

The Station Pages
A Short Story
By Stephen Winters

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The Station Pages

13 days ago I was trapped.

The stone walls of my tiny room didn't move, not that I expected them to, but they weren't silent either. From outside, it was that familiar *scrapesrape, scrapesrape*, rhythmic noise the uprights always made when they were hungry, alone, and there wasn't any other food around. In a way, it was worse when there was only one. A crowd was more physically dangerous, but at least there is no rhythm in the noise a crowd of them makes.

Lesson: It's the rhythm makes you crazy.

In the dark of my little gas station bathroom cum defensible fortress, I crouched, leaned against the wall and modulated my own breathing. The waiting game. Sit still, don't make a sound. It would be hours before the upright gave up, longer if he was freshly dead. By then he might have scraped and worn his fingers clean away, probably his lips and nose too, against the grit of the wall. I'd seen it before.

Lesson: Most of the time, Zombies give up after an hour or two. They just stop, lose interest, or maybe they forget. When that happens, that's when you strike. With their backs turned, it's safer to attempt a kill.

Curled up in the darkness, I shook my head. How could I have not seen the thing coming? I was smoking outside in the failing light of the evening one second, the next it was just *there*. I had no time to start the generator, turn on the pumps or lower the garage doors. There was only time to rush to the bathroom, the last line of defense. Somehow, I didn't smell or hear the sneaky bastard creeping up on me, and I definitely didn't see it.

I didn't get it. Maybe time was making me complacent, sloppy. I was pissed.

S scrapesrape S scrapesrape

Sloan would be pissed too, if he were still around. He owned this station, once upon an apocalypse. He was also my neighbor. I didn't like him much back then, but learned quickly that under threat of the undead, he was a handy guy to know.

As it happened, Sloan was a former mercenary. He never did tell me where, or when, or why he stopped. He did, however, train me to defend myself against the zombies. He did a good job, too. Of course, that was before he and his motorcycle up and disappeared one morning.

S scrapesrape S scrapesrape

Sometimes I miss him. Usually I'm just mad he left. That night it was the former. Sloan would never have allowed an upright undead to sneak up on us. Crawlers are different, they're harder to see, hear, smell, and kill. But uprights?

'Oh well,' I thought, 'at least I'm still alive.' There was life to be grateful for, even if I was, ~~sarapesarape~~, staring down a long and, ~~sarapesarape~~, miserable and, ~~sarapesarape~~, solitary night. There would be no sleep, not that sleep was ever worth a good goddamn to me anymore.

Just another kind of terrified, when you think about it.

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I don't know if 13 days goes far enough back to explain all of this, but it might. That was definitely the night I realized that my vigilance had slipped, and maybe for good. I didn't like being sloppy about things, especially when sloppy could mean death. Of course, I hadn't yet realized the big death question that would need to be answered before I could ever honestly address the vigilance. That would come later.

Anyway, you might need to know how all this happened. So here it is:

I think humans caused this apocalypse. It might not be true. Some things, I know, just happen. Still, this pandemic occurred when humans, Americans specifically, couldn't get enough of being sick. The US Military's funding of infectious disease research was at an all time high. Plenty of other nations were stockpiling weaponized bacteria and viruses, but we had the most and the strongest bacteria and viruses. They called the use of these diseases biological warfare. Living weapons. Nice.

I don't know how the first person got infected and I don't know if this was really a living weapon, but I do know a vaccine was created. About 200 people in Georgia and Washington DC got to take the vaccine before the scientific laboratory where the vaccine was being manufactured was destroyed.

The people who destroyed the lab were concerned parents. Before the outbreak happened, parents across the USA were up in arms over vaccinations, because a number of them believed that chemicals in the vaccines caused autism, a developmental disorder. Over several years, a lot of scientific studies were published showing no link between autism and vaccines, but these concerned parents didn't want to take the answers science provided them.

"Lesson: People don't like being wrong," Sloan once said to me. He was right.

Instead, these concerned parents tried to make science look wrong. They did this by attacking scientists in the media, or by simply repeating their claim that, "vaccines cause autism," hundreds of thousands of times. When these tactics still didn't work, the concerned parents became angry parents.

A week after the first outbreak, when the pandemic forecast was still rose-colored, the government announced the vaccine was in development. There were protests by these angry parents. Protests were harmless enough, but the government still insisted on a vaccine. The angry parents became violent parents. The next week, the Labs of the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia were bombed by a group calling itself "Parents for Autism Truth."

There was talk of a second vaccine. This work was answered by another series of bombings. After that, there wasn't much need for a vaccine. It was too late to curb the spread of the disease. The only people left who had been vaccinated were key government figures. They were probably all dead now anyway. The dead need to eat, and vaccinated or not, a congressman looks the same as a janitor when they've become so much zombie vittles.

So you can see why I think we did this to ourselves. If I were still surrounded by human beings, unlike zombies, I'd give them a piece of my mind.

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Eventually, the zombie outside gave up. Four hours, maybe more, had passed. It's impossible to tell time in total darkness. I grabbed my rifle.

Lesson: Aim for the spine, just above the neck. The virus works on the nervous system, not the brain. A bullet in the front of the head might not do the trick. Paralyzing a zombie always works.

I opened the door to the bathroom, keeping quiet. With great care, I raised my rifle, aimed, and squeezed the trigger.

Lesson: Squeeze, don't pull, the trigger. This is important. Sloan taught me this. If you pull the trigger instead of squeezing it down with constant force, it will mess up your aim. Report. One dropped zombie. I dragged the body around back. Burial would have to wait until morning.

I turned on the pumps, closed the garage doors, and again retired to my bathroom/bedroom. Precious hours of sleep had been lost. My body was weary, and exhaustion won out. Within minutes, I was asleep. That night I had a dream about Sloan.

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Sloan was working at the station when the first wave hit Prescott. As it happened, I was filling up my car at that exact moment. A good six of them found me as I pumped my gas. If it weren't for Sloan, I would have died that night. Or worse. I mean, I could be one of *them*.

I'm still not sure how Sloan mowed down my attackers so fast, or why he risked his neck to save me when anyone else would have felt outnumbered. In the end, it doesn't matter, because he saved me all

the same. He killed them all and we locked ourselves in the bathrooms. We stayed in there for three days, until the sounds of chaos abated.

Sloan had the idea of fortifying the gas station. I didn't understand what was so special about the place, or why we'd be better off there than a police station or supermarket. When I raised the question with him, Sloan just shrugged. "Yeah, well this is mine." We started with converting the bathroom into a living quarters, then moved on to reinforcing the walls, rigging the traps, and building the "gasoline shower." It was a lot of work- some of it tricky. Months passed before we were done. Every night one or two uprights would find us. Every night Sloan and I would destroy them.

There was safety in our little fortress. I can't tell you how many times the work we did has saved my life over the years, but I'm sure it numbers in the hundreds. Between the station and the weapons training, Sloan gave me everything I needed to defend myself.

Then, one August morning, Sloan climbed on his motorcycle and rode off while I was sleeping. He left me a note, but all it said was:

Ty,
Cabin fever. Sorry.
-Sloan

I hadn't seen him since, except in dreams.

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9 days ago I made love to a woman.

I was burying another upright in the lot behind the gas station when something whizzed past my right ear. The projectile smacked hard against the stone walls of the gas station, ricocheted, and landed in the dusty soil a few yards from where I stood. It was a small metal bearing.

I dropped the shovel and grabbed the rifle from the sling on my back. Thick growth of trees and bushes lined both sides of the lot, and the gas station lined the back. The shot had to have come from the front. I scanned the area through the scope in a slow, deliberate sweep.

The interloper was up in a tree, the sun at his back. I could make out his silhouette easily, but kept my sweep moving steady, so as not to let him know he was spotted.

"I'm not in the mood for games, come on out now."

The tree dweller said nothing, did nothing.

"Alright, suit yourself."

I swung the gun around my back again and picked up the shovel. There was another sound of displaced wind, another projectile, inches from my ear, and another ricochet off the wall of the station. I threw the shovel to the ground and charged at the tree.

"That is IT!"

As I approached the perch, the branches and leaves rustled. The rustling was followed by a sharp crack, as the large branch bearing my attacker gave. The dirty, long-haired interloper fell to the sidewalk and scrambled to get to his feet, but I was too fast. My boot landed square on his butt and kicked him down with ease. I cocked the gun to make sure he noticed my rifle was pointed at his back.

"Explain yourself."

"I'm sorry."

The voice was muffled, but unmistakably female. I felt my shoulders drop. "You're a woman."

"Yeah. I am."

"Where the hell did you come from?"

"Can I get up please? I won't run."

"I'm not worried about you running. What were you firing at me?"

"Bearings. I use a slingshot a lot of the time. I don't like guns. They make me nervous."

"Get up."

She rose from the sidewalk and brushed off her pants, which seemed a pointless exercise because the trousers were already caked with dirt. The girl was an earthy sort of pretty, but you would have to be close to see it. She took one look at the gun and averted her eyes.

"Now, where exactly did you come from? And why were you shooting your slingshot at me?"

"I've been living in a treehouse on 4th Street. And I shot at you because I don't know how else to break the ice in Armageddon. I haven't seen any other humans around, and if I had wanted to hit you, I hope you know I would have."

I smiled. I couldn't help it. She was cocky, but it was endearing.

"You been bit?"

She shook her head. "No, never. Any other questions?"

"I'll have plenty, don't worry," I swung the rifle back around my shoulder, "but you don't need to answer them at gunpoint. Right now, how about just one more question?"

"What's that?"

"Are you hungry?"

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The dream I have most often, when I dream about Sloan anyway, he's standing in the middle of the Prescott High School football field atop a pile of wooden crates. On the other side of the chain link fence that encloses the field on all sides, teeming hordes of zombies have collected. Sloan draws on his freshly lit cigar and pulls two rifles from one of the crates. Then he opens fire.

He does well, for a while. It even seems, at times, as if he's winning the battle. But there are always more undead to fill the

space of their fallen brethren. Soon they're through the fence and charging at him. Sloan's eyes widen with terror. He realizes it wouldn't have mattered if the entire football field, or the whole campus, the whole city even, were covered in guns. There would never be enough guns.

The cigar drops from his lips. They're coming. In my dream I'm watching all of this from the bleachers, and he looks up at me and his voice is loud as a Titan's. He says to me, "Ty. Cabin fever. Sorry."

He says this as they take him down.

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I made a great dinner. It really was quite a spread: Barbecue beans, canned corn, chicken- Frozen, but even frozen chicken was in short supply anymore, and I even opened a bottle of wine. As we ate, her story came out in snippets. It was a mechanical retelling, and I was almost sure she wasn't telling the truth, but decided it didn't matter. She was another living human, just like me, and probably needed the dinner she was getting.

"You know, you're welcome to stay here."

She smiled, but hesitated to reply. "That's very nice. Maybe I will."

"Somehow, I don't believe you."

"I'm sorry. It's just, I've been doing fine by myself. I can avoid the dead well enough, and, I don't know, the walls."

"What about them?"

"Don't they ever feel like a prison?"

It was my turn to hesitate. I shook my head.

There was a mirthful look on her face, a happy look. For the first time, I saw the contours of her smile. She looked angelic, even with skin coated by the dirt of a life spent outdoors. Her lips were full and thick. Something in her eyes seemed to pierce through me in the best of ways.

"Have you ever thought about leaving this place?," She asked.

"Sometimes. The guy who helped me get it safe left. I've thought about trying to find him."

"He's probably dead."

"You're probably right."

Her eyes met mine again. They seemed impossibly large, like windows to a wise soul. "I think I want you to kiss me now," she said.

In an instant, my lips found hers. It had been years since I'd kissed a woman. My whole body felt connected to her. It was as if, for once, I felt a hope for humanity, all through this embrace. Nothing else mattered in that moment.

I put my arms around her. She put a hand behind my neck. We kissed and smiled and soon found ourselves on the floor. The world beyond us faded away. Today, yesterday, the last few years passed somewhere behind our minds. We made love in the intimate dark.

In the morning, when I awoke, she was nowhere to be found.

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5 days ago, I went looking for her.

I took my motorcycle, the one Sloan trained me to ride, and tried to search out her tree house. Fourth Street in Prescott is notoriously overpopulated with trees, so I rode nice and slow.

I would have called her name if I knew it.

I can't say I was too surprised that there was no tree house. I can say, however that I was disappointed.

Over the next few days, I began to think I had imagined her, dreamed her up out of dust, an intimate deluge to fill the monotony of life at the station. Why else would I have made love to her without asking her name? I still went out to forage guns, ammo, canned food and the like, but the paces of my everyday life began to feel robotic.

I became lethargic.

Became sloppier.

Became embittered.

Lesson: There are two kinds of people in the world. There are those who love permanence and security, and those who trade safety for adventure and liberty. I still wonder if it was always this way, or if it just happened when the dead started to walk.

Until that woman showed up in my life, I assumed I was of the former camp. Until Sloan walked out of the station, I assumed he was as well. Now I wasn't certain about what anyone stood for, including me.

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4 days ago, two uprights and a crawler came at me.

I had to use the gasoline shower to take care of them. Luckily, I had time to get the pumps going.

Lesson: The big red button in the garage turns on the pumps. The pumps must be on to use the gasoline shower.

Lesson: The light switches in the bathroom don't work. The one labeled "Lights" now turns on the shower. The one labeled "Fan" now turns on the flamethrower. Use lights, then fan, and you'll never have to worry about the undead outside.

These zombies didn't sneak up as fast as the upright had 13 days ago, but there still wasn't much time. That attack could have been my undoing. I cried that night in the bathroom. I talked to myself about my pointless situation, my hollow victory.

I made up stories about Sloan, what he was doing. I sobbed until my voice was gone. At some point, my body and mind gave and sleep thrust itself upon me. This time, there were no dreams.

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Lesson: When in doubt, refer to the diagram I made on the wall of the bathroom. It will tell you where all the switches, traps, guns and food are hidden. In the pouch on the cot, you'll find a map of Prescott, good foraging spots are highlighted.

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Today, I've decided to leave the station. I've taken some of the food from my stores, some water, a rifle and I've filled my motorcycle with gas. It's all loaded up and ready to go. The bike will be heavy with all that stuff, so I'm going to take the rest of the morning to practice maneuvering.

I'm going because I've come to understand what I never understood before about why Sloan, and maybe the girl, live the way they live. The walls of the station are keeping me safe, when I use them right, but my heart just isn't in this life anymore. I long for freedom.

After this morning, I'll be able to go anywhere I want. Will it be dangerous? Definitely. But what else is there when your life doesn't feel like a life at all?

Lesson: Freedom to choose is just another name for freedom to do something stupid. Freedom to do something stupid is just another name for freedom to die. What I've come to understand is this: Freedom to die is just another name for freedom to live.

Maybe you'll reach the same conclusions, assuming you read this at some point. You're welcome to stay at the gas station. I hope someone does. I'd like to think of the place as occupied, even if I'm no longer there.

I've tried as best as I can to give you all the info you need on these pages, but I'm bound to have left something out. Sorry I won't be around to teach you all the ins and outs of the place, but who knows if you, the one who stumbles upon the station and reads this, are even a real person.

It's probably just as likely it'll never be found, or even read. If you do stay here, take care of the place. It'll repay the favor.

13 days, in retrospect, may have been ~~to~~ far back to go. I have a tendency to ramble, and I apologize.

Lesson: Never say over so many pages what could be said with a simple note.

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To whom it may concern,
Cabin fever. Sorry.

-Ty



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