

**AUTUMN:
THE HUMAN CONDITION**

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THE HUMAN CONDITION**

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INTRODUCTION

AUTUMN: THE HUMAN CONDITION is a companion book which brings to an end the **AUTUMN** saga. As well as presenting a number of new stories which take place in the **AUTUMN** world, the book also details the advent of the infection from the perspective of a number of individual characters who appear in **AUTUMN**, **AUTUMN: THE CITY** and **AUTUMN: PURIFICATION**. An appendix at the end of this book explains each character's involvement in the story. Earlier versions of some of these brief background stories were originally released as **AUTUMN: ECHOES**.

THE HUMAN CONDITION also expands on the events of **PURIFICATION**. It is recommended, therefore, that the original series of novels be read before this book.

Thanks to all the readers of the **AUTUMN** story for their enthusiastic and continued support.

David Moody

April 2005

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BEFORE

JAKE HUMPHRIES

Eight months ago Jake Humphries and his family immigrated to Canada from the United Kingdom. A regional manager for a global finance house, Jake agreed to move his family overseas for a well paid two year posting. His wife Lucy and their two children settled quickly into their new surroundings. The people who found it hardest to adjust were those they left behind. Polly Humphries – Jake’s well-meaning but highly strung and over-sensitive mother – still finds the distance between her and her son difficult to deal with. Mrs Humphries and her husband made their first visit to Canada several weeks ago. The trip did nothing to reassure the old lady. If anything it has made her more neurotic. Jake has grown to dread the weekly telephone calls from the UK. His mother usually phones on Saturdays. It is now the early hours of Tuesday morning.

‘Jake? Jake, is that you?’

‘Mum? Bloody hell, Mum, do you know what time it is?’

‘Are you okay, son?’

‘Apart from being tired because it’s gone midnight and I’d only just managed to get to sleep I’m fine. We’re all fine. Why shouldn’t we be?’

‘Haven’t you heard?’

‘Heard what? Christ, Mum, it’s the middle of the bloody night. I haven’t heard anything.’

‘There’s no need for the language, Jake, we were just worried about you, that’s all.’

‘Why?’

‘Are you far from Vancouver?’

‘It’s on the other side of the country. It’s thousands of kilometres away, why?’

‘Because something’s happened there.’

‘What do you mean? What’s happened?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think anyone knows. Your dad and I saw it on the news and...’

‘Look, Mum, I’m really tired. You’re not making any sense at all...’

‘I’m sorry, love. It’s just that you’re all so far away from us here and we worry about you.’

‘I know, I know... Anyway, what time is it there?’

‘Just after seven.’

‘What are you doing up so early?’

‘Your dad couldn’t sleep. You know what he’s like, once he’s awake that’s it. And once he’s up and

about I can't relax. He woke me up with his shuffling and his moaning so we both got up and came downstairs. We were watching the news and...'

'And what exactly is it that's supposed to have happened in Vancouver?'

'They're not sure. No-one's saying very much. No-one seems to know very much yet.'

'So you've woken me up to tell me that no-one knows very much about what's happening in Vancouver? Come on, Mum, I've got an important meeting first thing tomorrow and I can't afford to...'

'No. Listen, son, something's happened there but they don't...'

'Well give me a clue then. Has there been an accident or a bomb or...?'

'I don't know. I heard something about a bomb but they've stopped talking about that now.'

'So why have you phoned me in the middle of the night? This isn't little old England, Mum. This place is bloody huge. Just because something's happening in the same country doesn't mean it's going to affect...'

'I'm phoning you because they've lost contact with the city, and all the places surrounding it.'

'What? What do you mean, they've lost contact with it? Vancouver is a massive city for Christ's sake. There are thousands and thousands of people there. Millions. You can't lose contact with millions of people just like that...'

'I know...'

'You can't lose contact with a whole bloody city, Mum.'

'I know, but they have.'

'What channel are you watching? Are you sure it's genuine? Are you sure it's not just a film or one of those drama-documentaries about...'

'Jake, your father and I may be getting on but we're not stupid. I know what I'm watching. It's the news and it's real. We're sitting in front of the television right now. Your father's next to me. I'm only telling you what we've heard, and I'm only telling you because we're concerned about you, Lucy and the boys.'

'So tell me again exactly what it is they're saying.'

'Your dad says put your TV on, son. You're bound to have some news where you are. You're much closer than we are.'

'Okay, give me a second.'

'What can you see?'

'Hold on, that's strange.'

'What's strange?'

'Can't get a picture on some of the channels. Cable must be down. Sometimes this happens when...'

‘What about the radio? Try your computer. Try the Internet.’

‘Hang on, here’s something.’

‘What are they saying?’

‘Christ, it’s just like you said, they’ve lost contact with the area around... Hold on, you said Vancouver, didn’t you Mum?’

‘Yes son, why?’

‘Because the station I’m watching here is talking about Winnipeg. That’s miles away. And Seattle, and Portland. They’re talking about a massive part of the country. Bloody hell, what’s going on here...?’

‘Are they saying anything about what’s happened, Jake? Do they know why...?’

‘Christ, Mum, they’ve put a map up. It looks like it’s spreading out from the west. It looks like...’

‘Where are Lucy and the boys?’

‘Lucy’s here in bed with me, the boys are asleep...’

‘You should lock your doors. Don’t answer the door if anyone comes. Wait until we know what’s...’

‘What’s the point of locking the door? Mum, this isn’t anything to do with...’

‘Jake...? Jake, are you still there? What’s the matter, son?’

‘Nothing. Thought I heard something, that’s all.’

‘What?’

‘Thought I could hear...’

‘Jake...? What’s happening, son?’

‘Sorry, Mum, I’m going to put the phone down. Look, I’ll call you back as soon as I...’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Something’s happening on the other side of the river. There’s a fire. It looks like something’s gone into the front of one of the buildings on the waterfront by the... Don’t know what’s going on. I can’t see much from here... Hang on a second and I’ll try and... Shit, that’s all I need, the kids are awake now. Bloody hell. Lucy, could you go and...? Lucy...? Honey, what’s wrong?’

‘What’s the matter, son?’

‘Lucy? Don’t struggle, honey, lie back and I’ll get you a...’

‘Jake? Jake... are you still there?’

Over five thousand miles away, Mrs Humphries listened helplessly to the muffled sounds of her son, her daughter-in-law and her two grandsons choking to death.

Within hours both Mrs Humphries and her husband were dead too.

DAY ONE

AMY STEADMAN

Part i

Amy Steadman is a twenty-four year old graduate who is the manager of the lingerie department in an exclusive women's fashion boutique located in a busy out-of-town shopping mall. She lives on her own in the town of Rowley in a small one bedroom flat above an antiques shop on a narrow road just off the main high street.

It's five-thirty in the morning. Amy's alarm has gone off, and she's just dragged herself out of bed.

This morning Amy has to make her quarterly sales presentation to the company's senior management team. She dreads these presentations. She doesn't have a problem with standing up and talking to these self-important, vacuous, grey-suited people, she just doesn't feel comfortable with the way they stare back at her. They are smarmy, lecherous old men and she can feel them undressing her with their eyes. She hates the way they don't listen to anything she says, instead they just watch her. She knows that they fantasise about her. She finds their unwanted interest and their cheap, double-entendre laden conversation offensive and unnecessary but she puts up with it. It's all part of the job.

In Amy's line of business appearance is absolutely everything. She walks the shop floor as a representative of the store and the numerous expensive labels it stocks. She knows that she must be perfectly coiffured and immaculately presented at all times. Customers directly associate her with the products she sells. The better she looks, she often thinks, the more chance she has of making a sale.

After a quick breakfast (she doesn't feel like eating much this morning) and a lukewarm shower (she needs to get a plumber in), Amy dries her hair and sits down in front of the mirror to

apply her make-up. An exercise in precision application, the make-up is crucially important to her. Far more than just another part of her perfect appearance, it is a mask. She is painting on her work personality and her customer-facing smile. In fifteen minutes she creates a character far removed from the real Amy Steadman who sits in front of the television most nights, eating chocolate and relaxing in old jeans and baggy jumpers. More importantly, perhaps, the face becomes something she can hide behind. The senior managers who stare and leer at her see only the fixed smile, the white teeth and the flawless complexion. They are unaware of the disinterest and contempt she keeps hidden from them.

Less than an hour after getting out of bed, Amy is dressed, psyched-up and ready to go. She leaves her flat and crawls through the early morning traffic, arriving at work in just under fifty minutes.

It is almost eight o'clock, and the store is just opening its doors to the first customers of the day.

'These shoes are killing me,' Lorraine moans.

'Well what do you expect?' I sigh. Lorraine (who's had more nips, tucks, false tans and hairstyles than the rest of us put together) is a total slave to fashion. 'Bloody hell, girl, those heels would be enough to cripple anyone. Christ, you're virtually walking on tiptoe!'

'You're all right, you've got the height you lucky cow,' she snaps back at me. 'Short buggers like me need all the help we can get.' She stops talking and looks over my shoulder. 'Oh, hang on, stand by your posts everyone, here we go again. Here comes the slime...'

I turn round and see that our overpaid guests from Head Office are beginning to arrive. My heart sinks.

'Morning, Mr Jackson,' I smile through gritted teeth as the area manager makes his entrance with his entourage. What a vile and odious little shit this man is.

'Morning, Andrea,' he grins, getting my name wrong as he does every month. 'Looking more beautiful than ever!'

'And you seem to be more of a fucking creep than ever,' is what I want to say back to him but, of course, I don't. Instead I just smile politely, force out a little laugh and then relax when Maurice Green appears at my side to take Jackson through to the back offices.

'Excuse me, Miss,' a quiet little voice says from behind me. I turn round and look down and see an elderly man clutching a negligee, looking more than just a little bit uncomfortable. An odd choice of nightwear unless he's a transvestite or he's married to a gold-digger. I watched a programme on television a while back about women who marry decrepit and desperate men for their money. I can understand why they do it. Most of the men I've been involved with over the last couple of years haven't had any redeeming qualities other than the size of their wallets.

'What can I do for you, Sir?' I ask, looking around for Lorraine who's suddenly disappeared as she always manages to do when customers need serving. This isn't fair. I have to get to my meeting. I haven't got time to be dealing with customers today.

'I bought this for my wife's birthday last week and she doesn't like it,' he croaks.

Judging by the age of the customer in front of me, if his wife isn't a gold-digger then she's most probably somewhere between sixty and eighty years old. Can't imagine I'll want to wear underwear like this at that age.

'I see,' I say, taking the negligee from him and holding it up. There isn't much of it. Definitely not to be worn in the winter. 'Didn't she like it? Do you want a refund or...?'

He shakes his head.

'No. Actually I was wondering whether you had it in any other colours,' he says as his face turns lobster pink with embarrassment. He's taken me by surprise. 'She doesn't like black,' he explains, 'says she'd rather have red.'

I can't be late for the meeting so I'll have to hand the old gent over to a colleague. Typically there's no-one about. I'm about to lead him over to the customer services desk when I stop. Something's caught my eye over by the main doors. I can see Gary Bright, the area finance director. He's crouched down on all fours and he looks like he's choking or being sick. He's dropped his briefcase and it's open and there are confidential papers blowing all over the shop. I run over to try and help him. I call for Jenny Clarke who's the duty first aid officer. Christ, someone else is down now. A woman just to the left of me has collapsed against the customer service desk. Bloody hell, she looks like she's suffocating. Her face is red and her eyes are bulging. She's holding onto her neck and... Shit, Shirley Peters from sportswear is lying on the floor at the bottom of the escalator. She looks as if she's just...

Oh my God. What's that?

I can feel something at the back of my throat. It's like I've got something trapped. I keep trying to clear it but I can hardly swallow. Something's tickling and scratching the back and sides of my throat and I keep coughing to try and clear it away. I need to get some water. It's still there. It won't go. Stronger now. Christ, it feels like someone's got a hand round my neck. Need to get help. Jesus it hurts. It's stinging and burning. Bloody hell, I can't swallow. I can't breathe.

Slow down.

Oh God, I can taste blood in my mouth.

Don't panic. Slow down. Try and breathe. Try and...

Starved of oxygen, Amy fell back into a rail of expensive designer dresses, pulling half of the display down on top of her. She gagged and retched as blood seeped and dribbled down the inside of her inflamed throat. Unable to focus, she was momentarily aware of frantic, terrified movement all around her.

Quickly suffocating, she clawed at her neck and then began to thrash about as the remaining oxygen in her blood stream was rapidly used up. Already numb and unresponsive, she felt no pain when her flailing arms and legs smacked against the hard marble floor and the metal display units around her.

Her mouth and chin now covered with blood, she tried to stand but couldn't. The world became dark and the screams around her became muffled and then silent. The terrifying, claustrophobic panic which filled her mind disappeared.

Less than a minute after becoming infected, Amy Steadman was dead.

JIM HARPER

Fucking hell, I'm in big trouble. I can't believe I've been so stupid. Christ, I'm never going to get out of this one.

There are mistakes and there are mistakes. There are small mistakes and minor indiscretions that you can brush under the carpet and there are fucking huge mistakes that you know are going to cost you big time and haunt you for the rest of your life. This is a fucking huge mistake. It was a moment of madness. It was a really bloody stupid thing to do.

I'm in a hotel room. It only took me a couple of seconds to get my bearings after I woke up. I'm here on a course from work. This is day two of five. The way things are going it could be my last day in the job. It's a quarter to eight and the first session of the morning starts in less than an hour. I've missed breakfast but that doesn't matter. I couldn't eat anything. I feel sick to my stomach. The problem is, this isn't *my* hotel room. My room is next door and I shouldn't be here.

I'm keeping as still as I can, lying on my side and looking out of a crack in the curtains at a dull and rainy morning outside. I'm trying to work my way back through the events of last night to try and remember everything that happened. We're here for the week – Monday morning through until lunchtime Friday. There are seventeen of us here from different outlets up and down the country. We had a formal meal last night to break the ice and to get to know everyone, then we moved into the bar. And that was where we stayed. I got talking to a couple of lads from up north, and then I ended up with two girls who work in my area. I'd met one of them before, but I didn't recognise her friend. Turns out she was Helen Hunter – the daughter of Bill Hunter, my area director and one of the hardest, most unforgiving and ruthless bastards you could ever have the misfortune to come across. My missus, Chloe, works in his office.

And here's where things begin to get really, really complicated and unpleasant. I haven't plucked up the courage to check yet, but I'm ninety-nine percent sure that this is Helen Hunter's bed. And I'm equally certain that Helen Hunter is in it with me. Whoever it is that's lying next to me, she's just wrapped her arm around me and now she's started kissing my neck.

Keep calm. Just try and keep calm and get things into perspective. Am I sure it's Helen? I'm having trouble remembering last night clearly. I remember sitting in the bar with the two girls, drinking heavily. I was starting to get to the stage where you really know you've had a few drinks and your body starts to try and tell you to stop. Sometimes the beer plays tricks on you – the alcohol sort of waits for a while and then creeps up and rushes you all of a sudden. I'd been fine all night but suddenly I could feel myself going and I knew I'd reached the point where having another drink would have been a mistake. I know I stopped in the bar for at least two more pints after that. One of the girls finally got up and went to bed and I remember being left there with the other. It was definitely Helen. The rest of our group were long gone and we were the only two left in the bar.

We were having one of those conversations where you start discussing things you know you shouldn't be talking about. She started telling me about her relationships and then moved on to her sexual likes and dislikes (concentrating more on the likes). I started to get more and more uncomfortable and, at the same time, more and more excited. She was flirting with me (okay, I was flirting with her too) and I remember thinking that I was going to have to try and be a bit more distant in the morning because we have a whole week to get through together and I didn't want to give her the wrong impression. Problem was that by that time I'd already done more than enough.

I remember finishing our drinks and leaving the bar. We walked through the lobby together and went up to our rooms. We walked down the same corridor together and I started to get jumpy because I thought she was following me. I stopped outside my room and took out my key and she did the same with the room next door. She made some cheap comment about fate and coincidence and destiny or something and I just mumbled because my brain had long since stopped functioning properly. I remember thinking that I should just go into my room, shut the door and go to bed but I was having one of those moments where my body had decided that it was going to completely ignore whatever my brain tried to tell it to do.

Helen Hunt is a cheap (but good-looking) tart with a reputation for sleeping around and being a marriage-breaker. I was screaming silently at myself to turn and run but my nervous system seemed to have gone into meltdown, leaving my genitals in full control of the rest of my body. So instead of walking away from her I walked towards her. She wrapped her arms around my neck and whispered something filthy in my ear. I couldn't remember what it was she said, I just remembered smelling her perfume and the booze and feeling her breath tickling the side of my face. We started to kiss. One kiss, then another, then another and another until we were practically eating each other's faces. My hands started to wander. I grabbed her backside and pulled her closer. One thing quickly led to another and... and that's why I'm in trouble now.

It has to be said though, what I remember of last night was damn good. She lived up to her reputation. She was half-undressed by the time we'd made it onto the bed and I was completely undressed seconds later. The lights were full on and the curtains were open but neither of us cared. All I could think about was fucking her senseless. There was no hint of passion, just sheer lust and physical need. It felt like just minutes, but I remember looking at the clock on the bedside table at one o'clock, then two and then three. At some point one of us had turned the lights off and we'd finally fallen asleep.

Despite the fact that what I've done is wrong whichever way you look at it, it was bloody good. Just lying here thinking about what she did to me is making me feel horny again...

'We've got half an hour before the course starts,' a whispered voice says from behind me. She wraps her arms tight around me and starts to drag her nails across my chest. It hurts but Christ, it's really turning me on. I should try to be strong and say no but what's the point? The damage has already been done. There's nothing I can do. Might as well lie back and enjoy it...

She rolls me over and I find myself looking up into Helen Hunter's face. She looks fucking beautiful – an absolute gem. For a second it's easy to forget that I'm married and that the woman I'm in bed with is the precious daughter of my boss' boss. I can't think straight. All I can do is react that what she's doing to me. Now she's sliding down underneath the covers. She's biting my chest and licking me and she's not stopping there. She's going lower. I put my hands behind my head and lie back and get ready to take it.

Quarter past eight. It's over and all of the sudden excitement and lust has gone. Now all I feel is

stupidity and regret. What have I done? Why have I done it again? Helen's grinning at me like an idiot but then, compared to me, she's got nothing to lose. Chances are I've already lost everything. How the hell am I going to be able to look Chloe in the face now? After the last time I promised her this would never happen again. I know I mean nothing to Helen and it's just been a bit of fun for her. I'm just another one of her victims, another conquest. She's renowned for it and I should have known better. She'll walk away from this without a bad word being said against her and I'll take all the flack. If Bill Hunter finds out then I've had it. I've probably just thrown away my marriage, my house and my career for one night of sex. What a fucking idiot.

Shit, what the hell do I do now? She's moved and I'm left lying on the bed on my own, looking up at the ceiling and trying to work out how I'm going to bluff my way out of this one. Easiest thing would be to grab my stuff from the room next door and do a runner but I know I can't do that. I just can't believe I've been so stupid again. This is definitely the worst yet. I've never done anything this bad before. Actually, the first night Chloe and I spent together was pretty similar in a lot of respects but this is different and this was a mistake. I'll talk to Helen now and tell her that it meant nothing.

She's in the shower. Despite the fact that we've just spent the night together and I've already explored every available inch of her naked body I now feel embarrassed because she's undressed. I don't want to look at her but I can't help myself and she knows it. She's flirting with me again. Bloody woman knows that I'm watching her and she's going to make me pay for it.

'Look,' I say, clearing my throat, 'we need to talk.'

She doesn't answer at first. I don't know if she can hear me over the noise of the shower. I'll have to raise my voice although that's the last thing I want to do. Most of the course delegates' rooms are probably on this floor. I don't have any choice. This is a conversation that won't wait. I have to say my piece now.

'Listen, I'm going back to my room now. I had a great time last night but we shouldn't have done what we...'

She peers around the side of the shower curtain, making sure she shows just enough flesh to keep me interested and make me lose my train of thought.

'I'll see you later,' she smiles, 'play your cards right and your whole week will be as good as last night.'

'I'm sorry,' I try to protest. 'You're a really great girl, but I think we've made a mistake. I don't think we should see each other for the rest of the...'

She's shaking her head.

'Too late for that,' she grins. 'You're going to learn more in this little room than you will on the course,' she promises. 'I'm going to do things to you that are barely legal. You're mine for the rest of the...'

She stops talking. The expression on her face changes suddenly.

'What's the matter?' I ask, half-thinking that she's just winding me up.

'I...' she stammers, 'I can't...'

She grabs hold of her neck with one hand and grips the shower curtain with the other to keep herself steady. She can't breathe. She's suffocating. She's trying to breathe in but she can't get any air. She's

looking at me with wide, frightened eyes and I don't know what to do. I just stand there. I can't move. I want to help her but I don't know what to do.

Her legs buckle underneath her and she falls, pulling the shower curtain down with her. Her head hits the faucet with a soft thud that makes me feel sick. Now she's lying in the bath shaking and choking and there's blood pouring out of a gash on the side of her head and washing down the plughole, mixing with the foam and running water. I turn off the shower. Christ, there's blood everywhere. I need to get help.

I run to the bed to get my trousers. My legs are wet from the water that's splashed on me from the shower and I can't get them on. I stumble and trip around the room. I grab the phone and dial for reception to ask them to get an ambulance but there's no answer. No-one's picking up.

I'm standing in the bathroom door again now, half-dressed. Helen's not moving. I've got to do something but I can't bring myself to touch her. Christ, I think she's dead. What the fucking hell is happening here...?

Now I know that I must be a real spineless bastard. Poor girl's lying dead in front of me and for a split second I feel relieved. Now I might have a chance of salvaging my life from this mess. I can tell them that I was in the room next door and I heard her fall down so I came in to help and I found her like this...

Hold on, maybe that will only make things worse. My things are all over this room. Not just my clothes either, there will be hairs and fingerprints and God knows what else all over the bed and probably all over and inside her too. Fucking hell, what if they say I did it? What if they think I pushed her over in the shower to keep her quiet about what we'd done together?

Got to get out of here. Can't stay here any longer.

I grab my things off the bed and run to the door. I try and leave the room but then I see her body again and my conscience tries to make me stop and help her. But I'm too fucking scared. I open the door and go out into the corridor.

There's another body on the floor. Jesus Christ, it's a porter. I don't want to get any closer to him. I can see his face and it's all twisted and contorted with pain and there's blood on the carpet around his mouth.

There's another body further down, just outside one of the rooms. It's Steve Jenkins. I sat opposite him at dinner last night.

I can't handle this.

I let myself into my room and sit on the end of the bed.

I can't hear anyone.

I try the phone again but no-one answers.

I'm scared.

I'll wait here for a couple of minutes then I'll go and find help.

James Harper cowered in his hotel room for more than two hours before finally plucking up

courage to go out and look for help. The smell of burning forced him into action. The hotel kitchens were on fire.

He searched the entire building but could find no-one else left alive. His colleagues, the course tutors, the guests and the entire staff of the hotel were dead.

SHERI NEWTON

Of all the shifts I have to work, this has to be the one I hate the most. I can handle starting early in the morning and working through the day, I don't mind starting in the afternoon and working through the evening, but this I can't stand – sat here from one in the morning until nine. It's not too bad at weekends because there's usually plenty going on, but on mid-week days like today the time drags. There's no comparison, this is definitely the worst shift, and today it's even worse than usual. There are usually always two of us in on lates but Stefan called in sick so I've been sat here on my own for seven and a half hours. This morning there's been nothing to do and hardly anything to see. Between two and three o'clock the pubs and clubs were clearing out so there was some activity on the streets for a while, but after that everything went quiet until around seven-thirty. That's when the daily crowds of commuters started to arrive and that was when I had to start paying attention to the screens again. This job is all backwards – I want to be busy at the start of my shift, not at the end of it when I'm too tired to concentrate. By seven-thirty my eyes are starting to go. Okay, so the work's not physically tiring, but sitting here in front of seventeen screens watching CCTV footage of a shopping centre, an office block and the surrounding streets is enough to put anyone to sleep. Still, as I have to keep reminding myself, it pays the bills. Just about. It's easy money really. I don't have to do anything much. Even if I see something suspicious all I have to do is call the police or centre security. They do all the dirty work. I just sit up here and watch them.

Like I said, at the weekend there's usually enough activity in town to keep me busy, but this has been by far the worst day of the worst shift. Very few people are out and about on Monday night and even fewer are still around in the early hours of Tuesday morning. I've seen absolutely nothing this morning. I watched a drunk get arrested by the police in the high street about two hours ago but since then nothing's happened. The only screen I've watched with any interest is the handheld TV that I brought in with me because I knew it was going to be like this.

It's just after eight now.

Here we go, first sign of trouble for the day.

The area the cameras cover includes all the public areas of the shopping centre, the access roads, the main entrances and the reception area in the office block. There's a driver making a delivery around the back of one of the electrical superstores. He's just fallen out of the cab of his truck, clumsy sod. Bloody hell, what's wrong with him? He must be drunk. Bloody idiot, he can't even get up. Christ, how can these people let themselves get in such a state and then get behind the wheel? Don't they have a

conscience? I think they should be made to... Hold on, he's trying to pick himself up again. He's grabbing at his throat like he's choking on something. Damn, I can't see anyone else around down there to help. I've got a direct line to the loading bay. I'll try and get someone to go and see him... Come on, someone pick up. The line's ringing out but no-one's answering. I can't see whether this bloke's been attacked by someone else in the truck or whether he's ill or... Hang on. Wait a minute. There's someone else behind him in the shadows. Now they're coming out into the open. They must have heard him. Bloody hell, there's something wrong with them too. This person can hardly stand. He's grabbing at his throat as well.

Will someone please answer the bloody phone.

Shit, on screen seven one of the cleaners working outside the main department store has just collapsed. What the hell is going on here? The two screens I'm watching are showing feeds from cameras at opposite ends of the complex. I thought it might have been fumes or something else in the air doing this, but how could the same thing affect three people so far apart, at the same time?

Wait, there's more...

Camera twelve is fixed on the public walkway between the music store and the supermarket. Oh Jesus, what the hell is happening now? I think that's Jim Runton, the assistant manager of the supermarket. He's down on his hands and knees in the middle of the walkway. It looks like he's throwing up. It looks too dark to be vomit. Could that be blood?

No-one's answering this damn telephone. I'll have to try one of the emergency lines linked direct to the police.

There's Mark Prentiss the head of security now. He's running back towards the offices. He might know what's going on. Oh no. Christ, now he's slowing down. He's not going to make it back here. Bloody hell, his legs just went from under him. He's gone down like the others.

What the hell is causing this?

There's no answer on the emergency phone either. There should always be someone there to answer the emergency phone. Someone has to be there. I'll try and get one of the security team on their radio. One of them will answer me...

The truck driver around the back of the superstore isn't moving now. He's just lying there, face down on the tarmac at the side of his truck. It looks like he's dead but he can't be, can he? The other person near him isn't moving either.

Still no answer. I can't get any response.

The cleaner outside the department store has stopped moving too.

All I can hear is static on the radios.

Jim Runton's body has been spasming and shaking since I first saw him but now he's still as well. Mark Prentiss is flat on his back and he's not moving either. There's a pool of blood or vomit around his face.

I can move camera fifteen. That's the camera which covers the main entrance and the pedestrian approach. Using the controls I can turn it through almost a full circle. There should be crowds of people moving towards the mall from the station now. I'll try and get a better view and see if anything's happening outside...

Jesus Christ, I can't believe what I'm seeing here. There are bodies all over the place. There are dead bodies all over the bloody place. The streets outside are covered with them. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. It's like they've all just fallen where they were standing...

I've got to get out of here.

Nothing's moving on any of the screens now.

Sheri Newton got up from her seat at the control desk and ran out into the small security office immediately behind the observation room where she'd spent the last eight hours. She found the lifeless body of Jason Reynolds (her colleague who had been due to take over from her in twenty-five minutes time) sprawled across the cold linoleum floor in front of her, his frozen face and wild, frightened eyes staring hopelessly past her and into space. Further down the corridor a dead security guard was slumped in a half-open doorway. She stepped over the body on the ground, tripping on an outstretched leg, and ran through the silent building until she was out on the street.

Overcome by the disorientating fear and shock of what she had seen and was continuing to see, Sheri fell back against the nearest wall and slid down to the ground. For more than an hour she remained there, fixed to the spot in terrified disbelief, as frozen and still as the countless corpses lying around her.

SONYA FARLEY

Her pregnant belly wedged tight behind the steering wheel of her car, Sonya Farley stared at the never-ending queue of traffic stretching out in front of her and yawned. This was the seventh time in nine weeks that she'd driven this nightmare journey for Christian. Generally she didn't mind – Chris worked hard and he was doing all he could to get everything ready for the arrival of their first child. It wasn't really his fault that he'd been needed in the firm's Scottish office while the papers and designs he'd been working on at home were needed in the central branch. He'd put hours and hours of effort, commitment and concentration into each design and she understood completely why he wasn't prepared to trust their delivery to some two-bit courier firm – after all, there were two vital contracts at stake here. But regardless of the reasons why and the logical explanations for her being stuck out on the road for hours on end, today those explanations offered little comfort. At this stage of their pregnancies, Sonya thought, all of her friends were at home with their feet up, resting and getting ready for what was about to happen. And where was she? Going nowhere fast in the middle lane of one of the busiest motorways in the country during the peak of the morning rush hour. And where did she want to be? Just about anywhere else.

Focus on tomorrow night, she told herself. Tomorrow night Chris would be coming home and they'd finally be able to spend some time together. It would probably be their last chance for a while. They'd planned to go out for a meal and to see a movie. The couple were well aware of the massive upheaval

and change they were about to experience in their lives and they both fully realised the importance of making the most of the time they had left before the baby came. The last few weeks had been a struggle, but Sonya could see things getting easier for a time before the birth. A nice warm bath and an early night tonight, she thought, would be just what she needed to get herself ready for tomorrow. She'd missed Chris. She hated it when he wasn't there, especially now at this late stage of her pregnancy. She couldn't wait to see him again.

Something was happening up ahead.

Struggling to shuffle in her seat and move her cumbersome bulk while still keeping control of the car, Sonya peered into the near distance where she could see movement in sudden, unexpected directions. Her heart sank. That was all she needed. She was a couple of miles away from the nearest motorway exit. An accident now would most probably add hours to her journey. She'd been joking with Chris on the phone last night that if he kept making her do this drive she'd end up giving birth in the back of the car on the hard shoulder. The idea didn't seem so funny now...

Whatever it was that was happening, it was quickly getting worse. Sonya could see the sudden red flashes of the lights of countless hastily applied brakes, burning brightly through the grey gloom of the early morning. Even over the sound of her own car's engine and the radio station she was listening to she could hear strained mechanical whines and squeals as drivers struggled to control their cars. Almost immediately the screaming brakes were replaced with grinding thuds and heavy groans and thumps as vehicle after vehicle after vehicle slammed and crashed into the back of the one in front, literally hundreds of them quickly forming a vast tangled carpet of twisted, wrecked metal along the entire visible length of the motorway.

She had no time to react. It was getting closer now. There was no obvious way to avoid the carnage. Now it was starting to happen all around her.

Forced to slam on her own brakes as the vehicles immediately ahead of her lurched to a sickening halt, Sonya braced herself for impact. She didn't know what she was going to hit, what was going to hit her or even from which direction the first impact would come. All around her every vehicle seemed to be losing control. Just ahead, in the rapidly disappearing gap between the front of her car and the huge pile up which filled the road, cars, vans and lorries were swerving and crisscrossing the carriageway as if their drivers had just given up and stopped trying to steer them. The first collision she felt came from the right as a solid four-wheel drive vehicle smashed into the passenger door behind her, the force of the shunt sending her car spinning round through almost one hundred and eighty degrees so that she found herself facing away from her original direction of travel. Now head on to the rest of the traffic, Sonya's shock and surprise gave way to utter disbelief and abject fear.

An expensive executive's car was heading straight for her. For a few short seconds (which felt like painfully long minutes) Sonya watched the driver of the car thrashing about wildly. He was clawing at his neck with one hand, scratching and scraping at it desperately as he struggled unsuccessfully to hold onto the steering wheel with the other. His face was red and his eyes wide with pain. He was choking. Distracted as the car was rocked again by a collision from the left, she turned and looked out through her passenger window. A tanker had smashed into a van which had, in turn, smashed into her. The driver of the van had been hurled through his windscreen and now lay sprawled face down over the crumpled bonnet of his vehicle. His bloodied head slammed down onto the battered metal just a short distance from where she sat. She looked away in disgust and caught a glimpse of the tanker driver's face. The middle-aged man's face was pressed hard against the shattered glass of his side window, frozen in an expression of terrified agony. Dark red blood dribbled freely down his chin, contrasting starkly with the rest of his blanched white face.

The executive's car ploughed into Sonya at speed, sending her flying back in her seat and then lurching forward awkwardly. Consumed by a sudden wave of nauseating pain as her distended belly and her baby were momentarily crushed again, she briefly lost consciousness.

In the few minutes that Sonya was unconscious the world around her changed almost beyond all recognition. She slowly woke and cautiously half-opened her eyes. Slumped heavily forward with her face pressed hard against the steering wheel she pushed herself upright, struggling for a moment with the weight of her unborn child. Her own safety was of no concern as, for a few seconds longer, she remained still and closed her eyes again, running her hands over her tender belly until she was sure she had felt the reassuring movements of the baby inside. Her split-second feelings of relief and elation were immediately forgotten when she lifted her head again and looked around.

Apart from the occasional hissing jet of steam rising up into the morning air and smoke and flame from numerous burning vehicles, the world was completely silent and still. Nothing moved. Where she had expected to hear voices and cries for help there was nothing.

Sonya instinctively tried to open the door to get out of her wrecked car. Another crashed car to her right, however, had wedged it shut and she was unable to force it open any more than just a couple of centimetres. The van which had collided with her on the other side prevented her from opening the passenger door. The sunroof seemed the only safe escape route. Suddenly freezing cold and shaking with shock and nervous fear she turned the key in the ignition far enough for her to be able to use the electrics of her disabled car. She lifted a trembling hand and operated the control which opened the sunroof. The sudden, jerking noise sounded disproportionately loud in the oppressively silent vacuum of the grey morning. The tinted window above her slid open before stopping with a heavy thud. Slowly lifting herself up onto her clumsy, unsteady feet she guided her head and shoulders out through the restrictive rectangular opening. She cautiously stood upright on her seat and waited for a moment and wriggled her toes, water retention having swollen her tired feet and ankles. She lifted her arms out of the car and then eased and squeezed her pregnant stomach through the rubber-lined gap. Her arms weak and heavy with nerves, she put the palms of her hands flat on the roof of the car and pushed herself up and out. A few seconds of grunting and straining and she had moved far enough to be able to sit on top of her wrecked vehicle. For a while she just sat there in stunned disbelief and surveyed the silent devastation around her. The carnage seemed endless and without any apparent reason.

The motorway around her was dead in both directions. Whatever had happened had worked its way back along the wide road towards the city. Sonya carefully shuffled around so that she was looking back towards the collection of tall, imposing buildings which she had driven through little more than three-quarters of an hour earlier. For as far as she could see both ahead and behind her the traffic on the motorway was motionless. She deliberately tried not to look too closely at any of the wrecked vehicles although it was hard not to stare. Their drivers were dead. Some remained sat in their seats, frozen and lifeless. Some were burning. Others appeared to have suffered a more violent and inexplicable fate. Many twisted and bloodied corpses lay on the ground in the random gaps between the wrecks of their cars, tankers, lorries, bikes and vans.

A cold autumnal wind gusted along the length of the road, buffeting Sonya and prompting her to move from her exposed position. Overcome by the sheer scale and speed of what had happened, and unable to think about anything but the safety of her unborn child, she carefully pulled her feet out of the car and lowered herself down the windscreen and onto its crumpled bonnet. Using the wrecks of other vehicles she made her way over to the hard shoulder. Once there – where the road was a little clearer – she began to walk back towards the city. Dark thoughts occupied her mind with every step. What had

happened to Chris in all of this...?

The city, more than four miles away, was dying too. She could clearly see the destruction, even from a distance. Random explosions ripped through buildings and fire began to quickly spread and take hold. She could see smoke pouring into the early morning air in thick, steady palls, leaving a dirty grey shroud hanging above the devastation.

With her swollen feet already sore, and with the delivery of her baby ominously close, Sonya dragged herself back towards the city in search of someone – anyone – who could help her.

HARRY STAYT

Given the choice, if they didn't need to get up and go to work, school or whatever each day, many people (probably most) would prefer to spend their mornings in bed. Harry Stayt is not like most people. Harry is up, washed, dressed and ready to run by eight o'clock at the very latest, usually much earlier. Harry does not enjoy being cooped up inside. By trade he is an outbound activities instructor, qualified to teach (amongst other things) rock climbing, abseiling, caving, rafting, canoeing, kayaking, mountain biking and hill walking. The summer holiday season has just ended and he has no lessons booked for the best part of the next three weeks. For the first time since early summer he now has some time to himself. Harry being Harry, he intends to spend much of this time undertaking those activities he is usually paid to teach.

Harry loves to run. He rents a small cottage in a village which is nestled on the banks of a large, man-made lake. A single, continuous road of some eight miles in length encircles the reservoir. This is his regular running route.

Harry sat on the front step of the cottage and, as he tied his laces, he looked out over the stunning view which greeted him. There could be no better way to start each day, he decided. The world was silent save for bird song, the rippling of the water on the surface of the lake and the occasional distant rumble of farm machinery and traffic. And if this was favourite time of day, he thought, then early autumn was his favourite time of year; a brief, quiet interlude after the busy summer holidays and before the winter snow and ice brought skiers, snowboarders and others to this area of the country. This morning was picture perfect. The sky above him was a cool, clear, uninterrupted blue and the lush greenery surrounding the scene was slowly beginning to turn. The endless shades of green which had been present all summer had now begun to disappear and had been replaced by yellows, oranges and brittle browns. And the air... Christ, even the air tasted good this morning. Cool but not too cold, dry but not parched and with a very gentle breeze which blew at him from across the surface of the water.

Around Harry the population of the small village were beginning their morning rituals and daily routines. As he stood up and closed his front door he looked round at the few small houses and shops

nearby and smiled inwardly. What was it about human nature that made people so desperate to trap themselves into strict routines like this? Couldn't they function without this structure? He'd moved as far away as he could from the city to escape from the relentless boredom and monotonous familiarity of the rat-race but even here, out in the middle of nowhere, there was still too much focus on structure and conformity. All around him the same people were doing the same things at the same time of day as they always did. Mrs Rogers was opening the village store as she did every morning, putting the same goods out on display in exactly the same place as always. Her husband was taking the daily delivery of bread, milk and papers. The small school gates were being opened and children were beginning to arrive. It was happening everywhere he looked. In some ways he was no better, he had to admit. He often ran the same route at the same time of day and he always performed a well-rehearsed stretching and loosening exercise routine before going out. Although he wanted to believe otherwise, maybe he was as regimented as the rest of them.

Harry checked the door was locked, checked that he had tied his spare key onto the string of his shorts, checked and started his stopwatch and then began to run. He moved slowly at first, knowing that the first few footsteps were crucial. He'd had more than his fair share of avoidable injuries over the last couple of years and he knew now that it suited his body to start slowly and gradually build up to something resembling a decent speed. In any event, this was a simple training run and he didn't intend overdoing it.

He jogged out through the village, acknowledging a couple of bemused folk as he passed them, ran across the dam and then began his usual clockwise circuit of the lake. He'd run this route many times before and had adapted it over time. He knew that it was more sensible to run clockwise because the majority of the children who attended the school lived on farms and in other villages to the east. The timing of his run today had been carefully considered so that he wouldn't reach the busiest stretch of road until the school traffic had been and gone. He expected the rest of the route to be quiet. Although very busy at the height of summer, with the ending of the holiday season the lake and the village had become noticeably quieter. Harry didn't expect to see more than a handful of people while he was out.

That was how he liked it.

Three miles in and the village had long been lost in the distance behind him. A heavy canopy of trees bowed over the road, giving Harry shade from the strangely cool but still brilliant and relentless sunlight. The cover muffled and changed the sounds around him, blocking out the very distant rumble of village noise and traffic, making every birdsong and animal noise seem random and directionless, and seeming to amplify the constant thud, thud, thud of his trainers pounding the ground. His breathing also seemed inordinately loud although he knew it didn't matter if it was because there was no-one else nearby to hear him.

The peace and tranquillity was disturbed momentarily. A car engine (which could have been ahead or behind him and anywhere between half a mile and a mile and a half away) was abruptly and unexpectedly silenced. Harry then thought he heard the crackle and spit of splitting wood. It could have been anything, he quickly decided, but it was probably nothing. One of the local farmers working their land on the steep banks of the lake perhaps? He ran on regardless.

The lake was roughly quadrilateral in shape. He had already run along its longest side and had just followed a sharp bend in the road round to the right. He was now running along the second side which was less than half as long as the first. The dense forest of trees to his left, the grey tarmac ahead and the glare of the sun bouncing off the water's calm surface to his right were all that he could see. His foot scuffed against something unexpectedly and he looked down at his trainers to mind his footing over a

particularly uneven stretch of road. For some reason the ground here was covered with debris. Slowing down but not stopping, he tripped and kicked his way through the tangled branches of a sapling that had been felled, its narrow trunk having been snapped near to its base. Something – a car or truck perhaps – looked to have collided with the young tree. There were huge, arc-shaped scars in the mud just past the trunk. The vehicle, it appeared, had been knocked off course and had gone off the road close to where he was now running. The dirt, leaves and stones which had been disturbed by the collision had been dragged across the track in a rough curve which stretched ominously all the way across the tarmac. To Harry's right was a steep bank which dropped down towards the water. The tyre marks ended suddenly. He knew what had happened before he had even seen the car.

Slowing down to walking pace, he cautiously approached the edge of the bank and peered over. Some five meters or so ahead and below him, wedged tightly between two sturdy trees, was the wreck of a small red car. No doubt the car which had made the noise he'd heard minutes earlier, it had been forced over onto one side by a moss-covered tree stump and had come to rest ungraciously with two wheels up in the air, still spinning slowly but about to stop. Panting with the effort of his run but still in full control, Harry carefully clambered down the bank towards the car, knowing that he had to help. He hadn't seen anyone else in the last half hour and chances were it would probably be at least as long again before anyone else passed here. It was down to him alone to try and help whoever it was who had been trapped in the crash. As he made his rapid descent it occurred to him that there didn't seem to be any obvious reason why the accident had happened. No other vehicle seemed to have been involved. Perhaps it was mechanical failure, he decided, or maybe something had happened to the driver? Either way it didn't matter now.

The driver's door had been wedged shut by the awkward angle at which the car had suddenly come to rest. The windscreen was shattered (it had been pierced by a sharp, thick and low-growing branch) and he cautiously pushed the remaining glass out of the way and peered into the vehicle. He was then able to see the body of the driver, and it was immediately apparent that the injuries they had sustained had been fatal. The same branch which had smashed the window had impaled the stocky, grey-haired man through the left shoulder and his neck had been snapped, presumably by the force of the impact. Jolted out of his seat by the sudden and violent crash, the man's mouth had smashed against the steering wheel. Blood, bone and shattered teeth dribbled down the corpse's chin. The appalling injuries suffered by the driver were so obvious and extreme that for a few seconds Harry didn't notice there was a passenger in the car. A woman of similar age to the man next to her, it was instantly clear that she was dead too. Harry looked deep into her lifeless face. The second corpse didn't seem to have suffered any of the physical traumas that the first had, but it too had trickles of dark blood running from its mouth. Perhaps this lady's injuries were internal? His stomach was strong and, having obtained numerous first aid qualifications as part of his outdoor activities training, he instinctively leant across and checked for a pulse. Nothing. Although her skin was still warm to the touch, it was clear that it was already too late and there was nothing he could do for her. He stepped back and stared into the car again. In contrast to the driver, the reason for the woman's death was far from obvious. Whatever had happened to her, her face bore an inexplicable expression of absolute fear and gut-wrenching agony.

Harry's options were limited. Did he stop with the bodies and wait for another motorist to pass (which would likely be some time) or should he try and get back to the village as quickly as he could to alert the authorities? Although harder, the second option was clearly the most sensible. The poor buggers in the car were beyond help and there was nothing to be gained from stopping with them. Harry quickly scrambled back up to the road, brushed himself down and then began to run again, continuing with his clockwise circuit of the lake.

What started as a gentle training run had suddenly become a painful struggle. As well as having to contend with the shock of what he had just discovered, Harry also now needed to get his body moving

again. He may only have stopped running for a couple of minutes, but that had been more than long enough for his muscles to begin to seize and tighten. He was just over halfway along his circuit so it made sense for him to continue on in the same direction. Perhaps he'd come across some of the school traffic that he'd originally hoped to avoid, heading back home after dropping off children.

Harry forced himself to try and maintain a steady pace. He was tired and he knew that he didn't have enough energy to run faster – with more than three miles left to cover he knew that if he tried he'd probably end up walking most of the way back. At the same time, however, the furious, adrenaline-fuelled chemical reactions racing through his body were intent on making him pick up his speed. All he could see were the bodies he'd just found and all he could hear was the thump, thump, thump of his feet hitting the ground and his heavy, rasping breathing which seemed to be becoming harder, deeper and more desperate with each passing metre.

Finally another sound disturbed the uncomfortable silence and distracted him. He could hear a plane in the distance. He rounded another gentle corner at the bottom of the lake and began to run the relatively straight two and a half mile stretch of road that would lead him back into the village. The relentless sunlight flickered through the trees, blinding him intermittently with its brilliance and causing him to involuntarily screw his eyes shut. The run was getting harder. He was suddenly beginning to feel cold and the ends of his fingers and toes had begun to tingle. Had the temperature dropped or was it shock? He'd run this route many times before and he knew he was more than capable of completing the distance, but now he was beginning to doubt himself. And all the time the plane's engines were getting louder.

At the side of the road a twisting mountain stream tumbled down the hillside, disappeared under the road and trickled into the lake. That was Harry's two mile mark. If he pushed hard he knew that he could be home in less than fifteen minutes now, but it would take just about every last scrap of energy he had to do it. His legs were hurting. Christ, that plane was getting low and close...

When the noise from the plane became deafening and was so loud that he could feel it through the ground beneath his feet like an earthquake, Harry stopped running again. This plane sounded different. Apart from the sheer volume of the noise it was making, this didn't sound like one of the military jets that often flew down the valley or even one of the smaller civilian aircraft that frequently passed over. The aircraft was moving in the same direction as he was, coming from behind him and flying along the length of the lake towards the village. He could see it above the trees now and it was flying lower than any plane he'd seen around here before. The slope of the bank down to the lake was relatively gentle here. Breathing heavily he jogged down to the water's edge to watch.

The plane passed alongside him. It could have been no more than fifty meters from the surface of the lake and it was falling rapidly. As Harry watched in stunned disbelief its nose and starboard wing dropped slightly. The inevitable seemed to take an eternity to happen. Its rapid descent continued until the tip of the wing eventually clipped the water and somersaulted the plane forwards, flipping it over and over in mid-air and breaking it into several huge pieces which landed in the lake with a series of massive splashes, sending vast plumes of water shooting high into the air.

Harry didn't connect the two crashes he'd seen until he found a third. He discovered Kenneth Brent, the local postman, dead in the middle of the road next to his motor-scooter. Letters were blowing casually across the silent scene like leaves on the breeze.

By the time he arrived back at the village – exhausted, bewildered and terrified – he knew that something of vast and disastrous proportions had happened.

By the time he arrived back at the village the wreck of the plane had disappeared beneath the surface of the lake, leaving the water appearing calm and deceptively normal.

By the time he arrived back at the village everyone else was dead.

JACOB FLYNN

Part i

Jacob Flynn is serving a prison sentence for manslaughter. Like pretty much every other inmate, he will protest his innocence relentlessly to anyone who will listen. The fact of the matter is, however, that Flynn caused the death of a seventy-three year old gentleman through reckless driving. He will tell you that the old man was at fault as much as he was. He will give you any number of entirely plausible reasons why he feels his case was handled badly, and why the judge had something against him, and why his solicitor let him down, and how if it hadn't have been for the fact that he'd caught his lying bitch of a girlfriend in bed with his best friend then he wouldn't have been driving at almost twice the legal speed limit down a narrow residential road at just after two-thirty on a quiet Thursday afternoon in late November last year.

Whatever Flynn might tell you, the fact remains that he lost control of his car around a tight bend, mounted the pavement and mowed down Mr Eddie McDermott as he walked back to his house after a lunchtime drink with friends. The fact remains that his driving was the sole cause of Mr McDermott's untimely death, and in the eyes of the law he is being punished accordingly.

Flynn shares his small, rectangular cell with two other men, Suli Salman (minor drug trafficking offences and assault) and Roger Bewsey (corporate fraud). According to his own mental records, he has now been locked up for five months, three weeks and a day. It is just after eight o'clock in the morning and he has been awake for three hours.

I hate this place more with every second I have to spend here. I don't know how the rest of them can handle it in here. I still don't know how I'm going to handle it. Every morning I wake up and wish that I hadn't got into the car that day. Every morning I wish that I'd never found Elaine with that bastard Peters or that I'd never met the bitch in the first place. We'd only been together for just over a year, and look at how much it's cost me. I'll spend more time in here alone than we ever spent together. I know there's no point thinking like this but I can't help it. The hours in here are long and slow and I don't have anything else to do.

It's the stench that gets to me first. Even before I've opened my eyes I can smell the soulless, disinfected emptiness of this fucking place. Then I hear it – the relentless clattering noise from the scum in the cells around me. No matter what time it is it's never quiet in here. There's no escape. It never bloody stops. I keep my eyes closed for as long as I can but eventually I have to sit up and look around this concrete and metal hell.

I shouldn't be here.

Maybe if I'd driven a different way that day or if I hadn't gone round to see her then I wouldn't be here now. I'd be out there where I should be. Because of that fucking slag I've lost everything, and I bet she bloody loves it. She's out there with him, sleeping with him in the bed that I helped pay for, wearing the clothes and the jewellery and the perfume that I bought for her. Bitch.

Bewsey is snoring again. He amazes me. I don't know how he does it. There's a man you'd have put money on cracking up by now. He's in his late fifties, he's overweight, has a stammer, gets picked on constantly by the mentally-challenged thugs in here and, as far as I'm aware, had never been in any trouble before he got himself wrapped up in the mess that eventually wound him up in here. Salman, who sleeps in the bunk above mine, on the other hand, is a cocky little bastard. He's only in here for another couple of weeks. He's in and out of these places all the time, has been for years. He'll be back in for another stretch before Bewsey or I get out.

The mornings are hard here. Some days there's work to do, but most of the time there's nothing. Most days we spend virtually all of the time sitting in here, locked up. That's when it really gets to me. I've got nothing in common with the rest of the shite in here. I've got nothing in common with the other two except the fact that we share this cell. I don't have anything to talk to them about. I don't even like them. They both irritate the hell out of me. Most of the time I don't have anything to do here but sit and think. Sometimes I wake up and I can't imagine that I'll make it through till the end of the day. I feel like that now. Tonight seems an eternity away. Next week feels like it will never come. And I have years of this to get through...

Here we go, first fight of the day. I can hear trouble a few blocks down. Someone's screaming. Sounds like they're being strangled. This kind of thing used to shock me, even scare me, but you get used to it pretty quick. It's par for the course in this place. You can't go for anything longer than a couple of hours here without...

Jesus Christ! Bewsey just scared the hell out of me. I thought he was still asleep. Shit, he just sat bolt upright looking like he's just seen a ghost or had his parole turned down or something. Bloody hell, his face is ashen white. Something's not right with him.

'All right, Bewsey?' I ask.

Bewsey doesn't answer. He's just sitting there, looking at me with this dumb, puzzled expression on his face. Now he's starting to rub at the side of his neck, like he's strained it or something.

'You okay?' I ask him again. Being in this place has made me suspicious of everyone, no matter how harmless they might make themselves out to be. I don't trust him. I'm starting to think that he's either trying to trick me into getting closer or he's about to have a full blown panic attack. Either way I'm stopping over here on my bunk, right out of the way.

'I can't...' he starts to say as he rubs at the side of his neck again. He's looking into space but then his eyes dart up to look above me. Salman is trying to climb down from his bunk above mine. He's half-tripping, half-falling down. Now he's doubled-up with pain and he's coughing and wheezing like he can't catch his breath. He's dragged himself over to the sink. Christ, he's spitting up blood. What the hell is going on here? Now Bewsey's up on his feet and he's grabbing and scratching at his neck too.

'What is it?' I ask but he can't even hear me, never mind answer. He's not messing around. I can tell that this is for real. The cell is suddenly filled with their hoarse, grating coughing and rasping screams for help. The fact that it's happening to both of them is enough to make me... Wait, Bewsey can't breathe. Bloody hell, the poor bastard can't get any oxygen. He's up on his feet and he's trying to take in air but it looks like his throat is blocked. I have to do something. I push him back down onto the bed. He tries to

get up again but then collapses back onto the mattress. His body starts to shake and he tries to move but all his strength has gone. I can hear Salman moaning and coughing behind me and I can hear similar noises coming from other cells around this one. I glance back over my shoulder just in time to see Salman fall to the ground and smack his head against the wall.

Bewsey is convulsing now and it's taking all my strength to keep him down on the bed. There's panic in his eyes. They're as wide as fucking saucers and they're staring straight at me like he thinks that whatever's happening to him is my fault. There's blood on his lips. Shit, there's a dribble of blood trickling down his cheek from the corner of his mouth. He's stopped shaking now. Bad sign. Fuck, he's grabbed hold of my arm and he's squeezing it so bloody hard I think he's going to break it. More blood now. Fucking hell. He arches his back and then crashes down onto the bed.

I just stand and look at him for a second before touching his neck and checking for a pulse.

He's dead. Jesus Christ, he's dead.

I stare at Bewsey's body for so long that I almost forget about Salman lying on the floor of the cell behind me. I turn around and I can tell by the way he's lying that he's dead too. Like Bewsey there's blood trickling from his mouth and there's more pouring out from a deep cut on his head.

And now I realise that I can't hear anyone else.

The whole bloody prison block has suddenly gone quiet. It's silent. I've never known it like this before. I'm scared. Jesus Christ I'm scared.

'Help!' I scream, pushing my face hard against the bars and trying to look down the corridor and across the landing. I can't see anyone. 'There are men dead in here. Help! Please, someone, help!'

Shit, I'm crying like a bloody baby now. I don't know what to do. This cell is on the middle floor. I can see the bottom of the staircase which leads up to the top landing. I can see one of the officers sprawled over the last few steps. I don't know whether he fell or whether what killed Salman and Bewsey has got him too. Even from a distance though I can see that he's dead.

For almost half an hour Flynn stood in the corner of the cell in shock. He pushed himself hard against the wall, trying to get as far away as possible from the two bodies incarcerated there with him. It was a while before the initial panic began to subside and his brain was able to function with enough clarity to start trying to make sense of the situation. What had happened to the two men who shared this cell? Why had the rest of the prison also fallen silent? Why did he seem to be the only one left alive?

A few minutes later and Flynn's logical thinking helped him to arrive at the cruellest realisation of all. He dropped to the ground and began to sob uncontrollably. He was trapped. Much as he was used to being locked in this small, dark, depressing space for endless hours on end, he realised now that, for the first time, there really was no way out. There would be no exercise or work sessions today. There would be no meals, showers or classes or counselling sessions. If it was true and he really was the only one left here, then there was no-one left alive to let him out of his cell.

As the day wore on and no-one came and nothing more happened, Flynn painfully began to accept that, without warning or explanation, the term of his prison sentence had been dramatically extended to life. No parole, no early release, life. Paradoxically, he also knew that

without food or water, this life sentence would ultimately be much shorter than the minimum length of time the law had originally decreed he serve.

All he could do was sit and wait.

BRIGID CULTHORPE

Brigid Culthorpe yawned, rubbed her eyes and squinted at the spraypaint-covered sign at the end of the street, hoping to make out the name of the road they had just turned into.

‘It’s like a bloody maze round here,’ she grumbled to her partner, PC Marco Glover. ‘Don’t know how you can tell one road from another.’

Glover grunted and nodded as he slowed the patrol car down and coaxed it gently over a speed bump.

‘You get used to it,’ he said. ‘Believe me, you’ll spend plenty of time down here. It only took me a few weeks to get my bearings on this beat.’

‘Get much trouble down here?’

‘Virtually all the trouble we get starts down here,’ the grey-haired policeman sighed wearily. ‘Every town has an estate like this. It’s a dumping ground. It’s where the scum and the unfortunate end up, and the scum don’t think twice about praying on those folks who can’t look after themselves. And even if the trouble doesn’t start here, wherever it kicks off it’s usually people from round here who start it.’

‘Nice,’ Culthorpe muttered as the car clattered over another bump.

‘Not really,’ Glover mumbled. ‘Right, here we go, Acacia Road . Sounds okay but...’

‘...but it isn’t,’ Culthorpe interrupted, finishing her colleague’s sentence for him. The car stopped. She climbed out and looked down the length of the desolate street. Ten or twenty years ago this might have been a decent area, she thought. Today, however, it was anything but decent. Unchecked weeds sprouted wildly between the cracks in the pavements where overgrown and unruly front lawns had spilled over the remains of collapsed walls and fences. The battered wrecks of old, half-stripped down cars sat useless outside equally dilapidated houses. Uncollected and overflowing black sacks of rubbish had been dumped in piles waiting for a council collection that would probably never come. Acacia Road was a grey, dead and depressing scene. Culthorpe’s throat was dry. Not long out of training, an uneasy mixture of nerves, adrenaline and trepidation filled her stomach.

‘Which number was it?’ Glover asked as he walked around the back of the car to stand next to her.

‘Forty-six,’ she replied.

‘Come on then.’

The male officer began walking down the road. Culthorpe followed, checking the numbers on each one of the dark, shell-like buildings as she walked. They passed number four (which, as it was between numbers twenty-two and twenty-six, was most likely actually number twenty-four) and increased their speed. Thirty-eight, forty, forty-two, forty-four and then they were there. Number forty-six. The number had been daubed on the wall in off-white emulsion paint next to the boarded-up window in the front door. From the end of the path they could already hear the argument taking place inside. She noticed the remains of a large piece of furniture in the middle of the overgrown lawn. The front bedroom window had been smashed and a pair of thin, grey curtains blew out in the early morning breeze like a dirty flag. It didn’t take a genius to work out what had happened.

‘What gets me,’ Glover moaned as he forced open the garden gate (the bottom hinge was broken and it scraped noisily along the ground) and began to walk up the path, ‘is the fact that these people are even awake at this time. You know, most of them are usually off their faces on booze or drugs and they don’t open their eyes before mid-afternoon. Bloody hell, these people shouldn’t even be awake yet, never mind having a domestic before eight o’clock in the bloody morning.’

‘Probably still up from last night,’ Culthorpe suggested.

‘You’re probably right,’ Glover agreed. ‘Bloody dirty bastards. More bloody trouble than they’re worth...’

Culthorpe smiled to herself. Glover was a far more experienced officer than she was, but even after just a couple of days working with him she had already learnt to read him like a book. As he got closer to an incident and became more nervous, she’d noticed, he started to swear. She, on the other hand, became more controlled and focussed as dangerous situations approached. It was the idea of conflict that she didn’t like. Once she was actually there in the middle of the trouble doing something about it she could handle herself as well as the next man. In fact, she could usually handle herself better than the next man.

‘What’s this bastard’s name again?’ asked Glover, nodding towards the grim building they now stood outside.

‘Shaun Jenkins,’ Culthorpe replied. ‘The call came in from his partner, Faye Smith. Said he was threatening her and the kids.’

‘And how many kids was it?’

‘Three,’ she replied as she reached up and banged on the door. ‘Open up please, Shaun. It’s the police.’

No answer. Culthorpe hammered her fist on the door again. She could hear something happening inside. A child crying and then heavy, desperate footsteps trying to get to the door. A collision and a muffled scream. Jenkins, it seemed, was having a last ditch attempt to sort out the so called domestic problem – whatever it was – without police involvement.

Glover leant forward and thumped on the door.

‘Open up,’ he bellowed, ‘or I’ll kick the door down.’

‘Fuck off,’ a hoarse, angry voice spat from just inside the building. Glover exchanged a momentary glance with Culthorpe before stepping back and kicking the lock. They could hear more struggling inside

the house. Something slammed against the back of the door – Faye Smith, presumably – and it then opened inwards. Culthorpe barged her way in through the half-open door and lurched towards Jenkins who was grabbing at Smith, trying to drag her up onto her feet so that he could kick her back down again. In a single movement Culthorpe marched through the hallway, grabbed the junkie by the scruff of his scrawny neck and dragged him into the nearest room where she threw him onto a magazine, beer can and cigarette butt-covered sofa. A large, solid woman, she had a weight advantage over most people so this scarred and drug-addled excuse for a man didn't have a hope. Even if he'd been lucid enough to be able to react he still would have had no chance.

Culthorpe glanced back at Faye Smith who lay on the threadbare hall carpet in a sobbing heap.

'I'll look after this one,' she shouted to Glover. 'You get her and the kids sorted out.'

Glover helped Smith to her feet. She wrestled herself from his grip and began to limp towards the room at the far end of the hallway. The policeman could just make out the shape of a child waiting anxiously in the shadows of the kitchen. He saw two more children – both boys, both half-dressed – standing at the top of the staircase, peering down through a gap in the banister.

'It's all right, lads,' he said, 'your mum's okay. You stay up there and get yourselves dressed and we'll be up to see you in a couple of minutes.'

Glover glanced to his right and saw that Culthorpe was in complete control in the living room. He had to admit, she was turning out to be bloody good in situations like this. He was happy for her to take the lead, despite her relative inexperience. She stood tall over Jenkins. The wiry little man squirmed on the sofa.

'Do you want to tell me what's been going on here, Shaun,' she asked him, 'or should I...?'

A sudden spit of hissing crackle and static from her radio interrupted her. Annoyed and distracted she grabbed at it, keeping one hand tight around Jenkins' neck. Through the white noise and interference she thought for a moment that she could hear something. Muffled, unnatural sounds. It sounded as if someone at the other end was being strangled or choked or...

A sudden movement from Jenkins immediately refocused the police officer.

'Look, Shaun,' she began, 'we can do this here or we can...'

Jenkins' face began to change. His vacant, drugged-up expression disappeared and suddenly became more alert. Culthorpe tensed and reached for the baton on her belt, sensing that he was about to attack. The man tried to push himself up from the sofa but then stopped and fell back down. The expression on his face had again changed. His features began to twist and contort with sudden shock and pain.

'What's the matter?' Culthorpe asked, still cautious of the junkie. 'What's wrong?'

Jenkins grabbed at his throat and she relaxed her grip. His breathing changed. His drug-fuelled panting became shallow, irregular and forced. She could hear him beginning to rasp and rattle. Was he for real? Christ, what should she do? She hadn't covered this in training. Did she risk trying to help him or should she call Glover and... and the colour in his face was beginning to drain. Bloody hell, there was no way he was faking this. Was it a seizure or a fit brought on by whatever he'd taken or was it something she'd done? Had she used too much force...? Jenkins' eyes, already wild and dilated, began to bulge as he fought for breath. He threw himself back in suffocating agony and began to desperately claw at his inflamed throat.

‘Glover!’ Culthorpe shouted. ‘Glover, get yourself in here now!’

Culthorpe had to take a chance. She grabbed Jenkins’ flailing legs and laid him out flat on the sofa. He arched his back in pain, his willowy frame beginning to shake and convulse furiously. Pressing down on his bare chest with one hand she tried to hold his thrashing head still with the other and clear his airway. Suddenly motionless for the briefest of moments, the odious addict then let out a tearing, agonising cough of pain and suffocation which splattered the police officer with blood and spittle. Shocked and repulsed she staggered back and wiped her face clean.

‘Shit,’ she cursed. ‘Glover, where are you?’

Still no response from her partner. Jenkins began to convulse again and she forced herself to move back closer towards him. It was her duty to try and save his life, much as she knew it wasn’t worth saving. She crouched down next to him. By the time she’d decided what she needed to do he’d already lost consciousness. He wasn’t moving.

‘Glover!’ she yelled again. Now that Jenkins was still she could hear more noises all over the dark, dank and squalid house. Her heart thumping in her chest, she stood up and walked cautiously towards the door. From the kitchen came a sudden crashing noise as plates, dishes and glasses fell to the ground and smashed. Culthorpe ran into the room and found Glover, Faye Smith and one of her three children sprawled motionless on the cold, sticky linoleum, surrounded by the remains of the food and crockery which had been knocked off a now upturned table. They were all dead. Smith, Glover and the child at her feet were dead, as was Jenkins when she returned to him. She ran upstairs. The two children up there were dead too. One was in the bathroom, the corpse wedged between the base of the sink and the toilet pan. She found his brother lying on the carpet next to his bed. Both of the children were white-faced but with crimson, almost black blood dribbling from their silent mouths.

With clumsy, nervous hands Culthorpe reached for her radio again and called for assistance. The familiar sound of hissing static cut through the silence, reassuring her momentarily.

She yelled desperately into the radio for help. No-one answered.

PETER GUEST

I keep going over the conversation in my head again and again and again, and every time I see Joe’s face it hurts me more. I’ve been close before but I know I’ve really done it this time. I’ve made a huge mistake.

What happened at home this morning has been brewing for weeks, but I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about it. Sometimes I feel like I’m trapped and that I don’t have any control. I’m trying to do my best for everyone but no-one can see it, and at the same time everyone blames me whenever anything goes wrong. I’m starting to think that whichever way I turn and whatever I do I’ll end up pissing someone off and paying one hell of a price.

I can't stop looking at the clock. It's almost eight. Jenny will have Joe ready for school now. He'll be in the playground with his friends before long and everything that happened last night and this morning will be forgotten until he gets home. He kept telling me it didn't matter but I could see that it did. He kept telling me it was all right and that there'd be another time but there's no escaping the fact that I've let my son down again. The trouble is, how can I justify sitting in a school hall watching my child's first class assembly when I should be at the office, closing a deal that's taken days and weeks of effort to bring to the table? I know that in financial terms there's no competition and the office has to take precedence, but I also know that on just about every other level I should be putting work at the very bottom of the pile. It's hard to do that. The pressure they're putting me under is immense. And worst of all, I have this gnawing, nagging emptiness in the pit of my stomach which is telling me this morning that I might have just paid a price that can't be measured in pounds and pence.

It wouldn't matter so much if this were the first time. It wouldn't even be that bad if it was only the second or third time either. Truth is because of work I seemed to have missed just about every notable landmark event in Joe's short life so far. I missed his first day at playgroup because of an off-site meeting and I missed his first morning at nursery because I was in Hong Kong on a business trip. I missed his first day at school. I missed his first nativity play and his first proper birthday party with his friends. And why did I miss all of those things? If I'm honest, I truly believed that I was doing it all for Jenny and Joe. I just want us to have a good standard of living and not to want for anything. If that means I have to work long hours and be dedicated to my job then so be it, that's what I'm prepared to do.

Jenny doesn't see things that way. She used to, but she doesn't anymore.

She really laid into me last night when I took the call and told her I was going to be at the office early. She started hurling all kinds of threats and accusations in my direction, telling me that we were getting close to the point where I was going to have to make a choice between my career and my family. She's said things like that before, but last night it felt different. I could tell that she meant every last word she said. I tried again to tell her that I was only doing it for her and Joe but she wasn't listening. She asked me if I could imagine a time when I didn't work for the company and I said that I could. It might still be a long way off, but I know the day will eventually come when I don't work for them any longer. Then she asked me if I could imagine being without her and Joe. I said that I couldn't and that I didn't even want to think about it. She said that was the choice I had to make. If they were more important to me than work, why did I keep choosing work over them?

Bloody hell, I know she's right and I know I should be stronger, but the company has got me by the balls.

Traffic's bad this morning. God, that'd be bloody ironic, wouldn't it, if the traffic makes me late for the meeting after all the grief I've had over this. I'm over halfway there now and it's been pretty much bumper to bumper since I left home. This isn't unusual. This is the main route into town and I know that a lot of commuters will be turning off and heading for the motorway soon, leaving the last mile or so to the office relatively clear.

Last major set of traffic lights coming up. I might be sitting here for the next ten minutes or so but, once I'm through, I should be at the office pretty quickly. I'll get this meeting done and I'll see if I can't get away a little earlier tonight. I'll find a way of making it up to Joe and Jen. If we get the deal closed this morning we all stand to get a decent payout next month. I'll take them out for dinner tonight and put it on the credit card. I'll take them for a pizza or a burger, Joe will love that. Maybe we could go to the cinema if he's not too tired after school. I can't keep him out too late. Perhaps I'll take them at the weekend. Maybe I'll just get them both something from town at lunchtime. But I don't want it to seem

like I'm just trying to pay for...

Bloody hell, what was that? As I pulled away from the lights just then I'm sure I saw a car going out of control on its way down the bypass. There's no way I can turn back. There are plenty of other people about and there's probably nothing I could do anyway. The police watch all these roads on CCTV and they'll be on the scene before... Jesus Christ! I'm just heading down into the Heapford tunnel and I've seen another crash at the top of the slip road I've just pulled off. I went by so fast I didn't really see what happened. There was a blue-grey estate and it smacked into the back of another car. They both went spinning across the carriageway. Thank God I missed it. I hope everyone involved is all right and I don't want to sound completely uncaring, but I can't afford to be delayed today. A minute or so later and I would have been stuck in the tailback and chaos that rush-hour crashes always leave behind.

Down into the relative darkness of the tunnel. The light quickly fades and I listen to how the sounds change around me – the signal on the radio disappears and the noise of the city is muffled and snuffed out by the sounds of car engines echoing around the inside of the tunnel. The road ahead bends away to the left. I can see the bright red glow of brake lights up ahead. Drivers are always having to brake sharply at the end of this tunnel. They just don't anticipate the filter system. Everyone drives too fast down here and... and there are quite a few cars backed up now. Bloody hell, I hope it is just the filter and nothing more serious. I'm cutting it fine now. To be stuck this close to the office would be just unbelievable.

The noises around me are changing again. Now I can hear brakes and horns and engines roaring and other sounds. The radio is still quiet. It sounds like there's been another... Hang on, the traffic is stopping. There must have been another accident. Christ, three in one morning, and all in less than a mile. What are the chances of that...? Shit, what the hell is happening...? Jesus, this is a bloody pileup. It looks like a load of cars have smashed and been wedged together and... and I've got to stop before I hit them. I slam on my brakes but I'm going too fast to stop in time. The car behind me is doing the same, and the one to my right too. I'm going to hit something or something's going to hit me. I try to keep hold of the steering wheel and take my feet off the pedals so that I don't damage my legs and I'm just trying to...

Seven minutes later Peter Guest woke up. Dazed and disorientated, he gently pushed himself upright and gagged and coughed as warm, semi-coagulated blood trickled sickeningly into his open mouth and down the back of his throat from his broken nose. The fact that he might miss his vital meeting was the first irrational thought that crossed his concussed mind. He immediately struggled to unbuckle his seat belt and disentangle himself from the remains of the now deflated airbag which had prevented his face from smashing into the steering wheel with any more force. He had to get out of here and get to the office. He had to let them know what had happened. They'd understand if they knew he'd been in an accident.

Guest slowly and painfully attempted to focus on his dull surroundings. The end of the tunnel around the bend allowed a degree of grey morning light to trickle and seep across the scene a hundred meters or so ahead. Nearer to him the yellow-orange strip lights suspended along the arched ceiling of the tunnel provided a little more illumination. His car was wedged tight between the tunnel wall on his left and a crashed black taxi cab to his right. He tried to open his door but could move it no more than a couple of inches. Needing to get out of his car and out of the tunnel he lifted his aching body up out of his seat, clambered over the dashboard and scrambled through the shattered remains of his windscreen before rolling over onto his back on the car's crumpled bonnet. The effort required to move just that short distance was immense. He lay still for a moment or two longer (just enough time to let a sudden debilitating wave of nausea subside) and

then stood upright on his car, leaning breathlessly against the grubby tunnel wall for support.

For as far as Guest could see both ahead and behind him the tunnel was filled with a huge mass of tangled, crashed traffic. Most vehicles seemed simply to have collided with those in front and around them and had come to a sudden, shunted stop whilst others had been forced up into the air by violent impacts. A few cars behind where Guest was standing a once pristine bright red, two-seater sports car lay on its roof, straddled widthways across the remains of two other vehicles.

Apart from him, nothing was moving.

Guest cautiously began to edge forwards. The road was obscured by wreckage and he had no option but to clamber over the mass of cars, trucks and vans if he wanted any chance of getting out of the tunnel. He had to do it. He was in pain. He needed daylight and fresh air. He needed help.

After dragging himself over the boot, the roof and then the bonnet of another car, Guest was faced with a short jump onto the boot of another. Pausing to compose himself and bracing himself for impact, he jumped onto the second vehicle and lost his footing, slipping down onto a small triangular patch of road that had somehow remained clear in the midst of the carnage. He fell clumsily against another car door. Inside the car the sudden lurching movement caused by Guest's impact made the body of a passenger slump over to one side, its head smashing against the window with a heavy, sickening thump. Christ, he hadn't thought about the other drivers. Struggling with his own disorientation, pain and confusion he had only been concerned with his own safety and well-being and with trying to get himself out of the tunnel as quickly as possible. Now that he stopped to think about the others, however, they were suddenly all that he could see. He scrambled through the devastation to get to the nearest body but it was no use, the poor bastard was already dead. As was the next one he found, and the next, and the next. He was the only one left alive.

Everywhere Guest looked he saw bodies. Vast, countless numbers of them. Bloodied, battered faces smashed against windows and limp, shattered bodies hanging awkwardly out of half-open doors. And the longer he stared into the shadows, the more he saw. In the low gloom he saw splintered, broken bones, dripping pools of crimson-black blood, torn skin, gouged eyes, twisted limbs and smashed faces. Suddenly finding enough terrified energy to be able to rise above his own pain, he began to run, jump and dive like an adrenaline-charged athlete until he had cleared the tunnel and was finally out in the open air again.

But the carnage and devastation had not been limited to the inside of the tunnel. All around him now it continued, unabated and unstoppable. Endless, inexplicable and seemingly without reason or direction.

Guest dragged himself along silent streets to the office where, sitting amongst the lifeless bodies of the colleagues and business associates with whom he should now have been meeting and negotiating, he sat and tried to make sense of the incomprehensible nightmare which had reduced his world to ruin.

It was almost two o'clock before I made it back home. The house was empty. I knew in my heart it would be.

I ran the half-mile or so between home and Joe's school. Once or twice I nearly stopped and turned

back. By that time I'd already seen hundreds of bodies, possibly even thousands, but they were faceless and nameless. As I neared the school I began to see corpses that I recognised. I walked among the bodies of people I had known – Joe's teachers and the parents of his classmates, Jen's friends. I knew that somewhere in the school building I would find the bodies of my family.

Joe was in his classroom. I found him underneath his desk, curled up tightly in a ball. Jen was in the assembly hall, lying next to an upturned chair, half-covered by the body of another dead child's dead parent.

I carried them both to a little room and the three of us sat together for a while longer.

If I'd listened to Jen I would have been there when it happened. I might not have been able to do anything to help either of them, but if I had listened I would have been there. Because of me my wife and child died frightened and alone.

I don't know what to do now. I don't even know if there's any point trying to do anything.

I lost everything today.

JACKIE SOAMES

Jackie Soames opened one eye and then closed it again. It was late. She should have been up hours ago. George should have woken her up hours ago. Bloody man, sometimes he was absolutely useless. She didn't ask much of him but she relied on him to help. She ran the business and looked after the punters, he kept the home running and kept her happy. It was an unusual arrangement but it worked, and it had worked well for more than twenty years now.

Jackie opened one eye again.

It was quarter-to-eleven. Christ, how could she have slept in for so long? She should be opening the pub soon. She'd never missed opening time before – not even on the day her father had died - and she knew she'd take some stick from the regulars if she was late unlocking the doors today. She couldn't afford to waste time like this. In the pub trade you live and breathe the job. You're never off duty – there's always something to do and it all has to be done. She worked from the crack of dawn until the very end of each day (that was the curse and the joy of living with the job) and she couldn't believe that George had let her sleep in for so long. Where was he? She remembered him getting up when the alarm went off just after seven o'clock, but she couldn't remember him coming back after that. Strange, she thought, he usually brought her up a coffee before half-past eight and left it on the beside table for her. There was no cup there today...

Last night had been hard going. Monday nights were usually difficult. Jackie always had to do something special to try and get a decent sized crowd in on a Monday. She'd tried quiz nights and theme nights and cheap drinks promotions but the punters never seemed to want to know. Last night they'd had

a band on, and a bloody awful band it had been too. Nice enough lads, but they were all noise and no talent. She'd come across plenty of similar acts trying to make a name for themselves over the years. 'Give 'em enough volume,' they seemed to think, 'and the crowd won't know we can't play.'

They should have been here to pick up their stuff a couple of hours ago but she hadn't heard them. The bedroom was right over the bar. Anything happening down there would surely have woken her up. Christ, she must have been in a deep sleep. Maybe she was coming down with something? She couldn't afford to get ill. She couldn't risk leaving George in charge...

The music had not gone down well with the regulars at the Lion and Lamb last night. A good old traditional British spit and sawdust pub with good old traditional spit and sawdust locals, halfway through their act the noise from the less than impressed crowd of drinkers had threatened to drown out the music from the band. The drummer had given up straight away. The others lasted for another song and a half before admitting defeat and putting down their instruments. Trying to make the most of a disappointing situation, and trying to recoup the cost of the night without leaving the boys in the band out of pocket, Jackie had locked the doors after closing time and kept everyone drinking through the early hours of Tuesday morning.

Christ she was paying for it now.

Finally managing to prise open both eyes, she picked herself up out of bed, stumbled to the bathroom and threw up. That was better. Once the acidic taste and the vomit and booze-induced disorientation had passed she began to feel herself again. As a regular (daily) drinker of admirable capacity and many years standing, Jackie had become hardened to the effects of alcohol. It was a well rehearsed routine that she followed now. She got drunk, she fell asleep, she woke up, she threw up, she felt better. And the next night she did it again. It was all part of the job. The first cigarette of the day helped settle her stomach.

Where the hell was George?

'George?' she called out. 'George, are you downstairs? Do you know what time it is?'

When he didn't respond she quickly got dressed (no-one ever saw her in her nightwear except her husband) and went out onto the landing. Nothing. She couldn't hear or see anything. Cursing her husband under her breath she stormed back to the bedroom. He must have gone out, she decided. That bloody man had gone out and left her fast asleep. And I bet those boys from last night haven't been able to get back in and get their stuff, she thought. With just over half an hour to go before opening time Jackie was close to losing her temper on a massive scale. Takings were down as it was. The last thing she needed was George making things worse for her by not pulling his weight. He was probably down the betting office, she grumbled to herself. That was where he seemed to spend most of his spare time. She earned the money and he flittered it away on horses and dogs. She'd have sacked him by now if she hadn't been married to him.

The bedroom was still dark and she kept it that way as she got herself ready. Regardless of what had happened to George, she still had a business to run. When it came to the crunch it was down to her and her alone to keep the pub running. It was her name on the licence, not George's. It was her name on the lease and on the contract with the brewery and the buck stopped with her. She wasn't complaining. That was how she liked it.

In the semi-darkness Jackie began to assemble her public image. No-one saw her without make-up but George. She was never seen in public looking anything less than perfect. Once dressed she sat in front of the mirror where she brushed her hair and painted on her smile. Copious squirts of her favourite fragrance to hide the smell of drink and cigarettes and she was ready to face the rest of the world.

The landing was as dark as the bedroom. Beyond that the living room was as dark as the landing and the first floor function room was as dark as everywhere else. Jackie popped her head around each of the doors before going down. Strange, she thought, it was Tuesday. Paula Hipkiss hired the function room on Tuesday mornings to run her weekly keep-fit class. What had happened to them? There was no way she would have slept through that. If the thumping music hadn't woken her up, then the elephantine crashing of anything between ten and twenty-five sweaty, overweight, middle-aged housewives surely would have.

'George,' she yelled again, her smoker's voice hoarse and angry. She coughed as she stumbled down the stairs. Bloody hell, it was as dark down there as the rest of the building. The cleaners, aerobics instructors, crowds of chubby women, talentless musicians, her useless husband – someone should have been here to turn the lights on and get the place ready for the punters. And she was right, the band hadn't been able to get in to get their gear. She could see it piled up at the far end of the room.

'George!' she screamed at a volume that, had he heard her, he would never had dared ignore. 'Where are you for Christ's sake?'

Jackie opened the curtains and stumbled around the bar. She found her husband of twenty-three years dead on the stairs which led down to the cellar. Poor bugger, he looked like he'd lost his footing and fallen headfirst down the steps, smashing his face into the concrete cellar floor. Shaking with sudden shock and emotion she slowly made her way down to him, one precarious step at a time, stepping over his sprawled out limbs. When she got to the bottom she sat down on the step next to him and began to cry.

Oh, George, Jackie thought, and there I was thinking you'd let me down. Sobbing, and filled with guilt, sorrow and a genuine deep, raw sadness, she tenderly stroked her husband's mop of white hair and gently shook his shoulder.

'Come on, love,' she whispered hopefully, 'wake up.'

She knew it was too late. She knew that George was dead.

Several long, quiet, grief-filled minutes later Jackie managed to drag herself back up from the cellar. It was almost opening time now but that didn't seem to matter anymore. She poured herself a large gin, knocked it back, poured herself another and then picked up the phone to call for the doctor. The pub was still dark and empty and she looked around the shadow-filled room with sad, desperate eyes. Much as she was the brains of the operation and the one who made all the decisions, Jackie didn't know how she'd cope without George.

The telephone wasn't working.

She finished her drink, hung up and tried again. Same problem. Couldn't get a line.

Not the kind of people to waste their time with gadgets and fads, neither George nor Jackie had ever owned a mobile phone. Jackie decided to try and telephone from the bank next door. If the worst came to the worst, she thought, she'd walk up to the doctor's surgery. It was only a little way down the high street. She'd go out through the back door to avoid any of the regulars who might be waiting around the front to get in.

When Jackie stepped out into the cobbled courtyard behind the pub she immediately noticed how quiet it was outside. She buttoned up her coat, locked the door and then walked out through the gate,

down the alleyway and onto the high street.

The devastation was incredible.

A bus was on its side just up the road. In the distance Westwood Garage was on fire. There were crashed cars all over the place and, for as far as she could see in every direction, hundreds of people lay dead on the cold ground around her.

This had happened hours ago.

What had caused it?

How had she slept through it and why hadn't it affected her?

Jackie went back into the Lion and Lamb and poured herself another gin.

GARY KEELE

'All right, Tuggie,' shouts Meade across the carpark. The sun's bright this morning. I have to cover my eyes with my hand so that I can see him.

'Morning, Keith,' I shout back. 'Good day for it?'

He looks up and around.

'Just about perfect, I'd say,' he answers as he grabs his bag from the back of his car and starts walking towards the office.

He's right. It's a perfect day for flying. It's days like this that make me glad everything worked out the way it did between me and Sarah. If we were still together then I wouldn't be here now. I'd still be stuck living in our cramped terraced house in the middle of the city, spending long hours stuck in traffic and even longer hours stuck at the office. Most of the people I used to work with are probably still there, too scared to leave, stuck in a rut. And while they sit at their desks and follow orders, I'm out here in the fresh air, sitting on my backside and occasionally flying. I'm making it sound like I don't do anything around here. I do – I work damn hard when I have to – but I enjoy it. It doesn't feel like a job.

Shame we had to part on such bad terms though. I had a good few years with Sarah until we split up. Everything happened within the space of six months. She went off with a financial adviser (who advised her that he was worth a lot more than I was) and then, as I was just getting myself back on my feet, the bastards made me redundant. I had nothing to stay in the city for. We sold the house and I took my share and what was left of my redundancy payment and packed my bags and moved to the other side of the country. I learnt to fly a plane (it was something I'd always wanted to do) and then managed to get myself a job here at the Clifton Gliding Centre, towing gliders two thousand feet up into the air and then letting them go so that they can drift back down to the ground. Easy. I have a good life now. Simple, but

good.

A line of three virtually identical (in all but colour) cars pull into the gravel carpark. The sound of their wheels crunching along the ground disturbs the quiet of the morning. This must be today's visitors arriving. There are supposed to be eight or nine of them I think, sales reps from a company in town. Noisy buggers. It's only just turned eight and all I can hear is them laughing and shouting. Why can't they talk quietly? It's probably just nerves. It's good sport watching blokes like this. They try and act all cool and relaxed on the ground, but I know they're nervous as hell. As soon as they're strapped into the gliders and they're ready to go up they change. All the bravado and macho bullshit disappears. When there's just the hull of a flimsy little plane and two thousand feet of air between their backsides and the ground they tend to shut up and drop the act. I hate these corporate team building activities. To think I used to have to do all this...

As the group disappears into the office to sign in and be briefed on the rules for the day I start getting the plane ready. I can still hear the voices of the seven men and two women as I walk over to the hanger. I climb into the plane, shut the cockpit and fire up the engine, drowning out their noise once and for all. I taxi out onto the airfield (which literally is a field here – no concrete runways for us) and move into position. Once we're ready I stop the engine, get out of the plane and walk over to where some of the other staff are standing in front of the hanger.

'Do me a favour,' I say to Willy who's one of the regular glider pilots.

'What's that?' he asks.

'Give them a fright, will you? Scare the shit out of these buggers!'

He smiles knowingly. He shares my dislike of overpaid businessmen.

'No problem,' he grins. 'Anyway, Tuggie, five minutes of being dragged up behind you with your flying is enough to scare anyone! I'll be shitting myself, never mind them!'

'Cheeky sod!' I snap as Willy walks away, cackling to himself.

Willy and Jones (one of the ground staff) stand and wait for Ed (Willy's lad) who's towing the gliders out of the hanger and out onto the airfield. The tractor he's driving is a noisy bugger. It fills the air with chugging and clattering and with clouds of thick black fumes which it spits out of its exhaust. I head back to my caravan for a cup of coffee to wake me up properly before the flying starts.

We move quickly. It's not even nine o'clock and I've already towed three gliders up.

This really is a simple job. The glider's attached to the back of the plane by a cable. I take off and drag it up until we've reached around two thousand feet. The glider pilot releases the cable. They go up (for a while, if the conditions are right) and I go back down. They usually stay up for anything between twenty minutes and half an hour. The flights might last a little longer today. The clouds are good and the sun is bright. There should be plenty of thermals to keep them up in the air. Once I've lost them I can just coast back down to the landing strip.

We usually try to have four or five gliders up in the air at the same time. This morning the first three went up without any problems. Ed's just attaching number four to the back of the tug plane. I watch the lads getting the glider ready in my mirrors. Ellis (the pilot) nods to Jones who gives me a hand signal and I start to move slowly forward until the cable is taut. Another hand signal and I stop. Behind me two

ground hands hold the wings of the glider, keeping it steady. A final signal from one of them tells me that they're ready to fly.

We're off again. The tug plane bumps along the uneven grass for a couple of hundred yards before I give it a little more gas, pull back the controls and start to climb. The rumbling beneath me is suddenly silenced as the wheels leave the ground. Now the glider's up too and we're on our way. I can see the faces of the two men in the plane behind me. Ellis is talking ten to the dozen but his passenger isn't listening. He's bloody terrified! I think he's got his eyes shut!

Christ, the sun's bright. There's no escaping it when you're up here. It's hot too. It's not like you can pull down a blind or open a window. You just have to put up with it to an extent. You know it's not going to last for that long. A few minutes flying and then... Shit, what was that? Turbulence? Not at this altitude. No, I didn't like that, something's not right. I'm looking at the controls in front of me, but there's nothing wrong with my plane. Everything looks normal. It must be the glider. Something's happening behind me. I can't see what they're doing... Oh, Christ. Jesus Christ, Ellis is losing control. We're not even a thousand feet up yet and he's lost it. I can't see what's happening and I don't know if he's...

Oh, God, the glider's rolling to the side. He has to release. If he doesn't he'll drag me back with him and... and I can't see Ellis. Bloody hell, I can see the passenger's face now. He looks like he's trying to get out. He's banging against the sides of the cockpit. Maybe he's had a panic attack or something. Damn, I can just about see Ellis now. He looks just as scared as the other man.

The glider's tipping again. We have to separate. I don't have any choice, I have to pull the emergency release. If I don't then they'll pull me down with them and we'll all... There, done it. Had to do it. I'm free again and I've got control back. I bank and climb and look down below me as the glider rolls and dips and begins to spin towards the ground.

I can't watch. I don't know what happened in there, but I know that the two men don't have long. It'll be over in a couple of seconds. I just hope Ellis can try and get control and level out before... I need to get back down there and get help. If I... Jesus Christ, what was that? What's happening now? Fucking hell, another glider has just dived right across the front of me. It could only have been a hundred yards ahead. Shit, another couple of seconds later and it would have hit me and I'd be heading down there with Ellis and... and what the hell is happening here?

The planes are dropping out of the sky all around me. The four gliders we put up this morning are all either down or on their way down. Keith Meade – a man who's been flying these things for more years than anyone else I know – has lost control of his glider too. The plane is spiralling down towards the hanger. I don't want to look but I can't help but stare as the flimsy aircraft smashes through the roof, its metal and fibreglass wings and body crumpling and being torn apart on impact.

My heart is thumping and sweat is pouring down my face. I can't think straight. God knows how I'm managing to keep flying. My legs are shaking with nerves and I can hardly keep the wings of the plane level. I've got to keep going. I'm approaching the airfield from the wrong direction but it doesn't matter. There's no-one else left up in the sky. I can't see anyone moving down there. Surely someone should have been out here to help by now?

I have to leave my landing a little longer than I'd like. What's left of Ellis' glider is strewn across the middle of the landing strip. There are pieces of plane and God knows what else scattered all over the place. I can't risk hitting any of the debris. I manage to put the plane down in half the distance I'd usually need. I kill the engine and sit and wait for the propeller to stop moving before I move. I don't want to go out there. I can't see anything or anyone moving.

I can't sit here all day. I slowly climb out of the cockpit of the tug and just stand there for a moment, listening to the loudest, most overpowering and terrifying silence I've ever heard.

What the hell has happened here?

There are bodies at the side of the airfield. Without stopping to think about what I'm doing I find myself walking towards them. These aren't people who were flying. There are a couple of faces that I recognise – Meade's daughter is one of them. The rest, I think, are the remains of the men and women visitors who weren't flying. They're dead. They're all dead. As cold and lifeless as the rest of their colleagues who are scattered in pieces around here.

Inside the office I find Chantelle Prentiss, our Admin girl, dead at the front desk. The phone is off the hook next to her upturned hand. It looks like she was in the middle of a call when it (whatever it was) happened. I pick up the phone and lift it to my ear. Silence. I hang up and try to dial out but there's no answer on any number. After a while the phone stops working completely.

The world is dead.

I'm up in the plane again, flying round and trying to find someone else who's left alive. There's no-one.

The whole damn world is dead.

JULIET APPLEBY

'So what time *will* you be home tonight?' asked Mrs Appleby, staring with frustration at her daughter across the breakfast table. Sometimes trying to get information out of Juliet was like trying to get blood out of a stone.

'I don't know Mum...' she began to answer, in a quiet, mumbling voice that her mother had to strain to hear.

'Because you know how your dad gets if you're not back when he's expecting you,' Mrs Appleby interrupted.

'I know, but I can't help it if I have to stop back...'

'He has to have his meal before half-six otherwise it keeps him awake all night. And you know how he likes us all to eat together. It's an important part of family life.'

‘I know.’

‘Dad just likes his routine, that’s all. And he likes to know where you are. He likes to know that you’re safe.’

‘I know that too, Mum, but...’

‘But what, love?’

‘I’m thirty-nine for God’s sake.’

Juliet Appleby closed the front door behind her and walked down the garden path to the car, pulling on her coat and brushing her long, wind-swept hair out of her eyes. She glanced back at the house before unlocking the car and getting in. There they were. She could see them both hiding behind the net curtains, pretending not to watch – Mum in front, trying not to be seen, and Dad standing just behind her. Hiding behind Mum, that was where he seemed to have spent most of his life, she thought. Inside the house he was king, and he let the two of them know that constantly and in no uncertain terms. Stick him outside and force him to face the rest of the world, however, and he couldn’t cope. The accident twelve years ago (which was still a taboo subject that they weren’t allowed to talk to him about) had destroyed his confidence and unbalanced his temperament. He didn’t seem able to interact properly with anyone outside the small and tight circle of the immediate family. Outside Dad would always get aggressive or angry or confrontational with some poor unsuspecting person and it would inevitably be left to Mum or Juliet to smooth things over and sort things out.

Juliet sat down in the car and started the engine. Poor Mum, she thought. She’d dedicated her life to Dad. She’d put up with years of his moaning and his mood swings and his tempers. Sometimes, though, she was just as bad as he was. As Dad relied on Mum, so Mum seemed to rely on Juliet. And who was there for her? No-one. On the few occasions that she’d been brave enough to start talking about leaving home and setting up on her own it was usually Mum who played the sickness card and who came up with a list of reasons why she couldn’t leave and why she had to stay and why they needed her around. She believed it. Each and every time she heard it she believed it. Why would they lie to her? Her friends at the nursery told her that she should just pack her bags and leave. But it was easy for them. She’d left it too late, and now she was trapped, spending her time being paid to look after other people’s children when she should have been raising her own. Fat chance of that ever happening. She hadn’t ever had a ‘proper’ relationship. Men were either put off by the fact that she behaved like a timid old-maid trapped in a younger person’s body, or Dad managed to put them off for her. She’d long since stopped dwelling on all that she had gone without physically, but she often thought about the cruel irony of her situation – there she was, a thirty-nine year old virgin, surrounded constantly by the fruits of other people’s sexual encounters.

A quick wave to Mum and Dad (even though they thought she couldn’t see them) and she was off. A ten minute drive into the centre of Rowley and she’d be there.

Juliet always seemed to be the first one to arrive at work. She was always there ages before anyone else. At the time she arrived at the nursery each morning there were usually only one or two other people around – usually just Jackson the caretaker and Ken Andrews, the deputy head of the infant school to which the nursery was attached.

‘Morning, Joanne,’ smiled Andrews, waving across the playground. Bloody man, she thought. In all

the years she'd been working in and around the school he'd never got her name right. Occasionally she thought he did it on purpose to try and wind her up, other times she decided he was just plain ignorant. But the fact of the matter was he continually got her name wrong because he rarely had any reason to speak to her about anything of importance and also because she'd left it too long to correct him without there being more embarrassment on her part than his. To say that Juliet melted into the background was something of an understatement. Years of her overbearing parents had virtually destroyed her self-esteem. Juliet had reached the point where she preferred it if no-one noticed her.

As usual the caretaker had opened up the prefabricated hut they used for the nursery class. The classroom was always cold first thing in the morning, even in summer, and this September morning was no exception. Her breath condensed in billowing clouds around her mouth and nose and the low temperature made the tips of her fingers feel slightly numb. She glanced up at the clock on the wall. Half an hour until the children were due. Probably twenty-five minutes before any of the other classroom assistants and nursery teachers would grace her with their presence. As low, depressed and dejected as she could ever remember feeling, she began to prepare the room for the morning's activities.

What the hell was that? Juliet stopped what she was doing and looked up. Fifteen minutes now to the start of class and she'd just heard an almighty crashing noise just outside the door. It sounded like kids messing around on the concrete steps which led up to the classroom. It sounded like they'd thrown something against the door. Juliet didn't like confrontation. She kept her head down, hoping that whoever it was would go away as quickly as they'd arrived. Maybe they'd just miss-kicked a football or something...

Suddenly another sound, this one very different to the first. It sounded like someone coughing and choking, but it couldn't have been, could it? Juliet crept cautiously towards the window and looked outside. The playground was empty and still with the only movement coming from the birds flying between the roof of the school building and the rubbish bins and back again. She was about to turn round and go back to what she'd been doing when she noticed it. She had to stand on tip-toe and crane her neck to see properly, but she could definitely see a foot sticking out over the edge of the steps. So there were kids messing around after all, she thought. With her pulse racing (she didn't like it when she didn't know what was happening) she walked over to the classroom door and pressed her ear against it. She couldn't hear anything outside. Very slowly she pushed the door open. Lying on the steps in front of her was the dead body of Sam Peters, one of the boys who had been in the nursery class last year. Panicking, she immediately slammed the door shut again and leant against it. Not knowing what she was going to do, and overcome with sudden nervousness and disorientation, she slid down to the floor and held her head in her hands. There was no question that the boy was dead. She'd never seen a body before but she knew he was dead. His frozen face was all twisted and contorted with pain and there were dribbles of blood on the front of his yellow school sweatshirt.

No-one's coming. Christ, no-one's coming.

Twenty minutes later and still no-one else had arrived at the school. Juliet had been counting on someone else finding Sam's body on the steps. She'd planned to act dumb and pretend she hadn't known he was there.

Someone else should have been here by now. Where were the other children?

Marie and Dorian, two of the other nursery helpers (who travelled to work together), should have

arrived at least five minutes ago. So where were they? Were they outside? Had they found the body and had she just not heard them? Unlikely. She crept towards the window and peered outside again. She could still see Sam's foot. He was still there.

As the minutes ticked by her conscience finally got the better of her fear. She had to do something. She couldn't just sit there knowing that the poor boy was out there on the steps.

The main school office was directly across the playground from the nursery hut. Juliet decided she'd have to make a run for it. She'd open the door, run down the steps and then find the headteacher or the deputy head and tell them what had happened, despite the fact that she didn't know what the hell was going on herself.

She had to do it now.

Juliet put on her coat and, taking a deep breath, opened the classroom door and burst out into the open. Forcing herself to look anywhere but down at the body on the steps she half-jumped, half-tripped over the boy's corpse, landing awkwardly, twisting her foot and almost falling over. Managing to keep her balance she ran across the playground with the sounds of her footsteps, her heavy, frightened breathing and the thumping of her heart ringing in her ears.

The headmaster of the school was dead. She found him in the corner of his office, buried under a pile of papers that he seemed to have knocked off his desk when he'd fallen to the ground. She found the school secretary dead in the short corridor which ran between the office and the staff room, and in the staff room she found three dead teachers.

In a vacant, disorientated daze Juliet roamed round the silent school and then the surrounding streets looking for someone to explain to her what had happened.

Quarter past five.

After what had happened at the school Juliet returned home before midday and had found both of her elderly parents dead. Mum was in the bathroom, sprawled across the floor with her knickers round her ankles, and Dad was (as always) in his armchair, staring up at the ceiling. Dribbles of blood had run down his chin and trickled down the front of his shirt. She'd wept for them both of course (especially Mum), and had felt a real sense of devastation and loss. But after a while the hurting feeling had, unexpectedly, started to fade. In the strangest, perverse kind of way, she began to enjoy the freedom that the dark day had unexpectedly given her. She'd never had the house to herself like this. She hadn't had to eat at any particular time (not that she felt like eating anything anyway) and she hadn't had to sit through Dad's choice of television programmes (not that the television had been working). She hadn't had to explain her movements every time she got up out of her chair. For the first time in a very long time she felt free.

Juliet's small, quiet and fairly insignificant world had been turned upside down. She'd seen hundreds upon hundreds of bodies littering the streets and hadn't known the reason why any one of them had died. She'd tried to make contact with her few friends, her neighbours, the local police and pretty much everyone else she knew in the local vicinity but she hadn't been able to reach anyone. Her telephone didn't work. There were no answers when she knocked on the front doors of the houses of friends and family.

Frightened and bewildered, but also feeling strangely empowered and stronger than she had done for a long, long time, she sat alone in her bedroom and waited for something to happen or someone to come and help, not that anyone knew she was there. At the end of the first day she moved Mum and Dad into the back room. When she woke up on the second day she dug two deep holes in the garden and buried them both. Dad had always wanted them to be buried together. She knew that Mum would have preferred them to be close but slightly apart. She'd still loved Dad but, like Juliet, she'd had enough of him too.

KAREN CHASE

‘What the hell do you call that?’

I looked at him for a second. Trick question? What did he expect me to say?

‘I call it your order,’ I answered. ‘Full English breakfast. Bacon, sausage, scrambled egg, mushrooms, hash browns and baked beans.’

‘Doesn’t look like the picture in the menu.’

He opened the menu up, laid it out on the table in front of him and jabbed his finger angrily at the photograph at the bottom of the breakfast section.

‘I know, but that’s only a representation...’ I tried to explain.

‘But nothing,’ he interrupted. ‘I appreciate that there will inevitably be differences between a photograph and the actual meal, but what you’ve brought to me here bears very little resemblance to the food I ordered. The bacon’s undercooked. The mushrooms are overcooked. The scrambled egg is lumpy. Do I need to go on?’

‘So do you want me to...’ I began.

‘That was what I ordered,’ he sighed, tapping the photograph with his finger again, ‘and that is what I expect to be served. Now you be a good girl and run along back to your kitchen and try again.’

A genuine complaint I can deal with, but I have a real problem when people try and patronise me. I was so angry that I couldn’t move. It was one of those second-long moments which seemed to drag on forever. Did I try and argue with this pathetic little man, did I tell him what he could do with his bloody breakfast, or did I just swallow my pride, pick up the plate again and take it back to the kitchen? Much as I wanted to go for either one of the first two options, commonsense and nerves got the better of me. I picked up the plate and stormed back to the kitchen.

‘Bloody man,’ I snapped as I pushed through the swinging door. In the kitchen Jamie and Keith, the two chefs on duty, stopped playing football with the remains of a lettuce and stood and looked at me.

‘Who’s rattled your cage?’ Jamie asked.

‘Fucking idiot outside. Wants his breakfast to look exactly the same as the picture in the menu.’

‘Tell him to fuck off and get a life,’ Keith sighed as he kicked the lettuce out through the back door.

I stood and stared at the pair of them, waiting for either one of them to move.

‘What do you expect me to do about it?’ mumbled Jamie.

‘Make another bloody breakfast,’ I answered, ‘you’re the cook, aren’t you?’

Christ, these two were stupid. Jamie was still looking at me with his mouth hanging open as if I’d just asked him to prepare forty meals in ten minutes. All I was asking him to do was his job. It was what he was being paid for, for God’s sake. If he’d done it right first time he wouldn’t have to do it again now.

‘Fucking hell,’ he complained as he snatched the plate from me. He studied the faded photograph on a copy of the menu stuck to the wall and took a clean plate from the cupboard. Then he took the food from the original plate, rearranged it on the clean one, warmed it up in the microwave and then slid it across the work surface towards me.

‘You expect me to take this out to him?’ I said, not quite believing what I was seeing.

‘Yes,’ he grunted. ‘Looks more like it does on the menu now, doesn’t it?’

Keith started to snigger from behind the newspaper he had picked up.

Knowing that there was no point in arguing with either of the chimps I was working with I picked up the plate and turned back round. I stood behind the doors for a couple of seconds to compose myself and looked out through the small porthole windows into the restaurant. I could see my nightmare customer sitting at his table, looking at his watch and tapping his fingers on the table impatiently, and I knew that whatever I did he was going to give me a hard time when I went back out to him. If I went back too quickly he’d accuse me of not having had time to prepare his food properly. If I kept him waiting too long he’d be just as incensed... I decided to wait for a few seconds longer.

Customers were the worst part of my job, and today I had been landed with the very worst type of customer. We got all sorts of passing trade at the restaurant, and there tended to be a couple of customers like this one coming in each week. They were usually travelling sales reps who were stopping in the motel just up the bypass. As a rule they were all badly dressed, loud, rude and ignorant. Maybe that was why they did the job they did and spent their time travelling around the country? Perhaps their wives (if anyone had been foolish enough to marry them) had kicked them out? Perhaps that was why they all came in here with an attitude like they had something to prove. Bastards the lot of them. It wasn’t my fault they were so bitter and insecure, was it?

I pushed myself back out through the door and stood cringing next to the customer’s table.

‘That’s better,’ he said to my surprise as I put the plate of food down in front of him. Thank God for that, I thought as I quickly began to walk away.

‘You’re welcome, you wanker,’ I muttered under my breath.

‘Just a minute, girl,’ the customer shouted as I reached the kitchen door. The three other customers in the restaurant looked up and watched me walk back to the table.

‘Yes, Sir?’ I answered through gritted teeth, doing my damndest to remain calm and polite and not empty his pot of tea into his lap.

‘This is cold,’ he complained. He skewered a sausage on his fork, sniffed it and then dropped it back onto his plate in disgust, sending little balls of dried-up scrambled egg shooting across the table.

‘Is it really?’ I asked with obvious sarcasm and mock concern in my voice.

‘Yes, it is,’ he snapped. ‘Now you listen to me, missy, you scuttle back over to your little kitchen right now and fetch me a fresh breakfast. And while you’re there, send the manager out to see me. This really isn’t good enough.’

There may well have been some justification to his complaint, but the tone of his voice and the way he spoke to me was completely out of order. I wasn’t paid enough to be patronised and belittled. It wasn’t my fault I had bills to pay and no other way of getting the money to pay them. It wasn’t my fault that...

‘Are you going to stand there looking stupid all day,’ he sneered, ‘or are you going to go somewhere else and look stupid instead?’

That was it. The customer is always right, they say, but there are limits. Here at the Monkton View Eater, it seemed, the customer was always an asshole.

‘Look, I’m sorry if the food isn’t up to the standard you were expecting,’ I began, somehow managing to still sound calm, even if I didn’t feel it, ‘I’ll get that sorted out. But there is no need to be rude to me. I’ll go and get you...’

‘Listen,’ he said, the slow and tired tone of his voice indicating that it was a real effort for him to have to lower himself to speak to me, ‘I’m really not interested in anything more you have to say. Be a good girl and fetch me my food. You are a waitress. You are here to serve me. And if I want to be rude to you then I’ll be as rude as I fucking well please. You’re paid to take it.’

‘No you listen,’ I began to pointlessly protest, ‘I’m not...’

‘Get the manager,’ he interrupted with a tone of infuriating superiority. ‘I don’t need to speak to you any longer.’

Another one of those moments which seemed to last forever. I was suddenly so full of anger and contempt that, once again, I was too wound up to move. Compounding my awkwardness was the fact that the other customers had all now stopped eating and were watching and waiting to see what I’d do next. I glanced back over my shoulder and saw that the Neanderthals in the kitchen were peering out through the portholes at me too, grinning like the idiots I knew they were.

‘Well?’ the customer sighed.

I turned and walked, pushing my way through the swinging doors to the kitchen, sending Jamie flying.

‘Where’s Trevor?’

‘Fag break,’ Keith replied.

I stormed out through the back door to where Trevor, our so-called manager, was standing smoking a cigarette. He was leaning up the rubbish bins, reading Keith’s newspaper.

‘Trevor,’ I began.

‘What?’ he grunted, annoyed that I’d interrupted him.

‘I’ve got a problem with a customer. He says he wants to speak to the manager.’

‘Tell him you’re the manager.’

‘Why should I?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Tell him I’ve gone out to a meeting.’

‘No.’

‘Tell him I’ve got Health and Safety coming.’

‘No.’

‘For Christ’s sake,’ he groaned, finally lifting his head from the paper, ‘just deal with it will you. What the hell do I pay you for? Dealing with customers is your responsibility.’

‘Looking after your staff is yours.’

‘Oh give it a rest...’

‘He swore at me! I’m not prepared to speak to a customer who’s going to swear at me. Do you know how bloody insulting he was when...?’

‘Now you’re swearing at me. You can’t have it both ways, love!’

That was it. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I ripped off the bloody stupid pinafore that they made me wear and threw it at Trevor, along with my order pad.

‘I’ve had enough! Stick your bloody job!’

I couldn’t afford to do what I was doing, but at the same time I couldn’t put myself through it any longer. This wasn’t the first time this had happened, and I knew that if I stayed in the job it wouldn’t be the last. I pushed my way back into the kitchen, grabbed my coat, and marched out through the restaurant.

‘Is the manager on his way?’ the odious little customer asked at the top of his voice as I walked past. I stopped and turned round to face him. His food couldn’t have been too bad because he’d managed to eat half of it.

‘No he isn’t,’ I answered. ‘The manager cannot be bothered to come and speak to you, and I can’t be bothered wasting my time dealing with pathetic little fuckers like you either. You can stick your meal and your attitude and your complaint up your arse, and I hope you fucking choke on your food!’

And he did.

Still chewing a mouthful of breakfast, the sickening, smug grin of superiority which had been plastered across the idiot’s face as he watched me ranting at him suddenly disappeared. He stopped eating. His eyes began to water and the veins in his neck began to bulge. He spat out his food.

‘Get me some water,’ he croaked, clawing at his neck. ‘Get me some...’

A noise from behind made me turn round. The customers in the far corner of the restaurant were choking too. The middle-aged couple were both in as bad a state as the little shit who had caused me so much trouble this morning. I turned back to look at him again. Christ, he looked like he was suffocating. Much as I’d wished all kinds of suffering on him a couple of minutes earlier, now I just wanted his pain to stop. I ran back to the kitchen.

‘Call an ambulance,’ I yelled. ‘There’s a customer...’

Jamie was on his knees, coughing up blood on the floor in the corner of the kitchen. Keith was lying on his back in the storeroom, rolling around in agony like the others. Trevor was also lying on the ground. He'd lost consciousness. His fat body had fallen half-in and half-out of the back door.

By the time I'd picked up the phone to call for an ambulance everyone in the restaurant was dead.

PHILIP EVANS

Part i

Mum isn't well.

She's suffered with her health for years now and she's been practically bed-ridden since last December. She's not been well all week but she's really taken a turn for the worst this morning. I've been up with her since just after five and it's almost eight now. I think I'll get the doctor out to see her if she doesn't start to pick up soon.

I don't know what I'd do without Mum. I've forced myself to try and think about it plenty of times, mind, because I know there's going to come a time when she's not around anymore. We're very close, Mum and I. Dad died when I was nine and there's just been the two of us since then. I'm forty-two now. I've not been able to work for years because I've been looking after her so we don't see much of other people. We pretty much live out on our own here. There's just our cottage and one other on either side and that's all. The village is five minutes back down the road by bike. We've never bothered with a car. I don't drive, and we can get a bus into town if we really need to go there. There's not much we need that we can't find in the village.

She's calling me again. I'll make her some tea and take it up with her tablets. It's not like her to make a fuss like this. She always tells me she doesn't like to make a fuss. She tells the doctor that too when he calls. And the health visitor. And the District Nurse. And the vicar.

It's just her way.

I need to get help but I can't leave her.

Oh, God, I don't know what to do. I was up there talking to her when it happened. I was trying to get her to the toilet when it started. Usually when she has one of her turns she's able to let me know when it's coming, but she didn't just now. This one came out of the blue. It seemed to take her by surprise as we were coming back across the landing.

She started to choke. Now Mum's chest has been bad for a long time, but nothing like this. It was almost as if she'd got something stuck in it, but she hadn't had anything to eat all morning so that was

impossible. She'd turned her nose up at her breakfast. Anyway, before I knew what was happening she was coughing and retching and her whole body was shaking in my arms. I lay her down on the ground and tried to get her to calm down and breathe slowly and not panic but she couldn't stop. She couldn't swallow. She couldn't talk. Her eyes started to bulge wide and I could see that she wasn't getting any air but there wasn't anything I could do to help. I tried to tip her head back to open up her windpipe like the nurse showed me once but she wouldn't lie still. She kept fighting against me. She was thrashing her arms around and coughing and spluttering. The noise she was making was horrible. It didn't sound like Mum. She was making this scratching, croaking, gargling noise and I thought that there was phlegm or something trapped in her throat. I thought she might have been choking on her tongue (the nurse told me about that once too) so I put my fingers in her mouth to make sure it was clear. When I took them out again they were covered in thick, dark blood like the insides of her mouth were cut. Then she stopped moving. As suddenly as she'd started she stopped. I sat down on the carpet next to her and held her hand until I was sure that she'd gone.

I could still hear that horrible choking sound in my head even after it had stopped and Mum was lying still. I could hear it ringing in my ears when everything else had gone quiet.

It's been quiet like this for hours now.

My Mum's dead.

I can't just sit here and do nothing. I can't help Mum but I can't just leave her lying here either. The doctor will have to come round and then someone will come to take her away and then... and then I don't know what I'll do. I don't know what I'm going to do without her. I've always had Mum.

About half an hour ago I decided to move her. I couldn't leave her lying there on the floor in the middle of the landing, that just wouldn't have been right. She seemed twice as heavy as she did when she was alive. I thought the best place for her would be her bedroom. I put my hands under her arms and dragged her through to the bedroom and onto the bed. I wiped the blood off her face and tried to close her eyes to make it look like she was just sleeping. I managed to get one eye to stay shut but the other one stayed open, staring at me. It was like she was still watching me. It was like one of those paintings of people's faces where the eyes seem to follow you round the room. In a way it made me feel a little better. Even though she's gone it's like she hasn't stopped looking out for me.

I tried to phone the doctor's surgery but I couldn't get an answer. I couldn't even get the telephone to work properly. I knew someone would have been at the surgery (it's open until late on Tuesdays) so I guessed it was our telephone that wasn't working. Often in winter the line used to go down because we're so isolated out here. But it isn't winter. It's early September and the weather's been fine.

I didn't want to leave Mum but I didn't have any choice. I shut the bedroom door, locked up the house and got my bike out of the shed. It didn't take long to get into the village. Mum never liked me riding on the road (she said it was the other drivers she didn't trust, not me) but it didn't matter this morning. There wasn't any traffic about. It was almost too quiet. Now the village isn't the busiest of places, but there's usually always something happening. This morning it was so quiet that all I could hear was the sound of my bike. It made me feel nervous and scared. And as I got deeper into the village, it got much worse. So much worse that I nearly turned round and came home, but the thought of what had happened to Mum made me keep going forward.

I was cycling down past Jack Halshaw's house when I saw that his front door was wide open. That was strange because Jack's always been careful about things like that. He used to be a friend of my

dad's and I've known him all my life. So I stopped the bike, because I thought I should tell him about Mum and I thought he might be able to help me get things sorted out. I walked down the path and leant inside and shouted to him but he didn't answer. I shouted a couple more times but still he didn't reply. I walked down the side of the house to see if he was in his back garden and that was where I found him. He wasn't moving. He was lying on his back on the pavement and I could tell just by looking at him that he was dead. There was a pool of blood around his mouth and it looked like he'd died the same way Mum had.

I didn't know what to do. I kept going until I got to the village. When I got there I just stopped the bike in the middle of the road and stared at what I could see all around me. Whatever had happened to Mum and Jack Halshaw had happened to other people too. In fact, the longer I spent there, the more obvious it became that I was just about the only one it hadn't happened to. I went into the doctor's surgery and found Mrs Cribbins from the chip shop and Dr Granger dead in the middle of the waiting room. Their faces were horrible – splattered with blood and all screwed up like they'd been in terrible pain when they'd died. The doctor looked like he'd been trying to scream when it had happened.

I kept going right into the middle of the village and then wished that I hadn't. Even though it had happened fairly early in the morning, there had been lots of people out and about. They'd all just fallen and died wherever they'd been and whatever they'd been doing. And because our village is such a small place I knew them all. I knew where they'd been going and what they'd been doing when they'd died. Bill Linturn from the hardware shop was dead in his car – he'd just arrived to open up for the day. Vera Price, the lady who's on the till at the grocer's on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday mornings was lying dead on the pavement just outside the shop. It looked like she'd fallen into the middle of the fruit and veg displays they always have outside. There were potatoes, carrots and apples all over the place.

I looked around for a while but I couldn't find anyone to help me. I know it was silly, but I didn't want to leave Mum alone for too long. I knew there was nothing I could do for her, but it just didn't feel right leaving her alone at home with all that had happened. I got on my bike and cycled back to the cottage.

It's been over ten hours now since it happened. I can't get a picture on the telly and I still can't get anyone on the phone. I've tried listening to the radio to find out what's happening but all I can hear is hissing and crackling. I've been into the cottages next door on either side but both Ed and Mrs Chester are dead as well. I found Ed in his bath (the water was all pink because of the blood he'd dribbled) and Mrs Chester was at the bottom of her stairs. I tried to move her into her living room but, because of how she'd fallen and because her legs and arms had gone all stiff and hard, she was wedged behind the door and I couldn't move her.

I think I'm just going to sit here and wait for a while. Someone will come sooner or later, I'm sure they will. And anyway, I can't leave Mum here on her own. We did our weekly shop yesterday afternoon so I've got plenty of food in. I'll sit here and wait and everything will be okay.

Everything will be all right again in a couple of days when the police and the government start sorting out what's happened. I'll have to start phoning round the rest of the family to let them know that Mum's passed away. I'm not looking forward to doing that. Aunt Alice – Mum's sister – will be heartbroken.

DAY THREE

AMY STEADMAN

Part ii

Almost fifty hours have passed since infection. Amy Steadman has been dead for just over two days.

Just minutes after death Amy's body began to decompose. A process known as autolysis has begun. This is self-digestion. Starved of oxygen, complex chemical reactions have started to occur throughout the corpse. Amy's cells have become poisoned by increased levels of carbon dioxide, changes in acidity levels and the accumulation of waste. Her body has begun the slow process of dissolving from the inside out.

There has already been a marked change in Amy's external physical appearance. Her skin is now discoloured with her once healthy pink hue having darkened to a dull, dirty grey. Her veins are now considerably darker and more prominent and, in places, her skin has taken on a greasy translucency. Amy died lying on her back, with her body arched across the feet of a metal display unit. The parts of her body which are lowest to the ground – her feet, legs and backside and her left arm – now appear swollen and bruised. Blood, no longer being pumped around her circulatory system, has pooled and coagulated in these areas.

The first outward signs of the chemical reactions occurring inside the corpse are now also becoming apparent. Fluid-filled blisters have begun to form on Amy's skin, and around some areas of her body skin slippage has also occurred. Her face now appears drawn and hollowed.

To all intents and purposes Amy is dead. Her heart no longer beats, she no longer breathes, blood no longer circulates. The infection, however, has not completely destroyed her. Unlike the majority (perhaps as many as two-thirds) of the fallen bodies, part of Amy's brain and nervous system has continued to function, albeit at a virtually undetectable level. There are several other corpses nearby which are also in a similar condition.

As an identifiable and unique human being, Amy has ceased to exist. All that now remains of her is a decaying carcass and all traces of the identity, personality and character she once had have now all but disappeared. As time has progressed since infection, however, Amy's brain has begun to steadily regain a fraction of its original capacity. Until now the recovery has been slight and unnoticeable. It has, however, finally reached the stage where the brain is about to regain a degree of basic control over the dead shell which houses it. The brain is only capable of the most basic and rudimentary yes / no decisions. It no longer feels emotion or has any needs or desires. At this stage it operates purely by

instinct. Overall control of the body is gradually returning, but at a phenomenally slow speed.

Amy's body is now beginning to move. The first outwardly visible sign of change is in the body's right foot which has begun to spasm and move at the ankle. Over the next few hours this movement gradually spreads to all four limbs and across the torso until, finally, the body is able to stand. Its movements are clumsy and uncoordinated. Coagulated blood and the gelling of the cytoplasm within individual cells (because of the body's increased acidity) is preventing free movement. Its eyes are open but it cannot see. It cannot hear. It cannot feel or react to any external stimulation. The combined effects of gravity, its physical deterioration and the uneven distribution of weight across the corpse after two days of inactivity causes the body to move. Initially it trips and falls like a newborn animal on unsteady legs. Soon, however, its control has reached such a level that it is able to distribute its weight enough to be able to manage a rudimentary walk. Devoid of its senses, the body simply keeps moving forward until it reaches an obstruction. It then shuffles around until it is able to move freely again.

The body remains in this state for a further two days.

PHILIP EVANS

Part ii

Wonderful news! I can't believe it! It looks like Mum's going to be all right!

When I got up this morning I found her out of bed. I couldn't believe my eyes. I mean, I was convinced that she was dead. She must have just been in a coma or something like that. I saw a programme about it once on telly. Anyway, she couldn't hear me and she wasn't very steady on her feet but at least she was up and moving about. I knew she wouldn't leave me alone here.

I can tell that she's still very ill, mind. She doesn't look well and she smells. But that's nothing that a good soak in the bath won't cure. When she's ready I'll run her a nice hot bath. I say run a bath, but I'll have to bring some water up from the stream at the bottom of the garden and heat it up on the little camping gas stove we keep in the kitchen for emergencies. The taps have been dry for the best part of two days now, and there's no gas either. I don't know what's happening. Still, Mum's getting better and that's the most important thing. I'm sure there are other people whose condition is improving too.

She's really been shaken up by all of this, has Mum. She's not herself at all. I've had to shut her in her room to stop her wandering off. She just keeps walking around and she won't sit still. Come to mention it, she won't even sit down in her chair or lie on the bed. I keep telling her that she needs her rest but she won't listen to me. I expect she just needs to keep moving for a while after being still for so long.

I've felt so scared and worried for the last couple of days but now I suddenly feel much better again. Everything is okay. I knew that Mum wouldn't leave me.

It's just after lunchtime and I've had to tie Mum to the bed. I didn't know what else to do. She just won't stay still and relax and I'm frightened that she'll do herself even more harm if she keeps on like this. I know it's not right, but what else can I do? There's no-one to ask for help or advice. I keep telling myself that it's in Mum's best interests to be firm with her. If she keeps wandering off then who knows what might happen? I could find her halfway down the road or worse...

I didn't need to tie her down tightly. She's still not got very much strength. I went out into the back yard and took down the washing line. I couldn't think of anything else to use. I put Mum back into bed (I had to be quite forceful and hold her down while I did it) and wrapped the line right around the bed and the bedclothes. Since Dad died she's only ever had a single bed. That meant I could wrap the line round her a few more times. I left it quite loose because I didn't want to hurt her or upset her. She can still move but she's not strong enough to get out of the rope and get up.

I keep telling her that I'm doing it for her own good but I don't know if she can hear me.

I walked into the village this afternoon. I didn't like it there. Some of the people who got ill around the same time as Mum also seem to be getting better. They were walking around too. There were some of them who were still lying where they'd fallen. Poor old Bill Linturn was still sitting in his car, dead to the world.

The people who were moving were just like Mum. They didn't look at me or answer me when I spoke to them. They scared me with their blank looks and grey skin. I got out of the village as quickly as I could. My place was at home with Mum. I ran most of the way back to the cottage and locked the door behind me.

More good news! Mum seems to be getting better every day. I still can't get her to eat or drink anything but when I went in to see her just now I'm sure she turned her head and looked at me. When I spoke to her she reacted. I think she recognised my voice. She tried to get up but I told her to relax and take things easy. She's still trying to do more than she should. She won't lie still now. She's wriggling and twisting on the bed all the time.

She's getting stronger by the hour and I've just had to tighten the ropes.

I think she's going to be all right!

JACOB FLYNN

Part ii

‘Bewsey?’

Flynn opened his eyes and looked up in tired disbelief at the figure standing swaying in front of him. It was Bewsey. But it couldn't be, could it? Two days ago he'd stood in this very spot and watched him die. It was impossible. Over the last forty-eight hours Flynn had been forced to consider so many impossible thoughts and possibilities that one more didn't seem to make any difference. He decided that he was hallucinating and buried his face in his grey, prison-issue pillow. That was the most plausible explanation he could think of. He'd hadn't had anything to eat or drink for more than two days, the rest of the world had either somehow been destroyed or had inexplicably disappeared, and he'd been trapped in a ten foot by seven foot cell with only the corpses of his former cell-mates for company. What was left of his mind was obviously playing tricks on him again.

Bewsey's clumsy corpse staggered across the tiny room, tripping over Salman's dead body and knocking into the small bookcase next to the sink, sending its contents crashing to the ground. Flynn sat up as the unexpected thumping and clattering rang out around the cell. This was no hallucination, much as he quickly wished it was. He pushed himself against the wall and into the shadows and watched from the relative safety of his dark bottom bunk as the body awkwardly dragged itself around.

For a while he remained completely still, almost paralysed with fear. Then, very slowly, he inched forward so that he could get a better view of what remained of Bewsey. The dead man's face was cold and expressionless, his eyes empty and unfocussed. The corpse obviously had very little control over its numb, unresponsive body. It simply shuffled across the floor until something prevented it from moving any further forward and then, more through luck than judgement, turned and shuffled back. Salman, by contrast, still lay where he had originally fallen, face down in a pool of dark brown, congealed blood.

‘Bewsey?’ Flynn hissed anxiously, not sure whether or not he actually wanted to attract the bizarre figure's attention. The lack of any response to his voice was strangely reassuring.

Still shell-shocked from almost forty-eight hours of silence, fear and isolation and mentally exhausted from searching constantly for the answers to countless obviously unanswerable questions, he moved forward again and cautiously swung his feet down from the bunk. Bewsey didn't react. The corpse continued to aimlessly move around, colliding with walls, furniture and, eventually, with Flynn himself. He instinctively lifted his hands and grabbed hold of the body to prevent it from getting any closer.

‘Bewsey?’ he asked again. ‘What the fucking hell is going on? I thought you were dead...’ Flynn stared deep into the dull and clouded eyes of the corpse. They were covered with a milky-white film of sorts and it was clear that they were unseeing and unfocussed. He let the body go and watched as it tripped off again in another direction before turning and tripping back towards him. No wiser and no less terrified, Flynn crawled back onto his bunk and pulled his covers tight around him.

Less than two hours had passed before he decided that he couldn't stand it any longer. Bewsey's body just never stopped, not even for a second. It continued to shuffle about aimlessly and lethargically. It was the noise and the constant movement that Flynn was finding hardest to handle. Why didn't Bewsey just lie down and stay dead like Salman? He couldn't take it any longer. He had to do something about it.

Creeping anxiously forward again, Flynn climbed off his bunk and looked around for some kind of weapon or implement with which he might be able to disable the corpse. He had finally forced himself to admit that this definitely was a corpse moving to and fro in front of him. How could it not be? How could someone lie motionless and without breathing for two days and not be dead? Mind you, he thought

wearily, how could that same person now be moving again?

It was no surprise that the prison cell contained very few items which could be used effectively as a weapon. In fact, all that Flynn could find was the jug they used to pour drinks of water from. Long since empty, the plastic jug had a hard base which, if he used it with enough force, might just be strong enough to use to batter the body into submission. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed Bewsey by the throat with one hand, raised the jug above his head with the other, and then brought it crashing down in the middle of the dead man's face with brutal force. He lifted the jug away again and saw that, despite being a little more bruised and bloodied, the lifeless expression had not changed. He lifted the jug and brought it down again and again and again...

It wasn't working. It didn't matter what he did to Bewsey's body, the dead man didn't react. He continued to move relentlessly, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Flynn was even there.

Increasingly desperate, Flynn let the body go and then turned and dragged his bunk bed into the middle of the cell, swinging it round through ninety degrees so that it formed a barrier across the width of the small room. With mounting disgust he grabbed hold of Bewsey's body again and pushed and shoved the man's clumsy remains over the metal frame of the bed and out onto the other side, successfully confining the cadaver. Keen to separate himself from both of his dead cellmates, he then did the same with Salman. The second body was stiff and inflexible and was difficult to move.

Tired, Flynn leant against the cell door and peered out through the bars, hoping to catch sight of someone (anyone) else in the oppressive semi-darkness. He could see movement in other cells across the landing, but when he called out to the men over there they didn't respond. He assumed that they were in the same unnatural and inexplicable condition as what remained of Bewsey.

He could hear slow, heavy, dragging footsteps approaching. A figure emerged from the shadows at the other end of the corridor. He couldn't tell who it was at first. As it gradually came into view, however, he could see that it was one of the prison officers. In fact, he was sure it was the officer he'd seen dead at the bottom of the staircase. The dead guard lumbered towards him, its head hanging heavily to one side. Although tired, frightened and confused, Flynn immediately realised the importance of seeing this body. The officers had keys and, if he could reach them, then for the first time there was a real chance of him escaping from the cell.

Suddenly more alive and alert, Flynn watched the dead officer intently as it approached. Then, when it was almost level with the cell door, he stretched out his arm between the bars and attempted to grab hold of it. The tips of his outstretched fingers brushed the side of the corpse's sleeve, but not enough for him to be able to get a grip. His heart sank as the body stumbled past and out of reach again.

The prison landing was clear and without obstruction, leaving the dead officer free to continually stagger from virtually one end to the other. Flynn watched the body's every move like a hawk. Eventually, some four and a half hours after he had first noticed the corpse, he was finally able to catch hold of it. He managed to slide his fingers into the creature's shirt pocket and, once he had a grip, he was able to pull the comparatively weak figure towards him. Once close enough he then grabbed the cadaver in a neck lock and, straining to reach and having to fight to ignore the pain and discomfort as he stretched and forced his free arm through the bars, he tugged and yanked and pulled at the body until he was able to reach its belt and keys.

Half an hour later he was free.

INNOCENCE

It was almost fun to begin with; a game, an adventure. But now he's had enough. He doesn't like being on his own anymore. He's scared, he's hungry and he's lonely. He wants everything to get back to how it used to be before it happened.

Dean McFarlane is seven years old.

The day before yesterday, as they were walking to school together, Dean's mother dropped dead in front of him.

'Dean,' Mum sighed, 'you've only been back at school for a couple of days, how comes you've got yourself in trouble with the teacher already?'

'She don't like me,' he answered as he followed his mum along the garden path and out onto the street. They were late setting off for school and Mum was annoyed. He'd been dragging his feet all morning and he seemed to have slowed down again now that they were finally out of the house and on their way. Even though she was seven months pregnant his mum marched along the road at double his speed. 'She picks on me,' he whined pathetically. 'She lets Gary and them lot get away with anything. I never done nothing and she blames me when...'

'What do you mean, you never done nothing?' Mum snapped, stopping and turning round to face Dean. 'What kind of a way to talk is that? If you never done nothing, then you must have done something...'

Dean looked at her and screwed up his face. What was she going on about now? She didn't believe him, did she? She didn't even want to try and understand. Anyway, he decided, he didn't care what she said because he knew Miss Jinks was picking on him and he knew that he was going to get Gary Saunders back as well at lunchtime or afternoon break because he'd got him into trouble yesterday afternoon and...

'When I tell your father what you've been up to,' Mrs McFarlane warned, pointing her finger accusingly at her son, 'he'll kick your backside.' She turned and began to walk again, still talking. 'You know what he's like, he just won't stand for this kind of behaviour. I suggest that you...'

She stopped talking mid-sentence.

'Mum?'

Mrs McFarlane stopped walking again. Suddenly she was standing in the middle of the pavement looking straight ahead, pulling that kind of puzzled, almost angry face that she pulled when she was out shopping with Dean and she couldn't remember what she needed, or when she didn't know which way to go, or when Dean's baby brother growing inside her started to kick and move. Expecting her to start

walking again, Dean went a few steps further forward before stopping and turning back when he realised she still wasn't moving. She was still stood in the same spot, looking frozen and lost. Now she was rubbing the side of her neck and she looked like she was in pain.

'What's the matter, Mum?' he asked again. Mrs McFarlane looked down at her son but didn't say anything. She couldn't speak. The pain in her throat was getting worse. Her eyes were suddenly watery and wide with unexpected shock and sudden, searing agony. She dropped her shopping bag and it tipped over onto its side. Dean immediately crouched down and began to quickly gather up her spilled belongings, still looking up anxiously into her face.

'Dean, I can't...' she began to try and say, her voice a quiet, strangled whisper. 'My throat is...'

Without warning she fell to her knees directly in front of her son. He jumped back in fear. Suddenly at eye level with him she began to retch and gag violently. The inside of her throat had swollen rapidly and already her windpipe was almost completely blocked. In seconds blood began to trickle freely from brutal lesions which had ripped open at the back of her mouth. Her head hung forward and she dribbled, spat and coughed a long, sticky string of bloodied saliva onto the grey pavement. Reaching out for her son she spluttered and coughed again and began to choke.

'Mum...' Dean whined with tears of panic and fear rolling down his cheeks. He shuffled back along the ground away from her, scared and confused by what was happening. He scrambled up onto his feet and looked around for help but he couldn't see anyone else nearby. If he could just find another grown-up who could help... He looked for Mrs Campbell who lived three doors down at number seventeen – she was always sat looking out of her living room window. If she could see what was happening then maybe she'd come out to help him and...

Clutching her stomach in agony, Mrs McFarlane groaned, screwed up her bloodied face, rolled over onto her back and then began to spasm and twitch. Now sobbing with helpless terror, Dean crouched back down next to her and grabbed her shoulder, trying desperately to hold her steady and to make her stop throwing herself about. He was scared that she was going to hurt herself or the baby. Her eyes were still wide open and she stared at him with an expression on her face which frightened him more than anything he'd ever seen before.

And then it stopped.

As quickly as it had started it was over and Mrs McFarlane lay motionless on the ground. Her eyes were staring up into space and her mouth hung wide open. A pool of dark blood was gathering around her frozen face.

Dean shoved her and shook her and tried to get her to respond but she wouldn't move.

I knew straightaway that she had died because I kept shouting at her to wake up but she wouldn't. I kept shaking her shoulder and shouting into her ear but she wouldn't move. I tried to clear up some of the blood that was on her face. I got some tissues out of her handbag but I just made things worse and got her in even more of a mess. She'd got blood in her hair and inside one of her ears and I couldn't get that out either.

Grandad Johnson told me once about the time he'd saved a man's life when there had been an accident. He said you had to make sure the person who's hurt is breathing before you do anything, and he showed me how to do it. He said you could feel for a thing like a little heartbeat on their wrist or their neck, or you could just listen to them breathing. I couldn't remember

exactly where to hold Mum's wrist so I just listened to her instead. I put my ear right next to her mouth and listened and listened and listened but I couldn't hear anything.

I kept looking up for someone to help me but I couldn't see anyone. I remembered Grandad telling me that you had to get the person you're looking after to a hospital quickly by phoning for an ambulance. We learnt that at school last year as well and I knew what to do. I got Mum's mobile out of her pocket and dialled '999' like I'd been shown. No-one answered. That scared me because my teacher and Grandad had both said that someone would always answer '999'.

Mum started to get cold really quickly. I tried to move her closer to the house but she was too heavy. I dragged her a little way closer, but not far. I got the keys from her coat pocket and ran back to the house. It took me ages to get inside because I couldn't get the right key at first. When I got in I ran upstairs and took one of the blankets out from the drawer under Mum and Dad's bed and one of Mum's pillows. I went back out and covered Mum up and put the pillow under her head. I was scared that something was going to happen to the baby. I put my hands under the blanket and onto Mum's tummy but I couldn't feel anything. The baby wasn't moving but it might just have been asleep.

I thought I should sit outside and wait with her.

Dean needed the toilet. He held on for as long as he could but, after an hour and a half sitting outside in the cold next to his mother, he couldn't wait any longer. He ran back to the house, unlocked the door, dashed to the toilet and then ran back out to Mum. He'd naively hoped that when he got back out to her he'd find that she'd opened her eyes or rolled over or made any movement that might indicate that she wasn't dead and that he wasn't on his own any longer. Nothing.

Before sitting down next to his mother's body again Dean walked the length of the street looking for help. He didn't dare go any further than that. From the end of the road he could see more than twenty other people lying on the ground like his mum. As far as he could see there was no-one else still moving around like he was. For a while he thought about going a little further but, when he found the body of his friend Shaun Wallis lying face down in the middle of the road with his dad, he got scared and ran back to Mum again. He tried knocking on a few of his neighbours' doors but none of them answered.

The sun had disappeared behind a dark grey cloud and it had begun to rain. Dean made another quick trip back to the house and fetched an umbrella to keep him and Mum dry. He was soon wet and shivering with cold but he couldn't go back inside. He couldn't leave Mum, could he? What if something happened to her? It didn't matter that he hadn't seen anyone else all morning, he just didn't want to leave her on her own out there in case someone came along and took her or did something horrible to her. And anyway, he decided, he wanted to be there when she woke up. She'd be really proud when she found out that he'd looked after her like this. She had to wake up, he thought. If anything happened to Mum, who would look after me? And what about our baby?

A short time later a loud and unexpected electronic bleep shattered the relentless, uncomfortable silence. Dean jumped up with fright and then relaxed when he realised it was just Mum's mobile phone. He picked it up from where he'd left it and looked at the display. On the screen it showed a picture of a battery that was almost empty. Mum had shown him how to use the phone in case anything happened with the baby and they needed to get in touch with the hospital or Dean's dad quickly. He tried the emergency number again but there was still no answer. He decided that the police and the ambulance people must have been busy looking after all the other sick people he'd seen lying on the ground beyond the end of the road.

Dean pressed the button which made a list of names come up. Mum had made him remember how to do this. He then pressed the button with an arrow on it which was pointing down and the list of names began to move. Some of the names he knew, others he didn't. Some he couldn't even read. He saw the names of his Aunt Edie and Caroline, Mum's best friend. Further on down the list he found the name he'd been looking for – Royston McFarlane – his dad. He'd call him and tell him what had happened and get him to come home. He should have thought of doing it sooner.

He couldn't get the phone to work.

He was sure he was doing it right, just how Mum had shown him. He highlighted his dad's name on the list, then pressed the green button in the top left corner of the keypad to make it ring. He kept trying but it just wouldn't work. It looked like it was going to work, but then it just beeped in his ear three times and disconnected. It kept on happening. After a while the battery picture came back on for a second before the phone switched itself off completely.

As the long day dragged on Dean became increasingly tired, cold and hungry. Sitting on the pavement next to his dead mother he ate the packed lunch she'd made him for school while he waited for his dad to come home from work.

By half-past six, when it was starting to get dark and still no-one had come, Dean became increasingly upset. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to go back to the house, but he didn't want to leave Mum outside on her own. He tried to drag her again but only managed to move her a little way. When he touched her skin she felt even colder than he was. When the light had almost completely disappeared he reluctantly accepted that there was nothing more he could do. He tucked Mum under the blanket again, put the pillow back under her head and ran back home.

Dean struggled to open the front door. Finding the right key had been hard enough in the daylight, now it was almost impossible. Nothing was working when he finally managed to get inside. The lights wouldn't come on and the television wouldn't work. The telephone was dead. He tried to dial '999' again but it didn't even ring out. He locked the door (Dad had his own key and would be able to let himself in when he got back) and went upstairs. He sat on the end of his bed and looked out of the window and waited. From where he was sitting he could just about see the top of his mother's head on the pavement.

It was exciting for a while, being on my own in the house. Even though it was dark and cold I could do whatever I wanted. I had a torch and a toy with a light in it so I could stay up and read and draw. I wanted to play games but I couldn't get the computer to work.

I kept getting upset when I looked out of the window and saw Mum, especially when it got really dark. I didn't like leaving her out there but I couldn't do anything about it. I tried not to cry and I kept hoping that I'd see Dad coming home soon. I sometimes used to sit in my room and look out for him coming home from work. I used to know which car was his as soon as it turned into our road. But the weird thing was I didn't see any cars at all, not even one.

I got myself some crisps and chocolate from the kitchen and ate them in my room. Mum never let me do that normally, but it wasn't a normal night and I didn't think she'd mind.

I'm not very good at telling the time. I know when it's something o'clock or half-past something, but I get mixed-up with quarter-past and quarter-to's. I remember going to the toilet and then looking at the alarm clock in Mum and Dad's room. I think it said it was almost ten o'clock but I wasn't sure. Whatever time it was, I knew that it was way past bedtime. I started to

get really scared then. Dad should have been home from work hours ago. I didn't know why he hadn't come back. Maybe he'd been going out somewhere after work and Mum hadn't told me?

Some nights in the school holidays I used to try and stay up as long as I could but I always seemed to fall asleep. Now I wanted to get to sleep and I couldn't. I wanted to go to sleep and wake up when it was morning. I didn't like being on my own in the dark. I wanted to go back outside and sit with Mum for a bit but I was too scared. I didn't want to go downstairs on my own. The moon came out a few times and when it did I could just about see her. She was still lying on the pavement where I'd left her. I wished she'd get up and come indoors.

When Dean woke up next morning it was late. It was almost midday by the time he climbed out of bed. He remained blissfully unaware of the fact that he had stayed awake virtually all night and had slept through almost the entire morning. He lay still for a while and ran over the events of the previous day in his head. He remembered his mum and how he'd left her lying in the street. He jumped up and his heart sank when he saw that she was still there on the pavement. Then he remembered his dad. He must have been home by now, he thought. He checked his parents' bedroom but the bed hadn't been slept in and, he realised sadly, the car wasn't outside either. Why hadn't Dad come back yet?

The sunlight had been streaming in through Dean's window, warming the area on the top of his bed where he'd curled up and fallen asleep. The temperature dropped noticeably as he moved around the rest of the cold house. He took off his school uniform (which he'd slept in) and, without thinking, threw it downstairs for Mum to wash. Then he grabbed the warmest set of clothes he could find from the wardrobe and got dressed. He'd never known the house to be this cold. It was quiet too. There usually always seemed to be noise all around him and this silence was frightening.

Before going down Dean returned to his bedroom and stared at his mother's body outside again. Why hadn't she moved? What was wrong with her? He decided that he'd go out and see her in a few minutes, once he'd had some breakfast. He didn't much feel like eating but his stomach was rumbling and he knew he'd have to eat something soon. He hadn't eaten much yesterday and he hadn't had anything hot to eat since dinner the night before. He couldn't ever remember feeling so hungry.

Down in the kitchen he fetched himself some cereal with warm milk (the fridge wasn't as cold as it usually was), some bread and a few biscuits. He couldn't find anything else. He didn't know how to use the oven and he couldn't get the kettle, the microwave or the toaster to work. Mum had shown him how to make a pizza in the microwave before now. He decided he wouldn't use any of the food from the freezer. Everything in there was warm and wet and the ice had melted leaving a puddle of water in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Dean put on his school coat and, clutching his food and a half-full bottle of lemonade, walked out of the front door and made his way over to where his mum still lay. All day he sat on the pavement next to her. He didn't know what else to do. He didn't feel safe anywhere else. During the course of the day he tried again to drag her back closer to home. He managed to move her a couple more meters, almost to the edge of their drive, but that was all. As the darkness drew closer again he stumbled dejectedly back indoors.

I couldn't help it. I didn't mean to do it, it just happened. Mum's going to be mad at me.

I'd been sitting outside with her for ages and it started to get dark again so I came back in. I'd been thinking about using my torch under the covers to read or trying to get the telly to work but

when I got inside the house was all dark and quiet and empty again and I got really scared. I could hear loads of noises and I knew what they all were but they still scared me. There was dripping water coming from the freezer in the kitchen and I could hear the blind at the window in Mum and Dad's room being blown by the wind. It kept hitting the window and making a tapping noise. And every so often the wind made the letter box in the front door flap. Mum's been nagging at Dad for ages to get it fixed. It sounded like someone coming to the house and, the first few times, I ran to the door because I thought it was going to be Mum or Dad. I got upset when there was no-one there.

I didn't want to go upstairs. I wanted to hide away out of sight so I crawled under the dining room table. I only came out a couple of times, first to get some more food from the kitchen and then to try and find my torch. I got myself another packet of crisps and the last bar of chocolate from the cupboard. I wanted some bread and butter but I must have left the bread open because it had gone all hard and it tasted horrible. All of the lemonade and cans of Coke had gone. I had to drink orange juice straight from the bottle because there wasn't any water to make it properly with. It made me feel a bit sick but I was really thirsty so I kept drinking it.

It didn't feel like home anymore. Everything felt different and strange without Mum and Dad and it seemed to be getting colder and colder. I didn't want to go upstairs so I put my coat back on and my dirty school jumper that I'd thrown downstairs that morning for Mum to wash. Thinking about Mum and Dad made me upset again. I was starting to think I was never going to see Dad again and that he wasn't coming home. I was glad I'd missed two days of school but I would have rather gone there and have everything back how it used to be.

I've made a real mess in here. They're going to be mad at me. The dark frightens me so I tried to light the big yellow candle that Mum keeps on the sideboard. I took it under the table with me and used a match from the box out of the kitchen. Anyway I lit the candle and I must have had it too close to the tablecloth because it started to burn. It burned really, really quickly. I crawled out from under the table and used the bottle of orange juice to put out the fire. I tried to pull the tablecloth off. I didn't know that there were plates and things on the table. I pulled it and they fell on the carpet and most of them smashed. That made me upset again because the noise made me jump and because I knew that Mum would be cross that I'd broken her plates. She always got cross if I broke a plate or a dish or a cup. I didn't want to move because I was scared I might cut myself on some of the broken pieces.

I think I fell asleep soon after that. When I woke up I was wet. I thought it was just orange juice at first but then I realised it was all over my trousers and all over the floor and I knew that I'd wet myself. I haven't wet myself since I was four. It was all over the carpet and I tried to clean it up with the burnt tablecloth but all that did was make things worse. My trousers were soaked so I took them off. I didn't want to go upstairs so I put my coat over the top of me and tried to keep warm but I couldn't stop shivering.

Exhausted and suffering from shock and mild exposure, Dean slept intermittently for a further few hours. The morning finally arrived, bringing with it some welcome light and warmth. Tired and aching, he crawled back upstairs and got himself dressed in some clean clothes. He smelled from the accident he'd had in the night but he couldn't wash because he couldn't get any water to come out of the taps. He used some of Dad's deodorant spray to try and cover up the smell.

Dean was finding it harder and harder to come upstairs on his own. Dad had recently decorated the spare room ready as a nursery ready for the birth of Dean's baby brother. He'd painted teddy bears and

cartoon characters on the walls. When Dean walked past the open door of the room he felt like their eyes were moving, watching him as he crept around the house.

While Dean was up in his bedroom getting changed he noticed that his mum had gone. For a second he was excited and relieved and he ran back downstairs to find her, expecting that she'd be back inside, cleaning up the mess in the kitchen or sitting on the sofa waiting for him. When he discovered that she wasn't there he slumped down at the bottom of the stairs and began to sob. Where had she gone? Why had she gone? Why had she left him and why hadn't she come back to the house? The pain of this sudden, unexpected rejection was in many ways worse than the unexplained loss and confusion he'd been trying to deal with for the last two days.

He had to go and find her.

Dean grabbed his coat from where he'd left it at the bottom of the banister and put on his trainers. He filled his school bag with all the food he could find in the kitchen, swung it onto his back and stepped out into the open. He shut the door behind him, locked it (he was pretty sure he'd done it properly) and then put Mum's keys in his trouser pocket.

She hadn't taken her bag. Strange that she'd left it there in the middle of the street. And her phone too.

He picked up the phone and held it tightly in his hand. He picked up the bag too but then stopped and put it down again at the end of the road because it was quite big and heavy and because he didn't think there was anything that important in it. Mum always carried her purse and her money in her coat pocket because it was safer. Dean tucked the bag out of sight at the end of someone's drive.

Where was she? Where would she have gone?

Strange that there were other people moving around now. Strange that none of them seemed to respond, even when he got up close to them. Strange that all their faces looked so cold and empty and that none of them answered when he asked them for help.

I remembered the way to Dad's work because Mum took me there on the bus loads of times when we went to meet him in the holidays. I thought I'd try and walk there even though I knew it was quite a long way.

I'm going to go and find Dad and then the two of us will go and find Mum.

DAY FIVE

AMY STEADMAN

Part iii

A further two days have passed since Amy Steadman's corpse began to move. It is now five days since first infection and death.

Amy's body has continued to move constantly around its immediate surroundings. Until now its movements have been automatic and spontaneous and any changes to direction have occurred purely as a result of the corpse reaching a physical obstruction and being unable to keep moving forward. The corpse is little more than an empty collection of bones, rotting tissue and dead flesh. At this stage it does not have any conscious control or decision making capabilities. The body moves until it is stopped and then alters direction and continues to move again.

Although animated, the cadaver remains otherwise lifeless and oblivious to its surroundings. It is ignorant to its physical limitations. The body is continuing to decay and the lack of a functioning circulatory system is beginning to cause movement problems. Gravity has steadily pulled the body's internal contents downwards. Blood has swollen its already clumsy hands and feet. Its bowels are slowly and involuntarily evacuating. The face, already tinged with the blue-green hue of decay, is otherwise drained of colour.

Until now the body's nervous system has been operating at a massively reduced level, and the corpse is oblivious to changes in its surroundings such as temperature, humidity and light levels. Several hours ago its clothing became snagged and torn after becoming entangled with the wheel of an upturned shopping trolley. The body's once smart black skirt is now just a rag wrapped around its right foot. It has also lost one of its shoes which causes its awkward gait to become even more clumsy and unsteady.

The corpse does not respire, nor does it have any need to eat or drink or seek shelter or protection. There is, however, still some activity in the centre of the brain which facilitates some basic functionality. The eyes and ears operate at a massively reduced level. It can see and hear, although it is presently unable to interpret and understand the information it absorbs. As the rest of the body continues to deteriorate, however, the part of the brain least affected by the infection is beginning to re-establish itself, albeit at a desperately slow rate.

Less than three hundred meters away from the corpse's present location the front of another building has collapsed. Initially damaged by a truck which plunged off an elevated section of road when its driver became infected, the weakened structure has now crumbled and caved in on itself, producing huge amounts of dust and substantial vibrations and noise. Amy Steadman's body, although not understanding what the disturbance is, has instinctively altered direction and is beginning to move towards it.

It is just before eight o'clock in the morning and the building where Amy died has now been in almost total darkness for more than twelve hours. With no electricity, almost all of the visible light comes from the windows in and around the main entrance doors which the body is now moving towards. It does not realise that this is an exit, but it gravitates towards the doors because of the comparative level of

brightness there and also the fact that the sound and vibrations from the building collapse emanated from that general direction. Three of the four main doors are blocked. Still drawn to the brightness outside, instead of turning and moving away when it reaches the glass, Amy's body now shuffles clumsily from side to side until it finally reaches the single open door and trips outside.

The body is ignorant to the sudden change in its surroundings. It is noticeably cooler outside and it has been raining steadily for the last two hours. A strong westerly wind is gusting across the front of the building that the corpse has just emerged from, and the sudden strength of the wind is sufficient to knock the comparatively weak body off course. The cloud of dust which was thrown up by the collapse of the second building is steadily being washed down by the rain, causing the entire scene to become covered in a light layer of grey dirt and mud. The noise and vibrations have faded now and there remains no noticeable indication of the previous disturbance. Without any obvious visual or auditory distractions, Amy Steadman's corpse begins to move randomly again, shuffling slowly forward until it can go no further and then turning and moving away.

Several hours have now passed.

The corpse has now moved more than half a mile from the building where it was infected and killed. It has continued to make constant but slow and directionless progress. Its dulled eyes have gradually become accustomed to the light levels outdoors. Additionally the rain has now stopped and the scene has brightened. Previously only able to see clear, obvious movements and stark differences in light levels, the sodden corpse is now able to distinguish a finer level of detail and is aware of more subtle changes around its immediate vicinity. There are other bodies nearby. Amy's cadaver is now able to see their movements from a distance of around ten meters away.

As a result of the immense devastation caused by the infection, the ground outside is littered with debris and human remains. The streets are uneven and the corpse frequently loses its footing and falls, its slow reactions preventing it from taking any corrective action until it is too late. As the day has progressed, however, the body has been able to move with slightly more freedom and control.

The environment through which the body is now moving is largely silent. It has reached a wide and straight road which leads out of town and it has been moving along this road in the same general direction for some time. There are numerous crashed cars and other vehicles nearby. Just ahead, straddling half of the width of the carriageway, is a family-sized estate car containing three corpses. In the back is a dead child, in the front passenger seat its dead mother. The third corpse – that of an overweight man in his late thirties – moves continually but is restrained and held in place by its safety belt. In the boot of the car, trapped behind a protective wire-mesh grille, is a dog. It has no means of escape and is becoming increasingly angry and scared. For some time the hungry and confused animal has been quiet but the movement from the body in the front of the car and the close proximity of another random corpse outside has suddenly excited it again. It has begun to bark and howl and its cries can be heard from a considerable distance away.

Half an hour and already three more bodies have reached the car. Attracted by the animal's noise they crowd around it, leaning heavily against its windows and occasionally banging their numb, clumsy fists against the glass. Their appearance and actions cause the dog to become even more agitated. Amy Steadman's corpse has now become aware of the noise and is moving towards it. It reaches the car and joins the group of cadavers.

This section of road is relatively remote. Nevertheless, in the absence of any other constant and distinguishable sounds, just over an hour later and the dog in the car has been surrounded by another seventeen corpses.

By next morning Amy Steadman's corpse is one of a crowd of almost two hundred bodies gravitating around the car.

DUCK AND COVER

Counsellor Ray Cox never wanted this level of responsibility. He'd wanted the title 'counsellor' for the social status and financial implications, not for any other reason. Overpaid and underworked, he had sat in the shadows at the back of the council chambers for several years and had tried his best not to be noticed, except when it was unavoidable or in his interest to be seen. It was a sad indication of the apathy amongst his constituents that he had been elected and then re-elected without actually ever having done very much for them at all. It had been different to begin with, of course. Back then in the early days he'd wanted to make an impression. He'd wanted to be somebody. But the novelty of office had quickly worn off and the reality of the job set in. Cox's priorities had changed and his prime concerns became lining his own pockets and claiming back as much food, entertainment, drink and travel costs in expenses as he possibly could. The good of the community had been long forgotten – never completely ignored, but often conveniently overlooked and put to one side. In the space of a single devastating and unimaginable day, however, everything in Cox's world had been turned on its head.

Working with the council leaders had stood Cox in good stead, both personally and on a business level. When he'd made a few very public mistakes (a couple of years ago now) and had got himself mixed up in an ill-considered and wholly inappropriate business deal, his friends in high places had looked after him. They found him a quiet and modest little office at the far end of a particularly long corridor and gave him responsibility for the borough's tennis courts and football pitches and various other public amenities which tended on the whole to pretty much look after themselves. They made sure that there were enough of their people working with him and around him to make sure he made the right decisions and to keep him out of trouble. All things considered, Cox was happy with the arrangement.

Full council meetings were, at the very best of times, long, drawn out and tedious affairs which frequently degenerated into huge, overblown debates about the most trivial of issues. He'd sat there for hour upon hour before now listening to the arguments for and against such issues as the politically-correct renaming of school 'blackboards' to 'chalkboards' and whether or not the frayed and threadbare chairs in the council chambers should be reupholstered with dark blue or light purple material. Cox switched off whilst these pointless debates raged, writing them off as a total waste of time without even bothering to listen. He never contributed to the discussions and he found it hard to hide his disinterest. He'd always felt the same about the Emergency Planning Committee too although, of course, he'd pricked up his ears

and listened intently when they'd explained what the counsellors should do in the event of an emergency. He'd even found a reason to go down and check out the bunker on more than one occasion. The committee – or EPC as they were known – were the butt of many private jokes and whispers. A group of fairly senior council members who regularly got together to assemble and maintain detailed plans to coordinate and run the Borough should the unthinkable ever happen. Well now it had.

Cox had been one of those counsellors who'd thought the EPC an unnecessary and over the top waste of time and money. He just couldn't see the point in it. The council did a pretty bloody poor job of running things at the best of times, how the hell would it cope in the event of a nuclear or chemical attack or similar? And anyway, the cold war was over and, despite the increased number of terrorist threats and attacks that had taken place around the world recently, such an event seemed less likely than ever, certainly here in Taychester anyway. Listening to the committee members discussing the rationing of food, decontamination of the population, the disposal of mass fatalities and the like had seemed pointless and not a little surreal. If the world did come to an end, he thought, then the population would be buggered whatever happened, and no amount of council diplomacy and planning would help. Whenever he thought about the subject he couldn't help remembering an old American public information film he'd seen recently on TV. 'Duck and Cover' he thought it was called. In the film a cartoon turtle walked happily through a cartoon forest, only to hide away and cower safely in its shell when a nearby cartoon atomic bomb exploded. What was the point of telling school children to get under their desks in the event of a nuclear strike? As far as Cox was aware very few materials had been discovered that could withstand the pressure, heat and after-effects of a thermonuclear explosion. And he was pretty sure that even if such a material did exist, it wouldn't be the flimsy wood that the desks the children of Taychester sat behind at school were made from. Even if they managed to survive the blast, what was the point? What would be left? Cox believed it would be better not to survive and 'Duck and Cover' was an absolute bloody joke as far as he was concerned, as was the Taychester Borough Council EPC and its underground bunker. If it ever did happen, he had long since decided, he wanted to be stood underneath the very first bomb. He didn't particularly want to be around to pick up the pieces afterwards. There'd be one hell of a mess for the council to sort out...

Well now it had happened. Not as he'd ever expected or imagined, but suddenly, from out of nowhere yesterday morning, the end of the world seemed to have arrived. Sitting alone underground in the semi-darkness he struggled to comprehend what had happened around him. He wasn't sure what had taken place on the surface above, but from the little he'd seen it was already clear that it had been an event of unprecedented scale and devastation. It was Wednesday now – more than a day since it had happened – and still he couldn't even begin to come to terms with what he'd witnessed.

Tuesday had begun normally enough. After taking a cup of tea up to his wife Marcia and waking her gently he'd left home at the usual time and had driven across town to the council house. He'd driven down the ramp into the car park below the main building and it was there that the nightmare had begun. He was reversing into his usual space when he caught sight of movement on the ground behind him in his wing mirror. Thomas Jones, one of the finance directors, had collapsed at the side of his car. Cox jumped out and ran round to help the other man but he hadn't been able to do anything for him. He seemed to be suffocating or choking on something. He looked around for help but there was no-one nearby. Cox ran back up the ramp towards the security guard's hut only to find another three people along the way who were suffering in the same way Jones had been. They were writhing and squirming in agony on the dirty concrete floor. Potts, the regular morning car park security guard, was in a similar state also, helplessly thrashing around on the floor of his little square fibreglass hut.

Cox had started to panic. More terrifying than the fact that at least five people around him appeared to have suddenly been attacked by something that he couldn't see or hear, he realised that it might be about to get him too. He continued to run. When he staggered back out into the open and looked across

the civic square, however, he stopped and his legs buckled underneath him with nervous fear. It was happening everywhere. For as far as he could see in every direction people were dropping to the ground, unable to breathe, grabbing and clawing desperately at their burning throats. He had to do something. He couldn't help them. The only remaining option was to help himself. Instinctively he turned and ran back underground. Moving faster than he had done for years he forced his unfit and overweight body to keep moving. Level G, Level 1A, past his car on Level 1B and then down to Level 2. There it was, right at the far end of Level 2, a single, inconspicuous grey metal door – the entrance to the council's emergency bunker. He pushed himself towards it, his lungs about to burst but the fear that the invisible killer might be closing in on him kept him moving forward. A figure lurched out of the shadows to his right and stumbled into his path, arms outstretched, desperate for help. Without thinking he grabbed the body and dragged it along with him. He smashed into the bunker door, yanked it open, forced himself and the body inside and then turned back to seal the shelter. He couldn't see anyone else nearby. The Emergency Planning Committee, he decided, were probably already dead. Cox slammed the door shut and sealed and locked it behind him.

The body on the ground was convulsing. Inside the bunker was dark and the only illumination came from dusty yellow emergency lights hanging from the low ceiling. Cox crouched down at the side of the helpless figure and looked it up and down, not knowing how to help or even where to start. Before he could do anything its arms and legs went into a sudden flurry of quick spasms – a fit or a seizure – and then it lay ominously still. His eyes now becoming used to the low light, Cox looked around and took a torch down from a rack on the wall above him. He shined the light into the face of the person now lying motionless at his side. No reaction. The young woman was obviously dead. Her wide, blue eyes stared desperately up into space, as if searching for an explanation as to her sudden demise. Her pale white skin was speckled with spots of dark, crimson blood. Cox wept with fear as he tried to wipe the blood away and as he shook her shoulder to try and get her to move. He had seen the girl around before. He knew that she worked in Payroll (their offices were not far from his own) but he'd never had anything to do with her. The name on her ID card was Shelly Bright. Much as he'd genuinely wanted to help her, Cox wished that she wasn't there. He wished he'd left her outside.

Adrenaline and pure fear kept Cox moving uncharacteristically quickly for the next couple of hours. Like most council members he had a very basic knowledge of what was housed in the bunker and how the generator, lights and air conditioning and filtering systems worked. Relatively basic and foolproof instruction manuals had been left by each piece of machinery and, to his immense relief, he was able to get the bunker operational in a fairly short period of time. It was a dark, depressing place which had been stocked with basic supplies but nothing much of any substance. The EPC had considered it increasingly unlikely that the bunker would ever need to be used as the regional command centre it had originally been designed for. Much of it had been decommissioned over the last decade with just an essential core being preserved. There was sufficient food and water down there to keep a small group alive for a couple of days, perhaps even a week. Alone and preoccupied as usual with thoughts of his own survival, Cox estimated that if he was careful there would probably be enough stored underground to keep him alive for almost a month.

It was a short time later, when the initial shock of the bizarre morning's terrifying events had begun to fade, that Cox truly began to appreciate the potential enormity of what had happened around him. Shelly Bright was dead and so, he assumed, was everyone else that had been affected. Of course he had no way of knowing how widespread this attack or whatever it was had been, but the fact that no-one else had yet tried to gain access to the bunker meant that vast numbers of people in the immediate area had probably been struck down. But surely he couldn't have been the only one who had survived? In an unforgivably selfish moment he found himself hoping that he was. Because, he realised ominously, if the rest of the council were dead, by default he was now in charge of the borough of Taychester! Cox had never wanted this level of responsibility. It wasn't what he'd become a council member for.

He didn't dare move. He couldn't risk going back out there. Suddenly 'Duck and Cover' seemed like sound advice.

Cox sat alone in the cold, echoing emptiness of the bunker and waited.

Cox rapidly grew to hate the body of Shelly Bright. It frightened him. He couldn't bring himself to touch it or move it. He didn't want to look at it but at the same time he was also too scared to look away. What if she moved when he wasn't looking? What if she wasn't dead? He hated the pained expression on her frozen face. He'd once thought her attractive (Cox found any woman under the age of forty attractive) but her smooth skin and soft, delicate features had been stretched and contorted by the pain of her sudden suffocation and demise. In the wavering dull yellow light the shadows seemed to shift and her expression seemed continually to change. He knew she hadn't moved, but she now seemed to be grinning at him. A second later she was sneering, then smiling, then snarling... He wanted to close her eyes and shut her out but he was too scared not to look. Eventually, in a moment of uncharacteristic strength and conviction, he covered the corpse with a heavy grey fire blanket.

The long day dragged endlessly and Cox's mind span constantly – filled with a thousand and one unanswerable questions and, it seemed, a similar number of nightmarish images and split second recollections of everything he'd seen. An inherently selfish man who had been conditioned by years of nine-to-five working, it was only as six o'clock in the evening – dinnertime – approached that he began to think about his wife. Was she safe? Should he leave the bunker and go and find her? He already hated being underground but he knew that he didn't dare leave. He'd had a lucky escape this morning. If he went outside now, whatever had killed everyone else would surely come for him. He knew that he had no choice but to sit and wait.

Never a man to follow procedures (often because he didn't understand them), it wasn't until almost nine o'clock that Cox started to read through the emergency planning guidelines and manuals that lay around the dark and cluttered command room. Following step-by-step instructions with the painful, awkward slowness of someone who had avoided as much contact with technology as possible over the last few years, he eventually managed to get the radio working. He cursed the fact that he was so hopelessly inept. Forty-five minutes of fiddling and messing with the controls and all he could get was static punctuated by brief moments of silence. What he'd have given to hear another voice.

It felt like the morning would never come. The lack of natural light was strangely disorientating but, having slept intermittently for the last few hours, just after five o'clock Cox finally plucked up enough courage to get up from his seat and properly investigate his surroundings. He'd so far spent almost all of his time in the main command room but had also briefly visited the stores, the plant room (where the generators and air purification and conditioning equipment machinery was housed) and the bathroom. Moving slowly, and using the torch and dull emergency lighting to find his way around, he peered into two cramped and musty smelling dormitories and a hopelessly inadequate kitchen before returning to the heart of the bunker. Perhaps it was the lack of any proper lighting making things seem worse than they actually were, but the whole place seemed to have fallen into a state of terrible disrepair. He found himself cursing those (himself included) who had mocked the efforts of the EPC in those long and tedious council meetings. If only they'd been better prepared...

It was only when he returned to the command room that he realised just how much the body on the ground was still playing on his mind. Even though it was covered up and was almost impossible to see clearly, he found it difficult to be in the same room as the corpse. What if he was stuck in there for weeks

or a month? Imagine the smell and the decay and... and he knew he had to do something about it. It took him over an hour to finally decide what to do, and a further forty-five minutes before he was ready to actually do it. He then shifted the dead bulk into one of the dark dormitories. Shelly Bright's body was stiff, awkward and cumbersome. Its arms and legs were frozen by rigor mortis and Cox had to push, pull and shove it in order to get the corpse from where she'd died, round the corner, down the corridor and into the dorm. Terrified, shaking uncontrollably, panting and sweating profusely he slammed the door shut and sobbed his way back to the command room.

If only there was a window in the main door or some other way that he could see what was happening outside. A part of him began to wonder whether the carnage he thought he'd seen above ground was really as bad as he'd thought. It all seemed so bizarre – had it really happened at all? Was this unbearable self-imposed incarceration necessary? Would he eventually emerge from the bunker to find everything back to normal above ground? He'd be a laughing stock (again). If he stayed down there long enough, someone would probably have moved into his office and taken over his desk...

The urge to open the door and take a look outside was almost impossible to resist. Just a quick look, he thought, just long enough to see what, if anything, was happening out there. Just long enough to see if there really were still bodies lying around and whether there were other people like him who had remained apparently untouched by what had happened. He knew that he couldn't risk it. In frustration he leant against the door and wept. Cox wept for the family and friends that he was sure he'd lost. He wept for the easy, comfortable life which he was certain was gone forever. First and foremost, however, he wept for himself. His retirement from office had been looming on the horizon and an even easier and more comfortable future was in the offing. Now, through no fault of his own, he found himself buried underground with only a corpse for company. Even worse than that, if and when he eventually emerged from the shelter, as potentially the last surviving council member his life would inevitably become harder and more complicated unless he found a way of resigning his position. Maybe he should have stayed outside and let it get him too...

Wait. What was that? He could feel cold air. A very slight breeze on the back of his hand. It was little more than the faintest of draughts coming from the side of the door just below its hinges. In sudden fear he stumbled and tripped further back into the bunker. The bloody door was supposed to be airtight. If he could feel a draught then the seal had been broken, and if the draft was coming from outside then whatever it was that had caused all the death and destruction out there had probably already seeped into the bunker. He scrambled away from the door and hid like a frightened child on the other side of the command room and waited for it to get him.

More than an hour had passed before Cox finally allowed himself to accept that he probably wasn't going to die, not yet, anyway. The people outside had been struck down in seconds. He'd been out there with them when it started and he'd been breathing in the same air (albeit in a filtered form) for more than a day. The fact that he might have some immunity to what had killed so many seemed even more improbable than the arrival of the infection itself. He didn't like to think about it. Cox distracted himself by eating a little food (a powdered meal which he made with cold water) and then fell asleep clutching a picture of Marcia which he'd found tucked amongst the crumpled bank notes, credit card receipts and out of date business cards he'd found stuffed in the back of his wallet.

He could hear something. Cox had been sleeping lightly again but a sudden and unexpected shuffling, bumping noise had disturbed his slumber. Something falling off a shelf? A problem with the generator or the pumps that were filtering and circulating the air? There it was again. He jumped up from his seat, a cold, nervous sweat immediately prickling his brow. In the deathly quiet of the bunker the direction of the

noise was clear. It was coming from the dormitory where he'd left Shelly Bright's corpse. But it couldn't have been, could it? As much as he wanted to walk the other way, Cox forced himself to walk towards the room.

Another crash. The sound of someone tripping and falling? What the hell was going on in there? Was there another entrance to the bunker that he wasn't aware of?

Cox wiped the sweat from his forehead and cleared his throat.

'Hello...' he whispered meekly, too scared to raise his voice any louder. 'Hello...?'

He lifted his hand to open the door and then stopped. Come on, he thought, this is bloody stupid. The main entrance to the bunker was sealed and he was sure there was only one way in or out of the dorm so how could there be anything on the other side of the door? He decided that it must have been rats or some other vermin that had somehow managed to tunnel their way in, although how they'd managed to do that when the place was supposed to be airtight was anyone's guess.

Another crash.

'Oh, Christ,' Cox moaned pathetically to himself. He was completely on his own. He didn't have anyone to hide behind now. He knew what he had to do.

Holding a torch in his left hand (both as a source of light and as a potential weapon), Counsellor Cox timidly shoved the door open and shone it into the room. The dull yellow circle illuminated the back wall opposite the door but nothing else. It must have just been...

'Bloody hell,' he cursed loudly as Shelly Bright tripped across the room in front of him. 'What the bloody hell...?' He desperately shone the torch around until he found her again. There was no doubt that it was Bright, but how could it have been? She'd been dead since Tuesday morning, hadn't she? Cox stood rooted to the spot with confusion and fear. After all that he had been through over the last day or so, this new discovery was too much to take. He stared at the body with an uncomfortable mixture of bemusement and sheer terror and he only moved when the creature awkwardly turned itself around and, quite by chance, began to shuffle towards him. He held out his hand and shoved it away. It fell back and then dragged itself back up and walked away, stopping and turning again when it hit the wall at the far end of the room with a heavy, uncoordinated thud. Unable to go any further the cadaver slowly began to walk back towards him. Cox looked deep into its face. Its skin was unnaturally discoloured and its pupils dilated and unfocussed. Without waiting for it to get any closer the terrified counsellor slammed the door shut and gripped the handle tightly. He felt the sudden collision as the corpse hit the back of the door and then listened carefully as it turned and shuffled away again. He dragged a chair out of the other dormitory and wedged it under the handle, preventing it from being opened again.

Back in the command room Cox paced up and down with his hands over his ears, trying to block out the sound of the clumsy body clattering around. The sealed entrance to the bunker now looked more inviting than ever. He purposefully stormed over to the door, fully intending to open it, but then stopped. Although the bunker was obviously no longer airtight (he could still feel the cool draught from outside) he couldn't bring himself to take that final step and push his way back out into the unknown. It might have been hellish underground, but for all he knew it could have been a thousand times worse outside. Sitting tight and doing nothing was, for the moment, the lesser of two evils. With the sounds of the body still crashing around in the background Cox sank to the ground, covered his head with his hands and curled himself up into a ball.

It never stopped. The bloody thing never stopped. All day the damn cadaver trapped in the other room moved constantly, smacking into the door, tripping over furniture, knocking things over – the noise, although not particularly loud, was enough to rattle Cox to the core. It was driving him insane. He had to get away from it.

It was almost seven o'clock. He'd been down in the bunker for a day and a half and he wanted out. All day he'd been sitting there in the semi-darkness, trying to decide what he should do. Did he go outside or stay down there and wait? The body would have to stop moving sooner or later, wouldn't it? It couldn't just keep going indefinitely. And how the bloody hell was it managing to move at all? Nothing made any sense.

Cox knew it was important to try and eat but the limited food supplies he had tasted bloody awful. A lover of rich, fatty foods and sugary sweets, cakes and puddings, his stomach was growling angrily and he seriously wondered whether he'd be able to survive on the meagre rations that had been stockpiled below ground. He was growing to detest every aspect of his grim and gloomy surroundings – the stale and musty, artificial smell, the noise of the body, the lack of any decent light. For a while he actually found himself crouching by the door in desperation, sniffing at the 'fresh' air which was somehow managing to seep inside.

What's the point of sitting in here doing nothing, he dejectedly thought to himself? He wanted out. He wanted to go home and find his wife and find out what had happened to the rest of the world. He wanted to change his clothes and eat properly and be away from the damn body which was still moving around incessantly. So what was stopping him? Apart from the obvious fear and uncertainty and the fact that he still thought going outside might kill him, he realised that the main reason he wanted to stay underground was particularly cowardly and selfish. He silently admitted to himself that he didn't want to go up there because he didn't want the responsibility of having to do anything about the mess, and he definitely didn't want to have to take charge of what was left of Taychester. He couldn't do it. He knew he wouldn't be able to do it. But hang on a minute, why should he have to? Although in his early days at the council he'd had his fair share of appearances in the local papers, who would know who he was now and, more to the point, who would care? If he got into the car and drove away quickly, no-one would be any the wiser. He could get on with sorting out what was left of his own life and he could forget about everyone else. In the intense, claustrophobic darkness of the bunker, getting out gradually began to seem more and more like a good idea. Another crash from the dead body in the dormitory convinced him that the time was right to try and make his move. And anyway, he thought, what was there to lose when, in all probability, it looked like he'd already lost everything?

Cox grabbed his jacket and the torch and, after overcoming a final moment of uncertainty and self-doubt, strained to re-open the heavy bunker door. He groaned with effort. It wouldn't open and, for just a second, he panicked as he realised that he might never get out. Another hefty shove and it began to move. He cautiously stepped outside.

It was quiet. And cold. And dark.

Slowly, step by nervous step, Cox moved away from the bunker entrance and began the long climb back up the twisting concrete ramp which led back through the underground car park to the surface. Suddenly there was movement ahead which made him stop dead in his tracks – a single dark figure tripping across the width of the car park. He tried to call out but the silence which shrouded the scene was intense and he couldn't bring himself to make any noise. It didn't matter anyway. The person up ahead was in the same condition as the body he'd left down in the shelter, it was obvious even from a distance. The shadowy figure moved in the same awkward, listless and directionless way as Shelly Bright's remains had done and it failed to respond when he got closer to it, even when he crossed its path

and was directly in its line of vision.

As Cox neared the surface the number of bodies around him increased. There were numerous corpses still lying where they'd fallen on the cold concrete and many more dragging themselves silently through the semi-darkness of early evening. In the strangest way he was slightly relieved – everything he'd thought he'd seen on Tuesday morning had actually happened. He hadn't imagined it. He walked past the security guard's hut and peered in through the window to see what remained of Potts scrambling around on the floor pathetically, trying desperately to stand but unable to pull itself up with useless, heavy arms.

The civic square in front of the council house was a grim sight. The sun was just disappearing below the horizon, drenching the scene in warm orange light and casting long, dragging shadows. It had recently been raining and the sunlight made the wet ground glisten and shine. Cox counted sixteen bodies traipsing across the block-paving in various random directions. One of the stupid things nearby lost its footing and tumbled down a short stone staircase just to his right. Its clumsy, barely coordinated movements made him chuckle nervously to himself. His laughter, although quiet, sounded disproportionately loud and made him feel uncomfortable and exposed. Now that the silence had been broken, however, he finally felt brave enough to call out.

'Hello,' he said, his wavering voice at little more than normal speaking volume.

Nothing.

'Hello, can anyone hear me?'

Nothing.

'Hello.'

Nothing.

Cox took a few more hesitant steps forward (avoiding the crumpled remains of a foul-smelling, rain-soaked corpse) and then turned back on himself to look across the landscape of Taychester. He'd lived there all his life but had never seen it like this. Tonight it was an alien and cold place. It was so dark. Not a single pinprick of electric light interrupted the steadily increasing darkness. No street lights. No light coming from inside any of the hundreds of buildings he could see. Suddenly feeling cold, alone and afraid the counsellor turned and walked back down to where he'd left his car on Tuesday morning.

He paused for a moment longer before setting off. Perhaps he should go back into the chambers and up to his office and see if there was anyone else around. Had any of his colleagues survived? He couldn't risk it. He couldn't afford to get wrapped up in any council business when he had so many issues and uncertainties in his own life to sort out. That was his excuse and he was sticking to it. He climbed into his car, keen to get away quickly.

The sound of the engine was uncomfortably loud but Cox felt protected and safe behind the wheel. He pulled out of the car park and began to drive home. He clipped the hip of a random body which lurched into his path from out of nowhere as he turned left onto the main expressway. He slammed on his brakes and reversed back to help the bedraggled figure. He watched in petrified disbelief as the corpse silently picked itself up off the ground and limped away.

Used to only having to think about himself and Marcia, Cox drove home quickly, forcing himself to block out and ignore the hundreds of bodies, the countless wrecks of crashed cars and the unprecedented destruction and devastation which lined his entire route home.

The house was just as he'd left it first thing on Tuesday.

Cox stopped the car on the drive and walked towards the front door. He paused before going inside. He needed to compose himself before he faced whatever he might find in there. Turning around he stared at the quiet cul-de-sac where he and Marcia had lived for almost ten years. It looked pretty much the same as it always had done, and yet everything felt uncomfortably different. This Wednesday evening had the still and silent air of an early Sunday morning. No-one was about. Nothing moved. Nothing, that was, apart from the remains of Malcolm Worsley (who had lived opposite). Worsley's corpse was trapped in its front garden, hemmed in by the ornate shrubs and privet hedges he'd so lovingly tended for years.

Cox turned back to face the front door and put his key in the lock. He stopped and took a deep, calming breath before opening the door and going in. Inside the house was as quiet as everywhere else.

'Marcia,' he called hopefully, 'Marcia, are you here?'

She should have been there. She hadn't said that she'd planned going out anywhere on Tuesday morning. He walked further down the hall. He instinctively started to take off his coat but then stopped and quickly pulled it back on. It was almost as cold inside the house as it was out on the street.

'Marcia?' he called again.

He peered through the doors into the living room, dining room and kitchen. All empty. They all looked just the same as he'd left them. He then began to climb the stairs, knowing that his wife would most probably still have been in bed when it had happened. Christ, he hoped she was all right. But she would have answered him when he'd called, wouldn't she? Cox prepared himself for the worst as he neared the landing. Through the gaps between the wooden banister posts he could see into their bedroom. Their duvet lay in a heap on the carpet at the side of the bed. He climbed the last few steps two at a time and burst breathlessly into the room but she wasn't there. The bed was empty.

The carpet on the landing was wet. Water had seeped out from under the bathroom door and had spread along virtually the entire length of the landing. It was obvious now where Marcia was. Cox walked up to the bathroom, his feet squelching beneath him, and knocked on the door.

'Marcia? Marcia, it's me, love. I'm home...'

He tried the handle. It was locked. He pushed and shoved at the door to little effect before taking five or six splashing, sliding steps back down the landing and then running back and trying to shoulder-charge his way into the bathroom. The lock was weak and gave way almost instantly with Cox's considerable weight pushing against it. Marcia had been moaning at him for months to get someone in to change it. He pushed the door fully open (sending a low wave of water rippling back across the bathroom floor) and there, in front of him, stood what remained of his wife. Completely naked and completely oblivious to its surroundings it walked blindly towards the dumbstruck Cox and collided with him. He grabbed hold of his dead wife's arms and held her tightly. Her eyes were dark and vacant and she felt cold to the touch. He pulled her close to him but then pushed her away again. He pressed himself back against the wall and watched in heartbroken silence as she lurched past, staggered the length of the landing and then crashed into the door of the spare bedroom.

Cox shut Marcia in the living room and then went around the house and locked and bolted every ground floor door and window. Wednesday night turned into Thursday morning as he busied himself around his home. The flood in the bathroom (Marcia had been running a bath when it happened) had caused massive damage both upstairs and down in the kitchen below. The cold water made the house

smell of must and decay, or perhaps that was just the smell of his wife? Cox wasn't sure. At least she'd left him with a bath full of water. That might prove to be useful.

Very occasionally, and only for the briefest of moments each time, Cox allowed himself to think about what had happened. What could have caused the deaths of hundreds, maybe thousands of people and why had some of them dragged themselves back up onto their dead feet again? Why hadn't it happened to him? Why had he been spared and why were there no other survivors? Why hadn't anyone come to help yet? Surely this couldn't have happened everywhere, could it?

Despite his vocation, thinking about other people was most definitely not something that came naturally to Cox. Soon enough, he had come to the conclusion that the most sensible course of action for him to take would be to just continue to concentrate on his own safety and wellbeing and sit tight and wait. Despite the fact that the gas, electricity and water supplies were all off, his house was still relatively comfortable and, as far as he could be sure, safe. There was a shop round the corner from where he could get food and drink supplies. It made sense to stay at home. What use would he be to anyone else, anyway? One man to help hundreds, possibly even thousands? It would be far more sensible for him to concentrate on looking after himself. That was, after all, what he was best at.

A strange sense of normality gradually overcame Cox. Apart from making one hurried trip to the shop around the corner to fetch food early on Friday morning he remained locked in his home from daylight until dusk. He checked on Marcia a couple of times but there had been no obvious change in her condition. He dressed her and moved her to the garage to limit the damage that her endless and pointless staggering around was causing in the living room. He didn't get annoyed. She couldn't help it. Somehow the noise and inconvenience his wife's corpse caused was more bearable than the constant banging and clattering of the body he'd left behind in the bunker.

With little else to do to occupy his time Cox tried to make good the water damage to his home. It was difficult to do much without any power but he was glad the electricity supply was off. It was safer that way. The light fitting in the kitchen was full of water which had dripped through the ceiling from the overflowing bath. He'd drained as much of it off as he could. By the time the water supply came back on, he decided, it would probably have dried out. He'd have to get someone to come out and look at the damage later. No doubt they'd charge him a fortune...

On Friday evening Cox sat at his desk in an alcove at the side of the dining room towards the front of the house. He read books by candlelight until his eyes began to droop and close. It was good to be occupied and distracted. It was a relief to have something positive to think about and do for a while. He was finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the relentless silence of the dead world around him. After a good hour of searching he found a battery powered cassette player upstairs and used it to play a tape of loud classical music to drown out the quiet.

At a quarter to two on Saturday morning, Malcolm Worsley's corpse (his dead neighbour from over the road) escaped from its garden, staggered over to Cox's house and slammed against the window next to where he was sitting reading. Startled, he leapt back, his pulse suddenly racing. He quickly began to regain his composure when he realised it was only one of the dumb bodies from outside and nothing more sinister. He nodded in recognition when he realised it was what was left of Malcolm and watched as the corpse on the other side of the glass pressed its lifeless face against the window, leaving behind a greasy, bloody smear. As he watched, it lifted a single, rotting hand into the air and slapped it down on the glass. Strange, thought Cox as he watched the wizened, decaying shell of his friend hitting the glass again and again. It didn't bother him unduly. In fact he felt quite sorry for it. The windows were double-glazed and that muffled each bang to little more than a dull thud. Tired, Cox turned up the volume

on his cassette player and carried it upstairs with him to bed.

Saturday morning. Day five.

Cox slept well. It would have been wrong to say that he was happy with his situation but, all things considered, it could have been much, much worse. He'd begun to accept what had happened and was determined to make the most of it. Regardless of what had happened to everyone else, he remained relatively safe, warm and well protected. For a while he lay there and didn't move, staring up at the ceiling and thinking about how everything had changed.

What was he going to do today? He really needed to start thinking about getting more supplies in. He'd noticed earlier in the week that workmen had been at one of the houses down the road when all this had started last Tuesday morning and their van was still parked outside the house. Perhaps he should borrow it and drive it round to the local supermarket? If he spent a little time today filling the van with absolutely everything he'd need, it would save him having to go out again for maybe as long as a couple of weeks. By then he was sure that the situation outside would have improved. It couldn't get any worse, could it? In a couple of weeks time, he decided, the other people who had survived like him would start to coordinate themselves and get things organised.

Cox forced himself to get up. He swung his legs out of bed and winced at the sudden drop in temperature – without the central heating working the house was icy cold. He tiptoed across the landing to the toilet (stepping gingerly over the still damp carpet) and relieved himself in the plastic bucket he'd been having to use since the toilet cistern had dried up. Once a day he carried it down to the bottom of the garden and emptied the contents over his roses. That felt better, he thought as he shook himself dry and walked back to the bedroom to get dressed.

He was half-dressed and halfway down the stairs when he noticed that something had changed. It was a subtle, far from obvious change and he struggled for a moment to put his finger on exactly what it was that was different. It was dark. That was it, the ground floor of the house was unusually dark this morning. Feeling slightly uneasy, but not overly concerned, he continued down the staircase.

He saw them at the front door first. Visible only as shifting shapes through the frosted glass, he could see the heads and shoulders of at least three or four corpses, maybe more. Unusual, he thought as he continued down, zipping up his trousers and tightening his belt as he walked. As it was every morning, his next port of call was the kitchen at the back of the house. Still half asleep he walked barefoot across the cold, tiled floor to fetch himself some breakfast cereal from the cupboard next to the sink. The cupboard door slammed shut (the hinges were loose and needed tightening) and the sound echoed through the empty house like a gunshot. Cox cringed and then frowned. He could suddenly hear Marcia moving around in the garage. Was it just coincidence, or had what remained of his wife just reacted to noise for the first time since she'd died? He was about to go and see her when he caught sight of something in the dining room. Like the rest of the ground floor of the house this morning, that room also seemed darker than usual, and Cox was sure he could see some movement. He put his head around the door and then quickly drew it back again. Bodies. Hundreds of the bloody things, or that was how it seemed. Fighting to keep himself calm, he peered through the narrow gap between the open door and the door frame and saw that the entire width of the wide bay window at the front of the house was packed tight with dead flesh. He could see countless ghastly, cold faces pressed up against the glass, scouring the room with their dry, clouded eyes. Why were they here? What did they want? Cox leant his head against the wall and tried to understand what was happening. None of the creatures had shown the slightest interest in him before, so why now? Were these somehow different to all the other bodies he'd so far seen? His mind wandered back to what had happened just before he'd gone to bed. Malcolm Worsley. That was

it, that bastard Worsley had brought them here. He must have tipped them off that he was from the council. Did they think he'd be able to do something for them? Before he'd died Worsley had asked Cox to do favours for him on more than one occasion – everything from rushing through planning permission for an extension to his house to trying to get a parking fine overturned. Cox had no reason to think he would have changed his ways now just because he'd died. He peered through the gap again. There he was, the sly bugger, his dead face pressed hard against the window, letting everyone know where Cox was, wrongly assuming that he was the man who could (and would) help them.

His fragile confidence rattled, Cox felt suddenly uncomfortable and unsure. He ran back upstairs and peered out of the window in the spare room. Bloody hell, there were hundreds of them out there. A huge, ragged crowd of diseased, decomposing flesh had suddenly gathered in front of his property. The nearest corpses had been rammed tight against the front of the house by the relentless pressure of countless others behind, and the whole mass had spilled out into the middle of the road. His car – his escape route – had been surrounded and swallowed up by the dead hordes.

The nervous counsellor considered his suddenly limited options. As he continued to watch from behind the curtains he could see more of the dark, shuffling shapes dragging themselves along the nearby streets towards his house. Individually they seemed weak and distant and he had no reason to believe that they would intentionally do him any harm, but how could he be sure? How could he be sure of anything? These things were dead, for Christ's sake. He never thought that his constituents would resort to mob rule to try and get action from the council. They'd never shown any interest before. He began to regret the day he'd stood for election.

Cox crept round to the back of the house and sat down on the edge of the bed. I'll stay here and keep out of sight for a while, he thought. Maybe they'll get tired waiting and go somewhere else.

By mid-afternoon the crowd of bodies had filled the entire length of the street, and still more were approaching. They were hammering against the windows and front door, and the sound could most probably be heard for miles around. Cox had finally plucked up enough courage to creep back downstairs and had quickly come to the conclusion that, as his stay in the house might now prove longer than he originally expected, his supplies were far from sufficient. He only had enough food for a few more meals. Sitting there with his throat dry and his stomach rumbling at the breakfast bar in the kitchen (well out of sight) he came to the crushing realisation that, because of the bloody public outside, his situation was now nowhere near as comfortable or safe as he'd originally thought. Disconsolate he stood up, walked across the room and went out to the garage to see Marcia. Maybe her condition would have changed today? Perhaps she might have improved enough to be able to offer her husband some support at this increasingly difficult time. No such luck. He peered into the garage through the window in the door and saw that his dead wife was still crashing tirelessly around the room. Her dressing gown had slipped off and she was naked again. Bloody hell, she looked awful. Several stones overweight, wrinkled with age, limp-breasted and her skin had turned a dirty shade of blue-green. He wished she'd stop. As long as she was making this much noise the people of Taychester would know there was someone in and would continue to beat a slow (but very definite) path to his door. Perhaps if he went in there and found a way of keeping her quiet? Christ, what was he thinking? He'd never been able to keep Marcia quiet when she was alive and she'd been able to listen to him, how the hell was he supposed to get her to cooperate now?

Maybe he needed to get away and lie low for a while. But how was he going to get out and where was he supposed to go? The answer was disappointingly obvious. He anxiously glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was already close to midday. In a few hours time the light would start to fade. He could

either sit tight for another night or make his move today. His mind wandered back to the size of the ever-increasing crowd on the street. If there were hundreds of them out there now, how many more would he find when he got up tomorrow morning? Or the day after that, or the day after that? It wasn't so much the size of the crowd which bothered him, instead it was the fact that they wanted him to help them. As a counsellor surely he had a public duty to help and protect them? As he'd done for most of his life in public service, he decided to turn his back on that responsibility and run.

Get some food, he thought, then get back underground.

Almost four o'clock. A tired and frightened Counsellor Cox, on foot and with a heavy holdall full of spare clothes in his hand, approached the supermarket that he and Marcia usually shopped at. His way out of the front of his house blocked, he'd sneaked out of the back door and clambered over the fence at the bottom of the garden. Bloody hell, some of the public had been waiting for him there too! He'd found himself in the middle of a crowd of between twenty and thirty of them. For a moment he'd tried to reason with them, tried to make them see that there was nothing he could do to help so many of them but they wouldn't listen. To his shame he'd pushed and barged his way through the crowd in tears, unable to get away quick enough. A fifteen minute walk through the shadows and he was there.

The supermarket was as quiet and desolate as everywhere else. That pleased Cox. He didn't want to see anyone else, unless they could talk and control themselves and help him. He was sick of the pathetic, lethargic population and the way they gravitated towards him whenever they saw him. He wished they'd just leave him alone. Didn't they know that he had problems too? Who was going to help him out? Just because he didn't appear to be as sick as they obviously were, it didn't mean he was there to run to the aid of every person who happened to see him. As he got closer to the building he could see that there were people swarming around the front entrance and car park. He decided to try and get in through the back. The loading bay was a much quieter option.

Cox weaved through the abandoned lorries, trolleys and carts at the back of the huge store and slowly worked his way through the staff area, the bakery and into the main part of the shop. Bloody hell, the place smelled awful. The council health and safety department would have had a field day. A week's worth of rotting food and rotting flesh. It was so strong that it made him gag and he thought about turning round and getting out. 'Keep calm Ray,' he told himself, 'this is the hardest part. You can do this. Get everything you need here and then you can shut yourself away for as long as it takes for this bloody mess to sort itself out.'

Two bodies tripped and staggered towards him. Cox turned when he heard their heavy, shuffling footsteps.

'Leave me alone,' he hissed at them, loud enough for them to hear but not so loud that the rest of the dead shoppers would notice. 'I can't help you. There's nothing I can do for any of you...'

They kept coming towards him.

'Look,' he continued, 'I'm really sorry. I'm sure someone will be along soon who'll be able to help you, but it's not me. I really can't do anything for you. I'm just here to get some food then I'm leaving. I've got problems too, you know.'

The corpses continued undeterred. The nearest of them was just a couple of meters away now and its relentless, slothful approach unnerved Cox. He turned and tried to make his way over to the other side of the building but there were more of them approaching. Panic rising, he looked around and could suddenly see them dragging themselves towards him from just about every direction. Creeping up the

aisles. Crawling over empty cardboard boxes and piles of spilt food. He could see more than twenty of them now, and others were beginning to drag themselves in through the supermarket's open entrance doors. In desperation and exacerbation he climbed up onto the lid of the nearest of a row of freezers full of decaying, defrosted food to both escape from and address the advancing public.

'Stop!' he yelled, his voice echoing around the cavernous building and attracting the attention of the few remaining bodies nearby who hadn't yet noticed him. 'Just leave me alone, will you? There's nothing I can do for any of you. Go away!'

In his frightened, confused and misguided state Cox failed to appreciate the stupidity of his actions. With renewed interest the corpses continued to advance towards him. As the nearest few began to reach out and grab at him with cold, numb hands he scrambled back across the row of freezers. One of the freezers – the third or fourth in the line – was open. Cox didn't notice until it was too late. He struggled to keep his balance but was unable to stop himself from falling down into it. He sank deep into a mushy sludge of soaked cardboard boxes and defrosted pizzas and lasagnes and he threw his arms out to steady himself. The sudden unexpected descent had brought him face to face with the dead, eye level with what was left of the people of the borough. The same people who used to use the tennis courts and football pitches that he had responsibility for. The same people whose lives were shaped in the council meetings he used to sleep through. Cox tried to scramble up again but lost his footing and slipped deeper into the mire. Cold, wet and terrified he reached out and grabbed hold of the shoulders of the nearest cadaver and hauled himself up onto his feet using the body for support. Once upright again he climbed out of the freezer and pushed the body away. Cold, soaking wet and covered with foul-smelling, rotting food he pushed through the heaving crowd. The dark mass of bodies turned and followed him as he ran towards the rear of the shop and back out through the loading bay.

Cox arrived back at the council house in a supermarket branded home delivery van. He slammed on the brakes when he reached the civic square and looked anxiously in his mirrors. Already more of the people of the borough were coming his way. Would they never stop? He'd only been stationary for a couple of seconds and already they were swarming around the van, banging and hammering angrily on its sides. He edged the vehicle forward nervously, hoping to nudge the bodies out of the way. They just stood there defiant and stared at him. Stupid bloody things. In temper he slammed his foot down on the accelerator and tore through them.

Into the car park. Down the ramp. Round and round and down until he reached Level 2. He left the van in front of the still open bunker door and ran into the underground shelter. It was still empty, thank God, except for the body in the dormitory, of course. Too scared to stop and think about what he was doing Cox crashed through the bunker rooms and yanked the dormitory door open. Shelly Bright's corpse, now looking particularly grotesque and discoloured, lunged at him at the same time that he lunged at her. The counsellor and the corpse both fell heavily to the ground. Cox scrambled back up onto his feet and then, with an utter contempt and lack of respect, he grabbed hold of the cadaver's hair with one hand and its right arm with the other. Panting heavily he dragged the kicking and squirming corpse out of the bunker and threw it into the car park.

There were other bodies close now. He could see what appeared to be hundreds of them tripping and falling down the concrete ramp towards him. Obviously attracted by the noise he'd made returning to the bunker, more crowds were spilling in from the surface. The steep downwards slope of the car park seemed to be increasing their uncoordinated speed dramatically.

'Bloody hell,' Cox whimpered as Shelly Bright's body lunged for him again. He threw her to one side, not even giving her a second glance as she collapsed to the ground and then stood up again. He'd

wanted to check the back of the van to see if there was any salvageable food inside but he knew he didn't have time to do it now. Maybe he'd be able to come back out in a couple of hours time when the excitement had died down and the bodies had disappeared. He remembered the ever-increasing size of the crowd of corpses outside his house and tried to convince himself that this would be different. They wouldn't stay down here in the darkness waiting for him, would they?

Shelly Bright was coming for him again. There was another body almost as close. He had to move.

Ray Cox looked out at the desperate scene around him one more time before scurrying back into the bunker and slamming the door behind him.

No sign of them disappearing yet. Every so often I try and open the door a little bit to see what's going on. It's been a couple of days now and the bloody things are still waiting for me. From down here it looks like the whole car park is full now. How the hell am I supposed to get out? Maybe it's the noise of the generator and the air conditioning pumps that's attracting them, but I can't turn them off, can I? I'll just have to sit here and wait. They'll have to go eventually, won't they?

I don't mind being down here on my own. I've spent years keeping a low profile and trying to keep out of sight. It won't be long now. Just a few more days.

I try not to think too much about what's happened because I don't understand it and I don't think I ever will. All that matters now is making sure that I get through all of this in one piece.

I can finally see the sense of 'Duck and Cover' now. It has to work, doesn't it? Stay under cover long enough and you'll be okay. I'll keep my head down until this has all blown over.

PENELOPE STREET

Penelope Street is nearing the end of her life. She's becoming very weak now and it's an effort for her to lift her head, even to keep her eyes open. In many ways it's much easier to stay head bowed and eyes shut. She doesn't want to see what's happening around her.

Penelope wants the end to come quickly but every single second seems to take a cruel eternity to pass. She just wants it to be over.

One hundred and thirty-three.

I've been sat here for one hundred and thirty-three hours now. How much longer will I last? Will I reach one hundred and thirty-four or one hundred and thirty-five? Christ, I hope not. I can't take much

more of this but there's absolutely nothing I can do. I can't make the end come any faster. I've reached the stage when the frustration is worse than the fear.

I feel so weak. I haven't got my medication with me and I haven't eaten or had anything to drink since first thing on Tuesday morning. That's more than five and a half days ago now. Surely I can't last much longer, can I? I can't do anything but sit here with my head hanging down, looking into my lap. Sometimes I try to look up and look around but it's all so horrific that I can't stand it. Everything has changed and I don't know how or why. Arthur's body is just in front of me (I can see his feet sticking out from behind the sofa we were looking at buying) and they are all around here. Dark, decaying shadows of people who should be lying dead on the ground. Cold and empty bodies. Thank God there are none of them here in the shop with me. When I look up I can see them through the window, constantly moving up and down the street outside. I don't move so they don't see me, but if I make any noise they stop. I screamed and shouted at them to start with because I thought they'd be able to help me but now I know they can't. When they hear me they stop and stare and bang on the glass, and then more of them come. I'm used to being stared at. I don't move. I don't react. After a couple of hours they start to drift away.

Arthur brought me here on Tuesday morning to choose a new sofa. Not that he needed me to come. There wasn't any point in my getting involved in the decision. It was down to him to choose one and try it out and decide whether or not we were going to have it. We got here early so that there wouldn't be many people about. If there are too many people then I just feel like I'm in the way. We'd just got through the front door and round to the sofa section when it happened. It got him and everyone else. I watched them all crumble and fall and I wish that it had taken me too. I kept waiting for it to get me, hoping and praying that it would, hoping and praying that it would soon be over. I can't stand being alone like this. It makes me feel more helpless and vulnerable than ever.

I'm so hungry. And thirsty too. My mouth's dry and I'm so dehydrated that I feel like my tongue's swollen to ten times its normal size. I can't talk properly now, not that there's anyone left here to speak to. I think there must have been a fire near here a couple of days ago. People must have been trapped inside. I smelled the smoke first, then the burning bodies. It was like sitting the middle of a damn barbeque. The whole world stank of roast meat. Every so often I can still smell it. It made the hunger pains immeasurably worse.

The worst part of all of this is the fact that I haven't got any control over anything. I've not had much control for a long time, but now I don't have any. It hurts more than the fear and the not knowing. I can't do a bloody thing about the situation. I can't do anything to help myself or to bring the end any closer. Help might be just around the corner, but I can't even get myself out of this damn building, never mind get anywhere else. An inch might as well be a hundred bloody miles for all the good it'll do me now.

Just trying to look up takes so much energy. There are more bodies outside now, gazing at me with their cold, vacant eyes. I feel like a bloody shop window dummy. People always stared at me. You'd think I would have got used to it by now, but I haven't. I've never been able to handle the sideways looks and the glances and the stares and the whispers behind people's hands. Mostly they didn't say anything at all or they'd go completely over the top and patronise me. They made me feel like a freak. They always saw the wheelchair before they saw me sitting in it. I'm paralysed from the neck down, not up. I can't move my body, but that was the only difference between me and everybody else. My arms and legs might be numb and frozen, but I've always been able to feel pain and get scared and panic like everyone else. Christ knows I'm scared now.

I would have been all right if it hadn't been for him, that stupid bloody husband of mine. If he'd have left me there after the fall I would have been okay. It would have taken time to get well again, but I would have been okay. But no, he knew best, didn't he. It was him trying to move me that did the real damage

to my neck. He blamed himself and so did I. And now here I am, trapped in this cold, dark and empty place and starving to death with the rest of the world already dead around me. I can't move an inch, and all I have for company is Arthur's useless corpse. I don't know what I did to deserve this.

Come on death, hurry up. Enough's enough. I want it to be over now.

I'm tired of sitting in this bloody chair just waiting...

DAY SEVEN

AMY STEADMAN

Part iv

It is now several days since Amy Steadman's corpse took its first unsteady steps away from the shadows of the building where she died. It is a week since infection.

The body continues to move at a painfully slow and lethargic pace. Its movements are still limited and difficult. It has, however, been moving constantly and has now covered a considerable distance since leaving the crowd on the motorway. The dog trapped in the car – the cause of the disturbance which originally attracted the mass of cadavers – became weak and quiet after several hours. Many of the dead, Amy Steadman's corpse included, gradually drifted away from the scene in random, uncoordinated directions. By pure chance Amy's body continued to follow the route of the road forward in the general direction in which it had originally been travelling. Although it has come across numerous blockages and occasional distractions along the wide, rubbish-strewn road, it has been able to keep moving in largely the same direction. It has now covered several miles.

As time has progressed so has the body slowly regained a further degree of control over its movements. It now walks with slightly more fluidity and speed although its muscles, flesh and nerves are continuing to decay. The body's limbs – previously stiff, awkward and largely inflexible – are now able to bend and flex to an extent, although their range of motion is still severely limited. The body is now able to draw its hands into fists and can move its fingers independently. It can also move its head. There has been a substantial increase in the number of voluntary head movements, indicating that the corpse is becoming increasingly aware of the direction of sound.

The long and wide motorway, which had remained relatively straight for a considerable distance, eventually curved round to the right as it merged with another major road which skirted around the centre of the city of Rowley. Amy's body, however, did not change direction. Instead it continued to move forward and straight ahead, leaving the tarmac and tumbling down a grassy embankment. After managing to stand up again, the corpse crossed the width of a field, stumbled through an open gate and then found

itself following a narrow gravel path which ran alongside an isolated bungalow. After dragging itself along the length of the gravel path the body then reached another narrow tarmac road. The steep banks on either side of the road channelled the corpse and prevented it from moving in any other direction but forward.

The physical effort of the distance travelled has caused the condition of the body to deteriorate further. The process of decay has continued unabated. Its skin is now extremely discoloured. The chemical reactions continuing to occur throughout the cadaver have manifested themselves as numerous weeping sores and lesions. In the fall down the embankment the corpse sustained a number of cuts and lacerations to its right hand, its arm, its upper torso and its face. Thick, congealed blood has slowly seeped (rather than poured) from these cuts. There is no pulse. The body's circulatory and respiratory systems no longer operate. Blood and oxygen is no longer being pumped around the body.

The self-awareness of the corpse has steadily increased. Although still at an extremely low and rudimentary level, it is now aware of its own general shape and size and compensates for its bulk whilst moving. It can now use its hands to push and grab with limited success. Its balance has also improved although it is still occasionally unsteady on its feet and has difficulty coping with uneven ground.

A sudden heavy downpour of rain has drenched the body which is now struggling to cope with a steep gradient of descent down a hillside. It is still following the road. There is now a canopy of trees hanging overhead which, coupled with the increased cloud cover, has substantially reduced the available light. The loud, echoing sound of the rain hitting the ground and the leaves overhead is confusing the creature. It is now surrounded by noise. It moves its head around constantly, looking for the source of the directionless sound. It eventually emerges from beneath the canopy and the volume of the noise subsides.

Both of the body's feet are bare and the exposed flesh is rapidly wearing away. It leaves a greasy, bloody residue on the ground with virtually every footstep. Already there are insects feeding off this residue and also off the many other corpses scattered around the countryside. Amy's body has just passed another cadaver which died as the result of a car crash. The body is trapped in the wreckage of the car and it appears, over the course of the last seven days subsequent to its death, to have been picked at and ravaged by various scavenging animals. The sheer amount of dead meat which is now easily found almost everywhere is proving to be an unexpected benefit to many millions of predators and parasites. It is likely that over the coming months the population of these creatures will increase massively. The lack of any form of pest control will further allow their numbers to multiply unchecked. It is still very early days, but it is already clear that the removal of almost all of the human population will have an unprecedented effect on the ecosystem.

A brief moment of sunlight bathes the scene with unexpected brightness and warmth. Although unable to detect or understand the change in temperature, Amy's corpse does notice the increased light levels. The quality of its eyesight is still rudimentary and poor – it sees shapes and is aware of movement but has so far been unable to make out any level of finer detail. The sudden illumination allows it to see slightly more, but nothing of any significance. The control the body has over its eyes and its ability to absorb and interpret what it sees is improving, but at the same time its physical condition continues to deteriorate. The eyeballs and the associated nerves and muscles are rotting.

The body has reached a junction where the road it has been following joins a more major route. Here a crowd of bodies has gathered around a young survivor. Caught out in the open looking for food, a ten year old girl has become lost and has found herself dangerously exposed. With nowhere else to shelter she has shut herself in a telephone box. She is on the ground with her back pressed up against the door to prevent it from opening. There are already seven bodies surrounding the girl with a further three

approaching. Amy Steadman's corpse is now also close. Whilst the young survivor has learnt that by keeping still and silent she can evade detection by the corpses, her situation is so unexpected and unnerving that she is finding it impossible to contain her fear and emotion. She is sobbing uncontrollably, and the bodies on the other side of the glass are reacting to every sound. Although they don't understand why, they are driven to try and get closer to her. One of them begins to bang on the glass, and this new sound attracts the attention of even more nearby cadavers.

Steadman's corpse has now reached the telephone box. Although it does not understand what it is doing, the body has an instinctive, insatiable desire to reach the source of the disturbance at all costs. It reaches out and grabs hold of the nearest corpse and awkwardly attempts to pull itself nearer to the survivor. Less decayed than some of the surrounding cadavers, it clumsily rips at them and pulls and pushes them out of the way. Their rotting flesh is weak and is literally torn from the bone. Steadman's body keeps moving until it is standing directly in front of the telephone box. It leans forward and presses its decaying face against the glass. The girl inside is now face down, covering her head in fear. Steadman's corpse stares down at it with dry, cold and unblinking eyes.

As long as the girl continues to move or make any noise the bodies will remain.

JACKSON

You can learn a lot about them by watching.

I'm not a biologist or a doctor. I don't know what's happened to them or why it hasn't happened to me. I don't know if I'm immune or whether it will get me eventually. I might only have a day left, I might live for another twenty years. I know hardly anything, except how to survive.

I never had any training for this kind of thing. I did a couple of years in the Boy Scouts but that was the limit of my experience. I could have done with a stretch in the forces, but it wasn't for me. I couldn't stand the shouting and the discipline. I've never been able to handle being told what to do. I work better on my own and I always have done. I get on with other people (not that there are many other people left) but if I'm given the choice I prefer my own company. Especially now. I wouldn't be able to trust anyone else to be quiet enough or still enough when the bodies are about. The world is dead and everything I do is exaggerated by the stillness.

If I move they see me. If I make a sound they hear me. Hear me breathe and they want to kill me.

So what have I learned about them? Well, forgetting about what they used to be before it happened, they're pretty simple and easy to read. There's not a lot of conscious thought going on inside those empty skulls. Actually I've got no idea what's happening inside their festering brains and their rotting bodies, but I have noticed more and more of them following certain behaviours. And those behaviours seem to be changing. What they're doing today isn't necessarily what they're going to be doing tomorrow.

It's almost a week now since it happened. They lay still for a while, and I checked enough of them to

know that they were dead. Well their bodies certainly were, but I think that something inside must have survived. And whatever part of them has resisted the disease, it seems to have been growing steadily stronger ever since. It began when they picked themselves up and started to move again, and then they were able to hear and see. Over the last day I've noticed that they've become even more animated and controlled. They're beginning to show some rudimentary emotions too. They're showing anger, although it could actually be frustration and pain. No doubt that's going to make things more complicated for me in the long run.

Enough of this. Thinking like this is a waste of time. Hypothesizing pointlessly about what might and might not be happening to them isn't going to help me. All I can do is respond to the changes day by day and hope that I can stay one step ahead of the game. My comparative strength and my intelligence should be enough to see me through. I just have to keep control and hold my nerve. Start to get jumpy or twitchy and I'll start to make mistakes. Make mistakes and I've had it.

These things don't communicate with each other, in fact they're fiercely independent and I've seen them tearing each other apart. That said, they do also have a strange tendency to move together in large groups. It's almost like they're herding. If something happens which attracts the attention of one or two of them, more and more seem to follow until there's a huge crowd around whatever it was that caused the disturbance. I can use that behaviour to my advantage, but there are disadvantages too. The advantages? When they're together it's easy to pick them off. I haven't yet, but I can imagine being able to take hundreds of them out at a time if I have to. The disadvantages? Pretty obvious really. If I'm the one making the noise and causing the disturbance, I'm screwed.

There are other benefits to be gained from attacking them when they're grouped together. Apart from the obvious plus of getting rid of masses of the damn things with one hit, it also takes the heat off me for a while. Even starting a small fire is enough to flush them out from a wide surrounding area. The stupid things can't help themselves. They stumble towards the heat or light or noise or whatever without giving me a second look. I can virtually walk past them and they don't notice. Their senses are obviously pretty dull and basic. Give them something obvious to focus on and they don't seem to see anything else. It's like they can only concentrate on one thing at a time.

The darkness is my friend. These things are still pretty awkward and clumsy and they'd struggle to catch me, even if I gave them a chance. Take away their sight, though, and the advantage I have over them increases massively. I now travel almost exclusively at night. I only risk walking out in daylight when I'm out in the middle of nowhere and I know there are only a few of them about.

So what am I planning to do? I'm going to keep travelling in one direction for a while, probably north but I might head towards the coast in another direction. It's not going to be easy, but I can't think of anything else to do. Why the coast? Seems as good a place as any. Nowhere's going to be completely safe anymore. The coast strikes me as being rough and inhospitable, and with the ocean on one side I'll have less land to have to keep watching. It will be okay. I expect that as the bodies deteriorate they'll find it harder and harder to cause me any problems.

I'll be all right on my own. Maybe I'll get lonely, maybe I won't. Whatever happens, I'm just glad that I survived. In a strange way I'm almost looking forward to whatever the future brings. It'll be a future without the countless bullshit trappings of my previous daily life. A future without the drudgery of trying to hold down a job and pay bills. A future without politics, crap TV, religion and who knows what else. Who knows what's going to happen. And I know I'm being naïve, because for every problem the infection has solved, it's created another few thousand. You have to be positive though, don't you?

I often wonder how many people like me are left? Am I the only one, or are there hundreds of us creeping quietly through the shadows, avoiding the bodies and, by default, avoiding each other too.

Doesn't matter.

It'll be okay in the end.

More to the point, I'll be okay.

OFFICE POLITICS

There are thirty-seven houses on Marshwood Road. Only one of them has a freshly cut back lawn. Only one has had its dustbins emptied and the rubbish placed neatly in black plastic sacks at the end of the drive. Only one has had the curtains in its windows drawn each night and opened each morning since the infection destroyed more than ninety-nine percent of the population.

Different people deal with stress, loss and other emotional pressures in a wide range of different ways. Some implode, some explode. Some shrivel up and hide in the quietest, darkest corner they can find, others make themselves visible and make as much noise as possible. Some accept what was happened, others deny everything.

Simon Walters is handling what has happened to him particularly badly. The arrival of the infection and its subsequent repercussions and after-shocks has been little more than a trivial irritation which has further complicated his already utterly miserable existence. One of life's perennial victims, in his eyes no-one's misery can compare to his own. Walters cannot cope with what has happened all around him. As a last ditch defence mechanism he has shut out all other suffering to concentrate on his own.

The sudden clattering of Walters' battery-powered alarm clock shattered the early morning stillness of the house. He groaned, rolled over and switched it off. It sounded louder than ever this morning. How he hated that damn noise. No, he didn't just hate it, he absolutely bloody detested it. Especially today. When that unholy clanging began he knew it was time to get up and start another bloody day. The noise was marginally more bearable on Thursdays and Fridays as the weekend neared, but today was Monday, the beginning of yet another week, and the alarm sounded worse than ever.

'Morning, love,' he yawned as he rolled over onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. June, his wife lying next to him, didn't move. Lazy cow, he thought to himself. Okay, so she only had to drop the kids off at school and work and they didn't need to be there until just before nine, but she could at least make an effort once in a while and get up with him. She'd been the same all weekend. She hadn't got out of bed once. Perhaps when he came home from work tonight he'd sit her down and force her to talk. They needed to have a proper discussion about what was bothering her. God knows he needed to say something. Her personal hygiene standards were slipping. Her hair was greasy and lifeless and she was beginning to smell. He wondered whether she'd even been bothering to wash? He'd tried to say something to her about it yesterday afternoon but it was a delicate subject and he'd found it difficult to find the right words. He'd tried his hardest to be careful and tactful but he'd obviously said something

that had upset her because she'd not said a word back to him. She'd just stared into space and ignored him. She hadn't even had the decency to look at him. Late last night he'd brought her up a glass of wine and a slice of cake as a peace offering. She hadn't even touched them.

Walters rubbed his eyes and glanced over at the alarm clock again. Five past seven. He couldn't put it off any longer. There was no avoiding it, it was time to get up. Much as he wanted to curl up and pretend the day wasn't happening, he couldn't. He had responsibilities. He kicked the covers off his side of the bed, rolled over to the right and then yawned, stretched and stumbled to the bathroom.

This country is well on its way down the road to ruin, he decided as he stared at himself in the mirror. No water again. The taps had been dry for almost a week now. There really was no excuse. God, he thought to himself, I look awful. He looked tired, and that was because he was bloody tired. Tired of his family and their behaviour towards him, tired of his job and tired of himself. Forty-seven years of age and he'd found himself stuck in a deep, directionless rut. He couldn't see a way out. The only way he could see himself getting back in his family's good books would be to pander to them and buy them more, and the only way he could afford to buy them more stuff would be to get promoted at work or find himself a better job. Bloody hell, how he hated his job. He'd worked for the bank for more than twenty-five years and in that time he'd seen huge changes. It was no longer the same job he'd walked into after leaving school at age sixteen. Back then it had been a career to be proud of and working for a bank had given him some kind of status and standing in the community. People had once looked up to him and his colleagues but now he was little more than a glorified salesman, stood at the counter all day trying to sell loans, accounts and insurance policies to people who either already had enough loans, accounts and policies or who had only come into the bank to pay their gas bill. Maybe it was his own fault he thought sadly as he began to shave with his old electric razor. He'd seen plenty of people who'd joined the bank after him overtake him and be promoted through the ranks at speed. In fact, he'd trained three of the last five managers he'd worked for to be cashiers when they'd first joined the company.

The bank needs people like me, Walters decided as he tugged and pulled at the weekend's stubble with his razor. If it wasn't for people like me at the bottom, he thought, the high-flyers and the people at the top wouldn't be able to do their jobs and make their massive profits. Some of his colleagues laughed at him because he'd been in charge of the stationery cupboard for longer than most of them had been in the bank, but they'd be laughing on the other side of their faces if he didn't put in a stationery order, wouldn't they? How could they sell their loans and their accounts and their insurance policies without the right brochures and forms? And how could they fill them out without any pens? He did more for his branch and the company overall than any of them gave him credit for.

The batteries in his razor ran out mid-shave. The left side of his face was mostly clean shaven, the right still covered with long, dark stubble. Bloody typical.

They needed to go shopping. The kitchen cupboards were practically empty. He should have gone to the supermarket at the weekend. More to the point, June should have gone. Why was everything left to him all of a sudden? As he sat munching his dry cereal (no milk), Walters scribbled out a shopping list. He'd leave it on the table for June. Hopefully she'd get up later and go out and get everything they needed.

Walters looked around the kitchen dejectedly and shook his head. He wished he could understand what was going on. He'd never known anything like it. The water, gas and electricity supplies had been off since early last week. To lose one of them would have been bad enough, but all three? At the same time? He wondered what he bothered paying his bills for. And it wasn't as if he'd been able to get June to phone to complain either. The telephone had been out of action for just as long. He'd tried to phone

up himself from work last Friday but they'd had the same problem there. He sighed sadly to himself. Imagine the grief I'd get if I didn't do my job properly, he thought. There'd be hell to pay if the customers couldn't get access to their money.

As ready for work as he was ever going to be, Walters stood up and packed his lunch away into his briefcase. It wasn't really very much of a lunch, just a few dry crackers, some biscuits, a packet of crisps he'd found at the back of the cupboard and an apple, the skin of which felt slightly rubbery and wrinkled. He jammed his food in amongst the hundreds of old circulars, leaflets, handwritten notes and photocopied procedures that he carried to and from work every day. None of it was necessary (most of it was probably out of date) but it made him feel safer and more important carrying a case full of papers to the office. It was a security blanket of sorts, something to hide behind. He convinced himself it was necessary. He needed to be well-informed and up-to-date in case someone tried to get one over on him.

'Are any of you out of bed yet?' he yelled from the bottom of the stairs. Christ, what was happening to his family? Was he the only one who was bothered now? Agitated and nervous (he always felt that way before work) Walters put his briefcase down at the foot of the stairs and stormed back up to try and inject a little life and motivation into his lethargic family. He could hear something happening in Matthew's bedroom. At least he was up.

'Are you ready for school, Matt?' he asked as he pushed his way into his fourteen year-old son's room. What was left of Matthew was on the other side of the door, trying to claw its way out in reaction to hearing its father's voice. Walters shoved the door back and sent the wasted body of his son tripping backwards. 'Sorry about that, son,' he mumbled. The corpse regained its footing and lurched forward again, crashing into him. 'Steady on,' Walters laughed, 'take it easy!' Matthew's corpse grabbed at him with rough, uncoordinated hands. 'I haven't got time to mess about now,' he sighed wearily, assuming that the body was play-fighting with him, 'I've got to go to work now. I'll see you when I get back, okay?'

Laughing, Walters picked up the light, emaciated body and carried it across the room and dumped it on its bed. The corpse immediately stumbled back onto its feet and began to awkwardly stagger back towards the door.

'Make sure you change your sweatshirt before you go to school,' Walters ordered, pointing a disapproving finger at the dribbles of blood and other bodily emissions which had seeped down the front of his dead son's dark blue jumper. He left the room and pulled the door shut behind him, ignoring the heavy clump and clatter as what remained of his son smashed into the other side of the wooden barrier.

Just like her mother, he thought as he peeled back the bedclothes in the next room to reveal the head and shoulders of Emily, his daughter. She'd just turned seventeen when she'd died and had started work in a hairdressing salon three weeks earlier. He gently shook her shoulder and the lifeless body fell over onto its back. Its unmoving, vacant eyes stared through him unblinking.

'Don't you be late for work,' he whispered. 'You don't want to give them the wrong impression, do you?'

No response. Walters leant down and kissed his daughter's cold, discoloured cheek. There was a spider in her hair. He picked it out and flicked it across the room.

'See you tonight, love. Have a good day.'

Walters paused and took a deep breath before going back into the bedroom he shared with June.

'I'm off to work now,' he said quietly. 'I'll see you tonight. Maybe we could talk later? I'd like to

know what it is I'm supposed to have done...?'

For a moment he stood and stared sadly at the body in the bed. She didn't move. Eighteen years of marriage (some of them pretty good years too) and she couldn't even bring herself to acknowledge him. What had he done wrong?

Walters pushed his way through the growing crowd of rotting bodies gathered around his front gate and began the short walk to work. He didn't know why these people were there or what it was they wanted. They'd been there for days now. Didn't they have homes to go to? More to the point, didn't they have jobs to go to? Was he solely responsible for keeping the country running? It was certainly beginning to feel that way this morning. There wasn't a single car out on the roads. He couldn't see any of the usual faces he saw heading off to work or taking the children to school or walking the dog. All he could see were more of these dirty, ragged people. Some of them had tried to grab at him and pull his clothes as he passed them and he couldn't understand why. What did they want from him? What had he done to them? He ran to the end of the road, hoping that they would disappear by the time he got home tonight.

His first port of call (as it was every morning) was the newsagents on the corner of Marshwood Road and Calder Street. The shop was quiet. Walters picked up his usual paper (last Tuesday's again – bloody annoying – he'd bought the same paper seven times now) and dug deep in his pocket for some change. There was no-one about to serve him (again). In temper he slammed the coins down on the counter (next to the coins he'd left there yesterday morning) and left the shop, yet again cursing the desperate state of the country under his breath as he stormed back outside.

More bodies. He pushed them out of the way and marched towards the high street, a man on a mission.

Walters hated his job. As he did every morning, he felt his guts tighten and churn and his bowels loosen as he neared the bank. A tall, traditional and imposing late-nineteenth century building, its architectural beauty had been destroyed by the array of perspex signs which hung above and around its solid wooden doors, the gaudy advertising hoardings plastered across the inside of its large, arched windows, and the ATM which had been crow-barred into what had once been a street-level window. Ignoring the unwanted attention of yet another rancid, dribbling corpse which hurled itself at him, he paused to check the screen of the ATM. Bloody thing was down again. No doubt he'd get the blame. Nothing short of 99.85% uptime was good enough for the bank. Another target missed, and he hadn't even made it through the front door yet.

The staff door at the side of the building was already open. That was completely against the company's security policy. Which idiot had left it open? Didn't they know there was a strict security procedure to be followed each morning before anyone could go inside? Angrily he stormed into the building and slammed and bolted the door shut behind him. He'd let himself out last thing on Friday evening and he'd assumed that one of the others would have locked the doors after him. Christ, could the bank have been left open all weekend?

By quarter past nine only three other members of staff had arrived for work. The branch manager (Brian Statham, ten years Walters' junior) had already been in his office when Walters had arrived, pacing about furiously, slamming into the door and occasionally banging against the glass. Two of the other clerks – Janice Phelps and Tom Compton – were dead at their desks. Janice was slumped over

her computer terminal whilst Compton had fallen off his chair and lay spread-eagled on the carpet. Walters was appalled by the lack of work being done around him. He knocked on Statham's door to try and get something done about it but his manager seemed unconcerned and was only marginally more responsive than the others. He took it upon himself to try and improve the situation. There was no way they could run the branch on a skeleton staff like this, was there? He dug out the telephone numbers of some of the missing staff from their personnel files and tried to call them to find out where they were and what was happening. He cursed when he couldn't get the telephones to work. The damn lines were still down.

He just had to get on with it, Walters decided. It was half-past nine, time to open the branch to the public, and it was all down to him again as usual. He disappeared back into the manager's office and took the front door key from his desk drawer. He then walked the length of the banking hall, unlocked the heavy wooden doors and pulled them open.

Nothing happened. A few random figures in the street stopped and turned around to see what the noise was but, other than that, nothing happened. Walters sadly remembered a time when the banking hall would have been filled with an endless queue of customers all day every Monday, and the queue would have been out the door first thing. How things had changed.

He dejectedly wandered back and took up his position behind his till.

Walters didn't mind hard work. He could cope with an in-tray piled high with papers and a huge queue of customers at the counter. None of that bothered him just as long as everyone was pulling his or her weight. He'd happily work until midnight if everyone else worked that late too. But today that wasn't happening. He was already annoyed by the fact that less than half of the staff of the branch had turned up for work today. What was really winding him up, however, was the fact that he was the only one who seemed to be doing anything.

It was almost midday. The bank had been slowly filling with customers for the last half-hour. After waiting until almost eleven o'clock before the first customer of the day had appeared, a ragged bunch of them had now dragged themselves up the concrete wheelchair access ramp and through the doors. Unsavoury looking types, they hadn't actually seemed to want anything, they'd just wandered up and down on the other side of the glass panel which separated the back-office from the public area. Walters had shouted at them and tried to get them to come to his till. They'd crowded round when they heard his voice, but he still didn't know what it was they actually wanted.

Behind the counter absolutely nothing was happening. Walters glanced back over his shoulder occasionally and shook his head in despair. Lazy bastards, he thought to himself, you bunch of lazy bastards. There he was, trying his best to deal with the customers, while they just sat there and did nothing. Janice was still face down on her computer keyboard and Compton hadn't yet got up from the floor. Statham – inexperienced, overpaid and bloody useless in Walters' opinion – was still pacing up and down in his office. None of them had lifted a bloody finger to help him all morning.

Usually he could take it. Usually he'd stand at his till and stew about them in silence or he'd find a reason to disappear off to the stationery room and hide there for as long as he could, forcing the others to serve a few customers. Today was different. Today the others weren't only doing very little, they were doing absolutely nothing. Walters wasn't prepared to sit back and let them take advantage any longer. He'd had enough. Maybe it was the lack of respect shown to him by his family that had pushed him over the edge? Perhaps it was the dire and deteriorating state of the country? Was it the fact that the customers in the banking hall (and there were more of them now) were all but ignoring him too? Could it

have been the appalling conditions he suddenly had to work under? No heat or light, no computer or telephone, and not even any money in his bloody till. Whatever it was that had tipped the balance, he decided at last it was time to do something about it. For the first time in as long as he could remember he was finally ready to stand up for himself and speak his mind.

‘Staff meeting,’ he shouted suddenly. The bodies in the banking hall turned towards the noise and slammed up against the glass, trying desperately to get to him. A short distance away Brian Statham’s body also threw itself against the door of its office. Unperturbed, Walters slid his ‘till closed’ sign into position and closed his till drawers. ‘I want a staff meeting right now,’ he demanded angrily. ‘I’ve had enough of this.’

Ignoring the rotting clientele on the other side of the counter (whose numbers were rapidly increasing as a direct result of his sudden outburst) Walters strode up to the door of the manager’s office and flung it wide open in temper. Statham’s body lurched towards him.

‘We need to talk, Brian,’ he said as he shoved the decaying bank manager back into its room and blocked its way out with its desk. ‘Things just can’t go on like this. I’ll get the others in.’

Suddenly feeling strangely empowered, Walters strode back out into the main office. He grabbed hold of Janice Phelps’ shoulder and peeled her back from her computer before tipping her back on her swivel chair and wheeling her through to the manager’s room. Tom Compton was heavier and a little more awkward. He dragged him along the floor before putting his arms under the dead man’s shoulders and lifting him up and sitting him down on one of the customer chairs on the other side of the office. His body was bloody heavy. Walters had to use all his strength to get him in and get him sat down.

With Statham trapped behind his desk and the other two now in position, Walters took the floor.

‘You all know me pretty well,’ he began, suddenly trembling with nerves, hoping that the others couldn’t tell. ‘I’m a reasonable man and I’ll do whatever’s expected of me.’ He paused and looked around at the lifeless faces which surrounded him. Ignorant bastards weren’t even looking at him. He continued regardless. ‘We’ve all got a job to do here. Now in the past you might have thought that you were better than me and that your jobs were more important than mine, but I want to put things straight. We’re all small cogs in a much bigger machine.’ He paused again, pleased with the cliché he’d just managed to slip into his address. It made him sound more confident than he actually was, although his nerves were now beginning to fade slightly. ‘Without me none of you would be able to do your jobs properly.’ He took another deep breath before making another crucial point. ‘Without me this branch wouldn’t function.’

Walters paused for a moment to let the others fully absorb the enormity of what he was saying. Almost on cue Compton’s body slid off the chair he’d left it on. Its head hit the wall with a dull thud. Walters, thrown off his stride momentarily, seethed with anger. He picked up the corpse and threw it back onto its seat.

‘You see,’ he yelled, finding it hard to keep calm and controlled, ‘that’s exactly the kind of thing I wanted to talk to you lot about. You all think it’s funny, don’t you? You think you can all have a good laugh at my expense. Well you can’t, not any more. I’ve had enough. I’ve had enough of being the butt of all your stupid bloody jokes and of having to do all the donkey work around here. It’s not fair, do you hear me?’

Statham’s corpse became more and more animated as the volume of Walters’ voice increased. Other than that, however, the other dead bodies failed to respond. Their lack of reaction incensed him.

‘How dare you?’ he screamed. ‘How dare you treat me like this? Show me some bloody respect,

will you? I've been working flat out this morning while you've all been sat on your backsides doing nothing. If I stopped working like you lot then this place would grind to a halt in seconds. Well things are going to change round here. I'm not going to carry you anymore, do you hear me? From now on you're on your own...'

Still no response.

Walters grabbed Janice Phelps by the scruff of her neck and screamed into her dead, decaying, discoloured face.

'Are you listening to me?'

Janice wasn't, but the other bodies in the building clearly were. The dead hordes in the banking hall began to beat their rotting fists against the walls, driven wild by the desperate man's voice. Walters ignored the noise as best he could.

'There's not a lot that any of us can do today, not until the power comes back on anyway,' he said, his voice now fractionally calmer. 'I'm going to shut the branch and I suggest we all go home. We'll come back tomorrow morning and try again, shall we?'

He looked around the room again for a response but didn't get one. The hammering on the wall behind him continued unabated.

Walters stood in the middle of the manager's office for a moment, surrounded by his dead colleagues, and he realised that he felt a little better. The others hadn't agreed with him, but they hadn't turned against him either. More importantly, he'd just taken a managerial decision and no-one had argued. Could it be that he was about to be shown some respect? Had the rest of them finally realised just how important he was to this office and to the company? Bloody hell, he thought, maybe he should try the same approach on his family when he got back home. Maybe he could make them listen to him too?

'I'm going to lock the door,' he said, his voice suddenly cocksure and uncharacteristically strong.

He still had the key in his pocket from when he'd opened up hours earlier. Brimming with unexpected confidence he stepped over the outstretched feet of Compton's body (which had slid down off the chair again) and left the manager's office. He walked through the back-office and made his way towards the heavy security door which separated the staff from the customers. Security conscious as ever, he peered through the fish-eye lens viewing hole before going through. Bloody hell, he thought, the banking hall was suddenly full of customers. Now this was how it always used to be on a Monday. With no computers working and no cash in his till he couldn't serve them of course. He'd just have to go out there and make an announcement. He'd tell the customers how things were going to be in the same way he'd just told the staff. He was getting pretty damn good at taking charge of situations.

A deep breath and he opened the door. A sudden, second-long pause followed before the huge mass of rotting flesh which had filled the building turned and lurched towards him. Ignorant to the sudden danger of his situation, Walters pushed deeper into the crowd, fighting to move forward as everything else pressed against him.

'If you could just bear with me for a second please, ladies and gentlemen,' he shouted as he struggled to stay upright. A sudden surge of decaying corpses from the general direction of the main entrance door knocked him off-balance and altered his direction. He found himself shuffling helplessly further back into the building and reached out to try and stop himself moving. The bodies pushed him back against the wooden counter. He climbed up onto the other side of his own till and stood tall above

the crowd. Before trying to speak again he brushed himself down. He was covered in stains from the customers.

‘Now look,’ he shouted, ‘I’m sorry but we’ve got some problems here today. Our computer systems are down and staff shortages mean that we’ve not been able to get into the safe. I apologise for any inconvenience, but I’m going to have to ask you all to leave. If you’d like to come back tomorrow morning I’m sure we’ll be able to...’

Another forward surge in the crowd interrupted him. The sound of his voice seemed to be attracting interest from all around. The bank was filling up instead of emptying. For some strange reason more and more people were trying to get inside. The situation was beginning to get uncomfortable.

‘Look,’ Walters tried again, ‘I realise this is out of the ordinary and I understand that you’ve been inconvenienced, but I do need your cooperation. There really is nothing more I can do for you today. Please come back tomorrow when I’ll be more than happy to...’

Damn. They still weren’t listening. Still more people were trying to cram into the building. Walters couldn’t stand it when people didn’t listen to him.

‘Please,’ he yelled, now shouting at the top of his voice again to make sure that even the people still struggling in the doorway to get inside could hear him, ‘let’s have some common-sense here...’

Without realising it had happened Walters had gradually been forced further and further back along the counter. He now found himself at the opposite end of the banking hall to the doors he’d originally intended closing. Between him and the other end of the long, narrow room were at least a hundred furious customers. He looked down into the faces of the nearest few. Christ, they looked angry. If he wasn’t careful the situation might turn nasty. He banged on the wall behind him, hoping that one of the others in the manager’s room would hear him and come out to help.

‘Could I have a hand out here please,’ he shouted, watching anxiously as another wave of bodies attempted to cram themselves into the already tightly-packed building. ‘Tony... Brian... could one of you come and...’

His words were cut short as the heaving movement of the bodies at the far end of the building rippled along the room and reached him. With nowhere else to go the closest of them reached up for him. Two or three of them managed to catch hold of the bottom of his bank uniform trousers. He recoiled and tried to pull away but lost his footing. He slipped down from the counter and fell into the bodies below him like a bizarre middle-aged crowd surfer at a concert. Panicking, and fearing for his life, he covered his head with his hands and curled himself up into a ball. He had to move. Crawling on his hands and knees he began to slowly move forward, weaving through the forest of decomposing feet which continued to stagger deeper into the bank. For a fraction of a second he thought about trying to help the others get out but he knew he couldn’t go back. Without him realising it had happened the coward in him had suddenly been allowed to take control again. The momentary flame of strength and defiance that had burned today had suddenly been extinguished just as quickly as it had been lit. Terrified he closed his eyes and kept pushing forward, ignoring the countless bodies which stood and blocked his way, working his way around them. He accidentally knocked a handful of them down and they fell like skittles. He kept on moving, forcing himself on inch by slow and painful inch until he was level with the front door of the bank. Should he try and stand up to close and lock it? He knew it was impossible – he’d never be able to do it. Knowing that he was weak and hating himself for his lack of courage and strength, Walters instead kept on crawling forward until he was out of the building, down the ramp and onto the street. The crowd slightly thinner, he picked himself up and began to run, glancing back at the overrun bank for a second before sprinting towards home.

Ten o'clock. A half-eaten can of cold baked beans and three-quarters of a bottle of whiskey later.

The house was silent, save for the occasional thump from Matthew upstairs. Walters sat alone in darkness at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. He couldn't stop thinking about the events of the day now drawing to an end. It was one thing that he'd left the bank wide open and abandoned his colleagues, but it was another aspect of the dark day just passed which concerned him more. For a moment back there today he'd actually felt like somebody and it had felt good. It had felt damn good. But he'd been brought back down to earth with a harsh and sudden bump. The bitter truth was that he was still a nobody. A forty-seven year old stationery clerk and cashier with no prospects, a family that weren't interested in him and an increasingly bleak future. Maybe he should just accept where he was and who he was and do his best to live with it? Stick with what you know, that had always been one of his father's sayings. Don't take risks and don't take chances. We're not all made for great things. Stick with what you know.

Walters got up from his seat and shuffled out into the hallway. He paused to look out at the dark crowd of bodies at the end of his drive before wearily climbing the stairs to bed, a final tumbler of whiskey in his hand. He undressed, put his dirty shirt in the washing basket with all the others, and then put on his pyjamas. He could still hear Matthew banging around in his bedroom. Bloody teenagers, he thought. He should be sleeping or resting or at the very least studying. If only his son knew what he had to put up with every day. His attitude would soon change if he was the one who had to face the daily indignities and humiliations of office politics. Christ, he hoped Matthew didn't make the same mistakes he had. If only he'd worked harder at school and not just taken the first job he'd been offered after leaving...

No point dwelling on all that now, he thought as he climbed into bed behind June. She had her back to him. She was still in the same position as he'd left her this morning. She hadn't done the washing or the shopping. In fact, it looked like she'd been in bed all day again. Bloody hell, she didn't know how easy she had it. If she'd had to put up with what he'd faced today...

He wrapped his arm around his wife's cold, lifeless and rapidly putrefying body and pulled her close. He wished she'd talk to him. He didn't want to go to sleep yet. He wanted someone to listen to his problems and reassure him that he was doing his best and that it was the rest of them who'd got it wrong. The silence was deafening.

Walters felt humiliated and let down by everyone, even those closest to him. He'd tried so hard today but, ultimately, all he'd done was make matters worse for himself. Christ, how was he going to face them all at work tomorrow?

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Part i – GOING UP

Barry Bushell sat at the dressing table in his wide, palatial executive hotel suite and fixed his make-up. He wondered whether this was just a fad – just a phase he was going through – or whether he was destined to spend the rest of his life dressing as a woman. He wasn't gay and he wasn't transsexual. This wasn't something he'd always wanted to do. He wasn't a drag queen or lady-boy in training. Barry Bushell was just a typical, red-bloodied, heterosexual man who happened to have recently discovered that he felt comfortable wearing women's clothes. And when the rest of the world lay decaying a couple of hundred feet below him, why the hell shouldn't he wear whatever he damn well wanted?

The last seven days had been the strangest, darkest and longest seven days of Bushell's life so far. Everything had been changed forever. If he was honest, his problems had started long before last Tuesday. A few months ago he'd been happy and settled. He'd moved in to his girlfriend Tina's flat with her and, for a time, life had been good. Their relationship had abruptly ended on what had, until then, been the worst day of his life. Out of the blue Bushell lost his job when a huge black hole was discovered in the accounts of the company he'd worked for and they were forced into administration. Gutted and penniless, he'd returned to the flat unexpectedly to find his brother Dennis in bed with Tina. She'd proceeded to tell him that Dennis was better in bed than he was and that their relationship was over. By three o'clock that afternoon he'd lost his partner, his brother, his job and his home. That nightmare day had, of course, seemed like the best Christmas ever in comparison with last Tuesday. Last Tuesday morning Bushell had helplessly watched as the entire population of the city (and, he later presumed, the country and perhaps even the world) had fallen and died. After the cruel and unexpected hand that life had dealt him recently, there was a part of him that found some slight comfort and solace in the sudden isolation and quiet. His pent up anger and frustration with the world made the pain, fear, confusion and disorientation slightly easier to deal with. Subconsciously he blamed the inexplicable trauma which had unfolded around him for his sudden 'gender-realignment' (as he had labelled his drastic change in appearance). And now here he was, alone and, as far as he could tell, the last man on Earth. Almost certainly the last man on Earth in a dress, anyway.

Five days ago many of the bodies lying dead in the streets had risen. At first he'd gone back down to ground level to try and find out what was happening, only to quickly return to his isolated and comfortable hide-out as soon as he realised that the situation had worsened, not improved. The people wandering the streets down there were dead. Although they moved, there wasn't the slightest spark of life left within them. Their sudden reanimation was as improbable and impossible to explain as their equally sudden demise had been just days earlier. Bushell climbed all the way back to the top of the twenty-eight storey, five star city-centre hotel and barricaded himself in the Presidential Suite on the twenty-eighth floor. It was the safest and most sensible place that he could think of to hide. Within the hotel's three hundred or so bedrooms, many kitchens, function rooms, dining rooms, bars, restaurants and sports facilities he'd been able to find pretty much everything he'd need to survive, and a vast wardrobe of women's clothing, make-up and accessories to boot.

He stood up, smoothed the creases out of his dark blue dress, and looked himself up and down in the full-length mirror to his right. God I look good, he thought, pretty damn convincing. His first experiments with make-up last week had been over-the-top and amateurish but now he was definitely getting the hang of it. He wore a long, straight blonde wig which he'd taken from a shop-window dummy but he hoped that in time his own hair would grow to a sufficient length for him to be able to style it. He'd stopped biting and started painting his fingernails and he was finally getting the hang of walking in heels. That had been the hardest part of all but it had been worth all the effort. The knee-high leather boots he'd found in a bedroom on the seventh floor looked perfect with this outfit.

Am I confused, Bushell thought to himself in a moment of self-doubt, or have I just gone completely fucking insane? Whatever the answer to his question, he was relatively happy and, all things considered, he felt good. He could do whatever he wanted now. He was in charge. If he wanted to wear a dress then he'd wear a dress. If he wanted to walk around naked, then that was what he'd do.

It was starting to get late. This was the time of day he really didn't like. This was when he found it hardest being alone and when he started to think about everything that had happened and everything he'd lost. His sudden change of outfit had been deliberately timed to give him a much needed confidence boost to help him get through the long, dark and lonely hours until morning. As much as he was comfortable in his own company, there were times when he needed the isolation to end and when he desperately needed to see and speak to other people. He lit lamps in all the windows of the suite at this time every night, praying that someone out there would see them but at the same time also hoping that no-one would. He had to let the world know where he was, but in doing so he left himself feeling vulnerable and exposed. But he couldn't not do it, he continually reminded himself. He would be safer with other people around him. Problem was that so far there hadn't been any other people...

Bushell walked around the perimeter of the vast suite (which covered almost the entire top floor of the building) lighting candles, lamps and torches in every available window.

Distracted by the increasing complications of his own already complex situation, he remained blissfully unaware of sudden movement and confusion outside. For the first time in a week a vehicle had entered the city.

'You're a stupid fucking idiot, Wilcox,' Elizabeth Ferry screamed hysterically. 'I said keep out of the city, not drive right through the bloody city-centre. Fancy a little late night shopping do we?'

'Shut up,' Wilcox hissed. 'If it hadn't been for the fucking noise you two make with your constant bloody talking I wouldn't have taken the wrong turn in the first place!'

'Don't bring me into this,' Doreen Phillips snapped. 'It's got nothing to do with me.'

'It's never got anything to do with you, has it, Doreen?' piped up Ted Hamilton from the seat directly behind her. 'Of course it's your fault. It's got everything to do with you. You're a bloody trouble maker, you are.'

Doreen turned round and glared at Ted who, as usual, was filling his face with chocolate.

'And you're a fat bastard who should...'

'For Christ's sake,' Elizabeth sighed, interrupting her, 'give it a rest, will you?'

Doreen immediately stopped talking, folded her arms and slumped into her seat like a scolded child.

'Just keep going,' John Proctor's comparatively calm voice suggested from three seats back. 'We're here now and shouting at each other isn't going to help. Just keep driving.'

Nick Wilcox took one hand off the steering wheel for a couple of seconds, just long enough to rub his tired eyes. He'd been driving for what felt like hours and he was struggling but he wasn't about to let the others know. They annoyed him beyond belief. He'd so far only found five other living, breathing human beings since all of this began. So why did it have to be this five?

This ragged, dysfunctional group of survivors had been together for just three days. They'd found

each other by chance as they'd each individually wandered through the remains of the devastated world. Elizabeth and John Proctor had been the first to meet, Elizabeth having walked into the church where Proctor used to preach just as he was tearing off his dog-collar and walking out. A cleric of some thirty years standing, his already wavering faith had been shattered by the cruel and unstoppable infection which had raged across the surface of the planet. If this God is so powerful, loving and forgiving, he'd asked Elizabeth, then how could the fucker let this happen? Proctor's sudden loss of faith had been as powerful and life-changing as his initial discovery of the church had been in his early days at college. In all seriousness Elizabeth had suggested that the plague might be some kind of divine retribution – a Noah's ark for our times. Proctor told her in no uncertain terms that he thought she was out of her fucking mind.

Ted Hamilton, a plumber, part-time football coach and full-time compulsive comfort eater, had been on the roof of an office block working on the water pipes when the infection had struck. He'd had an incredible view of the destruction from up there but he'd been too afraid to come down. He'd sat on the roof for hours until he saw Doreen Phillips walking down the high street, shopping bags in hand, stepping gingerly over and around the mass of tangled bodies which covered the pavements. Together they'd wandered around aimlessly and pointlessly in search of help which never came. Their constant shouting and noise had eventually attracted the attention of Paul Jones, a sullen and quiet man who kept himself to himself but who recognised the importance of sticking with these people, no matter who they were or how stupid they appeared.

Jones had suggested building themselves a base from where they could explore the dead land around them and, hopefully, find more survivors. As obvious and sensible as his plan had been, it also proved to be unnecessary. As they struggled to establish themselves in a deserted guest house on the edge of a small town, more survivors had found them. Three days ago the eerie silence of the first post-infection Friday morning had been disturbed by the unexpected arrival of a fifty-three-seater single-deck passenger bus driven by Nick Wilcox. Wilcox – who had previously driven such buses for a living – had ploughed through the town with a nervous disregard for anything and everything. Jones and Hamilton flagged him down and it was only the quick reactions of Elizabeth Ferry (who, with John Proctor, was already travelling with Wilcox) that stopped him from gleefully running them down in the same way he'd destroyed several hundred rotting bodies already that morning.

The motley collection of survivors made the bus their travelling home. It was relatively strong, comfortable and spacious and there was more than enough room inside for them, their belongings, and as many boxes of provisions and supplies as they could lay their hands on. And the bus had a huge advantage over everywhere else they'd previously tried to shelter because it moved. When things got too dangerous or there were suddenly too many bodies around they just started the engine and drove somewhere else.

'Just keep driving, Nick,' Proctor said, his calm and deceptively relaxed tone helping to settle the group and diffuse the mounting hysteria within the bus. 'Just keep going until we reach a major road then follow it back out of the city.'

'I can't see the bloody road,' Wilcox cursed anxiously through gritted teeth, 'never mind follow it.' Even with his headlights on full-beam he could see very little. The streets were teeming with movement as the dead continually staggered into the path of the huge, bulky vehicle. His vision already severely limited, he was forced to frequently flick on his wipers to clear blood, gore and other splattered remains from the wide windscreen in front of him.

'Does anyone know where we are?' Elizabeth asked hopefully. 'Anyone been here before?'

Her question was met with silence from the others.

‘We could just stop,’ Ted Hamilton suggested, his mouth still full of food. ‘We’ve done it before, haven’t we? Sit still and shut up and they’ll leave us alone after a while.’

‘Come on, Ted,’ Elizabeth sighed, ‘there’s got to be a better way. They’ll take hours to go, you know that as well as I do, and there are hundreds of them around here. I don’t want to spend another night lying on the floor.’

‘I’m not sleeping on the floor again,’ Doreen immediately protested in her grating, high-pitched voice. ‘It’s bad for my back. When we did...’

‘Doreen,’ Hamilton interrupted, ‘with all due respect, love, would you please shut your fucking mouth. You couldn’t keep quiet if you tried.’

Wilcox managed half a smile as he steered the bus around a sharp bend in the road and powered into another group of shuffling corpses. He knew as well as the rest of them that several hours of absolute stillness and silence would be necessary if they wanted to try and fool the bodies into leaving them alone. With Doreen on board it was impossible to have even five minutes of silence, never mind anything longer.

‘Bloody hell,’ Hamilton said suddenly, swallowing his last mouthful of food and wiping his mouth on his sleeve. ‘Look at that.’

‘Look at what?’ Paul Jones asked, quickly moving forward along the length of the bus towards the others and surprising them with his sudden involvement. Hamilton pressed his face up against the window and pointed up.

‘There,’ he mumbled.

‘What is it?’ demanded Elizabeth anxiously. Apart from Wilcox (who was craning his neck to see what was going on from behind the wheel) the rest of the survivors stared out into the unending darkness on the left hand side of the bus, not knowing what they were looking for but desperate to see whatever it was that Hamilton thought he’d seen.

‘A light,’ he said quietly, not quite believing himself, ‘up there.’

Visible fleetingly between the tall, dark buildings which lined the streets along which they drove, the light – although relatively dull – appeared to burn brightly through the otherwise total blackness.

‘Head towards it,’ Doreen demanded.

‘Where is it?’ Wilcox yelled.

‘Over to the left,’ Proctor replied. ‘You watch the road and we’ll keep an eye on the light.’

High above the disease-ridden streets Bushell’s quiet and solitary life seemed now to be filled with a series of infuriating contradictions. He wanted to be surrounded by light, but the brightness made him feel vulnerable and exposed. Likewise darkness made him feel safe but it was also unsettling and cold and he was scared of the shadows that filled the hotel at night. He wanted to hear some noise to end the eerie silence but, at the same time, he wanted the quiet to remain so that he could hear everything that was happening in the dead world around him. He wanted to sit out of sight in the relative comfort of his suite but he also felt compelled to check each window and stare outside almost constantly. He knew that he was alone in the building and that it was secure (he’d checked every one of the rooms and had kicked

out every moving body himself over the last week) but an uneasy combination of nerves and paranoia convinced him almost constantly that there were bodies on the staircases and walking the halls. He felt sure that rotting hands would reach out of the shadows for him whenever he opened a door. Whatever he was doing he felt uncomfortable and unsafe. It was far easier to handle the situation in daylight. Each night he found the darkness harder to cope with, and that led to the cruellest paradox of all. Bushell's fear would keep him awake through almost the entire night. Only when the morning (and the light) came was he finally able to relax enough to sleep. Invariably he would drift and doze through the morning and early afternoon and miss almost all of the precious daylight.

He wandered listlessly along the long west wall of the suite, the stiletto heels of his boots clicking on the marble floor. Where was this going to end, he wondered? Would he stay here at the top of the hotel indefinitely? It wasn't a bad option, in fact he struggled to think of anywhere else that would be safer or more comfortable. The height of the building meant that it was unlikely the corpses down below would ever see or hear him. The only problem would come when his supplies started to dwindle as they inevitably would. Okay, so he appeared to have the entire city at his disposal, but even if he managed to find everything he needed, there then remained the problem of dragging it up literally hundreds of steps to his new home. Maybe he could set up some kind of winch or pulley system? Perhaps he could use the window-cleaner's cradle that he'd seen hanging halfway down the side of the building?

His mind full of questions and half-considered answers, Bushell reached the corner of the room and stopped walking. He turned round and was about to begin retracing his steps back along the wall when he happened to glance down into the dark streets hundreds of feet below. In silent disbelief he watched the bizarre sight of a fairly ordinary looking bus ploughing through the rotting crowds, sending whole and dismembered bodies flying in all directions and hurtling at speed towards the hotel. He waited for a fraction of a second – just long enough to convince himself that what he was seeing was real – before sprinting out of the suite and down the hallway to the staircase.

'Next left,' Paul Jones instructed. He'd moved to the front of the bus and was now standing next to the driver's cab, doing his best to guide Wilcox through the mayhem and towards the light. 'No, sorry, not this one. Take the next one.'

Wilcox grunted and pulled the steering wheel back round to his right. Uneasy, Jones glanced down and across at the various dials in front of the driver. The bus was travelling at a furious speed along the debris-strewn streets and its passengers were being buffeted from side to side. The breakneck journey was so unsteady and turbulent that even Doreen Phillips had become uncharacteristically quiet and subdued.

'Can you see where it's coming from?' Wilcox asked, glancing up for a second to try and catch sight of the light again.

'Not sure,' Jones admitted. 'It's bloody high up though.'

Wilcox braced himself as he forced the bus up and over a mound of rubble and mangled metal at the side of the road. The passengers behind him – not expecting the sudden jolt – were thrown up in their seats as the huge machine clattered up and then back down onto the road.

'Take it easy,' protested Hamilton.

'Next left,' Jones said for the second time, his voice now a little more definite than before.

'You sure?'

‘Positive,’ he snapped, annoyed that he was being doubted. ‘I can see it. We’re almost directly under the light now.’

Wilcox slammed on his brakes and swung the bus around to the left. The second street was as difficult to navigate as the first. Huge crowds of lumbering, rotting bodies turned and dragged themselves towards the approaching vehicle. Wilcox increased his already precarious speed, knowing that the quicker they were moving, the more chance they had of continuing to make progress through the rancid crowds. Countless corpses were obliterated by the flat-faced front of the heavy vehicle. They smashed into the bonnet with a relentless bang, bang, bang which sounded like rain clattering down onto a flat tin roof.

‘How far now?’ he asked breathlessly.

Jones crouched down low and looked up to his right.

‘Almost there.’

Proctor got up from his seat and scurried towards the two men at the front of the bus, holding onto the passenger rails and supports and struggling to keep his balance as the vehicle tipped from side to side.

‘It’s a hotel,’ he said, panting with excitement and nerves. ‘There’s a sign on the side of the building.’

Wilcox nodded.

‘So where do I go?’ he asked, peering hopelessly into the relentless gloom.

‘There must be a car park or something?’ Proctor suggested. ‘Maybe it’s around the back...?’

‘Fancy walking out in the open carrying all our stuff, do you?’ Jones immediately snapped. ‘Forget that, it’s too dangerous. We need to get as close to the main entrance as we can. We need to minimise the distance we have to cover on foot.’

‘How am I supposed to do that?’ grumbled Wilcox. ‘I can’t see a fucking thing.’

‘Here it is,’ Jones interrupted. ‘Sharp right now!’

With no time to properly consider his actions Wilcox turned the bus as instructed. The dark silhouette of the hotel loomed large in front of him.

‘Where?’ he screamed, desperate for some help and guidance.

‘Just keep moving,’ Jones yelled back. ‘Keep going forward until...’

He didn’t have chance to finish his sentence. The low light and the constant criss-crossing movement of hundreds of bodies made the distance between the bus and the front of the hotel impossible to accurately gauge. Tired and terrified, Wilcox jammed his foot down on the accelerator and sent the bus crashing through the front of the building. Their velocity was such that the bus continued to move until the twisted metal and rubble trapped under its wheels eventually acted as a brake. Eighty percent inside the building with only the last twenty percent of its rear end sticking out into the cold night, the bus came to a sudden, juddering halt in the middle of the hotel’s wide and imposing marble-floored reception, its front wheel wedged hopelessly in an ornate and long-since dried up decorative fountain.

No-one moved.

‘My back...’ Doreen eventually wailed from somewhere on the floor under a pile of carrier bags full of clothes and other belongings.

‘Is everyone all right?’ Proctor asked. No-one answered. ‘Is anyone all right?’ he asked again, slightly revising his original question.

Paul Jones shook his head and dragged himself back up onto his feet. He looked across at Wilcox who was trying to stem the flow of blood from a gash just above his right eye.

‘Nice driving,’ he sneered.

‘Fuck off,’ Wilcox spat.

‘Shit,’ Elizabeth cursed from somewhere in the darkness behind them. ‘Get out of here. We’ve got to get out of here.’

The sudden fear and desperation in her voice was clear for all to hear. Without pausing for explanation the six survivors picked themselves up, grabbed as many of their belongings as they could carry, and moved towards the door at the front of the bus which Jones had already forced open. He glanced down the side of the long vehicle and immediately saw what Elizabeth had seen. A large part of the hotel entrance had collapsed. Although still partially blocked by the bus, there was now a huge, gaping hole in the side of the hotel where the main doors had once been. Hundreds of bodies were already swarming into the building from outside.

‘Over here,’ an unexpected voice yelled. Barry Bushell stood at the bottom of the main hotel staircase at the other end of the vast, dust-filled and rubble-strewn lobby. He gestured for the survivors to follow him. The light inside the building was minimal and they struggled to make him out at first. Wilcox was the first to see him. He ran across the room, closely followed by Doreen, Elizabeth and Jones.

‘Come on, Ted,’ Proctor pleaded. ‘Leave your stuff, we have to move.’

Hamilton was busy collecting his belongings and supplies. Loaded up with bags and boxes he tripped and stumbled down from the bus after the others.

‘Keep going,’ he gasped, already out of breath. ‘I’ll catch you up.’

Proctor looked back at the other man who was clearly struggling.

‘Just leave that stuff,’ he shouted. ‘We don’t need it.’

‘I need it,’ Hamilton groaned.

‘They’re coming!’

Come on you idiot, thought Proctor. Drop the bags, drop your boxes and get your backside over here. Hamilton was oblivious to the swarm of bodies that were now dangerously close behind him. They moved like a thick, heavy liquid slowly seeping across the floor of the hotel reception. Already the bus had been swallowed up and surrounded, overcome in the same way that scavenging insects might cover and devour a dead animal. Proctor looked around to see that the rest of the survivors had all but disappeared. Just Elizabeth remained, standing at the bottom of the staircase.

‘Move you fucking idiot!’ screamed Proctor.

Hamilton tried to speed up but, if anything, he was slowing down. He was desperately unfit and scared. He glanced back over his shoulder and, seeing how close the nearest bodies now were, he tried unsuccessfully to increase his speed again. He couldn't do it. He couldn't make his tired legs move any quicker. It was hopeless.

'Move!' Proctor screamed again as he nervously backed away and moved towards Elizabeth.

Whereas most people would have dug deep and done everything possible to cover the remaining difference between themselves and safety, Hamilton did not. He was already exhausted and the staircase ahead of him seemed to stretch up into the darkness forever. He'd never make it. An eternal pessimist, subconsciously he had already decided that his number was up. He made one last weak attempt to move quicker but it wasn't working. The distance still seemed huge. Hamilton stopped and dropped his bags and boxes. Proctor and Elizabeth watched helplessly as the bodies swarmed around him and over him and dragged him to the ground.

'Let's go,' Proctor sighed. Elizabeth was already on her way up the stairs. Proctor turned and disappeared into the shadows after her. Although he couldn't see where he was going, he could hear the others' voices up ahead.

'So what the fucking hell are you supposed to be?' Wilcox asked as they climbed. They had stopped momentarily to regroup a few flights up. Bushell carried a torch with him which he used to check who was with him. It was the first time that any of them had been able to see him clearly. He could see the puzzled expressions on their faces. Suddenly self-conscious, he didn't know what to say. He hadn't needed to explain his bizarre dress-code to anyone else yet. For a moment he felt foolish before remembering how good these clothes made him feel and how, when there was just a handful of people left now, what he was wearing was of absolutely no consequence to anyone.

'I'm Barry,' he eventually answered, 'Barry Bushell.'

'So why are you wearing a dress?' Wilcox demanded.

'Because I want to,' he answered factually.

'You look lovely, dear,' Doreen said as she passed him on the landing. Already gasping for air and in need of a cigarette, she patted him on the shoulder and nodded her head upwards. 'This way, is it?'

'Just keep going,' he replied. 'I'm living in the suite on the top floor. It was as far away as I could get from everything that's been going on down here.'

Doreen nodded and kept climbing, her nervous fear helping her forget and overcome her tiredness. Wilcox waited on the landing with Bushell and Jones as Elizabeth and Proctor finally caught up.

'Where's Hamilton?' Wilcox asked. Proctor shook his head.

'Didn't make it,' he said, panting with the effort of the sudden climb. 'Silly bastard got caught.'

'Shit,' Wilcox mumbled under his breath. He shook his head and carried on up the stairs.

The climb to the top of the building seemed to take an eternity to complete. Weighed down by their physical exhaustion and the bulky supplies they'd manage to salvage from the bus, the survivors struggled to make progress. Eventually, several stops later, they reached the impressive top floor penthouse which Bushell had claimed for his own. Even though their appreciation of material possessions and the value of

property had been massively distorted by the events of the last seven days, the sheer luxurious scale of the huge apartment still impressed all of them.

‘Nice place she’s got here,’ Wilcox hissed sarcastically as he gazed around the room. Some of the group had sat themselves around a rectangular dining table, others were sprawled out on a nearby sofa.

‘Shh...’ Elizabeth scowled. ‘Leave him alone. He’s obviously got problems.’

‘We’ve all got problems,’ he sighed.

‘Lovely place,’ Doreen agreed. ‘Just think of all the famous people who must have stayed here. Royalty? Film stars?’

‘Why?’ Paul Jones grunted.

Doreen looked puzzled. How could he not be excited by the prospect of sleeping in a hotel room that might have been used by millionaires and mega-stars?

‘Imagine who’s sat round this table...’ she continued.

‘Why?’ he interrupted again. ‘Why waste your time thinking about people like that? People like that who could afford to stay here had too much money and not enough sense. You shouldn’t look up to them. The only difference between you and them was the size of their wallets compared to yours.’

‘It was more than that,’ Elizabeth protested. ‘It’s about glamour and watching them do the things that you always dreamed about and...’

‘So did you two read all the celebrity gossip and buy all the glossy magazines that were...?’

‘Absolutely,’ Doreen said quickly.

‘And I bet you used to watch soap operas and reality TV shows and...’

‘Never missed my soaps,’ she told him with something approximating pride in her voice.

‘Pathetic,’ Jones snapped. ‘Bloody pathetic. It’s got nothing to do with glamour or anything like that. I bet you used to swallow all that crap because your own lives were pointless and empty.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ Elizabeth said angrily. ‘Let us know when it’s our turn to tear you to pieces.’

‘Where are all your celebrities now?’ he asked.

‘Dead, probably,’ Wilcox interjected. ‘Face down in the fucking gutter.’

‘You know what I think?’ Jones continued, even though he knew they didn’t care what he thought. ‘I think that if by some strange twist of fate one of your precious celebrities had survived and was sat here now instead of one of us, you’d still be treating them like some kind of fucking god.’

‘As long as it was you they were here instead of, I wouldn’t care,’ Elizabeth spat. ‘Sometimes you’re so far up your own backside that...’

‘I’ve got more food than this,’ Bushell explained as he appeared from the kitchen, interrupting the conversation to the relief of the others. ‘I’m trying to make it last as long as possible. I’m trying to avoid going outside.’

‘I’d be trying to avoid going outside if I looked like that,’ Wilcox smirked.

‘Leave it, Nick,’ sighed Proctor. ‘What’s the matter with you lot? We’ve lost our transport and poor old Ted and...’

‘Honestly,’ Wilcox laughed, not listening to a word Proctor had been saying, ‘we wait all this time to find someone else alive, and when we find them it turns out to be a fucking faggot!’

The other survivors cringed with the sudden awkwardness of the situation. Proctor didn’t know what was making him feel more uncomfortable, Wilcox’s provocation or the fact that their host was wearing full drag. At six feet tall (almost six foot two in heels) Bushell cut an imposing figure. Strangely confident and unruffled, he sat down opposite Wilcox, opened a can of beer and passed another one across the table towards his aggressor.

‘Look,’ he began, his voice surprisingly calm and assured, ‘I’m not surprised you’ve got a problem with what I’m wearing. Fact is I like it and I’m not going to change. I don’t know why, but dressing like this is helping me to come to terms with the fact that all my friends and family and probably everyone else I’ve ever known is dead. I’m not gay and I’m not a fucking faggot as you put it, I’m just a normal bloke who’s decided to try wearing dresses for a while, okay?’

The wind had been taken out of Wilcox’s sails by Bushell’s brutal honesty.

‘Okay,’ he mumbled humbly as he reached for his beer.

‘Anyway, It doesn’t matter what any of us is wearing, does it?’ Bushell continued. ‘It’s not going to make any difference. Same as the colour of our hair won’t make any difference either, or whether we’re right or left handed. Fact is we’re all stuck in this mess together and we’ll need to work with each other to get ourselves sorted. Now then,’ he said, his voice suddenly louder and more confident, ‘who have we got here and what the hell are we going to do now that you’ve made a fucking big hole in the front of my hotel?’

Dragging introductions and pointless, meandering hypothecations about what had happened to the world took the group through the last few hours of day seven and well into day eight. Spirits were temporarily high – Bushell had the company he’d craved and the others suddenly found themselves in a safer and much more stable and comfortable environment than that which they had become used to.

Proctor pulled up a chair and sat in front of the widest window in the suite for hours watching the night melt away and be overtaken by the first light of day. As the sun began to climb more and more of the shattered world was revealed. Whilst they had been down at street level it had been difficult to fully appreciate the enormity of what had happened to the landscape through which they’d travelled. From twenty-eight floors up, however, the catastrophic damage and devastation was clear.

‘You okay?’ Elizabeth asked. Her voice surprised him and distracted him from a particularly dark train of thought.

‘I’m fine,’ he replied, managing half a smile, ‘you?’ She nodded but said nothing. ‘I was just looking out there,’ he continued. ‘Look at it. The whole bloody world’s in ruins.’

Elizabeth took a few steps closer to the window and leant against it. He was right. For as far as she could see the world looked dead and was drained of all colour and life. Apart from the bodies in the streets nothing moved. From this height they could see for endless miles into the distance. The sheer scale

of what had happened around them was humbling and soul-destroying.

‘Much happening?’ Nick Wilcox asked as he joined them. He’d been sat on his own but he preferred the company of others. Elizabeth glanced back over her shoulder at him but didn’t bother to answer.

‘Not a lot,’ Proctor replied. ‘No surprise really.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure,’ Elizabeth said, her face still pressed hard against the glass. She’d diverted her attention away from the horizon to the more immediate area around the base of the hotel building. ‘Have you seen what we’ve done?’

Concerned, Wilcox peered down. The largest crowd of bodies that either of them had yet seen had gathered around the entrance to the building and were pushing their way inside through the huge hole the survivors had made with the bus last night.

‘Bloody hell,’ he cursed under his breath.

Proctor stood up and joined them. The sight of the massive gathering below them made his legs weaken with nerves. His mouth suddenly dry he swallowed hard and looked around for Bushell.

‘Barry,’ he shouted. Bushell appeared from the master bedroom and walked over to where the others were stood.

‘What’s the problem?’ he asked anxiously. Proctor nodded down and Bushell looked towards the ground. ‘Christ almighty,’ he sighed.

‘They can’t get up here, can they?’ Wilcox wondered timidly, concerned that he really was to blame for this unsettling new development. He looked over towards Bushell for an answer. Bushell shrugged his shoulders.

‘Don’t know. Can’t see why not. If enough of them keep pushing forward from behind, my guess is they’ll start climbing eventually.’

‘But they won’t get up here, will they?’

Bushell shrugged his shoulders again.

‘This place has one main staircase in the middle of the building,’ he explained, still staring deep into the vast crowd below them. ‘There are a couple of fire escapes, but they’re blocked off as far as I know. To be honest, I didn’t look into security too deeply when I got here. There didn’t seem to be any need when the place still had a front door.’

Wilcox glared at him for a moment.

‘So what are you saying?’

‘If there are enough of them and they keep coming, who knows what they’ll be able to do. Give them enough time and there’s every chance they’ll manage to get up here.’

‘Can we still get out of here if we need to?’

‘Well, I think we can get back down no problem,’ Bushell sighed, ‘but what we do once we’re down there is anyone’s guess. Thanks to you lot the building is surrounded. I can’t see a way out.’

‘Let’s all keep calm and try and get things into perspective,’ Proctor said quietly, doing his best to prevent panic from spreading. ‘The chances of them getting to us are slim and we’re so high up here that they’ll probably disappear long before they even get close.’

‘You reckon?’ Elizabeth snapped. ‘There doesn’t seem to be much else happening in town this morning, does there? It looks like we’re the main attraction.’

Bushell, Elizabeth, Wilcox and Proctor stood side by side at the window and stared down. The streets below were filled with grey, staggering bodies and in the absence of any other distraction the whole damn rotting mass seemed to be making its way towards the hotel.

There were already thousands of them down there, and thousands more were dangerously close.

DAY NINE

THE GARDEN SHED

Lester Prescott thrives on order and uniformity. On many levels he has constantly proved himself to be an inept and dysfunctional human being. He finds it difficult to connect with people emotionally. Although he has tried, over the years he has proved himself to be a boring and dull husband, a passion-free and unimaginative lover and, perhaps worst of all, a disappointment both as a father and role model. Lester has, however, excelled in other areas of his life. His home is pristine and perfect and is situated in a relatively well-to-do residential area, he is well respected socially and is the most accurate and productive accountant ever to have been employed by the firm of Ashcroft, Jenkins and Harman. Lester Prescott thinks in black and white. Show a child a cardboard box and they’ll turn it into a spaceship, a plane, a car, a robot suit or whatever else their unrestricted imaginations can create. As far as Lester Prescott has always been concerned, however, a cardboard box is, was and only ever could be a cardboard box.

Prescott and his long-suffering wife Janice have been married for twenty-seven years and two months. For twenty-five of those years they’ve lived in the same semi-detached house a third of the way down Baker Road West . Twenty-three years ago next month their only child – Madeline –

was born. Maddy, as she's known, left home at the age of eighteen to study. She loves her parents dearly but does her level best to only go back and see them when she absolutely has to. She recently qualified as a nurse and now works in a large hospital on the other side of town.

Last Tuesday morning Janice, Maddy and more than six billion other people were killed by the most virulent virus ever to curse the face of the planet. Much to his surprise, Lester Prescott survived.

Day eight ends and day nine begins. What will this day bring? This last week has been harder than I could ever have imagined and I need to stop and take some time out now. None of it makes any sense. I sometimes come here at night to try and work it all out. I sit here on the end of Maddy's bed and look around her room. It's just as she left it when she went to university. Mother and I didn't see any point in changing it until she'd got herself married and settled down in her own home. It'll never happen now, of course. I'll never change this room now. It's a little oasis of normality in a world that's gone completely mad.

The passage of time hasn't made any of this any easier to understand or deal with. The chain of events which began last Tuesday are still as confusing, inexplicable and painful as they were when they first happened. It started like just about every other Tuesday has started since I've worked for AJH. I arrived at work at ten to eight, got my desk ready and then started on my figures. Bill Ashcroft (one of the senior partners) was the first person it caught. He was standing talking to his secretary Allison when it took him. I then watched it work its way around the office, killing everyone around me, and I just sat there, too afraid to move, waiting for my turn. I still don't understand why it didn't get me. I don't know why I escaped. Before I knew it I was the only one left alive.

I left the office as quickly as I could, stopping only to put away my papers again, pack my briefcase and fetch my newspaper and coat from the cloakroom. I made my way home as fast as I could but the journey was harrowing and painfully slow. Outside it was as if someone had simply flicked a switch. Everyone seemed to have died at almost exactly the same moment. I saw hundreds of bodies down and cars crashed. It seemed to take me forever to work my way through the wreckage and get back to the house.

I had been thinking about Janice and Maddy constantly since leaving the office and I had hoped to return home to find Janice sitting there waiting for me. After all I seemed to have survived, so why shouldn't she have too? Sadly it wasn't to be. I found her in the kitchen, lying on her back on the floor in an inch and a half of water. The tap had been left running and the room was awash. My dear Janice was soaked through. I set to work sorting things out straight away. I dried her off as best I could and then wrapped her in a blanket and covered her with black plastic refuse sacks which I taped up. It wasn't an easy or pleasant task but I managed to get it done. It seemed a little undignified at the time, but I was acting in accordance with the instructions contained in the government information booklet we received last summer. Janice used to mock me because, by nature, I am occasionally pedantic and perhaps a little obsessive. She used to say that my attention to detail was infuriating. Thank goodness I am that way is all that I can say. As a result of the filing system I've implemented in my study I was able to lay my hands on the booklet immediately and deal with my wife's body quickly, humanely and hygienically, just as the government had instructed.

As I worked to move Janice's body and clean up the mess in the kitchen I kept a constant eye out for Maddy. I felt sure that she'd come home before long and I wanted to make sure that Mother had been properly dealt with before she arrived. My mood darkened with every minute that passed. As if losing my closest companion hadn't been enough for one day, with each second that ticked by it looked

increasingly likely that my only child was gone too. Eventually, at half-past one that afternoon, I could sit and wait no longer. I set out to find her. Once again my progress outside was frustratingly difficult and slow. I arrived at the hospital in an hour and ten minutes and immediately started to look for her. According to my notes she should have been on duty but I couldn't find her. I had an awful time searching through the bodies for Maddy. So many poor, innocent people had lost their lives so suddenly and inexplicably...

When I couldn't find her on any of the wards she covered I worked my way back from the hospital to the house she shared with her friends Jenny and Suzanne. It was there that I found our little girl in her front garden, lying on her back in the long grass. Bloody hell, she deserved much more than that. Such a cruel, sudden and undignified end to such a short and beautiful life. It broke my heart to see her like that. I put her in the car and brought her back home with me. I dealt with her body in accordance with official instructions, just as I had Mother's.

It was impossible and undignified to leave my family out on the patio as I had done. They both deserved so much more than that. I read through the government booklet again that afternoon. It said that the bodies of any fatalities should be buried away from the house. Dejectedly I decided I would have to do just that. I dragged them both the length of the garden to the small area of lawn between the garden shed and Maddy's old swing. We'd originally brought her that swing on her sixth birthday but Mother and I decided we'd keep it even after she'd grown out of it and stopped using it. It was always there to remind us of her. She used to have so much fun playing on it with her friends. Even now whenever I look at it all I can see is young Maddy swinging on it in the summer sunshine. We had hoped that we'd have grandchildren to use it one day.

I unlocked the shed and went inside.

The garden shed has always been my escape. As well as being a very practical and convenient storage space, it was also a quiet and comfortable little area where I could sit and work or read my paper or listen to sport on the radio. Maddy and her mother liked their television and their soap operas but I couldn't abide the constant noise and distraction. Quite often – almost daily in the summer months, certainly most weekends – I would shut myself away in the shed and relax in my own company with a cup of tea or a glass of something stronger.

Before I picked up my tools I sat down on the deck chair in the corner of the shed and tried to take stock of all that had suddenly happened around me. Sitting there it was hard to comprehend the enormity and finality of what had happened and I could hardly believe that my wife and daughter's lifeless bodies lay just inches away. With tears in my eyes I looked around the little wooden hut and remembered all that I had lost. The season was almost over and the mower and some of the garden tools had been cleaned and were ready to be put away. On the opposite wall was where I stored the summer things that Maddy and her mother used to use; plastic patio furniture, sun-loungers and deck chairs, garden games and the like. In a small wooden box tucked away in one corner I found a collection of brightly coloured buckets and spades which I had again kept for those grandchildren who would now never arrive. They reminded me of many summer holidays now long gone where Maddy, Mother and I would spend endless days playing on the beach in the blistering sun. All of that seemed hundreds of miles and thousands of years away now.

With a heavy heart I stood up, picked up my spade and the garden edging tool, and set to work. I took a rough measurement of the length and width of Maddy's body (she was slightly taller and thicker set than her mother) and marked out the shape of the two graves in the turf close together. I carefully lifted the turf and then spent the next two hours digging. Although we used to go to church most Sundays I wasn't quite sure what I should say before I covered up their bodies. It was difficult to think of the right

words. I loved them both very much but I've always found it hard to properly express my feelings. Being gushing, emotional and romantic was something I've always struggled with, such words have never come naturally to me. In any event I thanked God for their lives and asked that they would now find peace. They were good people and I was confident they would. I was far less sure about what the future had in store for me.

I'm not the kind of man who sits around feeling sorry for myself. I wouldn't have been doing anyone any favours if I'd just sat there and done nothing. I spent a lot of time over the first two days of the crisis trying to make sense of what had happened but I soon realised that it was impossible. No answers were forthcoming. More to the point, I couldn't find anyone or anything to help me find those answers. Strange as it seemed, the whole world seemed to suddenly have died. The whole world, that was, except me. I read through the government booklet again and again but it was of little help. It kept talking about how the authorities would help and how I should sit and wait for further instructions from them. I was ready to sit and wait, but I was pretty certain that no further instructions were ever going to come. As far as I could tell (and I didn't do anything to verify the validity of my claim) I was the only man left alive.

So what did I need to do in order to sit and wait? I had plenty of food at the house, but it was already clear that I'd need more. With each hour that passed it seemed more and more likely that what had happened was going to take many weeks and months, possibly even years to sort out – if it ever got sorted out at all. I needed to be ready to fend for myself for a long, long time. With that in mind I took the car round to the shops and started to collect supplies. Food, cleaning materials, clothing, medicines... even books, paper and pens. I had already realised that it would be important to try and keep myself occupied both physically and mentally. I had written myself a comprehensive list that ran to almost two full sheets of paper. I managed to get just about everything I needed and it took two trips in the car to get it all back home. It didn't feel right taking such a large amount of goods without paying, but I had no means of making payment and there was obviously no-one there to make payment to. Instead I made a second list of what I'd taken and also the cost of each individual item. When some semblance of normality finally returned, I decided, I would go back and make a payment for everything I had been forced to take. The proprietors of the shops involved, if they ever returned, would undoubtedly understand.

The third morning was as frightening and disorientating as the first had been. Just when I was beginning to get used to my situation it changed again. On the third morning many of the bodies that had fallen and died suddenly began to drag themselves back up onto their feet again. When I saw the first of them I hoped that was the end of it, that this was the first indication of an impending return to normality. It quickly became clear that was not the case. The bodies that had moved were unresponsive and slow. I stood out in the middle of the road in front of the house and stopped the body of Judith Springer from number 19 as it staggered past the end of the drive. I had known Judith and her husband Roy for many years, but the cold, empty creature which stood in front of me that morning was most certainly not Mrs Springer. It looked the same (save for a few unpleasant signs of deterioration) but it failed to react as a normal human being should. For goodness sake, the bloody thing wasn't even breathing.

I shut my door on the rest of the world again and went through to the back of the house. What about Maddy and her mother? Had their condition changed also? I found myself faced with the bizarre and repulsive (but very real) possibility that the wife and daughter I had buried just two days earlier might now be trying to escape from their hastily dug graves. I made my way through to the back garden and crouched down next to the two slightly raised humps in the turf. There had been no change as far as I could see. I didn't know what to do for the best. I lay there and put my ear to the ground and listened but I couldn't hear anything and I couldn't feel any movement. I reminded myself that not all of the bodies outside were moving again, some still lay where they had fallen. I didn't know whether Maddy and her mother remained motionless or whether I had buried them too deep for them to be able to get out. For a

second I seriously contemplated digging them up and exhuming their bodies, but what would that have achieved? If they were capable of moving, so what? What difference would it have made? Judith Springer, as vacuous and uninteresting as I had always found her, was most certainly dead, despite the fact that she was suddenly and inexplicably mobile again. I decided that it was kinder both to Maddy and her mother to leave them where they were and preserve what remained of their dignity.

I sat out in the garden shed again that afternoon and read a book and occasionally dozed lightly. My sleep was punctuated with desperate dreams and twisted nightmares about my dead daughter and wife. It was almost dark when I woke up properly and went back inside. The low light increased my unease. I regretted having slept. I tossed and turned all night in bed.

As the situation outside continued to change I made a conscious effort to try and find things to do to try and keep myself positive and motivated. I had left the car parked on the drive and had stored the provisions I'd taken at the far end of the garage. In fact I had collected such an impressive volume of supplies that they filled almost the entire length of the cold, rectangular room. On the morning of the fourth day, when there was finally enough light to see clearly, I sat at my desk in the study and made a list of my daily dietary requirements. I used reference books, our family medical dictionary and the encyclopaedia to calculate the minimum I would need to eat each day to survive. I then spent the entire day in the garage, dividing the numerous boxes and bags of food into equal-sized daily rations, making sure there were sufficient levels of the necessary vitamins, proteins and whatever other chemicals I needed for each day. I also allowed myself a daily luxury – a can of beer or a packet of sweets for example. It quickly became apparent that I wouldn't be able to get quite everything I needed from my provisions. I decided I would have to look at fetching vitamin and mineral supplements when I next went out, if they proved necessary. During the day I also became very aware that none of the food I had was fresh. Perhaps, I thought to myself, I could start trying to grow my own vegetables if my situation remained unchanged for any length of time. Janice and I had always maintained a small vegetable plot, but perhaps I would need to expand the operation over the coming year. Sitting there on the garage floor surrounded by packages of food I found the idea of having to fend for myself on such a basic level strangely exciting.

I worked long and hard that day and, by eight o'clock when the light had all but disappeared again, I was finished. On the garage floor lay forty-three separate food parcels for the next forty-three days. I tried not to think of them as rations but that, in effect, was what they were. Talk of rationing made it sound like it was wartime, but it most certainly wasn't. For me to have been at war I needed an enemy, and at that moment in time I was very definitely alone. I locked the side garage door and walked around to the back door and let myself back into the house.

Things changed again on the morning of day five.

I woke up and threw back the curtains to find myself looking down on a street scene very different to the one I had last seen the previous evening. Outside my house was a vast and continually growing crowd of people. Initially elated I quickly got dressed and readied myself to go outside to see what they wanted. These people – although similar in appearance to the empty souls who had been dragging themselves along the streets for the last two days – behaved differently. They were definitely gravitating around my house with a purpose, not just drifting by. I stood out there with them, separated from the crowd by only the metal gate across the end of the drive, and for what felt like an eternity I said nothing. My heart sank as I got closer to them. Their faces were blank and empty and they seemed to look through me as if I wasn't there. The nearest few figures were being continually jostled and pushed against the gate by those immediately behind them and yet they failed to react or stand their ground. I tried to speak to them but

they didn't acknowledge my words. Every time I opened my mouth to address them there was a ripple of sudden movement (bordering on muted excitement) throughout the crowd, but none of them seemed capable of responding to me properly. I began to lose my temper. Perhaps it was just the frustration of my increasingly confusing situation getting the better of me. Whatever the reason, I stood there at the end of the drive shouting and screaming at them to answer me. It was an embarrassing show of uncontrolled emotion which I immediately began to regret.

I returned to the house and stood at the bedroom window hoping to make sense of what was happening. Although the behaviour of the bodies outside had changed, it occurred to me that my overall situation remained much the same. What the people on the other side of the gate did or didn't do had no bearing on my fight for survival. Ultimately there had been no substantial change in my situation or my priorities – I had to continue to fight and fend for myself. As the government booklet had said, I needed to sit and wait.

I could see more and more of the bodies approaching from various directions, perhaps drawn to the house as a result of my undignified rant in the street earlier. Whatever the reason, with little else happening in the neighbourhood it seemed that my home was rapidly becoming the centre of attention. It slowly dawned on me that, with everything else dead and silent around me, there was nothing else to distract them. More and more of them would undoubtedly keep coming. I decided that I had few options. I could lock the doors, close the curtains and sit and wait until they disappeared, or I could pack up now and run. After having worked so long and so hard for everything I owned I knew there was no way I could bring myself to leave home, especially not now that my family were buried in the back garden. I knew immediately that I was going to stay there. It was now just a question of how comfortable and safe I could make myself.

Although accountancy was my chosen vocation, I have always had a talent for working with my hands and have prided myself on some of the improvements I have made around the house over the years. I made furniture for Maddy's room, I decorated throughout (several times), I re-glazed a few windows and I laid the patio and built a low brick wall around it. On top of that I devised and constructed storage areas in the attic, the garage, the study, the utility room and the shed. I approached the strengthening of the house with real relish and I planned it carefully. If nothing else, the project would keep me occupied for a few days at least and would help the dragging, lonely hours pass with more speed than they had so far been.

I needed to go out to the hardware store and get materials. Timber, fixings, tools and numerous other bits and pieces were necessary to protect the house as I wanted. I had to leave but I couldn't get the car off the drive. The crowd around the front of the house was, by now, more than fifty bodies deep in places. Even if I had been able to get the car onto the road, in doing so I would inevitably have opened up the drive and the front of my property would have been surrounded. With still more of them arriving by the minute I didn't fancy the prospect of trying to herd the unresponsive throng away from my house and back onto the street.

When we'd first moved into Baker Road West there had been a large expanse of grassland beyond the fence at the bottom of our garden. Five and a half years ago the council sold the land to a housing developer who built more than double the sensible number of houses they should have on it. I certainly would never have considered buying a plot there. They were crammed together and their gardens were virtually non-existent. I had an acquaintance who lived there and I dropped him back home after golf on a number of occasions. The estate was like a rabbit warren, a sprawling maze of cul-de-sacs, groves and avenues. To squeeze more homes in, many of the later phases were built with garages at the bottom of their gardens with access from a track which led along the back of their properties and, by default, across the back of mine also. Although I hadn't yet solved the problem of getting to the hardware store,

the track provided me with a convenient means of getting close to the house with the equipment I'd collected when I returned.

I decided to walk. As risky and dangerous as it may have sounded, it strangely seemed the most sensible way to leave. I could climb over the back fence, creep down the track and then quietly and carefully make my way along the main road to the hardware centre at the bottom of the hill. The store catered for trade as well as the general public. There were trucks and vans which could be hired to help transport bulky loads. I'd hired one previously when I'd built the patio. I decided I would use one again to bring back whatever it was I decided to take.

In five minutes under two hours I was back. My trip out progressed with little incident, save for a few uncomfortable moments in the hardware store car park when I found that another crowd of ragged, dishevelled people had gathered around the front of the building after I had disappeared inside. I took my time and moved around quietly, hoping that they wouldn't notice me. I used a trade entrance at the rear of the building to load up a small truck and was able to load everything before any of them had seen me. Once I got home I parked the truck at the back of my house and threw the timber and other items I'd taken over the fence. I left the truck where it was just in case I needed to use it again.

The figures in the streets had become increasingly inquisitive and, for want of a better word, nosy. I couldn't move without huge swathes of shuffling, lethargic bodies tripping towards me. They appeared washed out and empty and, although they were easy to brush to the side, their unwanted attention made me feel uncomfortable. If they continued to come, I thought to myself, the house might end up surrounded by incalculable numbers of them and I might end up using the hardware store truck as a means of escape. I couldn't imagine leaving. I decided that it was more important than ever to make my property as strong and secure as possible. I set about barricading and strengthening every door and window, even every vent, no matter how small, insignificant or unreachable it appeared.

I began with the front of the house. My property is already separated from the road by a knee-high brick wall with a low iron railing on top and a strong iron gate. It seemed sensible to try and increase the height of the barrier, to completely block the house and myself from view as far as was possible. I sank a row of six-foot concrete posts and fence panels into the flower bed directly behind the wall and I used nylon rope and chains to secure a split panel onto the gate (which I also locked with a hefty padlock I had taken from the store). The front of the house was the hardest place to work. The relentless interest of the people on the street was unsettling and disturbing. On more than one occasion I had to push them back to get them out of the way. I asked them to move back but the bloody things were incapable of any positive response. In the end I just shoved them off my drive and back into the crowd.

I did a beautiful job on the ground floor doors. In a moment of inspiration I decided to build a second timber frame around each entrance and fitted new doors on top of the existing ones. Solid wooden fire doors, separately hinged and able to open independently. Perfect. I did something similar with the windows, making wooden shutters that completely blocked out the light. I couldn't help but make a terrific amount of noise as I fitted them. I had no option but to drill into the masonry around the windows and doors. From the top of the ladder working on the front of the house I could see over the newly raised fence and I was able to see the dramatic effect the noise was having on the crowd of people in the street. Some of them began to bang and hammer angrily on my new gate. At times the noise they made threatened to drown out the sound of my drill. I was almost relieved when the battery pack ran out.

It took the best part of two days to make the house as secure as I wanted it. By the time I'd finished I was exhausted. I worked whenever it was light, knowing that I would have plenty of time to stop and rest once the job was complete. At six-thirty on Tuesday evening – more than a week since all of this had started – I sat out on the lawn next to Maddy and her mother and looked back at the house with pride.

They would have been impressed with what I'd achieved, I was sure. If nothing else they would have been proud of the fact that I had survived when so many others had fallen. Perhaps Janice wouldn't have been too keen on the aesthetic side of the alterations, but she'd have surely appreciated their functionality. I sat between the graves of my wife and my daughter with a can of beer and the remainder of my daily rations and finally allowed myself to relax. The food and drink tasted better than ever. I had a normal appetite for the first time in days. Rationed food wasn't so bad after all, I decided. I had a fairly wide selection of tastes and flavours in each day's supply. I fully appreciated that my choices might lessen and become substantially more limited as time progressed but, for now, I was doing fine. Tired, but fine.

I slept well last night.

This morning I found that the situation had deteriorated again. Things have suddenly become much less certain and I feel increasingly unsure. Although the house is now secure, today I feel scared and the enormity of what has happened to the world has again become painfully apparent.

I lay lazily in bed for a while, resting after the efforts of the last two days. When I finally got up I went to the front of the house and opened up the new wooden shutters which cover the spare bedroom and bathroom windows. I immediately saw that the crowd outside had more than doubled in size. It now stretched from one end of the street to the other – filling the entire length of Baker Road West – and I couldn't understand why. Surely once I had finished work on the house and was out of sight the people outside should have drifted away, shouldn't they? I cautiously prised the bathroom window open and listened. Although not one of them spoke, there was a constant and very definite noise coming from the unwanted gathering. The sound of shuffling feet, bodies tripping and falling, things being knocked over in the street and smashed, tired hands being slammed against my fence... Individually the sounds were insignificant and indistinct but together they were uncomfortably loud. It was obvious that this was no longer a crowd which would simply drift away again. I could see even more people arriving and joining the edges of the huge gathering.

I ran to the back of the house, thinking that if I did have to leave quickly I could use the hardware store truck which I'd left parked on the track behind the fence at the end of the garden. It was no good, the truck was surrounded. Those bloody things had somehow found the entrance to the track and had filled it for as far as I could see in both directions. There were bloody hundreds of them out there, wedged in so tight that they could hardly move.

The front of the house was cut off, as was the back. Increasingly concerned and unsettled I fetched my binoculars from the study and tried to make a full assessment of the situation. The news wasn't good. My house – number 47 – is two-thirds of the way down Baker Road West which is a fairly straight road. Looking out of the back of my property there are more houses behind and to the right. To the left, two hundred and fifty yards (ten houses) away, is a large pub, The Highway. To my horror this morning I saw from the bedroom window that the pub car park was full of more of the dark, shuffling people. The crowd was immense, and it dwarfed the gathering at the front of my house. And, worst of all, all that separated them from my garden and my house was eleven wooden fences. The fences around my property are all in relatively good repair, but the same couldn't be said for those belonging to some of my neighbours. I would frequently see their fences wobbling in strong winds and I doubted whether they'd be able to withstand much force. I had an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that the mass of bodies in the car park would be able to exert more than enough collective pressure to bring them down.

At the other end of the road, almost out of sight from where I watched, was another crowd of similar proportions to the one outside the house. What had I done? What an idiot I had been. I knew that I was responsible for bringing the people here. In my haste and enthusiasm to protect the house and make it

secure the noise I had made had inadvertently revealed my position to untold thousands of the damn things. Did I sit and wait this out or take my chances and run? My two original choices seemed suddenly to have been slashed to one. There was no obvious way of getting out.

I read through the government booklet again and again, hoping that I would find a page I'd somehow missed previously that might give me some idea of how to deal with my situation. No matter how hard I stared at the pages there was nothing. There was information on dealing with bomb threats, hostage situations, flu epidemics and terrorist attacks, basic first aid advice and a list of emergency telephone numbers (useless as the phone had been dead all week) but nothing to help me with the sudden and very real threat that I was facing. Apart from me the entire population had fallen and died, and now most of them seemed to have returned from the grave and were gravitating around my house. What the hell was I supposed to do?

During the course of the day now ending I have watched the crowds slowly draw closer. Just before one o'clock this afternoon the fence around the pub car park finally gave way under the weight of the countless bodies pushing against it. With the barrier down the people pushed, shoved and surged into the first garden only to stop when they slammed into the fence on the other side. It began to wobble and shake precariously but, for a time, it stayed intact, finally falling about an hour and a half later when it could no longer withstand the pressure being exerted from behind. The size of the crowd was incredible. As each fence collapsed it was as if a dam had burst its banks and the people poured through like an unstoppable wave.

Bill Peters, who lived at number 55, had a good, sturdy fence with concrete posts and a strong base which held up their progress for a while. Even Bill's fence wasn't good enough to stop them. They finally broke through at a quarter past four, leaving them just three gardens away from my home.

Day eight ends and day nine begins.

It's a little before one now and I'm sitting in Maddy's room watching them. I can see them from the end of the bed. I can see hundreds, probably thousands of shifting, bobbing heads moving in the cold moonlight. The recent nights have been overcast and dark but tonight the sky is clear and the moon is full and I can see everything. I wish it would disappear back behind the clouds. I'd rather see nothing.

I can't get out of here now. Even if I could, I'm not sure that I'd want to. This is my home. Everything I've ever worked for is here. The people I did all the work for are here too, buried at the bottom of the garden. This small plot of land is my world. I have nowhere else to go and there is no-one else to go to. I will not give up what is mine. I would rather die here than anywhere else, and as the clock ticks tonight the end of my life seems strangely inevitable.

I'm calm. I feel nervous and unsure and I don't want to face them, but I'm calm and I'm keeping my head. I will maintain my dignity and pride and I will continue to defend what's mine. There will be no kicking and screaming and no shame.

Oh, Christ... The splinter and crack of wood and another fence goes down. I move to the window and I can see that the crowd is closer than ever now, surging awkwardly across Pauline and Geoff Smart's lawn and slamming against the fence on the other side of their garden. They are now just two gardens away from me. It won't be long now.

Three-fifteen.

I've sat here uselessly and watched them move closer. The penultimate fence is down now and a few thin wooden panels are all that separates the crowd from my property. I'm standing at the window now, looking directly at them. There doesn't seem to be any point trying to keep out of sight. It won't make any difference. Even if they don't know I'm here, their progress is unstoppable. They're coming here whatever.

I don't feel right. Something's missing. I know what it is – I shouldn't be stood up here watching them and waiting to mount my final defence, I should be down there. More to the point, I should be with Maddy and her mother when it happens. It's not the house I should be defending, it's my family.

If I'm out there then everything will happen as soon as the fence comes down. If I stay up here I'll be watching and waiting for God knows how long until they get into the house, and I'm not entirely sure they'll be able to get inside, no matter how many hundreds of them there are. They don't seem capable of doing anything that requires thought or concentration, they just blunder about continually. I doubt if any of them would even be able to open a bloody door. My provisions are stored out in the garage. I don't think I've got time to bring them all into the house now and even if I did I'd just be sat here with my memories, waiting for them to get in or for the end to finally arrive. Imagine starving to death in your own home. It's not right. That's not how I want to go...

I'll go outside.

Couple of hours and it'll all be over.

Lester Prescott quietly and tearfully left his daughter's room and shuffled across the landing to the bedroom he and Janice had shared for the last twenty-five years. Tired, dejected and with his heart heavy and full of resignation, sorrow and grief, he opened the wardrobe and took out his favourite jumper. Threadbare and tattered, it was the jumper he always used to wear when he was out in the garden at weekends. He pulled it on over his head and then sat down on the edge of the bed to tighten his shoe laces and pull up his socks.

Pausing only to take four cans of beer from his next week's rations, he took one last long look around his home and then went outside. He walked the length of the garden, looking around with pride and even now stopping to pick a weed from between the slabs on the patio and to tidy the edge of a flower-bed where the uncut grass has started to tumble towards Janice's prized plants. He stopped when he reached the garden shed and looked down at the two uneven mounds in the lawn where he'd buried his wife and only child.

Seems a shame that it all has to finish like this, he thought as he disappeared into the shed and fetched a spade and garden fork with which he could defend himself when the fence came down. He then squeezed his backside onto the seat of Maddy's swing and sat and looked back at the house. All that work for nothing. All those years of relentless number-crunching, day after day, week after week. Maybe he should have taken more time off? Perhaps he should have spent more time at home. And when he'd been at home, should he have spent more time sitting doing nothing with his family instead of working on his projects or hiding himself away in the garden shed? Lester opened his first can of beer and drank half of it in a series of quick, gassy gulps. He'd never been much of a drinker and the beer made him feel slightly sick. He belched and wiped his mouth and looked at the fence which was now rocking and shaking with the force of untold numbers of bodies behind it. Hope I can get through enough of these to take the edge off the fear, he thought, shaking his half-full can and stifling another belch.

Bloody hell, Lester sighed sadly, this is like waiting to see the dentist. Just wish we could get it over with.

Lester had just started his final can of beer when it finally began. For the briefest of moments he'd actually managed to become distracted with pointless, random thoughts about nothing in particular and he'd almost forgotten what was about to happen. The sudden sharp crack of splintering wood brought him crashing back to reality. He jumped to his feet and grabbed the garden fork, holding it out in front of him like a four-pronged bayonet.

The fence had given way at the other end of the garden, nearer to the house. It was difficult to see much from his present position, but he was vaguely aware of dark, swarming movement around the building close to the garage door. It was frighteningly indistinct and random, but something was definitely happening. The fence – already weakened close to the house – now began to bow and buckle about halfway up the garden. Lester watched as it dipped further and further down, finally dropping so low that he could see the heads and shoulders of the dark, relentlessly advancing bodies on the other side. Their direction, although to a large degree random and uncoordinated, was obvious and inevitable.

As the first few bodies began their stilted, awkward walk towards him, Lester took up position in front of the graves of his family. His heart began to thump angrily in his chest. What would they do to him? Were they capable of an attack or would they just trample him down? He couldn't look away. His gut-wrenching fear made it impossible for him to do anything but stare directly at the dark advancing shapes. He wanted to stop them. He didn't care what they did to him, but he wanted to stop them from trampling the graves of his wife and daughter. I might not have been able to tell you how I felt about you when you were alive, he thought, picturing Maddy and Janice in his head, but I can show you now...

As the closest bodies lifted their weak, emaciated arms out for him, Lester lunged forward with the garden fork. He smashed into the chest cavity of the nearest cadaver, skewering it and sending it crashing to the ground. He wrenched the fork back out and swung it around at other shadowy shapes, catching one of them on the side of the head and practically decapitating it. Fuelled by adrenaline and fear he attacked again, diving deeper into the crowd, desperate to defend his family's honour. The final section of fence that had remained standing suddenly came down with a tremendous groan and an ominous heavy thump. Hundreds more bodies dragged themselves into Lester's garden. He wanted to keep fighting but he didn't have room to move. They surrounded him on every side now, reaching for him and grabbing at him tirelessly. With tears of panic in his eyes he span around, terrified and disorientated. Out of the corner of his eye he spied the dark silhouette of the garden shed and he ran towards it, pushing and kicking bodies out of the way. He reached out for the door handle, knowing that the end of his life was close but too scared to let it happen. He knew that he was doing nothing but prolonging the inevitable (perhaps only by a few minutes) when he flung the door open and crashed inside. The door flapped shut in the wind behind him, the sudden noise leaving the mass of bodies in no doubt as to where he was hiding. Now sobbing uncontrollably, Lester collapsed into his deckchair in the corner and waited.

So many memories. The garden shed, the coldest, weakest and most exposed part of his property, suddenly felt reassuringly strong and warm. In the half-light he looked around and remembered all that he was about to lose. The tools with which he and Janice had lovingly tended their small plot of land. The battered wooden tea-chest on which he used to leave his paper or his

book and his drink when he dozed in the shed on long, relaxing Saturday afternoons. The plastic table and chairs which had been dragged out onto the patio each year when they'd entertained family and friends. And finally the box of garden games and the buckets and spades and all those memories of being with Janice and Maddy. All about to be lost forever. Most of it already gone. Lester knew that not long remained now.

More through luck than judgement a single skeletal hand managed to wedge itself between the flapping door and the door frame and threw it open. The first body dragged itself into the shed, followed by an apparently endless queue of others. Do I know you? Lester stared at the rotting shadow which lurched towards him. Were you once a friend or someone I used to work with, he wondered? Have I passed you on the street or did I work on your accounts? The creature's face, repellent in the cold moonlight and shadow, was vacant and unrecognisable.

Lester stood up to try and push the bodies away but their numbers now were too great. Forced onto his back foot, he struggled to stop himself moving back further into the shed. One of the bodies trying to get inside tripped and fell, pushing those in front of it forward with surprising force and speed. Like dominoes they fell, crashing into Lester and knocking him back. He slammed against the back wall of the shed unexpectedly, feeling a sudden stinging pain between his shoulders as the ten steel prongs of his garden rake punctured his skin. It was more a disorientating discomfort than pain as such. Lester lifted his arms and shielded his face from the rotting bodies which continued to advance, pushing him back onto the wall and forcing the spikes deeper and deeper into his back.

Warmth, he thought to himself as blood from the puncture wounds seeped down his back. The heat from the blood was strangely comforting. Unable to move or help himself, Lester's legs gave way underneath him and he crashed to the ground, taking several bodies down with him. The rake dislodged itself in the fall, and Lester was able somehow to roll over onto his back. He closed his eyes and screwed up his face as an unknown number of rotting feet trampled down on him.

Lying in parallel with the bodies of Maddy and her mother outside, Lester looked up at the roof of the garden shed for as long as he could keep his eyes open.

ROBERT WOOLGRAVE

I'm starting to think I might have got this all wrong. I've gone about it all the wrong way. I thought I was so bloody clever to start with, thought I knew what I was doing. I was too quick off the mark. Think I might have fucked it all up for myself.

Fuck the lot of them. That was the attitude I took from the minute all of this started. Didn't seem to be much point doing anything else. I had to be selfish, didn't I? If I'd have spent all my time looking out for the thousands of fuckers lying dead on the ground then I might as well have just given up and laid down with them. I had to try and give myself a fighting chance. It's pretty bloody obvious that it's every man for

himself now. How could it not be when I'm the only man left?

Hindsight is a fucking great thing. If I'm honest though, I probably wouldn't have done anything any different if I'd had the chance to do it again. I did what pretty much everyone else would have done in the same situation. After I'd got my head around what had happened I spent some time looking for other survivors and trying to find help. It was pretty bloody obvious pretty bloody quickly that I was the only one left. I took one of the cars from work and drove round the city. I tried stopping in different places and shouting out for a while. I drove right into the middle of the pedestrian area and stopped the car in the shopping centre and yelled my bloody lungs out but no-one came. After that there didn't seem to be any point trying. If I was going to find other people, that was where they'd have been. And even if they were hiding in other places, everywhere was so damn quiet that the sound of the car's engine should have been enough to let anyone who was still alive know where I was. It didn't take long for me to come to the conclusion that, for some bloody ridiculous reason, there wasn't anyone else. When the bodies started to pick themselves up off the ground and walk again I decided that enough was enough. I had to start thinking about my safety and nothing else. Scariest fucking thing I'd ever seen, that was, seeing them dragging themselves up and moving around. Worse than watching the rest of the world dying around me last week. Completely fucking terrifying.

I didn't know where to start. I made the office my base. It was a choice between my flat and the office and as the other flats were filled with corpses it was a pretty simple decision to make. I went back home to fetch clothes and a few of my things, then I collected as much food as I could carry in the back of the car. I dumped it all in the office and set about trying to make the place a little safer and better protected. I work at CarLand, which is a bloody stupid name for what is – what was – one of the biggest and busiest second-hand car lots in the country. Now it's nothing more than a bloody big and bloody quiet car park.

The office was built a couple of years back. It's a two-storey concrete and glass building right in the middle of the car lot. It seemed as good a place as any to hide because CarLand's on a business park just off the motorway, it's not actually in the city. I spent some time clearing out all the desks and computers and other crap from the first floor and started trying to make myself comfortable. And that was where I made my first mistake. It was too bloody easy to concentrate on comfort at the expense of everything else. I should have stopped to think.

I took a van and fetched myself some stuff from the furniture store on the other side of the road. I got a bed and a mattress, a couple of easy chairs, a sofa and a table. Nearly crippled myself getting that bloody lot up the stairs. Then I started to get greedy. By the fourth day it was looking more and more likely that I was going to be on my own here for a long stretch so I made another trip out for food and drink and I stopped at the electrical superstore on the other side of the business park on the way back. I took as many battery powered things as I could find – CD players, portable DVD players, hand-held games consoles and the like – and as many packets of batteries as I could lay my hands on. I had to have something to keep myself occupied, didn't I? I didn't feel bad taking the stuff. There was nothing I could do, was there? It wasn't my fault that the rest of the world had dropped dead around me.

For a couple of days I was comfortable and I felt safe. Thought I was living a life of bloody luxury, I did. Space, quiet, comfort and nothing to do except eat food, drink, listen to music, watch films and play games. After a while I stopped watching films. It just didn't feel right. They left me feeling empty and sad and they reminded me of how everything used to be. I found myself some porn (nothing hardcore or extreme) but I couldn't even bring myself to watch it. I couldn't get turned on watching women who I knew were most probably dead, lying rotting somewhere. And music... I stopped listening to music too. I didn't like wearing headphones. I couldn't stand not being able to hear what was going on around me. Playing video games, on the other hand, seemed to help. I couldn't concentrate on puzzles or adventures,

but I got a bigger kick than ever out of action and fighting games. They passed the time and it helped to be able to take out some of my frustrations on the screen.

Things started to go wrong last Saturday morning. I didn't think I'd been making much noise, but the little sound I did make was starting to have an effect on the bodies outside the office. The bloody things wouldn't leave me alone. They hadn't been interested in me before, but they suddenly changed. Christ, they only had to see me moving in the window and they'd turn and start walking towards the building. Bloody things. They were slow moving and weak and it didn't take much effort to get rid of them, but there seemed to be more and more of them. The way they moved scared me, and the way they just kept coming. It didn't matter what I did or didn't do, once they knew where I was they'd just keep dragging themselves towards me and they wouldn't fucking give up. I had to do something about them. I couldn't stand having them so close.

I spent all day Monday trying to make the office even more secure. I went outside with as many sets of keys as I could carry and I started moving cars closer to the building. I took my time and planned it properly. I parked as many cars as I could right around the outside walls of the building and then moved another layer up and parked them close to the first, and then another layer after that. It took me from ten in the morning until late afternoon to get the job done but it was worth it. The place is secure now. I left myself a way to get in and out if I have to and I also left a couple of cars ready just in case I have to get away quickly. Bottom line is, though, none of those fuckers are going to get me while I'm in here.

Something happened when I was moving the cars on Monday that really bothered me. I had to start getting aggressive with some of the bodies. It worked both ways, because those fucking things started getting aggressive with me first. I couldn't believe it – one of the fuckers just went for me completely out of the blue. No provocation or anything. If it had been any stronger then I might have been in real trouble. As it was I just threw it to the side and carried on. When I was inside the cars they were less of a problem. When I was on foot, though, things got a little nastier. By the end of the day I had to get violent with them to keep them out of my way and I didn't enjoy that at all. It wasn't my fault and I didn't have any choice, but I had to do some things that I really wasn't comfortable with. I mean, I had kids and old ladies coming at me for Christ's sake. Fucking hell, at one point I found myself battering a little kid around the head with a jack from the boot of one of the cars. I had to do it. I had no choice. It was get them before they get me – kill them or be killed. After a while I gave up trying to fight and manhandle them and I started wiping them out with the cars. I feel bad about it now, but there was a part of me that actually enjoyed it at the time. Fucking hell, by the end of the day I was chasing the fucking things round the car park, ploughing them down and giving myself points for killing them with style or at speed. Crazy really. It was only when I woke up the next morning and saw what I'd done that I realised how stupid I'd been. I must have killed more than fifty of the damn things. There was blood, guts and bits of bodies everywhere.

I don't feel so good today. I'm scared. It's late on Wednesday night and there are hundreds of those bloody things outside again. There's no way they can get to me in here but the damn things won't give up. They just stand there, watching and waiting for me. I've started trying to black out the windows because I don't want to see them and I don't want them to see me. I've started thinking some bloody crazy thoughts too. I'm starting to wonder whether they're here for revenge. Are they coming to get me because I wiped out so many of them? Am I a threat to them?

Christ I feel sick.

Don't know whether it's something I've eaten or something else that's making me feel like this. I've lived on crap since this started – mostly chocolate, crisps, biscuits and other snacks – because that's been the easiest kind of food to find. I haven't eaten bread or anything fresh for days. My stomach is

bad. It might just be nerves. Jesus, I hope that's all it is. I stuck my head out of the door for a second this afternoon and all I could hear was the buzzing of thousands of fucking flies and I started thinking about the millions of fucking germs and diseases that are going to be filling the air soon, if they're not already there. I've probably been breathing them in for days now. For Christ's sake, the whole of the fucking car lot is packed solid with human remains.

This building is starting to smell. It's getting so bad in here that it smells worse than outside. It's getting to the point where I can't stand it any longer. I'm not helping. I've had diarrhoea since yesterday morning and I can't flush any of the toilets. They're all backed-up with shit and there's nothing I can do about it. I don't have any water or bleach to clean them with. I wish I'd been better prepared. Wish I'd thought more about what I'd need and spent more time getting food and water than fucking DVD players and games machines.

It's dark now. There's nothing to do but sit here and wait for morning. I'm frightened. I don't want to listen to music or play bloody games anymore. I don't want to be distracted. I want to know everything that's happening around me so that I'm ready for them, but at the same time I don't want to look. I don't want to see them.

I'm tired but I can't sleep. I slept for a little while this afternoon but it wasn't enough. I can't even bring myself to shut my eyes now, and even if I could the pain in my guts would keep me awake.

Those fucking things still won't leave. They just stand there waiting for me. They try to climb over the cars but they can't do it. They don't have the coordination or the strength. I don't know why they don't just go. They know I'm here, I'm sure of it, but I don't know what they want from me. I don't think they know.

I'll stay here for as long as I can but I'll have to try and find some medicine and proper food soon.

Maybe I'll try and get away in the morning. Maybe I'll wait another couple of days.

I've built myself a fucking prison.

KATE JAMES

They've been gone for days now. I'm not exactly sure how long it's been. I've lost all track of time. I've lost track of everything.

Things seemed to change when Michael, Carl and Emma left here. I should have gone with them. I wish I'd had the strength to go with them. I wanted to at the time but I just couldn't bring myself to leave. My head was telling me that what they were doing was right but when it came down to it nerves got the better of me. When it came to the crunch I couldn't move. Like everyone else here I was too scared. I was born in Northwich and I've lived here all my life, give or take a couple of years. Might as well finish it here. Might as well stay here now and end my days surrounded by the things and places that I know

and used to know and...

Come on. Got to stop it. Got to try and stop thinking like this.

The rest of the people here are as frightened as I am. I can sense it coming off them. You can almost taste the fear in the air. No-one looks into anyone else's face anymore. People just stare at the ground. Because if you start trying to communicate with anyone else then you know you're going to end up talking about the mess we're in. When you do that you realise just how bad things are and you start thinking about how hopeless the situation really is. You start to realise that this is never going to get any better, and that this is as good as it's going to get. Talk to other people and you start to remember everything that you've lost.

The building is deathly silent, and has been for days.

This morning four of them went out to get supplies. It wasn't through choice, they did it because there's nothing left here and we were thankful that they agreed to go. We had absolutely nothing. No food, no water, no fresh clothes, no medicine, nothing. They went out in one of the cars that had been left in the car park outside the building. The noise of the engine sounded so loud and we just sat there in fear because it made us feel more vulnerable and exposed than we already were. The sudden noise made me realise just how quiet and dead the world has become. Hardly anyone speaks. People don't even argue or cry anymore. There isn't any point.

I could still hear the car in the distance even after they'd been gone for almost ten minutes. I couldn't tell whether it was getting closer or still moving further away. It sounded directionless. The engine noise eventually faded away to nothing but then returned about an hour later. I stood and looked out into the car park through the little window by the main door. The world seemed still and unmoving save for the bodies and the dead leaves which blew across the ground. After what felt like forever there was a sudden burst of movement and frantic, frightened activity as the car sped around the corner and back into the car park. I opened the door and started to help the others to get the things they'd collected out of the car and into the building.

The four men who had been outside were unnervingly quiet and subdued. They looked more desperate and frightened (if that was possible) than they had been before they'd left. I could tell that something was wrong but I didn't want to know what. At that moment my ignorance was my only protection, and a pretty bloody weak protection it was too. It was as we unloaded the car that I noticed the bodies. Three or four of them at first, but soon their numbers had increased dramatically. They were as slow and clumsy as any that we'd seen before, but they seemed to be dragging themselves down through the car park from the road. They seemed to be moving towards us intentionally. It was almost as if they'd followed the car. But that wasn't possible, was it?

One of the men looked back over his shoulder and saw them coming nearer.

'Come on,' he hissed, his voice full of fear. 'Come on, get inside.'

The men barged past me, throwing bags and boxes into the hall and forcing their way back into the community centre. The last man – I think it was Stuart Jeffries – pushed me inside with him and slammed the door shut behind us.

Jag Dhandra, one of the men who'd been out, was sat on the floor next to where I was standing, slumped against the wall. His face was pale and his brown eyes wide with shock and disbelief. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. He saw that I was staring at him.

‘They can see us,’ he mumbled.

‘What?’ I asked, crouching down next to him.

‘They can fucking see us!’ he spat, his voice trembling with an uneasy combination of anger and fear. ‘Those bloody things out there can see us and hear us and...’ He stopped talking momentarily and tried (unsuccessfully) to compose himself. He cleared his throat and tried to speak again. ‘We were getting the stuff. We were busy with what we were doing and we didn’t notice them at first. When we looked up and tried to get out there were hundreds of them all around the building. They were just stood there, waiting for us.’

‘But why? How could they...?’

‘They could hear us!’ he repeated, his voice suddenly louder. ‘The bloody things could hear us and see us!’

The rest of the people in the community centre were all silent, listening anxiously to Jag’s terrified words. When he stopped talking I became aware of another noise behind me – a dull, constant thumping. I stood up and walked back towards the door. I could feel it moving as the bodies outside collided with it. Although weak and decaying they seemed to be hitting the side of the building with controlled force. I looked out through the window. There was already a crowd – somewhere between ten and twenty of them as far as I could see – gathered around the front of the building.

Christ, we’d been lucky until then. Stuck out there right on the edge of the town we’d somehow managed to stay pretty isolated and safe. Maybe it was because of our location, tucked away to the side of a once busy main road, out of sight. Perhaps it was just because we’d hardly made a sound for days that we managed to escape their attention for so long. Whatever the reason, the trip out for supplies today has blown whatever cover we might have had.

This afternoon the group has disintegrated. Already battered and bruised by days of constant frustration, fear and grief, the people here seem now to have lost the last degree of control that they’d managed to hold onto. And once a few people started showing signs of cracking, most of the others quickly followed.

The food and supplies that had been brought back earlier didn’t last long. Like a pack of starving dogs we descended (me included) in search of much needed food and drink. I couldn’t help myself. I felt ashamed and degraded as I scrabbled around on the dirty floor on my hands and knees with the rest of them, desperately ripping open bags and boxes in search of anything that might give me a little energy and nourishment. Had it not been for the fear which distracted and tormented me, the hunger pains that have ripped at my gut for days now would surely have killed me.

A couple of minutes ago two men and a woman began to fight. I don’t know what caused it. It started in another room and I didn’t know it was happening until the woman stumbled out of the room and tripped and fell on top of me. My face got smashed into the floor and I immediately tasted blood in my mouth. The sudden shock and fright prevented me from feeling any pain at first but I can feel my split lip stinging now. The woman got up, pushed herself away from me, and then ran screaming back towards one of the men who had followed her out into the hall. The force of her impact sent them both smashing into the nearest wall which shook with the collision. I was scared. As they disappeared back into the room I grabbed hold of all the bags and boxes I could lay my hands on and crawled away into the shadows.

The fight still isn't over. It's spilled out into the hall again. More people are getting involved. The stockpile of supplies has quickly disappeared but people are still desperately hungry. They're joining in the ruckus, desperate to get their hands on anything remaining. I'm sitting in virtual darkness in the quietest, most secluded corner of the building I've been able to find. I'm looking through the scraps I managed to keep hold of, although most of it is rubbish. Even though the others are being distracted by the fight I don't dare make a sound for fear of people turning on me and trying to take my things. I've got a tin of cat food, a small bottle of milk drink (which has probably gone sour), a box of headache tablets and a tube of toothpaste. I've started to eat the toothpaste. I can't bring myself to eat the cat food yet.

The noise in here is frightening and confusing. It's late afternoon and in the low gloom it's difficult to see what's happening around me. It's starting to get dark outside and it's getting harder and harder to see who's who in the shadows which fill the main hall. Every so often the frantic noises and scuffles stop momentarily and, in those few, random moments, I can hear more sounds coming from outside the building.

The man called Ralph (who thought he was in charge to begin with but who's hardly spoken or even moved for the last few days) has suddenly become more vocal and animated. He's scrambled up onto his feet and he's climbed up onto a chair to try and look out of one of the small rectangular windows which run along the length of the main hall. His tired, frightened face is pressed against the glass and he's trying to look down towards the ground. Even from over here I can see that the thin outside wall he's leaning against is being battered from outside.

He's looking round now, trying to get people's attention.

'Christ,' he yells, his voice uncomfortably loud and unsteady, 'they're trying to get in! The bloody things are trying to get inside!'

His words have attracted the attention of everyone in the building and, for a second, the entire group has become silent. The arguments and the fights have stopped. People have stopped what they're doing and they're standing still and listening. And now we can all hear it – there's a constant barrage of bangs, thumps and crashes coming from all directions. It sounds like the whole community centre is surrounded. If the man I spoke to earlier was right and the bodies can somehow now respond to the things they can see and hear, then it stands to reason that their individual interest in something is going to attract more and more of them to the same place. The noise they made earlier with the car and the arguments was enough to attract a few of the corpses. The shouts and cries and screams which have come from this place since then must have attracted many, many more.

After the brief moment of stunned silence, panic is again tearing through the building.

Ralph has jumped down from where he's been standing and he's lost his footing and fallen onto another man. The second man (I think his name is Simon Peters) has picked himself up and has grabbed hold of Ralph by the scruff of his neck. Ralph is kicking and screaming. I'm trying to push myself further and further into the shadows because I know that the trouble kicking off in the middle of the hall is about to boil over into something far more serious. The people here are right on the edge. It's not going to take much to push them over...

Ralph's been shoved down to the ground. He's lying there and I can see him panting and struggling to get up, his face pressed hard against the dirty floor. He's half-turned towards me. Even from a distance I can see sheer and absolute terror in his face. Like a man possessed he's somehow managed to push himself up and he's knocked Peters out of the way. Pumped full of adrenaline and fear, he's punching and kicking at Peters (who is half his size) and he's sent him reeling. Now Peters is on the ground and their positions have been reversed. With a desperate, terrified look in his eyes Ralph has now

picked up the chair he's spent most of the last day sitting on and he's lifted it above his head. Peters is looking up at him and he's trying to crawl away backwards. I can't bear to watch. I know what's going to happen. Ralph starts to bring the chair down and I look away. I can hear him smashing the chair down on the other man. I can hear him grunting with effort and picking up the chair again and again and smashing it down on the body at his feet. I force myself to look up. I have to know what's happening. Now Peters is lying in the middle of the room in a crumpled heap, twitching and shaking with blood dripping from his head. Ralph is standing over him, still holding the chair up high, looking ready to strike again if Peters moves.

Someone – I couldn't see who it was – just ran at Ralph and tried to grab the chair from him. He's swung it at them, and he's caught them on the side of the head and sent them crashing to the ground. Now someone else – it might have been Jag Dhandra – has just run past me, sprinted down the length of the hall, tripped over Peters' now motionless body and is running down towards the main entrance.

I know what he's doing.

Jesus Christ, he's opening the door.

Oh, God, Dhandra's lost it and he's made a run for it. People are trying to get to him but it's too late to stop him. The door has been opened. I can already hear the wind and feel the cold air blowing into the building from outside. People are screaming. I can see them rushing to grab their belongings and get away from the door and move back towards this end of the community centre and...

And now I can see them.

Bodies.

There's an endless stream of grey, featureless bodies slowly dragging themselves into the room. The people out in the hall can move with much more speed and control but they're instinctively recoiling from the painfully slow cadavers which are lurching towards them.

I have to get out of here. Jesus, I need to find a way out.

There's no way I can get back through the hall – there are far too many bodies in here now – and I don't know of any other exit apart from the windows. Now there are other people around me, all moving in the same direction and trying to get away from the sea of dead flesh that continues to push its way inside. I'm trying to stand up but it's difficult to move. The main hall is almost completely full of corpses now. Ralph is still in the middle of the room, swinging the chair around like a madman, knocking the bodies off their already unsteady feet. Their flesh is decaying and each blow from the chair rips their rotting shells apart. The shadowy-grey of the room is now flowing with dark red and crimson-browns. Ralph has just lost his footing and slipped in the bloody mire. He's gone down. I can see him struggling on the floor. He can't get up again. He's been trampled under the feet of countless corpses.

I'm being carried forward by the stream of panicking survivors. There's nothing I can do but move with them. I can't stop and I can't go backwards. Somehow I've managed to keep hold of the cat food and tablets and I'm grabbing them as tightly as I can as the crowd surges and pushes through the semi-darkness. One of the women to my right has climbed up onto a chair and is forcing herself out through a small skylight in one of the store rooms. Others are following her. I don't have any choice, I have to do the same if I want to get out of here. I'm pushing my way into the room to get to the window. I tripped then. There's a body beneath my feet. I can't see who it is but they're screaming and crying out for help. I wish that I could do something for them but I can't. I have to keep moving.

I've managed to get up onto the chair and I'm trying to push myself through the skylight and get out.

The gap is too narrow. I don't think I'm going to be able to get through. Can't go back. There are people pushing me from below, all trying to get out too. I have to try and get through... God it hurts. My head and shoulders are through. I can feel the window frame digging into my skin.

Somehow I'm out, and now I'm standing on a small square area of roof. There are already too many of us up here. A couple of people have either jumped or have fallen down to the ground below. It's not very high and I'm sure I'll survive the drop if I have to. I'm near the edge of the building now and I can see that there's a crowd of dark, shuffling bodies below me. I want to try and get over to the other side but I can't. The constant stream of people fighting to get out of the community centre is pushing me back towards the edge and I know I'm going to fall. I can't do anything to stop myself...

Kate landed in the middle of the crowd of cadavers, their shell-like, empty bodies cushioning her and breaking her fall. Winded and stunned for the briefest of moments, she scrambled to her feet and began to run, disappearing into the municipal park behind the community centre. The autumn evening was cold, dark and wet and a patchy fog covered the scene. Terrified and disorientated she forced herself to keep moving away from the community centre, heading deeper and deeper into the darkness and smashing the numerous bodies she collided with to the ground.

She couldn't keep running indefinitely. Kate was overweight, undernourished, tired and unfit. For a while she slowed down to walking pace before finally giving in to her exhaustion and stopping.

A children's playground appeared through the mist. Kate sat on one of the swings and held her head in her hands as she listened to the helpless screams and yells which rang out from the building she had left behind.

Alone.

Terrified.

Too tired to move.

Kate James spent her final day in Northwich. Still sitting in the playground in the park, cowering under a slide, as daylight broke she became painfully aware that she was hopelessly exposed and vulnerable outside. She also quickly learnt that her every movement attracted the attention of the obnoxious bodies. Every step she took and every sound she made inevitably drew ragged crowds of them closer and closer to her.

At nine o'clock in the evening, sitting in complete darkness in the attic of a nondescript semi-detached house halfway down a similarly indistinct street, she decided to give up. The pain and the effort had proved too much for her. She took the headache tablets she still carried and every packet of pills and bottle of medicine she could find in the cold and silent house, and swallowed enough to make sure she wouldn't wake up again.

DAY SEVENTEEN

AMY STEADMAN

Part v

Amy Steadman's corpse has continued its remarkable transformation. It is now more than two weeks since death and its physical deterioration has continued unabated. As the shell of the body has continued to fester and decay, however, a modicum of understanding and control has slowly returned. Defying all previous understanding of the changes undergone by the human body after death and during decomposition, as the physical condition of the body has worsened, so its mental strength has returned. Although still only a shadow of what it once was, the corpse now demonstrates remarkable self-awareness. Involuntary movements and reactions have very gradually become voluntary.

Time has taken its toll on each one of the millions of cadavers still walking the streets. Their flesh is disintegrating and countless internal and external chemical reactions are affecting the composition and strength of the remaining skin, muscle and other bodily components. Steadman's corpse is no different. Its flesh has darkened and dried out in places as bodily fluids have steadily drained away. As a result of these changes the body has also become breeding grounds for huge numbers of insects. Amy Steadman's corpse is a melting pot of insect activity. It is riddled with maggots.

The bodies have only one need, and that is a basic and instinctive desire to continue to exist. Self-preservation is each corpse's only concern. Because of their worsening physical state, however, the bodies have only a limited ability to defend and protect themselves. As a result their reactions now are frequently exaggerated and overly aggressive. The bodies will fight to protect themselves at all costs even, perversely, at their own expense. It is not uncommon to see a body attack and tear another corpse apart in self-defence, and sustain substantial damage to itself in the process. This is the norm with those bodies that are particularly badly decayed. Where the process has been slowed – as with Amy Steadman's cadaver which initially spent several days indoors protected from the elements – their actions are slightly more reserved and controlled.

It is now early on Thursday morning and a light, misty rain has been falling since dawn. Amy Steadman's body is shuffling along the side of a large, warehoused-sized furniture store. There are a large number of other corpses nearby, although the reason for their swollen numbers is not immediately apparent. It may be that there has previously been an incident here which initially attracted the attention of many bodies, and that this is the residue of the crowd which is gradually disappearing. The fact that many of these bodies seem to be moving in the same overall direction, however, indicates that this may be the

beginning of the incident, not the end.

Steadman's corpse continues to drag itself wearily around the building and the surrounding streets until a single noise in the near distance attracts its attention. It is the sound of a survivor preparing to leave its shelter to make an unavoidable trip out into the open for food and other supplies. The corpse, along with all the others in the immediate vicinity, immediately turns and begins to move towards the source of the sound.

The lone survivor is based in an office building in the centre of a large and sprawling car lot. Over the last few days the survivor, a young male, has attempted to fortify and strengthen his hideout with limited success. As the behaviour of the bodies which plague the countryside has changed, so has the survivor been forced to change his priorities. Failing dismally to appreciate the severity and potential long-term problems caused by the infection, the survivor is now struggling to stay alive. Initially believing naively that he could continue to exist at something close to a 'pre-infection' standard of living, he focussed his attention on comfort rather than practical necessities. As a result he has been vastly under-prepared for the length and harshness of his isolation. Unable to easily venture outside for supplies (as a result of the increased number of bodies nearby and also because of the fortifications made to his location) he has been trapped without access to water, sanitation, medicine or food of any real nutritional value. The survivor is in very poor health. He is dehydrated and malnourished. After an aborted attempt to fetch supplies three days ago, his mental state is also questionable. At this point in time the difference between each individual corpse and the survivor is remarkably slight. Because of their numbers and lack of emotion, however, the bodies are now at a clear advantage.

In the middle of the car lot the survivor has now emerged from the office building where he has hidden for the last two weeks. He moves slowly in an attempt to avoid detection. Unfortunately, because of his poor condition, his movements are uncharacteristically clumsy and lethargic. He plans to take a car and drive until he finds a supermarket or other such place where he might be able to locate the supplies he needs. He is confident that once he is in the car he will be relatively safe. His activity, however, has not gone unnoticed. His pained, awkward movements and deep, rasping breathing have already attracted the attention of several of the nearest cadavers. An inevitable chain reaction of movement has now begun throughout the crowd as more bodies gravitate towards him.

Amy Steadman's body is approaching the scene. It has crossed the main road between the furniture store and the car lot and is heading towards the office building. It does not yet recognise this building as the source of the disturbance, rather it instead focuses on the increased levels of movement all around it. From many directions the dead are closing in.

Some bodies – those that have decayed more than Steadman's – are distracted from the survivor by the moment of other corpses around them. Steadman's corpse, however, has learnt to distinguish between the dead and other distractions. Although it will not hesitate to attack any cadaver that threatens it, Steadman's corpse no longer sets out to destroy other bodies. It concentrates on moving towards the source of the disruption, although it is not fully aware why. It is likely that it sees this disturbance – whatever is causing it – as a threat to its continued existence which must be destroyed.

The survivor is weak and, after a long period of frightened inactivity, he finds the sudden effort of moving at speed unexpectedly difficult. Just leaving the building has left him feeling light-headed and breathless. Already nervous and unsure, he has stopped in the shadows at the side of the building and is now trying to summon up the strength to make the hundred or so metre dash to the car he has left ready for such an escape. In amongst several hundred other cars it is indistinct and unnoticeable and he is hoping that this will allow him to escape successfully. He intends to return to this place once he has collected sufficient supplies.

Steadman's corpse – along with almost a hundred others – is now less than ten meters away from the front of the office building.

The survivor is now aware of the sudden movement all around him but is unsure what to do. The poor weather has reduced his visibility and he is unaware of the level of danger he is in. His choices are becoming more limited as each second ticks by. He can now either retreat back into his hideout (as he did earlier in the week) or continue with his attempt to get out and fetch supplies. He knows that either option is equally dangerous – if he turns back he will starve and his sickness will worsen, if he leaves then he risks exposing himself to the immediate danger of attack from the hordes of bodies which are dragging themselves ever nearer. He knows, however, that he will have to leave eventually and that going back inside will only delay the inevitable. He decides to make a run for the car.

Indecision has ultimately proved to be this survivor's undoing. His brief but unnecessary delay has given sufficient numbers of bodies enough time to drag themselves into the narrow space between his present position and the car. Confused and bewildered, he begins to make a desperate and painful run towards the car. He attempts to swerve around the first few bodies which reach out for him and is successful. Another couple of meters forward, however, and there are too many for him to avoid. He tries to double-back on himself but once the first creature has caught hold of him he is trapped. He attempts to release the corpse's grip on him and has almost managed to do this when a further group of bodies close in on him and drag him down.

Amy Steadman's corpse is at the front of the crowd which swallows up and kills this survivor. With countless others it lashes out at the survivor's flesh and tears the helpless man apart. The survivor's bloody, steaming remains are dropped on the floor and discarded.

Half an hour later and the scene has begun to change again. With the survivor gone the crowds of bodies have started to drift away again in random directions. Amy Steadman's body limps alone through the mist along a wide and silent road strewn with corpses.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Part ii – GOING DOWN

Ten days.

That's how long we've been sat here now. That's how long we've been sat here doing nothing except shouting, arguing and fighting with each other. This can't go on much longer.

John Proctor slumped dejectedly against the wall and held his head in his hands. He watched the

others through the gaps between his fingers. Christ, how he'd grown to despise these people over the last week and a half.

Proctor had always been taught (and had always taught others) to look for the good in other people. Trapped here on the top floor of the hotel, waiting to either starve to death or be flushed out by huge crowds of bodies, he couldn't help but concentrate on the faults and irritating personality traits which made the five other survivors trapped with him the worst cell-mates he could have imagined.

Barry Bushell. Now there was an interesting character. It had taken Proctor some time to work him out, and he still wasn't sure whether or not he understood him. Bushell had been understandably annoyed when the other survivors had arrived and had made such a mess of his precious hotel. Even now he'd maintained a slight distance between himself and the others. He spent a lot of time alone in the master bedroom. No-one else ever went in there. Proctor had initially admired his confidence in wearing women's clothing but he struggled to understand why he did it. There must be some underlying sexual issue or confusion, he'd thought. Whatever the reason, he'd been surprised when, a couple of days ago, Bushell had reverted to wearing more 'normal' clothing. He'd plucked up courage to ask him why he'd changed his appearance again after being so defiant for so long. Bushell had explained that he'd done it to shut the others up. He'd said he'd had enough of the constant digs and jibes from Wilcox and Elizabeth, and tireless and pointless questions and sideways glances from that bloody annoying woman Doreen. Why didn't they just leave him alone? What difference did it make to any of them what he was wearing? That said, he personally found it easier to relate to Bushell when he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt rather than full drag. It really shouldn't have made any difference but it did. Bushell now sat on his own in the doorway of his bedroom quietly reading a book that he'd already read at least twice before in the last week.

Elizabeth and Wilcox had a strange relationship. They seemed to detest each other and enjoy each other's company in equal measure. One minute they were fighting, the next laughing. They were of a similar age and background, maybe that was the connection? Proctor sensed that the decision to fight or laugh was predominantly made by Elizabeth. She was fairly attractive (very attractive when compared to Doreen who was almost forty years her senior) and, although he hadn't seen or heard it for himself, he suspected she used her femininity to twist Wilcox around her little finger. Perhaps he was doing her a disservice? Perhaps he was jealous?

Now Doreen he couldn't stand. No ifs, buts or maybes, he simply couldn't abide her. He hated her grating voice and her witch's cackle of a laugh. He hated her smell and the cloud of cigarette smoke which followed her around the room. He hated her wizened, wrinkled skin and her yellow teeth. Most of all he hated the fact that she moaned constantly about everything, anything and everyone. She had more aches, pains and problems each day than the rest of them put together. No matter how low or desperate someone may have been feeling, Doreen had it worse. It had reached the stage where Proctor now tried to avoid all contact with her, which wasn't easy when they were trapped together in such a confined space.

It was interesting just how little the rest of them had to do with Paul Jones. Wilcox in particular hardly ever spoke to him. Perhaps there was an element of competition there? Perhaps they both considered themselves to be the all-important alpha male of the group? Whatever the reason they kept their distance from each other, although in all fairness Paul Jones tended to stay apart from everyone else. He both infuriated and fascinated Proctor. Such an isolated and solitary person who, when he could be persuaded, added so much to the group. He was obviously intelligent, perhaps too bright for his own good? His distance from the others came across as an unpleasant arrogance and superiority. Perhaps he just wasn't very good at relating to other people? On the other hand perhaps he really did consider himself to be better than the rest?

Funny, Proctor thought, that these six people should find so many faults with each other. There they were, all living under the same cloud of uncertainty and fear, and yet they couldn't work together. He was as bad as the rest of them and he'd freely admit it. Shame though, that in the face of such uncertainty, they still preferred to splinter and fragment because of trivial differences rather than trying to work together for the common good.

Doreen and Wilcox were sat at the dining table playing cards, their faces long and emotionless. Close by Elizabeth dozed on a sofa. Like Bushell, Paul Jones also had a small area of turf which he'd marked out as his own. His usual position was sitting on a chair looking out of the wide floor-to-ceiling window which overlooked the front of the hotel. From there he could just about see the rear-end of the bus sticking out of the gaping hole in the wall where the building's main entrance had once been. Although much fewer in number, even now more bodies were still stumbling through the rubble to get into the building. Ten days on and the volume of dead flesh which had forced itself into the building was continuing to increase.

An uncomfortably familiar mixture of boredom and curiosity forced Proctor to get up from where he sat and wander over to Jones. Jones noticed him but didn't react, hoping that if he didn't acknowledge the other man he'd go away again. He didn't.

'Any change?' Proctor pointlessly asked.

Why the hell did you ask that question, Jones wondered? Was he really that desperate to start a conversation, or was he just too stupid to look out of the window for himself? In response Jones grunted and shrugged his shoulders.

'Still more of them coming?'

Jones grunted again.

'You'd think they'd have given up by now, wouldn't you?'

'Suppose,' Jones mumbled. Finally, a response! 'Fuck all else to distract them round here though, isn't there?'

Now it was Proctor's turn to grunt an unintelligible answer. Talking to Jones made him feel uncomfortable. He never knew what to say for the best. He could never gauge the level of the conversation and Jones always seemed to gain the upper hand, leaving him looking and feeling stupid. He turned around and was about to walk away when he stopped himself. Looking round the vast but strangely empty suite there didn't seem to be any point going anywhere else. Nothing was happening. Might as well stay here and look out of the window.

Proctor knew that it annoyed the other man, but he couldn't help himself incessantly asking unnecessary questions.

'Think they'll ever stop?'

'What, stop moving or stop trying to get in here?'

'Both.'

'Yes.'

'Yes what?'

‘Both. Yes they’ll eventually stop moving and yes, they’ll eventually stop trying to get in here.’

‘When?’

‘Quarter past six tomorrow night. How the fuck should I know?’

‘Sorry.’

‘They’ll stop moving when they’ve rotted down so much that they just can’t do it anymore and they’ll stop trying to get in here when there’s so fucking many of them crammed into this fucking building that there’s no more room for them. And please don’t ask me which is going to happen first because I haven’t got a fucking clue.’

Proctor took that as his cue to move. A sudden tirade like that from Jones meant that he’d had enough of speaking to you and it was time to disappear before he told you to go. Dejected, Proctor turned and ambled slowly back towards the middle of the huge penthouse apartment. It had been an impressive sight when they’d first arrived there. Now the Presidential Suite looked as ragged and rundown as the rest of the decomposing world. Tired, bored and uneasy, he walked towards the kitchen to look for scraps of food. He knew there wouldn’t be much there. They were rapidly running out of supplies. Maybe he’d find something in the rubbish that one of the others had missed...

Proctor waded through the discarded boxes, bags, wrappers and other litter that covered the floor of the suite’s small kitchen and thought about Jones’ words. He was right, the bodies would keep trying to force their way into the building until there was no more space. That was a terrifying thought, and one which had generated a lot of animated discussion but very little action over the last ten days. If things kept progressing as they had been – and there was no reason to suggest that they wouldn’t – then a time would inevitably come very soon when the building in which they now sheltered would be filled to capacity with dead flesh, leaving the group stranded without supplies in their once-luxurious top-floor airlock. But what could they do about it? They’d talked and argued about the problem on and off without reaching any conclusion or workable solution. There had so far been enough food in the kitchen and enough space between the living and the dead for the survivors to enable discussions to be put off until tomorrow, and then the day after that, and the day after that. On the whole the group seemed content not to do anything until they absolutely had to. Proctor sensed that soon, one way or another, they would have no choice but to take action.

Proctor had, for his part, tried to do something constructive. Granted it wasn’t much, but (as he frequently reminded them), it was more than the rest of them had done. A once keen photographer, five days ago he’d found a digital camera and batteries lying around the Presidential Suite. Bushell had brought them back with him from an early trip into town but had never used them. In a moment of unexpected initiative he’d crept out onto the landing, attached the camera to the end of a fire-hose, and lowered it down the middle of the staircase. Through trial and error he’d managed to work out what length of hose was necessary to lower the camera to the floor below, then the floor after that and the floor after that. At the same time he set the camera’s timer and flash to take a single picture once the required level had been reached. With surprising accuracy he had soon developed a means to take photographs of the main staircase at each level (albeit only as far down as the hose would stretch) and, therefore, he’d found a way of measuring the speed and progress of the dead when they finally appeared. Their incalculably vast numbers meant that the bodies at the front of the crowd were continually being pushed and shoved forwards and up the stairs. With corpses continuing to pour through the bus-shaped hole in the hotel wall, once the ground floor reception had been completely filled with flesh there was nowhere else for them to go but up. The enormous crowd was slowly channelling and funnelling itself further up the stairs and deeper into the hotel.

Each time Proctor hauled the camera back up to the top floor the group crowded around the little screen on the back of its casing to monitor the progress of the slowly climbing cadavers. There had been no sign of them initially, but Proctor had continued to take his photographs every morning regardless. And then, yesterday morning, the furthest advanced of them had been photographed on the twenty-second floor. It was a simple enough calculation to make – the dead had covered twenty-two floors in about nine days. They were climbing at the rate of just over two floors a day. The second simple calculation the group made was altogether more disturbing. It was Thursday today. If their rate of climb continued at the same speed (and there was no immediate reason why it should change) the bodies would reach the twenty-eighth floor sometime on Saturday or by Sunday at the very latest.

Proctor found a strange sense of enjoyment in his role of chief cameraman and body-watcher. It made him feel useful. It made him feel indispensable and gave him a purpose. Perhaps even more importantly, it gave him a role which he could hide behind and use as an excuse for not doing anything else. He saw the camera as a potential way out of some of the pretty bloody unpleasant and downright dangerous jobs which would inevitably come their way over the course of the next few days.

Three forty-five. The afternoon sun had begun another rapid descent towards the horizon, filling the Presidential Suite with harsh orange light and long, dragging shadows. Rather than spreading themselves around the edges of the apartment, on this rare occasion the six survivors were sat together around the dining table. There was no meal to be eaten or food to be shared this afternoon. The reason for sitting together was to finally talk about the issues they'd avoided talking about for the last ten days. The agenda for their discussions was dishearteningly short and simple. Firstly, they had hardly any food supplies left. Secondly, according to the photograph Proctor had taken earlier, the bodies were now close to reaching floor twenty-four.

'So exactly how much food have we got?' Doreen asked.

'A days worth,' Bushell replied, 'maybe two at the very most. After that there's nothing.'

'We must have something...?'

'No,' he said again, shaking his head, 'we won't have anything.'

'But...?'

'But what?' snapped Wilcox. Christ, how did they get through to this bloody woman? 'Listen, we've got nothing, okay? We're down to our last few meals. We haven't got an extra little stash of food tucked away for emergencies. After this we'll have absolutely nothing. Fuck all. Zip.'

Doreen slumped back in her seat and stared into space.

'So what are we going to do?' she eventually asked. More sighs from around the table.

'That's what we're trying to decide, you stupid cow!' Wilcox groaned. 'Bloody hell, are you on the same planet as the rest of us?'

'Wish I wasn't,' she grunted.

'So we've got two problems,' Proctor summarised, trying his best to control the direction of the conversation. 'We need to try and get out and get supplies but...'

'But this building is full of bodies,' continued Bushell, 'thanks to the hole you lot made in the front

door.' He glanced across at Wilcox as he spoke. Uncomfortable, Wilcox looked down and did his best to avoid eye contact with anyone.

'So what do we do?' Doreen asked again.

'Is there any way of getting out of here and back up again?' Elizabeth wondered.

'Not that I know of,' Bushell answered quickly. 'Getting down's no problem, we can use the fire escape.' He nodded towards an inconspicuous looking door in the far corner of the room. 'The problem is what to do once you're down there,' he continued. 'Open the fire escape door on the ground floor and you'll probably find yourself face to face with a few thousand bodies. And if you manage to get outside, Christ knows how you're going to get back in again afterwards. It'd be impossible if you were carrying supplies...'

'There must be a way?'

'Get a sheet, hold it like a parachute, climb up to the roof and jump off,' Wilcox suggested to Doreen, less than seriously.

'Do you think that will work?' she asked, her response meeting with groans of disbelief from several of the others.

'Only if you try it, Doreen,' he smirked.

'How would I get up again?'

Wilcox didn't bother to answer.

'We should go down there,' he instead suggested. 'We should go down there and torch the place on our way out. Set light to the building and watch the whole fucking place go up in flames.'

'What good's that going to do?' wondered Bushell.

'It would distract them. Christ, the heat and light this place burning would generate would be more than enough of a distraction for us to be able to get away. They're not going to be interested in a handful of people sneaking out the back door if that's going on, are they?'

Wilcox's plan was met with a muted silence from the others. They each thought long and hard about it, but none of them were sure. It wasn't the wanton destruction that put them off, rather it was the thought of running again...

'What about the cradle?' Proctor said suddenly. 'We've talked about it before, haven't we? Barry said there's a window-cleaner's cradle half way up the side of the building. We could use that to get us down, couldn't we? We could use it to get back up as well...'

'What about power,' Jones grunted from the end of the table. The others turned to face him. 'How do you think you winch it up and down? Think the window-cleaners used to pull themselves up thirty floors by hand? No power, no cradle.'

Another idea quashed.

'Seems to me that if we can get out of here in one piece then maybe that's what we should be looking to try and do. Maybe we're going to have to find ourselves somewhere else to hide,' Elizabeth said dejectedly.

Bushell shook his head.

‘I don’t want to leave here,’ he sighed, his voice soft and tired. ‘I can’t see any point in running.’

‘Of course there’s a point,’ sneered Doreen.

‘Is there?’

‘Yes...’ she stammered, sounding far from certain, ‘of course there’s a point...’

Bushell shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’m not so sure there is.’

‘So what are you saying?’ snapped Wilcox. ‘Do we just sit here and starve? Fucking good plan, well done!’

‘What are you running for?’

‘Because I don’t want to die,’ Wilcox answered quickly.

‘Good answer. Why don’t you want to die?’

He struggled to answer. It was a simple enough question, or maybe it was a trick...

‘No-one wants to die, do they?’ he said quietly.

‘But is it the end of your life you’re worried about, or is it death itself that scares you?’

‘What?’

‘Are you worried that you’re not going to achieve everything you’ve always wanted to achieve, or is it the pain of being torn apart by hundreds of bloody bodies that bothers you?’

Again Wilcox couldn’t answer. Neither could any of the others.

‘What point are you making, Barry?’ Proctor wondered.

He shrugged his shoulders and sat back in his seat.

‘Sorry, I’m just thinking out loud really. I’m not trying to wind you all up. I guess what I’m saying is that I can’t see a way out here. If we run we’ll find somewhere else to hide for a while, then something will happen and before you know it we’ll be moving on again, and again, and again...’

‘Not necessarily,’ Elizabeth protested.

‘No, but that’s probably what will happen. We have to be ready to expect the unexpected. Christ, I thought I was doing okay here until someone drove a bloody bus into the building!’

‘But running has got to be better than just giving up and waiting to die, hasn’t it?’

Bushell shrugged his shoulders again.

‘I’m not so sure. That’s what I used to think, but I don’t know anymore. Every morning when I wake up, it becomes clearer and clearer to me that my life is just about over. We’re massively outnumbered and society is finished. Christ, we’re sitting here talking about risking our necks just to get food. What

kind of a life are any of us going to have if getting the basics like food and shelter are so difficult?

Silence.

‘Still don’t understand you,’ Doreen admitted. ‘What were you saying about death and dying?’

Bushell rubbed his tired eyes and explained.

‘I don’t want to keep struggling and fighting forever,’ he said sadly, ‘and I don’t think any of you do either. If I’m completely honest, I just want to relax and let things happen naturally. I don’t think we were supposed to survive. So while I don’t relish the idea of letting those things out there tear me limb from limb, I’m not too bothered if I die.’

‘But that’s...’ Proctor was about to protest.

‘It’s not normal,’ Bushell interrupted. ‘It’s not what any of you were expecting me to say. We’ve been pre-programmed and conditioned by society all of our lives to keep fighting and keep struggling. All I’m saying is that there’s no point anymore. Just sit back and relax and let nature take it’s course.’

More silence.

‘No,’ Wilcox said suddenly.

‘What?’

‘I said no,’ he repeated. ‘No way am I just going to sit here and wait to die. Absolutely no way... There must be more we can do.’

‘I’m with you,’ Paul Jones said, similarly unimpressed by Bushell’s words. Proctor looked up in surprise at Jones’ sudden allegiance to the other man. Strange how their apparent dislike and distrust of each other had immediately been put to one side now that their backs were against the wall.

‘So what do we do?’ asked Elizabeth .

That was the million dollar question that no-one could immediately answer. A heavy and ominous silence descended on the room as the six individuals quietly considered their limited options and the apparent hopelessness of their situation.

‘Exactly how full of bodies is this place?’ Jones asked.

‘They’re almost up to the twenty-fourth floor, I told you that a few minutes ago. Weren’t you listening to...’ Proctor answered before being interrupted.

‘No, you told us how far up the staircase they’ve managed to get, you didn’t tell us how full of bodies the building is.’

Proctor struggled to see the difference. He wasn’t alone.

‘So what are you saying?’ Elizabeth wondered.

Jones shook his head. Christ, these people annoyed him. More to the point he was annoyed with himself. Why hadn’t he thought of this before?

‘A couple of minutes ago we were talking about getting out of here, weren’t we?’

‘Yes.’

‘So how was Bushell talking about getting out?’

‘Do you always answer questions with questions?’ she snapped.

‘Do you?’ he replied infuriatingly before re-phrasing and asking his previous question again. ‘There’s another way out of here, isn’t there?’

‘The fire escape,’ Bushell eventually answered.

‘Which is still clear, correct?’

‘As far as we know,’ he stammered. ‘Why, what’s your point?’

‘Is the fire escape anywhere near the main staircase?’

‘Of course not,’ Proctor answered quickly. ‘What would be the point of that? The fire escape needs to be on the other side of the building so that...’

‘Exactly.’

‘So what’s your point?’ Elizabeth sighed, confused and tired and unable to follow the rapidly changing direction of the conversation.

‘What I’m saying,’ Jones replied, ‘is that the fire escape gives us a way of moving around the building that’s well away from the main staircase where we think the bodies are...’

‘And there’s a good chance the bodies are still only on the staircase,’ Wilcox continued, taking over from the other man. ‘Which means that if we’re careful we could still go onto the floors and into the rooms.’

‘What’s the layout of a typical floor?’ Jones asked.

Bushell thought for a second before answering.

‘Just one U-shaped corridor,’ he shrugged. ‘Staircase in the middle, fire escape at either end I think.’

‘And when you first set yourself up here, did you clear the place out?’

‘I checked all the rooms for bodies and I took what I needed but...’

‘Did you take everything?’

‘No. Didn’t need to.’

‘So there’s your answer,’ Jones said smugly, rocking back on his chair and almost looking down his nose at the others. ‘We go back down as far as we need to and grab what we can.’

‘Think that’s going to work?’

‘Might do, might not. Should prevent us from starving to death for a few days longer,’ he sneered cynically. ‘Delay the inevitable for a while.’

‘That’s all you’re going to do,’ Bushell reminded him, ‘just delay what you know is going to happen anyway.’

‘He’s right, isn’t he?’ asked Doreen. ‘It’s not going to change the fact that those bloody things will be up here with us in the next couple of days, is it? It’s not going to help us get away.’

‘No,’ he agreed, ‘it won’t. But it might give us a little time and space.’

Eight thirty-five. Pitch black. Jones, Wilcox and Elizabeth crept cautiously down the fire escape staircase towards the lower floors of the hotel. Hunger, claustrophobia and fear had combined to deadly effect to kick the instinctively cowardly survivors into action. Their hastily considered and half-improvised plan seemed increasingly risky with every step of descent. Jones had suggested they head all the way down and work their way back up. They had only made their way down as far as the seventeenth floor when he stopped and turned round to face the others.

‘What’s the matter?’ Elizabeth asked, immediately concerned.

‘I want to have a look,’ he replied.

‘What for?’

‘What do you think?’

‘But you said...’

‘I said nothing. We know they’re on the stairs. We don’t know where else they are, do we?’

She shook her head. Jones moved towards the door and gently pushed it open a fraction. He shone his torch out onto the landing.

‘Anything?’

‘Can’t see any movement,’ he replied, his voice little more than a whisper. ‘I’m going to have a look around.’

Without waiting for a response from either of the other two Jones slipped out through the door and onto the landing. He switched off his torch, concerned that the light might attract unwanted attention, and then cautiously moved further down the dark hallway to the first corner. The layout, as far as he could see in the gloom, was pretty much as Bushell had described. A long, wide corridor with a right-angled right turn which ran towards the central part of the building where, he presumed, the staircase and several thousand rotting bodies would be. He moved closer to the corner and peered around, holding his breath for fear of making any sound which might tip the balance and alert the dead to his presence. He couldn’t see anything. It was too dark.

Jones felt his way along the wall and paused at the door to one of the hotel’s many bedrooms. Did he go inside? It would be worth having a quick look around the room before he returned to the other two waiting on the fire escape staircase. He wanted to see the layout of a typical room so that he could get a feel for what they were dealing with. How quickly would they be able to thoroughly check a room for food? What were they likely to find? Would there be a mini-bar or similar? Christ, he needed a drink. Imagine if each room had its own supply of booze. Surely some of the more expensive rooms on the higher floors would have...

Jones reached down and tried the handle. Damn thing was locked. No surprise really. Bushell had a set of master keys which he’d taken from reception. Elizabeth had them with her. He shoved the door again, hoping it would open. It didn’t matter. He’d go back to the... Wait. What was that? He sensed

movement nearby. Jones felt something brush against his arm and he froze. He lifted his torch and turned it on. Ahead of him the whole corridor was filled with bodies.

‘Fucking hell,’ he mumbled as he tripped and staggered back away from the dead. Illuminated now and then by the unsteady light from his shaking torch, he saw that the corridor was packed full of corpses which had obviously spilled out from the staircase. They began to stumble towards him. He turned and ran back to the fire escape and hammered on the door. Elizabeth opened it slowly.

‘Move!’ he yelled, forcing himself through and slamming the door shut behind him.

‘Bodies?’ she asked over her shoulder as she instinctively began to climb back up.

‘Fucking hundreds of them,’ he grunted. He glanced around for Wilcox but he’d already gone and was way ahead of them both. Cowardly bastard. He made a mental note never to put himself in a position where needed to rely on Wilcox for anything.

The survivors pounded breathlessly up the stairs, suddenly not bothered about the volume of noise they made, just desperate to get back to the Presidential Suite. As he climbed Jones thought more about the progress of the bodies he’d just seen.

‘Wait a minute,’ he shouted, stopping Elizabeth in her tracks. Breathless, he shone his torch at a small sign on the back of the nearest fire door. Floor twenty-six. It was worth taking a chance to see if this floor was the same as the one ten floors below. Elizabeth walked back down five steps to stand next to him.

‘What are you doing?’

‘According to Proctor they haven’t reached this floor yet,’ he said. ‘We might as well see if we can find anything before we go back.’

She agreed. He was right on two counts. Firstly, if the bodies hadn’t yet made it this far up the staircase, they wouldn’t have made it up to this floor at all. Secondly, it looked likely that this was their last chance to get food before the dead reached the Presidential Suite.

‘Come on,’ she mumbled.

The two survivors crept through the fire door (leaving it propped open with a fire extinguisher) and moved slowly along the corridor to the first corner. Jones put his head around the corner and shone the torch down its length.

‘Clear,’ he said, the relief in his voice obvious. ‘Let’s stick to this end of the corridor and stay away from the stairs.’

‘Suits me,’ Elizabeth replied.

The layout of floor twenty-seven was different to floor seventeen. This floor bore more of a resemblance to the luxurious twenty-eighth floor than any of the lower levels. There were several large suites on this floor and Jones was immediately hopeful they’d find some food and drink at least.

‘Got a key for an executive suite?’ he asked. Elizabeth worked her way through the huge bunch of keys she carried. The door was quickly opened and the two of them slipped inside.

‘So what are we looking for?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Anything,’ Jones replied, ‘and make sure you split what you find into two piles. Keep one for yourself and we’ll share the rest with the others.’

‘But that’s...’

‘...completely fair. How many of those fuckers are down here with us? If they want more they can come and get it themselves.’

He turned round and began to ransack the room.

A little under an hour later Elizabeth and Jones returned to the Presidential Suite. They had with them the entire contents of the drinks cabinets of the Executive Suites on the floor immediately below. They’d found very little in the way of food, but that didn’t seem to matter anymore. The survivors gratefully took what they were given as they listened to what the others had seen on the other levels. Regardless of their nerves and uncertainty, what food they were given was eaten quickly.

‘Feels like a last supper, doesn’t it?’ Bushell said quietly. He didn’t know who was listening. No-one had lit any lamps this evening.

‘So what do we do tomorrow?’ Proctor asked, sitting a little way behind him. ‘Do we just sit here and wait for them, or do we run?’

‘We’ve been through this before,’ Elizabeth sighed.

‘Wilcox will run,’ Jones smirked. ‘You’re good at running, aren’t you, Wilcox.’

Wilcox switched on a torch and shone it around the room until he found where Jones was sitting.

‘Shut your fucking mouth,’ he hissed angrily, shining the light directly into the other man’s eyes. Jones laughed at him.

‘Thanks for your help back there,’ he smirked, referring to Wilcox’s sudden disappearance on the fire escape stairs. ‘Couldn’t have managed without you.’

Wilcox switched off his torch. He didn’t know how to react. He was angry and he didn’t like Jones mocking him, but he didn’t feel able to retaliate. What was going to happen tomorrow was much more of a threat than Jones and his snide comments.

‘So what do we do tomorrow?’ Proctor asked again. ‘Do we run or...?’

‘Let’s just think about it logically, shall we,’ Bushell suggested. ‘They’re still coming in through the front door, aren’t they? And they’re climbing the stairs because of the growing pressure from other corpses behind them. So what’s going to happen when they reach the top of the stairs? They’re not going to turn back round and start heading for the ground floor again, are they?’

‘They’re going to keep coming,’ Jones said ominously. ‘When they can’t go up, they’ll start spreading onto the landings like they did on the other floor.’

‘And even when there’s no more room on the landing up here,’ Bushell continued, ‘they’ll keep coming. Before we know it they’ll be up against our door and then, when the pressure gets too great, our door will give and this place will be filled with the damn things.’

‘Lovely,’ mumbled Doreen.

‘So you don’t think there’s anything we can do?’ asked Elizabeth .

‘It’s like I said earlier,’ Bushell replied, ‘what’s coming is coming. I think we’re all going to die. The only choice we each have left is how we do it. Now I don’t personally intend being torn apart, but I also don’t like the idea of running either.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Not sure yet. I haven’t decided.’

‘You haven’t got long.’

‘I know.’

‘I’m running,’ Wilcox muttered.

‘You would,’ laughed Jones. ‘I’ll probably run too.’

‘What about you, Doreen?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Too tired to run, too scared not to,’ she answered dejectedly. ‘We’ll just have to see what tomorrow brings, won’t we?’

Next morning. First light. Proctor picked up his camera and nervously walked out of the main doors and across the landing, intending to carry out his self-imposed daily duty and ascertain how far below them the advancing bodies now were. He walked out to the staircase and leant over the banister. He immediately pulled his head back. There was no longer any need for cameras and fire-hoses. He could see them. They still had several flights of stairs to climb, but he could now see the first few dead. He ran back to tell the others.

‘How far?’ Elizabeth asked as he burst back into the room breathlessly.

‘Not far.’

‘How long?’

‘Not long.’

‘More specific?’

Proctor shrugged his shoulders.

‘Couple of hours maximum.’

Doreen began to sob with fright.

‘Shut up you silly cow,’ Wilcox snapped with his characteristic lack of concern and compassion, ‘all you’re going to do is get them up here quicker.’

‘So what do we do now?’ Proctor asked, his face suddenly ashen grey and emotionless. ‘Do we just sit and wait?’

‘You might as well,’ a voice suddenly said from behind him, ‘but I’m not ready to. Not yet, anyway.’

The survivors turned around. For the first time that morning Barry Bushell emerged from his bedroom. He was dressed as a woman again, complete with blond wig, full make-up and high-heeled boots. He stormed into the main part of the suite with a bright confidence, completely at odds with the others who sat around dejectedly, each contemplating the decisions that they would soon have to make and the horrors they were about to face.

‘So what are you planning?’ Elizabeth asked, looking Bushell up and down and admiring his nerve if nothing else.

‘I did a lot of thinking last night,’ he explained.

‘And...?’ Jones pressed.

‘I tried to see if I was wrong. I wanted to know whether I’ve been looking at everything the wrong way.’

‘And?’ he pressed again.

‘And I think I’m right,’ he sighed. ‘And the more I think about it, the more I realise that it’s hopeless. We’re really up against it and I can’t see a way out. I’m not just talking about the hotel here, I’m talking about what’s left of our lives in general.’

‘What do you mean?’

Bushell thought carefully for a moment.

‘Whatever we do, wherever we go, we’re fucked.’

‘Nice.’

‘Seriously, just stop and think about it. I’m not being defeatist here, I’m just being honest. Whatever we decide to do, it’s going to be a struggle. We’re going to have to fight for absolutely everything, and that’s bloody stupid when you think there’s probably only a few people left. The world’s our oyster, but I don’t think we can take any of it. What does that say to you?’

Blank, confused looks. Silence.

‘Like you said,’ Elizabeth mumbled, ‘we’re fucked.’

‘Exactly. The end’s coming and there’s nothing we can do about it. The only thing we have any control over is what we do with the time we have left.’

‘But we don’t know how long that is,’ Proctor protested.

‘We never have done,’ Bushell argued. ‘Seems to me that we can spend out last days and weeks hiding in the shadows out there, starving to death, running from place to place and freaking out every time someone farts...’

‘Or...?’

‘Or we can just stop trying so hard to survive and just let things happen naturally. Go out with a little dignity.’

‘You’re talking crap,’ Wilcox protested.

‘Am I? Am I really? Do you really think you’re supposed to survive all of this? Don’t you think there are some things that are bigger than us...?’

‘Please don’t start talking about God and divine retribution and all that crap,’ Proctor sighed. ‘I’ve given all of that up. It’s taken me until now to finally see what a load of old shite all that really was.’

Bushell shook his head and smiled and brushed away a stray wisp of long, blond hair.

‘That’s not what I’m talking about at all. What I’m saying is that whatever happened here was the twenty-first century equivalent of the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs.’

‘What?’ Jones exclaimed. ‘Now you’ve really lost me.’

‘This is our ice-age. This is our apocalypse. This is the end. We should just accept it and let nature take its course.’ Bushell’s comments were met with an ominous silence. Keen to press his point he spoke again. ‘Our problem is,’ he sighed thoughtfully, ‘we’ve all fallen foul of the programme. We think we’re bloody superior. We think the planet can’t go on without us. It’s part and parcel of the human condition. Truth is the world’s going to thrive without us here to screw it up.’

‘The human condition?’ Wilcox sneered. ‘What the hell are you talking about?’

Bushell shrugged his shoulders.

‘I can’t think of another name for it. I was looking out of the window last night watching birds flying from building to building...’

‘Fucking hell,’ Jones interrupted, ‘he’s lost it. I’ve long had my doubts about him but I think he’s finally lost it...’

‘I was watching the birds,’ Bushell continued, ignoring him, ‘and I started thinking about the difference between us and the animals. Seems to me there’s one huge difference that doesn’t often get talked about.’ He paused to give the others opportunity to make a cheap joke or to throw another insult in his direction. Unusually they were silent. ‘The difference is,’ he explained, ‘that we know we’re eventually going to die and they don’t. Animals strut about the place thinking they’re going to go on forever, we spend our lives worrying about how they’re going to end. That’s what I mean when I talk about the human condition. We’re too preoccupied thinking about death to enjoy life.’

There followed an unusually long moment of contemplation and reflection which was only disturbed when Proctor remembered the bodies on the stairs.

‘That’s all well and good,’ he said anxiously, ‘but what are you going to do now? Are you going to wait for the bodies to get in here, or are you going to kill yourself and get it over with?’

‘Neither.’

‘What then?’

‘Get rid of a few bodies if I can and try and slow them down a little. Then sit here and drink myself stupid with what’s left of the bottles Paul and Elizabeth kindly fetched for us last night.’

‘And how do you propose to slow them down?’

‘I’ve been thinking about that too. We’ve already established that they’ll keep moving forward until they can’t go any further, right?’

‘Right?’ Elizabeth agreed.

‘So instead of letting them stop here on this floor where we are, let’s help them go a little further.’

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘Lead them up onto the roof.’

‘And?’

‘And that’s it. What they do up there is their business. If they stay true to form they’ll follow each other up, one after another, until there’s no room left.’

‘Then what?’

‘Then they’ll either start forcing themselves back down, or they’ll start forcing themselves over the edge!’

‘Brilliant,’ Jones grinned. ‘Absolutely fucking brilliant!’

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Was the man in a dress really suggesting they spend their last few days sitting in a luxury hotel suite watching three week old bodies push each other off the roof?

‘It’s worth a go, isn’t it?’ Bushell smiled.

‘Okay,’ Jones said, surprising even himself, ‘let’s do it.’

The roof of the building was accessed from a narrow staircase which led off an unremarkable looking doorway at the top of the main stairs. With the bodies continuing to make unsteady progress towards them, Jones and Bushell crept up towards the hatch that would lead them outside.

‘It’s locked,’ Bushell grunted as he tried to push the door open.

‘Don’t you have the key? You’ve got keys to everywhere else.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Smash it open then.’

‘What about the noise?’

Jones looked down the staircase, back into the heart of the building. Even from this distance he could see indistinct, shuffling movement.

‘Bit late to worry about that,’ he mumbled.

With limited space to manoeuvre his bulk, Bushell swung himself back and then crashed his shoulder against the door. It rattled in its frame but didn’t open. Another couple of attempts were equally unsuccessful.

‘Let me,’ Jones said, pushing the other man to the side. He launched a barrage of well aimed kicks at the lock. The wood began to splinter and crack. Another few kicks and it flew open.

The two men climbed out onto the roof. A phenomenal wind threatened to blow them off their feet.

‘Jesus,’ Jones said, having to shout to make himself heard, ‘bit blustery, isn’t it.’

Bushell didn’t answer. He was already busying himself with trying to pull the door off its hinges. For the bodies to be able to keep moving forward the doorway would need to remain clear. The only way to make sure that happened was to remove the door completely. Jones picked up a discarded strip of metal from the roof and, using it as a jemmy, began to prise at the hinges. A couple of minutes of grunting and groaning and the wood splintered and gave way.

‘That’s it,’ Bushell said, dragging the now redundant door away and dropping it on the asphalt. ‘Let’s get back.’

The two men clattered back down the staircase towards the Presidential Suite. Jones stopped at the top of the staircase and peered down at the bodies moving towards him. Was it his imagination, or had they begun to move slightly quicker than they had been? He tried to think logically as he watched the distance between the living and the dead rapidly evaporate. Previously the bodies had been driven by the pressure of others pushing them from behind. So what had changed now? The answer was simple. The corpses furthest up the stairs now knew that there were survivors above. Rather than wait to be pushed forward, those at the front of the queue were now moving under their own steam. The distance between them was disappearing rapidly. Jones stood on the landing and watched the nearest of the rotting figures awkwardly climbing towards the top floor of the hotel. Bushell stood next to him.

‘They’re getting faster,’ Jones said quietly, not quite believing what he was seeing. ‘I think we need to...’ He stopped speaking when one of the bodies looked up at him. Was he imagining it? No, now Bushell had seen it too. The creatures were looking at them...

‘Move,’ Bushell said simply. The other man didn’t argue.

‘Done it?’ Proctor asked hopefully as they burst back through the main doors.

Bushell nodded.

‘Done it.’

‘Now what?’

‘We might have a problem...’ he began to say.

‘What’s the matter?’ Doreen asked, concerned.

Jones still stood by the open doors, looking back down the corridor and occasionally turning round and glancing over his shoulder at the others. He was about to try and tell them what they’d seen when the first bodies appeared on the landing. Elizabeth covered her mouth in horror and stifled a terrified scream. Proctor scrambled away from the open door.

‘Fucking hell...’ gasped Wilcox.

‘They saw us,’ Jones mumbled pathetically. ‘There was nothing we could do.’

More bodies appeared and began their typically slow, dragging walk towards the survivors. Frozen to the spot with shock and disbelief Jones stood and watched them. No-one else moved. And then Doreen spoke.

‘Did you open the door to the roof?’ she asked.

Bushell nodded.

‘Yes, I don’t know why they’re not...?’

Doreen sighed.

‘It’s bloody obvious why they’re coming down here and not going up there, they followed you, you pair of bloody idiots.’

‘Shut the door,’ Proctor pleaded from somewhere deep in the suite. ‘Please, shut the door.’

‘So is that it?’ Doreen asked. ‘All that noise and all that effort and that’s it? That’s all you’re going to do?’

Bushell tried to mumble a response but he couldn’t coordinate his brain and mouth to make it happen.

‘What else can we do?’ Jones hissed under his breath, taking a step back as the nearest cadaver took another lumbering step forward. ‘We’re completely screwed.’

‘If that’s true,’ Doreen hissed back, ‘then I’m not about to sit here, lovely as it is, and let those things have their way with me. I’m an old woman with standards. I’ve still got my pride.’

More interested in the relentless approach of the dead than the prattling of a nervous old woman, no-one paid her any attention. Infuriated by the lack of response from the others, Doreen took it upon herself to take action.

‘Bloody useless, the lot of you,’ she grumbled. ‘Get back in there, close the door and enjoy your little party or whatever it is you decide to do...’

Doreen was tired. She’d really had enough. Wiser and more shrewd than they gave her credit for, she’d listened to everything that Bushell had said and she’d agreed with him completely. Death was inevitable, and she didn’t have the energy or the desire to go on running. She pushed her way past Jones and slammed the door of the Presidential Suite in his face. With a complete lack of nerves she walked towards the bodies and pushed past them. Although their numbers were imposing, they were weak and clumsy. They swung their rotting fists at her and tried to grab at her with slow and gnarled, talon-like hands but she was as wiry and thin as they were and she slipped past them, weaving between them with the sudden grace and subtlety of a woman with chronic back pain which was ten percent physical and ninety percent attention seeking bullshit. She pushed her way deeper into the throng until she had reached the stairs. She then looked up and saw the short flight of steps which led to the roof. Without stopping to think she gave a loud whistle and then threw herself up the last few steps and out onto the asphalt. Distracted by Doreen’s sudden speed, noise and movement, several of the bodies turned away from the door to the Presidential Suite and followed her.

Bloody hell it was cold. Doreen wrapped her thin cardigan tightly around her and braced herself against the wind. Now what did she do? She hadn’t quite thought this through. She knew what she was doing, but now that she was standing unprotected on the roof the consequences of her actions really began to hit home. This was it. No more running or hiding or sleeping on the floor. No more fear or confusion or disorientation. Time for a rest. A long overdue and well deserved rest.

Doreen walked towards the edge of the roof and looked down. Bloody hell, she thought, it was higher than she’d expected. That was probably a good thing, she decided. Although she was only a few feet higher up there than she’d been in the suite just below, the difference was stark. Perhaps it was

because the protection of glass and concrete had gone. Perhaps it was because now there was nothing between her and the rest of the world.

The first few bodies staggered out onto the roof.

This is it then, she thought, time to do it. She'd been toying with the idea of suicide for few days, a few weeks if she was honest, but she'd always clung onto the slim hope that things would get better. Suicide had always seemed like the coward's way out before today, but after listening to what Bushell had said earlier she'd come to realise that this was far from a cowardly act. Her fate was sealed, whatever she did. By ending her life this way she would manage to hold onto some dignity and control, and that was all she had left.

Nervously she climbed up onto the low concrete wall which ran around the outside edge of the building. The wind seemed even stronger there as she gingerly stood up straight. She held out her arms like a tightrope walker and tried to keep her balance. Bloody hell, she thought, I can't do it. I can't go through with it. She looked down past her feet towards the street many hundreds of feet below. Save for the occasional body staggering by the pavement was relatively clear. Her mind began to fill with stupid questions. Was this going to be painful? Would it definitely kill her or would she somehow survive and end up lying helpless on the ground with her arms and legs broken as the dead swarmed over and around her? She thought about the old adage she'd heard countless times before – it's not the jump off the top of the building that kills you, it's hitting the ground that does it. She managed half a smile but those words were of little help now. Would she feel anything? What would the fall be like? Would she know when she'd hit the ground or would it all be over before then...?

Doreen looked around and watched more bodies continue to pile unsteadily out of the door and onto the roof. They hadn't seemed to notice her yet. They wandered around aimlessly like the empty, soulless vessels they were. She turned her back on them again and looked forward across the town. There was no going back now. Even if she changed her mind, she couldn't get back inside now.

What are my options? Do I do it now or wait for them to get closer to me? Do it now or wait until the last possible second? What will I gain from waiting? Is it worth clinging onto a few more seconds of life? What good will it do me? Do I want to stand here, freezing cold and terrified, trying to keep my balance and not think about those bloody things behind me, or do I just let it happen? Think about finally being able to stop and rest. Think about not having to run and hide...

Doreen closed her eyes, tipped forward and let gravity take over.

'Well?' Elizabeth sobbed. Bushell was pressed against the door, peering through the spy-hole out onto the landing.

'Not good,' he sighed. 'There are too many of them. They know we're in here now.'

Elizabeth began to cry uncontrollably. Proctor attempted to put his arms around her and comfort her but she pushed him away.

'So what do we do now?' Wilcox asked, the strained emotion in his voice clear.

'Can't see that much has changed, really,' Bushell answered, his face still pressed against the door.

'What?'

'I said I can't see that much has changed,' he repeated, turning round to look at the others. 'We're

still in here, they're still out there. They're just a little closer than we hoped they'd be at this stage, that's all.'

'So what do we do?' Elizabeth pleaded, desperate for someone to answer.

'Seems to me you've got the same two options you've always had,' he answered, his voice low and resigned. 'You can sit here and wait for the inevitable to happen, or you can run for as long as you can keep going, then stop and then let the inevitable happen anyway.'

'I'm running,' Jones said. He was already edging closer to the door to the fire escape. 'I'm not just going to sit here waiting for them to get in. Fuck that. I'm leaving now...'

'Me too,' Wilcox agreed.

Bushell looked at Proctor and Elizabeth, although he didn't really care what they were going to do. Proctor began to nervously side-step closer to the two men waiting by the fire escape. Elizabeth, struggling to hold herself together, instinctively did the same.

'Come on,' she pleaded. 'Don't stay here. It's suicide.'

'I know,' Bushell smiled, 'but it's suicide on my terms. Why do you all want to keep on running when there's no point? It's not your fault, but can't you see that the game's over?'

'It's not a game,' Jones interrupted angrily.

'I know, I'm sorry,' Bushell said, regretting his choice of words, 'but you don't have to keep fighting. You can choose not to. That's the difference between us in here and those things out there. You can stop and switch off if you want to, they're cursed to keep going until there's nothing left of them.'

'Come on, Barry,' Proctor said quietly.

'I'm not running,' he replied. 'I've had enough.'

Sensing that there was nothing they could do to persuade him otherwise, the four remaining survivors pushed their way through the fire escape door and began their dark descent down towards the ground floor of the hotel.

It was suddenly quiet. Save for the thumping noise coming from the mass of decomposing bodies on the other side of the main door, Bushell's hotel suite was suddenly quiet and empty. More to the point, it was his again. His and his alone. Just how he'd wanted it.

Tearful (he knew he didn't have long) he walked around the vast suite dejectedly, collecting together his things. He salvaged everything that he could from the little that was left and packed it all against the wall of the master bedroom. A sudden sound distracted him. More noise from outside. He peered through the spy-hole to see that the corridor outside was now a solid mass of flesh. It wouldn't be long before they broke through. He wiped a tear away from the corner of his eye (still taking care not to smudge his make-up) and then took one last, long and very definitely final look around the suite which had been his home for the last few weeks of his life. Ignoring the increasing noise coming from the door he took a moment to walk around and look out of each of the windows in turn, staring at the remains of the city where he'd lived and remembering everything and everyone that had gone and been left behind. The memories were harder to deal with than the thought of what was to come. It still surprised him how much it hurt to remember all that he had lost. Thinking about the little he had left to lose didn't seem to matter.

He'd collected everything he'd needed. With the door rattling and shaking in its frame, he slipped quietly into the master bedroom and closed the door behind him. Once inside he shoved the bed across the entrance to the room and wedged it into position with other furniture and belongings. If he'd had a hammer and nails, he thought, he would have nailed it shut. The bedroom door wouldn't be opening again.

Barry Bushell, with tears streaming down his cheeks, selected another outfit from his wardrobe and got changed. Finally presentable, he lay down on the bed and picked up a book. With his hands shaking so badly that he could hardly read, he lay there and waited.

'Keep moving,' Elizabeth yelled, slamming her hands into the middle of Wilcox's back and sending him tripping further down the last few stairs to the ground floor.

'Watch it!' he protested, grabbing hold of the handrail to try and stop himself from falling. He looked back up the stairs. Proctor and Jones had stopped a short way back.

'What now?' Proctor asked. They'd finally reached the bottom of the staircase. It was a pointless question. They didn't have a choice. Wilcox cautiously edged closer to the door and teased it slightly open before, equally carefully, closing it again.

'Well?' Elizabeth asked hopefully.

'Not as bad as it could have been,' he replied.

'Bodies?'

'Hundreds, but I was expecting more. We'll probably make it through if we're fast and we keep moving.'

'Fucking hell,' Jones grunted, 'and I was going to walk.'

He shoved past Wilcox and peered around the side of the door. Back inside, he leant against the wall and composed himself.

'This is it then,' he quietly announced.

'Is it?'

'It's goodbye.'

'What?'

'We'll stand more of a chance if we split up.'

'You think so?'

Jones shrugged his shoulders.

'Maybe,' he grunted. He took a deep breath, opened the door again and slid out into what was left of the hotel reception. It was light outside and surprisingly bright after the enclosed gloom of the fire escape. The air, although still heavy with the noxious smells of death and decay, was somehow fresher. Several of the nearest bodies noticed his sudden emergence from the doorway and immediately turned and began walking towards him. Jones, terrified and pumped full of adrenaline, ran, pausing only to stare in disbelief

at the main staircase of the hotel which was a solid column of slowly moving flesh.

Without direction he skipped and weaved through the lifeless corpses that still dragged themselves around the rubble-strewn ruin and then burst out onto the street. The bodies were fewer out there, but he knew they would be upon him soon. Not knowing where he was going or why, he ran.

‘Bastard,’ Wilcox moaned as bodies began to slam against the other side of the fire escape door. ‘That bloody stupid bastard, he’s let them know where we are.’

The three remaining survivors stood together at the foot of the staircase in stunned silence. What the hell did they do now? Elizabeth thought about Bushell, twenty-eight floors above them, and the sense of his actions became painfully clear. It was no longer about surviving, it was about choosing where to die. Still tearful, she opened the door and barged past the six bodies that were now clawing against the other side. In panic Proctor ran after her.

Wilcox froze. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t bring himself to go out there. He knew as well as the others that what was going to happen to him was inevitable, but he didn’t have the mental strength to keep going like they did.

As the fire door had swung shut, one of the bodies had become trapped, leaving it half-open. More of the sickly cadavers gravitated towards the exit and clambered over the trapped corpse. Wilcox watched as the first few of them moved closer. What did he do now? Still breathless from the sudden descent, he began to climb back upstairs.

This is bloody stupid, he thought to himself as he climbed. His body wanted to slow down but the panic and claustrophobic fear he felt kept him moving forward at an uncomfortable speed. He was soaked with sweat and his legs felt like lead but it didn’t matter. He’d left those fucking things at the bottom of the stairs for dust.

It was more than half an hour later when he reached the fire escape door on the twenty-eighth floor. He pushed through it eagerly, keen to find Bushell and... and the suite was full of bodies. He looked up, terrified, and saw that the main door was down. The cadavers had noticed his sudden and unexpected arrival too. They surged towards him and knocked him off his feet. As their sharp, bony fingers dug into his flesh he lay on the ground and looked at the open fire escape door through which he’d just emerged. If he really tried, he thought, he might be able to crawl through it and give himself a little more time.

What’s the fucking point, Wilcox thought as warm blood began to gush and pour from gaping wounds that the dead had torn open. Bushell was right. Just give up, lie back and wait for it to be over.

Elizabeth wasn’t aware that Proctor had followed her until she heard him shouting for her to slow down. She glanced back over her shoulder and saw him dragging himself after her. She wasn’t interested. She didn’t want to be with anyone else now, certainly not him. She kept moving, if anything increasing her speed. Not knowing the city particularly well she didn’t have a clue where she was going. She’d wanted to head out of the centre but, instead, had inadvertently found herself running through the main shopping area. The bodies there were still dense in number and tightly packed but she moved with sufficient speed and control to work her way around them and through them.

Needing to stop and rest she turned left into a dark alleyway. She stopped running for a moment and rested with her hands on her knees, sucking in as much precious oxygen as she could. No bodies had

followed her yet. If she could get out of sight quickly she knew she might have an opportunity to properly catch her breath and decide what to do next. There was a door halfway down the alley. She looked in through a small, dusty window but couldn't immediately see any movement. She pulled the door open and slipped inside, too tired to care what she found on the other side.

Bloody hell, she thought as she climbed a narrow, white marble staircase. Of all the doors in all the alleys, she seemed to have chosen the staff entrance to Lacey's department store. Christ, she'd never been able to afford to shop there although she'd always wanted to. It was one of those places that made you feel dirty and unworthy if you walked in without a purse full of gold and platinum charge cards and credit cards. Today, of course, it was a cold, dark, skeletal shadow of its former self but what the hell, it was still Lacey's.

Barry Bushell's words continued to play heavily on Elizabeth's mind as she crept further up the stairs and deeper into the building. How right he'd been. She couldn't think of anywhere she'd be completely safe and, even if she could, she had no way of getting there now. She continued to climb, stopping when she reached the jewellery department on the third floor. There were no bodies around that she could see. Always a sucker for gold and stones, she found herself drawn to the cobweb-covered display cabinets. They were still filled with beautiful pieces that, a month ago, would have been worth a fortune. Today they were worth nothing. But hell, she could dream, couldn't she? Dreaming was just about all she had left...

Elizabeth finally had her shopping trip around Lacey's. She worked her way through the building floor by floor, avoiding the occasional corpse and staring in wonder at all the things she'd never been able to afford. When she reached the ladies clothing department she changed out of her dirty clothes and dressed in the most expensive outfit she could find. She climbed to the very top floor and sat on a leather sofa she'd never have been able to afford in a hundred years. She drank wine, ate chocolate and swallowed enough headache tablets to kill an elephant.

Paul Jones had also decided to take his own life.

He stopped running and hid in the shadows of a newsagents until the effect of his sudden appearance and disappearance had faded away and the bodies had lost interest. He lay on the floor behind the counter and read the last ever editions of half a dozen newspapers until the sun had disappeared and the light had faded away. All of the headlines that had once seemed so important and relevant now seemed puerile and insignificant.

Walking slowly through the shadows now without fear or concern, Jones made his way along the dark city streets to a construction site. With a rucksack full of booze on his back, he climbed to the very top of the tallest crane he could find which stood in the middle of the foundations of an office building that would never be completed. Protected by the height and enjoying a view which was even more impressive than the view from the hotel's Presidential Suite, he drank and slept.

In the morning, when the sun finally came up, he looked back across town at the hotel he'd left behind and watched the occasional stupid body fall from the roof. He laughed out loud without fear of retribution.

Paul Jones had decided to take his own life, but not yet. He'd do it when there were no other options left.

Once Proctor had lost sight of Elizabeth he'd stopped running. He'd slowed his pace to match that of the dead and, for a time, had been able to walk among them undetected. I can do this, he thought, I can outwit them. I can move around them and between them and I can do this. Bushell was wrong. They were all wrong. I don't have to run and I don't have to give up. It's not over...

For almost a day he managed to survive, but his foolish confidence proved to be his undoing. It took only a single sneeze. One sneeze in the middle of a vast crowd of bodies and his position was revealed. And Proctor, being a cowardly man, tried to run. Instead of standing his ground and continuing to mimic the actions of the bodies all around him, the stupid man tried to run. Deep in the middle of several hundred rancid, rotting cadavers, however, he didn't stand a chance. They ripped him to pieces before he had chance to scream for help.

Wouldn't have mattered. No-one would have come.

Barry Bushell lasted for several more days. The hotel suite was overrun with bodies but, as far as he could tell, they didn't know that he was still in the bedroom. He remained quiet and still. Without food, water and exercise, however, he quickly became weak.

Bushell died a relatively happy man. He'd rather not have died, of course, but he'd managed somehow to retain the control he'd so desperately wanted - the control that death had stripped from the millions of bodies condemned to drag themselves along the streets outside until they were no longer able to move.

Dressed in a silk negligee and lying in a comfortable (if slightly soiled) bed, he died peacefully in his sleep at the end of a good book.

DAY TWENTY-THREE

AMY STEADMAN

Part vi

It is now more than three weeks since infection. Amy Steadman's body has been moving away from the site of its death constantly for more than two weeks. It is now little more than a rotten and featureless shadow of what it once was. The face, once fresh, clear and attractive, is now skeletal and heavily decayed. Its skin is discoloured and waxy. Its once bright eyes are dull, dark and dry. Because of its physical limitations the creature moves slowly and forcefully. Movements which had previously been random and uncoordinated, however, now ominously have an underlying purpose and determination.

This putrefying cadaver has no need to respire, eat, drink or rest and yet it continues to struggle across the dead an increasingly grim landscape. It is driven by a single goal – the need to continue to exist. The condition of its physical shell is deteriorating and it has become painfully aware of the extent of its decay. It now understands that it is vulnerable and exposed. Every unexpected movement or sound which it detects is automatically assumed to be a threat and the corpse reacts accordingly.

Now and then the body experiences the faintest flicker of recollection and memory. It has no concept of *who* it used to be, but it is vaguely aware of *what* it once was. Earlier today it tripped and fell in the rubble of a shop-window display. Inadvertently it grabbed a handful of rubbish which included a cup. Momentarily it held the cup by its handle as if it was about to drink. It then dropped it and continued moving. Yesterday, more through luck than judgement, it attempted to reach for a handle and open a door.

There are considerably more bodies around here than most other places. Throughout this silent, empty world the slightest distraction continues to attract the unwanted attention of thousands upon thousands of these sickly creatures and here, on the outskirts of the ruins of the city of Rowley, there is a distraction which is calling untold numbers of them ever closer.

The corpse has left the street it staggered along earlier and has now reached an unexpected blockage whilst making its way across a wide and barren field. Eleven bodies are pushing forward, trying to force their way through a wooden gate. The gate has a sprung hinge which constantly pushes back against the dead. Even when moving together they are weak and they struggle to make progress. Occasionally one or two of them manage to stumble through. Aware of the movement of the dark shapes around it, as it approaches the gate Steadman's corpse lifts its hands and begins to grab at the nearest bodies. With twisted, bony fingers it slashes at the other cadavers. Steadman's corpse is stronger and more determined than most others. It moves with more force and purpose than they are capable of. The other bodies are unable to react with anything other than laboured and lethargic, shuffling movements. They do not have the speed or strength to be able to defend themselves.

Steadman's corpse knows that it must continue to move forward, although it does not understand why. It negotiates the gate (its relative speed and strength forcing it open) and continues towards the distraction up ahead. Whatever it is, it may be able to help ease the corpse's pain and suffering. On the other hand, it may prove to be a threat which the body must destroy. Whatever the reason and whatever it is, this putrefying collection of withered flesh and brittle bone is driven relentlessly towards it.

The body stumbles through more fields, moving further away from the cold and skeletal remains of the city which it once called home. Every single aspect of Steadman's previous life has now been forgotten and erased, as it has from all of the bodies. Virtually every trace of race, gender, social class, wealth and intellect has been wiped from the dead. Steadman's corpse, like the many hundreds of similarly faceless cadavers around it, is now almost completely featureless and indistinct. What remains of its clothes are ripped, ragged and stained. Its face is emotionless, blank and cold. The only discriminating factor which separates the bodies from each other now is the level of their individual decay. Some – those that are the most severely rotted – continue to stumble around aimlessly. Those which are deteriorating more slowly, however, are those which present the most danger to anything unfortunate enough to happen to come

across them.

Steadman's withered body has become aware of a dark mass on the horizon. It is a crowd of many thousands of bodies. Oblivious to any possible implications it continues to stagger towards the immense gathering. Before long it reaches the edges of the diseased throng. When the massive numbers of cadavers ahead stop it from moving any further forward, it again reacts violently, ripping and tearing at the decayed flesh which surrounds it on all sides until its path is clearer.

Deeper into the crowd the bodies are even more tightly packed together. Still more of them continually arrive at the scene, crawling slothfully towards the distraction from every direction, blocking the way back and preventing the corpses already there from doing anything other than trying to move further forward still. Unaware that their actions are ultimately pointless, the dead relentlessly attempt to shuffle closer to the disturbance which brought them here. A chain-link fence eventually stops them from making any more progress.

It takes several days for Steadman's body to make its way past enough corpses to enable it to finally stand at the fence. It is pushed hard against the wire by the rotting throng behind, and from there it watches. On the other side of the fence is a wide and uninterrupted swathe of clear and uncluttered, green land. Most of the time it is quiet, but occasionally there are deafening noises and sudden flashes of huge, controlled movements which whip the diseased hordes into a riotous frenzy.

Steadman's corpse is just one of a crowd which is now hundreds of thousands strong.

Thousands more are approaching.

KILGORE

Kilgore sat alone at a metal table in the furthest, darkest corner of the bunker mess hall. The wide, low-ceilinged room was largely empty. Only the occasional noise from the kitchen and the constant, piercing electrical buzz and hum of the strip lights hanging above his head broke the silence.

Spence ambled casually into the hall and fetched himself a tray of food. With only a handful of other people eating there (none of whom he knew well) he walked over towards Kilgore.

'Mind if I sit here?' he asked.

Kilgore jumped in his seat, surprised by the unexpected interruption. His thoughts had been elsewhere. He looked up at Spence with dark, tired eyes and shook his head. 'Go for it,' he mumbled before looking down into his food again. He played with his fork, stirring the lukewarm and piss-weak stew on his tray, pushing lumps of meat-substitute around from side to side and making tracks in the gravy but not actually eating anything. Spence sat down on the bench directly opposite him.

He'd come across Kilgore on a couple of occasions before they'd been ordered underground. He'd

always had a reputation for being a moaner – the kind of person who would instinctively complain and whinge pointlessly and continually about everything and anything he was ordered to do. The kind of person who made the simplest of routine tasks seem like some huge and practically impossible undertaking. An incessant talker and a compulsive liar, he wound the officers up and he wound his fellow soldiers up. He wound everyone up.

He was crying.

Spence shuffled awkwardly in his seat and began eating, wishing that he'd chosen another table. The other man's show of emotion made him feel uncomfortable and uneasy. He hated it when he heard people crying down here. It reminded him of his own sadness and the constant emptiness he felt. The three hundred or so people he'd been buried underground with were, generally, hardened, professional and well-trained soldiers. Men and women who had been conditioned to suppress their emotions and feelings and just get on with doing whatever it was that they'd been ordered to do. But that was becoming more and more difficult with each passing day, almost each hour. The fact that some of them were showing emotion at all indicated just how serious, unpredictable and uncertain their situation had become. And the longer they spent below the surface, the more disturbed and confused they became. No-one seemed to know what they were doing or why. No-one knew what had happened or what was going to happen next. What were they hoping to achieve? By now they'd all heard about the devastated condition of the infected world above them from the few advance parties that had ventured out, and that only served to make their time underground even more difficult. What did the future hold for the millions of people left on the surface, scarred by plague? More importantly, Spence thought, what did the future hold for him and for the rest of them underground?

The tap, tap, tap of metal on plastic disturbed his train of thought. He looked at Kilgore again. His hand was shaking. He could hardly hold his fork still.

'You okay, mate?' he asked quietly.

Kilgore looked up again and shook his head. More tears. He wiped them away on the back of his sleeve.

'No,' he replied under his breath.

'Want to talk about it?'

'What's there to talk about?' the soldier began. 'What good's it going to do? What good's any of this going to do? We're stuck down here, you know. I tell you, mate, there's no fucking way we're going to get out of here.'

'Why d'you say that?'

Kilgore dropped his fork into the middle of his plate and took a swig from a mug of cold coffee. He leant back in his chair and ran his fingers through his wiry hair. For the briefest of moments he made eye contact with Spence before emotions took hold again and he was forced to look away. Eventually he cleared his throat and composed himself sufficiently to be able to talk.

'You been up there yet?' he asked, looking up at the low ceiling above their heads.

'No,' Spence answered.

'It was my first time outside today,' Kilgore explained. 'I was fucking shitting myself. I've never seen anything like... I tell you, you can't even begin to imagine what's going on up there...' He stopped, took

another deep breath and tried again. 'Fucking hell, I can't...'

'Take your time, man,' Spence said quietly.

Kilgore closed his eyes and steadied himself.

'Sarge says we're going above ground. He tells us we're going on a walkabout looking for survivors in Ansall. You know Ansall? Little town just outside Hemmington? Anyway, we're ready and out in minutes, before we've had chance to think about it. I put the mask on and I'm standing there in the suit and that's when it first hits me. I'm standing there thinking about what I've heard it's like out there. I start thinking Christ, get a fucking hole in this suit while we're out there and I'm dead. I'm thinking, catch the suit on a nail or a door handle or whatever and I've fucking had it. We're all feeling it. No-one says a bloody word. Then Sarge gives the nod. We get into the transport and he gives them the order to open the doors.

'Those bloody doors slide open and Christ, for a minute it looks fucking beautiful out there. You don't realise how much you miss daylight until you see it again. I tell you, the world never looked so good as it did this afternoon when they first opened the doors. It's about one o'clock and it's beautiful. The sky's blue, the sun's burning down and there's not a fucking cloud in the sky. We roll up to the top of the ramp and for a few seconds everything's all right. For a couple of seconds it feels good and you start to think everything's going to be okay. It feels good just to be getting out of this fucking place for a while. Even though we've all got our masks on it feels good to see real, natural light for a change and to be able to see trees and grass and hills instead of fucking concrete walls and metal doors.

'I had Smith sitting next to me. You know Smith? The big guy with the crooked nose? Anyway, we start moving away from the base and he suddenly sits up and starts staring out of the window. He's cursing and pointing and we all crowd round to look at whatever it is he's seen. And that's when we saw them. People. I was thinking we should stop and try and help them but then I remembered what I'd heard from the others who'd already been above ground. Sarge stops the transport for a second and we watch as they keep coming towards us, all slow and awkward like their legs are numb. I could only see a couple of them at first, but they kept coming. They're coming out of the trees and from around the side of the entrance door and I counted at least thirty of them before we started moving again. I could see even more in the fields around us. From a distance they looked normal, just slow moving, but when they got closer you could see that they were sick. Fucking hell, their skin... it was like it was rotten. It was all discoloured and grey and green and on some of them it looked like it was hanging off their bones. Others looked like bloody skeletons, all shrivelled up and dry. Jesus, you've never seen anything like it. Sarge screams at the driver to ignore them and keep moving and she puts her foot down. She hits a couple of the fucking things – there was nothing she could do, they just walked out in front of us. I watched one of them go down. We hit it so hard it virtually snapped in half. Its legs were all fucked up. But then it tries to get up again. Fucking thing's lying there with both its legs smashed and broken and it's trying to get up again.

'We just sit there in silence for a fucking age. No-one says anything. No-one knows what to fucking say, you know? Anyway, we follow the track away from here and we see more and more of them. Christ knows how they know where to go, but it's like they're all moving towards the base but then they turn round when they see us and start following. I mean, we've got to be doing about thirty or forty miles an hour and these things are following us like they think they're going to catch us up! We get onto the main road and start heading for Ansall and I start thinking about what we're going to find there. Fucking hell, if there are this many people out here in the middle of nowhere, what the hell are we going to find in the town?'

Kilgore paused to finish his drink. Spence said nothing. He stared into the other soldier's face. He

didn't want to hear about what Kilgore had seen because he knew that he'd have to face it eventually when his turn came to go above ground. At the same time he had to listen. He knew that he had to know.

'The roads were an absolute fucking mess,' Kilgore continued. 'It was like someone flicked a switch and everything just stopped. I tell you, everywhere you looked all you could see were bodies and crashed cars. Christ, I saw some fucking horrible sights out there. Anyway, because we're on the road now the driver puts her foot down and speeds up. Our truck's heavy enough to just plough through most of the wreckage. I started getting freaked out by it all, and I could see that it was getting to the others too. It was the sheer bloody scale of it. Everything's been wiped out up there, you know. I felt myself starting to panic. It was so bloody hot in the suit, and the truck was like a fucking sun-trap. And all I could think about was the taste of fresh air and all I want to do was take off the mask and feel the sun and the wind on my face and... and it occurs to me that none of us are ever going to feel that again. Then I start getting really fucking frightened thinking about whatever the shit is in the air that's done all this. I'm thinking about getting a rip in the suit again and not knowing about it until it's too late. I can see Fraser's face opposite me. His eyes are darting all round the place like a bloody mad man.

'We get to Ansall and I don't mind telling you I was scared shitless. I've never been so fucking frightened. I mean, you're like me, you've seen plenty of service, but I tell you, you've never seen nothing like this. Remember last winter when we were stuck in that school in the middle of that fucking gunfight that went on for days? This was worse. At least then we could see the bastards and we could shoot back.

'It was still bright but between the buildings the streets were dark and cold. Coming into the shadow from the sun made it difficult to see what was happening. We stopped on the edge of this little market and Sarge told us to get out and start having a look around. We were supposed to be looking for survivors but all I could see were people in the same state as those we'd seen back at the base. The first one I saw up close was this little old lady. She's half-dressed and I'm just stood there thinking that this is someone's mum and that my mum could be like this somewhere, and the rest of my family and probably yours too. And when you start thinking about home you get this urge to just get in a car and try and get back there to try and find out what's happened to your folks and your girl and... and you know there's no point.

'Fraser calls out for help and I look round to find him. He's got his weapon out in front of him and he's moving towards this building. It looks like an office or something and I can see that there are people trapped inside. They're stood there leaning against the glass, banging it and it looks like it's a real effort for them to move because they're sick or something. The door's been blocked by a motorbike that's crashed and gone skidding along the ground. I help Fraser shift it out of the way. We move it and he throws the door open and straightaway the people start wandering out into the open. I only have to see them for a second to know that they're just like all the other poor bastards we've seen. One of them walks into me and I look into its face. There's nothing there. Not a single bloody spark or flicker of emotion. Not a single fucking sign of life. It's not even breathing. These bloody things are dead but they're still fucking moving!

'Sarge gets on the loudhailer. He's shouting the usual crap about how we'll help them if they cooperate and he's trying to get them out of the buildings and into the market square. I turn round to look back at the others and, fucking hell, there must have been a couple of hundred of the bloody things getting close to us already. They're crowding round us and they start reaching out and trying to grab hold of us when they get close enough. I'm thinking about my bloody suit again and I keep pushing them away but they keep coming back for more. Sarge fires a few warning shots into the air but it doesn't make any difference. Next to me Fraser starts hitting one of them and the fucking thing doesn't even notice. Every

time he hits it he's doing more and more damage but the damn thing just keeps coming. Its fucking face is falling to pieces but it keeps fucking coming.

'Every way I turn now I can see more of them. We're looking at Sarge for some instruction and he's just looking back at us, as scared as we are. I lose sight of him when a couple of them rush me. I lose my footing and before I know it I'm on the ground with them on top of me. There's no weight to them. All I keep thinking is watch the fucking suit, make sure you don't get cut. I'm punching and kicking out but the bloody things just won't give up. I manage to get back up and I can see that we're surrounded. And there are more and more friggng bodies coming out of the shadows all of the time. I notice that Wheeler's heading back to the transport and I can see that the driver's back in her seat. I'm thinking that I've got to get out of here and I start pushing my way through the crowd.

'Fraser's the last one back inside. He tries to shut the door and gets caught by one of them that manages to grab hold of his leg as he climbs up. I'm watching and I can't look away and I'm thinking that this can't be happening. It's a kid, probably not even fifteen, and it's body is so light and empty that it's hanging off him and Fraser's just dragging it along. It's got hold of his boot somehow and he's using the butt of the rifle to smash its hand away. He pushes it off and tries to shove it back out of the door. Wheeler leans out and pulls the door shut but the bloody thing isn't out. Its head and shoulders are fucking wedged in and Wheeler's banging and pulling at the door, trying to get it shut. The kid's got one arm inside the transport and it's still trying to grab hold of Fraser. He just stands there, lifts up his rifle, and blows a fucking hole in the middle of its face. Wheeler opens the door while we're driving and kicks what's left of the kid out onto the street.'

Kilgore rubbed his eyes and looked up into the light above him momentarily before dropping his face and letting his head hang down again.

'And that, mate,' he mumbled, trying unsuccessfully to light a cigarette with nervous, shaking hands, 'is just about all that you and me and everyone else in this bloody place has got to look forward to. We either spend the rest of our time buried in this fucking hole, or we end up stuck out in that bloody mess up there, wrapped in a fucking plastic suit until whatever it is that's done all this finally catches up with us.'

SKIN

My name is Skin, and I have been waiting for this for so fucking long...

His name is actually Scott Weaver, and despite all the bravado and bullshit, he's scared as hell although he'd never admit it. Skin is what he used to call himself in front of his friends. It's the name he used to use on Internet forums and chatrooms, and which he sprayed onto the side of buildings and bus shelters. Skin is sixteen and, like many other distant, alienated and disenchanting adolescents, has a grudge against the rest of the world because he's convinced that the rest of the world has it in for him. His frustrations have

been building and his problems festering for months now, and each day he has felt himself getting closer and closer to breaking point. Three weeks and two days ago, however, some of the pressure was suddenly and inexplicably released. Three weeks and two days ago the rest of the world died.

In the long hours alone Skin often thought back to how it began. It was a Tuesday morning, and his parents had been giving him hell because he'd only just come back in from being out all Monday night. He didn't know what their problem was. He'd been out with a few friends and they'd lost track of time, so what? They'd had a few drinks, so what? They'd done some drugs (nothing heavy, but his parents didn't need to know that), so what? His dad had gone on and on about how this was the time of his life where he needed to put more effort in, not less. He and Dad had started shouting and swearing at each other and that had made his mother cry, and that had made Dad even angrier. Christ, they couldn't ever see his point of view. More to the point, they didn't want to. They judged him more by the way he dressed and the music he listened to and the people he hung around with than anything else. His dad hadn't spoken to him for almost a month when he'd first had his ears and nose pierced. Fucking hell, if only they'd known about the tattoos and the other piercings he'd had done in the summer just gone...

He'd been sat there in the kitchen, trying to find a way out of the conversation without letting them win, when it happened. One minute they were both in full flow – Dad yelling at him for being a bloody waste of space, Mum crying into her tea and yelling at Dad to stop yelling – the next they were dead. Both of them. Face down, dead on the floor.

The death of his parents (and, apparently, the rest of the world) was the moment it finally all began to make sense. Up until that day Skin's summer had been fucking miserable and the tedium showed no sign of relenting. He'd flunked his exams and left school and had then been forced into enrolling for re-takes at college. And his girlfriend had left him. They'd been together on and off for eight months when Dawn ended it. She said that he'd bullied her into having sex. She'd said that he kept making demands that she wasn't prepared to fulfil. It was her fault, the fucking tease. She was the one who dressed like a fucking whore all the time for Christ's sake. Jesus, she was the one who'd been sat there in a fucking corset, tight black leather mini-skirt, fishnet stockings and knee-high PVC boots when she'd told him that she didn't want to be with him any more. He'd lost his virginity to her pretty early on in their brief relationship and his imagination had run away with him since then. He'd already learnt that he was the only virgin in the relationship (he'd suspected as much) and that made him feel like he had something to prove, or that he had some catching up to do. Skin had always imagined first sex would have been this incredible event – the undisputed highlight of both their young lives so far – but the reality had been bitterly disappointing. Instead of endless hours of uninterrupted dirty passion he had to settle for a fifteen minute fumble in Dawn's bedroom while her mum went to the chip shop. And half of those fifteen minutes were spent trying to get the bloody condom on.

In the three weeks between Skin splitting up with Dawn and the sudden arrival of the end of the world, he began to hate her with a vengeance. He still saw her regularly because, after she'd finished with him, she started sleeping her way around his friends, doing more with each of them (if the rumours were to be believed) than she'd ever done with him.

After they'd all died he'd been nervous and frightened for a while of course (who wouldn't have been?) but his fear and anxiety was primarily caused by the fact that he didn't know whether he was in danger, not because of what had happened to the rest of them. As the hours ticked by and his personal safety and apparent immunity to whatever had happened seemed more certain, his confidence and attitude gradually returned. He got himself as far away from his parent's safe and predictable upper-middle-class home as he could and began to enjoy his new and unexpected role as king of the world. He could do what he wanted, whenever he wanted. After a couple of days the bodies had risen, but even that hadn't dampened the sudden euphoria he'd felt at having survived when absolutely

everyone else had died. He was invincible. Without doing anything, he had won.

Brought up on a dark diet of pulp horror films, comics and books, Skin revelled in the filth, disease and decay. As the bodies around him became more active, he actually became more confident and self-assured. As the potential danger increased, so his excitement and adrenaline levels rose. He looted shops, taking food, booze, cigarettes, magazines, music and whatever else he damn well wanted. And, in a long-considered and calculated gesture of defiance, he built a base for himself right in the middle of the school he'd just left. He spent days tearing the place apart. He ripped the heart out of the place that had caused him and countless hundreds of other kids untold amounts of grief over the years. He'd pissed on the headteacher's corpse. He'd even squatted down and taken a shit in the middle of the classroom where he'd been humiliated and yelled at by his Nazi-like Maths teacher Mr Miller last term. And where was Miller now, he thought smugly to himself? Dead, just like the rest of them. Skin had sat in the classroom for a while, his feet up on Miller's chair, drinking scotch. He laughed out loud at the irony of it all. And they'd said he'd never amount to anything...

The bodies became increasingly insistent. The damn things just wouldn't leave him alone. He tried to convince himself that he was the subject of some bizarre kind of hero-worship but he knew that wasn't the case. Just the slightest sound or unexpected movement from him would cause a crowd of the bloody things to herd after him incessantly. And he noticed that they'd started to become violent too, occasionally tearing each other apart. He guessed that it wouldn't take much for them to start on him if he gave them half a chance. Skin made a conscious decision to keep out of sight and lie low for a while but, before disappearing from view, he went out looting again. He rode into town on his bike, following the route of the bus he used to take. Once there he cycled through the side-streets until he reached one particular shop. He and his friends had spent hours looking in the window before now but they'd never managed to make it inside. The shop sold hunting and fishing equipment. He didn't know what he wanted or needed, but he took as much from the shelves as he could carry – knives, pistols, rifles and anything else which looked vaguely useful and suitably harmful. He packed it onto the bike and rode back to school.

Skin was in charge now. Unrestrained and unstoppable, he made the decisions and he made the rules. Hiding away didn't suit him. Why should he keep out of sight when he was in control? He moved through the bodies with contempt and disinterest, only running when he absolutely had to. Already feeling vastly superior to the decomposing relics which surrounded him, the fact that he was now armed made him feel impervious and all-conquering. He carried weapons with him all of the time. He hadn't had to use them yet, but he was ready.

Food began to become a problem. He'd had some supplies with him but they'd quickly dwindled down to nothing. With a rucksack slung across his back and a rifle in his hand he walked to the local shopping precinct, which was around half a mile from school. He'd spent many long afternoons hanging out there with his friends when they should have been in lessons. Hadn't done him any harm missing school, had it, he thought to himself as he crept through the supermarket, collecting up all the food he could find which was still edible. Most of the shop's stock had gone rotten. The place stank of decay and he almost threw up. He needed to rest and catch his breath before he made the trip back to school. Not wanting to wait in the decaying supermarket he walked further into the building, eventually emerging out of a back entrance. A grey concrete staircase led up to a row of boarded up, graffiti-covered flats above the shop. Skin climbed the stairs and forced his way into one of the flats. He rested for a while in a cold and damp empty living room. He lay on the floor and passed the time with cigarettes and alcohol he'd taken from the shop below.

A narrow veranda ran across the front of the flats. After almost an hour had passed Skin stepped outside and stood there and looked out over the whole of the dead precinct below him. A large, roughly

elliptical collection of run-down shops centred around a large oval patch of muddy grass, it didn't look very different now to how it always used to look, he thought. There were a few bodies still lying on the ground, but other than that the place looked as grey, lifeless and terminally dull as it always had done. Even those bodies which incessantly dragged themselves around looked strangely similar to how they'd been before they'd died. Slow, empty and pointless. Skin baulked at the idea of ever allowing himself to become like that.

Standing up there, in full view but knowing that he was completely safe and untouchable, he felt incredibly powerful and strong. He felt in full control, almost like some kind of ancient lord looking down over his rotting subjects. Maybe this was his opportunity to show them just how powerful he was? He ran back into the flat and grabbed the rifle he'd brought with him. He rummaged around in his rucksack for ammunition and then stepped back outside. He loaded the rifle and took aim.

Can I do this? *Of course you can.*

Should I do it? *Why not, who's going to stop you? No-one tells you what to do anymore.*

Does it matter? *Don't be fucking stupid. Of course it doesn't matter. Damn things are dead anyway.*

Skin lined up a single, bedraggled figure in his sights. Breathing heavily he squeezed the trigger slightly and took up the slack, loosening his grip momentarily with nerves. There's nothing to be scared of, he thought, clearing his throat and then holding his breath as he prepared to fire. *Just fucking do it.* The end of the rifle seemed to be waving about uncontrollably. He wedged the butt deeper into his shoulder, shuffled his feet and re-balanced himself and then located the figure in his sights again. Before he'd had chance to dissuade himself he pulled on the trigger and fired. The gunshot cracked in his ear, rendering him temporarily deaf on one side, and the force of the shot almost threw him over. He dropped the rifle and rubbed the sore patch on his shoulder where the recoil had dug in. He shook his head clear and then looked out over the precinct. There wasn't much to see at first, primarily because all of the bodies gathered there had turned and had suddenly begun to stagger towards the supermarket. After a few seconds he managed to locate the body he'd been aiming at. He'd hit it. Christ, he thought, he'd hit it bloody well. It was difficult to see exactly how much damage he'd caused, but it looked as if at least half of its head had been blown clean away. More importantly, the fucking thing had finally stopped moving.

Skin stood on the veranda and fired another thirty-two times, managing to down at least another twenty-four bodies. Each time he fired the rifle he became more accustomed to the noise and the kick it gave him. He learnt to ride the recoil and absorb it. He learnt how to load and reload quickly. Most importantly, he learnt how to get rid of those fucking things below him.

Unchecked and unrestricted, Skin's confidence soared. No-one was laughing at him now or trying to tell him what to do, were they? No-one was on his back to do this or do that or be home by a certain time or not to wear certain clothes or not to speak in a certain way or not to drink or not to smoke or... Christ, he could do anything.

He began by getting himself more comfortable. The school had two gymnasiums, housed in a single two-storey building. He moved from his previous classroom hideout and made his home in Gym 1 (as it was known) on the first floor. There he hoarded the supplies he'd collected and, under cover of night, he fetched more. Using a battery-powered machine he filled the vast room with music from when he first woke to when he finally fell asleep at night. Fully aware of the effect the noise had on the dead population but arrogantly indifferent to their attentions, he drank and smoked his way through each day. His height

above the crowds seemed somehow to camouflage the direction and source of the sound. Although it continued to attract many more bodies to the school, they wandered aimlessly around the campus rather than gravitating towards the gym building.

Skin kicked a football around the gym. He threw empty beer bottles out of the window and watched them hit the bodies below. He spray-painted the bland grey-brick gym walls. Now and then he took out one of the guns and took pot-shots into the festering crowd. He slept. He ate. He began to get bored. The novelty of his situation was beginning to wear dangerously thin. A person of sound mind and average intelligence might well have been able to rise above the boredom, or put up with it in view of the potential danger outside the gym. Skin, however, although possessing sufficient intelligence, was also still driven by a hormone, alcohol and drug-induced anger. The remarkable power he suddenly seemed to have was incredible, and yet he still wanted more. The strength of his feelings was increasing by the hour and none of the distractions he could find seemed able to alleviate or reduce his frustrations. In spite of all he suddenly had, he still felt incomplete.

It was late one night – around midnight – when the way forward came to him and things suddenly became clear. Revenge. That was what was missing. It was the ultimate expression of his superiority. Hell, why hadn't he thought of it before? Here he was in this incredible position of power and authority, and he hadn't used it properly once. Sure, he'd fired a few shots and got rid of a pile of bodies and he'd defaced about ninety percent of the school, but he'd not yet taken out his anger on the people who deserved it most, had he? Christ, he had a list of names as long as his arm of people he wanted to get even with. His parents topped the list, then his ex-girlfriend, then the so-called friends who'd slept with her after she'd dumped him, then his teachers... Fucking hell, he thought, what an idiot. All that time he'd been sat there, letting those fuckers wander about free.

This was his time. He was in control. Time for retribution.

There would be little satisfaction in just finding these people and destroying what was left of them, he thought to himself next morning as he walked through the dawn shadows back towards his parents' house. What I need to do, he decided, is make them suffer. What I have to do is make things as difficult and painful for them as they did for me. I have to make them hurt.

His mother and father were still in the kitchen of the house where he'd left them on the first morning. His mother lay dead on the ground, slumped between the defrosted fridge-freezer and the dishwasher. Her soggy body stank. She was going nowhere, but a whack to the back of her head with a rolling pin made it completely certain that she wasn't going to get up again. He hated his mother marginally less than he hated his father. It didn't matter unduly that he was going to leave her, as long as he got to take Dad with him. Skin's dead father followed him around the kitchen, occasionally lunging at him and lashing out with sharp, twisted hands. Skin brushed aside the body's pathetic attacks and slipped a dog collar and lead around its neck. He tied its hands together with the washing line from the overgrown garden and half-led, half-dragged it the quarter-mile or so back to school. He threw the body into the empty ground floor gym and watched it scramble around aimlessly for a while. He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke into the damn thing's face.

'Bet you wish you hadn't been such an uptight fucker now, don't you Dad?' he sneered as the corpse stumbled towards him again. 'Who's laughing now?'

Dawn was in her bedroom back at her mother's house. She was Skin's next victim that afternoon. He slipped the lead around her neck and then tied her to the bed in which he'd lost his virginity earlier in the year. Before leaving he spent some time going through her belongings. He wasn't sure whether that made him feel better or worse. In her underwear drawer he found the kind of things he'd always hoped she'd wear for him, but which she'd obviously saved for his friends. To humiliate the dead bitch he stripped her

bare before dragging her back through the streets and dumping her in the gym with the remains of his dad.

He'd had a feeling that he'd seen the bodies of Mr McKenzie, Mr Miller and Miss Charles wandering around the school. It was getting harder and harder to distinguish between the bodies but he knew that he had to look. It was while he was searching for them that he came across what was left of an ex-friend (and one of Dawn's recent conquests) Glenn Tranter. Tranter's face was pretty badly decayed, but he could tell from the body's general build that it was him. Although his skin was a blotchy blue-grey, he could still see the tip of a tattoo he'd recently had done on his shoulder and neck, just below the collar of his blood-stained school shirt. The corpse's neck was scrawny and emaciated and the shirt hung unintentionally loose, revealing more of the tattoo than he'd ever been allowed to show at school. Another one for the gym.

There was no sign of Mr Miller. Damn, if there was one fucker who deserved a little dismemberment and torture, it was him. It was of some consolation when he found what remained of Mr McKenzie, his dictatorial modern languages teacher, dragging itself along the corridor outside the main assembly hall. Stupid fucking thing was still wearing the same damn tweed jacket it had worn to school every bloody day. He took great pleasure in wrapping the dog collar around the dead teacher's neck and dragging the body twice round the school before throwing it into the gym.

Miss Charles, his twisted, sadistic, sour-faced ex-head of year, had been trapped in the stock cupboard next to her office when she'd died. Skin found her still crashing around the room, half-buried beneath text books and papers. He'd hated this bitch more than any of the others, and she'd hated him too. He tried to drag her to the gym by her wiry grey hair but it wasn't strong enough and it kept coming away from her rotting scalp in sickly clumps. Instead he resorted to the dog lead and another drag through the increasingly crowded school grounds.

Over the course of the next day and a half he gathered together another fifteen bodies. Some of the rapidly putrefying, reanimated corpses had belonged to people who had, in one way or another (according to Skin), wronged him. Others were just unfortunate cadavers which just happened to have been picked out of the faceless masses and flung into the gym.

So what do I do with them now, he thought to himself as he lay on his makeshift bed at the far end of Gym 1. Music blared out of the CD player that he'd now hung from a basketball hoop with skipping ropes. He thought it sounded better like that, although the volume was so loud that getting the right acoustics didn't really matter. The room was filled with a haze of smoke from cigarettes and improvised spliffs. The smoke helped disguise the increasingly obnoxious stench of death, decay and putrefaction that filled the gym building and the world beyond its walls.

It was hard to believe whom he'd managed to shut into the gym downstairs. The incredible fact that they were all trapped in there and that their fates were completely in his control was almost harder to believe than what had happened to the rest of the world. This was an opportunity for revenge on a massive scale that he wasn't about to pass up. He was determined to make the most of every last second and make these fuckers suffer in the same way they'd tortured him for years. They had no idea what they'd done to him. None of them had given a damn.

I'll start tomorrow, Skin decided as he drifted into a nauseous, drink-fuelled sleep. One by one I'll take each of those fuckers to pieces.

He didn't wake up until early afternoon. He woke with a hangover of immense proportions which, he

decided, could only be eased by more alcohol. Damn, he was getting low on booze. He'd need to go out and get more soon, but not today. He had more important things to do today.

After he'd taken a piss out of a first floor window onto the heads of the crowd below (and thrown up too – he was feeling particularly bad today) he ambled down to the ground floor gym and opened the door. The twenty bodies he'd shut in there immediately began to move towards him. He pushed his way through them with an ignorance which bordered on contempt. With complete disinterest he pushed them away whenever they made to lunge towards him. He was preoccupied with his plans for the day and, ultimately, for each of them. He wanted to spend a reasonable amount of time with each body and not be rushed into destroying any one of them too quickly because of unwanted attention from one of the others. These fuckers were all due some uninterrupted personal service from him.

Still coughing (and occasionally retching and vomiting) he began to build a barrier around one corner of the gym with various pieces of apparatus he found lying around. The bodies, although still very animated, were also clumsy and their coordination was desperately poor. It didn't take very much to keep them restrained. Using benches, vaulting horses, trampolines, crash mats, weight training equipment and anything else he could find he built a division around the far left corner of the room, leaving the rest of the gym clear.

Who first?

He'd had a late start and getting the gym ready had taken longer than expected. The sun was already beginning to set as he stood breathless and looked across the room at his motley collection of corpses. Which one of these fuckers has caused me most pain? Which one hurt me most? Which one showed the most complete disregard for me and for everything I ever stood for or believed in or wanted? It was a close call between two of them. It was either Dad or Dawn. Just because he preferred the idea of messing with Dawn's body (it made him feel slightly excited in an uneasy, perverted kind of way) he chose her. He reached out over the barrier he'd built, grabbed hold of his ex-girlfriend's corpse and threw it back onto the other side.

'Okay, Dawn?' he asked, surprising himself with the sound of his own voice. Dawn's dead body lumbered towards him, twisted arms outstretched. For a moment he was close to panicking and he almost lost his nerve. What did he do? Did he hit it or push it over or...? He took a deep breath and instead of looking at the unsteady bulk of rotting flesh which staggered towards him, he instead remembered her as she used to be. More specifically, he remembered what it was she'd done to him. Even more specifically, he remembered what it was she hadn't let him do to her. Bitch.

Christ, just look at the state of her, he thought as his dead ex-girlfriend slipped in a puddle of blood or vomit or something equally unpleasant. Over the course of the last twenty-four hours the floor of the gym had become covered with various noxious spillages, both from the corpses and from Skin himself. The corpse dropped heavily to its knees in front of him and then managed to pick itself up again and continue moving towards him. She was an appalling sight but, knowing her strange tastes, she might have approved of the look. Her eyes were hollow and sunken, her skin green-hued and ruptured and pockmarked in places. She had a deep cut on her bare right shoulder and, in the low light, Skin was sure he could see squirming movement in and around the lesion. Was it just blood or decay glistening, or was it something more foul? Maggots, flies or larvae feeding off her dead flesh perhaps? Whatever it was, the thought of it was disgusting, too much even for the twisted mind of Skin to handle. The sight of her standing there, naked and practically falling to pieces as he watched her, was too intense. He pushed her back over the barrier and grabbed another body from the other side of the divide.

Mr Read! Bloody hell, it was Mr Read, the head of the music department at the school. He'd forgotten that he'd managed to get Read's body. He hadn't set out to find this particular teacher but he

was glad that he'd got him. He'd been one of the last corpses he'd collected yesterday. He'd found three bodies at the end of the corridor and this was the one he'd taken. The others were just kids. Now this bastard deserved to suffer. He was the one who made kids sing on their own in front of the class and play endless bloody glockenspiel solos in his lessons.

Skin hadn't liked Read, but there was no real emotional attachment to this teacher. He felt sure he could damage this body without giving it a moment's thought. Maybe the strength of his hate for Dawn, his dad and certain other ex-teachers somehow made it difficult for him to do justice to their bodies. He needed to practice. He needed to start with someone who had been fairly neutral and then build himself up to the bastards who really deserved to incur his wrath. The body of Mr Read seemed ideal.

What could he do to him? He glanced around the gloomy gym and his eyes settled on a pile of weight-training equipment in the corner of the room. As the body dragged itself after him pathetically he took hold of a short bar (the kind he'd seen used before for single arm exercises) and stripped the weights off it. He was left with a bloody heavy, fourteen inch, chrome plated metal bar. He turned back around to face the body of the dead teacher and swung the bar at its head. He'd expected to feel the impact but he hardly felt anything. The bar seemed to cut through the flesh like a hot knife through butter, such was the level of the creature's decay. And fucking hell, look what he'd done! The damn thing's jaw had been ripped right off its bloody face!

Suddenly feeling more confident and in control again, Skin circled the helpless corpse. He was moving at several times its lethargic speed, and it had no idea where he was. Standing right behind it he chopped down viciously at its legs. He hit the right knee cap, shattering it and sending the body crumbling to the ground. Too bloody easy! He smashed down with the bar again, this time coming down directly on its pelvis. He could feel the bone smashing and crunching under the force of the metal.

Whatever tensions, frustrations and fears had been building inside Skin were quickly released by the therapeutic destruction of the school teacher's dead body. If the truth be known (and Skin wasn't the slightest bit interested in why it made him feel better) it was the sudden physical exertion of the attack that revived the feelings and power he'd felt since the rest of the world had fallen. Whatever the reason, in his confused, immature and naïve mind, he knew it felt good, and he knew he wanted more. By the time he'd finished with the first body it had all but disappeared. Mr Read had been dismembered and spread around virtually the entire gym.

Dad was next.

Starving, tired and cold, Jackson approached the school.

More bodies.

Something must be happening around here.

What's the attraction? Why this place? I need to stop for a while and I need to take on some food. Think I'll take a look around.

Skin dragged his father's body through the greasy, creamy remains of the music teacher. Using more skipping ropes which he'd found by the weight training equipment he lashed the body's flailing arms and legs to a wooden climbing frame which had been stored against the gym wall. His knots weren't particularly good but his father's corpse didn't have the strength to be able to escape from them.

Just look at you, he thought as he stared at what was left of his father squirming on the wooden frame like it had been crucified. You used to tell me you were somebody I should look up to, and now look at you. You used to tell me that I should aspire to be like you, to do the things you did and to believe in the things that you believed in. Now look at you. A pathetic lump of rotting meat that's about to be destroyed. Now you look at me. I took so much shit from you because of how I looked, what I did and who I did it with. And why? What was so good about doing things your way? What made your ideas and your values any better than mine? If you were so fucking clever, why aren't you the one who's stood here now? If I was so stupid and so wrong, how come I'm in control?

Skin had edged closer and closer so that he was now just inches away from his dead father's face. He stared deep into the corpse's cold, black eyes hoping, bizarrely, to see a flicker of recognition or memory or emotion. Strange as it seemed, he wanted his father to know what was happening. He wanted him to see and feel everything that was happening and that was about to happen. He wanted him to understand and to be able to admit that Skin was right and he'd been wrong.

Nothing.

Stupid fucking thing.

In a fit of temper Skin picked up a metal-framed chair and swung it at his father's remains. Two of the chair's metal legs dug into the rotting flesh which covered the creature's abdomen and ripped it open, practically disembowelling it. Partially decomposed organs began to slip, slide and ooze from the body and dripped onto the floor below it.

Skin dropped to his knees and watched the bloody thing begin to slowly fall apart.

It must be around here. This is where the bodies are heading. Was this a school or a college or something?

Jackson crept around the outskirts of the school campus. Something had definitely happened around here. There were far too many bodies for them just to be here by coincidence. It couldn't have been looters because this wasn't the kind of place where there'd be anything to take. Most likely survivors had been here. Interesting. He'd only come across a handful of survivors in all the time he'd been travelling. He'd found evidence of them having been around and he'd come across their remains when the bodies had got to them before he had, but he'd seen very few actually managing to survive. He'd done his best to keep out of their way. The more of you there are, he'd decided, the more noise you'll make, the more you'll move around and the more chance you'll have of being caught and killed. Stay alone and stay alive was rapidly becoming his motto.

The nearest door into the school was open. Jackson pushed his way inside and listened carefully to the sounds inside the vast, stinking building. The odd distant shuffle and crash of bodies but nothing too ominous. He decided he could risk stopping and looking around.

Whenever Jackson found a staircase he instinctively climbed it. Stairs give me an advantage over the dead, he'd long since decided. The bodies had trouble climbing (although they'd manage it if you gave them long enough and if they had enough of an incentive) and the higher you climb, the better view you have of whatever's going on around you.

At the top of this particular staircase Jackson was confused. Below him was a grassy courtyard in the middle of the campus which was filled with bodies. In the grim darkness, however, he couldn't immediately see what it was that was drawing them there. He'd come across huge gatherings before

which had been caused by the most ridiculous of things – an open door continually banging in the wind or a broken gutter dripping with rainwater. He stood and watched the crowd for a little while longer, trying to analyse their movements.

Then he saw it. There were bodies trapped in a gym on the diagonally opposite side of the grassy quadrant. Was that really it? Perhaps the noise of them moving around in there was creating enough of a disturbance to keep the hundreds of surrounding corpses close. It was possible, but unlikely. Whatever the reason, he decided that was where he was going to make his attack. Just a very quick run in and out. Enough to cause a little damage and get a decent fire going. And once the building was properly alight he could concentrate on getting himself sorted out. He was starving. He hadn't eaten for more than a day and he desperately needed to get his hands on some food. There'd be shops nearby. There were usually always shops built close to schools. The fire would distract the bodies and he'd go scavenging through the shadows.

How to get close? The buildings which surrounded the courtyard appeared to be connected. He'd work his way around until he got as close as he could to the gym, then he'd cause a minor distraction and make a run for it through the crowd. It wasn't going to be easy but he'd done it before. He took his rucksack off his back and scrambled around inside for the various items he'd need. A small plastic bottle of paraffin and a cigarette lighter. Simple.

The best thing he'd found to use as a distraction was a well dried-out but still mobile body. If he could find one that had been trapped indoors for a decent length of time, that would be ideal. The bodies were always attracted to fire, and if he set one of them alight its random, barely-coordinated movements would add to the confusion and increase the effect dramatically. Although the infection had originally struck before the school had officially opened for the day, he had no trouble in finding the suitably emaciated cadaver of a young boy scrambling around pathetically in the shadows of a second floor classroom. He grabbed the body by the scruff of its neck and carried it back down to ground level.

There's no room for sentimentality any longer, he thought as he soaked the body with the paraffin. Whatever this thing used to be, its character, personality and every other attribute which once made it an individual and unique human being died with it on that Tuesday morning, more than four weeks ago. This thing isn't someone's son, brother or friend anymore, it's a collection of dead flesh and bone. I'll be doing it a favour by destroying it.

Without allowing himself any more time to think about it, Jackson checked that the door to the grass courtyard was open and then lit the body. He gave it a few seconds for the flames to really take hold before he pushed it out into the night. Hundreds of bodies immediately turned and moved towards him, attracted first by the sound of the opening door, then by the brilliant, dancing flames which consumed the figure in front of him. He grabbed hold of one of its arms and dragged it over to the diagonally opposite corner of the courtyard to the entrance to the gym building, and roughly planted the body back onto its feet again. Bizarrely ignorant to the fact that it was ablaze, it staggered towards the mass of bodies which silently converged on it.

Jackson took a deep breath and moved. He ran back to the door he'd just emerged from and waited, wanting to be sure that the decoy had worked before he risked running further from safety and deeper into the bodies. Perfect. It was working like a dream. The entire mass of diseased, decaying flesh was ignoring him and moving towards the bright flames about fifty meters away. Several bodies were burning now. Stupid bloody things, he thought. Relaxing slightly, he crept along the nearest wall towards the entrance to the gym. He tried the door but it wouldn't open. Strange. He looked down at the handle and shook it. Bloody hell, he thought, it had been barred from the inside.

There wasn't much left of Dad.

Skin had punched and kicked and slashed and ripped and pulled and spat at the remains of his father until very little still hung from the wooden climbing frame. There was almost as much rotten flesh on him and on the floor and surrounding walls as there was left on the corpse.

If the destruction of the teacher's body had been strangely therapeutic, then this was bliss. Using climbing ropes Skin had flogged his father's corpse. He felt no remorse and no pain. Half-drunk and half-stoned, he ripped and tore at the body mercilessly. For a while nothing else mattered. Years of pent up anger and frustration were let loose in the space of a few perfect minutes of revenge. He forgot about the other bodies in the gym. He was so transfixed by the destruction and disintegration of his dead father that he didn't see the fires outside. Suddenly feeling able to do anything again, he turned his attention to Dawn. Once again he dragged her body over the barrier and out into the gym. He grabbed her from behind (it felt good to do this in front of his father) and ran his hands over her flesh. Her skin felt alternately wet and then curiously dry and brittle, but that didn't matter. He gently caressed her still feminine shape as he decided how he would dismember her. In a state of semi-arousal and drug and drug induced euphoria, he didn't hear the glass smash and the gym entrance being forced open.

'What the hell are you doing, you sick bastard?' Jackson asked as he burst into the blood-soaked gym. He shone a torch at Skin who immediately let go of Dawn's body and pushed it away. Christ, Jackson thought, he'd seen some pretty unpleasant things over the last few weeks, but never anything like this. A stupid little fired-up teenager torturing and molesting the dead. He knew that he'd just done something pretty unpleasant to a dead school boy outside, but that had been different. There had been a reason and a necessity to his actions. What this kid was doing was just sick. Twisted, evil and sick.

Suddenly ashamed, Skin stood in front of his crucified father, dumbstruck. Behind him the body still moved and twitched continually. Its head lolled heavily from side to side.

'I...' he began, 'I just...'

Jackson shook his head in disbelief as he shone his torch around the blood-soaked room. He glanced back over his shoulder as the bodies from outside began to drag themselves into the building through the door he'd left hanging open. He'd only intended being inside for a matter of seconds.

'What the hell have you been doing in here?' Jackson asked again, still not quite able to believe what he was seeing. 'Is there something wrong with you? I know what these things are and what they do, but this is wrong. Have some respect...'

Skin wasn't listening. How dare this man come into his world and start questioning his actions and decisions. Did he know who he was? Did he know how strong he was? Did he know that upstairs he'd got guns and knives and that he'd destroyed huge numbers of corpses over the last few weeks? In Jackson Skin could suddenly see everything that he'd despised about the world before the apocalypse. He saw the authority he'd rebelled against and he saw the common-sense and rule-following that he detested. He couldn't let it go on. This man was a threat to his new found strength, independence and freedom. He had to make a stand or it would all have been for nothing. He grabbed the metal bar he'd used to bludgeon the music teacher and ran at Jackson.

'Don't be stupid,' Jackson yelled as the desperate teenager approached. Skin lifted the bar high, ready to strike. With twice his speed Jackson let rip with a single jab to Skin's face, catching him on square on the nose and sending him reeling back. He dropped the bar and it clattered loudly to the ground.

Jackson looked around anxiously. By breaking into the building he'd opened it up to the bodies

outside. They were now streaming inside in huge numbers.

'Time to get out,' he suggested to Skin who still sat in a crumpled heap on the floor, blood pouring down his face. 'Unless you like this sort of thing, of course,' he added. 'Could have yourself a real party now, you sick bastard.'

Skin couldn't move. He couldn't speak. All of the anger and frustration and hate that had been released since the world had died had now suddenly returned, and now it was worse than ever before. He was crushed. He watched in desperate silence as Jackson turned and shoulder-charged his way through the dead and back out into the night. There were still a couple of bodies burning nearby. That, coupled with the movement around the gym, was enough of a distraction to enable him to slip away into the darkness. What about the kid, he thought? Forget him. Stay alone and stay alive.

Skin slowly stood up and stared at the body of his father. It seemed to stare back at him. He stood motionless in the middle of the gym and, for a time, was unnoticed by the hundreds of bodies that had dragged themselves into the building.

The room was filling up quickly.

Skin was scared. All of his strength and bravado had gone. He needed help. He looked around for Dawn but she'd gone, swallowed up by the faceless crowd. There must be someone who can help, he thought. With tears of sadness and humiliation running down his face he walked deeper into the gym. He reached the barrier he'd built and looked over the mass of chairs and equipment. In the darkness he could see what remained of his friends and teachers. Over his shoulder the mass of cadavers moved ever closer.

Skin climbed over the barrier and collided with the body of Miss Charles. He had to look twice before he was sure it was her. He began to talk to her. Wiping blood and tears from his face he began to apologise for what he'd done and how he'd behaved. Miss Charles wasn't listening. Along with the remaining seventeen bodies of his teachers and his friends, she lunged towards him and tore him apart.

Jackson watched from a nearby hillside as the school burned. It was a dry night. The fire must have spread quickly through the bodies outside and then to the buildings. Whatever the reason, the whole bloody place was up in flames now.

Good.

He lay still on the grass for a while, watching as the bodies all around him stumbled towards the bright light in the distance. When enough of them have disappeared, he thought, I'll go and get myself something to eat.

DAY THIRTY-EIGHT

ANNIE NELSON

After I left the community centre I came back home. There didn't seem to be much point in doing anything else. I had nowhere else to go. That was weeks ago now. Just over four weeks I think but I'm not exactly sure. It's getting harder and harder to keep track of the days.

I never felt safe in that community centre. People used to talk about surviving, but no-one actually did anything about it. There were always people crying or arguing or fighting but no-one actually did anything constructive. When I first got there I thought we might all bond together and make a go of things like we used to if there was a crisis, but we didn't. Most people were too scared and upset to even try. You see, everyone had lost someone else. Everyone had their own problems that needed sorting out before they tried to help anyone else. For most people there didn't even seem to be any point in trying to pick up the pieces.

My friend Jessie (the lady I used to talk to at the centre) said that she couldn't ever see things getting any better. I kept telling her that they had to and that they would do eventually. No matter what hardships you have to get over, you always manage to do it in the end, don't you? It might be a long, hard struggle, but you'll always get there if you think positive and refuse to give up, won't you? I should know. My whole life's been a struggle, not that I'm complaining, mind. Poor old Jessie. I lost her when those things got into the building. She tried to get away with the others. Don't suppose I'll ever find out what happened to her.

There were a few people in that community centre who were like ticking bombs, just waiting to explode. It was only a matter of time before something happened there. I've never been as frightened as I was when the fights started and when the doors were opened. It was all I could do to keep out of the way. I curled myself up into a ball and lay still under a table as the room filled up with those horrible, dirty, stinking things from outside. I know that they used to be people and that I should be respectful but honestly, they were disgusting. They made me feel sick to the stomach. We all have to go someday, but I hope and pray that I don't go like that... I just want to go to sleep one night and then not wake up again. I looked out for Jessie when the building started filling up but she must have already gone. Most people were trying to get out through the back and she must have been dragged out with them. I hope she's all right.

I just kept my head down and waited for things to calm down again. I kept as still as I could and watched those creatures as they dragged themselves round and round the room. My old bones were killing me but I knew I couldn't move. I couldn't let them see me. It must have been the best part of a day later when I finally saw a gap in the crowds. I stood up, as quiet as I could, and crept out of the

building. I did my best to stay out of sight but I never expected it to work. I'll never know how I managed to get past them.

It was good to get back home.

I let myself back in and suddenly everything felt better. I collected up all the food and drink I could find and then dragged the mattress out of the spare bedroom down to the cellar and that's where I've stayed since then. It's cold and dark and miserable down here but at least I'm home and at least I'm safe. I've got a torch and candles and matches for light and I've managed to find plenty to do to keep me occupied. I'll stay down here as long as I have to. I've got books to read and I can knit and sew if I want to. Shame there isn't any music. I miss the radio. I miss the voices. The radio used to keep me company. I know that I have to stay quiet. If I make too much noise those things will find out where I am. Sometime I can hear them moving around. Sometimes I can even hear them in the house.

Such a shame about all those people in the community centre. Such a waste. You don't have to make a noise and fight and scream all the time to survive. Look at me. I'm doing perfectly well down here on my own, thank you very much. I've lived through wars and terrorist attacks and flu epidemics and water shortages and much, much worse. I've been mugged twice and I got over that, didn't I? The problem with those people is that they didn't have enough experience of life. I'm eighty-four, and I've seen just about all there is to see.

The trouble with most people is that they want their problems sorted out today, not tomorrow. They've had it too easy with their computers and their mobile phones and the like. They expect someone to flick a switch and make all their problems disappear but that's not going to happen, is it? People just have to accept that this isn't going to get better overnight. It's going to take time. It's going to take patience. Be quiet and keep yourself to yourself and everything will be all right in the end.

It's very cold today. Must be the middle of October by now. Not sure what the exact date is. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm sure I used to have a little oil heater somewhere. Maybe I'll nip upstairs and try and find it later, if there aren't any of them about. It might be in the bedroom. I think that's where I last saw it. I need to do something though because it's going to get much colder yet. And the cold and damp won't do my cough any good. I hate it when I cough. When I cough it lets them know where I am. I don't want them to know where I am.

I keep thinking that someone's going to come. Someone will come for me eventually, won't they? They'll have a long list of who lives where and they'll tick them all off and realise that I'm missing. Someone from the government or the army will come and help us sort this bloody mess out.

I hope it's soon.

I'm doing less and less each day but I'm getting more and more tired. Everything's an effort. I've got to go out and get some food soon but I can't face it. I keep putting it off. I haven't got much left.

Keep your chin up. That's what I keep saying to myself. You've done all right so far, Annie.

I'll be all right.

I'll survive.

DAY ONE HUNDRED AND NINETEEN

UNDERGROUND

John Carlton is a twenty-four year old army mechanic who, for the last one hundred and nineteen days, has lived underground in a military bunker buried deep in the countryside. Trapped down there with him are another one hundred and sixteen soldiers, less than half the number of troops that originally manned the base. A pale shadow of the highly trained and once powerful fighting force they used to be, these men and woman are desperate and terrified. Backed into a corner, all order and control has now broken down. Supplies are running dangerously low. Time is running out.

For these men and women the bunker has become their tomb. They have no means of escape or salvation, and each one of them is painfully aware just how finely poised and delicate their precarious situation is. Their alternatives are all equally hopeless. It will not be long before their lack of equipment and supplies renders the base uninhabitable and yet they are unable to leave the bunker. The air outside is still filled with a vicious infection which will strike them down in seconds before causing their dead bodies to drag themselves back up again and walk the Earth relentlessly. Furthermore, the dead remains of the population on the surface have, over time, already gravitated towards the base, burying it under thousands of tonnes of rotting human flesh.

Inside the bunker the situation is deteriorating day by day. Law and order is now non-existent and every man and woman has to fend for themselves. Respect, rank and position are long-forgotten things of the past. Everyone is equal at the bottom of the pile, and everyone is a potential enemy. Self-preservation is all. The next breath of air that the person next to you takes or the precious mouthful of food or water they swallow means, ultimately, that there is now less for you.

Death is inevitable and is fast approaching. Whichever way these men and women turn they will die. And worst of all, each of them now knows that death no longer carries with it any certainty. The end of their natural lives may just be the beginning of something far, far worse.

John Carlton is painfully aware of what is happening around him. He has hidden in frightened isolation in one of the most inaccessible parts of the bunker for a considerable length of time. His home for the last two weeks has been a dark and narrow service tunnel. All he has with him are a pistol, a few rounds of ammunition, some meagre supplies and his standard issue protective suit.

Sound is carried along the twisting maze of tunnels and throughout the bunker. Although he cannot easily tell which direction it is coming from, he knows that trouble is uncomfortably close. He also knows that the sounds he hears are the beginning of the end. Somewhere in the underground base fighting has broken out.

The supplies must have finally been exhausted. That's got to be it. That's got to be the reason for the sudden increase in the volume and number of shouts, screams and gunshots I'm hearing. It had to happen sooner or later. This base was only ever stocked for a stay of around seventy days and we're now more than forty days over that deadline. The fact that we lost so many men and women in the battle meant that we were able to make what supplies we did have last a little longer than expected. It sounds like time's quickly running out now.

The day of the battle was the moment I knew we had no hope here. I'd always suspected as much, but until then I'd done my best to remain positive and optimistic. It was the lack of information that unnerved me, the lack of any hard facts and clear instructions. I mean, I'd heard the stories about the people on the surface and the huge number of casualties and what might have caused all the deaths, but while we were safe down here and the doors remained shut none of it felt real. I half expected to finally go above ground and find that nothing had changed, that we'd been subject to some fucked-up military psychological experiment or something like that. It wouldn't be the first time. It's happened before, no reason why it couldn't happen again.

The day of the battle was the moment I realised all the nightmare rumours I'd heard were true, and that was when I began to prepare myself for death. No point in doing anything else, really. Unless something happens to make the surface safe and habitable again, we're all destined to die down here. The trick now is to drag things out as long as possible. Suicide isn't an option yet. I'll only do that if there is absolutely no chance of survival. If I can stay here until the fighting stops then I might be able to survive for a little longer. Who knows? I don't know anything anymore.

The fight had already been raging for several hours when my lot were ordered to suit up and get ready to go above ground. There was no tactical briefing, because there were no tactics. There was no battle-plan because no-one knew what it was we were going to face. We'd heard rumours of an enemy that numbered into the hundreds of thousands, but there were no hard facts or definite details to make plans around. We were told to go out there and just get rid of as many of them as we could. If it wasn't military, we were told, destroy it. We got ourselves suited up and ready to fight and we'd made it as far as the decontamination chambers when the retreat began.

I've never seen anything like it, and I pray to God that I never do again. I only managed to get the faintest of glimpses outside before the doors were closed, but it was like hell on earth out there. Our boys were trying to get back inside but it wasn't a controlled fall-back. Blokes were just running for their lives. And behind them... Christ, following them in was a wave of thousands of the fucking things. Huge staggering swarms of these bloody things that looked like corpses. They were decayed and slow and awkward but you could see that they knew what they were doing. I watched them ripping our men and women to shreds. Hundreds of them trampling our lot under their rotten feet and tearing at their suits and their skin. There was nothing they could do against the numbers they were facing. The commander gave the order to lock-down the base and all we could do was watch as the chambers were sealed. Fucking heartbreaking it was to see men and woman that I'd stood alongside and fought next to just left stuck out there. They'd have kept on fighting for as long as they could – I know they would – but the bodies must have got them in

the end. Rumour has it there was so many of them that they couldn't close the main bunker doors. There was too much dead meat and abandoned equipment in the way for them to get the bloody doors closed.

I went back up to the decontamination chambers about a week later with a handful of others to do a check on some of the systems. We tried to look outside but it was dark and we couldn't see much. The hanger was still full of rotting flesh. The bodies were packed so tight against the doors that the bloody things couldn't even move.

All that happened sixty-five days ago now. Since then I've counted every hour and watched every long minute tick past. Hard to believe how much time has gone. Truth be told, it feels like I've been here ten times longer than that.

10:17 am.

Gunfire.

I just heard gunfire again. Part of me wants to try and find out what's happening but I don't dare move. Maybe when it quietens down again I'll try. I'll have to move sooner or later. I've run out of food. I don't want to but I'm going to have to move soon.

1:35 pm.

More fighting. More gunshots and more screams and shouts. Bloody hell, I wonder how many are left alive now? I can still hear screams in the distance. I keep imagining that I recognise the voices but it's probably just my mind playing tricks again. Maybe I should try and get closer now...

Carlton crawled slowly back down the low tunnel where he'd been hiding. His joints were stiff and aching. He tried to move quietly but, after many long days of inaction, his movements were frustratingly clumsy and uncoordinated. Matters weren't helped by the protective suit which he wore. He'd kept it on because it gave him an extra layer of warmth and, if he was honest, because he was too scared to take it off. What if whatever it was that had done the damage outside managed somehow to get into the base? He had to take a chance and leave the breathing apparatus off. It was too bulky and it slowed him down. He held his loaded pistol tightly in his hand. He wasn't going anywhere without protection.

The service tunnel led round into a second tunnel which was slightly wider and taller than the first. That tunnel, in turn, eventually connected with a corridor which led back deep into the heart of the base. He'd see how far he could get.

The lighting around him was virtually non-existent – a dull yellow glow from intermittent emergency lamps, that was all – but it was enough. The darkness was helpful. He'd didn't want to be seen.

Carlton paused for a moment to try and get his bearings. The bunker was a large, sprawling construction which seemed to meander aimlessly underground in every direction. Long, empty tunnels connected storerooms, mess halls and dormitories which were a surprising distance apart. If he was where he thought he was, the next door on his left would be the entrance to the kitchens. He crept further along the corridor, pressed tight against the wall, and then stopped when he reached the door. It was

half-open. He peered cautiously inside and then gently shoved the door a little further open. No response. There didn't seem to be anyone in there. Carlton slowly eased himself into the room.

It was slightly brighter inside the kitchens than it had been out in the corridor, and the relative brightness hurt his eyes after days of hiding in the darkness of the service tunnel. It was immediately obvious (and not at all surprising) that the whole area had been ransacked and cleared out. The cupboards and storage areas – those that he could see from where he was standing – were stripped empty. The large refrigeration unit in the corner was also open and its shelves too were bare.

Carlton was about to leave the kitchen when he stopped. Something in the rubbish under his feet had caught his eye. He bent down and pushed a pile of plastic food trays out of the way. It was a lifeless hand, reaching up for help through the garbage. Working quickly but quietly he cleared pots, pans and other rubbish away from the immediate area around where he was standing. He gradually uncovered the body of Lynn Price. Price had been the officer in charge of the kitchens. The poor bitch had a bread knife buried deep in her right kidney. Huge amounts of blood had spilled out over the kitchen floor underneath the layers of rubbish. In places it was still tacky but most of it was dry. She'd obviously been dead for several days.

Nerves threatened to get the better of Carlton. Did he continue to push further into the base, or did he turn back now and scuttle away to the relatively safety of his dark tunnel hideout again? Hiding was by far the easier option, but he knew it wouldn't have done him any good in the long run. If he didn't find food and water soon he'd be in serious trouble. He was already beginning to dehydrate. Christ, what he would have given for just a single drink of clear, ice-cold fresh water. The fact that he was standing in the middle of a kitchen, surrounded by pots and pans and discarded cutlery and crockery only made him feel worse. He pressed on.

The kitchen was connected to the main mess hall. Carlton climbed through a wide serving hatch and took a few steps into the deserted hall. It was in just as bad a condition as the kitchen. It looked like there had been a riot. Furniture had been upturned and he could see the bodies of at least four more ex-colleagues buried in the mayhem. He was about to check the vending machines in the corner (which were obviously empty but which were still teasingly illuminated) when the sound of another hail of bullets stopped him in his tracks. That was close. That was too close. A moment of silence and then the sound of heavy footsteps thundering past the entrance to the mess hall. From his position he saw three or four unidentifiable figures rush past the door and carry on down the corridor. He waited for a moment before sticking his head out into the corridor and peering after them.

'Carlton...' a voice hissed from out of nowhere. Carlton's heart skipped a beat and his legs weakened with nerves as he looked for the owner of the voice. He spotted a frightened face hiding in a doorway opposite. Who was it? It was difficult to see but he was too afraid to get any closer. He stared again. Was it Daniel Wright?

'Wright? Wright, is that you...?'

The figure on the other side of the corridor slowly stood up straight and then looked left and right before crossing over into the mess hall. Wright pushed Carlton further back into the shadows.

'Where the hell have you been?' he asked, his voice hushed and secretive. 'Haven't seen you for weeks.'

'Been hiding,' Carlton replied.

'Sensible. Best bloody thing to do around here.'

‘What about you?’

‘I was with a few others. Got themselves into a scrap and I took the chance to duck out and get away.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘We’re waiting to die, didn’t you know?’ Wright replied, his voice drained of all emotion. ‘Place is falling apart. Fucking people are falling apart. Half the people left down here are already dead, and most of them killed themselves.’

Carlton was silent for a moment as he took in Wright’s words. None of it had come as a surprise.

‘So what are you going to do now?’

The other soldier shrugged his shoulders.

‘No bloody idea,’ he admitted. ‘Not a lot I can do really, is there?’

Carlton didn’t answer.

The awkward conversation was interrupted by the sounds of more scuffles and fights taking place deeper within the base. Wright peered out into the corridor again, then quickly drew his head back inside.

‘Anything?’ Carlton asked.

‘Nothing,’ Wright replied, ‘but it’s just a matter of time. Won’t be long before this whole fucking place goes up in smoke.’

‘You reckon?’

‘Absolutely.’

More noise. Getting closer. Wright started to shuffle uncomfortably.

‘Where you been hiding?’ he asked, the desperation very evident in his voice. Carlton thought for a moment before answering. What did he say? He didn’t want to tell him. ‘Come on, man,’ he begged as the noise in the corridor continued to increase in volume. ‘Let me come with you. I won’t do anything to get you found, I promise. I just want to find somewhere safe where I can...’

Soldiers appeared at the end of the corridor. More gunshots. A figure collapsed in a hail of bullets. More troops trampled the body as they ran for shelter.

‘Christ,’ Carlton mumbled under his breath. He wanted to turn and run back to the service tunnel, but Wright would follow and he knew that he couldn’t afford to let him. No matter what the other man said, having him with him would increase the risk dramatically. He had to find a way of getting rid of him, and quickly.

‘Come on,’ Wright pleaded. ‘Fucking show me!’

In desperation Wright whipped a knife out from his belt and held it to Carlton’s neck. Christ, thought Carlton, not the suit. Cut me but don’t cut the bloody suit.

‘I can’t...’ Carlton began to protest.

‘Show me where you’re hiding or I’ll do it,’ Wright threatened, his face now close to the other man’s. Carlton recoiled at the noxious smell of Wright’s acrid breath.

‘I can’t,’ he said again, bringing his pistol slowly up from his side. Before Wright had realised what he was doing Carlton fired a single shot, ripping a bloody hole through his chest cavity and lungs. Wright collapsed to the ground and Carlton stepped over him, wiping dribbles of blood from his precious suit.

He was about to step into the corridor when another group of soldiers thundered past the mess hall doorway, this time moving in the opposite direction to the first, moving back deeper into the base. More followed, then more. One of the soldiers straggling at the back of the pack tried to grab hold of Carlton and drag him along with him. Carlton instinctively recoiled and squirmed free from the soldier’s grip.

‘Get yourself out of here,’ the soldier in the corridor screamed. ‘Get out of here now. The fucking idiots are trying to open the bloody doors!’

He couldn’t afford to wait. Not caring who saw him Carlton turned and ran back through the mess hall and clambered quickly through the serving hatch and into the kitchen. Behind him a constant stream of desperate, terrified troops fled deeper into the bunker.

Carlton ran back to his hideout as quickly as his tired, under-exercised legs would carry him. He threw himself into the service tunnel and scrambled around furiously in the darkness for his breathing apparatus. With hands trembling with nervous fear he put on his kit and melted back into the darkness and waited...

At the entrance to the bunker a group of soldiers had fought their way through into the decontamination chambers. Their minds twisted and deluded as a result of weeks of hopeless isolation, two of them struggled to open the sealed doors while another three held off more troops who fought to prevent the base being compromised. Risks, priorities and perspectives had been distorted after spending months buried underground without hope. Perhaps the infection had finally passed? The men now struggling to open the doors and get outside genuinely believed that this was their last chance for freedom and life.

The soldiers at the doors were being protected by their three colleagues who, whenever they saw the slightest movement in the corridor leading up to the chambers, unleashed a torrent of bullets. Those trying to stop them didn’t stand a chance, such was the position of the doorway being defended at the far end of a long corridor. Explosives and grenades were useless too. Fire munitions of any strength at them this close to the chambers and enough damage would almost certainly be done to immediately compromise the base. A few desperate fighters continued to try and prevent the breach. Those who had been unfortunate enough to have already seen what was outside and who knew what was about to be let into the base. Those who had already fought hand to hand with the dead and who had witnessed for themselves their vast and unstoppable numbers. Those who would rather be mown down by bullets than face the rotting crowds that were about to flood into the bunker.

It was inevitable that the doors were going to be opened. It was just a matter of time.

Carlton lay on his back in the tunnel and trembled with fear. The world sounded different from behind the mask, muffled and somehow distant and indistinct. It made him feel even more uncertain and scared.

In the distance he could hear further battles raging. Bullets were flying and screams of pain and panic

were ringing through the twisting maze of subterranean corridors and passageways. Even more than before it was now impossible to gauge the direction of any of the sounds. The noise seemed now to surround Carlton and come at him from every angle. The volume increased steadily and previously distinct sounds gradually merged into a single unintelligible cacophony.

Then it stopped.

A sudden silence so ominous that it made Carlton lose control of his bladder. He lay on his back in a pool of his own piss and lifted a shaking hand up to his mask. He wrapped his fingers around the breathing apparatus, ready to rip it off. Perhaps I should just do it now, he thought, just get it over with...

He couldn't bring himself to do it.

Sobbing with fear he lay still and waited.

The silence continued for the best part of two days. In his cramped confinement Carlton listened intently to the stillness, hoping for a clue as to what had happened but too afraid to move and investigate. Weak with hunger and nerves, he waited impatiently. He didn't know which was worse, the physical or mental pain? Every bone in his body ached and he knew that if he moved some of that pain might ease. But he couldn't do it. He was too bloody scared to do anything.

After endless hours, minutes and seconds of nothing he finally heard something. Had he imagined it? He held his breath and listened carefully, the rapid thump of his own frightened heartbeat ringing in his ears and threatening to drown out any other sound. What was happening? He'd begun to presume that the all-consuming silence of the last forty or so hours had been a good thing. Surely if the base had been invaded by swarms of decaying bodies he would have seen or heard something by now?

There it was again. The bang and clatter of metal on metal. It sounded more like a random, clumsy crash than anything more purposeful or sinister. He had to do something now, he couldn't just lie here and do nothing. Moving as cautiously as he could he slid back down the service corridor to the junction with the second, slightly wider passageway. Once there he crouched down on his aching knees and listened again, keeping out of sight. More noise. This time even further away, still unclear and indistinct. He shuffled further forward again.

Carlton stopped when he reached the next corridor. He glanced over at the kitchen door. The lights were lower than he remembered. The main power supply within the base must have failed and the structure was now illuminated only by the low yellow electric back-up lighting throughout. He retraced the steps he'd taken a few days earlier, tiptoeing carefully through the wreckage which covered the kitchen floor and trying not to make any unnecessary noise. He stepped over the fallen body of the officer he'd discovered last time he was here and then slid through the serving hatch and out into the mess hall.

More distant sounds. He primed his pistol, cringing at the noise it made, and walked to the end of the hall. He was about to step out into the corridor when a figure appeared from a doorway to his far left. Christ, who was that? More to the point, what was it? It was dressed in a soldier's uniform, but it was so slow and clumsy. Whoever it was must have been injured, he decided. Maybe he should try and help them? Carlton chose instead to do nothing, preferring to wait until the soldier got closer before he took any chances. You can't trust anyone these days, he thought. And, he quickly remembered, the advancing soldier might be equally uncertain of him. One unexpected move and he might find himself staring down the barrel of the other man's rifle.

The trooper was close now. Carlton held his breath, trying not to move for fear of giving away his position. Something wasn't right. Another sudden sound came from the other end of the corridor behind him but he ignored it, concentrating instead on the soldier still approaching. The figure's head hung heavily over to one side and it seemed to be dragging its feet rather than managing to take proper, controlled steps. What the hell was going on? The soldier was now no more than a couple of feet away. It staggered into the dull yellow glow of one of the emergency lights directly overhead and Carlton recoiled at the creature's nightmarish face. What the hell had happened to this man? It was as if the life had been sucked out of him. His skin was white, almost blanched, and thick, dried blood had dribbled from his mouth, down his chin and onto his uniform. His eyes were dull and unfocussed, staring ahead but not actually appearing to look at anything. To all intents and purposes this poor bastard looked dead. Carlton disappeared back into the shadows of the mess hall. The soldier (or corpse or whatever it was) shuffled past him oblivious.

It had to be the infection. That was the only explanation. The integrity of the bunker had been compromised and the germ or whatever it was that had done all the damage outside had been let in. His mind began to work overtime. If the rest of the soldiers are infected, he thought, then I have to get out of here. Christ, he'd seen for himself what the dead hordes were capable of when they'd forced the military back and entered the hanger almost seventy days ago. And now he found himself trapped on the wrong side of the bunker doors with, potentially, anything up to a hundred of the bloody things. He had to get out. He had to get out right now. He didn't know where he was going to go, but he had to try and make a run for it. He was going to die soon, that much was inevitable, but he wasn't about to let himself be torn apart at the hands of his former friends and colleagues. As weak and tired and frightened as he was, he wasn't prepared to end his days like that. One last burst of energy...

Carlton stepped out into the corridor. The body of the soldier continued to trip away to his right. It must have heard him but it didn't react. To his left the passageway was clear. Leaving the safety of the shadows he limped further down the corridor, passing the door from which the body had emerged and eventually reaching a T-junction. Left or right? All the corridors in this damn place looked the same – white-grey and disappointingly featureless. Carlton was disorientated and in pain and he couldn't remember the way to the control room. If he could reach the control room he was sure he'd be able to then find the communications room. Once he'd managed to reach the communications room he knew he'd be able to find his way back through the maze of tunnels to the decontamination chambers. That had to be the area he aimed for. If he could reach the chambers then, providing there wasn't still a flood of rotting bodies trying to force their way inside, he'd have a chance, albeit a very slight one, of getting out of the base alive. What happened after that, however, was anyone's guess.

He turned left. Damn, the door to a ransacked equipment store and a dead end. He turned back again and began to move down the corridor in the other direction. Movement was gradually becoming easier and his joints were feeling less stiff. Now all that he had to do was... Shit, another one of those creatures right in front of him. He looked at it and wondered if he could see who it used to be. To keep moving in the right direction he knew he had no option but to try and pass it. For a moment he stood helpless in the middle of the corridor, completely still and completely useless, unable to decide what to do. He watched the shabby figure as it tripped towards him and he poised himself for its attack. Three meters between them and he held up his pistol.

'Stop,' he commanded. 'Stop or I'll blow your fucking head off.'

The body continued its lethargic advance. He had no option but to shoot. He closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger and winced as the deafening sound of the gunshot echoed throughout the whole of the underground complex. When he dared to look again he saw that the soldier's corpse had crumbled to the ground in front of him. The back of its head and the contents of its skull dripped red from the grey

corridor walls. Carlton was so preoccupied with the bloody fate of the first body that he failed to notice another two approaching until they had almost reached the cadaver on the floor. Without stopping to consider his actions he lifted his pistol again and fired another two shots at close range.

Control room. He'd found it. Carlton weaved around the empty desks and past dusty, lifeless heaps of long-since redundant computer equipment on his way through the room. Another body staggered towards him but, rather than waste precious time fighting it, he instead simply stepped out of its way. The stupid thing blundered past. It hadn't even seen him.

Out of the control room. Another left turn, down the corridor and then right. Jesus Christ, yet another body. He shot this one in the face – the corridor was too narrow to risk taking any chances. He stepped over the fallen corpse and pushed through the door into the communications room. And then he stopped. Another couple of hundred meters or so of corridor and he'd be outside the decontamination chambers. Did he really want to do this? Could he do it? More to the point, did he have any choice? Carlton's ever-decreasing alternatives were continuing to rapidly deplete. His final choices were now appallingly grim – stay underground with a hundred dead soldiers for company, or try and get up to the surface and have to face the possibility of having to deal with many, many more bodies up there. The thought of escaping from the relentlessly grey and enclosed confines of the bunker was the deciding factor. Okay, so it might not be any better (it might be much worse) above ground, but at least he'd be out in the open, if only for a few minutes. The choice was made.

Carlton paused for a second longer to catch his breath, and then pushed through the door out of the communications room. He ran headlong into a crowd of seven bodies, all struggling to make progress down a corridor which was only wide enough for two. Instinctively he began kicking and punching at them, smashing them out of the way and knocking them to the ground. They offered no resistance as he angrily battered his way through them.

The corridor ahead was clear. He could see the doors to the decontamination chambers. Just a few meters further now... Yet more bodies. In the doorway to the main chamber lay a pile of fallen corpses, blood-soaked and riddled with bullet holes. Bloody hell, the creature at the very bottom of the gory heap was still moving... In the room itself more corpses staggered around aimlessly. Doing his best to ignore their disarmingly insistent, clumsy movements, he looked past them and out towards the open decontamination chamber doors, ready now to face the onslaught of endless thousands of savage, decaying figures baying angrily for his flesh.

Where he had expected to see frantic, angry activity he instead saw nothing. No movement. Relative calm.

In disbelief Carlton pushed away the dumb bodies still tripping around the chamber and stood at the final door which separated the interior of the bunker from the rest of the diseased world outside. He could see that the huge hanger doors were still open and the vast cavern was filled with harsh but beautiful sunlight. After months underground it took a while before he was able to open his eyes fully and look around the hanger properly. As the bright stinging in his eyes faded away he looked around at an utterly unbelievable scene.

Carlton took a single hesitant and very uncertain step out into the hanger.

The place was appalling and virtually unrecognisable. The hanger buzzed with the angry noise of millions of swarming flies, germs and other insects. He carefully put his foot down on the ground, having to step into a putrefied sea of human remains several inches deep. Bloody hell, the whole of the room was covered with a coating of stinking and festering rotten human flesh. As he looked deeper into the sickening quagmire he was able to make out features – bones, the remains of clothing, abandoned

weapons and armour. And it was moving! All around the apparently endless grey-green-red mire he could see occasional twitches of movement almost like a heat-haze.

Overcome by the horror of what surrounded him and almost forgetting the fact that he was now standing outside the bunker's inner sanctum, Carlton moved slowly forward through the once-human sludge. He forced himself to look up rather than down and he dragged his tired feet. It was easier to drag and scrape the soles of his boots along the ground rather than risking taking proper steps and slipping and sliding deeper into the gore.

Before long he had reached the foot of the ramp that would lead him back up to the rest of the world. He didn't hesitate to start climbing. No matter what he found up there, it couldn't be any worse than the sickening pit of death that he was already standing in, could it? It was almost impossible to climb the flesh-covered incline. His boots wouldn't grip in the slime and relentless filth. He dropped down onto his hands and knees and began to crawl, still keeping his head facing upwards so that he couldn't see what he was crawling through. He kept moving steadily, trying desperately to think about absolutely anything that might distract him from the slurry of rotting human remains beneath him. Whilst generally slippery and creamy and almost liquid in places, the gruesome mixture was peppered with untold thousands of brittle bones and pieces of abandoned military equipment. Don't rip the suit now, he thought desperately to himself, for Christ's sake, don't rip the suit.

Finally he had reached the top of the ramp. Before looking out he remembered the lush green countryside which had surrounded the base. It had been the last thing he'd seen before they'd disappeared underground more than four months ago. He'd been haunted by a lost vision of the blue sky, bright sun and endless rolling hills every day since then. He never thought he'd see it again.

Carlton carefully climbed to his feet and walked out through the main bunker doors.

The sky was as deep and blue as he remembered, but everything else... Jesus, just what had happened to the world? For as far as he could see in every direction the ground had been torn and scarred by battle. Mud replaced grass, there were huge craters and dips where munitions had exploded, trees had been scorched and burned to the ground and the bodies... God, the bodies... Carlton stood completely still, transfixed by the horror all around him. Everywhere he looked he saw more and more of the dead. The withered skeletons of his former colleagues, still wrapped in what remained of their now useless protective suits, lay side by side and entangled with the twisted, gnarled, charred remains of the emaciated corpses they'd died fighting. And there was still movement. Subtle and indistinct, but some of the bodies were still moving, too decayed to get up and walk, but still moving. Bloody hell, hadn't these things suffered enough?

Shattered and disconsolate, Carlton finally walked away from the underground base.

It was a cold, dry and bright winter morning. The precise time, day, date and season didn't matter anymore, Carlton knew that this would almost certainly be the last day of his life. If not today then tomorrow or, at the very latest, the day after that. He couldn't imagine lasting much longer than that. If he was honest, he didn't want to last much longer.

Months back, from the relative safety and security of the bunker, he had failed to appreciate the sheer scale of the battles that had raged on the surface above. He'd heard what his few colleagues who'd been out there and returned had said and he'd seen some of it for himself, but the scale of the devastation was incredible and hard to comprehend. It seemed to go on forever. He had walked for hours and was still surrounded by craters, abandoned military machinery and bodies. Endless hordes of twitching,

putrefying bodies...

He guessed that he must have covered several miles by the time he reached the outermost edge of the battlefield. It had clouded over and the light had faded but he could see that, slowly but surely, the number of bodies and the battle-scarring of the land had gradually reduced. A short distance further forward and the world around him suddenly began to appear deceptively normal and familiar. Grass, trees, roads, hedges and even birds in the trees. For a few misguided seconds he allowed himself a little hope. Might there yet be an escape from this nightmare? But then, as a few drops of icy winter rain trickled down his visor, he was reminded of the need for his protective suit. He remembered the germ in the air which had caused all of the devastation, and his illusions of salvation were again shattered.

Carlton stumbled through several more fields before coming across a narrow, twisting road. For a while he walked along it cautiously, keeping close to the hedge at the side of the tarmac should a car or other vehicle be driving towards him. The longer he walked, however, the more he listened to the silence around him. He accepted quickly that there would be no car, van, bike or any other vehicle. Today – for one day only – he was completely alone in the world.

Further down the track Carlton finally came across a car. It was a small but pretty standard saloon car. He stopped and stared at it for a moment. There was nothing special about the car, and perhaps that was its strange attraction. It looked so normal and so usual. In the bizarre world he was walking through, however, what he considered usual was now most certainly unusual. The car looked completely at odds with its surroundings. Carlton looked further and saw that it had been parked on a patch of gravel next to a gap in the hedgerow. It was a drive. Curious, he took a few steps away from the road. There was a house. It took him a while to be able to properly distinguish the outline of the building. Once typical and ordinary, today the house looked strangely different. It had been partially obscured by growth from the unkempt and overgrown garden. It looked like it was slowly being swallowed up by the countryside. Its windows were covered with a layer of yellow-brown mould and grass and weeds had begun to climb over the brickwork. Untended garden shrubs and trees had grown across the face of the building, obscuring much of it from view. Carlton stood and stared for a while longer before moving on.

Another house, then another and then another. Soon he found himself standing in the middle of a cold and empty village. It was perfectly still – like a freeze-frame – and uncomfortably eerie. Several buildings on one side of the village had been destroyed by fire and were now little more than charred black outlines of their former selves. The rest of the silent shops and houses looked dirty and overgrown like the first building he'd come across. He stood in the middle of the road and thought about calling out. What good would it do? It had been an instinctive reaction. What if he found someone? There had to be survivors, didn't there? But what could they do for him? More to the point, what would they expect him to do for them?

Carlton continued to walk until he could go no further. He followed the road as it trailed back out of the village and dragged himself along it as it wound up and around the side of a hill. The earlier rain had passed and the world was now drenched in bright, warm winter sunlight again. The sun was well on its way down towards the horizon. The lone soldier watched its descent with fascination and a fond sadness, knowing in his heart that he wouldn't see it rise again.

At the top of the hill, the tired and disconsolate soldier clambered over a wooden stile and sat down at the edge of a steep field. There were sheep at the bottom of the field, and from where he sat he could see cows and horses in the distance. His eyes were tired and his vision blurred but he scanned the horizon constantly. It occurred to him that he couldn't see a single trace of man. It would be there all right, if he looked hard enough, but he didn't want to. Buildings, roads and everything else seemed to have been swallowed up and absorbed. Carlton felt an overwhelming sense of alienation and isolation.

He felt like he no longer belonged there, but at the same time he was also glad that he'd been given this final opportunity to see the world.

It was getting dark. One last thing to do.

Carlton unclipped his pistol from its holster on his belt and loaded it. I'll take off my mask, he decided, and then end it. I'll take my life before the infection gets me. I'm ready to die now. I don't want to come back.

Nervous and cold, he took off the mask and slipped the end of the pistol into his mouth. He pressed it against the roof of his mouth, gagging as he shoved the oily metal deeper towards the back of his throat, and waited. Should it have happened by now? He sucked in cool, clean air through his nose, too afraid to take the gun out of his mouth just in case the infection caught him before he was able to fire. He'd heard his colleagues in the bunker talking about a germ which struck and killed in seconds, so why hadn't it got him? Was it over? Was the air here clear? He couldn't believe that – the soldiers in the base had been infected just a couple of days ago. The only alternative, he decided as the seconds ticked by, is that I am immune. The bloody irony of it he laughed, trying not to choke on his pistol. All that time! All those long, awful days, weeks and months spent down there and I could have walked out at any time!

Almost a minute had passed. Still no reaction.

Carlton took the pistol out of his mouth and shook his head and laughed out loud. The perfect end to the day he thought as he grinned and lay back on the grass.

I'll give myself a few minutes longer, he thought.

Carlton looked up into the sky and thought about his family and all that he had lost. He thought about the nightmare of being buried underground and how he'd had to battle through the reanimated bodies of his dead colleagues to get outside. He thought about Daniel Wright, the soldier he'd killed in cold blood just a few days earlier. He thought about the fact that he might well have been the only man left alive. He thought about the aching in his bones. He thought about his appalling physical state – the dehydration and malnourishment. He thought about how much effort it would take now to find food and clean water, and how much of a pointless struggle it would be to try and make himself well. The village he'd walked through earlier would be the most sensible place to start. He thought about those cold, empty, dead buildings and the distance he'd have to cover to get back there. He thought about the effort and whether it would be worth it.

Carlton enjoyed the next hour. He lay on the grass, completely at ease, and dozed and daydreamed and remembered until the light had all but disappeared and the sky above his head was full of stars.

Calm, composed and completely sure of his actions, he slipped the pistol back into his mouth and fired.

DAY THREE HUNDRED

AND NINETY-TWO

THE LAST FLIGHT

JACK BAXTER

About an hour ago, just before she went to bed, Donna asked me if we've done the right thing coming back here. I think it was just nerves talking. I told her to shut up. She knows full well that this was the right thing to do. Bloody hell, we'd been talking about it for long enough before today, hadn't we? We've been planning this for weeks.

About a month ago the group started planning to make one last trip to the mainland for supplies. We decided (myself and Donna included) that it was time to cut-off completely from the past and concentrate our efforts on developing Cormanse. But things suddenly changed. Two important events took place in September which started me thinking. It was those two events that altered how I felt about everything.

At the beginning of the month we reached the first anniversary of the infection. A whole year had passed since that dark day when all of our lives were turned upside down and shaken to the core. A year since the hurt began, and still I don't know whether the pain will ever completely go away. Two weeks later, though, and we were celebrating. For the first time in a long time we finally had a reason to be happy and positive about something when Emma and Michael's baby was born. Maggie, they called her. Named after Emma's mother and Michael's grandmother I think but I might have got that the wrong way round. We lived every moment of the labour and birth with them. The whole bloody group were just sat there in the church, waiting for it to happen. If I'm honest, I expected the baby to die the moment she was born, as did most people. Donna thinks she lived because both Michael and Emma had immunity. Whatever the reason, things suddenly stopped feeling as final and hopeless as they had before. That doesn't mean I think we've got a chance. I still think our days are numbered. We just might last a little longer than I originally thought, that's all.

Before all of this happened I used to read books voraciously. I always used to love post-apocalyptic fiction. I used to love hearing about the world being destroyed or invaded and mankind being brought to its knees. My problem was I hated the end of most of the books. Nine times out of ten they'd finish with some smug little community rising up out of the ashes. A little group of farmers and cooks and teachers and... and call me selfish if you like, but I've never liked the sound of any of that. Now I'm here, now that I've actually made it to the very end of the world, I don't want to spend my last years tending sheep, boiling water over log fires, growing a beard and wearing home-made clothes. For God's sake, we've got the remains of the entire world at our disposal, and I for one intend to rape and pillage it for as long as I can. It won't be sophisticated or clever, but I know that I can carve a better existence for us here out of the remnants of the past than I ever could on Cormanse. Some people are born to live off the

land, but not me. Donna feels the same way, and that's why she came back with me. And as Clare is closer to the two of us than anyone else, she decided to come along too. We have to accept that the human race is all but finished. I'm not interested in trying to prolong it. The people on the island are trying to rebuild, but I don't think that's ever going to work.

They tried to stop us. I think just about everyone on the island tried to talk one or both of us out of coming back over the course of the last couple of weeks. Even Richard Lawrence tried during the flight over here this morning. He said it wasn't a problem if we changed our minds. He said he'd sooner take us back to Cormansy than a helicopter full of supplies.

The flight had been planned for a long time. Richard and one passenger (it was Harry Stayt who came over in the end) were flying back to the mainland specifically to fetch as much medical supplies and fuel as they could find to get the group through the winter. I've always thought that was another disadvantage of the island – the isolation was wonderful when we had to worry about the bodies, but being so cut off our food and provisions were always going to be in short supply. And it wasn't just a case of getting in the car and driving to what's left of the nearest village to get more either. Food has always had to be measured, monitored, rationed and controlled for as long as we've been there.

We left just after ten this morning and arrived back on the mainland just before eleven. We asked Richard to drop us off right on the coast, thinking it would be safer to check things out here before we headed inland. He left us in the middle of an empty car park on the sea front. He wanted to stop and make sure we were okay but I insisted he went. They flew on to the nearest large city. I told him to fly back over the car park on his way back to the island and if we were still sitting out there, to land again and pick us up. Needless to say we'd already found ourselves a place to stay by the time he flew back overhead.

The first thing I noticed were the bones. We'd been away so long that the bodies had rotted down to just about nothing, leaving countless piles of bones littering the streets. The place was quiet – eerily silent – like a ghost town. We're used to the quiet, but this was different. We knew that we'd probably got the whole country to ourselves. For a while I felt uneasy, particularly when we walked through a deserted playground and amusement arcade. It seemed strange to think that there had been hundreds of people there once. Families. Kids on the rides...

We let Clare choose where we stayed. I thought she'd be sensible but we ended up in a static caravan in the middle of a holiday park overlooking the sea. It was a sensible choice really – isolated, small and self-contained. Reminds me of being on holiday, sitting here. It's strange. Tonight I actually feel excited sitting here and looking out over the ocean.

Tomorrow morning the rest of our lives start again. We don't have any great plans. We'll get food and clothes and I'll try and persuade Clare to let us move into a house for the winter. It's going to be bloody cold. My guess is that because all the cities across the world are dead, the temperature will drop lower than normal. I don't think we'll have an ice-age or anything like that, but it's going to be bloody cold.

Donna's going to teach me to drive, if we can find a car that will start. It's about time I learnt. She says I should pick it up pretty easy. She says it will be easy for me to learn because I won't have to bother with the highway code or anything like that. We'll just be able to point the car forward and go. And that's what we're going to do eventually. Next summer, if we're still here, we're going to find a motorhome like the one Michael and Emma used to have. Then I'm going to fulfil my ambition and drive right around the coastline of our little country. It will be a complete waste of time but who cares, we've got nothing better to do.

Michael used to say to me that all we can do now is make the most of the time we have left. That's exactly what we're going to do.

AUTUMN: THE HUMAN CONDITION

Appendix i

AMY STEADMAN

Is not a named character in the novels, but she appears in **PURIFICATION** as the figure on the other side of the airfield fence which grabs the recently re-animated corpse of Kelly Harcourt. *“Eight weeks ago this creature had been a young, intelligent and attractive clothing store manager with a bright future ahead of it. Now it was a mud-splattered, half-naked, emaciated collection of brittle bone and rotting flesh.”*

JIM HARPER

Is one of the first six survivors to settle on the island of Cormansey in **PURIFICATION**. He is introduced when Michael arrives on the island and is seen collecting and burning bodies with another survivor, Bruce Fry.

SHERI NEWTON

The shopping mall where Sheri Newton works is the mall which is looted by Nathan Holmes and Bernard Heath in **THE CITY**. Sheri joins the group of survivors in the university and leaves with them to find the military base (although she is not mentioned by name). She also stays with the group when they travel to the airfield and, subsequently, Cormansey. Michael mentions her arrival when he is searching for Emma.

SONYA FARLEY

Eventually reaches the survivors in the university in **THE CITY**. The birth, and subsequent death of her baby is a tragic and significant event. The baby's death from the infection brings the group to the harsh realization that the human race now has very little chance of survival.

HARRY STAYT

Plays a major part in **PURIFICATION**. Another one of the first group of six survivors to arrive on Cormansey, his physical strength, confidence and enthusiasm make him perfect when it comes to clearing the island of bodies and preparing the place for the arrival of the survivors from the mainland. He is also mentioned in 'The Last Flight' – further evidence that he remains an important member of the island

community.

JACOB FLYNN

It's not clear at what stage Flynn joins the survivors at the airfield in **PURIFICATION**. He shows his true (unpleasant) colours when he is unable to get on the plane and leave the mainland when the fence is brought down by the dead.

BRIGID CULTHORPE

A strong, confident and determined character, Brigid soon takes charge of Cormansey when she arrives with the first group of survivors in **PURIFICATION**.

PETER GUEST

Guest is one of the group of survivors from the university in **THE CITY**. The office where he used to work is, in fact, less than a mile away from the university campus. Guest struggles more than most with the loss of his family, so much so that he is not mentioned by name until the group flee from the military base at the beginning of **PURIFICATION**. Although a nervous and irritating individual, he plays an increasingly important role in getting the survivors to the airfield and, later, in making Cormansey habitable.

JACKIE SOAMES

A loud and colourful character, Jackie is one of the driving forces behind the group of survivors gathered at the airfield in **PURIFICATION**.

GARY 'TUGGIE' KEELE

A lazy coward who's confidence was shattered when his wife left him for another man. Keele now struggles to take any responsibility, and the prospect of flying the survivors to Cormansey in **PURIFICATION** terrifies him.

JULIET APPLEBY

Has spent much of the first thirty-nine years of her life trying to blend into the background. She lives and works in Rowley and made her way to the airfield at an early stage. Given her demeanour and lack of confidence, it is hardly surprising that she is left behind when the survivors attempt to leave the airfield in **PURIFICATION**.

KAREN CHASE

Is a member of the group of survivors based at the airfield in **PURIFICATION**. A woman who has had a difficult last few years, the catastrophe presents her with an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and be stronger and more positive.

PHILIP EVANS

Philip is discovered at the end of **AUTUMN** by Michael and Emma. A sad and lonely bachelor, all he knows is the house he shares with his elderly mother and the small village community nearby. His naivety distorts his understanding of what has happened to the rest of the world.

DEAN MCFARLANE

Is perhaps the youngest survivor. He joins the group in the university in the early part of **THE CITY** and is referred to in a conversation between two survivors; *'You see that young lad who came in this morning?'* Yvonne asked Sunita. *'Poor little bugger. Could only have been six or seven years old. One of the others spotted him running down the ring road. Said his mum had died and he'd come into town to try and find his dad. Wouldn't be told that he was probably dead too...'* Looked after by the group, we later hear that Dean has survived when, towards the end of **PURIFICATION**, he makes it onto the plane to Cormansy.

PENELOPE STREET

Does not appear in any of the novels. The tragic irony of her situation is that the furniture store where she is trapped is half-way down the road from the 'Lamb and Lion' pub where Jackie Soames is the licensee. Penelope says *'help might be just around the corner...'*. She does not know how true that is...

KATE JAMES

Is a primary school teacher who appears in **AUTUMN**. Initially strong and positive, the pressure of events take their toll on Kate and although she wishes she could leave the Whitchurch Community Centre with Michael, Carl and Emma, her nerves give out and she stays. Kate's story also makes reference to **STUART JEFFRIES** and **RALPH**, two other characters from the first book.

KILGORE

Plays a major part in **PURIFICATION** after leaving the bunker with the survivors who flee as the military attempt to clear the bodies.

ANNIE NELSON

Is a survivor who escapes from the Whitchurch Community Centre in **AUTUMN**. Both Annie and her friend **JESSICA SHORT** (who Annie mentions here) are briefly spoken to by Michael in the original novel; *"Clearly from opposite ends of the social spectrum, they seemed to be drawn to each other*

for no other reason than their similar ages. Money, position, possessions, friends and connections didn't count for anything anymore."

JOHN CARLTON

A young, frightened soldier trapped in the underground military shelter, Carlton's story includes references to 'the battle'. This is the misguided attempt by the military to clear away the thousands of bodies that have gathered above the bunker in **PURIFICATION**. "*'Some of the boys who went out last time,' he explained, 'told the bosses that they managed to get rid of hundreds of those things up there. Rumour has it,' he continued, 'that they're looking at trying to organise one massive push. Rumour has it we're all going above ground to torch the whole fucking lot of them.'*"

JACK BAXTER, DONNA YORKE & CLARE SMITH

Are characters who first meet in **THE CITY** and subsequently make it through to the island of Cormansy at the end of **PURIFICATION**. Jack is a widower who finds Clare wandering through the city after her father has been killed by the infection. They remain close throughout the story. Donna Yorke also gravitates towards Clare, becoming something of a big sister to her.

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