

Bill's Last Day

Special thanks to Joel Lafferty and Tom Kercheval

*Dedicated to my knucklehead friends of the Shickell Arms:
Blink, Harkin, Ken, Mick, Ashneko, Pathea and, of course, the Waddells.*

Bill Sullivan was dead.

He had locked himself into a small room with no other exits. The wooden door was finally giving way under the hail of blows from the mob outside. Their longing groans increased in tempo as they became aware that their prize was now almost within reach.

Once again, Bill threw himself against the door. It shifted with his weight, its integrity almost gone. Futilely, he tried to re-anchor the deadbolt using a rusty Philips-head screwdriver, but the screws were tearing free of the door. He pushed with his shoulder, then gasped in horror as he felt the wood splinter.

A grey hand worked its way through the gap, scrabbling at his face.

Another hand had seized his shirt.

Bill screamed, trying to pull away. The door splintered further.

Bill was now looking right *through* the door. Inches away, a bloodshot eye with a completely dilated pupil glared back at him, full of mindless malice. Bill twisted desperately, stabbing at the hands with the screwdriver...

With a thunderous crack, the door gave way. Dozens of hands seized Bill. Teeth closed on his arms, shoulders...

"NOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Bill woke up flailing, tangled in his sheets. He kicked himself free, then, realizing he was not in fact dead, fell back against the damp mattress, gasping for breath, heart racing.

Fucking zombies. God help us.

Pale blue light filled the bedroom, as dawn broke over Springfield. His alarm was not going to go off for another twenty minutes, but Bill knew he was not getting back to sleep. He reached over and turned it off, then closed his eyes and tried to get his breathing under control.

It had been five days since his harrowing ride with SWAT. Five days of nightmares and little sleep, except for Saturday, when he had gotten raging drunk and passed out on his couch. He briefly considered calling in sick and trying to catch up on rest, but he knew what would be waiting for him when he closed his eyes. Better to go earn his dollar.

He rose slowly, unsteadily and, catching a glimpse of himself in the dresser mirror, tried not to draw a comparison between himself and the shuffling antagonists from last Thursday. He took a moment to stretch and get the kinks out, then stripped his damp bed and threw the bedcovers in a pile near the hamper. He turned on the 26" Panasonic and switched over to the early morning news. After the mandatory car commercial, the pretty face and perfect hair of Alexis Dixon appeared, informing the populace of Springfield and nearby communities of 'a recent study' that indicated eating too much and not exercising at all makes you fat.

"Holy crap! No way, are you serious?" Bill carped, heading for the shower and hurling his undershirt in the general direction of Alexis' glittering teeth.

Bill walked out of the bathroom, damp hair still tangled and hanging in his face, and grabbed a dress shirt from his closet. The news was back on, and it sounded like they were actually talking about something relevant.

"...to welcome Dr. Simon Huddleston, of Springfield A&M. Doctor, thank you for being on today's show."

"Thanks, Alexis. It's good to be here."

"So, I understand that you have been studying the Nemesis Comet."

Dr. Huddleston's smile was greasy and condescending. "*Nemesis Comet* is an ill-informed layman's colloquialism. You of course refer to Turner-Maher, which recently passed within eighty-thousand miles of Earth. And yes, I studied both its approach and subsequent retreat from perihelion..." The good doctor paused, to make sure he gave Alexis, and their audience, time to mull the word, "...Perihelion is the point in the comet's travels that it was closest to us."

"Ah!" Alexis nodded emphatically and smiled too brightly. Then to the camera, and Bill, "*That's very interesting, Doctor!*"

Bill scowled as he finished buttoning his shirt. He had taken Astronomy 101 in his sophomore year and even *he* knew that perihelion was the comet's closest point to *the sun*. Its closest point to the earth would be its *perigee*. He stopped paying much attention to *Doctor Huddleston*.

"So, Doctor, did the *Nemesis Comet* have any actual effect on us?"

Huddleston cited an increase in crime, violent crime in particular, as well as looting, hoarding, price gouging. All the things, he asserted, that accompanied End-of-the-World Paranoia.

Bill was zipping up his khakis when Alexis asked, "*So, Doctor, is there cause for concern?*"

Huddleston assured the audience, and Alexis, who was already glancing at her card to queue her next question, that there was no real danger from any alleged illness accompanying the comet's pass. He advised people to wash their hands and to take vitamins, to eat nutritious meals and to get at least seven hours of sleep each night.

Bill was lacing up his shoes when Alexis asked, "*So, Doctor, is there anything the people should be doing in the face of this situation?*" To which Huddleston advised avoiding people who were acting strangely or who appeared to be in distress.

"*Don't help anyone*," Bill summarized. "That's wonderful." He jabbed the power button with his thumb and was thankfully spared any more of Dr. Huddleston's theories or Alexis' vacuous and canned questions.

"Time to make the doughnuts," he muttered, grabbed his backpack, his keys and a handful of Advil, then headed out the door.

The VW Rabbit was several years old, and second-hand, but it was reliable, relatively gas-efficient, and did not complain about the pile of empty coffee cups that had accumulated on the floor. The early morning traffic was sparse as Bill navigated from the residential sector to Springfield's Mercantile District, homing in on his favorite java house...which happened to be a corporate chain. He had long ago made the decision to ignore that, based on the fact that the coffee ruled.

There was only a single vehicle ahead of him in the drive-thru, but nearly five minutes had passed and Bill was still waiting. The woman was in a grey-green Honda Odyssey, its back window adorned with a string of stick-figure decals which, Bill surmised, advertised her entire family. The largest was a glasses-wearing male with a briefcase; the second was a bob-haired female in a business suit (the driver, he guessed); the third was a girl with a lacrosse stick; the fourth and fifth seemed to be twin boys (they were identical stickers, so Bill assumed their real-life counterparts to be); the sixth was a smaller girl that they had impressively managed to get braces onto. These were followed by an infant in diapers, a dog, a cat and, astoundingly, a fish in a bowl. They had enough space on the window to advertise their favorite radio station. Which happened to be one that Bill thought sucked.

Though the woman was alone, Bill assumed her to be ordering for every member of that stick-figure family, including the dog, cat and fish. After ten minutes, he began to get really aggravated, but the fact that he had gotten up early meant he still had time to get to work. He took a deep breath and tried to relax. The radio was the usual bullshit, so he poked the **mode** button and let his CD spin up. A kickass guitar lead by Peter Dinklage crackled through the speakers and Bill settled into his seat to wait.

Mercifully, after about fifteen minutes, the drive-thru window slid open and the woman received her order. Bill's annoyance returned as he saw a mere two cups passed out to her. The matriarch of the stick-figure clan seemed irritated as well, as evidenced by her frenetic gestures towards the window. After almost another minute of watching the one-sided conversation, Bill leaned on his horn. The stick-figure woman turned and flipped him off, yelling something he did not hear, then put the Odyssey into gear and peeled out of the drive-thru.

Bill rolled up to the window, his face neutral. Just inside the window was Rolle, who had taken his order over the two-way speaker seventeen minutes ago. The young man was clearly agitated, his dark skin flushed. He held up one finger to Bill, indicating he would be right back, then scurried out of sight.

Bill sighed and waited another couple of minutes. In the distance, he could hear sirens. He realized he was becoming numb to the sound; living near the city, one heard sirens fairly frequently. Over the last week, however, they had been occurring *far* more regularly.

The glass slid aside quickly and Rolle was back, Bill's drink in his hand. "Double-black, four sugars," he said abruptly, thrusting the coffee out to Bill.

"Everything okay, Rolle?" Bill asked, taking the coffee and handing over a crumpled ten dollar bill.

The younger man took a moment to gather himself, then nodded. "Yeah, sorry Bill. I worked a double yesterday and I was supposed to be off today. They called me in last minute; everyone's calling in sick. This stupid crap with the comet."

"Are you the only one here?"

"Yep. The night manager took off as soon as I showed up. I..."

A patron inside the store was ringing the counter bell and demanding his order. Two more cars had pulled in behind Bill and one driver was already blowing his horn.

Rolle grumbled something in his native language, then, "I gotta go, Bill. Have a good day."

There were signs everywhere. Despite "Doctor" Huddleston's advice, Bill was guessing that most people were *not* getting at least seven hours of sleep. Police and auxiliaries were out in great numbers and, as he got closer to the downtown area, he even spotted National Guardsmen with rifles. Everyone was on edge; he was flipped off at least twice more, and he saw numerous arguments, even this early in the day. Most were conducted on the fly from cars, but he did pass a bus stop where a pair of citizens were being held apart by an overwrought-looking young cop.

And yet, stores were open...most of them, at any rate. The early bird shoppers were out; he even spotted a mother with her two daughters, heading into Grosso's Bakery. An H2 was being towed by Edward's Impound from in front of Patrick's Pub...

"HEY!!!"

The Rabbit's tires screeched as Bill came to a halt, his coffee splashing up on his dash. He looked up in alarm and spied a fully-decked out SWAT trooper jogging towards him. He started to smile...

"Eighth Avenue is *closed!* You can't come through here!"

Bill's smile faded. He did not recognize the officer. In fact, he was not SWAT at all, though he was wearing bulky body armor. "I...I'm going to work..."

"How is that *my* fuckin' problem?!" the cop asked, already turning away and waving someone else out of the intersection.

"Well, what happened?!" Bill called, but the cop either did not hear him or was pretending not to. It was difficult to see, but it looked as if there was a multi-car pile-up about halfway up the block.

Bill wiped the coffee from his hand and the dash and cranked his wheel over, heading down 44th Street.

Bill arrived at The Beacon at ten-of-eight, pulling leisurely into the parking lot around back. He noticed with mild concern that a large section of the security fence had been mowed down overnight; the presence of broken glass, orange cones and lack of any vehicles indicated it was probably a one-car accident and that it had already been handled. He let his gaze wander to the print shop, the single-story building at the back of the Beacon's lot. The Beacon still printed their paper on-site. The print shop was in a separate building, due to noise and insurance regarding the chemicals. It was a single-story structure with a large basement, connected to the office building by a covered walk through the parking lot. The southern side had a two-bay loading dock; that area of the lot was a wide open area that Beacon employees were forbidden to park in since the trucks that picked up the paper required a large turnaround. That open area was where Bill and a few of the others would occasionally play soccer during lunch breaks. Lately though, more often than not, they would sit and talk and smoke Marlboros.

Still, it was nice to have the option.

Bill pulled into a space in the middle of the lot, looking around. Roughly a dozen of the eighty-eight spaces were occupied. Not that the lot was ever full, but it would be normal for there to be about thirty cars here on a Tuesday morning. He checked his watch, then shrugged. It was still early.

He finished the dregs of the coffee and pitched the cup to the floor. He stretched as much as the small compartment would allow, stifling a yawn. He decided he had lost too much coffee on the dashboard and required another cup; he was hungry anyway. He lingered a moment, letting the last track of *Life's Rich Pageant* finish, then hopped out, shouldered his pack, and headed around front.

There was no way that 'Genoa' was the merchant's real name; he was Syrian, for Christ's sake. On the rare mornings that Bill ate breakfast, Genoa was his guy. The leather-skinned, always-smiling vendor ran a breakfast cart on the corner just across from The Beacon and was there from six am to noon, and from one-thirty to five. Shattering all preconceptions due to his ethnicity, he had excellent Columbian coffee and cart dogs that were better than any Bill had ever had. That is, aside from his summer in New York City when he had dated that Jewish grad student, Hillary. The bitch.

Today, Bill got an extra-large java and a breakfast 'dog and, while Genoa was preparing, asked him about his experiences since the Doomsday Comet.

Genoa did not have much to tell Bill. Most of his family was still in the Middle East; those that were in Springfield (and Bill could never figure out how many there were) were all doing 'veddy well'. Even so, Bill made note of a never-before-seen cricket bat hanging on Genoa's cart.

Even though he could not really afford it, Bill tipped Genoa one hundred percent, wished him and his family well, then jogged across Seventh Avenue towards work. He hopped up on the curb and crossed the sidewalk quickly, heading for the glass door on the right of the Beacon entrance; he always used it, having some subconscious superstition about the revolving door in the middle. At the last moment, he pulled up short; yellow CAUTION tape crossed the inside of the door in a towering 'X' and he could see the lock-bar was engaged.

He looked through the glass in confusion and spied Lincoln Collins behind the security desk. The guard had been watching him and now gestured at the revolving door pointedly.

"What the hell?" Bill muttered, sidestepping and pushing through the revolving door with barely-suppressed trepidation. "Something wrong with the doors, Lincoln?"

"The doors are fine," the guard answered. He was a year or two older than Bill, a hulking Southerner who had played tight end for Tuskegee. Clearly, he had not been able to land a job in the NFL. Bill had never learned what had brought him to the Beacon. "We're just having folks use the center door this week."

Bill shrugged it off, then took a deep pull at his coffee. He wavered a moment, then headed for the elevator.

"Geez, you look like hell, Bill."

"They're lucky I came in at all," Bill growled, walking past the desk.

"Hold on," Lincoln said, standing up. His tone had changed. "You didn't have a run-in with one of those... *things*, did you, Bill?"

He stopped in his tracks. Lincoln's hand was under the high wall of the counter, but Bill could see it resting on handle of a sweet DeMarini Juggernaut that probably cost more than all four tires on Bill's car. He lifted his gaze to the guard's face; at 6'5, Lincoln towered over him. The guard was sweating, but steady.

"No, Linc," he answered. "I just haven't been sleeping. I feel like shit, but I'm not injured." He considered holding up his hands and doing a pirouette, but decided he was too tired and that it was a stupid idea anyway.

Lincoln relaxed, his hand releasing the bat. "Okay, good. Sorry, Bill. Wild stuff out there. Try to have a good day."

"Agreed. I will. You too, Linc."

Bill got off the elevator on the second floor and walked past the Marketing offices, all of which were dark. The lights were on on the main floor, where the reporters shared space with the Accounting people, though most of the cubicles were unoccupied. He stumbled past a couple of interns whose names he had never learned, nodding in greeting. As he reached his own cubicle, he spotted Otto, the Beacon's IT geek, logging off of his computer.

“Hey, Bill!” Otto greeted.

Bill grunted at the thick, bespectacled, flannel-wearing man and nodded towards his computer. “What’d you do?”

“Just installed your latest Wupdates and virus defs, Bill. You’re good to go after a reboot,” Otto replied. “Good to see you made it in. Most people are calling in sick.”

“I thought about it,” Bill said, changing places with the tech and dropping into his chair. “I see you’re in bright and early. You look rested. Everything going okay?”

Otto smiled. “Yeah, all things considered, I can’t complain.” His face became somewhat more serious. “I know a lot of people have been hurt or even killed during the last couple of weeks. I’m real sorry about that. But my family’s been pretty lucky. My folks and sister are up at the cabin this week; for the most part, my friends are all okay too.”

“Nice,” Bill said with a nod. “Thanks for updating the pc.”

“Oh, no problem.” Otto looked around and a hint of his smile returned. “I need to keep myself busy; I’m a little nervous. I’m waiting for Shelby Ellsworth to get in.”

Bill raised an eyebrow. “Shelby from Subscriptions? Why is that?”

“I’ve had my eye on her for a while,” Otto answered, his voice lowered. “Something about all this ‘Doomsday Comet’ stuff has finally gotten my nerve up.”

“You’ve never had an issue with asking women out.”

“True,” Otto confessed. “I’ve asked her out before, but she turned me down. I don’t know; I just have a feeling. Something about the stress that’s out there. I feel like it’ll work in my favor.”

Bill laughed, despite himself. “Really, Otto? Her?”

“She’s *hot*, Bro. What’s the problem?”

“I dunno. She’s a little...I dunno. *Heavy*?” The fact was, Shelby was more than a little overweight. She had a nice enough face and pretty eyes, but in the short time she had worked there, she had gone from pleasantly-plump to chubby and beyond. Bill also disliked her shortish hairstyle and found her to be far more arrogant than her looks or accomplishments warranted.

Otto scoffed. “You can keep those anorexic broads. The girls who can’t drink a beer or eat more than a salad? What fun are they? No, man. Women are like race-tracks. No curves is *boring*. She’s like a Mesopotamian love goddess! I want to do *terrible* things to her!”

Bill shook his head. “Too much, too early, Otto. Off you go.”

Otto laughed and headed off to continue updating the computers.

Bill checked messages, ran through emails and made two unsuccessful attempts to outline his day while he ate his breakfast and finished the coffee from Genoa.

The breakfast settled fine, but the second cup of coffee had gotten to him.

Bill was ‘camped out’ and two-thirds of the way through the article about A&M’s prospects for Spring Training when the door to the men’s room banged open and he heard the rushed clap of wing-tips on the tiled floor. The door to the handicapped stall banged open, then shut.

“*Ohhh....Hells Bells...*”

Bill made a face, and yet... “Hey, Henry. That you?”

A pause, then, “Yeah, Billy. Sorry for the noise. Rough night last night.”

“No need to apologize.” Henry Gannon worked in the advertising department and he and his wife were notorious drinkers and carousers. The man always made it into work, but he also logged his share of time in the restroom. “Just hang in there, Henry...”

Bill had been hearing more sirens, and close by, so he rode the elevator back down to the lobby. He found Lincoln by the glass doors, peering outside. Flashing lights reflected off the buildings across the street and Bill could see Genoa standing near his cart, wringing his hands nervously.

“What’s going on, Linc?”

“Bad car crash over on 116th Street. I think there was a fender-bender, but then some crazy person came speeding along and crashed into the other vehicles. It’s a mess over there.”

Bill craned his neck to see. There were several emergency vehicles cluttering the intersection to their left, and he could see at least one mangled car. Shattered glass was everywhere. People had gathered to gawk, and emergency personnel were doing their best to keep things orderly. Traffic was already backing up in front of the Beacon. As Bill and Lincoln watched, a stout policewoman with a high-visibility vest trotted by, likely going to direct traffic away from the scene.

“Wild stuff out there today,” said Lincoln, shaking his head. He checked the lock bars on the doors, then headed back to his desk.

Bill watched for a couple of minutes more, then was forced to step back as four people arrived at the front of the Beacon and came in through the revolving doors.

“Good mornin’ there, Boys!” called the first man, a southerner by the sound of him, wearing a bright orange Hawaiian shirt over dungarees and cowboy boots. He had a bit of a gut, but was broad and carried it well. His white hair and beard were cut short; his grey eyes were piercing, yet friendly. He took Bill’s hand in his and pumped it energetically. “Dale Ryan, from Garland, Texas. Pleased to meet ya, Son!”

Two other men and a young woman had filed in behind Dale. The young man and woman were dark-haired, dressed in Dockers and dress shirts, and stood quietly to one side. The last was a tall, sandy-haired fellow in glasses and business casual, who waved first to Bill, then to Lincoln. “I’m Todd Menzies; this is Jeremy Ross and Anne Whitman. We’re here for a meeting with Henry Gannon?”

“Ah, the steakhouse account,” Lincoln acknowledged. “You’ll be Mr. Gannon’s ten o’clock.”

“That’s right,” Todd answered with a broad smile.

Bill glanced at the clock over Lincoln’s head. He guessed Henry would have had enough time to finish his acrobatics in the men’s room.

He realized the Texan was still pumping his hand. “And you are, Son?”

“I’m sorry,” Bill answered. “I’m Bill Sullivan. I’m just a reporter here.”

“Hey, Son. Nobody is *JUST* an anything,” the Texan said soberly, then released his hand and clapped him on the shoulder. He headed over to join the others.

“Looks like you fellas are getting the worst of it here,” Todd said, nodding towards the street. “We had a bear of a time getting here from the airport.”

“National Guard’s even been called out,” added the younger man, who Bill noticed did *not* have a southern accent.

“Yeah, wild stuff out there,” Lincoln agreed, now glaring at the glass doors suspiciously.

“Are you gentlemen experiencing these...disturbances...in your home states?” Bill asked.

“There’s been some shenanigans along the border,” replied Dale. “But that’s nothing new. Around Austin too...Dallas, a bit. But we’re talking about *Texas*, Son! Texas always handles its issues! The Galveston Hurricane, The Alamo, Waco, that 1-15 season by the Cowboys...”

“Oh yeah, *Waco* worked out great,” Bill sniped. The others did not hear him, as they were all laughing at Dale’s joke about his football team.

“So, don’t you worry about Texas,” Dale told him. “I expect this will all be blown over by the time we get back home tomorrow. But here...this...” he gestured vaguely towards the street. “This is a little disconcerting, Bill Sullivan.”

“Hey, they’re on it,” Todd countered. “National Guard is on the scene and we saw plenty of police. They’ll have it handled.”

“You’re probably right,” Dale conceded. “Though I’d be startin’ to consider martial law if I was this here mayor.”

Bill scowled, but held his tongue.

“Meeting’s gonna happen in about five,” the Texan said to his watch. “Bill, it’s been a pleasure. You take good care now; we’ll see you later!”

Bill nodded and waved as the quartet headed off, directed to the elevator by Lincoln.

Bill was fuming. He had had his story about the ride with SWAT finished and submitted by early Saturday morning. It was a Sunday Edition piece without question, but he had accepted Ron Rogers’ hedging that there might not be time to proof it and get it to press before the morning edition went out. But then, it had

not been in Monday's paper either. Perhaps they would wait until the following weekend to run it? But it might lose its timeliness by then.

In passing, Bill had picked up the Monday evening supplement and flipped through it.

"DAMMIT!!"

Bill saw Ron's light was finally on. He barely knocked before shoving his way into the office. Ron's secretary Meagan was not at her desk.

Ron glanced up, then back to his paperwork. "Where've you been, Bill? You just coming in?"

"I've been here since quarter to eight, Ron."

Ron looked up at him. *He* had just arrived. "Ah, good man. Kind of thought you might be taking more time off. *Lots* of people taking time off this month." This last he said to no one in particular.

"It *is* flu season," Bill quipped. When Ron did not respond, "Ron, *dammit!* You know that piece was a Sunday edition story, *front page* if you ask me!"

The older man sighed. "Yeah, but I *didn't* ask you, Sullivan."

"And not only did you completely rape my story, you bumped it to the fucking Monday *evening* edition? Why did you take all those details out?" What had also surprised Bill was what Ron had left in. After his *severe* editing of Bill's story, it had come out mainly as a public-interest piece on the police department and the officers of SWAT themselves. The mission at the flea market had been included, albeit reduced to a mere paragraph. The subsequent fiasco at the apartment building was mentioned in passing, but details had been left out almost entirely. The police officers came off looking like interesting and sympathetic individuals; Bill had to admit that he would have thought Ron would go in the other direction, much like the officers had suspected when Bill first joined them.

Ron looked up at him, uncharacteristically contrite. "It was a really good story, Bill. Don't think I don't know that. The edits were made...to *soften* it a bit. I mean, it was pretty rough stuff, especially that part at the end."

"You mean when the zombies killed two of the SWAT troopers and nearly me along with them?"

Ron made a sour face and held his hands up. "Easy, Bill. Easy. We're not in the panic business."

"I...*what?!*" Bill yelled. "I thought we were in the fucking *reporting* business, Ron!!"

Ron slammed his hand down on his desk, scattering papers and folders. Despite himself, Bill jumped. Ron stood up, his eyes hard. "*Yes*, we're in the *reporting* business, Sullivan. But what are you *reporting*, exactly? That the recently-dead are jumping up and *eating* the living?! Yeah? *THEN*, what?!"

Bill glared back, but could muster nothing.

"You want to report that dozens of bullets don't stop them?!" Ron asked. "You want to report that, despite what we've been told, the National Guard is *barely* containing this?! How about that Springfield IS NOT the only city affected by this?!"

"I think people know that..."

"*SHUT UP, BILL!*"

Bill shut up. Ron got a hold of himself, straightened his tie, then continued, his voice more reasonable. "Once the cops and the soldiers get this thing in hand, we're all over it. We report about the *positive resolution* of the problem.... You get it, Bill?"

Ron was breathing hard; he looked exhausted. Bill took a good look at him. This was not his boss from last week. It was obvious he had not been sleeping. He probably needed to hear it, so...

"Yeah, I get it."

Ron managed a tight smile. "Okay then." He sat down heavily.

Bill paused, unsure if he should push. *Ah, the hell with it.*

"So, Ron. I noticed a lot of the cubicles on the floor are empty today."

Ron exhaled slowly through his nose. "*Lots* of people calling in sick this week..."

"That being the case, I'd like to expand my workload. I have a couple of pieces I've been kicking around, and I'd like permission to start interviewing people."

"What are the pieces?"

“More of the human interest side of the Doomsday Comet phenomenon. I’d like to talk to people who’ve been affected by the mania, both directly and indirectly. I’d like to explore theories that this may not be what it seems, that things are being kept from us.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “What are you getting at?”

“Well, that this whole thing might somehow be engineered.”

“Bill, you *saw* the comet.”

“I saw *something*. I saw a streak of light up in the sky. I’m no astronaut. I only ‘know’ that was the comet because I was told that.”

“You’re getting a little ambitious, aren’t you, Bill?” Ron scoffed. “Government conspiracy? All of this? I gave you one story, and I’m still not sure how I feel about the fact that we ran it.”

“You hardly ran it at all.”

“*You want to keep this job, Asshole?!*”

Bill jumped, but forged on. “Most, if not all of your staff writers have called in sick the past two days.”

“People get sick.”

“When was the last time Martha Valde called in *sick*?” Bill scoffed. “At the very least, people are scared. *And* you are now very short on writers and quality material. You gonna fill up Wednesday’s paper with Texas Steakhouse ads?”

“What did we just talk about, Bill?! I’m not printing scare material!”

“No, not yet,” Bill agreed. “I’ll work some filler stuff for this week. But for *afterwards*... We’re all over it, you said. Right?”

Ron frowned and rubbed at his chin. There was a very long pause. “Okay, you’re right.” He sighed, then, “You’re up... *temporarily*. Show me some of these filler pieces for this week. Don’t make me regret this and we’ll see if it’ll stick. Let me down, and you’re back to running coffee, Sullivan.”

“Got it.”

“Now, get out.”

Fucking hell, Bill thought as he left the office. Battlefield promotion.

Bill was on a roll. He had already finished two stories that Ron would find acceptable for the Wednesday edition: one was an article on general stress disorders and comparisons to behavior he had observed in Springfield during the crisis, backed by basic facts from his old Psychology textbook. Another was a piece on price gouging during the crisis, which he had already compiled plenty of data for over the past two weeks. Relevant, but nothing too ‘scary’. He was just calling up the draft for a third piece, which would challenge general corporate policies on vacation and sick time during times like this, when his phone rang.

It was Abby.

“*Hey, Bill! I wasn’t sure if you were gonna make it into work today.*”

Abby worked next door at a photography studio specializing in headshots for amateurs and aspiring actors. Bill had met her six months ago when eating lunch at Applebee’s. She was petite, cute as hell and fun to talk to.

“I thought about staying home, believe me.”

“*So, is Ron working you guys hard over there? Or is it like over here?*”

“What’s happening over by you?” They had been out for drinks with groups on three occasions. Nothing had ever happened between them, but Bill was convinced there was potential.

“*Oh, it’s like the day before Thanksgiving or something. No one’s getting anything done. The manager called in sick, and not a whole lot of people are looking for clients to book.*”

“So, you guys are just...hanging out?”

She paused, giggled, then took a minute to explain.

“A ‘Zombie Party’?” Bill asked, incredulous. “Isn’t that...kind of in bad taste?”

“*Oh come on, Bill. It’s just a gag. Of course we know that there are people out there that really got hurt. We’re just trying to deal with it. Come on! It’ll be fun! We’ve invited some friends, even some clients! There’ll be models...*”

Bill sighed heavily and ran a hand through his hair. He did want to see her.

“Come onnn....”

“I’ll try,” he answered. “Ron *is* running us, but I see no reason why I can’t get out of here for a late lunch. When did you say you’re starting?”

“Two o’clock! Bill, it’s going to be great! Hey, Ron won’t lynch you if we send you back to work a little tipsy, will he?”

“He can’t afford to lynch me right now. I’ll see you later, Abby.”

Halfway through the article on corporate leave policy, and with two more cups of company coffee in him, Bill took a break to hit the men’s room. Standing at the urinal, he heard a soft exhalation and turned to see the handicapped stall was occupied. He looked down and saw the familiar wingtips.

“You back, Henry?”

There was an uncomfortable groan, then, “Those jalapeno poppers were *worth* it, Bill!”

“How’d your meeting go with the Texans?”

“Still going; just on a break. But it’s going well! I’ve already got ‘em for three months, but I’m close to getting them to commit for a full year!”

“Atta’ boy, Henry.”

“Hey, Billy. If you ever do Bloody Marys, stay the hell away from Senor Gato’s Spicy Mix. You hear me?”

“I hear you, Henry. You hang in there...”

The sirens had calmed earlier, but had returned in force. Bill had wandered down to the lobby again, but Lincoln’s mounting agitation caused him to decide the roof might be a better place to survey the area. Quite a bit of it was a tangle of vents and satellite dishes, but there was some walkable space. One area on the eastern side had even been outfitted with a small table and a few chairs; several of the employees would slip up here for their morning coffee when the weather allowed. It was here that Bill now lingered, looking out across Seventh Avenue and at the city beyond.

The police and ambulances (for there were now three) were still occupying the intersection at 116th and Seventh. From this vantage point, Bill could see that there were no less than five bodies covered with sheets. He could not fathom why the hell it was taking the authorities so long to clear the accident scene. Just north, he spotted police cruisers flying down 118th Street, and could hear the wailing of sirens from nearly all directions. In the distance, smoke rose from several significant fires.

“Trying times for our fair city,” said a voice from behind him.

Bill half-turned and nodded at Nathan Hatcher, one of two attorneys that worked for the paper, heading up the Legal department. “Hey, Nathan. I’m surprised to see you in today.”

“The courthouse is a *madhouse*,” the greying black man answered, strolling over to join Bill at the edge of the roof, steaming mug of coffee in his hand. “I came here to organize a couple of briefs, then I’ll probably head home. The wife is freaking out about all the unrest.”

“And who could blame her? Geez, Nathan. Is this the most insane shit you’ve ever seen?”

Nathan took a sip of his coffee and chuckled. “Hey, remember I went to Cal Berkeley. This is up there, though.”

They were silent for several minutes. The sirens continued to wail. The crowd at 116th and Seventh continued to grow. In the distance, fires continued to burn.

“I have to admit, I thought they’d have this under control by now,” Bill said softly. “Do you think they will any time soon?”

Nathan smiled. “Have some faith, Young Bill! If not in our Lord and Savior, then at least have some faith in your fellow man.”

Bill was dubious, and his face showed it.

“Think about this,” Nathan said. “How many times each day do you put your life in the hands of your fellow man, even just driving to work? Think about how many times someone, a total stranger, is in a position to take your life. Just one jerk of the wheel, one stomp on that gas pedal...whether intentional or accidental...and your day takes a very different turn.”

“That’s pretty heavy, Nathan...”

“Add to that the men working on the window scaffolds, the crane operators, people maintaining the gas lines, airline pilots...” Nathan trailed off and just gestured out at the city. “You see? You have faith in your fellow man, even if you aren’t aware of it.”

Bill sighed. “This sounds a bit like that speech you gave me about not getting stressed during the rush hour commute. Where, instead of being angry at the people in my way, I should realize that we are all in this together, and try to feel some solidarity with them. And also, that I should focus on being grateful for all the hard work that people put in to build the roads I drive on, and to coordinate the traffic signals...”

“I told you that one, huh?”

“Yeah. At the Christmas party last year. You kept waving your cognac in my face to accentuate each point.”

Nathan shook his head and laughed. “I do love my Hennessy. But hey, that doesn’t make any of that any less true.”

Bill’s dubious look was back. “Does it work for you?”

Nathan winked. “*Some* days.” He clapped Bill on the shoulder and the two shared a laugh. Turning back to the railing, they grew silent again. The sirens continued; in the distance, they could hear a man shouting orders on a bullhorn. The silence between them lengthened, until,

“So, you saw them, right? Up close?”

“Yes.”

“I read your article. I get the feeling you did not...disclose all your experiences.”

“Mr. Rogers *edited* my piece a little bit,” Bill said with what he hoped was the proper level of acid.

Nathan rubbed his hands on his mug nervously. “Well, then...you might have a better idea than most of us how this thing might go.” They looked at each other. “Do *you* think we’ll get this under control?”

Bill thought about it. Nathan was watching him, waiting for an answer. Despite his perpetually optimistic demeanor, he was actually scared.

“I dunno, Nathan. Those SWAT troopers had to really work to bring them down. Seems like they don’t feel pain like we do. They can absorb a lot of damage...”

“You have to shoot them in the head, right? Just like in the movies.”

“What?”

“...like in those Romero movies.”

“I never saw them,” Bill admitted. “I don’t really watch horror movies.”

Bill was a fan of indie flicks, if he watched movies at all. The mainstream studio productions were so much mindless crap, served up in modular, formulaic drivel piles for the brainless herd that frequented the cinema. Bill did not get along at all with the Beacon’s movie critic, Macie Sherman, who thought that a movie was ‘an intellectual journey’ simply because it had Matt Damon in it.

“I can’t tell you that they definitely or definitely *don’t* have to be killed with a shot to the head...I...Nathan, there was *a lot* of shooting going on.” He trailed off himself, at a loss. He just shrugged. Maybe he *should* have watched George Romero’s movies.

Nathan regarded him for several long moments, then nodded and patted his shoulder again. “I think I’ll collect those briefs and finish them at home. Thanks for the talk, Bill.”

Bill was at his computer, brows knitted together in mounting annoyance. Nathan’s question had sent him back to check his earlier research, but every site that he had mined for information prior to his ride with SWAT was offline or delivering some kind of “Forbidden” message. The main news sites were still up; Bill began scanning those, grabbing stories of interest and setting them aside.

His phone rang.

“Springfield Beacon, this is Bill Sulli...”

“*BILL!*” then laughter.

“Abby?” He glanced at the clock on his monitor. 2:18. Where was the day going? Even so, it sounded like they had started earlier than 2pm.

“*Bill, where are you?! People are already here!*”

“I’m coming. I just have some work to take care of first.”

“Bill, you have to hurry! Adrian brought over a bottle of cinnamon schnapps and you have to do a shot with me!”

“I’ll be over soon, Abby. I swear.”

There was more laughter in the background, as well as music. Abby giggled. *“Don’t take too long, Bill! The party’s really getting rolling! HA-HAAA!”*

Bill chewed his lip for a moment, listening to the continued sirens outside. “Abby, maybe it would be a good idea to head home early today.”

But Abby had hung up. The line was dead.

Bill had not thought to pack a lunch today, and there was no delivery place with less than a two hour wait. A look out the window had revealed that Genoa was gone, so Bill now found himself in the modest cafeteria provided by the Beacon, chewing on a pre-made turkey-and-cheddar on whole wheat. The only member of the kitchen staff that had showed up for work was Fawn Pilgrim, a matronly woman of indeterminate age and background, who was now upstairs catering lunch to Henry and the Texans. She had left out a tray of sandwiches and chips with a payment jar and the stern words, “Honor system!” before heading up to the conference room.

Otto had been in the cafeteria when Bill arrived, eating with Greg Soto, the mailroom supervisor. Greg was pale, surly, in his mid-thirties and had likely risen as far as he would in the world. They had waved Bill over and, despite himself, Bill had acquiesced. They were joined shortly thereafter by the two journalism interns, whose names Otto thankfully knew. On most days, they never would have sat together. Today, with no one else around...

Rebecca was a fairly-cute redhead in her junior year at State. She aspired towards International Journalism and held onto the notion that the ability and willingness of reporters to unearth ‘the whole truth’ of all things would eventually lead to world harmony.

Clay was a senior at A&M who probably would have been handsome if not for being in the midst of an unfortunate and protracted bout with acne. His interest in anything beyond the Sports Desk was limited, and Bill doubted he was very serious about pursuing a career in journalism.

Otto and Greg had already been talking about ‘the state of affairs’ when Bill sat down, so that remained the focus of conversation throughout lunch.

“I don’t understand how crippled the city is over this,” Greg was complaining. “No one is showing up for work; do you guys have any idea how backed up the mailroom is? I’m doing my best on my own, but honestly, I stopped giving a shit about it about two hours ago. Whatever gets sorted, gets sorted. The rest will just back up and we’ll get it out when we can.”

“There are a lot of people that have been badly hurt,” Rebecca countered. “Some even killed. Don’t you care about that?”

Greg wrestled with it, finally saying of course he cared, when he probably did not. “My point is, the mayor’s office should’ve just let the police handle this from jump. We’ve got a solid police department. And now the ‘Guard is here to boot. Why are they still half-assing it?”

“What do you suggest?” Bill asked.

“Martial Law, if they have to,” Greg answered. Rebecca and Clay both reacted angrily, and Bill was ready to jump in. “Okay, easy! Easy, you bunch of Liberals! All I’m saying is, give everyone a day off of work, stay off the roads, let the authorities clean the mess up without having to worry about crap like traffic control and protecting people shopping at the strip malls. One day, maybe two, and we’re back on the rails. That’s all I’m saying!”

“Not going to happen,” Bill said, shaking his head.

“I think we may be in one of the worse areas,” Clay put in, waving the second half of his tuna on rye towards the windows that looked onto Seventh Avenue. “That intersection has been a mess all morning, but the feeds from 6 and 14 are saying the National Guard showing up turned the tide. Even the public broadcast system said that it’s under control. There was that big incident at the train station this morning, but other than that, there were only a handful of events today. Less than yesterday.”

“It’s not just here,” Bill countered.

Greg seemed surprised by that, but Otto and both interns nodded. “We’ve seen the broadcasts from Chicago, New York, Boston,” Rebecca said. “But they’re doing the same stuff, containing it.”

“The internet’s a beautiful thing!” Otto carped, hoisting his Mountain Dew to no one in particular.

Bill shook his head. “It’s the same sanitized bullshit that the outlets are broadcasting here.” He struggled for a moment, then gave up. “If you could have seen the horde at the apartment building last week...” He trailed off, staring into the distance.

Greg scoffed. “A *horde*?”

“There were *hundreds*.”

“What? In *one* apartment building?” Otto asked.

Bill nodded. “I couldn’t believe it myself.”

“I thought the big deal was at the flea market. There was almost nothing about the apartment building in your story,” Greg argued. “I cut it out and hung it in my cubicle...”

“Ron *butchered* my story,” Bill interrupted angrily. “He took out almost all of the details about the end of the operation. I’ll be happy to forward you my original document. That is, if it hasn’t been deleted off the server...”

“Only I have that access!” Otto protested in mock indignation. “And I would not allow your hard work to be destroyed. Not even a crisis such as this shall cause me to shirk my duties. I am honor-bound to...”

“Hey, Douchebag,” Rebecca interjected. “Why do you think this is all so funny?”

“I...I think *everything’s* funny,” Otto answered. It was a sincere statement. He seemed surprised that he had been called out on his levity.

“It’s not a joke, Otto,” Bill muttered, shaking his head. “This thing is serious.”

“Guys...of *course* I’m taking this seriously,” Otto told them, with an incredulous smirk. “But what’s the use in being stressed about it?” His mood suddenly sobered. “You want to know how serious I’m taking it? I’ve got food and water for two weeks in my basement. I’ve stocked up on extra batteries, filled a gas can, that sort of thing. I even have...” He looked around, as if there were others in the cafeteria besides the five of them, then, in a lower voice, “I have my old man’s .38 out in the glove box.”

“In the car? Why not *on* you?” Clay asked.

“Because it’s not licensed. And I certainly don’t have a *carry* permit.”

Bill sniffed. He had always felt people should be able to defend themselves. He favored training courses and licensing, but recent events were beginning to salt his opinions.

Clay was more adamant. “I think getting picked up on a handgun charge is kind of mild, compared to the alternative. If Bill is right, and it’s as bad as he thinks, how could you be worried about *getting in trouble*?”

“Because we haven’t passed that bell curve in the Anarchy Corollary yet.”

“The what?”

“The Anarchy Corollary,” Otto repeated. “Things may be going to shit. But they’re *not quite* there, yet. Looting’s still illegal. You should know that, Bill; you just went on that ride with SWAT...which is *mad cool*, by the way.”

Bill ignored Otto’s fawning. “Of course it’s illegal. But it’s still happening...more and more.”

“And they’re still arresting people for it,” Otto countered. “The infrastructure is wobbly, but it’s still there. The last thing I want to do is get myself roped for carrying illegally or ‘acquiring supplies’, then get locked in a jail cell, unarmed, when the undead hordes storm the police station.”

Bill shuddered at the thought, images from Thursday coming to his mind unbidden. The others did not seem pleased at the idea either.

“Besides,” Otto went on, turning his attention back to his egg salad, “we may still get our collective act together and beat this thing. It never seems to happen that way in the movies, but it’s possible. And I don’t want to lose my job because I jumped the gun and ended up fleeing into the mountains. And WiFi doesn’t reach all the way up there yet. That would totally suck.”

“Well, at least you’ve got your priorities straight,” Rebecca sniped, then flashed him an impish smile and returned to her Cobb salad.

They all fell silent, finishing the last of their lunches. The muffled sounds of activity outside contrasted with the uncharacteristic stillness inside the Beacon. They were clearly all aware of it, and the rising tension was becoming palpable.

“This place is dead,” Bill remarked, stating the obvious and immediately regretting the adjective. Trying not to wince, he quickly added, “There were only a dozen cars when I got here.”

“Probably half that now,” Clay answered. “Everybody’s boogying. Except *us* of course. And Idiot-me, I agreed to proof and enter all the box scores before taking off today. I’ll be here until nine...”

“Maybe if you’d learn to fuckin’ type, you could get your work done in a timely manner,” Greg carped.

“Bite me,” Clay responded.

“Well, *I’m* outta’ here too,” Rebecca said. “My boyfriend Shawn’s coming to get me. He said things are getting too crazy in the city and we’re going to his parents’ place at the lake.” She paused, then, “He’s a kickboxer.”

“He’s an *underwriter*,” Clay countered sullenly.

“Ron approve a half day for you?” Bill asked.

“Ron can kiss my ass,” Rebecca answered. “I’ll email the time-off form, but it’s not an actual request.”

On cue, Rebecca’s phone chimed. She picked it up and looked at the incoming text message. “Ooh, looks like I’m outta’ here even earlier!” she said with a wide smile. “He’s here!”

Greg and Otto headed back to their respective jobs, but Bill decided to accompany the interns to the front desk where Rebecca’s boyfriend was waiting.

Shawn Boyle was the quintessential 21st century jock. He stood just around six feet tall, was muscular, but not muscle-bound, lean, but not skinny. His tan was even, but not too dark. His receding hair-line was nullified by a close-cropped hair style, his tan and bright green eyes. He wore low-top hiking boots, cargo shorts and a baggy t-shirt that nonetheless showed off his well-developed arms. Bill tried to suppress his immediate dislike for the man. He could only assume the grey-green Jeep Wrangler pulled up on the sidewalk belonged to him.

Shawn had been leaning on the counter, talking with Lincoln, but turned when Rebecca, Bill and Clay entered the foyer. “Hey, Baby,” he said with a quick smile. “You ready to get outta Dodge?”

“More than,” Rebecca answered, covering the last few yards to him and throwing her arms around him. After a quick kiss, she made a big show of turning, an overly-pained expression on her face. “Oh...the email to Ron. Um..Clay? Would you mind sending it for me? My laptop is locked, but you know my password.”

“No problem,” Clay answered flatly.

“Hey, Clay, we appreciate it,” Shawn told the younger man. “Bro, you aren’t staying here much longer, are you?”

Clay shrugged. “I’ve got work to do. Hope to be out of here by seven...or six.”

Rebecca had already been headed for the glass doors, towing Shawn along. Shawn stopped then, shedding her arm. He looked around at the other three men, to make sure they were listening, then, “Folks, it is *on* out there.” When they did not react right away, “Listen, you need to wrap things up here and hit the road. Your parking lot is empty; who the hell is still here?”

“A few employees,” Lincoln answered. “Some consultants, having a meeting upstairs.”

“Any of the executives?” Shawn scoffed.

“My editor,” Bill answered.

“Well, tell him it’s time to close up shop, Bro!” Shawn said, too loudly. “This isn’t a joke; we’re losing the handle out there. You guys understand that there are *zombies* attacking people, right? The recently-dead, rising from the grave to kill the living? Sound familiar to anyone?”

“Shawn!” Rebecca admonished.

“The police are on the scene,” Bill countered, pointing in the general direction of 116th Street. “It does look kind of wild, but they’ll get things under control. If not, the mayor has called in the National Guard.” He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

“They’d come and evacuate us if it was that bad,” Lincoln put in, though it was clear he was more hopeful than certain.

“We should maybe go check the news feeds again,” Clay offered. “If there are emergency instructions or rescue stations, that’s where they’ll broadcast them.”

“Don’t you guys have an exit strategy? Some kind of plan?” Shawn asked.

“An ‘exit strategy’?” Bill asked. “You mean like leaving the city?”

Shawn nodded. "Sure. Unless you have someplace defensible where you can hole up. Food and water for a few weeks?" He looked around. "This place sure isn't secure."

"Well, my roommates and I just bought groceries on Saturday..."

"My wife keeps a few extra cans of soup in the pantry..."

"No..."

"Jesus, you people," Shawn shook his head. "*The National Guard will come evacuate us'... 'Maybe there are emergency instructions on the television...' Just waiting for the government to do everything for you, huh? Live hand-to-mouth, do you? Power goes off in a storm and you just sit there, shaking?"*

"Shawn, this isn't helping anyone!" Rebecca scolded him.

He shook it off. "Okay, that's true. Sorry. Look, they'll get it under control eventually...maybe. But in the meantime, it's the Wild West out there. You know what I saw on the way over here, passing through Lower Shelby? A squad of those National Guardsmen that you are all waiting to come save you. They had a checkpoint set up at the corner of MacClellan and 18th, checking cars...for what, I never found out. Well, one of those things comes lurching out of an alley by the apartment buildings, and these guys immediately panic. Three of them start spraying bullets all over the place. They got the thing, eventually, but not before shooting up two stores and killing at least one innocent bystander.

"At that point, I drove up on the sidewalk and took off. They were too busy dealing with the mess they'd made to do more than holler at me. So, here's the news: the authorities have got their hands more than full with this situation. And rest assured that the majority of Springfield's population is going to be crying for help, instructions, supplies and safety. We're on our own, at least for the moment."

Bill said nothing. Lincoln and Clay both cursed.

Shawn went on, "Look at it this way: If we can fend for ourselves, we're that many less people the government needs to worry about. We're off the breadlines and letting them get to the business of squaring this away. Right? Right."

They were silent. Bill chewed his lip.

Rebecca exhaled sharply, looking at Shawn. "I'm ready."

"Let's hit it," he replied with a nod. "Folks, we are vapor! Hopefully see you all in a week or three, and we can all laugh about this. Clay, thanks again for taking care of that email! You guys, be strong. Take care of each other!"

After Shawn and Rebecca had left, and Lincoln had secured and checked the doors, Bill and Clay had headed back upstairs. Bill tried to get back to work, but he could not concentrate. Even the corporate leave item was not holding his interest; every new siren he heard caused little adrenaline rushes and pulled his head towards the windows. He was beginning to wonder if maybe Shawn and Rebecca had had the right idea. Halfway across the cubicle cluster, he could hear Clay's excruciatingly slow typing and occasional curse as he made a mistake. Ron's light was still on, the door closed. Other than that, the entire half of the top floor was vacant.

Bill took the stairs up to the roof, hoping that the fresh air might clear his head. But up here, the sirens were not muffled. Neither were the blaring horns of the cars stuck in traffic, nor the more and more emphatic instructions bellowed by men with bullhorns. As Bill returned to the table and chairs where he had earlier spoken with Nathan, he noticed that two of the fires they had watched earlier had spread, and that several new columns of smoke had appeared. Helicopters were in the sky, and not just traffic choppers. There was a pair of police helicopters hovering a mile or so to the northwest, and...in the distance, was that a Blackhawk?

The intersection at 116th had been cleared; that was one bit of good news. Traffic was still backed up, but the ambulances were gone, and the remaining police officers were working on getting things moving again.

Bill paused; there was a new sound. It was music, of all things. And laughter...

Bill made his way to the north side of the roof. Across a wide alley was the roof of the photography agency where a small group had just emerged. The usable space on their roof was far less than the Beacon's; the building was smaller to begin with, plus much of the roof was a snarl of ventilation ducts for the central air conditioning.

There were around a dozen people, Bill guessed, though the small roof and a screen of ductwork made it difficult for him to be sure. He recognized a couple of Abby's coworkers, though he could not recall their

names; the majority of the people were strangers to him. There were several older, heavy-set men, a very thin younger guy in what looked like a pizza delivery outfit, and then a half dozen young women. The guy in the delivery outfit was holding up a radio with an impressive set of speakers.

A part of him wanted to go join them. A part of him hoped that they were on to something and maybe it would be best to just let this thing run its course. Maybe it would be best to let the powers-that-be worry about maintaining order, and just go have a drink and a few dances with Abby. But something about the scene just came off as wrong.

The music grew suddenly louder and the partiers all cheered, holding aloft a variety of bottles, cans and plastic stadium cups. Most of them danced along to the loud thumping of the bass, the girls doing a far more competent job than any of the men. After watching for another minute or so, Bill spotted Abby, who emerged from the crowd, waving.

Bill waved back. Abby held aloft her cup and toasted him, then waved him over, dancing the whole time. Bill drummed his fingers on the edge of the half-wall that edged the roof, thinking that he might actually head over for a couple of drinks.

Just as he stepped back, he heard another sound. He could not discern it at first, over the loud music, but the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up and he felt a twisted feeling in his stomach. He turned, quickly surveying the roof. No, the sound was not that close. It was coming from the other side of the building, from the street. He moved quickly back towards the table and chairs, peering over the wall onto Seventh Avenue.

What Bill was hearing was a chorus of cries. To the south, just past the intersection of Seventh Avenue and 115th Street, a city bus had run up on the sidewalk and crashed into the front of Tom's Hardware. It did not look like the bus had been doing much more than rolling when it went off the street, but there were at least two people down that Bill could see. More chillingly, it looked like the back window of the bus was splattered with blood, from the *inside*.

There was frantic activity inside the disabled bus, and at least a dozen passersby were converging on the vehicle to help. A lone police officer, mounted atop one of those ludicrous Segways, was buzzing down the street towards the scene, but the remainder of the police presence in the area was still concentrated on 116th Street.

Bill tried to scream, "*No!*" to the people below, but he just froze. As the good Samaritans pried open the bus's two doors, two knots of hysterical passengers were practically launched forth. They were followed immediately by the screaming wounded. And lastly, by the undead.

He only watched for a moment as the crowd began scattering. He turned and sprinted back to the north end of the roof, waving his arms frantically and screaming for Abby's attention. A handful of the crew spotted him and began waving back, mimicking his arm moves and continuing to dance.

Bill flew into an incredulous rage, slamming his fists on the half-wall and spinning about. He was cursing so hard he was actually spitting. Realizing he was doing no one any good, he calmed, nearly losing control again when he saw the roof-partiers, Abby included, continuing to mimic him. Many of them toasted him again, and waved him over.

"MORONS!!!" he screamed, then dashed back for the stairs.

Bill zig-zagged through the cube farm, practically falling into his desk. He grabbed up his phone and began jabbing the numbers to Abby's cell. After two unsuccessful attempts, it began to ring. The wait seemed endless and Bill felt panic encroaching. Sounds from outside remained muffled, but he knew he heard at least one gunshot.

More would be better, he mused, as Abby's voicemail finally kicked in.

As he then endured her extended and adorable voicemail message, he was jolted by the angry hammering of a bell on the first floor. It took him a moment to realize it was the security alarm, indicating one of the doors had been forced open.

Ron Rogers had been looking out his office window, one that gave him a perfect view of the 115th Street intersection. Face pale and hands trembling, he came to his door. "Bill! Bill! What the hell's happening?!"

But Bill was already disappearing into the elevator.

Bill came skidding into the lobby, expecting the worst. He was relieved to see the front doors were all intact, yellow caution tape still in place, and security bolts locked. “Linc?! LINC?!”

“Here, Bill,” came the reply, from the hallway behind him.

Bill spun around and saw Lincoln approaching. The security guard was breathing hard, his shirt stained with sweat. He held the DeMarini in his right hand, resting it loosely on his shoulder. Bill took a cautious step back, but as Lincoln moved closer, he could see he was uninjured.

“What’s up with the alarm?” Bill asked, raising his voice to be heard over the bell.

Lincoln trotted past him to the security desk, reached under the counter and shut off the bell. “It’s getting *real* wild out there, Bill. A bus crashed. Some of those things were on it.”

“I saw that. Did they try to get in here?”

Lincoln nodded. “One. Broke the window to the storage room and was pulling itself inside.” He paused, looked sick. “Bill, it was *tearing itself apart* trying to get at me. Got all caught up on the security grill and the broken glass!”

Bill felt dizzy. “Did you...you know?”

Lincoln shook his head. “No, I... I was so scared, Bill. I couldn’t do it. I...I just pulled some crates down by the door, then I locked and bolted it. That door is heavy. It should hold. It should hold.”

He was probably right; the door to the storage area was a fire door. It had always seemed inane to Bill to have such an expensive portal on one side of the room when the lock assembly on the window security grate had rusted off and they refused to replace it.

“Wait a minute,” Bill said. “If he got into the storage room window, that means they are in the parking lot!”

Lincoln nodded slowly.

“How many did you see?”

“Just the one...but I wasn’t exactly pushing past him to get a look outside.”

The elevator chimed again; neither man had noticed it head up to the second floor and then return. They turned to face it, hearts pounding, just as the two Texans emerged. The younger consultants followed, almost literally on their heels.

Todd and Dale both wore very serious expressions, but they were calm. Jeremy and Anne, on the other hand, were both pale as ghosts. Anne’s hands were trembling almost uncontrollably and Jeremy looked like he was about to get sick.

“Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure,” Dale told them, moving hurriedly past them. Surprising to Bill, the comment did not sound at all sarcastic.

The four consultants made a beeline for the doors, but Lincoln moved to block them. “I can’t let you out there. It’s getting crazy.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Dale assured him.

“We’re aware of the *rapidly* worsening situation, Sir,” said Todd. “We have a plane to catch.”

“If you go out there, you ain’t getting back in,” Lincoln told them. “No way, no how.”

“That’s fine by us,” Todd responded, stepping around the guard. He came up short, eyes wide.

Bill had been watching the men and had not even noticed the two zombies that had stumbled into view. Both were dressed in business casual; the nearer one wore a blazer. They in return had noticed the activity in the lobby, and were now shambling to the doors.

“Can they get through that glass?” Anne asked in a shaky voice.

“I don’t think so,” Lincoln answered, then moved quickly to the revolving door and threw the anchor bolt. He stepped back and joined the others.

“Well *now* what?” Dale asked.

“There’s got to be another way out of here,” Todd said, looking at Lincoln, then Bill. “Where’s the back door?”

“There might be a problem with the back door,” Bill replied.

Before anyone else could answer, a panicked-looking police officer ran into view. His vest was torn and his shoulder bloodied. His radio swung loose, but they could hear it squawking crazily, even inside the building. His eyes were wild, but he spotted the zombies banging on the glass doors, and halted his flight. He raised a pump-action shotgun and took aim...

“NO!!” cried Dale, Lincoln and Bill in unison.

The blast took Blazer Zombie in the back, but several pellets of the buckshot hit the glass door. The zombie pitched forward, striking the cracked glass, and crashed right through it. The second zombie glanced towards the wide-eyed policeman, then shuffled towards the broken door.

Lincoln shouted a curse at the policeman, then stepped forward, raising the DeMarini. The cop fired again, blowing a hole through the second zombie’s side, but also thoroughly destroying what was left of the glass door. Lincoln howled in pain and toppled backwards, scattering the consultants.

“What the *FUCK!*” Bill yelled at the cop, rushing to Lincoln’s side. The cop was frozen in indecision, looking like he was about to come help Lincoln. But then, he spun and looked back towards the intersection at 115th Street. To Bill’s horror, a half dozen bloodied forms stumbled into view, hands outstretched, reaching for the cop. He nearly fumbled the shotgun, but managed to pump it and get a shot off, taking the head right off the lead zombie. After that, his nerves failed and he turned and fled down the street, yelling.

One of the zombies on the floor was still struggling to get at Lincoln; Bill retrieved the bat and delivered several overhand whacks to its head. Jeremy vomited right in the middle of the lobby floor.

The thing screeched as it died, a chilling sound that set Bill trembling. More importantly, the zombies in the street heard it, and several broke off their pursuit of the cop to lurch towards the Beacon’s lobby.

“Oh shit!” gagged Jeremy, who then bolted. His female counterpart stayed a moment longer, then followed. Dale and Todd remained, and together they dragged Lincoln to his feet. The guard was bleeding from a half dozen wounds, from shotgun pellets or glass fragments, Bill could not tell.

>*BING!*<

“Get to the fuckin’ elevator!” Bill yelled, dragging at Lincoln with Todd on the other arm. The doors slid open as the group got there, and they rushed inside.

“Dale!” Todd cried.

Dale was behind; he had dragged the padded bench from the waiting area and now heaved it into the breached door. It would serve no good as a barrier; what it did accomplish was to send the zombies stumbling back through the shattered entryway. The burly Texan came skipping into the elevator just as the doors slid closed.

“Things getting a bit sporty out there!”

They reached the second floor and the three of them managed to get Lincoln into the conference room and up onto the table. Fawn had been hurriedly cleaning up after the Texans’ meeting with Henry. When she saw Lincoln,

“I *thought* I heard the alarm, but then it stopped! What happened, Lincoln? Is he *shot?*!”

Bill quickly explained the preceding few minutes as Dale and Todd opened up Lincoln’s shirt and addressed the wounds.

“Now, he got you with double-aught buck, Son,” Dale was saying. “Those are like a bunch of little .22 caliber bullets. He was kind of far away, and the pellets had to go through the glass to get to you, so they aren’t in too deep.”

“He didn’t hit anything vital,” Todd added. “You’re not in danger of dying, but they are going to hurt like hell until someone can dig them out.”

“Hell, I got my pen-knife,” Dale said, fishing out a small blade.

Lincoln swore and shoved Dale back, knocking him onto his backside. He took a deep breath, then, “Sorry. Just leave ‘em, okay? I don’t want you cutting on me.”

Dale regarded him for a moment, then nodded. “Your choice, Son.” He held out his hand and Todd hoisted him to his feet. “Now, we need to find young Jeremy and Anne.”

“Linc, you sure you’re going to be okay?” Bill asked.

Lincoln nodded, his breathing returning to a more normal pace. “He’s right; it hurts like hell. But I’ll be all right.” He stood up and winced, then shifted his weight away from his left leg.

“That’s that one that got you close to the knee,” Dale told him. “You sure you don’t want me to get that out? Last time I’m gonna ask.”

“I’ve lived with plenty of knee pain,” Lincoln countered. “I’ll be fine.”

“Well, you sit still for a minute anyway, you big tough guy,” Fawn told him. She had retrieved one of the OSHA-mandated first aid kits from the hallway and set about cleaning the guard’s wounds.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Dale leaped to the door, ready to welcome his returning coworkers. His look of disappointment was disguised, but still evident, when Ron, Greg, Otto and Clay burst in.

“That’s it! All hell’s breaking loose!” Clay yelled.

“People, I saw a busload of those things pour out all over Seventh Avenue,” Ron followed, attempting to maintain the illusion of executive coolness. “We need to get out of here immediately. You’re all granted the rest of the day off.”

“Holy shit! What happened to Lincoln?!” Greg cried, pointing.

Bill told them.

“Well that means those things are in the front door and probably all through Legal and the cafeteria and IT by now,” Otto said, blanching. He looked at Greg, “Thanks for coming to get me, Dude...”

“We can just head down the freight elevator and out the back door into the lot,” Ron said, already heading for the door.

“They’re in the lot already,” Bill countered. “One of them broke into the store room...through the *broken* security gate.” He could not help himself.

Ron was incredulous. “Then how the FUCK are we getting out of here, if you assholes relinquished the entire ground floor?!”

Lincoln glared at Ron, but was distracted as Fawn applied astringent to yet another buckshot wound.

“Listen, we’d love to help you all work this out,” Todd interrupted, “but we have friends to find.” The tall Texan exited to the hallway with Dale right behind him.

Bill followed them into the hall. “Hey, guys? Shouldn’t we stay together?”

Todd had already pressed the elevator call button, but Dale was jabbing it repeatedly with his thumb. “We’re all for solidarity, Son. But we have two young people who are in serious danger, and y’all are in there bickering about what’s in the past. We need to tend to the garden right now.”

Bill understood, and actually agreed. But he did not think it was wise to split their group up. He was trying to compose a decent argument when Dale turned back to him.

“Listen, Son, you’ve got potential about you; I can smell it. You’ve got to try to get control of that group in there and get your people to safety. Now, if you want my advice...”

The elevator chimed and the doors slid open. Anything Dale was going to say was forgotten as a bloodied form lurched out, hands outstretched and reaching...

Bill thought the Texan was dead but, inexplicably, the fellow suddenly produced a handgun from underneath the billowy Hawaiian shirt. In one fluid motion, the aging businessman had the weapon out, safety disengaged, and brought the gun up to eye level in a two-handed grip. It was a compact automatic, and made far more noise than Bill had expected. Dale fired twice, backed away to gain some space, then fired four more times.

The others came pouring out of the conference room, eyes wide. Dale held the compact at low-ready, his breath coming hard.

“Dear God,” Todd breathed, then patted his friend on the back.

“How’d you get that on a plane?” Greg asked.

Bill had moved next to the Texans, getting a good view of the elevator. The interior was splashed with blood and brain matter; Dale had hit the creature twice in the face and four times in the chest. Judging by the brown sweater and dungarees, Bill thought it was probably one of the group that had been storming the glass doors when they fled, but the face was now unrecognizable.

Bill was fighting to keep the turkey-and-cheddar down, and he could definitely hear at least one other person getting sick. His world was spinning, but he realized someone was talking to him.

“BILL! BILL SULLIVAN!” Todd was there, snapping his fingers in front of Bill’s face. “That’s the elevator that goes down to the lobby, and that’s obviously compromised. Jeremy and Anne ran *that* way out the lobby, right? Where would they have gone?”

Bill did his best to shake out the cobwebs. “Uh, they ran into the cafeteria. So, they could have ended up going through the kitchen and mailroom out the back...” He winced at the looks he drew. “*Or* they could have

caught the other elevator, that way!” He said this last, pointing towards the reporting floor, and the cube-farm that he usually occupied.

“We just came from there,” Ron said. “We didn’t see anyone else.”

“With all due respect, Mister,” Dale retorted, “we’ll go look for our people anyway.”

Bill, emboldened by Dale’s earlier words, incomplete though they were, turned to his coworkers. “We’ll all go. Let’s stay together, Folks! Lincoln, you can walk, right?”

“Hell yeah, I can walk,” Lincoln said with a nod. “Wish you guys hadn’t left my bat downstairs though...”

It was less than a minute later when the nine of them stood on the reporting floor.

“You see?” Ron said, waving around. “No one here.”

Otto was looking at the elevator. “The car’s up on the roof.”

Todd looked at Bill questioningly.

“Yeah, this one goes all the way up.”

“That would actually make sense,” the bespectacled consultant agreed. “Can that car hold all of us?” He had already pressed the call button.

“Maybe some of us should stick here,” Greg offered. “A little closer to the actual exits.”

“You want to stay here, *closer* to the busted doors?” Lincoln asked, limping towards the elevator. “Be my guest.”

Greg glanced towards the windows. Sporadic gunfire could be heard outside as well as yelling and screeching car tires. A crash sounded, then the clang of a fire hydrant coming off its moorings.

Greg decided he was fine with being crammed into the crowded elevator.

The group spilled out onto the roof, thankful that the groaning elevator car had delivered them successfully to their destination. Dale and Todd split up, yelling for the younger members of their team, but it was no use. They were not there.

The thumping bass was omnipresent and, in a rush, Bill remembered Abby. Running to the north end of the roof, he was both relieved and disgusted to see that the party continued, and had escalated.

There were probably thirty or more of them now, cramming the roof. The music continued to crank as it had before; hell, it could have been the same song for all Bill could tell. Most of the revelers continued to jump and undulate to the beat, waving cups, cans, bottles and smoldering sundries about. Many of them were doing more than dancing; groping seemed to be commonplace, and there were almost a half dozen couples attached at the face. Bill was surprised at the jealousy he felt as he spotted Abby, arms wrapped around one of the client models, practically lapping at his face. He could not tell if he was more sickened by that, or by the creepy guy in the velour jumpsuit that had his hand down the pants of a young brunette in a State sweatshirt.

He took a moment, then shook his head and began calling out. Even waving his arms did not work this time; the rooftop partiers were too engrossed in what they were doing to even notice him. In the streets below, it was chaos. The containment had failed. Springfield had *not* gotten things under control. If he could judge by their movements, there were almost as many zombies in the streets as there were fleeing citizens. Despite this, he spotted three young men kicking in the front door of Spencer’s Audio/Video. They stormed in, whooping and laughing, oblivious to the quartet of zombies that came shuffling behind.

“Bill! They aren’t here!” Ron was yelling to him. “We’ve got to head back down and figure out a plan!”

Bill waved him off. He took a deep breath, cupped his hands over his mouth and bellowed.

“AAABBBYYYYY!!!!”

The party continued.

God-fucking-dammit. He could not see the front of the photography studio, but if the Beacon was breached...

The partiers surged suddenly: a spastic and involuntary stage-rush away from the interior door. Bill cried out in impotent horror as he watched the undead storm the roof and begin slaughtering the party-goers. He pounded his fists against the half-wall and yelled to different people, trying to direct them away from certain doom, but it was hopeless. He was vaguely aware of Clay and Otto joining him at the roof’s edge, lending their

frantic voices as well. Then, amidst the rage, Bill felt something else. Something very dark crept into the edge of his consciousness. *What was that? What was that that he felt?* The realization almost caused him to retch.

He was watching a purging. Some secret corner of his soul exulted as he watched the zombies sweep the roof clear of the hedonistic partiers. What had, only minutes before, been an undulating pile of flesh, indulging in all sorts of selfish pleasures, was now being purified. Purified by pain. Purified by death. By rending, bloody death.

In that instant, Bill was more afraid of himself than he was of the walking dead. *What the hell kind of person am I? Those people over there have parents, brothers, sisters...they have lives. Hell, they probably have kids, a lot of them. Those aren't a bunch of college kids; there are people in their 30s, 40s, even that one dirty old codger had to be pushing sixty...*

Bill scowled. *What kind of parents are they, then? If they do have kids, where are they? And what the fuck kind of parent is partying on their job's rooftop at midday on a fucking Tuesday with the mother-loving zombie apocalypse descending on the world when they should be protecting their kids, getting them to a safe place...?*

He caught a glimpse of Abby who, despite the carnage occurring all around her, seemed shocked as her newest (and final) partner was hauled away from her. Only at the last did she realize her predicament; as grey and bloodied hands closed on her from all around, she threw her head back and screamed. She disappeared in a wave of surging flesh and a spray of arterial blood.

Bill flinched as she vanished, but stood frozen now, his unblinking eyes locked on the scene across the street. Of the thirty or so partiers, there were maybe ten left, seven...no, five, three... Otto and Clay continued yelling.

At the near corner of the roof, one young woman, makeup now running from her tears, clambered up on the roof's parapet. She tottered there for a moment, staring down at the likely-fatal fall, then back at the tide of walking dead. She looked across the way; for a moment, her eyes met Bill's. Then, she jumped.

Bill barely heard her scream, which cut off abruptly as she struck the pavement of the Seventh Avenue sidewalk. His breath caught in his throat and he gasped, finally shaking off the reverie that had embraced him. He blinked back tears and realized his fingernails had sunk into the tar paper of the half-wall. He extracted his fingertips painfully and brought shaking hands up to his face.

He looked across at the roof of the studio. All he could see now were the heads and shoulders of stooping zombies. They fed. He turned away.

Bill must have been in shock, because he was back on the reporting floor before he realized he had even been in the elevator. He was seated on a desk with Fawn holding his hand and talking to him soothingly; the others were all in a cluster, babbling and gesticulating.

Todd and Dale were backing out of the group. Todd had his hands up. "Listen, Mr. Rogers, we need to go find the kids. But at this point, I'd say our car service isn't coming, so we'll be back, and we'll all get out together. *PLEASE* start working on a plan. This is *your* city and you know it better than we do."

"You seem to be the man in charge," Dale added. "Do your people right and see to young Bill there."

"I'm okay," Bill announced, startling several of them. He stood, shrugging off Fawn. "Guys, I'm fine. Sorry." He cleared his throat and wiped at his face, trying to get himself together.

"Sorry about what happened to your friends," Dale said, jerking his head towards the roof.

"Glad to see you're okay," Todd added. "Like we said, get a plan together. We'll be back shortly."

Dale had reloaded his pistol's magazine and now returned it to the weapon and racked the slide. "Let's do the stairs, Todd. I'd like to be able to maneuver."

"Agreed." The two moved off quickly, heading past the conference room, through Marketing, towards the stairs to the first floor.

"I need to get my gun," Otto said.

Clay looked at him. "Leaving it in the car doesn't look so smart now, does it?"

"Fuck you."

"There aren't that many of them," Greg was saying, though the quaver in his voice betrayed him.

"There are *enough* of them," Fawn retorted.

Bill, Greg, Fawn and Otto were at the windows on the west side of the reporting floor (the row actually belonged to Accounting, but that was irrelevant), gazing down into the parking lot. Ron was back in his office, trying to raise the authorities on his phone. Lincoln and Clay were at the two elevators, continuously pressing the call buttons, holding the cars on their floor. The freight elevator had a kill switch that Otto had thrown. There was nothing they could do about the stairs on the north end of the building. They were counting on the Texans to handle that.

The parking lot was not exactly overrun; Bill had seen a ‘horde’ at the apartment building and a ‘mob’ at the flea market. There were maybe a dozen wandering around the lot, maybe a dozen more on 115th Street by the broken fence. He craned his neck to see downward...okay, maybe another half dozen at the back of the building.

“This is it,” Bill said. “This is the way. We have to go out the back.”

“How?” Greg asked. “You gonna break a window and shinny down the drainpipe and run to your car? You’d never make it.”

Bill thought about it. He was among the more athletic of them. He probably *could* do that. He looked at the others: Fawn was old and overweight; she would be picked off easily. Otto was younger, but he spent his days staring at a computer monitor getting myopic and sitting in a chair getting ass-spread. Greg? Greg might be able to keep up, and might even be worth something in a fight, but he had the wrong attitude.

Bill looked at his Rabbit sitting there in the middle of the lot. The closest zombie was twenty yards from it. Hmn...

He shook his head. Get rid of those thoughts. Dale’s words echoed: *Listen, Son, you’ve got potential about you; I can smell it. You’ve got to try to get control of that group in there and get your people to safety.*

“Guys, we’ve got to do something,” Clay said from where he was still prodding the elevator call button. He had pulled one of the televisions over and was watching the feed. “It’s not just here; they’re losing control all over the city. There are *so many* of them. How are there so many of them...?”

Bill moved over to where he could see the television. The sounds of sirens and yelling outside interfered with him hearing what was being broadcast, but the pictures were telling. Springfield SWAT and local police were coordinating with National Guard units, setting up barricades and strongpoints at key places around the city.

“Where are the Texans?” Greg asked.

“Oh, you know they left us,” Fawn answered. Her tone was an even mixture of annoyance and mounting fear.

“I can’t believe we let the only guy with a gun leave!”

It had been about fifteen minutes since Todd and Dale had left to find the others. There had been and continued to be sporadic gunfire in the streets outside, but nothing had happened to indicate that a battle had broken out downstairs. Bill had assumed that the zombies were inside the Beacon in force. But maybe, just maybe, they had been distracted by the activity on the streets and passed them by. That was wishful thinking and he knew it, but...he was at an utter loss as to how to proceed.

Seeing the shots of the mobilization on television made Bill think of the men he had ridden with the previous week. How he wished for the SWAT troopers at that moment. Hell, even for *one* of them. He thought of Rollins organizing the squad, McGee clearing the foyer of the apartment building, even Bayonne, shouting orders at the civilians...

Bill jolted as he heard the distinct bark of Dale’s compact from the first floor. Somebody cried out...Todd, he guessed. Three shots rang out in quick succession. There was a short pause, then more fire, rapid and wild. There was a strangled cry, then Dale,

“Choke on it! Choke on it, you pasty-faced sack o’ shit!!”

Two more shots, then a guttural scream, choking off to liquid.

Ron was in the doorway of his office, phone in-hand, looking ashen. The others stood flat-footed, stunned, staring north through Advertising and Marketing towards the north end stairwell. That is, until Lincoln’s voice hollered from the Marketing hallway,

“I ain’t holding this motherfuckin’ elevator anymore!!”

“Hang on, Linc! We’re coming!” Bill yelled, running into the east-side hallway that led through Marketing. The big security guard was already backing away from the elevator, as fast as his wounded leg would let him. The doors were open, but were sliding closed.

“Just block the damn doors!” Greg yelled from behind them, yanking a fire extinguisher off the walls. He got to the doors just before they closed and pushed them back open. He then set it on the floor between them. He stood back and watched as the doors tried to close again, then nodded in satisfaction when they hit the extinguisher and bounced back open. “That’s what we should have done in the first place.”

“Oh sure, *now* he has an idea,” Lincoln grouched. “Leave me sitting in the hallway with my ass hanging out for all to chew on...”

“That’d be a lot of chewing, Big Boy,” Greg retorted with a grin.

Fawn and Otto trotted up behind Lincoln.

“Go do the same for Clay at the other elevator,” Bill told Greg, slapping him on the shoulder. “Great idea, man; better late than never. Fawn, you want to help Linc back to the reporting floor? Otto, I need you. We need to check the first floor...”

“For *WHAT?!*” Otto cried, taking a step back.

“For the Texans, dammit!” Bill snapped.

“The Texans are fucking *dead*, Bill!” Otto shot back.

A half-dozen retorts collided in Bill’s brain, along with Dale’s echoing words. Finally, he said a very un-leader-ish thing. “Fine, *fuck you*, Otto, you fucking coward.”

Bill spun and jogged north, through Marketing, passing the elevator and restrooms and reaching the north-side stairwell. He leaned over the railing and looked down to the first floor. The stairs were clear.

Footsteps behind him brought him around. Otto came plodding up, hands crammed in his pockets.

“I’m sorry I’m scared. But that shit was uncalled for,” the tech said sullenly. “I’m telling you, if you guys let me get my gun I’d be a lot calmer.”

“Glad you’re here, Buddy,” Bill told him. “Sorry about what I said.”

Otto shrugged.

“Look, I’m not saying we go down there and get ourselves in trouble,” Bill said quietly, moving towards the top of the stairs. “Let’s just creep down a little bit, listen, have a look around...right? Maybe one of them got away. Maybe both of them. Those guys seemed pretty competent, right?”

Otto nodded, following. “Pretty badass, actually.”

“*Badass*. Exactly.” Bill reached the top of the stairs and paused. The noise outside was subsiding; sirens still blared, but he heard no gunshots. Cries could still be heard, but they were scattered.

Otto moved up next to him. “What’s wrong?”

A shadow had fallen on the base of the stairs. Both men knew by the movement exactly what it was. Even so, they both stood rooted to their spots, waiting until the mangled form limped into view. Anne had had chunks of both shoulders and her right forearm torn off. Fresh blood covered her dress shirt and Dockers. Her dead eyes fixed on Bill and Otto and she let out a little squeal of recognition. Her pace quickened, and she mounted the stairs.

“Holy motherfuckin’ shit...,” Otto managed.

“Get something,” Bill said. “Get something to hit her with.” But even as Otto began casting about, Bill changed his mind. A half dozen others, attracted by Anne’s squeal, lumbered into view. As they spotted Bill, they too let out groans and cries of their own.

“Grab the bench!” Bill yelled. He and Otto hoisted the padded bench that served the Advertising waiting area and heaved it down the stairs. It tumbled as it fell, then lodged between the banisters, knocking Anne back into the others. It was a temporary barrier, but it would have to serve.

Bill and Otto fled, running back through Advertising. Bill came up short, noticing that one office light was still on. “Hank!”

Henry Gannon’s office was a mess, as it always was. But the light was on, as was Henry’s computer. His briefcase sat on the floor, and a half-eaten piece of sausage pizza sat on his desk. Bill realized that he had just assumed Hank had left after his meeting with the Texans. Yet, since *they* had not been able to get away, it made sense that Hank would still be here...

Otto had pulled up as well. “What are you doing?!”

Bill jerked his thumb at the men's room across the hall and ran to the door. He pushed it open and called, "Hank?"

"Gnnrrrrrh?"

Fuuuuck...!

Bill froze, one step into the men's room. Peering around the ceramic wall, past the urinals, he could just see the front of the stalls. All doors were open, except the last one. He could see two wing-tipped feet flailing spastically in thin streaks of dark blood.

"What's going on?" Otto asked anxiously.

Bill gritted his teeth and waved Otto back. He froze, indecisive. Then, there was a bang as Hank hit the stall door.

"GNNnArRAggARrrrh!!!"

Bill swore and backpedaled from the men's room, trying to find some way to lock the door from the outside. Realizing there was none without the proper keys, he ran back for the reporting floor, pushing Otto in front of him.

"Well, the phones are fucking dead," Ron reported, coming out of his office. "What, what's going on?!" he yelled as Bill and Otto came running back.

"Hank Gannon is dead," Bill told him. "He's in the men's room."

"Zombies are coming up the north stairs!" Otto added, pointing frantically.

The others unleashed an avalanche of cries and curses.

"What are we going to do?!"

"Well, we gotta get outta here now!"

"I just need to get my gun!!!"

"Wait, I'm still getting a cell signal!" Fawn said, holding her phone up.

"Give me that!" Ron said, snatching it away. "I had gotten a hold of the mayor's office!" He began dialing the phone then, noticing Fawn's scathing look, "I'm sorry."

"You get me out of here and no apology necessary, *Sir*," she said.

Bill glanced back up the hallway through Advertising. It was clear. The bench was still holding the stairs and Hank was still stuck in the bathroom. But he knew it would not be long. He moved to the windows and looked down. The number of zombies inside the lot seemed about the same, but there were more on the streets.

"Mayor's on the TV!" called Clay, pointing. The others gathered, save Ron, who was on Fawn's phone, engaged in a conversation which was not going well, it seemed.

Mayor Kart was poised in front of a battery of microphones, dressed in a grey suit and black tie. His face was grave and lined; the expression did not appear to be an affectation, as it had many times previously. A police captain and several bodyguards were close enough to also be in the shot.

"My fellow Springfieldians," Kart began, *"we have come to a time of crisis. As some of you or all of you may know, our city is experiencing a period of heightened unrest, perhaps caused, or perhaps not caused, by a fringe group that may, or may not, be associated with one or more aspects of the Doomsday Comet."*

"Holy shit," Greg muttered.

"At this time, my office is interfacing with various agencies on both the local, municipal, state, regional and federal level. We are working very hard, at even this very moment, to coalesce resources so as best to address this terrible, horrible, distressing situation."

"At this time, we ask that the good people of Springfield please, please adhere to the rule of law. This is no time for looting. Please pay your taxes..."

Mayor Kart and the men assembled behind him reacted as gunfire sounded nearby. "Ahhh, that's all we...", was all the mayor managed to add before a gloved hand snuffed out the camera lens and a very loud voice ordered, *"THAT'S ALL! SHUT IT OFF!!!"*

The feed died momentarily, then came back to an inappropriately cheerful "9 Lives" commercial, featuring the immortal Morris.

"Turn it off," Fawn said. "That's the last real thing we were going to hear."

Clay obeyed wordlessly. Now, they could hear the zombies working at the bench on the stairs. Judging by the noise, they were moving it upwards.

Otto began hurling a stream of steadily loudening expletives as he tapped fervently at his computer. “Internet is done, Boys and Girls! I’m getting nothing but *503 errors!*” He put the exclamation point on his frustration by hurling his beloved Alienware laptop into the cube farm.

“Otto, turn the goddam freight elevator back on and let’s get the fuck out of here!” Greg snapped. “Look, I know it’s shitty, but maybe *some* of us can make it out the back. Everyone have your keys?”

They silently exchanged looks. No one had a better plan. Bill slung Lincoln’s arm over his shoulder and helped him to the elevator. Ron seemed to be the only one unperturbed, continuing to yell at low-level civil servants on Fawn’s phone.

The seven of them had ridden the freight elevator to the first floor and now occupied the rear lobby and the Security office. Greg and Clay had quickly bolted the doors to the kitchen and Maintenance; unfortunately, the hall to the north end of the building was not securable. It was there that Lincoln now stood with a crowbar clutched in his hands.

Bill and Otto were looking out the window of the back door. “I’d say some of us have a better chance than others,” Otto said gravely, pointing at the pair of zombies now beating on Bill’s Rabbit. Something about the car had agitated them; they had already shattered the driver side window and the windshield was a spiderweb of fractures.

Bill was distracted from his disappointment as a loud horn sounded. From the left, a box truck suddenly lumbered into view, pasting several zombies on its way towards the print shop. The driver cut the wheel expertly, peeling to his left. The white reverse lights came on and the truck shot back towards the loading dock of the print shop, smearing another trio of undead.

Eyes wide, Bill turned to the others. “Were we expecting a delivery today?”

Greg ran to the window. “Holy shit! That’s Evan!”

Evan Hollins was a freelance Class B driver that worked both ways for the Beacon, delivering supplies to the print shop or bundles of papers to their distributors. His otherwise unremarkable white truck was adorned with a half dozen Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle decals. More zombies filed into the lot, attracted by the flurry of activity.

“He’s out of the truck...,” Otto reported. To be sure, Evan had leapt from the cab, swinging what looked like a machete. Slightly overweight from his time behind the wheel, Evan was nonetheless a large and imposing figure. He hacked into one zombie, dropping it to the deck. He wheeled as another came on, making a ruin of its head. A third lumbered up; Evan spun, swinging the machete like a bat. The two-handed swing was true, burying the blade deep between the zombie’s ribs. Unfortunately, this did not stop the creature and, before Evan was able to extract the weapon, the thing was upon him, biting and clawing. Two more converged from behind, and the quartet fell to the ground in a writhing, shrieking pile.

Bill felt sick.

“*Goddammit,*” Greg spat.

Ron was oblivious, continuing a rant. “No, no. *YOU* listen to *ME*, Commander. I need to know wh...What? Oh, I’m sorry. *Lieutenant* Rollins, then. Listen to me, *Lieutenant* Rollins; I need to know what you’re doing to get this thing under control, and what you’re doing to get us...”

“Holy shit!” Bill yelled, running over to Ron. “Give me the phone!” He snatched the cell phone and yelled, “Lieutenant! Lieutenant Rollins!?”

Ron swore savagely and tried to grab the phone back. Bill turned his back and forced Ron away.

“This is Bill Sullivan of the Beacon! Bill Sullivan! I rode with you and your men last week!”

There was a long pause. The others were looking at Bill skeptically.

“*Billy?*”

Bill laughed in elation. “YES! Yes, it’s me! Lieutenant, there are seven of us alive here at the Beacon building! We’ve got the stairs and the elevators barricaded, but those won’t last long. Seems like the cops and Guardsmen...”

Bill jerked away from the phone in pain as there was a wash of feedback. “Lieutenant?”

“*Bill, we’ve got a bit of a situation here...*”

“Yeah, no shit.”

There was more feedback, and a cascade of noise from Rollins' end. He was talking again, but the phone faded in and out.

"Look, Billy. Can you get to our rescue station? We've got one close to you.... got one...bridge at.....77th."

"The bridge over the river at 77th?!" Bill clarified.

There was more static, then, *"Yeah, Billy...77th."*

"Yeah, Lieutenant! Definitely! There's a delivery truck out back: one of those big box trucks. We can all fit in that."

"...standing, Billy. Can you get to it?"

"Yes, should be able to," Bill answered, though his exuberance waned. He looked at Lincoln, wincing every time he put weight on his left leg.

"Hail me on frequency four-one-six-dot-oh-oh as soon as you folks are in the truck," Rollins told him. More static. *"...talk you in."*

"Okay!" Bill let the phone go dead. He looked at the others. Lincoln, the best physical asset they had, badly hurt. The others...? He looked outside. Evan's attempt at...whatever it had been...had now tripled the zombie presence in the parking lot. There was now no way they could all make a run for truck, or even their cars. *He* might be able to...

NO. He shook it off again. Once more, Dale's words echoed, *Listen, Son, you've got potential about you; I can smell it. You've got to try to get control of that group in there and get your people to safety.*

...your people...

Again, he found himself wishing for the SWAT troopers. Someone who knew how to lead. Someone who could take control and get everyone moving. Then, he found something. Between Dale's directive to him and his memories of the actions of the troopers, he found something. He drew a long, slow breath, then let it go.

"All right, *listen up!*" Bill yelled, drawing several surprised looks. "We need to move and we need to move *NOW!* Here's how it's *gotta* go down: *I* will make a run for the truck. Securing these back doors won't matter because they're already in through the front doors. You guys need to get back upstairs and block the Marketing and Advertising hallways. You can use the cubicle walls; they come apart with a good tug. Lincoln, you're hurt. Can you...?"

"I can handle cube walls," Lincoln answered immediately.

"All right. You guys block the halls, then you bust a window open on the reporting floor and I'll bring the truck right under you. You guys will have to hop out onto the roof, but it's the best option. We can't load in the parking lot; there are too many of them."

"Helluva plan, Bill," Ron said with a nod.

"Wait, why aren't we just heading to our cars?!" Greg countered, waving his keys.

"We have wounded here; we can't all run for it," Bill answered, pointing at Lincoln.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. Bill wondered if they were buying it.

"It's a good plan; why don't you assholes just shut up and get to it?" Ron snapped. "Billy, go get that truck. We've got this end."

Fawn nodded and started helping Lincoln towards the freight elevator. Otto and Greg looked less certain, but nodded.

"I'll go with you," Clay said, stepping up. He looked like he was about to shit himself, but Bill was not far off himself.

"All right, man. You and me. We got this."

They waited two minutes as Lincoln, Fawn, Ron and Greg rode the freight elevator back to the second floor. Otto would stay to secure the back door, then join the others up top.

"You sure the truck is gonna run?" Clay asked.

"Keys are in the ignition," Bill answered. "You can see the exhaust; it's still running."

"This is so fucked."

Bill and Clay broke from the back door at a dead run. Each had armed himself with a length of pipe from Maintenance. Bill swung his cudgel wildly at anything that came close, missing most times, but connecting with a few significant hits. He broke into the open and sprinted, closing on the delivery truck.

Lagging behind several steps, Clay was nearly caught, but he hurled his pipe into the face of a bloodied meter maid, and skipped clear of her outstretched hands.

As they came within a few yards of the truck's cab, a tall old man in robes tottered towards them. Bill swung his pipe in a titanic backhand that caved in half of the man's forehead. As the zombie's blood and cranial innards splashed onto the Beacon's asphalt, Bill was alarmed at the lack of remorse he felt.

He turned and came to an abrupt halt. Climbing clumsily back into the cab of the truck, his clothes now rent and soaked with his own blood, was none other than Evan. The undead driver regarded Bill over one shoulder for a moment, then he let out a screech of recognition. His eyes rolled back into his head and he released the door, twisting back towards Bill...

Bill kicked Evan in the hip as he came off the cab step, sending him face-first to the asphalt, then delivered a series of savage blows to the back of his head with the pipe, shattering the zombie's skull. This time, he almost exulted. He hit Evan one last time, to make sure he was dead, then pulled himself up into the cab. "Around the side, Clay!" he yelled.

But Clay was nowhere close. Sent over the edge at the sight of Evan, the young intern had fled. His panic and long legs had carried him through the growing throng, through the damaged security gate and into the street, but it was there that he was hemmed in, caught and was now being hauled down and dismembered. His screams had no effect on the zombies pulling him apart, but they jarred Bill and set his hands shaking to the point where he could almost not put the truck in gear.

A hand slamming against the glass of the passenger side window caused Bill to jump again. He threw himself over and locked that door, then rocked back and locked his own. He pushed himself slowly back into his seat, trying to tune out the moans that now assailed him. A half dozen freshly-dead were gathered about the truck's cab and many more were on their way.

Fighting his mounting panic, Bill threw the truck into gear and drove out into the lot. He clipped several zombies, but suppressed the urge to swerve at them. The last thing he needed to do was to put the truck into a wall or lightpost and disable it. He tried to ignore the maroon smear where Clay had ended as he navigated the lot, taking care not to crash into any of the few remaining cars. He rolled slowly, tuning the CB to Rollins' frequency. "I'm in the truck, Lieutenant."

His plan was to swerve around, then back up to the building, but, as he made his turn, he was suddenly interrupted by someone running in front of the truck, screaming, "NO! NO! NO! NO!"

Bill slammed on the brakes, coming to an abrupt halt. Incredulous, he saw Otto and Greg running past the truck, waving at him. "What...the...FUCK?!"

He looked up and saw the back door, the one he and Clay had just fled from, was now wide open. Most of the zombies in the lot were being attracted to him and the truck, but a few were wandering inside the Beacon.

"WHAT ARE YOU DICKS DOING?!" he roared uselessly. He could no longer see Greg or Otto, so he threw the truck into reverse and began backing up. There was a wet crunch, and the truck began to skid, so Bill slammed on the gas.

"Noooooo!!!!" someone screamed.

Bill hit the brakes, threw the truck into Park and launched himself at the passenger window. There was a single gunshot, then Otto lurched into sight, two bloodied zombies latched onto him. Bill gasped as Otto fell, eyes wide, his father's revolver clattering away from him on the pavement. Scanning quickly for Greg, and not seeing him, Bill leapt back into the driver's seat and threw the truck into gear. Stomping on the gas, he crossed the lot, spun the truck and backed it up to the Beacon. He could now see where the zombies were feeding upon Otto and Greg. He fought his gag reflex and, making sure there were no undead in the immediate vicinity, lowered his window and craned his neck to see the second floor.

No windows were broken.

Bill regarded the open back door with severe anxiety, but desperately held out hope. Nearby, the zombies closed in. He leaned on the horn, yelling up to the second floor. "It's time! Let's go!!!"

The undead converged. They were within six yards, then five. Bill rolled up the window. He leaned on the horn again. Four yards. Three. Two...

Bill put the truck in gear and pulled out into the lot. He turned and went into reverse, to get a view of the Beacon.

He looked to the windows of the second floor, along the reporting floor. He saw the silhouettes of forms lumbering sluggishly to and fro. There was no battle. No one fought. No one fled.

Bill's face screwed up and he began to sob.

He put the truck into gear and floored it, roaring out of the parking lot, hitting as many zombies as he could.

Bill Sullivan had been driving for a while. He was no longer being shot at by people who were supposed to be his loving neighbors, nor assailed by the living dead heaving themselves at the truck. He had been forced to navigate around the occasional wreck, but the roads were surprisingly open.

Bill drove, barely seeing the road in front of him. The CB speaker crackled to life.

"Billy, are you okay? Respond. We haven't heard from you in over fifteen minutes."

"They're all dead. They all died. It's just me."

"Yes. You said that before."

"I tried to get my people out. I tried to get my people to safety."

There was a very long pause. Then, *"Bill, I'm sorry. Look, it's bad all around. We're okay here, and we're looking for you. But the city itself...real bad. Are you still going to be able to get to us?"*

Lieutenant Rollins had contacted Bill moments after his escape from the Beacon. The 77th Street Bridge rescue station had been abandoned and he had directed Bill to divert southwest out of the city to a new rally point.

"Yeah. I'm on my way."

"All right, good. Are you out of the city yet?"

"I'm on the outskirts."

"You have anyone you need us to call?"

Bill was barely aware of telling Lieutenant Rollins the phone numbers of his parents downstate, his younger sister at U of Denver, his ex-girlfriend's cell phone on her ski weekend.

"Okay, Bill; I got the numbers. We're going to work on getting a hold of them and you just get here, okay? We're waiting for you, Bill. We're waiting for you!"

Bill was numb. He drove. He wasn't going to see any of them again.