

“Confessions of a Zombie”

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It wasn't at all like in the movies, the celluloid images of rotting corpses clawing their way out of the grave. No, it wasn't like that at all. In fact, the bones of the long since dead didn't as much as rattle. Bodies need a brain and muscle tissue to move, and those that were long decayed had neither. No, it was only the newly dead that suddenly sprung back to life, and nobody knew why. The dead just seemed to want we all want, more life.

It was during those first few hours that the fabric of modern society was so swiftly unstitched. All of humanities great leaps forward were rendered irrelevant in a few short hours. I don't know which was more horrifying, the reanimated dead, or just how quickly civil society disintegrated. It all happened at once, this new plague. Around the globe, in every nation, state, and village, the dead decided to rise up. And like I said, those old films had it all wrong. They weren't lumbering around moaning in hordes of brain hungry corpses. No, they were quiet, and swift as any living being. They didn't just eat brains, they ate everything and anything, but I would guess that you already knew that.

I was working at a bank downtown off Ocean Blvd when it happened. It seems like such a wasted life now, all of those tedious hours pushing numbers, but that was a different time. I'm not sure where our so called “Patient Zero” came from. There was a funeral home over on Atlantic Avenue, and an old folk's home somewhere on Fourth Street. Hell, it could have been some random schmuck who just happened to have keeled over pumping gas at the Shell station on the corner. They say it all started around five, and it was a little bit before six when I saw my first one. She came wearing a light blue dress darkened with blood. One of my co-workers, Frank, had spotted her first and was running out to help her while yelling for somebody to call 911. Everyone thought she had been attacked or something, but then we were all struck stupid as the scene played it self out. It was over in a matter of seconds. I remember it like a series of snapshots. Frank was out the door. The woman saw him. Her face pulled snarl as she lunged at him, at his throat. His blood sprayed against the huge front windows. Her face bloody as she looked

up and saw the rest of us. The insatiable hunger in her eyes, as if she were looking through a butcher's window.

She dropped Frank, leaving him to spill out onto the sidewalk and into the gutter. She threw herself head first at the window, not aware of the doors just five feet to her left. I told Stephanie to distract her, as the woman in blue clawed the glass. Poor Stephanie, her perfectly applied make-up was now a run of muck in the trails of tears running down her face. Confused and shocked, she had no clue what to do. Thankfully, she didn't really need to do anything other than to look like food, which is about all she could manage to do. The woman in the blue dress didn't take her eyes off of Stephanie as she slowly walked along the window, moving away from the door. The woman in blue pressed herself to the window, her tongue licking at the spray Frank's blood. Then she slowly slid toward Stephanie, leaving a smear of blood along the window's length. With the woman in the blue dress distracted, I grabbed one of the chairs from the new accounts desk and slid the legs of it between the handles of the doors. Once the chair was in place, I turned to Stephanie; I was going to tell her to move back behind the counter, to get out of sight, but lost my words.

"Bobby, look out!" she screamed and pointed at the front doors. I turned just in time to see Frank shoving his body against the doors. His eyes void of any recognition, face covered in his blood, a chunk of flesh loosely hanging from his neck. I fell backwards, but thankfully the chair was able to hold to door closed.

We all moved back behind the counters, away from the windows, and out of view. We tried to call for help on our phones, but the lines were tied up and none of us could get through. Then a short time later, the lines were simply dead. The tension in the air continued to rise as we debated on what was going on.

"This is your fault," one of my co-workers said, glaring in my direction.

"What the--" I started.

"God has damned us all because of you, you fucking faggot."

"Are you kidding me?" I said as loudly as I dared, not wanting to draw any unwanted attention from outside. I was used to hearing this type of accusation from religious conservatives following some sort of natural disaster. But I would have never guessed in a million years that somebody I knew personally would make such an ignorant

leap. “Frank was dead, on the sidewalk, and you want to blame me for that because I’m gay? This is joke right?” I looked around at the faces of my other coworkers, expecting them to rebuff the ridiculousness of his statement. Nobody said a word in my defense. Whether they were too scared to do anything or if they agreed, their silence was enough of a slap in the face. I stood and went to punch my accuser in the face, but I stopped short. I may not be perfect, but I knew that I certainly deserved better than this. Rather than waste my breath any further, I simply turned and left through the emergency exit in the back of the building. I didn’t know how I was going to get home, but I knew I just needed to be away from these people, back to what really mattered to me.

Unfortunately for me, we were a one car household, and since we lived relatively close to downtown, I got to take the bus. Typically it was a 20 minute bus ride home, however, since there wasn’t any bus service it took me a couple of hours. I quietly made my way through small side streets and alleyways. I was surprised at how still the night was. The silence was only cut by the occasional scream or gunfire in the distance. When I finally arrived at home I found Sam, my handsome Sam, alive and okay. He had locked himself up in our third floor apartment when he could see the first signs of the calamity unfolding on the streets below. I could see the relief wash over him as I opened the door.

“You know you probably should have blocked the front of the door with the sofa or something,” I said.

“I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t totally lock you out. I didn’t know if you... I just couldn’t.” he said. Then I kissed him on his perfectly shaped lips, we still had each other, and we both began to cry.

Sam and I holed ourselves up in our apartment. We waited, thinking that there would be some sort of help dispatched. Hours became days and days bled into weeks, and still nobody came. The building was completely empty, and the security gate in the entrance kept everyone out. Either the other tenants in the building left the city straight away, or they were now part of the larger problem. We covered the windows with sheets and kept watch on the street below. When we finally accepted that help was simply not coming, we raided the other units in the building, stocking up on food. In one of the apartments we even found a gun with half a box of bullets.

One morning, we watched one of undead wandering down the street when another one ran up to it and attacked it. We puzzled over what would cause one to attack another, maybe the hunger was enough to turn them on themselves. Initially we were hopeful that the problem would then just take care of itself, but when it became evident that their horrible numbers continued to grow, we decided it was best to leave the city before it became impossible.

So after loading up our small SUV with the essentials, we fled. We watched in the rearview mirror as the occasional groups of undead came out of hiding, running out of open doorways and alleyways as they tried to chase down the car. Didn't matter to us, we were well on our way, and there was no way they were going to catch us.

We were driving east through the desert, on Interstate 15, when we saw a large size pickup truck driving towards us flashing its lights and honking. I cautiously slowed to a stop, as the pickup, with a horse trailer in tow, pulled to a stop in the left lane just in front of us. A man, younger than us, probably around twenty five, jumped out of the cab and started to wave his arms over his head.

"Good Afternoon, I'm Larry Johnstone, but you can call me LJ," he said in a friendly tone, kneeling down by the driver's door. "Are you headed to Ludlow?"

"What's in Ludlow?" Sam asked, leaning forward to look at LJ.

"Sorry, thought you might have seen the signs coming out of San Bernardino," he said, looking at Sam as if he just realized that I was not alone. "A bunch of us have set up a camp. Head down the 40. Its about 50 miles east of Barstow, it's on old Route 66."

"And why aren't you going there?" I asked.

"I have some business to take care of in Victorville. I'll be on my way back before nightfall. Take care not to stop in Barstow, it's still infested."

Infested. The word echoed in my head as we turned off the 15, onto the 40. Is that what civilization has become? With no other place to go, we decided it was best to head that way. We were not sure what to expect in when we arrived Ludlow based on what LJ had said, but it was nothing like what we found. The small desert town that had essentially been dead since the 50's had sprung to life. The old decayed motels and homes that had been abandoned since the interstate was built now served as home to a few

hundred refugees. And for those who did not fit in the few remaining structures there was a growing shanty town that sprawled away from the road and into the desert.

Weeks went by, and our little community slowly continued to grow. As people arrived, they also brought with them news from far away cities. News that was mostly gossip mixed with hopeful speculation. Stories about scientists who were working in some hidden underground labs, trying to determine what caused the dead to rise and a cure that would put them to rest once and for all. Regardless of race creed or color, we all died, and when we did, our bodies would reanimate. Like fleshy robots programmed to do one thing. Feed.

We also had to adapt the way we lived. Those who were near death, the old and the very ill, were to be separated from the main camp and put under armed guard. This segregation bothered Sam immensely, even though he understood the perverse logic behind it, it didn't seem right to him. He would often walk out to the quarantined area and spend a lot of his free time just talking with the people over there. Making them feel as though they were still part of the larger group.

Everyone in the community had some sort of job in order to contribute to the community. Naturally, Sam volunteered to be a caregiver to the elderly and infirmed, while I ended up becoming what LJ called a "Wrangler." We were groups who would drive out to neighboring cities and scavenge up whatever goods we could find and bring them back to Ludlow.

LJ was the unofficial leader of the Wrangler group, since he was one of the first to go out scavenging. He and his group would make frequent trips to Barstow while the other groups would hit up smaller towns like Needles or Newberry Springs. I had learned that he had been a young priest in the Church of Latter Day Saints. He and his wife were living somewhere in San Diego when everything started to hit the proverbial fan. They joined the Ludlow group shortly after. He and his wife lived in one of the rooms in the motel, one of the privileges of taking a high risk job. While he was often seen out in the community, we didn't see much of his wife. When she did come out the room, her appearance was always brief and she always looked a bit melancholy.

It was late one evening, maybe three weeks after we had first arrived, when a group of us returned from Barstow. The sun had just disappeared below the horizon and the sky was spotted with brilliant purple and pink clouds. I was walking through the little tent city, back to the tent that we now called home, when I found LJ talking to Sam.

“Bobby,” Sam said with sigh of relief. As he put his arms around me, I kissed his soft lips. It had become something of a ritual. Every time I went out, a days worth of worry and anxiety released with the sigh of my name.

“Sorry I didn’t call,” I smiled, “it took us a little longer than expected to get a full load together. But I scored us some creamed corn!” I said, pulling the can from my backpack. Creamed corn was never high on my list, but for some odd reason, Sam really liked it. It was just one of the little peculiarities that I loved about him. He smiled and kissed me again. “So what do we owe the pleasure?” I asked, turning to LJ.

“I have a proposition for you, Bobby. You are one of the best wranglers in our little community.”

“All of that banking experience I have really comes in handy.”

“I heard all about what happened at the Walgreens,” he said. I grunted and looked at the ground. Of course he had heard what happened, everyone knew by now. The incident at the Walgreens had started out fairly routine. Roger was sitting in the van, keeping an eye out, while Gregory and I loaded up the van with goods. Gregory was pulling bottles of warm soda and water from the refrigerators, while I had been loading up on medicines from the pharmacy. It was a small miracle that the place had not been picked clean.

Roger was obviously doing a piss poor job as look out, because he did see the dead thing run up to him. It grabbed him by the hair, pulling Rogers’s body half out of the driver’s side window. I had just set a box of prescription medicines down in the back of the van when I heard Roger scream. Gregory had heard it too, dropping a flat of soda cans as he ran outside, the cans exploding as they hit the ground. It was in the process of chewing Roger’s head off before it saw us. Gregory, who hadn’t been a wrangler for long, began to panic. He fumbled for a gun, but the dead man was on top of him before he could pull off a shot. Gregory struggled to keep its rotten teeth off of his flesh. I pulled the tire iron from the back and ran over to them, smacking it square on the skull. It slumped,

weakened, but not finished. Gregory shoved it to the side and I delivered a series of blows, smashing its face beyond recognition until it finally stopped moving. All of this happening before the soda cans on the ground had expelled the last of their carbonation.

I grabbed Gregory's hand and helped him up. He was still shaking when we walked back around the van to find the Roger's body, half hanging out of the window. His head was rolling around loosely as the body tried to situate itself. Gregory stared at me, with the gun in his hand, waiting for guidance. "Roger is gone," I said, taking the gun from Gregory and firing off three shots into Roger's head. The body jerked once, and then stopped moving all together. Cautiously, I opened the door and slid the body out. It felt to the ground with a soft thud. "We'd better go," I said, calmly getting into the driver's seat, "Others will definitely have heard that." Later that night, I found it nearly impossible to sleep. Despite keeping a level head during the whole ordeal, I ended up taking a couple of sleeping pills from the bottle I had pocketed in the pharmacy earlier that day.

"So what do you want from me?" I asked LJ pointedly as I pushed the memory of the event to the side.

"As you know, I'm one of the original wranglers in this camp. I'm looking for somebody to come with me into Barstow tomorrow, and to work with me on a regular basis. I need somebody like you, somebody who can keep his cool in tough situations."

"What's in it for us?" I asked, knowing full well that this was an opportunity for us to get a room in the motel.

"We lost Wilson last week," he said. I was little surprised, as I did not hear about Wilson. "You two could sleep in an actual room with a door that has a lock." The idea of sleeping in a room with solid walls instead of a cheap tent with no security was very appealing.

Sam and I talked about it all that night. He wasn't so keen on my being a wrangler in the first place, and even though there was definitely a benefit, he still felt leery about the whole scenario.

"Why does LJ get special privilege for doing what you do? You are all risking your lives to keep this camp fed and watered just as much as he is. There is something else going on here, there has to be. It's all very shady," Sam had said that night. I knew he was

right, but I rationalized it as my already being out there, so why not try and get something more for it.

I walked over to old motel the next morning. The room numbers on the door had gone missing sometime ago, but the “101” was still visible in the slight discoloration in the wood. After knocking, LJ answered the door wearing nothing but a pair of fitting white boxer-briefs. He invited me in as he strutted back to his bed like a peacock proudly displaying his fit body.

“Going to the White Party this weekend?” I joked.

“Huh?” he said with a confused look, though I could have sworn I saw a glimpse of understanding in his eyes.

“Uh, nothing, so where is the wife?”

“Oh, she is out getting some breakfast.”

I grunted, “Well, I just wanted to come by and tell you that I’m in.”

“Great!” he said, leaning over to the nightstand and tossing me a key. “You can move into your room anytime. Its two doors over.” I took the key and hastily made my exit.

Two days later we went out on our first run. I met up with LJ by the cafe near the edge of town where LJ parked up his truck and trailer.

“Why do you park all the way out here, away from everyone?” I asked.

“Because there isn’t enough room in front of the motel to park this trailer,” he answered with a wink while slapping his hand on the side. “It’s just easier to keep it out of the way.” Our conversation was interrupted when Tom, a tall lanky guy I had seen around the camp, walked up. “And Tom makes three,” LJ said cheerfully, “Shall we go boys?”

We rode in the cab, LJ driving, and the horse trailer in tow. LJ insisted that I sit in the middle since Tom was slightly taller than I was. We had just passed through Barstow and LJ gave no indication of stopping.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Victorville,” LJ answered, “Special run. We should be home before midnight.”

“I wish you would have let me know, so I could have mentioned it to Sam. He’ll be expecting us back before that.”

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine,” he said, lightly smacking the top of my thigh.

When we arrived in Victorville, LJ pulled the truck into one of those gas station convenience store combos. The three of us piled out of the cab, Tom went inside with a small generator to turn the power on. Once the power was on, LJ was able to fill the tank. I walked to the front of the truck and leaned against the hood. I watched the scattered white clouds glide silently across the sky and thought of Sam. How, despite what was happening, I wanted to make our lives together the best possible thing in the world. Together, I felt, we were the only things truly alive on this planet that was suddenly filled with decay.

“We got one!” screamed Tom as he ran out of the convenience store pointing down the road.

“Well, looks like it may be an early evening after all, boys!” LJ said, replacing the pump and running to the back of the trailer. He dropped the gate open and pulled out three long aluminum rods, each with a loop of rope sticking out of one end, similar to a lead rope used by animal control officers. He passed one over to Tom who casually trotted over to the undead man as it slowly moving towards us. LJ then handed me the third pole.

“What the hell is this for?” I asked LJ.

“Wranglin,’ Bobby, wrangling,” he answered. “We are the original wranglers. We don’t come out here to go grocery shopping, never have,” he added before running to catch up to Tom.

“Looks like this ones been dead for a while,” Tom said, turning back to LJ, “he’s not so fast.” The man’s once white cotton t-shirt was filthy and brown with dried blood. He made a sudden lunge at Tom just as LJ was able to get the loop of rope around its neck. It jerked forward, pulling the pole from LJ’s hands, causing LJ to fall backwards and the free end of the pole to bang on the ground. It turned toward LJ and moved towards him with sudden speed as Tom was caught it in the loop of rope at the end of his lead pole. It was strong, and able to pull Tom forward slightly.

“Little help here Bobby!” LJ called. I ran over toward it, yelling to get its attention. As it started toward me, walking head first into the loop at the end of the pole. It definitely had some strength in it, as I had to dig my heels into the ground to keep it steady. Once LJ regained his composure, he grabbed the loose end of pole that had been dragging on the ground. Between the three of us, it was easier to manage.

“This one definitely has some fight in him,” LJ said as we maneuvered it into the back of the horse trailer. Once inside, Tom closed the gate and we removed the lead poles.

“So now what?” I asked crossly.

“Now we earn some real dough.” LJ answered.

We then drove back through Barstow, but instead of getting on the 40 to head back down to Ludlow, we continued going west on Interstate 15. We drove for about another half an hour, until we were about half way to Baker. LJ slowed the truck and turned onto an unmarked dusty road. The evening sky was slowly darkening as we continued on the unmarked road for another five minutes until I saw the faint glow of lights on the horizon.

“Almost there,” LJ finally said to me, interrupting the conversation that he and Tom had been having. I had said nothing to either of them since we left Victorville. As we continued to approach, two sets of bleachers began to take shape, they were facing each other with a six foot high iron fence nestled in between, creating a small arena. Around the perimeter of the area were several mobile light posts, the kind you would see in a construction yard. Several vehicles were parked in a ring around the whole set up. It looked as if the rodeo had come to town.

We backed the trailer up to a gate that opened into a holding pen. Another gate separated the holding pen from the main arena. When we got out of the truck I was able to fully survey the set up. The diameter of the main arena was perhaps fifty feet, with another holding pen directly opposite of the first. There were men with rifles on either side of the holding pens, as well as at the top corners of the bleachers, which were quickly filling with people.

LJ dropped the gate of the trailer open by unlocking a latch that was on the side. The gate didn't even hit the ground before the undead man we had captured ran into the

holding pen. The crowd roared at its energy, as it thrashed about in the holding pen, pulling at the bars. Tom then released a second gate that was attached to the holding pen, confining the dead man in the pen.

“We have a few minutes before the games begin, if you want to walk around,” LJ said to me.

I turned without saying a word, half tempted to start walking back down the dirt road, fully aware that I wouldn't make it back to Ludlow. I walked around to the back side of the bleachers nearest to me and discovered a man in black suit sitting behind a large collapsible table. His suit was dirty with dust kicked up from the desert floor, and he was flanked by two men with guns. In front of him was a long line of people waiting to make bets. People trading food or medicine for credits to use as wagers.

“I hear the Ludlow crew caught a really winner today.” I overheard a man wearing bright yellow Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian print shirt saying to his friend.

“Yeah, but the Vegas guys are always tough to beat. They always seem to get the best and freshest,” The friend replied. “All I know is that if I win tonight, I'm going to be eating good, hopefully some of those hotdogs I saw somebody trading in earlier.”

Disgusted by the conversation, I continued around to the other side of the area and saw the other holding pen. Inside was a woman, and judging by its appearance, it was recently dead. Its skin was colorless but still appeared to be smooth and not splotchy or discolored with rot. Under the powerful lights, I could tell that the blood in its hair was still wet and sticky. I could see the red nail polish on its fingernails was slightly chipped away. I wondered who she was as she repeatedly threw herself at the fence of the holding pen.

“This is what we are. And this is what we always will be,” I thought to myself.

“Five minutes, five minutes,” announced a man with a bull horn who had been standing near the top of the bleachers to the right of me. I made my way back to our side of the arena.

“This is abhorrent,” I said to LJ when I found him standing next to the holding pen poking the man inside with one of the poles.

“Mighty big word there for somebody who, just the other week, shot a man's head off,” he said dryly, referring to Roger and the incident at the Walgreens.

“He was dead, LJ, he needed to be put down.”

“And what do you think we’re doing here? Breeding them? They’re not like us, Bobby. They don’t think, they can’t feel. They don’t even fuck,” he said looking me up and down with one eyebrow raised. “Besides, the winner gets a quarter of the take. Do you know how much food that ends up being?”

“No more bets,” announced the man with the bullhorn. “One minute to match time, one minute to match time!”

I grunted and walked over to the bleachers to sit down. I tried to process what was going on, and rationalize it to myself. I knew that food was going to be drying up soon in Barstow. But then what? Sure it was true, they were already dead, and they did need to be put down, and what harm was it, they didn’t feel pain, did they? Just a lustful hunger. But no matter how much I tried to rationalize it, no part of what was happening made me feel okay.

Somewhere a bell rang, and the gates to the holding pens were both thrown open. I watched as the contestants ran from the pens. The crowd roared once the woman contestant caught sight of the man and charged him. He must have seen her from the corner of his glossed over eyes, as just when she leapt for his head, he managed to reach out, and grab a fist full of hair. He pulled her head back exposing her neck while pulling her closer with his other arm. His mouth clamped on her and bit down as she savagely scratched at his face. Her fingernails with the chipped nail polish disappeared into his rotten eyes. The crowd howled as he continued to gnaw at her neck while sticky mucus ran from his eyes sockets. When he pulled his head back with a mouth full of flesh, she turned the game to her the advantage, fingers still clawing in his eye sockets, pushing deeper into his brain. The arm that he was using to hold her suddenly went limp, and she was able to scramble behind him. Climbing onto his back, she began to chew the side of his face. Two seconds later he collapsed to the ground, motionless, dead for a second time. She was still chewing on his face when one of their wranglers aimed a gun at her head and fired off two quick shots. She collapsed on top of the man in a rotten heap while the cheers of those with the winning bets rang out.

On the drive back to Ludlow, LJ did not let up about the loss. He kept going on about how their guy seemed like such a sure win, and if the Vegas team didn't have such a fresh body, then they surely would have beaten Vegas.

"I don't even know why they call themselves 'Vegas,' they don't even live in Vegas. Nobody does!" LJ's rant continued. "We need to score some fresh deaths. Hey Bobby, does Sam have any insider info on anyone in the camp who is going to die soon? He's like the camp nurse or something, isn't he?" He glanced over and caught my look of contempt. "Just kidding, jeez, it's just a joke, man!" he said with a laugh, patting my thigh.

We arrived a little before one that evening, when the headlights passed the front window of our room, I could see Sam sitting in front of it, holding vigil. LJ dropped Tom and I off near the front and then pulled forward to turn the truck around.

"Oh my god, Bobby, I was so worried!" he said as he put his arms around me and squeezed me tight. How I loved to melt into those strong arms.

"I'm so sorry Sam," I whispered to him, my lips grazing his ear. He squeezed me tighter. "It's been... well... let's just go inside and I'll tell you everything." We walked into our room, as I turned to close the door I caught LJ looking at me. He smiled and motioned to tip his hat, even though he was not wearing one, then he drove off to the empty café to park the truck and trailer.

We sat on the edge of the bed as I told Sam the whole story. "Don't worry, I'm not going back out with him," I said once I finished my tale.

"Thank god, because I didn't want to have argue with you on this," he said, clearly shocked and saddened by it all. "I don't trust him, Bobby. We'll give him this room back, fuck it, we'll sleep in the tent again, I don't care."

"I'll do you one better, let's get the hell out of here."

"What? Where are we going to go?"

"Away from here. Away from all of this, away from these people. We'll go northeast, to the foot of the Rockies, we'll find a cabin, and if we can't find one, we'll build one. We'll make it work," I said, smiling, "We'll be away from all of this ugliness. Just my handsome Sam and me."

Then he smiled. "I love you so much," he said, tears in his eyes.

“I’ll go out with Gregory tomorrow,” I continued laying out the plan, “We’ll drive out to Needles one last time, stock up on some more food and supplies, while you pack here. Don’t say anything to anyone. Let’s do this discreetly.”

“Sounds perfect, but until then...” he trailed off as he ran his hand under my shirt and over my chest. He pushed me back on the bed, and leaned over me. Pulled him close and kissed him with all of the love in my heart. In that moment, nothing mattered to me more.

In the morning, I caught Gregory just before he left, he was ecstatic to have me going back out with him. The day before it had only been he and a pair of relative newbies making the run, and even though the events with Roger had hardened Gregory some, he found their nervousness of the newbies contagious, and they made him uneasy. He definitely appreciated the calm nature I brought on our previous runs.

It was just a little before noon when we entered town. “Hopefully we’ll miss the lunch rush,” one of the newbies said with an uneasy laugh. We circled around to the far side of town where we found a small convenience store. It was getting harder to find places that had not been picked through yet. We were able to load up several cases of bottled water, and there was a nice stock of trail mix and dried fruit. Predictably, the newbies went for the energy drinks and the candy bars, though I did make sure we some beer so that Sam and I would be able to have a celebratory drink. We had cleaned out the store in just a couple of hours, and were back on the road by four.

While the newbies sat in the back of the van laying claim to who got which candy bars, I sat in the passenger seat and looked out into the distance. I thought about how nice it was going to be nice to leave this desert behind, this vast wasteland. It stretched out for miles, and yet, nothing more than a few emaciated Joshua trees and dried out brush. There was so much brutal ugliness here.

We arrived back in Ludlow just as the sun had begun to dip into the horizon. We divided up our share of the haul and handed the rest over to those whose job it was to distribute to the rest of the camp. I walked toward the motel and saw our SUV parked in front of our room, but I did not see Sam. As I walked closer I saw that the front door was

open. I called out to him, but there was no answer. When I couldn't find him in the room, I walked out to the makeshift hospice to see if he was there saying his goodbyes. I finally ran into somebody who thought they had seen him walking off with LJ not too long ago.

I ran back to our car and drove over to the café where LJ parked his truck. I pulled around to the back but the truck and trailer were gone. I was turning the car around when I saw that the ground was around where the trailer was parked was wet. I threw the car into park and jumped out. I didn't have to see the bloody knife to the right of my shoe to know that something terrible had happened. I looked past the knife and saw a thinning trail of blood leading away, back toward the road.

Rage fired up in me as I jumped back into the car and flew down the road. Through tears of anger and worry I made it out to the arena in record time. I spotted LJ's truck, parked with the trailer sticking in the holding pen. I drove around to the opposite side of the arena. I stopped just outside of the lights, and got out of the car. The crowd was roaring like a beast, the match had already started. I took a few steps closer, and saw him, my handsome Sam. The back of his shirt was wet with blood.

I choked as my eyes welled up. Then I fell to my knees as my heart dropped.

"No, no, no," my mind repeated, refusing to process the scene that was unfolding before me. I couldn't bear to watch the outcome of this twisted competition. My head became hot with rage as I scanned the faces of the crowd. Could they not see that my Sam had been murdered? Killed for their pleasure, for their entertainment? Their cheers roared on, clearly indifferent to the crime, just hungry for the show. Then I saw LJ and I nearly went blind with hate. I fought the urge to jump back in the car and run him down, to feel his skull crack under the weight of the car. But this was all too public, and redemption could be found another way. I pulled away as quietly as I could, trying not to draw attention to myself, as floods of tears streaked my face. Sam had given me life, and now I had nothing. Then I knew exactly what I needed to do, and I turned back toward Ludlow.

I sat by the window for hours, staring out through the partially drawn curtains. Then I finally saw him walking past. He had a slight sway in his step, as if he had had a few celebratory drinks. That was going to make it easier. I jumped out up and popped my

head out the door and called out to him casually. When he turned I caught a flash of panic in his eyes that he quickly buried down with all of his other secrets, but I pretended not to see it.

“Uhm, hey Bobby, what’s up?”

“I can’t find Sam, we argued last night. I’m afraid he left me…” I trailed off, nearing losing sight of the plan. I had even parked our car away from the camp, out of sight. The plan would have been harder to pull off if LJ had not been so predictable.

“Oh don’t worry about it, I’m sure he’ll come to his senses and come back,” he paused. “Do you want me to come sit with you for a bit? I have some beer,” he added after seeing an opportunity. I had encountered so many people like this. Those false fronted smiles do desperately hiding the truths underneath. My regret was not picking up on the cues sooner. If I had, then maybe Sam and I would have been out of here already, together. But now it was my turn to put on the fake smile.

“I really would appreciate it, but shouldn’t you get back to your wife?” I said, hoping the words were coming out as genuine.

“She’s sleeping by nightfall, completely oblivious to the world around her,” he said with a grin.

“Of course,” I thought to myself. “They usually are.” We went into my room and sat on the bed talking for a while, pulling back beers. It was difficult to keep my façade up, but the drunker he got, the easier it was for him to believe it. After about an hour, he got up and pulled the curtains closed then sat back down on the bed with a fresh beer. He put his hand on my knee, as if he were trying to console me. I fought the urge to punch him, keeping as relaxed as I could as the pieces fell into place.

“You know what, fuck him. I mean, he left me, right?” I said, putting my hand on his thigh. I saw the lust in his eyes as he went to take my shirt off, clearly this wasn’t his first time. “You know what I’ve always wanted to try?” I said, as I stood up and walked over to the closet. I pulled out a couple of silk ties that I had stashed away, gifts from Sam that I couldn’t leave behind when we left our home.

LJ’s hungry eyes seemed to scream with excitement. He pulled his pants off and pushed himself to the center of the bed. I bound his hands and feet, taking swigs from my beer in between. He groaned, his sex hard with anticipation, even as he let me gag him.

As he lay on the bed, quiet and immovable, I looked down at him, seeing him for exactly what he was. Then I sat down on the dusty arm chair in the corner.

It was in that moment when the cloud of drink cleared just enough for LJ to see not the desire for flesh in my expression, but the lust for revenge. Confused, his sex withered with the realization. I leaned forward to pull a folded 4x6 picture out of my back pocket. It was a photo of Sam and me taken this past New Years Eve. As I stared at the faces in the picture my heart filled with sorrow. LJ tried to scream and jerk his arms loose, but I had bound him too well. Even sitting across the room from him, I could barely hear his muffled screams over my tears.

“You are lucky, LJ,” I said, “I can’t just kill another man. No, I don’t have that kind of darkness in me.” He grunted a sigh of relief. “But, I’ve now lost the only thing that matters to me. Now, all of this,” I spread my arms out, gesturing to indicate the camp, the highways, the cities, the whole ugly world around us, “means absolutely nothing to me. This...,” I held up the picture of Sam, my handsome Sam, “This is everything.” I sat back down in the chair and pulled a bottle of sleeping pills out of the dresser drawer, pouring them out. A hundred or so pills clattered across the top of the dresser. LJ continued to look at me, his confusion becoming disbelief. His gaze moving between the pills and my hardened stare. “I’m going to sleep now,” I said, taking one of the pills and chasing it with a swig of beer. I continued to alternate between the pills and the beer until both were gone. “I’m going to sleep, LJ, and I... well... I probably won’t be waking up. But that doesn’t mean that I’m not going to see you again real soon.”

So that’s the whole story. LJ is still whimpering and twisting around on the bed, his hands and feet look a little purple. Guess I made those knots a little too tight, oh well. I left the little note on the door, before I locked it. Just so you aren’t “surprised” by what you find in here. I hope after you had found this notebook and read my story, that you won’t remember me as a monster, just as a man, who wanted nothing more than to be with his love. I’m getting really sleepy now, heh, but I guess that’s to be expected! I’m going to close my eyes in a minute, but I’m going to look at this photo of Sam a bit longer. I want to drink him in with my eyes... and maybe... maybe if I concentrate hard enough,

I'll feel his warm arms around me. I wonder if I'll dream of him, holding me tight in those arms, holding me as I melt, giving my all to him, because he was everything for me.