

WE, ZOMBIE

I knew the zombies were coming years before they did, even when I was a kid. I'd stay up late at night reading my graphic novels with my booklight in my hand, careful not to clip it to the pages and dent or dogear them. I knew these works contained messages. I knew they were our future unfolding before me. I could tell when the authors were interfering with what was going to happen; when they had messed up with the spread or the speed of the undead, or how the typical human would respond. I knew they had no idea how quickly we'd lose contact with the media and radio towers would begin to transmit nothing.

You see, in the movies and shows, it all happens so fast; it's like the virus eats through the wires or the zombies infiltrate the media buildings first. But the undead aren't really like that. The undead hunger for brains because they don't have any, because theirs have stopped working. The only thing they can think about, the only thing they are alive for is what keeps them alive: that small part of their brain that says, *find brain and consume, consume brain and brain will consume more brain*. That's their whole M.O. Unless you're in the room with a brain eater, unless the brain eating begins at CNN or NBC, cell towers; those brains have time to tell other brains that we have a situation on our hands.

Other things, the books had spot on. I could feel a soft buzz all through my body when I read them, like we were harmonizing. It was the same sort of feeling I got that time I was lost in the woods and my neighbor, Eddie, had gone home to his house early, and then I saw my house through the trees, and I knew that I was safe. Or like that one time I had to do the dishes and that wasn't fair because it was my sister's turn, but she was going to a friend's house. I cleaned all the plates and the serving plate so long and so

shiny and when I turned around my parents were still sitting at the table, and no one was doing anything important, so I scooted the whole rack of them off the counter with my arm and listened to the crash.

That's another thing it felt like: that sound; and I'm standing there and they're looking at me, and in my head there's this really nice hum.

As I was saying, those things, like how a zombie moves—that hunch thing—like they're lurching towards stuff, kind of reaching towards it with their head? That's true. Zombies don't have nerves. It's not like their brains are connected all the way down to their feet, saying, move here. They're just dragging their feet along. The actors on *The Walking Dead*, well, you can see it, that that's what it looks like when someone becomes undead. And I'm not saying that *The Walking Dead* is real. Or *I, Zombie*, or any of that stuff. Those were all the precursors—the signs—that this thing was sweeping the nation. That it was in our collective consciousness. That it wasn't just kids like me and my friends in little niche circles talking about, “what if?” It became this big thing. It went from this thing I did on my own in the dark, with Eddie and stuff, this thing that my sister made fun of me for and that I had to beg for money to buy, and then it just showed up on our streaming platforms. All I had to do was click a button on the remote and zombies were everywhere. The undead were on my TV and in the movie theatre and on posters and you could get them on t-shirts. It was like they were taking over.

I wanted to buy a gun and it felt like the right time. Eddie's dad always said he would buy us our first guns and that's how I knew I couldn't have bipolar because once, when I was on those meds, I read you can't have a gun with a mental illness, so I took myself off them. Eddie and I had a pact. We had always had a pact, to take down the

undead and you can't do that without a gun. But being fifteen meant waiting and waiting meant I needed to take more extreme measures in other ways.

I was twelve when I got my first good hunting knife. My mom's brother, Uncle Dan, gave it to me, "for all that zombie stuff he's into."

Like he knew. Like he gave it to me for this exact purpose. Like before the big blockbuster films and Netflix shows and stuff. Like he was ahead of the times too.

It came in a case, and I could clip it to my belt with two buttons that snapped behind it and when I put my hand over its sheath, I knew I was ready.

I'd practice in my room at night, slowly pulling it out of the holster so as not to injure myself—because an apocalypse is a very bad time to have unnecessary wounds—and then faster so I was quick as lightning. Then I shattered a vase in the living room with it and no matter how many times I apologized, Mom still asked Dad if maybe it was time for me to see Dr. Oberlin again.

After that, it was just for outside, which was okay, because there were lots of things to stab out there. Also, I still snuck it inside at night. To my room. Because in case the zombies came then, no way was I going to bed unprotected.

I asked for a guard dog. I should have used different words. I should have said that I wanted a dog, just a dog. My sister asked for a kitten once and we still have that cat. That cat would *watch* a zombie walk in and probably help it finish off our brains. That cat is no help.

When I asked for a "guard dog," we were eating dinner. Dinner in my family is when we talk about important topics, like: is my dad going up for that promotion at work and why can't my sister just have her *own* life for once? I asked for my "guard dog" at the very end of dinner. Everyone's day was fine: my dad got the promotion, Mom had

finally selected a new color for her office, and Jenny wasn't even in that bad of a mood. It seemed like a really good time.

So, I said, "I think we could really use a guard dog."

My sister rolled her eyes and got up to leave and my dad hit the table so hard with his fist that all the silverware jumped.

"I have had enough of this nonsense," he said. "You're obsessed."

"It's his OCD, Howard," said my mom.

"It is not," said my dad, "his OCD." To me, he said, "I've had enough. If you're this scared of living that you think a dog is going to save you—a dog for Christ sakes—" and he started laughing, "you know what, kid?" and he leaned back in his chair, "get a dog."

"Howard," said my mom again.

"No, a dog would be good for him," said my dad, "get a dog. Get a dog and see how long it is before you kill it with that knife."

And then he left the table and Mom left the table after him.

Jenny did the dishes with headphones in, just picked up my plate and the rest of them without saying a word.

I didn't say a word either.

I could hear Mom and Dad talking in the den that night. All night. I could hear Mom talking to Dad. Their voices would raise then lower, raise then lower. Even up in my room with the door just cracked and then closed. And then Jenny knocked and came in and I wasn't reading graphic novels, I was just playing COD on the computer and getting headshots—which is the best way to kill anyway—and Jenny wanted to talk and check in and I told her it was really dumb of me to use the word, "guard dog," as I bagged another body and she laughed and said more shit and finally I paused the game

and asked what was up with her and she said, “oh, you know, just Mom and Dad.” And I said, “yeah,” and went to put my headphones back on, and she said, “just please, like, try to consider what you say around them. I know you’re not like a zombie freak or whatever just, it’s like a fad, and that’s cool—”

I un-pause the game and it’s a kill shot to my head.

The next day my dad comes home with a dog. He said he stopped by the shelter on his way home after work and thought I could use a “guard dog,” like it’s just for me. Like I’m being silly. But he doesn’t say it nasty or anything. He just repeats the word I said and says he even thought of a name, “Flesher.”

“You know,” he says, “so he can strip ‘em of their blood and guts and stuff.”

And then he goes on about how he was the fiercest (and gentlest) one at the place: “really protective and stuff unless he knows you’re a good guy.” And he holds me by the shoulder and makes dead-serious eye contact.

And I know we’re in serious trouble now because dogs are not for “stripping” the undead. No one is supposed to eat or *peal apart* a zombie, not even a dog. This was supposed to just be an intruder alert kind of system. Like a house alarm. And now my dad thinks I’m crazy because I want our house protected and he’s gotten me a dog that is not fierce and that I will not be calling “Flesher,” even to humor him.

This dog is some sort of spaniel and I call him, “Burt.” I also call bullshit.

Burt becomes my new “obsession.” I take him out into the woods, and we practice hunting. We practice, “leave it,” “sit,” “quiet boy,” and, “fetch.” We practice how long we can stay out there on our own and Mom says: no longer than two days on our own and

two nights if Eddie is with us and she has verbal confirmation from his mother. We must be home by dinner on a school night.

After a year of this, we've missed most dinners but we're stealthy. I'm sixteen, but a skinny sixteen. Burt can go through the dog door and if I put my backpack in right after he goes, I can catch it before it starts flapping all over the place, and then I push the backpack through and I go in after and gently set the dog door on its magnets.

No one has been saying anything lately. It's like they finally know what we're doing is for the good of us. We eat what we forage for and sometimes skin a rabbit or a squirrel. If we ever catch more than two and come home super late, I put the remains in a Tupperware for the family and it's always gone in the morning. They're getting used to the food too; even for breakfast and maybe cold, which I don't think I could do yet.

I'm home one afternoon, packing up to go hunting with Burt, and Jenny has papers all over the table. Jenny never has papers all over the table. Jenny is always off somewhere, doing something with somebody and not paying any attention to anything. Jenny says that it's okay, that she'll always share her location with me, and she does, which is how I know that she's always moving around, but right now she is sitting here, and she says she can't wait to get out and go to a big city and these pages are how she's going to get there, and her top choice is New York.

In my head there is a crash. The zombies have set off the intruder alarm to our house and are here. Right here in our kitchen and I am saying, "no Jenny, you can't do this, it's way too dangerous."

And she says, "Jer, calm down, it's okay, it's just college, you can still track me and whatever."

And I'm saying, "No, Jenny, you don't get it, you don't get it, Jenny, no." And I'm throwing my hands through all her papers and they're flying all over the place, flapping around, and Jenny is flapping and screaming.

"What the hell, Jeremy! Stop it!"

And somewhere a door is opening and closing and I'm flapping and flapping the papers and Jenny shoves me, and I go to bite her, to make her slow moving, dumb, and she screams. Loud. Jenny screams loudly. And Dad is there, and Burt is barking and growling at me.

"Enough!" roars my dad. "That is enough! Go to your room!"

And I stop.

And Jenny is bleeding, and I am standing straight up and saying, "come Burt."

And Dad says, "no, the dog stays here."

And I can hear Jenny crying and I'm so confused walking up the stairs to my room. Wasn't I protecting her?

I come downstairs for dinner because I'm hungry and I didn't go into the woods.

Jenny's arm is bandaged, gauzed. I can still see a ring of blood from where the zombie got her underneath the dressing. The bite mark, the infected wound; it's down there, about to slowly start spreading to her brain.

I get a plate, silverware, napkin, open the cupboard above the sink and grab a glass. I fill it with water and, holding the rest of my place setting in one hand, take a swig of water. Man, I was thirsty.

I refill the glass and finish that one too, then fill it again and head to the table with all my things.

Everyone is staring at me when I sit down.

“Do you have *anything* to say to your sister?” Mom asks me.

I look at Jenny, who is looking at me, then looking at Mom, and I can't tell what exactly she's feeling; what it's like to be turning into a zombie.

“Jenny,” I say, slowly, “could you pass the peas?”

“Oh my God,” says Jenny, “Mom, please?” and she leaves.

Mom looks at Dad and Dad looks at Mom and I wonder if we're all finally thinking the same thing. If it's finally time for me to say the right thing.

“We need a gun now,” I say, “don't we?”

And Mom's head bows. She's shaking a little and I can't really tell what she's doing. Her hands are flat out on the table and Dad reaches over to take one.

“It's time,” he says.

And Mom nods. Mom nods and her body goes up and down in a deep breath. Their hands are squeezing very tight: Dad's over Mom's and Mom's fingers white circling under his.

Mom takes big snuffles and then shakes her whole body out like a dog. When she looks up, she has very red eyes with tears in the creases and Dad lets go of her hand so that she can wipe them.

“I'll go get his things,” she says to my dad.

And I say, “whose things?”

I'm still waiting for the peas, so instead, I'm putting mashed potatoes on my plate because their famine already happened.

“Where's Burt?” I ask.

“Burt’s outside,” says my dad, walking around the table to my sister’s chair, the one kitty-corner to me, and I watch him with my eyes.

Dad sits down slow.

“Did Jenny bite Burt?” I ask. I don’t hear any growling or foaming, but we live in a well-built house with a big backyard; it could be he’s already satisfying his hunger or that the virus is spreading in him as slow as it is in Jenny or that I just can’t hear him. Or that he’s not a zombie? Jenny didn’t seem like a zombie. Didn’t I bite Jenny? I’m not a zombie, am I? I try to think a non-zombie thought.

“Jenny didn’t bite Burt,” says my dad. “Do you remember who bit Jenny?”

And that’s the wrong thought. That is a zombie thought. That is me biting Jenny. I shouldn’t have this thought.

“A zombie bit Jenny,” I say, which, once I hear it, also sounds like a zombie thought.

My dad’s fist clenches. I flinch, ready for it to hit the table.

“A zombie didn’t bite Jenny,” I say. “It’s the zombie brain!” And now I think I’ve got it: “it’s my zombie brain, Dad! I have zombie—” and then I think of Jenny upstairs and how I don’t understand her actions and what if she really *is* a zombie and wait, no, I can’t be acting like this. I need my gun. “Dad,” I say, “I’m sorry I bit Jenny.”

And my dad is sitting all the way back in his chair. He has a hand over his eyes, rubbing his eyebrows and his breathing is different too.

“Dad,” I say, “I bit Jenny, Jenny’s not infected,” and I reach out my hand and try to get his away from his face so that he can see how earnest I am. “Dad—” and he starts shuddering too.

He shudders and gets up and walks a little away from me. Just looks at me. Looks at me and I look at him and I say that everything is going to be okay, that the gun is just for protection— and he screams. He screams like an animal standing there and now I am the one who is taking deep breaths and Mom comes running down the stairs with one of *my* bags and says, “it’s okay, it’s okay Sweetheart,” to my dad, “they’re here.”

We walk outside, all three of us and my bag and I say, “where are we going? Why do you have my stuff? Where’s Jenny?” And we just keep walking. Mom is holding my hand and Dad holds the door; first the door to the house and then the door to a van and then Dad puts my stuff inside and says that he loves me very much and puts his hand on my shoulder, which is his, “be brave,” saying and Mom is still holding my hand so tightly and she says I’m so brave and I know, I spend all my time in the woods hunting and I’m going to get a gun to save us from the zombies, and I nod. And Mom takes both my cheeks in her hands and has me look right at her and says, “I need you to listen to everything the doctors say, okay?” and kisses me on the forehead and the doctors? I’m not going to the doctors! And I pull out of her hands and am ready to make a break for it but someone very strong has my shoulder and I’m already in the van and I’m screaming, “my gun! I need my gun! You can’t take me without my gun! We have a pact! I have a pact!” And I’m trying to roll down the window, kick the door, and then there’s a prick and I’m asleep.

It's been six weeks. Six weeks of white walls and white bars making cages on the windows. The showers go off, on, off, on, off, on. Every thirty seconds. Even if you move around a lot. Even if you yell at it. Even if you hold your hand in front of the sensor. This is to keep us from drowning ourselves.

Everyone wears normal clothes and walks around like it's regular in here. Like we all signed up to do arts class together and music class together and talk to our therapists in their offices alone and sometimes, together.

But no one in here is regular. I tell this to my therapist, Dr. Perry. Dr. Perry asks me what I mean by that: that no one in here is regular.

"Watch us," I whisper, "when we're all in line and they give us our meds and they calm us down and we don't have to run from here anymore, they're keeping us calm."

"Very good," says Dr. Perry, "some of your meds are to keep you calm so we can help you find other ways to regulate."

Tell me, do you have any favorite classes here?"

"No Doctor," I say, "you don't get it," I say, "we're not supposed to enjoy those classes. Those classes are to distract us."

"Yes," he says, "you may not enjoy them for a bit, while your brain is adjusting. It's been quite a few years since you've been thinking real thoughts."

We've been talking a lot about "real" thoughts: zombies and the apocalypse=not real. Art and music and therapy=real.

"But Perry," I say, and what he still doesn't get after all this time is: "it was always me, right? Or all of us here? We were always the zombies. If we just hadn't tried so hard to save everyone, we wouldn't be the zombies now?"

"What do you mean save everyone?" He asks.

"Keep them safe from the zombies," I say. "If I hadn't needed a guard dog or a knife or a gun?" I ask.

They keep saying I'll never get my gun. No gun and I'm wondering, can I have a gun if I say I don't need it?

“Jeremy,” he says, flipping through my file, “you might not be here if you hadn’t cared so much about being sane.”

At dinner that night I sit down between people whose brains are eating medicine, same as mine. We’re all munching on unseen things while our fingers hold forks and plastic cups. We’re talking with mouths that are triggered by art and music and therapy to say things differently or not at all. Someone is shouting in the corner, and I think, his brain must be starving for something it’s not getting. I mix everything on my plate into a big mush and think to myself, *brains*.