

## THE FOUR OF JULY

By  
Shawn M Riddle

I wake with a jolt, dreaming of being lowered steadily into a thumping cement mixer. As I struggle back to the waking world, I realize that the sound isn't only in my dream; it's resonating throughout the whole cabin. Damn! Those helicopters again. They've been flying around here at all hours of the day and night for the past two days. Helicopters in Washington D.C. were common enough, but not all the way out here.

"I'm gonna find those flyboys and tear 'em a new one," grumbles Jack as he sits up in his cot and rubs his eyes.

"I don't know man. Something doesn't seem right," I say.

"We're in the middle of the Shenandoah Mountains, for Christ's sake! I expect this kind of crap at home, but I came out here to get some peace and quiet!" Jack's voice gets louder with every word.

"I don't know which is louder; you two or the damn helicopters! Will you shut the hell up? I'm trying to sleep over here!" Mike yells from his bed.

"This is starting to freak me out a bit," I say. "Maybe there's something wrong."

"We can ask at a gas station on the way back, if you like," Jack says with a shrug.

Since there's no cell phone reception out here, and the local radio stations aren't much better, it's about our only option. I nod in his direction.

"Why are you worrying about a few helicopters anyway? They're probably just on an exercise or something," Mike says.

"Well thanks to those damn choppers, we're already up, so we might as well get goin'," I say. "Let's get something to eat and pack up."

Jack and Mike mutter a few unhappy remarks, but finally get out of bed. We get the coffee pot going and load the car. We finish up, lock the cabin and head down the road. After an hour or so of hairpin turns and narrow mountain roads, we finally turn onto the paved road that leads to the Interstate. Jack turns on the satellite radio. The speakers remain silent.

"Did you pay your bill this month, Einstein?" Jack asks me with a smirk.

"Yeah, I did. It should be working. Try the regular radio."

He switches the receiver to AM/FM and thumbs through about a dozen stations; nothing but a soft hiss. I lean back in my seat and light up a cigarette. I must be looking grim because Jack turns around and tells me, "You worry too much, man. It's probably just the antenna. I'll check it when we get to the gas station." Deciding that Jack is probably right, I hand him my MP3 player and he kills the quiet with some music.

There are no cars on the road, but that's not unusual for this remote area. Along the way, we pass a couple of people walking in the road, staggering back and forth. One of them is limping. "Looks like they've started nipping at the Kentucky sipping medicine a little early today," Jack chuckles as we pass them by.

We reach the gas station and hope to pick up a snack and fill the tank, as well as hopefully get a few answers. The lights aren't on inside and neither is the electronic display on the pump.

"Well, this sucks," Mike says as we get out. "Ten thirty in the morning and the place is still closed? What the hell's up with that?"

“Closed or not, I gotta take a leak,” says Jack.

Jack walks around the side of the station toward the restroom. When he turns the corner, he stops.

“Hey man, what's up?” I ask. “Didn’t make it to the can? Should we bring you some dry clothes?”

Mike and I chuckle, but instead of the expected sarcastic remark, Jack says nothing and still doesn’t move. We start to walk over to him. Before we reach him, an acrid stench catches in our nostrils. Mike turns his head and retches and I gag and swallow back bile. With eyes watering, Mike and I turn the corner of the building and see what’s rendered Jack speechless.

A few feet from the restroom entrance, a man is sprawled on the ground, his skull split wide open, pinkish gray remains of his brain smeared on the sidewalk. On the wall, next to the body, there is a reddish brown stain. Maggots are crawling over the rotting flesh of his skull.

“Holy shit!” I gasp.

Mike gapes at the corpse. “What the hell?”

Jack’s face is deathly white. He turns around, falls to his knees and throws up. I struggle to contain the contents of my stomach. Covering my nose and turning my head, I take a few deep breaths to compose myself.

“You OK, bud?” I manage to ask, as Jack regains some composure. He slowly nods his head, but says nothing. I help him to his feet.

“I’m OK man,” he says finally.

Mike pulls out his cell and stares at the display. “No Service. Hey, either of you got a signal?” he asks as he flips his phone closed.

Jack and I check our phones. “No dice,” I say as Jack shakes his head.

“Well, let’s not just stand here with our dicks in our hands. Let’s get inside and call the cops,” says Mike.

“What if the guy who did this is still here?” I ask, glancing around nervously.

Mike turns and heads towards the shop. “You gotta be pretty stupid to hang around after doing something like this.” Jack and Mike, despite being the best friends a guy could have, can be impulsive and reckless at times. As if to prove this point, Jack follows Mike without a word.

“At least keep your eyes open, guys,” I say as I hurry to catch up.

The shop is unlocked and the interior has been trashed. Packages of candy, chips and cans litter the floor. I go behind the counter and pick up the phone. It’s dead.

I take a long look at the mess. “What the fuck is going on?” I ask. Neither one of them say a word.

I light up a cigarette and inhale deeply. Mike follows suit.

“Hey man, hand one over,” Jack says.

“I thought you quit?” Mike asks.

“Just give me a damn cigarette!”

I toss Jack my pack and lighter. He lights up and inhales half the cigarette in one drag.

“What do you think happened?” I ask finally.

“Who gives a shit?” says Mike. Motioning in the direction of the corpse, he says, “All I know is someone popped that guy’s head like a zit and we need to get the hell out of here!”

“You’re right,” I say. “Let’s just go.”

Before we get to the front door, Jack says, "First things first. Hold up." He heads to the cooler in the back and opens it. Pulling out a twelve-pack of beer, he frowns and then says, "Well, warm beer is better than no beer!" He opens up a bottle and downs it in seconds.

"What are you doing?" Mike asks, incredulous. "Isn't this is a fucking crime scene?"

After belching, Jack says, "Do you think the cops are gonna give a shit about a twelve-pack of beer? Are they gonna come in and take inventory? No, they're gonna walk straight over to dead Fred or whatever the hell his name is, stick a meat thermometer in his ass and vacuum up what's left of his brains."

Mike and I glance at one another then, despite the situation, we start chuckling and it doesn't take long before we're out right laughing.

"Fair point," I say and head for the door.

As I open the door, something grabs me by the arm and pulls me toward it. I stare into my attacker's face and nearly piss myself. The thing looks like a man, with pale greenish, bloodshot eyes, but half of the left side of its head has been torn away; its left eye bulging from its socket and dripping with thick yellow pus. The bones of its jaw protrude through the torn skin. It moans as it tackles me to the ground, opens its mouth and lunges forward. I lash out, yelling, "Get this fucking thing off me man!"

Mike kicks the creature in the head, sending it reeling across the floor. It stands up as I scramble away. Jack stares into its rotting face, his eyes wide with shock. Mike is fixed to the spot, staring in horror.

It begins to move toward him. Jack reacts first. He punches the thing in what's left of its face, knocking it back to the ground. Breaking the empty beer bottle against the wall, he jumps on its chest and jabs it straight down into its left eye. Thick yellow-brown fluid shoots out the top of the bottle, splattering his shirt. It twitches, and then lays motionless.

Mike helps me up. I stand there, shaking, staring open mouthed at the bloody corpse on the ground. My heart is pounding in my chest; every beat sounds like an earthquake. I'm sick to my stomach, sweat pouring off me. My friends look first at me, then at the body on the ground.

"Thanks, guys." Neither respond, just nod numbly. They're dazed, almost like they're moving in slow motion.

"What the blue fuck is going on?" Jack asks. "We're in the middle of a bad horror movie! That thing was a zom—" "Don't even say it," Mike interrupts. "We all know what that thing was."

"We have to go. Now! Maybe we can find some help." Jack looks around and walks over to the service island to grab a few paper towels. After wiping some of the blood and pus from his shirt, he comes over to me and puts his hand on my shoulder. "Come on man. Let's get out of here."

A moan sounds from across the road. One of those things is running from the rear of a house, heading right for us. Its moan becomes an ecstatic howl.

"Get in the fuckin' car!" Mike yells.

As we race away from the station, tyres squealing, I look out the rear window and see the creature chasing the car. It falls behind quickly and then disappears out of sight.

Mike lights up another cigarette and, offering me one, says, "You gonna be OK bud?"

"Yeah." I take a cigarette from him, my hand trembling slightly.

“I don’t know about you two, but I need to get to my parents’ house and check on them. I hope they’re OK,” Jack mutters, staring ahead.

“Me too,” says Mike.

My family is Jack, Mike, and Jack’s parents. I’ve known these guys since grade school. They’re the closest things I have to brothers. Jack’s parents sort of adopted me after my parents died. I spend holidays, weekends, and most of my spare time with them. I’m just as worried about them as he is. If something’s happened to them while we’ve been off screwing around in the mountains, I don’t know if I could deal with it.

We drive for a long time. As we reach the outskirts of civilization, we see other vehicles, broken down and abandoned. At first there’s only one or two, but then more and more clog the roadside. On the other side of the highway, we see another vehicle heading our way. It shoots by at high speed. Several more pass us before we merge onto Interstate 66, east bound towards Washington D.C., and home.

We all live in Rosslyn, just outside D.C. proper. We see signs of further carnage as we drive. Burning vehicles and numerous bodies litter the highway. Many appear to have been torn to shreds. Jack has to swerve several times to miss creatures that are wandering in the road. Some chase after us as we pass them, but most of them continue to stagger aimlessly.

“What do you suppose started this shit in the first place?” Mike asks the question we have all been wondering.

“Don’t know and don’t care right now,” Jack says. “What I do care about is finding some gas for this heap before we end up walkin’. From what we’ve seen so far ...” Jack pauses and points to one of the creatures stumbling in the road, “walkin’ ain’t exactly my preferred choice and we’re damn near empty.”

“We also need to start thinking about where we are gonna get supplies too,” Mike adds. Jack and I nod in agreement.

Jack takes another look at the gas gauge. “Keep your eyes open, and let me know if you see anyplace we can stop.”

A little further down the road, just outside the City of Manassas, we come to a rest area and coast into the parking lot, out of gas. Two other vehicles are here, one SUV and a large van with the markings of the Virginia State Police on the side.

The SUV’s driver’s side window is smashed; the half eaten corpse of a woman hanging out the door. Bite marks cover her torso and arms, and her severed head is lying on the ground a few feet from the vehicle, cheeks and eyes gouged away. The van appears to be intact, with the exception of one flat tyre.

The rest stop is a small single level building, with two separated sections for public restrooms and a lobby in between. There’s a small picnic area and a pet rest area at the side of the structure. Scanning the area, we see no signs of life or movement. Dismembered bodies are littered everywhere.

“Fuck me,” Jack says as he takes in the scene. “It’s a war zone.”

A man, – or what used to be one, – staggers out from behind the building near the pet rest area. Its left arm is missing from the elbow and its torn business suit is covered in blood and gore.

“Shut up and get down,” I whisper, pointing to the creature. We kneel down behind the car, out of the creature’s line of sight. We and wait for a few minutes. The creature shambles on aimlessly.

Jack scans the area. “We can’t sit out here all day, man. There’s got to be more of those things creeping around.”

“Well, we can’t just walk by that thing,” I say.

"I've got a plan." Mike leans into the open door of the car and takes out a long metal flashlight. "I'm gonna go around the other side of the building, sneak up behind that thing and crown its ass."

"Are you on drugs?" I ask him. "What if there are more of those things around back? They'll rip you to pieces!"

"What choice do we have?" Mike replies fiercely.

Jack and I look at one another and then nod to Mike. I don't like the idea at all, but it's all we've got. He is small and fast, so he has the best chance of the three of us.

He inches around the side of the car and takes a peek. The creature is standing motionless in the pet rest area, looking in the opposite direction. He takes his chance and darts around the side of the building and out of sight.

Several tense minutes pass before I see Mike appear around the other side. He crouches low and creeps up behind the creature. It seems oblivious. Once close enough, he swings the flashlight over his head and brings it down onto the back of the thing's skull. Blood spurts upwards and it falls to the ground with barely a sound. He jogs back with a big smile on his face. "Fucker never saw it coming."

"Don't bust your arm patting yourself on the back man," Jack says, but manages a smile.

We head for the building, stepping over bodies along the way. We see dozens of empty bullet and shotgun casings amongst the dead. I reach the front door first; it's locked and chained from the inside.

"Stop right there and put your hands up!"

Looking up, I see a woman on the roof with a machine gun pointing at us.

"Hold it lady, we're not armed! We just want to get inside," I say, putting my hands in the air.

"Are you bitten?" she asks.

Jack looks to me and Mike then to the woman on the roof. "What?"

"Are you bitten?" she snaps.

"No," Jack says. "We're not! Will you put that thing down before someone gets hurt?"

She stares at us down the barrel of her weapon. "I give the orders here. If you want in, you're gonna have to strip!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" I ask.

"Strip, now, or get the hell out of here!" As if to emphasize her point, she pulls back the charging handle of her weapon, chambering a round with a series of dry clicks.

We strip fast. We're standing there naked, in front of a rest stop off Interstate 66. Under different circumstances it would all seem pretty funny. "Turn around nice and slow; now!"

After we've turned a full circle, her tone more relaxed, she says, "OK, put 'em back on and get over to the front door. I'm coming down." We nod, getting dressed even faster than we stripped.

A short time later, she appears at the door, wearing the uniform of the Virginia State Police. She fumbles with her keys, unlocks the chains and gestures at us to come in. Keeping her eyes on us, she chains the door once more.

"Look, lady, if you wanted a date, there are certainly better ways to ask than that," Jack says with a smirk. Leave it to Jack to make a smart ass remark to someone who just threatened to shoot us.

She ignores his comment. "I'm sorry. You can't be too careful; I let some folks in here a few days after I got here and one of them had been bitten. In a couple

of hours, she turned and chewed up her family and two of my men before I put the bitch down. You three are the first living people I've seen since then. My name is Sergeant Diana Ortiz."

After somewhat shell-shocked introductions, she leads us into an office and hands us some bottled water. A table in the centre of the room is cluttered with a variety of shotguns, pistols and ammunition.

"That's a nice piece!" I say, gesturing to the machine gun in her hands. "I didn't know cops were allowed to carry those."

"I'm a trooper; it took me a lot of hard work to earn this uniform." She scowled at us to emphasize the point then added, "It's an MGA MK46LE SAW; very useful as an attitude adjuster. We had a few back at the barracks. They're issued on a limited basis – crisis situations, terrorist attacks, that sort of thing."

"OK, sorry," I say. "Can you please tell us what the hell is going on?"

"Where the hell have you three been?" Sgt. Ortiz gapes at the three of us in astonishment.

"For the last three weeks we've been out at Jack's cabin." I gesture with my thumb toward Jack. "Out Shenandoah way. We went up there for the Fourth of July weekend ... and our yearly vacation. We heard helicopters flying around the past couple days, but besides that, we don't know a damn thing about what's going on. We come down from the cabin this morning and find the world has gone to hell."

Sgt. Ortiz nods at this and says, "About two weeks ago we started getting calls in like you wouldn't believe. Out of the blue, we were getting hundreds of them an hour. It gets busy at times, but never like that. Murders, attacks, looting, you name it. When people started describing the attacks, we thought we weren't hearing things right, thought maybe they meant dog attacks, an outbreak of rabies or something."

"Dog attacks?" Mike asks.

She takes a drink from her water bottle. "Yeah, we kept hearing about people being bitten. But it didn't take long to figure out it wasn't dogs doing the biting."

"Jesus Christ," Mike mutters, shaking his head.

"He has nothing to do with it. Within hours, all the law enforcement agencies in the Washington D.C. area were completely overwhelmed and simply couldn't respond to every call. It spread so quickly, there wasn't even time for the National Guard to be properly mobilized. A few units here and there were rumoured to have gotten moving, but we never saw any kind of help from them."

"Did anyone have any clue what was causing these things to walk around?" Mike asks.

"The same bullshit you always hear on the radio and TV, people talking like they knew what was going on, but no one had a fucking clue. After I lost my partner on a call, I decided not to ask any more questions. Before long I couldn't raise anyone on the radio anymore to ask. All the channels had gone dead. The few times I was actually able to raise someone; they were just as clueless as everyone else. Some were begging for help that I was no longer in a position to give. What's the point of knowing why or what anyway? The only thing we can do is deal with it! Those things have taken enough, they're not gonna take any more away from me!" She gestures to the table next to us, pointing out the small collection of guns and giving a curt nod.

"What happened to your partner?" Jack asks.

Sgt. Ortiz takes another drink from her water bottle, brushes her hair away from her eyes, and continues. "I was on duty in the Fairfax area with my partner. The call came through as a domestic dispute. We normally don't answer calls to residences, but the shit was hitting the fan and the local cops needed our assistance.

When we arrived at the house, the lights were off and the curtains drawn. Knocking on the front door didn't elicit any response. My partner David and I kicked in the front door and went in. What we found there ..." She trailed off, her eyes glistening brightly.

I pull out my water bottle and say, "Maybe something to drink?"

She takes it. "Thanks."

Jack grabs a cigarette from the pack I had left on the table and lights up. "So you just walk up to the house and kick in the door? Not too bright if you ask me with those things running around."

"At that point we didn't know those things were the cause of this shit! Perhaps I wasn't clear on that point. Can I continue now?" Sgt. Ortiz snaps.

"Sorry," Jack says, looking as if he has just been slapped in the face.

"We saw the woman of the house – neighbours said her name was Wilma Simmons – dead on the kitchen floor. No, not dead, worse than dead. When I looked at her I thought she'd been torn apart by a wild animal. Blood was still oozing from her wounds, she hadn't been dead long. Nothing left of her face – it had been bitten ... ripped off. Blood was everywhere. Then like that," she snaps her fingers," a loud crash and David was screaming. I turned around and saw a man on top of him. It must have been Mr. Simmons; he had his mouth around David's throat and was tearing at him like a wild dog. When he pulled away ... well a mouthful of blood and David was dead. I shot the fucker in the chest. He jerked but he didn't fall. Then he ran right at me. I shot him right between the eyes, which put him down for good."

"Talk about fucked up!" I say.

She ignores me and continues. "I didn't even have time to take more than a couple breaths, and then the old lady ... just got up off the floor and came at me. I never thought an old lady could move that damn fast! I shot the bitch in the head before she got too far. I looked over at David lying on the floor. His eyes were wide open, blood still oozing from his neck. I checked for a pulse, I got nothing. Then he started to stir; I stood up and put my foot on his chest to keep him down. He began to moan and thrash, jaws snapping at the air, trying desperately to bite me. His eyes were a milky greenish colour, all bloodshot and cloudy ... I put a round in his head, there was nothing else I could have done. I'd known David Brown for ten years, and I put him down like a rabid dog." Tears roll from her eyes.

"I ... I'm really sorry," Mike says, putting his hand on her shoulder.

She shrugs off Mike's hand. "It's done, and I can't change what happened." She wipes the tears from her face and takes another drink. "Shortly after that is when things just went to shit. Buildings were burning out of control, people in the streets with guns, shooting those things and each other. All order broke down, it was anarchy. I came back to my barracks and loaded up the van with as many guns and men as I could. I lost five men in the few hours after we left, two were torn apart by those things, and the other three were killed in a shootout with some looters. The whole world was coming to an end and these motherfuckers were out looting DVD players and shooting people? When it's all said and done, people will never change. It makes me sick. There were only three of us left when I decided to get us the hell out of the war zone. The situation had escalated far beyond anyone's ability to control. We heard reports on the radio of several local towns completely engulfed in flames. Other reports stated that the President had ordered non nuclear bombing runs on major cities. We were driving on Route 66 West, trying to get as far away from D.C. as we could when we saw a formation of bombers in the air, headed for D.C. It didn't take long for the city to be reduced to a steaming pile of rubble. The explosions and

flames were incredible. Did it do anything but kill thousands of people? No, those things are still everywhere. What a waste.”

I feel as if someone has just hit me in the chest with a sledgehammer. I stare at my friends and a look of absolute horror is etched on both of their faces.

“D.C. is gone? No ... I don’t believe ... Mom? Dad? No! I’ve got to find them!” Jack shoots out of his chair. Sgt. Ortiz gets up, firmly puts her hands on Jack’s shoulders and forces him back into his chair. She brings her face up to his, so they’re staring nose to nose. Speaking very clearly and firmly, as if to a child, she says, “I’m telling you ... D.C. is gone, there’s nothing left. All you’re likely to find are those creatures.” Jack begins to sob, slamming his head on the table.

Mike’s eyes are wide with shock. He slams a fist down on the table. “I don’t believe this shit!” I put my hand on Jack’s shoulder, trying to offer him comfort; I do the same for Mike. I feel a burning hatred welling inside me. These creatures, they’ve taken everything from us, I want to kill every last one of them with my bare hands!

After a few long minutes of silent sobbing, Mike wipes tears from his eyes and looks at Sgt. Ortiz. “Excuse me offi—”

“Trooper,” she corrects.

“Sorry, there’s something bugging me about those things,” Mike says.

Jack lifts his head from the table and glares at Mike, “You mean besides the fact our families are most likely dead because of those motherfuckers?” His eyes are filled with a rage you only see in movies.

“As I was saying,” Mike continues, a little stunned. “The thing that kind of bothers me here is the one that attacked him.” He pauses and gestures to me. “It didn’t move very fast, but the other one we ran into at the gas station moved faster than a redneck seeing a ‘free beer’ sign. If these things are dead, they shouldn’t be walking at all, but since they can obviously walk, shouldn’t they be stumbling around, you know rigor mortis making them all stiff or something?”

“Didn’t move all that fast? Try being at the receiving end of that bear hug and tell me it didn’t move fast!” I snap.

Sgt. Ortiz puts up her hand. “From what I’ve seen and heard in the initial reports, the ‘fresher’ they are, the better they seem to be able to function. I’ve seen people get up and run, climb ladders, jump over barriers, and even use some basic fighting skills just seconds after they were killed. The ones that are a little older move pretty slowly, with no real co-ordination. You can almost walk past them. So it’s the fresh ones you have really to worry more about. I wouldn’t want to get caught with my pants down in even a small group of the slow ones though. I don’t really know how long it takes for them to slow down, probably a few days or so.”

His voice still rather weak, Jack looks at us and says, “I think it’s time we all thought about what the hell we’re gonna to do. We still need supplies and we sure as hell can’t stay here forever.”

I nod. “Man’s got a point.”

Just then I hear a ‘whoop whoop’ noise in the distance that can’t be mistaken; a helicopter. “You hear that?” I ask.

Sgt. Ortiz bolts from her chair and yells at all of us to follow her to the roof. She runs out of the room and down the hallway that leads to the roof hatch. We follow her as quickly as we can. We climb the ladder and open the hatch to the roof. “There!” Sgt. Ortiz points to the helicopter. It’s swaying back and forth and I see smoke coming out the back.

“Oh man, they’re fucked,” Mike says. Another larger puff of smoke erupts from the passenger compartment and flames become visible. It auto rotates to the



ground about a quarter mile from the rest stop. We watch as it circles around and around, trying to keep some measure of control in its descent. It hits the ground hard, landing on its runners just on our side of the highway, near the edge of the woods fifty yards or so from the rest stop. Two people jump out before the chopper explodes, sending shards of metal and debris everywhere. We duck down behind the parapet wall for cover. The sound of the explosion is almost deafening.

The people who escaped from the chopper are on the ground, not too far from the building. They're barely moving. "They need our help! I'm going out there!" Sgt. Ortiz snaps.

"Me too," Jack and Mike say simultaneously. I hesitate for a moment, frozen with fear. I've spotted dozens of those things coming out of the tree line – about 100 yards or so from the downed chopper.

"Holy shit! Look at all of 'em!" Jack yells.

"Downstairs in the office, there's more guns. Get down there, grab something to fight with and let's get out to those men before those fuckers do!" Sgt. Ortiz commands.

"Come on man, these guys need our help!" Mike shouts to me as he heads down the ladder.

I slide down the ladder and run to the office. I grab a 12 gauge shotgun, as many shells as I can manage to stick in my pockets and a 9mm pistol from the table. Jack and Mike grab some shotguns and pistols as well. Sgt. Ortiz holsters her pistol, grabs her SAW and leads us to the front door. After she unchains the door, we run as fast as we can toward the crash site and the injured people. It's an Army chopper; the men who made it out are wearing digital camouflage fatigues. They're on the ground, blood covering their uniforms. We bolt into the field as fast as we can, but it's too late. We hear the men scream as the things reach them first, tearing them to pieces. There's nothing we can do. Several creatures notice us and start to run toward us.

"Move it! Get your asses back inside!" Jack screams. The four of us turn and run towards the rest stop. Twenty more of the creatures have appeared as if out of nowhere, blocking our retreat. They're runners, explains how they closed the gap so quickly. Sgt. Ortiz opens fire. She cuts the first few of the things down in mid stride. The chatter of her SAW is deafening enough; the addition of our three shotguns in the mix makes my ears scream. The blasts keeps coming and coming. The creatures in front of us are falling – blood, bone, tissue, and every type of matter possible in the human body are being ripped apart by the hail of bullets and buckshot.

Once the last of the runners are down, we continue back to the building. "They're down, let's go!" Sgt. Ortiz yells to us. I'm surprised that I can hear anything at all with the ringing in my ears.

Before we get to the front door of the building several of the runners come around the opposite side of the building and grab Mike who's a few feet behind the rest of us. We hear him scream; all of us turn around at the same time. They have him down on the ground, sharp broken teeth sinking into his limbs and torso. He screams again and again as he lashes out, trying to fight them off.

Jack shoots two of them, but it's too late to save him. As Mike is being torn apart, I raise my pistol and shoot my friend in the head – his screaming brought to a sudden, brutal stop.

We enter the building and chain the doors behind us, barely making it inside ahead of the creatures. Looking through the glass doors, we see the area is now teeming with them. Some of them are the runners, but many of the ones that move

slowly, making their way methodically toward the building, and us. They're everywhere, the sound of the crash and resulting explosion must have brought them.

I begin to panic. "Those things killed Mike! They're everywhere! We're fucked! There's no way out of here!" My vision flashes white and I feel a white hot sting on the side of my head as Jack slaps me hard across the face. I fall to my knees, stunned and sobbing.

"Get yourself together man! There's nothing we could have done for him. We have to stay cool!" Jack growls at me. Shocked, but gathering my senses, I rub my throbbing cheek and jaw, stand up and nod silently.

There's loud banging on the service entrance door in the back. More of the creatures have made their way behind the building. Sgt. Ortiz rushes towards the noise and yells, "Cover the front!" The back door begins to shake and buckle under the onslaught of the creatures.

After reloading, Jack and I look to the front and see twenty or thirty creatures pounding on the safety glass, desperate to claw their way in. Bloody handprints stain the glass. A loud crash signals the demise of the back door. Sgt. Ortiz's SAW begins to chatter. Another crash and the creatures break the safety glass and start surging into the lobby. Jack and I dive behind the information desks. We raise our shotguns and start shooting. A heady cocktail of rage and terror are burning through my veins; hate for these things, these murderous God damn things. I bellow and scream as the blasts tear apart the rotting corpses.

As I glance at Jack, his shotgun clicks empty. He raises it like a club and runs at the remaining creatures.

"You pus-brained motherfuckers! You want some, come and get it!" Jack screams as he charges them. He hits one in the side of the head, shattering its skull. He continues to wade into them as I fire into the crowd. Still hearing the chatter of the SAW in the back of the building, we continue to fight. One creature manages to get behind Jack and grabs him.

I aim at it and pull the trigger, but instead of a recoil, I hear a dry click. It sinks its teeth into Jack, tearing a chunk of flesh from his arm. Howling, Jack discards the shotgun and lifts the creature off the ground. As it snaps at him, he twists it and slams it head first into the ground with a sickening crunch.

An arm tears away from its socket in his powerful grip and he uses it as a club; adrenaline lending him extra strength. He uses his improvised meat club and beats several others back before he's overwhelmed by them; they take him to the ground. As the things rip him apart, he yells "Hope you choke on it you fucks!" They tear him to pieces in front of my eyes. It takes less than ten seconds.

Screaming, I take out the remaining creatures near me using the butt of my shotgun, crushing skulls. The ones who have just murdered my friend get extra treatment, smashing their heads into mush. I turn to face another one; it lunges at me and sinks its teeth into my throat. I manage to throw it off and cave in its rotting skull with one final swing. I fall to the ground, choking on the blood pouring from my neck and into what's left of my throat. As the world begins to blur, I hear pistol shots coming from the back of the building. My final thoughts before all goes dark are of my friends ...

Blackness ...

*I feel ... Strong ... powerful. I don't hurt.*

*I hear loud noises close by ... What are they?*

*My eyelids feel like lead, but I force them open.*

*Where am I? How did I get here?*

I look around and see someone at the back of the building. Loud noises and screams are coming from her.

*She looks familiar ... but ... I can't ... remember ...*

*She's holding something in her hand ... a gun ... she's shooting the others.*

*Rage ... searing, blinding rage ... and hunger, a burning, uncontrollable hunger. What's happening to me?*

I stand up and run toward the woman in the room. She doesn't see me, her back is turned. All I can think about is this woman's flesh. *So alive, so warm. I want to rip it from her body, tear her to pieces ... hungry ... this hunger's unbearable! I must have her!* I'm so close, I can smell her, even taste her in the pungent air. She turns around, raising her pistol. I see a flash of bright white light and the sound of thunder roars through my head ...

**THE END**

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