

## **Those Left Behind: Wilfred Python**

*Jack's* was a biker bar if one ever existed. It sat about two miles off of the interstate in the middle of nowhere and yet did solid business every night of the week.

The structure was made of wood overlaid with siding that looked as if it had been put on a hundred years before but was really only a couple of years old. There was a sign. It said *Jack's*. Sometimes the lights worked and sometimes they didn't. It was the contention of most of the clientele that the lights worked when the owner decided he wanted *Jack's* to shine.

The owner of *Jack's* was a man named Ralph. Ralph was a grizzly old guy who, if you looked at him closely, defined the term "biker" in a way that no stereotype could. He had white hair on his head cut short. It looked like he did it himself and, in fact, he probably did. He generally wore blue jeans that looked as if he'd gotten them from goodwill and, in fact, he probably had. His beard, also white, was trimmed short, but he didn't take a lot of time grooming it and, in fact, it showed. The most obvious feature was Ralph's leather jacket. It was old and worn out, with brown patches showing up where it should be black. But Ralph wore it night and day during cold weather and warm. His customers speculated that he wore it to bed whether he was alone or not.

In fact, he probably did.

Ralph had owned *Jack's* for about seventeen years. He and his brother had bought it together from the previous owner, a guy named Milton. Milton had been a straight and narrow kind of guy who had gotten roped into buying the place by his wife. She had divorced him four months later and he had kept it to prove to her that he could be a successful businessman. He had succeeded, but he had never intended for the place to be a biker bar. Sometimes things just turn out the way they turn out. Even Milton hadn't bought the place from the original owner. The original owner was a guy named Jack and the original name of the place had been Ruthie's Saloon. When Jack had died (in a gunfight no less), his three sons had taken the place over and renamed it *Jack's* after their father.

Coincidentally, Ralph's brother had been named Jack. Though much of the clientele knew of him, few had ever met him. He had died almost fifteen years before, the victim of a fast growing cancer in his brain. Most people thought the bar was named after Ralph's brother.

It was getting close to nine o'clock when Wilf strode into *Jack's* and started making the rounds. Wilf knew just about everyone who frequented the bar and a handful of the guys that would always stop in on their cross country road trips. He was a big guy, over six feet tall, with a roundish frame. He didn't look like he was in any great shape. Under his green coat, he wore nothing but a white tank top undershirt. It left little to the imagination, showing off a sagging chest and developed gut. But, if you were foolish enough to try fighting Wilf, you would find some seriously rock hard muscle underneath that gut. And when the unfortunate time came for Wilf to hit you, well, you would find that your own muscles were pathetically inadequate to the task of protecting you. As if to add insult to injury, you would wonder how a man, obviously in

his sixties, with a matching physique, and nothing but a crown of white hair on his head could have so thoroughly kicked your tail in.

"Evening, Ralphie," Wilf greeted with a kind smile.

"It's night," Ralph replied, holding a Stein under a tap.

Wilf looked at the darkness just outside the window. "Guess I can't argue that point." And he wouldn't, because when Ralph was cranky, it was best just to let him be that way. It wasn't that Wilf was afraid of him. Wilf wasn't afraid of anyone. But it was Ralph's bar and Wilf respected that.

Ralph appreciated it. Placing the mug of beer in front of Wilf, he walked away to tend to someone else.

Sipping his beer, Wilf looked around. The crowd was light and those that were there seemed a bit listless for a night at *Jack's*. A couple of the boys were playing darts but the game lacked the shouting that usually accompanied such a competition. The pool table wasn't unoccupied but there was just one person there, a woman who Wilf didn't know. She was continuously racking the balls and breaking them, seeing what she could get in on that first shot. He could sure see just by that small sampling that she was much better than he at the game, but that didn't bother Wilf. He'd always been a good sport, not placing much stock in pointless competition. He was just getting up to go and join her when she broke into a fit of wracking coughs.

He went and joined her anyway.

She looked up at him as he came over. Despite his impressive frame and equally impressive reputation, Wilf had a way of appearing non-threatening. The woman, probably about ten years his junior, sized him up, quite rightly, as a man simply coming over for some pool and some conversation.

"Winifred," she introduced, extending a hand and then immediately withdrawing it to cover up a second series of coughs. "Sorry."

He smiled and grabbed a pool cue. "Wilfred."

"Really?" she asked with humor as she went over and racked the balls. "Do you want to break?"

"I think I better," he laughed. "It's the only way I'll get to take a shot."

She laughed and coughed.

"You all right?" he asked as he set up his shot.

She shrugged. "Just started coughing. I'm probably coming down with something. Figures, too. I'm on my way to see my grandkids."

"Well that explains why I don't recognize you," Wilf said. "It'll be all right."

His break put the fifteen ball into the corner pocket. It was a lucky shot but it gave him a chance to shoot again. Who was he to look a gift horse in the mouth? His next shot sank the thirteen. Then he missed.

Winifred immediately began to take over the game. Despite her poor health, she managed to almost run the whole table before missing what Wilf thought was an easy side pocket shot. It didn't really matter. He would make one or two shots before messing up and then he would turn the table over to her and probably concede. He was about to start when trouble walked in.

As a general rule, Wilf didn't have any problems with the police. He had only one arrest on his record and that was for an assault charges that had been quickly dropped. While he was a particularly powerful and formidable individual, he did not go looking for trouble. He was not a gambler or a womanizer. He did not ever drink to excess. But this one cop, this soon of a bitch, just loved to cause trouble with the bikers.

To the best of Wilf's knowledge, Antonio Jones was assigned to the gang squad. The trouble with Antonio Jones was that he equated biker with ganger. Even though he never had to bring his squad to *Jack's* to break up a gunfight, he seemed to hate bikers as if they were the most vile of criminals. And he seemed to hate Wilf most of all.

Trying to ignore the trouble, Wilf lined up and took his shot. He missed. Worse, he scratched. Winifred looked at him strangely.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

He nodded toward Jones. He was in uniform which meant he was on duty.

"Are you a wanted man?" she quipped with a hacking cough that came from deep in her chest.

"Only by him."

Attracted by the coughing, Jones looked over and found him.

"Python!" he shouted with a smile.

Only a very few people called him Python. He wasn't sure what had earned him the name. It was either the long chain he wrapped around his arm while fighting, which he lovingly called his python, or the long winding tattoo of the snake around his right arm. So that's what they called him, a few people.

Wilfred Python.

"Antonio Jones," he cried, mimicking Jones' tone of voice.

Jones strode over like he was some beloved celebrity nodding and smiling at the patrons as he went. The truth is, those that knew him hated him. Those that didn't know him quickly understood why.

Taking a pool cue, Jones lined up and took a shot. It was a good shot, delineating a prowess that rivaled Winifred's. Wilf watched with indifference.

"Is this lady kicking your tail?" Jones asked, taking another shot.

"I was until you ruined the game," she said.

"What do you want, Antonio?" Wilf asked impatiently.

Placing the cue on the table, Jones said. "Can we have a word?"

Winifred started coughing again.

"Privately," Jones amended.

Confused but intrigued, Wilf followed Jones over to the bar, promising Winifred he'd be back to finish their game (or, actually, start a new one since Jones had ruined their first one).

"Can I buy you one?" Jones asked.

Wilf looked at him quizzically. "What's this about, Antonio?"

"I'm not supposed to be on duty right now. A lot of cops are sick. A lot of people are sick." He looked over at Winifred.

"What are you driving at?"

"You haven't got any idea," Jones said, shaking his head. "Look around you. Light night, right? Too many people are too sick to come out. Check out your pool buddy. Check out Zeke over by the bar. They're both sick. Almost everyone in here is sick except you and me."

"So? So something's going around," Wilf argued.

Jones nodded skeptically. "Yeah. Something's going around. I'm just wondering how it's going to end. If people at the office get sick in a rotation over the course of a couple of weeks, you can say something's going around. When it's like this..."

"Well, how bad is it?" Wilf asked, suddenly feeling the beer start to bubble in his gut.

"Bad," said Jones. "No cops. No firemen. No doctors or nurses or anything else we need."

"Then who's taking care of all the sick people?"

"Uh huh," said Jones. "My point exactly." He paused a minute, looking around the bar. "I gotta go, Python. You take care of yourself. Look for me if it all goes to hell."

Wilf didn't know what to say to that so he said nothing as Jones lifted himself off of his stool and headed out of the bar. For a while, he just sat there thinking about what Jones had meant by it all going to hell. If people were sick all over the world, it would wreak havoc for a couple of days, but things would ultimately normalize. They had to, right?

Wilf wondered for a moment if Jones wasn't just messing with him. Then he glanced over at Winifred and saw that she was sitting in a wooden chair. It looked as if she'd nodded off. Just how sick was she? Zeke was at the bar, just a few stools away. Wilf liked Zeke because he was always upbeat and ready to have a good time, even if things weren't going so well. Now he was propped up in his stool with his head in his hands.

Wilf was about to go over to him when the front door opened and two giant men walked in. They were bikers in a biker bar and, therefore, welcome. Wilf knew them. He'd met them about a dozen times, never in the same place twice. The Tucker brothers always traveled together. The older one, Moose, had lost his birth name a long time ago. Though they called his little brother the Juggernaut, he preferred to be called by his given name, which was Devin. Moose and Devin were known far and wide in the bigger scene. People loved to fight them because they were unstoppable and yet never actually needed to badly hurt anyone to get their point across.

It was good to see them.

It was better to see that they weren't sick.

"Wilfred!" Devin shouted, coming forward and grabbing the older man in a giant hug. As big as Wilf was, Devin had about six inches on him. He was a bear of a man with a bald head and bushy red beard. There was some grey in the beard now, but not a lot. Devin was in his mid forties, Moose approaching fifty. He lifted Wilf clear off the ground and gave him a big scratchy kiss on the cheek before setting him down again. Moose, by far the more reserved of the two men, shook Wilf's hand vigorously.

"Let me buy a round," Wilf offered.

The two men agreed, but didn't have much time.

"Mom's taken ill," Devin confessed. "Alzheimer's."

"Jesus," Wilf moaned. "Sorry to hear that."

"We've known for a while," said Devin, "but things took a turn for the worse a few days back. Dad called us to come home."

"I didn't know your parents lived around here."

Devin nodded. "We're still about ninety minutes out. Since we've never actually been to the legendary *Jack's*, we thought this might be our best opportunity to check it out."

They talked for a while, Wilf and the Tucker brothers. It made Wilf feel good to sit with two people who weren't falling apart. Finally, Devin signaled that it was time for them to hit the road. They had wanted to get there before midnight, but that already didn't seem likely. The three men exchanged their goodbyes, which included Devin lifting Wilf into another bear hug. Drinking water now, Wilf watched them depart with a smile.

"Good folk," he muttered to himself.

The crowd at *Jack's* had really thinned out in the time he had spent with them. Winifred hadn't moved from her chair and it seemed that a number of the other patrons had taken to sitting as well. A lot of them had nodded off. Their feet propped up on tables or other chairs.

Wilf went back over to the pool table and nudged Winifred.

"Hey," he said. "Do you want to have that game now?"

She looked up at him with sunken eyes. "I'm a little tired. You play and I'll watch."

"Maybe you should get back to your hotel," he suggested.

"Tired," was all she said.

So he racked the balls, picked up a cue, and started playing. He completely lost track of time. Over the next several hours, he racked, broke, and ran the table. It was mind numbing, but it kept him from worrying. It didn't feel normal, though. He didn't have an opponent or even a spectator. Winifred was hardly watching. Her eyes were closed and she was grumbling in her sleep. Every once in a while, an awful cough erupted from deep in her chest. It semi-roused her, but only for a moment.

A hand on his shoulder brought him back to reality. It was Ralph and he had a worried look on his face.

"I don't know what to do," Ralph said.

"What do you mean?"

Ralph looked around the bar. "It's almost two, Wilf. No one's drunk, yet you and I are the only two guys standing."

The place definitely wasn't packed but it was far from empty. Ralph clearly wanted to close up, but everyone had found a spot in which to literally crash. There was one guy sitting up against the wall by the bathrooms. He had his legs out in front of him and his head lolled to one side.

Wilf went to Winifred and shook her by the shoulder. She barely stirred.

"Did you call 911?"

Ralph nodded. "They said it would be awhile. If no one's dead then we have to go on the list."

"List? What kind of a list do you need for 911?"

Ralph shrugged. "I don't suppose you'd consider waiting around with me. I'm kind of creeped out."

Wilf hesitated, thinking about it.

"I won't charge for your drinks tonight," Ralph offered.

While that didn't really mean a whole lot to Wilf, he nodded anyway. He wouldn't have wanted to be left alone like that either. The place was like a morgue. It was scary. So he moved himself to the bar, had himself just one more beer, which he nursed for the better part of ninety minutes, and kept Ralph company while he cleaned up around everyone.

It was getting pretty close to four o'clock when Ralph decided to try 911 again. He dialed the number and stood behind the bar silently. Wilf watched him, rubbing his fingertips against the long since dried glass of his mug. Finally, Ralph hung up the phone.

"There's no one there," he said. "There wasn't even a recording."

Wilf went over to check on Zeke. He hadn't moved in almost an hour. Wilf had looked over as the big man had lifted his head, beads of sweat dotting his face. Now the sweat was dry and his skin was cold. Wilf withdrew his hand as if he'd suddenly touched something scalding.

"Zeke?" he whispered.

"What's the matter?" asked Ralph.

"I think..." Wilf started and then he trailed off. "I think he's dead."

Lifting Zeke's head, he realized that there could be no mistake. Zeke's eyes were closed and he wasn't breathing. He looked around the room yet again. How many were dead?

"I'm going for help," Wilf said, heading toward the door.

"What?" Ralph asked. "Where are you going to go?"

"It's fifteen minutes into town, less if I break the speed laws. I'll go straight to the hospital and bring back help."

"What am I supposed to do?" Ralph asked.

"Just wait here. I won't even be an hour."

They moved outside together and Wilf went right to his bike. It was a big bike, with a place to store luggage on an extended trip. He started it up and it roared to life. Wilf grabbed his helmet and placed it over his head.

"I'll be quick," he promised.

Ralph nodded with a gulping swallow of nerves. Wilf left, vowing to himself that he would not let his friend down. Of course, there was no way he could know that, by the time Ralph went back into the bar, Zeke and a couple of others would have recovered from their deaths and begun to hunt for food.

Ralph would be that food.

The roads, Wilf noticed, were strangely silent. Even at four o'clock in the morning, there were usually some cars. Not today, though. Today there was nothing. He rode through the dark morning at almost one hundred miles per hour, afraid of what he was going to find when he reached the hospital.

Reaching his exit, he slowed the bike and headed into town. Town was kind of a cross between the city and the suburbs. Toward the center, where the hospital was, there were tall buildings, subway lines, and no parking. On the outskirts, ringing around the perimeter, were small businesses and houses. Wilf passed through these more suburban areas at a slower speed. There were people wandering around and he was afraid to hit any of them.

A few blocks in, he began to notice oddities among the pedestrians. Many of them were dressed in their pajamas. Though he was curious, he pressed on, recognizing the urgency of his task.

The crowd on the streets thickened as he got deeper into the city. When someone noticed him and began running after him, he slowed. Others suddenly followed suit and began coming toward him as well.

"What do you need?" he asked them, bringing his bike to a halt in the middle of the road. "Are you sick?"

They didn't answer. The one nearest, a young man in a suit and a tie, came right up to him and grabbed him by the arm. Wilf was surprised by this, but completely flabbergasted when the young man tried to bite him through his leather jacket.

"Hey!" cried Wilf, prying the man off of him and shoving him away.

It was only then that he noticed the odd look in the man's eye. He didn't really look...aware. In fact, he looked dead. A slow, creeping terror overtook Wilf. A quick glance at the other



approaching people told him everything he needed to know. The man, who should have known better than to get up and try again, was doing just that.

Kicking the bike into gear, Wilf took off down the road. Even understanding what he had just learned, he expected the people to get out of his way, but they didn't. He swerved and nearly toppled himself. He clipped one woman and sent her sprawling into the street. He did not go back.

As he drove deeper into the city, his worst fears were realized. The crowds grew thicker, though not too thick. More and more of the dead people tried to catch him as he went by. One of them even threw herself right in front of his bike. If it wasn't for Wilf's practiced skill, he'd have gone down for sure. The woman went down, though, and he felt a bump as he went over either an arm or a leg.

Wilf still did not go back.

When he reached the hospital, the scene was the most horrible thing he had ever witnessed. And he had witnessed some horror in his lifetime. There were hordes of people pushing at the entrances and exits. They were all sick. They were all dead. He wasn't going to find any help there. As the sun was rising over the buildings, he got off of his bike and surveyed the scene. They would notice him soon enough, but he was safe. He could be on his bike and away long before any of them could reach him.

He was just standing and watching when a lone figure detached itself from the crowd. It was tough to see in the early dawn's light, but it looked like a cop. He moved differently than the dead people. In fact, he was using what Wilf thought to be his night stick to ward them off. He was young, with skin as dark as Wilf had ever seen. He was clearly of African descent. As he broke free of the main crowd, he caught sight of Wilf just standing by his bike. The uniform he wore was clearly visible now. The two held each other's gazes for a moment before the man took off down the street in the other direction.

That was it then. Dead people attacking the living. Cops running scared. There was no help to be found here. With a jolt, Wilf realized that he had left Ralph alone with a bar full of sick people. Zeke had already been dead. Did that mean he was going to suddenly get up and attack Ralph?

As some of the crowd of the dead began to notice and approach Wilf, he turned his bike and started off down the road. This time, he picked up speed, even on the city streets. When he reached the highway, he plunged onto it at over one hundred miles an hour, pushing his own tolerance for the wind. All he could think of was Ralph.

A car raced by him on the other side of the road. He ignored it. A few minutes later, he was getting off of the interstate and heading toward *Jack's*. As he pulled up, he didn't see anything out of order. The bikes and trucks that had been parked there the night before were still there. The door to the bar was closed and everything seemed quiet.

Getting off of the bike, Wilf pulled a length of chain from a pouch on its side. This was his Python. It, like the tattoo that coiled up his right arm, was responsible for his last name. Taking one end of the chain in his right hand, he began to wrap it tightly around his left arm, starting up by his shoulder and winding it all the way down to his wrist. Even still, there were about two feet left, which he wound around his fist. Wilf had used the Python in numerous fights. When he had first started biking, some of the less respectable fellows had thought a hazing period might be fun. The Python had shown them otherwise. In recent years, he'd rarely had use for the old girl. Now, though, it seemed as if things had changed.

With the Python ready to strike, he walked up to *Jack's* and opened the door. The first thing that hit him was the smell. It smelled like death. There were a number of people milling about. They seemed lost.

"Ralph?"

He finally caught sight of the last owner of *Jack's* as several people turned from the bar. Zeke was one of them, Winifred another. Ralph, or what was left of him, was laid out on the flat top. Wilf couldn't even identify the parts, but he knew Ralph's boots and his jacket. Both were slick with red and black gore. It was on the counter top and dripping onto the floor. Angered, Wilf took two steps into the bar. Then he thought better off it. He couldn't fight them all, not in such an enclosed space. Taking one last look at *Jack's*, he stepped back outside and closed the door. Seconds later, as he was heading back to his bike, he heard them rattling against the door, trying to get out.

"Are they all dead?" came the voice of a young girl. Wilf turned his head and saw her, hiding just within the tree line. She looked anywhere between sixteen and twenty. There was some grime on her face.

"Fraid so," he told her.

She didn't say anything right away, just stared at the building. "My dad's in there."

Wilf looked at her more closely. Ralph had no children. There were plenty of guys inside that he didn't know. Still...

Her face was round, almost cherubic, her hair poking out from underneath a bandana. She wore a pair of jeans and a button up blouse. She looked sad just then but Wilf could imagine her smile. "You're Zeke's girl."

She nodded.

"I'm so sorry," Wilf said. "Zeke was a good man."

She laughed just then. It seemed so out of place that Wilf actually looked around for the source of the noise before realizing that it was coming from her.

"He was anything but," she said, suddenly turning hard. "Maybe he was a good drinking buddy, but he was a liar and a cheater and a terrible dad."

Wilf didn't know what to say to that. He was kind of torn between wanting to defend his friend and understanding that she was probably right. If anyone had a right to speak that way about a man it was his child.

"Persephone," Wilf said suddenly. "Right?"

She seemed impressed.

"He did love you," Wilf said, but it sounded hollow.

"Whatever. I guess you must be Wilf. The tattoo is a dead giveaway." She paused for a moment, then added, "He loved you, too."

All at once Wilf started to laugh. He was interrupted by a sharp crack as the door to *Jack's* took a damaging blow from the inside. He looked at it, figured he had a couple of minutes before it split and released a storm of the dead. Flexing his left bicep, he felt the reassuring pinch of his Python. He was getting ready to fight when he noticed Persephone pulling a small pack from the bushes and throwing it over her shoulder.

"Where are you going?" Wilf asked.

She gestured to the door. "I'm not hanging around here."

He saw the wisdom of that and went to his bike. "Hop on," he offered.

"No thanks," she said, raising her hand and slowly backing away.

Wilf sighed. "I'm not going to hurt you. It's been a long time since I had any interest in teenage girls."

She studied him for a bit, but didn't make any move toward the bike. There was another crack and the door split. They could see arms trying to claw their way through.

Wilf looked over at them and then back at Persephone. "That's what the world is like now. Are you sure you want to be alone in it?"

One final crack sent half of the door spinning away from the frame. The first zombie through was Kal Anderson. Wilf had known Kal for thirteen years. He was a kind and generous man who was now snarling and baring his teeth as he approached.

Wilf started the bike. In an instant, Persephone made her decision and ran up to him. He waited for her to secure herself behind him and then took off for the highway.

Neither of them was wearing a helmet, but it didn't really matter. There was no traffic as the morning sun began to shine. Wilf rode at a moderate pace. He was tired, having spent all night babysitting Ralph. Now the adrenaline was waning and he just wanted to sleep. A couple of exits down the road and he got off the highway. Persephone knew the area. She lived a couple of miles in the opposite direction. As they moved into the deserted streets, she got a sinking feeling.

Persephone wanted to ask Wilf where they were going, but the noise from the engine would have drowned out her small voice. Still, she wasn't happy with the neighborhood. It was a low income area that boasted a fair amount of gang activity. It only served to reinforce her earlier trepidation. She began to think of ways to escape.

A few minutes later, Wilf pulled the bike to a halt in front of a tall apartment building. Though she had never been there, she knew the place by reputation. It had once been government subsidized but the money had run out. Now it was just a building full of drug addicts and other criminals.

"What the hell is this?" she cried, hopping off the bike and taking a generous five steps backwards.

Wilf looked up at the building. "I live here."

"Here?" she asked dubiously. "You live here?"

He shrugged. "The rent's cheap."

"Life is cheap here," she complained.

"I wouldn't worry about crime so much if I were you," he said. "I think most of my neighbors are probably dead by now."

This was small comfort as they made their way into the building. Dead, unfortunately had taken on a completely different meaning in recent hours. Dead now meant spry and hungry. Dead meant dangerous.

Inside, the lobby was disgusting. There was litter everywhere and a smell Persephone couldn't quite identify. Wilf didn't seem to notice. To him, everything must have been just how it always was.

He stepped through the garbage and rang for the elevator. He was answered by a loud rattling and an accompanying hum.

"Have you lived here long?" Persephone asked.

He nodded. "About fifteen years."

"And you've never had any trouble?"

The elevator came and opened up to an empty, if filthy car. Wilf beckoned the girl in and followed her. He pushed the nine button.

"There's a lot of gang activity here," he said. "But they don't bother me. We're kind of kindred spirits, except bikers don't go around selling drugs and shooting each other to pieces. Besides which, there aren't any five of them that could take me in a fight." He said it without boasting, just in that matter-of-fact way that you might talk about the color of your walls.

The door opened on nine and someone was standing there. Wilf recognized him as the guy from 9G. As far as Wilf knew, the guy didn't have a job or a family or any real friends. He was high on something all of the time, but Wilf could never imagine where he got the money for the drugs. In short, the guy had no life. Now, he wasn't even alive. He must have heard the rattling of the elevator and come to check. He practically fell through when it opened. Wilf sidestepped him out of sheer instinct, but Persephone just stood dumbfounded as he fell on top of her.

There was no doubt that he would have had her if it weren't for Wilf. He reacted before the dead man could sink his teeth into her by grabbing the man's hair and yanking him back. The guy from 9G tried to turn himself and go for Wilf, but the veteran biker was too smart to fall for that trick. Shifting his weight, he shoved the man back into the hallway and followed him out.

The first blow from the Python went to the midsection. The guy from 9G didn't even react. Wilf took this all in stride, learning from the battle as it continued. If body blows were no good, then he would have to go for the head. He didn't want to. A head shot with the Python would likely kill him. Then he'd remembered that the guy from 9G was already dead.

There was a vicious crack as Wilf's fist, wrapped in the protection of the Python, slammed into the guy's forehead. He staggered for a moment, then fell back against the wall. Twitching uncontrollably, he slumped to the floor.

"Oh, my God," Persephone breathed. "I think he's dying. He's going to die. You killed him."

Wilf looked down at his twitching neighbor and then up at the hysterical girl. "You're welcome."

Turning away, he marched off toward his apartment. This was the world now. It was the dead versus the living and he liked the side he was on. He was determined to stay on it.

Persephone slipped out of the elevator just as the doors were closing and followed Wilf down the corridor, glancing back frequently. Only when they turned a corner did she stop looking and start to breathe.

Wilf stopped in front of apartment 9H and fished in the pocket of his jeans for his keys. Her unlocked the door and invited her to go in first.

The apartment was not what Persephone expected. She had grown accustomed to her father's place, which had ratty old furniture, dishes in the sink, and smelled like cigarettes. Wilf's place was small, but immaculate. It was definitely very different from the common areas of the building in which it was housed. The door opened into a small living room. There was a couch and a coffee table, an end table and a flat screen television set. The floors were hardwood, but there was a tasteful area rug centered perfectly under the coffee table. On the end table sat a remote control, a lamp, and a picture of a much younger Wilf with a woman and two children, a boy and a girl.

In the back of the apartment, really part of the living room, was a kitchenette. There was no kitchen table, so Persephone assumed Wilf took most of his meals on the couch, in front of the television. In truth, Wilf took most of his meals out. On the right, there was a short hallway with a bathroom set into it and a bedroom in the back.

Persephone walked over to the table and picked up the picture. The boy in the picture looked like he was about fourteen. The girl was younger. Both looked a lot like Wilf. The woman was handsome, but not pretty. Wilf, though, was the real enigma. With brown hair and no beard, he looked like a regular person. He was thinner, too, and wearing a fashionable sweater with a pair of brown slacks.

"Is this your family?" she asked him.

Walking over, he took the picture from her and set it back on the table.

"So?" she pressed. "Did you have some kind of mid-life crisis and walk out on them?"

"They died," he said flatly. "A long time ago."

Moving into the kitchenette, he looked out the window and down to the street below. There were a few people wandering about, but he could tell by the way they shuffled along that they were dead. He grunted to himself.

"I need some sleep," he told her. "We should be all right here for a few hours if we keep quiet."

She nodded.

"You can have the bedroom."

She nodded again.

"Go on," he said impatiently. "I don't want to stay too long."

She wanted to ask where they were going to go, but didn't feel like Wilf was going to answer any questions. So she went into the corridor, stopped at the bathroom, and then into the bedroom.

Alone, Wilf threw himself onto the couch and closed his eyes. Though he fell asleep instantly, he knew that only minutes had passed when the knocking began. Sitting up, he listened.

Tap, tap, tap.

Tap, tap, tap.

Persephone came out of the bedroom looking pale and scared

"They're at the door," she mouthed, but Wilf shook his head. If there were dead things at the door, they wouldn't be knocking. They would be pounding and clawing and scraping. He hadn't seen much, but he'd seen enough to know that they were hungry and feral. No. There was a person at the door.

Putting a hand out so that's Persephone knew to remain where she was, Wilf went to the door and looked through the peep hole.

He almost burst out laughing.

The knocking came again, this time louder. Opening the door, he found himself face to face with five teenage gang members. He recognized two of them from the neighborhood, but the other three were new. Wilf faced them with passive indifference. They all had the gang brand that was so familiar to him. It looked to Wilf like a three legged top hat, but was supposed to signify the outreach of the gang. The brand was given by hot poker. He'd heard some of the kids screaming as it was administered. On two of the kids, the brand looked new.

"That your mess in the hallway?" the leader asked. She couldn't have been more than fifteen years old. She had spiky hair, glasses, and a mean look on her face. Wilf had never seen her before. As far as he knew, girls didn't have such major roles in the gangs. He supposed that had changed as well as everything else.

"Yeah," Wilf answered and offered nothing else.

"Nice piece of work," the gang girl commented, eyeing the Python on his arm. He'd fallen asleep with it on. Now that he'd had his attention called to it, it was starting to hurt, but he dare not take it off in front of these jokers. Instead, he clenched his fist tightly around the chain, working the kinks out all the way up his arm.

"Thanks," he said. "Is that all?"

She shook her head. "No. Lord Brawn wants to see you."

Wilf didn't know anyone named Lord Brawn. "Can it wait?"

She laughed at him.

He laughed back. "Let me rephrase that," he said. "It's gonna have to wait."

She stopped laughing, her face turning mean again. "Lord Brawn ain't gonna wait."

"Look, kid, I've been out fighting dead things all night. I need a few hours of sleep before I do anything. Tell Lord Brawn, I'd be honored to meet with him right afterwards."

She chewed on this for awhile then said. "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure we're supposed to drag your old bones down there one way or the other."

This wasn't going well. "Do us all a favor, kid. Tell him what I told you. An intelligent guy like him will understand."

"And if he sends us right back up?" she asked.

Wilf scowled. "Then I'll make an even bigger mess in the hall."

He shut the door in their faces.

"That wasn't smart," Persephone said as he plopped himself back on the couch.

"Shut up."

She pursed her lips in frustration. "What if he sends ten of them next time?"

"It'll take that many just to get me and my Python winded."

"Nice talk, old man. But you're not that tough and your 'python' is just a chain, not a living thing."

"She coils and she strikes. Don't tell me she ain't alive."

"Whatever. Meanwhile, what's going to happen when they come back?"

He shrugged. "Hopefully, we'll be gone. Right now, though, I need to sleep."

This time, when Wilf laid himself down on the couch, he slept. Though he was plagued by dreams of dead people calling on him at home and at *Jack's*, he remained undisturbed for almost six hours. He came awake as the noon day Sun was starting its journey west. Sitting up, he stretched, yawned, looked at the picture of his family, and went to the bathroom. He stripped off his clothes and took a quick shower. He had the feeling it was the last time he was going to be able to do so for some time. The power was already out. He didn't guess the water service could be far behind.

Wrapped only in a towel, he went into his bedroom where Persephone was still sleeping in his bed.



"Wake up," he said as he rummaged a white tank top and a pair of jeans out of his drawers.

She came awake groggily, starting when she caught sight of him in all his glory.

"Jesus, Wilf!" she cried. "I don't want to see that!"

"If you want a shower, you've got ten minutes. We've got to go."

"Where are we going?"

"I've got some ideas," he said. "Get moving."

It took Persephone twelve minutes to shower herself, dry off, and dress herself in some clean clothes that she had in her pack. She tied the kerchief around her head to keep her hair up. Wilf was impressed by her speed and efficiency. She may not have been the best company, but at least she wasn't going to slow him down and get him killed.

In the intervening time, he grabbed a few things and threw them into a backpack. There wasn't much in the way of keepsakes in which Wilf was interested. He was mostly looking for useful items. He grabbed a scissor and a nail clipper, some canned goods out of the cabinets, a can opener, etc...

Persephone saw him lingering by the picture on the end table, but he made no move to take it.

"You're just going to leave it?" she asked.

He nodded. "It's a different world now. They may as well not have even existed." And he was glad of that.

Coiling the Python around his arm, he moved to the door. He looked through the peep hole and saw that the coast was clear. He had at least expected the gang to be guarding his door. Maybe they didn't figure he'd make a break for it. After all, to them, having a gang at your back was probably the only rational way to go.

Turning left outside the door, he headed down the hallway to the fire stairs. On a regular day, those stairs were dangerous as hell. But there were no more regular days. There wouldn't be for quite some time.

There was a dead woman at the end of the hall. She looked beaten, not bitten, which was an indication that the gang kids had been living it up. Wilf felt a brief bout of rage and had to pause to get his breathing under control. What did this Lord Brawn want with him? Did he think that Wilf would want to join his gang and be a party to things like this?

"You've got a gun, right?" Persephone whispered as they moved into the stairwell.

Wilf stopped, looked back at her. Raising his left arm, which was wrapped in chain, he said. "No. You?"

She looked exasperated. "I thought all of you biker types had a frigging armory."

He shook his head. "Sorry. I prefer my weapons a little less lethal."

"My dad had a whole collection of pistols and rifles."

"Then maybe we should go to his place," Wilf said. He said it sarcastically, but even before he finished, they had both decided that Zeke's was probably a good place to visit.

They walked down the nine flights to the ground level, keeping quiet on the stairs. Wilf ignored the doors in all of the landings, but Persephone was curious. She glanced through the windows and saw that a number of the dead had gotten out of their apartments. She wasn't sure how they were managing it. They didn't seem smart enough to open a door. But there they were, milling about the corridors like the lost souls.

At the bottom of the staircase, Wilf let her out into the lobby. It was a different one than the one through which they had entered because the staircase was on the opposite side of the building. Wilf had taken this one on purpose. With the gang interested in him, they needed to be cautious. He was worried about getting into a fight with some of those kids. With the current state of affairs, he'd probably have to kill them.

Out on the street, he saw that his problems had multiplied. Standing around his bike were the same five gang members that had shown up at his door. Apparently, Lord Brawn didn't want him sneaking away. For a moment, Wilf thought about wading in and taking his bike back by force. It didn't seem likely that there were more of the kids nearby, what with everyone dying, but he couldn't take that for granted. Besides which, five of them was more of a risk than he wanted to take.

Grabbing Persephone by the arm, he made to turn away from them and his beloved bike when he caught sight of Dean. Dean was one of Wilf's neighbors. He lived a floor below and several apartments down, but the two seemed to cross paths quite a lot. They weren't friends but the old biker found the man to be pleasant enough, if not a bit downcast. He was a retail manager at one of the larger department stores. He always wore a white shirt with a pair of slacks and a plain tie. He was wearing that now but the shirt seemed a bit dirty and the tie knot was pulled down to the second button. There was something different about the look on his face, too. Wilf found it unsettling.

Approaching cautiously, the old biker nodded in Dean's direction. "You all right?"

Dean nodded. "Never better."

It was an odd choice of words.

Wilf cautioned him to lower his voice. “A bunch of those gang kids are guarding my bike. They came to see me last night, but I sent them away.”

Dean nodded again. “I know.”

It suddenly came clear to Wilf what had been bothering him about the look on his neighbor’s face.

“Are you with them?” he asked.

“They do what I tell them.”

Wilf scowled. “Did you tell them to kill that woman in the hallway?”

Dean frowned now. “They have to defend themselves just like you and...”

“This wasn’t some dead monster, Dean. This was a survivor.”

Dean sighed. “I’ll speak with Lord Brawn about it.”

“Oh,” Wilf said. “Then you’re not Lord Brawn?”

Dean laughed. “Are you kidding, Wilf? You’ve lived in this building for how many years, and you’ve never heard of Brawn?”

Wilf shrugged.

“Well,” said Dean. “Why don’t you and I go and meet him?”

Wilf shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’m not thirsty enough for his brand of punch.”

A shade of the old Dean crept back into his face. He didn’t quite know how to handle Wilf’s refusal. He looked almost as lost as the kid the night before.

“Look, Dean,” Wilf said. “I like you. You’ve always been a good guy. Why do you want to throw in with this kind of trash? We’ve got some plans and we could always use an extra set of eyes. Come on with us.”

Dean seemed to consider it for a minute, then hardened again. “I don’t think so, Wilf. I don’t know what you’ve been doing all night, but the world just did a one eighty. I’ve lucked into a good pack of wolves and I don’t think walking away from it is the smart move.”

“Suit yourself,” Wilf said, dragging Persephone past him.

Dean caught him by the shoulder, but Wilf reached up, letting go of the girl, and grabbed Dean by the wrist. Despite being clearly overpowered, Dean didn't seem afraid. "I could call out to them."

Wilf nodded, sucking his lips into his mouth. Then he lifted his left arm, the one with the python, and said, "You shouldn't, though."

Apparently, Dean took him seriously enough to back down. They held each other's gazes for a moment before Wilf let go and took Persephone's hand again. She had only a sense of what had just transpired between the two men, but it was enough to leave her trembling as he led her away from the building and the area in general.

A few blocks away, there began a neighborhood full of two and three bedroom townhouses. It wasn't exactly the richest or safest neighborhood, but these people had cars. Since most of the people were dead, Wilf wouldn't feel bad about taking one.

Initially, as they moved, he was concerned about running into more gang warriors. They didn't see anyone, though. Wilf assumed that Lord Brawn just didn't have the manpower he needed to prevent one old man from slipping away.

So much the better.

Once they moved onto the streets full of houses, they began to encounter the dead. A number of people had gotten out of their homes and were now wandering around aimlessly. Persephone began to fidget like a rabbit ready to bolt. Wilf was worried she might do just that. In that case, he would have to choose to either protect her or allow her to be the distraction she would become. Fortunately, she kept it together. He was not forced to make that choice.

A couple of the dead approached. Wilf got a good look at them and lost all inhibitions when it came to fighting them. Unleashing the full power of the Python, he left many of them bleeding in the street.

"We can't stay out here much longer," Persephone said.

She was right, of course. Wilf was pretty sure he could handle a dozen of them on his own, but if he had to protect the girl as well as himself, he would be more vulnerable. Looking around at the houses, he noticed that some of them had open doors. He supposed that some of the dead people had walked out through those doors rather than having to smash their way to freedom. By that logic, it also seemed that the houses with the open doors would be safer because the residents would be on the street rather than lurking in some corner.

Wilf went for the nearest house, taking down a woman in a nightgown, a man in jogging shorts, and the mailman on his way. Opening the screen door, he ushered Persephone in and followed. Then he slammed the front door shut behind them.

Probably all of the houses in the neighborhood had the same layout as this one. There was no entryway. The door led them into a narrow room that was probably designed as a living room, dining room combination, but was barely large enough to support just one of those rooms. On the right, there was a staircase and in the back there was a kitchen.

"Anybody home?" Wilf called out loudly.

"What are you doing?" Persephone complained.

"I'd rather they come to me than having to go and find them."

After a couple of minutes, Wilf called out again, but no one appeared. There was a bit of a crowd forming by the front door, though.

"Stay with me," Wilf said, moving toward the rear of the house.

"What are we looking for?"

"Car keys."

They were hanging on a hook in plain sight in the kitchen. Wilf took them and then hurried back toward the front of the house. Persephone thought he was going to open the front door, but he went upstairs instead. He was cautious, but the house really was empty.

The upstairs was much like the downstairs. There was a narrow corridor connecting three small bedrooms and a bathroom. The master was in the back so Wilf headed away from it. Standing at the front window, he looked out at the street. It was going to be tough getting through the growing crowd. Lifting the keys, he pressed the button on the remote. He hoped the owner had gotten a good parking spot. When nothing happened, he hit the other button, the one that locked the car. A four door economy car across the street honked its horn once and flashed its lights. The noise caught the attention of the dead people on the street, but it was so brief that they didn't bother to investigate.

"Do you see it?" he asked her.

She nodded. "How do we get to it?"

He handed her the keys. "You can drive, right?"

She nodded.

"I'll take care of the crowd while you get the car started."

She looked out the window. "There are so many."

Wilf didn't say anything. Instead, he turned around and headed down the stairs. He had an inkling to search the place for anything useful, but decided against it. With all of the dead wandering around, he just wanted to get on the way.

They didn't go out the front. If they opened the front door, they'd be swarmed. Persephone would wind up waiting behind Wilf while he fought them in close quarters. It was definitely not the ideal scenario. Instead, they went to the kitchen and snuck out the back door. There was a bunch of bananas hanging on a hook. They were still a bit green. Persephone realized that she would probably not see another edible banana in her lifetime and took the bunch, quickly stashing them in her pack.

The backyard was mostly untended. Grass and weeds grew thick around a narrow deck. A rusted charcoal grill sat by itself in the middle of the yard. An old table frame was pushed up against the equally old fence. Wilf took notice of all of it, but instantly dismissed it as useless observation. He went straight to the side of the yard and made his way toward the front.

The dead were clustered around the front door. Wilf put a finger to his lips as he gently pushed Persephone ahead of him. She went straight for the car, unlocking it with the button on the key remote. Wilf hung back, flexing his left arm and making the Python dance around his muscles. Sensing his presence, the crowd turned. They regarded him for a moment and then came for him as a wave.

Wilf took two steps toward them before recognizing that it was both unnecessary and, probably, suicidal. Backpedaling, he made for the car. Persephone was already inside, thankful that it had started up without a hassle. Rounding the passenger side, Wilf got in and shut the door just as a man broke away from the pack and charged the car like a marathon runner.

"Holy crap!" Persephone said as he slammed into her door. "I haven't seen one move like that."

Wilf regarded the feral creature. Apparently, there was more to these dead folks than met the eye. While most of them shambled around like drunken senior citizens, there were obviously a few that had retained their physical strength and speed. It was something to keep in mind.

Wilf was still thinking about it when Persephone pulled away from the curb. She aimed the car back at the highway, but Wilf directed her around his own neighborhood for fear of running into any of Lord Brawn's crew. If they had guns, they'd shoot at anything that moved. Persephone agreed, checked the fuel gauge, and made a circuitous route back to the interstate.

Their short term goal was to go to Zeke's house and stock up on guns and ammunition. They didn't have a long term goal. Wilf felt responsible for coming up with one, though he knew that he was no more qualified to do so than she was. The only thing that he had going for him over Persephone was that he was completely unafraid. He didn't know why, either. The world had become a horror movie. In the past few hours, Wilf had fought in a way that he had always avoided. He knew that he would have killed those gang kids, if it had come down to a fight. He'd have had to. Still, what lay behind him and the lack of prospects ahead had no effect on him. He was the picture of serenity.

"What's that up ahead?" he asked suddenly.

There was a car on the side of the road. The windows were fogged and it was surrounded by people who seemed to be trying to get in. Wilf had to tell Persephone to stop, otherwise she would have simply driven by. Clearly the people trying to get into the car were dead. What piqued Wilf's interest was the notion that there must have been someone inside the car if the dead were all riled up.

"Stay here," he said to her, uncoiling the length of chain wrapped around his hand. Under other circumstances, he could whip these few inches of chain at an opponent causing pain and slight injury. His limited experience with the dead, however, had taught him that they didn't feel pain, so he had something else in mind.

The dead had already noticed them even before he exited the car. That was fine. Grabbing the lead attacker, a young man in sweat pants and a t-shirt, Wilf spun him around and wrapped the Python around his neck. Holding tightly to the chain, Wilf kept control of the man, using him as a shield against the others as they approached. Wilf was a powerful man with fists that could daze a rhinoceros. When the dead came to attack him, he would select one and punch him or her in the head. It took a couple of attacks for him to realize that he had to hit them really hard to stun them or knock them out. When the man in the sweat pants became useless as a shield, Wilf let him go and brought the Python in as his weapon of choice. The dead went down like dominoes.

The fighting was harsh and lasted several minutes. Wilf became so engrossed in the combat that he didn't notice the trunk of the car pop open. He didn't notice the small man get out of the driver's side. The man pulled a tire iron out of the trunk and came over to where Wilf was putting dead person after dead person to rest. He stayed clear of the main fight, keeping to the periphery, whacking people in the head with the tire iron. Before too long, the crowd began to thin. The fighting became much easier. If the people had been alive, they might have dispersed. As it stood though, it seemed that no amount of violence worked as a deterrent to the horrific creatures.

Standing amidst a sea of dead people, finally at rest, Wilf breathed in some much needed air and studied the man. They stood silently as the other car doors opened and a family got out.

The woman was taller than the man. Like him, though, she had chocolate brown skin and deep set eyes. They might have been brother and sister except they weren't. They were husband and wife. The boy was probably ten years old while the girl looked about six. She was wearing a pretty dress that seemed completely inappropriate for the end of the world.

"I don't know how to begin to thank you," the man said. "We've been trapped in that car for hours."

"You're a family," Wilf mused out loud. "An honest to goodness family."

The man smiled and nodded. "Geoff Ripley," he introduced, extending a hand. "This is my wife Shana and our kids, James and Michelle."

Wilf just gaped at them. "None of you were sick? None of you?"

Geoff pulled back his hand and retreated a couple of steps. The smile faded and he gripped the tire iron tightly.

But a great big smile broke out on Wilf's face. He took three giant steps forward and grabbed the smaller man in a bear hug. He felt like Devin grabbing *him*.

"Great!" he shouted with glee.

Geoff was taken by surprise but Persephone, still sitting in their commandeered car smiled a small smile.

"Where are you headed?" Wilf asked Geoff, releasing him and beaming at the kids.

"Um...my parents own a little diner about thirty miles up the road. We were going to meet up with them."

"Sounds great," Wilf said. "You can ride with us."

There didn't seem to be much of a choice. Though Shana did not smile, she did not object. Wilf unwound the chain from his arm, leaving bright red marks all along its length. He took over the driving while Persephone sat in the back with Shana and James. Geoff sat up front with Michelle in his lap. At first, Shana had wanted to bring the car seats...for safety. Wilf had laughed at that.

By the time they were settled into the car, a couple of more dead were wandering out of the trees on the side of the road. Wilf steered around them.

They traveled south for about ten minutes when the big man took an exit ramp.

"Umm...Where are you going?" Geoff asked.

"Quick stop," Wilf answered

"We need to go by my father's place," Persephone elaborated.

Shana looked around the car, clearly wondering how they were going to fit Zeke inside.

"Don't worry," Persephone said to her coldly. "He's dead."

With thin lips, Wilf shook his head sadly.



Zeke lived by himself in a three room house that had been built on a slab of concrete rather than a foundation. It was one of several dozen houses sitting on an open lot of land. There was a sign as they headed into the community that boasted Luxury Modular Homes. Wilf had only been there twice and didn't remember the way through the network of tiny houses. Persephone, though, knew exactly which way to go. She directed him as he drove. Ultimately, they pulled up to one of the less well kept houses. The roof shingles were falling off and the green paint was peeling. Everyone got out of the car to stretch their legs. Wilf went up to the house.

The door was locked.

"Do you have a key?" he asked Persephone.

She shook her head.

Sighing, he stepped back, raised his leg, and kicked through the frame.

Wilf didn't hesitate as he entered the house. Persephone came in behind him while the Ripley family waited on the street.

Zeke's house was not clean. There was a smell that defied the senses. Within a moment, they knew what it was. A woman, probably somewhere in her fifties, came running at them. She was wearing nothing but a pair of underwear and t-shirt that Wilf had remembered seeing Zeke wear a few times. The woman wasn't hurt, but she was clearly dead. There was that look that the dead all seemed to have on their faces. Both Wilf and Persephone were becoming experts at identifying it. Wilf didn't have the Python, but that didn't stop him. As the woman came into range, he hauled back with his right arm and punched her right in the forehead. She crumpled like a deflated paper bag.

"Anyone you know?" Wilf asked.

"Shut up."

Persephone hadn't been lying about her father's gun collection. Zeke had been one of those guys that really liked the power associated with heavy arms. Just having the guns in his house helped compensate for just how much of a failure he was. There were all kinds of rifles and handguns. Many of them had been purchased illegally, but that had never mattered to Zeke. He never even used them, really. He just liked to take them out and admire them.

Wilf picked up some semi automatic assault weapon and fiddled with it carefully. He didn't know anything about guns and couldn't even figure out how to eject the clip.

"Let's take it all," he said suddenly, grabbing up a duffel bag and shoving guns into it. "Don't forget the ammo."

Persephone said nothing as she helped him load up. He shouldered the bag, hefted a gun case in each arm, and left the house. There was more, but he couldn't carry it.

Geoff was standing by the car, talking with his little girl. Shana had gone off down the block with the boy.

"They shouldn't go too far," Wilf said. "These houses are probably crawling with the dead."

Geoff looked up, stricken, and opened his mouth to call out.

"I wouldn't do that," Wilf cautioned.

Geoff put Michelle into the car and ran down the block to get the rest of his family.

Reaching in to pop the trunk, Wilf said, "Your dad's funny."

"I know," the little girl answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world."

Wilf took his time putting the guns in the trunk. Once they got to this diner, he could sort through them and try to figure out how to use them. He waited for Geoff to return so that Michelle wouldn't be alone. He was just heading back inside when he noticed the faces in the windows. They were dead faces that saw him and his companions only as food. For the moment, they were just standing there, staring out at them. That wouldn't last long.

Calling out for Persephone, he grabbed one more arm load of weapons. This was going to be it, though. He wasn't armed with the Python and didn't want to risk being overwhelmed in the street.

Geoff was calling.

Persephone met Wilf in the living room. She was carrying a heavy tote bag filled with who knew what.

"Time to go," said Wilf.

As they came out of the house, they were greeted by the sound of breaking glass and angry snarls. Geoff already had the car started and was sitting in the driver's seat. At least he'd had the good sense not to close the trunk. Wilf dumped his stash and slid into the passenger seat. Persephone got into the back, crushing the two children between her and their mother.

By the time Geoff pulled off of the block, the first few straggling dead had pulled themselves through the shattered windows and started toward them. They were way too slow to come anywhere near the accelerating car, though.

On the road again, Persephone paid close attention to Shana. She hadn't been friendly, or even grateful when they'd met. Now, though, she seemed downright perturbed. She glared at her husband, who glanced in the mirror every once in a while to see if she was, in fact, glaring at him. Persephone watched this for several minutes until it dawned on her what was going on between them.

"You wanted to leave us," she said, staring directly at the other woman.

Shana's reaction was telling. She didn't even answer.

Wilf turned his head and looked angrily at Persephone.

"Don't look at me like that," the young girl admonished. "She wanted to go and he decided to wait."

Wilf would not be cowed. "Accusing people of things is not the best way to start a friendship."

"Neither is leaving them to a bunch of brain hungry zombies."

"Listen, Persephone..."

"No," said Geoff. "She's right."

"Geoff!" cried Shana.

He shook his head. "It's true. We didn't know whether or not to trust you and we talked about leaving while we had the chance."

Wilf now looked at Geoff. "Why? Why would you do that?"

"We saved your lives," said Persephone.

"You did. I know."

"Now we're even," said Shana. It was the first thing she'd said to them.

Persephone turned on her. "We're not even. Not killing someone is a lot different from saving her life."

"You're right," Geoff admitted. "But that's the point, isn't it? You saved us. You really did. Eventually, I would have had to get out of that car and try to fight my way through those...things. And then we'd just be stranded on the side of the road and probably out in the open now when it's getting dark. So you saved us. But what do you want in return? Why bother saving us?"

Persephone was steaming but Wilf, a more thoughtful individual, was considering the question. "Why didn't you leave us, then?"

Geoff shook his head. "Because you waited with Michelle when I went to get Shana and James. You wouldn't leave her alone by the car."

"So?" asked Persephone. "So what?"

“So, lives have value. My life is worth more to me than it is to either of you and my daughter’s life is worth even more than my own. But for you to be conscientious enough to stay with her showed me that our lives are valuable to you. It showed me that I can trust you.”

Wilf was nodding as Geoff pulled off of the interstate and headed south down 25A. The trees thinned out until there were hardly any at all. They were still two miles away when the diner came into view under the moonlight.

“It’s about numbers,” said Wilf, thinking about Dean and how he’d tried to recruit him. “It’s up to us to protect ourselves and, I think, we’re going to need to choose our companions well.”

Geoff was nodding. “My thoughts exactly.”

He pulled the car off the road and into the diner’s lot. The place was dark and there were several dead at the door trying to get in. Shana took in a gasp. Wilf wound the Python around his arm. Geoff reached for the tire iron.

“You stay back,” Wilf instructed him. “I can handle myself against these few but may not be able to break away to stop some from coming over to the car. You take care of those. The rest of you stay in the car.”

Opening the door, he attracted a few turned heads. The dead spun their bodies awkwardly and started marching toward him. Wilf didn’t hesitate. He still wasn’t afraid of them. He’d fought some tough men in his lifetime. These stumbling things were no more than bowling pins.

Wading into the thick of them, he bashed skulls with his left arm and shoved assailants away with his right. There were less than a dozen of them but, as he suspected, several were attracted to Geoff and the car. Geoff was able to hold his own with the tire iron, though. He was a smart, if not terribly fierce, fighter. Realizing that the women and children were safe inside the car, he stepped away when he had to give himself room. Within ten minutes, the battle was over. The dead lay down dead while the living stood triumphant.

Geoff tried the door, found that it was locked. “Dad!” he called out. “Mom?”

“Keep your voice down,” said Wilf. “I’ll check around back.”

The diner was a typical roadside affair. It had a glass front and a large neon sign on top. The sign was dark. Wilf was thinking that a sentry on the roof would be able to see for miles on this flat ground. If even a person came out of the trees on foot, they’d have almost an hour before that person reached them. Unfortunately, though, the place was hardly defensible. It needed some reinforcement, maybe some barbed wire. If they could dig a trench around the place, it would be great. Even with all of that, though, Wilf wasn’t sure they’d be able to hold out for long.

Around the back, he found nothing. There were a few more cars parked there. They would be worth investigating. Apparently, there had either been some nighttime business before everyone

had died or some very early morning business. Either way, he was pretty sure that he and Geoff had just murdered off the clientele. He'd have to search the bodies for keys to the cars and then search the cars for anything useful.

There was one dead person wandering around the back. She must have gotten disoriented, or whatever passed for disoriented among these freaks. Wilf almost didn't see her in her black dress. Fortunately, she wasn't quiet. He put the Python to work, impressed with the quickness of its strike.

Coming back around the front, he heard some voices. There were two that he didn't recognize, a man's and a woman's. When he emerged, he saw an older gentleman with white hair talking to Geoff. Presumably, this was Geoff's father. His mother was by the car with the children. She and Shana were talking in hushed voices while Persephone kicked at the sand a few yards away.

Geoff introduced his father as Roland Ripley. Roland was about Wilf's age, maybe five years older give or take. But the years hadn't been as kind to Roland as they had been to Wilf. He was slow moving. He seemed tired. Still, he was a combat veteran and knew about the guns. After the introductions, Wilf and Geoff started bringing them inside the diner. Even before they'd finished, Roland was laying them out on the tables around the diner, cataloging them. Every once in a while he'd make a comment that sounded almost nostalgic.

"I can show you how to shoot most of these," Roland told them all once they'd settled in for the night.

That was fine, but Wilf wasn't much of a gun person. He did much better with his fists. He was also much more concerned with stocking up on supplies and fortifying the diner. He insisted on there being round the clock watches, preferably on the roof. Roland showed him where there was an extension ladder in the basement and he and Geoff hauled it out the back. Then Wilf took himself up and sat himself down. He sat there for four hours and then went to get Persephone.

When morning came, there was a wolf at the door. A lone person had wandered up the road. He was wearing the remnants of a business suit. His shoes were worn through and his feet were bleeding. He was as dead as dead could be and still scratching at something in the dirt. When Wilf came out of the diner, he saw the man and went to take care of it. Then he climbed up the ladder, woke Persephone, and told her that if she couldn't be reliable to keep a watch then she wasn't going to be much good to them.

It became clear within a few hours who was the leader of their small group. While Roland was an extremely intelligent man with a keen sense of what to do to survive, he didn't have the air of authority that Wilf did. His wife, Myrna, was a much more commanding person, though her ideas were often short sighted.

By the early part of the afternoon, Wilf and Roland had drawn up plans for converting the diner into a mini fortress. It would take an awful lot of work during which time they would be vulnerable, but the only other choice was moving on. At this point, that didn't seem feasible.

Wilfred and Roland discussed the possibility and neither of them was too keen on it. Though they agreed that the roadside diner wasn't going to last them indefinitely, they needed to get a real handle on the world around them before trying to establish something more permanent.

Scavenging the cars in the lot had turned up little of use except the cars themselves. They pulled them into a semi ring around the front of the diner, leaving the two with the most gas available as getaway cars in case of the extreme. It didn't seem likely to Wilf that they would have to fend off a horde of the dead, but he wasn't taking any chances. After a light lunch, because all meals would be light for the foreseeable future, Wilf, Geoff, and Myrna took a pickup truck into town to try and find some of the things they needed to protect themselves. Persephone and Shana set to digging a pit for the bodies while Roland stood guard with an assault rifle.

The town was about ten miles down 25A. With Myrna as a guide, they figured to be able to move through it pretty quickly. With a little luck, they'd be able to get some wood, some tools, and a decent helping of canned goods. They didn't count on more survivors.

The town had a major hardware chain and that's where they went first. Wilf wanted to get some wooden boards for the glass front of the diner and he was hoping to find some fencing. He wasn't really worried about the undead. It would take dozens of them to present a real threat. But the gang kids were never far from his mind. As their supplies dwindled, they would branch out. He didn't imagine that this Lord Brawn had any thoughts of the future. Like a plague themselves, they would eat up their food and take whatever they could from everyone else. Whether or not they would head toward Wilf and his companions or in another direction was irrelevant. He wasn't worried about Lord Brawn per se. Where there was one pestilence, there were a dozen or a hundred others. There would be more gangs. There would be militants. There would be savage lunatics. There would be so many more enemies than the ones that they had faced and they would all present their own brands of danger.

Wilf should have realized something was amiss when they encountered no dead in the store. Instead, he reasoned that the store had been closed when the bug had done its real work. It was all very rational. But the doors were open, which contradicted that logic. He completely missed it, so they were taken completely by surprise while loading planks of wood onto a flatbed.

The woman who stepped into the aisle was blonde, probably somewhere in her mid to late fifties. Her face was creased and her hair was tied back in a sloppy pony tail, but her eyes were like steel and her hands were steady as she held the pistol. Wilfred had no doubt that she could put down all three of them before he got to within five feet of her. So he just lowered the plank he'd been pulling off of the shelf and raised his hands into the air.

"Jackie?" Myrna said. "Is that you?"

The blonde woman didn't move. "What do you want here, Myrna?"

Myrna seemed taken aback by the attitude and didn't answer right away. Wilf took a breath to say something but was quickly shushed by the woman.

“We’re over at the diner,” Myrna said finally. “We were just getting some wood to shore up the place.”

“Don’t go near the market,” Jackie said. “That’s our food.”

“How many of you are there?” Wilf asked gently.

“If you go near the market, we’ll kill you,” Jackie answered.

He nodded solemnly. The survival instinct had taken less time to take hold than he’d guessed. He watched her as she shifted her aim a bit, pointing the gun at each of them in turn. Then she disappeared from the aisle, her soft footfalls echoing away in the empty store.

“You know her?” Geoff asked his mother.

“It’s a small town, Geoffrey,” Myrna said, staring after the woman with an unidentifiable look in her eye.

Wilf waited a moment, then grunted as he lifted the plank onto the flatbed. In the end, they made three trips for wood. They grabbed package after package of batteries. They took anything and everything that they thought might be useful. Wilf kept a watchful eye as they worked. He slowed them down, but that didn’t seem to be much of a problem since this was going to be their only stop. He wondered if they were being watched. No one tried to stop them so whatever they were taking must have been considered unimportant. Anyone who would consider flashlights and batteries unimportant in the coming days was a fool, though.

On their way out, they passed through the registers and several racks of candy. Wilf hesitated, wondering if all of the food was off limits or just the food in the market. Grabbing a basket, he quickly emptied the contents of one rack into it. Geoff caught sight of him and called back his mother. Together, the three of them took all of the candy they could carry and tossed it into the truck.

On the way back to the diner, they saw a woman walking down the side of the road. Geoff slowed the truck, attracting her attention. But she was dead and Wilf urged him on. The woman turned as they passed and started following. Before long, she disappeared in the rearview mirror.

“This is it, then?” Geoff said, more to himself than to anyone else. “It’s been two days. Less. And this is what the world has become? People pointing guns at each other and the dead walking the roads looking for people to eat?”

“This is it,” Wilf agreed.

“Will it ever go back to normal?” Geoff asked.

Wilf shrugged. The diner had come into view, though they were still more than a mile off.

“There’s something wrong,” Myrna said, leaning forward. She was sitting between them on the bench seat.

Wilf was already struggling the Python around his arm, handicapped by the confined space.

There was a lot of movement around the diner. Dust was being kicked up everywhere. Even at this distance they could see there was a crowd. The whole area rippled like a heat effect. But it wasn’t hot enough. Wilf just hoped they were the dead and not something worse.

As they pulled closer, his suspicions were confirmed. There were a lot of them. He began to speculate about where they might have come from and what they were doing there. Most were dressed in casual clothing or pajamas. They were your average civilian who had died during the night. They were probably neighbors. In a previous life, Wilf had been a numbers guy. He began calculating the distance to the nearest community and the rate of speed at which these monstrosities moved. The solutions that popped into his head were close enough for him to deduce that this was a pack that had traveled together toward the diner. The real question was, what had attracted them and were there more to come?

Roland, Shana, and the kids were all on the roof. Wilf didn’t see Persephone anywhere. Roland had a sniper rifle and was picking off the dead one at a time. He had figured out that he had to shoot them in the head to stop them. There were bodies laying prone all over the ground. As Geoff pulled the truck around the diner, they could see that the extension ladder had either fallen or, more likely, been kicked away. There was no way for the four Ripleys to get off of the roof.

Where was Persephone?

“Back me up,” growled Wilf to Geoff.

The smaller man pulled the truck to a stop and the biker got out. He flexed his left arm, tightening the Python around his bicep and forearm. The dead took instant notice of him. He only hesitated when he noticed that the door to the diner was open and there were dead meandering around inside.

Where was Persephone?

Geoff didn’t know what to do as Wilf furiously dived into the dead. He was petrified just watching the big man fight. He was wearing nothing but a tank top and a pair of jeans. He fought with bare fists, unless you counted the Python. He used each of his hands very differently. The right arm, though powerful enough to stun or even kill one of the attackers, was used defensively. It bought him time as they came, sometimes pushing them away, sometimes hurling them to the ground. The left, with the Python coiled around it, was lethal. Wilf never wasted a moment with that arm. Every blow went to someone else’s head. Each was delivered with skull crushing force. Those that suffered the wrath of the Python did not get back up to fight. Wilf could even use it as a whip. A couple of times, he opened up his fist so that the chain could unwrap itself from just his hand and strike. He could then curl it back around his palm and fingers with the snap of his wrist and begin pounding them again. It really *was* a python.



Though Wilf had told Geoff to back him up, he didn't need it. The only action Geoff saw was when a teenage girl in a pair of stretch pants and a workout shirt started toward him. He lifted his tire iron to defend himself, but his dad just shot her in the head. At the sound of the shot, all of the dead attacking Wilf did a curious thing. They stopped their attack and looked up at Roland. In that instant, they all forgot about Wilf and started back toward the diner again. He stood in the midst of them, using the break to catch his breath. Then he killed three of them before they remembered he was there.

All in all, the battle took about ten minutes. There were still a few stragglers, some that had been wounded by Wilf's right fist but not killed. When it became clear that the big man was going to be victorious, Geoff, went around the back and lifted the ladder up so that his family could climb off of the roof. The children came first and then Shana. Roland decided to stay on top. He could see more of the dead coming across the plains and he wanted to use his gun to thin them out as much as possible.

"Where's Persephone?" Wilf said to Shana as they rounded the front of the diner. He was sweating and covered in blood. They weren't sure if any of it was his but they weren't going to ask.

"She ran inside," James answered. "We ran to the ladder because grampa said he could shoot them from the roof. But she didn't want to be with us."

"You've got about five minutes," Roland called down from the roof.

"Five minutes to what?" Geoff called.

Nobody bothered to answer.

"Give me a shout when it's down to thirty seconds," Wilf called back up, running inside the diner.

There were several of the dead inside. They were mostly just wandering about, moving up and down the aisle and behind the counter. Wilf was a bit shy about taking them down inside. A bloody battle would not be ideal. Then again, as the first of them came toward him, he did what he needed to do.

Two minutes went by before he had them all down. Geoff had appeared in the doorway, awestruck as ever by Wilf's ability to fight without any stray thoughts getting in the way of his skill. The truth was that Wilf had always had a knack for fighting. He'd fought a lot as a kid and again when he'd taken on the identity of biker. After he'd gotten married he'd mostly stopped. When the kids had come, he'd quit cold turkey. That was all behind him now, though. That was another life.

"Persephone!" he shouted.

He was answered by a shuffling from within the kitchen. Two more dead, a black guy that looked like a biker Wilf had fought three years before and a skinny skateboard kid, came through the swinging doors. Wilf dispatched them easily enough and headed into the kitchen himself. There were three more people huddled around the freezer door. Wilf came up behind them and split the skull of the closest one before the others even had a chance to turn. They were dead, again, before another thirty seconds had passed.

From outside, he heard Roland call his name.

Time was running out.

Opening the freezer door, Wilf was assaulted by cold air. The sealed room had maintained its temperature despite the loss of power. Persephone was huddled and shivering on the floor.

"Out," Wilf ordered, not even realizing that, until that moment when he spoke, she had been terrified of him. Filthy and bloody as he was, there was little to distinguish him from the dead.

Scrambling to her feet, she came out of the freezer. Wilf remember to shut the door and ran back through the diner as Roland's calls became more frantic and was joined by gunshots.

Once outside, Wilf was confronted by another couple of dozen dead. He told Persephone to get on the roof. She opened her mouth to protest, but thought better of it. The time for petulance had passed. They were all in it together which, she decided, was better than being in it all by herself.

Roland gave Wilf some gun support but his skills were rusty. As the dead surrounded the sixty three year old biker, the elder Ripley ceased fire but kept his gun trained on the group. If Wilf went down, he was getting the first bullet.

Watching this second fight was like seeing a replay of the first one. It took a little longer for Wilf to go through them, but he was successful. The big difference in the outcome was how winded he was. He hadn't done anything like this in a long time. With tired eyes, he looked up at the people on the roof.

Roland stared down at him. "There are more," he said. "Just a few, but they're headng in our general direction."

Wilf nodded. "Stay up there, then, would you?"

Roland nodded.

"The rest of you come down," Wilf ordered. "We need this truck unloaded and the bodies cleared out from inside the diner."

As his companions came down from the roof one by one, Wilf gave them their orders. If the dead were going to continue to come straggling up the road, he was going to have to defend the

diner. It would be up to the others to begin constructing some of the fortifications for which they'd brought supplies. He looked out to the horizon and saw a few figures in the distance. It was hard to tell, but it didn't look like they were making their way toward the diner. Ultimately, though, something would attract them. He didn't know whether he had five minutes or an hour. It didn't matter. For the foreseeable future, events were going to dictate his behavior rather than the other way around.

Inside the diner, the cleanup had already begun. James was helping, but Michelle was just sitting at a table and staring at them. Wilf went over to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of water. As he gulped it down it, he went over to talk to Myrna.

"Can you shoot?" he asked her.

"A little," she replied. "It's been a while."

"Roland can't stay up there by himself indefinitely. You'll have to split the watches with him. You should teach Shana how to shoot also."

"What about Geoffrey and your girlfriend."

Wilf laughed. "It's been a real long time since anyone called herself my girlfriend. Anyway, Geoff and Persephone have to build."

"Will it all be enough?"

Wilf shrugged. "For a little while at least. Eventually, we'll have to move on, try to build a community."

"That's not what Jackie was thinking?" Myrna said.

"Jackie?" Wilf asked. "Oh, that woman back at the hardware store. Yeah, we've all seen a lot of end of the world movies. Those every man for himself types are going to get a strong dose of reality. Maybe a fatal dose. The only way we survive this is by working together."

Myrna smiled. "I sure am glad you found us, Wilf."

He smiled back, then went out front with his bottle of water. Roland and Myrna had had some lawn furniture set up outside for the warmer weather. It was all toppled now and some of it was broken, but Wilf found a serviceable chair. He righted it and sat in it. He felt a little bit of guilt about just sitting around while the others were working, but the blood on his shirt and the Python wrapped around his arm were a reminder to the group that his job was the most important of all.

Over the next few days, the dead came wandering around often. Most of the groups were small, a dozen people give or take. Wilf began to learn how to fight them. They were an uncomplicated bunch, their soul concern seeming to be eating him. With every new fight, there was a new concern. Blood splattered onto his lips and into his nose. His knuckles cracked and

bled from both the constricting hold of the Python and the impact of blow after blow after blow. But he never mentioned his concerns to the others and he never got sick.

Though Persephone never warmed up to Shana, she got on well with Geoff and the kids. It made Wilf feel a bit better about bringing her along since he didn't really like her himself. She wasn't very nice to him and complained often about the work they had to do.

There was a lot of work.

Under Roland's direction, they boarded up the windows, leaving peepholes so that they could see out. They set up a sentry station on the roof complete with food and water should anyone get trapped there. You still needed the ladder to get up, but there was a rope on top in case the ladder should get knocked down. A few yards from the diner there was an entrance to a cellar. Roland and Myrna had used it as storage for equipment, but they turned it into sleeping quarters and the armory. The last major fortification they created was the fence they fashioned out of wooden planks and two by fours. They crisscrossed the boards all around the diner and strung the whole thing with barbed wire. On more than one occasion, it served as a useful obstacle when Wilf couldn't keep them all from approaching the diner.

After a week, the group had a nice system going. Wilf, though, was on the verge of exhaustion. Geoff came out to help him fight every once in a while, but he wasn't nearly as effective. There wasn't a span of more than three hours during which Wilf was free. He used that time to sleep and to eat and do little else. They wondered if the trickle of the dead would ever come to a stop. Surely, they could not go on like this. They would either need some help or they would have to move on. Though they couldn't quite make up their minds, the solution fell right into their laps.

Roland saw the cars coming up the road minutes before they arrived. There were three of them, though there were only five people. One of them was Jackie, but she was in no condition to speak. She was badly wounded. One of the dead had gotten hold of her and taken a bite out of her leg. She had since developed a fever and was declining rapidly. As Persephone and Myrna helped the newcomers bring her inside the diner, Shana looked on with mistrust.

"We work together," hissed Myrna to her daughter in law.

The leader of the group, or at least the man who did the talking, was a short balding man in his mid thirties. Wilf could tell that the man had regularly shaved his head, but now the crown of stubble around the sides and back was starting to grow in. He didn't wait to be addressed, nor did he seem interested in the group as a whole. He went straight to Myrna, who was not only the matriarch of the group, but seemed the most authoritative. She was, of course, completely the opposite. It was one thing for her to deal with her own children, but it was quite another when confronted by complete strangers. She drew in an expectant breath when the bald man approached her and started giving her orders.

Wilf, concerned with Jackie's condition, didn't notice the exchange between the bald man and Myrna. It was Persephone who caught his arm and nudged his attention toward the two of them. He scowled as he looked over.

Marching over, he came up right behind the man and put a firm hand on his shoulder. “What’s the trouble?” he asked. “We’ll do the best we can for your friend.”

The bald man looked up at Wilfred, who stood about six inches taller, and showed no indication of backing down. “Jackie? I’m not worried about Jackie. The only cure for what she’s got is a bullet in the head. We only stopped here to gather up as many supplies as you have and move on.”

“Now hold on a minute,” Wilf said. “I can see you’ve been through a lot, but...”

“Been through a lot? Listen here, Moose, the whole damned town’s been overrun. I don’t even know where they came from? We woke up one morning and our watch was dead. Twenty of us made a break for it and what you see here is everyone who made it.”

Wilf swallowed hard. He knew that the man had called him *Moose* because of the way he stood and the way he looked, but it made him think of the Tucker brothers. They had been on their way to visit their sick mother before she died. Wilf wondered what had ever become of them.

“You’re as thick headed as you are thick skinned,” the man assessed. “There are hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. And they’re on their way here. They’re going to run right through this place and chew you people up.”

Next to him, Wilf could feel Myrna begin to shiver. They had seen as many as thirty or thirty five. Wilf had spent eight days fighting those things in between meals and naps. He was as good a weapon against the dead as just about any gun. But hundreds of them? No, he couldn’t take on that many. It was ludicrous.

Heading outside the diner, he called up to Roland, “Can you see anything?”

“What am I looking for?” Roland asked.

“People. A lot of people.”

“I don’t see anyone yet. Are these people living or dead?”

“Dead,” Wilfred said.

Turning, he found both Myrna and Persephone standing near him.

“What are we going to do?” Myrna asked him.

He didn’t know yet. But that didn’t bother him. He was considering the time it would take for a living person to walk the ten miles from the town to the diner. He estimated somewhere in the neighborhood of three hours at a brisk pace. The dead didn’t walk a brisk pace. At least, most of them didn’t and any of those crazy aberrations would hopefully fall into line with the horde as they marched. Wilf was just formulating an idea when the man came out of the diner. His other

three companions were all women. One was a tiny little person with a hook nose and spindly fingers. She couldn't have been more than four foot ten and looked like a child next to Wilf. Another was a deceptively tall woman whose torso was very long and whose legs were proportionately short. The third woman looked like Jackie, but was much younger, perhaps even in her teens. She was wiry and athletic. A jagged red line ran across her forehead and down around her eye. It looked like a knife wound that was healing badly. She wore a perpetual scowl on her face.

“Are you coming?” the man said to Wilf.

“What's your name, friend?” Wilf asked him.

“My name? You want to know my name?”

“Shut up, Tom,” the girl who looked like Jackie said. “All you do is answer questions with questions and shout about everything. We've got a couple of hours at least, so why don't you just calm down?”

Wilf smiled at her. “Thank you. And you are?”

She pushed a hand out at him. “Alyssa Munro,” she said.

Myrna's eyes bugged out. “Alyssa? Little Alyssa? I haven't seen you since you were three years old.”

Alyssa nodded. “That's because you and my mother don't like each other, Mrs. Ripley.”

Persephone laughed out loud.

Wilf noticed something that passed between Alyssa and Myrna, but let it go. The tall woman was Roberta Koehler and the tiny woman was Belinda Young. The man was Tom Alicides. He was as intimidated by Alyssa as he was by everyone else. Despite her admonishment, he continued to cry about how the sky was falling and that they needed to gather everything they could and get out.

“We're not leaving,” Wilf said decisively. This was the first thing that shut Tom up. “We don't have any idea what the world is like twenty or thirty or a hundred miles away and I'm not willing to jump out of the frying pan just yet.”

“But the fire is heading right toward us,” Alyssa said.

“They're just walking. If they don't know we're here, they should pass right on through without stopping.”

“The cellar?” asked Myrna.

Wilf nodded. "Lord knows I could use the rest."

"Wait," said Tom. "You want to hide in the cellar? What if they find us? What if they get inside?"

"You don't have to stay."

"We don't have any supplies," Tom said. "That's why Jackie told us to come here."

"Jackie pointed a gun at us and told to stay away from the market," Persephone shouted at him. "What do we care if you have any supplies?"

Alyssa, at least, had the decency to look away. Tom was about to rebuke, but Wilf cut him off.

"We're not going to fight about this. What Jackie did was wrong and I'm not going to compound that by doing the same thing. We want to build a community and a community needs people. Tom, you and yours are welcome to stay and help us. You're also free to go, but you're not taking any of our supplies with you."

"What if I don't like those choices?" Tom challenged.

Wilf punched him right in the jaw. He pulled the punch so that there wouldn't be any more than a bruise on his chin, but he wanted to see just what Tom could take. Tom took it well. He staggered back a couple of steps, but didn't fall. He took a step forward, but Wilf put up his hand.

"Go or stay. If you try to make a third option, I'll kill you." There was no hidden meaning in the big man's words. Though he was impressed with Tom's resolve, there was no doubt that he wasn't on Wilf's level. They needed to prep the cellar for an extended stay.

"I'm staying," Alyssa said. Both women nodded in agreement. They were terrified of staying. The idea of being locked in a basement while the dead wandered overhead was almost beyond their ability to comprehend. But their imaginations painted an even worse picture of what lay ahead for them if they ventured out on their own. Reluctantly, Tom agreed to stay as well. A day before, he had been part of a much larger group of people. They had taken care of each other. But he had watched most of them either get torn apart or turn into those things. Alyssa, Roberta, and Belinda were all he had left. He wasn't about to leave them.

Wilf ordered Roland to stay on the roof and keep a watch out for the horde. They would have a good head start into the basement when he spotted them. In the meantime, just about everyone else began moving absolutely all of their supplies into the cellar.

Tom pulled Wilf aside. Wilf was about to cut him off when Tom lowered his voice, "This is serious. It's about Jackie."

“What about her?”

“She can’t come down there with us. She’s going to die very soon and then she’ll turn into one of those monsters.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve seen it happen a couple of times. Whatever kept us safe from the virus, or whatever it is, in the first place doesn’t work against a bite.”

“She was bitten?”

Tom nodded. “A dozen times over. We can’t save her.”

“Do the others know?”

“Of course they know. We’ve all gone through this together. Alyssa didn’t want to leave her mother behind.”

Wilf walked away and went back into the diner. Jackie was laid out on the counter. Her state could hardly be called conscious. This was the woman who had pointed a gun at him and Geoff and Myrna. Wilf shook his head sadly.

Alyssa, carrying two large cans of mixed vegetables, stopped next to him and lingered. “I know she’s going to die,” she said.

Wilf nodded again. “She’s suffering.”

“Do you have any guns?” Alyssa asked. “We lost all of ours.”

“Yeah. We’ve got a few.”

“If you give me one, I can end it for her.”

Without a question, Wilf went out the door and down into the basement. He took one of the smallest caliber guns he could identify and loaded exactly one bullet into it. Despite all of his own preachings of community he still didn’t trust these people.

Back upstairs, he carried Jackie out of the diner and laid her out on the ground out back. Handing the gun to Alyssa, he gave her some privacy. A few moments later, they heard the shot.

There wasn’t time to bury her. They had too much to do. While keeping a lookout, Roland began to draw up a mental plan in case they were overrun in the basement. The last resort was a bullet to the head for each of them, but he thought they might be able to hold off the dead for a while if they broke through. They were well armed and if they shot them as they came down the



stairs, the bodies would build a natural barrier against further intruders. Unfortunately, he didn't have a plan for getting out of the basement afterwards except, of course, the bullet to the head.

The enormity of the horde took him completely by surprise. Despite Tom's best efforts to warn them, he just hadn't expected to see what he saw. At first, they started as specks on the road. Eventually, though, those specks grew into blotches until the road and the surrounding plains were covered in the black and red mass of the marching dead. It looked like a protest march. Roland stared at them, impotent sniper rifle in his hands. He was beyond terrified. He knew then that Tom had been right. They should have run.

It was Geoff that noticed his father just sitting on the roof staring. From below, he couldn't yet see the mob, but the look on Roland's face was plain enough.

"Dad?" he called up. "Can you see them?"

Absently, Roland nodded.

"How far out are they? Dad, how far?"

"Not far enough," Roland whispered.

Wilf came up behind Geoff and looked up at the older man. "What's wrong with him?"

"They're coming," Geoff said.

"Roland, get down here," Wilf ordered, but the old man didn't move.

With a curse, Wilf told Geoff to get everyone into the basement. Then he headed on up the ladder.

"What's the matter with you?" he said before even looking out to the horizon. Then he saw them and he knew.

It had been a long time since Wilfred Python had been awed by anything.

"Let's go," he told Roland. "Now."

"I want to stay," Roland said. "I just...want to watch them."

Wilf grabbed the other man's face with both of his hands and pointed his eyes right at his own. "Are you raving?"

Roland shook his head. "They won't be able to get me up here."

"Sure, maybe. But they'll never leave either. The whole point is that they don't know there's anything around here to eat. Now get yourself down that ladder and into the basement."

With a quick glance out into the distance, Roland nodded and started down. Shaking his head out of exhaustion, Wilf went after him. On the way to the cellar entrance, he made sure that the door to the diner was secure. He didn't want any of them wandering inside and getting stuck in there. He went to the car and grabbed the Python, draping her over his neck as if she were a real snake. Then he made sure that everyone was downstairs and sealed the door.

It was dark in the basement except for a small battery operated lamp. They had decided to conserve the batteries and the energy. Wilf thought it would be best if most of everyone just went to sleep. There were eight cots down there, enough for the original party. He and Geoff gave up theirs. Michelle curled up next to Shana on another and Tom refused to take one. That left just enough for everyone else. They lay down in the dark and tried not to think of the storm that would be passing overhead.

There was little to do. Wilf had ordered absolute silence. Anyone violating that rule was subject to being knocked unconscious. It was the most awful torture, sitting there, doing nothing, waiting...waiting...waiting...

A sprinkle of dust fell from the ceiling. All eyes looked up. Wilf put a finger to his lips, reminding them of the rule. He kept a close eye on Tom who was sweating and shivering. They began to feel a vibration in the ground and realized it was caused by the hundreds of feet pounding the ground above them. The falling dust rained down on them in streamers, making them wonder if the whole ground would collapse, burying them under cement and dirt and dead bodies.

James sneezed.

Wilf looked at him quickly, but didn't do or say anything.

Something rattled at the door above.

Tom tensed and took a step, but Wilf put out a hand.

"They're coming down," Tom said and Wilf whirled around, pushing the small man up against the wall and pressing his hand up against his mouth. He was totally silent but his eyes held a warning that Tom would not soon ignore.

The rattling intensified and Tom went rigid under Wilf's grip. Wilf raised his fist, holding it in front of the other's face. Tom relaxed, but only a little. Letting him go, Wilf motioned to Roland. He grabbed up his rifle, urging Shana and Myrna to do the same. Wilf began wrapping the Python around his arm, determined to die fighting rather than taking his own life. Slowly, he approached the stairs and listened. There was definitely someone, or multiple someones, at the door. The rattling, however, sounded random, rather than a regular shaking. It was possible that they were just walking over it. Slowly, crouched down, Wilf padded silently up the stairs and observed. He was right. There was no regularity to the disturbance. The huddling survivors had not been discovered.

Returning to the basement, Wilf gave them all a thumbs up. For the moment, they were safe.

It went on like that for hours. They stifled their sneezes and controlled their terror. Whenever the door began to rattle, Wilf went up to make sure it was just happenstance. It was. Every time.

Eventually, the intervals of rattling ceased. The dust stopped falling. The vibrations dulled. The storm was passing. A silent conversation passed between Wilf and Geoff and Roland about how long they should wait before going up. An hour? A day? They settled on waiting through the night.

With the disturbance from above gone, most of them were able to sleep. Tom curled up on the floor by the wall. Wilf watched him and felt sad. He saw a man whose confidence was a façade. He was trying desperately to adjust to this world and failing. All he had managed to do was keep on breathing. Wilf was certain he'd been a completely different person before the ApocalypZe.

When morning came, they were as reluctant to leave their shelter as they were eager to be free of it. Wilf stretched his body after a two hour nap and slowly began winding the Python into position. He motioned that everyone should wait while he went up the stairs. The basement doors opened out so he might be able to get out and slam them shut before any of the dead could get in.

There was no point in hesitating.

Opening the door quickly, he lifted himself out of the cellar and shut it behind him. He hadn't really known what to expect, but certainly not what he saw. Despite the trails of ragged footprints, the whole area was largely undisturbed. The diner stood untouched in the sunlight. A couple of the sections of fencing had been knocked over but not badly damaged. Wilf could see one person over by one of the cars in the lot. She was on the ground, just sitting and leaning up against the tire. Her leg looked broken. When she saw Wilf, she began to drag herself forward. Apparently, the voraciousness of the disease overrode any sense of pain. The Python ended her quickly.

A quick search of the area showed nothing. It seemed anti-climactic and yet he was glad of it. Going back to the basement, he threw open the doors and announced that they could all come out. One by one, they emerged, shaking his hand, clapping him on the back, thanking him. Tom came out last and just stood there, staring at him.

“What?” Wilf said tiredly.

“How do you do it?” Tom asked. “I just...I can't do it like you do.”

“There's no secret, Tom. You just find your role and you play it.”

Taking the big biker's hand in both of his own, Tom shook it vigorously. “Thank you, Wilf. I'll do that. I'll find my role. Would you mind, though, if I look while I'm following you?”

Wilf started to laugh. He grabbed Tom in a Moose Tucker bear hug, lifting him off of the ground. Then he clapped him on the back and walked away.

Persephone came up to him and said, “You should get some sleep. The rest of us can handle clearing the supplies out of the basement.”

“Leave a stock in there in case we need it as a shelter again,” Wilf said. “I also want to reinforce that door.”

She nodded. As he was starting away, she said, “Wilf?”

He turned back.

“You can’t just throw away the past.”

The old man wrinkled his brow in confusion.

Reaching into her pocket, Persephone pulled out a folded up photograph. She unfolded it and handed it to him. Wilf looked down at his family and felt his eyes glaze over.

“I took it for you,” she said. “I knew you would want it.”

He nodded. “Thanks, Persephone.”

She wandered away. She was right, he knew. The past was an important part of building the future. A whole lot of the man he was was owed to his wife and children. To bury them with the world that had been lost would be a tragedy heaped on top of so many other tragedies. So he pocketed the photo and walked around the diner.

“Wilf?” Roland had climbed back up on the roof.

Wilf lifted his chin so that he could look at him.

“You may want to have a look at this.”

*What now?* thought Wilf, as he mounted the ladder.

Up on top of the diner, he accepted the binoculars from Roland and looked out to where he was pointing. There were several figures in the distance. He counted eight, but it was tough to tell. Each of them was wearing a dark robe over his clothing. The hoods were pulled up over their heads, hiding their faces. Though the robes didn’t match, they were clearly wearing them so that they stood out. They weren’t dead, but that didn’t mean they weren’t bad news. Wilf wondered what men in robes, men who looked like they belonged to some cult, meant in the aftermath of the ApocalypZe.

Flexing his left arm, Wilf felt the reassuring pull of the Python. It looked as if sleep was going to have to wait.