

By the time the zombie hordes chewed their way through the lobster-flavored humans of the East Coast, gnawed the brains of the cushiony corn fed Midwesterners, and snacked on the sturdy calves of panicked Mountain folk, the people of Washington State had a lot of time to prepare for the horde's arrival.

Wealthy yacht owners bought warehouses full of preserved goods and filled their stores. Zombies can't swim, after all. Seattle's elite took to the sea, or to the Puget Sound and pacific inlets, rather. Bomb shelters weren't as prominent in this state as others, but there were bomb shelters to be had in Gold Bar, Spokane, and Eastern Washington. Those individuals stocked up and hid out.

Many took to living in the frozen cold of high elevations. Zombies weren't great with inclines. Though they persistently tried to stumble up steep mountain sides after the fit outdoorsy portion of Washington's REI elite, zombie avalanches were frequent in the higher altitudes. They'd roll comically down steep mountainsides, foiled by gravity, their greatest foe.

Others took to the trees. It turned out that Washington State was lousy with treehouses: Mt. Rainier, Fall City, Seattle, Whidbey Island, and many other places hosted treehouse bed and breakfasts, treehouse resorts, treehouse suites. Local citizens organized builds to add to the existing structures, to accommodate more people.

All the zombies hordes came, full force. Food ran out on the ships, treehouses, mountains and bomb shelters. Scouts sent for supplies were often eaten or turned.

Those who made it to stores, warehouses and residences and returned didn't have much to show for it. Too many desperate people already raided the city stores. Zombies were everywhere, and they were fairly settled in the far West Coast, having nowhere left to go.

People were soon starving, left as ravenous as the zombies they feared. Some humans even fantasized eating their fleshier companions in times of weakness. Ironically enough, starvation took the lives of many of these survivors, who then woke and preyed upon the same friends they'd ashamedly dreamed of munching when alive. The horde was hungry, too, and would eventually die without sustenance, but they could starve for much longer than humans, could live long past their ability to move.

Desperation and hunger were the survivor's constant companions. Until the day the signs appeared—nailed to trees, taped to poles, held under rocks and cans of precious, scarce food. The signs all said the same thing: "Aberdeen: Come as you are. Be as you were." A sentient, non-shambling being was sending the remaining citizens of Washington a message. *Sanctuary*. There was a place where people are as they were, and that place was Aberdeen.

"Are you sure, Stiles?" Milly questioned her third husband, her voice thick with doubt.

Stiles was her second post-apocalypse marriage. She had a habit of marrying men not as sturdy as she. Life in zombie land was bound to be short, so she left very little

time for mourning after her first post-apocalypse marriage ended in a shambler's awaiting maw. She had many mottos she flung about, when people asked why she married again so quickly.

"You only get to live once," or "Don't wait when it's true love." Lately, her motto was less romantic, "There's strength in numbers." Truth was, having a husband made life seem more normal, and any semblance of normalcy was worth clinging to.

She hoped Stiles lasted the journey. She knew her voice sounded plaintive, possibly whiny when she questioned his decision to move on. Even if moving from the relative safety of their colony's treehouse to pursue a life in the most down-trodden town in Washington state was their only course of action, she didn't have to pretend to like it.

"We need a community. Here, it's only you me and the Martin family. And we're all starving." Stiles' white blonde brows furrowed in worry.

She nodded in a resigned way, but didn't voice her concern that Stiles wouldn't make it as far as Aberdeen. She hoped she was wrong. Good men were literally hard to find these days.

She took a deep breath before standing. "Okay. Well, let's go talk to the Martins, then. I imagine it will be hard to talk Martina into it, but Carl can't wait to get out of here."

Carl was a hulk-like man, who was comically afraid of everything. On top of his long list of fears was the fear of heights. Living in the treehouse colony had been harder on

him than on his family. His fear served him well in the post-apocalypse; caution kept him alive. Whether that life was worth living...

Milly and Stiles made their way across the sturdy swinging bridge to the Martin's tree home. The Martin family had been the owners of the treehouse resort before it was expanded into a treehouse village. As such, they occupied the largest, most enhanced home.

Martina was the brains of the operation. Despite her husband's objections with heights, she used their savings to construct a cedar-shingled treehouse air b&b on their large lot. People went nuts for it. She added smaller treehouse additions to the lot, and erected a centralized bathing and cooking station on the ground, around the covered pool. She made so much money from the venture she was able to quit her job as an attorney.

When the apocalypse hit, she immediately sent out an announcement: "Help us extend our treehouse resort. Build your own home and survive."

Milly rubbed her face, staring absently towards the Martin's large beehive-shaped home, decked out in cedar shingles. Living here would be a dream come true, without the persistent groaning of the horde of zombies that slugged around at the foot of the trees. Milly refused to look at them. Some of the zombies were sure to wear the faces of her neighbors.

Many of them died going on secret kitchen raids. They still had food, after all. The people who attempted it were like skinny fish lured to fat worms wriggling from a hook.

They were always caught. Zombies weren't fast, but they were many, and they were growing increasingly hungry. They'd broken down the gates surrounding the kitchens and pool area on the third day. The community was trapped high above their food. Starvation took some of them. Trying not to die of starvation took the rest.

Milly tapped politely on the woven branch door to the Martin's home before announcing herself. "Martina, Carl, it's me, Milly. Can we come in?"

Suddenly, an immense weight slammed against the door, toppling Milly backwards onto the wrap-around deck. The familiar sound of guttural growls—the attack mantra of the undead—played on the other side of the open door. She heard Stiles curse, but the door blocked her view.

Did I lose another husband?

"Hey! Over here! I'm over here, you undead piece of shit," she bellowed.

Martina poked her buzzed head out of the window nearest Milly. "Milly, please watch your language! Curtis is inside, and that's my husband you're talking to." Milly was too preoccupied to argue. Martina was the sort who didn't feel like any situation deserved a curse word, so any argument would fall to deaf ears.

Instead, she sprinted the length of the wrap-around porch, almost colliding with Stiles, who was backing away from a massive, rabid Carl. He didn't yet look like a zombie. That's the thing the movies got wrong. He looked like an ashen version of Carl, the muscular giant. But where Carl would never have attacked a spider (would have, in

fact, probably run from a spider), zombie Carl had no such qualms, and was making impressive use of the size and strength human Carl left him with.

They were coming upon the rope bridge they'd just left, when Milly got an idea. "Stiles, go down the rope bridge. He's a stumbler now."

Stiles didn't need to be told twice. He was a pale flash as he skipped across the rope bridge and away from zombie Carl. Zombie Carl, however, had a short attention span and didn't seem interested in shambling after a fast moving target down a precarious bridge. Why bother when a snack-sized treat stood before him, looking decadent with her dark chocolate hair and delicious caramel skin. Pink drool dripped from Carl's gaping mouth.

"That's right, Carl, I'm a delicacy. Follow me, big guy. I taste as good as I look."

Slobber pooled under his chin as he stumbled toward Milly, swinging his slow lummoX arms towards her. She skipped backward, looking for the "last resort" escape rope tied to an adjacent limb next to the Martin's dwelling. She caught the thick white boat rope in her peripheral, and leapt over the side of the treehouse just as Carl lunged for her. She swung a wide arch away from the treehouse. Unfortunately, the rope swung toward the toppling body of zombie Carl just as he flipped over the side after her.

Damn it!

One minded, zombie Carl flung an arm out and grabbed ahold of Milly's boot. Milly felt her right arm disconnect from its shoulder socket as Carl's huge frame pulled it beyond its limits. Thankfully, her boot could not stand the weight either and fell off just

as she was sure her left arm couldn't hold their combined weight any longer. She watched as Carl tumbled to the earth, chewing on her shoe like an idiot puppy, towards a group of gawking, drooling zombies, all waiting for her to drop. He took out about five of them out as he landed with a sickening *thunk*.

Thanks for that, Carl.

Her right arm hung at her side, limply, and her left arm still shook from taking her weight. She swayed her body as much as she dared, trying to reach the side of the treehouse deck with her be-socked foot. The bottom of the rope swung frantically, but she didn't make a whole lot of progress with the section that held her. She tried to ignore the hungry growls and the eager dumb faces below her.

"Milly! Over here!" Martina swung something over her head with such speed that her dark brown arms were a blur.

"Milly, do you have the strength to stick your legs out? Both of them?" Martina's face was a stoic mask of concentration. Her arm was still spinning so fast it made Milly dizzy.

Instead of wasting energy with words, Milly grunted, gripped the rope as tightly as she could with her flagging grasp and lifted her legs up with her abdominal muscles.

Thank God for fifteen years teaching yoga, she thought, though she couldn't figure what Martina was up to.

When Milly's legs were parallel with her stomach, Martina let loose a "whoop" and released the lasso she'd been spinning. At the same time, Milly's wet grip slipped and

she felt herself fall. For the briefest of moments, she was airborne and flipping backwards, her head pointed directly at the slobbering maws of at least ten zombies, just waiting for their next meal to fall like mana from heaven.

Then, suddenly, she felt a forceful tug around her ankles. Her flight abruptly halted. The zombies just two feet below her growled in protest, mauling each other to reach her first, but she was just out of reach of their clumsy hands. She heard Martina and Stiles grunt with the effort of pulling her up. She would have complained, if she didn't have to focus on not passing out from the pain in her dislocated shoulder and burning ankles.

I'm 105 at most, wimps.

Once up, Martina asked for her good hand, which she willingly gave. Her ab muscles miraculously worked still, and she was able to help pull herself up to sitting. Stiles grabbed her around her ribcage and lifted her to safety. One quick look at her arm, however, made his pasty complexion pale even further.

"Your arm looks terrible. Did it pop the socket?"

She chose not to answer and looked to Martina, whose tall son, Curtis, stood beyond her, staring down towards the zombie horde. His face held a sad sort of disgust.

"I'm sorry, Curtis. That wasn't your dad, though. Your dad wouldn't hurt a fly."

Curtis rolled his eyes. "Not a fly, maybe, but he was dumb enough to hurt himself and put us in danger. I'm *glad* he's gone." But his voice broke at the end and weighty tears tumbled down his cheeks from eyes more sad than angry.

Martina turned to him, and Milly almost interjected. *The boy is just upset*, she was about to say. But she needn't have bothered. It turned out that Martina understood his outburst all too well. She gathered her lanky son into her arms and they sobbed together.

When they were finished, Martina's large brown eyes were bloodshot with grief. She mumbled something to her son and kissed him on the cheek. He nodded and turned back toward their home. He walked as though the air around him weighed upon his broad shoulders.

Martina wiped the moisture from her cheeks and knelt down by Milly. "Thank you for what you did. I couldn't think right. I didn't know what to do when I woke to him...like that. I slept near Curtis in his loft yesterday, after Carl and I fought. I brought up leaving, heading for Aberdeen because of the signs. Carl didn't want to, was terrified of the horde, though it's a much smaller one than it once was. I thought he'd want to go. It's been harder on him than on us, living so high up. In the end, the horde scared him more than the heights."

She paused as if the next sentence took all her energy to say. She stared at Milly's dangling arm, rather than meet her eyes. "He was a botanist before all this. Did I ever tell you that?" She didn't wait for an answer before continuing. "He'd been collecting poisonous plants this whole time, without having to leave the trees. It seems many poisonous leaves grow right here, where we made our home. I don't know how many he ate, but it must have been a lot. When I woke, I woke to a grunting corpse with Carl's

face. Around his mouth was bloody foam. Plants were scattered all over the floor, along with vomit...”

She took a ragged breath. “It’s not that I don’t understand the urge. He’s always had problems with depression, and the added anxiety didn’t help. But I can’t figure out why he did it the way he did it. I’m angry about the fact he did it, but I’m madder that he didn’t do it in another home. What was he thinking? Why did he put us through that? He could have killed us.”

Milly shrugged. She wouldn’t say what she was thinking. Martina was hurting, and she didn’t want to make it worse. Carl wasn’t thinking. The whole situation had driven him off the edge. When he poisoned himself, it was in a sick state. His personality, his brain, processed things differently than Martina’s. Martina had the type of personality that rose to the challenge, that hardened with each blow. Carl was strong, physically, but he was soft and sweet on the inside. *Maybe he didn’t want his family to have to live through it...*

Milly couldn’t say any of that. Not with pieces of Carl splattered next to the swimming pool. “You were right. We need to move on. I’m sorry about all of this. I really am. But I still want to survive. I think you do, too. Or, you will. For Curtis.”

Martina sighed. “Lay back. We’ll go after I push your arm back in place.”

After the excruciating return of her arm into her shoulder socket, the remaining survivors huddled with their few belongings and preserved goods in Milly and Stile's abode.

"I've been preparing for our inevitable departure for a few days, now," Stiles was telling the woe begotten band. "And I've managed to capture a couple live squirrels. I made a cage, I can lower it down, just out of reach of the horde. There's a latch that I think the rodents will eventually figure out, but until then it might distract the horde long enough that we can sneak down the opposite way. I've checked the perimeter around the third bathhouse and it's pretty clear. They are gathered here because that's where we, the food, are. But we all know they're just as likely to eat other mammals, especially if they're easier prey."

Milly nodded along. He'd told her this earlier. She scanned the faces of the other two, but found only resignation. It wasn't a great plan, but it was the only one they had. After a few minutes of awkward silence, Martina stood.

"Okay, then. We die if we stay. If we go, we have a chance. It's still early. Let's just go."

And go they did. To everyone's surprise, the squirrel plan went off without a hitch. The zombies stared dumbly above at one uninterested mammal busily playing with the easy release latch stick on the cage, while the other happily snacked on a nut. The undead reached and grunted and mowed over each other, trying to nab the tasty squirrels, while the bigger prize snuck away down the backside of the treehouse. No

one breathed in relief or said how easy it was to foil the monsters. Since zombies were now a reality, they'd all grown decidedly more superstitious, and didn't want to jinx themselves.

Though Stiles did smile in a smug little way, once they were a mile down the main road. Curtis mumbled about how the main road was always a problem in zombie movies—people dead in their cars, abandoned vehicles, confused zombies hanging out in hordes around places where no living person roamed. It turns out that was not the case in reality, however. Zombies had no interest in places void of food.

The small group was hoping to find cars abandoned, full of gas, along the road. That's something that happened in movies, right? Alas, no cars were to be found, no fast escape to be had.

"It makes sense. Most people stockpiled gas when they headed West. And I'd certainly stay in a fast moving vehicle, too. I suppose we could head back to Olympia and get our cars, but that sounds like a death sentence. It's probably a day or two of foot travel to Aberdeen. I say we steer clear of cities, since we know the hordes gathered there early on. Let's travel with the road in sight. Maybe we'll get lucky and find a car." Milly looked at her group, waiting for other suggestions, but none came.

Curtis looked sad but determined. He clutched a heavy black Taser at his waist—one of the remaining weapons the group had. Martina's eyes were distant, focused on a sign on the road that read "Aberdeen 50 miles."

Stiles just shrugged. Milly knew that her husband was probably pretty happy to be on firm land, walking again. He was rigid about keeping in shape, and helped her stay fit and ready to flee, too. His motto was burned in her brain, “Strong bodies matter more than strong brains. We have devolved.” It was pretty strange, actually, since he was a rather heavy-set computer programmer when they’d met, and she was a career yoga instructor. Pasts didn’t matter anymore. Only present mattered, only surviving.

After a few hours of skirting around skinny hordes of slow witted and snail-paced zombies, they made it to a little town called Elma. Elma was a commercial town, pre-zombies. Much of the commerce centered around the limber and farm trade, but there were a couple gas stations, grocery stores and shops, too. They managed to hit up a gas station on the outskirts of town, where they picked up a few meager snacks and drinks. There were about three corpses trapped in the station, but they’d been too long without sustenance.

They’d melted into decayed body pools upon the floor, but attempted to clutch Milly as she stepped past them to grab whatever was left on the shelves—strange seed crackers. There were a few cans of seltzer waters left, as well, so she grabbed them and the group continued on. They walked, out in the open, past tiny hordes for many miles. Once in a while they broke into a weak jog when the undead attempted a lame pursuit.

By night fall, they found some good climbing trees—in an apple orchard behind an old farm. They were able to climb to the top and pick some fat apples that had yet to be

claimed. They did this out of sight of the undead, so they were left to sleep on precarious branches without the sound of groans and growls accompanying them. Since they'd all grown used to the groans, the absence of them made for a night that was almost too quiet. Like growing used to traffic, the noise was now their lullaby. They slept restlessly, afraid they might fall from the limbs if they slept too soundly.

The next day, they were able to climb right down from the trees and continue on their way—easily avoiding the sluggish hordes they encountered. By that time, Stiles grew brave enough to joke about the zombie in lingerie, not far outside of Satsop.

“How'd you like to be the poor sucker who woke up to that?” Stiles pointed and everyone chuckled. The comment might be insensitive, but one became a little less touchy during the apocalypse.

By the time Stiles stopped walking and threw himself down on an empty hillside, everyone followed suit.

“Is it just me, or is this whole avoiding hordes thing a lot easier than we thought it'd be?” It was funny that the silent, brooding Curtis was the first to speak this awful realization.

Martina bit her lip, looking as though she was trying to hold back tears. She clutched the tall grass of the hillside in clenched fists. The group was discomfited by her vulnerability. The only time Milly had seen her cry was just after Carl went over the rails.

Milly's throat felt tight and dry. Her stomach clenched and she blinked slowly a few times. She felt wetness upon her cheek and started as if she'd been slapped. She

wiped the wetness away in a daze, stared at it for a moment. She looked up, confused, trying to locate the answer to what was happening inside her in Stiles' steady face. But, at that moment, his face wasn't the steady determined mask she'd grown used to. It was drawn into heavy lines, bright red and damp with tears.

Milly went to him and cried, loudly and heavily, into his sharp, riby embrace. She heard Martina and Curtis sobbing loudly, too, but did not turn to them. They'd stayed in the treehouse, in fear of the hordes, rationing, almost starving, going slowly crazy. And for what? The hordes were slow, stupid, easily distracted and wasting away. Did they ever have reason to be afraid? Were the hordes always like this? She tried to locate an answer, but she could only find pain. Not that pain was bad. The release felt...amazing, really. They'd all become so hard, all except Carl. And he'd gone out of his mind, like the other sensitive ones.

They cried for a few minutes when, abruptly, Curtis stood. His arms were tense, his eyes wide, his hand hard around the black Taser at his belt. He stared off to one side of the tall hill they occupied. "Holy shit!"

"Curtis Ryan Warren! Watch your mouth, son," Martina scowled, her cheeks flushed in anger or grief. She stood, though, and followed his gaze, authority radiating from her body. Until she saw what made Curtis curse, then the authority leaked out of her as if she were a balloon deflating.

"Holy shit," she whispered in reverence. It was the first time Milly had ever heard the woman curse. It sounded like a prayer.

She stood and turned reluctantly away from Stiles' warm embrace to meet a sight that sent her blood running cold. The largest horde of skinny, desperate zombies she'd ever seen was shambling toward their pitiful group several feet from where they were gathered.

"Why didn't we see them? Where'd they come from?" Stiles' voice was strained, but not terribly frightened.

"The trees, to the left, down the hill..." Curtis voice was whispered awe. He started backing away. "They just keep coming, too. I mean...I thought...I though the hordes were dying off."

He wasn't wrong. This horde was massive. It was like those ridiculously organized zombies from the TV shows aired pre-apocalypse. She'd always laughed at how the giant hordes snuck up on the show's unsuspecting heroes and heroines. *How can they not hear them? How can a group of hundreds of zombies just sneak up on you?* Now it was happening, to her. And it was terrifying. So it surprised even her when she started laughing hysterically, as if she were watching the horror from the comfort of her bed on her tablet.

"Uh, oh. I think it all finally broke Milly," Martina mused, backing away, too. "Come on. They're zombies, not marathon runners. If we jog for a bit, we can put some distance between us and them."

It was hard to continue the hysterical laughter and the running, and Milly *wasn't* actually broken, just worn, so she forced the hysteria down. The severity of their

situation grew as they neared Aberdeen. Zombies were on every side of them, except for ahead, which seemed strange.

The jogging did, indeed, distance them from the first horde. But other hordes had joined, and the mass of shamblers had grown so thick behind and to the sides of them that it was all any of them could do to keep out of the hungry mouths of crazed, starved zombies.

So it was that the small group, limp-jogging after the tenth mile of their run, were doggedly pursued by a deafening horde of rotting people eaters. Their hunger made them shuffle faster, but the size of the horde made it difficult for them to get very far without tripping upon one another, growling in frustration all the while. In this fashion, the bone-tired survivors dragged themselves the last mile to Aberdeen, all four of them intact but barely able to trot.

When the telltale sign came into view—Aberdeen: Come as You Are—Milly felt like breaking down into another bout of hysteria. She might have, if she had breath left for laughter. The eleven-mile jog took everything from her though, except a nagging sense of irony.

“Come as you are.” And they did. They ran past the white and green sign exactly as they were: dirty, ragged, wheezing, sweat dried up miles ago. Curtis shot his Taser at the zombies in their path pacing, strangely, just outside the city limits of Aberdeen. Martina swung a heavy bat at others. Aberdeen was eerily devoid of zombies, so,

hearts too tired to ask questions, the group heaved themselves into the cracked streets of their new haven.

Unfortunately, it was hard to tell the zombies apart from the people from the vantage point of the posted sentry, which is probably why the man hunkered behind the giant welcome sign shot Milly in the shoulder.

The shot was drowned out by the hungry growls of the horde. But it needed no accompanying noise to feel like a burning dagger fresh off the blacksmith's coals. No other shots followed Milly's agonized wail. She fell to the ground, almost too dead tired to hurt. Almost. She clutched her shoulder with a shaking hand, biting her lip to stave off the howl that bubbled up inside her. The zombies would come for her without the aid of her screams. Stiles kneeled down beside her, removing his t-shirt and pressing it to her wound. The pressure felt like hot water running over a new burn.

"Stop! Run, Stiles! The horde's not far behind, and someone is shooting at us. You have to keep going!"

Milly pushed at her husband weakly, but he ignored her and doggedly wrapped her arm tightly with his dirty t-shirt. She kept trying to push him, but her attempts fell lightly upon his frame. She looked past him, her heart beating frantically, and noticed that a man with a rifle held at his side ran toward them. But what she didn't see running toward them was even more astonishing. The massive horde that had doggedly pursued them for miles was lingering just outside the sign welcoming them to Aberdeen. They walked along the road, staring at the meal that was so easily laid out before them, but they

made no move to approach. A few brave ones swiped the air past the sign, only to pull their grubby hands back as if they'd been slapped.

Milly blinked her eyes. Her vision was blurry from blood loss, but her eyes weren't playing tricks on her. The hoard was still howling, but their howls weren't hungry. They sounded desperate, frightened, and heart-broken. Milly would have felt bad for them, if they hadn't been trying to eat her for the last several miles. They were distraught. It was amazing. She'd never before seen a zombie acting in any way other than ravenously hungry.

Her arm throbbed painfully, but she could tell the tight knot Stiles fashioned from his shirt had slowed the blood. The man with the rifle jogged into view, but his rifle was pushed back over his shoulder, and his face was distraught.

"Oh, man! I'm so sorry, lady. You guys were really limping, barely moving faster than the dead ones, and you...well, sorry, but you look pretty ragged. I was sure our luck had run out when I saw that massive horde coming. You all looked like zombie ring leaders or something. I'm really sorry. Let's get you up and over to medical."

The man with the rifle was younger than her, just past his teenage years. Twenty at most. He had long brownish-blond hair that fell over stormy eyes. His mouth was a thin line of worry over a stubborn, cleft chin. Milly's heart skipped a beat over the deep introspection of his intense gaze, like a swooning eighteen-year-old. But that made her feel like a dirty old woman, so she looked away from the dreamy, slouching youth.

Milly examined Stiles' dirt covered face and worn clothes. Not a patch of his pallid skin shone through the road dust that caked it. His eyes were knitted in worry, but he smiled weakly at her. She looked past Stiles and noticed Curtis and Martina scanning the depressed line of zombies outside the city limit. The Martins limped as they walked the length of the invisible border between the undead and themselves.

While from this close it was clear to her that they were human, she could see how their ashen skin, dry cracked lips, dirty clothing and persistent limps gave them a zombie-like quality. If she looked any worse—and she was sure her hair was a wild rat's nest compared to Martina's neatly shaved head—then she may have shot her, too. She instantly forgave the dreamy youth for gunning her down.

“Honest mistake,” she tried to say. It sounded a lot more like, “Hoest milkshake.”

She blinked her eyes dumbly several times before attempting to stand. It was the wrong move. She couldn't manage to get blood to her brain or her limbs. Her surroundings spun. Stiles' deep frown lines merged with the guilty pout of the young man holding her good arm. The sad horde and the stalking Martin family danced together. It looked like a hellish merry-go-round. She fell backwards into the youth's awaiting arms, but she was not awake to appreciate it.

The next two days were a blur of faces staring down upon her in a mixture of worry and boredom. Though she was too weak to say it, she was a little annoyed with the fact that Stiles looked bored watching over her.

You're alive and unshot, asshole!

But she didn't have the energy to say that, so she stored it inside for when she was fully functioning, which happened to be only a couple days later. She opened her sandy eyes and smacked her dry lips together. She looked about the room to see who was sitting with her, but found herself alone.

Guess the threat of my death is over, and they've found something more interesting to occupy themselves with, she thought bitterly.

She attempted to sit up and failed several times. The pain in her shoulder was excruciating. She looked down at her cleanly bandaged wound and bit her lip over the pain as she forced her abs to pull her up. You never know how connected all your muscles are until you're shot in one of them. The movement sent a searing pain up her entire arm and through her chest.

"You could just relax, you know."

The voice startled Milly into turning too quickly, which she immediately regretted. Tears sprung to her eyes. "Oh, jeez. Bad choice."

"Oh, God. Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." His voice was a warm, deep tenor. He stood by an open door in what appeared to be a small clinic. She looked down and noticed that she was sitting on a flat medical bed.

She wished she could smooth her hair or look like less of a windblown, dirt caked mess, but that wasn't happening. She gave up her mini crush on the stunning mopey youth who shot her, and decided she was too old and too hurt to care. "It's fine. Being

post-apocalypse makes one jumpy. Probably the same reason you shot me. Where's my husband? The Martins?"

The young man came into the little clinic room, walked to her bed and adjusted a lever on the back of it, lifting the bed up so she could relax against it while sitting. "Is that better?"

She nodded. "Thank you."

"Your husband is on patrol duty. The Martins are setting up apartment, but Martina said she'd be back to check on you soon."

"Oh, okay." She was too dizzy to come up with anything more intelligent to say.

"Are you feeling good enough to eat? We have you on fluids," he pointed to an I.V. stuck into her limp arm, "but you will probably feel better when you can eat. I brought apple sauce."

The shaggy haired youth pulled a packet of applesauce from his over-large grey zip-up. He shook his long bangs away from his stormy eyes for a moment, and Milly finally figured out why she was so dumbstruck over the young man.

"You're not that much younger than me, are you? You just look it. I'd put you at about 20. I think it was the eyeliner that did it. Or maybe your posture or outfit. I don't know."

The young man shrugged. "I don't know how old you are, so I'm not sure. I'm 27."

Milly's eyes grew wide and her heart pounded in her ears. *Just like Kurt...No. It couldn't be. He's dead. The only dead that come back to life are zombies, and this guy is no zombie.* But another thought battled her reason. *If zombies are a thing, why not this?*

But she said none of that, only held out her hand for the applesauce packet. The uncanny youth frowned over her expression, but handed her the packet. He didn't say anything when she made sure to touch his rough fingertips—calloused as though worn from plucking taut strings. But he grinned, a pull at the side of his mouth, as if he knew what she was doing. His fingertips were as solid and textured as any real person's. If she felt a little weak from the contact, it was only because she was dizzy from loss of blood. Or so she told herself.

“Uh, sorry. I didn't catch your name before I passed out. You know, after you shot me for looking like a zombie.”

The man smiled for real this time, and it was a beautiful smile. His cheeks creased in a pleasing and familiar way, his eyes brightened, though they still held a vivid sadness. “I really am sorry about that. Your husband took the liberty of cleaning you up, and I can see I was badly mistaken. My name's Colby. Yours is Milly, right?”

Milly clasped his hand a little too eagerly, her small hand shaking inside his grip. She was thankful, at that moment, for her caring husband, who'd thought to clean her up. “You don't look like a Colby.”

Colby shrugged. "You don't look like a Milly. Milly is an old white lady's name, and you're not old or white."

Milly laughed. "Good point. I'm originally from Hawaii, the island of Lānaʻi. Milly was my white grandma's name, so you're not far off."

Colby nodded. "Ah. Why did you leave Hawaii for the rainy Northwest?"

"I wanted to live in the pines, where the sun don't ever shine." Milly raised an eyebrow at Colby.

Colby didn't seem shocked or bothered by the comment. He simply smiled and said, "A woman after my own heart. Anyway, you better try eating. I'm up to take over for Stiles, anyway. See you around, Milly."

"Wait!" In her shock over Colby's uncanny resemblance to her favorite grunge heartthrob, Milly almost forgot to ask the most obvious question. "Why did the horde stop? Why won't they come into Aberdeen?"

Colby's laugh was a forced, angry chuckle. "Would you come to or through Aberdeen if you didn't have to?"

Milly frowned. "Well, no, but I'm not a zombie willing to stumble around for miles after a warm-blooded meal, either. I doubt zombies care about how lame Aberdeen is."

Colby shrugged, resigned. "There doesn't seem to be any other reason. Those who started out in Aberdeen, like me, have been watching them. The moment they near the

city limits of Aberdeen, they back off. Their groans change, even their faces look different.”

Milly remembered thinking the same thing when she scanned the undead before she passed out. “Yeah, they seemed sad.”

Colby shook his head. “Not just sad. Depressed. Aberdeen depresses the shit out of the undead. Honestly, it’s pretty depressing for the living, too, but the zombies won’t come near it, not even to eat. The zombies that hang around—staring at us on the other side—are changed, somehow. We sit sentry not because we think the hordes will change their minds and come across. I mean, we are prepared for that, but really it’s more of an experiment. The dead that hang out near Aberdeen lose their zombie instinct. They wail and whither, and die, waiting for us, I think. Or maybe not. I really don’t know why they stay.”

He leaned towards Milly, who suddenly realized her mouth was hanging open unattractively. She closed it. He continued in an intense whisper. “An old woman died last week from pneumonia. We tried to get her the right antibiotics, but we were running too low, and she told us to not waste them on her. She refused to take them. She was a good woman.” Colby’s shoulders fell, as if he was carrying the weight of her death. “She changed, like we all do when we die. We knew she was going that night, so we put her in a house near the border of the city and handcuffed her to the bed, to keep her secured. Zombies aren’t real nimble with their fingers, as you know.”

Milly nodded. “What happened?”

Colby frowned. "When she turned, she went crazy. We heard her scream. Have you ever heard a zombie scream?" He shivered.

Milly shook her head, her face horrified.

"Well, you don't ever want to. She screamed for at least an hour then the sentry watching the house heard glass break. The guy ran down there to subdue her, keep her from making a shamble town out of the only safe place left in the U.S. When he got there, he stood only feet away from her. He pulled his rifle out and waited for her to run at him. He said the hunger was evident. She stared him down, licking her lips, just before she cried out. That's what he said, 'Cried out.'"

Colby's storm-cloud eyes were distant. "He said it was the most haunting sadness he'd ever heard. Then she turned from him, a perfectly good zombie snack, and ran across the border, wailing until she was past the limits. She stays there, just outside of Aberdeen, a handless zombie, staring forlornly at every sentry who sits watch. But she doesn't seem to watch us out of hunger. Or, I don't think she does...I don't know how to explain it, but she seems to be worried about us. She was so serious about getting out of the town that she tugged until her hands separated from her body."

He stood to leave, "It's safe to say zombies hate Aberdeen."

Over the next two weeks, it was clear to Milly that Colby was right. It'd taken her a couple more days to heal enough to carry a rifle, but when she did, she had to take

position along one of many posts along the wall. So she got her turn playing zombie watch.

She wasn't sure which was more depressing—watching zombies waste away to nothing, or being in a town where even the houses frowned. She'd pointed this reverie out to Stiles when he'd shown her their new apartment. It was situated in an old house along the main residential stretch in Aberdeen. She'd stood at the foot of the house and stared at it for a couple of minutes before figuring out why it gave her the creeps.

The white porch sagged in the corners and bowed in middle. She eyed the house along the street, and found that they all dipped in the same familiar way.

The houses are frowning. Even the houses are sad here.

The ones that weren't sad, the nicer houses of Aberdeen, were stuck in the 70's and garishly painted. They were the first ones to be taken up by more established residents. Many of the houses weren't complete enough to frown—those were falling apart, rotting, faded or boarded-over. Even the boarded-over meth houses had to be used as more and more people came for sanctuary.

Many of them still functioned as meth houses, in fact, for as long as the ingredients to brew the smelly shit lasted, anyway. Milly was just thankful she didn't live too closely to one of those places. The people living there weren't undead, but they might as well have been. They were rotting in much the same way, their teeth and hair falling out, their skin blistering and scabbed, their body fat burning up.

The residents weren't the only desperate thing about Aberdeen. The local stores, restaurants, bars, and homes had all been combed over. The town's supplies were brought to what used to be a farm store and were divided out evenly among families, every week. The fresh fruit and veggies had been eaten long ago, and the gardens in Aberdeen were miserable little affairs, stifled by a lifetime of industrial air, surrounded by hot pavement. Some survivors spent their time trying to perk the unhappy gardens up—watering, de-weeding and feeding them fertilizer from the farm store. But they remained spindly, drooping crops no matter what. The residents of Aberdeen would not be eating fresh food anytime soon.

Milly had driven through Aberdeen before the apocalypse, and supposed that the browning grass and lack luster gardens stemmed from a lack of funds and time to tend yards, but now she wasn't so sure. Time was an abundant commodity, now, and money was a thing of the past. It was as if the air in Aberdeen was bogged down, even without the dead smokestacks clogging the air. She could feel the air weigh on her, as she stalked cracked sidewalks and paced pot-holed streets. The town wasn't desperate because of the people who lived there; the people were desperate because of the town.

Unfortunately, the only way to survive was to become accustomed to living life in a town that dragged—from the skinny brown trees to the broken shop windows. The ocean roared several miles away, but you wouldn't know it from the confines of this stagnant town. You couldn't smell it on the air. The air was trapped in a concrete bubble. *Milly* was trapped. Sometimes, when sitting watch at the outskirts of town she daydreamed about shooting a path through the horde and running until she reached the

frigid rolling ways of the Pacific. She'd run a marathon before, and it had to be a shorter distance than that.

But the horde was too massive, and they stayed firmly glued to the outskirts of Aberdeen. They were probably hoping that the people inside would eventually do just what Milly thought of doing every day. Their woeful faces and glazed eyes looked, just as Colby relayed, apologetic. Not so much for themselves but for the sentries inside of the city. The zombies seemed to feel bad for her in the same way that humans feel sorry for too cramped chickens and cows living in their own feces in farm factories. They'd still eat her if she ran for it, but she was sure they'd feel happy she got a chance to stretch her legs first, free-range style.

Milly saw the no-handed zombie on her fifth watch day. Most of the zombies walked back and forth, stumbling along the border looking somber, sometimes reaching out toward the city limit, and drawing their hand back as if stung. But not that zombie. She just stood and stared, as her skin melted away, and her bones became exposed. She stared and wailed, and looked so forlorn that Milly almost wanted to hold her. Only that would be disgusting. And eventually painful.

She knew she wouldn't run, for the same reason she hadn't tried leaving the treehouse before Stiles suggested it. She wanted to live.

Even so, she stood on the edges of Aberdeen most days, looking past the pacing undead towards the wild, furious Pacific. Stiles had grown used to his wife's obsessive routine and had, for the first two weeks, collected her from the edge of town and guided

her back to the frowning porch in the middle of the anguished city. Not tonight, not for a few nights, actually.

Lately, he'd chosen to visit the Martins instead, leaving his wife to wonder home when or if she wanted. Some nights, she'd stumble home in a daze and Stiles would not be in their room. She'd ask the other residents where he was, and they'd look away, embarrassed. They'd mumble that he'd left earlier in the day and hadn't returned. *He's with Martina* was the unspoken response.

Milly wanted to care. She wanted to worry about losing her husband. But she found herself too preoccupied with plans of zip-lining off the highway signs, over the mass of starving zombies waiting for her to break free of the tired town.

"It might work. If I could catch something on the other side of the zombies...a tree. Maybe Martina could lasso a pole. She might help..." Milly mumbled her plan out loud, pacing down the row of sagging houses on her block under the lone light of the moon, and forgetting that Martina was probably sleeping with Stiles at this moment. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but leaving.

"Might help with what?" A voice from behind her prompted. A delicious tenor voice. The only voice holding her back.

She turned to Colby, a blush coloring her cheeks. Colby's brows were drawn down over his stormy eyes. His perfectly clefted chin sunk in a little more when his lips were pursed in worry, as they now were.

“Oh, I was just...” She trialed off, embarrassed.

“Thinking about leaving again? Yeah, I thought about a zip-line before. But there’s really nothing to attach it to on the other side, or nothing that I could reach, anyway. I don’t think that any of our trucks would make it through the horde, even weakened as they are. Most of the gas has run out, anyway. Used it for the generators to keep the frozen food fresh.”

Milly’s heart fell to her stomach, and frustrated tears fell down her face. “I can’t do it, anymore, Colby. This place...it’s not a haven. It’s hell. I can’t stay her with the meth heads, my cheating husband, the Martins who are sure I’ve lost my mind, and the living scraping by in a town that’s already dead. I can’t live here. If I’m not mad already, I will be within days.”

“It’s either that or the zombies, Milly.” Colby put a warm hand on her trembling forearm. “Come back with me, for now. You don’t need to make any decisions tonight.”

Milly swallowed hard. Her stomach felt fluttery and her face flushed. A ravenous feeling crept over her, a feeling she’d not felt since even before the apocalypse. Certainly not something Stiles brought forth, with his cautious touch and stony face.

Stiles was a choice made in the throes of survival. This feeling was not about survival, this feeling was entirely animalistic. For a moment she wondered if she were dying, turning into one of the nameless horde. But when she met Colby’s deep eyes, full of unvoiced sorrow, she saw the same hunger. And when their lips met and their hands

searched each other, it felt as though they were finding something the apocalypse had taken from them.

They gave over to their desperate feelings that night, in plain sight of the scrambling, moaning undead on the border of Aberdeen. Their grunts of passion didn't sound much different than the moaning of the horde, so no one came to investigate.

When they fell apart, exhausted and spent, an hour later, Mill felt at peace for the first time since the apocalypse stole all normalcy. She lay in the crook of her young lover's arms and stared at the curve of his jaw, the five o'clock shadow, the way his sandy hair fell in angles over his care worn face. And she was sure, regardless of the improbability of it, that she was being held by her first grunge love, though his flannel had been replaced by a worn zipper jacket and sturdy farm store blue jeans.

She wished they could have stayed naked and entangled for a little bit longer, but summer was giving way to fall and the night was growing chill. Anyway, new sentries might happen upon them soon. She didn't really care if Stiles found out about Colby, since she was sure he and Martina had moved past caring about her, but she'd rather not be found with her pants around her ankles, literally or figuratively. She pulled her clothes back in place, and they fell asleep to the lulling moan of the dwindling horde.

The sun broke through the ever present gloom of Aberdeen long enough to shine on their groggy morning faces, and the dumb faces of decaying shamblers. Milly blinked open her eyes and immediately met the accusatory stare of Stiles and Martina.

“Milly? What’s going on here?” Stiles did not even attempt to conceal the hurt in his voice.

Meanwhile, Martina looked down at Milly and Colby in complete shock. Milly was immediately offended and defensive. As if Martina and Stiles hadn’t been doing the exact thing for days, if not weeks, now.

Milly stood and crossed her arms, putting herself in between Stiles and Colby. Stiles was leaning toward her lover in a way that said he was ready for a square off.

“Oh, come off it, you two. I might have been out of it lately, but I know you’ve been seeing each other. And I didn’t say anything. You do what you have to do to survive this hellish place, and I’ll do what I have to do.”

Stiles rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Milly, that’s not what’s been going on. Yes, I’ve been going to the Martin’s house. We’ve been working on a new plan. We don’t like it here anymore than you do, but we haven’t given up. I tried to get you involved, but you’ve been shut off since we first got here. You didn’t respond when we talked to you, when we asked you what was wrong. We were sure that you were going off the deep end. Martina, Curtis and I have been planning a way out. I see you staring of toward the Pacific. You talk about it in your sleep. We were working on a way to get out, while you’ve been acting just like them.” He waved a dismissive hand at the interested zombies peering at the arguing snacks with great interest.

“And now you’re talking again, but waking up in the arms of a kid? Milly, you’re thirty-five years old, almost thirty-six. Colby is eighteen. He’s barely fucking legal!”

Martina hissed over his curse and put a steadying hand on Stiles' arm. Milly shook her head, pointing to Martina's hand.

"I'm not crazy! See how she's touching you. Whether you're together or not, I know you want to be. And Colby is not nineteen! He's twenty-seven. He told me so when I was in the hospital. Just ask him. He'll tell you." She turned to Colby, then, who was standing a little off, his head bowed sheepishly, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his sweater.

He spoke to his zipper when he finally spoke. "I'm sorry, Milly. I didn't know how old you were. You look so young. I thought...I thought you were like thirty, or something. I liked you and I didn't want you to treat me like a kid. But...I'm eighteen. I thought you knew I was lying, and you didn't mind."

Stiles glared at the youth. "We had a flippin' birthday party for him last week, Milly. You were off talking to yourself and staring past the horde, like always."

Milly's looked from Stiles to Martina and back again. Their faces were a mixture of anger, disgust and pity. Any remaining love they held was either gone or was hidden inside the stronger emotions clearly displayed on their faces. She turned to Colby, uncomprehending. If what he said was true, then...

She put a shaking finger under his chin and tilted it to the rare sun. She wished she hadn't. Had it been the shock of being shot? The pain killers in the hospital? The bad light last night? Her own broken brain? How had she ever thought Colby was older than twenty? In the bright morning sun, his eyes held no great wisdom, no crow's-feet from

laughing or crying, and they were...green. A dark, hunter green. Not the stormy blue of the Pacific. His face was rounder, less angled than she remembered. In the bright light, it was clear that his hair shone more brown than blonde.

She backed away from him and knocked into Stiles, whose face was filled with unspoken pain. Stiles had blue eyes, but they were not the color of the Pacific on a cloudy day. The only good thing about Aberdeen was the fantasy she'd created. But her fantasy died in 1994. Aberdeen was nothing but a slow death. Kurt had known that all those years ago. Colby probably didn't even understand her references, the poor kid. He'd just wanted to have a little fun in this dead man's town.

Milly backed away from the awkward group—her husband, her only remaining friend, and her silly tryst. She turned from the hurt and desperation on their faces, turned away from the frowning, dying town, and ran past the city limits of Aberdeen.

The smiling faces of the decaying horde greeted her. They extended their arms in welcome. Their melting skin was a beautiful brackish blue, the blue of the Pacific, which she could just smell over the decay. And even decay smelled better than Aberdeen.

