

Twisted

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We were driving past Kalamazoo towards the edge of the desert when the withdrawal began to set in. I remember feeling light-headed for moments before phantom weevils scuttled down my spine. Caustic burblings oozed through my gut. Dogwood, my Minister for Lateral Problem-Solving, looked askance at me under his dust-encrusted ski-goggles.

“We can’t stop again, man.”

He left it at that, aware I understood the situation. The Minister had insisted on liberating a convertible and driving it with the top down across broken plains that required goggles to shield the eyes. Our holy mission necessitated a certain vibe, he’d argued, and felt this justified grit in the teeth and a car with a dying battery. Besides, it was all right for him: I’d been seeking gastro-intestinal regularity by varying the elements of my drug intake, producing gut-locked stony constipation on one side, and fluid Lovecraftian bowel-horrors on the other.

Our rationing was forcing me towards Accidental Soiling, and the Minister jouncing us at high speed across the dusty hills towards the yellowing bowl of Lake Michigan didn’t help.

Dogwood elbowed me then—distracting me from a passing cramp—and pointed out to a ditch ahead of us. It was surrounded by clouds of flies over corpses, like the foaming head on some sun-warmed simmering flesh-beer.

Not a good place to stop, no.

Dogwood pawed one-handed at one of our satchels of Supplies as we crested a cracked rise above the sprawling incline of the desert bowl: “I need amyl nitrite. Popper. Just the one. Keep me focused.”

“Our resolve must be strong, Minister,” I said, thrusting forward a heroic chin.

“Screw resolve! Gimme!”

I understood the battery situation, and the Minister understood the drug situation. Then again, he'd also insisted on calling me "Horse," since he'd learned we intended to cross the desert, and did nothing but giggle when I demanded explanations. I pulled the bag out of his reach as our car picked up speed and caught sight of movement behind us in the wing-mirror. A zombie clambered out of the flesh-beer like a whale breaching in a thick sea of meat and tried to follow us down the slope. I winced and shook myself—truly, this was a bad scene. I then settled back into my seat just in time for the Minister to guide our descent into an old drier, half-sunk in crusted Michigan mud, the impact smashing us briefly airborne.

"You did that on purpose!" I cried stridently.

"An amyl would help me drive."

I remember bickering as the corpse behind us fell away in the dust, following our movement since it couldn't smell us. Dogwood eventually had his amyl, I made vile assertions about his mother, and peace was restored.

I remember that our mission happened the same year as the infamous Presidential debate between Ozzy Osbourne and Tommy Lee, or would have done if either of them had turned up. Perhaps nobody told them, but it had been a great party nonetheless.

Our essential problem was that our home town of Bad Axe was not a key pharmacopeia to greater Michigan, and as such the supply of drugs available to we survivors was becoming thin. The Minister and I had realized this and begun to spread the word.

It had been a clear morning when we saw Smiley Fletcher staggering down the street, haggard and horrified through the pains of withdrawal. When some of the ubiquitous zombies turned toward him in one movement and began to close in, it had all become clear. The Minister crash-tackled Smiley to the ground and held him down while I squirted wood glue—nice and toxic—into a supermarket fruit-bag, hands thick and nerveless with my own drug song. I handed it to Dogwood, who covered Smiley's face and roared, "You *reckless bastard!*" as Smiley sucked down the fumes and went limp.

I remember waving vaguely—I was deep in a Green Shrieker spiral, beatific, wise and spiritually well-hung as Christ on a stump—and declaiming, "Forgive him, Minister, he knows not what he do. Does . . . ? Whatever."

The Minister had ignored me, but we each took an end of the man and hustled him away from the zombies activated by his sobriety. I took the

time to waft glue fumes around to further mask the scent, and we got him to safety. There is, however, a central problem with the Emergency Glue, or Emergency Drugs as a wider class: it is very difficult to interrogate someone high as a kite.

So we'd given up.

Indeed. Ours is an interesting society.

In the days that followed, the scope of the problem became clear. Drugs, however communal, were running low in Bad Axe. All but the cheapest, nastiest grunge was gone, and it is a truly sad state of affairs when a liberated society dependant on illicit pharmaceuticals for its very survival *isn't having fun*. So the Minister and I had scrounged up our supplies along with what anyone else could be persuaded to part with, taking it upon ourselves to quest forth for the common good.

Dogwood was along as Minister for Lateral Problem-Solving due to his greater experience in escaping lock-up situations. The man kept a spare Zippo in one boot for the express purpose of starting distraction fires, and his inclusion seemed a good idea at the time. I, sterner of vision and focus, was the noble leader.

As we careened down Lake Michigan I remember noting that the Minister's horrible hat was still on his greasy head, despite my demands he throw it away. A graying and cracked nacho cowboy hat, serrated at the rim with flaked chips, which the Minister had sprayed with lacquer weeks before as a preservative. The bell of the hat, originally filled with plastic petrochemical cheese, was crusted with dead flies and cigarette ash beneath layers of road dust.

It was an undying affront to gods and men alike. How could he possibly not know the hideousness of the lamentable hat? Perhaps it had been only to spite me, and had I not mentioned my Hate for the thing it would have slipped the Minister's mind and been forgotten. And yet here we were.

I refused to fill our journey with the baboon squeals and high gibbering which would follow a defense of the Hat, so bore its company in silence, hoping it would shake itself apart as Dogwood drove.

Our immediate mission was but part of a larger path that I had been traveling at the time, Minister Dogwood at my side. We were used to each other, and this helped explain what I was doing stuck in a convertible beside a man wearing a scrofulous nacho hat and filthy ski-goggles. We plummeted

on bad suspension towards the damp flats of Lake Michigan, with its treacherous patches of sucking mud and sundered machine hulks like the rising rusted fists of days gone by.

Night found us on the far side of Lake Michigan in a scrubby wooded area, dying trees around a fire that was objectively dangerous in the dry conditions. As the Minister had said, "Screw it, it's cold."

And it was cold, night in this new pupating desert. Over-irrigation had salted the earth, which had been survivable till the Feds drained our water-table and routed it to wealthier drought-stricken parts of our fair feral nation. Once they had, the salts settled out and nothing new would grow, leaving us with a savage new landform on our doorstep, waiting to be born.

I had always wondered what it had been like for the Feds when the dead rose. All those DEA guys figuring out that their stockpiles of confiscated drugs could be the key to survival. You'd have straight-laced preppy swine taking precise, measured doses of whatever they had nearby to stave off the hungry dead. Which would have worked great, right until Cookie Monster lunged for them from the dark foot-well of their desk, shrieking in unhallowed tongues.

That's the thing, you see. The levels of drugs required for safety aren't the kinds of demons you can dance with and expect to get away unscathed. They're going to ride you, scar you, write their initials in your skin . . . and occasionally one is going to climb into your skull, grab the wheel and take you for a ride.

The Minister, myself, and those like us have enough experience to respect the demons and know that expecting to keep control is folly, leading only to Bad Crazyiness. Roll with the punches, embrace the demons and surrender.

The Suits? How they'd have handled it? I wish I could have seen.

Had a friend called Shanks once whose theory was that the zombies tracked brain activity, and so drugs messed you up enough that they couldn't find you.

Then again, this is from a guy who became so monstrously drunk with the technician of his local black-market Augmentation chop-shop that he wound up with a Mister Stun implant where a Mister Stud implant should go, the poor bastard. Heard he found a girl who likes that recently, though. Calls him "Tickler."

But that's beside the point.

What you need will not play nice, will not play fair, but it means you can sleep without being surrounded by groaning fiends come morning. That was how they got you. Sooner or later you have to sleep. The central benefit of our lifestyle was that when I saw the fetid corpse of my first crush reaching out to tear off my face, I could be *practically certain* it wasn't real. It made for an interesting transition period, but after a while the wandering dead fell away into background irrelevance, like parking wardens and homeless people before the world changed.

Such peace was not always two-way. I remember that our evening's ration carried the Minister away on a tide of energy and impulse-control problems. We were still clad in our road clothes, the Minister in the Lamentable Hat and a blue Hawaiian shirt decorated in dirty playing cards, with unclean jeans and army boots. Dust and silt ground into his face except for patches left by the goggles, like some demented reverse-raccoon with mania shining in bright eyes. He'd found three or so zombies lurking nearby our fire-pit, and was gleefully diving and swooping around the lumbering beasts, seeking opportunities to tie their shoelaces together and watch them shuffle and stumble about. I can't recall what I wore myself, just that it was cold so I sought my sleeping-bag early.

In retrospect this was probably for the best. Soon after that, I worked through the lag you get with decent mescaline and suddenly everything mattered less. I was still aware of the Minister gallumphing around in his untied army boots, but was rapidly distracted by drifts of red, juicy butterflies hanging from tree branches like ripe fruit. What were these things, I remember thinking? Thick, fleshy wings, like ham steaks, flaps of foreskin or perhaps thickly sliced tomato, with no bodies to speak of. In a resonant conundrum, perhaps they were all of these *at the same time*. This needed more thought, I decided.

They shivered delicately with every muffled roar or clatter Dogwood produced, the motion echoing in my nervous system like they were under my skin. I understood instantly that his noise offended them, and terror that they might flee thrilled through me. I was considering how best to calm the Minister—couldn't he see how he frightened these poor things?—when a succession of sharp popping cracks, each one electricity flaring down my skull and out my limbs, filled the air and startled the hamforeskintomatoflies. Then someone screamed.

I was already on my feet before I consciously thought, *Christ, what's the Minister doing now?* And found myself heading towards the source of the

noise. I located Dogwood, stripped to the waist but still wearing the Hat, wrestling with a dark woman in combat fatigues. Fallen zombies littered the ground around them, all shot in the head, but more silhouettes were grumbling towards us through the trees.

“Glue, Horse!” the Minister roared.

I hiccupped and ran back to the camp on uneven feet as bruised flesh-petals fell in slow flurries, the delicate crimson creatures in the trees coming apart from the stressful vibrations humming all around us. The wood-glue leapt into the plastic bag like an oddly warm, fat voluptuous slug, making me squeal.

How had this happened, I wondered? Confusing beauty swirled into malevolent slugs and screams in the night, leaving me bewildered and undone.

The Minister was hustling the woman towards me through the dry and dying trees in a near headlock, one arm twisted behind her back. I held the gruesome pulsating slug-bag to her face, prompting muffled screams and sharp movements as she tried to get away.

“Take it, you daft cow!” hissed the Minister, for he had grown up a Briton and was prone to slipping into the vernacular of his youth in times of crisis. “Breathe it in.”

She went limp, which made it easier for us to drag her away from the pursuing zombies and the eerily silent patient tread they always fell into when following prey. I fell back, waving the glue around to confuse the trail and hoped that would lose them. The dead are dull-witted but canny predators, like some form of flesh-eating math teacher, but once they’re agitated and activated by potential food, they’ll go for anything in the vicinity whether it’s medicated or not.

You’re either good and fucked up or a danger to everyone, nothing in between. The Minister was furious. We dropped her, swooning and puking, back at the camp and wordlessly took up our weapons—a crowbar and tire-iron between the two of us—to go clean up her mess. The zombies were disoriented and had lost the trail, but they were still meandering around. Once activated, they’d keep stumbling through the area for a while, and there was always the chance they’d be agitated enough to go for movement if they found any. It was easy enough to sneak up on them and club their heads to slurry for safety’s sake, but an unpleasant task indeed. All the more so for its unnecessary nature.

What the hell had she been thinking?

Her rifle and pistol were empty, meaning she’d caught my attention firing the last of her wad. Paranoia and bad-craziness curled through me, as if tiny

people were sneaking up on me over my own skin. Who was this woman? Shooting zombies was a mug's game. However many there were, more would follow the noise, as they followed any atypical stimuli.

Why would she be here by herself, intent on riling up zombies near where the Minister and I planned to sleep?

Who had sent her, and what did she *know*?

I remember turning from my dark thoughts to see the Minister caught in what I initially took to be his own paranoid spiral, but then I realized his rage had shifted on him again. He was contemplating the unconscious woman and vaguely fingering a small bag he'd carried for years, filled with what the vendor had sworn was genuine Spanish fly.

Then he saw me watching him. An avalanche of expressions crossed his face as he thrust the bag away, out of sight.

"Didn't! Wasn't! Never would!" the Minister cried sharply, before subsiding with a muttered, "Can't be helped."

There was a moment of peace, and then his hand flashed to the fractal-blade he kept on a thong around his neck with a shriek of "Don't you judge me!"

My eyes locked on the intricate blade, glittering in the dying firelight. It was serrated all the way down, and considering the sickly radioactive gleam in the Minister's eyes, more than capable of making me much less pretty. He'd been carrying the damnable knife ever since his sister had used one to cut herself free from a trapped inverted canoe, although he didn't share an interest in that sport or any other.

You must understand that I'd known Minister Dogwood for many years, since high school in fact, and so I had a firm awareness of just how untrustworthy a fiend I was dealing with.

I pointed the woman's pistol at him, hoping he hadn't seen me check it earlier.

"Back off, you unhinged bastard! I wield *indiscriminate justice!*"

Dogwood's gleaming eyes narrowed, the knifepoint tracing unsteady Moebius strips in the air. Desperate now, I cried, "Go to sleep! What would your mother think?"

A moment of stasis then, before fat tears filled his eyes. He nodded to me once, then climbed sniffling into his sleeping-bag and curled into a ball. I waited for a moment and went for a walk to calm the screaming in my blood, treading on the fallen meaty petals of whatever those poor doomed fantastic things had been.

Something crunched underfoot and I found the shattered remains of the Minister's Lamentable Hat, where it must have been crushed as he wrestled the mysterious woman. I took the loss of the horrible artifact as a good sign for our journey—thankful that the Minister hadn't noticed—and then went to bed myself, suddenly aware of how cold it was and had been for some time.

Morning was a dangerous time for us, full of disorientation and spikes of crystalline suffering into the brain. I felt restrained and lashed out, eventually struggling free of the sleeping bag as from a warmly padded womb. I then made an attempt to remember where I was.

The presence of the woman was very confusing to me.

Who was she?

Had we *done* something?

Her guns and the zombie remnants brought it all back before self-accusation cut too deep, but also raised more questions than were answered. As I considered her, she stirred and woke, clearly with a splitting headache. I sympathized. Our Emergency Glue was not a fun ride, but it did the job.

I poured some water from our rations and set it down where she could get it before drinking some myself. She eyed me warily.

"There were zombies," she said eventually, in an even tone. "Then that maniac attacked me."

"Course they followed you. You sobered up, and were pulling them in from all over."

"Excuse me?"

Nonsensical. Perhaps speaking of bad damage. I played along, as patiently as I could.

"They follow you unless you're ripped. Can't shoot them or you attract more. Easy."

I dragged out the breakfast amyls and offered her one. She recoiled.

"What's that?"

"Amyl nitrite. Good for you. Got vitamins."

Nothing in her expression suggested comprehension. I sighed, pondering how a pharmacological virgin could have survived this long. Perhaps she was some Unabomber nutcase only now out of bullets. Since she seemed to be a newbie I took pity and opened one of the bags.

"You're going to have to take something, or the Minister over there is

going to wake up and make you take something, maybe the glue again, and the glue is a harsh and caustic mistress.”

She blinked in silence. I continued.

“We have amyls . . . Mescaline . . . Some weed, but that’s recreational rather than safety related . . . The last of the Green Shrieker . . . Some skinpatches with Mayhem Tweed and Strict Blue . . . Some meth, which will sort you out properly but rots your head and your teeth . . . A decent amount of acid and shrooms . . . Hard liquor and speed—”

“—Booze will save you from zombies?”

Incredulous hostility came from her in waves. It gave me a headache, and even more in need of my own dosage.

“Are you *from the past*?” I yelled, grabbing some gear from the supply bags and leaning over the Minister, punching him on the shoulder a few times. “Hang on,” I said to her, before returning to Dogwood. “Come on, Minister, breakfast dosage!”

He mumbled something unhelpful; I cracked an amyl under his nose and held it there.

“Come on, breathe deep . . . Good man.”

He went limp, which is always more comfortable when you’re already lying down. I grabbed one myself and turned back to her.

“Anything that’ll fuck you up properly will work,” I said, aiming for patience. “Booze will do, but you need a lot of it. You’d need to be utterly wasted.”

She chewed over the idea, then defaulted to the familiar: “I guess I’ll go with the booze.”

Handing over a bottle of tequila, I cautioned, “You’re going to need to be dedicated with this, and if they come after you again it’s back to the glue.”

Gamely enough she took a big swig and grimaced. Hardly surprising; it wasn’t very good tequila. I cracked my own amyl and breathed deep, carried away by the biting chemical scent and a delightful tide of dizziness. Purple haze hung in my vision, suspended in a timeless silence in which the world turned around me.

The main wave passed, leaving me with ongoing light-headedness and a sudden awareness of hunger. Food! Yes! I craved sugar and fat, perhaps caffeine. During a visit to the Minister’s sprawling family in the U.K. before the dead rose, I had encountered the deep-fried Mars bar: molten delectable battered money-shots from some chubby god of cardiac arrest. Couple of

them, some speed or ecstasy and perhaps a pint or two, and I'd be fuelled for another ten hours of experimental hooliganism.

The Minister maintained the same effect could be achieved with just the speed—with beer to flavor—but the man lacks an artists' soul, any respect for the culinary arts, and a basic knowledge of nutrition.

Alas the issue was moot: there was no access to the pinnacle of Western civilization that was deep-fried chocolate bars. Not without the underlying substrate of Western civilization. That ship had long since sailed, carried away by a rising tide of the walking, hungry dead.

The woman took another swig from the bottle and woke me from my reverie. "If it's just us against the zombies, I'm going to need to know what to call you. I'm Chantal."

"He's the Horse," interjected Dogwood, putting the lie to his apparent coma.

I jerked a thumb at him. "The man who is full of *lies* is Dogwood, my Minister for Lateral Problem-Solving, long term companion and sidekick."

I noticed that the woman had made a healthy dent in the tequila and was looking rather green. Heavy booze on an empty stomach. I saluted her enthusiasm, but she was going to geysir.

"Whoa!" said I. "Slow down or you're going to lose it all!"

It was hard to say whether she heard me. Wordlessly Dogwood began loading our gear into the car and started the long road to actually getting the engine running.

"Why are you two out here?" she asked, clearly bilious. "Where are you going?"

"The Minister and I are on a quest for more Safety Drugs for our community of Bad Axe."

"We're heroes," Dogwood said sagely, fiddling vaguely with the car.

"We head west, seeking population centers which might have a pharmacological bounty for us. But not into central Chicago itself. No, that might be a little too exciting. We seek the outlying regions."

Dogwood added, "Detroit would have been way too exciting."

I saw in that moment that she understood, but in retrospect it was probably somewhere between my experience with the amyl, and hers with rising bile. She took another swig and shuddered.

"So that's your plan? Survivors just taking drugs forever?"

The Minister and I exchanged a glance and started to laugh. It was not an

unreasonable question. Hell, I'm the first to admit that we had not hit upon an ideal long-term solution. Kids, for example. Kids could not be expected to be as Resilient as the Minister or myself, and yet the situation remained. Any given babies had the choice of being pulled apart like some struggling, gut-filled jelly-donuts, or growing into dribbling addicts with skulls full of bad cheese.

I'm not saying we had the answers then, but this was a bridge to cross another day. However, Chantal had inadvertently stumbled onto the larger path that the Minister and I walked, a noble plan to which our current holy mission was but one small part.

"Nah," Dogwood said. "We're going to get Twisted."

It was a simple statement, perhaps too simple by the blankness in Chantal's eyes, and as Dogwood said it he popped the engine cover. At the time I wasn't paying attention, but in hindsight the signs of the car's doom were all there. But leaving that aside, the Minister was absolutely right. Our larger quest was to get Twisted, like those noble leaders of men, Presidents Ozzy and Tommy Lee. I believe myself to have been more attached to the notion and disciplined in its pursuit than Minister Dogwood, even then.

"Twisted," I said sagely, "is when you take enough different drugs over enough time that you—you—"

"Smell different than people," called Dogwood, from somewhere inside the car.

"—Thank you, Minister—enough that your body-chemistry changes. Then they never find you, even if you're straight."

Dogwood straightened up and mused, "Sounds useful, but I don't see the point of that bit."

As I say, the Minister lacks true vision.

I remember waxing lyrical, but can't remember precise details. To be Twisted is to be truly free in this new benighted world of ours, untouched by the dead. Transcending natural human body-chemistry to become divine acid-casualties walking the world at will, spreading the word. Why do you think Ozzy and Tommy Lee are probably President? Nobody wants a Commander-in-Chief who might get eaten. It's just sense.

I was about to go into my theories about why cocaine doesn't seem to work when the Minister proclaimed, "Car's bugged."

He was right. Upon investigation, the battery reeked of sulfur.

I'm sure that to someone who knows anything about cars, that'd mean

something important. As it was, we were instantly reduced to moving by foot.

“Everything out of the car, Minister,” I said, knowing he was already working on it. “This will not slow us down, for we are Resilient.”

“True,” he said, “unless you mean in overland speed.”

Manfully, I ignored him, for we did actually have a plan. I went for our supply bags. Moving by foot was going to expose us to more zombies, so we needed something good and nasty, with fundamental endurance of effect. I went for the acid; the Minister went for a skinpatch of the Mayhem Tweed. He slapped the patch onto a forearm, giving himself a temporary tattoo like a piece of living couch or librarian’s jacket which sank slowly beneath his skin. Dogwood’s face flushed and paled in rapid succession while his irises bloomed darkness.

“That’s good Tweed,” he breathed. I eyed him sidelong while peeling a decent chunk of blotter free. Under Tweed, he was going to need watching, but that was hardly new. After the amount of acid I was intent on taking, I wasn’t going to be up for sainthood myself.

Chantal hid behind her tequila bottle when I offered her the bag, drinking more before vomiting copiously into the bushes. With the wad of blotter tucked into one cheek, I began sizing up westward angles to take—it’s always easier to take downhill trends on acid—when she spoke up and wiped her lips.

“You’re looking for drugs, right?”

The Minister and I exchanged a glance.

“Why?”

“Jackson. Lots of drugs in Jackson.” She straightened up and took another pull from the bottle. “Police station lockup is full of stuff. I just came from there.”

Dogwood snorted. “Bollocks you did, not on foot. That’s way the hell back east and—”

“—You have a better idea?”

He deflated with a shrug and looked at me.

“She raises a compelling point.”

So without a better idea of destination, and a limited timeframe to decide before polysyllabic demons got a vote, Jackson it was.

Retracing the path towards Jackson wasn’t hard. The trail of patient zombie steps and sporadic corpses was pretty clear, but six hours of blisters later and

the Minister was on the verge of mutiny. A rising column of anger seethed from him and stained the sky above the bleeding footsteps left in his wake.

The Tweed had taken him to a dark place without words or otherwise numbed his tongue. He stalked in silence over the dusty ground while the world throbbed and hummed nameless tunes around us. Chantal obliviously clutched her bottle like a savage cactus-based teddy-bear. She was a metronome vomit-fountain, staining the dust with stinking neon horrors that ate into the ground and sang of vague malevolence.

Me? I just felt kind of mellow.

The air was filled with the scent of dust and dry vegetation, along with crushed parsley and burning insulation rising in waves from the Minister's every bleeding footstep.

It was when the ground stood up and started yelling that I thought I was really freaking out. I can't explain the terror I felt when vaguely humanoid figures the color of dirt were suddenly there, shedding dust and trailing vines, reeking of anger and the cruelty man poured into the very soil.

Several things happened in rapid succession.

The Minister collapsed into a paralyzed crouch, a high keening in his throat, his eyes glistening white with fear as the compost beasts came for us.

I screamed in what I was later assured was an appropriately masculine manner.

Chantal dropped her bottle, raised her hands and said, "They're harmless, sir! Phillips reporting!"

One of the creatures spoke, each word a hideous Darth Vader rasp of Inescapable Doom. It was at that point I believe I dropped to the dirt and began to grovel, but in a clearer mind I remember it said, "Christ, Phillips. You go for bullets and find mouths."

"Civilian drug-fiends, sir. They saved me . . ."

The conversation was ongoing, but I stopped paying attention when I noticed the monsters encircling the Minister as he wailed wordlessly against their dusty existence. The outrage pulled me to my feet.

"You can't have him!" I roared. "He's mine!"

Chantal and the dirt-beast looked around.

"Mother of—" it said, pausing before making a cutting motion. "Fine. We'll sort these two out. You smell of puke."

"They think intoxication keeps them safe, and weren't happy unless I played along . . . I drank enough that I kept throwing up most of it."

Treachery!

The thought thrilled electrically through me, but by now I was already making efforts to dodge the monsters coming after me like they were herding a rabbit. The wrongness of their presence made me shrill and dizzy, but I am no rabbit.

Some fiend threw a sack over my head, the fabric membranous and alive, softly mewling. I crashed to the ground and hauled part of it off in time to see one monster touch the Minister.

The physical contact told him whatever he was seeing was tangible. In an instant he went from paralyzed silence to a gargling howl. One hand flashed to the fractal-blade at his throat and then he waded into the offending monster's leg like a kid into red-spurting birthday cake.

Shouts, then. Noise and bad confusion.

Next thing I remember is finding myself in restraints on a gurney.

A relief. This had happened before.

But where was the Minister?

I shifted as the restraints would allow, and there was no sign of Dogwood. Some medical personnel were dickering nearby, a woman and middle-aged man. I overheard, "—what Phillips says it's a miracle they survived this long, but we'll soon sort them out."

"You can't threaten me!" I shouted, channeling the stern hybrid spirit of Clint Eastwood and Charlton Heston. "I deal with scarier things than you in my shoes every morning, and that's only the stuff that's real!"

He knelt down beside the stretcher then, one of those paternal doctors you just want to dose with something vivid and enduring, then set free in a shopping mall. We'd see who's so smug *then*.

"My poor boy," he said truculently. "What have you been doing to yourself?"

"No negotiation with terrorists, doc! Return my Minister to me immediately, and we'll be on our way."

"In your current state, you'll poison any Reanimates who bite you!" he laughed, rotund and jocular.

"Ha. Ha. Yes. I fucked your daughter."

I could see this statement displeased him as he backed away, so I tried to figure out these restraints now that I lacked his gaze. Curses! The Minister was much more talented than I in this area. I fiddled and tested and pulled, only to overhear:

“—flush their systems and clean out the muck, straighten them out good and proper.”

“Wait, what?”

Silence and blankly hostile faces. The Fear began to rise in me from some chill and murky underground well.

They couldn't do that! They mustn't! I was so close to being Twisted I could taste it in the very air. A few more months! That was it! The Minister and I had started on this path long before the zombies provided a reason.

We were ahead of the game!

It became obvious that I was thrashing and probably yelling when they came with glinting unfriendly needles to silence my uncomprehending horror.

I howled out, “The drugs are good for meeeeeee!” before icy oblivion climbed up a vein, put the chairs on the tables and turned out the lights.

I woke to the smell of smoke, who knows how long later, under a sense of vague, watery sedation. Unrestrained, which meant they were getting careless or trusting, but confronted with a mutinously solid door. However, I guessed that the smoke meant that the Minister was nearby, and about to teach them Proper Caution.

I dragged myself upright and everything felt wrong. The criminals had leached the drugs from my system and replaced them with weakness—fat and heavy metals, weighing me down. Peering through the door's little window, I banged and hollered as best I could: “Fire! You can't leave me in here with this maniac! *Fire!*”

A disorganized pack of people came and let me out, suspicious but fundamentally uninformed of my basic nature. There was something on the air along with the smoke, some primal trapped terror and confusion. These people had far bigger problems at the moment than even myself and the Minister could provide. It was at that moment I remember thinking that we might get out of this yet.

We'd had a lot of practice dealing with panic and disorder as it all came down, and this felt like a flashback or a sequel. First thing's first, however, I had to locate Dogwood. I harnessed my rescue crew with a cry of “Dear Lord! Smoke!” and ran towards it, leaving nothing more than a startled, “Hey, wait!” in my wake. I figured they'd be keeping the Minister nearby, and that if I could keep these people off-balance enough, they'd forget to be too suspicious.

The smoke coincided with frantic hammering on a heavy door. I turned to the confused pack following me and cried, “What are you waiting for? Get the poor man out!”

Dogwood tumbled to the concrete and linoleum-tile of the corridor through thick smoke as the door opened, half-naked and wheezing, grabbing my leg.

“They tried to kill me, Horse!” he coughed. “Locked me in and left me to burn!”

“No more of that ‘Horse’ garbage, understand?” I hissed in his ear before straightening to proclaim, “This man is ill and my responsibility—”

But my words were interrupted as the Minister coughed till he was sick on my foot.

“Look,” a haggard youth said, unshaven and reeking of The Fear. “We don’t care about whatever line of bullshit you’re trying to spin. It doesn’t matter. And just trust me when I say you’ll fight with all the rest of us when the time comes.”

I nodded busily, grinning in what I hoped was a manner that spoke of agreement and total comprehension: “Indeed! Fighters, us. Stern repose. All that stuff.”

It seemed that we’d been less clever than I’d thought, but they really believed something terrible was coming. It seemed best to trust them on this, and just focus on getting the hell out of Dodge before it arrived. The Minister caught my attention again with another coughing fit, making me pull my foot out of range. His eyes rolled pink like an agitated lab-mouse, wearing nothing but boots and jeans, both legs torn raggedly so that one ended above the knee and the other courted indecency.

“Where are your clothes, Minister?”

“Burned ’em. Had to start somewhere.”

Of course he had, but it couldn’t be helped. Definitely time to be moving on, away from this foreign place and its aura of doom.

Wait, where *are* we, I thought?

The Minister and I staggered from the concreted area of our incarceration—gray, glass and steel—only to find ourselves on the third story of an incomprehensible madhouse, when we could see the ground. Vast walls and fences surrounded an area of something akin to four blocks, teeming with shanty structures and fetid masses of humanity. Buildings, clearly pre-existing the Reanimates or whatever these guys called zombies,

hauled themselves up out of the complicated mass below. Few people were left at ground level, seeming to prefer to get as high as they possibly could.

What kind of lunacy was this?

Why were they all trying to get off the ground? It looked safe. Or were they looking out over the walls, and if that was the case, why were they freaking out so much?

The furled edges of a conclusion touched my mind, but I will admit that Dogwood got there before I did and saved us the trip upstairs to investigate.

“They’ve got zombies. A scorching case.”

Of course. All of Chantal’s weird behavior and the incomprehensible drug-theft treachery could fit if these misguided cretins were from the past, and simply hadn’t noticed that pattern. Morons.

This was something out of *Mad Max*. Razor-wire and gun-emplacements at the top of the wall, never mind that the repetitive noise would bring them in like nothing else. Well, excepting the smell of legion overheated unwashed humans, or maybe concentrated brain-radiation, or whatever it was they homed in on.

In any case, this place was sun-ripened spam in a can.

It was time to run away.

“You’re right, Minister! My god, these people are going to get us both killed!”

“Bad scene, man,” he grated on a smoke roughened throat. “Irresponsible.”

“Indeed! We need to get to the ground and get out before the zombies arrive.”

“What if they’re at the gates already?” he clutched my arm. “We might *smell of food!*”

A chill went through me, reminding me of how physically dissolute and watery I felt, sapped of Power and Resilience. A conundrum.

“These people will stockpile gear, Minister. For one thing, they’ll have ours. That should be enough to get free of this place. We must find it!”

The two of us slinked and reeled down sets of stairs to reach the ground, passing or jumping barriers across the stairs when we found them. We were straight-sober for the first time in living memory and the experience was ghastly, stripping away all the filters sane humans need to function and setting us loose like panicky rats under snake-eyes. There was nothing on these levels but shoddy hotel-sized units turned apartment shanty-towns.

Not what we needed. I remember peering over banisters and scanning around for a structure that would predate the Big Zs. It'd be run down and blocky. Utilitarian. Just *scream* "police."

In the end, the Minister found it by falling down the stairs. He came to rest and, when the swearing died down, reported that there were low windows at the street, containing a six inch view of what looked like cells. And the Minister knew cells.

Breaking into police stations turned out to be surprisingly easy when all the police are AWOL for fear of flesh-rending horrors. I was bent on getting the lock picked or finding something to chisel the hinges when the Minister kicked in one of the ground windows and climbed inside.

"Minister!" I said, scrambling down to the window. "We want to avoid jail cells, and you don't like them. Been very clear on that in the past . . ."

"Door's open, Horse . . ." came the muffled response.

I dislike crawling over even the most tidily broken glass, but truly these were Desperate Times. Dogwood was missing, as happened frequently in times of stress and confusion, but would not stray far. I could hear him scuffling around somewhere beyond the cells, which were indeed open.

I called, "Find anything?"

"Cops stop filing when the world starts to end. Guess it's been ending here for a while."

The man can be a poet when he wants, when the demons aren't soiling that part of his mind, or riding him around the city like a radioactive jet-propelled scooter bent on mass destruction.

The real question was, where would they have put our stuff? Or failing that, where would they have been keeping other people's stuff, which we could then get into and abscond with? The search took some time, from memory, leading two increasingly desperate men—both of whom were in the early depths of different flavored DTs as the sedation wore off—through a plethora of pathologically dull police rooms. By a process of elimination we found an evidence lock-up, and it was there that the dark gods smiled upon us with their blackened grimy teeth and decided we'd suffered enough. If the cops had still been in a filing mood we might never have found it, but getting into all the lockers and drawers meant that we located bags that looked suspiciously like our supplies. The Minister was even reunited with his fractal-blade, still rusty with monster juice or—in retrospect—soldier blood. He returned it to its thong, and to the gap it left in the tan around his

neck. All of the Safety Drugs were there, tagged and dated in little plastic bags.

And then we noticed all the other stuff in the locker. In little plastic bags. And in the lockers next to ours.

They say when it rains it pours, and *howling crackbaby CHRIST* but it was beautiful. My mouth went dry as the Minister began to laugh a low, dirty chuckle.

It was more than we could carry by a significant margin, such riches that to take all of it would have been lamentable greed. The Minister and I were and are pillars of the global community and would not dream of it.

“We have to try some of this . . .” the Minister said.

“Indeed! It’s medicinal! Choose your weapons and see what you can find by way of a wheel-barrow or box mover, something wheeled.” I grabbed a decent chunk of acid and some speed. “Take what you want, Minister; we’re making up for lost time and need to be safely wasted by the time the zombies get in.”

He rooted in the bins and suddenly looked up. “They’ll be agitated when they arrive. Won’t matter if we’re wasted so long as we’re moving!”

A relevant, alarming point. “True. Drugs, a barrow and a stolen car, Minister. We have our mission.”

We didn’t find anything so useful as a wheeled box conveyance, but I did find some decent back-packs and a roll of carpet from the adjoining office, which I figured might be useful for getting over any barbed wire. However, in the time it took me to return, the Minister had chosen to plunge us forward once again into Interesting Times.

Different shades of upholstery fabric crawled detectably up each arm and stained his torso, with a third mounting one leg. His eyes were intense and manic, shining with an unwholesome inner light.

I shudder thinking about it, even now. Little will make a grown man more foolhardy, unstable and depraved than mixed, conflicting Tweed. And from the way the cloth pattern stain was spreading, all were unusually high doses.

The plan had changed, although the overall mission remained the same: complete all objectives before Minister Dogwood became a portal for horror and bad confusion to enter this benighted world.

How long could I keep control of my own demons, I wondered? The gust-front of the acid was curling through my brain like a serpent returning to a comfortable lair, and pretty soon it was going to take the wheel.

Here I was, responsible for Minister Dogwood, currently the human equivalent of a dirty suitcase-nuke with a low timer and nothing but red wires. The two of us trying to get out of an armed compound before an unspecified number of the undead—an unknown distance away—broke inside, and all before the acid-snake took me for a joyride.

It is challenges which make us grow.

A susurrus of voices and the sharp taps of gunfire carried in the air when we managed to get out of the police station. The cell windows were much too high to escape from the inside, so we had to use the door. Far above, I could see the arms and gestures of the milling throngs as they surveyed their impending doom arriving on implacable rotting legs. No idea how long we had, so safest to assume not much time at all and then work from there.

“Minister,” I declared, trying to keep him focused. “Look for vehicles.”

I was aware myself of the incipient dust melting into an iridescent sheen and climbing slowly up our legs.

Dogwood’s gaze was fixed on the balconies above, apparently on a once-fat woman with sagging bundles of flesh holding onto a malnourished Pomeranian.

“Dogsa darkmeat, yeh?”

Sinking feeling, or was that the melting dirt? Our downward spiral begun so soon? Had to keep him focused, and that would be increasingly difficult.

“No good, Dogwood. Too many bones.”

“Can’t trust the bones, no.”

“Cars, Minister! Focus.”

We were attracting attention and shouts from the people above, but that wasn’t the real concern. I had to think. Cars would be outside the camp to give them space and since zombies wouldn’t damage them, so we had to seek a way out of these hideous walls. The Minister was following me and I wasn’t worried about anyone here interfering with him. Mostly naked except for lopsided torn pants, clashing upholstery patterns crawling under his skin and mixing in his torso, brightly maniacal eyes and a fixed grin . . . He was obviously far too crazy a person to mess with. The Tweed patterns were a biological warning to predators, part of how the world declares Do Not Disturb. He was like some feral fusion-powered couch-based Frankenstein lurching around this little settlement in defiance of God’s laws, and daring polite society to form a mob. Fortunately, polite society had bigger concerns.

Our wanderings lead us to a change from concrete to hurricane fencing, beyond which the horizon could be seen behind indistinct humanoid figures in the distance. Progress at last! I climbed up enough to throw our carpet over the sharp wire, then hurled the gear bags I was carrying over the fence to the other side. I hoped the Minister would follow my lead, but I was beset by traitorous whispers. Setting him loose here would be like throwing a sack of weasels into a kindergarten; it would definitely afford time for my own escape, but I couldn't do that! He was my Minister, and the crazy bastard for all his faults didn't deserve that. And these poor misguided swine didn't deserve him, not in this state.

I climbed the fence, the wire under my hands throbbing with a giant, slow heartbeat and singing in a phantom wind. I was aware of hostile attention from the crowds above and hurried, aiming to cajole Dogwood across once I was on the other side. As I reached the dirt I saw him throw his arms wide and look up at the crowds before booming, "Don't worry, citizens! We're not the undead!"

Thank you, Minister. I remember thinking. *Succinctly put.*

"Come on, throw me the gear and climb over," I yelled. I could see Chantal moving our way through a growing crowd daring the balconies of the lower levels, but ignored her. Dogwood, however, was confused by my interruption.

"What? Why are we leaving? Have you caved in to these people?"

"Over the fence, you animal! We don't have time for games!"

Dogwood glared intensely and began to climb, still carrying all his bags. He fought his way up to the carpet, his underskin patterns growing out behind him as membranous fabric wings while my pulse roared and sang in my ears.

Hold it together, I thought. *Maintain!* I thought.

Lose control now and the two of you will be lost in the storm.

When the Minister came down, the carpet came with him. Shrieking, he rolled in its embrace, punching and biting. I hauled it away and Dogwood looked up at me with huge, mad eyes.

I dragged him bodily away from the fence and looked for vehicles. As I did, the community's situation became clearer. They were in a box-canyon, so the gunshot echoes would summon zombies for miles. The initial forerunners of the undead horde dropped like ripe rupturing fruit as they reached the range of the guns, but that was a finite solution at best—particularly given their thickening crowds. Despite the pace they were being cut down, the mob was

still making visible if very slow progress towards the walls. And then they'd start to climb each other.

The two of us had seen this before.

Well, not with the whole *Mad Max* walls and gun-emplacement thing, but otherwise we'd seen it.

The car-pool was dusty and some of the vehicles looked dilapidated, but that'd never stopped us before. I unleashed the Minister and directed him to the nearest jeep. He was always better with hotwiring than me, even while chemically unbalanced.

I watched the man plunge beneath the dashboard and rip into the wires there with a high, tearing scream of laughter. Perhaps, I thought, this time he was too far gone. Yet this was negative thinking and of no purpose. The jeep had some big water tanks strapped to the side which sounded full, and a pile of silver-wrapped food packs in the back. Food and water would be useful if we wanted not to have to drink our piss before we reached civilization.

Never fun.

The engine turned over with a zapping scream, matched with a cry from Dogwood, who began punching the dashboard and swearing. He seemed to have the situation in hand, and my attention was drawn back to the walls of the bleak settlement that was doing everything wrong.

Poor, misguided, uncomprehending wretches. Trapped in a new world they didn't understand, and much of which wanted to consume their living flesh. A very bad scene today, fear in the air, yet another apocalypse the Minister and I had to witness. The acid hummed, spat and whispered that perhaps this was no accident. Were we the karmically-invested sin eaters of an entire way of life?

Troubling thought, but I doubted it. We didn't really know these people, not even Chantal.

Chantal.

My eyes narrowed as a conclusion formed, even if I wasn't completely conscious of it at the time. Chantal was a crystalline example of this community. Misguided, unheeding, desperately human, and seeking a means to continue that state. She had a face, particularly in comparison to everyone else the Minister and I had dealt with here, all of whom realistically had been total dicks.

She had a face and a name even if we didn't know her, and she deserved another chance. By extension, so did the rest of them.

I clambered around to the back of the jeep and rooted around for tools,

spooking the Minister. He brandished a pair of pliers at me from the floor and weaved dangerous, eerie patterns in the air with the shining points, like a crab signaling territory over lake mud.

These people were organized. There were two sorts of tire-iron, and right where they should be, rather than under the seats or taped to the bodywork. I grabbed the longer one that was unimpeded by a cross-piece, and set out at an angle that would bring me towards the thickening tide of zombies while keeping me visible to the watchers above.

The chattering of the idiot guns was still keeping them far enough back that it was a long walk in the afternoon sun, any moment expecting a stray round. The acid wave hit and broke over me en route, melting the ground into a thick stodgy soup and staining the sky with strobing neon torment. An endless staticky hiss filled the world, like a bad recording of surf on a stony eternal shore. The zombies seemed to join the soup, reminding me of the ghastly visions which beset me when Chantal lead us into that trap.

For a moment I contemplated going back and ceasing my rebellion against The Fear, soured by memory of that betrayal. But no! I would be holy Teflon to that ugliness, and refuse to soften my resolve.

The lecherous, biting gunfire laughter stopped altogether as I neared and singled out one particular zombie, which at least suggested they'd noticed me and cared. I was touched. Then they started up again, to chew away at the fringes some distance from me.

I focused on my target as the viscous world lurched, bubbled and sang.

You can't trust the dead. For every staggering Romero-brand which saps your caution, you'll find another one fresh enough to run screaming or throw something. Or one dried by desert winds into staggering carnivorous cordwood, seemingly harmless till they get close enough to release the crossbow tension in twisted tendons like steel cables and rip you in half. And then occasionally you find a zombie with activated Augments and implants. If you're wary you have a very bad day. If you're not wary you probably don't get a chance to have a bad day.

Even if you're ripped or Twisted, there are few guarantees. Not when you're up close and personal, and particularly not when they can smell flesh on the wind.

The one I'd singled out was dry and old, but lively enough. His stiffened leathery skin—all in patches—creased into a frown as he neared me, aware I was there but not what I was. I steeled myself and held out an arm before the

creature, watching its rotting nostrils flex in and out, wuffling around and searching for this weird thing I was. Those horrible nostrils! They unfurled slowly like miniature elephant trunks on the hunt, or seemed to, sparking thrills of nauseous horror. I didn't move except to turn back to the walls and balconies where binoculars winked.

Backing a safe distance away from the hideous, duel-elephant thing, I pointed and roared, "See? No bitey!"

At the noise, all the zombies recalibrated to me, until the settlement fired again and refocused them on the walls. With luck, the villagers finally noticed that part of the pattern. I moved back to the zombie I'd initially targeted and smacked it in the skull with the tire-iron till it stopped moving. The body smelled like opening a bag of jerky which has started to turn—dry, salty and corrupt. It took me back to that god-awful bar in Terra Haute, with gleaming soiled gems of teeth and enamel fragments in the urinal, but I forced the memory down and decided to drive the point home to these people. After all, they were woefully behind the times.

I spent five or ten minutes running through this forest of corpses and played the Minister's games. I pushed them over like tipping humanoid cows, danced around before them, safe in their confusion, and even tied one's shoelaces together to leave it stumbling and crawling. Nothing without risk, but I was high on superiority.

Puffed by my Heroic Exertions, I moved back toward the settlement to see results. People with rifles were watching me, one with binoculars. Chantal was also in evidence with that group. As I watched, one of the armed figures turned to the man with the binoculars and spoke.

Instantly, I knew what was said, like a voice from over my shoulder stating in a reasonable tone, "Maybe we should shoot him?"

Paranoia gripped me in a cold, thorny fist. A finger lanced out at Chantal.

"Her!" I screamed. It took a second or two for the sound to hit the balconies. "Indeed! She's seen it! Ask her!"

Already she was engaged in conversation with Official Looking People, perhaps to deny knowing me. It was hard to say. But it can be very hard to stop talking when acid is at the wheel, words tumbling out despite my terror that I was only making things worse.

"The police station! Full of glorious drugs to keep you safe! More than you need! And *stop shooting at them!*"

People on the move, either towards their miraculous drug cache or to come get us.

It was Time to Leave.

I ran back towards the jeep, finding the engine running and the Minister strapped securely into the passenger seat, grinning alarmingly and showing bright teeth. His eyes held mine, inhuman intensity and mirth unblinking in shining white orbs. I'd seen that stare. Hell, I've stared that stare, and it is a noted harbinger of nothing good. No matter, I thought. A problem for another time, and we had many miles to travel yet.

Climbing into the driver's seat, I made sure that the supplies were actually in the car. Dumping the soiled tire-iron in the back, I floored it, sending us towards more comprehensible climes in a cloud of dust—or would do, as soon as I figured out where we were. Chantal had mentioned Jackson, but was this another Unfortunate Lie?

I considered the situation as we drove into the golden heat of the late afternoon sun. The growl of the engine thrummed through the very ground until the sky itself coruscated to its tone before the two of us, a pair of Chemical Saints, mission accomplished and returning home—as soon as we found it.

Warily, I also kept an eye on the Minister as he savaged open the packaging on a Meal Ready-to-Eat with his fractal blade.

It was serrated, you see.

All the way down.

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Welcome to the gonzo zombie story. To me, this *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*-style zombie defense is highly (pun intended) appealing and makes perfect sense: transcend human body chemistry and melt your cerebrum to avoid the mindless brain-eating walking dead. Beats barbed-wire, dwindling ammo, and imposed militaristic discipline any day.

But hey, that's me. You might feel differently. Of course, I lived through the seventies and even remember some of it.