently not trusted any type of electronic file storage to do its job and had printed out every email, website receipt and computer record that had ever seemingly come across his screen. Besides all the detritus of a life sustained on carry-out food, the desk was covered with what must have been reams of letter-sized paper, covered with everything from an email from a friend ("Rob -- Great to see you on Tuesday. Have you lost weight? Just kidding, I know you haven't. -- Craig.") to a receipt for the purchase from Nile.com (four workout DVDs: "From Cankles to Ankles"; "Grace Bagby Kills Cankles"; "Cankles: A Historical Perspective"; and "30 Minute Cankle Workout" -- I guess the guy had issues with his lower legs.) A few stray customer records with their full info were scattered amongst the pile, but the far wall of the office (and the office was so small that the wall was not so far away) was lined with floor-to-ceiling filing cabinets, several of which were helpfully labeled "Customer Records." I pushed aside a pile of festering Chinese take-out boxes and, with some hesitation of what I might find, opened the drawer marked "R-T."

Apparently, Rob Anise, Grocer, had had some assistant or temp worker who occasionally came through to help out with his filing because instead of a huge mess of papers, stuffed into the filing cabinet at random covered with grease and filth piled on top with more papers and garbage (which is what I had assumed I would find,) the drawer opened with ease upon a neat and orderly collection of files, alphabetized properly. I could have sworn I heard a holy chorus sing a single, sustained note as I slid the drawer open.

I quickly rifled through the files until I came to Stimph's. Just as easy as pie, I had all the information I needed. He lived, at least until June 30th of 2020 which was the date on the printout, just a few block from the store.

"Told you I could do it, Westy," I said triumphantly.

"Brains." *Yippie*.

I could swear this comment was followed by a sarcastic slow clap.

"Come on," I pleaded. "In this day and age, *in this economy*, I think it's pretty damn impressive that I decided to find *one person* whom I had met *one time* without the help of a smartphone or Google or even a damn phone book. Give me some credit here."

"Brains." *Fine. You're amazing. Now, can we go? This room is making even me feel kind of nauseous.*

Westy had a point. It was time to get out of there.

Finding Stimp's address was easy. Getting to his address was not. Though it was a mere five blocks from the grocery store to his residence, those five blocks, apparently, had been amongst the most hotly contended streets in the city. We were getting closer to downtown and as population density rose, as it did the deeper into the city you got, so did cases of Westphail outbreak, which meant death and destruction on an ever increasing scale. Picking my way carefully through shell craters, destroyed cars, abandoned military posts, barricaded streets it took nearly an hour to make it half way. I wasn't getting tired, but I was getting bored.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Maybe revenge is stupid."

"Brains." *The city is empty. There's nothing here for us.*

I wasn't sure if he was using the royal "we" or referring to himself and myself there, and I didn't really want to know. If he -- or... they, whatever Westphail was -- had some master plan, I was happy enough being just a pawn. I knew there wasn't really anything for me *anywhere*. No answers, no prospects, and definitely no cure. I started thinking about what I might actually want to do with the rest of my life, such as it was.

"Brains."

"Eh, fuck it, we've come this far." My zombie mind was fickle, easily changed. My human mind had been too, but zombie me was capricious to an extent previously unknown to me. I set out again.

When I got to Stimp's apartment building, it was nothing like I had expected. In my mind, the man must live in a run-down hovel of a shit hole. Something like what I was living in. His building, at least on the outside, looked to be anything but. It was the kind of building that had once probably had a doorman, and a concierge, and a massive and beautiful fountain in the courtyard. The doorman and concierge were long gone, and the fountain had been reduced to rubble, but the building's obvious opulence remained. Stimp had lived, apparently, like a king. It made me all the more angry. This dickhead was living in luxury while the rest of us were just struggling to get by. Well, I hadn't exactly been struggling, but I didn't need to consider that at that moment. The question of the moment was how to get inside this building that was treated pretty much as a fortress before the zombie outbreak and most certainly had been further fortified after all hell broke loose.

This was a tricky situation, to be sure. I had started thinking of myself as something of a super hero. I mean, here I had survived Westphail. Or at least, I had gotten through to the other side without having completely lost my mind. Granted, there was a voice in my head constantly telling me to kill people and eat their brains, but hell, who doesn't have a voice in their head from time to time? Anyway, the super hero thinking was a dead end. I might feel no pain and not need to eat but neither of those were of any use in this endeavor. In fact, the lack of pain thing was a definite downside because there was every chance that I could seriously injure myself without even knowing it. On my way to Stimp's building, I'd cut myself in numerous places on barbed wire, rebar, and other debris that I'd had to navigate. Each time, I'd felt the urge to cry out (I did say "Ow!" out of habit a couple times) even though I never really felt it. I could probably lose a

limb without missing it until I went to try to use it.

So, lacking the ability to fly, or bend steel, or walk through walls, I went to the front door, which, as expected, was locked. And barred. And boarded. And on fire. That shit was the very definition of inaccessible. There was no getting in.

"Dammit! We came so far and now this!" I cried. "How come nothing in my life can ever just go easy?"

"Brains." *Did you want to try the back or no?*

"The back? Hell, Westy, why didn't I think of that?"

"Brains." *You're hungry. You're not operating at peak performance. You need to eat.*

Brains.

"You might be right, pal," I said. "You just might be right."

It took twenty minutes just to get around to the back of the building. Where the streets were difficult to travel upon, the alleys were damn near impassable. Instead of any kind of organized defense, random barricades had been erected, pits had been dug and filled with burning oil (which had long since burnt out) or tar, or spikes. Concrete slabs with spikes embedded in the tops were covered with Zs who had impaled themselves in an attempt to climb them. Cautious and careful travel was required, so I took my time.

The back of the building featured a large loading dock which had a rolling door which I was not at all surprised to find was locked up tight.

"Well, this was a colossal waste of time," I said.

"Brains." *Try next door.*

"Next door?" I looked at the building in question. The two buildings were of equal height, but the one on the right had a striking difference: Its back door was hanging off its hinges.

"Westy, you're brilliant!"

"Brains." *Tell me something I don't already know.*

"Where should I start?" I wondered. "How about how elevators work?"

"Brains." *Let's just take the stairs.*

So we did. The back door lead directly into a stairwell which, aside from the random dead body, pile of broken glass, or splintered wood, was clear of debris. In my former life, there was no way I would have climbed ten flights of stairs without some serious huffing and puffing (accompanied by some intense bitching and moaning.) But now, with my total zombie makeover, I was able to climb the stairs with no problems. Have you ever seen a real Z (rather, a less evolved Z than myself) try to climb stairs? It's hilarious -- and, if you have any sort of heart at all, a little sad -- to watch them try to navigate. There is much falling (and moaning, but of a different sort.) Watching them go down stairs is even better since most of the time, gravity just takes hold and does its thing. I was surprised there wasn't a zombie pile at the bottom of the stairway, not an uncommon sight in more heavily infected areas.

The door to the roof was also, thankfully, open, though I'm sure the people who appeared to have made a last ditch effort to defend themselves up there hadn't been so happy when the Zs tore it down. Streaks of gore lead to the roof's edge. I followed them to investigate.

Sure enough, when I looked over the edge, I could plainly see a couple bodies; people



who had given up trying to fend off attacking Zs and taken the plunge. Their corpses had been thoroughly ravaged by the Zs who had apparently taken the plunge along with them. The streaks of gore trailed off down the street into the distance. Gotta hand it to Z: he takes a licking and keeps on ticking.

"Brains." *Can we back away from the edge?*

"What's wrong, Westy?" I asked. "Don't like heights?"

"Brains." *Not a bit.*

"Don't mind 'em myself. But, I don't blame you for getting skittish, what with not being in total control here. I could just hurl myself out into space." I jerked towards the edge, as if I were about to do just that.

"Brains." *It's not the falling that scares me. Go ahead and jump. I just don't like being up high.*

"Weirdo," I said, under my breath.

There was about a ten foot gap between the roof I was on and the roof of Tim Stimpf's building. I'd never been involved in a rooftop chase which required me to leap from one building to the next, but I'd seen a lot of movies, and it looked like a lot of fun, so I was eager to get going. How often do you get an opportunity like that?

I gauged the distance, estimating how much of a running start I'd need. Ten feet isn't a whole heck of a long jump (the men's world record in long jump is almost six times as far) but when you're ten stories above ground, it tends to make you extra cautious even if you're certain (or at least the voice in your head is certain) that you'd survive the fall. Jumping from roof to roof was something I wanted to do. Experiencing a 100-foot drop with a sudden and violent conclusion was not.

"This is so bad-ass," I said, psyching myself up. "I'm a fucking action hero."

"Brains." *You're a zombie with a human complex.*

"And you're a wet blanket buzzkill. This is going to be so cool."

I stepped back about 30 feet, and did a couple test runs of the running start. When I was confident I could manage the jump, I took a couple deep breaths (unnecessary, of course) tore ass across the roof and leapt into the air.

"Yippie-cay-yay motherfucker!" I shouted.

"Brains." *Why is it that David Hasselhoff was killed in a riot in Berlin? I thought he was really popular in Germany.*

"Guh?" I asked. And then, as I slammed into the side of the building whose roof was my target, I said something along the lines of, "Oof."

I'd caught the lip of the building's roof right in my midsection. I think I felt (and heard) a couple ribs crack. If I still had a functioning circulatory system, I'd have a hell of a bruise. As it was, I was just really annoyed.

"Dammit, Westy," I shouted, "you did that on purpose!"

"Brains." *I have no idea what you're talking about.*

"Yeah you do, you distracted me in midair just so I would fall. Were you trying to prove a point or something? Way to fucking go. Dick."

"Brains." *How long are you going to just hang here and insult me? Shouldn't you be trying*

*to pull yourself up?*

"Alright, but this isn't over."

With some effort, I managed to get a leg up on the edge of the roof and then awkwardly haul the rest of my zombie ass up to solid ground. I lay on the roof for a few moments, collecting my thoughts, if not my breath -- no need for that.

"Brains." *Whatever you're going to say, don't bother.*

"You son of a bitch bastard ass jerk face smelly piece of...."

"Brains." *I said don't bother.*

"You can't tell me what to do."

"Brains." *I tell you what to do all the time, remember? I'm the voice in your head, pulling your strings.*

"Pulling my strings? You're doing no such thing! I'm in control here! I'm in charge!"

"Brains." *Whatever helps you -- how do you humans say it? -- "sleep" at night.*

"You know, up til now I feel like I've been pretty damned accommodating for you. I've let you run around in my head, kept us from just plunging like a dumbass zombie down a stairway or into a fire --"

"Brains." *You're mistaken if you think this is some sort of symbiotic relationship. I am a virus. I am a parasite. I am not making deals with you. I am not negotiating. You are my host, yes, but you are also my hostage. You would do well to remember that.*

I had no response to that. Of course, he was right. *It* was right. I may have beaten the worst aspects of Westphail -- the mindless dedication to the acquisition of human brains chief amongst them -- but I was still a victim; I was still a Z, and there was no changing that. And there was no use fighting with the voice in my head. As long as we were going to share a noggin, there might as well be peace.

But, I was stubborn, and I was still pissed, and there was no way I was going to back down just yet.

"Alright, Puppet Master," I said, getting to my feet. "Where to, now?"

"Brains." *'Tim Stimph' occupied apartment 913. Let's find the stairs.*

The stairwell door on this building was well-secured. Everything about this place was well-secured and it was starting to piss me off. They could have survived for days during a Z attack. The building manager at my old place probably would have invited the undead in and given them a tour. The managers here were probably handing out shotguns to every resident. Stupid, rich jerks.

"Brains." *So the door is locked.*

"You noticed? What the hell are we going to do now?"

"Brains." *Remember the door on the other rooftop?*

"Well of course I do. My experience with it was one of the defining moments of my life. Discussion and description of that door will undoubtedly feature hugely in my memoirs. I'm going to tell my grandkids about it, not that, thanks to you, I'll ever be able to find someone to have kids with me." I paused, considering. "Say, does my junk still work?" I pulled the waistband of my trousers out to sneak a look "down there." I'm not going to describe what I saw; suffice it to say that it wasn't pretty.

"Brains." *Focus. That door was opened by us, and we did not have a key.*

"Us? You and me?"

"Brains." *Others like us, if you prefer.*

"Ok, so how did they -- or we, if you prefer -- do it?"

"Brains." *There is strength in numbers.*

"Oh, so I just need to get twenty or thirty Zs to come help me bust down this door? I left my zombie call at home."

"Brains." *You did not let us finish. There is strength in numbers, but there is also strength in strength.*

"Strength in strength? You are one cryptic zombie virus."

"Brains." *You do not know what you can't do until you try.*

"I read about Mosetsanagape Basadi. I know what happened in Batswana. She couldn't even break a window and she had the advantage of being so far gone that she didn't give a fuck -- or even know, really -- what was happening."

"Brains?"

"Mosetsanagape Basadi. Patient One."

"Brains." *We did not know her name, but we do remember her. Why do you call her 'Patient One'?*

"She was the second documented case of Westphail. Westphail himself was the third. He's Patient Two. Or something like that."

"Brains." *Second? She was our fifteenth conversion.*

"Fifteenth? Jesus. What happened to the others?"

"Brains." *They must have escaped your collective awareness.*

"Fine, well, if she was your fifteenth and she didn't know how to open a door, or have the spatial awareness to go around a corner, or the ability to break a window, what can I possibly do?"

"Brains." *She was our fifteenth. You are number 3,428,194. Do you think we have not made improvements?*

"Wow. Almost 3.5 million?" I was amazed. I'd never known the numbers were that many. "Am I the best?"

"Brains." *We wouldn't go that far.*

"But you're saying that I can bust down that door?"

"Brains." *We're saying it wouldn't hurt to give it a shot.*

"Hey, what the hell, right? If the voice in your head says to try putting your shoulder to a six-inch thick steel door, you do it."

I'd never kicked down a door, either, but it had been a day full of new experiences and I was eager to give it a shot. I gave the door a tentative kick which seemed to have no effect. I kicked harder, putting the toe of my wingtips into it. My shoe came back with a permanent dent.

"Brains." *Not like that. Flat of your foot, right next to the knob. It's the weakest part.*

"You know, for someone who didn't even know what a door was a few hours ago, you have an awful lot of opinions concerning their forced opening."

"Brains." *What can we say? We are a quick study.*

I shrugged. It made sense, anyway, and now that I thought of it, I remembered my *Worst-Case Scenario Survival Guide* saying the same thing. I aimed my kick just to the left of

the door knob and dealt a savage blow to the door. Nothing happened.

"You know," I said, "this door opens out. Towards us. There's no way we're going to kick it in. We might be able to kick it out. If we were, say, on the other side."

"Brains." *You have a point. Maybe we can pry it open? Look around for a crowbar.*

"Good idea."

As I scoured the rooftop for a prybar or something else I might use for leverage, a thought dawned upon me.

"How come you're being so helpful all of a sudden? Why the change of heart?"

"Brains." *We realized there was no talking you out of this ridiculous quest of yours. You're more stubborn of a human than we have ever encountered. Therefore, we decided it would just be best to help you finish this to whatever degree possible so that we can move on to more pressing matters.*

"Brains," I said.

"Brains." *Exactly.*

"Well, while I'd certainly feel better knowing I had your approval, I guess I'll make do with simply having your compliance." I added, "And I suppose your help doesn't hurt either. Did you see anything that looked like a good bet?"

"Brains." *You are the eyes.*

"Fine."

It quickly became clear, however, that there was nothing on the roof that was going to help me get through that door, which seemed ridiculous to me. What if someone got stuck up there? Someone, that is, with a legitimate reason to actually be up there and need to get out of there? Were they supposed to just jump, as I had, from roof to roof? I didn't relish the idea of making that leap again, what with the way it had turned out before, and I certainly didn't want to just tumble to the ground. Sure, there were several piles of bodies down there which would break my fall, but I'd probably also break my neck. I was having a hard enough time keeping my shit together as it was, I didn't need my head permanently twisted at some fucked up angle making things worse.

Dejectedly, I walked back to the stairway door, intending to look for some previously unseen weakness in its design, or, failing that, bang my head against it repeatedly for the sake of dramatic effect. I did end up banging my head on it from the start, but just because someone opened the door right into me.

"Eeeyagh!" I said, out of shock and surprise.

"Holy fuck!" shouted the person on the other side of the door.

I took several steps back and the door flew open. An intensely nervous and frightened individual emerged from within and flew at me. The door swung closed -- "Don't let that....aw, hell!" -- with a clang.

"Dammit!" I said. "That was my chance!"

Westy's nerves -- or whatever you wanted to call them; it was like "Spidey-sense" every time we got near something that excited or scared him: fire, dead bodies, other Zs -- were on edge and it didn't take a genius to figure out why: a living breathing human had just, quite literally, stumbled into our -- my -- arms. Her momentum had carried him right at me, taking us both down to the surface of the roof.

I lay there, looking up into the eyes of the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. They were blue -- the purest blue of mountain streams, or deep oceans, or something -- and piercing, intelligent, cold. Strands of her long strawberry-blonde hair fell into my face. I could smell her shampoo -- she had somehow remained remarkably well-groomed in the midst of all the chaos; something I instantly admired -- and it was intoxicating. I mean to say, to me, it smelled horrible, like the rotting food in the grocery store manager's office should have smelled but didn't. But, I figured that since it smelled bad, it must be good. It was intoxication inasmuch as it made me feel like I'd been on a three day bender, had finally crawled out of bed, and was paying reparations in the form of copious amount of vomit. That kind of intoxicating.

The moment lasted for but a moment, though it seemed as though I spent a lifetime just gazing into her eyes, seeking out her soul. Had my whole life brought me to this point? Could a zombie and a human find true love? I had to know.

"Hi there," I said, using the sexiest voice I could muster. "How you doin'?"

"Are you kidding me?" she asked, disgusted. "At a time like this?" She rolled off me and leapt to her feet, keeping a watchful eye on the door while glancing about, looking for escape routes.

I was unfazed. "My name's Zach Graves. What's yours?"

"We need to barricade this door," she replied.

I laughed. "Barricade it? Lady, I've been trying to get through it! That thing's locked up tight. We don't need to worry about it. Just you and me here."

She cast a disgusted look in my direction. "You idiot. We need to barricade it on this side. There's a pack of Re-Ans coming up the stairs. They'll be out here any second."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true," I said. "The city seems pretty quiet."

"Pretty quiet?" she asked. "Are you kidding me? Did you not hear about the hundreds of Re-Ans that killed the mayor, the entire roster of the White Sox, and Oprah Winfrey? And that was just yesterday!"

"Sorry, I've been... out of touch. I didn't realize it was so bad."

She took a closer look at me. "Who are you anyway? What are you doing up here? I've never seen you in the building before."

"Oh, I... I'm just looking for a friend of mine. Wanted to make sure he was okay."

"Who's your friend?" she asked suspiciously.

"His name is Tim. Tim Stimpf. Do you know him?"

The suspicion seemed to leave her face. Her eyes lit up at Stimpf's name. "Yeah, I know Tim. He's my next-door neighbor. We hang out all the time."

"No kidding!" I exclaimed. "What a small world!"

"Well, I hope so, for your sake. I haven't seen Tim in a few days."

Dammit. He wasn't in the building. I knew it had been too easy to track him down. Well, the great detectives never have it easy either, right? I'd just have to follow whatever leads I could, starting with getting as much information out of this woman as I could.

"Do you know where he is?"

"He came by the other night and told me he was taking off for a little bit and asked if I would feed his cat. I don't know where he went."

"Hmm, you know what? Now that you mention it, I think he did say something about going

out of town for a while. I told him that was a bad idea, what with, you know, *all the zombies* running around.” I chuckled. She did not.

“I told him the same thing, but he can be so stubborn sometimes. He just said that one place was just as bad as any other right now and he had *business* to take care of.”

“Business?” I asked. “That sound ominous.”

“Oh, you know Tim, he’s always saying he has business to take care of. He can be so cryptic. He said he’d bring me back some of his favorite beer. I hope --” she was getting choked up “-- I just hope... that he’s alright.”

“I’m sure he is,” I said as I sidled up next to this beautiful creature -- Westy was practically drooling with anticipation. I was too, but for different reasons -- and placed a comforting hand on her back. She pulled away immediately.

“Sorry,” I said, thought I wasn’t particularly. Touching her, ever so briefly, awoke something in me that felt amazing. It was longing of the purest sort, passion of the most intense kind; desire, and need, and... hunger. “Oh. Shit.” I backed off.

“What is it?” she asked, turning towards the door, backing away from it, assuming I’d heard or seen something.

“Nothing. No. Nothing,” I said. I couldn’t make words very well. The voice was loud, distracting, all-consuming. “No.”

I continued backing away, and she, seemingly satisfied that the door was secure for the moment, and not at all unhappy about my sudden desire to *increase* the distance between us, resumed her search for something with which to bar the door.

“There’s nothing,” I managed.

She had come to the same conclusion, apparently, and gave up her search for anything to be used for defensive measures and started casting about for an escape, often looking over her shoulder at me, or at the door. The only way out (that I could see) was the way I had come, and she shortly came to that realization. She had just begun gauging the distance between the buildings, deciding whether or not she could make the leap when the door crashed open again.

There were three Zs immediately visible in the doorway. They looked pretty bad -- clothes ragged, skin torn, mouths agape with hunger. They clearly hadn’t fed in a long time and -- aside from a momentary glance in my direction -- were desperately focused upon the tasty-looking morsel now standing at the edge of the roof with a mere 20 feet of unobstructed ground to cover. The trio burst from the doorway and made a beeline for the woman. Behind the Zs was a considerably larger pack that, due to its size and lack of coordination, was having one hell of a time trying to get through the door.

I tried to shout a warning. Something like “Look out!” or “Head’s up!” but nothing would come. Instead, I watched with a mix of horror and some sort of sick delight as the Zs leapt at her, their momentum carrying them all over the building’s edge and down to the ground below. They landed with a sickening crunch. I winced and sucked air over my teeth, as if I’d just seen a particularly brutal hit in a football game. I felt fleeting sadness at my lost opportunity for love, but more than that, there was disappointment and annoyance, not unlike how you would feel if you went to the office refrigerator and found that someone else had eaten your lunch.

The Zs that still crowded the doorway prevented the door from closing. I opened the door

wide, eliciting a chorus of groans and moans from the group. I held the door open for them, beckoning them to come outside. They managed to untangle themselves from each other and make it through. Any joy they might have felt at this small victory was surely quelled immediately by the disappearance of their prize (and their innate inability to fear joy as well.) The sounds of a great feast came up to us from the ground below.

"Thanks, fellas!" I said cheerily as I popped through the door, making sure to pull it shut securely behind me. I obviously wasn't scared that they'd come after me, but I was in no mood for surprises and the instinct to be creeped out by and nervous around zombies was still strongly felt.

"Brains," Westy said. *Well, that was a missed opportunity.*

"A missed opportunity for love, you mean." I thought for a moment, and then made a decision. "Her name was Dolores, and I shall mourn her for so long as I am able."

"Brains." *Her name was lunch, and you are an idiot.*

"I'm going to let that one go," I said. "But only because she was kind of a bitch."

"Brains." *Fine. Shall we proceed?*

Excitement about renewing my quest filled me again. "Yes! Let's do!"

I bounded down the stairs, practically flying down them, passing Zs who were still intent on making it to the top. Their dedication and focus was admirable. Back when I was still alive, I would have never worked that hard for a turkey sandwich even if I hadn't eaten since breakfast and it was already noon. Being unable to think about anything except for one sharply focused goal has its advantages, I suppose.

We came to the 9th floor quite quickly. The door was propped open -- matters of security had apparently been trumped by matters of convenience. Making my way down the hall, I discovered that although the outside of the building had been largely untouched, the interior had not been so lucky. With the doors locked up tight, the destruction must have been an inside job. One or more people had turned into Zs in the comfort of their own homes and busted out in order to wreak havoc upon their neighbors. There was debris (again, the usual: broken furniture, broken glass, broken bodies) everywhere. Antique wall sconces had been torn from their mounts, either by accident, or, more likely, to be used as makeshift weapons. Plush couches were torn apart. Doors were splintered, and broken. The scene of destruction tugged at what was left of my heart strings. These had been people's homes and if I had had any values back when I was a human, it was a strong sense of the sanctity of home. A man's home was his castle, and as much as I hated my house, I loved my home. I spent much of my time there, and were something like this to happen there, it would be devastating for more reasons than just the destruction -- it would be a betrayal, an invasion.

Putting those thoughts aside, I came to Tim Stimpf's apartment door which, unlike the rest of the doors in the hall, was quite intact, and also, quite locked.

"Dammit. Dammit dammit dammit!" It had been a long time since I'd thrown a temper tantrum -- at least three years -- so I was about due. "I've been having the worst luck ever since I turned into a zombie. This isn't fucking fair!"

"Brains." *You are acting like a child. Pull yourself together. Grow a pair.*

"Grow a pair?" I shrieked. "Grow a pair? Are you seriously telling me that I need to *grow a pair of testicles*? You know what? I had a perfectly good working pair of balls before you came

into my life you sadistic sack of shit. Now I have *this*.” I yanked my pants down, revealing my grossly disfigured crotch.

“Brains.” *You don’t need to drop your pants to show us. We know what it looks like.*

“I thought maybe you sick fuckers would get a kick out of checking it out again,” I said, swiveling my hips back and forth so he could get a good view.

“Brains.” *We are not amused.*

“Well neither are we.... am I.... Whatever. Neither am I. Amused. I haven’t been amused one bit since this whole thing started. Not one bit.”

“Br--.” *We--*

“Do you know, Westy, how much I absolutely love being amused? Oh wait, let me correct that. How much I *loved* being amused? I fucking adored it. Being amused was my favorite past time. And now I’m looking at a future where I have no more amusement. Ever. *Ever*. Do you know how that makes me feel?”

“Br--.” *We--*

“That’s right, you have no idea how it makes me feel. But you know what? Neither do I? Know why? Because I hardly feel shit anymore because, I don’t know, there’s a sentient fucking virus stuck in my head, taking over all the parts of my brain that feel shit. I’m not even sure that I’m angry right now, that’s how fucked up my head is.”

“Br--.” *The--*

“I don’t *know* why I’m yelling. I think it’s just something I enjoy -- or *enjoyed*, thank you very much -- doing back when I had feelings, and a life, and working fucking genitalia.”

“Br--.” *Wou--*

“No, I won’t let you get a word in edgewise. I don’t care what you have to say right now.”

Awkward silence extended into a full-fledged cessation of conversation. I guessed that Westy finally listened to me.

Which was all well and good, and what I had wanted, obviously, but I had to admit Westy had given good advice on getting me into the building, and probably would have an idea or two about how to get us into Stimpf’s apartment. Also, I was never happy when I knew someone was mad at me, or giving me the silent treatment. I’d do whatever I could -- assuming I gave a shit about the person’s opinion -- to make amends, to keep the peace. Besides, even though Westphail had turned me into whatever it was that I currently am, I’d grown accustomed to Westy’s voice. While I valued moments of silence, this one was different: intentional, weighty.

“Westy, look. I’m sorry. I’m sorry about what I said up on the roof, and just now. I know it seems like I’m a solid, well-adjusted, mentally stable rock of a man --” If Westy had a face, I know he’d have a confused look on it, as if to say, “Brains.” *Are you sure you’re talking about yourself?* -- “...or maybe not so much. But, you have to admit I’m taking this pretty well. I know this isn’t how you planned things. I know you expected to invade my body, shut down all my vital systems and carry me along on a mad kill-crazy rampage until I got decapitated, eviscerated, and incinerated, or until, I don’t know, whatever grand master scheme you had in mind was completed, and that having a still-sentient, thinking, somewhat-feeling thing who has yet to even try to sample the brains of a human being doesn’t really line up with your goals of the day. I know you must be frustrated, and yeah, I’m frustrated too. I mean, don’t think there isn’t a part of me who doesn’t wish that I was just a brainless automaton shambling around town, tearing into



human flesh without a care in the world. Sure, that sounds like fun, like maybe a better way to spend my time than climbing buildings, jumping between rooftops, trying to kick down doors, all that. Really, I'd rather just be back in my apartment, waiting for the end to come. I'd gotten pretty good at that. But, hell, this is how it is. This is the new reality. This is what's what. We've got to just make the best of it. Bickering back and forth, trying to hurt each other, what does that accomplish? I know, yeah, sometimes we're going to get on each other's nerves and say things that we might regret, but let's not forget that we're on the same team here. We've got to make the best of it."

I took a deep breath. There were some moments of silence then, and I wondered if I'd said too much, or come across as weak, or just been completely wrong. Maybe all my reasoning had fallen on deaf ears. Maybe Westy didn't give a shit about peaceful cohabitation. As a matter of fact, I thought, why would he? He was just a virus. *It* was just a virus. Fine, if it wasn't going to make the effort to make things tolerable for the both of us, then I wouldn't either. See how it likes it when I don't ever eat a single brain. When I go around just --

"Brains."

I was too wrapped up in my thoughts to catch the nuances of the word. "What was that, Westy?" I asked.

"Brains." *You are right. We are sorry. You do not need to 'grow a pair.'*

"Well alright!" I shouted. "I wish we could high five. Or 'hug it out.'"

"Brains." *That is not necessary.*

"No, I suppose you're right."

"Brains." So....

"So...."

"Brains." *The door.*

"Yeah. Another door." I tried the handle again. Still locked.

"Brains." *Perhaps there is a key.*

"Well, of course there's a key. There's always a key. The problem lies in *finding* the key. People don't just leave their keys lying around, you know? That's the whole point of locks. I know you're not totally familiar with the idea of keys and locks, which is what makes *doors* such a great defense against zombies --"

"Brains." *Same team, remember?*

I took a deep breath, calmed down. Anger, which usually wasn't something I was consumed by, came so easily now. "Christ, Westy, I'm sorry. I don't know why I keep blowing up."

"Brains," said Westy, and he left it at that.

"I hear you, and as soon as we find Stimph, I will obey. I promise."

"Brains." *So each lock only has one key?*

"Yeah, that's what makes them so secure." I thought for a second. "Unless...."

"Brains." Yes?

"Unless you make a copy to give to your best buddy next door neighbor so she can come in and feed your cat while you go out somewhere to *take care of business.*"

"Brains." *My thoughts exactly.*

"Now where did she say she lived?"

It wasn't hard to find where Polly Carlile lived -- her name I learned from old pieces of mail piled on a small table in the entrance to her apartment. The decor in the unit to Stimph's left was too masculine, too spartan to be hers. A quick check in the drawer of a stainless steel and glass desk proved my theory correct: the apartment was home to one Len Grossman; not what I was looking for.

Polly's apartment was a 180 degree turn from Grossman's. There was clutter -- which awakened my sense of unease at disorderliness, but not the type of revulsion I felt in Rob Anise, Grocer's office. Mismatched furniture with knickknacks and keepsakes covering every surface filled each room.

Knowing that Stimph's keys were most likely in a kitchen drawer, or one of the innumerable small wicker baskets that were strewn about the apartment, I still took a detour into Polly's bedroom. I couldn't resist the opportunity to check it out.

"Brains." *You think the keys are in here?*

"No, Westy, I do not."

"Brains." *Then what are we doing in here?*

"I just wanted a chance to get to know Polly Carlile, find out who she was, what she was all about," I explained as I looked through a jewelry box (mostly costume jewelry with few pieces of any value) and examined the couple photos on her dresser (one was obviously her mother; the other looked much like a stock photo that might have come with the frame: a phot of her with some guy, the pair of them laughing, holding hands, running through crashing surf on a beach in some tropical location.) "She's gone now -- I assume -- with nobody to mourn her -- I guess. Someone should remember her, know who she was." I placed my thumb over the guy's face in the photo, imagined my own in its place. What would it have been like to dance through the waves with Polly Carlile?

"Brains." *What is the point?*

"I know that while you ooze your way through the human brain you don't pay much attention to the thoughts, feelings, and emotions contained within. You're focused on carving all of that out and turning your poor victim -- sorry, I know that's a loaded phrase, how about test subject? Brainwash companion? Whatever -- into a hapless puppet. And that's cool. That's how you're made. But me? I'm a sentimental sap -- sometimes -- and that's still there. So, I just want to get to know Polly a little so that I can keep her in my thoughts, so that she's not forgotten. Besides, if she hadn't led those Zs through that door, we'd still be stuck up on that roof. We owe her this much."

"Brains." *Do we also owe it to her to go through her underwear drawer?* For Westy had noticed that I had moved on from the surface of the dresser and into the contents of its drawers. I spent perhaps a little more time than necessary amongst her unmentionables, but hell, when would I get another opportunity?

"Jeez, she sure has a lot of crotchless panties."

"Brains." *Even we know that this is disrespectful.*

"Fine," I said as I closed the drawer. "We'll let sleeping panties lie, so to speak. Moving on...."

I took another cursory glance around the bedroom on the off chance that Polly had kept

Stimph's keys there. Finding nothing, I returned to the front of the apartment.

The keyring -- identified by the attached flashy, gaudy, faux-gem encrusted medallion into which had been engraved "TIM!!!" -- sat, as expected, in one of those little wicker baskets on the kitchen counter. I grabbed up the keys, took one last look around Polly's apartment, and gave a little wave.

"So long, Polly Carlile," I said. "I wish I'd gotten to know you a little better. I bet under different circumstances you probably wouldn't have been such a bitch to me. Probably."

I guess I'd been rubbing off on Westy because he said his peace as well: "Brains."

"That was real sweet, Westy."

Where Grossman's apartment had been almost devoid of any signs that someone lived there, and Polly's place had been on the verge of becoming the subject of an episode of *Hoarders*, Tim Stimph's place was somewhere right in the middle. I felt like Goldilocks must have felt when she tried Baby Bear's porridge: This is just right.

Except it wasn't *just right* inasmuch as it was the apartment of my sworn enemy, my arch nemesis, my anh chàng đồ tôi thực sự ghét as the Vietnamese would say. It felt strange to be in his home after all these years -- well, it felt like years, but it was really just hours -- of focusing on getting there, getting to him, getting revenge. It was a little disturbing to me to see how comfortable I felt in Stimph's apartment. Really, I didn't feel much in any direction, but I was pretty excited to finally be there.

"We did it, Westy! We really did it!"

"Brains." *Calm yourself. This is just the first step in a long journey.*

"You're right, of course, Westy. I should stay calm. Not count chickens. Take a deep breath." I did all that.

"Brains." *Let's see what we can find, shall we?*

The initial search of Stimph's apartment revealed very little. The kitchen was illuminating only in that it showed me Stimph's terrible dietary habits. The cupboards were filled with Twinkies, Ding Dongs, Ho-Hos, Apple Pies, Chocolate Pies, and many other disgustingly sugar-filled, empty-calorie type foods. The choices were unsurprising, from what little I knew about Stimph, and also considering the fact that those items would keep rather well in case of a long stand-off with zombies. Somehow this building still had electrical power, and the refrigerator was full of cold beverages and condiments: beer (an entire case of Miller Lite mostly), soda (Pepsi products), and ketchup (Hunt's). The freezer was empty except for two ice trays and a bag of frozen peas.

Moving on from the kitchen into the dining room wasn't much more fruitful. There was a table with four chairs, a credenza which contained a phone book, several pens, a dog-eared copy of *Catch-22* and the September 2014 issue of *Boy's Life* magazine. Had Stimph been a Boy Scout? Was he a troop leader? Or did he just enjoy the *Goofus and Gallant* comic strips in each issue? I might never know.

The living room was all couch and coffee table and bookshelves and nothing else. No TV. No computer. Nothing. How could a man live like that in this day and age? It just didn't seem possible or the least bit likely. I searched again and again for either item, shocked each time I

didn't find them.

"Tim Stimpf is some sort of technology-hating hermit," I announced. I remembered my theory that he blew up the library. "Fits right in with his terrorist activity."

"Brains." *You're still convinced of that? It's ridiculous. You have no evidence to support that theory.*

"You'll see."

I thumbed through his books -- there was a whole lot of chick-lit, Tom Clancy, Robert Ludlum, and Johnathan Grisham in there -- and was wholly unimpressed. Not a single thing that could be classified as literature. Apparently Stimpf wasn't one much for thoughtful reading. Trashy books have their place in the world, sure, but it's not something I'd display proudly as he had. There was a first-edition hardcover Sophie Kinsella book. I flipped open the cover, not taking as much care with it as I would, say, an actual book, to find that it had been autographed. The inscription read, "To Tim: My favorite shopaholic. Love, Sophie."

"Eeeyugh!" I exclaimed.

"Brains." *What is it?*

"I didn't know they even made hardcover editions of these books. Look at the binding!" For the book was leather-bound with gilded pages. It must have cost a fortune to produce, and a larger fortune to procure. "I've seen a lot of shit over the past day, hell, over the past five years. I've seen people and families destroyed, homes burnt or bombed to rubble, bodies distended and bloating, decapitated heads rolling in the street. I've seen the living dead swarm and overwhelm human beings, tearing at their flesh with their teeth. It's not been a pretty time for the living, and death has become a real ugly thing. But this.... this is the first time I've felt really, truly nauseous."

I looked down at the book in my hands and sighed. I wanted to destroy it, but a book was a book and I couldn't bring myself to do it. I slid it back on the shelf into its place of honor.

"Tim Stimpf seems to be a real piece of work."

"Brains." *It is good to know your enemy. Then you can think like him. Then you can destroy him.*

"Jesus, Westy. Have you been reading Sun-Tzu or something?"

"Brains." *It's common sense.*

"Well, you're right. Let's get to know him a little better."

The apartment had two bedrooms. The door to the one on the left was wide open so I went into the right which was obviously the master bedroom. Tim's king-sized bed dominated the room. I appraised it with a professional eye. If there was one thing I knew, it was beds, having spent a good deal of my adult life firmly planted in one. This one was a thing of beauty: I could tell without even pulling back the covers or feeling the mattress that it was a Ypsilanti Dragon Fluff-nite TempurFoam Deluxe, retail price in the upper \$5k range. That bed didn't care whether you preferred a firm mattress or a soft one, if you were a side sleeper, a back sleeper, or if you were most comfortable sleeping hanging from the ceiling, it would just accommodate you. *Modern Sleep* magazine gave this bed six "snoozes" on their scale of five. No other bed had ever scored even a five. That's how good it was.

"Goddamn," I exclaimed. "That's one fine bed!"

"Brains." *Stimph appreciates the finer things in life.*

"I don't know, Westy, nothing else in the apartment is this fancy." I gestured towards the living room. "It's not like he has some sort of fancy couch out there." I was also pretty well-schooled in the qualities of various couches. Basically if you could sit on it or lay down on it, I knew most everything there was to know about it. I was a master relaxer. Still am, I guess -- yesterday I moved a brand new Hammocker and Schleeper Mark VII Recline-a-Couch from the storeroom of the Sears down here to my little hidey-hole. Only the finest for this Z! I don't really notice a difference, but that's just due to my slumbering nervous system. I'm sure my joints and muscles would be thanking me if they had any way to communicate anymore.

"Brains." *Maybe he was saving up for one.*

"Maybe. But, the 'fridge was full of Miller Lite."

Crossing the room, I opened a door to find a gigantic walk-in closet, full of clothes more expensive than I had ever worn from floor to ceiling. I could tell just by feeling them that they were of the highest quality. The labels were of designers I'd only vaguely heard of, never having paid much attention to fashion. The only thing that was of lesser quality was the gigantic economy-sized bag of Depends Adult Undergarments that sat in plain view, at eye level, on one shelf. Seven empty hangars amongst his shirts and four more amongst the pants provided further evidence that Stimph had planned and packed for a trip away from home.

"Nice duds," I said.

"Brains." *Nicer than yours.*

"What do you know about fashion anyway?" I asked, defensively.

"Brains." *We are learning.*

"That's just adorable, Westy. Maybe I can show you some old episodes of *Project Runway* or *America's Next Top Sweatshop Workers*. You'll love them, I'm sure."

"Brains." *We believe that you will find, once you get around to actually fulfilling your end of the bargain whereby you eat some brains, the brain matter of one who watches less than four hours of television per week are of much higher quality in terms of size, taste, and tenderness than those who watch more than four hours per week. One who watches more than 20 hours per week will have a brain that is very nearly inedible according to a recent survey.*

"According to a recent survey'? Who conducted this survey? Where were the results published? *Zombie Digest*?"

"Brains." *We keep track of these things. Four out of five zombies agree that reality television has the most adverse effects on brain quality. Those who partake in video games (particularly puzzle games and adventure games), crossword puzzles, and reading are reported to have higher quality brains.*

"Wild." I considered the results. "Where the hell do you find someone who watches less than four hours of television a week anyhow?"

"Brains." *We admit, it is quite the rare delicacy. Amish country is a popular zombie destination for food holidays.*

"You never cease to amaze me, Westy. Never." I took another glance around the closet and made for the door.

"Brains." *Did you not want to look through the drawers?*

"Nah, no need. Got all the info I can get here."

"Brains." *Did you not want to examine his undergarments such as you did 'Polly Carlile's'?*

"Eww. What? Why? No."

"Brains." *In order to know your enemy.*

"God. No. That's gross. Shut up. We're done in here."

"Brains." *But do you not want to be thorough?*

I retreated from the closet. "No. Done. Door is closed. No underwear. Not going there."

Back in the bedroom, I ran my hand over the comforter on the bed. "I wonder if she ever slept with him on this."

"Brains." *Who?*

"Polly Carlile," I said. "Do you think they were lovers? Polly and Tim? She said they were good buddies, that they hung out all the time. You don't think she'd sleep with him, do you?"

"Brains." *What difference does it make? She is dead and we're trying to kill him. What they may or may not have done in the past is immaterial.*

"I know that in my head. But, in my heart, it's a different matter."

"Brains." *Your heart no longer beats. There is no blood for it to pump. Nothing for it to do. And nothing for it to know.*

"It's an expression, Westy. It means that I can't fully accept that the past doesn't mean anything. That I have no ties to Polly. That her choices in life don't affect me in the least. I can't explain it, but.... Well, I just hope she didn't."

"Brains." *What if she had?*

"I don't want to think about it."

"Brains." *The thought of 'Tim Stimpf' with her; his grubby hands touching her beautiful body; his thin, formless lips kissing her; his microscopic member attempting to enter her. How does that make you feel?*

I fumed. I knew what Westy was trying to do -- that he wasn't trying to bring me down or make me sad, just trying to motivate me. Psyche me up before the big game, so to speak. I had to admit, it was working. "It makes me feel like killing him. And maybe eating his brains."

"Brains." *That's the spirit.*

"Should I wreck the place a little?"

"Brains." *That's not necessary, but --*

I took that as a yes -- and what a great opportunity! I tore the covers from the bed, tore the pillows apart, knocked tables over, turned the dresser on its side, punched holes in the walls, broke glasses and dishes. I still couldn't bring myself to hurt his books, nor to damage that beautiful beautiful bed. I trashed Tim Stimpf's apartment such that it looked like a band of Zs had battled it out with a human, or perhaps looters had come through looking for valuables. I did it out of the rage that Westy had manufactured, and I did it out of the sheer joy of just letting go.

"That felt good," I said, after I had gotten it out of my system.

"Brains." *We must admit, we rather enjoyed it as well.*

"No kidding?" I asked, a little surprised. "I didn't know you could enjoy things, Westy."

"Brains." *We did not know that either. Like you said, we have a lot to learn. From each other.*

"Indeed we do, my friend. Indeed we do." I looked around at the scene of destruction. I'd

really done a number on the place. But I didn't feel like we were any close to tracking Stimpf down, or really knowing much about his motivations, or knowing my enemy. "So. What now?"

"Brains." *There is still one more door.*

In my rampage, I'd totally forgotten about the other bedroom door. I didn't have much hope that anything illuminating would lie behind it, but it always paid to be thorough. I tried the knob. The door was locked.

"Brains." *Another locked door. You humans sure love your locks.*

"We're a generally untrusting species. If you hadn't noticed."

"Brains." *I imagine there's a key for this somewhere.*

I looked around the apartment, everything now out of place. "I don't remember seeing a key during all of that, but then, I wasn't looking for one. But you know what, Westy? I don't think we'll be needing a key for this door."

"Brains." *And why is that?*

"'Cuz I'm gonna kick the fucker down."

"Brains." *We don't mean to be a 'buzzkill' -- I could hear the airquotes in his voice -- but that didn't work out so well last time.*

"That was a secured door to the outside world. Relatively high security.

Un-kick-down-able, if you will. This is a flimsy interior door whose lock is mostly for show, just meant to keep a snooping guest -- such as ourselves -- from stumbling upon something embarrassing or incriminating. This is probably just Stimpf's porn stash room. I hope you're not easily embarrassed."

"Brains." *We have seen it all.*

"If you say so. Just be ready for something gross -- like midget scat elephant porn or something."

"Brains." *If you say so.*

"Okay. Let's do this."

I lined up in front of the door, gauged the distance and angle. Took a deep breath -- just for show.

"A one. A two. A three!"

I lifted my foot and gave a swift, heavy kick to the door just to the left of the knob. My foot easily crashed through the flimsy wood as if it were cardboard. The door remained closed. My foot remained wedged inside.

"Well ain't this a bitch," I said.

"Brains." -- A close approximation of laughter, probably the nearest Westy ever came to showing some sort of mirth.

"Laugh it up, virus-boy," I said. "It got the job done. Sort of."

I wrestled my foot from the door, an endeavor which took more time than I'd like to admit, and provided Westy with no end of amusement. Finally free, I shoved my hand through the hole I'd made and found the door knob on the other side.

"Brains." *Careful now.*

"Nonsense. Just a simple twist of the wrist, *et voila.*"

"Brains." *Wait --*

Westy's warning was cut off as the door swung open on oiled hinges followed

immediately by an explosion, which though it was, in terms of explosions, small and controlled, still rocked the apartment and slammed me against the wall behind me.

Had I been knocked out? Was it possible for a Z without a nervous system to be rendered unconscious? It was some moments, or minutes, or hours later that I opened my eyes again. I checked my head and limbs -- habitual self-diagnostic -- and found everything to be in the right place. The only thing amiss was the foot long piece of a Masonite Palazzo Series interior door sticking out of my chest.

"Holy fuck!" I exclaimed. "Would you get a load of that?"

"Brains." *The door exploded.*

"Must have been booby trapped."

"Brains." *Would someone go to such lengths to protect his porn collection?*

"I don't know -- I might. Not that I have a porn collection. Really."

"Brains." *Right.*

I rose to my feet, yanked the splinter from my chest and tossed it aside and was treated to the singularly unique experience of looking into my own body. Organs blurbled about inside, but mostly it just appeared to be a silent mass of gore. There was no activity to speak of. And why should there be?

"I think I'm going to pass out," I murmured.

"Brains." *No you're not.*

"I'm not?" I asked. "Oh, yeah. I'm not. I'm cool."

Why would Stimph booby trap a door in his own apartment? And how had it been rigged? And how was it possible to disable the defense system to allow for safe entry by authorized personnel. A quick examination of the wall to the right of the door revealed the remains of a keypad that had previously been hidden from view by a sliding panel.

"Crap. Should have thought of that first."

"Brains." *We did.*

"Well, you could have said something."

"Brains." *We tried.*

"I suppose you did," I admitted. "Well, no matter. We're still in one piece, I think."

"Brains." *Your shoe is on fire.*

I looked down to see that Westy was right -- my shoelaces were smoldering. I stomped on one foot with the other, putting it out.

"Good looking out, Westy."

"Brains." *No problem.*

I peered through the smoke into the bedroom. Apparently the trap had been designed only to kill or maim someone breaking into the room, and not to destroy the contents of the room itself. I guess that spoke to Stimph's confidence that the bomb would do its job, and a lack of foresight that a mostly indestructible member of the walking dead might be curious about what was behind that door. I supposed that had I been your every day run of the mill human being that I might be in worse shape. If the splinter through my chest hadn't done me in, there were plenty of other dangers that would take care of an ordinary *Homo sapien*: the shockwave of the explosion forcing all the air from my lungs; the resulting fire; or the smoke. Whoever had made



this bomb knew what he was doing.

As the smoke cleared, I took stock of the bedroom. There was no bed -- where one might have gone, there was a large table that had been covered with beakers, test tube and other lab equipment. The glass, of course, had all shattered, and anything sturdier had been thrown aside, but it was still clear that this was a work table of some sort.

"Was Stimph cooking meth?" I wondered aloud. But I immediately knew this wasn't the case. I'd watched *Breaking Bad* and knew that even the smallest meth labs required more space, security, and ventilation than this room could offer. Still, it appeared as if he was making *something* that required chemicals; something that required the greatest secrecy.

Smoke still obscured much of the room, but I could make out a closet to my right. The doors had been thrown off their rails by the explosion, and they had absorbed some of the blast, but they were still mostly intact -- the blast really was designed to blow *out* of the room. I pulled the doors down and threw them aside. Inside the closet were two large drums -- one of ammonium nitrate, the other of some sort of sulfate. On shelves above the drums were metal cans, empty bottles, jars of ball bearings, electrical components that looked like fuses or detonators. Bomb making stuff. It appeared as if Stimph had rigged the trap himself.

"Curiouser and curiouser," I said. "Looks like he likes making things go boom."

"Brains." *So it would seem.*

"But what?" I asked. "And *why*?"

"Brains." *Do those things really matter?*

"You said it yourself, Westy. Know thy enemy. "

The smoke had mostly cleared from the room allowing me to take in the rest of its contents. There wasn't a whole lot more to be seen -- a few plastic bins along one wall which contained more bomb making supplies; a box of Christmas decorations, completely out of place amidst the destructive materials; and a previously unseen banner attached to the wall.

"Westy!" I cried. "Do you see that?"

"Brains." *I see what you see. Of course I see it.*

"Well, what do you have to say about that?"

"Brains." *I suppose you may have been right.*

"May have been?" I crowed. "*May* have been?"

"Brains." *This is still just circumstantial evidence. This does not prove anything.*

"This, my friend, is what they would call a smoking gun. Or, to put it more accurately, a smoking bomb. Or, even more accurately, the smoking pile of rubble that is the Chicago Public Library."

"Brains." There was a sigh in his voice. *Fine. This does look pretty convincing.*

I approached the banner and pulled it from the wall, marvelling at the total cosmic convergence that it implied.

"Damn. I can't believe it. I mean, don't get me wrong, I knew all along that Stimph was a twisted individual, but I think that about most people, you included, Westy. It's particularly surprising to find that my suspicions were actually correct."

"Brains." *Congratulations. We are so proud.*

I threw the banner to the floor. It was red with gold letters and it read "Death to Libraries! Specifically the Main Branch of the Chicago Library!"

"Where are you going next, Tim Stimpf?" I asked a photo of him that I had earlier hurled across the living room and into the kitchen. The glass in the frame had shattered, but the picture itself was undamaged. I peered deep into his beady, black, soulless eyes hoping for an answer, a sign, a clue. Nothing came to me.

"Brains." *Was there nothing else in his bomb room?*

"Not that I could see. Bomb making stuff, the banner, and more bomb making stuff. No diagrams, blueprints, or maps."

"Brains." *Where else are there libraries?*

"Well, hell, Westy, I've been a bit out of touch, you know? Three years ago, most of the libraries had already closed. There were just a few left. But they're probably all gone by now. And anyhow, how do we know he's not just out on walkabout, seeing the sights?"

"Brains." *Well, I'm at a loss.*

"Me too." I opened the refrigerator again. "Sure wish I could have a beer, even if it is just Miller Lite. God, Westy, how I loved beer. So much flavor and complexity, it rivals wine for variety of flavor, body, and character. Not Miller Lite, of course, but other beers. Better beers. Actual beer beers, you know? Stimpf had good taste in everything but books and beer, apparently."

"Brains." *We have just now recalled something that might be pertinent.*

"Oh yeah? And what was that? That Tim Stimpf is an asshole?"

"Brains." *No, not that.*

"Well," I said, shutting the refrigerator door, "I'd say that's about the most pertinent thing I can think of. What'cha got?"

"Brains." *That woman, the human --*

"Polly," I supplied.

"Brains." *Yes. 'Polly'. She said something about 'Tim Stimpf' promising to bring her a bottle of his favorite beer. With the amount of 'Miller Lite' in this refrigerator, would it not be a safe bet to assume that 'Miller Lite' is 'Tim Stimpf's' favorite beer?*

"Nobody has that much Miller Lite in their 'fridge by accident," I said. "Where are you going with this?"

"Brains." *Wouldn't it stand to reason then that 'Tim Stimpf' is going, or has gone, to the location where this 'Miller Lite' is produced?*

"He wouldn't have to go to the Miller brewery just to bring her a bottle of Miller Lite. He could have just come to his refrigerator and grabbed one. He sure had plenty here."

"Brains." *That is true. However, and please, correct us if we are wrong, but is it not somehow traditional for vacationing or travelling humans to often say that they will bring back one of (or some of) whatever it is that the place to which they are travelling is famous for? For instance, if one were to be going to Maryland, one might say, "I will bring you back some crabcakes." Or if one were going to Detroit, one might say, "I will bring you back some crime, unemployment, and urban blight." Therefore, if one were going to wherever it is that 'Miller Lite' is produced, one might say, "I will bring you back a bottle of Miller Lite."*

"Good God, Westy," I marvelled. "You're brilliant!"

"Brains." *We do what we can. Now, where is it that this 'Miller Lite' is produced?*

"Miller Lite is made by MillerCoors, LLC which is located in Chicago," I said.

"Brains." *So he has not travelled far.*

"That's just their corporate offices, I think."

"Brains." *Then where is their production?*

"Miller products are brewed in Miller Valley. Up in Cheesland. Home of the Brewers. Land of Sausage."

"Brains." *Milwaukee?*

"Yep," I said. "Milwaukee."

"Brains." *Well, what are we waiting for?*

I looked down at my chest, at my ruined shirt. Idly, I stuck my finger into the hole. "I should check out that wardrobe again."

After a quick stop in Stimpf's closet, we headed down the stairs to the lobby. I had taken one of Stimpf's shirts and was both pleased and chagrined to find out that it fit me like it had been tailored to my measurements. I'd never worn something so nice and I was sorely tempted to change into an entirely new ensemble. Only sentiment kept me from discarding my old suit.

The building's main entrance had been hastily barricaded with furniture from the lobby which was easily cast aside. The residents had apparently felt fully comfortable with little fortification, not thinking of the possibility of an attack from within.

"How should we get there?" I asked. Every abandoned vehicle I had seen appeared undriveable, and I certainly didn't have access to a car.

"Brains." *Zombie train?*

"What the fuck is a zombie train?"

"Brains." *Hitch a ride with a pack. By this point, there are going to be zombies wandering all around the country, looking for food.*

"You mean walk? You think we should -- no, no, that I should -- walk to Milwaukee?"

"Brains." *Why not? You don't get tired. You don't need to rest. All you have to do is put one foot in front of the other until you get there.*

"But what's the point of going with the zombie train if it just means walking with a bunch of zombies?"

"Brains." *There is safety in numbers. You will attract attention on your own. With a pack, you will be anonymous.*

"What if the Army decides to drop a shell on us? Wouldn't I be better off moving on my own?"

"Brains." *There are risks inherent in all methods.*

"Well, is there a schedule posted somewhere? Where's the next train to Milwaukee?"

"Brains." *Just wait. And watch.*

"But.... Fine. There's nothing better to do."

So I stood there. For a while. And Westy was right. Packs of Zs came through on their way to parts unknown. There was no rhyme or reason to it. But, none of them were headed north, so I decided to just start hoofing it in that direction by myself. I figured it wouldn't hurt to walk on my own for a bit. I hadn't gone two blocks before I spotted, in the distance, a decent sized pack up ahead. They were indeed headed north, so I quickened my step.

Catching up to the Zs wasn't hard. They don't walk all that fast unless they're chasing

food, and there wasn't much in the way of food on the street. I was tempted to stop in the Taco Bell, but it looked as if it hadn't been a functional food source for quite some time. The rest of the fast food joints on the street were all in the same state. Windows were either boarded up, or broken, doors hung loose on their hinges, lights were off, nobody was home.

~~The Zs were headed north, which suited me fine. I didn't really care where we went, was just along for the ride, there to see what I could see.~~

The commercial zone gave way to a residential area, but it was just as empty. Houses were boarded up, barricaded however the owners could imagine to do it. It looked like everything had come on in a hurry, like people were a bit rushed when trying to build their fortifications. This zombie thing had been going on for years and it still took these folks by surprise. It didn't look like these fortifications worked all that well -- windows were broken, doors torn down, worse....

~~Here and there, you'd see it. A lone Z, or maybe a couple of them, on hands and knees, tearing at entrails, feasting on a kill. What was left of my humanity caused me to wretch. What was left of my stomach was completely empty, so nothing came out.~~

~~"Brains," said Westy. C'mon kid. The first one's always the hardest. Like this was a murder scene and Westy was the grizzled veteran homicide detective and I was the young rookie looking to prove himself. Except that here, proving myself meant finding some living thing, preferably a human being, and eating it. I wasn't all that eager to get that first notch on my belt.~~

~~"Well, yeah, let's go."~~

We walked on. Well, I walked while they plodded awkwardly, picking their way over and around rubble, abandoned cars, bodies. The further north we got, the more ruined the landscape became. I surmised that whatever defense Chicago had had -- police, National Guard, crazed gun nuts and zombie fans who had been prepping for this day or something like it -- the suburbs hadn't been as lucky. The fortifications were less professional, less standardized. Everything was jury-rigged with strings of store-bought barbed wire where military razor wire might have been; hastily erected barricades of 2x4s and furniture where concrete slabs and fighting trenches would have gone. Leaflets of some sort fluttered about in the wind. I grabbed one that had impaled itself on the spike of a string of barbed wire and read it in the dim moonlight. It was a propaganda sheet, spread by the US Department of Homeland Security (Zombie Defense Division) warning of an imminent outbreak and the need for a quick and orderly evacuation. Thousands of these things blew down the street.

"Winnetka's not quite how I remembered it," I said.

One house we passed by still seemed as if it had fared pretty well during whatever had taken place here. The house was huge, taking up most of a city block, had three floors, a ceramic-tile roof. This was rich-people territory. The fortifications had been more thoughtfully erected. They looked professional. I supposed the family had opted to pay for some third-party company to come out and barricade the house for them. Domestic reinforcement must have become a pretty booming business right before and during all the outbreaks.

As the horde, which I had been letting travel a few hundred feet in front of me, just for caution's sake, passed the house I felt a palpable tension from within. The house seemed to close up even more than it had been already. I could sense there were still people inside. Good for them!

"Brains." *Let's go check it out.*

"Are you kidding? Look at how well-defended that house is. It's hardly been scratched in all this."

"Brains." *No. Seriously. Let's go check it out.*

"I know you're not really a tactical genius. I've seen how you throw wave after wave of undead monsters against some defended position in order to deplete their numbers and eventually overrun them, but I refuse to take part in that. I'm not going to be your cannon fodder, Westy. No way."

Westy was silent in reply. Was the virus giving me the cold shoulder? Fine. I'd let it be a little baby if it wanted to be.

We passed the house. I could almost feel the sighs of relief from within. I turned back to look and saw movement at one of the upper floor windows. The curtains were drawn back and I could just make out the face of a child -- a little girl looked out in wonder at the horde of monsters passing by her home.

I smiled my friendliest smile and waved cheerfully. The curtain was dropped. Kids never liked me anyway. I tipped my cap in the direction of the house, jauntily turned on my heel, and followed after my newfound friends.

I decided to take a break in the shade of a baobab tree at the center of a large public park. What a baobab tree was doing that far north, I did not know, but there it was. The Zs went on ahead; Zs don't take breaks. I didn't really need a break myself -- I wasn't physically tired; I don't get physically tired anymore -- but there was still a need, somewhere in my head, something Westy hadn't managed to get rid of yet, to take a minute or two to just stop. Relax. Chill out.

And even if my body wasn't tired, my mind sure was. All I'd been doing was thinking and talking with Westy, and Westy was pretty tiresome what with all its questions and constant demand that I seek out human brains. Blah blah blah. The homicidal three year old in my head was almost too much to bear. I needed to take a load off. Rest my head.

"Brains." *You don't need sleep.*

"I know," I said, my hands behind my head, leaning up against the trunk of the tree, my legs crossed at the ankle. If I'd a straw hat, plaid shirt, and overalls, the image of the hayseed at rest would have been complete. I kept my eyes closed as I spoke with my ward. "But I *love* sleep. I was a world champion sleeper before all this. I could sleep with the best of them -- no double-entendre intended. I was the sleepest sleeper who ever slept."

"Brains." *Are you done?*

"No, I'm not done, I'm just getting started. I realize that you're an unseeing, uncaring virus that never knew pleasure, or pain, or anything in between, and that all this turning people into unseeing, uncaring, unfeeling monsters is your way of lashing out at the world, trying to get revenge upon those whose only crime is that they're human. That they have emotions. And can know joy and sorrow. And pride and shame. We are fallible, flawed creatures. We make mistakes. But we also make beauty. Art. Love."

"Brains." *Are you done?*

"No," I said, though I was stalling for time, searching for other examples of humankind's frailty and value. "We. Uh. Make...good movies. And Twinkies."

"Brains." *Okay, you're done.*

"Yeah," I admitted. "I'm done."

"Brains." *I am not borne of jealousy. I am not here to exact revenge on a people who rub their supposed emotional superiority in my metaphorical face. I am a virus like any other virus, like Swine Flu, or Ebola, or HIV. I am here to restore balance in the world of man; strike a blow for nature; bring harmony back to the universe.*

"Holy shit!" I exclaimed. "I was right!"

For I had been thinking all those things (you remember, yeah?) and that all of man's hubris had come back to haunt him. And that curing cancer was flying in the face of God. And on and on.

"Brains." *We were just kidding.*

"What?"

"Brains." *An attempt at humor. We suppose we have a lot to learn in that regard.*

"You were making a joke?"

"Brains." *Yes. A story with a humorous twist. An attempt to provoke laughter or amusement.*

"So...."

"Brains." *There is no reason for us. We are simply here. We simply are a twitch in the genetic soup. A protein that bonded differently under a flickering fluorescent light.*

"You took a left at Albuquerque when you should have gone right."

"Brains?"

"A joke. An old one. So there is no greater plan? No greater cause? This isn't punishment for mankind's attempt to play God? This isn't a great cleansing to restore order?"

"Brains." *How are we to know? We don't even know how to get to Carnegie Hall.*

"Practice," I said.

"Brains." *We set you up for that.*

"You make a great straight man, Westy. You're learning."

I pulled my hat down low over my eyes and settled in. Westy still protested, still didn't understand the need or desire to rest. I didn't fully understand it myself, for I no longer really felt anything that I would call desire, anything I would call a need other than the low-level gnawing hunger which I was consciously and actively ignoring. It was something I can only chalk up to habit, a remaining memory of my humanity which I had yet to be rid of.

It was the voice -- Westy's voice -- that brought the hunger, and the voice was constantly there, constantly chattering, constantly saying that one thing again and again: Brains. *Brains.* I was able, when I needed to, to quiet it by concentrating on other things, but it took its toll mentally, and I was feeling the strain.

"Is there any way," I began, "that you could just, I don't know, be quiet for a little while?"

"Brains?"

"Don't get me wrong, Westy," I said cautiously. I knew I had to be tactful about this, so I chose my words carefully. "I enjoy our little chats. I really do."

"Brains." *We do as well.*

"Great! That's great! It's just that, well, I don't know how it works with the other guys" --I

nodded in the direction that the pack of Zs had disappeared-- "but I'm beat. I know that sounds strange to you, but I could just use a bit of silence. Just a few minutes. Just to recharge."

"Brains." *We don't understand. This is very simple. We walk, and we find brains, and we feed, and we walk. Sometimes we groan.*

"I've noticed that. I've also noticed that I'm, you know, different from the other guys."

"Brains." *We have noticed that too. We were surprised to take so long to gain access. We were surprised to hear you speak back to us.*

"Well, we -- I mean, I -- was surprised to hear you speak in the first place. I know I'm different now than I was before. I mean, I've never walked this far in all my life. And here I am just merrily going on a hike through the post apocalyptic landscape, just bopping along without a care in the world--"

"Brains." *Brains.*

"Except for brains, yeah. I hear you. I really do. I can't deny it, it's starting to sound pretty good to me, I just, I just need a break."

"Brains." *We think we can accommodate that. We will also... take a break.* There was hesitation and uncertainty in the voice as it considered a concept completely foreign to its thinking. *Though we are not sure why.*

"I 'preciate it, Westy," I said, pulling my hat lower to cover my face. "I really do."

I didn't exactly go to sleep. I was pretty certain at that point that sleep was something I'd never do again -- something that saddened me because I really did love to sleep. It was one of my favorite activities. I guess I'd say that I spaced out for a while. Entered the zone. Meditated. Shut down. I was dimly aware that the sun was moving through the sky, time was passing.

I was roused from my mental slumber by the sound of footsteps, quietly and carefully approaching. They were quiet, made by someone who was used to -- and damn good at -- walking without making much noise. I probably wouldn't have heard them had it not been so quiet both outside and within. I reached up to lift my hat.

"Move slowly, friend," said a voice. It was a man's voice. The voice of someone who had seen it all and survived to tell the tale in his gruff, raspy voice. "Don't go doing anything that might make me nervous. I don't like being nervous and you definitely won't like making me nervous."

My hand halted in midair, my other one came up to join it, palms facing out towards the source of the voice, a gesture of deference and good will.

"No need to be nervous," I said. "We're all friends here."

"Brains," Westy said, and of the three of us, I could tell that Westy was the most nervous. There was apprehension there. Fear.

"It's alright," I said, more to Westy than to myself or to the stranger.

"Go ahead and lift your hat," the stranger said. "But you should know I've got my scattergun trained right at your head and I won't hesitate to take your hat off for you, if you catch my meaning."

"No need for that."

"*Brains.*"

“Just stay calm,” I urged.

I lifted my cap, holding it out to one side. The sun had set; what little moonlight there was came from spilling out from behind clouds which had rolled in as night fell. I could see the man standing 20 feet away, the scattergun he'd mention held up to his eye as he sighted down the barrel at me. Slowly, I put my hat back on my head, hoping he hadn't noticed my zombie-pattern baldness. I kept my hands in the air, hoping it would make the stranger at ease.

He stepped forward, keeping the gone trained on me, his eyes darting in all directions, seeming to take in everything around him while still keeping me in focus. He stopped at about 10 feet; close enough to have a conversation, far away enough that I couldn't make a move for his gun without him getting a decapitating shot off first. I got a better look at his face. He looked young; younger than his voice sounded. He also looked familiar but I couldn't place where I knew him from. He let a duffel bag that he carried over his shoulder fall to the ground. It landed with a heavy thump.

“What'cha doing out here?” he asked.

“Just taking a break,” I replied.

“A break? From what?”

“Well, from walking I guess.”

“Walking where?”

“North.”

“Ain't nothing up north but more of this.” He jerked his head towards the littered road.

His way of talking was infectious; I quickly picked it up and made use of it myself. “Ain't nothing south but more of this either,” I said.

“Well now, that's the truth,” he said, chuckling. “What's yer name?”

“Zach. Zach Graves.”

“Well, Mr. Graves, I hope you'll excuse my impoliteness but it does seem awful strange to find a man out here all by his lonesome. Makes me ask questions.”

“I was thinking the same thing about you. What are *you* doing out here?”

My effort to derail the line of questioning was futile. The man was unflappable. “I guess I don't have to remind you that I have a very powerful gun pointed directly at your head.” He was right; he didn't. He tapped the barrel of the gun with his right hand anyway.

“Since you've got the gun, I guess you don't have to answer my questions,” I allowed. “That's how it works in the movies, anyway.”

He chuckled again. His laughter seemed to come much easier than I would have expected for a gun-toting lone wolf. “The movies. That's rich.” He eyed my suit. “Speaking of rich, that's a mighty fine suit you're wearing. Haven't seen finery such as that in a long time.”

“My dad bought it for me,” I said without thinking.

“Your dad. Well, wasn't that sweet of him?” he asked without a trace of irony. “He didn't see fit to buy you a warmer jacket though, huh? Ain't you cold, Mr. Graves?”

Of course, I hadn't felt the temperature drop, hadn't felt the cold that came in with the night. I realized that with each word the man spoke, I could see his breath forming steam in the air. Mine had no such effect.

I faked a shiver. “Now that you mention it....”

He knelt to the ground. While still holding the gun on me, he managed to get the duffel



bag open and rooted through it. "Ah. Here we go. I can spare this, I think." His hand came out with a black hooded sweatshirt, the back of which bore the embroidered logo of the local women's roller derby league. He tossed the hoodie to me. I tried it on, finding it to be at least two sizes bigger than I'd normally wear. In my emaciated state, it was at least a third size too big. It fit nicely over my suit coat, however.

"Isn't that better?" he asked. I assured him that it was. I made enough grateful noises of new found warmth to set the man's mind at ease. Not so much at ease, though, that he felt he could lower his weapon.

"Is this how you greet everyone you meet?" I asked. "A gun in their face and a warm sweatshirt?"

The chuckle again. "It's what's kept me alive this long. Can't ever be too careful. But," he said, "you don't want to be so careful you stop being human, know what I mean?"

"I do indeed know what you mean, sir."

"That's good. That's good." He again took a look around, and not liking what he saw, gripped his gun a little tighter. "Now, Zach, tell me this: where's your stuff?"

"My stuff?"

"Your things. Supplies. Clothes. A bag." He kicked the bag at his feet for emphasis.

"All I have is the suit on my back, sir." He was younger than me, I could tell that, and yet there was something about his demeanor and bearing -- more than just the fact that he had a shotgun pointed at me -- that caused me to address him with a respectful title; that and the fact that he hadn't told me his name.

"The suit on your back, huh? Nobody leaves everything behind. Nobody who wants to make it out in the open, that is."

"I had to leave home in a bit of a hurry. And I travel light. Never been a big packer, you know?"

"Well, me neither, Zach, but you can't survive out here without supplies." He kicked the bag again. "Think I like carrying this damn thing with me everywhere I go?"

"I can't imagine that you do, sir," I replied. "I really didn't have much to pack, nor much time. I've only been out here a day."

"So you've gotten lucky so far. Can't believe you didn't get et by a Z just sleepin' out here in the open."

"I haven't seen a single one since I saw Chicago," I lied. No need to tell the man I'd been following a good sized pack of them the entire way; nor that I had planned on catching up with them just as soon as I could get on the road again; nor that I hadn't exactly been sleeping.

"Well that may well be true, but this road's seen its fair share and there ain't no rhyme or reason to when they come, when they go, and when they come back."

"I guess not."

"Son, maybe you haven't been around much lately but I can tell you ain't stupid, so I hope you won't get offended if I give you a piece of unsolicited advice."

"Not at all," I said.

"You gotta always be on your guard these days. I ain't sure how you lived before Westphail fever swept the nation, but you can't be livin' any other way but this. You traipse about like you're still in the good ol' days, you won't last long. Just strollin' along, mindin' your own

business and then *bam!* --” he shouted this; I didn’t flinch “-- zombie got yer kitten.”

“Zombie got yer kitten?” I asked.

“Yep,” he said, as if no further explanation was needed, and I suppose one wasn’t.

“Zombie got yer kitten.”

During the entire interview, Westy had remained relatively quiet. There was the occasional input (“Brains?”) and still the tendril of fear reaching out. It was the fear that made me uneasy, or whatever passed for fear and uneasiness in my new state of mind. What made Westy so nervous? Was it the man himself? Or the fact that I wasn’t mindlessly trying to attack and kill the man? Whichever it was, Westy wasn’t being more clear, and in order to focus on a conversation in which I was trying to give the impression of not being spoken to by a zombie virus to a man who seemed incredibly adept at killing zombies, I’d had to ignore most of what the virus was saying.

There was a silence between the man and me then, as we stared at each other. He still didn’t trust me, for whatever reason. I got the sense that trust didn’t come easily to him. But, as the silence lengthened, a smile crept across his face.

“Ah hell,” he said. He seemed to have made a decision. The gun lowered. He slung it on its strap over his shoulder. “Sorry about all this. The name’s Ak” -- he pronounced it “Ock.” He extended his right hand. I lowered mine and shook his.

“Brains!” *Now is your chance. Now is your chance. Now is your chance.* Westy’s voice was urgent, desperate, and hard to resist. My grip tightened on Ak’s hand. I had a hard time letting go.

“Pleased to meet you, Ak,” I said.

Ak winced. “Hell of a grip you got there.” He grabbed my right hand with his left and pried it loose. “But you’re all skin and bones.” He held my wrist in his hand, his fingers easily encircling it and then some.

“I, uh, I haven’t eaten in a while.”

He let go of my wrist, put his hands on his hips. “Looks like you haven’t eaten in months.” He tilted his head sideways, trying to see past the shadow the brim of my hat cast across my face. “Or years.”

“It’s a medical condition,” I said. It wasn’t entirely untrue, just not the entire truth. “I’m naturally gaunt. Never have to diet, at least.” There was the lie. I tried to change the subject: “You look awfully familiar.”

Even in the dim light I could tell the man was embarrassed. “Yeah, I hear that a lot, but you know, I’m still not used to it. Ever since they put my face on that beer bottle, I got everyone coming up to me all the time, askin’ for autographs, wantin’ to take photos with me, tryin’ to get me to take care of their Z infestation. It’s gettin’ to be so I can’t go out in public anymore.”

“Beer bottle?” I wondered. And then it dawned on me. “Holy shit! You’re the Zombie Hunter!” For it was him, the tattooed, gun-toting man that graced the labels and tap handles of Zombie Hunter beer. “I’m a big fan!”

“Brains!” *This man hunts us. This man kills us.*

“This man is a fucking living legend!” I said this to Westy, but made as if I was addressing an imaginary crowd so as to not raise suspicion that I was stark raving bonkers.

“Please, I’m just an ordinary guy. I just happen to be really good at killing the undead.

Those beer guys really made a big deal out of all that.”

“I love your beer!”

“Yeah, it’s not bad,” he said. “I’m more of a High Life guy myself.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said. I was nearly beside myself. I never got to meet celebrities and now, here I was, just sitting around, shooting the shit with the Zombie Hunter. How cool was that? “I mean, no, I’m like, I’ll drink whatever, you know?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Ak said.

More awkward silence fell between us during which time Westy took the opportunity to pipe up.

“Brains.” *This is the Zombie Hunter. Do you know what that means? He hunts zombies. We are a zombie. He hunts us.*

I had to have it to old Westy; he was really getting the hang of conversational sarcasm.

“Well, anyway,” I said, trying to break the silence. “What are you doing out here in suburban Chicago? I figured you’d be out in LA or something.”

“LA?” He dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. “They tried to get me out there but I wasn’t havin’ none of it. That place is for sissies and phonies. Nah, I like to keep it real out here in the heartland.”

I looked around. Beyond the edges of the park were beautiful multi-million dollar houses, the occasional Jaguar or Lexus, and boutique shops which catered exclusively to the wealthy. I gestured towards the opulence.

““Keep it real?”” I asked. “Here?”

Another dismissive wave. “Hey, man, don’t give me any of that class consciousness bullshit. These folks might have -- maybe I should say might have *had* -- more money than you or I would ever see in a lifetime, but they’re still real folks. Honest, hardworking, midwestern folk. Not like you got out West.”

What he was describing was nothing like my experience with the people that lived around here, but I decided not to argue the point.

“So what have you been doing here?” I asked.

“Well, I’m just wandering the roads, going where I’m needed, helping where I can,” he replied.

“You’re like the Lone Ranger!”

“I suppose I am, son,” he said. He really was about 5 or ten years younger than me, but for some reason when he called me “son,” it worked. I resisted the urge to call him “dad.” Every time he agreed with me, or chuckled at a joke I made, or gave me any kind of encouragement, I just wanted to hug him. I doubt the feeling was mutual.

Still, I got the feeling that Ak liked me, at least enough to tolerate my company, because he kept standing there, in the dark, talking to me for quite a while. He told me stories about the zombie wars which basically served to fill me in on what’d been going on the past three years while Westy was busy working on my brain and I was totally incapacitated. It was awkward, at first, considering the fact that I had no valid excuse for being unaware of the goings on in the world.

“I was in a coma?” I tried, hopefully.

“No kidding?” He seemed to accept my story at face value, though he was definitely a

hard man to read. He didn't display his emotions readily, so he may have just been humoring me, seeing where my story would go.

"Yeah. Man. What a coma. Car accident. Was just driving up Western Avenue. Do you know it?" He nodded. "Yeah, you know, going about 35 miles an hour, headed north, minding my own business, come across Morse Avenue and this asshole comes out of nowhere and hits my car. Just T-bones me right across oncoming traffic and into a light pole."

"Holy shit," Ak said. "You're lucky to be alive."

"I know," I said. "That's what they tell me, anyway. All I remember is seeing the car come at me, this big green Grand Marquis. I saw it as I was coming to the intersection. He nosed out but then stopped. I figured he saw me. Then when I came up to him, he just pulled out and slammed into me. It was like he was trying to hit me. And then I blacked out."

"And just came to?"

"Yeah, just about three days ago. Woke up in the hospital, all by myself, no idea what was going on."

"Jesus, just like *28 Days Later*."

"I mean, when I woke up, I had no idea how much time had passed, or what had happened. I figured it was like, later that day, or maybe the next day, but I wasn't thinking it was three years."

"Or like *The Walking Dead*." Ak was fixated on the similarities between the story I was crafting and popular zombie movies and television shows. They were undoubtedly informing my tale, maybe too much; I had to veer from the beaten path.

"Right, yeah, never seen that one." I'd watched all six seasons of it.

"No shit? Man, that's what got me into zombie hunting in the first place. This one guy, Darryl, man, he was a badass. Didn't take any shit, but you know, had a soft side, heart o' gold. Died at the end of season five." Ak shook his head sadly. "Man, that pissed me off."

"Wow, that sucks. I hate when my favorite character gets killed off. They usually keep the most annoying ones around, too."

"He carried a crossbow," Ak said. "I used to too. Ran out of arrows for it though. Bah. No use cryin' over spilled weapons, I always say."

"Interesting saying."

Ak broke out of his train of thought. "Sorry -- didn't mean to interrupt. What was you sayin'?"

"Woke up in the hospital. No idea how much time passed."

"Oh yeah, well how would you know, right? Hospital abandoned, all by yourself. Probably a shit ton of zombies stuck somewhere in the basement, right?"

"Uh, no, actually," I said, remembering that that's exactly what happened in *TWD*. "It was just the middle of the night. Nobody around. I pulled the IVs out, peeled off the leads from the heart and brain monitors and rolled out of bed. My legs were pretty weak from all the time I'd spent in bed, not moving, not doing anything. It was like I had to learn to walk again." I figured I could pepper in details from my actual experience to make the story seem more realistic and believable.

"I bet, you'd have to be pretty atrophied after three years of lyin' on your ass like that."

"Yeah, I totally was. Atrophied. That's it. A weak little baby, really. I mean, I think they did

some work with me while I was out, you know, making sure I didn't totally waste away or anything, but still, I guess there's only so much you can do. Anyway, I figured out how to get on my feet, started making my way out of the building. It wasn't totally abandoned, there were a few other patients there, people who'd been left behind. I found a couple people in the coma unit who, like me, were totally out. I found a newspaper, figured out the date."

"Total mindfuck, right?" Ak asked. "Like, where'd the last three years go?"

"Yeah, absolutely. Like, yeah, where'd the last three years go?" I was running out of steam. I'd never been much of a story teller (ample evidence appears on these pages) and I was an even worse liar so keeping all the words coming was getting increasingly difficult. I was leaning on Ak's prompts and whatever bits and pieces of non-zombie related dramas I could think of. "You know? I like collapsed right there, the thought of three years going by was too much for my weak legs to bear. It was super dramatic."

"Jesus, it's like.... *While You Were Sleeping* or something."

Ak's knowledge of cinema apparently rivaled my own. I wondered when he'd had time to watch everything I had. I mean, I'd done absolutely nothing with my life. This was the fucking zombie hunter. The man had been busy.

"Uh yeah, haven't seen that one either. Anyway, I just laid there on the floor, you know, kinda quietly sobbing. I'm not ashamed to admit it."

"It'd be a blow to any man," Ak said, with a reassuring clap on my shoulder. I don't think he was entirely sincere. He probably hadn't cried since the doctor that delivered him gave him that first slap on his ass.

"Yeah, just quietly sobbing, like, 'Where'd three years go? What's going on? What about all the things I've missed? Where are all my loved ones?'"

It struck me as I said this that I had not had any of those feelings. I guess it says a lot about my previous life that I shrugged off the loss of three years like it was nothing. I'd had nothing going on, no three- or five- year plan that I missed out on, no lost time at all. What would I have done with three years? Sat on my ass, counted more holes in ceiling tiles, drunk myself to death. I certainly couldn't bring myself to feel sad about any missed opportunities -- there weren't any opportunities to miss except the opportunity to miss more opportunities. Does that make sense? Well, it does to me.

As for loved ones, well there wasn't much to miss there either. I mean, when I pulled that suit my dad bought me out of the closet, it was the first time I'd thought about my dad in probably the three years I'd been under Westy's care and the three years before that. We weren't what you would consider a close family by any means. Hadn't had any idea where my mom was for even longer; she'd dropped out of sight when I was a kid and hadn't been in touch. My siblings? There was a brother, somewhere, I guess, and a sister, equally as uninvolved in my life. The point is that when I came around, I hadn't thought, "Where's my family?" because they may just as easily have been dead and buried long before the Zs came as during those three years. They say that family is important because they'll always be there and you'll always be related, but I just don't know about that. My family treated me like a Z before Westphail even existed. I'm just surprised they never tried to shoot me.

Ak nodded thoughtfully. "Man, that'd be the hardest part. The not knowing what happened to my family."

"Yeah," I lowered my head as if actually wondering what happened to my family. "I just. I just don't know. I couldn't find anything."

Ak was lost in thought again. "My family, man, they're all..."

"...dead? Zombies? What?"

"What? No. They're all at the Oklahoma City Reanimated Human Defense Zone Relocation Center. Mom and Dad. Wife. Kids. My cousins, aunts, uncles. Grandma. Yeah, they're all fine. Got 'em set up real nice, thanks to the ZH beer people and my Red Bull sponsorship. I saved Senator Pitt's kids from certain death during a Z outbreak in DC back in '16 so he owed me one. They got a big-ass house, nice car, a pool. Everythin'."

"How come you're not down there with them?" I asked.

"I'm a Zombie Hunter. Sorry, *the* Zombie Hunter," he said. "Zombie Hunter gotta hunt. Never mind the sponsors and the contracts and the TV show, it's in my blood, son."

"TV show?" I wondered.

"Hell yeah, son, I got me a TV show. Realest reality show you ever seen. Cameras followin' me around watchin' me kill Zs wherever I go. Big hit. 'Course, God knows how many people got TVs or 'lectricity such as they can watch anymore."

I peered out into the night, wondering if I'd missed a camera crew that had been shadowing Ak. This conversation would have been an editor's nightmare -- long, action-free, mostly devoid of plot development or pertinent details. I felt bad for the guy.

"Where's the camera crew?" I asked.

Ak shook his head again. "That's something else only God knows, I guess. Lost them a few days ago. Zs came outta nowhere, outta the sewers, outta everywhere. I saw a few of 'em go down, yeah, did what I could to help, then we got split up in the chaos. Spent the last few days lookin' round for them, but haven't had any luck." He brightened. "Say, you ain't seen nobody carrying a big-ass stupid camera, running around scared like a zombie chicken with its head cut off, have you?"

"Sorry, Ak, I can't say that I have."

"Didn't think you would have, figured you'd'a mentioned that one already, but figured it couldn't hurt to ask. Sure hope someone made it. I'd really like to see the footage from that fight. Boy, I pulled some shit that night I thought I was too old to do. Was killin' Zs with everything I could get my hands on. Killed one Z with a pitchfork. Never held a pitchfork before in my life. No idea what a pitchfork was doin' in the middle of the suburbs. Just lyin' there on the side of the road. Pinned that Z to the wall. Got another one with a boom mike. Just grabbed it out of the sound guy's hands, he's still holding it out, recording, I don't know, me gruntin' and fightin' and swearin'. I just grabbed it from him, knocked a Zs head clean off with it. Smack. Plop. Dead. Good stuff."

"Man, I would love to see that. Hope the cameras were still rolling."

"You and me both, son. That could really make the season right there." Ak sighed at the thought of lost quality footage. "Anyhow, I interrupted again. You know me long enough you'll realize that every story you tell, I'll butt in with my own thoughts each time. Bad habit of mine, I guess. The wife keeps tellin' me it's something I gotta work on. I figure only thing a man's gotta work on these days is keepin' dead critters from eatin' his brains."

I laughed. Westy said, "Brains."

Ak continued: "But there I go again, turnin' a 'pology into another bit of ramblin' discourse 'bout nothin' and nobody but myself. What were you sayin'?"

"I don't exactly remember. I'm sure it wasn't important. Tell me more about your wife." I hoped I could use Ak's love of talk to get him to go on about something other than the fiction I was creating about myself.

No such luck: "You were tellin' me about findin' out about them three years what passed while you was sleepin'."

I sighed. "Oh yeah. What a mindfuck that was, man. As if waking up in a nearly-empty hospital wasn't bad enough, finding out I'd spent three long years asleep, doing nothing but wasting time, I was wondering what all I'd missed. What I'd missed out on. Turned out, it might have been a blessing that I missed those years, what with all I've been able to piece together. And what I saw when I walked out that front door."

"It was pretty bad, huh?"

And then I simply described to Ak the scene of devastation I'd found outside my own apartment: the rubble, the bodies, the tank.

"Man, them tanks look tough and sure, they can crush a Z or two, but they ain't shit when it really comes down to it. If ranks break down and a swarm hits it? What's a guy gonna do when there's thirty or a hundred Zs all swarming around on top of his big bad killing machine? Nothing, that's what. Tank crew buttons up in there, holes up real nice, feels real safe, but how long you gonna last? Z, he lasts forever, don't give a shit. Tank's got maybe a couple days oxygen, less if a Z gets lucky and is sitting on the air intake. Ain't got a whole lot of food or supplies in there. Man can get dead real easy in there once he thinks he's safe as houses," Ak paused for breath. I didn't even try to get a word in. "And hell, they cause more damage to real people and property than they do to the Zs. All that rubble, all that fire, all that destruction? That's all tanks and artillery. Man fucking up his own shit just to kill a few walkers.

More silence, interrupted by Westy.

"Brains?" No meaning above and beyond, just a simple query. It sounded like he was actually bored. Not me. I could listen to Ak tell stories all night.

And I did. The sun was rising when an awkward pause turned into a longer silence which turned into the two of us shifting our weight uncomfortably, searching for something to say. But it seemed like there was nothing more to say. Ak wanted to get on the road, and I did too, but there was no way to break up our little palaver. He was a man who, though we worked alone, was used to having people around him. And though I had spent much of my life on my own, I was actually enjoying this man's company. It was a pleasure to be able to talk to someone that I could see was real and wasn't just a clawing, whining voice in my own head.

"So...." Ak said.

"Yeah," I replied.

"I'd best be headin' on out." Ak looked towards the rising sun. "People that need my help somewhere, I suppose."

"Which way are you heading do you think?" I asked.

"Well, I'm not really sure. I'd probably better spend some more time lookin' for that crew of mine, but honestly, I'm equally as glad to be rid of them. Hard enough lookin' after my own self, much less a bunch of undertrained, overeducated television types."

"I can only imagine it would be tough to do what you do when you're constantly worried about keeping a whole group of cameramen and sound guys safe."

"You have no idea, Zach." Ak whistled quietly, shaking his head. "You have no idea. These fools didn't even have the slightest concept of noise discipline. Guys like that woulda gotten a whole squad killed in 'Nam."

"You were in 'Nam?" I exclaimed. Ak didn't look old enough to even know what 'Nam was.

He blushed. "No," he admitted. "It's just, you know, a sayin'."

"Oh, I got'cha. Yeah. I bet they were real hard to keep track of."

Ak laughed, "Well I think I've proven that by losing track of all of them."

I chuckled uncomfortably, not knowing if it was an actual joke or just a way for the Zombie Hunter to cope with the fact that he misplaced the crew of novices that had been following around, helping to keep the Zombie Hunter story alive.

Just as Ak was turning to leave, he stopped, cocked an ear to the wind, and listened.

"What is it?" I asked.

He held a finger to his lips. "Shh shh shh." Three short, sharp, professional shushes. The man even shushed like a master. I copied his stance, tried to hear what he was hearing, but couldn't. A moment passed. Then two. Then the Zombie Hunter dropped to a low crouch and beckoned me to do the same. I crouched next to him.

Ak brought his head close to mine and spoke in a low voice: "There's a small pack. Three, maybe five Zs, just about a klick to the West." He pointed off in that direction. "They haven't caught our scent yet, but they're coming our way."

"Jesus," I exclaimed a little too loudly. Ak shushed me again. I lowered my voice. "Jesus," I repeated.

"Don't think he got nothin' to do with this," Ak said, obviously annoyed with my unnecessary verbal output, but unable to resist a retort of his own.

"Sorry. So, you could catch all that just from, what? The wind?"

Never one to turn down the opportunity to do a little schooling, Ak was happy to show off the depth and breadth of his tracking skills. "Yup. Could hear the groan. The tone of it tells you what's on their minds, the length tells you how many you're hearin'. Each Z got a voice, just like we humans do. You can start to tell them apart once you get to know them well enough."

"That's truly amazing," I said.

"Brains." *He's pulling your leg. There are no zombies nearby. This man is a fraud. Eat his brain.*

"Shush, you," I said to Westy, forgetting myself for a moment.

"I didn't say anything," Ak said.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought you had."

"You're the one making all the damn noise. I'm trying to track these sons-a-bitches."

"Sorry," I said again. "I just got scared for a minute."

"No need to be," Ak said, patting the shotgun slung across his back. "I've got everything covered. We'll be fine."

"Brains." *I think I might be sick.*

"You don't get sick," I said.

"Nope," said Ak, "I never get sick of it. The thrill of the hunt, the pride in the kill. It still



hasn't got old."

"Are they getting closer?"

Ak held out one hand in a "Wait just a sec" gesture, and held his other hand cupped around his ear. I waited patiently, still straining to hear what he could hear. Westy was making all kinds of noise, making it extremely difficult to hear anything else.

"Brainsbrainsbrainsbrainsbrainsbrainsbrainsbrains."

"Shhh," I whispered.

"I didn't say anything," Ak said.

"Oh, sorry."

"Well, no worry," he said, rising to his full height and assuming a relaxed stance. "They headed off a different way."

"Really?" I asked.

Ak nodded. "Yup. Nothin' to worry about."

I stood up next to him, still looking off towards the West. "Well, that's a relief."

At that moment there was a sudden scream of fury from behind us. I was suddenly hit with great force and thrown forward. My attacker grabbed onto my shoulders and rode me down to the ground. I felt the distinct pressure of teeth on the back of my head. It didn't hurt, but I knew they were there.

"What the fuck?" I yelled.

Ak had jumped back in surprise at the attack but quickly sprang into action. He might have been bullshitting about the pack of Zs in the distance, but his skills were the real deal. Truth be told, I had worried a little that he was just a marketing ploy, some mascot or figurehead that had gained prominence with the Zombie Hunter beer label and subsequent ads and promotions. But whatever the truth was, he didn't fail that day. His boot found my attacker's midsection and sent him flying a couple feet to the side. I jumped back to my feet to find Ak levelling his shotgun at the head of what appeared to be a Z which was now writhing in pain on the ground.

"Goddamn ferals!" he spat. He cautiously approached the man and kicked him again. He turned and looked back at me. "You okay?"

I rubbed at the back of my head. A clump of hair fell out in my hand. I palmed it quickly lest Ak think I'd been injured, or worse, suspect the truth about my health. "I'm fine," I said.

Ak nodded and turned back to the feral. "Fuck you thinkin' runnin' around here like a goddamn maniac, scarin' this nice fella' outta his head? You go a little nutty from all the stress? You think we ain't all got our own problems? Our own stress? This man here, he was in a car crash, in a coma, woke up to a world fulla zombies. Coulda' gone nuts like you! Yeah, maybe he spent a little time cryin' like a little bitch -- " Ak looked back at me, and shrugged in apology. I shrugged back. "-- but he didn't go doin' nothin' like this!"

The feral was unresponsive, still moaning, not zombie-like, but like a regular human who had just been kicked twice in the ribs by the pointy-toed boot of a man who had seen it all and wasn't afraid to kick the shit out of something that needed the shit kicked out of it. I approached cautiously, fearful that at any moment he would snap again and attack.

Ak watched my approach, motioned for me to come closer. "Don't worry," he said. "This one's done. Lotta people think that ferals need couch time with head shrinkers, or the ol' shock therapy treatment, or a support group or something. I say that they ain't got nothing that can't be

cured by a swift kick to the ribs and a stern talking to. C'mon, give it a shot. There's still some bones in there that I didn't break."

I waved him off, "No thanks, Ak. I'm good."

"You sure?" he asked. "Man did just make you soil your pants."

Just so we're clear, Ak was referring to the fact that I'd fallen in a damp patch of grass and had gotten some green stains on the knees of my trousers. I had not shat myself. I'd felt no fear, none of that fight or flight response, none of that. At most, I was annoyed.

Annoyed enough to kick the man who'd knocked me down.

"Whoa whoa whoa there," Ak said, grabbing my shoulders and holding me back after I'd taken more than a few swings at the feral's ribs, along with one to his head which had apparently knocked him out. "I think that's enough."

"Guess I got a little carried away."

"No worries," Ak said with a chuckle. "It happens."

"So, what do we do with him?" I asked.

"Hell if I know. Haven't run into a feral when I wasn't with a whole crew. I mean, most of 'em I just had to put down on the spot 'cuz they was bein' a danger to everyone around them. Worst thing 'bout ferals is they're even louder than an untrained film crew. They start making a whole buncha noise lead a big pack of Zs right down on your head. Feral's'd get an entire platoon killed in the 'Nam." Ak blushed again. "Sorry. Keep sayin' that."

"No worries."

"Anyway, it's a pain in the ass, to be sure. The ferals I didn't put down got shipped out to rehab facilities. Dunno how much good it did 'em. Probably most of them is locked up in padded cells getting poked at by men in white coats." Ak poked this feral with the toe of his boot. "Feel bad just leavin' him here. Probably won't make it. Get 'et by a zombie or do his own self in if he comes to and remembers all the batshit crazy he just went through." Ak pointed at the man's mouth with his boot. "He's got blood all over his face, y'see. Probly ate his kids or something."

I recoiled. "That's terrible!"

"Don't gotta tell me that. But I've seen worse than that. Ferals running loose in packs, thinkin' they're Zs, leavin' people half-et, half-dead, just lyin' there. Packs of ferals what didn't disguise themselves enough gettin' set on by real Zs, it's crazy, looks like the Zs just went bonkers started eatin' dead flesh, but of course, Z don't do that."

I shook my head in disgust, unable to think of anything to say. Ak boke the silence.

"Anyhow," he said, "I'm gonna git. It was real nice meetin' you, Zach Graves. Good luck out there."

"Nice meetin' you too, Ak." I shook his hand. "It was an honor. And a thrill to watch you work. Thanks for, you know, saving my ass. And for the sweatshirt."

"Think nothin' of it," Ak said. "Just, I don't know, pay it forward, or whatever, when you can."

"Say," I said, "is there any way you might want to --"

"What now?"

"Brains." *Do not do what we think you are about to do.*

"Well, this is hard to say, but --"

"Just spit it out, son."

"It's just that I'm heading up to Milwaukee."

"Uh huh?" Ak asked. I could tell he was a man who just said what was on his mind, not caring whether or not it was awkward or embarrassing. My hesitation undoubtedly annoyed him.

"And, well, I'm going to the Miller Brewery to find the guy who wrecked my car."

"How's that now?"

"It's a long story, one I can tell you on the way, if you come. But I tracked him to Milwaukee, and I think he's going to try to blow up the library."

"What?"

"Yeah, like I said, it's a long story."

"Must be. Blow up a library? Are you serious?"

"I am dead serious, Ak," I said.

He shook his head. "Goddamn terrorists. Blowin' up books. It's nonsense."

"That's how I feel as well."