



**Song of the Living Dead**

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*On April 2, 2005, two days before the end of the first modern day zombie plague, a Designated Armed Services team of twelve men descended onto the platform of the Rosslyn Metro station about two miles from the Washington, D.C. city center. There had been eyewitness reports from two homeless men of a large gathering of zombies in the tunnel. The Metro system had been controversially closed the day before this action because of widespread zombie infestations. Kenneth Vanderwal was the commander of the investigating team. He offered this statement to the Operations Watch Panel of the D.A.S. on April 9.*

*What was your plan to deploy the men inside the tunnel?*

VANDERWAL: I had our two most senior men, Captain Sidney and Captain Flagg, put on floodlight packs and head west along the tracks. I told two men to go east as well for three hundred yards with flashlights. Five others followed Sidney and Flagg, and I stayed on the platform with the rest of the team.

*Did the men heading west see anything?*

Nothing. But they only got about one hundred yards and hadn't even gotten their floodlights working properly when Metro Control radioed us. The Foggy Bottom station chief told us there was a train headed our way. We were shocked and confused, understandably. Instead of arguing with the station chief, I shouted for all our men to get out of the tunnel, very quickly.

*What exactly did the station chief say?*

He said that when the west side of the system was shut down, some trains had remained in their stations and weren't returned to the central bay, and one of them had apparently begun to move, to merge onto the main track, and that it could be at Rosslyn in as little as three minutes.

*Why did you not ask for the station chief to shut down power?*

We wanted to know what was coming, and why. Also, there was a chance it would have taken upwards of three minutes to shut down the track power, so it might have been useless anyway.

*So you waited.*

We waited, all twelve of us on the platform, for about ninety seconds to two minutes, and then we heard the train. Its headlights were off, and so were the interior lights. It was travelling about fifteen to twenty miles per hour, very slowly.

I had the men draw their weapons as a precaution as the first car passed us. Juliard and Frank Bayless trotted beside the car and waved for the conductor to stop. He didn't; the train kept moving until the first three or four cars were out of sight, inside the tunnel.

*Could any of your men describe the conductor?*

It was definitely a male, a white male, over thirty years old, younger than fifty. Beyond that, none of us could really get a good look; the cab was darkened.

*And then the train stopped.*

The train stopped and the doors opened, and the zombies came out. They occupied three of the cars, three consecutive cars. When the doors opened, six or seven of them immediately stepped out onto the platform.

*Did you immediately give the order to fire?*

No. I judged that the cars held maybe thirty zombies total, and with twelve of us I was confident we could handle the situation while taking the time to make sure there were no humans on the train. We had plenty of room to retreat; we had the whole platform to work with. But as soon as we were confident no living humans were on the train, I did give the fire command to Sidney and Flagg.

*Were the zombies aggressive?*

I'm not sure I understand the meaning of the term, really, when we're talking about zombies, because I've never really seen any that were. But in just seconds they were all out on the platform. The men drew their short range sidearms, as they need no command to do, and they began firing.

*Was there ever a threat of injury to anyone on the team?*

Only in the sense that we were forced to retreat very quickly, forced to the edge of the platform, backpedaling because we were trying to avoid any contact whatsoever, as per our usual orders, and a few of the zombies did get very close. But they all handled themselves flawlessly, the men I mean.

*How long did it take to dispatch all the zombies?*

About two minutes, total. A couple of them fell onto the tracks on the other side of the platform and they were the last to be shot.

*Did anyone go after the anonymous conductor?*

Yes, I myself went after the conductor. The doors to the cars had all been left open and I entered and made my way forward through them. But there was no one in the cab by the time I got there.

*So he had obviously run deeper into the tunnel.*

Yes. And as we know, he wasn't found. Given a two to three minute start, and an obvious knowledge of the tunnel system which we did not have, he got away.

*So you assume the man driving the train had a knowledge of the system?*

Obviously, if he were capable of driving a train.

*How long did you pursue him?*

About twenty minutes, then the pursuit was taken out of my hands. I was radioed while I was somewhere in a tunnel underneath the Potomac River.

*And what did you see when you began walking back to Rosslyn station? You were totally alone in the tunnel, correct?*

Yes. I had taken only a flashlight and about fifty yards shy of the train, I heard footsteps behind me. I turned and advanced about ten yards, until I could see that a zombie was walking my way. It was a woman, a middle-aged woman in a shawl and a baggy sweater. She was making a strange sound. I had never heard something like it before from a zombie. I let her approach. Her eyes were not really focused on me, so I felt no imminent threat of a scratch.

When she got to within twenty feet or so, I determined that she was singing. There were no actual words coming out of her mouth, of course. She stopped her progress and stood there and sang. It was unintelligible, but it was clear that's what was happening.

I had no recording device of any kind to document this. But the singing went on for forty-five or fifty seconds. The song this woman was trying to sing was vaguely familiar to me, but it was like a person singing in their sleep, half-mumbled, coming from deep inside the zombie's throat, something that could almost be confused for nonsensical sounds at first, but before she fell over and stayed totally motionless, anyone could tell that there was music coming from that mouth. I had never seen or heard anything like it, not ever.

*She merely fell over and stayed that way? Like all the others began to do just a couple of days later?*

Yes. For all I know, that singing woman may have been the first to lie down, and just not get up again.

## **1. Buckeystown**

**You can't know what it is to be truly human until you do something totally unimaginable to a completely defenseless creature.**

**—DeMarko Cline, 37, Charlotte, North Carolina**

**Lionel Gathers, age 32, restaurant server**

On May 2 we came down through Frederick in the van, and at some point around two o'clock we passed a minor league baseball stadium. On some instinct I decided to cruise around it, and I saw that the center field wall had been partially removed, and the outer chain link fence that surrounded the stadium was wide open. So I drove the van through the gap in the wall and right into the outfield, where we parked it and got out. The five of us were standing in the middle of this big empty stadium, and I tried to get a sense of the atmosphere and the silence. Sometimes you can just get a feeling if there are zombies about. It's not that you can hear their footsteps; it's that weird tickle you get on the back of your neck that tells you you're not alone.

This time, I just didn't know. I didn't know what I was sensing. Those eight thousand empty seats, they gave off a strange vibe, like the end of the world had truly come. The scoreboard was a manual one, and it still had the score from the last game played there, except it had only gone four innings for some reason. I looked up into the little press box and I saw a box of popcorn still sitting there.

Everything seemed safe, but you could never tell. I asked Athena to reach into the back of the van, and very carefully bring out my weapon. She did this and placed it in my hands. Only when I had my weapon did I relax.

**Athena Carew, age 33, artist, longtime fiancée of Lionel Gathers**

Yes, he'd had that silly softball bat since he was nine, which he never got tired of telling me. Lionel would make up some really obvious lies about the great athletic feats of his younger days, and I always had to talk to his friend Corvin to get the truth, which was that Lionel had spent his formative years making little baseball cards of himself out of Polaroids and a Magic Marker, and the amount of time he actually spent playing with the other kids was pretty minimal. So now he was trying to redeem his lost dreams of glory by suckering people shamelessly into

putting on a mitt and fielding his sad fly balls every time the opportunity presented itself. That had obviously been his whole plan as soon as he saw the stadium. All that talk about a picnic out in the sunshine was a pathetic smokescreen.

### **Ronald Torrance, age 27, Absent Without Leave from the United States Army in 2005**

I think it always bothered Lionel that Athena hated sports so much, and she kept hitting his so-called "Demon Pitch" right back at his head every time he tossed it to her. The "Demon Pitch" was some kind of pathetic spinning thing, and even Melissa poked one of them into left field at one point. And if Melissa, *a teenaged girl*, can hit off you, you may as well hang it up and go live in Antarctica where no one can see you. She wasn't even sure which end of the bat to hold.

### **Everett Mouses, age 61, professor of art history, Penn State University**

That was the first time I had played baseball in forty years. It was notable only because of the way it brought out the male rivalry between Ronnie and Lionel. It was quite amusing to watch the two of them slowly exclude the rest of us as they descended into that closed world in which athletic superiority was the only thing that mattered to them.

### **Melissa Lansford, age 17**

God, they were so funny, especially Lionel. You could tell he was a dweeb when he was younger. It all came out when they started playing. I thought he was gonna die when I hit that ball right past his face. Baseball's such a boring sport anyway.

### **Lionel Gathers**

You have to understand that my athletic dominance is *total*, and that it took a great deal of effort to parcel out the hits evenly amongst the group so their feelings would be protected. I even made some intentional errors in the field to keep things light-hearted. But Ronnie started to get a little cocky, so understandably, I had to throw one at his head.

### **Ronnie Torrance**

When Lionel came up to bat after he threw at my head, I think his knees were shaking. I did a total, elaborate wind-up on my first pitch, and I hadn't even released the ball when he bailed out and dropped the bat and ran for the dugout like a cartoon character, like Shaggy, with his arms held out in front of him. Where I come from, that's a forfeit. Athena and Melissa tackled him, and that more or less ended the softball experiment.

## **Major Eric Ford, 7th Infantry, Designated Armed Services**

From the very beginning, people were advised to stay away from places with narrow tunnels and minimal exit opportunities. Now, zombies are also attracted to the dark, they just gravitate toward it during the day, so even something like a small baseball stadium, with a partially underground structure where you might have some thin dim hallways and only a couple of ways to get out, is something to be avoided. Also because that sort of location is such a weak traffic area, what with no games having been scheduled anywhere for some time, a zombie infestation would not be surprising at all. Look what happened at Madison Square Garden. That became a nightmare.

## **Athena Carew**

We had brought a picnic lunch and we ate it in the middle of the diamond, just some roast beef sandwiches and a lot of chocolate pudding and a six-pack of Pepsi, and we all gave Melissa her birthday presents. I gave her a portable CD player and a couple of sweaters, and I'm not sure what the others got her, but everyone had a little something. I do remember Mouses got her a book on M.C. Escher, which was the only artist Melissa really liked, because she had seen his posters for sale at the mall where she used to work. She thought that book was just great.

That sunshine, that perfect weather made me just never want to leave that day. It was maybe seventy-five degrees, and there was a nice breeze going. We had the place completely to ourselves. It wouldn't have been ruined, I suppose, if Lionel and Ronnie hadn't finished eating so early and run back to hit more balls at each other, as if it were life and death.

## **Lionel Gathers**

It was basically just a challenge to Mr. Big-Shot Oh-I'm-In-The-Army-And-I-Have-Biceps Ronnie Torrance to see if he could hit something a little faster out of the park. The fact that he hit my very first pitch over the wall was admittedly a little distressing. But he had the wind with him, and it was only 320 to left center, and I have had some shoulder problems, which I shall detail later.

## **Ronnie Torrance**

The second one I hit went to the right field corner and bounced through another gap in the outfield fence, into some area where it looked like they had stored away the groundskeeping equipment. Lionel absolutely did not want to lose that ball, so he walked after it, and I wandered up the foul line too, more out of politeness than anything else. I felt bad because I was killing his pitches so easily.

## **Lionel**

The area behind the right field fence was actually underneath an overhang of bleacher seats. The bullpen was off to one side, and tucked to the right was a big shadowy area full of rakes and bags of grass seed and hoses and paint and that sort of thing. I had no problem finding the ball. It had rolled into a little patch of what I figured was mulch. I picked it up and it was covered in the stuff, and I wiped it off on the ground, but the stuff was blacker than mulch and much finer, so I saw that I was wrong. I filtered some of it through my fingers and realized what it really was.

There was a corner that bent even further to the right, deeper behind the right field stands. It was so dark back there that I didn't want to check it out unless there was a light back there I could find.

So I went anyway.

## **Ronnie**

I was just about to the fence when Lionel came walking out again with the ball. I asked him if there was anything interesting back there. All he said was, "I want to get out of here before Melissa sees this."

## **Athena**

When they came back to the picnic, Lionel looked a little ill. He had the worst poker face in the world. It was just so poor. I made the mistake of asking them if they had made any new friends, and Lionel said that no one should go back behind the outfield wall because there was a lot of rusty construction equipment back there in a pit, just waiting for someone to fall in and kill themselves. Ronnie didn't say anything. If only Lionel had just advanced the conversation from that point somehow, maybe Melissa wouldn't have been watching their faces so much.

## **Mouses**

We all took perhaps two more bites of our rather good pudding when Melissa got right up and started walking into the outfield. Lionel asked her where she thought she was going but she didn't turn around. Athena didn't make much of an effort to stop her, just let her go. So did I. We all followed eventually, but no words were spoken all the way into the outfield and beyond the fence.

## **Ronnie**

Melissa had some weird sense of where Lionel had been and what he was trying to hide. She turned to the right and Lionel caught up to her and at least located the lights and hit them so we could all see what had happened. He did put one hand

on her shoulder to keep her from stepping into the ash. We all stood there and looked. Only two of the bulbs were still working, but that was all the light we needed.

### **Mouses**

The walls of that room, which was really more like an open metal shed, had all been scarred by flame, and the equipment in the room had been burned beyond recognition. I recognized a lawnmower and several sections of a short wooden fence. But most of the space was empty cement floor, which was also blackened.

You could make out human forms in the heaps of ash, arms outstretched, torsos still intact, hands, feet, entire zombies which had seemingly been in motion when they were burned. Bones were protruding from disconnected stumps. Heads had been withered to the size of fists, featureless and black and smooth. Most of them had been burned away to almost nothing. Turning around, I noticed that there was a sliding wall behind us which could have been shut tight as they were immolated. The ash was somewhat damp and slick. There was so smell.

### **Athena**

No smell at all, that's what I remember. They had been burned so thoroughly that there wasn't even that smell of rot and decay. I would say there had been twenty or thirty bodies in there in the beginning. Six or seven could still be identified as being definitely human.

### **Major Eric Ford, 7th Infantry, Designated Armed Services**

There has never been a proven incident of unapproved cremation carried out by U.S. troops beyond the single incident in Steelton, Pennsylvania. Mass burnings have always been the crime of gangs and individuals. There is simply no pragmatic point to exterminating zombies through burning. It's an act of cruelty, straight and simple.

### **Lionel**

Somewhere along the line I suppose I had promised Melissa that we wouldn't try to protect her from that sort of thing, as long as she was with us, but that kind of promise couldn't really mean anything, it just couldn't. I mean, seeing something like what she saw in that shed, she didn't understand that it wouldn't just vanish from her mind in a couple of months, that the things you see when you're young stay with you and bite you as you get older and older. How do I explain that to someone who'd just turned seventeen that day?

## **Melissa**

I'm not nine years old, and Lionel never got that. Things today aren't like what they were when he was growing up. It takes more to shock people now. When the whole zombie thing started, I was perfectly fine. It was the adults that freaked out so badly.

## **Athena**

Melissa was upset, and she walked off and left us, and she waited for us in the van. What bothered me most was that Lionel and Ronnie and Mouses didn't seem to be feeling anything I could point to as shock or repulsion. I saw Mouses staring right at a human forearm, which was by itself just a few inches away from my feet, and maybe he was trying to feel something, and it just wasn't coming. Our sense of connection to these things as human beings had eroded to almost nothing. That was what horrified me. I didn't speak of it to Lionel until that night.

We packed everything up, what little there was to pack, and we rolled the van out of there just before dusk. And this is why I was so grateful to have Melissa with us sometimes: no one was saying much of anything a few minutes after we left the stadium, but when a Whitney Houston song came on the radio Melissa put her hands to her ears and wailed long and loud, and claimed she would physically die and come back to life again and eat only the brains of the people inside this van if I didn't put in a CD that very second. Everyone laughed and we were past it. And that was Thursday.

## **Ronnie**

It might have been a military kill, what happened inside that room, but this time I don't think so. It had been too messy. But to say that no units ever burned zombies: that's a lie right up there with Santa Claus.

## **Dr. Belinda Sherman, the University of Michigan**

A persistent feeling of utter disconnect from the horror of the zombie situation became known as Cognitive Retreat in published articles just two months after the crisis began. The so-called awakening of the dead held so many properties of the absurd along with so many properties of the tragic and the nightmarish that society and the individual's reaction to it was simply one of functional, deeply embedded shock. It was so reminiscent of bad horror movies that we as a whole came to believe that the best way to get along was to act as if we really *were* in a bad horror movie, and thus true grief and outrage were sublimated in favor of crazed fear and hilarity. We were all walking around in a dream. When some sort of cataclysm strikes a society, there is action followed by anger and grief. But the rising of the dead could not be compared to a massive terrorist attack or assassination of a president or biological plague, because it was so off-the-chart

bizarre and darkly funny to many people. Thus many, many people, so conflicted by how they should feel, felt nothing more than the sense that they were watching a fascinating news event unfold all about them, one that simply could not be happening, so the real cataclysm that should have been taking place inside the psyche never came. It was nothing to be shameful about, this disconnect. The world had never experienced an event so horrifying and yet at the same time so completely strange. We as humans did not have the necessary experiences to deal with it. Our minds had no frame of reference for a dead man shuffling across the Golden Gate Bridge. Cognitive Retreat became widespread enough to absorb entire towns, then entire cities, then most of the country. It was a time of waking sleep, and the sleepwalking feel no emotions.

It would certainly have been different had the zombies been aggressive, or attacked at will, or were bent on revenge. But there was none of that. They were as harmless as stones, and this, I believe, was the true catalyst which brought about nationwide insanity. And when the zombies simply began to collapse wherever they stood and rest in peace again just a few months after they had risen, the dream-state began to fade.

### **Lionel**

Our plan after we left the stadium was to drift in a southerly way and find a place to spend the night, probably a campground. Ronnie seemed to be getting more and more concerned with being spotted somehow and arrested, and even walking around a place like that made him uneasy, so it was getting tougher for us all to agree on just where we were going. Athena didn't feel comfortable with taking Melissa more than a few hundred miles away from State College, so it was all very day-to-day. We kept putting gas in the van and we kept moving, but our progress, however you define it, was slowing.

### **Athena**

We saw three or four zombies lying in an enormous field off to our right somewhere south of a place called Lime Kiln. The cleanups were still very slow. About fifty yards from the zombies, in the eastern part of the field, was a big pen full of cows. One of the cows was standing at the wire and just sort of gazing at the zombies lying there, chewing its cud. I guess it gave the cows something to look at, just for a moment.

### **Lionel**

Mouses was the one who pointed out the elementary school coming up on our left. We had happened upon some sort of very small town, and it was going to be dark soon, so I wanted to check it out, even though Athena had her usual resistance to the idea of breaking and entering, the thrill of which, if you ask me, was the whole point of our trip to begin with. The place was basically your

average-sized school for grades one through five, just one story high, a nice big playground out back, nothing special, but it looked a lot like the school I went to when I was a kid, except this one had much spiffier monkey bars, a definite plus. We swung the van beside the cafeteria, where it would be safely out of sight, and took a quick walk around the side facing the woods. Most of the windows were unlocked and we had our pick of which classrooms to enter. Ronnie gave me a little boost into one of them and I was standing in the kind of place I hadn't been since I was eleven. All the desks and the chairs were still there, and there were construction paper collages covering the walls, stuff about Abraham Lincoln and the metric system and such, untouched, but definitely having a few dust issues. I pushed a little chair through the open window so the others could boost themselves up and in. The lights weren't working but that was all right; we didn't want to attract any undue attention anyway.

### **Athena**

No, I was never crazy about the idea of trespassing someplace. When we had first started out, Lionel assured me we'd stick to campgrounds and fields and places where the worst thing that could happen to us was the locals asking us to move on. But two nights in he had already wanted us to spend the night in an abandoned mental hospital in Pittsburgh. "Come on, it'll be fun!" He got one look inside that place and came running back to the van totally depressed and creaped out. Sleeping at Six Flags was interesting, I'll give him that; we had a good time sitting in the bumper cars when everyone else was asleep. The elementary school was no worse than a lot of the places Lionel had suggested we sleep. We stayed mostly because the water was working.

### **Ronnie**

Not only was the water working, but there was a locker room beside the gym slash cafeteria slash auditorium, and showers too, which was phenomenal. I don't remember ever having a locker room in our elementary school. Maybe kids were getting more concerned about hygiene these days. So Lionel and I could squeeze an hour or so of shooting baskets in the gym and then we could bathe. Perfect.

### **Lionel**

All the basketballs and the volleyballs and so forth were locked inside a metal cage, and we spent ten minutes looking for the key to no avail. So we busted the cage open, we admit it. I committed yet another misdemeanor inside an elementary school. And Ronnie and I shot baskets while Melissa got up on the stage with a mat she had taken from a pile in the corner and did her pilates and listened to the CDs I'd given her for her birthday. And eventually it got dark.

I think I beat Ronnie like 117 to 3. I'm pretty sure that was the score.

## **Athena**

Mouses and I got the sleeping bags and the lanterns out of the van and went back in through a door Ronnie had propped open for us. So far as we could tell, no one even suspected we were in there. The road was not exactly a high traffic area, and two sides of the school were bordered by woods. The huge playing field was on the third side, so we had a nice buffer zone between us and the rest of the world. Not bad, I guess.

## **Mouses**

Melissa was certainly a well-adjusted girl, mature for her age, but despite her claims that everything that was happening around her was nothing worse than what she'd had to put up with around her parents, the coming of dark often brought out her fears. That night in the elementary school was a case in point. She was visibly uneasy navigating the few hallways with the lantern and she decided to wait for morning to have her shower. Ever since we'd had that unpleasant experience with that one zombie fellow at the amusement park, the sunset meant Melissa was different. She camped out in a classroom with Athena with the door closed and did not move for the rest of the night. She sat in her sleeping bag and read a Stephen King novel and did nothing else.

## **Lionel**

Ronnie and Mouses and I hung out in a different classroom after dark and we had our first real discussion about things in about a week. Athena would have knocked me silly if she'd found out we were having Man Talk without her, but Melissa needed her company and Ronnie had some things on his mind. One of our lanterns wasn't working and we had kind of a weird atmosphere in the classroom, sort of like we were there to tell each other ghost stories. Mouses had gotten real fascinated in a Lippincott fourth grade reader and we had to snap him out of it to join the discussion.

Ronnie's parents had died nine weeks into the whole zombie thing. They had gone off the deep end paranoia-wise and gone to a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and at some point during their hiding something had gone wrong with the heating system, and they'd apparently died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Their possessions had been found in the cabin, and their car, and physical evidence of a huge carbon monoxide leak. But they were gone. So you can sort of deduce what had become of them.

Ronnie knew from being in the military that of course if his parents wound up being dispatched by the army, the chances that they would be accurately identified were not so great. So in the very beginning our idea had been to slowly work our way down to Georgia, where his parents would have been. Being AWOL, he couldn't use his name, so he had no idea how he would go about

finding out where his parents were. He just wanted to make sure they were buried properly. Maybe if he just drove around the area, he thought, he might find them. The zombies had stopped moving eight days before, and the government claimed the cleanup crews would have them all removed in two months or less, so if his folks had remained walking since February and had just recently gone to rest again, there wasn't that much time.

He couldn't really decide if it was something he truly wanted to do, so he didn't object to our slow going, not at all. It gave him time to think, to prepare himself, maybe. Meanwhile, we'd been zigzagging across Pennsylvania like vagrants.

### **Mouses**

Ronnie was the sort of young military man who'd subscribed wholeheartedly to the illusions of the life he'd gotten into his mind from a very early age, through movies and television and the fact that his grandfather had been an infantry hero in World War II, at Guadalcanal, and like a lot of young men who enter the army with those illusions, he saw them vanish within months. He'd been utterly lost. Unlike most men, though, he reacted to that not by caving in to pessimism but by setting his personal goals even higher, to become the best possible soldier there could be. It must have torn him apart to go AWOL. I suppose I might have been the only one among us who suspected right away that his reasons for it went far deeper than what he revealed to Lionel and Athena.

### **Lionel**

The thing was, did we take Melissa all the way down to Georgia. Did we go all the way with this adventure, like I wanted to. Bringing Melissa along meant being somewhat responsible, which of course ruins every great plan of mankind. We had crossed only one full state, not exactly an eye-opening journey of discovery, and it felt like we were on some kind of border, and we couldn't decide what was best to do, to keep puttering around the northeast like kids, or roam the south like total potheads. Mouses was a pothead in the sixties, you know, he told me so. Like I couldn't have figured that out for myself. Anyone that rational and academic had to be covering for some serious toking in bygone years.

### **Ronnie**

We had the radio on, and literally right in the middle of the conversation, someone came on WAMU with the story about how the AWOL amnesty was not only being shortened out of nowhere, but the penalties for getting caught beyond that had been stiffened like the wrath of God. Three years in jail for desertion. It was Thursday night when we pulled into the elementary school. Suddenly I didn't have till the end of July to turn myself in. I had until next Wednesday. Beyond Wednesday, the hunt was on.

## **Lionel**

We got real quiet then. It was surreal. They'd yanked the amnesty away like cotton candy from some kid. It was on the radio one minute, and then they were talking about the economy.

We'd have to start the conversation all over again.

## **Senator Rick Deveraux, Republican, New Jersey**

When the zombies began to walk, naturally there was hysteria, but if you took a moment to think logically, you realized the danger would not be so great if everyone simply kept control of their panic. To speak graphically, obviously the dead in their graves could not get out, which left only the very recently dead to rise. These were located mainly in hospitals and funeral homes. These risings were of course horrifying and sent hundreds of hospitals into complete chaos, but if you look at raw statistics, the chances that you would encounter a zombie on the street were fairly slim. Sudden accidents accounted for many of them, and these were both the most gruesome and the most worrying. But within a week or two, if a relative or a loved one died, it was relatively easy to ensure that they would not walk. All it took was physical restraint, and cremation.

So given that, within days the question on everyone's mind was, Where the hell are all these zombies coming from? How could there be so many? In any mid-sized city, you couldn't leave your house without seeing one. How were these people dying with no one around to keep them down and in place? Part of the answer was that they seemed to have a natural instinct to congregate, almost as if they didn't want to be left by themselves. The appearance of three or four of them seemingly at once was more of a shock than just one, so it took much longer to start to get a handle on the problem; a little too long, because things got very chaotic, out of control. And because they didn't like the light so much, and tended to move into the woods or similar places at night, it was quite difficult to stop them.

## **Dr. Belinda Sherman, the University of Michigan**

You had these reports of zombie imitators, which were absolutely mind-blowing. Teenagers, outcasts, walking along, having zombie parties where they would walk alongside them, imitating them, or just following them to see where they went, trying to predict what they would do. One or two were accidentally shot, I believe. Then the absurd images of biologists grabbing and tagging zombies, monitoring their movement from inside nearby vans. Then the darker side of it all, the tortures and the beatings. Suddenly there was an easier target for sadists than the homeless. It was awful.

## **Senator Rick Devereaux**

The most depraved thing I ever heard was that a gentleman in Phoenix attempted to ship a zombie across the country. He had trapped one of them somehow in a huge box, and he sealed it in, and pinned it down with a mattress, I believe, so it couldn't move properly, and he tried to ship it to a friend. He eventually was arrested, but I don't think there has been a conviction yet. It would have taken a full year to pass all the laws we really needed to in order to curb people's uglier desires, and that was time the country simply did not have.

## **Dr. Belinda Sherman**

Like no other tragedy or uproar in American history, what happened in January of 2005 initiated an almost inexplicable silent and shared desire amongst people all over the land to simply stop everything, everything that could be stopped, for as long as was humanly possible. The machinery of society should have gotten back up and running again in February—but it did not. After a couple of weeks of hand-wringing and confusion, schools should have re-opened, small businesspeople should have gotten back behind their counters, movies should have been made—but they weren't. Workers who had left their jobs to collect themselves didn't return, leaving thousands of companies scuffling to stay afloat. The ordinary had been shattered, and individuals were simply in no hurry to set things right again. It was as if two hundred and thirty years of the American way of pacing ourselves had crashed to a halt, and everyone just needed a breather, just one, before setting the wheels spinning again. Colleges wiped out entire semesters because students decided to take them off, hundreds of stores and restaurants had to close because no one came back to work the registers or make french fries.

It took something truly freakish to do that. A massive tragedy or the start of a war couldn't have done it. These things make Americans want to get back to work quickly, to take their minds off things. Perhaps with the dead up and walking, there was just too much to think about, and everyone wanted to take their time sorting out the universe somewhat before getting back to the endless grind. Or maybe it wasn't as complicated as even that; maybe everyone needed a vacation. They saw the chance for it, and they did not care. "If the universe isn't going to live up to its responsibilities, why should we?"

## **Mouses**

I found Lionel in the art room around midnight. He was in there with his lantern, and he had found some colored chalk and was going to work on the chalkboard, drawing what I later found out was the one and only scene he kept repeating over and over again: the joining of two plowed fields beside a distant farm, with mountains in the distance, and the silhouettes of cows grazing beside a creek. Athena told me he'd never attempted anything else. It was ironic, because that was

how Athena had begun to draw, on chalkboards when she was a department aide back in junior high school, decorating the teacher's lounge to kill time. And then she had come to Penn State, and blown so many people away with her work, and here was Lionel with his field and his farm, Athena at age fourteen, except Lionel had about as much talent for art as I do for throwing a baseball.

We sat for a while and looked out the window which overlooked the playground. He asked me the one thing he always did whenever we were away from everyone else, which was how long I thought we had out here on the run from everything that mattered. More specifically, how long it would be before the world was able to seamlessly move on.

### **Lionel**

The fact was, he had already seen something out there in the dark which he wanted to talk to me about; he'd seen it when he was in the bathroom down the hall, trying to feel his way around without a lantern, because I'd taken the one we had when I went off to draw. I don't know why I drew like that. It was asinine, but it beat reading *Tip and Terry*, which I swear to God I remembered from when I was in first grade. Creepy.

### **Mouses**

I had seen some equipment out on the blacktop where the basketball hoops were, in the courtyard, the playground, and I had gone out there and checked it out, because I had a hunch what that stuff was. And I think I was correct, I really do.

### **Lionel**

Mouses said that they were re-lining the blacktop and filling in the sand around the monkey bars. It was impossible to tell when that stuff had been brought in, but maybe they were preparing the grounds for the September school year—or even summer school. That made more sense, that's why they were doing it now, not in August. The kids were going to come back soon, he thought. I couldn't really disagree. So maybe on Monday morning the maintenance people would keep maintaining, and most likely there'd be people inside the school, too, fixing everything, getting it ready.

### **Mouses**

So we had to leave soon; that much was obvious, but where would we go? For me, the goal was to stave off the miasma of my retirement for a few more hours; for Ronnie it was escape from the law. To Lionel, the object of the game was to keep gas in the van and sleep someplace new every night, relishing all the little decisions that had to be made along the way. But at what point would this mean having to sleep legally in motels, and shop in packed supermarkets, and God

forbid, go back to work? It was going to happen very soon now. By the beginning of summer it would all be over, that was my guess. There was an economy to worry about.

I left Lionel sitting there to think it over. I realized he would put it all down to my pessimism again, but at least he always listened to me. I felt badly about taking him away from his zone, the zone where he could just sit, contented, and tick off places on a map that seemed interesting to go to next. But if I hadn't done it first, Athena would have been right behind me. And to her, he would always have no choice but to say yes. He was a waiter and she was an artist, and that should have meant nothing, but to Lionel, it was everything that mattered in the world.

*Dear Marianne,*

*Something very interesting happened to me the other night, something kind of disturbing. I have been knocking around the state with a little group of people that Athena and I managed to collect somehow, her mentor at the university from when she was twenty-two, and an ex-military guy named Ronnie who got into a little bit of trouble and took off from that whole mess, and our next door neighbor's kid from State College, Melissa. She's seventeen (sixteen? No, seventeen) and lobbied hard to come with us, much to the ire of her parents, but they didn't have much say in the matter. Anyway, we've been moving from place to place and one night we pitched camp inside Gerard Manley Hopkins Elementary School in Buckeystown, Maryland. It was kind of like a Days Inn without working electricity, which is really no more depressing than any Days Inn I can name.*

*So in the middle of the night I was up and poking around with a lantern around the principal's office and such, just bored and unable to sleep. At one point I had to go to the bathroom, and while I was there standing at the, ah, fountain, I got the shock of my life when I saw that someone was watching me. It was a zombie, standing just outside the window, at two a.m. I zipped up fast and just kind of stared at it, because it was staring right back at me. It was a woman. She was about sixty, I would say, maybe even a little older, and she was wearing a blue housedress. Even in the dark I could make out the beet red complexion which all of the please-go-back-to-being-dead have, and the ugly vertical wrinkles that lined her face, and the way her bones were much too prominent beneath that sandpapery skin. I hadn't seen more than four or five on their feet since they all started to lie down again. There were definitely still a few around, according to the news, and we had seen one or two in the distance as we drove, but I didn't expect to have a close encounter with one. I actually moved a little closer to her, and the strangest part of it was, I thought I had seen this zombie somewhere before. Actually, I was certain of it.*

*Now theoretically that's probably impossible, because we've just been moving a little too fast for a single zombie to keep up with us, but the feeling of deja vu was pretty powerful. After gawking at me for about fifteen seconds, the zombie turned and walked off toward the playground, walking like they do, as if they had all their lives to get wherever they were going.*

*So I went back to Athena's room, meaning the classroom where she was asleep, and she woke up and asked me where I had been, and I told her this little story, and about how convinced I was that I was being followed across Pennsylvania and into Maryland by a zombie. She called me crazy. What did she know, she was groggy and tired. We fell asleep and I almost forgot all about it. But just before I started this letter to you, I had a sudden flash where I'd seen that zombie before. It seems too impossible to be true, but I'm going to tell you about it, and you can send men with butterfly nets to get me if you want, but good luck finding me. By the end of next week we could be in Ohio, or West Virginia, or Georgia, or Cuba for all I know. There's no stopping the Lionel Train now.*

### **Roger Vancoeur, The Humm Foundation, political think tank based in Falls Church, Virginia**

The first reports of the dead coming back to life, such as it was, came out of Toronto on December 30. By the middle of January, the world was in crisis, but only America seemed to suffer a brutal political divide over how to deal with the situation. The White House called on the military quite quickly and deployed the army to attack the situation. This was not terribly surprising and was perhaps even necessary in the earliest days of the crisis, when there was some looting and a great deal of panic, but the deployment of troops to Africa was a fairly shocking maneuver. To the public, stabilizing the situation in Uganda could not have been of lower priority, and so for the President it was a case of awful timing. The White House and the CIA had been working on getting Boltu Voss out of there for months, and suddenly it was all about to fall apart, and so a thousand troops did not seem so great a sacrifice to get a hold on the country. The level of paranoia about nuclear weapons being lost was quite high. But few people understood that, so it seemed that the U.S. was taking advantage of the crisis to aggressively pursue its purposes outside the country. Voss abdicated quite suddenly when U.S. troops entered Kampala, and we went ahead and set up an interim government, and the rest of the world used this action as an impetus to point out America's expansionist policies once again.

The White House's response to this was to double the number of troops active in zombie containment and blast dire warnings about the zombies day and night, to completely draw focus away from the fact that not only was the U.S. establishing a new government in Uganda, but was deploying warships to South Korea to bolster their defense against a possible northern attack.

### **Senator Rick Devereaux**

The White House had absolutely no choice in its military actions, both concerning Uganda and South Korea, and as we see now, it was a great act of foresight on the part of the President to get those troops to their proper positions. We can't ever really know what catastrophe might have occurred if America hadn't situated itself between North and South Korea, if only for a few weeks.

The decision to use the military as a peace-keeping tool within the United States was a direct response to the high levels of fear on our streets, in addition to the exhaustion of state and county police forces, and even the National Guard, within days. To control the occasions of looting and vigilantism that occurred all across the states, it was necessary not just to make arrests but to provide a tangible presence of might on the street, a staunch barrier between confusion and outright chaos.

### **Roger Vancoeur, The Humm Foundation**

This does not explain the so-called necessity of military units to attack zombies in residential neighborhoods, shopping centers, on university campuses, and around public buildings. With these graceless attacks, the government was essentially sending its citizens the message that violence was not only the first but the most acceptable response to the situation.

### **Senator Devereaux**

The liberals would have had us slowly corral every zombie possible, identify them, and then spend months haggling over a respectable way to dispose of them. The fact is, no one had any idea what the zombies were capable of. There were so many false and contradictory reports of injuries and even killings at the hands of the zombies that it became impossible to sort fact from fiction. So the most rational choice was made: put down the threat quickly and protect the country from an invader whose capabilities and intentions were utterly unknown. Now I admit that the number of violent encounters with zombies, so many of which were unfortunately captured on video, was very high, but to call them without cause is ridiculous. As I speak now, we have more than one hundred and fifty documented cases of S.T.G. in this country, and two fatalities that may very well be due to S.T.G.

What you also have to take into account is that this was a crisis that had to be tackled with the utmost speed, since its damage to the economy was so immense, and its effects on global security were so hard-hitting.

## **Roger Vancoeur, The Humm Foundation**

One thing is for certain, and that is that this crisis set the favorable tide toward gun control which had been growing in the country ever since the tragic Preakness shootings all the way back to square one. The supporters of the second amendment never had a better friend than the walking dead, even though a wet roll of paper towels was more than enough defense against them, for the most part. Gun manufacturers had no complaints with the zombies, none at all. No other member of the economic structure of the country benefited so much so quickly.

## **Mouses**

The stock markets may have tumbled and tumbled hard and stayed that way, and unemployment may have doubled for a while, but the zombies were a gold mine for a handful of clever entrepreneurs. The T-shirts alone must have brought in millions. I ROSE FROM THE GRAVE AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY T-SHIRT. I think I saw that one two or three times. Or PLEASE HELP ME, HOMELESS AND I CAN'T SEEM TO STAY DEAD. Very popular with the young ones.

## **Lionel**

Like bumper stickers you see all the time, you couldn't seem to actually find these T-shirts to buy anywhere, but there they were all the same. There was one I liked, how did it go...I think it was DON'T BLAME ME —THAT WAS SOME STRONG VIAGRA.

## **Ronnie**

One of the most popular games with kids and vandals was to get one of these T-shirts onto a zombie somehow, though there was almost always a bit of a fight. That was the thing about them, they were docile unless you tried to mess with them. They didn't appreciate being touched. Even then, if you were scratched it was by chance. They didn't fight back, just waved their arms around a lot and freaked out without making a sound.

I FINALLY FOUND SOMETHING THAT *DOESN'T* BEAT WORKING, that was one of the shirts I saw that was kind of a head-scratcher at first, but the more I think about it the more I appreciate it.

## **Dr. Belinda Sherman**

The difference between those who got some sort of twisted enjoyment out of the whole thing and those who were truly horrified by it was simply that people of a certain age had an awareness of their own mortality, while some did not. I would

venture a guess that not one person over the age of thirty ever bought one of those T-shirts, or in any way found a humor in the situation that was untinged by a deep melancholy.

## **Mouses**

You can make the obvious guess that after this all ends there'll be a huge jump in the number of books and magazines about UFO experiences, witchcraft, the Tarot, crop circles and the like, and take it a step further and say the economy may not recover for a decade, since when people are living in a world where the unthinkable can and has happened, long term planning and saving will seem less attractive, for a while at least. But you can go further than that, I think, and some already have, to say that the de-mystifying of western religions because of the zombie crisis will slowly cause a new secularism to creep in over the next thirty or forty years, and hopefully with it a slow bend toward enlightenment and tolerance. Illusions of a transfiguration and ascension after death, like those held by devout Christians, have taken a brutal hit, and it will be interesting to see how the church will absorb this event and make an attempt to align it with its convictions. Conversely, the Middle East is already becoming a flashpoint of a new extremism, as the zombies were for the most part seen as a grim punishment against mankind direct from God.

Atheism will skyrocket, this we can see already. The divinity of the human soul is a tough theory to argue for when it turns out that death, the most awesome force known to man since the beginning of creation, brings only a distasteful biological burp to homo sapiens before he gets up and starts stumbling around again, no more intelligent than tumbleweed, robbed entirely of all that made him human yet still intent on taking air and light. It makes it so easy to equate a human being with a grubworm or a jellyfish. I've never seen a church close due to lack of interest, kind of like McDonald's, but it may happen now.

## **Dr. Belinda Sherman**

It's no accident that in certain parts of South America and Africa, and of course places like Haiti, there was so little panic and almost no need for government intervention on a grand scale. These are cultures that do not see death as an unnatural serial killer bent on destruction. To them the zombies were objects of fascination, sometimes worship.

## **Thomas Burritt, Professor of Anthropology, Princeton University**

Tourism will shift from Paris and England toward countries that were once considered primal and mysterious, as people come more to believe that these people had the answers all along. The number of cheap gift shops selling Haitian trinkets and snow globes commemorating festivals like the Oaxacan Day of the Dead will go up an untold percent in the next five years. The young people in

America and Europe who celebrate the "goth" lifestyle by revering vampire fashions will embrace voodoo instead. And there'll be more of them. The definition of "fringe" in culture will have to undergo a major overhaul as it becomes more and more difficult to laugh off any belief system which seems completely insane.

### **Ronnie**

I remember when I was stationed at Fort Detrick, and we sent out two trucks to check out a bad car accident three miles south of Yellow Springs. Two cars coming fast toward each other had gone off the road, both of them running head-on into trees. Probably a drag race that had caught some innocent person coming the other way. It happened at about three in the morning and no one drove by for about ten minutes after the crash, so when we got there, they were all gone. Everyone in the cars was gone. So we had to go after them on foot, and it wasn't a very long distance we had to cover, but it was a sickening feeling, going through the woods with flashlights, armed, just waiting to see what condition those bodies were going to be in.

And my first feeling upon seeing one of them wasn't repulsion, really, although the zombie's face had been totally destroyed in the crash. It was also moving so fast, I couldn't believe it, walking across someone's back yard. The feeling I had was, for someone to believe in something like a soul was totally ridiculous. I always had trouble believing in God, but seeing that zombie walking with no face and its broken arms, I actually felt ashamed that I had even entertained the idea that we were more than just what went into our raw biology. Then we had to shoot its legs, to bring it down somehow before the entire neighborhood woke up and watched, and one of its knees just disappeared when we shot it, and I know this sounds horrible, but it was like this human being was a cookie that you could just snap pieces off of, and when you snapped so many pieces off, well, no one would want it anymore. This was how I was seeing a man, a man who had been loved by the wife he was in the car with, loved by his children, who dreamed about where his life might go, who was dreamed about by other people. And I can't get that out of my head, and I'm sure I'll never even come close to believing in God again.

It's all right; it's all right. It just wasn't meant to be.

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### **Athena Carew**

The next day, Friday, we all got in the van after our granola breakfast and went out exploring a little. We'd decided to hang on to our little elementary school haven just until Monday. After only two and a half weeks on the road, we had gotten somehow really tired. No one was in the mood to spend all day driving. Ronnie didn't mind that we weren't hustling south. Some days, it seemed dire to him that he get to Georgia as soon as possible, to the point where he was about to just hop on a train or a bus somehow, if he could somehow get around the ID check. But most days were like Friday, when he was like us, and didn't really know where he wanted to go, and the big Z pattern we'd made across Pennsylvania didn't bother him at all. He wore sunglasses and a silly floppy Baltimore Orioles sun hat wherever he went now, so as not to be spotted. That seemed excessive to me. It surprised me that he would be that worried. The penalties for going AWOL were brutal, but it wasn't as if the government had a dragnet out for him.

### **Lionel**

Athena had never seen a farm stand she could pass up, so that was the first place we stopped, which was notable for two reasons. The first was that this place had strawberries the size of volleyballs, and they were real cheap, so we bought ten thousand of them or so. Melissa was an interesting girl because she didn't like strawberries and she didn't like chocolate. Neither did Mouses, except Mouses went totally off the chart because he also didn't like pizza. There was just "something about the taste of it," he told me. This, to me, defies description. That's sort of like saying, "No, I've never really liked music. There's just something about the sound of it."

### **Ronnie**

The farm stand was right at the bottom of a huge sloping field, and there was a nice little house at the top of it, about two hundred yards away, and in the driveway I saw a Specimen Control van. I had to look real hard to figure out that's what it was, but I recognized that thin purple stripe. Now the driveway led all the way down the slope, getting thinner and thinner until it hit the road just about seventy feet or so from where the little vegetable stand was, so I figured the girl taking our money and handing us the bags of strawberries must have known about

the van, and why it was there. She was maybe twenty-two or so, working the stand alone.

## **Mouses**

Ronnie made sure the girl wasn't watching and then he pointed out the van to me without a word, just with a quizzical expression on his face, which Lionel and Athena both saw, and they looked up there with no subtlety whatsoever, so here we were, five customers at a fruit stand and four of us staring up at the Specimen Control van, only Melissa still engrossed in the cantaloupes, and of course the girl running the stand had to notice. So she told us what the van was about. She didn't seem to mind. She seemed very strong.

## **Donna Rutain, Buckeystown, Maryland**

My grandfather's doctor had called the Specimen Control people a couple of days before, because that was the law. And they called us back to make sure we were going to be there, which seemed silly because where could we go, and then they came, kind of late at night on Thursday, and they showed us what to do when Grandpa died. It was almost like a weird little class they gave us in the living room. They took a look at the bed he lay in and then gave us the correct restraints for it, and showed us how to tie them. They showed us how to gum his eyes down so he wouldn't be able to see anything if he came awake again.

They had us take everything out of the room that we could, except for a couple of chairs. They said that when he died, we should take just a few minutes alone with him, no more than five at the most, and make sure the window was sealed tight, and wedge a block they gave us underneath the door and adjust it with a little tool so that the door couldn't be opened from inside. And then we were supposed to call them right away, and they would come and take him away. It all seemed kind of unnecessary, since the dead people had all laid down already—well, almost all of them, I know there were still a few walking around for some reason, but so far as we knew, no one had come back to life. But that was the law, so we signed something and we told them we'd do what we were supposed to do, and the hospice woman went back upstairs to sit with Grandpa.

But the kind of funny part was, the two guys who gave us the talk couldn't get their van started when they went out to leave. They tried and tried, and my brother tried to give them a jump start, but nothing worked. So my brother tinkered around in there and he figured out that their alternator was fried and the van wasn't going anywhere. It was almost eleven o'clock by then, so my brother said that if they wanted, he could run over to his friend Larry's parts place tonight and get them a used replacement alternator and put it in for them, rather than them having to wait for a tow and maybe not have the van fixed till who knows when by some garage. They said that would be great, but they didn't want to impose, but they didn't know my brother very well, of course, and how much he loved that

kind of thing, so he got in the Mercury and went off to Larry's, and the Specimen Control guys wound up staying with us and watching the end of a re-run of *Saturday Night Live* on Comedy Central down in the living room while me and the hospice woman stayed up with Grandpa. And then, because it was still going to be a while, we did the craziest thing: my mother said we all looked hungry, so she made us breakfast at one in the morning, plenty of eggs and waffles and bacon, and even though Larry had just about fixed the van by then, they were more than happy to stay and eat breakfast with my mom and my brother and my uncle and me. We'd been doing this a lot since Grandpa got so sick, our hours were completely crazy. The Specimen Control guys wound up calling in to their dispatcher, or whoever it was, and staying the night, one of them sleeping on the couch, the other sleeping in the upstairs room right around the corner from my grandfather. I got a few hours of sleep and then I had to set the stand up for the day. I figured the guys would get in the van and leave us as soon as they woke up, but they didn't. My mother cooked for them again and had the food ready as soon as they got up, and so they got another meal, and Grandpa wasn't looking so good, so the guys called in again and said they were just going to wait there until they got another call they absolutely had to take. I think the guys weren't married and they each lived alone, and I think they really liked being there.

Grandpa died on Friday night. They told us it would be best if my brother and my mother and I got into our car and went for a little drive together, just for a half hour or so, while they took care of things, so we drove to our neighbor's house and sat with them for a while, then came back. They'd taken Grandpa away, and set everything back in the bedroom just the way we'd had it to begin with, and they'd left a note thanking us for being so nice to them, with their phone numbers in case we ever needed them for any other reason, even if it was just to help move Grandpa's things to the shed, like we meant to do. And they wrote that if they or anyone they knew needed their car looked at, they would be happy to send my brother the business instead of calling a garage.

### **Lionel**

We were just tooling around looking for a place to do some laundry, and Athena was poking through the town newspaper, which was the first thing she did whenever we went into a new town. And she spotted something in the local newspaper's events calendar, all three lines of it, and said we had to take a spin by the Buckeystown Cultural Center, because there was an art exhibit she wanted to check out. We asked her what the exhibit was about, and she just said, "Trust me." That was usually bad news.

### **Melissa**

Those were some of my favorite parts about the trip, when Athena would force us to go see these little out-of-the-way art galleries. Well, she didn't force us; that makes it sound like we hated it, but the ones that were still open were always

cool. Some of the stuff she pointed out to me, I never would have seen any other way. And she didn't just admire something, she took the time to point out why what we were looking at was so different from anything else. Mouses too, since he was an art professor, but it was better to hear it from Athena, because she was a better screener about what I'd be interested in and what I wouldn't.

### **Lionel**

The Buckeystown Cultural Center was just the kind of place Athena wanted to run someday. It was in a little sliver of a row house, between a flower shop and, luckily for us, a laundromat, so I would have the perfect excuse to hop out early if it turned out we were due for a half hour of pottery or Egyptian beads. We went in and obviously this had once been somebody's home, cleared out entirely, no furniture, no nothing except for art on the walls and bare wooden floors and some flyers on a table in front telling about puppet theater shows and decoy crafting classes coming up.

And wouldn't you know it, the subject of this week's exhibit was *The Walking Dead in Art and Memory*.

### **Ronnie**

You'd think any normal person would have had fifteen times too much overexposure to everything related to zombies, but not Athena, and she was as normal as they come. But you know, she just wanted to lap up everything cultural, she was a fiend. How she wound up so stuck on Lionel, I'll never figure out. His idea of culture is to break out his old tapes of *The Simpsons* and open a box of Ritz crackers. I know, I know, look who's talking.

### **Melissa**

The exhibit right in front was really strange. It was called "Seven Days With Lev", and some photographer had just randomly decided to call a zombie Lev, and followed him around for a week, snapping photographs of him as he went. There were photos of him at dawn and sunset, near the beach, walking across a highway as people slowed down so they wouldn't run him over. The best photo was one that someone else had taken of the both of them. You saw the photographer following Lev, crouched down kind of low, as they went across a bridge. Weird stuff. And the last photo was of Lev getting cremated, I figured the photographer had reported him, but according to the cards below each photo it had just happened naturally, on the seventh day of following Lev he had been rounded up with two other zombies and burned up.

## **Ronnie**

The best photo, in my opinion, was this gorgeous shot of a creek somewhere up in the mountains, a real Ansel Adams type of thing, snow everywhere, snow was actually falling as the picture was snapped, and way in the back of the frame there was a deer licking at the surface of the creek. And across the bank from him was a zombie, just watching him, except he had one arm lifted toward the deer, like he was going to ask him a question. Pretty and awful at the same time.

## **Mouses**

There was one very, very good photo of a zombie's face, very close-up, the camera maybe eight inches from its face, so well done I was very surprised I had never seen it in a magazine or a newspaper before. It reminded one of that famous National Geographic cover of the young hooded Middle Eastern girl, the one with the big blue eyes. The zombie in this photo was quite old, and its hair was flying about its head crazily, but there was a strange glimmer of something in its eyes, or maybe it was just the way the eyes were directed, past the cameraman at some unseen horizon, as if the zombie were contemplating a long journey. The photo had been taken at dusk, very effective lighting. The best other portrait of a zombie I had seen was the one drawn on the cover of *The New Yorker*, the profile of a young male zombie standing in the rain, looking at its own hand as if seeing it for the first time. Definitely a classic. I want to say Art Spiegelman did that one, but I can't be sure. I can't believe I don't know that.

## **Athena**

The paintings were definitely the weaker aspect of the exhibit. I would have thought there would be some extraordinary things coming out of the whole zombie motif—did I just use that term for real, zombie motif?—but most of the stuff was overtly nightmarish, and not too subtle. Lionel and I both agreed there was some good material there for posters for zombie movies, but not a whole lot more. I did like the watercolor series which showed the progression of a gathering of zombies as they walked across a patch of dark desert, getting closer and closer to the viewer's perspective. The artist had made all of the zombies into silhouettes except for one, and in each progressive painting, of which there were six total, that zombie got more and more involved with taking its shirt off over its head, having a great deal of difficulty obviously as he and the others lurched along. So you had the phantom zombies and just that one with a lot of detail and clarity to him, and the last painting just caught the edge of the zombie as he walks past the viewer and out of the frame, and he's gotten his shirt off but his head and face are out of frame, so his expression is never really seen.

## **Ronnie**

I think about that poem, too, actually, that one by the French guy called "Gunshot". It was on a card beneath a black sculpture. The sculpture was creepy but mostly sad, there was a black globe and a zombie with no real detail to it wrapping its body along the equator, taking up about a quarter of the world's total surface, reaching like it was crawling across the earth.

*Yes, those were sirens,  
they were.*

*Laughing madness shoved me  
through my window  
I flew outward  
a profane scream  
a bleating of wings  
soaring slashing through the wind  
through the rain  
through the stars.*

*I flew without  
a visible moon, I landed  
in a secret shape  
so the medics wouldn't notice.  
In between I closed  
my eyes and raged  
against you, believed  
you had ruined  
our chance.*

*How could you? I could  
dive in a shrieking frenzy  
clench death itself  
in my teeth, fling  
the slithering head down  
upon the shattered glass  
gnaw him to a pinpoint  
bury him in the sea.  
You would have admired  
me then  
you would have been  
so proud.*

*I lost my way a few times in the dark.  
By the time I got to the alley  
they'd locked your life in your mother's memory  
and your body, your body;  
your heart.*

*I saw a man leaning against a lamppost  
Ohmygod, a zombie Jesus turned to me with a bloodshot eye  
as blind as the moment that came for you,  
as blind as the stone that they built for you.*

—Etienne Janvier

## **Mouses**

We had been there for fifteen minutes when Athena came up to me, ashen-faced, and just tugged on my sleeve and guided me into one of the smaller side rooms, where there were just three paintings trying to fill in the space, and she pointed, and I saw that one of the paintings was her own. It was "If You Remember Me At All," hanging beside a window.

"If You Remember Me At All" was completed two years before, a little less than two years, actually, and it was sold at a group show in Philadelphia to a man who owned thirty percent of a professional basketball team but who'd had a pretty good eye, from what he told Athena about his collection, not an oaf by any means. And the painting had been packed for him and Athena had taken his check and she'd never seen it again, outside of some poster prints she'd made. The last time I'd seen it was in Art East, which had done a paragraph on it in the previous summer's issue.

So you can figure out for yourself, of course, that since the painting was two years old it had absolutely nothing to do with the living dead. The man shown in the painting climbing the brick fence that divided a cemetery from the grounds of a sheet metal foundry was not a zombie. But because his features were so obscured, what could anyone else have thought, standing there in an art gallery surrounded by the undead, having no clue that Athena had been painting an image she'd remembered from when she was a child and visiting her father at the foundry. The man in the painting was a co-worker of his who sometimes hopped over the boundary fence to have his lunch there, since he'd found the cafeteria in the foundry to be far more sad than eating his sandwiches among the dead. There was something intangibly tragic about the image she'd painted, of a man headed back to work in that shadowy plant after lunching alone in the cemetery. Here was a

man leaving the small town graveyard he was almost certainly destined for, and spending his days just a hundred yards away, the years drawing out, drawing out.

### **Lionel**

She didn't seem to want to know how the painting had come to be in that gallery, but I did ask the receptionist where they had gotten everything, and she said a member of their staff had gone out and canvassed for the stuff, some of it had been specifically commissioned by other galleries—zombie art was just then getting big—and some of it had been donated for sale. Athena's piece had a price tag on it, and it was selling for about a third of what she had originally gotten for it, with all the proceeds going to the arts center. So apparently the guy who had originally bought it had donated it outright to them. Maybe the associations it had were just too eerie once the zombies started to walk, and it was too odd to have that piece hanging on his wall.

### **Ronnie**

Athena didn't put up any kind of fuss at all about it, I suppose there wouldn't have been much point. But she was a little bit different through the rest of the day. That painting thing had really gotten to her. I suppose it kind of drove it home, how much had slipped away because of the damned zombies.

### **Mouses**

As I had tried to explain to Lionel the night before, this is a woman who was one of the most interesting artists in Pennsylvania when the zombie crisis broke out, but also one of the most misunderstood. People tended to think her canvases were too downcast, and it turned a lot of people off, and they couldn't get past their muted nature to see how the colors she chose were in direct contrast to that, and how, if you looked at "If You Remember Me At All", the ground was torn and muddy but there was a profusion of gorgeous trees in the background through which the light was summery and powerful, and the sheet metal worker's right foot was about to come down, comically, into a perfect profusion of daffodils. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, this contrast between sadness and joy. When the zombies came, it was as if she knew somehow that she might have to re-invent the way she did things, go in a totally different direction than the one she'd been used to and worked so hard on for years, just because so much of her stuff unfortunately now evoked images of the undead. The figures in her work were shadowy, faceless people for the most part, disconnected from everything, and there was no way anyone could look at those people and not think about what was going on. Her intent was made meaningless. She hadn't sold a painting since January, and of course most of that was due to the fact that no one was buying art during this time, and the other part of it, I'm sure, was due to her subject matter. She was a victim of terrible timing and nothing more. But it was as if she'd had a premonition of the way things would go from now on. She'd have to re-invent the

way she depicted human beings, which meant she would have to totally re-imagine the way she painted. All because of one cosmic joke played by God.

"It's the best thing for me," she would say. "It's when you suddenly put limits on someone, that's when they're forced to really start using their brain." She didn't sound quite so convinced to me.

### **Lionel**

I saw Melissa talking to some forty-ish guy off to the side, and at first I thought he was just asking her directions or something, but then he pulled out a business card and handed it to her, so I drifted over to see what was up—you know, I'm supposed to be some kind of father figure here, even though Melissa would probably laugh in my face if she heard me say that.

### **Melissa**

He had just come out and introduced himself as a freelance TV producer, and he said he was beginning work on a documentary about how the whole zombie thing had affected people in their teens and even younger than that, and he was looking for people to interview, and he really hadn't been sure how to go about it, so he was just walking around and going up to people he thought might volunteer. For money, too. He said he was paying for the interviews, so I thought, I have noooooo problem with that.

### **Ronnie**

Lionel tried to be all protective and he asked the guy a lot of questions. This kind of irritated Melissa. So then Athena came over and asked pretty much the same ones, and of course Melissa didn't mind so much when she did it. Poor Lionel. If he and Athena ever have kids, he might as well just sit in the living room and watch TV all day. He should never have admitted to Melissa he'd been waiting tables at Ruby Tuesday. She lost all respect for him when she saw him in his uniform.

### **Douglas Widgeon, television producer, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

The concept of the documentary would be, yes, the effects of the crisis on Americans to whom this was the first real catastrophe they were fully cognizant of, and to a lesser extent, how it affected their view of God and their own mortality, which they hadn't even had a chance to fully grasp yet. This was something I hadn't bothered to shop around first, I just wanted to do it, to grab a cameraman from HTK and make it my weekend project, turn it around in three months. The speed of it was, sadly, part of the reality of the documentary business, because now that the zombies had laid down, there was about to be an explosion of things like this, so part of my project would be to find some sort of

angle that no one had seen before, and hopefully that would come out as I watched the interviews.

### **Mouses**

I definitely had to keep out of the conversation as soon as I heard the letters "TV". Lionel looked right at me and that was pretty much my cue to wander about the gallery some more, otherwise I'd have undoubtedly said something rude and completely uncalled for. Fortunately by the time they came to collect me, Lionel had figured out that Widgeon was not quite the odious scorpion I had assumed he was, and that he'd actually had something to do with a very good documentary about the Lodz ghetto I'd once seen. So we could all eat turkey sandwiches together with no hard feelings.

### **Athena**

I told Melissa I had no real objections to her being in the documentary, and Widgeon was offering a couple of hundred dollars for a few hours of her time, plus he said if we liked he would go out to his car and show us the questions he'd prepared for it. He could call his friend the cameraman and he could tape her that afternoon and we could be on our way. So we said, Yes, that sounds good if we can take a quick look at the questions, and since we were right next door to this cute little outdoor cafe, we all decided to have lunch over it.

### **Lionel**

Athena was always trying to get people to have lunch with us. Widgeon was okay as people go, but some of the time Athena would latch on to some weirdo and it would be kind of awkward and she'd laugh and apologize to us afterwards. On the second day of our trip—and this was after I'd lobbied so hard for Mouses and Melissa to come with us, so they weren't entirely convinced yet this was a good thing—we'd met Ronnie, who turned out to be a keeper, even if his actions on the baseball field were unethical and offensive, and that was a good lunch, but on the very same day she'd insisted we eat dinner in someone's RV, some weirdo woman who photographed us all so she could later make figurines of us. She made figurines of everyone she met. Yeah, thanks, there's nothing that makes me sleep better at night than knowing some crazy person has a little clay Lionel on her mantel.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

I had thought Melissa might make a good subject for an interview based on nothing more than the expression on her face as she was looking at one of the pieces at the exhibit; I was hoping there was an intelligence there that I needed. I suppose I had some pre-conceived notions of who I was looking for to feature, and I had so little experience in finding subjects from scratch that I wasn't sure

how it would affect the project. I definitely wanted to get on film how Melissa had come to be with this group, her problems with her parents and their willingness to let her go out into the world, as if it were no different than summer camp.

They were a very friendly bunch, Lionel and his girlfriend and Everett, who they just called Mouses, and Ronnie, who told me he was a mechanic and their next-door neighbor back in State College, which I found out wasn't the truth. Athena kept pressing me with questions of her own, so I wound up telling them a great deal, maybe more than I would have normally, and maybe some of that really was due to a need for atonement, or maybe I just talk way the hell too much and should be stopped.

### **Lionel**

I forget which of us it was that asked him where he'd gotten the idea to interview such young people, since he wasn't married and had no kids of his own, and that's when he told us about the Real Zombie tapes, which made my jaw sort of drop, and Athena's too, and Ronnie's. Mouses, of course, saw this phenomenon coming all along, or at least he pretended to. Widgeon had been working for public television in Philadelphia and fiddling with some documentaries on the side, and the latest one, something about Andrew Jackson, had been a huge flop. I didn't know it was possible for a documentary to be a flop, but apparently this can happen. So he'd been scrambling around for funding for a new thing for TV, and his boss had asked him if would like to do some editing for a DVD series that some company was putting out, and because it meant some quick money, Widgeon had said sure. So he drove up to Albany and met with this company called Nexclusive Media Ventures, and he was told about the Real Zombie tapes.

### **Ronnie**

They had bought the rights to hundreds of hours of home video movies of zombies that people had taken, most of it worthless but some of it really disturbing and gruesome, of course, and they were going to market three or four DVD volumes of the "best" footage. And they asked Widgeon if he could slap these things together, and maybe find a narrator if he knew anyone through his connections at public television.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

I'm not really sure what was more disturbing: the fact that someone had had this idea, the fact that they assumed people would pay to buy these DVDs, or the likely fact that it would sell very well indeed. They were certainly banking on it. They'd paid an absolute pittance for the rights to the footage, plus given a couple of hack cameramen a thousand dollars each to go out and find their own good stuff, and it was basically me and one assistant slated to edit it all together, so

there was not a whole lot of up-front money for the production; it was all going to go into the advertising. It was definitely one of those should-I-do-it-even-if-it's-revolting-because-if-it's-not-me-then-it-will-just-be-someone-else deals.

### **Melissa**

I don't even see how he could have even considered doing it. That would have been really nasty. Who wants to watch that? Losers, I guess.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

They showed me the marketing materials, which were more ghoulish than I had even thought they were capable of, and that pretty much decided me, so I walked away from it. And then a couple of days later I felt a sick twinge in me, a sick little tide, because maybe if they had just offered me a little more money, enough to get my own project going, I probably would have agreed to do the editing, with the provision that my name wouldn't be associated with the whole affair. It wasn't a mere brush with selling out that made me queasy, but the fact that I would have done it and then tried to cover my traces, and justify it to myself in three or four different ways. Somewhere along the line I had become pretty brutal. This is what not winning a Peabody can do to you, see?

### **Mouses**

When he went on and told us about the reality show, *that* I did not believe.

### **Ronnie**

I'm sure he had reliable sources in the TV biz, but the thing about the reality show that one network had supposedly talked about, no, I didn't really think that was possible.

### **Athena**

The reality show with the zombies didn't surprise me at all. I believed it one hundred percent. This is TV we're talking about. Please.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

I was talking to a friend of mine who worked at CBS about pitching them a spinoff documentary from a pretty successful mini-series about World War II they'd aired six months before, and he told me of course that their news division pretty much got priority for everything, and it was all about zombies, and everything else was low priority, which wasn't surprising. And he told me about an idea for a reality show that had been kicked around for a couple of weeks. It

was the baby of the guy who had produced *Time Machine 2005*, which, as stupid as it was, had actually been a clever idea once.

Apparently he had been talking with someone about going out and somehow getting a hundred zombies or so and cooping them up somewhere in the east for a few months, and then transporting them to an island off Florida. And the show would consist of just one man, or maybe a married couple, who had to live on that island with the zombies for a full year, constantly in fear of S.T.G., you would figure, and just plain weirded out every single day. A pretty weak concept. Actually, if want to get grim about it for a moment, you'd have a plenty workable idea if the zombies had been aggressive and angry and of the flesh-eating variety from the get-go, but even then, who would watch it if they had to deal with that danger and awfulness in their own lives?

### **Mouses**

Reality TV voyeurism depends on the ability of the audience to mock the subject from a safe distance, no? So the Zombie Island idea, or whatever they would have called it, would be rather like asking combat troops to watch a reality show about men fighting on the front lines. There's no separation from it, so it wouldn't have worked, thank God.

### **Lionel**

Widgeon said that maybe one of the concepts would have been that they would take a very pacifist person and plop them down there on the island, and watch how over the course of a year, irritated by zombies twenty-four hours a day, they might resort to a bit of the old ultra-violence. I think that's how Widgeon explained it to us, or some variation on that theme, but he was just going by one conversation with some friend of his, so who knows.

### **Athena**

You can go on the internet anytime you want and buy a bumper sticker that says MY OTHER CAR'S A SPECIMEN CONTROL VAN or THANKS, ELVIS, FOR STAYING IN YOUR GRAVE, so why would anyone think this reality show couldn't possibly happen? Let's get real here for just a moment, we'll all be better for it.

*....So, Sis, it looked like we were going to get Melissa a little bit of fame and a couple hundred bucks out of the deal to boot, but Widgeon had to go track down his cameraman first, since we'd told him we needed to be on our way the next day. He made a couple of cell phone calls and said we could do the interview that*

*night. We shook hands and told him roughly where the elementary school was and what time we'd probably be back there.*

*We left the bright lights of Buckeystown for a bit (and not only did Athena not have a fit about her painting being stranded in the art gallery, she actually donated ten dollars to it, something she always does, good Lord) and found a very nice creek to hang out beside for a couple of hours, since the weather was freakishly perfect once again. We made a mental note to camp there whenever we left the elementary school, and at one point in my wandering around, I found a hiking trail and wandered along it for a bit, defying the very specific poison ivy precautions Athena had drilled into my head for the past few weeks. And there, on the trail, I swear on our mother's macaroni and cheese, was the zombie I had seen the night before, the one who spied on me as I relieved myself at the school.*

*She was about fifty yards away and walking right towards me. Her mouth was open. I recognized her first from that K-Mart housedress. When she got to within about thirty feet or so, she stopped and took a left and wandered deeper into the woods. I just stood there for a while, certain that someone had written me into an episode of The Twilight Zone as a joke.*

*Then I had an idea, which I was certain wouldn't work, but I figured I had nothing to lose—and at least I could finally say I was doing something with my life! I ran back to the creek and rummaged around in Athena's things till I found her camera, then dashed back toward the trail again, telling her I had come across some sort of Civil War fort thing or something like that, some lame excuse, and I went off in search of my stalker zombie. I found her pretty quick. She had mosied off the path and was walking through a pretty little meadow. For the first time ever, I actually went towards a zombie, jogging in a very, very wide circle around the woman and finally positioning myself in front of her, fifty yards away, kind of hiding lamely behind a tree.*

*At that moment, I had my worst ever case of the chills. All it took to bring them on was the sound of the woman's footsteps through the grass and leaves, so sluggish and without purpose. I was out of sight then and couldn't see her, so there was only that one sound above the birds and the breeze. The footsteps stopped entirely for a moment, as if she were figuring out where I had gone to. Then they started again. They got quieter as she hit a patch of what might have been smooth dirt. Then there was a crunch as a stick was stepped on and broken. The sounds of those footsteps just could not be real, and I couldn't be hiding behind a tree listening to them get closer, but there I was. For a moment I was really terrified for the entire human race, because obviously all bets were off.*

*When the zombie went past me, I stepped out and made a sound that was kind of like "HA!" and when her head turned, I snapped a photo of her face. I expected her to keep going then, but she didn't, and that was very unsettling. She just stood there, looking at me, so I ran off and got the hell out of there. I looked back once,*

*and she was still there, watching me go. I got a little chill up my spine when I saw that and wondered why the hell I thought approaching her would be such sport.*

*I am going to have that photograph developed real soon as part of a kind of plan I have cooking to satisfy my curiosity about where I'd seen that zombie before. I think it's going to cost me a hundred and fifty bucks, leaving me about six hundred total to my name, but who's kidding who, Sis, Athena's been mostly running the show for almost a year when it comes to keeping us fed and housed, and my piddly Ruby Tuesday tip money isn't exactly what's been buying her art supplies and keeping the van gassed up. Just when I think I can feel as bad about that as I possibly can, I always manage to top myself somehow.*

## **Athena**

Lionel was sitting on the sofa when the news from Vancouver came on the local news, back in January. It wasn't even on the network news at first, what had happened, probably because they wanted to give the whole thing a second look before Dan Rather splashed it across America. I remember he had just gotten home from work an hour before and he was heating up a TV dinner, and I was reading on the porch, and we were going to go for a walk after he ate, through the neighborhood and down toward the pier. And I heard him shout out, "Holy guacamole!" and I came in and he said a doctor in Vancouver who had lost a patient on the table while trying tricky heart surgery had reported that the dead man had gotten up from the gurney as they were pushing him to the morgue, and they had restrained him to figure out what could have possibly happened, and you can take it from there. At first Lionel had been shocked mostly because he was amazed that someone would even bother to report a ridiculous story like that, so he was laughing, really. But then there was the doctor at a press conference, with two other doctors who backed him up, and they said it wasn't even the first report of something like this that week.

Still we sort of got past it, and two hours later there was a special report during *Serpico*, and the next morning it was all anyone could talk about. By dinnertime that night, zombies had been seen wandering around.

Lionel had the same reaction as everyone else, more or less, but not even a week had gone by before he got very pensive, and I could already tell what he was thinking about. He hadn't even considered going back to work as soon as the first reports came out, as if he suspected this was going to change everything, and he was yearning for it. He took the van out a lot and just drove around, and I could sense the guilty excitement in his voice when he told me he'd seen military convoys and more and more businesses temporarily shut down for no other reason than it was acceptable to do it. He could sense he was about to be free. But still he waited to suggest we take off. I don't think he really knew how to explain to me

why we should start to roam, head off in the van and not look back, without it seeming selfish. When the zombies began to lay down again, he panicked a little bit, and watched TV endlessly that first day, and by sunset he had suggested we go on "vacation" while we could, and he knew I understood what he really wanted; finally he gave me credit for figuring it out.

## **Mouses**

When he all but broke through the screen door on my porch to tell me about it, of course he framed the whole trip as a sociology project, and asked me what else I could possibly be doing now that I had retired. He didn't have to argue too much; I thought it sounded like great fun. But every day that the country made more progress back to what was now considered normal was a tough day for him. He had dreamed of a country gone completely mad through which he and Athena could drift like leaves, and he'd had it in the very beginning, and had just waited a little bit too long to come up with the van idea, out of respect for Athena, out of respect for the fact that she'd come to think of State College as home.

Those first few days of riding were the best, because the uncertainty of what was going on, with almost but not quite all the undead packing it in and laying down, made it all seem like we had wandered into some strange costume party where there were no rules. The military was everywhere, and no one was going to work, just like when the dead had first risen, and strange celebrations were being held everywhere. The country had been holding its breath for three months, and it had to finally let it out, and the place just went nuts. It was so good for Lionel. When he was at the wheel of the van, he wasn't a waiter or a bookstore clerk or an office temp anymore. I think he was exactly, precisely what he had always wanted to be.

## **Ronnie**

The first time my unit was sent out to take zombies down, it was a nasty, rainy Sunday night, cold, ugly, just the worst possible January situation you could ever want to have, and we were called off the New Jersey turnpike to go into Atlantic City, just eight guys in two trucks, and I was having trouble getting a signal in on my radio for no reason I could figure out. We knew we were going to have to shoot some zombies down really soon but not in this kind of ungodly weather, and not that late at night. But my CO told me over the radio, and he had to repeat it four times so I could make out all the words, that we were needed on the beach, that was where we should head. The problem was, no one had informed him or us where on the beach we should go. The entire freaking city is on the beach, so we just headed in from the expressway, went down Pacific Avenue, and slowed the trucks next to the Sands Hotel and got out. We had no rain gear at all. It was just disgusting.

So I asked my C.O. before we headed down the beach if our orders were strictly to kill, and he said, "Yes, do what you have to do to get the bastards to stop walking. Call me when you have something."

It was about ninety seconds before we had something. There were about seven zombies walking along the shore. That was an image that just blew my mind. We were standing in the rain, freezing, the eight of us, armed, with the ocean off to the right, the surf really coming hard, our breath billowing out, and the zombies on the tideline backlit in this strange cloud of light; the rain and the mist from the ocean was hanging in the air and the lights of the boardwalk and all the hotels and casinos shone through it and made it completely ghostly. And bam, the man next to me, a guy they called Sharpie, took aim at the first one and dropped him, a shot right to the head, and it felt like my spirit was going to leave my body or something; nothing made any sense, and I screamed at the rest not to fire until we were absolutely goddamned positive that those silhouettes coming towards us actually were zombies and not humans.

We took them all down, and we looked up and there were more shadows on the beach, regular people a hundred yards away who had left their hotels and come out to watch. Not one of them had an umbrella. They were afraid they were going to miss something, so they just went out without them. Four or five people, just watching with newspapers covering their heads. One of them shouted something which I couldn't hear; it sounded like an insult, but over the sound of the rain and the ocean, who knows.

The trucks drove out onto the beach and we got out the specimen bags and zipped the bodies up and loaded them in. We were completely drenched. We weren't about to drive all the way back to Monmouth like that, it would have been ridiculous, us sitting there and shivering in our wet clothes. That may have been necessary at Stalingrad, but we were out shooting zombies, a total of seven of them, and the rain was more of a threat to our health than they were. So I had the drivers stop the trucks almost immediately in front of the Tropicana, and I ran into the hotel, through the lobby in my fatigues, and told the guy at the front desk that we needed towels and clean clothes somehow, and a place to change. And he was more than happy to give the stuff to us. I radioed back to the trucks and the rest of the guys came in. The hotel was almost entirely empty, of course, because this was maybe day nine or ten of the crisis, and everyone was still flipping out, so we weren't noticed by too many people. It was January anyway, right, and bookings weren't exactly through the roof in A.C.

He took us right down to the laundry room, where there was no one working, and gave us T-shirts and sweatpants and socks, and then he showed us where the employees' locker room was so we could shower. This was all happening within a half an hour. I was taking a hot shower in the Tropicana after having shot some zombies. What really would have made it complete is if I'd stopped by the casino afterward and plopped twenty dollars on lucky fourteen. Don't think I didn't

consider it. And then a mad hare or whatever could come out of the lobby and we'd have a tea party.

## **Mouses**

What really did help the national psychotic breakdown to get into high gear was that the first nationally televised reports came out on New Year's Day. That fit flawlessly into every nutcase's vision of Armageddon. January first, 2005, and the dead began to walk the earth. You couldn't ask for a better horror show. I myself admit that I thought about that date a lot. Of course, it was later revealed that the dead had been walking for a full two days before that, just mostly unnoticed; or the eyewitness reports were put down to practical jokes or cruel hoaxes. But the calendar is a powerful thing, and people still insist it was the first day of the new year when it all began to happen. Those who tried to argue for the case that Z-Day was December 30 were put down as antagonistic agnostics. Still are, actually.

## **Athena**

The funniest term I ever heard when it came to some expert talking about the zombies was "biological persistence". That was an absolute gem. As in, "Ah, those who are....biologically...ah.... *persistent*.... must be controlled using whatever means available."

*Meet the Press*, I think it was. The term did not catch on for some reason. Shame.

## **Lionel**

We all got to bed, meaning our sleeping bags, pretty late that night; Widgeon came to the school at about nine with his cameraman, and we had forgotten to tell him that there was no power in the school, so they had a little problem with the lighting. Melissa wound up being interviewed by the light of the lanterns we had, which Widgeon said would be fine, except he would somehow have to explain it in the documentary. He talked to her for about an hour and a half, and Widgeon stayed after that, just to join in on the drinking, which took place in Principal Polley's office. From the decor of the room, it seemed Mr. Polley was just a wee bit full of himself, and also don't let anyone ever tell you that you can't win a slew of awards when you work in an elementary school, because it's apparently not true. The guy had certificates in frames *everywhere*.

We sat around and had some beer, me and Mouses and Ronnie and Widgeon, and Widgeon told us some good stories about the TV biz, and we found out that he'd turned down a scholarship to Harvard when he was nineteen out of some crazy kind of dream of being a world adventurer, and had slowly lost interest in both adventuring and going to college, both. He'd stolen a camera from San Jose State University and started making documentaries. We told him the real reason Ronnie was travelling with us, and he said maybe he should interview Ronnie too, and

save the footage and use it only if he got in the free and clear, all the AWOL stuff behind him, but Ronnie was a little too nervous about that idea.

Widgeon drank too much and decided to sleep in one of the classrooms, since the next day he wanted to hang around a bit and grab some second unit context footage of Melissa, which meant we would be in the documentary too, in the background. Mouses' back was killing him so he was out by midnight, so it was just Ronnie and I who stayed up listening to the radio, and I remember him telling me stories of what it was like to go to a strip club, which I've never been allowed to do, so I have to live vicariously. And I was just about to leave and find Athena and crash out when the news came on and they talked about how those soldiers posted in Manhattan had claimed they were attacked by three zombies, and one of the zombies had taken a bite out of a soldier's arm. There was a very disturbing sound bite from him, about how the zombie's eyes never moved when he was biting him, just grabbed a hold of his elbow and sunk his teeth in. When the story was over, I looked at Ronnie and Ronnie looked at me, and he said, "It's a goddamn lie, Lionel," with more bitterness than I had seen in him before. He said it like he really, really meant it, and hated hearing it, and every second he'd had to listen to that story on the radio caused the acid in his stomach to roil. Alcohol had nothing to with it. The dude had just about had enough of the lies. That was just twelve hours or so before he told us all about the biggest one of all.

From *Song of the Living Dead*, a documentary by Douglas Widgeon, public television air date December 14, 2006, KTCA, Minnesota:

Scene 13, 21:15:00

99. EXT. MELISSA IN FLEA MARKET

NARRATOR: Unlike Cynthia, Melissa Lansford is going through it all without her parents, but by choice. She had always had problems with her mother and father's rules, and the zombie crisis quickly intensified the strain to the breaking point. When Melissa's parents decided to leave the country during the second week of the dead's return, and completely seclude themselves until it was over, Melissa refused to go with them. Instead she told them she would stay with some adult friends of hers, who planned to wait out the crisis on the road, moving from town to town, observing what was happening to the country.

100. INT. MELISSA IN CLASSROOM, LAYING OUT SLEEPING BAG

NARRATOR: She's very much a typical seventeen year old. She has friends back in State College she looks forward to seeing again. She thinks she might like to become an actress someday, or to work in fashion. She doesn't mind English

class, but she hates Geometry. There's something different about Melissa though, and there has been ever since the first week of the crisis.

#### 101. INT. CLASSROOM MELISSA INTERVIEW

MELISSA: It was the middle of the night, it was about two in the morning, and I got up to get something to drink from the kitchen, and I didn't bother turning the lights on or anything. And I was just standing there, stirring sugar into this pitcher of iced tea, and there was this....shadow right at the doorway, out of nowhere, it hadn't made any sound at all, there was a little tiny sound when it shuffled its foot forward onto the floor, and that was it.

#### 102. EXT. MELISSA IN REAR OF VAN, LOOKING OUT WINDOW

MELISSA (VOICE-OVER): It was just so much taller than my father, I knew instantly what it was, I didn't have any doubt in my mind, I mean, I know my mother or my father when I see them. And I was right next to the drawer where all the cooking stuff was, and I just opened it and felt around for a second and grabbed the big carving knife, and went towards the shadow and I started....you know, I started wailing away at it, I guess, I didn't think about it, I just took a few steps and started stabbing it. I wasn't going to stand there and let it wander into the kitchen. I guess I was....I was mad, that it could just wander in like that.

#### 103. CLOSE-UP, SLOW ZOOM IN ON MELISSA'S ELEVENTH GRADE PHOTO

*Q: Was it a shock reaction, was it fear, was it...?*

MELISSA (VOICE-OVER): No, no, I mean....I just thought, Hey, no, this isn't going to happen, so I didn't know how to kill it, really, but I figured I could at least put it down, or get it to change its mind, or whatever, so I just did it. No big deal.

#### 104. INT. CLASSROOM MELISSA INTERVIEW

*Q: What did your parents do when they came downstairs?*

MELISSA: They panicked, they went insane, and my father grabbed me and led me out of there, outside, and my mother ran out too, screaming hysterically, which was pathetic, I mean, they had freaked out more than anyone about this whole thing and I think they had gone so nuts that it made them forget the obvious things like locking the front door at night.

*Q: That zombie, the one you stabbed, never did get back up again, right?*

MELISSA: Yeah.

*Q: Do you think of it as killing something, or someone even?*

105. EXT. MELISSA GOING INTO GAS STATION SHOP

MELISSA (VOICE-OVER): I try not to think about it. I mean, it's sad that someone died and here they were getting up again and they had to die a second time, and so gruesomely.

106. INT. CLASSROOM MELISSA INTERVIEW

*Q: What did it feel like, to stab that person with a knife?*

MELISSA: Well....that's the thing, I don't remember that part of it. It got blocked out somehow. I don't even really remember my parents coming down the stairs. I remember grabbing the knife out of the drawer and walking towards the shadow, but it kind of cuts out there. And my memory picks up again with me outside on the lawn and the policeman talking to me, and a Specimen Control guy.

*Q: You don't remember any part of what happened when the knife came down, no feelings, no....*

MELISSA: No, nothing. I mean, I know what I did, I know I did that with the knife, because I have this weird....trace sense of it, but it's more like I read about it in a book and I didn't get all the details. I know I really stabbed the zombie a lot, and I know it only took a few seconds, but it's just gone.

*Q: Do you know that sometimes when someone experiences a tremendous trauma, like a car accident or something horrible their brain is trying to protect them from, they will have no memory of it, it will get washed away?*

MELISSA: Yeah, I know that, so I guess that's what happened, but I thought that happened only when you had a head injury, or you were knocked unconscious for a while. But for me, it's like that thirty seconds or so just never happened. Just the result of it happened.

107. EXT. MELISSA CLIMBING MONKEY BARS AT SCHOOL PLAYGROUND

MELISSA (VOICE-OVER): I hope that doesn't mean I'm some kind of violent person, I don't think it does, I try to give myself some credit. You know, you talk about how movies and TV de-sensitize people my age, well, movies and TV drum a few things into you about how not to behave when something scary happens to you. In every movie the girls scream and trip over everything, and they call the wrong people for help, and back up into the guy who's trying to kill them. If you see enough scenes like that, maybe it gets into your head, like, Hey, you've seen this before like a hundred times, so you know exactly what it takes to survive the

ghost or the serial killer coming after you. You don't act like a stupid girl. So maybe the movies can help you out sometimes.

108. INT. MELISSA READING HARRY POTTER BOOK BY LIGHT OF LANTERN

NARRATOR (VOICE-OVER): Melissa does not think she has been scarred by her experience, though her obliteration of the memory of attacking the zombie which came into her home might seem to suggest otherwise. Perhaps she will remember it all someday. For now, she has other things to think about.

109. EXT. MELISSA AND ATHENA C. PREPARING PICNIC IN FIELD

MELISSA (VOICE-OVER): People get so bogged down in their problems, but they bring so much of it on themselves, I mean....my parents are that way, too. It seems to me like when you're going about your business, every problem or every little thing that can cause you stress is sort of like a big heavy suitcase just lying on the ground. If you don't want to pick it up, you don't have to. You can just keep right on walking past it if you want, and you don't have to let the suitcases bog you down. My parents pick up every suitcase that gets in their way, like a lot of people. They're weighed down, they complain about so much, they get obsessed over everything from the past and stuff that people try to throw in their face, or big things like zombies running around, but no one is forcing them to obsess over things. They don't have to pick that stuff up off the ground. You make a choice, right? Just walk right past. Why suffer if you can just keep on going?

110. INT. MELISSA, CLOSE-UP, SLEEPING IN CLASSROOM

CUT TO: NEXT SCENE

## **2. Lake Linganore**

**We torched twelve zombies inside some tiny baseball stadium in Maryland once, Shiggs and I. When they tried to get out of the room, on fire, we just knocked 'em back in with a rake.**

**--DeMarko Cline, 37, Charlotte, North Carolina**

## **Lionel**

I woke up early, real real early, on Saturday, because my plan was to somehow get breakfast bought and prepared for these people, starting with Athena, because it was our anniversary of the day we met, which meant she would be awoken with two fruit and nut bars, apple juice, and an Egg McMuffin, none of which I exactly had on hand, so I had to sneak out and get them for her before she woke up, and also remember what everyone else wanted. It was about seven when I crept into the school locker room for my shower, and maybe seven-thirty when I left the gym, and saw Mouses coming toward me down the hallway. And I thought, Damn, my plan's been blown already, since when do these people get up before nine? But Mouses was obviously up for a reason, he looked real strange, pale and kind of shambling along towards me, and he said to me, "Lionel, would you mind dropping me off at a hospital if you're going out? I do believe I've had some sort of heart attack." And people say *I* joke too much.

## **Mouses**

A very unique experience, an experience full of contrasts. When I woke up I felt a bit disconnected, an odd floating sensation, as if my body were trying to levitate itself but just couldn't. My entire left side, from my head all the way down to my legs, was very warm, and I had no clue where I was, what day it was, or what my last name was. There was a definite sensation of pain, but it was buried underneath a stack of protective blankets. The pain seemed to be happening to someone else entirely. Getting up off the floor was out of the question, but that didn't worry me much. I was far too busy trying to remember why I was lying inside a classroom inside an elementary school. For some reason, I looked down at my right hand and thought, "Wow, look how old I am, look at that wrinkled skin, I'm really up there. How did that happen?"

## **Lionel**

I had left my wallet and the van keys back in the room, so I went back in there and made too much noise, so Athena woke up, and I had to tell her what happened. So she whisked herself out of her sleeping bag and came along. Melissa kept snoozing, nothing could ever wake her up, she was a tigress when it came to shut-eye.

Mouses didn't need us to help him out or anything, and didn't even seem to want us to touch him. You know, those sixty-ish college professors don't like to be touched, it's a fact. He got into the front seat of the van and we went off, and I was very nervous because one moment I was absolutely sure where the hospital was, and the next moment I wasn't so positive of it. The landmarks weren't where I'd thought they were. So I went on faith, and I didn't tell Mouses or Athena that I had these doubts. I didn't want to worry them until I had to. I guessed in the end. For a bad second I thought I was completely lost. But I got it right.

## **Athena**

Mouses was scared, of course he was scared; he was being far too funny about the whole thing. He said he felt back to normal, just thought he should have some tests done and put it on the university tab, and while he was at it he just might treat us to a round of HIV tests. That sort of gallows humor, you know. But his face—gray as a blanket.

## **Lionel**

We went into the emergency room and they were very quick and responsive. One thing I remember is that there was a girl in there, a college girl from the looks of her, and her hand was wrapped in about fourteen towels, just waiting for the doctor. She had half of Bed Bath and Beyond around that hand. Total overkill, whatever was wrong with it.

The doctor took him back and sat him on top of a table and asked him a bunch of questions, nodding all the time, taking it all in stride. Mouses gave way too colorful a description of his symptoms, but that was Mouses. Every word he spoke, it was like he was trying to win an essay contest. The doctor told us he was going to run a bunch of tests, and it would take a couple of hours. So Athena and I drove to McDonald's, and I bought her that anniversary breakfast, which cheered her up for a little while, not too long. She was really worried. She was quite fond of that overly literate old warhorse, you know.

## **Athena**

I just didn't feel like going back to the school just then. Everything felt wrong somehow. The whole world felt wrong. It was the only unusual, precognitive

sense I'd ever had, and it wasn't about Mouses, not at all really. It was for the very atmosphere we were driving through, every person and place on earth. The vibes were just off. I asked Lionel if he felt the same way. He frowned and said, "I can't describe it, but you just might be right."

**Timothy Zamberger, United States Department of Homeland Security**

The ballpark estimates concerning the number of zombies within the United States as of week three of the crisis came from a very loose collection of hospital data and educated guesses based on factors that had never been sorted out before. Literally, three people got together in a room with a blank pad of paper and tried to work out how many zombies we could be dealing with. The number of the dead in state, county, and hospital morgues, funeral homes, plus the "sudden" dead who passed from accidents and illnesses outside of hospitals, was estimated loosely from a day's worth of compiling computer statistics from various public databases. Then a certain percentage was added, based on factors that were a little too dark to explore in full detail, but which allowed numbers growth for everything from counting about thirty percent of missing persons as undead to factoring in the dead interred in places that could theoretically be escaped from. And when it was all added up, it still made no earthly sense; the total was just absurdly low for the numbers of zombies witnessed in public places and which were encountered by the military. Because the vast majority of them are still unidentified, it will take us a long time to figure out where so many of these zombies were coming from. It makes you think.

THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY'S  
GUIDELINES FOR THE PROPER PROCEDURES IN HANDLING AN  
ENCOUNTER WITH A WALKING SPECIMEN, *published January 24, 2005 in  
235 American newspapers:*

- 1) A walking specimen may be diseased and it is not yet fully known what sort of pathogens it may carry. Therefore, any contact with a specimen must be avoided.
- 2) It is better to retreat from a specimen than to fend it off unnecessarily. In the event of seeing one, you should enter the nearest dwelling, storefront, or other interior and shut and lock the doors and windows. Entering a car and driving away slowly will also take you safely away.
- 3) Trained Specimen Control workers can be reached by dialing 992 on any touch tone phone. Clearly state your name and your location and wait calmly for the authorities to arrive.
- 4) In the event that you are unable to avoid contact with a specimen, ward it off by pushing against its chest or back with a long stick or object that you can grip

firmly while at no time getting within arm's reach of the specimen. Striking the face is not as effective in throwing the specimen off balance and away from you.

5) It is almost never necessary to use violence on a specimen. They will move slowly and walking away quickly is the best defense. The use of violence in anything but a physically threatening situation may represent a violation of law.

6) If you are injured by a specimen, call an ambulance or get someone to take you to a hospital. There is no need to panic, but it is always advisable to let others provide your transport to an emergency room. Do NOT allow a cut or wound to go untreated for more than twenty-four hours.

KEVIN REED DOWNEY'S GUIDELINES FOR THE PROPER PROCEDURES IN HANDLING AN ENCOUNTER WITH A WALKING SPECIMEN, from *The Wee Hours With Kevin Reed Downey*, The E! Channel, March 21, 2005:

1) A zombie can be distinguished from a living person by the slow rate of its movement. A zombie can be distinguished from a clerk at the Motor Vehicle Bureau because one of them is wearing a nametag.

2) Most zombies do not understand a word of English. They will respond only to the universal language of screaming and running.

3) If for some reason a zombie does speak to you in fluent English, he's obviously not from this country.

4) Do not attempt to feed the walking dead. If you want to see a well-fed zombie, a list of Keanu Reeves movies is available at Blockbuster.

5) You should only use violence against a zombie if it tells you it's in talks with Whoopi to produce a third *Sister Act*.

6) In the event that you are scratched by a zombie or otherwise slobbered on, Match.com is not liable and will not refund your membership fees.

7) If you see one or two zombies, you should remain calm and call 992 for a Specimen Control van. If you see a group of four or five zombies, you should call 911. If you see a group of nine zombies, you're probably just watching a Detroit Tigers game.

*...So Athena and I drove back towards the hospital to wait for Mouses to emerge from the medical gauntlet, but still having an hour or so to kill, we decided to just*

*get outdoors for a while and breathe in some air that wasn't full of chalk dust. Maybe a half mile from the hospital, there was a nice empty park with tennis courts and a playground and three or four soccer fields, so we took a brisk walk through that. It was another gorgeous morning and it was going to be another gorgeous day. That made about nine or ten in a row, as I'm sure you know. All spring: perfect, day after day, that's my memory of the weather. I might just be putting a positive spin on it, but even Athena started talking about how flawless it had been, as if we were living in northern California, just like a certain sister of mine to whom this letter is addressed, and who thinks she's cooler than everyone else just because she hasn't seen snow in eight years.*

*Past the park, the surroundings got even nicer and more serene. There was a long downslope that ended beside a little creek and a field beside it with croquet wickets set up. No one had mowed the field for a long time, so it was better to just doze in than play croquet in. And of course it was ruined, as these things so often are, by the presence of a zombie. This one was dead, or asleep, or gone to rest, however you refer to it, just like the vast majority of the others. It was lying in the field near the creek in some tall grass. We felt the need to walk past it, just to confirm it wasn't a homeless person or something. What the zombie was wearing was kind of puzzling: all I saw was the color pink, and Athena decided to get even closer, after me telling her to be careful, for God's sake. She's always been a daredevil. I followed her just in case things got weird.*

*The zombie was wearing a bridesmaid's dress; that's what it was. Athena had to tell me that, because I really didn't understand the difference. A long, flowing, pink bridesmaid's dress, not a very attractive one, Athena said. When Athena saw that, she got very quiet, and very sad, and I may have accidentally cursed God in that moment for putting that zombie there and ruining the morning, and maybe cursing God was what brought all the rest of it down on us starting that day, who knows. But I thought that despite Mouses' stroke, which was bloody horrible, certainly, I had managed to find a little place where I could give Athena her anniversary present, and the perfect weather for it, and it just got washed away because of that zombie. Athena wanted to get real close to it, and I let her, of course, despite the fact that I wanted to leave, so badly. Athena was right; the air was wrong, something felt different, everywhere.*

*We kind of crouched beside the dead woman and looked at her for a while. She was on her side. Her dress shoes were still on her feet. Her eyes were open, and Athena looked into them for a while, silently, studying her I guess, maybe artistically, or maybe just because it was so tough to look away from a face like that. The woman had been in her mid-twenties, maybe. She was a little overweight. A bee landed on her shoulder and crawled around a bit and I waved it away. There was one dandelion touching her forehead. I had this mental image of her lying in the exact same position the night before, from sunset through the darkest hour of midnight, into the pre-dawn, still staring at the grass, still dead, never going anywhere ever again, time not meaning anything. Finally Athena*

*stood up, and she sighed, and said, "Let's just go," and she backed away a few steps but she did not go, she just stood there, looking down, for several more seconds, and I put an arm around her, which she didn't seem to notice. Then there was a gunshot and what came next was just too horrible to think about.*

## **Lionel**

The bullet hit the bridesmaid in the face, so the shot must have come from across the creek, in the woods. The bullet just made it come entirely apart in the blink of an eye, and one second after that a second shot hit the zombie's head again, in the same place more or less, and maybe the bullets were the kind that were tipped with explosives, because the head disappeared in an awful spray, and Athena shrieked and grabbed me and I wrenched her away from where we were standing, about five feet away from the body, which all of a sudden was a torso and legs in a dress with nothing that was recognizable as a head. The body did not even jerk each time it was hit. I had my arm around Athena's shoulder and I half-carried her up the slope. She was coughing, sick, and making a strange sound deep inside her chest, as if she were vibrating with the force of her shock and her fear. When we got to the top of the slope she tripped and fell, and I helped her up again and we moved as fast as we could, which wasn't as fast as if we had been running individually, but Athena did not want me to let her go. I sort of knew what had happened, that the bridesmaid was just target practice for someone, some vicious bastard who had thought it would be good sport to frighten us and do some damage to a zombie at the same time. God knows why I just assumed that, why I didn't assume someone was trying to kill us all. But we had all heard about the hunting games before, about the little contests, and the shots were so precise....but I see now that maybe I didn't even panic enough, that my survival instinct didn't kick in the way it was quite supposed to. Anyway, we got into the van and drove away. Athena didn't cry. She just doesn't cry, it's not her way. Instead she got very quiet, which meant she was upset beyond being able to express it. She became a stone. The way that girl, the bridesmaid, vanished, or rather the way it was only her head that disappeared with two shots, in less than two seconds....and of course we had both been still looking right at her face when the first shot hit, and we didn't even have a chance to look away before the second one came. And that was how, in conjunction with Mouses' stroke, a perfect summer day became something totally different once again, just like at the baseball stadium with that roomful of ashes.

I held Athena for a long time as we sat in the parking lot of the hospital. One thing she hates is if you ask her if she's all right, so I didn't do that, and she didn't do it for me either. Finally, she said, "I really want to go home, Lionel," and I said, "I know," and told her we'd talk about it that night, when everything had settled down. After another ten minutes had passed I was about to suggest that we go back inside the hospital, but Athena crawled into the back of the van and just laid down, so I laid down next to her, and we looked at the ceiling for a while, not

speaking. She took my hand and held it. Eventually we had to go find Mouses, we couldn't just stay there forever, I guess.

Happy anniversary.

### **Athena**

You know, your most basic human instinct when something happens to you is to tell someone about it, it's a reflex. But some things slip out of your hands and go right down into you somehow, so the reflex is stunted. That's what happened with Lionel and me when we saw Mouses coming down the hospital hallway, holding his test results over his head with mock glee. We just bottled up what happened in the field, without consulting each other about it. And it disappeared, but it disappeared down into us, which wasn't good at all. That's never where things should go, but it felt like, to me, I had no choice. What I saw in the field was mine and mine alone.

### **Lionel**

So yes, Mouses had had what they call a mini-stroke, Mouses who had claimed never to have been sick a day in his life, and when the doctor went through his medical records, that confirmed it. Mouses had never been in the hospital for any reason. Now he had a low grade case of heart disease. His cholesterol level was lousy, he never got any exercise, and so he'd gotten snuck up on, and now the doctor had given him a list of five hundred things to be careful of, and told him that he had to get tested for various things every two months. He spent the trip back to the school telling us how bizarre it had felt to make his journey through the hospital, a patient for the first time at age sixty-one. He was fairly certain he would never go back for the tests. He said the experience of it would not be worth the extra few years they wanted to tack onto his life. And Athena said, Well, I'm going to make sure you go back for the tests, old man, whether you like it or not. There was a little bit of humor in her voice, but not terribly much.

All we said about our morning walk was that we'd seen an unpleasant sight or two. Nothing more. Not only can I still hear those gunshots exactly the way they really sounded, I can feel with complete precision the length of the gap between them, down to the millisecond. It's as if my brain chose that to fixate on rather than the obvious, which would be the image of the girl's head exploding. The sounds got embedded and I was almost, but not quite, spared the visual. Maybe for Athena it's been the opposite, I don't know. And now that I've talked about it, that's one more thing I'll never have to talk about again, until the time comes to write my autobiography. Thank God no one would ever want to buy it.

## **Athena**

Everyone was up by the time we got back, of course, so we told them what Mouses had been through, and everyone treated him with kid gloves, which instead of irritating him seemed to bring him a little satisfaction. Even he thought it would be a good idea to remain sort of inert for the rest of the day, so I made him some breakfast and Lionel set a folding chair out on the playground for him so he could hang out there and read all day if he wanted. I guess that was the closest Mouses would ever get to knowing what it was like again to have a wife take care of him. He ate it up.

And Widgeon was still there, which kind of surprised me. I really think he wanted Ronnie to open up about his military experiences, especially about the new AWOL law, and maybe he was just there to work him a bit, but beyond that, it could be that he was just a little lonely. He'd gone through a pretty sad divorce, apparently, and for him spending Saturday with us was just more fun than knocking around his apartment all day, which is what he knew he'd wind up doing instead of working the phones and trying to get his documentary together. He said Saturdays always got him down. We didn't mind him hanging around. Lionel's ultimate idea would have been to see the group snowball into the thousands anyway.

We all sort of did our own thing for a couple of hours. When the stranger came, I know Ronnie was in the gym, shooting baskets, Mouses was sitting on the playground reading some Thomas Mann thing, I think it was *Buddenbrooks*, and talking with Widgeon about heart treatments; Widgeon's father died of a stroke ten years ago. I was in the music room, fiddling with the piano there.

I couldn't concentrate on anything, I admit it. I would shake once in a while, just in my right hand. It was only three o'clock, but all I could think about was, this can only get worse, I just wanted it to be tomorrow. And I didn't want to go to sleep that night. Not because I was afraid of dreaming of what had happened in the field, but because before I ever even got to dream, it would be there to stay.

## **Peter Toye, Newsweek**

The AWOL amnesty had to be drastically shortened because the number of soldiers who went absent without leave did not drop at all from January to April, it remained consistent no matter how much closer the military got to their stated goal of exterminating all the zombies. You wouldn't see a percentage of AWOLs that high even in wartime. There was just something about the details these men and women were sent out on that got to them. Part of it was that a lot of people were taking advantage of the unsettling of the country to seize the opportunity to start new lives or drastically alter the ones they already had. Many assumed that the situation was so catastrophic that they would never be prosecuted for running out on their commitment. So the army decided something had to be done, a firm

statement that an agreement to defend one's country through military service was a promise and a contract.

### **Lionel**

I was showing Melissa how to fix some things on the van. Melissa was a great show-me-how-to-do-that girl whenever she got bored. She had to keep occupied, no matter what, or she would start insulting my haircut. So I was showing her how to fill the washer fluid and top off the oil, and telling her what leads were and why she should never believe the people at those quick oil change places when they told her she needed a new air filter. And a gray Cadillac pulled into the parking lot. I should have parked the van around back and out of sight, of course, but after that morning I hadn't been thinking.

This guy in his late forties, early fifties got out, a guy in very good shape, with a faint southern accent, and he came over and asked if we needed help with anything, if we were having mechanical problems. So I told him that wasn't it, we were just fooling around with the van a bit. He introduced himself as Henry.

### **Melissa**

I was totally not there to that guy. Lionel introduced me and he just kind of nodded and smiled and then I don't think he looked at me ever again. That was just weird. You'd think at least he'd ask me if I was Lionel's daughter or sister or something, but nope. Maybe his granddaughter, ha.

### **Lionel**

He asked me....I don't know, a couple of questions about the van, but the most obvious question, which was why we were there, he didn't ask. I had an answer prepared, that we were going to knock some golf balls around the field out back. That was the best thing I could think of, but I didn't have to trot that one out. Henry mostly asked what we thought about the morning news reports out of Salt Lake City, which we hadn't heard. He said people had been talking about a group of zombies that had attacked people in a bank, but mostly it had seemed unsubstantiated, and he hadn't even heard it on more than one station. I told him I hadn't seen any zombies for days. I'm not sure why I lied. I was nervous. I didn't want him to know that a bunch of adults and a teenage girl were trespassing and basically living in a public elementary school, and every question he asked seemed to be getting me closer to having to invent some real whoppers.

### **Melissa**

If it had been just me there, I would have said, "Oops, so sorry, gotta be going," and I would have gotten in the van and driven away, but Lionel wasn't thinking

right for some reason. He didn't know how to make the guy go away. He should have just tried, "Bye bye, Pops."

### **Lionel**

Finally he left. He gave us a little wave and he rolled his Cadillac out onto the main road and drove out of sight. I waited till he was totally gone, and then Melissa and I got in the van and drove it around the side of the school to hide it a bit. Then we went back in, and Ronnie was waiting right inside the door, and the first thing he said to me was, "Lionel, I've gotta get out of here, and now."

### **Douglas Widgeon**

I had come in after talking to Mouses, and Ronnie was standing at the doors that looked out on the front parking lot, and he had this very intent look on his face....I asked him what was up, and he said he might be in a little bit of trouble. He was watching this gray car roll out of sight, and as soon as it was gone, he walked the length of the hallway and met Lionel on the other end.

### **Lionel**

Ronnie said that the man I'd just been speaking to was definitely military, and that he was about ninety percent sure he was looking for Ronnie, and that he was going to be back very soon. Ronnie had been watching the whole encounter, and said he could tell from the guy's walk that he was military. Every little thing about him, he was sure of it.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

From his walk, he could tell that. He was utterly convinced he was right about this. Lionel told him that the guy, this Henry, hadn't even asked if they were there with anyone else, or even what they were doing, and to Ronnie that's what made it so very suspicious. And he wasn't taking any chances.

### **Lionel**

I was kind of lost. I said, "Jesus, Ronnie, they're really looking for you? What the hell did you *do*?"

### **Douglas Widgeon**

This was not just an AWOL soldier, then, wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses when he went out during the day so he wouldn't attract any undue attention. Ronnie was on the run, and he didn't think he had time to explain it just then. He thought the guy might be back with MPs within minutes. We were all walking down the hallway then, and Athena came out of the room she was in, asking what

was up. Ronnie grabbed his backpack from the classroom he'd been sleeping in and started looking around for his wallet. Melissa just looked frightened.

### **Lionel**

Ronnie was going to go out the back; he didn't want us to just hop in the van and go, in case we were pulled over by the MPs. He asked if we could meet him somewhere in four hours and he could explain this, but he said he understood if we just wanted to take off. So we decided we'd meet him on the little street around the corner from the arts center we'd been at, at nine. He really wanted us to disappear until then, if not for his sake then because the next time someone came to ask questions, we might get into trouble for being inside the school, and that would give someone an excuse to hold us and pelt us with questions about where Ronnie had gone to. I didn't need any convincing.

### **Melissa**

You'd have thought he'd murdered someone, the way he walked out of the school and started jogging toward the woods. Ronnie was so freaked out.

### **Ronnie**

I had no idea where I was going to go. I didn't know anything in the area, so I thought I'd just head deeper into the woods for a while, figure out my way from there, find some dive maybe and read a book with my chair facing the front window for a while. Anyway, for all I know, when I left the group and went into the woods and got attacked fifty feet in, I was one of the very first people ever to actually get into a serious, dangerous fight with a zombie who wanted to kill me.

### **Lionel**

So off Ronnie went. I had almost completely forgotten about Mouses. Here the man has a stroke in the morning, and a few hours later he has to be on the run from the military police who may or may not have been coming back. He was okay about the whole cloak and dagger thing, he didn't try to be pithy or theoretical, he just hauled ass like me and Athena and Melissa and Widgeon. No cameraman for Widgeon, tough break.

### **Mouses**

There was a very tense silence when Lionel and Athena went into their room to gather up their things. I followed them, just trying to be helpful. They spoke in mono-syllables as they grabbed everything. Lionel asked her if she could think of anything they were leaving behind, and without a word Athena pointed across the room to his watch, which was sitting on the teacher's desk, and then again she pointed to the chalkboard ledge, where his blue Notebook of Mystery which he

carried everywhere had been left sitting. Just pointed, not in a rude or hostile way, but as if to say, All right, if you say we have no time to talk, we have no time to talk, let's be out of here and forget we were ever here, that's fine, we're done with this place, now you need to be as fast as you've asked us to be, come on.

And we were in the van and driving away very quickly. Lionel paused at the edge of the parking lot and closed his eyes for a second. He was trying to remember which way the man in the gray car had gone, and Melissa told him he'd gone left. So Lionel turned right. Lionel reminded Athena to put her seatbelt on and she did so without a word.

Widgeon had climbed into the van with us without ever giving a care to his own car. He'd parked it the night before in the adjacent neighborhood out of respect for Lionel and Ronnie's concerns that no one see them, and he seemed just fine with letting it sit there. He sat where Ronnie used to sit, on the floor between myself and Melissa. He sat cross-legged, just as Ronnie had. A bit of an unsettling omen.

### **Melissa**

At first we just went grocery shopping, then Athena suggested we all splurge a little and have a really good meal at a restaurant somewhere, some place where Mouses could eat really terribly since the next day he'd have to start really watching himself. Lionel tried to get a nice argument started over where we should go, just to entertain us, and we wound up at some sleazy place with pool tables, because that's where everyone wanted to go secretly. Me and Mouses were the ones who finally admitted it. So we played pool and I had a hamburger, and Mouses was funny because he tried to get everything unhealthy they had in the restaurant on top of his hamburger. He ordered a Polish hot dog to go with it and he cut that up and put it right on the burger and grossed us all out when he tried to eat it.

### **Athena**

Lionel parked the van in the middle of the parking lot, so that it was surrounded by other cars. He didn't like that it was still visible from the road.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

In the middle of pool, they switched the TVs in the place over to CNN, which was reporting three more confirmed attacks by zombies on people. No video footage yet, fortunately, but this time it was the top story. No one had been killed yet that anyone knew of. That entire restaurant was just riveted to the TV. I remember there was just one guy, at one of the corner pool tables, a real skinny guy in a leather jacket, who just kept playing pool as if he was completely unaware that

everyone else was glued to the set. He just racked them up and set them down, one after the other. Didn't even look up, I don't think.

### **Lionel**

When they went to a commercial, Mouses said, "You know, leaving my horrifying brush with my last end aside, I could have sworn from the time I woke up that something didn't feel right today."

Since that morning, none of us had seen a single zombie, anywhere. That had only happened on one day before, the day we spent entirely at Longwood Gardens.

### **Athena**

We were a little bit late in meeting Ronnie because we got kind of lost. You'd have really thought that with all our back roads driving, we would have seen some zombies, but no. We kept the radio tuned to the news. For now, they were still going on with regular programming. They started going full-time with the zombie reports just a few hours later, as if it were starting all over again.

Ronnie was sitting on the steps of the arts center with his head down. I guess he felt a little safer now that it was dark. He got in the van and you couldn't help but notice that the left sleeve of his T-shirt was gone. I asked him about it right off, and he said, "Well, you know, it's been a really, really interesting evening."

### **Ronnie**

I wasn't five hundred feet into the woods next to the school when it had happened. There was a very thin trail beaten down and leading back into the heavier brush, where it eventually ended. But standing in the center of the trail, shambling towards me, was an old man in a brown suit, a zombie, walking no faster than they always did, really. I was going to give it a wide berth just because it was my instinct, everyone's instinct, to avoid them, but he was coming right at me, which meant I'd really have to go into the tall grass to avoid him entirely, so I started to run right at him and I was going to elbow him out of the way as I ran, just to get past him as fast as I could and not have to absorb too much detail. I'd already seen that he had a bad gash on his forehead. I swung my elbow when I was within two feet and out of nowhere he lunged at me, lunged at my neck.

I dragged him along for a few feet, and he wasn't letting go, and I had never really felt one like that up close, in direct contact, and I was so repulsed that for a second I didn't even fight back. I pulled on his arms but he held tight, much tighter than a seventy year old man should have been able to hold on. So I bent over at the waist and flipped him, and his back hit the ground first, then the back of his head, and his eyes rolled up into their sockets, but in the same motion his right arm swung around and gripped my ankle. I tried to hop out of his grasp but it

didn't work. And then he opened his mouth, with his corneas still invisible, just two white scleras, and went for a bite of my leg. He got nothing but material, and then I knelt down and drove my fist into his face. It didn't slow him much. With my other foot I pinned his neck down, trying to balance myself, and I just pressed and pressed. I thought his hand would never let go of my ankle, but finally it did. His grip loosened just enough so that I could get out. Instead of trying to finish the zombie off I ran for it, and looking back for just a second I saw him getting up again. My foot would have crushed a human's neck, but the zombie kept going. I tore down that path as fast as I could, and I didn't stop running until I had popped out of the woods a half mile later and into the cul-de-sac of a residential neighborhood. So I knocked on the first door I came to, and someone opened up, and I told them that I'd just gotten into a fight with a very persistent, very angry zombie, and that I was in the military and they should either stay in the house and call for the police and the Specimen Control team, or lend me something to go back into the woods and finish that one off. The guy said he'd go next door and get his neighbor's gun, that he would take care of it, and he would keep an eye out. I hoped to God he meant it. I couldn't tell if he did or not. I didn't stick around to answer any questions.

## **Lionel**

A military convoy went past us as we drove along 80, a bigger one than we had seen before, about six or seven trucks. We turned the radio on and the news station was going live now, with all kinds of reports of zombies getting violent. Apparently it was everywhere.

I had a habit of putting the high beams on because they were like deer sometimes, the zombies, crossing the roads indiscriminately. We saw one then, it was walking off the road and into the woods a quarter mile ahead. By the time we got to it, we only saw its back moving into the bushes. Athena was scanning the map and she found a campground a mile away near Lake Langanore, so we checked it out. Mouses went in and got us a cabin for the night, one of those rickety things with some bunk beds and nothing else. He said the woman behind the counter in the reservations hut didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary about the night, except that it was really, really slow. The campground was at least half deserted.

## **Douglas Widgeon**

That was a very unsettling feeling, bringing the sleeping bags and such into the cabin, because we were all keeping one eye out for shambling things that might come after us. We didn't see anything. When we got into the cabin we lit all the lanterns and closed the door tight and turned on the radio and hung out on our bunkbeds like the prisoners of war in *The Great Escape*. There was not a sound around the campground. Our cabin was in a row of twelve, of which two others were occupied. You could only tell that because of the faint glow through the windows.

## Ronnie

Here's what happened:

Back in March, when I was stationed at Fort Lomax, a call went out around the base for people to volunteer for an S.T.G. test they had supposedly been working on at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. This was during the time when there was a lot of paranoia growing about S.T.G.; every couple of days the media would splash a story around about someone who had been scratched by a zombie and had then developed some rough symptoms of something or other, chills, nausea, partial paralysis, and two total paralyses, one in Canada, one in Florida. Ten soldiers had been treated for it. At that point it was just penicillin they said they were using. So I volunteered to give a pint of blood for the test, and fill out a bunch of medical history forms, after which I and about twenty other people came back the next day and they gave us what looked like a green Chiclet to swallow. This was the second part of the test. The doctors explained they wanted to see the effects of a certain dye on our system, which would be read through urine output over the course of just a few hours. Apparently they wanted to use this dye on people taking a test for S.T.G., because it would quickly indicate levels of some enzyme in their blood. I think I'm remembering this right. There would supposedly be no side effects, except that our urine was going to be various shades of green. We had to collect it in these cartons that looked like the kind you get Chinese carry-out in. Good times.

Well, I got sort of sick a couple of hours after I took my Chiclet, I had a headache, a little fever, nothing interesting, except they wanted us to report any symptoms whatsoever, so I did. And they wanted me to hang out in the infirmary for a full day so they could check me out. That was a long Tuesday, just laying there, completely alone, while they took my temperature and just sort of monitored me in no threatening way. The fever passed and they thanked me and gave me a two-page receipt that I could turn into Payroll so I could get my \$125.

The next Wednesday just before going over to Payroll I scanned the receipt for a place to sign my name, and I noticed that one of the various boxes said "Reason for Stay", and someone had written in the number 49 and the words "S.T.G.-related illness." When I turned it in, the guy at Payroll saw that too, and he said since this receipt had to be put into my medical file after they were done with it, I might want to get that corrected at some point.

A friend of mine who had volunteered for the same test a few days after I did asked me if I had gotten a little ill, because he had too, and so had another guy he knew. And then he asked me if I had enjoyed my "S.T.G.-related illness." He had gotten the same description on his form, written in by hand.

This just stuck in my mind as strange. The people who had come to administer the tests were gone, taken off again for Atlanta, I suppose, who knows. And I also

began to think it was weird that they would send someone out to an army base hundreds of miles north to do this, when they could have gotten anyone. Maybe that's the way these things were done, who knows really, but I guess I have a suspicious mind.

I let it go for a month; I figured what the hell do I know. Then one day in April I read an article in the newspaper that attributed sixty-one cases of S.T.G. to the military as a whole. Now if the only way you could contract S.T.G. was a scratch or bite from zombies which I'd never seen scratch or bite anyone, that seemed to indicate that soldiers were totally careless idiots who were walking up to them and saying Howdy and letting them have a go at us. I called the newspaper and tried to get a hold of the reporter, but he was always out, and I didn't leave him a number because I wasn't crazy about the idea of anyone knowing I was talking to the newspaper. Finally I called him one night from the base convenience store, and he told me he'd talked to a Major Blair at Camp Torrez, who had quoted him the figure of sixty-one S.T.G. patients, and when the reporter had asked for a detailed list of where the soldiers served, Blair had his secretary fax him one. I asked him if he still had it, and he asked me to call him back in about twenty minutes. When I did, he gave me a rundown on the various bases that had reported their soldiers coming down with what appeared to be S.T.G. And three cases had come from my base.

### **Steve Bankard, reporter, the Washington Post**

All that Blair's office had given me was a table of raw statistics; he couldn't give me names. I told him I was interested in doing a follow-up piece, a couple of interviews maybe, with men who had contracted S.T.G., but he told me he couldn't reveal the identities of the patients, which seemed like a new policy to me.

### **Ronnie**

He and I talked some about S.T.G., about how many cases had been reported; one hundred and ten, according to that day's New York Times. Like me, he'd never read an interview with anyone who'd ever suffered from S.T.G. I told him my little story about the test, and then he told me to write down a phone number and call a guy named Horace Blankenship, who was serving at Fort Stewart in Georgia.

### **Corporal Horace Blankenship**

At Stewart we had one team of guys go out on a couple of sweeps in the first week of February, and then we were relieved of having to do that; the 102nd took over. But the local paper ran this insane story about how two of our guys had symptoms of S.T.G. from zombie contact, and they even went so far as to name them. They were both my friends, and they had both been in the infirmary for one

day each from the flu. Somehow it had gotten reported that they had gotten S.T.G. They called their families and told them it wasn't true, but it ended there. They didn't care what the paper printed. Why should they? But then that story got picked up by the major papers, and their names were in the San Francisco Chronicle and the Toronto Globe and Mail.

### **Ronnie**

My name popped up in the Globe and Mail as being a treated S.T.G. victim on the thirteenth of April. I found the article online. A day later, it was in the Baltimore Sun.

Go through as many newspapers as you want, you'll never find a doctor who can say without doubt that any S.T.G. case he treated wasn't caused by something else entirely, not some zombie scratch. As far as the total paralyzes went, the ones reported in Canada and Florida, it took me only about a week to figure out that was more an urban legend than anything. There was all this crap about how the names of the victims could not be released, and no doctors' names were ever mentioned, just the names of the hospitals where these people were treated. Watch all the press conferences, you won't see a doctor anywhere talk about what made S.T.G. different or how contact with a zombie could specifically lead to getting infected. There were a couple of investigative stories about how maybe S.T.G. was more of a myth than anything else, including a good one on the NBC Nightly News, but it didn't do much good. The military kept reporting S.T.G. cases, and so did everyone else. The details were another thing entirely, if you could find any at all. What was happening all along, I think, was that as soon as S.T.G. had a name, people would show up at hospitals after getting into a bit of a scrape with a zombie, and they would say, "Oh, I need an anti-S.T.G. shot. I don't want to become one of those poor bastards with S.T.G." And that's all it took to make it real.

### **Dr. Belinda Sherman**

By May the media seemed to be giving a little less credence to S.T.G. They were losing interest because it was just so tough to put a human face on this so-called illness. Where were the victims? Who were they? Who did anyone know who had suffered from it? Then it appeared on the evening news that a Russian girl had apparently died after having been accidentally bitten by a zombie, just accidentally, mind you. A twelve year old girl, said the news stories. I never saw her name printed anywhere. I'm not sure anyone else did either.

### **Ronnie**

I guess I'm an idiot, because I called the Army's Public Affairs office, and told somebody my story, and they of course said they'd look into it. Two days later I was coming out of class and a man came up to me, a Major Smalls, and he and I

went back into my empty classroom, and like an idiot I came right out and told him I thought the military seemed to be inventing fake S.T.G. cases, and whatever their reasons for it, I didn't care, but I just wanted my name to be removed from the sick list, I didn't want to be part of something like that. He asked me why I thought they would do that, why they would fake S.T.G. cases. I told him I figured it had to do with preserving their image, which had taken such a beating, what with the Steelton incident, and the public's objection to their presence on the streets. Some of it might have been political, I just didn't know. I asked him if he could explain why so many soldiers who I and Blankenship knew, who couldn't have been infected, were reported just that way, and he blamed it, real smoothly, on reporters doing sloppy work. Yeah, sure, they just invented names, and those names happened to belong to actual soldiers.

This guy, this Major Smalls, looked at me so patronizingly I just began to sweat. He said my fears would be noted, and while they obviously couldn't retract anything that had already been printed, they would do their best to make sure I was "cleared" of anything having to do with S.T.G. Only near the end of our little talk did the little voice inside my head screaming at me to stop finally get through. And I realized what a huge fool I was, how I was messing with my career in talking this way to a total stranger, slandering the military. Subconsciously, I guess you could say I wanted out pretty badly by then. When my parents went missing and I got a furlough, my mind was a total fog. I couldn't go back, I just couldn't. My legs wouldn't carry me. Once I was gone for a day, I just kept going. Finally, I felt I could breathe.

### **Lionel**

But the thing with the S.T.G. was not quite enough to convince him that they were going to come looking for him. What convinced him of that was simpler: when he went AWOL, he was the only soldier who had been at Steelton when that nightmare had gone down, and then gone running. Now, he was free to tell whoever he wanted the whole story. He had made accusations against the army, and then he had run for it. He had trouble written all over him.

We never did get the story of the burnings at Steelton from him. We never asked for it. That was one story we knew we could do without.

### **Athena**

The thing about Ronnie...I just don't know; as he told us that story, he got more and more agitated, and I could see something different in him, like a young boy coming out in him and wanting to blame his troubles on monsters that no one could quite see. I know he was telling us the truth, but how likely were they really to come after him, and how much of it was him trying to convince himself that he wasn't to blame for his mistake of going into the army when he hadn't really understood it? I had no trouble accepting the notion that they had falsified

records, invented S.T.G. from almost nothing. But he was taking it further, asking us to believe in a conspiracy against him, in a monolithic entity that suddenly had his personal ruination in mind....all I could think of was, maybe there was a point when Ronnie simply wanted a truth that wasn't quite really there, and he reached for it, because it gave him license to make his past into something *they* had destroyed, not something he'd lost himself.

### **Melissa**

We didn't see any zombies that night. After Ronnie told us that long story about the S.T.G. test, everyone got kind of quiet and looked out the windows and didn't say anything, so I listened to my Discman and let them get depressed about everything. When I really, really had to go to the bathroom bad Douglas and Lionel walked me over. They told me to look under the stalls before going into one. Wouldn't that have been hilarious, if that's how one got me? Because I went into a stall and it jumped on me, and I got eaten just because I wanted to go have a pee?

Lionel and Douglas didn't really think that was funny. I told them to lighten up.

### **Mouses**

The radio commentators began to repeat themselves, trying to fill up dead air, as it were, and then they gave up and classical music came on. Poor Widgeon, all those good tales from Ronnie and he didn't have his cameraman anymore.

When I laid down to sleep that night, I offered up a little prayer. It had nothing to do with zombies. I basically said, "Okay, body, you tried to kill me once today. What say we just try to get along, at least until I get around to treating you right?" I tried to figure out if I was ready for my heart to conk out in my sleep that very night, if I had settled my affairs. I wished I had said a better goodbye to my cat when I'd given him away to come out riding with Athena and Lionel, but that was about it.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

I had no one to call, really. Funny, how it really sank in that night, that I had no one to call. Even Melissa left a message on her father's cell phone, telling him she was safe and all right, and Mouses left a message at the desk of his mother's nursing home. I doubt Ronnie or Lionel or Mouses or Athena or Melissa were even really aware I was still there, in the cabin, not going home, not worried about my car. It was all right. In a strange way, it felt like something was happening to me for the first time in a very long time.

**Richard Rolstein, author, *The Dead Walk: A Year in America***

Sociologists had to invent a term for what America experienced when the dead first rose and essentially harmed no one, posed no direct threat. The term was *image shock*, and is meant to mean the immense effects of seeing something that damages the mind and the heart, even if it cannot conceivably cause one injury or death, now or at any time in the future. Hand in hand with that term was *system collapse*, the necessity of an individual to suddenly accept the truth of a phenomenon which, logically, simply cannot be real. There was a third term sociologists began to use when the zombies began to get up again and actively attack in May, a term that doesn't sound quite so esoteric, scientific. It was *brown fog*, the sense of despair, helplessness, and abandonment an individual suffers in the first days when already nightmarish situation unexpectedly becomes far, far worse.

**Athena**

Lionel and I were the first ones to wake up the next morning. I'd come awake in the middle of the night, actually about 4:30, and I saw Ronnie still sitting and looking out the window. He slept in, like everyone else. Lionel and I crept out of the cabin and walked down to the reservations hut, where there was a television set that hadn't been on the night before, but we figured we could ask the woman there to flip it on for us.

The woman was standing out in front of the building, and there were four or five people there too, in a circle around a dead body in the grass. They'd been waiting for a Specimen Control van to show up for an hour and a half, but none had come. One of the campers, who had been sleeping on the other side of the campground from us, had a zombie stumble right over his little one-man tent, collapsing it right on him. And then the zombie had pawed against the tent until the man had scrambled out, and the zombie went after him. The man, really just a kid from the university nearby, James I think he said his name was, had taken a rock and bashed him over the head, and that had put him down. He'd dragged the zombie all the way to the front office. He was terrified, he claimed the zombie hadn't gone down easy, and had been incredibly aggressive.

The zombie's head was at a bizarre angle, almost a ninety degree angle to its body. I guess the force of the blow did that. For some reason the kid was still holding the rock in his hand. He'd dragged the zombie there, still holding it, and he wasn't letting it go.

Lionel still wanted to see what the TV said, but I went back to the cabin instead.

*Lionel,*

*No sleep for me tonight, I'm afraid. I'm not terribly worried about zombies or my own defective heart; it's just the usual insomnia of an old bastard trying to figure things out for himself. Strange how while I seem to need less and less sleep as the years go on, I have less and less to do in those extra hours. Thank God I've only read about twenty percent of Earth's entire collection of books, and still have so many more to go.*

*I think the best thing for me to do now is step off this cruise ship and head back to Porch Lane, if not right away, then maybe first to my mother's nursing home to check in on her. I haven't seen her for almost three months. That's a pretty sorry state of affairs, no question about it. The money you and Athena save on gas now that I won't be weighing down the van should bring in enough to buy you a nice dinner for two somewhere when this has all blown over.*

*If it happens that I am not around when things get back to normal—if they ever do—it doesn't necessarily mean I've gone to my last reward, or they've thrown me into an old age home myself. It might mean that I've gone off on my own little trip, something not quite as ambitious as yours has been, but I hope still educational all the same. I've been thinking about this for the past couple of nights. I'm interested in seeing what a sixty-one year old man can absorb from his country on the road when things are at their strangest. I have no intention of writing a book about it, thank God, but all of my learning in the past ten years has come from reading the exploits of other people, and perhaps this little stroke of mine was as good a signal as any that I need to squeeze in just a bit more first-hand research before I stop moving altogether.*

*It's more than that, even. It's time to be alone again, truly alone, which is something I haven't experienced in almost forty years. I've been surrounded by colleagues and friends and a couple of ex-wives for so long now, I've forgotten what it's like to take everything in on my own terms absolutely, to see every sight and hear every sound unfiltered. Who knows what I might come to think if I'm left completely to myself for several months, or a year maybe, thinking of the entire country as a blank chalkboard.*

*I have to do this now, I believe, because I can't quite escape Athena's sentiment that to grow old alone is the worst curse anyone can endure, and this feels like the last time I'll be able to stand by myself without fearing that curse. Another couple of years and it'll be too late; I'll be too afraid to go solo. I can already feel that inside myself, that aching to cling to the people I know so I won't be abandoned in my little house. The worst part of this day was when the nurse left me alone in the examination room for just forty-five seconds, and I had a glimpse of what it might be like if no one, not even you and Athena, were outside waiting for news of what was wrong with me. It was terrifying. So I'll roam now, and I'll stop when I get*

*scared, which may be sooner than I think. What would be even scarier is if I get out there and find no one really misses me.*

*Every instinct I have tells me that it's time for you to go home now, too, Lionel, not because you've seen all there is to see—in fact, I'll bet the next couple of months would be incredibly memorable if you were able to "stay out in the cold" somehow—but because you'd be risking too much by going on. Melissa, Ronnie, and I have gotten much out of our little vacation from reality, but I'm afraid Athena really hasn't. She never needed any escape from anything; it was all a gift to you, her coming along, as you probably know. She knew you felt you needed something like this, something that could make you feel like you were finally in control, our leader, so to speak, and she would be willing to follow you even a little bit further down this path. How much further is the question. I wouldn't want to see you damage the best thing you have going in your life.*

*I remember when I returned to the states after going to Vietnam in 1969 for the university, what it felt like to be immersed in chaos for six months and then, after my flight home touched down at Los Angeles airport, to sit in my car in the parking lot for an hour before driving back to my apartment, with all that silence and routine waiting for me. I felt depressed for almost a year and a half, because nothing on this side of the world could compare to the grisly drama and the ugly electricity that watching a war up close generated. Now I see you carried away on that same current, living a life that's become weirdly charmed because the country is so up in the air, riding along in the van with no direction, no forward or backward, and not knowing what's coming next. I know you think that your life was too quiet before this, too cluttered with dead end jobs and days of sameness and of watching Athena become more and more fulfilled as an artist and a human being, maybe to the point where you felt like you had fallen far behind her. As long as you're roaming the purple mountain majesties, you'll feel like an adventurer. What I saw of war was revolting and painful and ugly, but it was thrilling in a dark way, and so is this, of course, and I completely understand what it's like for you, to feel such energy and vitality during the day and go to sleep with great guilt that it's finally found you only because of the dawning of such horror.*

*So you'll go back to Porch Lane, I hope, and maybe you'll have to wait tables at another restaurant, or work with the textbooks again at the campus for less money than any adult should make, and feel empty inside too many days of the week, and still remain very much lost as to what your life should be. The faster you get back there, though, the better, because that's where Athena is, and as long as you have her, your fight to understand yourself will be far less brutal than it could be. She's extraordinary, Lionel, which on the one hand you know very well but which on the other hand you've lost sight of because you've become so spoiled by having this gift for so long. She'll wait for you to catch up to her, she really will. She would wait for years, which is incredibly rare, and she won't yearn for New York or another degree or a real marriage or children, because her patience is seemingly*

*infinite, but to test that patience would be the act of a damned fool. For what it's worth (and I know that the idea of Everett Mouses talking about the human heart is fairly ridiculous), I've always believed people have to make a life entirely for themselves before they can be happy with anyone else—unless they happen to come across someone who is capable of giving freely without resentment or loss, and that person is Athena. It just might be no one else for you. She knew you were confused this morning about where the hospital was, and that for a second you were really panicked as you looked in both directions, foot on the brake, your mind racing, but she never let on. She waited to see if she absolutely had to say something, and then you made the right guess. With her, you've won a lottery whose odds brutalize almost everyone. Never make the mistake of thinking you're so special that you could win it twice.*

*I'm going to do something a little crazy now and leave this note in your shoe, and then walk right on out of this cabin and down the road. I haven't had an adventure of my own in so long that I want to jump right into it, and that means feeling what it's like to be totally irrational, to splash some very cold water in my face, become rudderless, throw away my compass. There are few things quite as odd and delirious as an old man in tennis shoes walking down a country road and not knowing where he's headed. I hope I get to see you both back on the Lane before too much time goes by, and I hope you keep each other safe from the darkest parts of the coming days, and that you learn much, and steal some simple happinesses where you can. Don't let the beasties scratch or bite or eat you, and just as importantly, don't let them come between you. I'm dashing off a quick letter of Athena's own, fifty words or so to say so long for now, and this one we can keep just between us.*

*God help us for being so glad we're around for this, right? It's all right; if he actually exists, he knows what we're going through, and he's already shown that he has the most whopping sense of humor we could have hoped for.*

*Your bespectacled friend,*

*Mouses*

## **Douglas Widgeon**

The radio and TV kicked into overdrive with their twenty-four hour coverage then, and it lasted something like four days. Zombies which had never been disposed of were waking up somehow, and new ones were everywhere. There had been three confirmed deaths already, which probably meant that there was either just one or maybe ten, but either way, it was obvious from watching the faces of these people as they told their stories on CNN that no one was making this stuff up. The zombies were definitely aggressive, and while there was no cannibalism going on that anyone could tell, they would have a go at anything from dogs to

children. Anything moving really, even cars. There was a great deal of videotape, people who had put their camcorders away two months after the first crisis began were scrambling now to get them out again. A lot of it showed the military response to the situation, which of course was immediate and brutal. There was a clip one night I remember which showed a zombie on fire from head to toe, and a group of soldiers surrounding it. It wasn't clear how the zombie had gotten on fire, not at all; they weren't using flamethrowers or anything that I knew of. The image reminded me of a child's game of Marco Polo. The zombie was staggering around and the soldiers would hop two or three steps back if it happened to wander over to them. No one wanted to be tagged.

### **Melissa**

We were all in the van, except Mouses, and I think Lionel was headed toward the highway, but then he turned off, and no one said anything, but it was sort of like we were just going to be spinning our wheels and we should have talked about where to go next before we left the cabin. So we wound up back at the elementary school. Lionel just said, "This should be pretty safe for a bit," so there we were bringing our stuff back in. It was bad, it felt embarrassing sort of, to be back there. We weren't getting ahead at all, we were just completely stopped. We had to keep listening to the radio to figure out what to do.

### **Athena**

On the way we wanted to stop somewhere just for a second to get some batteries for the radio. So we pulled off the road into a place called Smokey's Superette. Just as we were walking in, the owner of the place came walking out, locking the place up. He said Sorry, I'm headed home. He was going to get his wife and his dog and go to Italy, literally. His brother lived there. We said to him, Well, there's zombies there too, you know, and he said, Yeah, but at least over there I won't have to hear about it on TV so damn much.

He did something nice for us. He went back into the store when we told him we were there for batteries and he went up to the rack and he grabbed six or seven packs and just gave them to us. Batteries enough to last for months. When I crammed them into the glove compartment of the van, that was actually another bad moment. All those batteries, so we could listen to the updates on the radio forever and ever and ever.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

There was one other stop in there that I remember. Lionel wanted to buy a new notebook, he had run out of room in the one he carried everywhere, and which he wouldn't open in front of anyone. I asked Mouses about it once, and even Mouses didn't know what the deal with it was. Lionel said he wrote letters to his sister in it

and kept careful track of all our heights and weights. He laughed it off, but he definitely had a secret.

### **Lionel**

Ronnie and I figured that one thing to do to begin with when we settled in again at the school was check the place out from top to bottom, just to make absolutely sure there was nothing in there that might come at us instead of just drifting on by. We were walking down the hallway of the lower grades wing and Ronnie said to me, "Maybe we need something with us." He was talking about a weapon. I got the softball bat out of the van and gave it to him, and there was really nothing else suitable. So I went into room 110, where the others were hanging out, and I took a teacher's pointer off the chalkboard ledge and brandished that.

### **Melissa**

That thing Lionel took with him was skinnier than a pool stick, and not sharp, and about three feet long. I have no idea what he thought he was going to be able to accomplish with that. He swished it through the air at us real threateningly and he said, "Every generation needs a hero. I tell you, ladies, I am that man!"

### **Ronnie**

In room 125, which was locked, which we got into only after we found a master ring of keys in the principal's office, there was a cat feeding three kittens. The cat was just lying right in the middle of the floor and the kittens were noshing. She looked up at us, really perplexed, like "What the hell are you people doing here? You don't have enough to do?" So we looked around the room trying to figure out how the cat had gotten in there. The windows were all closed. The ventilation shaft up near the ceiling had no grille on it, so that was how she did it. I got up on a desk and peered in there, having this vision of a zombie crawling through the shaft. But the thing was so tiny, that cat must have actually squeezed her way into the room. We left the door open for her so she could prowls around at night. We didn't tell Melissa about the cat because she'd want us to go out and get some food for it, no doubt. Chances were it lived in the neighborhood somewhere. All the time we were in that room, it glared at us. It wasn't just a mother cat in a bad mood in the middle of feeding time. I swear, it was a total condemning of everything humans were.

### **Lionel**

The two kindergarten rooms were sort of funny, because their ceilings were actually lower than in the other rooms, as if they'd figured everyone in here was really small, so why not bring the roof down a bit. The first room had been the possession of someone named Mrs. Kirchner, and it was a little bit freaky because the bulletin board on the wall opposite the chalkboard was full of letters written

on construction paper from the students to her, some of them really primitive ones because the kids could barely write at all—they were all from different grades, like the whole school had been in on this project—and they all said Get Well Soon or We Miss You, one said Don't Be Sad Because You're So Sick, and in the middle of them all was a thumbtacked Polaroid of this woman, and she was obviously in the hospital, and she looked absolutely terrible. White as a sheet, trying to smile, it was an awful photograph. That woman was not well at all.

On the chalkboard someone had written a few sentences. And there was no way of knowing when they had done it. It might have been two hours before for all I knew. Because the windows were all closed and the door had been locked, I assumed it was months ago. The handwriting was male, that much I think I'm sure of, and as neat as could be. It was a poem. On one wall you had the student letters to this dying woman, and on the chalkboard opposite it you had this poem. Beside the poem, they'd drawn a zombie in eight or nine quick slashes. Its arms were reaching out at whoever was looking at it.

LAZARUS STUMBLED INTO A BAR  
SAID "GIVE ME THREE SHOTS OF WHISKEY, FOR I HAVE COME FAR!  
THE OTHER SIDE'S MYSTERIES STILL SWIRL IN MY EYES;  
THE PARTY REALLY STARTS WHEN A MAN UPS AND DIES.  
GATHER 'ROUND TO LEARN OF THE SIGHTS I HAVE SEEN  
AND POUR ENOUGH JACK TO MAKE MY TOOTSIES TURN GREEN!"  
THE BARTENDER NODDED AND SMILED AND SAID  
'WE'RE ALL SURE IMPRESSED YOU'VE COME BACK FROM THE DEAD,  
BUT SAVE THOSE DAMN VISIONS FOR SOME CHEERIER DAY—  
YOU'RE JUST GONNA SCARE MY PATRONS AWAY.  
I THINK FROM YOUR FACE, YOUR VOICE AND THAT SMELL  
ALL YOU CAN TEACH US IS, IT STILL SUCKS IN HELL.'

### **Ronnie**

I had the strangest feeling when Lionel and I went back to put the keys in the office again. I was watching the way the light was coming through the windows and I was feeling so weird. It was late afternoon by then, and the sun was trying to peek out from behind all these really creepy storm clouds, so all of these nearly black clouds had rings of bright light around them, and it gave a freaky look to the sky.

We opened the door to the principal's office and it was the shock of my life, I mean it, even more than when that zombie attacked me in the woods, because it was like I had just walked right into a dream. The guy behind the desk in the office was just sitting there in a suit and looking through some papers, like it was the middle of a school day and he had reports to file, and suddenly two zombie

hunters had stumbled in from another world, like two dimensions had gotten accidentally brushed together, and we were never supposed to have seen each other.

### **Lionel**

I recognized him at once, because of course this was the guy from the photos in the office, Principal Polley, the guy who had all his awards festooned around the office. He had absolutely no expression on his face; there was no shock, no anger, no nothing. He was totally empty. He looked like someone who had seen too much in Korea or Vietnam. His hair was perfectly neat, and he had this dark blue suit on. And he wasn't saying anything. He said absolutely nothing, so I had to speak, I told him we were really sorry, that we had come across this school and had thought it was empty, and we were going to leave soon, we had just stopped for a little while.

Nothing. No response, except for a little nod he made at us. He was holding these papers in his hands and he set them down, and then he got up out of his chair very slowly. Ronnie and I didn't know what else to say. I was scared, truly scared, because I thought this guy was nuts. Why wasn't he saying anything?

### **Ronnie**

He got to his feet and he came around the desk, moving kind of like an old man. I asked him if he was okay, and he did that little half-nod again, but it was kind of a delayed reaction, like he was hearing me a few seconds after I spoke. And he moved right past Lionel, and he went out the door and started walking down the hallway like he was seventy years old instead of just forty-five or so. He had a very old walk. We had no idea what to say or do. We were baffled.

### **Lionel**

I said something like, "Please stay," something really useless, but the exit doors were right there, and he pushed on the metal bar and went out the door. There was no car out there or anything. Ronnie and I went up and stood in the doorway, half inside and half outside, and we watched him go.

He just walked across the parking lot, and across the road. He didn't look left or right to see if any cars were coming. We were hypnotized, watching him. He went onto the jogging path that went all the way to the middle of town, and he went down it and out of sight. Weird, as soon as he disappeared from our field of vision we heard a thunderclap, but there was no rain that came afterward.

## **Ronnie**

I swear, the second he was gone, there was this thunder, but it never amounted to anything. I looked at Lionel and he looked at me, and he said, "Hey Ronnie, is it possible, just remotely possible, that we just talked to a goddamned zombie?" I said No, that couldn't be, he wasn't dead, you could tell a zombie instantly. And he'd nodded at us, and he was reading some papers, and he walked fairly normally, even if it was like he'd had arthritis and too much to drink. He wasn't a zombie. There's no way to prove it, but that would have been too bizarre for me to even think about, so I didn't.

## **Lionel**

And I thought, Jesus Christ, is someone watching us from above, and methodically testing the endurance of our imagination? Is that what this is all about? Are our brains just in a dish in some lab somewhere, getting fed the craziest impulses the scientists can think of, just so they can giggle and write down the results and deliver a paper on it someday? What was next?

We locked the place very securely that night. No more visitors, not even cats, that was absolutely it.

*....This letter shall end, dear sister, with one last description of an occurrence which simply could not have really taken place, and yet it did. I saw my stalker zombie one more time. It was that very same evening, and my hand is starting to hurt too much to go into the details, so let's just say that I stayed up late and everyone else was asleep and I did the unforgivable and snuck one of Ronnie's cigarettes from his bag in the van and sat out on the playground for fifteen minutes, puffing away, because I allow myself one cigarette every six months or so, and no, it's never more than that. And my zombie in the housedress was in the field that sloped away from the playground, wandering from east to west, never looking at me. How could I tell it was her, when it was two o'clock in the morning and I was so far away? Well, there was a full moon out, and she had a certain walk, and blah blah blah, but what it comes down to was that I just knew. Call me crazy, that's fine; I think I've been crazy for almost four months now.*

*You know what? She did look at me, just once. I couldn't see her face, but I swear I saw her head turn in my direction, and then she was out of sight again, gone.*

*I assume the postal system is still up and running and they've just added "nor the walking dead" to that little rhyme of theirs, so this letter should get to you in a couple of days. Say hi to the husband and the totniks, stay indoors for a while, and write me back at Porch Lane for when I get back there eventually, and tell me what I should call the book I'm going to list all these stories in. It'll have to be a*

*very original name, mind you—the world is going to be full of books just like this one in no time at all.*

*I'll call you soon.*

*Love, Lionel*

From *Song of the Living Dead*, a documentary by Douglas Widgeon, public television air date December 14, 2006, KTCA, Minnesota:

Scene 53, 1:23:15:00

355. EXT. MELISSA LANSFORD SITTING ON PUBLIC BEACH, ALONE

NARRATOR: On May 6, Melissa's friend Lionel drove her to a Denny's restaurant in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where her father would pick her up and take her home. She had been on the road with her friends for more than three weeks, but they had decided finally that it was too complicated, and perhaps too dangerous, to keep her with them any longer. When they arrived at the restaurant, Melissa's father had not yet arrived, so they sat in the van for a half hour, and waited.

MELISSA'S VOICE-OVER: We hadn't said much on the drive up there, it was two hours and we just listened to the news, I guess. When we got there we were looking at this guy who was across the parking lot, sitting on the little step in front of Denny's, which was closed. This guy was just sitting there with his head down, almost like he was asleep, but he had one arm stretched out and he was petting this dog who was sitting beside him, petting him with one arm over and over and over again, in exactly the same pattern, but never looking up. All we saw was the top of his head. He might have been drunk. The dog was pretty cheerful, it was a German shepherd. The guy did this for ten straight minutes, like a robot. Finally the dog wandered away from him, and went off into the woods. I guess the dog wasn't even his, because he never looked up.

We were watching that and Lionel got a real serious look on his face, and he talked to me differently then, and it really was like he was trying to be an adult for me. All this time he hadn't bothered with all that, that was more Athena's job, he supposed. But now, she wasn't around. She'd already hugged me goodbye and everything.

356. INT. MELISSA WALKING THROUGH THE EMPTY HALLS OF HER HIGH SCHOOL, ALONE

MELISSA'S VOICE-OVER: He said he wanted me to remember that exact moment, the time when I was waiting for my father to come and get me, so I could go with them and be miserable up in the mountains, or even in England. He told me that as soon as I got out of the van, I wouldn't really be seventeen anymore, that I would have aged somehow, just in the past couple of months. By going back with my parents, it would sink into me without me even knowing it, how suddenly I would be more than seventeen, I would be an age that had no number. There's no number for your age now, he said. And I wouldn't ever quite be like other people, almost but not quite. He said there had been something added to me and something else taken away, not just because the dead people all over the world had gotten up and walked, but because I had spent the time since then away from my family and free, and not afraid.

357. INT. MELISSA'S ROOM, CLOSE-UP OF ITEMS AND POSTERS ON WALLS

MELISSA'S VOICE-OVER: He told me he thought that because of the zombies, I might feel angry sometimes and not really understand why. And he said not to let anything make me forget that I was young. Not my parents, not the zombies, not anything. That night he wanted me to turn out the lights when I went to bed and say to myself: I am young, I am young, I am young.

It was like he was trying to teach me everything he'd learned, but it got kind of mixed up in his mind and he couldn't get the words out right. I don't know why, but it made me cry. So I sat there crying, and hoping my father just wouldn't ever come for me, ever.

The thing is, I do want to be like other people. I want to have a nice house and a good job and get married and live in a little neighborhood somewhere, and drive one of those cars no one notices. When I said that to Lionel, it cheered him up a bit. He wanted to hear that I would be normal after all this. So I told him I'd have a bunch of cats, too, and two boring kids, and I'd spend my weekends at Home Depot, and go on vacation in Ocean City. And when people asked me about the zombies, I'd say, "Oh, yeah, way back when, that was a really big deal for a while. It was like September 11 and the Vietnam War. But you know, we got over it."

358. INT. MELISSA'S ROOM AT NIGHT, MELISSA CLIMBING INTO BED, SHUTTING OFF THE LIGHT

MELISSA'S VOICE-OVER: I got him to laugh at me, and forget that I was crying. And eventually my father pulled up. When we drove away, Lionel was still sitting in the van. He promised he wouldn't go anywhere till I was out of sight, because he didn't want it to feel like he and Athena and the rest were leaving me. He wanted it to feel like the other way around. So the van stayed and I went, wherever it was I was going to.

## **Last Chapter: The Notebook**

Those zombies in the baseball stadium....I feel bad for 'em sometimes. A couple were looking at me even when they were melting. But then I remember, a zombie, an apple, a person, a typewriter, God hates 'em all equally and the same.

**--DeMarko Cline, 37, Charlotte, North Carolina, three days before his suicide in police custody.**

### **Kenyon, homeless man, Reno, Nevada**

WELL, my blueberries, there's nothing you can DO when the french fries come walking again, yes SIR, when the french fries decide to up and be lawnmowers, that is IT. I seen them walking past here just an hour ago, thump thump thump. But you know, it's no ACCIDENT that a french fry will become a lawnmower, if the blueberries are BAD then they by accident cause the TRANSFORMATION. And once TRANSFORMED into the lawnmower STATE, a thing cannot be RECALLED. All you can do is make blueberry rules for the lawnmowers and give them all our land. If you don't give it to them, they'll thump thump thump their lawnmower LEGS all over from Texas to Egypt and take it with anger. There's nothing more TASTY to a lawnmower than a blueberry, so watch your ARMS and your LEGS, young listener, when you go down strolling, teeth are everywhere now, teeth in mouths are everywhere! Those who remember what KING HEROD said to CAIN before he brought that big old boulder down on his head will be SAVED if they can get to a PHONE in time and tell the ANSWER MAN those SAME WORDS: "You're never gonna get AWAY with THIS one, brother, my LORD has WAYS of fixing the score. Next time you turn around, you'll have to feed ten billion LAWNMOWERS walking and chewing the earth, and they're only happy with tender, yummy blueberry BRAINS."

### **Athena**

When Lionel got back that night, Ronnie was already gone. He'd stayed till about noon, and then he'd called a cab, and he talked the dispatcher into sending a cab that would take him all the way to Point of Rocks. There was a commuter train to Washington from there, and he said he'd improvise his way further south, maybe figure out a way to get on a bus, take a chance and show his I.D. Lionel saw that Ronnie had left just from the look on my face. The first thing he said, even before I had a chance to ask him if everything had gone okay with Melissa was, "So when did he leave?"

I had tried to get Ronnie to take some money, but he said he was fine. Which wasn't the truth, of course, but I didn't argue the point. And he sat outside, and waited for his cab. He looked like a kid waiting for an ice cream truck.

You know, after you get out of high school or college, your whole process of making friends becomes so different...your friendships with other people are contingent on all the things that these people have going on in their lives. Jobs, wives, kids. It's all built around a structure they already have in place. But we managed to get away from that for a while; we were people who just knew each other, with no past and no future, and every day was just the next day on the road, eating together and telling the same jokes. Now I'm thirty-three, and there won't be another group like that, ever, I'm sure of it. It just fell in our lap, and before we knew it, it had disappeared. As for a scrapbook—we never kept one.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

He had just tapped lightly on the door to the library, where I was looking through some books. His backpack had been slung over his shoulder, and he said, "Take care, man," and he left without another word. I liked Ronnie. That was the way he did things. He was a big, muscular guy, but he wanted to be invisible. He thought going into the army was going to keep him invisible. It just didn't turn out that way.

### **Athena**

It didn't occur to me till later that we had never given him our address, or our phone number back home. And he was basically homeless, no way to reach him. So maybe we'd never hear from him again.

### **Douglas Widgeon**

After Ronnie left, it was just Athena and I in the school, so she turned on the radio but then she turned it off again immediately after hearing the top story on the news, which was about that man who was attacked and killed inside the movie theater in Miami, supposedly, and she didn't want to hear any more. I was really interested, but she wouldn't have it just then. She rooted around in a cabinet in the smaller of the two first grade classrooms and came out with a Nancy Drew board game, and she said, Okay, let's play this, just for kicks. So we spent a full hour playing the Nancy Drew board game, and Athena was very much into it, so she wouldn't have to think. When it ended and I won, she couldn't very well say Hey, let's play again, because that would really be admitting she didn't want to be left alone, so she took a nap instead.

I smoked just outside the main entrance. As I looked out on the road, I had a mental image of a million zombies walking at us, coming from over the hill. All with their arms stretched out towards us, and nowhere to run to.

## **Lionel**

The radio had told about some pretty gruesome things, no doubt about it, and it made me feel a little sick but also a little better about taking Melissa back to her parents. Four thousand troops had been called out to go on "emergency elimination missions", meaning they were out to destroy whatever was walking around with something less than the tact which they had tried to summon up till now. The routine had become: spot a zombie, clear the area of any living people with five or six guys running forward and keeping them out of the way, and then lay into the zombie with as much ammunition as it took to keep it from twitching. This was not as easy an idea as it sounded, apparently, because where before the zombies had just been content to lope around like vagrants, now they came after people, and there really were more than before, I would have sworn to it immediately. On the drive back from Gettysburg, I'd had to make three detours because the army had temporarily closed down a road, obviously to make a kill. Three detours, that was a lot. That didn't just mean three zombies killed; that was just how many were encountered on a road, for God's sake. And yet I didn't see one myself. I did think that was strange. Luck of the draw, I guess.

Traffic was a killer, too, because a lot of people were getting the hell out of whatever town they were in, just up and leaving. It wasn't so much the threat of zombies coming after them, I think, as it was that everything really felt like it was finally going straight to hell, everything.

They were getting harder to put down, too, the zombies were. That was hearsay, anecdotes reported from person to person and finally winding up on the radio. But it was a hell of a lot of anecdotal evidence, it really was.

## **Richard Rolstein, author, *The Dead Walk: A Year in America***

The runs on hardware stores and grocery stores were horrendous when the first zombie crisis struck in January; this time, it progressed to the point of violent looting. In suburbs and respectable neighborhoods, people who waited too long in line, and got too edgy and afraid, just started walking out with things, which started a chain reaction, and so it was a nightmare for merchants. There was a sense that whatever had to be done to arm oneself against the zombies, it had to be done immediately, right now, because God knew what was going to come lurching across the parking lot in the next fifteen minutes.

Speaking on crudely practical matters, the loss of productivity from January to April caused a recession; beginning on May 9, economists began to see signs that a total collapse might occur if the situation were not gotten under control quickly. This led to the president giving the go-ahead to a lightning-quick military response, even more swift than the first time around, which in turn led to some terrible errors in judgement, which led to the killing of two innocent people in New York, which led to a lot of jeeps in the streets and people not really

understanding how they were to work their daily lives around something like that. How could you work in an ice cream shop, or do data entry, or run a dental practice, when outside your window an army unit was running by, intent on trapping and killing something that was just wandering down the street? And they just couldn't find them all. There was always one more zombie to be dispatched. No more Specimen Control vans, a lot more bonfires.

One interesting side effect of the second crisis was that the hundreds upon hundreds of legal challenges designed to fight against brutality toward the zombies in their families' interest trickled to almost nothing. It was one thing when a zombified, and essentially harmless, family member was secretly cremated in the woods by a military which was trying to avoid the hassle of identifying any of the undead. It was quite another affair when the zombies were trying to do bodily harm. Even civilians, totally horrified by the awful video they were now seeing on the news, seemed to say: Okay, go ahead, fire at will, and leave none of them recognizable to us.

### **Athena**

It was too late in the evening to head out anywhere, really, or at least that's what we told ourselves. Douglas took the van out and went to the grocery store. When he came back, he told us that he'd had to stand in line for a half an hour. People were just buying anything and everything. They had a couple of policemen hanging around the place in case of trouble, either from the dead or from the living who just didn't feel like paying for their bread and toilet paper. Still no sign of any zombies, though people in line had been talking about seeing a group of four just a mile west of the shopping center. The army hadn't had a chance to come get these, apparently; a little vigilante contingent had done the job. That sort of thing was springing up everywhere. It had been illegal since February, to dispose of one yourself, especially since the Steelton thing, because who knew who you were really killing. But it couldn't be stopped now.

When Douglas was off at the supermarket, Lionel and I laid together in the dark in my sleeping bag. We were very aware of being in this huge building, just us, with the world going nuts outside. We turned out the lantern and just laid there. We didn't say anything, nothing at all, for a long time, and then I asked him where we were going the next morning. He said, "Home, I guess."

### **Douglas**

I think we played cards the rest of the night.

### **Richard Rolstein**

One of the scariest moments a country can face is not when it is about to be attacked, or invaded, or occupied, because that very sense of terror can stir up a

strong defense, a reactionary patriotism. "It's us against them." No, something scarier is when the bottom drops out of everything, and no one cares about their home anymore. They just don't care. You can feel it in countries where the government pushes things too far against its own people and the people strike back, destroying not just their leaders but the infrastructure of the land as well. You can feel it when a small nation's economy falls right through the floor, when their money becomes useless. The American people came very close to succumbing to that virus on Z-Day II. The dead walking brought out about a heavy dose of national nihilism, but a temporary one; the dead becoming *violent* broke the last mental defenses of people who already tended to believe the universe was random and that God had removed himself from the scene long ago. They reacted by staging bizarre parades, by defacing the country with billions of splashes of graffiti, by leaving their jobs in the middle of meetings. Some reacted with violence, terrible violence. As bad as things got, one fact was always sadly true: that the number of people killed by zombies in 2005 was drastically less than the number of people who killed *each other* in the darkest of all possible reactions to them.

### **Athena**

Lionel wasn't next to me when I woke up. It was about six in the morning. I got up and I found him outside, crouching beside the van. He was just staring off into space. I knew what he was saying, just by his crouching there. He was saying, Just a little bit farther, Athena, just a little bit.

### **Lionel**

But at least we'd go north, back in the direction we'd come from. And we'd roam back on that general path, toward Porch Lane, and we'd just kind of see what happened. Home was north, but north could mean a lot of things too. It could mean we'd sort of veer off and circle around. North could mean Williamsport. North could even mean Ohio.

I just wanted to see what happened, that was all. I was just curious to see what was what.

### **Galahad, homeless man, Burlington, Iowa**

See, you have individual karma, but then you have multiplied karma, and there's two hundred and fifty million people in this country, so when you multiply that much karma, the collective will of the masses is always satisfied. Now you take China or Russia, they have more people, but what do the Chinese and the Russians want? They just want to eat. They just want to be happy. But not America. America wants excitement, America wants roller coasters and Best Picture nominees and breaking news stories, live with so-and-so from such-and-such.

So it's obvious why the moseys are trying to kill people now, it's because of all that karma. America always gets exactly what it wants. If America wants another country, it gets it, if it wants a bad germ to use, it gets it, if it wants more money, it gets it. Every single person here, and that's me and you included, really really wanted the moseys to be more like the ones in the movies, so we all went to sleep one night and the force of our sleeping *will* rose them back up off the ground again, and now we finally got what we desired. More news flashes, more headlines running across the bottom of the screen, everyone looking up at the TVs in airports, what's next, what's next, let's have some more, oh I think I saw one, let's call the neighbors, let's see if they made a show about it yet, how many people have gotten jumped by the moseys, did you know anyone who did? All it took was just one night of going to sleep and dreaming it bad enough, all it took was the *desire*, and I'm here to tell you that *we Yanks have lust in our hearts like nobody's ever seen.*

### **Douglas**

There really were an awful lot of disturbances on the roads, and we traveled the back routes all the way. There were twice as many cars on those country roads as normal, and twice we were stopped dead for about twenty minutes, and when we finally got caught up we saw that what caused the delay was mostly rubbernecking. Whenever anyone passed a military convoy or a group of soldiers, they just had to slow down, or even pull over, to see what was going on. And then sometimes someone would report a zombie, or a group of zombies, in the area, and the army would come and shoo everyone away from the scene until it was taken care of. The killing of the zombie probably took all of three minutes, but what was happening—and I don't know this first-hand, so it might be my prejudice—was that the army didn't want anyone to see how the zombies were being dispatched, so they would close the road for fifteen minutes and then let people move on again. One thing was for sure, and that was that people were seriously on the go, loaded up with suitcases and bike racks, as if the whole country were going to the beach for the weekend. There was a gigantic tidal movement to rural areas. Anyone who had a friend living in the middle of nowhere wanted a few nights' stay. So even the back roads were sometimes clogged.

We had all gotten simultaneously tired of listening to the radio, so we listened to not much of anything. I had a chance to get out of the van and go right home, since we passed within two miles of my house, but I was now officially calling this trip "research" for the documentary. Which was a laugh, since I had no camera, no audio equipment. I think I was really more interested in where the hell Lionel thought we could possibly go and enjoy ourselves. It didn't seem possible anymore.

## **Athena**

Our diet was pretty damn awful that day, because we couldn't find one roadside stand that was open to sell us vegetables, which was a really ominous sign. I didn't see how anything could stop a farmer from needing to sell his crops, but this apparently had. We even went past the stand we'd hit on the way down, where that girl had told us the story about the Specimen Control guys staying overnight. No one was there. Very strange. So we ate hot dogs we got from a gas station, and the McDonald's on 550 was still open and kind of busy, so I made Lionel eat a salad, and Douglas ordered the same thing so as not to torture him. They were not happy.

We finally saw a zombie. 550 was mostly just a bunch of open fields, one after another, and in one of them these two guys were walking backwards, evading a zombie who was walking after them. The guys weren't frightened, obviously. They had nothing to defend themselves with, but the zombie wasn't moving too fast. They just seemed interested in its aggression. We rolled by them very fast and didn't stick around for the outcome.

## **Douglas**

There was this little place, Sazler's Hardware, on the side of 109, and it was open, and Lionel pulled in. He said, "We should probably, just in case, have a little something to knock one of the bastards over if we get surprised. Right?" Athena stayed in the van and we went shopping. She was pretty disturbed by the idea.

There was a really, really old guy sitting right in front of the store with a pair of binoculars. We immediately knew what he was doing. Why he felt the need to use binoculars, we weren't sure. It wasn't like a U-Boat fleet was going to appear on the horizon. Anything he saw out there, he was going to have more than enough time to haul himself back into the store and tell the proprietor to get ready for a visitor or two. Or three.

The owner of the store had all the things anyone could possibly need right up front. He'd had a run on it all: crowbars, axes, little cans of mace (only women bought that stuff, he said), a sledgehammer or two. All selling at full price, of course. I guess all the stuff would be marked down after zombie season was over.

## **Roddy O'Dea, owner, Sazler's Hardware**

I had people come in looking for nail guns. They wanted to go after 'em with nail guns, for Christ's sake. And blow torches, I sold those out. I was going to tell those people that the zombies weren't scared of fire. No one knew why, that was just how it was. You lit up a blowtorch, they just kept coming. Then one guy just wanted a pool skimmer. He figured if a zombie comes at him, he'll just plop the

net over the head and use the pole to just sort of back him up, then run for it. Jesus. You're not doing anyone a favor by trying to be subtle like that. Be a man.

## **Douglas**

We bought three crowbars. We dropped them in the back of the van, and just went on our way. The awkward part was that Lionel had to run out to the van to get some money from Athena, he didn't have enough cash and he wouldn't let me pay for the stuff for some reason. As if we were at the grocery store and he was going to just push my tomatoes or my cereal into his pile, to do me a favor. So he and Athena bought me my crowbar. The owner asked us if we wanted a handwritten receipt, because the printer inside the register was out of ribbon. And Lionel said, "Oh, does that mean we can return these when we're done with them?" The guy didn't really get the joke, he just told Lionel what the return policy was. Maybe we could use the receipt to write the crowbars off on our taxes.

That was one memorable feeling, holding that thing in my hands. It was utterly ridiculous, but boy, did I feel ready to use it. It was an instant burst of cheap testosterone. Come and get me, that's what I thought. I must have been going out of my mind.

## **Reynolds Gunthem, author, *The Expanding Flag***

At about midnight on May 5, or Z-Day II Plus Two, the U.S. sent about two hundred troops from the 103rd infantry out from Cyankia and across the Rwandan border. They got across secretly and without incident, but the 99th got into a skirmish with a restless border patrol they had not been expecting, and there was a firefight. The Rwandans got instant support from soldiers who had been waiting in the hills for weeks for an American incursion. The U.S. had not even suspected they were there. It was not believed that the Rwandans would have any idea we would try to cross into their country.

Statistics are lied about and statistics themselves lie, but at least thirty men of the 99th were killed in the attempted incursion. Somehow, Hutu intelligence had been far better than American intelligence, mostly because the Rwandans had gotten so suspicious since the fall, or removal, of Boltu Voss in Uganda. They must have simply thought they were next.

The 103rd stopped in the forest and awaited word from the 99th, and the word was so awful that they didn't know what to do next. They had expected that a border patrol might take out two or three men, not thirty. The 103rd did not know what it might be up against if they crossed the Birunga Forest. If their commanders had not known of the reinforcements on the border, God knows what else they didn't know about.

So the incursion was called off, very suddenly. The decision was made that if the troops pulled out fast enough, the debacle of the 99th might be explained somehow. You see, it had been the Americans' intent all along to go into Rwanda, to have troops ready to be reinforced for a rush on Kigali, but not until day eight or nine of the second zombie crisis did we want anyone to know we were in there. If the world knew we had sent troops in so quickly, it would seem too obvious that this was a pre-emptive incursion, and had nothing to do with another African regime's "sudden instability" due to a new zombie crisis. So the plan had been to set themselves up and then wait for the go-ahead to strike.

But the 103rd was surrounded. The Hutus swarmed over them from the east and the south, and there was nowhere to run but deeper into the forest. The firefight started around five in the morning and lasted about two hours. Three hours later or so, the news was everywhere: At least forty American soldiers killed where there should have been no American soldiers at all, a covert operation to begin the displacement of the regime in Rwanda revealed too fast, too soon, and no excuse could be made for it. These were not even Special Forces troops. These were regular infantry.

There was unanimous condemnation from Russia, France, Germany, Japan, China, and Spain. England tried to make as little comment as possible, but some very cutting words by the Prime Minister on the floor of Parliament made it pretty clear how offended they were as well.

The incident was in the news here in the U.S. for about three days, and then it was mostly gone. Polls showed that about fifteen percent of Americans had a strong disapproval of the action. Fifty percent said they didn't know enough about it to form an opinion.

### **Captain Lawrence Largent, 103rd infantry, United States Army**

At the very end, we were running through the woods, just getting west as fast as possible so the Hutus couldn't cut us off. We did not wait for the choppers. I had about seven men who followed me. Visibility was terrible, there was a full moon but the trees cut out all the light, so we couldn't move that fast. The 95th almost cut us down coming the other way. They had been radioed that we were coming, but they didn't expect us to be scattered so widely, and moving so hectically. They thought for a minute they were being ambushed. When we got into the clear, the jeeps were loaded up and we got back to the border. We were ready for a firefight there, but the patrols had gone into the woods to find us, trap us. We hadn't seen them. We only figured out a week later that as we had been running through the woods west, they were going east, and we missed them by about a hundred yards. If it hadn't been for the noise we made as we ran, we might have been able to hear their footsteps, and vice versa.

We stayed south of Kidaho for two days while things went to hell, while they were searching for a way to explain it all. And Major Douls was insistent that we be able to go back and get our dead out of there. But the Rwandans weren't going to let us in, no way that was going to happen. So they were all left behind, all the killed.

Still, we were made to wait another few days, with nothing happening. It was bizarre. We were all wondering, why don't we just get the hell out of here, since this was such a total disaster? What were we waiting for?

They were trying to make some kind of deal with the Rwandans. They'd figured that of the hundred and one men we'd lost, probably seventy had gotten up again, and started to walk. Maybe they would come back this way. At least some of them certainly would. It was a six mile walk. They didn't want the Hutus to gun them down. They wanted the Rwandans to let them pass, so we could do it, and return those bodies home.

But they didn't go for it. We didn't have a damn thing they wanted, and they wouldn't trust us anyway. The ones who had wiped out the 99th went on a hunt, and most of our guys who had been killed were never seen again. You hear these stories about how the hills are full of gorillas—not guerillas, but literally gorillas—and the Hutus would go on the radio over there and on the national station they would say things like, "The Americans have made good meals for our friends in the Virunga Mountains."

It was up to Major Douls to write the letters home. I have no clue what he could have said.

### **Athena**

Around about six on the day we left the school for good, after driving northeast for three hours kind of stop and go, Douglas mentioned the studios. The studios where WRTH used to videotape their programming were scheduled to be torn down, and it was basically just two big warehouses sitting in the hills outside York. Douglas thought no one had used them for going on two months, and thought it would be a perfect place to crash for the night if we wanted. They'd taken down the fencing around the studios and hauled them off to the new ones in the city, so it wouldn't be much of a problem getting in, and he was almost certain not a soul would be there or within a mile of the place. The only problem might be that we'd have to break into the studio buildings themselves, and as soon as Lionel heard that, of course, he said, "Yes, let's go there."

### **Douglas**

I'd been there two or three times, doing some editing work. To get there, you just drove through a little unattended gate and down a long dirt road. It was public

television, so there was no ritz to it, no secrecy or security. RTH had been on the verge of selling the property outright to the golf course adjacent to it, they were going to bulldoze the trees between the course and the studios and add some holes or something, I don't know. But the new studios were already up and running in the city, and it was just a matter of time before the old ones were torn down. My old friend, Gaylen Ross, who did some documentary stuff there sometimes, asked me a month before if I wanted anything from there. They didn't know what to do with some of the smaller props. So for my birthday she had taken seventy fake old-looking books they'd used for set dressing in the past and given them to me. They looked great, and they were totally hollow, and in my living room at home there they all were, in a nice wooden bookcase, and anyone who ever came over thought I was the most well-read dude they'd ever met.

### **Athena**

We got there at seven. The gate was unlocked, and it didn't seem like anyone else was around. There were no cars in the little dirt lot. I just had a lousy feeling about the place. There were no signs, no anything. I said to Lionel, "Come on, let's go to a motel." He said, "Yeah, you're right, probably, but let's check it out, maybe we'll change our mind." And then he gave me a crowbar, and he gave Douglas his, and we went in with protection.

### **Douglas**

The place had no windows, not one, because of course that would have messed with the lighting on the sets, so we had to jimmy one of the doors. That took about eight seconds. Lionel put his crowbar into the jamb and he pretty much popped the whole knob out without exerting a whole lot of effort. Whoops.

There were some light switches right next to our heads when we went in, and luckily about half of them still worked, so we could see everything, even though it was a little bit dim, since the lights were set about thirty feet above us. Most everything from the last few tapings they'd done was still there. RTH really had no money at all, so there weren't even any walls between the sets. They'd tape a segment of their money show in space C, which was five feet away and not separated at all from space B, where they did a kids' show. It was like a cheap studio apartment blown up to thirty times normal size. You could play hockey in there. The funny thing was that right in front of us was a bedroom set, a period thing, there were props suggesting the turn of the century. There was an old fashioned wrought iron bed with a mattress and covers, and Lionel looked at Athena and said, "*Now* do you want to go to a motel...?"

### **Athena**

I put my crowbar down on the bed as we looked around. I didn't want to carry it. There was no sense in it, the guys had theirs. Now I think to myself, how short-

sighted, how like the kind of woman men make fun of, to do that, to think that nothing really bad could happen to us, because we were special, we were the good guys, everything that was happening was just a big movie screen and we were watching it and not really involved. We made up our own little rules, living in an elementary school here, spending the night in a TV studio there, throwing our money away, passing everything by.

Being in that studio was so perfect, seeing these empty sets and the backdrops that had been painted for imaginary plots. None of it was real. I was glad Melissa wasn't there as soon as we turned on the lights. I didn't want her to want to become an actress, to play with all this illusion stuff, I didn't want her living in a dream world. I thought: This is the last night for this. After tonight, we'll be at Porch Lane, and Lionel will have to deal with it. No more pretending. And if we hopefully see Melissa again, we'll tell her about being at the TV studios, and when her eyes get wide and she gets envious we'll say: It was depressing to be there. The whole place was fake and empty. To them, a zombie was a cardboard cutout you put in a closet till you needed it for the next shot.

### **Douglas**

There was one backdrop that had been painted and I really wanted to know what it had been used for. It was fascinating. Lionel and I were going through a bunch of them, because they were all leaning against one wall, and he would get on one side and I would get on the other and we would push them forward, one by one, just looking at them. The people who drew these things were so good, I wanted to make one of them into an entire wall in my house someday. But the one we found which was so strange and puzzling was a ten by twenty foot slab showing a reddened horizon, and a huge bunch of zombies spread out over it, walking toward the viewer, and in the foreground there was just one boy, looking into the distance and waiting for them to come. He wasn't armed or anything, because obviously this backdrop had been drawn before the zombies had become violent. What he did have in his hands was a violin, and he was playing it, so the effect was, the zombies had been drawn out of the hills and over the horizon by the sound of the boy's playing. Like a fairy tale, almost. It was so big, this thing, they must have been planning a very unusual show or documentary or play or whatever. It wasn't even drawn realistically. It was more of a conceptual thing, like what Athena had told me they'd seen in the art gallery in Buckeystown. Impressive.

### **Athena**

I was just looking around and I happened to see Douglas near the back of the studio, or at least what I thought was the back, but the huge wall there was one of those sliding ones, I guess they closed it when they needed silence on the other side. I misjudged the size of the place, it was far bigger than I had thought. I never asked Douglas why he had suddenly felt the need to open that wall. Lionel just

thought the place was too neat, and maybe Douglas figured he wanted to see it all. And I was literally walking over to Lionel to tell him we should leave before it got dark; who knew if we could even find a place close by to stay, it might take a while driving. Lionel had jogged over to help Douglas with the bolt that locked the wall. I was five feet behind Lionel when they started to slide the wall open.

Now I think back on what Douglas had told us about that reality show his acquaintance had been planning, the one about all the zombies on the island, and the story that maybe they had collected some to use. He'd said no one thought they had really gone so far as to do that, but if they had, they would have had to put them someplace, somewhere in the middle of nowhere so no one would get suspicious, or ever find them, until they needed them. I think, What are the odds that the story was true, and that they really said, "Well, we know exactly a place we can use," and when I think the odds are ridiculously slim of any of that transpiring, well, then I think of the chances of the dead returning to life and attacking the living, and my head begins to hurt. If the universe can think of such things to throw at us, human beings are even worse.

They always have been. They always will be.

### **Douglas**

We shoved the wall to the left along its rollers, and it had gotten maybe four feet when the zombies started pouring out at us. When we let go of the wall, it slid another four feet or so, and they all came at us from that eight foot gap. The force of their momentum through the gap pushed it little by little even further left, until by the end, by the time they were all out, the wall was a third of the way open. We still had our crowbars in our hands, Lionel and I did, but when I stumbled backwards and one of the zombies landed on top of me, I looked up right away and saw that Athena did not have hers. And I screamed at her to run, and at the exact moment that word came out of my mouth, it came out of Lionel's too. Maybe we hadn't even set them down for a moment just to open the wall because we were men, and beyond always looking for danger, we crave it on some level, just a little taste of it, and God help us, sometimes it comes, and somehow we're ready.

### **Lionel**

There was no smell that led us to believe the wall hid thirty zombies, fifty maybe; we hadn't heard any shuffling or movement, nothing. When they appeared I went totally numb and my shouting to Athena was just instinct. A zombie was right in front of me but there was one just to my left, too, which was where Athena was standing, so I swung at that one first, a woman, having no conscious thought whatsoever in my brain. I went right for her head and I swung as hard as I could. The sound was like I'd hit a bag of seed or something, and that one went down, and then I swung back at the one right in front of me, and I got him in the neck

with the hook part, and something weird happened to his eyes when it went in, his corneas just shot to the right, and then he went down too. Douglas had managed to get on top of the one which had pinned him down and he got up, almost falling over, and he swung his crowbar right down on the thing's head. That was how fast we had become able to do that. It took two seconds, from the time we saw their stupid faces coming at us from the dark to the time we realized we were holding something to defend ourselves with. Then our brains sent us a command and we responded to it, like animals, nothing more. The sight of that zombie's eyes going so flat, the feel of resistance when the hook went into its neck, the sensation of clubbing a person in the head, none of that produced anything in us that stopped us. I had no revulsion. I didn't gasp in terror. That all left me instantaneously. In the blink of an eye. The new things we'd become didn't even know their own names.

Athena hadn't run. The first thing I saw her do was whip her right fist against the side of some zombie's face, viciously hard, knocking it aside. She just started swinging, and she hit me in the shoulder with one of the swings, which I only felt much later when the bruise formed. One of the zombies she hit kept coming at her, and it grabbed her left arm, so I hit it in the back with the crowbar, and at the same time I felt these cold fingers go into my mouth. I spat them out and felt something's arms around my waist, but I had to get that zombie off Athena's arm, because it was opening its mouth and going for her skin. I hit it in the back of the head. Blood flew up and hit Athena in the neck. Then I just started shoving the butt end of the crowbar against the forehead of the one that had me until it slid off me.

Some of them came right at us, some didn't. They came in our general direction but some had no intent, like dumb insects. The most awful part was that for a second or two I couldn't see Athena at all because we were literally surrounded. I kept screaming her name and she kept screaming mine. I swung the crowbar until I got to her. She had blood all over her, and at first I thought it was hers, but it was because I had been hitting these things in the head so hard that it kept spraying on her. None of the zombies made any sound, all you could hear was the movement of their feet on the cement. Some of them gripped at our clothes, some didn't, some tried to bite, some didn't. I was wearing jeans and when I looked down at one point there was a zombie in a baseball cap who wasn't even holding onto me, but he had some of my fabric in his teeth. I shook my leg free and didn't look at him again.

Douglas was kneecapping them, putting them down instead of going for the heads. He would break their knees and their bodies collapsed on the cement. That was the sickest sound, much more vivid than striking the heads, because you could hear the cracking sometimes. They were too uncoordinated to hang on to anything as they fell, and once their knees didn't work, they couldn't get up again.

Athena just pushed them, slapped them, punched them, anything she could. She tried to grab my hand to pull me out of there, but I was in the midst of swinging the crowbar and it tore me free of her. I heard Douglas cry out and the cry came from right beside me. One of the zombies had scratched him good on the neck, not deep enough to be truly awful, but a bad scratch all the same, and Douglas knocked that one to the ground and whipped the crowbar into its side, twice, and the zombie made a coughing noise and grabbed the crowbar. So Douglas kicked it in the head, once, hard.

Going for the knees was more effective, yes, but I found myself not doing that, I found myself looking into their eyes and hitting them in the head, with absolutely all the force I could muster, and I think once that when I missed I came very close to hitting Athena, but I tell myself that I really can't know if she was still that close, though I sensed she was. I think I came very close indeed to striking her. I couldn't control myself. I just knew that if I connected solidly with the heads, it meant I got to keep standing for a couple of more seconds. The lighting in there was pretty dim but I think one of the ones I killed was maybe fifteen years old. I didn't care. None of us did. The last zombie I saw Athena hit, she brought her fist against the side of its head, and it went off balance a bit but it was still standing, so she took a step forward and hit it again, in the same place, and it was fully tumbling over, falling to the floor, its tongue protruding from its stupid mouth, but she went after it, to hit it one more time, just full of rage, full of the wanting to punish it, to make the zombie go down instead of just watching it fall. That led her as far away from me as she had been, so I ran to her, and Douglas had gotten free and gotten there too, and we got away. The door we had come in had that broken knob so Athena just threw her weight against it and we were out. Night was falling, but I could still see the blood on Athena's green T-shirt. Douglas and I had gotten not a drop on us, it was just unarmed Athena, who had never wanted to leave home in the first place; the purplish blood had stained her very badly. Douglas came out third and I stopped for just one second to turn around to see if they were still coming after us, and they were. I flung the crowbar back inside, not caring anymore, and it went about twenty feet and it hit some zombie in the face, and its hands went up slowly to cover itself. That was the last thing I saw. I got in the front seat of the van, Athena in the passenger's seat, Douglas in the back, just like we had come in, and we drove away, and either the zombies came out and took over the grounds and went on from there, or they stayed in the studio, where they belonged.

### **Donna Rutain, Buckeystown, Maryland**

In the zombie movies my brother used to watch with his friends, no matter bad how things got, there were always two or three survivors left, the good guys. And they went into the sunset or whatever, to fight another day. The people who made these things were always careful to have some hope at the end. They would show you machete killings and people getting their eyes gouged out, but as long as the heroes were able to fly off with only one or two people lost, it was considered

okay. And it must have worked, because when my brother would force me to watch those movies, I would squirm and cover my face but when the ending came, I was like, "Whew, at least everything's going to be all right."

### **Ronnie**

What would have been interesting before all this is if they'd made a zombie story and in the end the zombies truly won, they finally got rid of all the humans on the earth, so that there couldn't be any band of survivors to go underground to repopulate. All that would be left would be the billions of buildings around the world that people had built before they had all been devoured. There wouldn't be a single sound left, except for the footsteps of the zombies.

### **Mouses**

With the last dying breath of the final hero, all of human history would suddenly vanish, and all the meaning in all the property and structures on the earth would disappear. The dead would wander those structures aimlessly, never starving, never laying down. The seasons would change and they would walk; earthquakes would strike and they would walk. There would be no borders between countries, no differences in cultures or languages. No evolution, no growing intelligence. Every square foot of ground, be it in New York or Paris or Afghanistan, would be just another step for just another foot.

If it were a movie, it could end with three straight silent minutes of zombies and their meaningless shuffling, just the sound of the wind over a protracted montage of the earth finally possessed by a race that didn't even care to own it. Three minutes of montage, and then a black screen. If it were a book, it could end with ten, twenty unbroken pages of images of that sea of biological persistence, covering the land and caring nothing for its past. And when the reader closed the book, a good writer would have made him thought: How peaceful. How perfect. How darkly beautiful in a way that can't be put into words.

### **Douglas**

I remember coming awake that night and having no idea where I was. I was in the passenger's seat with a blanket over me, and I looked through the front window at the trees, and I just didn't understand what had happened. Even when I turned and looked in the back of the van, where Lionel and Athena were lying, I didn't recognize them at first. Then it came to me.

I thought I wouldn't be able to sleep anymore. It had taken me hours just to pass out to begin with. I just looked out the window as the light went from a deep blue to a lighter blue. I read the rules of the park we were in off the sign in front of the van. Sometime during the night, someone had come along and left a styrofoam coffee cup on the hood.

I remember the way their bodies were positioned, Lionel and Athena, lying on top of their sleeping bags in the van. Lionel was face down on his, and his arms were up around his head, blocking his face, as if he were trying to block all light from getting through. Athena must have been even more uncomfortable; her head was on his back, she was holding him, but her right arm was stretched all the way out to his right hand, and she had linked her smallest finger around his.

I stared at the styrofoam coffee cup, thinking it would be good to get something like that in the morning, when Lionel and Athena woke up, and at some point I was asleep again.

I did not dream about zombies. My mind did something quite nice for me. My dream was about me sitting in a Dunkin' Donuts, drinking the kind of hot coffee I'd imagined might be in that cup on the hood of the car. There was nothing more than that. That was more than enough.

And that, I'm pretty sure, was the ending to our story.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, almost.

Douglas Widgeon's documentary *Song of the Living Dead* did eventually air, eighteen months after our awful evening at the studios of WRTH. The eighty minute film featured not only Melissa but four other people under the age of eighteen, including a twelve year old blind boy and a sixteen year old who was put in jail briefly for torturing zombies. The movie ended with the image of Melissa climbing into bed late at night and shutting out her light. Over the end credits, that twelve year old boy stood in a field and played his violin, and I knew right away where Widgeon had gotten that image from: the painted backdrop we'd found at the studio. He left me a message at Porch Lane telling me when the show would be on, and when it was over I called him and talked to him for the first time in a year and a half. He was doing fine, he said, he was in upstate New York and planning a film about the battle of Antietam. I asked him if he ever intended to make anything about the U.S. military's transgressions during the zombie crisis, since he'd had an inside glimpse of it through Ronnie, and he said no, he never intended to make a documentary about that topic, or anything about zombies, ever again. In fact, he hadn't even been able to finish *Song of the Living Dead* completely. He had hired two people to finish the last interviews for him, and to take care of virtually all of the editing.

About two months after he and I and Athena fought the zombies at RTH, Widgeon had felt himself sinking into a severe depression. He became more and more irritable over minor things, and he always felt angry, and was never sure why. He assumed it was because of what had happened that night, and he went on anti-depressants and stopped working on his movie. It took him about six months to start feeling himself again, and he thought now that he was going to be all right. When he asked me if I was somehow different since then, I honestly told him no, not really. I wanted to be, but I wasn't. I wanted to have nightmares and feel sickened that I had swung that crowbar as many times as I had. The nightmares never came. But then, I had Athena, and Widgeon had no one.

Melissa never saw the documentary; she didn't feel like watching it. Widgeon had called her and told her that it might be kind of awkward to watch it with her folks, because of some things she had said and which he felt he had to include. So she had someone tape it for her, and she thought that she might take a look at it when she was older. Her parents never moved back to the house they'd owned just around the corner from me and Athena. They have stayed in New Brunswick, Ontario since last June, and Melissa goes to school there now. Athena calls her once a month, and tries to get Melissa to focus on her college plans. Things have not gotten any better between her and her parents, not at all. Athena thinks it's Melissa's determination to get away from them as soon as she can that keeps her grounded, keeps her away from partying and boys and cheerleading, keeps her grades nice and even. She has friends. It's all going to be all right.

Ronnie called us from Seattle last December. He was still AWOL, and still had no intention of going back to the army. He was working for a food co-op, and really enjoyed it. He made about six dollars an hour but he lived with six people in a group house, and all of them worked for the co-op as well, and they all knew his story. He asked me if we'd had any unpleasant run-ins with the undead, and I told him Yes, we'd had one, and in five years maybe I'd feel it was all right to talk about it. He'd never found out the ultimate fate of his parents down in Georgia, and he felt ashamed about that. His sister, a dentist in South Carolina, had taken care of the legal details of their deaths, and hadn't been able to find out much of anything either. He was sure they were at rest now, at least, and he tried not to think about it too much.

Mouses writes to Athena and I once every couple of months. I don't think he's coming back to the Lane anytime soon. He appears to be having what Melissa might refer to as "a blast and a half". He has been back and forth across the country twice; he has hitchhiked, ridden a Vespa (and he *knows* I always wanted one of those), ridden Greyhound, bought a three hundred dollar car that smelled like beets. The postmarks on his letters are always different. He insists he has learned absolutely nothing on his journeys except that one is never too old to make an ass out of himself. He pretty much ran out of money last November, so he sold his house from Montana, taking about two-thirds of what it was actually worth, which was almost nothing to begin with. Athena and I moved the few

things he felt like keeping into our place. His next stop, he says, is Canada, then Alaska. After that, he's not sure. He always seems to have plenty of books to keep him occupied, and plenty of people to meet. He's had no recurrence of his heart condition, and he takes his pills like clockwork. At the end of every letter, he tells me not to be envious. There's no point to it. I am envious every single day.

Meanwhile, the dead continue to walk. There simply can't be as many as there are out there, not logically, especially after everything that's been done to make sure the recently departed go absolutely nowhere, but things are still not completely safe. Scientists keep trying to figure out why this has all happened, and their explanations are conflicting and sometimes predictably bizarre. Unfortunately, no one's buying what they're selling. I prefer to idiotically accept the apocalyptic words of a homeless man named Galahad, who told a magazine reporter that this headline-filled, cinematic ghoulishness was craved so badly by the public on a barely subconscious level that we spontaneously brought it on ourselves, taking the other countries of the globe down with us. The recession is still going on, and it's still brutal. In some places, it seems like the citizens of this fine land have decided to turn every available flat surface into a gigantic chalkboard full of graffiti about life after Z-Day II. America is still being viciously criticized for its decisions to send troops to areas of the world where it believes that sudden destabilizations due to zombie threats might make things too precarious. No one's made a documentary about it yet. Three people went to jail because of the events in March 2005 in Steelton, which Ronnie saw almost first-hand. Congress is routinely looking into charges that the military invented the entire concept of S.T.G. to scare everyone badly enough to keep the armed forces mobilized and in control and eating heartily, but it's not such a big controversy as one might think. It turned out the zombies really were dangerous after all, so people are willing to overlook a lot of things. Two hundred people have died from their attacks. This might mean as little as one hundred. Who knows.

I finally did find out the identity of the zombie in the housedress, the one I accused of stalking me, the one I saw all those times, hanging around the elementary school and elsewhere. Technology and a few hundred dollars can do anything. Using my photograph, an outfit based in Atlanta called The Search Techs scanned my close-up photo of the woman's face and in only thirty days provided me with the answer to my question. She was Beverly Brierly, and she was my fourth grade teacher at Hillsmere Elementary School in Annapolis, about sixty miles from Gerard Manley Hopkins Elementary School in Buckeystown, where our little gang stayed for a few nights that sunny and cloudless spring. She was just twenty-five or so when I was her student. I hadn't seen her in all that time, but when I saw her face, something had clicked. Memory is an amazing thing.

One day way back when, my folks went in for a parent-teacher conference with Mrs. Brierly. When they came out of it they took me out for a banana split, they were so happy with what she had told them about me. She said she thought that I

was one of those few children who could probably be anything I wanted when I grew up, that the future was boundless for me. Even after that day, she said that to me sometimes. Lionel, you are going to do great things, do you know that? she said once. She didn't like it when I goofed off too much, or did less than I was capable of. If only I applied myself, she said, my intelligence would carry me far. I might even be famous. I told her I thought I might want to be a writer. She said: Then you are going to be a writer. Once she rewarded me for doing well on a test by letting me go off into the next room alone during our math session and writing one of my little stories, whatever I felt like. She was proud of me. She believed in me.

That was Mrs. Brierly. I'm here on Porch Lane now, and seven restaurants in town have closed since Z-Day II, but I found some good hours at one that stayed open, and I think about her all the time.

\*

All the time.

I'm writing this last part from 188 Porch Lane, in the bedroom of the house I share with Athena, who's lying asleep after teaching a class at the community center where in return for several hours a week of instructing people in basic painting techniques, she's provided a studio of her own. Sometimes she's there working all day and teaching all night and doesn't get home till eleven or so. But we have weekends together still for another month or so, and then I have to start working Saturdays and just a few hours on Sundays, so we'll figure something out. She went for months without producing a single painting, and when she finally got back into it, she sold the first one she did, to a fellow instructor. So she's just as good as she always was. The money trickles in, there's our usual jokey talk about getting married this year, and we do all right. We certainly never spend anything. We share the car and I usually walk to work. It keeps me in shape. Athena spends a little on canvases and oils, which clutter our bedroom here in a very pleasant way.

A couple of years ago, I went down to the pharmacy for some cough medicine and I wound up also buying a five subject notebook, a big thick blue deal which I thought I'd use for random notes and jottings. I always tell people that I want to keep track of words I want to look up in the dictionary, and I want to have a little list of the books I want to read and the movies I want to watch, and small paragraphs about impractical ideas to make money, and so forth. And for a long time, I used the front of the notebook just for that.

Sometimes I would get frustrated by something I saw on the news and I would turn to the middle section of the notebook and scrawl a few words down about it. Athena thought it was a good thing, so I kept doing it. I suppose it gave me an

outlet for my irritating opinions, so she wouldn't have to listen to them so much. Once in a while I would see a severely handicapped person on the street or hear about some tragedy that didn't make any sense, and some words about these things went into the book as well. More and more recently, I would be reacting to some decision this country had made regarding throwing its weight around overseas, or its treatment of people I considered most in need of help, who weren't getting much of it, or America's embrace of violence in all its seemingly mild forms, from all the killing on TV shows to the fact that every movie poster seemed to be suggesting its hero was the definition of cool because he was wielding two guns against three bad guys, to the only half-joking opinions of normally decent people that we just nuke faraway places that cause us headaches. Most of what I wrote was indecipherable nonsense, gut reactions to issues I didn't really understand. But I felt what I felt, and I didn't have much control over it.

Then in December of last year, there was a tragedy that struck Athena and I, and I found myself writing in the last section of the notebook: a long story to take my mind off things, something ridiculous and implausible. It was so far-fetched it actually seemed to help a little, but soon I began to see that what I was writing about wasn't some horror tale that could never happen. I was writing about myself. When I realized this, I kept going anyway. The result was what I had really been trying to say in the first parts of the notebook, when I thought I was expressing all my fears about an America I would live in forever but which seemed to me to be growing more Darwinian and hardhearted by the year. The picture was both bigger and smaller than that, though. When all was said and done, my story was mostly about a confused thirty-two year old man who had misplaced the joy of living in a world where such beauty co-existed with such horror.

So maybe there never were any zombies, no Z-Day I or II, no controversial acts of military brutality, no travels across a couple of states with a group of my friends and the professional artist Athena Carew. Not that these people aren't real. They all are, everyone who came with Athena and I in that van, Mouses, Ronnie, Douglas Widgeon, and Melissa, friends or acquaintances or maybe even just people we met very briefly once and exchanged no more than a few words with. But the things they did and said, maybe they all came from the imagination of a man who hasn't written a story since he was eleven years old, and doesn't really understand too many of the rules of plausibility and linear plot, and had to resort to telling a tale of flesh-hungry zombies to relate his saddest fears about a world where some poisoned food would suddenly rip the life away from a seventeen year old friend of Athena's, who lived around the corner from us and daydreamed of getting away from her parents and of becoming an actress or working in fashion, and going with us if we went to Amsterdam one summer.

Melissa Lansford died painfully in December of 2002, a victim of random chance and gross human negligence, a death that seemed designed to shock its witnesses into a hideous, revolted silence. Death took her in a particularly harsh, cowardly,

uneducational way, and shortly afterward, out came my tale of zombies overrunning the planet, written in longhand across one hundred and seven pages. I would have written it eventually, I suppose. It was my way of challenging the universe to a contest of savagery. I wanted to write about a darkness so absurd that it would make darkness seem almost funny. It didn't work out for me. It hasn't made anything go away. Even in fiction, I couldn't quite keep us all together, but for a while, at least, I really did feel like I was driving that van, and we were all free of everything. I knew exactly what it would be like to cruise along the smooth blacktop of Buckeystown Pike with the driver's side window rolled down and my friends passing around a map. It was like being told I would be young for a hundred years.

Now Athena is sleeping a few feet away from me. She has been, and remains, my last line of defense against everything I imagine which lies outside the window to my left: disease, violence, failure, senseless destruction, murder, intolerance. Here, she has created a paradise for me. I've done what I can for her, though it can never be enough. She is smarter than I am, more successful than I feel I can ever be, more patient, more kind. She is so perfect in my eyes, it hurts sometimes just to leave to go to work. One step outside the door of 188 Porch Lane, and I am Lionel the waiter and the college dropout. To her, in our four room house, I am somehow still Lionel the Great. Her love for me is mysterious and deep. Our friend Mouses once told me so in a letter after he had a stroke, a letter I've reproduced, not quite verbatim, in this story.

In a few minutes I'll curl up beside her and say a little silent prayer. Help me be strong, Athena, I'll say. My country is not as pure as I had always believed it to be, and I'm not either, and phantoms are everywhere. There are sunsets and oceans and images of you brushing your hair on our porch swing, and there are gunshots and freak accidents and people to whom cruelty is only a means to an end they believe is just. The images flash by me, too many to be counted, alternating between good and evil, and it seems impossible it can all exist so close to each other, on the same earth. I believe you love me and always will, and I believe a boy's beautifully played violin could summon hungry zombies from over the horizon, and that music could come from a dead woman's throat. Yes, darkness and light are so close together, so relentlessly at war, that this can all be. I have written it down in permanent pen. *Nightmares dreamed in a field of perfect May grass, a bridesmaid fixed in a rifle sight*: words in a notebook you don't ever need to understand, which I will keep secretly for both of us, for as long as you stand beside me.

Lionel Gathers  
State College, Pennsylvania  
June 19, 2003

Other works, including *Knifepoint Horror: Book One*, available at

[www.soren-narnia.com](http://www.soren-narnia.com)