

S U R V I V A L K I T S E R I E S

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SURVIVAL
KIT'S
Apocalypse

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For W-Bot.

“Gotta copyright my heart so no one can steal it

And broadcast it out so everyone can feel it.”

Jason Molin, “*Jesus Rode a Bike*”



Chapter One



he box was old, lightweight pine. It reminded me of my stepfather's coop, but without the locks. I'd scrunched my body quickly into it, and the rough wood was repaying me with splinters.

I actually like small spaces; they usually help me feel calmer. I crawl into closets or corners and feel safer, secure. This wasn't that kind of time, though. I was hiding.

I wasn't hiding from rotters. I could handle them. Trying to hide from rotters in a box would be idiotic, anyway. They'd just keep growing in number, waiting around, no matter how long it took, for a person to emerge. And then they'd start biting.

What I was hiding from was an ugly band of men I'd seen cutting their way through the forest. Dozens of them.

And they had hostages. Women, men, and children. Tied together, gagged. These people had been severely beaten. They were bruised and bleeding. Blood and yellow-white crust covered their bodies. The tears they'd cried had left streaks through the gory crud on their faces.

These men were far more dangerous to me than any rotter.

So I'd hidden away in the first available spot, knowing running from their path would attract attention and make me one of their captives.

They marched into the clearing of this old campsite, and some of them stopped to rest while the others moved on.

“Tog!” a man shouted. “Get your ass over here and bring me back my good lighter!”

He sat down on the box. I held still, slowing my breathing and trying not to notice how hot and stuffy the small crate had already become. I waited.

The man fumbled with a lighter for several seconds before getting it lit. He smoked a cigarette and spilled his drink. It dripped through the cracks onto my shoulder.

Finally he heaved himself up and continued down the trail with the others, mumbling and grumbling about Tog.

I waited some more. I could wait in here for days, if I had to. I’d done it before, since the dawn of the apocalypse. And Before.

As darkness settled, I crawled out. Then I began to jog in a direction away from those terrible men.



My very first memory is of my father. I’d wanted to hide then, too. He’d set a four-year-old me down to take a nap, pulling a small satin blanket over my tiny body. He was singing. It was a familiar song, one I’d already heard hundreds of times in my few years, and I’d mostly closed my eyes but could still see him. I was in shadows, and he couldn’t see I wasn’t sleeping. He stood in the doorway, finishing the song and preparing to sneak away.

My father heard a noise and looked down the hall.

The man who was to become my stepfather moved into the doorway. They talked briefly, quietly. I don’t know what they said. Then the man stabbed my father in the chest. Dad fell sideways into the room, and he landed next to my little racecar bed with a knife buried in his heart. I froze. The man took off a pair of leather gloves, bagged them, and put the bag in his coat pocket before striding away.

I looked into Dad's deep brown eyes, and he stared back at me. His eyes were shining, shining. Then a different shining, and then the shine was gone.



After I'd traveled far enough away from the band of kidnappers that I figured there was no danger in taking a short break, I stopped at a clear, glassy pond. As I knelt down to wash my face, my reflection surprised me. My hair was clumped in random, filthy wads. Sweat had glued the box's dust and dirt all over my face. Ringed by the dark purple clouds above, the person looking up at me from the water allowed a frightened expression to flit across her face for a split second. I plunged my hand square into her nose, breaking this ugly creature into dozens of fractured ripples. In an odd way, that was probably a truer reflection.

After detangling my hair and washing up, I rummaged through the front pocket of my backpack for a snack. I looked at my dead MP3 player resting beneath a bag of Gardetto's garlic rye chips. I couldn't bring myself to get rid of the device.

Music isn't just entertainment for me. It's an escape. It helps me drown out memories of the worst times. Before I went to the farmer's, I'd only ever heard the music my stepfather listened to—shitty hard rock—and the occasional condescending Top 40 song someone at school might play for me. As a result, I'd never paid the entire medium any mind, considering it a background diversion at best. It was a provocation for unpleasant associations, usually. My first friend, Officer Bissett, had pushed me into singing for him a few times, but otherwise, my voice was only used for speaking in those days.

Officer Bissett. He was weird. He loved to listen to me sing. He'd been so kind to me, I was glad to be able to balance some of the debt I felt to him through the small favor of a song or two. He liked folk music best, and I'd learned a few songs specifically to please him, like "*Birches*" by Bill Morrissey and "*Bridge over Troubled Water*" by Simon and Garfunkel. They were nice enough, but I didn't feel them the

way he felt them, at the time. I didn't allow myself to feel much of anything, and Officer Bissett tried to encourage me to learn how to. He thought music would help heal me, that it would expand my world. He was right. It just didn't happen immediately.

I met a college-aged guy named Felix in town. He became my second friend. I'd been rummaging through fabric in a box at the thrift store, and I'd giggled at a hideous, colorful swatch of polyester I'd found. Its print made my eyes ache. The cloth was covered with pictures of a single jackalope, which were all identical except for their colors, Warhol-style.

"That's so ugly it's come back around to being cool," said a guy who'd been pawing through used CDs nearby.

I looked up and smiled at him.

"I'm Felix," he told me.

I put the bright, silly fabric into my shopping basket and shook his outstretched hand. The farmer's wife (who I was shopping with) took forever, so I chatted with Felix while I waited for her. When it was time to leave, he asked if I wanted to hang out sometime. I didn't. The farmer's wife elbowed me, though, and I decided to appease her by exchanging numbers with him.

Felix showed me how to *feel* through good music. He was home for the summer, and had brought boxes and boxes of CDs back from college with him. (I can't imagine how he lived with them all crammed into a teensy-tiny dorm room.) We'd been talking about something else over coffee, and I idly mentioned I simply didn't care about music because my experience with it had been so lousy.

Felix gasped in a manner which was clearly supposed to be joking, but I think he *meant* it as well. The next time I saw him, he brought a CD for me to try out: *The Sunset Tree* by the Mountain Goats. The album consists of a series of John Darnielle's reminiscences of the physical and mental abuse he suffered at the hands of his awful stepfather. It touched a nerve in me for obvious reasons, and I was moved deeply by it. I felt like I was riding a roller coaster, able to finally see the vistas around me

from a great height before my stomach plunged to my feet from the raw emotion on display. *Music can do this?*

I thought, utterly stunned. I listened to it for days on end.

That album was my gateway drug, and my tastes expanded and became more musically gluttonous from there. Felix gave me total access to his vast record collection, and whenever I wasn't doing chores or learning from the farmer, I took advantage of that. He had everything from country to metal, from jazz to rap to the flat-out bizarre, and I devoured all of it.

I was initially drawn to punk rock. Its aggression provided an excellent outlet for the anger and pain I felt. Over time, though, I gravitated more toward thoughtful, unhurried indie rock. The emotion of artists like Cat Power, Carissa's Wierd, and Barbara Manning gave me strength, helping me to remember I wasn't the only person who was hurting. Sometimes the melodies or the sounds themselves hit something deep inside me, but more often it was the lyrics which held me hostage.

I think Felix wanted more than a friendship with me, but I wasn't ready for it and only allowed him to hug me once—at the end of his senior year. He moved away for a job almost immediately after he finished college, and before he left, he ripped all his albums onto a large hard drive and told me the vinyl and CDs were all mine. It was an enormously lovely present, and that's when I let him put his arms around me. I didn't like it.

He left, and we started sending each other letters once a week. Every correspondence from him was signed, "Love, Felix." The best I could make myself respond with was, "Be well, Ally." That was actually pretty good, all things considered.



I don't know what happened to Felix. I never heard from him after After arrived. I still had my cell phone back then. It still worked, sporadically. He never called. I never tried to call him either. I chucked the phone when the battery died three days after leaving the farm.

The MP3 player held out slightly longer. Although I could no longer convince it to release any of the soul-cleansing songs trapped in its digital bowels, I still carefully guarded it. Over the years at the farmer's, I'd loaded that device with a battalion of songs that spoke to me on a special, ineffable level. The thought that they were all imprisoned forever on that hard drive—the thought that we now lived in a world where the Delgados' "*The Drowning Years*" or Nilsson's "*Think About Your Troubles*" might never be heard again—was unacceptable to me. They would bloom again. I would find a way.

I was thinking of this when a rotter clamped onto my shoulder. I'd been so lost in my thoughts that I hadn't even heard its approach. It whirled around and broke its grip, then backed away. It charged again. This time I was ready: I stabbed it through the eye. My knife had shattered the lens of the glasses the rotter still wore. Felix had worn similar hipster frames. I briefly had time to register this, and to think about whether rotters' vision would continue to be improved if they wore glasses after being turned, before a huge cluster of them lunged from the woods around me.

I yanked my knife from the wannabe Felix rotter's eye socket, and spun wildly, slicing at anything in my path. I had two objectives: not getting bitten, and getting away. The mass of rotters surrounded me. I kept slashing with my knife, unsure what to do next. I pulled out the farmer's wife's gun so I could stab with one hand and shoot with the other. Firing a gun was a *last-last* resort during a rotter attack, since the sound would just attract more of them, but I needed the short-term advantage it gave me. I blasted off some heads that were getting too close to my flesh for comfort. I kept turning around, keeping them from grabbing and latching on. Twice-dead bodies began to pile up in a mound around me, like sandbags around a foxhole. Soon this pile was too big—the rotters couldn't, wouldn't, climb over it. I stopped and took a breath. For the moment, I was safely out of the rotters' reach. I took stock of the ones that were still animated. There had to be at least two hundred active rotters waiting to bite me, beyond the body-wall. I sat on

the ground, surrounded. I ate a granola bar and drank some water, and rested briefly in my quiet little circle of death.

What I needed was a path. I could easily outrun the group, but I had to get past it first. I reloaded the gun and returned it to its holster. No need to waste my ammo. I did not look forward to the task I was about to undertake.

I scanned my mound of dead rotters, certain they'd yield valuable items if I could figure out how to use them. One of the rotters was wearing a heavy leather jacket. I removed the jacket from its body, feeling disgusted—and disgusting. It's not so easy to undress a dead body, especially one in an advanced stage of putrescence. Feeling skeeved out, I pulled the jacket on right over my backpack. The jacket was way too big and too long. I looked around again and found a treasure: there was a machete sticking out from a rotter's torso. Someone had stabbed the thing through its stomach? Guess they didn't know any better. I hauled the machete out and wiped it on the dead undead's shirt.

Make your own damn path, I told myself. I'd better get going soon, or more rotters would join the party. I zipped the jacket and fussed with its collar until it covered my neck. Time for action. With a knife in one hand and the machete in the other, I climbed onto the mound of decomposing bodies, then leapt from them. Rotters were on me before I even landed. I lashed out at those in my path and fought to keep my forward momentum. Rotters fell around me and I stepped through them. It felt like I'd never find the end of the path I was making... but at least it was keeping rotters from staggering up behind me. Ahead, they were all around, trying to bite. They chomped down on the leather jacket I wore, which made them spit in disgust. The leather held, and it saved me from dozens of bites. I finally made it to the edge of the cluster, feeling relieved. As soon as I reached clear ground, I shed the jacket and broke into a run. I didn't stop running for at least an hour.



Chapter Two

Y

ears ago, the farmer and his wife had accepted me onto their property as if I'd simply been a transient farmhand. They taught me about growing crops. They taught me how to care for their animals. Most importantly, they gave me education in the form of vivid experiences and adventures. My life felt rich, being with them. Rich, comparatively. It's all relative. My life was still missing something, but it was so much better than what had come before.

Money was scarce when I stayed with them, but they kept me clothed and fed, and occasionally provided me with a little spending cash. I usually spent the money on concerts, after Felix came along.

I'd been living with the farmer and his wife for a long time before the end came. Once they were gone from my world, I felt a little lost.



It seemed dumb after I'd become proficient at killing rotters, but I still abhorred killing bugs. One evening, a palmetto bug walked across my belly. I jumped up and it fell to the ground. I reflexively smashed it with a tree branch. Not hard enough. It lay on its back, slowly and repetitively moving one leg, looking like it was waving, and a wave of guilt crashed over me. I finished it off and started thinking about the

farmer. The farmer was the first rotter I killed. I still have horrible dreams about it.

After killing the farmer-as-rotter, I went to check on his wife. She lay on their old bed. She'd chosen the short ending, believing her husband's spirit was already waiting for her elsewhere. She'd been bitten, but hadn't begun to change before she put a bullet through her brain. The body was already starting to stink.

Next to the farmer's wife was a small scrap of paper. One word: "BELONG." She wanted me to do something I'd never done, and something I didn't think I could do. I tucked the note into my backpack, but it got lost somewhere along the way.

I picked up the gun and tucked it in its holster (the farmer's wife had left it on the bed for me), pulling the leather strap low around my waist and securing its belt and leg straps as tight as they could go. I'd have to punch some extra holes in the leather later. A box of bullets sat next to the farmer's wife's body, too. I shoved them into my backpack. Her pain meds were on the nightstand. I added them to the bag without looking over the labels. I'd sort them later. I had to get out of the area before more of those things barged in from town.

The farmer and his wife were kind and generous, and I would miss them terribly, but I'd always felt beholden to them. Now I was truly free. I didn't know what to do with my freedom and felt as though it would be wise to take my time deciding. I didn't know what I would find. Hell, I didn't know what I was looking for. I don't know why I didn't simply use the farmer's wife's gun on myself. Guess I wanted to see what might come next. I'm always curious about that.

I left the farmer's house, and I watched the sun rise. First, a barely perceptible light glowed in the darkness. Then the light grew, and the sky became lavender-blue-pink. A huge, wobbly, rose-orange orb climbed up from the land, turning the clouds golden-pink before they settled back to white. The sky was beautiful. I wanted to wrap a golden cloud around me and melt into it. Spurred by the feeling that something was out there, waiting for me somewhere, I set my feet to moving again.

I generally stayed off the roads, opting for random forays through thickly-wooded areas. This made avoiding people easier. I didn't want to deal with them, though I knew it was inevitable.



I considered playing with the pain pills the first night after leaving the farm, but didn't bother to. Better save them in case I needed them later. I'd taken the time to check the medications and consolidate them into one bottle, though. They were mainly different formulations of the same narcotics.

I'd gotten drunk before experimenting with a few other things back in the safety of the farmer's property. The farmer had been pretty liberal. He even grew cannabis for personal use. I liked that he allowed himself the pleasure. As long as a person's not hurting anyone, I figure what he does is his own business.

When I experimented, I tried to be responsible about it. I felt I should try to experience life fully, and this was part of it. I know lots of people would judge my actions and look unfavorably on me for them. Everyone's got a right to his or her opinion. I've made some choices that would probably qualify as controversial. They didn't feel that way when I made them, though. I stand by my decisions.

Some things I tried were far more appealing than others. Alcohol tasted terrible, but the buzz it gave was pleasant enough. I once drank way too much, though, and woke up with a headache and nausea that didn't quit for days. Why would anyone allow that to happen to herself regularly? I'd rather just have a touch of something to mellow me out and make sleep more likely to be friendly when I tuck myself into bed.

I took a small chug of vodka from a flask to help encourage sleep to settle in with me for the evening.

I slept after consuming that bit of vodka, but my sleep didn't last long. I got up, appreciating the light of the moon and a bat who became my sidekick. He feasted in the moth-filled beam of my headlamp (necessary for navigating the rough terrain) as I walked on. The bat was pale and

furry. I named him "Festus." Festus was a pretty great companion, but near to sunup, he flew away.

I love nighttime. I love the darkness. I have an extra touch of photosensitivity that makes daylight a vexation.

I've always liked the woods at night. In the moonlight, everything takes on a silvery hue. In the moonlight, deer prance about under trees. In the moonlight, raccoons waddle roundly over gnarled roots. In the moonlight, I feel a bit of peace.



In the morning, I ran out of woods. It happened abruptly; the trail bent around a corner and dumped itself out onto the edge of a small town. In the time it took me to consider turning around and seeking the shelter of the trees again, people emerged in the road ahead of me.

My long walk of solitary subsistence was at an end. A temporary one.

"I'm Saul." A man stepped forward from the group with his arm outstretched. "Join us!"

I couldn't understand why people wanted so desperately to band together. I'd heard folks talk about safety in numbers, but under the circumstances, the opposite was true. A group was far more likely to attract rotters than a lone person. This was before I understood what it was like to rely on someone, though.

I usually avoided houses, but Saul's group didn't, which disturbed me. They weren't cautious about it. They underestimated the danger. Houses can give a false sense of security. The stench inside many homes was overpowering, indicating they were crawling with disease. It festered and bubbled, breeding in the thick Southern air. Also, other groups set traps for unsuspecting travelers, either to stop them from looting supplies or for more sinister reasons. I'd been with Saul's group for only a day when one of their scout teams disappeared. We tracked them into town and found nothing but blood.

Saul was the first man who ever tried to rape me. It happened late at night, after my second day with his group. I'd agreed to stay on with

them for a bit—not because I found them engaging, but because I was too fatigued to come up with a good excuse to run off.

Saul was only strong in the way a normal man is stronger than a normal woman. He held me against a tree and smashed his mouth to mine as he felt me up. Saul had eaten clam chowder for supper, and I could taste and smell it on him. I knew I'd never be able to stand that smell again.

It wasn't hard to get away from him. I dropped straight down, out of his grasp. Away from his rough hands and his stubby fingers.

“Come on, baby!” he cried out petulantly, rubbing his crotch as I dashed away. I grabbed my things from the edge of the camp and broke free from them all.



In my brief time with Saul's group, I noted that there were still women who bothered with makeup. The more the better, apparently. Their clinquant distortions always seemed silly to me. I remember making pathetic attempts at trying some lipstick the farmer's wife had gotten me for Christmas.

“Isn't that color pretty on you!” she gushed.

I looked in the mirror. A clown smiled garishly back at me. But I thanked the farmer's wife and complimented her ability to choose colors. She had meant well.

This was true of most people, I figured. Every day we danced around each other, disparate notes that were part of a large orchestra's cacophonous symphony. Superficial interactions—artificial, even— but meaning well. How many times had I nodded and smiled at folks, essentially strangers? It had gotten old long before I arrived at the camp which became home. Still, it helped things go smoothly.

I wasn't very good at relations with people. Especially normal people. People who were somehow different from normal appealed to me so much more.

Then again, it seems like everyone has *something* they struggle with that has skewed their lives from the anticipated paths. Most people seem normal at first glance, but have more intriguing substance under the surface. It took me a long time to understand, but maybe there is no “normal” after all. Perhaps we try too hard to boil down the terms of an average life into a simple syrup. In any case, people who end up *extra*-far to the side of normal have always been easier for me to relate to. I could fake my way through most conversations, but it almost always felt like I was an actress performing in a sketch.

I'd gone into the thrift store with the farmer's wife a few times. A greeter offered flyers for the store's sales. He was in an electric wheelchair, his body contorted by disease or congenital defect. His speech was slow and deliberate, but I still had trouble making the words out. He'd patiently repeat them until I understood. These were words he had certainly practiced for hours to make comprehensible. “Have... a... nice... day,” I heard him rehearsing once, an aisle away. I rounded the corner, and he repeated the phrase while looking me in the eyes.

“You too,” I said cheerfully, feeling an impulse to hug him.

But I didn't hug him. I didn't like being touched. It had always been unpleasant. It reminded me of life before I stayed with the farmer and his wife.



Some places seem to breed monsters. Pockets of the world are filled with terrible people who do horrific things. I understand not all of the world is this way, but it was what I was dragged into as a young child, and it's all I knew for the longest time. Also, after After arrived, it seemed the people best equipped to survive were the cruel ones. So a lot of people I've met haven't had much in the way of decency, though most people are probably mostly good. I'd like to believe they are.

By the time I was old enough to be cognizant of the world around me, my stepfather essentially ruled the rural county in which we lived like his own private fiefdom. He was educated as a chemist or geneticist

or something—during his frequent self-aggrandizing monologues, he'd boast of his own expertise in almost every scientific subject you could name, but I was never certain which bits were true. Above all, he was a sociopath. He could be charming, he could be vicious. And he could turn those on at any time, like he had a toggle switch for it. (He usually defaulted to vicious around me.)

No, wait. "Toggle switch" isn't right, because there were definitely times when he was concurrently charming and vicious. It's part of why his Programs were so popular. He was a singularly compelling ringmaster. He gripped the audience with a tightly-calibrated, pandering wit and flair that made them feel as though they were sharing in the highly-evolved pleasures of a libertine *bon vivant* rather than being sold the ugliest manifestations of one man's fucked-up id.

His control of the locals went beyond simple charisma, however. My stepfather knew what he was doing by moving to this particular backwoods area, because clean water was a much-valued consumer product here. Pretreated city water was not a luxury that had reached the homes in this county. Hard, sulfuric water ran through most people's taps, showers, and toilets, and although it wasn't exactly unsafe to drink, the potent rotten-egg smell was certainly off-putting. Nearly every household and business purchased pure water from groceries or vending machines rather than using their own wells. (I laugh to think of it now—most of those customers would kill for reliable access to their old, stinky water at this point!)

So my stepfather went into the water supply business, working the "buy local" angle hard. He willingly lost a ton of money on this particular venture, as he would simply buy bulk shipments of whatever spring water he could find relatively cheap, repackage it (my siblings and I were often used as free labor, pouring water from one container to another), and sell it at a loss, undercutting his competition and ensuring it sold well in the area. "Short-term loss for long-term gain," he'd mutter proudly to himself.

The water was far from pure, though, which was the main part of his scheme. He'd spiked it with an odorless, tasteless chemical of his own design, which was completely undetectable by standard water analyses. It made the users fairly suggestible, which allowed a silver-tongued ghoul like my stepfather to effortlessly exploit them. It also bound to the Y chromosome, enhancing men's sexual drives and perverting these drives with desires for a show of blood—something my stepfather provided in abundance. It made the user get off on the suffering of people who were helpless. My stepfather sold his water, men developed tastes for exceedingly unsavory activities, and then my stepfather controlled them by hosting his Programs, fulfilling their desires. It made him popular, and it made him rich, and it gave him power. There was no fighting back, there was no running away. Everything revolved around him. No one in the region dared cross him. No one in the region wanted to.

Almost no one. Officer Bissett was the exception.

But it wasn't all bad, life at my stepfather's. There were stretches of days when he left us alone. When he was too busy with his "God-appointed" projects to bother with us. And there was school, when I could go.

I loved school, soaking up the knowledge which kept my mind occupied when terrible things were happening to my body. Sometimes, after one of my stepfather's Programs, I'd be stuck at home for a few days. Long enough for things to scab over. I had to learn to be very still, or the scabs would break open. A few times, early on, I'd returned from school with my dark shirts pasted to my back, the dried blood acting as glue. If I sat very still and straight at my desk, though, the scabs would hold. My teachers complimented me on my beautiful posture.

Once, a teacher patted me on the back and felt the scabs there. He didn't say anything. That summer, months later, I saw him in the audience at one of the Programs.



I decided to nap, hidden in the tall grasses of a field. I dreamed I died and turned. I remember the sensations vividly. I died quickly, violently, from rotter bites, and then my body got back up. I saw the world through a red haze. I saw people who looked somehow familiar, and I tried to go to them, but they cried and shouted and ran away. I didn't understand why, but I wasn't bothered by that. I was so hungry, just hungry. I couldn't really think. All I knew was "eat" and "friend." It seemed like everyone was my friend and I was supposed to bite them.

Nothing hurt. *Nothing*. And everything was okay.

It was one of the best dreams I'd ever had.



The late-night (or early-early-morning) sky was vast and gorgeous when I awoke. I watched the stars. I did something I'd never done before. I wished on a star, not actually believing for a second that anything my heart desired would come to me, not believing my dreams would come true. I wished on a small star, one I'd never be able to pick out of the Milky Way again. I liked that. This anonymous little star would hear my wish, and even if it granted the wish, I'd never know which one it was. It felt as if all the stars would be granting my wish.

"Send me someone..." my wish began. I didn't know what to add to it. Someone who understood? *Why did I want someone, anyway?*

I shivered in the chilly night air, and my wish formed itself.

"Send me someone who will teach me how to live."

When I said "live," I didn't mean "survive." I meant something more along the lines of loving life, experiencing it in a way that felt special and meaningful. I wanted a purpose.

I sent the wish up to my little star, like a helium-filled balloon floating off. I imagined it traveling into space and drifting up, up to that distant star. Then I let go of the string, and I let go of wishing, and I forgot.



Chapter Three

Daylight returned and I continued my journey. The world's surviving advertisements caught my eye and I pondered them as I strolled on. A diversion. Nature hadn't reclaimed anything yet.

I remembered an old favorite: "7Up. No caffeine. Never had it, never will." A few years after using that slogan, they'd introduced caffeinated 7Up. Thinking about it always made me smile.

Old ads are like exasperating friends. You've had time to pick apart their flawed logic. They no longer entice you. They can instead be comforting in their familiarity.

"Won't last long!" a realty sign declared.

"It's CERTIFIED!" yelled a billboard displaying a used refrigerator.

Meaningless drivel to distract. It had lost its power to motivate. It never had any real power, of course; just the power gullible folks had assigned to it. I thought of all the people who had been driven to buy things they had no need of. Of our common self-consciousness preyed upon by merchandisers and marketers.

People bought useless products and tried the items once or twice. They were disappointed. They tucked the junk away, in a medicine cabinet or the back of a closet. Hidden, the items fell apart or separated over a period of years. Some people had cleaned out, sent it away before After. Others still had it in their moldering homes. Its lifespan exceeded their own.



By afternoon, the weather had become H-O-T. Hot and humid. This was a bad thing. In the heat, rotters stank worse. In the humidity, they became a bit rehydrated. They got heavier, more substantial. And they got sticky. I told myself I shouldn't look forward to the cooler winter months either, and that I'd eventually regret it—rotters actually stay mobile longer in the cold because they don't decompose as quickly—but it was hard not to eagerly await anything that might squelch their stink.

I'd read books and seen movies about zombie apocalypses. No one had ever expected such a thing to really happen, though. The fictions weren't terribly different from the reality. Rotters do eat flesh, but they don't eat brains. Brains are too hard to get to. Rotters do walk funny. They come in various states of decomposition. Usually, bone is exposed from multiple sites on their bodies. They can infect through a bite, or through blood contact in a wound or mucous membrane (mouth, nose, eye). Rotters usually move slowly, but they are surprisingly strong and resilient, considering the deterioration of their flesh. They can clamp down and lock on a grip with more force than it looks like they could wield. The thought of being eaten alive by a group of them made my arms prickle and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

I never encountered a non-human rotter. Granted, I hadn't seen much beyond forest creatures. Perhaps there were rotter monkeys swinging their ways out of zoos while I marched on.



Back in the earlier days, soon after the zombies became part of reality, I studied some. Not the farmer. What happened with him occurred so quickly. In my travels, though, I'd chosen to capture one instead of killing him.

Killing it.

Here's another thing to ponder: how can you kill something that's already dead? Then again, there are refried beans and twice-baked potatoes. I guess one could re-kill a body, if the body had been reanimated.

Or maybe they hadn't actually died. Maybe they went through some sort of metamorphosis, like caterpillars becoming butterflies. Exceptionally fucked-up butterflies.

I caught a zombie and tied it to a tree. The zombie wasn't perturbed by this. Just kept snap-snapping its jaws when my body got close. It didn't seem to be suffering and it didn't seem to feel pain. The stench was terrific. How could it not be, with its entire body rotting and its bowels loosed in its clothes and urine dried on its pants? That's when I started referring to them as rotters.

I considered the existence of a rotter. They seemed solely motivated by food, like they were always, always hungry. They'd try to eat even if their bellies were bulging full. They'd try to eat even if their stomachs were gone. Must be part of some malfunction in their brains.

Some other rotters entered my experimental setting. They weren't at all interested in the rotter I had bound up. They weren't interested in each other. They didn't seem to be actively trying to make more rotters, either. That was incidental. Happenstance. When a regular person got bitten and escaped, they'd usually begin to change within a few minutes, though it could take hours. Generally, they'd break into fever, then their bodies would erupt with pus-filled blisters. Their skin would crack and peel, their eyes would change color.

Turning into a rotter looked like it should feel quite painful, but it apparently wasn't, according to interviews with people who'd been bitten and were in the process of changing. Something in the virus (if that's what it was) either deadened the nerve pain, severed the nerves' pathways to the brain, or caused the brain to not register the nerves' messages. Even without understanding the mechanism, I envied the result of it. I couldn't remember a time without pain.

At night, rotters glowed a faint blue—something to do with the bacteria growing on them. Postmortem luminescence was something I appreciated about the rotters. It was good to be able to see them in the darkness.

I now had five rotters strapped to trees. As nothing seemed to hurt them, I didn't feel too guilty. It felt important to penetrate the mystery of them. I needed to know more.

I took a moment to silently thank and mourn the people these used to be. Then I made some cuts. The rotters didn't cry out, didn't get agitated. They didn't seem to notice, even.

I cut the heart out of one. It kept moving (the rotter did, and its heart did for a minute, too), kept trying to give me a snap-snap. The heart hadn't been beating. It had been jiggling. It eventually stopped and I set it aside.

I tried to feed one rotter some food. It didn't want trail mix or crackers or honey. It wasn't even interested in jerky—maybe too tough? I cut some fresh meat from the fish that was going to be my supper. No. Rotters only wanted living flesh. And I'd never seen them shuffle after a non-human animal. They seemed only to be interested in *human* flesh.

Eventually, I determined the traditional stories of killing the brain or the brainstem to stop a zombie were right on. It was the only quick way to deal with them, too. They could be slowed down in many ways, but even when their legs were too broken to stand on, they'd drag themselves along the ground.

I re-killed four of my captives, gagged the last one, and let it follow me. For the next day, I led it along, studying it a bit more. It still just wanted to eat. It responded to sound, mostly, but also to movement, to visual stimulation. It didn't seem to have much of a sense of smell, but then the funkiness of its decaying flesh blocked out most scents. I doubt much can cover it up. I never got immune to that smell. It was like a fume that seeped into my pores.

The rotter continued to decay, mostly from the inside out. Rotter flesh is gray-black, but will stay intact until some festering mass of maggots bursts out. Or until the sun dries it and it shrivels up.

Rotters can stay mobile for a long time, even though they don't drink and might go a long time without food. If a rotter's body had been reasonably healthy when it was turned, it could go on indefinitely. It might walk for months, if circumstances are right. But they don't seem to think, don't try to speak. (I did try talking to my captive, but it never responded except to

follow the noise.) Their bodies don't heal and don't need sleep, though they sometimes wobble around in one spot; an odd attempt at conserving energy, I guess. Until something enticing passes by. They don't seem to be able to stay still. And they don't need to breathe. I took the lungs out of my last rotter test subject. It sputtered wheezily, attempting to inhale the air it didn't need, but was otherwise unimpaired. The part of the brain which controls involuntary functions must remain at least partially intact after the change.

Many human drives didn't seem to survive in the rotters— especially our desire for belonging. Companionship doesn't matter to the rotters one whit, let alone love. They sometimes travel in swarms, but they appear to be just as content on their own. I felt like a rotter that way. I didn't feel any particular need for companionship, and I didn't know how to love or be loved. It seemed like a second life as a rotter version of myself might not be so bad.

But I couldn't become a rotter.

I chopped my hunting knife across the back of the rotter's neck, severing its brainstem. I was done with my experiment.



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