

Zombie Stories – The College Town

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My boyfriend told me that moving to Mt. Ares was going to be a mistake I would one day "rue." Can you believe that? Nobody says "rue," nobody but characters played by Jeremy Irons. No one ever "rues the day." That's what I told him, too, when he said that. I slapped him on the shoulder and threw back my head and laughed at him and told him he was being silly. Still, I didn't like the idea of moving my entire life to a town of 5,000 people so... I didn't.

I feel kind of dumb admitting that, but I didn't do it. I kept my rat trap in Asheville and did a lot of commuting to Mt. Ares, which was 45 minutes straight up the side of a mountain. It made for some wonky hours, some really really early mornings I didn't enjoy, but it meant I got to have a life. If I'd actually gone and lived up there I'd have been schlepping it up and down that mountain every Friday night, every time I went to the mall, every time I wanted to get a cup of coffee that didn't have a fast food logo on the side.

Still, there were times when I just didn't have it in me to go back home after the day and so I'd shut myself in my office and curl up on a futon mattress I folded up and shoved between two filing cabinets and I'd sleep on an airplane pillow with an old quilt over me. On those mornings I could just hoof it up to the gym real early and catch a shower and change into the clothes I kept in a bag in my office and get breakfast in the cafeteria and enjoy the extra thirty minutes or so that would buy me.

I guess I should explain who I am. My name is Jennifer McCordy. I'm a Big Iron – mainframe computers, big old boxes that can do the heavy lifting for a large organization's back-end computing needs – system administrator. I majored in Comp Sci, sort of, as an undergrad. I say "sort of" because UNC didn't have a real computer science major when I went there. Sure, they had a huge Comp Sci department with a big, fancy building paid for by the Navy, but the Comp Sci department was grads only. I had to major in something called "Mathematical

Sciences" and get a computer science specialization. I took most of my classes in that very chic Comp Sci building but I couldn't get that on my diploma. They have an undergrad degree program now, yeah, but this was the '90s and it just didn't exist then. I figured if I got really good grades – and I did – then I could just coast into the grad program and renew my lease on my apartment and that would be that.

No such luck. They don't like admitting people who went to UNC as undergrads. They want a "more diverse student body," they said. I got turned down. Well, to be honest, I got wait-listed, which is as good as getting turned down. My backup was UNC-Asheville, so that's where I went. It beat spending a year behind the cash register at a bagelry with my fingers crossed. They had great big mainframes there, old VAX systems no one else had running. I ended up doing my dissertation on the impact of object-oriented programming curricula on the modern workforce's ability – lack thereof, really – to cope with real-world scenarios involving older technologies still in use in slow-to-adopt industries. That's what Y2K was all about, you know. Old COBOL programmers got called out of retirement left and right because they were the only ones around who knew how the hell to fix all the old mainframes sitting around data centers in aging coal plants and places like that. All the newly minted doctoral candidates in the world couldn't have solved that problem; it took a bunch of Santa Claus lookalikes in matching plaid suspenders and bifocal glasses to put the kibosh on the fall of western civilization. My UNCA profs loved it. I might as well have written them a three hundred page love letter. That wasn't what I meant to do, I wasn't angling for the sycophant's diploma, but it didn't hurt.

After that, even though Tim encouraged me to go get my PhD and become a professor – how many women like you had no good role models in the sciences, in math, in computer science especially, he'd ask, and I agreed but I was also pretty tired of school by then – I decided to go get some live-fire experience. It could only help my chances at getting into a doctoral program if I had a few years of real system administration under my belt, something done out in the real world. So I started casting around for Big Iron jobs in Asheville because I'd really grown to love that slice of mountain paradise. I figured I'd have an advantage there, in fact, because of the lack of a high-tech industrial base. Asheville's economy is tourism

and a few fading manufacturing plants. Landing a job nurturing some computer the size of a Cadillac and older than I was would be a piece of cake.

The only real nibble I got, it turned out, was from Mt. Ares Baptist College. They didn't have a comp sci program but they did have a few old IBMs in their machine room, under the math building. Tim rolled his eyes. "They're never going to respect you at a place with 'Baptist' in the name," he said. "They're probably going to give you the hairy eyeball for not wearing a skirt and walking two paces behind any men who happen to be around." He called it Mt. Ares Burqa College.

I don't want to give you the wrong impression about Tim. He's a good guy. I guess I love him, but to be honest I wouldn't throw myself off any bridges if he died tomorrow. That's not how I'm wired. He's followed me around from one academic program to another, though, and he never criticized me or what I was doing and I don't want you to think that he was using a lot of happy empowerment talk to control me in some weird, manipulative way. It wasn't like that. To support that, I'll tell you this: I took the job, and he never said another bad word about the place. I'd made up my mind and he respected that. Discussion over. Tim's like that. If he doesn't like something he'll say so and when he figures out that didn't convince you he'll shut the hell up.

When I took the offer at Mt. Ares it was August. School was about to start. The last sysadmin had retired in May. The systems they've got going up here could basically run on auto-pilot for weeks at a time, no problem, these are big old computers built with reliability and redundancy specifically in mind. These were Cold War-era systems that had been designed to keep the numbers crunched even if the Reds dropped the big one square on Washington. There was a real sense of that up in Mt. Ares, that idea that they were continually going to hold the proverbial fort against some outsider culture determined to stamp them out. They hadn't replaced the systems they had, even though they could afford to, because they'd "always worked just fine," they said, and I found out later they'd hired me in part because of my dissertation: Legacy High-Performance Computing and Media Survivability.

My first day was the week before the fall session began and my boss, J. Harley Boquest – I shit you not – showed me down to my new digs. His title is Dean of Information Management. What that means is that he's an accountant from the '60s. He attended Mt. Ares just in time to watch flower power bloom on television and I guess it scared him; he never left Mt. Ares. He hired on that summer as a bookkeeper in the Finance Dept. and he's climbed the ladder one decade at a time. He has a habit of talking about his childhood home in Kentucky as though it was a Boy Scout camp that never ended. Maybe it was. I smile and nod. He's a nice guy, it's just... well, I'm not into standing around reminiscing. Anyway, he showed me down to my office. It's in the basement of the math building. You go down the front steps and cut around behind them and down the stairs to the basement. At the bottom of those stairs there's a big double door, wooden, over-sized, big enough to drive a VW beetle through them, and there's a big sign on each one, identical, so you can read it even if one of the doors is propped open: NON-ACADEMIC.

Beyond that there's a hallway of plain, institutional puke green cinder blocks and a beige tile floor, the kind flecked with darker spots so you won't notice if it gets dirty. There are no doors along the first half of the hall, giving you a sense you're walking deeper than you are, deep into the bowels of the building and off into some secret, cavernous complex underneath the campus. For all I know, we are. There are weathered, faded, metallic signs here and there down there with the standard radiation symbol and FALLOUT SHELTER written on them in block letters. After a few yards or maybe miles of green cinder block there's a single double window, the right hand pane of which slides back so you can speak to the attendant on the other side. There's no attendant anymore, but there used to be back when this was where the printer lived. Note the singular there: the printer. The glass is double thickness with a wire mesh embedded in it. I don't know who they thought would rob this place, but it's bullet-proof all the same.

Finally, past that and around the corner, there are the double doors into the machine room. There's a big, red HIGH VOLTAGE sign with little cartoon lightning bolts all around it and a stick figure guy dying horribly in each corner. Fun.

J. Harley showed me the punch code – 1 2 3 4, I regret to inform you – and walked me back between a potpourri of different models of mainframes and data banks like mismatched Legos stacked in neat rows. In the back corner was a little

door with no window and, in there, a small room with two filing cabinets, a plain wooden desk, a chair and no external window. It has fluorescent lights and all the charm of a converted closet because that's what it is.

Harley swept his arm inside and said, "Your new home away from home." Then he laughed his snorty little laugh, said he'd ordered a new nameplate and a computer would be delivered next week and walked away. J. Harley doesn't know a lot about computers and doesn't really like that they've brought in an outsider. If J. Harley had his way, they'd retain a portion of every class as breeding stock and then eventually they'd staff the place with a bunch of gilled natives of Innsmouth.

I spent the next week looking over the old wiring diagrams, such as they were, and figuring out where the hell everything was. My computer arrived a week after he'd said it would, but I had plenty to keep me busy in the meantime. I also used that time to poke around campus a little, check out the lay of the land and make a friend: Everett Plank, Associate Professor of Biology. He called himself Underchair for Creation Science when he was feeling bitter about his job, but that wasn't often. I liked Everett. Everett was a good guy. We spent the academic year buddying around campus. I think Tim was jealous at first but then they met and even Tim's gaydar couldn't fail to pick up the beacon in the night that is Everett.

I realize my verb tenses are all confused but I've never told this before, start to finish, so sometimes I feel like I'm still there and sometimes I feel like it happened a million years ago.

My first year at Mt. Ares wasn't easy. There were staff who found me lacking in any number of ways: too female, too young, too non-academic. J. Harley turned out to be a nice enough boss, if a little weird sometimes. He had an odd sense of humor and these horn-rimmed glasses that were so thick they made it actually impossible to look him in the eyes. He would tell jokes about Communists and Everett would say they were coded anti-Semitic remarks and I'd say to myself that they'd both been there so long they'd gotten decoupled from the rest of the world. Everett at least went down to Asheville to go dancing sometimes.

He made it a lot easier on me, though, while I adjusted. We buddied around campus, catching lunch most days and dinner nearly as many. The school cafeteria was uninspired to say the least but I'd rather have bland casserole with someone

who makes me laugh than three lonely squares in isolation. It was one of those nights we'd caught dinner together in the cafeteria that everything went to hell.

The Mary Anne McCollough Memorial Cafeteria was a really typical school college cafeteria, exactly how you picture it even though I haven't mentioned the drab brown carpet an ascetic sixteenth of an inch in thickness or the iceberg lettuce on the salad bar or the cashiers who sighed heavily whenever someone tried to pay with something other than an easy swipe of their meal card. The one nod to luxury or the modern era in the cafeteria were the banks of TVs in the corners, three each. One was always on the Weather Channel, one was always on ESPN and one was always on Fox News. Sometimes someone would get a couple of friends and try to form a human pyramid to change the channels and a cashier would come squalling out at them and chase them off before they succeeded. Everett would stare at the middle one, Fox News, and sigh every four minutes; then he'd joke that Bill O'Reilly was the best diet he'd tried yet as he pushed his plate away and draped a napkin across it.

"Why do you do that?" I asked the first time he did it.

"Dead food," he intoned, very seriously, "Is gross."

So it went, at least three nights a week, sometimes more.

April rolled around in due time and the ground started to thaw. Kids went on spring break trips and came back rowdy and paying zero attention in classes. Professors grumbled about kids these days. Adjunct faculty picked up their mail and scurried off with it in case they'd gotten a better offer. The tenured types started putting the tops down on their convertible K cars. Everyone was bustling. Seniors who were about to graduate started spending a lot of time just looking at things - like, trees, shrubs, the sides of buildings - like they'd never seen them before. April on a college campus is like that: something big is about to happen. Something momentous.

Everett and I were in the McCollough getting dinner around the middle of the month when we both cracked up at something he'd said about his boss, Dr. Bach, I don't remember what, and I realized abruptly that we were too loud for the ambient noise in the cafeteria. We were having a big laugh and everyone else was quiet.

We looked kind of in the middle of the room and what I realized was that everyone was doing two things: keeping quiet and facing away from us. I followed the directions they were all pointed and found they were all staring at the TVs.

"Again, this is a developing situation on the ground in North Carolina but we can provide some early details: there have been wide-ranging reports of attacks tonight by bands of wandering people. The offenders have been described a number of ways. 'Vagrants,' 'demented,' 'junkies'; these are all words we're hearing used on police scanners and in the reports we're picking up online and from some calls some of our affiliates in that state have received from local viewers."

There was a talking head, a news reader, sitting there looking thoughtful in split-screen with a guy in desert fatigues standing on the incongruously green lawn in front of a Fox station in Greensboro. "So, are you saying these are mass attacks? Would you call them riots?"

"Well, John, I don't know, but that seems to fit with what we're hearing, yes."

"Is this terrorism-related? Do you think this is terrorist activity?"

"Again, John, I just don't know that yet but it could be, possibly. If so, they are extremely well-organized and they've recruited far more combatants than I would have thought possible."

"Can you describe them to us? The words you said people have been using, words like 'vagrant,' those strike a pretty strong chord. Are we talking about attackers dressed in rags? Are we talking about violent hobos?"

"Well, I..." The guy in the fatigues put his finger to his ear for a moment and then said, "John, we're piping you some footage just received by our local affiliate. The report I'm being given indicates that this was taken by a young police officer in the town of Hickory. The video comes from this brave young man's cellular phone. This is about to be shown for the first time."

The split screen faded and a blurry, pixelated image taken in too much darkness filled in the screen. It sat in freeze-frame for a moment and then, frame by trickling frame, the blobs moved.

They were people, marching. They were out of step and many were limping or dragging a foot and they didn't hold their arms out in front of them and none of them moaned or groaned or said anything you'd expect them to hear but they advanced - slowly - towards the cop, the guy taking the footage. He called out to

them, hard to understand but closed-captioning claimed he'd told them to stop and raise their hands. They didn't. Something sparked and buzzed and hissed and I realized that he'd tried to taze the one in front. It staggered for a few seconds and then it kept walking.

Its face was hard to make out with the poor picture quality but something - a ridiculously cliched trickle down my back - told me I didn't mind not being able to make out the face.

The cop pulled a gun and shot. It staggered again. He shot it again. It staggered again and it made a sound like a wheeze that was somehow much, much worse than moaning. The cop got his wits back, suddenly, and shot the thing in the kneecaps from maybe eight feet away.

It toppled over and started dragging itself around on its elbows. The perspective swung wildly as the cop jumped back in his car, tossed the phone aside so that we got a great image of the roof of the patrol car, and then trees and street lights blurred by out the window.

I surprised myself when my first thought was confusion as to why they were described as vagrants; they'd all been wearing suits and ties or nice dresses.

The screen went dark again and then the two guys from Fox were on again. "That... is some very impressive footage."

"Agreed, John. The reports we're getting indicate that's a fairly typical representation of what's going on. From what we're hearing, they've been spotted in every population center of any size, from the mountains to the coast of North Carolina. We won't hesitate to let you know as soon as we have any further information at all."

"Any advice for viewers in North Carolina? Have the authorities made any statements? Any recommendations?"

"Only to say to stay inside, to stay with people, not alone, to check before going anywhere that you have a stocked emergency kit including any prescription medications you might need. They've said to avoid travel even if you haven't seen one because, wherever you are, they could get there at any time."

The talking head turned back to the camera and started summarizing for anyone who'd just tuned in. Then he ran the footage again. Still no one in the

cafeteria spoke. We all sat in silence and watched the footage three, maybe four times in a row.

People started to trickle out by that point. No one who'd come in since it started had bothered to get food. The cashiers weren't at their stations, they were watching TV with the rest of us. Everett and I turned back to one another and he cleared his throat. "Call your boyfriend," he said. "Make sure he's OK."

I nodded and dug around in my backpack and came out with my shitty little free phone for my shitty little first-year-staffer affordable plan. I called him and it rang three times before he picked up. "I'm driving up there," he said, a little breathless. "I shouldn't be talking and driving. The road..."

He trailed off. I still hadn't said anything.

"They're on the roads," he said. His voice was tight.

"Be careful. Come to my office."

I hung up and looked at Everett. "Tim's on his way."

He nodded and drained the last of his glass of iced tea. "Come on," he said. "Call him back and tell him not to go to your office. My office is nicer."

Everett and I crossed campus not quite at a run. We would walk really fast and then jog a couple of steps between the wells of lamp light here and there where a light had gone out, then walk really fast again. There were students out on campus who clearly had no idea anything weird was going on anywhere in the world, kids with headphones on just strolling around, but inevitably someone else would run by and, in so doing, pause to tell them some garbled version of what was at that point understood to be going on. We had gone up the sidewalk at the side of the squat, brick Carl E. Hammerhead Student Life Center and cut between it and the more neoclassical, grey stone Joseph N. White Undergraduate Library and across the 1946 War Memorial Lawn - which everyone called the main quad - and then down between the Henry J. Swift Biological Sciences Building and the math department - the building where I worked - as yet unnamed because no one from any of Mt. Ares' math programs was both rich and dead.

Everett badged us into the bio department at the side door and he and I both stopped at the bottom of that tall, winding stairwell with the carved and tooled hand railing and the clashing grey-brown tile floor and black tread strips on the

steps. I didn't know why Everett had stopped until I realized - at the same time he made the same realization about me - that we had both stopped to listen for shuffling feet. Neither of us had spoken on the way over and that didn't change now that we were indoors. I went up the stairs face-first, he followed three steps behind me, half turned to watch behind us. Halfway to the fourth floor, where his office was, it occurred to me that we were kind of stupid to come to the biology department. I mean, we've all seen the movies. There were probably labs full of reanimated frogs pissed as all hell to find out they'd been packaged for dissection.

At the door to the fourth floor I peeked through the small window that looked onto the hall and didn't see anyone or anything. Everett nodded and I yanked the door open, staying behind it, while he leapt through and spun around to check the walls on either side of the door frame.

"Clear!" he said, and for some reason that did it. I started to crack up. A snort escaped me, then I clamped a hand over my mouth as I fought a wicked case of giggles. Then he made a breathy, adrenalin-poisoned sort of guffawing noise and four seconds later we were both laying on the floor laughing our fool heads off. I tried to gasp the word "clear" back at him a couple of times but I couldn't get out more than "Cl... cl...!" before I'd have to roll onto my side and curl into a ball and laugh until I was coughing and felt like I'd puke.

Two minutes later we were wheezing and panting and helping each other up and Everett had his keys in his hand. "Okay," he managed, "Let's have a drink."

I startled at that and wiped my eyes between blinks at him.

"I keep a little something around, yes," he whispered, "And no damned zombies are going to stop me from having one when I need it this bad."

I laughed again, less hysterically, just a couple of surprised chuckles. I'd been in Everett's office a million times and I knew he hated the pomp and piety of Dr. Bach and the unspoken expectation that evolution would most definitely *not* be featured on any graded material in a given semester but I hadn't thought Everett would actually drink at work. In some respects, it's different for engineers. It's so directly the opposite of what we would do. We don't drink at work. We just don't.

We do acid. Everyone knows that.

At any rate, he opened his office door and turned on the desk lamp as he walked around familiar corners in the dark. I waited for the light and slid into one of his visitors' chairs while he quickly and efficiently opened the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet, shifted a couple of overstuffed folders and came out with a bottle of scotch and a glass. The bottle was mostly full so I guessed maybe this really was a special-occasions-only kind of thing, and that wasn't so bad.

I caught my breath as I watched him pour. I'd started to think like these people. Christ, I hadn't even noticed, but it had seeped in somehow.

Everett held the glass out to me with a pretty generous pour in it and said, "Glass for the guests. I'll make do with a Dixie Cup." He stepped into the hallway for a minute and came back with a few big, red, disposable cups he'd snagged from the lounge down the hall or somewhere. I waited while he poured his drink, we touched our glass and cup together in silence and then we each downed what we had in a single go.

"How long before Tim gets here?" Everett was looking out the window, between the blinds, like a government agent in a bad movie.

"He didn't say where he was." It was the first sensible, together thing I'd said since we'd been in the cafeteria and that felt like about six hours ago despite being about fifteen minutes. I coughed suddenly and then pointed at the window. "You know what that glass is?"

"What?"

"It's *clear*." I expected it to crack us up but it didn't. Everett kept looking out for a few seconds and I sat in silence, my face still hot from the run up the stairs and the laughing and the fear. Everett turned around, finally, and winked at me.

"So what do we do when he gets here?"

I ran my fingers through my long, sort of bland, sort of wavy but not really but still somehow kind of frizzy and sort of brown-black hair and pulled it back and half-heartedly tried to twist it out of the way while I pondered a response. "You have a TV?"

"Why?"

"We could keep an eye on the news."

"Oh they're just going to keep showing that stupid cop's stupid cell phone thing," he said. "Or something like it."

I shrugged. Sometimes Everett could be a bitch when he'd had enough to drink. I really didn't want this one drink - okay, two - to be the start of a downhill slide into cynicism in a situation where we really didn't need cynicism. I resolved to do two things and immediately did them:

First, I announced that I needed to go to the bathroom, and did so. That gave me a couple of minutes in front of a mirror, kind of checking myself out. No wounds, no scratches, no bruises,, no anything. That was good, to look at myself and see myself whole while my brain bubbled trying to understand, incorporate and include in my understanding of the world around me exactly what seemed to be going on out in the world.

Second, on returning to Everett's office, I sat down and said, "You used the 'z' word."

Everett had the bottle within reach but he hadn't lifted it to his cup again. He took his eyes off it and smiled. "Well, you know."

"Know what?"

"Well, that's just good shorthand. It looked more accurate than 'vagrant,' you must admit."

"It isn't just shorthand." I kept my voice steady. "We both saw what was trying to come after that cop. He tazed it twice and shot it, what, five or six times after that?" I figured Everett was also remembering that moment when the thing fell down and started crawling forward on its elbows and that he was just as completely wiggled out as I was. "That's not normal."

My phone rang abruptly, making both of us jump. It was Tim. He'd pulled up into the parking lot downstairs. Everett took the stairs down to let him in and they rode back up in the elevator. Neither of us said anything but it was pretty clear he'd come back up that route just to make sure there was nothing in the elevator already.

Tim and I hugged, gave each other a long kiss, then hugged again. If you've ever been in that sort of situation, and had the chance to do that, you know why they do it in every movie ever made. Then the three of us sat in mostly silence. Tim didn't or wouldn't say much about the drive up from Asheville except to say

that there were sections of the highway that were almost impassible due to wrecks or people simply abandoning their cars the first time something came out of the woods at them. He was able to weave around and take to the shoulder in a couple of places and, finally, wind up in Mt. Ares.

We hugged again as Everett went back to his window-staring and then we heard static in the air as an intercom system crackled to life. "The Biology Department has an *intercom*?" I looked sort of astonished. What was this, 1957?

"No," Everett said as he turned around and sat back down in his seat. "The whole campus does."

All students are requested to return to their dormitories until further notice. The voice was Chancellor Thomas. All faculty and staff, the student government and all Resident Assistants are to report to the main auditorium of the Carl E. Hammerhead Student Life Center in thirty minutes. It is recommended that you walk in groups.

It repeated twice more, with thirty second pauses between the announcements. Everett and Tim and I sat together in silence and listened each time. Finally we heard the static whine of the intercom system turn off and Everett looked at Tim.

"Did you see any on the way here?"

Tim looked at him and blinked a couple of times, then nodded. "A few."

"How far away?"

"About... only about ten minutes outside of Asheville."

"There are a lot of miles of highway between here and there," Everett said after some thought. "We've got a lot of time."

"Were they..." I paused and swallowed air. "Were they headed this way?"

Tim kind of shrugged at me. "They were just, you know, there. They weren't headed anywhere in particular. I... I ran a couple over. By accident. They looked really, really - " but his voice caught, and he stopped and turned white.

Everett nodded at me and said, "We'd better go to the student center. We've got thirty minutes, though, so I suggest we take the time to arm ourselves."

"With what?"

"Mop handles, tire irons, whatever looks useful and doesn't require reloading."

I nodded at that and he and I left Tim sitting there in his office while we broke into and then ransacked the janitor's closet on that floor. A little duct tape around the middle of a mop handle gave me something kind of like a staff that I could get a good grip on in a hurry, and Everett tried to show me a couple of moves with it in two minutes. Turns out he's a black belt in something. I don't know what. It has a complicated name. He said Jet Li knows the same stuff and then waggled his eyebrows a little. Everett has a thing for Jet Li.

I carried my mop handle and Everett carried two lengths of chain with padlocks on the ends and some yellow plastic tape that said CAUTION - CAUTION - DO NOT CROSS - CAUTION - CAUTION - DO NOT CROSS on a roll. I didn't even bother asking. We gave Tim a fire extinguisher that had some heft to it but he carried it hugged in both arms so that he wouldn't be able to use it to club anything that wasn't already ramming its head against his chest.

The three of us left the bio building through the side entrance we'd used to come in and set off together towards the student center with fifteen minutes to spare.

I'll spare you most of Chancellor Thomas's speech. It was hurried and stumbling and basically he recapped the most sensational crap from Fox News. Then he introduced Security Officer Jacobs. Jacobs is a stereotypical donut muncher with a jarhead buzzcut. He was in Vietnam. He likes to talk about Vietnam, anyway. The truth is that anyone who was there, in my experience, doesn't so much like to talk about it. He's a retired sheriff's deputy who mostly rides around campus in a golf cart with a little blue light on top of it like the Grand Marshall of a K-Mart parade. He kept kneading his hands with one another while he spoke, rubbing the palm and back of one hand between the fingers and thumb of the other, then switching, while he talked. He fidgeted a lot. There was a tazer in a holster on his right hip and when he wasn't kneading his hands into dough he would rest his right hand on it and put his left thumb and middle finger together and gesture with them.

"In light of the current situation," he said, thumb and middle finger hooked in an 'o' on his left hand and bouncing in rhythm to his syllables, "I think we should organize some safety patrols. No group smaller than three. Faculty would be

matched with faculty, staff with staff. Resident Assistants should organize posted watches at any entrance to their dormitories and keep their residents inside. Cell service is functioning for now, so we can use that to keep in touch."

There was some murmuring in the crowd. "Is cell service expected *not* to work at some point?" came a voice from somewhere in the middle of the room.

Jacobs' forehead was sweating hard and his face was a deep red. "Well, I don't want to leap to any conclusions," he tried to say, but the next questions were already coming out: what about families of faculty members? Would anyone have to patrol with anyone else outside their own department? Did they have walkie-talkies in case phones stopped working? How long until the power went out? Had anyone talked to the Sheriff's Department? Had one of the... *things* on the news been seen in town yet?

Jacobs did his best to shout them down, then: "I've called over to the Sheriff's substation on the Asheville Highway and got forwarded automatically over to the 911 center in Asheville. It..." He paused and cleared his throat. "It went to a message telling me they had an unusually high call volume." With each of the last six words his voice got more and more quiet so that the wave of noise crashed over the last two syllables of his response. He put his hands up and dusted off his nothing-to-see-here voice he kept in reserve for Homecoming games. "Listen... *LISTEN!* People, the Sheriff's Department has their hands full on the other end of the county. We are on our own here." He was booming, assertive, something we didn't often see in Jacobs. "We have got to keep our heads level and work together. I want to talk to Department chairs and hash out the details and then we'll give out orders from there."

Everett looked around the room, saw Dr. Bach in a pair of chinos and a button-up shirt rise and walk towards the front to join the other department chairs, then sighed and said to us, softly, "These crackers are going to get themselves killed. What say we form our own patrol team?"

Tim was pretty blank but I sighed and nodded at him. "You've got it." I wasn't relishing having to walk around with my mop handle and try to keep any math professors from getting eaten. We started to get up and try to sneak out but there was more bubbling up from the non-chair attendees so that someone finally got a microphone in his hand - someone I didn't immediately recognize - and

pointedly said, "Officer Jacobs, exactly what are we facing out there? I've seen the news and they don't know what to call those people."

They're not people, came a few indistinct replies. One voice quite clearly followed that with, "They're muslims!" I buried my face in my hands and tried not to scream. This was not what I needed to psyche me up for going on patrol to defend myself against the 'z' word. Someone else, a woman in a track suit, grabbed the microphone away from the guy who'd asked and turned her back on the stage to address the crowd.

"We all know what they are," she said, pointing out, away, wherever 'they' were. "They're the walking dead. We've all seen the movies. Jacobs isn't saying this but if we see one out there we've got to know what to do: we've got to kill them." There were a few open scoffs and jeers but there were a lot of silent, attentive faces that waited to see if she had anything else to say.

So, they *had* been watching the news.

Everett tugged on my sleeve and I took Tim's hand and we slunk out the back and ran almost head-first into J. Harley Boquest. He was standing there rubbing his coke-bottle lenses on a sleeve and glancing blindly out the big, double doors of glass at the entrance to the student center.

"Christ, Harley," Everett sighed. "You shouldn't be out wandering around by yourself." J. Harley wasn't all that fond of Everett on the grounds that Harley was universally intimidated by big, physically powerful black guys no matter how light they were in their loafers. This is the inherent contradiction of racism combined with homophobia: the black man is a terrifying aggressor, the gay man a nelly collection of offensive femininity, but a black gay man is somehow terrifying and weak all at once? I will never understand a mind that works that way. J. Harley Boquest gave Everett a look - having to look up at an almost 45 degree angle to look into Everett's very tall eyes, it's worth noting - that had any number of cuss words in it and then snuffled something half into his sleeve as he slipped the glasses back on. "Miss McCordy," he said to me as he tried to bounce past us and into the auditorium.

"Forget him," I said, though I wasn't sure to whom I'd said it. "Let's just go."

Tim, Everett and I set off back across the campus vaguely towards the biology department.

"Can we just... hole up in your office?" Tim was speaking to Everett and Everett pondered in silence before answering.

"It would give us a view of the back of the biology department, at least," he finally said, "But that's pointed the wrong direction if these things are coming from Asheville.

"What about another office? Or a classroom?"

"No locks," I said. "Classrooms in that building don't have locks on the doors."

"A lab?"

Everett shook his head. "The labs are all in the basement."

We kept walking, naming buildings, finding them unsatisfactory. In time we were standing at the side entrance of the bio building, still having decided we didn't know of a good place to go and *hide*. Half the campus qualified as a bomb shelter in case of nuclear attack but nothing had been built to keep groups of people safe from ground troops. So, we turned and started walking again, diagonal to the way we'd come, and in so doing we started our own, unassigned patrol route.

Without discussing it, with no one really leading, we started a slow sweep of the outer edge of the main quad. At each point where a walkway branched off between buildings we would stop and advance slowly down it, checking behind shrubs and occasionally peeking into a dumpster or banging on its side to see if we scared anything.

We did two complete circuits of the main quad before we started seeing other patrollers. There were three faculty members from the Music Department, walking close to one another and wielding that long arm thing off of a trombone, the part that a trombone player slides back and forth in front of the bell. They stopped when they saw us, wary, but we stopped also and waved at them, called out, and they eventually decided none of us were the walking dead and didn't rush forward to attack.

Too bad about that kid who surprised them.

He was walking along with headphones on, hands in his pockets, head down. They had just decided we weren't the enemy when the three music faculty heard

him behind them and spun around. One called out but he didn't hear them, didn't notice them, and then he looked up abruptly when he finally noticed them frozen in fear in front of him. He opened his mouth to say something and one of those faculty simply swung the trombone arm thing around and clocked him with it on the side of the head as hard as he could.

The kid went down in a crumpled heap and twitched a little, so they hit him again, all three of them this time.

Tim gasped. Everett called out at them to stop and I ran towards them but by the time I got there it was way too late. Nine o'clock at night and we'd had our first casualty from the zombie apocalypse before any of the zombies had even arrived.

The three faculty looked at me like I was crazy when I shouted at them to stop, that he wasn't one of *them*, that he just had headphones on, then they turned and ran - just like that - in the direction they'd been going. I had to pull out my phone and try to call 911 to tell someone, Jacobs I guessed, that there was a dead kid laying in the middle of the quad but then I remembered what he said about 911 not working.

"Who do I call?" I said to Everett as he and Tim caught up. Tim was puking in a bush a few feet away. Everett was turning from dark brown to light brown, but he got it together enough to close the kid's eyes and kind of straighten his hoodie a little, fold his arms over his chest. "We didn't stick around to find out. What number do we call?"

Everett scratched his neck and then walked over to one of the blue-domed emergency call boxes on campus. I heard him make a report to what sounded to me like a static line on the other end, then he came back. "We'd better keep moving," he said, grave. "There's nothing we can do here."

I patted Tim on the back while he worked the last of it out of himself and then pulled out a napkin from somewhere in my backpack so he could wipe his face and the three of us kept going, a lot less certain of our route this time.

Going north past the student life center - now empty of the all-hands meeting from earlier - we started to run into other groups of three or four people on patrol. Most had a flashlight and nothing else. If you were in music or a janitor

or knew how to break into the janitor's closet then you could arm yourself. Otherwise, you had a flashlight and a cellphone and not a lot else. They were all scared, all going very slowly, creeping along, nervous as cats and less capable. We learned fast that the way to be recognized as a human being was to speak quickly and clearly. If we did that right away, the moment they noticed us, they would eventually stop shaking long enough to say hello back.

Going farther north meant crossing Ares Mill Road and then wending our way along the parking lots and sidewalks that ran behind the five senior dorms that were as close to off-campus living as a town like Mt. Ares could manage. It was twenty after nine and we found casualties two through seven: kids who'd thrown themselves out of fourth floor windows.

Tim didn't have anything left in his stomach but that didn't stop him from trying. This time I joined him, one hand on his shoulder while I puked myself empty and Everett pointedly did not try to smooth anything over for anyone else who might find them. Fifty feet is a long way to fall. Pavement does some pretty nasty things to a body from that height.

We were walking away, a little more hurriedly, when we realized that there was singing coming from the open windows of the third floor student lounge in one of the buildings. It was gospel-y but very, very white. There was clapping that kept getting faster to rush the song forward. The singing sounded a little, well, desperate.

"That's the Freaks' floor," Everett said. This was apparently some subtlety of campus life that I had failed to pick up when hiding in my little closet-turned-office in the non-academic basement of The Math Department With No Name. I wrinkled up my brow at Everett and he started to smile a little. "The Jesus Freaks," he said. I blinked at him, then kind of looked around us.

"You might not have noticed," I started, but he waved me silent with one hand.

"No, no, no, that's what they call themselves. They're a club. They're kind of cheerleaders for God." He shrugged a little. "Whatever twists your knob."

Tim stared up at the windows like... well, I don't know what the hell he thought would happen at those windows. Maybe he thought the Jesus Freaks - did

they really call themselves that? - maybe he thought they were working themselves up for a big cup of Kool-Aid. That was certainly what it sounded like to me.

We kept going, hurrying a little, eager to get away from the dead and the cheerleaders for God.

Another thirty minutes of walking the outer periphery of campus - without bringing ourselves to wander into the town of Mt. Ares itself - took us by some freshman dorms, all silent, and finally the McCollough. The doors to the cafeteria had been locked but someone had smashed in all the glass and opened them and then propped them open with a chair from inside. We could hear a lot of activity inside, some hollering, so the three of us advanced very slowly through the open doors and then the inner doors, which didn't lock, and then blinked back the bright light of the fully lit cafeteria.

In the middle of the part where everyone piles up trying to put their meal card back into their wallets and handle their tray at the same time, between the cash registers and the doors, were three wheelbarrows mostly filled with food. A lot of it was just loose, hamburgers in shiny wrappers and french fries piled on top of other french fries, a plastic bag that had been filled with the big, soft cookies from the ice cream bar. No one had been stupid enough to try to loot actual ice cream, so I guess the kids learn *something* here.

The hooting and chatter from back where people normally fill their tray started to die down and eventually an upper classman kind of swaggered - that's the only word for it - out from behind the cash registers with a baseball bat over his shoulder. "Oh, hey. Sorry." He set the bat down with an aluminum *tong* and kept his left hand around the butt end of the handle. "We saw three people walk in but didn't know if..." He smiled incongruously. "You know." He gestured at the wheelbarrows with his bat. "Want anything to eat? We figured we'd stock up now while the pickings are good.

"For how many people is all this food?" Everett spoke evenly but distinctly.

"Now, Professor Marsh..." The kid smiled and kind of cocked his head to one side, hooked the thumb of his free hand through a belt loop of his jeans and let his hand rest near his groin in a way that was weird. The vibe was very, very strange in the room all of a sudden. "We're not taking more than our fair share."

Everett's eyes didn't leave the kid's face. "Mr. Murphy, for how many persons is all this food?"

"The cafeteria has plenty back there in the freezers, you know. Delivery day was yesterday. They can feed everyone on campus three square meals for the next week at least." I kept staring at the kid's hand and I suddenly realized all this subtle or not-so-subtle body language was of flirtation. The hand near his crotch, the way he tightened and loosened his grip on the bat handle, the smile. I abruptly wondered if Everett had ever crossed that line, gotten involved with a student. It had to get lonely in a town like this. I had never really thought about it before. Everett's eyes still were on the kid's face, though.

"How. Many."

The kid shifted a little and all the flirtation fell away like fabric sliced in two. He was just an arrogant jock again, all of a sudden. "Well, there's fourteen of us on the team. Plus girlfriends, of course."

"Of course," Everett said evenly. "Take no more than is appropriate for the number. Take no more than enough for two days." He said this very firmly: "Be sparing in what you take. Remember that we may not have power for long. Eat the perishables first." Everett looked for some reason like he could murder the kid where he stood, then turned for the door.

I turned to follow him and Tim eventually turned and said, "Shouldn't we take some for ourselves?"

"No," Everett said. "We can come back on our next trip. They'll be gone by then. I don't think it's a good idea for us to stick around and force a confrontation with the baseball team at the moment." His face was really grim and I finally found my voice.

"That kid..." I paused, cleared my throat. "Was he, uh, flirting? Then? With the hand and the belt loop and the... you know? Stuff?" I knew he was already, of course, but I was watching Everett for his reaction. He smiled stiffly.

"Young Mr. Murphy tried last year to have me fired on grounds of immoral behavior. There's an old clause in the university handbook." The smile was very tight. "I don't care that he used such obvious tricks to win my favor temporarily. He knows he and his little friends are stealing. He hoped to charm me into failing to turn him in. The thing is, he doesn't realize our situation."

I nodded and felt the color drain out of my face. "That there is no one to turn him in to," I said. "That we really are on our own up here. Turn him in for stealing cookies? Who's going to give a shit? Anyone who might care on a normal day is too busy hiding or patrolling or trying to figure out where to put the bodies of kids who threw themselves out of windows."

Everett nodded. "Those young men basically run everything in student life, or could if they bothered. They know that but not so that they would assert themselves in this situation so soon. They haven't figured out the absolute vacuum of authority we're facing. They will, soon enough, and I'd just as soon not be in the room when they do."

Tim let out a long, slow whistle. "This place is a real fun town."

We were twenty minutes farther into our patrol when we heard gunshots and froze in our steps. Tim backed up a couple of paces but Everett and I looked at one another and then took off jogging towards the shots. We came around the corner of the English Department building and found four students in camouflage. They were milling around the outer perimeter of a small clump of bodies, maybe half a dozen.

I recognized a couple of them as faculty from the English Department itself.

As we approached, one swung his rifle around at us and the three of us dove into some bushes a second before he fired.

"Stop shooting!" My voice was hoarse and ragged from sudden screaming. "We're patrollers! We're okay!"

There was some muffled barking of orders or argument or something and then another shot over our heads. Then we heard boots running away, into the woods behind the English Department, and they were gone.

I started counting very quietly, up from one, and when I got to thirty I stood up just enough to peek over the bushes. No one around. I stood all the way up and waited for a gun shot and didn't hear one. I turned, slowly, to look back the way we'd come. Still no gunshot. I stepped out onto the path.

Still no gunshot.

Everett and Tim and I walked to within thirty feet or so. "Do you think they shot them by mistake?" Tim's voice was shaky. It struck me suddenly -

thunderously - that he was the only person I knew who'd already *seen* one of these things out there in the night, on his way here. And he was out here with us. I couldn't believe how brave that was.

"No," I said in reply. I pointed at one, then another. "Shot in the back. These were opportunistic killings."

"That would explain the pot shot they took when we called out."

"It might be," Tim managed, "That they shot a patrol by accident and then another patrol came running and they shot *them* to keep from being caught."

"That's a big leap," I said.

"It seems like a good enough possibility," Tim murmured, a little wounded, and I reached out and squeezed his upper arm.

"No, not that. You may be right. But if you are right, those kids made the jump from being accidental murders to intentional murderers in, what, a minute? Thirty seconds? Two minutes? That's a big leap."

"They've been told to protect themselves." Everett's voice was quiet. "They weren't told *from what* or that there were any limits to that."

I shuddered and pulled my arms around myself, the mop handle banging clumsily against my shins as I did so, and then turned to walk back to the quad. "Come on," I said. "We have to stop just walking around. We have to see if anybody has a plan."

They followed me for lack of anything better to do.

By the time we'd made it back up to the main quad, away from the little side-quad where a bunch of the humanities buildings were, the zombies had arrived.

Here's the thing about the South: there are graveyards everywhere. Mt. Ares was founded in the 1880's and it had a functioning campus graveyard for ninety years. The graveyard filled, it turned out, during Vietnam. It was kind of small but I guess at the time the college was founded, when the college was two buildings and the graveyard was what seemed like a million miles away from campus, it must have seemed plenty big. The population explosion of the 20th century is something that really took everyone by surprise, or at least it seems like it did. Everything from the 19th century seems so small, so cramped, so packed

together, like everything they build seemed like it must surely be big enough to last as long as it would be useful. Like, there's this film called *Man With a Movie Camera*. It's from the 1920's. A lot of it was shot in Odessa, in the Ukraine. There are these scenes of the streets and they're just huge and wide and there's nothing in them. The people in those scenes at that time must have looked on those streets and thought to themselves, We will never fill these streets. Now Odessa is famous for its traffic jams.

That's a little off-topic. Sorry. The next part is hard to talk about.

The graveyard had a lot of graves in it. I'm guessing whatever makes people into zombies doesn't work too well when there's not a lot left to work *with*, which is as much detail as I want to go into about it. My point is, there weren't a lot of zombies but there were a few and they were almost all in military uniforms and they were sort of wandering around on the corner of the quad closest to the graveyard. Maybe the lights had drawn them. For that matter, maybe the gunshots had gotten their attention. I pulled out my phone and I hit the number for J. Harley Boquist who was, at least, someone I knew had a phone and would answer it if I called.

He picked up on the third ring. "Ms. McCordy," he said, very formally.

"Listen, Harley. Where are you? I need some... help."

"I'm patrolling with Officer Jacobs and Dr. Bach." J. Harley Boquist sniffed a little at that. He was pleased with having drawn a department chair and the head of campus security as his patrolling buddies. "We've just made a terrible discovery behind the senior dormitories."

"The jumpers?"

"Why, yes," he said. "Don't tell me you've been burdened with seeing them. Are you nearby?"

"No, we saw them a while ago." I couldn't believe I was standing there having a conversation with him about some dead people on the other side of campus when there were walking-around dead people fifty yards away and vaguely headed this direction. Tim was gawping at them, his jaw working in silence, and Everett was giving me this look of, OK, seal the deal! Tell them what's happening! and making that keep-going spinning motion with his right index finger.

"Good lord, girl, why didn't you tell someone? This kind of thing is deadly to morale." J. Harley's biggest problem was, seriously, that I hadn't called someone.

"BECAUSE THERE IS NO ONE TO FUCKING CALL," I shouted, directly into the phone, held a few inches from my mouth. "BECAUSE THERE ARE ZOMBIES ON THE MAIN FUCKING QUAD."

"Mother of God!" I heard the phone clatter against the pavement and J. Harley was quickly marshaling Dr. Bach and Officer Jacobs into action. I could hear him faintly. "They're here! They're on the main quad! Mother of God, they're here!" Then there were some running footsteps and I hung up the phone.

Everett took ten seconds to point out two things.

"Girlfriend," he said, just as patiently as he possibly could, "Number one, don't shout when there are zombies around."

I glanced over and saw that all ten or so of them had stopped and turned this direction and some of them were... well, they were *sniffing* the air.

"Number two, whoever J. Harley Boquist has with him is going to know about it and so is anyone in a hundred-foot radius because J. Harley Boquist, goddess bless his cross-eyed soul and his paleolithic glasses prescription, is not a quiet or subtle man."

"Is that a kind of good thing/bad thing statement? Like, good job on the telling someone who will let everyone know but watch the volume in future?" I nodded a little. Right now I needed... I don't know. I needed to be able to teleport, that's what I fucking needed.

"No. I take this opportunity to point out the calibre of most of the campus' reaction to this event." Everett said it very sweetly, and then he and I grabbed Tim by either arm and took off running in the opposite direction from the zombies, towards the senior dorms, towards where J. Harley Boquist and Officer Jacobs and Dr. Bach were going to be coming from.

I glanced back, just once, and the zombies were walking - not running, just walking - the same direction we were. Everett did the same, and then he and I had Tim off the ground and we were practically flying, ourselves.

We met J. Harley and Dr. Bach - a big, round bear of a man in a jacket - I kid you not - a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbows, and Officer Jacobs.

They were huffing and panting and Jacobs looked like he might be about to stroke out right there in front of us but they were running anyway and all of a sudden I had a lot more respect for all three of them and I was ready, just maybe, to believe Officer Jacobs' stories about Vietnam.

We skidded to a stop and set Tim down on the ground and kept him from running farther ahead without us. The other three stopped for just a moment, hands on knees, wheezing for all the world, and Everett and I talked all over one another in a wild jumble but we managed to communicate that the zombies were back there, in the quad, on the corner towards the graveyard. Why no one had stopped to think about that I didn't know. On the other hand, for all I knew, someone *had* and they were laying dead in the graveyard or somewhere between it and here and no one else had any idea.

What surprised us was when we saw a few dozen other people running after them. We saw the baseball team - the sports dorm is next to the end of the row of senior dorms - and we saw the Jesus Freaks, every last one of them, running with Bibles held up and some of them running with their eyes closed, someone else driving them by tugging a sleeve, their hands up, praying while they ran. There were some of them still singing and they formed a pretty ragtag band of cheerleaders for God if you'll allow me a moment of honest, if shallow, assessment. There were the four guys in camo, who I guess figured they were already out and they had intended to hunt zombies and Everett was right, J. Harley had screamed his head off the whole way there so every dorm and class building and parked car for ten miles had heard the news, that real, dead zombies were on the main quad.

All of them - a hundred or more - ran past us in a single, endless crush and one of the guys in camo looked right at me as he ran by and I swear he recognized us, knew we recognized them, but he kept running. Everett put out a hand as though he was going to grab the guy's arm but I grabbed his wrist and jerked it back and let them go. "Not now," I said. "Later."

Everett watched them go and grimaced but he didn't say anything. In all the current of humanity going the other direction, Tim had managed to lose his momentum so that he stopped and watched them with us.

"They're all going to die," he said, simply. "I saw it in Asheville. People would try to gang up and then they'd get wiped out."

I blinked at him. "What?"

"Their resolve breaks down pretty fast," he mumbled. "Pretty fast."

I wondered if he'd been in one of those gangs, if his resolve had broken down when he'd seen one of them do whatever it is they were doing to the people they attacked, and if that's what had set him on the road here. I hadn't thought about that yet, why he'd come here, why he hadn't just stayed in his apartment and locked all the doors and windows and called and asked me to come to him instead. He lives on the third floor of his building, surely he'd be safe there, these weren't exactly agile creatures from what very little I'd seen.

The crowd finished running past us and Everett and Tim and I fell into step behind them. We weren't running but by now neither were they. They'd seen J. Harley and Bach and Jacobs stop and go around a corner and they'd slowed down to follow. In time, all hundred or so of us washed out onto the main quad at the opposite corner from the zombies and there they were, the dozen or so of them, milling around but somehow vaguely towards us. I saw them lift their heads here and there and do what just seemed like it must be sniffing, like they were smelling the air for our scents, and then they would kind of twitch and set off towards us with more purpose.

Dr. Bach was holding up his flashlight, one of those big, black Mag-Lite things, like a club. Officer Jacobs was holding out a nightstick, wherever he'd gotten one of *those*, but in his left hand; his right had the tazer in it. J. Harley Boquest was trying to hold the crowd of students back. The guys in camo had swung out to the flank of the crowd and were setting up to take shots. I didn't know how much ammo they had - or how much they'd used on half the faculty of the English Department, for that matter - but they were lining up shots as J. Harley was trying to get them to put their guns down. "You could hurt someone with those things," I heard him bawling at them. "Where in tarnation did you even get guns? This is a weapon-free campus!"

That's when the Jesus Freaks started singing again, singing with all their hearts. Their president - Spiritual Leader, I think is what they called him later - was this bright-faced young kid who looked like he'd stepped out of a JC Penney back-to-school circular. He was rosy-cheeked and he had this cute little sprawl of a haircut that made him look like he was fifteen instead of 21, and he was wearing a

flannel shirt tied around his waist and Chucks and his t-shirt had a picture of Jesus giving a big thumbs-up in a way that I felt was probably meant to be ironic and that this kid *did not understand*, but all that is just to help set the scene because what I heard the kid say, as he tried to shout over the singing, was, if I heard him correctly, "C'mon, guys, we can show these lost souls the way to their rest," and then he and the rest of the Jesus Freaks started walking across the quad, towards the zombies, singing and clapping and doing pretty much everything short of open ululations.

Jacobs was shouting at them to get back and Dr. Bach was staring wide-eyed at the zombies and J. Harley was running back and forth in front of the guys in camo, trying to get them to put their guns down, they were going to hurt someone, he said, and then the zombies and the Jesus Freaks met head-on and the leader of the Jesus Freaks had his throat torn out and everyone behind him stopped singing and started screaming.

The panic that ensued is a little jumbled and hard to describe. One of the kids in camo stood up and grabbed J. Harley and dragged him out of the way and the other three fired into the crowd. The zombies were going haywire, Jesus Freaks pounding on them or passing out or running around in every direction. I saw puffs of dust in the light of the sodium bulbs in the walkway lanterns as bullets hit the zombies and I saw sprays of blood as bullets hit kids or zombies bit them or whatever was happening out there. It took a few seconds, tops, and then the kids in camo were trying to reload but J. Harley was hitting them over the shoulders with a wooden stake he'd pulled out from a little section of rope around a patch of grass on the quad that had been reseeded and then roped off to keep people from walking on it and the guys in camo were yowling and diving away from him, crouched still, guns falling out of their hands as he walloped them there at the corner where shoulder meets arm. Everett and Tim had run forward to try to grab students and shove them away from the melee that had broken out in the middle of the quad, the baseball team only too glad to run the hell away rather than stand around swinging at dead guys in dress uniforms. Jacobs was screaming his head off and Bach was still standing there in shock. I saw a zombie take him down with one strike and then turn on Jacobs but the good security officer still had that tazer in his hand and he set it off.

The zombie froze and jerked and twitched and then landed on the ground with smoke curling from its flesh. Jacobs stared and blinked at it and turned as though to use it on another one but that one was already there and he, too, went down in a hurry.

I ran over and grabbed the little megaphone from Jacobs' belt - he hadn't had a free hand for it before - and held it up to my mouth as I ran back towards Everett and Tim and J. Harley Boquest, who had single-handedly chased away the kids in camo.

"Everybody," I shouted through it, "Get out of the quad. Run this way, right now, and keep going. Now now now now now!" Somehow, that got through to them and the students who were still there and still mobile were all at once running back the way they'd come, around the corner, out of sight, back towards their dorms and the far end of campus. The zombies were pretty casual through that, some of them making a weird hissing noise when their arms would close on empty air as an undergrad got ten feet for every one of theirs.

In the span of ten seconds, it was me, Everett, Tim, J. Harley and - quick count - eleven zombies and the zombies all turned to look at me.

"Harley," I said, voice relatively even. "Do you have your keys to the Math Department?"

"Yes," he wheezed. Something wasn't right in there, but he was still walking. "Yes, girl, yes."

"Get them out. We - the four of us - are about to run to my office. But I am going to scream my head off the whole way there. Have we all got that? We are not going to do anything but run straight to the front doors of the math building and we are going to go where I say we go and I am going to scream the whole way. Is that clear?"

Three heads nodded. I saw Everett smile.

"One," I said, "Two, three."

Then I flicked the contact on the megaphone and I screamed as loud as I possibly could. I screamed the girl scream, the one Fay Wray uses when King Kong has her in his grip. I screamed the way Judith O'Dea did, the way Elsa Lanchester did, the way Gloria Stuart did. I opened up, down deep, and I thought of that poor, demented kid from the Jesus Freaks, of Tim and whatever he'd seen in Asheville to

make him come here. I screamed for Officer Jacobs and the English Department and a kid who'd try to get Everett fired one year and been so scared and so desperate to horde food that he'd flirted with him the next in a cheap attempt to get away with some stolen cheese and crackers in a wheelbarrow. I screamed for fat old Dr. Bach who'd stood there in silent terror and I screamed for the fact that I didn't just get into damned UNC to do my masters in the first fucking place.

I screamed the scream of humanity afraid, and if there's one thing movies have taught me zombies must answer, it's that.

Eleven zombies turned as one and started coming after us and the four of us ran as hard and fast as we could to the front door of the math building. Harley was fishing around on his keyring and finally got the doors open and the other three started to pull me inside but I put up a hand to stop them.

"We have to make sure they follow me," I said. Tim and Harley started to protest but Everett nodded and squeezed my hand.

"Come on, Harley," he said, voice very calm. "We've got to unlock every door between here and Jennifer's office as fast as we can."

"Open the janitor's closet down there," I said as they started to go. "And fill every bucket you can find."

I stood there and watched the zombies march towards us. I only backed through the doors and around the front steps and down the steps into the basement as long as they could see me. I could see them, and they could see me - or at least the two or three in the lead could see me. I wanted them not to have a chance to get distracted, to wander off, to see a shiny and go for it instead. I needed all of them to follow me, right now. I was quick going down the stairs into the basement but they were pretty good at handling stairs that went down because, you know, gravity. Then I backed along the hallway, past the industrial green painted cinder blocks and the mesh window with the bullet-proof glass to protect a clerk that had been eliminated from the payroll fifteen years before. I counted the zombies as they shambled towards me.

Eleven. I really had them all, as far as I could tell.

I backed up the little ramp into the machine room and then I backed along a row between two rows of Honeywell DPS 7's which, to be honest, are from the late

'80s, not the '70s, but they looked like something out of the '70s all the same. I noted their Carolina Blue coloring with some irony.

The zombies shambled up the ramp and through the doors, past the HIGH VOLTAGE signs, as ignorant as babes.

Everett and Tim and Harley had been busy. They had some of the panels off the floor to slow down anything that wasn't that great with footing. There were some zombies that toppled over as one foot plunged into the raised flooring and wedged between pipes of coolant. Some got hung up behind those. Some advanced without any problems and when they were all in the rows between my babies, the precious Honeywells and the old IBM 360s and the UNISYS and the once-upon-a-time top-of-the-line Cray, I hefted the janitor's bucket that had been filled and threw it from the middle of my chest, with both hands, so that it struck one of those DPS 7's - the panel had been pulled open by Everett or someone - and sparks flew everywhere.

Everett heaved another bucket of water and hit another bank of machines and the zombies caught in the surge of electrified water moaned for the first and only time. Every time I'd heard them before - on the news, out in the quad, they had hissed. When they followed me down the hallway they had been completely silent except for the sounds of their shoes on the tile floor. Now they moaned, they moaned like living things in terrible pain.

Tim handed me another bucket and I threw it and fire shot out of one of the computers. Harley watched this in abject horror, frozen, so I took his bucket from his hands and threw it myself and more fire shot out and a cascade of sparks flew out of one of the first ones we'd hit and smoke poured out of it. The sparks and the fire had set off some sort of a reaction so that a geyser of sparks flew out of three entire rows and the lights flickered abruptly and Everett shouted, "Where to now?"

I turned towards the door to my office but that was crazy and I realized it in a second. So I turned around and the four of us ran towards that mesh window for a cashier that didn't exist. I threw it open and slid through, landing hard on the tile floor on the other side, then rolled out of the way so Tim could follow, then J. Harley with Everett shoving him from the other side, then Everett finally squeezing his massive shoulders through the window and kicking out so that the four of us were out of the machine room and all the zombies were in it.

"The Halon system," I panted. "It's going to go off and kill the fire."

"Disabled," Tim panted. "Everett threw a switch or something."

Everett nodded at me. There were still machines sparking out and bursting into flames in there and the zombies that hit the electricity were frying fast. Still, some were mobile, so I ran back to the janitor's closet and grabbed a hose that was attached to this weird sink and I dragged it back down the hall and it would just barely reach to the clerk's window. I jammed the window shut on it so that it held in place and then I ran back to the janitor's closet and turned on the water. Seconds later, water shot out and started spraying onto the remaining big iron in that room and Everett had already gone up the hall in his rubber-soled shoes to slam the doors into the machine room shut.

We stood there and watched water spray into the room and more smoke billow out of more machines and then the lights flickered and went out and the four of us ran, in unison, for the exit.

By the time we were outside and on the quad, I was laughing. Everett started laughing. Tim stared at us and then started to laugh and cry all at the same time. J. Harley Boquest just stared at the building and wept.

We laughed and cried and screamed and whooped and J. Harley produced a pack of generic menthols and everyone had one and coughed and sagged with exhaustion as we watched the fire shoot up through the ceiling of the machine room to the first floor of the math building, then from there engulf the building.

That took a few minutes, and then we all went to J. Harley's house and I was so incredibly exhausted that I had no trouble whatsoever going to sleep. We'd heard gunshots on the way there and I figured it was a sheriff's deputy or the kids in camo or something and they'd gone to the graveyard to see if there were more, but this time they seemed to have learned from experience because on Harley's police scanner we could hear people reporting that they'd killed one over on 8th Street or wherever.

I figured the world would still be there for us when I woke up in the morning and if it wasn't, well, I was too tired to give a damn.

The next day we learned that twenty zombies had been found and killed in and around Mt. Ares. The report said nine because it didn't include our eleven from

the math department; twenty was the real total. The fire, it turned out, had spread to the biology department before it had been put out.

There was another all-hands meeting two days after *that* at the student center and the chancellor wrung his hands and knotted his fingers together and announced Dr. Jane Dell would be the interim chair of the Biology Department in light of Dr. Bach's tragic, heroic demise defending students from an advancing wave of *the enemy*. No one would say the 'z' word anymore. I'd only said it a couple of times myself and already it felt stupid to use it. I knew what they were, yes, but it seemed ridiculous to use that word.

"That woman," Everett said, listening to the news about Dr. Dell. "She hates me. I'm going to have to find another job." He shook his head and crossed his arms. "You don't know. She just *hates* me."

I tried to tell Everett that was crazy, besides, what was I going to do without him? But J. Harley Boquest relieved me of that concern by firing me.

"You destroyed every computer in the machine room," he said, not looking at me, when he called me to his office a week later. "There just isn't a damned thing for you to *do*."

So I moved back to Chapel Hill with Tim and got a job at a bagelry and applied for the doctoral program.

Everett friended me on Facebook. He found a job at a little school in Nebraska. "If you think Mt. Ares is dead," he wrote to me in his first message, "You should see this town."