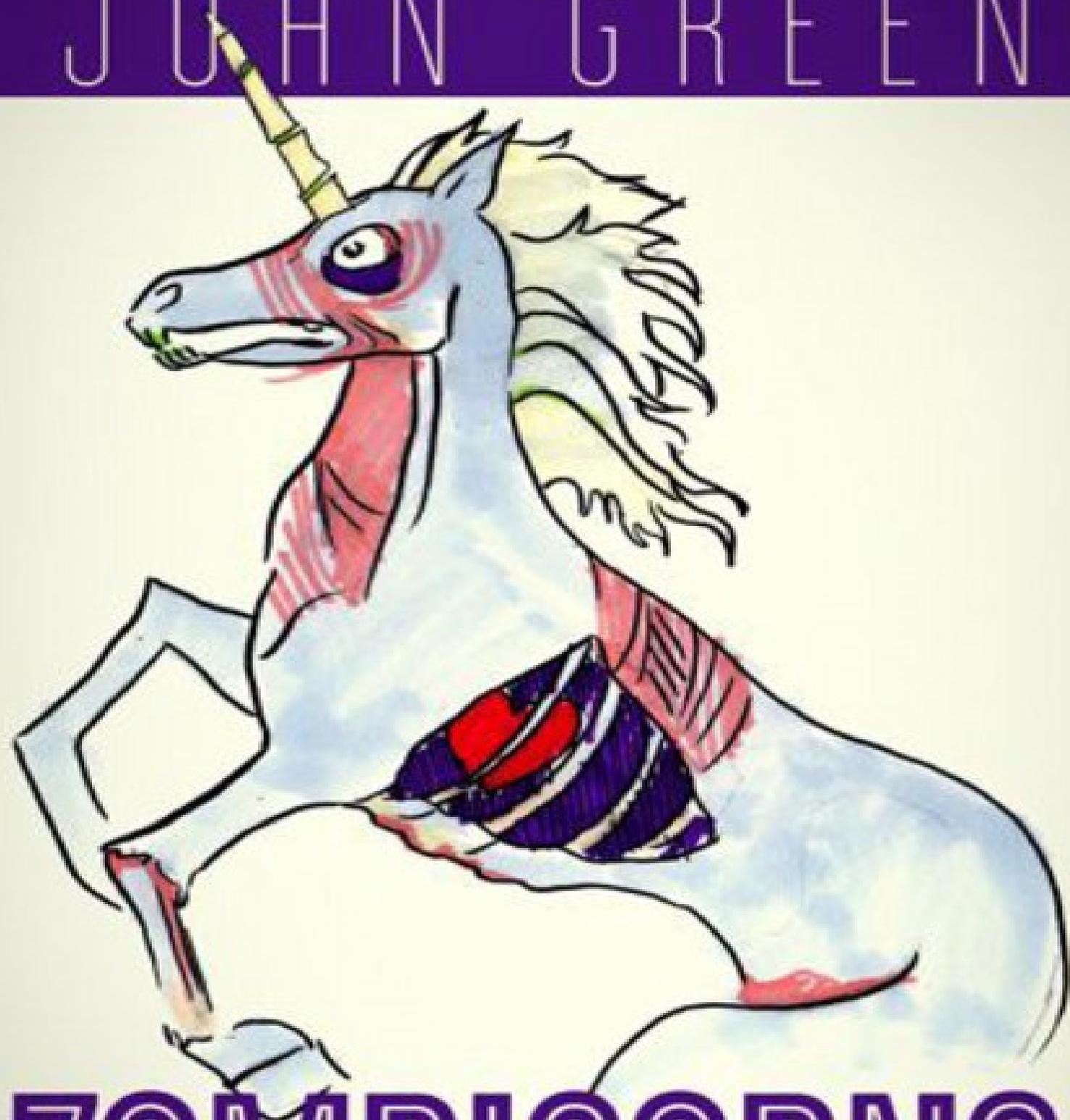


JOHN GREEN



ZOMBICORNS

Disclaimer: This book is not about unicorns.

To Nerdfighters

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ONE

Pre-zombification, my father was already obsessed with corn. He told me almost every day that corn was in control of us. Corn wants the world to contain more corn, so corn evolves us to agree with it: Corn tells us that we could make sugar out of corn, or fuel out of corn, or plastic out of corn, etc. The flu makes us cough, which spreads the flu. Corn makes us corn-hungry, which spreads corn. He got this idea from a book, and he never ceased to be amazed by it. For years, he would talk about it. We'd be eating mashed potatoes or something, and he'd say, "You know, potatoes are impossible without corn. That corn, it's everywhere." (He meant this metaphorically, although it is now nearly true literally.)

I think my dad was so fascinated by this idea because he realized on some fundamental level that he was not in control of his desires: I think he woke up every morning in his nice house with hardwood floors and granite countertops and wondered why he desired granite countertops and hardwood floors, wondered who precisely was running his life. Most people never stop to wonder why they like Pop Tarts or rainflow showerheads or skinny girls or whatever it is they like. Although my father never abandoned the narrowly circumscribed suburban life he was fated to desire, the why of it all nagged at him. I inherited that penchant for intellectualism, a character flaw that these days can only be thoroughly eradicated by getting Z'ed up.

Anyway, I have been thinking about the old man because it was a year ago today that I shot him in the chest with a hollow-point .45 caliber bullet. He kind of smiled as he fell backwards onto the overstuffed living room

couch. He took a minute to die, and it was the smilingest minute I'd ever seen from him.

A lot of the Z'ed up smile when you kill them. I don't know if they're grateful or amused or what, but it helps with the guilt, which quite a lot of people feel. I knew a kid once who was the kind of sentimentalist who found it troubling to think of himself as a murderer, so he called killing Zs completing them. I liked that.

That kid — his name was Marcos Marcos — got Z'ed up somehow. We were living in a very nice heavily chandeliered Lincoln Park townhouse with a few other humanoid types, and then one morning Marcos Marcos made a go at my puppy, Mr. President, and I had to complete him. I completed his head all over the dining room credenza of that townhouse and then me and Mr. President bolted for the proverbial higher ground.

Newzies go for dogs and cats and cows first, when they've still got enough of a moral compass to recognize that separating human beings from their vital organs — aside from being ethically troubling — is cannibalistic.

It is my own moral compass that has done me in now, working through the last few gallons of the gas that runs the generator that pumps the putrid z'ed out air down here into my Lincoln Square cellar, eating through the last rusted cans of diced tomatoes and Spam, drinking very expensive wine at the rate of precisely one bottle per day, watching the shelves empty out, wondering — as my father did — what terrible monster lurking inside of me forces me to go on rowing against the current when I could just walk up a staircase, unlock this cellar door, and get Z'ed up like a normal person.

TWO

I wonder a lot about Africa.

There were a few months when immigration was possible, if you could survive a 90-day maritime quarantine, if you could get a boat. I assume the virus made it there eventually, that the borders proved permeable. (Borders do, generally. I have seen mice flatten themselves to squirm through inch-high cracks in a wall. And mice have nothing on desperate men.)

But the last I heard, Africa was still clean, and the thought that it might contain human beings doing human being stuff — serving an older, more complicated master than the Z'ed serve — used to fill me with a kind of hope. I know I can't get to Africa, of course, but even now I find myself thinking sometimes that maybe this manuscript will be found in a thousand years when things are resettled, that my re/accounting will be read, that we will be remembered. Surely among the many outlandish successes of AMRV is that it has eradicated from human beings our original sin: hope. But I don't have AMRV, which means I still suffer from the cruelest disease of our species, terminal aspiration.

I'll tell ya: Some days I wouldn't mind being infected. But then I'll pass up a perfectly good opportunity: For instance, just this morning I left Mr. President and went out for a while — the smell seems infinitely bad and yet somehow manages to get worse each day — and found a couple dozen Zs planting in a ditch alongside the expressway.

They don't plant in rows because they're idiots, and they don't use farm equipment because they're idiots, and they don't plant in spring because

they're idiots, so they were just there on their hands and knees, in the rippling Chicago heat of August, their pointed Z sticks digging into the dirt so they could plant more and more and more, prototypical Zs, hunched and slow with skin like a sunless winter sky, and I honestly was going to just let them be but one of them heard the car and looked back at me, and then the others looked back at me, and then one of them stood up and I had to roll down the window and mow them down in a line with my AR-15. Perfectly good opportunity for infection, and what do I do? I complete them.

Now, I'm not going to pretend my stubbornness has been universal among my species. I've known plenty of Zuicides; they walk out into a group of Zs and just let it happen. It's a sad and beautiful thing to watch, let me tell you — all ritualized and elegiac, so that you can almost hear the choral music as the Zs descend upon the convert and stuff its mouth with a shucked ear of Devotion131Y, the magic maize through which all Zness is possible.

The Zification came so fast and so completely that I only found out about Devotion131Y months later, in a newspaper that was being used to block out the light (light attracts Zs) in a high rise on Michigan Avenue. The place's windows were covered with layer upon layer of late-stage newspapers, but even so on sunny mornings the light shone through, giving the newspaper stories a layered glow, which is how I discovered one morning a story one layer behind an advertisement for a sporting goods store: 100% of sampled people with AMRV (as it was then known, back when the world contained science, and initialisms) had been exposed to a specific bicolored maize varietal known as Devotion131Y, which, these days, is pretty much the sole product of the American economy. D131Y gives you the Zs, which you survive thanks to D131Y, which makes you feel indebted to D131Y in the way that makes you want to eat anyone who disagrees with you.

This is not a new phenomenon, by the way. The Romans knew it: quod

me alit me extinguit, they said: That which nourishes me, extinguishes me. The longer one hangs around this pestilent planet, the more one is confronted with the reality that the line between people and zombies is not so clearly defined as we might wish.

[Off topic, but I hate the word zombie, if for no other reason than its lack of specificity. The Z'ed up are not zombies anymore than the Spanish flu was Spanish. They are people — or at the very least former people — suffering from a real and specific disease, AMRV, but whenever I came across the uninfected and said AMRV, no one knew what I was talking about, so on occasion once has to give in to convention and say the z-word itself, although all in all, I prefer the colloquially popular “z'ed up” or “z'ed out” or “z'd,” all of which have a certain multivalence than zombie lacks.]

Anyway, one of the reasons it is important not to call Z's zombies is because they aren't zombies. AMRV is a disease, or at least it was a disease before it became ubiquitous (i.e., at this point one could make a pretty compelling argument that those of us without AMRV are the diseased ones), and very little of the zombie apocalypse canon has proven relevant to the world in which I find myself: It doesn't matter if I shoot a zombie in the head or the stomach as long as I kill it. Zombies will eat my brains, but they'll also happily eat the rest of me. They'll also eat anything else, except for Devotion131Y. It is consumption of the corn that infects you, but once you get infected, you don't want to eat it, because you're too busy loving it. (I hypothesize, although I can't be sure, that early victims of AMRV got it from canned corn, because I was the only member of my family who didn't like canned corn.)

Anyway, eating anything other than D131Y proves a bit problematic for Z's, because they don't do anything other than plant and water and tend Devotion131Y. (They are stupid. That much has proven canonical. They also

move quite slowly, although I'm not sure if it's due to malnourishment or some kind of actual brain damage.)

The mechanics of infection are pretty simple. From what I can surmise, you eat a little Devotion131Y, and you're infected, and thereafter, you never want to eat Devotion131Y ever again, because you just want it to be safe and happy and plentiful.

Which is more or less how we used to feel about ourselves.

THREE

Because it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish the newzie from the uninfected, the virus led to a certain discomfort in social situations. Everybody's got a different test, but mine is only one question long: What was the name of the first person you ever loved? Even the newest Z will struggle, because you lose those emotion-based memories first.

(How I learned this: Me, 358 days ago: "Mom, remember how Dad always laughed like he was choking or something, like there was something desperate about the laugh? I loved that." Mom: "Your father was very tall." Not knowing then what I know now, I waited six more entire days before offing her. I woke up with her straddling me, and she said, "Are you hungry?" And I said, "Mom, I'm sleeping," and she raised up this ear of corn over her head preparing to shove it down my throat, whereupon I threw her off of me and ran to my little sister Holly's room, who said, "Vut's Vong?"

She was speaking with her mouth full. Of corn.

I threw open the door, smacking Mom in the face with it, ran into the living room, grabbed the shotgun I'd used to complete dad from underneath the sofa, lured Mom outside, and completed the hell out of her all over this holly bush she'd clipped weekly so it would always be perfectly rectangular, and she kind of staggered backwards into the bush, which totally ruined all the work she'd done, and then I shot her again because I was pissed off about my sister. Anyway, I learned an important lesson from all of this: While gun ownership is morally reprehensible in the civilized world, firepower is more or less de rigeur in a zombie apocalypse.)

Right but anyway the first person Marcos Marcos ever loved was a Puerto Rican neighbor of his in Pilsen named Angela. The first person my long-time compatriot Caroline ever loved was named Jackson, an early Hunter who'd been imprisoned for murder back when things still functioned, where — like all early Hunters — he got Z'ed up in short order when the virus tore through the prison system in the last awful weeks of functioning.

And my own answer to the question? No one ever asks, but it hasn't happened yet. (See how the hope creeps in? Me and my yets. My ridiculous, quixotic yets.) I lost my virginity in spectacular fashion in the weeks after the fall on the glass observation deck of the Sears Tower, the tallest building in the United States, in the heat of a September twilight, with four inches of plate glass beneath us and nothing but a cloudy sky above, the boy — his name was Silas Marren — also a virgin, the sex itself utterly uninspiring except for the view beneath him, a thousand feet of air cushioning us, all totally hot and exhilarating. I was sixteen at the time, which is probably too young for a girl to be separating herself from her one and only maidenhead or whatever, but, you know, the frakking world was ending. (Also, Silas Marren was smoking hot, his face all hard edges and his hands rough and strong. I bet his hands are still rough and strong because somewhere he plies his trade in the dirt these days, planting d131y like the rest of 'em. He committed suicide after I broke up with him. He clung. He never let me breathe. He threatened to get z'ed up if I ever left him. The pressure was too much. So I left him. So he got Ze'd up. Quod me nutrit and everything.)

While we were up there, incidentally, we learned that you cannot kill a Z by dropping pennies from atop a skyscraper. Alas.

For a long time I thought I loved Silas Marren. But I don't think I did. If I'd loved him, I would've killed him when I had the chance. I loved my parents. But a boy? Not yet.

FOUR

I kept a count up to a thousand. Killing Z's is easy, but killing a thousand of them without getting z'ed up yourself is widely considered a marker of "success;" i.e., if only 30,000 people were as good at completing Z's as I am, our stupid species would have survived.

The main reason I do it now is not for humans — we're finished — but for other mammals, which are getting decimated by hungry Z's. Z's are too stupid to trap or hunt with guns, but they're numerous and highly motivated, and every day I find the skeletons of dogs and cats and rats and often even deer on the empty streets of the great city of Chicago. But of course the worst part is that animals eat d131y because there is nothing else around to eat, and then they get Z'ed up, and then they become cannibalistic corn evangelists, too.

(I never thought before all this that evangelism was itself memetic, but it turns out that existence is just a sort of species-wide battle over who will define your desires, so that evangelism is inherent to the definition of humanness, and when there are no more humans left to convince that you are right, you will turn to the animals, and when there are no more animals, you will turn to the trees, and I do not doubt when there is nothing left on this planet but Zs and d131y, the Z's will be smearing the rocks with corn, trying to teach the scorched earth itself to love corn. The whole AMRV thing turns out to have been entirely predictable. If it hadn't been d131y corn, it would've been some other virus, or some viral idea. Hope or Jesus or the sacrifice of 14-year-old virgins or something. The problem, I would argue, is

not that we got obsessed with something, but that we got obsessed with d131y, which turns out to be a disastrous obsession.)

I have six bottles of wine left, and not a ton of water. This morning Mr. President went into the back room of this root cellar, which he and I have established as the bathroom. (Sure, it smells bad, but raw sewage smells 1,000,000% better than the current surface of the United States). Anyway, Mr. President waddled into the bathroom — he is a beaglish mutt who was once overweight. The fat is gone, but the waddle endures — and I heard him peeing, and then he waddled back into the main room and nosed my leg while I was trying to write. I looked down at him and he stared back at me, thick-lidded, and stuck out his tongue, the universal Mr. President sign for “I am thirsty.” (He takes care of his hunger by eating mice.)

And it occurred to me: We use this valuable and rare uncontaminated water, Mr. President and I. And then we just pee it out. This water, so sacred, just turns into pee.

I’ve decided I’ll make a decision when I run out of wine. I’d hate to leave Mr. President, is the thing. He couldn’t make it without me. And between now and then, I will just write. I will tell what I know of the awful disease the Z’s contracted and the awful disease it replaced.

FIVE

I met Caroline in Millennium Park. I'd walked down to see the Bean, this mirrored sculpture in which you can see a distorted reflection of yourself (you can also see other things — the Chicago skyline, the lake, the sky — but people only looked at themselves). The Bean was kind of drenched in bird shit since people had stopped cleaning it, but it still looked great. A gaggle of Zs hauling water from the lake in plastic trash bins walked right past Mr. President and me on their way to the struggling unrowed corn field that had been planted where the lawn stretching back from Frank Gehry's amphitheater had once been.

Z's can be aggressive, certainly, but when they're focused on planting or irrigating or harvesting, they'll generally leave you alone. I am more reckless these days, but back then, my policy when encountering gaggles in public spaces was to save my ammunition. So I just walked along, AR-15 at my side, finger on the safety, Mr. President straining at the leash. We walked away from the Bean and toward the lake, because for some reason I wanted to see the lake.

I hit the ground instinctually when I heard the gunfire, tugging Mr. President close on the leash as he barked furiously as a response to the noise. The echo off the buildings was such that it sounded like a full-fledged platoon attacking, which briefly filled me with hope that the military might still be a going concern, but in fact when my ears were finally able to track the sound, I saw a single tiny girl seated on a low branch of a tree, her back against the trunk, an M-16 in each arm, Rambo-like, slowly waving the guns

back and forth, spraying fire across the corn field. The way the guns danced in her arms, it almost looked like she was conducting an orchestra or something.

I stayed down. Overeager hunters, in my experience, are almost as dangerous as Z's themselves, but Mr. President wouldn't shut up. I reached to grab him and momentarily let go of the leash, whereupon he took off. I scampered after him, the gunfire still raining down on me, but he was gone.

I watched the girl hop down from the tree and walk out into the field to survey her success, which was total. I stood up, then, and backed away as quietly as I could. I was entirely silent, but still she spun around and raised the gun to me. I raised mine back, an established way (at least in these parts) of stating, "I am also uninfected. Furthermore, if you kill me, I will kill you back."

"HUMAN?" she shouted.

"Yup," I answered, fighting the urge to back away. Zs will often back down from confrontation, unless there is a corn field they think they're protecting.

The girl lowered her gun slowly, and I lowered mine in turn. She walked up to me. Five two, maybe a hundred pounds, wearing new designer jeans and a black scoop-necked t-shirt. It was May, I think. Spring in the city and whatnot.

She walked up a staircase. I was confident she wasn't a Z; one of the first symptoms of the virus is that you lose your desire to off them. I would've been happy to pop a Z to prove my disinfection, but she'd eliminated all the ones in view. She got close enough to me to see the whites of my eyes (which, in the Z'ed up, eventually go yellow).

She leveled both guns at my chest. "Do you miss your mother?" she asked, the gun leveled at my chest.

“I miss being able to miss people,” I answered.

“Z!” she shouted. “That’s a newzie answer!” I saw her flip the safety off and waited for her to shoot me. But right then Mr. President returned, pawing at my thighs, and she put the guns down, because no Z would keep a pet, and she whispered, “Sorry. Sorry. Are you okay?”

I was crying. I wanted to miss my mom. I was thinking that maybe I was a Z.

“I’m Caroline,” she said.

“Mia,” I whispered.

SIX

Caroline lived at the Harold Washington branch of the Chicago Public Library, a gray stone behemoth downtown. She'd dragged a king-sized mattress into a windowless cinder-block walled dressing room attached to the huge auditorium where the library once hosted readings.

(In the Beez¹, I'd been a member of the CPL's Teen Advisory Board in my neighborhood, and we would sometimes come downtown together to have pizza with the other Chicago book nerds, and we would meet in this very auditorium. Like everyone I knew, I'd made a point of leaving my Beez life, but I could not leave Chicago, so I mostly just avoided my neighborhood, because Chicago is a city of many discrete neighborhoods, a place where the Venn diagrams do not much overlap. Having minimized my interactions with my past, walking down into that auditorium — which to me still smelled like pizza — was disconcerting.)

Caroline had set up a battery-powered baby video monitor in the auditorium, in the center of the stage, and since her bedroom had only the one door, she could see and hear anyone coming. It was pretty brilliant, really.

We walked back into the dressing room, rectangular, low-ceilinged. "It ain't much," she said, "but it's home."

On the linoleum floor beside her bed were hundreds of books. I looked at them.

"Corn," she said.

"Huh?" I asked.

"I'm reading every book the library has about corn."

“There are that many?”

She knelt down and picked up some titles, speaking excitedly, the evangelism of the convinced. “Yeah we were totally obsessed with corn even in the Beez. Like, I mean this one: Glorious Maize. You don’t see books about, like eggplants called All Hail the Magnificent Eggplant. But that’s how the books talk about corn. Zealously. Did you know that even in the Beez, more than 20% of farmland in America was planted with corn? Did you know in fact that of the total surface of the American continents, more than 1% was corn field?”

“Is that a lot?” I asked.

“Well by comparison the houses of every human being on the continents occupied less than one one hundredth of a percent of land. So, like, even before, corn took up a thousand times more space than we did.”

“Yeah,” I said. “My dad used to talk about that.”

“Z’ed up?”

I nodded. “Yeah, everybody.” Everybody. Every. Body.

She shrugged. “Yeah well I’m from Iowa City. Corn central. We were among the first.”

“How’d you...” I asked. We’d both had these conversations so many times with so many survivors that the actual finishing of the questions was unnecessary.

“No idea,” she said. “I think I just happened to avoid that particular varietal until it became clear that corn was the cause. Luck of the draw.” Most people had some convoluted theory that amounted to “luck of the draw,” but Caroline was the first person I’d met who could admit it. Personally, I’d never seen anyone get infected any way other than having d131y stuffed directly into their mouths.

Mr. President, still half-fat in those days, waddled over to her and curled

up on the bed. “Cute dog,” she said. “He from the Beez?”

“Nah, he’s a stray,” I said.

“I had a dog. My cousin ate him alive.”

“Z’s are classy that way,” I said.

She laughed a little. “So where are you from?”

“Here,” I said.

“Here? I never meet anyone from here,” she said. “No one stays.” I didn’t say anything, even though she was asking a question. I looked over at the baby monitor resting atop the mattress next to some ruffled covers. There were these lights beneath the video picture. If anything made noise, the lights lit up depending on the volume of the sound: A mouse’s peep might blink green; A clumsy hungry desperate Z thudding through the auditorium would have sent the monitor into the red.

Right now, it was green. Silent. Safe. I hadn’t felt like this in a long time.

“I have a sister,” I said finally. “I stay here to check up on her.” Caroline squinted at me, not getting it. “She’s Z’ed up,” I said. “My sister. Runs with a planting crew on the northwest side. She’s nine. I just...I just check up on her or whatever. Make sure she has enough to eat and everything. You know how they are with the little ones.”

“Sorry,” Caroline said, which was the only perfect thing to say.

“Yeah, well,” I said. “I know she’s not her anymore. I just — whatever. I’m a sentimentalist, you know?”

Caroline invited me to spend the night. She stood in a corner facing away from me when she changed into her pajamas — a black tank top and pajama pants — and then she turned back around and I saw the blueblack bruises inside both her shoulders, where the guns had pounded against her tiny frame. Her curly brown hair fell over her face. I slept in my clothes, gun

by the mattress, as I always did, curled up in the corner of the bed, not wanting to invade Caroline's space, because I wanted her to let me stay here, in the safe room with the baby monitor, as long as humanly possible.

SEVEN

Here's how it worked: Every morning, I drove² up to Lincoln Square, my old neighborhood, where I'd lived in a narrow house across the street from the Brauhaus, this crazy German beer hall where old men put on leiderhosen and danced with their ancient, hip-replacement wives atop long wooden tables. You could drink beer out of big glass boots at this place, and my parents loved going there, because they both spoke German, and the people at the Brauhaus really appreciated it when you spoke German, because generally the neighborhood was becoming so gentrified and WASPy.

So at the Brauhaus, they kind of hated kids. But because mom and dad spoke German, and because Holly and I knew a little German, they loved us. They made us special grilled cheese sandwiches off-menu because Holly and I hated sausages and schnitzel. And the old guys would come up to us while we were eating and ask us to dance, and we'd get on top of the tables with them, right near our plates, and dance with our feet on their huge black clunky old German guy shoes, and my parents would laugh. I could see them holding hands under the table even though they were trying to be sneaky about it.

• • •

Right. So every morning, I put Mr. President in the passenger seat and rolled down the window just enough for him to get his nose outside and then drove the Corvette up to Lincoln Square, and precisely at 9 AM, I came to a tires-

squealing halt outside the Brauhaus, and then I reached into the Corvette's tiny backseat, grabbed a piñata, and tossed it out of the window toward the perpetually dark doorway of the Brauhaus.

Different piñata every day. A sombrero, a pony, a unicorn, whatever. I kept a huge collection of them in an apartment building on Giddings Street, in the basement apartment that had once been occupied by an old lady who stared at Holly and me whenever we'd walk by on our way to the park.

There were thousands of piñatas sitting in the party supply stores of Chicagoland, and if the storefront windows hadn't already been shot out by someone else, I had plenty of ammo to do it myself. For whatever reason, I seemed to be the only person interested in piñata-specific looting in the entire metro area, because even after many months, the piñata supply still seemed infinite.

I stuffed the piñatas with some candy and some mini-boxes of sugary cereal, and I always made sure to include two or three of those protein bars that are stocked in the health and nutrition section of drugstores all over town. The bars had the protein little Z's like Holly needed.

After I threw the piñata against the Brauhaus door, I'd drive a little further down Lincoln Avenue and then pull a wheels-screeching 180 and watch from a distance as she slouched across the street and descended upon her piñata, tearing it apart, focused and ferocious in the way Z's disembowel their food, whether human or other animal. Every morning, I watched her dig into it face first, eating the crepe paper and then getting to the unwrapped candy and the protein bars, devouring everything.

You can train Z's to come to the same place every day at the same time. In the early days, the army used to set up food traps for them and when they walked into the trap, they'd be electrocuted "humanely." (They always said that on the news: "It's a humane solution." It was, of course, neither humane

nor a solution.) I got the idea for feeding Holly from those traps, and so I was able to see her alone once each day, away from her gaggle.

Her skin was the same pale silver as any other Z; her eyes predictably vacant and hollow, her black pupils ringed in yellow. Her stringy hair had started clumping into what we called Z dreads; she had the Z slouch, made the Z grunting noises empty of meaning, and except for this daily moment, she spent her Z days with her Z gaggle tending to a huge corn field that stretched from the east bank of the Chicago river to Welles Park, snaking its way through the contiguous defenced backyards of my old neighborhood. She and her gaggle of a few dozen spent their days and nights with the corn, sleeping amid it, working on it, pausing only to drink and eat enough to continue their service.

She was gone, my sister. And I knew that. But each morning when she pulled her face from that piñata, I got to see her mouth smeared with chocolate as it had been so often in the Beez. Her little mouth. Her narrow chin. Her fingers, long and thin like mine and like her mother's. Holly was well and truly Z'ed out, but still she looked more like me than anyone left on the planet, and seeing her made me feel the only thing I am still capable of feeling besides hope and dread: I loved her. And so I took care of her.

I came to the conclusion a while ago that there is nothing romantic or supernatural about loving someone: Love is the privilege of being responsible for another. It was, for a time, what kept me going: Each morning, for a little while, I got to feel the weight of the yoke on my back as I pulled the ancient cart of my species.

EIGHT

Five bottles of wine left, and I'm still feeling undecided. Mr. President wants to go on, of course. He is blessed with the self-consciouslessness of the Z — Mr. President yearns to go on living precisely because he is unable to think about why he yearns to go on living. There were no mice overnight, I guess, because all day he has been whining hungrily, nosing my leg and waddling back and forth across the cellar, miserable. In the end, I fed him a quarter cup of canned tuna and myself the other three quarters, even though I could have used the protein.

Why do I want to take care of Mr. President, particularly when he's desperate like this? Sure, he has been useful — he has saved me from many a newzie — but there aren't many newzies left. And it's not like Mr. President has infected me with a virus that predisposes me to want to care for him.

I think it's because Mr. President is a symbol, and symbols matter. Caroline liked to say that I was a sentimentalist. But sentiment is really just an appreciation for the reality and significance of symbols — which is why I'm still here, and she's not.

NINE

Caroline had a real zeal for the business of Z completion. I saw dezification as a kind of responsibility. But for Caroline, it was a war.

On our third day together, we took her semi truck cab down the Expressway to Indiana. The cab was brand new, painted purple with a pink outline of a naked lady on each door, and riding shotgun I felt like I was sitting two stories high. Behind our captain's chairs, two bunk beds and a TV with DVD player that ran on electric power generated by the diesel engine. Mr. President loved it back there, happily sleeping the day away above the pleasant rumbling of the road. Caroline's forehead was about on level with the top of the huge steering wheel, but somehow she managed to see well enough to drive. (Driving in the Aze is not tremendously challenging, there being very limited traffic. Lots of pedestrians, of course, but they're all Z'ed up.)

"I can't believe I never thought of a semi truck," I said.

"They're fast. And they come equipped with a bedroom that locks. Plus it's like the last way to watch movies. Kinda top-heavy, though. And you gotta drive stick."

• • •

So we drove for a long time past endless fields of corn; we could tell it was Z'ed out corn because it wasn't planted in anything approaching rows. We drove and drove, occasionally spotting Z's filling buckets with stagnant water

from the roadside ditches. Caroline didn't stop for these little gaggles. She had bigger plans.

“So the thing you've gotta do,” she was telling me while we listened to an old CD of country songs, “is you've gotta think like corn. That's why I got all those books on corn. Everybody who's Z'ed out is basically an extension of corn. That's how I figure it. They're basically humanoid corn — they want what corn wants when corn wants it. And what does corn want?”

The question sounded rhetorical, and there was a pleasantness to the pace of Caroline's speech — she talked rhythmically, almost to the beat of the bass line of the sad old song playing quietly just over the roar of the diesel engine. But she kept waiting for an answer, glancing over at me.

“More corn,” I said finally.

“Right. Exactly. You're a smart kid, Mia. You're like a little me.” I was in fact far bigger than her³, but I didn't say anything. “And what corn fears is less corn. Corn fears separation from itself — that's why in cities the Z'ed out tore up all the fences between backyards: Separation into fields would mean cultivation, would mean that we are in charge. Corn can't stand the thought that something other than corn would be in charge. Which means the Z'ed out can't stand the idea either. Which means the surest way to attract gaggles and gaggles of Z's is?”

“Um, I don't know?”

“Separation,” she said. “Get between corn and more corn.”

“I don't get it,” I said.

But within an hour, she showed me. We drove so far, it turned out, because Caroline's dezification strategy required a hill, which Chicagoland does not have in abundance.

At last we came to a deforested corn-covered hill downstate, just north of Rockford. Caroline exited the Interstate, drove along a narrow county road

for a few minutes, and then turned into a corn field, driving up the hill to a small ridge, maybe a hundred vertical feet above where we'd turned off the road.

She drove a straight line along the ridge, plowing down the me-high corn under the massive grill of the semi truck, slicing a mile-long break in the field, and then she turned around slowly, carefully, a nine-point turn atop this hill, the massive tires of the truck digging into the soft black soil, and then, dirt flying behind us, she drove to the approximate midpoint of the slice we'd made in cornutopia. She pulled up the parking brake and threw open her door.

“What now?” I asked.

“We wait,” she answered. Caroline turned back into the sleep quarters and grabbed her two M-16s and a backpack clanking with extra ammo clips. I grabbed my AR-15 and then we went outside, a clear afternoon in spring, just cool enough that I wanted all the heat the sun could give me. We sat on the cab's hood, leaning against the huge glass windshield. It was so flat and treeless that we could see for miles in every direction. The corn, packed tight together, literally everywhere.

It took a few minutes before we saw our first gaggle — maybe 25 Z's — zigging and zagging through the corn, careful (as they always were) not to disturb the growth of d131y. They slouched toward us, their spines twisted from the endless hours of planting and watering, bending down to the earth the way flowers contort toward the sunlight. They were carrying Z staffs, the walking sticks — sharp on one side, blunt on the other — they use to speed planting.

It took them forever to get within firing range. As we waited, Caroline said, “What's your sister's name?”

“Holly,” I said.

“Do you think Holly is still in there, somewhere?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “There could always be...I don’t know. A cure or whatever.”

“Who’s gonna discover that cure, Mia? You? Me?”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” I said. “You think they’re in range?”

“Technically, but if you get them too far out and you clip a leg or something, it takes forever to get them down.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.”

“You religious?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I was raised a secular humanist. You?”

“Not so much anymore,” she said. “Still a little. It’s like a cold I can’t quite shake.”

“You got any people left?” I asked. As I was asking, she raised an M-16 to her right shoulder.

“All right Mia. Let’s light ‘em up.” She fired a short burst, then another, and the Z’s started to fall forward, then crawling until one of us lit up their heads or they ran out of blood to trail behind them. Even once you got a head shot, they kept digging their hands into the ground, trying to crawl through the corn, and I was always astounded by the way they kept going until they were well and truly dead, the relentlessness with which they clung to a life that by any objective measure was miserable.

The next gaggle wove toward us from the east, so we swung around to the side of the cab and took aim, waiting for them to get into range. It was a larger gaggle — maybe as many as forty — and lots of kids, skinny and bony. Z’s age but they are known to be sterile, an evolutionary dead end, so all the kids were human once, and they tend to congregate in the same gaggles.

“I hate the kids,” I said.

“No room for sentiment in this game,” Caroline answered. “I think they’re ready if you’re ready.”

I sighted an adult Z and squeezed the trigger, the gun butt pounding into my arm, and I watched through the sight as the Z tumbled to the ground. Head shot. Caroline had in that time taken out three adults, although with less ammunitional efficiency, and as I sighted up the next grown Z, the inevitable happened: I watched the adult Z grab a kid by the arm and hold up the kid by the armpits, using this squirming Z’ed out kid as a shield.

Within seconds all the remaining adults had kid shields, and while Caroline kept firing, tearing through the kids and then destroying the adults with dozens of bullets a piece, perfectly willing to disembowel them, I just kept my sight dancing over this one Z kid squirming in the arms of his compatriot. The world was upside down.

“Come on, Mia,” Caroline said. That kid was someone’s sister, is the thing. And it might be curable. I knew it was this failure to pull the trigger that had led to the virus’s endemic spread in the first place: If we’d aggressively killed people the moment they exhibited signs of infection, we might have contained the virus. And I knew that Holly was not in the body of this skinny little girl, kicking her unsocked sneakered feet, trying to get back on the ground, back to the corn she loved. I knew, in fact, that Holly was not in Holly’s body. I knew this. But I couldn’t pull the trigger. In the end, Caroline lit them up, both of them, and they fell forward, the adult covering the child, making him invisible.

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s actually helpful to believe that humans have souls,” she said, “because if you believe in souls, it’s very easy to look at them and know they don’t have souls, that the virus stole their souls, and that you aren’t killing them, because their themness has already been killed. You’re killing the

virus, which is a frakking privilege as far as I'm concerned."

"Yeah," I said. I knew she was right. "It's not like I've never killed a Z," I said. "I lit up my frakking parents. It's just, like, this — I mean, it's slaughter."

"Yeah. Slaughter of the virus." She was right. I put a new clip in the AR-15 and when the next gaggle came I mowed them down myself, standing on the hood, knees bent so the gun wouldn't throw me backwards, eviscerating every last one of them. We killed them all afternoon with moments of idle conversation between, until our ridge was ringed with the bodies and they were crawling over their dead to get to us, their Z staffs raised up, still trying to repair the crack in their blessed corn, and we just kept completing them until the sun was low in the sky. They came more slowly then, and when I asked Caroline why, she theorized — we were all theorizing all the time — that a gaggle could only sense a cut in its field for a few miles.

This made no sense, of course: Z's were stunningly, amazingly stupid, and I found it hard to believe that they were able to telepathically communicate with corn. It seemed more reasonable that they heard the gunfire and were attracted to it, wanting to protect each other and the far fields. But neither of us knew anything of Z-ness from the inside.

As the clear sky began to purple, we went twenty minutes without a gaggle. My arms were jelly from a day of shooting, and the Z's were starting to stink, and I told Caroline I was ready to go.

"Just one more," she said.

"Who even know if there are any more."

"There's always another," she said. She swung her legs around and disappeared into the open door of the cab.

A few moments later she appeared with a rocket launcher, as long as her and nearly as thick. She struggled to hand it up to me. I held it, the red-tipped

rocket visible inside the launcher, my hands shaking, scared it would blow up in my face. I'd never seen a rocket launcher before.

We sat there with the rocket launcher, which stretched across both our laps, for a few minutes. In the twilight, it was harder to see the Z's coming, so I didn't notice the gaggle until they were crawling over their putrid compatriots.

"Three o'clock," I said. Caroline turned her head to the gaggle.

"Magnificent," she said. "Help me lift this thing."

I did. She stood up and raised the rocket launcher with me helping hold it up. She took aim, then fired, falling so hard back into the windshield I thought she'd break it. The noise of the rocket was literally deafening, so I watched in the roaring silence as it flew over the heads of the gaggle, beyond the piled bodies, and into the field behind, lighting a fire in the corn.

She'd missed. I started to raise my gun to my shoulder, but Caroline pushed the barrel down. I turned to her, confused. She pointed out toward the field, mouthing the word "Watch."

So I did. I watched in the fading light as the Z's spun around, saw the fire, and shuffled away from us, back over the wall of bodies toward the fire. I watched as they beat the spreading fire with their Z staffs and their stomping feet, and then I watched as they threw themselves one after another onto the flames to smother the fire and save the corn from burning.

• • •

Later, as Caroline and I drove down the Interstate, I said, "I expected them to scream or something."

"On the fire, you mean."

"Yeah." But they hadn't. They hadn't even made those Z'ed up grunts. They'd just dove onto the flames, one after another, silent, resolved.

“You know the phrase Ultimate Concern?” she asked.

I did not.

“It’s something they talked a lot about my church. Ultimate Concern is, like, the thing matters most. What, ultimately, motivates your living? For what would you die? What is your capital-u Ultimate capital-c Concern?”

I didn’t know.

“For them, it’s corn,” she said. “So it’s no big sacrifice to give up their lives for it. It’s almost a privilege. I think that’s why they smile when you off them.”

Like I said, everyone had a theory for everything.

TEN

Mr. President is not well. He can't seem to stop pacing, even at night, walking the same methodical path across the diagonal of this room. I took him for a walk up above this morning because I thought maybe he needed exercise, but he recoiled at the smell⁴ and then wouldn't walk anywhere, and I dragged him around on the leash for a while, pulling him around the backyard, and then I brought him back downstairs and took the leash off and he immediately commenced to pacing again. So far as I can tell, he has not slept in more than a day, which is unprecedented for Mr. President, who usually goes about four minutes between naps.

I cannot help but think that Mr. President has been seized not by a physical ailment but by the same existential crisis that has frozen me in place in this miserable cellar. Perhaps he has begun to contemplate his Ultimate Concern. Pacing back and forth, thinking to himself, "It can't be to continue my species, since I have no balls, having had them cut out of me when I was but a child." Pace. "Perhaps it is to keep the lady alive and happy, but she no longer seems to desire either happiness or life." Pace. "Maybe I am only here to pursue the petty entertainments of my species: the mice-chasing, pee-marking, rough-housing, sniff-exploring pleasures. Maybe the whole enterprise is mere hedonism, but if so, the pleasures are never worth the pains." Pace. "So why why why must I go on?"

I will admit that it's unlikely, but Mr. President is the closest thing I have seen in weeks to a sentient being, and so I cannot rule it out.

As for me, last night I enjoyed a very very nice Merlot from 1976, the

kind of wine that makes one briefly, toward the end of the bottle, believe that wine would not make a terrible Ultimate Concern. Which meant of course that I awoke this morning with a headache, a headache which has not entirely dissipated.

Four bottles left. All very, very nice, including a Bordeaux from 1982, and the last, a bottle of white, which due to circumstance I will have to drink unchilled, a Gewerensteiner, said to be the best dessert wine in history, which my parents were given by the owners of the Brauhaus on the occasion of their 25th wedding anniversary. Mr. President has his wine, and I have my pacing.

I will drink the wine, and then I will make my decision.

ELEVEN

About a week after we met, Caroline and I were in her room, sitting on plush faux leather seats we'd dragged down from the library proper. On the table between us, we passed back and forth cans of sardines and green beans, pretending to be each other's waiter, me saying, "For your third course, we have some wonderful sardines soaked in the finest Beez oils," and her saying, "Your fourth course today may remind you of your second course: We're serving a very nice, french-cut⁶ green bean out of a tin can, minimally rusted."

After we finished both cans, we took the Corvette up Lake Shore Drive to a drug store in Uptown. By then, the grocery stores had been pretty well emptied, but there was still a lot of canned food at drug stores and gas station convenience stores.

I walked around and shopped while Caroline stood, gun leveled, by the blown-out entrance. Being above ground, in open spaces, always scared the crap out of me — not only because I've seen hungry Z's pop up behind people, smack them unconscious with a Z staff, and then proceed to disembowel them while they are yet alive, but also because the air itself was already starting to stink, and you could sort of feel the world dying.

Anyway, I'd loaded up two tote bags with beets, tomatoes, spam, bottled water, and tuna. I was walking past the magazines and wondering if you could can broccoli — I missed and continue to miss broccoli — when I heard gunfire. I ducked behind the magazine aisle — all the magazines were already four months old then — and shouted, "You okay?"

She shouted back, “Just lighting up some Z’s!” and then started firing again. I zig-zagged toward her in a crouch, and joined her by the door. I saw a formerly fat Z with skin sagging off him lumbering toward Caroline from the photo section and shot him repeatedly in the stomach and head, his body opening up, almost inside out, blood everywhere, then walked over to make sure he was dead, which he was. I took his Z staff and broke it in half for no particular reason then walked back to Caroline, who’d stopped shooting.

A dozen of them lay dead on Montrose. Caroline and I walked out and shot holes into the trashcans they’d been carrying so the trash cans wouldn’t hold water so the Z’s who found them wouldn’t be able to use them for irrigation.

Then Caroline slung the gun over her shoulder, careful not to let the still-hot barrel touch her leg, and said, “What’d ya get? Any salmon? God, I could go for some salmon. Also, why don’t they can beef?”

“I was thinking of broccoli,” I said. “I’d like some broccoli.”

“Pizza,” she said.

“Really any bread-based product would be a delight,” I said. We got into the car and drove up Montrose for a couple blocks to the cemetery, which was now (it rather goes without saying) a corn field, and we sat up on top of the brick wall that surrounded the cemetery and enjoyed a lunch of sliced cheddar cheese, a half can of tuna each, and some tomato sauce.

During lunch, Caroline picked off fourteen Z’s. “You have any idea of your count?” I asked.

“Thirteen thousand three hundred eighty four. Ish.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said. “I’m, like, just over a thousand.”

She turned to me, and then looked back at the corn, growing so high that only the occasional obelisk reminded us this had been a cemetery. “Well, it’s the little pleasures that keep me going: Good food, good friends, zombie

murder.”

“I hate that word,” I said. “They’re nothing like zombies. They’re not undead. They’re got a vi—”

“That’s the difference between you and me. You think they’re people. You empathize. You try to imagine what it’s like to be them. Don’t you get it? There’s no there there. You know at funerals, wait, look, look.” She pushed herself off the wall, falling into the corn, and I followed her, landing on dirt cracked and gray, the corn sucking up all the water. Caroline stomped on some corn stalks, mowing a path to a gravestone. “Here,” she said, pointing. “Look.” It was a knee-high rectangular slab of granite. Here Lies All That Remains of Charlotte Foster / Wife, Mother, Daughter, Friend / 1886-1944.

“Okay,” I said.

“All that remains!” Caroline shouted, stomping a circle around the gravestone to get the corn away from it. “Not all of Charlotte Foster, but what remains. Charlotte Foster wife mother daughter friend is not in the goddamned ground, Mia, because Charlotte Foster wife mother daughter friend had a soul. Haven’t you read Descartes?”

I allowed as to how I had not. “Maybe they don’t have souls,” I said, thinking of Holly’s empty eyes ringed in yellow. “But they used to be people.”

“So did Charlotte Foster,” Caroline said, “And killing her isn’t murder.” I followed Caroline back to the wall. we pulled ourselves up and continued lunch. “You know who else used to be people?” she asked me after a while. “We did. And they took that away from us.”

TWELVE

Which observation has rather stuck with me. Here, in this meager root cellar, lies all that remains of Mia Featherstone, who was sixteen years old when circumstance separated her body from her soul.

I ended up reading Descartes. I stole him out of the Harold Washington Library and when I got to the cellar, I read him out loud to Mr. President, because unless I read aloud I couldn't understand a word he was saying, and there was no one left to read to except Mr. President. I am not much for philosophy, but that old Descartes, he got me thinking⁸.

Here's the question: Essentially, what is the difference between the Z'ed up and me? So far as I can tell, The Zs are in the business of walking around doing whatever they have to do to continue walking around. In this respect, they are like almost all people who ever lived; i.e., you will meet the occasional Rene DesCartes who sits down and spends a lot of time thinking about the nature and meaning of his existence, although the solutions such people settle upon are inevitably inadequate, almost as if all meaning is constructed, grafted onto life and not inherent to it. But, I mean, yes, occasionally you will encounter such people, but the vast majority of people are like Caroline: Why do you shoot Z's? Because I hate them. Why do you hate them? Because they ruined everything, and if everyone had been as aggressive as me, there would still be a humanity. Why is humanity better than Zs?

And it was there that she always paused, because the only honest answer is, "Because I am human." Because humanity is us and Zinity is them.

Sure, you can answer that they're a dead end evolutionarily, that their existence spells the end of our species. But let me submit to you as someone standing on the very edge of the apocalyptic cliff our species has so long awaited: The prospect of a world that contains neither humans nor Z's is not so terrifying. Nature will take its world back. Animals will frolic and fight. There will be no lord of the manor, which is not such a bad thing, because it seems to me that people have done a pretty poor job of guiding the biosphere for the last few thousand years.

The Z's will kill us all, and then the Z's will die out and in sixty years there will be no one to remember our silly war, Caroline's wasted ammunition, my year of zombic survivalism, Rene DesCartes's musings, or Michelangelo's sculptures. And that is really only the sadness here as I drink a thousand-dollar bottle of wine down here in the cellar: We did a few things worth remembering, and I wish for someone to remember them.

THIRTEEN

We were in the stacks of the Harold Washington Library maybe two weeks later, and I was reading a zombie apocalypse novel that pretended to be this kind of anthropological study of zombies complete with diagrams and whatever, and it was pretty funny.

Caroline, meanwhile, was reading Immanuel Kant in an attempt to come up with a logical framework that would empower me to leave Chicago. She'd gotten the idea that we should leave Chicago and go north. We were sprawled out on the ground, using hardcover encyclopedia volumes as pillows. "Okay, follow my logic here," she said. "Zs like corn. Agree?"

"Agree."

"Zs don't like to be apart from corn. Agree?"

"Agree."

"Corn does poorly in cold weather. Agree?"

"Agree," I said. "I see where you're going. You want to go North. North to salvation. North like everyone else has gone."

"Correct," she said. "North to a land without corn and ergo a land without Zs."

"Let me ask you this," I said. "If there is some Z-free world up in Canada or Alaska or whatever, why don't we get their shortwave radio broadcasts? Why don't they fly airplanes over us and drop leaflets saying, 'Hey, if you can read this, you are not Z'ed up, and therefore you should come visit us in wonderful Canada, where the weather is cold and the zombies are sparse.'"

“We don’t—” Caroline started, but I continued.

“Why don’t they organize armies and fight their way South to eliminate the virus? We’re damn near as cold as it gets in the Americas; why is damn near everyone here Z’ed up already? People believe in North for the same reason Z’s believe in corn, Caroline.”

“You’re just scared to leave your sister,” she said.

I thought about it for a second. “We need to learn about them,” I said. “Everybody’s got a theory, but no one is ever testing their theories. We don’t know anything about them, not really. For all we know, they like planting in cold weather. Maybe they prefer Canada. Maybe South would be better. We need to do some kind of anthropological survey.”

“The Care and Feeding of Contemporary Zombies,” Caroline said.

“What To Expect When You’re Expecting a Zombie Apocalypse,” I said.

“Awfully Fond of Corn: A Sociological Examination of AMRV victims,” she said.

“Mostly Grunting: A Linguist Explores Zombie Communication”

We went on like that for a while before settling on a name for our anthropological zombie study: “A to Z.” For some reason, we found this very funny. We laughed so hard that we woke up Mr. President and he started barking at us.

• • •

We began our sociological investigation that very afternoon. We drove over to the west side of the Chicago river, up California until we got to this old mansion my dad had always wanted to buy. It backed up to the river and Dad always dreamed that he would have a kayak lashed to the dock and every morning he would get up, put on his suit, and then kayak all the way

downtown to his office building.

Because water is so vital to Z's, we figured it would be a great way to observe them, so we pulled up next to this mansion and walked around back and pushed our way through chest-high corn looking for a canoe or a kayak on the river bank. But of course the Z's had tossed them all into the river to make room for more corn, just like they'll pull out small trees by their roots in order to free up a square inch for planting. We kept walking down the river, breast-stroking through the corn.

I was so busy looking for a canoe that I did not see the Z until she was on me, an old woman with sagging skin, the yellow fingernails of her left hand choking me. I kneed her in the groin and tried to throw her off me, but she clung with the superhuman strength of a mother protecting her children. She lunged forward and bit at me with a toothless mouth, then threw me toward the river and raised her Z stick as I shouted Caroline. I spun as the old hag brought her Z staff down on me, damn near stabbing me in the stomach. As I spun, I kicked her legs out from under her, then jumped to my feet, wrested her Z staff from her, and stabbed her through the eye. She smiled up at me and then started convulsing. I pulled the staff out of her eye socket and drove it into her chest. It went all the way through. They keep their staffs sharp, I'm telling you.

Caroline, I shouted again, and then spun around to find her standing right there. "What the hell?"

"You had it covered."

"You could have just shot her."

"Well, sure, but sometimes one needs to be reminded of the pleasure of nearly dying. It's such a wonderful thing to watch, a human and a Z locked in mortal combat. The hypermotivated, stupid Z against the marginally suicidal but intelligent human. Such a joy to see that survival instinct kick in, see the

anger in a human's eyes. Emotion, Mia. How I miss it.”

“You're crazy,” I said.

“I enjoy watching them die,” she said. “That's not crazy. That's the least crazy thing left in the world.”

“She's probably with a crew. We need to keep—” I saw a young male Z approaching Caroline from behind. She saw my eyes widen, slung her gun backwards and fired a wild burst of gunfire that nearly sliced him in two.

“Not an ideal situation,” Caroline muttered. “Can't really see 'em coming when you're in the field.”

“And you just alerted them to our presence,” I pointed out.

“Yay! That means we get to kill a bunch of 'em!”

Caroline fired a full clip of ammunition into the field away from the river, thinning the corn stalks enough to make an easy path to a four-story yellow brick building that backed up to the river. The windows were blown out already and the back door unlocked, so we went in, climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, then walked into an unlocked apartment.

The living room was all IKEA furniture and thrift store couches, a bachelor pad that had been shared, I imagined, by a bunch of roommates just out of college, starting their lives out. On our way to the back window, I stopped off in the kitchen and grabbed two cans of tuna and a can opener. We made our way to a bedroom with a futon for a bed and sat in a blown-out window ledge right next to each other, our feet dangling from the top floor. We ate the tuna with our hands straight from the can while picking off Z's.

“So far, I'm learning nothing about them,” I told Caroline.

“Ah, who are you kidding? We're not gonna write an anthropological study. We're just screwing around.”

I realized it was true. I scanned around, the corn thick and high on either side of the river, and suddenly my eye settled upon a blue canoe on the far

side of the river tied to a dock about two hundred feet downstream from us. I nodded the barrel of my gun toward it, and Caroline smiled. Then we returned to shooting.

I have to tell you: Z completion is a job that grows wearisome. It is surprisingly physically demanding to fire a gun, for one thing. Your shoulder gets sore and your arm muscles ache from grappling with the not-insignificant weight of the AR-15 and your head hurts because gunfire is really quite loud, and it jangles inside your skull long after you stop firing, a billion tiny concussions making your brain shiver, and then there is the sound of Z's in distress, their smiling blood-soaked gurgles. You don't think it's that difficult, firing a gun, but it's like trying to hold an excited puppy in your arms, and at the end of every burst of fire, you find yourself out-of-breath and sweaty. (It was hot that day, I remember, and the air stunk of course with our species's decomposition.)

I know many Survivors who grew to dislike machine guns so much that they preferred hand-to-hand combat or ninja swords or pistols with silencers, but all those folks have something in common: They are no longer survivors. People like Caroline and I lived with the unpleasantness of automatic gunfire, the lame and predictable cowardice of it, because lame and predictable cowardice is precisely how you make it to the end of the species.

Right so but anyway, it felt like we were firing forever; Caroline went through at least twenty clips, pulling them out of her huge 8-bit camouflage army-issue backpack every few minutes, and there were always more Zs to complete, and I found myself thinking about the Beez, about for instance say a guy who works for the Social Security Administration or something, some boring government desk job in a cubicle where he spends all day in the same chair that he's been sitting in for twelve and a half years or whatever, all day every day in this very same chair, and the guy sometimes thinks about his

relationship with this swiveling chair that can go up or down a total of eight inches with the aid of this polygonal lever just beneath the seat, thinks about how this chair is technically his most intimate acquaintance, about how he and the chair have shaped each other: There's an indentation forever in the chair where the guy's wallet is and the guy long ago changed his posture to meet the needs of the chair. He and the chair, they are these two symbiotic creatures locked in a decade-long love affair, and this guy with his chair and his cubicle spends every day doing the same paperwork.

Admittedly I've never had a job, but I always pictured it as filling out the same form over and over again with extremely slight variations. Right then, incidentally, my legs swinging happily from the third floor window, I literally shot a Z in both of his eyes with consecutive bullets, which I had definitely never seen before, and I was like, "Did you see that?" but Caroline didn't hear over the ringing echo of the bullets. But anyway, it occurred to me sitting up there and killing by Caroline's count some 230 Z's that my life was basically very similar to the life of my hypothetical cubicled government employee, except that instead of being in the paperwork business I was in the Z completion business, and also I didn't have a chair.

I had a Mr. President, back home in the Harold Washington Library auditorium's green room. And I had a Caroline, her tiny arms flexed beside me as she used too much ammunition, taking out Z's on the opposite shore of the river with her trademark sweeping arcs of gunfire. And I had a sister ten months removed from humanity. And that was all.

"Are we clear?" I asked after a minute without gunfire.

"I guess so," she said, and I turned around to find a Z walking through the abandoned bedroom toward us. I lit her up right through her middle. As the Z twitched beneath us, we stepped over her. "Call me racist, but they really do all look the same," Caroline said.

We walked through the apartment into the stairwell, where we found two more Z's and shot them up. We made it to the dock. I handed my gun to Caroline and jumped into the water feet first, then breast-stroked across, careful to keep the dirty water out of my mouth. I made it to the opposite bank, then floated downriver to the dock with the canoe attached. It was locked to the dock with a steel chain.

"Crap, it's locked," I shouted across to Caroline.

"Get out of the way," she shouted back, then took off her backpack, removed the sniper rifle tied to the back of it, and proceeded to shoot not the chain itself but the rotting wooden post the canoe was chained to. "Clear," she shouted. I walked back to the edge of the dock, jumping over the more rotted planks, and tugged on the chain until the shot-up wooden post came loose. The dock gave underneath me, falling down toward the water, and I scrambled off and into the canoe, which almost overturned. Then it was just the small matter of paddling alone upstream and across the river to Caroline, who tossed the guns and her backpack into the middle of the canoe and climbed in. I was in the back of the canoe, the steering position, while she provided the power up front.

We paddled south beneath the old Brown Line tracks, where above us Z's were walking along the tracks to get to tiny Jacob Park, which had once been a secret garden-type playground for my sister and me but was now a cornfield. We let them go as we paddled, something about the quiet and the peacefulness of the river — plus the fact that our guns weren't handy — seemed uninterrupted. I felt nervous we'd run into Holly's crew — I didn't want to have to explain to Caroline that we couldn't fire into her crew — but we didn't. We just paddled South, past Z's filling City of Chicago plastic garbage cans with water to drag to their fields, all the row houses abandoned, the glass blown out of the windows by the hooligans of the early Aze, who in

the last issues of the newspapers were viewed as every bit the threat as the Z's themselves.

Caroline and I didn't talk much. The silence made me wonder if we were real friends, or if we were just if-there-were-only-two-people-left-in-the-world friends. I wondered what we had in common aside from having lived this long. Watching her exposed, deeply tanned bony shoulder blades beneath her black tanktop and her cammo pants, I realized that we certainly didn't dress alike. (By comparison, I was wearing a green Welles Park Little League t-shirt and \$400 blue jeans for which I'd paid zero cents at a well-looted Macy's downtown.)

"What were you like in the Beez?" I asked her. "Like, were you popular?"

She didn't look back at me, just kept paddling. "I thought we were supposed to be making sociological observations."

"They come to the river to get water for the corn," I said. "They're really frakking keen on corn."

"You have a good sociological eye," she said. "So you tell me what I was like in the Beez."

"I bet you were kind of a freak," I said. She stopped paddling, resting the paddle across her knees, and spun her head around to me. "Define freak."

"Like, you were probably the hot nerd girl. Every school has a nerd girl who all the nerds want to get with."

She gave me a thin-lipped smile. "You are a sociologist. I wasn't the hot nerd girl. I was just a regular nerd girl. I was a big believer in hoodies and hair in my face. Minimize the percentage of myself that could be seen."

"Yeah," I said.

"You were popular?" she asked.

"I don't know. I guess. I was kinda big, though. It wasn't like all the

guys liked me.”

“But you were popular.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Only popular people don’t know if they’re popular,” she observed.

“Well, they’re all Z’ed up now, so whether they liked me seems rather irrelevant.”

“Fair enough,” she said. She raised an imaginary glass and said, “To our enemies meeting the same fate as our friends.”

“If only we had something to actually drink,” I said.

“Backpack,” she answered. I knelt forward out of the canoe’s seat and opened Caroline’s backpack and amid all the M-16 clips, I found a large silver flask monographed WHG. “My dad’s,” she said. “There is very, very good cabernet in there.” I unscrewed the cap and took a sip. It tasted like wine. I raised the flask to her. “To the Survivors,” I said and took a swig. I leaned over the middle of the canoe and she leaned back toward me and took the flask. “To the dogs,” she said, “for they know how to be dogs.” She twisted around, handing the flask back to me, and I leaned forward again, and the canoe shifted to the right as I reached, and then the two of us simultaneously overcorrected left, and then overcorrected more to the right, and then we were in the water, unarmed, our guns waterlogged and useless, nine miles from our rearmament center in the Harold Washington Public Library.

“Shit,” Caroline mumbled when her head popped up from underneath the water.

FOURTEEN

There's not a lot of power in the Aze, which I realize is a metaphorically resonant observation, but it's also a practical problem in my life: Most of the ways we have of generating electricity have gone idle. There are no power plants. I knew a guy in the early days after the unraveling who built a wind-powered thing that worked well enough to power a laptop, but so far as I know, the only power source remaining in the world is the gas-powered generator. Fortunately, I've so far been able to find gas left over in car engines (if there's a way to pump gas from gas stations, I haven't discovered it), so every day or two, I go out with my tube and my five gallon bucket and suck some gas out of the tank of some old car — it works easier on older cars for some reason — and then refill my generator, which gives me plenty of power to keep my desk lamp and my ineffective air purifier and the bare overhead bulb going, giving everything an appropriately apocalyptic glow, complete with the darkened moldy cellar corners.

Anyway, I no longer have need of a computer, but for quite a while in the Aze, I used one, even though without the Internet (which died amid the Unraveling) computers always seemed to me a little like fancy cinderblocks.

But but but the computer I used when I first moved into this lovely and underlit cellar had this searchable encyclopedia preloaded onto it, which is how I came to find the provenance of Caroline's toast in the upright canoe about the dogs who know how to be dogs.

There was this sociologist Peter Berger (not known to be deceased but presumed to be Z'ed up) who once wrote this famous line: "The difference

between people and dogs is that dogs know how to be dogs.” I know this to be true, at least insofar as Mr. President is an exemplary dog: Even today, with three bottles of wine left and the air soaked with putrid death, Mr. President is a dog in full possession of his dogness: His pacing is not finally about the great existential questions, because the pacing goes away the moment he eats. Today, as he tried to outsmart the mouse that he has spent the day chasing from The Latrine to The Room and back again, he is perfectly content. Why are you chasing the mouse, Mr. President? Because it makes my tail wag. Why does it make your tail wag? Because if I catch the mouse, I can eat it. Why do you want to eat it? I am hungry. Why are you hungry? Because my body wants to go on, so my tail can keep wagging. It is a closed circuit for Mr. President; he is a system unto himself, and in this respect he is my hero. Dogs know how to be dogs.

And I know nothing more about how to be a person than I did in the Beez. The system of my consciousness remains open — I cannot for the life of me answer the question of why satisfactorily. One could make a case, I suppose, that the reason for our existence was to marvel at creation, to see and appreciate the beauty of the universe and indeed to contribute to that beauty in ways that aren’t available to organisms without consciousness, but A. aesthetic arguments — as Caroline often pointed out to me — have the air of bullshit about them, and B. there is precious little beauty left to appreciate, and the mechanics of contribution have become quite a bit more complicated.

Even so, last night I decided to visit the above with Mr. President to see if the appreciation of beauty could in and of itself be sustaining. I brought:

1. A backpack with two clips of ammo, a Maglite, and a gray American Apparel hoodie in case it got cold.
2. The trusty AR-15
3. An orange five-gallon plastic bucket for gasoline acquisition.

4. Some excellent wine.

One thing about the Aze: The stars have come out in a big way. The Milky Way, which I always suspected was an elaborate fiction or else a sight reserved for citizens of the past, wrapped a band around the night sky, a thin moon rising on the clear night. Mr. President and I walked a few blocks over to Sunnyside Road, then up to a roof deck of what had been a new single-family home in the city. There were wooden Adirondack chairs up there, and I sat down and stared at the sky, thinking about the number of the stars, and the smallness of this failed experiment, feeling again that hopeful impulse: Maybe even after there are people on earth, there will be someone to discover us, to cut away the kudzu and reveal our monuments and manuscripts, someone to display our skeletons in their museums.

But what did I have left to contribute? Just this? Just being the last known pair of truly human eyes to look up into the sky and experience the fleeting flush of hope? Being a person, I had come to realize, is a communal activity. Dogs know how to be dogs. But people do not know how to be people unless and until they learn from other people.

Which got me to wondering whether it's possible to learn how to be a person in a world where all the people are dead.

Sitting there in the Adirondack chair drinking directly from the bottle with Mr. President's overly-skinned trunk flush against the roof deck's hardwood floor, I started thinking about this famous German soldier in World War II, Josef Schultz. My dad always talked about Josef Schultz. Schultz was part of a platoon that captured eleven Yugoslavian soldiers. They were ordered to blindfold the prisoners, then they lined them up and Schultz was part of the firing squad who was going to shoot these unarmed prisoners of war, but then he dropped his rifle and took off his helmet and marched into the line of prisoners in solidarity with his enemy and then the firing squad

fired anyway, killing all of the soldiers and Schultz, too.

Anyway, they've got a statue of Schultz in Yugoslavia somewhere, or at least they did in the Beez, and my dad would always talk about Schultz, and I remember one time he got in a huge fight with a drunk guy at the Brauhaus over it, this guy screaming at my dad in German and my dad answering back in the calm but sturdy way he had, and then when we were walking home, I asked him what they'd fought about, and my dad said, "The guy was saying Schultz was an idiot, because his death accomplished nothing. He said that if Schultz had wanted to be a real hero, he could've poisoned his unit and started fighting the Nazis. He said Schultz wasn't a hero because he didn't save anyone's life."

"And what'd you say?" I asked. It was a cold night, but I was bundled up, still a kid, still my daddy's girl. How you love your heroes when you are young and safe and the world has not ended.

"I told him they built a statue of Schultz, and then he said that a monument is cold comfort to a dead man, and then I said that the statue was built not for Schultz, but for us — to remind us how to be human."

• • •

The starlight was beautiful. Innumerable pinpricks in the ether. Brightness behind. But it was not enough, I decided as I drained the bottle. I looked down at Mr. President, who slept next to me. I couldn't decide if he'd be better off if I let him go or shot him first.

FIFTEEN

We swam to the bank of the Chicago River just north of Diversey, near the old Jo Ann fabric store and the Home Depot. The place was completely z'ed out; we'd swum to a parking lot but the other side of the river was several acres of z-tended corn, and Diversey was a huge Z thoroughfare because it provided easy access to the lake, and we were completely unarmed. We spent a few minutes trying to dry our guns out, but then noticed a gaggle of Z's on the opposite river bank shucking ears of corn — ears they clearly intended to shove down our throats.

“Home Depot,” I said quickly.

“K,” Caroline said.

As we jogged across the parking lot, I said, “We need a car,” and she said, “It could take hours to find a car with both gas and keys. We need guns.”

We jogged through the blown-out glass doors of the Home Depot and each grabbed carts. Caroline said, “We need to split up. Grab anything that could help and we'll meet back here in five minutes.”

“No splitting up,” I said, following her.

“You're wasting time. They're coming for us, Mia.”

“Yeah and we've got a better chance if we don't split up.”

Caroline sighed, annoyed. “Fine,” she said after a second.

The things we placed in our shopping carts:

1. Three four-foot long pressure-treated two-by-twos.

2. A package of four green plastic lighters
3. Wasp repellent
4. duct tape.
5. wood glue
6. three blades unscrewed from walk-behind Honda lawn mowers found overturned in the (totally empty) Miracle Gro and soil additive aisle.
7. Eight glass bottles of syrupy-looking wood cleaner

We hid in the back of the store amid the faux Persian rugs and Caroline quickly, silently, unscrewed the wood cleaner, doused the rags with the cleaner, which reeked of alcohol, then stuffed the rags into the bottle to serve as stoppers. Meanwhile, I used my knife to carve notches into the two by two and then wedged the blades from the lawnmower into the crevice I'd created, then lashed the affair together with some duct tape and, for good measure, a generous application of wood glue. The resulting devices looked like ghetto versions of the grim reaper's scimitar. I didn't even look up until I was finished. Caroline was standing above me, her backpack too big for her.

"We may have to slightly fight our way out here," she mumbled.

I stood, scanned the aisles for any humanids, and saw none.

"Lighting," Caroline said quietly, and there they were, amid the unlit lamps and can lights. I counted six shuffling toward us.

Caroline took a step toward them but I grabbed her shoulder. "We are not well-armed," I pointed out. "Don't be stupid. The corn fields are full of the brave and underprovisioned."

"The only way out is through," Caroline said.

I turned her soldiers toward the back wall of the store. "We run through the carpets, past the doors, then go down the lumber aisle. They'll never see us. We find a car, get back to the Corvette, then get the hell home."

Caroline nodded. "You're right," she said. She flipped her backpack off

one shoulder, unzipped it a bit, and pulled out a wood cleaner molotov cocktail. She rezipped the backpack. I handed her a scimitar and picked up two for myself, then we started walking, shoulders slumped, against the back wall of the Home Depot. I was leading Caroline for once, and it felt good.

“Mia,” she whispered. I turned around. “What?” I whispered back.

She smiled at me a little. “LEEERRROOOY JEEENNKKIINNNS!” she shouted, then spun around and ran toward the Z’s in the lighting section.

“Oh God damn it, Caroline!” I shouted behind her. For a moment, I considered leaving Caroline to her fate, but she was my friend, and I figured that counted for something, so I ran after her.

I was a step or two behind her when she lit the edge of the molotov cocktail rag and smashed it into the face of the closest Z, then nearly beheaded a second with a single swing of the scimitar. “Sharp,” she commented, impressed.

“I do good work,” I noted from behind her while slicing a middle-aged heavily bearded Z across the face with the scimitar in my right hand. I reached my left hand up and slashed a plastic wire above us holding a string of ceiling fans, which came crashing down onto two more Z’s. I stood above each of them in turn and sliced their necks and watched them smile as the blood pooled on the polished concrete below them.

“Entirely unnecessary violence,” I said.

“I LOVE IT!” Caroline shouted. “GIVE ME MORE! I NEED NO GUNS WHEN I HAVE MIA’S MAGIC LAWNMOWER BLADES!”

I walked past Caroline, who was still slicing at a clearly completed Z. “Stop,” I said. “It’s done.”

“Just making sure.”

“You’re being cruel,” I told her. “You were an idiot to go after them in the first place and now you’re just being a bitch.” I walked past her out into

the too-bright afternoon light of my dear, deserted city. There were a few cars in the parking lot, and I tried each of them but didn't find anything. I walked out onto Elston because you're more likely to find cars with keys in them on a road: Drivers who got out to attack some Z's and got Z'ed up. I found a Chrysler minivan with keys in it but the engine wouldn't even turn over. Six months into the Unraveling, fewer and fewer cars started, and I knew it could be a long and bloody road home if I couldn't get a motorized vehicle.

I was leaning into the rolled-down window of a white SUV when Caroline caught up with me, shouting, "THEY DID THIS, MIA! They made us like this! They are responsible for the end of the goddamned world, and it is our sympathy, our pathetic humanness that led to their victory," and I thought about Schultz and the marginal utility of what we call compassion, and all this stuff was going through my head but I couldn't explain what I was thinking.

"Well but you would rather be dead than be them, right?"

"Of course!" she said. And this was perhaps all that unified us — in a world where millions had given in and committed suicide, we two believed death was preferable to a life in service to d131y.

"When you torture them, you are them," I said.

"Ridiculous," she said. "Ridiculous! They're NOT PEOPLE, Mia. They are the destroyers of people. They are anti-people!" I noticed her cammo pants were soaked in blood — blood visibly indistinguishable from human blood. I looked down at my own jeans, and saw the blood on them and on my once-gray Chucks. I realized that Caroline and I had a philosophical disagreement, but we were both soaked in the same blood.

"Let's just find a car, okay?" I asked.

"Fine," she said. She scanned up and down Elston. There were several dozen cars visible on the street, although many had been plowed into the

sidewalk to keep the road passable. “Try that Town Car,” she said, pointing to a black Town Car with a crumpled trunk and its front two wheels up on the curb. I walked over there and, sure enough, keys in the ignition. It started immediately. Caroline came around to the passenger side and got in, tossing her scimitar and backpack into the back seat. The gas tank was a quarter full — astonishing even then.

“How’d you know?” I asked.

“People don’t check wrecked cars. So you gotta find a car that’s wrecked but still runs, and it’s likely to have some gas. Let’s pick up the Corvette.”

So we picked our way up Elston, then turned left onto Damen and drove past the cemetery — what a luxury it is to bury the dead — and then made it finally to the Corvette, on the tiny street by the river. I drove the Town Car up onto the sidewalk to keep the road clean, and we were driving back down, past the Brauhaus and my whole former life when Caroline said, “We should go to Canada,” and I said, “I’m a Chicagoan all the way through,” and she said, “I’m tired of killing them. You’re right, Mia. We need to go where they aren’t. The time has come to retreat.”

I didn’t say anything for a while. “I can’t,” I said finally.

“If we go north, maybe we can gather an army,” she said.

“You know there’s no one up North.”

“No, I only know there’s no one here. We’ve gotta try,” Caroline said. “Trying is the only difference between us and them.” (This struck me as plausible in the moment, although upon further reflection it was wrong.)

“There’s no one up there,” I said.

“Okay, maybe there isn’t,” she said. “But if we can get to a place that’s too cold for corn, maybe there won’t be any Z’s either. Maybe we can live in peace, you know?”

“Go without me,” I told her. “I’m staying.”
If only she had.

SIXTEEN

Last bottle, friends. Even warm, you can tell that it's as good as German whites get, a luxury that I am perhaps the last person on earth to enjoy. I'm drunk already, talking to Mr. President about where we should make our graceful exit. The obvious choice, of course, is home.

Caroline would want me to go out in a blaze of glory, to kill ten thousand zombies by starting a raging corn fire or something, but in spite of everything, I still find myself short on bloodlust.

Around midnight, I leash up Mr. President and load the AR-15 with the last clip it'll ever fire, feeling a weird nostalgia not for the broken world but for this little gun that has saved me over and over, that heroically recovered from drowning in the Chicago River, that stuck by my side for these many months while everyone else save Mr. President abandoned me. It's a mad, mad world when your best friend is a dog and your second-best friend is an automatic rifle, but such was life in the Aze.

SEVENTEEN

We made it back to the Harold Washington Library before dark and rearmed from Caroline's astonishingly complete arsenal. I slept like the dead and woke up the next morning around 8:30. Caroline was already gone — to the library to read about the great white north or the history of corn or the philosophical implications of violence or whatever — so I changed clothes, applied some deodorant in lieu of a bath, and took Mr. President and a sombrero pinata up to the Brauhaus in the Corvette, just like every morning. I tossed the sombrero into the darkened doorway of the Brauhaus, drove down Lincoln a bit, spun a U-Turn, and opened the door without getting out to let Mr. President out on the leash to relieve himself.

Like clockwork, Holly shuffled across Lincoln and knelt down to tear into the sombrero, which contained Mounds bars and Werthers Originals and all manner of yum. I could still see my little sister. It was the best part of every day.

And then the gunfire rained down on Holly as she knelt there eating, her body spasming as the bullets filled her up, animating her ever so briefly until the gunfire stopped and she did too, her body hideously still, cuddling the sombrero, bleeding out onto the candy I'd brought her. I tugged on Mr. President's leash, pulling him into the car, and then got out myself, cocking the pistol I'd acquired from Caroline's arms stash the night before.

I thought Holly was howling in pain until I realized it was me. She was my sister. My little sister. Running, I made it to Holly in seconds and held her as she died, her jaundiced eyes blinking up at me. I don't pretend that she

knew her sister was holding her, but I hope to God she knew that someone was holding her, that in those last moments she was not alone. I held out the hope that somehow she knew that I loved her for as long as I could, and then longer.

I stayed with her for a minute after I knew she was gone, her Z'ed up body limp in my arms, the last of her blood pouring out of the countless holes in her body, like the night sky pinpricked with stars. And then I laid her to rest on her back in the shadow of the Brauhaus, pressed her eyelids closed, and crossed her skinny little girl arms across each other, so that it looked like she was giving herself a hug.

After looking at her like that forever, I finally stood up and walked across Lincoln Avenue to Cafe Sel Marie.

Caroline sat in a steel-latticed chair beneath a tattered, wind-beaten umbrella, M-16 at her side, the casings all around her. "I had to do it," she explained. "She wasn't a person anymore, Mia. This game needs teams. I can't go north alone, and there's no one else to go with, but we need to go. There is no survival here, Mia. Maybe there's survival up north and maybe not, but we're definitely not gonna find it here. I did it for you, you know. I did it because you couldn't, and I hope you'd do the same for me."

I raised the pistol from my hip and shot Caroline once in the face. The chair fell backwards with her in it and I stepped forward. She started to say something or at least her mouth was moving, and I shot her twice more in the head to make it quick.

My regret was immediate and permanent and useless.

EIGHTEEN

Sitting on familial couch in my living room alone with Mr. President, I find myself thinking about what Caroline said: This game needs teams. It was true, of course: Before I knew Caroline, I bounced around from team to team, always seeking other humans so that I might be part of an us to fight the mighty infected them. Why had I gone to the Bean in the first place that Spring morning? It had been to find Caroline, of course.

She was crazy, but who isn't? We were friends of convenience, the kind of friends I'd had in the Aze who I ate lunch with because they shared the same cafeteria period as me and weren't reprehensible. But we were still friends. And I still killed her, making me finally a murderer after more than a year of relentless killing.

The game needs teams, and I've been without one ever since, and that is what's brought me here to say goodbye. Goodbye to the Aze, to memories of air that smelled like air. Goodbye to my great city, my big-shouldered city finally hunched by Zapocalypse. Goodbye to the streets of Lincoln Square, the final resting place of everyone I loved. Goodbye to my home, and to this couch, stained a hazy brown with the memory of my father's blood.

When I began this re/accounting, I wanted to understand the relentlessness of human hope, my insane refusal to stop being what I considered human. I wondered who was running the show, why I wanted what I wanted, which great and terrible master lay behind it all, steering me toward hope like the Z is steered toward corn.

The Z is the end of an evolutionary process: Corn found a way to shape

the desires of man. But what was shaping our desires before corn? What made my dad want rainflow showerheads and granite countertops? What made me fight and claw to continue the idea of humanness I'd been taught to believe in? And what made me shoot my only friend in the face as punishment for the sin of killing my already-dead sister? The great and terrible master of these desires still lies undiscovered, but as I sit here trying to gear myself up to shoot myself, I find myself still beholden to humanity.

And so. And so I choose to go on serving it. I choose to go north, even though like every other direction, it is rationally without hope. This game needs teams. My best shot at finding teammates is North. When I'm done writing this, I'll go outside, spraypaint A RE/ACCOUNTING OF HUMAN LIFE POST-VIRUS ON THE COFFE TABLE INSIDE on the vinyl siding of my house, and I will suck gasoline out of cars until I can get the Corvette half-full of gas, and then I will drive north with Mr. President, lighting out — in the great and failed tradition of my people — for the territories.

It's hopeless, of course, which is why I leave this re/accounting here. But if somehow this gets found: The green room of the Harold Washington Library's auditorium is safe, and if you go there, you should be able to find a stockpile of weapons and a baby monitor with plenty of batteries.

THE END

NOTES

[1](#) The era Before Zombification (BZ) is known locally and colloquially as, “the Beez.” The current era is known as the Aze.

[2](#) There are many, many schools of thought about cars in the Aze — given that basically any vehicle is available to you, choosing a car is one of the very few unambiguous joys of the whole affair. Some people go for the big SUVs that can in a pinch mow over a gaggle of Z’s; some argue that you want tinted windows because Z’s are too stupid to know cars are driven by humans unless they can see the human. Anyway, there are a lot of theories about which cars are safest. I drive a 1997 canary yellow Chevrolet Corvette because it’s fast as hell and turns on a dime.

[3](#) In the Beez I had been what is known as a “big girl.” Definitely overweight but not by any standard fully obese. I was, for point of comparison, a size 12. Zombie Apocalypses have a nice way of thinning a girl out, and on the Caroline day I was wearing girls jeans, size 6, and a medium t-shirt extolling the talents of a band that had long since disbanded due to a desire to pursue new opportunities, specifically the opportunity to plant, water, cultivate, and harvest d131y maize. Anyway, in the Aze big girls are totally beautiful (so are big guys) because the Z’s look like silver bags of bones, and the opposite of Z-ness — full, soft, warm — has, natch, become desirable. A good rule of thumb is that as I change, the understanding of hotness definitionally changes, because the ancient master has previously decided that the meaning of hotness is “not you.”

4 Burying people was the best thing we ever did, as a species. That was the nicest thing we ever did for one another.

6 For months, I refused to eat french-cut green beans even though they were healthy, cornless, and plentiful, because of the story my mom used to tell about when she worked in a green bean cannery in Oregon in her 20s, before she went to grad school and became an intellectual and everything: There were two kinds of green beans in the canning factory — regular and french-cut. And basically everything that wasn't an attractive, normal-looking green bean went into the french-cut pile, and one day my mom was sorting through the french cut green beans in this gigantic vat and the slicer thing that cut the beans frenchly came along and sliced off the top third of her right pinky finger. So they shut down the factory and while my mom was hustled off to the hospital all the other workers at the factory searched through the massive vat of french-cut green beans for the finger with no luck, and after about an hour, the factory supervisor said, "Screw it. It's just the french-cut," and started production back up. That isn't the distressing part of the story. The distressing part of the story is that no one ever wrote the factory to say, you know, we opened up this can of french cut green beans and couldn't help but notice the top third of a manicured pinky finger in our goddamned green beans. This left two equally horrifying possibilities: first, that some American family somehow managed to unknowingly eat my mother's finger, or else that somewhere out there, even now, there is still a container of french-cut green beans featuring mom's finger, this latter possibility rendered even more multivalent vis-à-vis the existential implications of eating french-cut green beans by the fact that if by some miracle my mom's finger is still floating somewhere in some can of french-cut green beans all these years later, that is the only part of her body still, like, here — the only remains I might recover. But anyway, I would submit to you that one of the less-lame definitions of

personhood is the unwillingness to do certain perfectly reasonable things (like for instance eating french cut beans) for deeply personal or sentimental reasons (like for instance a sense of fidelity to your mother's lost finger). That ship sailed for me that afternoon in Caroline's windowless room, which is probably why I remember it in the first place.

[8](#) And therefore being. Anyone? Anyone? Cogito ergo sum jokes? No? Okay.

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