

Cary S. Collin

So Thirsty

There were only three of them left for this outing and no one pretended it was anything less than a suicide mission.

“Do you think we’ll see any of them tonight Billy?” Diane probed from the passenger seat of the crudely armored mini-van.

“Hard to say. It’s cold right now, the shroomers don’t like the cold. Where we’re going there’s still snow on the ground. Really slows ‘em down. They’ll freeze up solid in it. Should make it easier for us though,” Billy replied in his slow, Texan drawl.

“No man, that’s not right,” Theo rebutted from the back seat, cradling his rifle like a swaddling babe. “I heard they’ve been spotted as far north as Indiana this time of year. I’ve even heard Michigan.”

“But they can’t function this far north, unless they have fresh food,” Billy argued. “Game ‘round these parts are too fast for ‘em and the people have long since vanished.”

“All except us,” Diane acquiesced, her face long forgotten to the luxury of cosmetics.

“Look,” Theo continued, “I know most of them retreated down south where it’s still moist and warm, the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida. A few survivors in Louisiana did what they could, busting down the levees to try and flood the bastards out. Little good that did though. They didn’t know drowning don’t work on shroomers. Bastards don’t need oxygen, just steak.”

Cary S. Collin

Billy knew it just as well as the others. Most animals were too quick and could get away from the slow-moving predators. So, by default, shroomers preferred meat of the two-legged variety.

“And they’ve been finding new food sources,” Theo kept going. “It’s been keeping their metabolisms up, helping them keep moist and warm. Some of the scientists in Europe think they’re mutating, think they might be acclimatizing better now, building some kind of super antifreeze in those massive fungal bulges. Soon, they’ll be snow shroomers. Huh, sounds kind of funny, don’t it?” He said it again, lower, “*snow shroomers.*”

Diane could only focus on the floorboards, “I don’t like talking about this. It’s making me feel really uncomfortable.”

“What’s wrong, don’t you like being the main course?” Theo chortled. He was more than a decade older than either of them and twice as cynical.

“Knock it off Theodore ,or I’ll jack you in the jaw,” Billy snapped, seeing how nervous Diane looked.

“Don’t call me that,” Theo rebuked.

“Then ease up on her a bit.”

“Alright, point taken tough guy,” Theo said sinking back into his rat-chewed seat.

Diane was matured now, her curves had filled in, and when she spoke in her soft voice it was all Billy could manage, just to be a gentleman. By Romeo and Juliet standards, he was six years older than her, but *now* it didn’t matter. *Now* with the way the world had become, nothing mattered much anymore. He sure as hell didn’t like seeing her flustered by Theo’s bad attitude.

Cary S. Collin

“Do you guys remember when they used to play music?” Diane said looking at the van’s lifeless radio, trying to change the subject. “I mean real music, not NPR and all those news broadcasts that came later, but real music? You know--Britney Spears, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Bruno Mars. Stuff you could really feel the rhythm with, stuff you could dance to.”

“Real music? That’s not *real* music,” Theo interjected. “G ‘N’ R, AC/DC, Metallica, Ozzy—now that was *real* music. The rest of it was just bubble-gum chips for the brainless masses, perfect music for those shroomers out there.”

“Give me a break, will ya? I mean, even in the apocalypse, there’s still music critics,” Diane said. “It’s sad when all that’s left in the world are roaches...and critics.”

“And don’t forget about lawyers,” Billy sighed looking over to Diane. He felt she aged well over the years from the skinny, thirteen-year-old teen who first showed up at the camp with the shroomers snapping right at her heels.

Her younger sister, Denise, hadn’t been so lucky, devoured just short of the camp’s fence line. He had only been nineteen himself when the terror first took hold. Now he was closer to thirty than he was twenty and felt his youth slowly slipping through the hourglass.

“Yeah, those were the good old days alright,” Theo romanticized. “Back when you could run down to Mickey D’s for a Big Mac, grab a hard drink in a smoky bar, or take a dump in a public restroom without checking the floor every twenty seconds.”

“Yeah, and you could still see a real baseball game. Have a hot dog, a cold beer, and feel the sun on your face without a care in the world,” Billy added.

Cary S. Collin

“Yeah,” Theo groaned. “That was back before drinking tap water gave you Montezuma’s Revenge 2.0. Personally, I’d take explosive diarrhea over cannibalism on all days ending in ‘y’.”

Billy grinned. “Makes you appreciate the simpler things in life, I guess. When I get done reinforcing the barriers, repairing the trucks, or gassing the gennies, my guilty pleasure is still sitting down and watching some of the old sitcom discs, minus the mind-numbing commercials o’course. But I even miss those sometimes. That’s how you knew television was still broadcast, that people were still out there. It had a pulse you could feel even if you didn’t want to seem ‘em, back when companies competed for your almighty dollar. *By switching to Geico, I saved fifteen percent on my auto insurance,*” Billy joked in his best pitch-man narrative.

“You’re right. It’s just not the same without the commercials,” Diane said. “Makes it seem stale and more historical than anything else.”

“Not me,” Theo said. “I still hate ‘em. They’d always interrupt a show right at the climax. Kind of like getting blue balls. All worked up and then *eerrrrk!*”

“Ew,” Dianne winced, she couldn’t even look at the greasy, balding specimen behind her. His crass demeanor made her skin crawl. She remembered last summer when Theo made a pass at her during guard duty. He had the stones enough to put his greasy hand casually on her bottom in mid-conversation like it was nothing more than a pair of warming mittens. She slapped him hard that night and hoped the message was received clearly.

Cary S. Collin

There was an awkward pause in their fond recollection of better times and then Theo started smacking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Say, are you guys warm in here or is it just me? I'm starting to get a little parched...a little thirsty."

And there it was. That was how it always started and...sometimes it really was innocent. People still got thirsty, after all, and with good reason. Every water supply in the world was now tainted beyond use—oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, ponds, and even tap water all had those mutated spores embedded in their life-giving waters.

"Don't even start that cottonmouth talk," Billy said. "We won't be there for at least another twenty minutes. Try to conserve. Take a nap if you need to."

"Man I hate this shit," Theo said laying his head down on the window sill and trying to use it for a makeshift pillow.

"Then hate it if you have to, but we have a while to go. I'm thirsty too. So's Diane. But we have to find a place that isn't contaminated. We've already used up most of the supply cities from here to Baxter. We have to find a fresh source."

"Like where, the Antarctic?" Theo snapped.

"Not even sure about that place," Billy replied. "I remember there were a couple of teams from the United States, Britain, and even China I think that went down to tap into the ice core there. Nobody ever heard from 'em again, so I'm guessing that didn't work either. We were just too far behind the power curve on this thing." He recalled the first outbreak reports seven years ago and how they were quickly dismissed as mass hysteria, fake news, or some new political hot-button.

"Do you think the entire world, I mean, the entire world is gone now?" Diane asked Billy somberly.

Cary S. Collin

“Seems like it, but who really knows for sure? The Tillman comet was like *the* big eraser. It took everything with it.”

“Everyone thought it was wondrous at first, I remember the scientists taking about it for months beforehand,” Theo murmured acerbically, his precious saliva leaking onto the window sill. “George Tillman made that *big* discovery from back yard telescope three years prior. Good job, George.”

“Some place in Arizona, if I recall correctly.” Billy nodded.

“Yep, sure was. Then it took that weird turn and—*bam*, a three-mile plume of fire and debris vomited into the atmosphere—wiped out nearly one hundred thousand people living near the epicenter around the Horn of Africa. Bet George Tillman didn’t see that coming. Must be strange to have the apocalypse named after you.”

“I guess we’re lucky it wasn’t named Comet Theodore, just doesn’t have the same ring to it,” Billy said.

“Yeah, then we’d be dealing with a planet of pretentious assholes instead,” Diane joked.

“Hey—,” Theo objected before he was cut off.

“There’s a sign just ahead,” Diane pointed at the dilapidated green highway marker overgrown with strangling, unbridled vines which had recently withered brown and died off in the cold mountain air.

“It says one mile to the next turnoff. Town called Salene,” Billy read it aloud.

“Do you think we could try it Billy?” she asked.

Cary S. Collin

Billy fought the wheel to swerve around a surprising truck-sized pothole in the road and inched his way slowly in between two abandoned cars with devoured skeletal remains still clinging purposefully to the steering wheels.

“Sorry, but we have orders. Any town *South* of Baxter. Besides, I think it would be a total bust. Too close to base, I’m sure we’ve long since raided any potential sources there.”

Theo beat his fist against the side of the van, “Orders? It’s not like any of us are in the military, or ever were. Or that there will ever be a real fucking military again there Chief. Seriously, what do you have to lose? It’s only a few minutes out of our way, and I’m *so* thirsty. I’m just *so* fucking thirsty. I can’t stand it anymore. I think I’d even swill Draino at this point.”

“He’s starting to sound bad Billy. I’m worried,” Diane whispered.

“I know, me too,” Billy answered touching the hilt of the gun stuffed down the front of his trousers. He watched Theo from the rearview mirror while weaving around the abandoned cars littered up and down the stretch of highway like carcasses leftover from some prehistoric time.

Theo was well into the first stages of dehydration and before long would be spiraling into the more serious stages unless they found a sustainable liquid source. He wouldn’t become a shroomer, but he would die just the same.

Billy too, felt the dry mouth and yellowing skin preceding dehydration sickness. They passed several ponds on the way to Salene, all filled to the rim with delicious poison. *And that’s the irony of it all*, Billy thought. *Surrounded by water, unable to touch a single drop like a person in a lifeboat drifting in a salty ocean.*

Cary S. Collin

People would often be found dead, washed up on the shores of huge lakes, on their yachts and lake cruisers, all dead of simple dehydration. Those amateur sailors thought the madness would soon pass too, that their supplies would hold them until the worst was over, but the shroomers outlived most scientists' predictions by many years.

There was a sudden movement in the tree line beside the road and the branches swung back and forth as some unknown thing darted away.

Diane pointed quickly to the movement, "Did you see that? Something moved in the woods as we went by."

"Probably just a deer," Billy said. "They roam free up here now that nobody's shooting them anymore. Plus, they're too damn fast for the shroomers to catch."

About the time he said it, Billy peered up the street towards the collection of snow-covered cars where, he too, saw strange movement—the signature, sluggish swagger they grew to despise. The shapes were too far away to make out the finer details, but the signs of the tattered, disintegrating clothes and the bulging fungi causing a distended head were readily apparent.

"Billy, do you see him?" Diane asked her fingers white knuckling the dash.

"I do," he answered.

"What was that you said a minute ago?" Theo mocked Billy in a high, nasally whine, "*They can't be this far north Theo. It's too cold Theo. You can't stop for a drink Theo.*"

"Well, I just thought—" Billy started.

"What a bunch of bullshit this is," Theo said crossing his arms. "Told ya, didn't I tell ya?"

Cary S. Collin

“Oh no,” Diane gasped. “He’s spotted us.”

“Run his dumbass down,” Theo said.

“I can’t,” Billy answered. “It’s an icy patch up there, if I wreck this van we’re sitting ducks. Plus, I don’t know if there are any roadworthy vehicles in this area. If we get stuck here, we might not have a ride back. That’s a hell of a long hike back to base camp.”

Billy sat there, stopped right before the off-ramp’s exit, staring at the growing movement farther down the highway. There were more of them—a lot more—shuffling their way towards the stopped van, in-between the spaces of cars parked on the deserted highway, approaching with their shroomer waddle.

“Yep, the fungus are among us,” Theo said pointing at the amassing group.

“Jesus, it’s a whole gaggle of them, about a hundred or so. We can’t go that way,” Diane answered. “They’re blocking the road, they’d tip us for sure.”

She could see through the clear pane of glass separating them from the shroomers—the walking mutations, who were still quasi-human beings. The distinctive orange and green-ringed mushrooms covering their bodies in sporadic-sized patterns like fungus on trees represented both symbiotic organism and parasite. Slick white bones revealed where the mushrooms had overtaken the host body without another food source, licking them clean.

The fungus controlled their host’s minds, leaving them with only the most instinctive urges, feeding only off the host tissue in times of starvation. Some of the growths had delved so far, grown so large, that they devoured most of the corpse’s tissue leaving giant, fanned mushrooms in their wake.

Cary S. Collin

“Well, what now boss-man?” Theo asked.

“I guess we’ll go with your idea,” Billy said. “We’ll head into this first town here, Salene, and load up quick. It’ll take those things a good half hour or so to get to town, hopefully by then, we’ll be long gone.”

“*If* we find anything,” Diane said.

“Right, *if*,” Billy answered.

The town of Salene was as darkly bleak as any other abandoned town. There were boarded up doors and windows, some torn down by brute force, some spray painted in faded, florescent X’s to show which residents had been saved and whisked away—once upon a time—when they still had a National Guard.

Dark Christmas lights and dilapidated decorations still clung to houses that decorated early, permanent reminders that the world ended during the Holiday season.

The largest building in town, Saint Mark’s Episcopalian church, had been burned to the ground. Only a charred version of the support beams still stood like the ribcage of some prehistoric beast. Piles of skeletal remains were gathered right in front of the doors where parishioners had stampeded to flee some long-snuffed out inferno.

“Poor souls,” Billy said. “People went there a little bit of prayer and for some kind of hope.”

“Probably hoped the Holy water was still Holy,” Theo joked.

“That’s not funny,” Diane said, making the Catholic sign of the cross and mouthing a silent prayer.

“That’s offensive to me, y’know, I’m Jewish,” Theo told her.

Cary S. Collin

“C’mon man, I’ve heard you say several times you were an Atheist,” Billy replied.

“Jewish, Atheist, like any of it matters anymore anyway,” Theo dismissed, “the only divinity I’m looking for now comes in a bottle. Let me know if you spot a liquor store along the way, huh.”

“That’s not what we’re here for,” Diane said.

“Sure helps the apocalypse go down smoother though,” Theo told her.

The van cruised down Main Street until Billy spotted a Bull’s Eye supermarket nearby. The cartoonish red and white bull logo was frozen forever in a one-eyed mid-wink and seemed to mock Billy as he scanned the entrance.

The windows had been smashed out—he could see that much from the van, but he was still too distant to gauge how safe it really was.

“Are you going to try it?” Diane asked.

“We’ll give it a shot,” Billy said. “If we’re lucky, we’ll find something inside.”

“And if we’re not lucky, we’ll still find something inside,” Theo jabbed.

Billy guided the van right up to the front of the store and slowly eased by the entrance looking in all the darkened windows for any signs of movement. The headlamps flooded in through the windows, casting everything inside to a tilted shadow.

Billy knew they would need flashlights, and flashlights were like magnets to the meat-munchers wandering around aimlessly in the wilderness. It was like drawing moths to an enticing flame.

“What do you think Bill?” Theo questioned, removing his knit cap and mussing his hair.

Cary S. Collin

Billy sat for a moment with the engine idling loudly. If there were shroomers inside, it wouldn't be long before the vehicle's noise would draw them out. He waited a few more minutes, but nothing appeared.

"Looks clean, I'm going to leave the engine running just in case though. Diane, hop behind the wheel. Theo and I are going in. If you see anything, keep honking the horn until our asses are back in here," he said pulling his .40 caliber from his trousers, checking the magazine, and then snapping it back in.

Theo bellowed, "Why does she always get to ride bench? I'm tired of risking my ass. Why don't you take her instead Bill? I'll take the wheel. Give her a crash course in survival 101. She needs to do this sooner or later."

"Don't be a dickhead, this isn't the time," Billy told Theo.

"When would be a good time? Why don't you take those training wheels off Bill," Theo jeered.

Billy scowled at Theo, then turned to his passenger, "Diane, do you *want* to try a run this time?" Billy asked hoping she would decline. Theo was stronger, could carry more weight, and frankly he hoped something would happen to Theo long before Diane.

"Sure, I'll go," but she sounded unsure.

Billy turned to Theo, "And remember if you see anything—"

"I know, I know. Honk the damn horn. I got it," Theo said trying to wet his mouth with what little spittle he could conjure. "Just hurry up, I'm dying."

"One can only hope," Billy muttered, exiting the van.

"Stay close to me," Billy said as Diane moved up behind him.

Cary S. Collin

She gripped her gun tightly, and had it raised in a high-ready position as they moved past the shattered doors smeared with old, murky stains.

Inside of the store, empty boxes littered the aisleways and the smell of stale death permeated the air. All the fresh produce, fish market, and butcher aisle concessions inside had long since rotted into black, shriveled compost devoured either by insects or by the carrion animals roaming free.

They weren't twenty paces into the store before Diane tripped over a thoroughly frozen corpse. She fell and landed face-to-face with yet, another corpse—its eyes eaten out of its head and most of its chest and lower torso missing. She squeaked and then covered her mouth.

Billy rushed over to pick her up, "It's okay. They're not shroomers. Just leftovers. They can't hurt us."

"This one's still fairly fresh," Diane said. "The body can't be more than a few weeks old. Nobody we knew though."

Billy agreed. Judging by the body's level of decomp, it hadn't been there more than a few days. The eyes had most likely been plucked from their sockets by the ravens, it was their favorite part of the leftovers. Shroomers preferred warm, living flesh. The fungal parasites living in their bodies needed it to metabolize their growth.

This discovery was immediately announced by the top leading virologist in the world, Dr. Antoine DeSotomayor, just minutes before he ate his lab assistant on national television.

Cary S. Collin

Prior to his devolution, Doctor DeSotomayor claimed contaminated water caused the dormant spores to grow in the blood. The spores, which later grew into the larger mushrooms, lived off the host's blood supply. When people began to turn, nothing—absolutely nothing—could quench their thirst. Nothing but living, breathing, thinking meat. It was a fast process, one that dominated the globe virtually overnight. People in the desert climates had fallen first, but soon the whole world followed suit in a fast sweep of crumbling chaos and madness.

“Boiling the water could work, theoretically,” Dr. DeSotomayor said just seconds before biting his assistant’s neck, “but is far too unreliable. The spores are a resilient, alien species to our planet, and boiling even a simple pot of water could take days to fully sanitize, if it works at all.”

The imagery that followed was just as disturbing as the message prior.

“Stay alert,” Billy whispered to Diane as the two sidewinded through aisleways littered with old cereal, pasta, and tin fruit cans rolling back and forth as they hopped past a few more mummified bodies—five or six years dead by the looks of them. Some of the bony parts had been carried away by dogs and other critters frequenting such spots until they ran into a shroomer, that was.

Billy’s thoughts went immediately to the domesticated animals—additional, unfortunate victims of the end-of-the world scenario. The space-spores didn’t seem to affect them or any other living creatures for some strange, puzzling reason. In a sad twist of fate, their formerly loving humans ate them up in a slobbering ambush—trapped in houses, apartments, and vehicles with their ravenous owners and no way to escape.

Cary S. Collin

“Here we are...and we might be in luck,” Billy said leaving fleeting thoughts of his golden retriever, Buck, as they traversed down the soda aisle. A few cans had busted open from shelf tipovers, but most were perfectly intact. Leaky ceiling tiles and dangling wires hung down like an urban jungle.

“Okay, what’s your flavor?” Diane asked, smiling, and holding up a two liter of Mountain Dew in one hand and a two liter of Grape Shasta in the other. Thick layers of dust covered them like ancient artifacts.

“Sorry, only diet cola for me, I’m watching my girlish figure,” Billy said patting his malnourished, tight ribs in a poor attempt at humor.

“Since this is my first collection, where should I start?” Diane asked unfolding canvas bags from the van.

“Be sure to check the dates before you move ‘em. We don’t want anything after Tillman Day. If the bottling date’s after that, leave it. The earlier, the better. Try to look for anything a week, or two, or even a month prior. Those are the best.”

The fifth of December or as it was called later, Tillman Day—was the day the world ended—a day of infamy when everyone was either turning into shroomers or dying from dehydration—or both.

Soda had been the unobvious answer—thousands upon thousands of units already bottled up when the comet came was effectively inert. The fungal spores weren’t present in those protected containers, but bottling dates *after* Tillman Day were easily carbonated poison.

That was how Diane first survived. She drank only sodas at thirteen, a choice her mother used to say would make her teeth rot out of her head and cause her to develop

Cary S. Collin

early saddlebags. The irony was that drinking nothing but soda—instead of water—had actually saved her life.

“These all say December 7th,” Diane said sadly, shining her flashlight on them.

“Then leave ‘em. Look on another shelf,” Billy told her.

“These over here say November 15th,” Diane said. “But it’s generic root beer. I hate root beer.”

“Hey, liquid’s liquid,” Billy answered throwing some Pepsi cans into his bag. “I’m grabbing some beer too, if I can find any. Scientists once proved it could keep a person hydrated just as good as water.”

“Speaking of, what about this water?” Diane pointed to some Aquafina bottles, but she hadn’t seen them come back with much of it in the last few years.

“What’s the date?”

“December 4th.”

“No dice, it’s too unreliable,” Billy said. “Too close to Tillman Day, the dates could be off. The soda dates are decent enough, but I don’t swear by ‘em. Assuming bottling dates are stamped correctly is like playing Russian roulette.”

People never really knew for sure. The best bet was to get bottles at least a month before the comet’s arrival and those had disappeared within the first week of Tillman Day, when panicked people ransacked stores to stockpile up on supplies.

“But I’m just so damned tired of drinking soda. I hate Coke and Pepsi equally these days. It’s a wonder we’re all not diabetics at this point. My pancreas is burnt up,” Diane said letting out a defeated, raspberry sound.

Cary S. Collin

“I know, but one drop of the wrong water and your pancreas will be the least of your problems,” Billy said before hearing broken glass crunch nearby.

“What’s that?” Diane asked turning and accidentally knocking bottles of Aquafina water off the shelf, a few of them falling towards her. She froze with fear listening for the groaning, that awful wheezy groaning which seemed to precursor shroomers. It sounded like a deep exhale mixed with slow, guttural, and mostly unrecognizable speech.

“Dunno, I’ll check it out,” Billy said drawing his gun from the front of his trousers and dropping his bag.

He rounded the next aisle to see a large raccoon munching happily away on a dusty bag of Doritos. It berated him squeakily in angry woodland talk and scurried down another aisle with the bag clutched tightly in its teeth.

“Just a raccoon,” he said.

“Oh, that’s a relief,” she sighed.

As Billy turned away from the fleeing raccoon—it was already there, and it was on him before he had a chance to react, to raise his gun.

The creature stunk with the vile smell of bloated gases, rotten meat, and the uniquely clove-heavy spice scent of the orange space mushrooms that grew in ringlets around the corpse’s neck, head, and up and down its arms like ghastly tumors. It stared at him with its foggy grey eyes and a stringy skull of hair. Its receding lips were stained red and there was a pink, fleshy substance dangling in the few remaining teeth of its powerful, grinding jaws.

The thing grabbed Billy vise-like by his shoulders and pulled him into its salivating maw, sinking its putrid teeth into the side of Billy’s neck—right into his

Cary S. Collin

jugular vein, the sweet spot they all liked to go after. As it tore a fist-sized bite away for another attack, a fresh dose of hot plasma ejected like a fountain from Billy's gaping wound and the shroomer lapped at it happily.

“So thirsty,” it groaned in its shroom-speak.

Billy gargled bloody spatter of expectorant as he choked out a scream and Diane came running.

When she saw the thing had already torn out Billy's neckline, she screamed out of both horror and anger. Billy would no longer be part of their crew—which at one point numbered well into the fifties.

Diane took a jar of Planters peanuts and clubbed the animated corpse in the head with it, flaking some of the pulpy mushroom growths off the decaying surface. The shape staggered forward releasing Billy of its death grip and faced Diane. It just stared, captivated by her, before it advanced again—its belly sloshing full of warm Billy.

“So thirsty,” it burbled.

She watched in shock as the shroomer's head exploded into bits of shredded fungus and dehydrated jerky, then heard the gunshot's ricochet. Its spore infected plasma sprayed on the nearby shelves missing her shoulder by mere inches.

Behind the new hole in its head was a smoking gun Billy clutched weakly. *“Get out, more of them coming,”* he gagged. *“Get the sodas and get out,”* as he fell to the floor, holding his purging neck. The red tide of his blood pooled underneath his fading body.

Diane witnessed this scenario all too often. Usually the shroomers would carefully wound one of the team members so that two more teammates rushed to their aide. Then

Cary S. Collin

they would have three to dine on instead of just one. For mindless creatures, the shroomers sure weren't dumb.

"No, I can't leave you here like this," she said with tears.

"It's too late," he offered in a whisper, *"more will come now. You know what to do."* He closed his eyes in anticipation.

The other shroomers lurking near the molded dairy coolers—five in total—responded to the loud gunshot, moving in quickly despite the freezing temperatures.

Diane raised the .38 revolver she carried since her sister's death and shot Billy in the head without much hesitation. It was her final gift to him and a much more humane death than the alternative. She would carry the painful memory of it later, if she lived, as she most certainly would mourn his loss. But now, she had bigger worries.

Diane sprinted down the soda aisle, grabbed her collected bag of liquids and bolted out of the store, leaping over the strewn corpses like an Olympic hurdler towards the parking lot.

She could see the swarming masses from the off-ramp finally making their way into town. They moved in faster than Billy's original prediction—a hive of shadowy figures, lumbering in unison.

She ran to the van, opened the passenger door, and jumped inside.

"Drive Theo, drive!" she barked.

Theo lifted his head off the driver's side door slowly, wiped the slobber pooling from his jaw onto his shirt, and blinked his eyes. "Where's Bill?"

"Were you seriously sleeping?" she asked slapping Theo in the face in appall at him.

Cary S. Collin

“I, uh, just dozed for a second,” he said looking past her, seeing the shroomers leaving the store doors of the Bull’s Eye towards them.

“*So thirsty*,” they all seemed to chant in one, hellish accord.

“Why didn’t you honk? Why didn’t you do anything?” she shouted.

“I, uh,” he blabbered.

“Just drive Theodore,” she shouted and soon they were heading back down the highway with a sack full of sodas in tow. Her thoughts went to Billy—one life for a bag of sugary, carbonated beverages. This mission was a total bust.

“Billy’s dead,” she said once they were well on their way back to the mountain camp.

“Did you get anything to drink?” Theo asked, seemingly unfazed about Billy.

“Yeah, we did, not that you would know anything about it,” she snapped.

“Well, congrats on your first outing. What, do you want a reward? You don’t think I’ve lost people too?” he said sounding very desensitized. “I was going on these treks when you were still fighting acne.”

“Now I see why you always returned,” she coldly turned away from him.

“Hey doll, it’s a shit sandwich, you just take the best bite you can and move on. You’ll figure it out eventually. Now, did you get anything to drink or not?”

“Yeah, here. Drink this,” she said throwing a bottle of root beer at him. “And here,” she said throwing another bottle in a baseball-style pitch. “And here! And here! And here!” Chucking multiple bottles at him.

He shuffled the steering on the van to compensate for his sudden swerving. It drew the attention of several grey eyes watching blankly from a distance.

Cary S. Collin

“Hey chill out! It’s just the circle of life there Simba, eat or be eaten. That’s the way things go around in this high stakes casino. You gamble with the odds, but the house usually takes everything,” he told her, the van’s lights cutting through the black pitch of night. Without functioning light poles or neon store signs left to light the way, the night was an utter blindfold.

“Tell that to Billy.”

“Don’t act like he was a martyr, Bill knew what he was doing. He knew it just like I do...just like you should.”

He twisted the cap off one of the 2-liter bottles—some of the pressurized spray dousing his lap from being shaken. He disregarded it completely and chugged it down in huge, painful gulps. He could feel the carbonation immediately exploding in his empty stomach like bittersweet medicine.

Diane sat quietly for a few moments watching the world fade away, then began again, “We need to tell the others how far north they’ve come. That the cold isn’t affecting them like it used to. And that they’re on the move. Probably towards us.”

“No need to get everyone in a panic chickie-poo,” Theo half-spoke and half-belched sourly, the expended gas burning through his nostrils. “We have a steep, winding road and a reinforced fence with heavily armed guards. They aren’t getting in.”

“Yeah, but for how long? How many of them will it take to bring down the fences? A hundred, a thousand, ten-thousand? As soon as they start making it up this far, it’s over. They’ll keep coming, they always do,” Diane said grabbing a random bottle from the bag and quickly sipping from it. She focused on the lights of the van piercing

Cary S. Collin

through the darkness like a scalpel, expecting to see the flooded outline of a shroomer shuffling along in tattered garments.

“Besides,” Theo said placing his cold hand on her knee, “We still have each other babe.”

“Take your hand off my knee or I'm gonna keep it as a trophy,” she said sliding a tactical knife from the sheath on her leg. The tanto shaped blade made piercing contact with his middle knuckle and a bead of blood rose to the surface of his skin.

“Billy's gone now little girl,” he said in a calculating voice, keeping his hand in place, and gritting his teeth, “how many other eligible bachelors do you know?”

She could feel him pressing, and now with Billy out of the picture, there was nobody to help her.

Theo grinned, “You once said the only way you'd ever get with me was if I was the last man on earth. Well, I think tonight might be my lucky night.”

Theo pulled the van off to the side of the road and skidded to a stop on the icy shoulder. The wind howled outside as he stared unblinking into her eyes. He had the same hungered look of a shroomer, a look she didn't care for.

“What are you doing?” she gasped, digging the blade a little farther into his hand. “Just giving you and me a little alone time,” Theo said reaching over and stroking his fingers through her corn silk hair. He ignored the pain of the dagger, then wrenched it away quickly by reversing his palm.

“Just drive Theo,” she said staring forward. Her heart was racing. Any cries for help would bring the hungry masses a-running.

Cary S. Collin

Theo stared at her chest heaving up and down with each nervous breath. It had been so long since he had been with a woman. At least eight years now by his count. Eight years was too long—*far too long*.

“We’re about to embark on a journey darling,” Theo said moving his hand first to her chest, then down. She held her legs tightly together as he tried to slip his hand in.

Diane processed this new fear of losing her body to an ally, not the enemy—and she didn’t want to be taken either way. Not by him.

“I’d rather take my chances with the shroomers, at least they don’t feed on their own,” she said.

“Aw, c’mon,” he took her hand and placed it on his pants. “Now how about that trophy?”

Diane reached down into the front of her jeans and pulled out the .38 revolver. The gun had saved her life once before, hopefully it would again. She pressed it up to the side of his cheek bone, the muzzle digging into the pressure point of his mandibular angle.

“I’m happy with the six inches right here, thanks. Now if you don’t want me to leave you here for warm leftovers, then I suggest you drive,” she said with stern resolve.

“C’mon Diane, you and I both know you won’t do it. You’re all talk.”

“Oh no? I finished Billy off and I actually *cared* about him. I could easily kill you and make up whatever story I wanted to. I’ll just tell the group that a shroomer turned you inside out like a fresh canapé. It happened to millions, why should you be any different?”

She pulled the hammer of the revolver back with her thumb so the trigger only required two pounds of pressure to fire—a very distinguishable sound.

Cary S. Collin

“Fine,” Theo said pulling the van away from the shoulder of the road, failing to notice the silhouetted movement just behind the red tail lights.

They were traveling again and soon they would leave the horde far behind them, back up the mountain trail towards safety.

Diane held the gun on him while she drank a flat soda in the darkness. She wouldn’t let up on him, not until they were at camp. She couldn’t wait to get out of the van. It stunk heavily of betrayal.

Diane hadn’t realized just how empty she really was. She was so dehydrated and kept drinking the tasteless soda.

“Better take it easy on that girl,” he said. “We have to save some for the others. They won’t take kindly to us coming back empty-handed after burning up all this precious fuel.”

“Shut it!” she said pressing the gun further into his cheekbone.

She took another sip, and then another. The gulps were getting stronger with each intake. Soon, she was guzzling it, the fluid flowing down the sides of her mouth, while keeping careful watch on Theo. It was like her mouth was a desert and she was drinking nothing but pure sand, flavorless and unfulfilling.

“I’m just so thirsty,” she said. “I can’t help it.”

“See, now you know how I felt earlier,” Theo explained.

“No, I just feel so drained. So empty. I need more,” she said tossing the vanquished bottle aside.

Theo hadn’t heard that talk in a long time. Not since years prior when the world had turned to utter shit. Back when his own mother had said those same words and then

Cary S. Collin

tried to take a bite out of his calf during the night. This, right before he lobbed her head off with a rusty pair of hedge trimmers.

“Hey, you okay over there?” Theo enquired. The pistol still tight to his face.

“I’m just so thirsty,” she said. “I need” and then she stopped speaking for a moment. “How’s about a kiss,” Diane said leaning over. She dropped her gun down just far enough so that Theo could give her a proper smacker.

“Seriously? Changing your mind just like that? You really are a woman.”

“Don’t talk, you’ll ruin it.”

Theo thought this might be his one and only chance, so he graciously complied. He leaned over, still piloting the van up the winding incline of the mountain—the oncoming search lights of the base camp flooded through the van’s windshield, illuminating the cabin.

In the bright lights, he could see the tell-tale markings of the orange speckles sprouting on Diane’s face and neck. Before he could react, she dropped the gun and sank her teeth eagerly into his neck, partially tearing out his vocal chords along with her intended target. Arterial blood spewed, and she lapped at it crazily like a dog drinking from a water bowl.

Theo gurgled a series of unintelligible mangled words. It was all he could manage, *“Ak meh, huh suh buhhd.”*

“So thirsty...so thirsty,” Diane moaned, drinking from the newly sprung fountain.

Theo tried to keep the van on the road, one hand on the wheel, the other trying desperately to cover the gaping hole in his neck while Diane attacked the spot repeatedly. The van serpentine back and forth all over the mountain trail.

Cary S. Collin

In tremendous pain and hoping for prompt medical aide—he stepped on the gas, ramming through the protective fence which stood for years protecting the base camp.

The van flipped as it crashed through the reinforced barricade, skidding on its roof and spinning circles on the snowy ground like some bizarre carnival ride, coming to a final rest near one of the guard towers. It resembled a helpless turtle laid on its back. Sirens bleated in the darkness and armed citizens of the camp scrambled towards the fence line, caught by surprise.

Theo finally blacked out, his last thoughts in deep contemplation of the afterlife.

Diane quietly fed, while Theo's body twitched.

Strange, ungainly shadows emerged from behind the overturned van up the wilderness road, closing towards the downed fence line. The horrifying shapes were illuminated by the red tail lights of the van, their orange mushrooms growing to astounding proportions against the biting, bitterness of the cold mountain air. The hungry masses shuffled passed the van, where gunfire erupted in all directions.

A bottle of Aquafina water tumbled out of Diane's seat and fell beside her as she contently ate in the darkness. The expiration date stamped on the bottle was Dec. 7th.

“So thirsty,” she growled.