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## Shriekers

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SHRIEKERS

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Bachelor of Art in English

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submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

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at the

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We hereby approve this thesis for

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for the Department of English

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# SHRIEKERS

JESSICA LEIGH JOHNSON

## ABSTRACT

In every horror sub-genre, there is a fear that the narrative exploits. In ghost stories, the fear is that of the unknown; in alien movies, it is the fear of the other; and in stories involving the undead we are confronted with the nature of living itself. In using creatures that were once human but now act only on instinct, we are forced to examine ourselves. Further, most stories involving zombies are set in a world where society is crumbling or has crumbled, and humans are forced to make difficult decisions, which brings us to question the nature of survival.

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## INTRODUCTION

A good zombie story, and by extension a good horror story, is not merely a narrative that is scary and exciting, but also one that comments on human behavior and society. By placing characters into extreme situations, a writer is able to examine what these circumstances will do to a person. Having a narrative that revolves around undead husks that were once human is the perfect vehicle to comment on the nature of living, the way we choose to live our lives and what it means to be alive. It gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves if we are truly living or if we are just existing.

George A. Romero, in his Dead Series, continually comments on society in his films, whether purposefully or by chance, with the commentary changing throughout the years to reflect the era that the movies were filmed in. In *Night of the Living Dead*, released in 1968, the casting of African American Duane Jones in a role that was meant to be a white truck driver, gave the movie more weight than it would have had otherwise in light of the civil rights struggle. As Scott McLemee points out in his article “Our Zombies, Our Selves”, this “color-blind casting brought out more fully the implications of an apocalyptic scenario produced during years of massive upheaval” (McLemee).

In the second film of the series, *Dawn of the Dead*, released in 1978, humans and zombies are compared more overtly drawing on both similarities and differences between the two. Set in a shopping mall, the movie “depicts humans and zombies as disconcertingly similar” (McLemee). Its narrative holds that the shopping mall was an important place to these people when they were alive, therefore they flock to it when they are dead, a “deliberate treatment of consumerism” and by extension a commentary on humanity's values (McLemee).

Outside of the cinema, the graphic novels and television series *The Walking Dead* continually shows the extremes a person will go to to survive in a world without laws. A world where brutality is the only language, and one person surviving means that another will die. While watching the series, we observe the humanity being stripped off the characters, some shedding the layers more easily than others. As children kill and are killed, we cannot help but wonder, as Susie Graham asks in “The Walking Dead: Humanity and Survival”, “If losing your humanity is a necessity for survival, are you really surviving?” In the article she also mentions a quote from a book entitled *The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave*, where a character asks, “How do you rid the Earth of humans?” then answers, “Rid the humans of their humanity”. Graham puts this quote into context for *The Walking Dead* by stating that “zombies have been stripped of their human-ness, and because of the existence of zombies, the remaining humans seem to be losing theirs as well” (Graham). In the end, we are left to wonder about the nature of living, and if simply surviving is enough.

The literary field has more than its share of narratives examining the nature of humanity in comparison to the undead. *World War Z* by Max Brooks examines the

entirety of a zombie apocalypse, from the very first infection to the rebuilding of society. In the form of interviews with various survivors, he is able to showcase human behavior during the crisis through very different perspectives. The result is a “platform to criticize government ineptitude, corporate corruption and general human short-sightedness” (Currie). In showing us humanities role in the undead crisis, Brooks is able to comment on the way the government and society operate.

The first story I wrote about the undead was inspired by my time working in a warehouse. Enduring the endless hours in the stifling heat, I dramatically felt as if my soul was dying, and this unhappiness seeped into my perception of those I worked with. There were some who were happy, who worked hard, but then there were those who simply went through the motions as a means to get through the day. In those two months, I began to wonder what the difference between existing and living was. Those thoughts, naturally, lead to what would happen if there was an outbreak of zombies in the outside world and how my coworkers and I would react to being trapped in the warehouse for an extended period of time. I would speculate on where we would hide, what we would eat, and most importantly, how long it would take for anyone to notice if there was a zombie among us. For some people the warehouse was high school, they would socialize and gossip, but for others it was just something to get through, walking down the aisles as if half dead. If one of the recently deceased entered our ranks, would they be any different?

While this story has been shelved and I may never write it, the idea of the difference between living and existing has never really left me, and while it was not part of the original Shriekers narrative, it has found its way in, expanding to involve the

nature of survival.

When I first started the story that would be the idea behind Shriekers, it was a science fiction tale on the perils of synthetic food which lead to a kind of classist society. I was struck with how difficult it was to eat food that was organic and how easy it was to get food that was terrible for you. This progressed into a story where, in the future, the upper class were able to eat pure food and were healthy and beautiful, while the lower class could only afford food that was synthetic or supplemented with additives that should not be consumed. As they were filling their bodies with food their bodies couldn't digest properly, the people grew tumors and were unhealthy and hideous. While I had liked the original concept, I had a difficult time figuring out a narrative and an angle, so I put the story aside. Or so I thought.

The story I moved onto was the bare bones of the narrative of Shriekers, which was essentially the Wizard of Oz with zombies. Reworking classic tales is a fun exercise for me when I am trying to work through writers block, but while I was developing the story it began to fuse with my previous one. I did not want the zombies in my story to be created by a virus and the idea that what you ate affected what you became lead me back to the story about supplements and synthetic foods.

When I first started to implement this idea of someone being zombified from what they ate, there were several different kinds of creatures a person could become. Preservatives dried a people out and made them into what essentially became a shrieker, fatty foods created large blob monsters, and so on. In the end, I decided that was too complicated and narrowed it down to just one kind, that of the shrieker. At first it was simply that preservatives dried the person out and created a monster, but that did not feel

like it was enough. Plus, if everyone became a shrieker, the world would be populated with them, and the story felt as if it should be empty. That is how I always viewed it, from the first image of the two young girls scavenging through cars in a motel parking lot. As I wrote, I tried to hone in on what it was that really created these monsters.

That is when I remembered *The Ruins*, a novel (and movie) by Scott Smith, where a group of college students trek to a ruin in Mexico only to be trapped there by the natives because it is home to flesh eating vines that get into your blood stream and eat their way out. The imagery of the vines from that novel, combined with the idea that the food in the world of the Shriekers is largely contaminated helped me to form a more solid concept for the shriekers themselves.

I do not worry so much as wonder if sometime in the future there is going to be an unforeseen reaction between two different advances we make to better our lives that will totally ruin them instead. This notion extended to the idea that the mutated vegetation scientists in the story developed to help end world hunger instead ate away at the humans who ingested them. The thinking behind this was that these plants that were bred to adapt to harsh conditions, advanced farther than expected and began to feed on anything organic it came in contact with. Further than that, people who had received gene therapy to help them adapt to illnesses to be healthier, reacted to the mutated vegetation differently and the two different sciences combined together to create the shriekers.

Shriekers, at its heart, is a story of the will to live. In having the main character, Denny, start the narrative with the monotony of survival, I tried to illustrate that her will to live had faded. She had promised to live, and that was the only reason she was still

alive, but it was not until she began to hope again that her spark came back to her. Throughout the story, through Denny's journey, I try to examine what it means to truly be alive and the nature of survival. This is why I feel it fits into the zombie genre thematically, while the shriekers may not be zombies in a traditional sense.

## THE CELLAR

The only cars Denny ever saw were the ones frozen in place on the Highway, rusted and faded. The road itself wasn't much better, small cracks making way for larger ones as plants weaved and snaked through, growing wherever they could until the street looked more like a series of rocks than one piece of tar or cement. Littered down the road in both directions were the cars, pulled over to the side, crashed into each other, or stopped in their lanes, all covered in green. Some cars still had their drivers inside, dried out and brittle, vines growing out of their noses and mouths. Towards the city there were seas of them, packed so close together it was almost impossible to get through, even on foot.

It was the Highway that brought Denny to the small farmhouse and cellar that was her home. She had been small, covered in blood, and crying, feet bare and clothes torn as she walked down the broken road. An elderly couple heard her and took her in. They showed her kindness, and raised her as if she was their own. Then they died, leaving isolation in their wake and their echo everywhere.

As Denny stood on the uneven stones of the Highway, she could hear Uncle

Jeremy telling her how people would drive from one side of the country to the other in their cars. All it took was a few tanks of gasoline and half a week. The thought of so much freedom was terrifying on most days, but on others, when the sun was bright, she wondered what was at the end of the Highway.

If the pamphlets were to be believed, it was the Pasture. A place untouched by the green, where people could live and work and play in safety. Uncle Jeremy didn't believe it, though he had wanted to. He was only a boy when the Pasture first started to speak out against all the changes people were making to their bodies and to the world around them. Warning that someday, there would be unforeseen consequences. In the end, they were right. They closed their doors and the world fell apart around them as they watched. People flocked to the Pasture, pleading, bargaining, threatening. In the height of the Chaos, people began trying to break through the thick walls that lined the compound, but nothing could penetrate their safeguards and the Pasture remained silent.

Years passed and the Pasture became a beacon. Lost souls would find one of the pamphlets from before the Chaos and make the long walk down the Highway. Sometimes they'd pass the farmhouse where she lived without giving it a second look, shambling on, following the siren song of a better future. Denny would hide with Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily, waiting for the traveler to move on their way, hoping they wouldn't see their little haven. Every so often, one of the trekkers would notice how well their farmhouse was maintained and wander over to their home. Uncle Jeremy would leave the basement with a gun held firmly in his grasp. He didn't always need it, but whenever he did, he came back to the cellar with his shoulders slumped under another burden.

Denny had met a few of the more friendly visitors, had seen the way they clutched

the faded, barely readable pamphlet for the Pasture. She had seen how frail their bodies and minds were, but their spirits still burned, alive and desperate. She watched as they continued on their path down the Highway, doubting any of them would ever make it to their goal, but their hope fueled their march and they went on. Fools, Uncle Jeremy had called them, but Denny saw bravery in their belief. It was a courage she lacked.

She hadn't seen another person in over a year and the solitude was so thick it sometimes made it difficult to breathe. She had heard a shrieker, had even seen one in a field a mile south, but the last person she saw with a pulse was a middle aged woman shambling down the Highway, half her body covered in leathery patches. Denny stayed in the cellar, watching through parted curtains and hoping she didn't notice that what looked like a barn was actually a greenhouse. Part of Denny wanted to run out of the basement, desperate for someone to interact with, but she knew it would be pointless. It wouldn't be long before the woman either shriveled or shrieked and Denny didn't want to deal with either.

She wondered if she was the last person left in the world.

Chilled by the evening wind, Denny took her eyes off the horizon and looked over to the small patch of world that was her home. A farmhouse, fragile but standing with a reinforced cellar, tightly maintained and cozy beneath it. Further back was the greenhouse, its front and sides boarded up with wood from an old barn to hide what it really was from the Highway. If anyone knew what was in it, it wouldn't be safe, and without it she would be dead. It was everything.

A few years after Denny had wandered into the lives of Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily, a group of people, frail with hunger and cold, clothes torn and ragged, came upon

their home. Desperate, they begged for shelter and food and Uncle Jeremy gave them what he could spare, careful not to reveal too much about how they lived. Still, one of the men, his eyes still keen, saw the barn for what it was, and he changed. There was only one reason a greenhouse would be hidden and the knowledge of the food being grown under its panes of glass straightened his spine, focusing his blazing hungry eyes. Denny clutched Aunt Emily's pant leg and the older woman stilled, the two of them watching from the top of the stairs that led to the cellar. They had come out because the group seemed friendly, but the atmosphere had become hostile.

Uncle Jeremy had once been an army man, devoted to his country until the country collapsed. He had seen it coming, prepared in secret, but had done his duty as long as his duty could be done. During the early stages of the Chaos, he was one of the troops assigned to bring order, but when no order could be brought, he fled with his wife to their home in the country. Over the decades, he worked on the cellar and worked in the field, scavenged and tinkered, and stayed fit, his senses alert. Two starving men and one emaciated woman would normally be no match for him, but desperation fueled them into a frenzy. Denny didn't see what came after the group lunged at Uncle Jeremy. Aunt Emily had dragged her down the stairs and covered her with her body, but she heard the snarls and the gunshots. Then the silence.

The next day Uncle Jeremy took Denny deep into the fields to teach her how to shoot. She could remember the heat of the sun and the feel of the tall grass as it gently parted for them as they walked. His hand was warm as it held hers. The gun was cold when he pressed it into her palm. As he helped her raise the gun steady, his voice was gentle, his eyes closed off and determined. When she fired the gun for the first time she

didn't think of the monsters that haunted the dark or the faces of desperation that attacked Uncle Jeremy the day before. She thought of Aunt Emily crying as she saw them off that morning, her face strong but her body quivering.

Denny hadn't understood the reason for the tears then, but now she thought understood. She took the gun from where she kept it tucked into the back of her pants and looked at it. The sun setting cast colors on the metal, making it almost beautiful.

As the last sliver of sunlight dipped behind the horizon, a shriek echoed in the distance.

The sun rose and Denny was still alive.

Her room was small, once being a laundry room, but electricity stopped working long before Denny came into Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily's lives. It wasn't a sacrifice for them to move the old clunky machines out and move Denny in. Aunt Emily would joke that they just exchanged one washing machine for another but it was years before she had Denny wash anything. Aunt Emily had wanted her to have a childhood, and it wasn't until it was necessary that she showed Denny how to do the laundry, carefully, in a salted area of the farmhouse. Making sure that no vegetation got anywhere near the garments when they were clean, Aunt Emily hunched over a large "kiddy pool" full of water and soap and instructed Denny on what to do. Rubber gloves covered the patches of leathery skin on Aunt Emily's hands as she scrubbed. Her movements were steady but her voice was not and Denny sat close to her, trying not to focus on what the lesson had meant.

Denny's room hadn't changed much over the years. A couple of mattresses were

pressed against the wall, taken from a spare room upstairs, one damaged and the other lumpy. Next to her makeshift bed, a wooden crate that had once said apples served as a nightstand. A small dresser full of worn but clean clothes and a toy chest full of toys Denny hadn't touched for more than a year filled out the rest of the room. As she grew, she felt the room getting smaller but she refused to move into Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily's room. Their presence in it was still too strong.

On the nightstand was a solar light, dimly lit. Denny would try to convince herself it was so she could see if there was an emergency in the middle of the night, but she knew the truth. The darkness still frightened her. Darkness and half remembered monsters. When she turned off the lamp, dim rays of sunshine filtered through the curtains of a small window attempting to illuminate her room. It was important to keep the curtains drawn at night, even if her room was towards the back of the farmhouse. She couldn't be sure the only visitors would come from the Highway and light drew all kinds of shadows.

After stretching she turned and began to straighten the covers, making her bed. The sheets were a set she picked up with Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily a few years before while raiding an abandoned department store. It was one of the few times all three had gone together, Aunt Emily usually staying back to work on chores, but she was unable to resist a "shopping spree". Uncle Jeremy had gone on many scouting trips before all three of them went together, to make sure it was safe, and when the day finally came for them to go, Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily's excitement was obvious.

Denny had thrilled with wonder and fear as she walked through the broken glass doors, the room beyond them so large her flashlight couldn't reach the back or even the ceiling of the room. Racks were turned over, things disheveled, but the store was still full

of items they needed: bed sheets, clothes, cookware. The people who rushed the store during the Chaos weren't looking to stay, they were looking to leave. Afterwards, the store must have been forgotten by looters, or perhaps a shrieker made the building its home for a time then moved on when food stopped walking in the front door.

While walking around, Denny and Aunt Emily came across a few bodies, mostly covered in plants, their skin tight and leathery as if everything of worth had been sucked out of them. Aunt Emily tried to make Denny look away, but Denny was used to seeing bodies. They weren't scary or sad, they weren't anything but dead. Years later she learned that it was different when the body was someone you knew, someone you loved.

The trip was a good one, each of them coming home with a wagon full of items. The day was bright and sunny and she got many things she had never seen before. Clothes, not just for then, but for the future; toys to play with when she wasn't working; good, new sneakers; good, new boots. They picked out several different sheet sets, ones that actually fit her mattresses, all with characters from things Denny had never seen before but liked the way they looked. Every month from then on, her sheets had been changed and washed.

When she finished making her bed, Denny walked out into the living area and opened the curtains, letting the light stream in and spread over her home. Everything was the same as the day she first arrived. Even then it had felt like home.

Aunt Emily had always called the basement, with a little laugh, a “Doomsday Den”. She would tell Denny how, when Uncle Jeremy was reinforcing the cellar, she indulged him but thought that it was a waste of time. Sometimes, when she was being more honest, she'd admit that she was scared he was right, and that joking about it,

thinking that her husband was paranoid, was easier than facing the truth.

The only entrance to the cellar opened into the backyard. It was the most important addition to the basement stronghold, meant to keep both intruders and any of the green out. A large steel door placed at the top of a steep cement staircase lead down to a matching steel door, creating a containment area. A small roof and airtight walls were built to keep the area enclosed and a thick layer of salt was spread right before the inside door to kill any green that was brushed off before entering the house. Three pairs of boots still sat in the salt, lined up side by side on the right. A pair of lace-up boots sat on the other side, unlaced and open, ready to slip on. A shotgun hung on the wall above them.

Inside the cellar, next to the door, Uncle Jeremy built a row of counters for his wife to work with. Simple, yet functional, there were cupboards both above and below, with a sink and a wood-burning stove. Shortly after the final throws of the Chaos, plumbing stopped working, but water still drained from the sink, and it was good for washing dishes when needed. As for the stove, it was simple and serviceable, but Denny had to be careful with what she brought into the cellar to burn.

A short way from the counters, a table for four sat with only three chairs on a beat up red and orange woven carpet. The fourth chair was pressed against the wall next to the steel door, covered in miscellaneous things with no where else to go. The other side of the large living area was set on a giant rectangle purple carpet. A brown leather couch was pressed against the outside wall, across from it a green plush armchair where Uncle Jeremy used to sit. Both faced an old television that was useless but Uncle Jeremy would insist that the room looked empty without it. Behind the chair, the wall was covered in

books, the shelves bowing under the pressure of the piles loaded onto them. A few books were scattered around the room where Denny had left them. Another was left on the arm of the green recliner where Uncle Jeremy had placed it shortly before he left the cellar for the last time.

Pushing away the melancholy that constantly threatened to cave in on her, Denny went to the counters and took an apple from the mostly empty fruit bowl. It was small and a little sour, it being too early to harvest apples, but Denny couldn't wait. She finished it quickly, putting the core in the compost basket on the side of the sink. She then drank the last of the water she boiled the night before, filling up the rest of her stomach.

In the bathroom, Denny put toothpaste on her toothbrush and started brushing her teeth without water. When Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily were alive, there was always enough water for whatever was needed, but Denny found it more and more difficult to boil water everyday. Whether it was materials to burn, or the energy to do it. There was so much to do, and just one her, and sometimes boiling enough water to drink was all she could do.

Gritting her teeth against the uncomfortable texture of the toothpaste, she looked up at herself in the mirror above the bathroom sink to take her mind off of it. The light from the living area drifted into the small room as best as it could, illuminating her small face and flashing off her course black hair. Spitting several times to get as much toothpaste out of her mouth as possible, Denny put the toothbrush back in its place and wiped her mouth. Not rinsing her mouth left it feeling minty and clean, which was better than the alternative.

Starting the day, Denny grabbed Uncle Jeremy's gun from where she kept it between her mattresses and stuck it in the back of her pants. She had only had to use it outside of practice once, but it was her constant companion. Part of her hated the gun and what it represented, but she couldn't deny that the cold metal was reassuring against her skin.

Opening the inner door to the cellar, she stepped into the gateway and attempted to slip her feet into her boots. They were old, and a little too small, so the process was difficult, but with a burst of protest, her feet gave way and popped into the boots, forcing Denny to take a moment and let her feet get used to the cramped space. Leaning against the wall for support, she looked down at the two pairs of boots left sitting in the salt, side by side. When her throat started to close, she forced herself up the cement steps and to the outer door.

While the door into the basement was heavy and solid, the door to the outside was even more secure with three different locks and a latch that opened to show the outside. Getting up on the tips of her toes, Denny opened the latch and looked out, scanning the surroundings as best as she could. Though she wasn't expecting to see anything, her shoulders slumped a little as she undid the three locks and walked out into the salt surrounding her home.

The salt didn't cover the entire span of her territory, but a few feet around all the important buildings was strictly maintained. The grass that aggressively filled in the rest of the ground had to be cut every few days, which she did with an old fashioned lawn cutter that didn't require electricity or gas. It was hard work, and the area she mowed became smaller and smaller, the grass reclaiming the land and growing as tall as her waist

in the farthest areas. Sometimes it felt as if the grass was marching closer and closer to her home, an ocean of green that swayed in the breeze. Beautiful, yet terrifying.

Turning off the safety to her gun, she walked around the farmhouse, keeping her eyes and ears alert, ready to react to any sound. She ended up on the Highway, looking down one way, then the other, scanning for anything different. Nothing. No one. And no matter how long she stood there looking, her eyes squinting to see the distance clearer, that didn't change.

A few feet from the greenhouse was a shed. Inside, Denny put on her work gloves, mud pants, and rain coat to protect her clothes from getting any green on them. She then took the wheelbarrow full of salt and began her rounds. The wheelbarrow was heavy and unwieldy, but she managed, walking around the perimeter of the house, the shed, the outhouse, and the greenhouse, checking to see if any green made it past the salt barriers. If it had, she pulled it out and threw it into the grass. If there were any places where the salt was weak, she added more. The last place she checked was the two graves. One she dug with Aunt Emily. The other she dug by herself. Both graves were salted, but green still grew, breaking through the salt and reaching for the sun. Ruthlessly, she ripped the tendrils from the ground and re-salted the area, making sure the salt layer was even, the edges clean. When she finished, she returned everything to the shed and locked the door.

Salt was piled around the greenhouse, pressed up against the sides at least two feet high. The gateway to the half glass building was strictly maintained, a few inches of salt on the floor and special hooks for old mechanic uniforms to change into on the walls.

Denny wore a faded blue jumper that was too large for her with the name Jude embroidered into an oval over a breast pocket. On her feet were a different pair of boots, boots that had never seen outside the greenhouse, but they were roomy, a fact that her feet appreciated while they could. Covering her hands were rubber gloves, wrapped closed with rubber bands. She had to be careful that no green from the outside could travel in and contaminate her food source.

The greenhouse was large, three sides of it boarded up to hide what it was, but the back wall and ceiling were glass to let the sunlight in. Salt, a foot wide and a foot tall lined all four walls, keeping out the green, but staying far enough away from her crops to let them grow. Everywhere else was food, growing weakly but faithfully. Even though Denny tried as hard as she could, she wasn't Aunt Emily. She didn't have time to spend with the plants, pruning them, washing them, taking care of them, and they suffered because of it. With only one person to feed, there should have been more than enough food for her, there being enough food to feed two people well or three people sparingly before, but Denny was failing and so was the greenhouse. Slowly, bit by bit, and Denny didn't know what to do.

The salt layer was the first thing Denny checked, taking a bucket of salt from its place by the door and a battery powered blacklight to check for any trace of pink in the salt layer. She tried to feel calm as she scanned, the blacklight causing the salt to glow as it passed over, weaving back and forth. She tried not to think of what she would do if the green had found its way into the greenhouse. It hadn't yet, there was no reason to believe that it would start, but Denny had been growing careless. Fatigue, solitude, despair, none of them were good friends with focus, and she had been slipping. Her breath left her all at

once in relief when she finished, content that her food supply was still safe.

More at ease, Denny put the bucket of salt back on its hook on the wall and took the blacklight over to her crops, checking to see if any pink showed up on the plants, vegetables, or fruits. She wasn't as thorough or as worried, confident that if no green had gotten past the salt, no green could get to the plants, but she did a cursory check just to be sure. Rows and rows of vegetables, tables of different types of fruit growing plants, as well as a few fruit bearing trees made up the entirety of her livelihood. Soon she would have to harvest as much as she could and start the long and laborious task of pickling, but for now she could just take what she needed for the day or a few days and be done.

When she could be sure that everything was safe, Denny gathered a few green beans, a couple of carrots, a tomato, and a cucumber. She wanted to take more, but forced herself to be cautious, putting them in an airtight bag and shoving them in her pocket for safe keeping as she finished.

In the corner of the greenhouse was a water trough full of clean water filtered through a system Uncle Jeremy had set up using rocks and different kinds of cloth. It was old fashioned, but stable, taking rainwater and weeding out the green as efficiently as anything else Denny could imagine. She had to clean it every once and a while, but Uncle Jeremy had showed her how, his voice raspy as his skeletal hands had showed her what to do. She hadn't fully comprehended everything at the time, but with practice she got used to the process of deconstructing, cleaning, then reassembling it.

Watering the plants took some time, going from plant to plant, making sure they all got the right amount of water, walking back and forth to refill the watering can. She lost herself in the rhythm of the process, taking refuge in the task that prevented her from

thinking too much. When she was finished, she changed back into her day clothes, making sure to put the greenhouse gear back where it was supposed to be, then locked the door to the greenhouse behind her.

In the basement, locked behind two metal doors, feet free of the smelly sweaty rubber boots, Denny cut the vegetables and mixed them together. She ate a little then put the rest into an airtight container saving them for later that night. The rest of the morning she spent washing clothes and dishes. The dishes had to be washed in water that had been boiled because they came in contact with food and she could never be too careful when it came to dealing with what she ate. That was how the green got you after all. You got careless and ingested it. Then it took root inside you, eating you from the inside out. If you were lucky, you shriveled. If you weren't, you changed. Denny had seen the process of both. Neither of them were appealing.

The clothes Denny didn't have to be as careful with. The water could be rainwater gathered and filtered through another system Uncle Jeremy had crafted, set up in a small room in the farmhouse. She just had to make sure no seeds or vegetation were in the water, and she could suds it up and wash the clothes, just like Aunt Emily had shown her. She then hung the laundry to dry in what used to be the old family room of the farmhouse. The roof had holes and the windows lacked glass, but both had screens put into place to prevent the green from getting through and contaminating the area. Still, a nice breeze flowed through the room and help dry her clothes.

When she was finished, she walked to the Highway and stood, watching. Waiting.

## AUNT EMILY

Aunt Emily had once been beautiful. Years added lines and wrinkles to her skin, attempted to steal that beauty, but while it had took the striking edge off her, it couldn't take the fierceness of her blue eyes or the gentleness of her smile. The green had taken those.

“It won't be long now,” Aunt Emily said, her once lyrical voice a rasp, her throat and vocal chords dry and brittle, just like the rest of her. Denny didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say. Nothing to make the situation better, at least, so Denny said nothing.

She felt numb, as if her soul had been eaten by the green, leaving her a husk of a human being. She should be sad. She should cry, and scream, and despair, but all of that was gone. Perhaps she was scared to feel her sorrow. If she did, the emotion would undoubtedly be too intense and would break her apart from the inside, so to keep her sane and alive, she felt nothing.

The woman who had once been her mother, her sister, and her friend, the woman who had taken her into her home and raised her, had called herself Aunt Emily, felt

distant to her. Denny could barely look over at the leather covered bones that lay in the salt, soaking in the sun, soaking in the last moments of her life. She could barely reconcile with herself that it was Aunt Emily, but perhaps that was because she was worried that in a few minutes it wouldn't be. She had seen the change before and knew what she had to do, her hand tightening on the gun in her lap.

Aunt Emily must have sensed the action because she said, "Don't hesitate, child."

"I won't." Denny promised.

"When I go, no matter what, you shoot."

"I know."

Denny didn't know how long they had been sitting out in the salt, in the sun, waiting for it to happen. Denny could end it right then, the waiting, the torture. She could shoot Aunt Emily and save both of them these minutes of drawn out suffering. But she wouldn't. The moments were precious. Underneath the numb calmness that had taken over her brain, she knew that if she took these moments from Aunt Emily, from herself, she would never get them back.

But what do you say in the last moments of someone's life. I'm sorry? I'm going to miss you? I love you? All of those go without saying, and though nice to hear, could only bring out the pain she was avoiding and Denny refused to let the misery in. Not yet.

"You were our light," Aunt Emily finally said, and Denny looked down at the gun in her dark hands. "You were our everything."

Denny knew she had brought something into the old couple's life they had never had, and while she was happy to hear it, she realized that she was still not enough to keep Aunt Emily alive. Uncle Jeremy had been the one to eat the green first. On accident. A

careless, foolish accident. She knew that Aunt Emily eating the green was on purpose.

Denny repressed the emotions that came with the thought, swallowed, and said, “Thank you, for everything.” She meant the words. Despite being abandoned, Denny knew that both Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily had given up a lot taking her in. The risk was greater than the reward, and still they did it. She should be grateful she had them and their security as long as she did. Perhaps, when Aunt Emily passed, Denny would just-

“Live.” The half rasping word came forcefully out of Aunt Emily's mouth, breath coming to her only with a great struggle now. “The most important thing is that you live.”

And then that was it.

Denny stood up, her head buzzing, her vision blurry. She gripped the gun, shaking, pointed it between Aunt Emily's sightless eyes and... did nothing. She waited for movement, waited for the ungodly shriek to burst out of the husk's lungs, but nothing happened. Aunt Emily was just gone.

## THE THING BY THE YELLOW CAR

Denny decided to go into Town. There was no great reason. She was running out of toothpaste and using watered down shampoo, but she still had reserves of both. She could easily wait a week or two before she would need to go, but the day seemed perfect. No clouds in the sky, the temperature warm. Autumn was making its way into the world, winter would soon follow, days like this wouldn't come often.

Determined, she went through the process of getting ready to leave her home. Taking the large hiking backpack from the closet, she set it on the table and placed the sealed container of food in it as well as two bottles of water, leaving the rest empty to fill with whatever she could find. Returning to the closet, she grabbed her “going out” jumper from its hook and put it on, belting it around her stomach to keep it from sagging too much. She then put on the backpack, securing it around her waist.

Going down the checklist in her mind, she took a combat flashlight and checked to make sure it was working then slipped it into one of the pockets of the jumpsuit she could easily reach on the side of her thigh. She then slipped Uncle Jeremy's gun into the side of her belt, making sure it was secure and feeling more secure with it there, ready to

be reached for at any moment. From the between the cushions of the couch she took a sheathed army knife and her own gun then left through the first steel door and locked it behind her.

Compared to her other two pairs of boots, the lace-ups were cavernous. An old pair of Uncle Jeremy's he gave her about two years ago, she had to lace them tight to make sure they didn't fall off her feet. Once they were tied up, she placed her gun in one of the boots and the sheathed army knife in the other. From its place hung by the side of the door, Denny grabbed Uncle Jeremy's shot gun and checked to make sure it was loaded, then marched up the steps.

As she locked the second steel door behind her, she felt an odd sense of finality. As if she had come to a conclusion and the path before her was set. She placed the keys in a zip up pocket in her jumper and moved on to check that the greenhouse and outhouse were still locked. Content that her home was as safe as it could be, she went to the shed and got out her baseball cap and sunglasses, putting both on before taking Aunt Emily's ten-speed. She was too tall for her old bike, she knew that. It was the only reason she started using Aunt Emily's, though the bike wasn't much of an improvement. Aunt Emily had loved the bike, refusing to get a new one, even when there were other ones, better ones available. She would insist that the bike was still good enough, even with its duct-taped seat and rusted frame. Denny agreed that it was good enough and refused, much like Aunt Emily, to take another one.

Placing the shotgun across the handlebars, she locked it into place using the mechanism Uncle Jeremy fastened to the bike, double checking that the grip was solid. She then locked the shed behind her and left.

The ride into Town was a long one, taking about an hour. Uncle Jeremy used to grumble as he peddled, griping that before it only took ten minutes by car. Denny tried to imagine what that was like. Simply hopping into a vehicle and driving to the store. It seemed too easy. “Don't long for the way things were,” Uncle Jeremy would tell himself more than her. “That's the path to more hardship than you're ready for.” Denny never had an answer to that. All she ever knew was hardship. So she peddled, drinking when she was thirsty, making sure to stay hydrated and alert.

On the way, she passed cars and a few houses. Each time, she made sure to keep a look out for anyone or anything. It would be in the darkness that they were resting, their senses ready and alert. Monsters, both human and less than human. During the day, it was people who were more dangerous. Degenerates. That's what Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily had called them. Brigands. Bandits. People who looked out for themselves, so interested in surviving they forgot kindness.

It was just a mile from her house, by a yellow car with smashed in windows that Denny saw it. Standing in the sunlight, the eyeless pits of its face staring up at the sun as if it could still see it, as if it could feel the rays, and perhaps it did. She couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman before it changed, its body completely devoid of any living tissue, a network of vines wrapped around bone covered in leathery skin. Just like all the lifeless bodies littered in the cars around them, vines crawled out of the eye sockets, the mouth, even some areas where it just broke through the skin, small thin tendrils snaking across the surface.

Denny stared, her feet planted on either side of Aunt Emily's bike, watching it, wondering if it could sense her somewhere or if its mind was completely gone, lost in reverie. She knew if she made a loud enough sound it would hear her and attack, but she wasn't scared. It looked almost as if a statue, completely still. She had seen many like this when she went to town with Uncle Jeremy. Sometimes they'd show up in their fields and Denny would have to stay inside all day. But when they were like this, all she felt for them was hatred, no fear.

She didn't know what caused the shriekers to freeze in daylight. Uncle Jeremy thought that maybe it was the green in them, feeding off the sunlight, because after all the meat in the body was gone, the shriekers had to survive on something. It just added to the mystery that they were. Uncle Jeremy was constantly forming theories, trying to figure out what caused them, why some people turned but most didn't, what they actually were. Denny didn't care. They just were. For her, they always were. And she always hated them.

If someone was going to die, they should just die. To continue on as a meat puppet to be eaten away, to be controlled like some green-stringed marionette... to look at a loved one with deflated, hollow eyes and to make that sound, that horrible sound...

Denny was gripping her handgun before she realized what she was doing, her hand shaking. She wanted to shoot it, she wanted to stab it, but she knew it would do no good. There was no organs to wound, nothing left to injure, to kill. Even had it been a newly turned creature, a bullet would only shock its system and cause it to shut down for an hour or two, giving a person enough time to burn it. Fire was the only thing that killed a shrieker, and the sound they made as they burned was worse than any noise ever imaginable. Just the memory of it set her teeth on edge.

This creature was old, all vines and skin. A shot would just make it angry. Setting it on fire would just draw any others in the area to it. There was nothing to do but go home, lock herself in the basement and wait for it to pass during the night.

Instead, she put the gun back into her belt, her shaking hand making it more difficult than it should be, and continued on, giving the shrieker a wide berth. She had decided to go to Town, and she would. There was enough daylight. She would be able to manage to get back home before the sun set. She wasn't sure if she truly believed that, but she didn't care.

## TOWN

The Town once had a name but Denny didn't know it. To her it was simply the Town. Even before the world went to hell, it had been small and sparse. It's why Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily chose to live there. There were more crops than there were people, and there was only one fast food place for the entire town. Uncle Jeremy had once taken her there, telling her what it used to be like. Standing in line, ordering food, it seemed so alien. Going up to a counter and asking for something, and getting whatever you wanted. Little meals for children, with toys in them. Uncle Jeremy had gone behind the counter and got her one, and she had kept it on her dresser for the longest time. It had since gone with her other toys in the toy chest, put away. She had wanted to play in the tubes that were in the play area, but it was covered in plants and Uncle Jeremy said it wasn't safe, so they left. A year later, the play area fell down during a particularly bad storm. As Denny passed it, she noted how sad and lonely it looked. Everything looked sad and lonely. The hardware store, the gas station, the church that looked more like a house than a house of worship.

Everything was covered in vegetation. Vines crawling over anything they could,

grass growing up to Denny's waist in some places, trees taking root in the tar and growing to twenty, thirty feet high. There were still the remains of streets, but it made for a long bumpy ride. Aunt Emily's bike was made for rough terrain, but it was a difficult road to travel, especially in areas where the vegetation was particularly thick. Still, the Town was infinitely better than the City. There were too many unknowns in the City, too many places for monsters to hide. It loomed in the distance, hazy but visible, the Great Tree towering over all the buildings. Uncle Jeremy told her that it had once been a building itself, but it was overrun with plants, more so than the other buildings around it, probably because it had something to do with the green. The plants grew so strongly around it, trees taking root through all of its floors, breaking through their pots and digging into the cement, spreading throughout the building. Somehow, over time, all the plants combined together and made the Great Tree. Denny had seen it up close just once and while remains of the building it once was could still be seen underneath the vegetation, from far away it simply looked like a tree.

Denny got to the Plaza as the sun was highest in the sky, beating down on the strip of stores and heating the patches of blacktop that remained. She pulled up to the Drug Store, parking her bike by the side and locking it to one of the outside support pillars. Odds were that no one was around to steal it, but she didn't want to have to walk home just in case. She then grabbed the shotgun from the handlebars and slipped it down her back, her pack being tight enough that it held it in place.

The shop was small, sitting next to the Food Store. Its front window was smashed and plants wended their way in, creeping and latching onto what they could. The door was

completely covered in vines, locking it shut, so Denny had to crawl in through the window, being careful not to make too much noise. Once inside, she pulled out her flashlight and turned it on, then pulled out Uncle Jeremy's gun from her belt, flipping the safety off. She wasn't expecting anything. She hadn't seen anyone or anything in Town for what felt like ages, but she had to be careful. It's when you stopped being careful that you ended up dead. And Denny had to live, so she stayed careful.

Slowly she walked down the ransacked aisles, stepping over the processed food scattered all over the ground. All the medicine was gone, taken long ago during the Chaos. The last time she was there, she took what remained of the soap and shampoo, but she hoped that maybe she missed something. Perhaps something rolled underneath a shelf. Careful where she shined her light, she looked for anything that could be useful. No batteries, no oil, no paper towels, or containers. All the food was useless, full of green and dangerous to eat. Anything that wasn't decomposed long before Denny was born. It felt lonely walking down the empty aisles.

The Town was “out of the way” so even when it had been populated, there wasn't much “out of town” business. It only felt slight aftershocks of the Chaos. A few people, stopping on the way to somewhere else, smashing windows and taking what they could grab. Much was left behind. For years, Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily came, taking what they needed and leaving what they didn't. They could have just stockpiled it all, but they would say that other people might find the store, and they shouldn't hoard what was there. The only way the human race would survive was by helping each other. But nothing lasts forever and the store was starting to empty.

Accepting that there was nothing of use in the front, Denny checked the back

rooms. Uncle Jeremy told her that the first time he ventured into the Drug Store, there were boxes and boxes of supplies in the stock room, but the years had seen the shelves go bare. Using her flashlight to check in all the little places something might have rolled or fallen, she searched for anything of use. When she found nothing, she felt a knot in her chest tighten. It was the first time she had ever been unsuccessful in finding at least something small, like a pen, or a battery out of its packaging.

She decided to brave the Food Store. It was large and had no natural light so she hadn't been to it since Uncle Jeremy died, but she knew she'd eventually have to start going. After checking to see if anyone or anything was coming down the road towards Town, Denny walked over to the Food Store and stood before its entrance. The doors were stuck open, vines wrapped around them, crawling out from the void inside. She shined the flimsy light of her flashlight into the darkness, half expecting to see a dried out face staring out at her, but there was nothing.

Carefully, each step and action measured, Denny entered the building. The room was too large and she was too small, there was no way to check to make sure the store was completely secure, so she had to listen, she had to be soundless. The Food Store, more than any other, was full of vegetation. Not just from the outside, but from the inside as well. There were patches of untouched aisles here and there, but a vast majority of the store was covered in plants.

Systematically, just as Uncle Jeremy had taught her, she went to one corner of the store, and walked down every aisle, making sure nothing or no one was around. It took time, checking for danger and checking for supplies, but the Food Store was more stocked than the Drug Store, simply because Aunt Emily and Uncle Jeremy didn't go in

there as often. Denny was able to find some soap and shampoo, dish soap, detergent, and a blanket with sleeves for her arms. She took the last thing out of its box so it wouldn't take up too much space.

There was still room in her pack when she left. Squinting her eyes in the sunlight she looked down the road both ways to see if anyone was coming. No one. The sun was still high, she had more than enough time, so she decided to make one more stop.

## THE LIBRARY

The Library was close to the City. Not close enough to be really dangerous, but close enough to make Uncle Jeremy second guess going every time they went. Denny had never gone by herself, but the day was bright and scavenging the Food Store went well, so it gave her courage. That's what she told herself, ignoring the shrieker that would be in her path on the way home, and the feelings that have been building in her over the year.

The building was large, with walls of windows, practically all broken. It sat in the middle of a parking lot, surrounded by trees. The trees, over the years, growing closer and closer to the building, through cracks in the blacktop. Grass from the land around the library, and flowers from its small garden also spread without humans to prevent them, making it hard to see the building. As with all other structures, the plants didn't stop at claiming the land around the library, but began to find its way in, through the broken windows, and sometimes even going through the walls themselves. As Denny took out her flashlight and Uncle Jeremy's gun once more, making her way into the building, she noted that the tree that grew in one of the reading sections was still there, growing

through the ceiling, creating cracks where sunlight streamed through. In the pools of light, flowers grew. The effect would have been beautiful if their invasion of the building hadn't been so disturbing.

Careful and quiet, Denny made her way to through the library, using her flashlight to check corners, wondering which section of the library to go to, what type of books to take home. She wanted to go to the young adult section, pick up some books about fantastic adventures, but another part of her told her she should take home some books on gardening or something useful. As she was looking through a few small paperbacks meant for her age group, she heard a sound and froze. Heart beating in her ears, Denny made sure the safety was off of Uncle Jeremy's gun and waited, body tense, for another sound. Something, anything.

If she ran, she was done for. Whatever it was would see her and give chase, whether human or shrieker. She had to find where it was, had to move quietly away, back to the windows. As long as she could get back to the windows, she'd be fine. She'd get on her bike and pedal as fast as she could. No matter how fast one of them could be, she could be faster. She had this, she could do this. She turned slightly to move toward the windows again, when she heard another sound. It was a word. "Wait."

It sounded wheezy, like a shrieker, the vocal chords brittle, but it was definitely a word. Curiosity getting the better of fear, she turned towards where the sound came from and her flashlight beam fell on a person. Or what was left of one, the vines visibly pulsing below the leathery skin, eating away at the meat behind. Denny almost threw up and turned away covering her mouth with the hand that held the gun. She felt the steel of

it on her face as she gagged, forcing the thoughts of Uncle Jeremy out of her head. She should go, it wouldn't be long before this woman was dead. Or at least Denny assumed it was a woman, her clothes and hair the only thing that indicated so. Soon, her hair would fall out and her clothes would rip away, and she'd just be one of them. Denny should leave.

“Wait,” the word came again. More human this time. Denny looked back at the woman where she sat, huddled, pressed against a door, her head back and her eyes unseeing. She had more time than Denny originally thought, though not much. The eyes were one of the last to go and they weren't deflated yet. Another word came, trying to work its way out of her mouth. “Please.”

Denny felt something she hadn't in a long time. Under the revulsion and fear was compassion. Or perhaps it was just connection, the first interaction she's had with another human in so long. Instead of going back towards the windows like she knew she should, she instead started to walk towards the woman, through the aisles, over to the door of what looked like a meeting room. The woman's face turned towards the sounds of Denny coming closer, trying to make more words but having trouble with them coming out as anything intelligible.

As Denny got closer she saw the food wrappers spread around on the ground and the second body, this one completely gone, its body limp and lifeless, a husk. Stupid. It was suicide to eat anything packaged. They must have known that. What did this woman want from her then, mercy? Anger swept over Denny like a wave. If the woman had given up, had chosen this path, then she should turn. The last thing she should hear as her humanity left her should be the horrible sound she made as she screamed and a shriek

came out instead.

Denny turned to leave but the woman's hand darted out and grabbed her, gripping tightly. Denny felt the vines beneath the woman's skin slither even through the jumpsuit and pulled her arm away roughly causing the woman creature to topple forward. Bent over, without the strength to sit up straight again, the woman made what sounded like a sob and once again said the word “please”, though this time it was followed by something and the movement of her other hand. She was gripping something. Something she wanted Denny to look at. Again, Denny's curiosity won over everything else.

It was a picture of what looked like a little girl and her parents. The girl was small, perhaps three or four, with long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She was chubby and well cared for and her parents looked happy. In the background was pristine foliage, the picture obviously from a time when agriculture was viewed as decoration and not the enemy. Was the woman in front of Denny the child? She couldn't have been the mother, unless under the weathered leather skin, she had been an old woman. Denny didn't think so.

The woman was jerking now, her body in the last stages of the change. Denny needed to go, but her feet were stuck to the ground. What did the woman want from her? What was she supposed to do with the picture. There wasn't much time. Denny squatted in front of the woman, reaching out and trying to still her, the woman immediately gripped her back. Now having an idea of where Denny's face was, the woman fixed her hollow eyes sockets on her.

“Pasture,” the woman said, clearer than ever. Denny stared into the darkness that was the woman's eyes, the faint light from the ceiling revealing something twisting and

convulsing deep in them. “Take her.” And then the woman let go and jerked backwards, her limbs moving spastically as if a complicated marionette with an unskilled puppeteer. Denny didn't have time to think, she raised Uncle Jeremy's gun and shot the woman between the eye sockets. It wouldn't kill her, but the jolt to her system would give Denny enough time to escape far enough away.

The woman's body slumped and a moment later Denny heard a faint noise coming from the room the woman had been sitting in front of. Could it be another one? It hadn't sounded like a shrieker, it sounded like a whimper, but that couldn't be. It didn't matter, she had to go.

Denny was on her way to leave when she stopped once again, registering what the woman had said. “Take her.” Her. Making what felt like the fiftieth stupid decision that day, Denny turned back to the woman and walked over to the door, kicking the creature who still jerked every few seconds out of the way. Gun ready, half expecting another shrieker to jump out at her, she opened the door.

Stench was the only thing that greeted her. The corner of the room farthest from the door appeared to have been used as a bathroom, a pile of feces there, poorly covered up by a towel. In the corner opposite was a pile of rags. Nothing else except food wrappers. Whoever the woman had meant was long gone. Then the pile of rags moved.

“Hello?” The word barely came out, her voice hoarse from unuse, but she cleared her throat and tried again. “I won't hurt you.” Denny didn't think she was lying, but was more than willing to hurt whatever it was if it turned out to be a threat.

It wasn't. It was a little girl of about five or six and it peaked over the rags, tears in its large blue eyes. The girl in the photograph. But it wasn't possible. The girl in the

photograph was in a place that couldn't exist. Not now. Not in this age. Perhaps it was the daughter of the girl in the photograph. Children resembled their parents. But Denny had a hard time convincing herself that it could be to this degree. She put the gun back in her belt, leaving the safety off, and took the flashlight in her free hand, looking once again at the photo she still held. It was her, it was the girl.

Denny didn't know what to believe. This couldn't be the Pasture that everyone was talking about. If it was, why would the woman have left, with her child no less. But if this place existed, perhaps the Pasture did, too. There was a leap in her chest. She stared at the girl who just sniffled and stared back. The girl looked like hope. For the first time in a long time, Denny had hope, and that glimmer of hope cast shadows over everything her life was. There was a thump on the wall as the woman's body jerked violently outside. Denny didn't have time to think, she had to go, but this child was a problem. With the kid with her, she wouldn't be able to use her bike. They'd have to walk and they were running out of daylight. She could just leave her, but she knew she shouldn't.

“You help people.” Aunt Emily used to say. “It's just what you do.” But Denny didn't have time to coax the girl out of the rags, to have the girl trust her and follow her. She would give the girl only one shot and then that was it. Sure that the girl would shy away from the gesture, Denny put the picture away in a pocket and held out her hand.

The girl ran and grabbed it, her dirty skin still light against Denny's own dark hands.

## UNCLE JEREMY

Up until that day, Denny never would have said her life was difficult. Compared to how the world used to be, with its conveniences, and its shortcuts, life was harder, but Denny knew nothing else. Living without the sense of loss that plagued Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily caused her to have a freedom they could never have again and Denny was happy. She worked hard, but she had time to play and she had family who loved her and who she loved. She had time to be a child.

Then Uncle Jeremy had gotten careless and eaten something he shouldn't have. Denny had asked him, in tears, what it was, why he did it, but all he would say was that it was an accident. He didn't mean to, but that didn't matter, because he had done it, and it was over. His life. Her innocence. All they could do was wait for him to slowly change. And he was going to change. The rate of his decay was too fast, the vines underneath his skin too active.

When he was a child, he had the blood disease. Everyone said he was going to die, but there was a new gene therapy that could help him. It was that therapy that made his cells more adaptable and saved his life. He was convinced it was that therapy that

would turn him into a monster.

Denny watched him as he sat in his chair, reading his book, though his eyes couldn't have seen the letters. Perhaps he just didn't want to look around at the people he was leaving behind. Aunt Emily sat at his feet, her head on his knees, eyes closed and tears streaming down her cheeks. Uncle Jeremy's hand, vines slowly working beneath the skin, was placed on her head, and Denny wondered how Aunt Emily could stand it.

Then Uncle Jeremy closed his book, set it down on the arm of his chair, and stood up. He looked down at his wife, helped her to her feet, and kissed her. He then handed his gun to Denny and walked to the door. Denny followed. They had talked about what to do. She was going to have to be an adult now, going to have to be strong. Aunt Emily rushed into her bedroom and shut the door and Denny followed her uncle out of the basement.

The sun was warm and as she followed her Uncle into a clearing he made in the field, she could almost see the shadows of him teaching her to shoot in the grass as it swayed, hear his gentle but firm voice on the wind. Had she known who the first person she would shoot was, perhaps she would have refused the lesson.

In the center of the clearing was a patch of salt with rocks making a ring around it. A can of gasoline and a box of matches sat next to it. Everything set up for the task at hand. Without wavering, Uncle Jeremy stepped into the center of the ring and turned to Denny. She tried to smile at him, to reassure him that she was going to be strong, but her mouth didn't move. How could a girl of eleven or twelve be as strong as she needed to be for this.

“If you are ready, you can do it now,” Uncle Jeremy said, his voice harsh and hollow, his vocal chords reeds. Denny shook her head, not trusting her voice, and sat

down outside the circle. Her uncle sat down across from her, and managed a smile. They sat like that for hours, waiting. Denny watched as the vines snaked and slithered underneath his skin, his eyes becoming sunken underneath closed lids. At any moment she could have ended his suffering, but her heart clung to him, not willing to believe that this was happening, that it was over. Their happiness was over.

“ You should do it now, child,” the words were barely there. “Now.”

Denny stood up, gripping the gun, aiming it at him. She had to do it now. So he could die as himself. So this can finally be over for him. But she couldn't. How could she shoot him when he was still him. How could she kill the man who saved her and protected her. Who took all the burden of murder for his family, and let that burden eat at his soul. She should have pulled the trigger. She should have spared herself what came next.

Uncle Jeremy jerked backwards. Then he jerked forwards, his body moving unnaturally. Denny wanted to rush forward, but instead she stood outside of the salt, her hand gripping the gun so hard it almost broke the skin, her eyes fierce with tears. He was on his hands and knees, shuddering, shaking, breathing ragged. And then he looked up at her, his eyes gone, his mouth open to scream but a scream wasn't what came out.

Denny shot him and the world changed.

## HOME

The girl had long blonde hair done in two braids that fell halfway down her back. Her clothes were pink but dirty, and on her back she had a little pack with a stuffed dog peaking out of the top. Her sneakers lit up as she walked, and she held Denny's hand so tightly it seemed as if she was afraid Denny would leave her.

As they made their way back towards Denny's home, all weapons stowed away, Denny holding the girl's hand, her other hand leading her bike, Denny tried to get the girl to answer questions, but the girl didn't make a sound. She appeared to understand English, but she wouldn't speak. The most remarkable thing about her, though, was that she had no signs of the green.

Progress was slower than Denny would have liked and the sun started setting before they reached the yellow car where the shrieker had frozen in place. Determined not to show any of the fear she was feeling, she stopped walking and squatted down before the child.

“Listen, from here we're going to have to be really careful, okay?” her voice

sounded weird and alien as she spoke. The little girl nodded. “You know what's out there, right?” She nodded again, this time more fervently. Denny smiled. This kid might be all right after all. “Okay, I need both of my hands for the rest of the walk, okay?” It took a while for the child to nod this time, but she did and let go of Denny's hand.

The moment her hand was free, Denny took out the flashlight from her pocket, flicked it on and attached it to the handlebars with duct tape she ripped off the bike's seat. She then pulled the shotgun out of where it was wedged between her backpack and her back. Her handguns were useless against a fully formed shrieker. The shotgun wasn't much better, but a close ranged shot at least had the force to knock a shrieker back and daze it for a second.

The little girl followed as they began walking again, Denny carrying the shotgun in one hand and guiding the bike with the other. The child followed so closely that she stepped on the back of Denny's boots repeatedly, but Denny said nothing. She had to stay focused.

Once the sun had started to set, it was gone quickly, leaving only the stars and moon to light the Highway. Denny felt her stomach chill, and tried not to jump at every noise, determined to make it home. It had been a long time since she had been out at night. Probably since the night she found Aunt Emily and Uncle Jeremy. All she really remembered was walking down the Highway, lost and scared and alone.

Denny didn't know what her life was like before that moment. If she had been traveling with someone, if they had lived in a safe place or scavenged the streets like rats. All she remembered were the stars, and the road, and the worried but kind faces of the

two people she would come to care for most. Sometimes, when she was half asleep, she would remember things. Faces, rooms, sounds, but when she woke up again, she'd forget. Aunt Emily used to say she probably didn't want to remember what happened, and Denny thought she was probably right. She wondered if the child would remember this moment like that. Walking the road with an older, darker girl, being brought home. Denny looked back at the child, with its dazed yet intent look. She wondered if she looked like her when she walked the Highway that night. It was no wonder that Aunt Emily and Uncle Jeremy took her in. It was impossible to leave a child like that.

When they came to the yellow car with the smashed in windows, Denny relaxed a little. The shrieker was no where in sight, but that didn't mean they were safe. The shrieker could have walked miles away or just feet. There was no way to know.

Ten minutes from home she heard rustling in the overgrown fields to her right.

It was close, closer than it should have been for the first time she heard it, and Denny stopped, putting her arm out so the child behind her stopped as well. Knowing what the tenseness of the older girl's body meant, the child clutched Denny's arm. If she had been on her bike, she would have been able to outdistance whatever it was if she peddled her hardest. It would have been hard but she could have done it. She was sure of it. But she couldn't leave the child, not like this, not when the child looked to her for protection. She sealed her fate the moment she took the child's hand in the library. Denny realized she didn't care. She didn't care if these were her last moments. She just had to make sure the child lived.

The creature leapt from the crops, its figure dark against the moonlight and the

two girls froze. Shriekers hunted by sound, their eyes and nose useless. If it didn't hear them, it would move on. But it didn't move on. Denny watched as the shadow moved slowly, cautiously, trying to ferret out its prey. It had heard them walk up the road, it knew they were there. It was only a matter of time before it came upon them. She had to be proactive. A shot from the shotgun would damage it, maybe enough to keep it discombobulated long enough for them to get away. She wasn't sure but she had to try.

Flinging the bike away, Denny took the shot gun in both hands and pulled the trigger. Both Denny and the creature were thrown back, though fortunately Denny kept to her feet while the creature did not. Not wasting any time, not even checking to see what the creature was doing, Denny grabbed the little girl's hand and began running towards her house. With any luck, the shotgun blast had did enough damage that it would forget about them and continue on to where ever it had been going.

Its cry into the night sky told her she wasn't going to be that lucky.

Denny reached the door to the basement and fumbled with the keys, her lungs and legs on fire. She tried to regulate her breathing, tried to focus, but her vision stung as sweat dripped into her eyes. One lock opened, but her hands were shaking. Her whole body was shaking. She heard the creature behind them but wouldn't look. Two locks opened. It was close, its shriek piercing the air, the quick sounds of its dash at them thudding up behind her. The third lock unlocked and Denny yanked the door open and shoved the child inside, quickly following her and slamming the door shut. The shrieker collided with the door the moment she locked the first lock. The sound filled the small room and Denny felt as if her heart would explode. Forcing herself into action, she

locked the other two locks, her hands jelly with every pound the shrieker landed on the door.

For a moment she just stood there, watching the door, expecting it to explode open, but the door held, as it always had. Taking a deep breath and letting it out, she tried to calm her heart, but her heart wouldn't listen. This was too much. Denny's mouth opened to let a sob escape when the sound came from behind her instead. The child, who had been so quiet, was now on the verge of tears. Denny had to hold it together. If not for herself, then for the girl.

Now with a purpose, she told the girl what they needed to do to get into the cellar and keep it clean. The girl had a hard time listening at first, flinching every time the creature collided with the outside door, and Denny had a hard time keeping her voice steady, but eventually the girl understood, taking off her backpack. As quickly as the two girls could, they stripped down to their undershirts and underwear, the little girl's movements slow but determined and Denny's quick but imprecise. Once Denny brushed both of them off, she opened the door to the cellar as calmly as she could and locked it behind her, leaving everything but the shotgun in the salt.

Feeling her way through the darkness, she found one of the solar lights on a window sill, then made her way back to the child. She led it to the bathroom, the safest place in the cellar, and turned the light on when they were both inside with the door closed. If the shrieker didn't see them, it would get bored eventually and run off. They just had to wait it out.

The banging was almost rhythmic as the shrieker rushed the door over and over.

The tempo slow and just sporadic enough to unnerve. Whenever a thud didn't come when Denny expected it, she would listen expectantly, hoping the shrieker had run off, but then another bang would come and she would slump back down into the bathtub.

Despite the tension she had felt as they fled, now that they were in the relative safety of the bathroom, Denny felt tired, sleepy. The child had already dosed, leaning on Denny, both of them wrapped in a towels to keep warm. It was as she almost fell asleep herself that she heard it. A shriek, this time from farther away, and the banging abruptly stopped. It was another shrieker. One that was newer, its cry more full, less inhuman. Denny looked over to the child who was now awake and looking back at her in the dim light. Perhaps they were thinking the same thing, but neither spoke, both listening, their bodies frozen.

The silence that followed was more unsettling than the pounding. She knew it wasn't over. Shriekers tended to be very territorial, especially in their advanced states. They could team up, or they could battle each other. One could be run off, or the other shrieker could never arrive. Denny strained to hear what was going on outside. The silence closed in on her. Nobody moved, not even the child. Then there was another shriek from the recently turned monster, the one coming towards their house from the sound of it, and the shrieker outside Denny's home responded with what sounded like an angry wail. Then it was off, shrieking as it ran towards what Denny could only assume was the new shrieker.

Part of Denny was curious, wanting to leave the bathroom and look out the window, but another larger part of her wanted to stay in the bathroom forever. This situation was more dangerous than the shrieker banging at the door. When it was focused

on an object that it could never get through it was unnerving but relatively benign. But engaging with another shrieker, potentially battling, it could destroy something important, something Denny needed to live, and she could do nothing. Going out, trying to scare them off would be suicide. If she watched from the window, it wouldn't change anything and could possibly spur her into doing something reckless.

Bangs and crashes could be heard from outside the house, moving around as the two clashed. Denny pictured them as they continued to move, trying to place where they were, the noises intermittent and faint. She wanted to hear the sounds getting smaller as they moved away. She willed the creatures to move on, towards the field, towards the Town or the City.

Her already tense body seized up when she placed their skirmish near the greenhouse. Her ears started to ring, and she strained even harder to hear something, anything, from anywhere else but where they were. When the silence continued, Denny let herself hope that it was over, just a little.

That hope was immediately crushed as a large crash broke through the ringing, sending everything into sharp focus. Denny untangled herself from the child, rushing out of the bathroom and to the windows. Stepping up on the couch, she brushed the curtains away from the window needing to see the greenhouse, needing to see that it was okay. It was still standing but it was damaged, a large hole created on the side where the two shriekers crashed through it. She could still see them, faintly, through the gaping maw of the fake barn as they tangled with each other.

There was another large bang and Denny stopped thinking, her body acting on its own. Before she registered what she was doing, she was at the door, unlocking it

frantically. She couldn't let them destroy the greenhouse, she had to get out. Her hands fumbled with the locks as she tried to unlock them faster than was possible. Through one door, then onto the other one, her hands moved jerkily, as if the task she had done so many times was suddenly foreign to her. When the last lock came undone, she heard the crash, the collapse, glass shattering. She stopped, once again frozen. Numb.

The greenhouse was gone.

Denny locked the door again, her hands sluggish, but accurate. All three locks, then the other door. She walked over to the window again and looked out to make sure her life was over. The greenhouse had collapsed, the only positive being that it had crushed at least one of the shriekers in the process, she could see the feet sticking out of the rubble. It wouldn't be dead, but it would be immobile and no matter how strong it was, it couldn't lift an entire building off itself.

Denny closed the curtains then went back into the bathroom where the child sat, huddled in a puddle of pee. Denny helped the child out of her soiled clothes, wiping her off with a towel and putting fresh clothes on her before cleaning up the puddle as best as she could. She then put the soiled fabric in the hamper outside the bathroom and shut the door. Turning off the light, she sat down in the bathtub where the child crawled into her lap.

In the darkness, Denny inhaled the smell of earth and sweat and urine, completely finished.

Denny didn't realize she fell asleep until she woke up, the child sleeping soundly

on top of her. The instant trust the child felt towards her, the way she clutched Denny's clothes, fearful even in sleep that Denny would leave her alone, attempted to endear her to Denny but Denny resisted. She tried not to blame the child for what happened last night. It was done. The greenhouse was gone, and Denny needed to take care of what remained.

Leaving the little girl behind in the bathtub, Denny grabbed the shotgun from where it was propped up by the bathroom door and left the cellar. She didn't have the energy or will to deal with her own, so she laced up Uncle Jeremy's tight to keep them on and shut the door behind her. She didn't lock it. Everything, all the measures she had taken for over a year, seemed pointless.

Feet heavy, she walked over to the wreck of the greenhouse. Half of it still stood, the other half caved in on itself, the glass ceiling completely ruined. Denny clenched her jaw, and tried to keep the anger from her muscles. She wanted to dig the shrieker out, to shoot it, to tear it apart, but it was safer for her to leave it under the rubble. She could burn it later, but she would have to burn it along with the greenhouse if she did and there was always the risk that the fire would become uncontrollable and burn down everything else. She wasn't sure what to do, even though she felt she had to do something. It wasn't dead. In the shadow of the remains of the greenhouse, where it could not feel the sun's rays, its feet were still moving, its body struggling to get free. There was no sign of the other one.

She wanted to cry. She could feel the tears coming, closing her throat, stinging her eyes, but crying would be useless. Instead she screamed. She screamed her throat raw, throwing the shot gun down, not caring if it went off. When she came back to herself, she

saw the child standing in the doorway of the basement. Picking up the gun once again, Denny walked over to the little girl and took her by the hand, leading her back inside.

Sitting on the couch in the basement, Denny opened up the tupperware container that held the last of her uncontaminated food from the day before. She gave a few vegetables to the child and had a few for herself, both girls drinking some of the water Denny bottled. Neither spoke, but that wasn't strange as the child didn't speak and Denny had nothing to say. There was nothing to say.

When they were finished eating, Denny dressed and went out to the greenhouse to assess the damage again, leaving the child in the basement to do as she pleased. The ceiling was completely ruined, broken glass sticking out of the ground and scattered all over the floor. Denny was grateful for her rubber boots, but was still careful not to step in any. Many of the plants were knocked over or covered in glass and debris, the remains of the edible food scattered here and there. There wasn't enough left to last a month.

Taking the blacklight from the wall, and a basket, Denny started the task of going over the remains of the plants, taking the food that wasn't infected. The whole time, she felt the presence of the shrieker under the rubble. She wanted to destroy it, to start the fire, to do something, but Denny needed to get to the untouched food before the green did.

All the days of work came back to her as she ran the blacklight over plant after plant, marveling at how quickly the green had spread and how far. There were a few untouched plants, with fruit and vegetables that could still be eaten, but not many. It was a start, though, and left her in a better place than she had originally thought.

Once finished, Denny took the food back into the basement and placed it in the sink, washing it off with clean water, to be sure that there would be no infection. The child sat on the couch, looking through picture books. Denny couldn't be sure if she could read or just liked the pictures, but she looked at each page intently, and Denny got the feeling that she knew what the stories were about. When the food was washed, Denny put them into airtight containers, hoping that they could keep them fresh. If she rationed them right, it might keep her and the child alive for almost a month.

After securing their food, Denny went about securing her home. She washed their clothes from the day before and washed the child, using the basin Aunt Emily used to use for her. She cleaned herself, cleaned the entryway and resalted it, resalted around the house, and went over the entire basement with the blacklight. During most of the process the child simply watched her, but not as if she was confused, as if she understood, and she even tried to help on a few occasions, salting and pulling out plants.

When Denny was satisfied that the house was as secure as it could be, she walked with the child back to her bike to retrieve it. The child trailed after her, clutching her stuffed dog, trying to keep up with the older girl's pace but having difficulty. Denny had told her to stay, but the girl insisted on following, and Denny tried not to be irritated with the child's persistence.

That night she let the child sleep in her bed and she slept on the couch. As she lay on it, she remembered how she used to sleep on the couch while Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily talked or read or worked on small tasks. It was nice, the feeling of family, of not being alone, and some of that came back to her.

It was as she was falling asleep that she realized she hadn't checked the Highway all day.

The child's name was Jojo. While dealing with the girl's belongings, Denny found a name written on one of the shirt's tags. Two upper case Js with two lower case Os. Denny couldn't be sure it was the child's name or if it was the name of someone else who had owned the shirt. She couldn't be sure it was a nickname, or whatever, but Denny started calling the child by it, and the child seemed to know she was being talked to, so it became what the child was called.

Jojo was a good companion. She helped whenever she could, and didn't seem to want to eat much, making the projections for their food usage even longer. As Denny went around her home, trying to salvage what she could, Jojo followed her every step, a constant companion. The two spent the first two days trying to figure out a way to fix the greenhouse, trying to figure out what to do with the shrieker. She thought that if she repaired some of the walls to protect the garden from the Highway, she'd be able to plant some crops that might grow enough in the month that they had food for, but then what about the shrieker. Vines had already started creeping out from under the rubble, reaching out as far as they could, trying to find something, anything to feed on. The salt kept the vines from getting too far, but it wouldn't hold off the vines forever. Denny had to do something. Sitting around and waiting for death to come would be agony. She had to try.

So she gathered wood, she stood on a ladder trying to make a successful wall, she salted the earth, and used the last of her good dirt to start potting new plants, but there wasn't enough. There wasn't nearly enough. Halfway through her work, she realized this,

but kept working anyways unsure of what else to do.

Later that night she found the picture of the girl and her family again and thought of the Pasture. Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Emily didn't believe it existed anymore, sure that it was overrun, or fell apart from the inside, or destroyed in some other large scale event. Still, it was something. It gave Denny an option. Something to think about, to work towards, even if it was pointless.

She didn't want to leave. That surge of hope that she felt when realizing that there could in fact be safe places had quickly been crushed by reality. The basement was the only home she knew, but she knew that staying would mean death by starvation. Leaving meant death by starvation or bandits or shriekers. There was no right answer, no clear way to know what to do, but there was a promise.

Three days later they left. Denny cleaned Aunt Emily and Uncle Jeremy's graves, set the basement in order, then left. She was going to lock the basement, but then hoped that perhaps some other family would find the safe haven and make it their home. It felt too lonely leaving the home to nothing, so she left it to the idea of something. She then lead Jojo by the hand to their bikes, making sure their packs were secure, making sure the guns were loaded but that their safetys were on, then making sure the bikes were oiled and the tires were the right fullness.

Then they left and Denny wouldn't let herself look back.

## THE HIGHWAY

There were three cars in the motel parking lot, each stripped of anything that could be useful. Denny and Jojo rummaged through what remained, their backpacks jingling, their small hands searching through glove compartments and side pouches. In a minivan, Denny found a few picture books under one of the seats. Glancing over at her silent traveling companion, Denny took the backpack off her own back and made room for the books inside. They had taken a few books on their trip, but Jojo had looked through the ones they packed and had lost interest in them. Some new ones might help take her mind off other things. Closing her bag again, Denny walked over to Jojo who was reaching her hand under the seat of the next car over. The little girl shook her head at Denny's unasked question.

Taking out her handgun, Denny undid the safety and headed over to the main office of the motel. She motioned for Jojo to stay by the wall outside the door and the girl nodded and did as she was told, clutching her ratty stuffed dog to her chest.

The setting sun cast an orange glow on the office through the large front windows, but it wasn't strong enough to reach into the shadows. Holding the gun out towards

whatever might be waiting in the shade, Denny used her other hand to take the flashlight from her belt, turning it on and wielding it as if a weapon itself. Thus armed, she entered the room, casting the light into the dark corners, first behind the counter, then into the backroom, expecting something to be waiting for her, but there was nothing.

Denny's body deflated like a balloon. She put the safety back on her gun and stuck it into her belt, then used the flashlight to look around again, this time for supplies. She wasn't expecting much, but she had to try. They were running out of food, and their batteries wouldn't last forever. Under a chair in the back office she found a stick of beef jerky. Looking at it, Denny's stomach grumbled. She knew she shouldn't take it, but her hand grabbed it and put it into the front pocket of her backpack. She then took a random key off its hook and left the office.

There was no one inside the motel room they picked. Denny was sure there would be something lurking in the room, but again there was nothing. Shutting the door behind her, she and Jojo went to work, starting the process they perfected after weeks on the road. Denny locked the door as Jojo began taking the cheap over-covers off of the beds. Denny then went over to the dresser closest to the doorway and began the long process of moving it to block the door. Once finished, she took the blankets from Jojo and, using a chair to stand on, fastened them over the windows with the clothes pins from Jojo's bag. Sunlight snuck in around the edges, enough for both girls to find their packs and unlatch their lanterns. Denny set hers down on the night stand and turned it on, letting the lantern brighten the room just enough. The sun had been bright that day, they'd have more than enough light for the night.

When they finished their preparations, both girls sat down on one of the beds and Denny pulled out the last of the tupperware containers that had food. She gave a little of what was inside to Jojo and ate a little herself. They drank the water she had boiled the day before, and Denny made sure that they both left enough for their ride tomorrow, until they came across water again. When they finished, they were still hungry. To keep Jojo from grumbling, she gave her the picture books. Jojo fell asleep clutching them.

The next day they found a river. Denny made a fire and set up a pot over it to boil water as Jojo looked through the new picture books. While waiting for the water to cool before putting it into the water bottles, Denny surveyed the surrounding foliage to see if anything was edible. She wasn't expecting much. Everything on their walk seemed to be saturated with green, glowing pink under the light. Every day, every time she checked, the little piece of her that hoped that they'd survive the walk got smaller and smaller.

When the water cooled, Denny filled the first of their water bottles, then started a second batch, then a third which they drank their fill from. It was time consuming but necessary. When they were finished, Denny packed everything up again and tried to coax Jojo out of the shade of the tree where she was napping. The child was reluctant, no doubt as tired of the traveling as she was, but they couldn't stay, it would be dark soon and they needed to find somewhere to spend the night.

"Come on," Denny said, as she often would, "It's only a bit farther."

The two girls started down the Highway once again.

That evening they found a farm house sitting in the middle of a field, vines

creeping through its windows and a small tree taking root in a hole in its side. It didn't look safe, but it was shelter. The only shelter they had seen within the last few miles. The problem was the shrieker standing in the middle of the field, watching the sun as it started to set. They would have to pass it to get to the house, not having enough time to approach from another angle, but they could do it if they gave the creature a wide birth and stayed quiet.

Leaving their bikes in some brush on the side of the road, the two girls paused outside of the vegetation, Denny making an effort to steady her breathing and Jojo staring at the plants that came up to her chin, clutching Denny's fingers. Smiling, Denny took the little girl's hand in hers and squeezed. "Stay behind me," her voice sounded strangled and raspy. "Step only where I step."

Jojo held onto Denny's hand for a moment longer, her eyes focused on the field ahead of them, then looked back up at her. Denny tried to look brave and confident, two things she hadn't felt in a long time, but she must have managed because the small girl slipped her hand out of Denny's fingers and stepped behind her, grabbing onto the taller girl's waste. With her hands now free, Denny took the gun out from her belt and undid the safety.

Clenching her jaw, she waded into the sea of wild plants, keeping her feet low to the ground and pushing forwards tentatively to make as little noise as possible. It was a slow process, but she had to be careful and she felt if she moved faster, she'd become careless. Even as the light from the sun meeting the horizon became orange, then red, Denny maintained her pace, her eyes set on the farmhouse. She wanted to run, but she knew that would mean death. She wanted to continue down the Highway to find

somewhere else, but at night that would mean death. The only chance for living was this house and the hope that the shrieker would move on during the night.

Step by step they passed the shrieker, twenty feet away but close enough to feel the menace radiating from it. It was frozen, still in its daytime trance, unaware of the meat walking passed it, but even so, Denny could feel the danger as if it was tangible. She tried to think of something else, anything else, but as they moved forward she remembered the flight from the shrieker just weeks before, remembered the fear and the panic. Jojo must have been remembering the same because her grip became painful, but it gave Denny strength and they continued on.

They were almost through the plants when the sun seemed to set all at once, stopping Denny in her tracks, Jojo following suit. In the silence that followed, Denny listened for the signs of any movement coming from the shrieker. If it sounded as if it was making its way towards them, they'd run, but it would be foolish to flee if the shrieker was going to leave. The silence continued. Perhaps it wasn't waking up, perhaps it wasn't a shrieker after all, but a husk used as a scarecrow. She had heard of such things before, but the nature of this shrieker made that unlikely. Still, she hadn't gotten a good look at it, it could-

There was a cracking noise from the center of the field as the shrieker began to move. Then another, and another. Denny quietly turned, unable to just listen, knowing the sounds would drive her into a frenzy of fear. Seeing wasn't much better, the sight of the shrieker orienting itself, tentatively moving its limbs was enough to set her body trembling, causing the gun to rattle in her hand. She quickly used her other hand to steady it, but it was too late. The shrieker had heard it. Both girls broke into a run, rushing

through the remaining field, but Jojo was small and it was harder for her. From behind them, the creature let out a horrible shriek, its voice cracked and raspy.

Blind panic took over and Denny grabbed Jojo's hand, dragging her along as she stumbled through the plants, desperately trying to reach the edge. Behind her she could hear the shrieker cutting through the field as if the plants were nothing. She tried to run faster, tried to muster any energy she could, but her body was done, not even adrenaline could make her move fast enough.

Once they reached the edge of the field, she stumbled and Jojo crashed into her causing them both to fall to the ground, the gun flying from Denny's hand. There was no time to get back up and resume the run. Denny rolled over to cover Jojo, backpack to backpack, and held as still as she could.

The shrieker stopped just feet from them, the vine muscles of its dried body flexing underneath a tight leathery stretch of skin. Its head whipped from one direction to another, its movements quick and precise, trying to find them. They were out in the open, but it couldn't see them. Its eyes dried out like the rest of it and useless, vines creeping out the edge of the sockets.

Slowing her breathing, Denny watched as the shrieker took a step in their direction, then another, letting out low shriek, trying to scare them into moving. Denny tensed her muscles, refusing to budge, to move, to make a sound, but it became increasingly hard as she saw its nails. They were long, inhumanly sharp, and bloody. Jojo whimpered from beneath Denny, the sound muffled against the ground, but it was enough. The creature's head snapped towards them.

Denny closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. She wouldn't make a noise. As long

as she didn't make a noise, it would go away.

It would go away.

Another shriek, this time right next to the two girls. Denny held her breath and felt Jojo tense underneath her. They were going to die if she didn't do anything. Her gun was out of reach, the shotgun was wedged between her and the pack. The only thing she had was the army knife stuck in its sheath in her boot. Opening her eyes a slant, she looked to see the dried and shriveled face of the shrieker just feet away, it was waiting for a noise, for a whimper, for the sounds of running to attack. Denny moved silently, reaching for her knife, bending her body so that she could, pressing Jojo down into the ground for a moment causing the girl to whimper again.

The shrieker moved quickly towards the girls just as Denny pulled the knife out of its sheath. She lunged at the shrieker, just as it lunged for her, stabbing the knife into its head as hard as she could. It went through the dried useless eye socket easily, but it was more difficult to get through the hard mass that surrounded the brain. She had stabbed it with all her might but it only went halfway through. It was enough to get the shrieker to jump back, surprised at the attack, nothing else, but it gave her an opportunity.

Determined not to lose the opening, Denny leapt for her gun. Behind her the shrieker bellowed, grabbing the knife and pulling it out just as Denny turned and fired, hitting it in its chest, then its shoulder. She tried desperately to aim for its head, the only place that might daze it for the moment she needed but couldn't focus. Throwing her handgun to the side, she pulled out the shotgun and fired. The shotgun didn't require accuracy and it sent the shrieker flying backwards. Denny was ready this time so she stood her ground, feeling a surge of triumph as the creature landed with a thud, twitching

as its body tried to recalibrate itself.

Steadying herself, Denny approached the twitching body of the shrieker, surprised at how old it looked. She had never seen one as dried out yet solid up close before. The only shriekers she had killed were Uncle Jeremy and the woman she could only assume was Jojo's mother, and both of them had been relatively new with some bodily fluids left. She had kept her distance from the shrieker that had chased them on the night she found Jojo, but even that one didn't seem as ancient. This shrieker didn't leak anything, completely dried out, plants winding through its body, wrapped around its bones.

Denny shot the shrieker again, then went over to Jojo and helped her up. It took a few moments to get the small girl to calm down enough for them to move into the house's cellar, but when they did the girl seemed to feel safe enough to stop shaking. Denny knew better than to calm down. There was no guarantee that the shrieker would forget them and move on, but finishing it off was out of the question. A big fire would only draw attention of whatever else was out there as would the shrieks the creature made as it burned.

They didn't sleep that night, huddled together behind their makeshift barricade of old furniture. When they left the next morning, the shrieker was gone, but their bikes had been destroyed.

The next day, around noon, they came across a broken down and faded sign that read "Organically Grown Crops". It pointed down what once had been a dirt road but now looked just like everywhere else, overgrown with vegetation. Denny knew the odds of the crops still being there, and still being safe, were slim, but they were dangerously low on food, and practically starving because Denny wouldn't let them eat more than a

little every day. They had to take the chance.

Signaling Jojo to follow her, the two began their detour, making their way on foot as well as they could. After a half an hour they came across the small farm, its crops decimated, people having taken everything they could over the years. Her disappointment left her in a sigh. Accepting defeat, she was about to turn and leave when she noticed a man standing in the middle of the one of the fields. His back was toward her, his body unmoving. At first she thought he was a shrieker, but he wasn't looking at the sun. He was just standing there.

It must have been a scarecrow. Uncle Jeremy told her that during the Chaos there were increasingly disturbing scarecrows meant to deter people from raiding crops instead of crows. Some were the husks of people devoured by the green to warn against infected food. Others were the mummified remains of humans, left as a warning to anyone who would dare steal crops. Obviously this one didn't work. Or perhaps it had. At his feet was a small patch of plants.

The part of her that wasn't ravenous told her to leave. There was a chance it wasn't a scarecrow, and last night's ordeal was fresh in her memories, but the larger part of her was starving and had to know if the food before her was safe or not.

Motioning for Jojo to stay on the road, Denny left and took the blacklight from her pack, making her way towards the small area of vegetation. Using the light in slow bursts to save the battery, she was happy to see that the grass and the various plants didn't glow pink. The closer she got to the crops, the creepier the scarecrow got, and Denny could have sworn she saw it sway when there wasn't any wind. When she was only twenty feet away from the crops, she noticed how new the scarecrow looked. Its hair was

straw-like and its red shirt and jeans were tattered, but for a dead body that had been out in the sun, it seemed rather well preserved. She looked down to its hands and dropped the blacklight. The scarecrow turned, revealing its leathery face and its bright blue eyes.

Denny grabbed her gun from her belt and pulled it out, aiming it directly at the shrieker, but in the panic of the moment she forgot to turn off the safety. The moment she pulled the trigger and nothing happened, she felt her death. She prayed that Jojo would be smart, that she wouldn't panic, that she would flee, and the shrieker would be so focused on her that he wouldn't follow the younger girl. Perhaps the girl could find her way to the Pasture alone.

Nobody moved. Not even the shrieker. Then Denny noticed that its face, while leathery, wasn't dried out. Its eyes were confused, its head tilted to one side. It didn't rush her, it didn't make an unearthly shriek, it just looked at her. Eventually, it raised one dried out hand and tried to make out a word, but Denny couldn't tell what it was. Whatever he was, he wasn't a shrieker, not yet, but for how long, she didn't know.

She turned the safety off the gun and aimed again at the creature's head. She'd shoot him and he would die. His body might be resurrected once the green was done with him, but he wouldn't have to experience it. It would be a mercy. She couldn't destroy his body with fire, but she could at least do this for him. This time, she could do it.

She remembered her Uncle Jeremy, how the vines wriggled underneath his skin, how she could practically see the green eating away at him. Then she remembered her Aunt Emily, and how she slowly wasted away as the green picked her apart, taking her away from Denny, piece by piece. Denny looked at the man's hands, at his face, trying to see any movement beneath it, but there was nothing. She then looked to his eyes, his

bright blue eyes, and saw a human.

Denny tried to tell herself that he wasn't a person, not anymore, but still she couldn't pull the trigger. Frustrated, she put the gun, safety on, in the back of her pants. She would handle her business and move on. This man wasn't her responsibility.

Picking up her blacklight, she looked back to where Jojo stood on the street, frozen, her hands clasped over her mouth. Denny nodded to reassure her, then, ignoring the Scarecrow Man, began flashing the blacklight over the crops. After a few flashes, then a long burst to verify, she saw that they were clean. They were actually clean. A smile, an honest smile, lit up her face and when she looked at the Scarecrow Man again, he smiled back at her.

Denny found that she couldn't feel threatened by him. He was still a few days from complete transformation, if Aunt Emily was anything to go by, as long as he didn't eat more green. Still, the vegetation in the area he was in was safe, which could have been the reason he hasn't changed yet. Perhaps giving the green something else to feed off of slowed down the process. She couldn't be sure. Aunt Emily had stopped eating all together after she got infected.

Turning back to Jojo, Denny waved her over. The little girl didn't move at first but eventually began to stumble her way towards Denny and the strange man. Once she arrived she took Denny's hand and looked warily over at the partially withered companion, no doubt disturbed by his appearance. The Scarecrow Man bent down to some of the vegetables growing, plucked a few and offered them to the girls eagerly. Seeing as they were safe, Denny took them and handed a few to Jojo who immediately started to eat. Denny was more cautious, but found that once she started eating she

couldn't contain herself. The two girls ate their fill, Denny full for the first time in her life.

When they finished, Denny pulled out their water bottles and they drank. The Scarecrow Man eagerly watched the two, and made some motions as if asking for some for himself. Denny was reluctant, but Jojo was not, handing her water bottle over. Denny wanted to stop her, but wasn't fast enough and the Scarecrow Man drank his fill, nearly depleting the water bottle. Denny would have to boil water again soon.

Frustrated, she took out the empty tupperware containers, and started to fill them with the food from the area, checking every now and again to make sure that the area she was pulling from wasn't contaminated. Jojo and the Scarecrow Man both tried to help, picking and handing food to her, but Denny told them to sit down and wait. The Scarecrow Man didn't fully understand so Jojo had to take him by the hand and lead him over to an area to sit. Denny marveled at the little girls lack of fear. Just minutes before Denny could barely get the girl to come over towards him, now she willingly stayed by his side.

When Denny was finished, she put everything back into their packs and signaled for Jojo to follow. She planned to leave the Scarecrow Man behind. He was a potential danger, despite the fact that the odds of him turning soon were low, and would only take up food and water. Jojo seemed reluctant to leave him, and only fully came to Denny's side after she gestured angrily for the girl to do so. As they started on their way, the Scarecrow Man started to follow them, at a distance at first, then slowly catching up to them. Denny stopped, looked back, and gestured for him to go away. He cocked his head to the side, trying to understand. When Denny turned and started walking again, the

Scarecrow Man started to follow once again.

Denny tried everything she could think of. Yelling, throwing rocks, nothing stopped the Scarecrow Man from following them and Jojo eventually started to drag her feet, apparently on the Scarecrow Man's side. She must not have understood that it was pointless. The Scarecrow Man had a limited amount of time left on the planet, and the only thing he would do for them was eat their food and drink their water. Frustrated Denny stopped and dropped her pack to the ground, picking up the shotgun that fell with it, and pointing it at the Scarecrow Man, who simply looked at her. Jojo cried out and grabbed Denny's waist, making a plaintive noise, the first noise Denny had heard the child willfully make. She looked down at the girl, then back at the Scarecrow Man as he moved toward them. Slowly, unsure, he bent down and picked up the pack, wanting to help.

Denny's resolve cracked, if just a little, and she lowered the gun. Jojo sensed what this meant and smiled, but all Denny could think of was the face Jojo would make when this man died before their eyes. Still, she knew when she was beat, and walked over to the taller man, having him bend over so she could put her back on his back, strapping it on securely. If he was going to tag along, he might as well be useful. She then took Jojo's pack and put it on, the small pack lighter and less of a burden, leaving Jojo free of anything to carry.

"Come on," she said as she looked back at her two charges. "Let's go."

That evening, while the three walked, looking for shelter for the night, Denny pulled out a flashlight from her belt and flicked it on. The light fluttered and died. Halting

the three of them, Denny took off Jojo's pack and began to rummage through it, looking for batteries. She found them, but she found something else as well. The wrapper to the piece of beef jerky she had found at the motel. It was opened by hands, hands that knew what they were doing, and every last piece of it was eaten.

Crumpling up the wrapper in her hand, she stomped over to Jojo and thrust it in her face, hand shaking. "Did you eat this?" she demanded, knowing the answer but asking anyways, wanting to hear or at least see Jojo admit to it. Jojo looked at the wrapper, then at Denny, her expression unreadable. "Did you eat this?" the question was more forceful the second time. Didn't Jojo understand? Didn't she know that practically all the food from Before was bad? Once you were infected, there was no going back. All because of one moment of weakness. But deeper than her anger over this was her anger that Jojo ate it when Denny had wanted to. She hadn't realized how much and that scared her.

The Scarecrow Man came over to the two, his face worried. Denny shoved him away but Jojo protested. Frustrated, Denny pulled Jojo over and checked her body for a sign, any sign that she was changing, drying out. Nothing. Not so much as a dry patch. Denny shoved her away then walked to the edge of the road, ignoring the sounds of Jojo crying and the Scarecrow Man trying to make comforting noises with his dry and cracked voice.

Jojo had to have eaten it. No one else could have. Alarmed, she checked her own body to see if perhaps she had and didn't remember. Nothing. Perhaps it hadn't been contaminated. Or the level of green was too small, or had faded away over the years. She didn't know, she had no way of knowing, and she wasn't going to tempt fate by trying to

figure it out.

Looking back at the distraught Jojo, Denny felt guilty, but she wouldn't apologize. Picking up the smaller pack, she changed her flashlights batteries, then put the pack on her back, sliding the rifle once again into place.

Turning on her flashlight, she started walking down the Highway, trusting that the other two would follow. They did.

## THE COMPOUND

About two days after finding the Scarecrow Man, who they named Ray after Uncle Jeremy's old dog, the three came across a compound with salted earth and high fences. Aunt Emily had always wanted to put a fence around their property, but Uncle Jeremy said that would only tell people for sure that someone was living there, so they opted to go fenceless. As Denny approached the interlinked wire, telling the other two to stay behind, she was positive that the place was inhabited. The majority of the fenced in area was freshly salted, no plants growing where they weren't supposed to, and there were several gardens maintained safely under tents of thin gauzy material. A large house sat in one of the corners of the property, windows sealed shut with metal and steel plates fastened to the outside, enveloping the home in safety. Its roof was covered with strange reflective panels that didn't look like they were used for protection, but Denny couldn't be sure what they could be used for. Scattered across the closed in area were a few other small buildings, all reinforced and in good condition. She was about to press her hand against the fence to look in further when Ray grabbed her wrist and stopped her. His eyes looked almost lucid for a moment, before going back to their normal glazed look. It was

then that Denny heard a strange hum emanating from the fence.

She wondered if she should risk climbing into the compound and pilfering some food, or finding somewhere to stay, but decided that the sun was still high and they should keep moving. Uncle Jeremy's policy on dealing with strangers was strict, and he was a kind man. The odds that the people who owned this little haven would have a similar and more brutal rule set was all too possible. Still, as she lead the others down the Highway, she couldn't help looking back. The place looked safe, it was well stocked. It would be a great place to settle down, perhaps like she had in the basement.

As she continued forward, a wave of exhaustion poured over her, her body protesting the continuation of their trek, attempting to get her to turn back, telling her that this place looked more real than the Pasture and it had the added bonus of being only a hundred feet away, two hundred feet away, three hundred. She forced herself to move forward, forced herself to look away. They had food, they had daylight. That was enough. It had to be enough.

They made it half a mile up the road before they came across a small gas station and Denny decided they should take a break. Both Jojo and Ray looked disheartened as well as tired. She wondered if they had been as drawn to the compound as she had, but it was pointless and not their goal. They couldn't get sidetracked. To get their mind off whatever was bothering them, she gave them their rations, and went inside to look for supplies, gun drawn, safety off.

As she looked through the drawers and cabinets, trying to find anything of use, she kept an eye on Jojo and Ray. They sat side by side against a gas pump, part in

sunlight, part in shadow. When she went into the back office to continue her search, she heard Jojo cry out, more startled than alarmed, but any noise from Jojo was cause for alarm so Denny ran from the gas station, gun at the ready. What she saw stopped her in her tracks. A vehicle, the kind she had only seen in the army blockades around the City, driving towards her. Uncle Jeremy had told her the name of it, but she couldn't remember what it was exactly, only that the name reminded her of a bird, a hummingbird. It was sturdy, and large, its sides plated up just as the compound's buildings had been, but she could see into the windshield and there was a man inside.

The car stopped ten feet in front of them and the man got out. He was in his middle years, not as old as Uncle Jeremy but not young either. His face was clean-shaven but dirty with sweat, his hair was cropped close but long enough that Denny could tell it was black with some gray. His looks, from what she could tell, could be considered handsome, his face only beginning to line deeply, his eyes bright and blue. He stood there for a moment, then noticed Ray standing behind the two girls, grabbed a shotgun from the front seat and aimed it at the Scarecrow Man. Denny found herself rushing in front of him, the words, "Stop, he's not bad!" coming from her mouth before she could stop herself. She hated the words. Not only did they betray some deeper affection for the man than she thought she had, but it made her sound childish. She cleared her throat and tried to seem more grown than she was. "He hasn't turned, and he isn't going to anytime soon. Don't shoot him."

The man stopped, startled, then scanned the group again, visibly considering what he saw. Then he smiled brightly revealing impractically white teeth.

"Well, now," he said, his words strange and slow. "This wasn't what I expected to

find when I went out today. How'd you come around these parts?"

Denny wanted to trust him. Everything about the way he talked and handled himself told her that he was trustworthy. But something kept her from letting go, from relaxing. She paused for a moment, waiting to see if the man would talk again, but he was patient and waited. Eventually Denny found herself saying, if only to break the silence, "We're on our way down the Highway. We're only walking through."

"And where could you be headed?" he seemed genuinely interested. Denny didn't answer this time. He didn't need to know, why was he asking? Her expression made him laugh good naturedly. "All right, you don't have to answer. Is it just the three of you?" Denny was silent once again. "I see. Well, it'll get dark in a few hours, and I know for a fact there isn't much down the road here to stay in, so why don't you come back to my place, just for the night."

Denny didn't move as the man started back to his vehicle, but Jojo started forward impulsively though when she noticed that Denny stayed in place, she stopped, confused. Ray stood by Denny's side, apparently determined not to move unless she did.

"Come on," the man said, smiling again. "It's all right." Jojo looked at her imploringly. Ray began to shuffle in place, wanting to go, but staying beside her anyways. The prospect of a worry free night and a free meal seemed too good to pass up, or to be true. She knew the best thing to do would be to continue on, but at that moment she felt the tightness inside her, the tightness that set in after Aunt Emily passed, working its way from her chest to her throat, choking her. If only she could trust him, this man with his kind smile and fortified vehicle, she could let go. And she wanted to let go.

It took a moment for her to start walking towards his vehicle, but as she did, the

others followed. She let the man help her into the back seat, Jojo scampering up on her own, knowing what to do. Ray was helped into the front seat, though the man didn't seem all too thrilled that he was coming along, his mistrust of infected people only natural.

As the man got into the car and shut the door behind himself, he looked back to the girls and smiled, only his teeth showing clearly in the darkness of the vehicle. "My name's Jack, by the way." He then turned to the front again, not asking their names, and started driving. It was the strangest feeling, moving without walking, better than Denny ever thought it could be, and faster, too. She wished she could look out the window, feel the breeze on her face, but all there was was darkness.

Denny wasn't surprised when they pulled into the Compound. She had known the moment the car pulled up that that was where the man was from. Jack got out of the car, pressed some buttons on a panel and the gate opened up. He drove in and the gate closed behind them. Denny should have felt safe, it was the most secure establishment she had ever been inside, instead she found it hard to breathe.

They pulled up to the side of the largest building on the compound, three stories high, completely covered with metal. It looked larger up close. The man pressed a button and a large door started to open. He looked back at Denny to see her reaction before driving in, smiling to himself.

"I use solar panels," he explained. "On all the roofs. Haven't had to go without electricity for more than a few days at a time." He then stopped the car and pulled a lever then looked behind at her again. "If you think that was impressive, wait til you see what I have inside." She didn't feel excited, she felt dread, despite how much she wanted to like

him, to trust him. She wondered what had happened to her over the years, over the time walking, to be so distrustful. Aunt Emily used to tell her that there were always good people, just as there were always bad ones. Denny wanted to believe that Jack was one of the good ones. There was no foreseeable reason why he would take the three of them back to his place for protection for the night just to harm them. She forced herself to smile back, and tried to be excited.

The four of them got out of the vehicle, some more graceful than others, Denny nearly falling over. Ray was tall, so the drop wasn't far for him, though he seemed unsure how to open the door despite some signs of recognition. As if he could remember how to open the door if he tried. In the end, Jack came around and helped him. He then lead the three of them into a small room that had all types of gear, guns, boxes of supplies, all piled together. Through there he brought them into his home. And that's what it looked like, a home. A worn and faded brown couch, chairs, and a television set, nicer than the one in Aunt Emily and Uncle Jeremy's basement. She wondered if his worked. Denny felt strange walking into the house without decontaminating herself. How was he able to keep the green out if they were allowed to just walk in? The green could be in the folds of their clothes, in their hair, little pieces of plant, seeds, something.

“Why-”

"Put your things wherever you like," Jack cut Denny off gesturing around dismissively.

Denny didn't move, “Aren't you worried about the green?”

“The what?”

“Plants, anything like that, getting into your house. We could have the green all

over us.”

The man hesitated for a moment then smiled. “It's not a big deal, I can just vacuum it up later.” The words were so strange to her, his nonchalant attitude towards the green, she couldn't understand it. But then she realized it was because this place was safe. It was clean. Denny slowly began to take off all her gear, the pack, then her boots. Jack took them from her, putting them in the store room. When he came back he held his hand out, and Denny knew what he wanted. Her guns. She didn't want to give them to him.

“It's all right,” he said, his voice soft. “It's safe, you don't need those here. And, no offense, I'm worried you might accidentally shoot something and then we will have a problem.”

“I've handled these guns for over a year myself,” Denny was defensive, but she still handed him the shotgun, thinking to keep the handheld, but after he took the shotgun he put his hand out again. She stared at him, and he looked at her right in the eyes, his expression kind but serious. She noticed then how much taller he was than her, how much larger. If he wanted to harm her he could, if he wanted to take the gun from her by force, he could. He wanted her to choose to give it to him. To trust him. Fighting her distrust, she took her guns and handed them to him, feeling completely bare without them.

“I'll give these back to you before you leave,” he said, then put the guns in the other room. She followed him to see him put them into a chest with a lock, but when he noticed her watching him, he didn't lock it. Finished, he turned her around and lead her back into the house.

The house had a working kitchen, the living room where the television was, a library full of books stacked on top of each other and spilling off the shelves, and three

bedrooms. There were two bathrooms, both working, with warm water. Both Jojo and Denny were able to take baths, separately, and Denny sat in it, cleaning herself until the water was cold again. It was an amazing feeling. When the girls were done cleaning, they wanted to clean Ray, but Jack said it would be inappropriate, so he did it himself. Jack even gave Ray a hair cut, making him look more human than before, despite his dry and leathery skin. That night they ate dinner together, food that Denny never thought she'd eat. Bread and butter, noodles with spaghetti sauce. She had the compulsion to check it before she ate, but she thought it might insult her host so instead she just waited for him to eat first. When he saw that's what she was doing, he gladly started in on his meal. That was proof enough for Denny and she ate her fill.

After Dinner, they watched a movie. Denny had only ever heard about them, but watching them was completely different. The pictures moving, the people talking, worrying about trivial things, not fighting for survival. Denny had never fully realized how many people there had been in the world until there was a scene on a busy city street. Thousands of people, so close together, and not killing each other for resources. It was completely alien, and the whole idea made Denny feel small, made the world feel so much bigger than it had before. She wondered if the Pasture really existed, and for the first time she wished with all her heart that it did. She would get there, her and Jojo. Once again, her will to survive sparked alive. Perhaps Jack would go with them, him and his vehicle. She looked to him to ask, but there was a distant look on his face, as if he was looking in on himself. She would ask him tomorrow when they left.

That night Jack took Denny and Jojo to one room, and Ray to another one. It was clean, with the metal shutters open and the lights on. It was for a child, the room, with

frilly pink bed spreads and stuffed animals. Denny wanted to ask whose the room was, but the distant look was again on his face and Denny didn't need to ask. She knew. No one could go for long without losing someone, not in this world.

Jack said good night to them before going to check on Ray. Jojo jumped into bed, a huge smile on her face, and Denny walked over to the window, looking out at the area around the house, the white salt faintly glittering in the moonlight. It would be hard to leave this place and the safety it presented, but they had to, and she hoped Jojo and Ray knew this. Sure, staying would be nice, it would be easy, but it would be just like the basement. It would just be existing. She couldn't do that anymore, not after seeing the way that life could be, a world with people, living together, working together. For the first time since Aunt Emily uttered her last words she wanted to follow them. She wanted to live.

Moonlight streamed through the gaps in the wall. Denny watched the little speckles of dust float gracefully to the ground from where she lay in a bed of straw. At first she wasn't sure where she was and she didn't care, she felt as if she was floating and warm but soon her body grew cold and her mind cleared. She was in some kind of barn or shed, constructed well but with small gaps between the wood planks that made up the walls and ceiling. Outside the wall, a sea of salt spread out towards a fence, and she remembered Jack and his compound.

The world became real again with a jolt and she sat up, her brain struggling to understand what had happened. In the corner of the shed, Jojo sat crying into Ray's shirt, the faint rasp of Ray's breath only barely audible under her sobs. His eyes were closed,

and Denny worried that they were gone, that his time was nearly up. She was sure he wouldn't turn into a shrieker, but the nearing of his passing still bothered her.

Jojo's crying died down when she saw Denny was awake and the girl rushed over to her, clutching her as if she would evaporate at any moment. It was then that Denny realized how much her own foolishness was going to effect the others. It was obvious Jack wasn't who she thought he was, or rather who she hoped he was. They should have run the moment they saw his metal machine, but instead she wanted to be taken care of by an adult. She wanted to lean on him, to have him come with them. She wanted to be a child again, and despite everything she learned, despite her instincts, she lead the three of them into this, a trap. Because that's what it had to be. But why? It made no sense. He already had all their stuff and he didn't seem like a killer, but she knew that was a weak argument. A good man could hide behind a scowl just as a killer could hide behind a smile.

Carefully prying Jojo's hands off while assuring the small girl that she wasn't going anywhere, Denny stood and began to examine the shed they were locked in. It had to have been the shed on the property. It was about the right size and shape, and the view of the house lined up with it. But why have a shed? Why put them there? Why take them into his home, treat them to food, just to lock them away? None of the answers that came to her made her feel any better.

She searched for something, anything she could use as a weapon, but there was nothing to be found. She was dressed in pajamas, completely unarmed. Completely helpless. She forced herself not to cry, but could feel the tears close her throat. Just when she wanted to live, she would die. Clenching her jaw, she forbid herself to think that way.

She had to think of something, the others were depending on her. She didn't want Ray to die like this, locked away. He should die in the sunlight, happy. She didn't want Jojo to die at all.

Before she could do anything else, the door opened and a lantern blinded her. Jack stood there, holding the light, darkness behind him. He was dressed in his clothes from before, his face blank, a plate of food in his other hand. He looked the same, but he was different. There was no kindness left. He was just hollow. Both of them stood for a moment, looking at the other, then Jack took a step in the shed and closed the door behind himself with his foot. With precise deliberate motions, he put the lantern on a hook that hung on the wall then placed the plate of food in front of Denny.

Infuriated, Denny kicked the food away, scattering it across the floor, and hitting Jack with some in the process. Closing his eyes, he wiped the speckles of food off his face and stood up.

“What are you going to do with us?” Anger filtered into her voice. If she was honest, she would admit that the anger was more at herself than him, but being mad at herself wouldn't serve any purpose. She held his gaze, trying to seem as strong as she could, but Jack's expression never changed, even as he turned to leave. In desperation, Denny's hand flung out and she grabbed his arm to stop him. He stilled, but didn't turn back to her. She had to get him to stay, had to get him to talk, had to think of a way out of there.

“Look, Jack” she struggled to keep her voice steady, tried to reach passed his mental barrier, hoping something human was there to appeal to. The only thing that she could think of was the room he had let her stay in, the pajamas he had given her to wear.

He had family once. “You lost your wife and daughter, right?” It probably wasn't the best thing to say and he stiffened in reaction, but he didn't leave. She had to work on this, maybe get his sympathy. “We all lost someone. I lost my aunt and uncle. Jojo lost her people, too. Ray probably has, too. It sucks, I know-”

“You've got something twisted here, girl,” Jack's voice was flat, emotionless as he brushed her hand off and turned to look at her. “I'm glad my wife and daughter are gone.” The words that Denny wanted to say to him froze in her throat, her brain unable to comprehend what he was saying. She had built a narrative in her head, him being the grieving widower, the father in despair, but that image was shattered and anything human about the man disappeared. “This world is no place for children, or for the weak hearted. I let them go. I gave them peace. I'm going to give you that same peace.”

Denny wanted to scream that she didn't want the kind of peace he wanted to give her, but she had a hard time forming the words. It was as if something disconnected her brain from her mouth and the two refused to work together. Jack interpreted the silence as acquiescence because he started talking again, “You just have to agree and I'll take you inside again. You can watch movies, eat whatever you want, and be happy for your last days. Remember how happy you were last night?”

“Last night,” the words came out slowly, feeling strange on her tongue. Last night seemed like it was a year ago, so alien to her. She had been happy, yes, but it was a bittersweet happiness, because she knew it couldn't last. She had to move on, she had to go to the Pasture, but first she had to get out of there. She could agree with him, and perhaps he'd let his guard down. Surely she wouldn't be able to escape from here, but if she agreed, he'd expect her to eat tainted food for sure. The fact that he viewed it as a

kindness made her want to vomit.

A horrible thought occurred to her and she shot her gaze back up at Jack, who smiled a mechanical smile.

“Yes,” he answered simply. “The food had the green in it.”

“But, I saw you...”

“I inherited this house, the farm, everything from my parents. I married my high school sweetheart. We debated having a child, decided against it, but it happened anyways. And life went on, day after day, the same thing over and over and over again. We had comforts others dreamed of, others wanted. We fought and killed. And we survived. But is surviving, living? My daughter, she'd grow up, and be lonely. No one to fall in love with. No one to build a life with. Everyone so desperate, so rabid and feral. And one day I'd die. My wife would die. We might as well have a few good weeks. So I got some food from the market. Stuff full of the green, but preserved. We feasted, we loved, we were supposed to die. They did. And I was left.”

Jack pulled up the sleeves of his arms to show her the clean, healthy skin. Denny's heart became ice in her chest. She could feel her mind fracture, the horror too much for her to bare. He didn't care about eating the food, didn't care about the green, because it didn't effect him. In the silence, in the stillness, she felt the green inside her, wriggling. It was subtle, faint, but it was there. Breath flooded out of her and she forgot how to breathe it back in. Her body refused to do even the basic functions to keep her alive, the enormity of what happened to her pressing in on all sides.

“It's a lot to take in, I understand,” Jack's voice didn't sound like it understood.

“I'll give you the day to think about it. Let the hunger return in full force. You'll make the

right choice then.”

Anger filled the void that the revelation had made, and breathe came to her quickly, fixing her eyes on Jack, trying to burn him with her gaze. He smiled for a moment, an almost genuine smile, then turned to leave. Denny's muscles coiled with unspent emotion, wanting to lash out at him, but he was so much larger, so much stronger than her. She had to be smart about this. She had to escape. But then he closed the door behind himself, locked it, and Denny deflated.

What was the point? There was no changing anything now. It was over. They were all infected. They would either sit in the shed and fade away, or she could give in and they could have a happy few days. Either way, their bodies would shrivel. The only consolation was the thought that one of them would turn into a shrieker and take Jack out in the process. Denny tried not to picture what she would look like, her eyes hollowed out, her skin dried out just like that beef jerky she had picked up at the motel.

The beef jerky! Someone had eaten it, and it wasn't her, so it had to be Jojo. She had doubted it before because the girl showed no sign of changing, but she was sure of it now. When she found Jojo in the library, she was surrounded by the wrappers of things that had to have been full of the green and that meant one thing. Jojo was able to eat it, just like Jack. Jojo would live.

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