

Every time I see them, they're doing something even weirder. Last I saw, they were sitting around, talking about how it will be once everything gets back to normal.

Currently, they're standing in a circle, pointing at each other and saying words.

Point of view: you're a fly on the wall during a beginner level improv class.

“Rush,” Chase said, pointing at Noah.

“Styx,” Noah said, pointing at Bryan, who it should be noted is not a student, but a professor.

“This is stupid, AC/DC,” Bryan said, pointing at Tina.

He wasn't wrong, of course, it was stupid, but for so many more reasons that what he meant. To him, it was stupid because he had a deep rooted hatred for improv from being told he was doing it wrong due to some poor instruction he'd been given during his first ever lesson, but then there was also the consideration that the whole exercise was ultimately pointless. I'd been watching them for the past few days and indeed they'd done the same generic task, going around in circles and saying their own assigned word, trying to forget about us, the bugs that can suck enough blood to kill or turn them, and how seeing as nobody was helping yet, clearly nobody would come.

Unfortunately for this man, however, when a group of English majors is trapped in a building and the likes of me are lurking around, it apparently isn't that easy to stay amused.

And the likes of me that I just mentioned? To the naked eye, you'd think I'm a harmless mosquito, but actually the creature that is speaking to you now resides within that creature: I cause infection. I am a

virus, just biding my time, waiting until I can find an easy mark, and bite it, turning it into a zombie.

The mosquito is just the vessel I use to transmit the disease.

“*Why* a mosquito?” is beyond me, but they are pretty unassuming, and while they and humans don't have a great relationship, it's not like they'd be squished the moment they're seen like a wasp or yellow jacket would.

I didn't exist two weeks ago, yet already I've evolved to beyond my wildest comprehension. When I came into being, I sprouted from a mere animal bite, going from a tiny insect into a human infection that spread incredibly easy. From there, I spread into friends, family, and all other creatures. As I got passed on, I gained power and skill, and now I can do pretty much anything I want, and I'm getting better and better. My only objective is to grow and learn, to spread as far as possible and wipe everyone else out.

You're probably wondering how a zombie virus that is transmitted through mosquito bites even happens. Well, you humans do love a good origin story, so here it goes: as far as I understand it, I was birthed in such polluted water that the condition from which I emerged caused a chemical imbalance that causes a hunger for human flesh and general deterioration of the human nervous system. See, when they're born, mosquitoes hatch from an egg and emerge as a larva that spends some time living in the water. But if that water is so full of chemicals that it can't properly support and nurture the larva as it turns into a pupa, you end up with my host: a mosquito I infected.

The mosquito whose body I reside in hatched

from a man made pond, located on a golf course in a place called Springfield, Ohio. But now we live at a nearby college campus.

I watch the group stop playing their mad game, and try not to allow the wings of my host to make too much noise.

The humans begin to speak, and after a few statements from some of the other people, what I believe to be a male and a female leave the room together.

The female has platinum blond hair that I know she'll never be able to maintain in this new world I've created for her and her kind, although that does seem to be the only bit of herself that she's been able to modify. She has a fairly generic appearance: green eyes, tan skin, average body.

Her companion however, is a different story: he has the classic good looks that come with bad teenage films.

Apparently what they wanted to do was personal and I wouldn't understand, so I'll back off from adding my commentary to the next part, aside from letting you know I found it annoying.

"But yeah," Nellie sighed, "this isn't fun. Um, do you mind if I stop in the bathroom for a quick second?" She was feeling gross.

"Sure, sure," Carl agreed brightly.

I watched as she slipped into the bathroom and took what was known as a whore's bath, but unable to do anything about her hair, which was short anyway.

I'm sure she would have made a bigger effort if she knew this was the last chance she'd get to use water for quite some time, but in her mind, they'd

only be in the English building for another day or so. Without knowing what happened to humans after we bit them, she wouldn't know how different the world was becoming: of course she'd think life would go back to the way it was and she'd be back to dorm life, attending classes, and casually strolling outside.

None of them would do well in that situation.

“Feeling better?” Carl asked as Nellie exited the bathroom.

“Good enough to go out in public like this, no,” she answered. “Good enough to hook up with you, yes.”

I'd been on this campus long enough to understand what was going to take place. I left to see if there were any of my children nearby, should these two leave this room at any time soon. I didn't witness any of the following account.

Having done this together many times before in their four and a half years in college, Carl was aware exactly what Nellie wanted. Before he could deliver on it, however, Nellie interrupted him.

“Wait,” Nellie said, taking his hands in hers, “this is all wrong. We can't do this right now.” A few thoughts flashed through Carl's head: had he read the signals wrong? Was the act of kissing her too passionate right now?

No, it was probably just that there were those bugs out there.

He asked if that was the problem, and she confirmed. Something weird was going on outside and while making out with him sounded nice, the idea also felt weird.

The next bit reverts back to the rest of the group and has little, if anything, to do with intimacy, so the virus is back in the narrator's chair, baby.

Differentiating between a human and a zombie can be done in a variety of different ways, but one of the earliest signs of change is a lack of emotion. However, I saw Bryan have a sudden moment of clarity that he should probably make like a professor and check in to see how his students were faring emotionally.

With the help of a student.

He had one student who had made it very clear at the beginning of the semester that she wanted to go by the name Comic Sans and never once be called by her given name.

Fact was, nobody even remembered what her name had been on the attendance sheet the first day anyway (Simone); Bryan had made a point to rewrite it so that it read Comic Sans instead of what her parents had named her. Throughout the semester, it became clear that Ms. Sans wasn't just into the font that nobody else seemed to like, but also a lot of other media and other such things that were very uniquely only interesting to her.

"Ms. Sans," he called, "why don't you tell me some of the trivia you have up in that head of yours." She knew a lot of random stuff.

With a shrug she started to rattle off random facts: a fact *about* Comic Sans, one about something known as a "hopping vampire", and some random things about songs.

"Did that give you a good dopamine rush?" the professor asked.

Comic Sans grinned and nodded.

If it had been me, I'm sure I'd have felt the same as if I'd just had a good feeding.

Anyway, Comic Sans was in a better mood, and Bryan was exhausted. He asked the student to check in with her classmates to see how they were all doing.

He was a weak human, and he needed to rest.

I was curious to see how they were doing, so I paid attention as she began by checking in on the alliterative brother/sister pair.

Charlie was leaning on Chase's shoulder; he'd taken on the role of protector for her quite well so far, but Comic Sans reasoned that just meant she ought to take extra care to see how he was faring.

“Correct me if I'm wrong,” she said, “but aren't you and Beth in a relationship?”

Another stupid human thing I'll never understand: relationships. As far as I can tell, people who aren't in them don't like them, and even those who have them often don't much care for them, either.

This did not seem to be the case for this individual, however, as he perked up immediately, abandoning his post as fraternal support and said, “Indeed. She and I had our first date several months ago and have been going out since.”

They started dating before I even came into being.

Although Comic Sans had instigated this conversation, she appeared uncomfortable to hear the story told.

“You know I never miss an opportunity to talk about this,” Chase was saying, very animatedly. I sat on the wall, willing the body I was currently inhabiting to flap as subtly as possible, trying to make little noise

as this human began talking about the first time he went on a date with Beth, who must have been the skinny one with long brown hair and a pink shirt and blue jeans sitting two seats away from him.

I noticed she wasn't wearing shoes. I wondered whether or not this was on purpose.

The best I could follow from what he said, the girl liked cheesy horror films, and she'd been wanting to go out with him for quite some time. He found out through his sister, Charlie, and the night was finally coming up that he and Beth were going on a date. As the night approached, however, she came down with a bad flu bug that had her completely bed-ridden.

"And so it came to be that the first time my girlfriend saw *Ghostbusters* and *Ghostbusters 2*, she was high on Nyquill," Chase finished off.

"He would have taken me to dinner, but I hadn't been able to keep anything down for about three days," Beth put in.

It seemed like they'd told this story before.

"You two seem fine," Comic Sans told them, making finger guns and pointing them at the two.

Being a simple zombie virus, I wasn't able to tell if any of these beings were the way they normally were, all I knew is they weren't craving human flesh yet and were therefore not working for me yet. I'm not strong enough yet to make them do my bidding, but I want to be able to do that. I'm watching, waiting to learn what I can, and so far all I know is that they care for each other and don't want to become whatever it is that is happening to the things outside.

But I know more than they do. They think I'm the only thing to fear. They think it's mosquito bites. They have no idea what they're actually up against;

that once they get bitten, they become a monster that infects and makes the infected infect, and that there's no stopping what is going to happen.

I love this.

As I laughed to myself about how in the dark these humans were, I saw Comic Sans approach Beth about a horror movie called *Frozen* that I guess she'd screened a few semesters ago.

It was one of Beth's favorite movies, and while Comic Sans didn't necessarily get it, she'd seen some of the other films by the guy who'd written and directed the film and thought those were pretty good.

"So, uh, would you still watch *Frozen*?" Comic Sans joked, resisting the urge to add "LOL" to the end.

"Yeah, I feel like you'd even like it now," Beth replied, glancing around the room. "You'd relate to the trapped feeling now, like I did." Her voice brightened suddenly. "I mean, at least there aren't any legends about this building or anything." Yet another horror reference, *Hatchet*. Okay, technically a series of horror films but by the same gentleman. "Unless there are and we just don't know them." Beth widened her eyes for dramatic effect.

"Sure, but that would probably just be an old professor holding a grudge," Comic Sans replied. "What's the worst that type of person could do? Probably wouldn't have any kind of weapon."

"Hey, learning is power," Bryan put in.

"I do know of a lot of allegedly haunted dorms I learned about from a podcast, if that counts," Beth admitted. "Scare You to Sleep. It's really fun to listen to that episode the night before I leave for college."

"I love finding out how much of a psycho you

are,” Tina said. “Legit, why aren't we best friends?”

“You're a psych minor.” The lack of hesitation in her response either meant it was a joke or a thought out response. Tina probably preferred to think it was a joke, planning to become best friends with Beth in the future.

“Tina, Beth, you two seem pretty normal, for yourselves,” Comic Sans noted. “Why don't you work on becoming besties, while I check on everybody else?”

“Okie dokie,” Tina agreed.

“Beth, explain to me again why you never wear shoes.”

Comic Sans walked away as Beth started explaining it. I stayed behind, because I had to admit, I was curious.

“In all honesty, I had a therapist a while back who told me about healing energy and convinced me that not wearing shoes would ground me,” she explained. “Bradley's way more into the culture than I am, but I'm learning and this was an easy way to incorporate it into my every day life.”

Perhaps Comic Sans already knew this, as she'd moved on to see how another student was handling things.

Next up was stoner and *Lost* fanatic, Noah.

This school had everything.

Comic Sans didn't know much about the series, but there had been enough memes for her to know what the popular opinions were about it.

She knew how to make a fan angry.

“I didn't think Desmond added much to that show *Lost*,” she said, appearing seemingly from nowhere at Noah's side. Bradley, standing close by,

sighed heavily, having been inundated with Noah's speech that could have (and he didn't doubt at one point did) include a PowerPoint presentation.

“Now that is just an ignorant statement,” Noah scoffed, taking particular note to how she'd simply called it *that show* Lost. “Lost was weird, and just when you thought it couldn't get any weirder, boom, there's Desmond, and Penny, then Henry Gale (or Ben Linus, depending on the season), and you're *completely* wrong about—”

“I legitimately have no opinion about any of this,” Comic Sans deadpanned. “Bryan told me to check in on everybody and make sure we're all ourselves.”

“So, naturally you said something stupid about my favorite show,” Noah laughed with a nod.

“Indeed that is what happened,” Comic Sans told him. “You keep doing your weird stoner thing, I'm going to go check in on Bradley.”

I hoped that this young adult fazed out more than actually engaging in anything, as it would be the exact opportune time for him to notice me on the wall, as my body was about to go through a change it does as it digests the blood it fed on recently, which I had done hours ago. In much the same way as a human's body creates gas that make hiccups, mine pulsates when I am digesting a large meal.

Next the student approached the one I found to be my biggest threat: he had a firm belief in extraterrestrial life, which I don't know anything about but would probably compare to in his mind.

“So here's something to think about,” Comic Sans told Bradley, “if you were to meet a being from another planet, how would you even communicate?”

I didn't even notice a moment's pause between the end of her question and his immediate response of "If the being has advanced enough technology to get to our planet, it has always stood to reason that there would be some sort of universal translator either through the ship's computer or in their uniforms." He paused. "Plus, if we haven't figured out that obvious gap in our knowledge, we have no business meeting advanced life."

Comic Sans took a moment to contemplate if this was Bradley being himself, if he was out of his mind, or if Noah had slipped him a gummy.

"Also, I am a stress talker," Bradley went on, saying each word rather meticulously. "That's always a speech I have up there, and any time I have an excuse to do it, I do."

But like so many of them, he had another oddity. Some time down the road, as he read up on alien life, he came across his other love: conspiracy theories.

"Admittedly, we don't know when we'll get out of here, but do you want to show me some of those podcasts when we do?" Comic Sans said, walking up to him.

"Are you trying to distract me?"

He told her that if they were doing that, he'd sooner talk about what he thought was the strongest argument of what happened to the people in the Dyatlov pass incident. Comic Sans urged him to go on, and he launched into a history of theories, beginning with what he considered to be the least likely (that the campers suffered from hypothermia and thus believed themselves to be overheated and undressed themselves), to the possibility of the campers having

been on drugs and not in control of what they were doing with their bodies (a truly boring explanation), to what Bradley considered interesting and likely: the three individuals involved were undercover KGB agents who were meant to deliver radioactive material to the CIA.

“Uh, I’ll ask you about other theories later if I think you seem off,” Comic Sans interrupted him before he could explain any further.

It occurred to me that some day, that would be the zombie virus they’d be talking about.

Not that technology was going to stick around much longer than a few months, of course, but maybe someone would pump out a podcast about us here in the beginning. I could picture it now: while they’re talking about what they think is going on, either they get attacked or start turning into one. We might have that technology at some point.

Until that time and while they were stuck here, however, I’d have to stay amused with their human interactions. This one seemed to be winding down, so I turned my attention over to Bryan, who was having a conversation with that guy, Benson.

“So, Benson,” he said, approaching the student, “when I graded your proposal on your final project, I don’t believe I commended you on the obvious mistake you didn’t make.” Benson’s face scrunched up; he sort of had hoped he would graduate (or the world would end, ironically enough) before Bryan even looked at his paper.

From my perch on the wall, I wondered why the professor chose this topic to discuss with the student. There was no chance they’d ever have another class together, and even so, how would they

reason how many pages each essay was now that they'd have to be hand written?

As I listened in, the two humans discussed ghost stories and English linguistics, while I daydreamed of attacking them. I hated that I couldn't in this room, given how exposed it was, how many people there were around, and that I was actively in a digestive cycle, but I caught myself thinking about dive bombing the student, who was younger and slightly thinner, if not more fit.

In truth, the student and teacher didn't look that different, both sporting brown page boy haircuts and green eyes, although they both stood at different heights and the professor had more of a gut than the student who just had the normal amount of college weight, it was like watching a "before and after" argue with each other.

As I watched them speak, I realized that these humans all had personalities, and they probably all had opinions of each other. To me, they were all pawns, all just things to eventually become infections. Looking around the room, I thought it through: sure enough, the weird cult classic nerd, the conspiracy theorist who frequently makes everybody uncomfortable, various members of the group who make obscure references that are just part of their everyday vernacular, and then the fandom weirdos. And they somehow all care that they each survive for reasons other than growth.

Pondering this, I'm disappointed to find I missed the beginning of Comic Sans' check in with her classmate, Tina.

"Not that *The Blob* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are my favorite movies in the world, but

can we at least check what's going on outside?" Tina was rambling when I got there. "Like, what if it's not scary but actually mildly interesting? We won't know unless we check. I get that you as a professor are concerned about the well being of your students, but this student is claustrophobic, and kind of getting freaked out."

I'll never fail to be amazed by the human ability to ignore what is right in front of them. All she had to do was look out the window and see that no, it wasn't safe, and staying in this room was only a temporary fix as the disease spread and this group eventually feels a little too safe.

You people always tend to think things will calm down, that the monster will eventually go back to where it came from (by the way, rude, we aren't objects), but we won't. We'll grow, and learn, and eventually, you'll have to accept the fact that you won't be able to continue living the way you did up until we took over.

I watched the student and the professor talk, and it looked like he was trying to calm her down, treading the line between the insects being a legitimate health hazard and not posing any problem at all.

"Think about it," he said, "when you were camping and you got stung by a mosquito, you rarely noticed it. So we'd already be risking getting bitten by something carrying a disease we don't know, plus with them looking how they do..."

"But I wasn't saying we should go outside," Tina argued. "All I'm saying is we don't know if the bites are anything other than painful."

The two of them went back and forth a few

times, until Tina talked him down to “until Carl and Nellie came back to the room.”

I didn't see that happening for quite a while.

As Bryan didn't seem to remember how college students behaved, however, he seemed to feel pressure to complete his task of checking up on the students. He looked to be hesitant to check up on Teri, as she was on her phone, looking very upset.

In my short time here, I've learned that upset can mean a lot of different things: distressed, shocked, jittery, but in our case, she was straight up angry. Something on her phone was making her mad.

There was a touch of shock on her face, too.

“What's going on?” Bryan asked, sitting down next to her. She blinked and gestured at her screen, which displayed an email from the college dean. Bryan signaled for everybody in the room to join in and read it, too.

Attention Students and Faculty,
Several of the professors have informed me that very few of their students have been attending their classes in the past week.

Classes have not been canceled, nor has tuition been revoked. There is just a new breed of bugs outside. Walk across campus to class, then go back to your dorm. If you're feeling at all unsafe, just stay in on the weekends or order food for delivery instead of going to the cafeteria.

The group stood around the screen, trying to digest the fact that the Dean of Students could be this

flippant about those attending this (admittedly Liberal Arts) college.

“Incorrect pronoun usage,” Bryan pointed out of *their* which should have been *his or her*, apparently a big debate in the English department, language being a construct and all.

“So basically not only do we not get snow days,” Noah went in, “but when bugs that Mr. Eko wouldn’t even face are attacking people who wander outside, we’re supposed to be cool with that as well?”

“Big words from a stoner,” Tina scoffed.

“Technically I don’t think we know for a fact how dangerous the bugs are, though, do we?” Charlie asked, talking for the first time in 3 days. Everybody froze, not wanting her to close in on herself again, as they waited for her to elaborate. Shrugging, she went on, “We all quarantined in here with the blinds shut after we got scared. No idea exactly what is going on out there. Judging by this email, we aren’t the only ones locked down, and it’s got to be like the whole zombie apocalypse theory, right? Eventually they run out of stuff on which to feed.”

So many of them had done that; the second they noticed something about the world had shifted, they locked themselves in, thinking it was going to slow us down.

It didn’t.

All that happened was we had to become more subtle about who we attacked and when: a trip to the bathroom alone, group attacks in the middle of the night, or just cruising around outside is an easy way to get lucky for any and all of us.

But you humans, some days a threat will be presented and the evidence is right there, explained both scientifically and in real life, yet you do everything to ignore it and do what they’re telling you

not to, then other times you figure it out on your own.

Science would never be able to catch up with us, though, as we'd rapidly change and kill off anyone who made any discovery, so my only concern was making sure I had a constant food source.

In typical human fashion, Tina said, "This counts as a statement from an official, right? Technically? It doesn't give us any information or help us in any way, but it's by an official and it's a statement. The Dean, 'stay in school, kids'..." She was directing this comment mainly at Bryan, who would admit that being stuck in this building was pretty brutal, but felt that doing anything other than sitting with their (correct in this usage) hands folded was the smartest thing to do.

I watched the teacher examine his nails and bounce on his heels in a way that made his position clear: while he'd heard and understood Tina, he didn't agree with her and therefore would not engage.. How this man became a professor made no sense outside of the classroom. Sometimes not even within it.

As if on cue, Carl's voice suddenly came from outside the door. "We made a mistake," it said. "Are any of you allergic to cats?" I was still watching from inside the room, but apparently he didn't have a good grip on the animal, as what must have been a cat ran inside the room, surprising the people inside.

"Penny!" Tina exclaimed to the animal as Carl and Nellie walked into the room.

An animal they didn't have before. They must have gone outside. They'd seen the change.

I listened as Carl explained that after he and Nellie had "gotten the coffee" they had started chatting about what life was like a few days ago,

before they'd been stuck in this building and what they liked to do in their dorm rooms.

Tina had apparently hosted something called "pet parties", since she has a cat. Nellie suggested going to get that cat, as this would also involve them getting a read on what they were facing.

"Mistake," Carl told them. "If you would, Nellie." He mimed handing her a microphone, which she in turn mimed angrily throwing on the floor.

"So, you've all had beef jerky before, right?" Nellie said to the room. "You all know what that is and what it looks like? Dehydrated meat." Tina held Penny closely.

"We looked so you don't have to," Carl said. "If you were to look out the window right now, the streets are littered with the bodies of completely dehydrated corpses, devoid of blood, appearing more as a grotesque monster's snack than human remains." I noticed he completely dropped the news anchor character he'd been doing for that bit.

So here's how I would transliterate his narrative of the events.

Once the adolescents had finished what they'd gone to the teacher's lounge to do, they decided they wanted to go across the street to the dorms in order to retrieve another student's pet cat.

I'd been pretty regularly monitoring the various buildings and streets on this particular campus and I knew that none of it was safe in any sense, but like the humans, nobody is infallible. They can just as easily slow down and injure mine as we can theirs.

They'd taken a minute to argue over whether

or not the mosquitoes would be angry and swarming like the bees in cartoons they'd watched growing up, or if they'd all be out hunting individually.

In the end, the students left without any plan whatsoever. That's my favorite kind.

The doors leading outside from the academic building had fairly large windows, so the two were able to tell when it looked like they had a clear shot across the street, which will never have another car drive down it.

It's funny to think about how global warming isn't going to be a concern any longer, since nobody's going to live to function long enough to learn to fly planes or drive cars, since they'll legitimately be mindless zombies.

Things will be so, so much better for the environment now.

They didn't look both ways before crossing, and the second Nellie stepped off the curb, a mosquito that has grown to an inch and a half landed on her hand in a weirdly graceful way.

As much as I love my kind and what we do, we're slow as fuck and haven't quite digested "bite before landing". This next part I have no trouble believing: Carl killed the bug before it bit her.

Slightly dazed, Nellie wiped the remains of the dead bug off her hand and speed walked into the street with tunnel vision, only focusing on the door of the dorm right in front of her.

Meanwhile, Carl was so distracted killing any of the other over-sized mosquitoes buzzing about that he didn't think to notice any of the corpses in the street.

Living here and having walked this path countless times, he knew where there were cracks in the ground he'd need to take extra care stepping over, and that the curb wasn't paved right, but he didn't expect to step on something squishy right before the curb that didn't line up with the sidewalk.

Campus beautification didn't have anything to do with campus safety.

Convinced it was nothing, he glanced down, sure he'd just see a pile of wet leaves or some trash at worst. Though it was a college campus, it could also have been vomit.

"What the actual fuck!" he yelled, recoiling in horror at the sight of the corpse he'd just casually walked over.

That was funny.

"Uh, Nellie? You remember that math class you were worried about? I, uh, I think you can stop worrying now."

Nellie, a few feet ahead and already crossing the street, had somehow been far enough to the left that she didn't encounter the guy at all. Forgetting what they were doing or that they didn't want to be outside, she backtracked to where Carl was standing over Professor Gordon.

Carl didn't really know anything about anything medical aside from having watched the show *Scrubs* an embarrassing amount of times (*including* season 9), but he knew that checking for vital signs on this particular body wouldn't really make any sense. To him, something had either found the corpse and then had its way with it, as there were large chunks missing, or he had been attacked and the attacker had then had a field day once he was dead.

Even though I was only witnessing this through the retelling of two very shook up young adults, I could clearly tell that what had actually happened was that a zombie had found this man and killed him, and he was due for reanimation, or never coming back.

In either case, this guy was not going to care how Nellie did on any of the tests for the rest of the semester.

Carl reported it as the man being totally, undeniably dead.

He slowly backed away from the body, trying not to fall over from trembling. "Um, Nellie? I have good news and bad news."

"Wh-what's going on?" Nellie asked, approaching the body.

"Okay, good news: we seem to know something about what the mosquitoes are doing," Carl said, trying not to start hyperventilating. "Bad news..." He gestured at the body.

It made no sense: there was no way that the bugs, no matter the size, could do that to a living thing. Their poor brains couldn't comprehend it; we weren't only taking small bits, but we'd attack and take what we wanted, juicing the human's body much like a lemon drained of its essence for an ingredient in a drink.

Nellie snapped a few pictures on her camera phone, then dragged Carl away from the body and into the dorm.

Carl was running on pure adrenaline after what had just happened, so he volunteered to get Tina's cat from her third floor dorm since he had the energy to do it.

“Maybe we should stay together, though,” Nellie pointed out. “In case one of us freezes, and so we can keep an eye on each other. Watch high and low. There must be something going on that’s worse than mosquitoes.” Carl nodded and they started up the stairs.

Predictably, on the first landing, Carl stopped and took a quick glance outside. The body of his math teacher was still there, but he wanted to know if anyone else had died under mysterious circumstances. He didn’t see anyone.

Of course, the reason he wasn’t seeing the dead bodies was that they’d quite literally just gotten up and walked away.

Suddenly, the window shade closed itself so Carl wasn’t able to see outside any longer. Nellie had picked up on him doing exactly what she’d imagined he would do (freeze up), and shut the blind since he was clearly stuck in some kind of mind game with himself.

“Come on,” she said forcefully. Carl shook his head to clear it and then resumed the climb up.

“Sorry,” he said, “I wanted to see if I was able to make out anything else out there. It makes no sense: what could have done that to him? Was he dead before he got torn up? And, most importantly, who’s going to start teaching his class once it starts up again?”

If I had a physical body, I’d be keeping track of how many times they made reference of things going back to normal.

“Maybe it’ll be one of those frat boys,” Carl assumed. “I don’t know, my frat knowledge is really all just film tropes.” Nellie didn’t know enough about

fraternities to dispute this either, so she shrugged in agreement.

Reaching the third floor, it didn't look like Carl was running on as much adrenaline as he thought, and he said he really wanted to figure out what had happened. And wondered why people weren't all staying inside.

I was pretty sure the students and I had an understanding: enough people were skipping class to raise alarm to cause the Dean to send out a letter. They knew they weren't safe.

That being said, though, nobody had sent out an official State of Emergency. They weren't forced to stay in: classes were still *technically* being held, and stores were open, waiters and waitresses were still serving food.

The people who were going out were risking their lives for whatever they wanted. Carl and Nellie were doing it for a cat, and also risking the cat's life.

Humans.

Tina always kept her door unlocked in case anything ever happened and her cat needed to be rescued. Unbeknownst to her peers, she was unreasonably obsessed with thrillers, namely the ones in which people were trapped, so the idea of her poor cat being stuck on her own was so out of the question that she just always made sure it would be easy for anybody to grab her.

The two students did not know which room was Tina's, so they tried every door, going into each of the rooms that were unlocked to see if it was the right one.

Actually, that's not technically true.

Carl and Nellie started at the beginning of the hall, trying the doors and opening any that were unlocked. A few doors in, however, an unlocked door led them to a student inside of the room.

“Sorry, we were looking for our friend's room,” Nellie said, shutting the door before whoever this was had the chance to react.

I'd be happier if they'd had a fight.

“So, we'll start knocking,” Carl said as they went to the next room.

The plan had made sense, from a certain perspective: they're in a college dorm in the middle of the day. In their world, it would normally mean they could safely check rooms, since people should be in class.

But nobody was going to class. And come on, everybody, even if they were, this was the English dorm, and those students never left for any other reason anyway.

At the next door, I watched Carl knock and wait for someone to answer it. Nobody did, but it turned out that the door was not only unlocked, but supposedly the very room they wanted, as it contained one cat.

And a copious amount of horror movie posters and props.

It appeared that although all of the dorm rooms were uncomfortably small, the student had put up not only the posters, but memorabilia that would make most individuals feel as if the walls were closing in on them, but must have worked for her.

To give you an idea, there were colorful perler beaded guillotines along the wall, a Chucky doll on the shelf over the window, a Jason mask and two

machetes over the bed, and her black cat curled up on the bed.

“We've been in class with a maniac!” Nellie whispered in a shrill tone, clearly joking.

“You have your coffee, she has her... torture devices,” Carl said, picking up a jar that contained a stuffed animal in a liquid, made up to look like a test subject in formaldehyde. “Let's get her cat and then never have to be here again.” I watched him glance around the room. “We may be doing the poor thing a favor,” he muttered.

“I'm surprised there aren't sconces on the wall,” Nellie laughed. She walked across the room and sat down on the bed next to the cat, which was named Penny, if she remembered correctly.

“Will anybody across the street be allergic to you?” Nellie appeared to ask the cat directly. It reacted as I imagined a cat would: by standing up and stretching, then staring at the human. Nellie shrugged and picked up the cat, then stood and walked across the room to the door.

Nothing about the hallway seemed any worse than one would expect from a college dorm: gross rugs that should have been replaced ages ago, public drinking fountains that probably don't get cleaned often enough (if ever), and everybody's least favorite thing: shared bathrooms.

The atmosphere was uncharacteristically quiet for these two as they walked down the hall, and I wondered if they were making a conscious decision to not make noise, thinking that it would attract enemies.

They walked, until without any explanation, suddenly Carl backtracked a few feet and pointed to a

door, as he tried to hold in a laugh, noticing the poster on the door.

The poster in question was much more “first semester college freshman” than upperclassman, about to graduate, but they both knew whose door it was.

Carl spoke very animatedly, almost as Chase had when recounting the tale of his first date with Beth, and I saw Comic Sans jump in her seat, knowing it was her room they were talking about.

As the story unfolded, I realized I was experiencing loneliness. I was born from a random pond in Ohio, yet here I was, watching this group of people who'd found each other and realizing I wished I had some sort of connection even though, in all reality, I shouldn't crave such a thing. I'm probably a microscopic organism, even a fraction of one, that hasn't connected with another one and likely never will.

If there were mosquitoes, or other viruses such as myself, even a couple of zombies, it would have been different, but here I was. We didn't swarm like you might imagine, and while the zombies did gather in hordes, they didn't really form any sort of bond.

After taking a moment to laugh about how she'd done her room, I'm delighted to learn that was right when the two went outside again.

Given how barren the streets were of both living and dead bodies, I'm eager to know how it was after that.

Knowing they were about to go back, I wonder if they thought about the fact that now they should also make sure nothing bites the cat they're bringing with them.

Nellie was more concerned with how Carl felt.

“I wasn't handling things well by any stretch of the imagination, but we needed to get back here,” Carl admitted. “Plus, let's be honest, Tina, you're going to be interested in all of this.” He paused. “You know, if all of that stuff in your room is a clear indication of the kinds of things you like.” Tina made the subtlest of nods, and the story continued.

Nellie took over telling the story.

Another student approached them, and based on the description I didn't *think* it was one of mine, but he did look a bit rough.

Probably just a hangover.

They had stopped to engage with him. I wondered what this random dude wanted to say to them: presumably it was to ask if they knew what was going on, or perhaps ask about the cat? Who knew?

“What's with the cat?” he asked. “Making some extra coin or something? I mean, I guess it makes sense at this point in the semester with the financial aid office doing their thing, but I don't know people would buy.”

Had Tina been there, she undoubtedly would have been horrified of the implication of selling her precious cat, but Carl and Nellie didn't have much to say, so instead the following took place.

“Uh, it's our friend's,” Nellie replied. “And you really probably shouldn't be outside.”

The stranger grunted and moved on, seemingly jealous about there being a cat, and only outside on a dare anyway.

As it turned out, given that the college society had gotten out of hand with nobody going to class any longer (and the few that did still show being allowed

to just leave by the professors), the fraternities had started making the new pledges go outside for whatever amount of time they thought would be amusing. It was terrible; sadistic even, but being stuck in a building makes people do weird things.

None of those who had become zombies were on that particular street at that particular moment, as Carl and Nellie made it across safely.

I saw a horrifying realization hit the human as she told the story: none of it had registered since it had all been so weird, and it explained why he'd been so fixated on the math professor's corpse.

"Those weren't piles of leaves, were they?" Nellie said, interrupting her own narration.

Carl shook his head slowly as it sank in for everyone what they were saying.

"Does our school have a medical department?" Chase asked. "Could we get some people who know medical stuff to join us or something? I don't really know what might have happened to those people." As students attending a Methodist Liberal Arts college, they all already pretty much knew the answer to his question.

"No," Nellie replied.

So in short, they'd gone across the street, seen the dead, mutilated bodies that would soon turn into zombies, and as expected, the bugs were getting bigger. The world had changed and they shouldn't go out again.

But they would. There was no way they could survive for an extended period here without supplies.

And when they do, that'll be it. The zombies will have been around by then, hungry, hunting, ready for attack. And yeah, the humans will have been inside

for long enough that they'll fight for a few minutes to stave off the boredom, but they won't have a plan, and it'll go badly for them.

As I contemplated how doomed their future was, I imagined some of them were doing the same. From what I'd picked up on, this wasn't exactly a group of heroes and they weren't about to jump into action, willing to fight zombies and giant bugs.

Specifically, I singled out Benson and Bradley as fun to keep an eye on, as they were the ones who'd get the most interested in researching how this had happened.

There was Benson, the self-proclaimed cursed, who probably actually liked being here, as any panic my creatures made would create such danger that being in a car would be the worst thing for him.

And Bradley, who would probably think it was aliens, didn't appear engaged in this at all.

"So what do we know?" Chase asked. "Officially? These two went out, saw some shit, came back and don't really know what happened. All we know is that there won't be any more MATH101, and the streets are somehow littered with dead and dehydrated bodies?" Carl nodded. It had been weird enough, but after the last few years of things happening in the country, pretty much anything went, and none of them really questioned anything anymore. But after Carl and Nellie's report, there was clearly something much more sinister going on.

"I mean, it wouldn't be all that hard to figure out if what they're saying is true," Tina mentioned. She went on before Bryan had the chance to stop her. "We have windows right here." She got up and started

toward them. I couldn't wait to see how this went. "All you did was go across the street, right? To the dorms?"

"Wait!" Benson said, darting in front of her. That fucker. "Don't do anything yet." She did not have the muscular control to raise a single eyebrow, but if she did, that's how she would have reacted. He'd always been quirky, admittedly, but she couldn't identify his drive for wanting to ignore what they'd just learned.

Benson himself didn't quite understand his motive for stopping her from opening the window, but he explained that Carl and Nellie obviously needed a bit of time to calm down, so having the rest of them on edge wasn't the best idea.

"Um, plus, with the cat here, we should just enjoy it," he added.

I didn't understand why she was still keeping this fascination to herself: this would be their lives now. If she told them why she wanted to look out the window, they'd know that side of her, but if she kept her mouth shut, she could continue on with the facade she'd created for herself.

She could just as easily volunteer to look outside, claiming she was willing to check if it was any safer now than it had been.

If she made the big confession, she could start writing the stories she wanted in Advanced Creative Writing, anyway.

"I have a morbid fascination with dead bodies, and if what they said is true, I'm curious," Tina finally admitted.

"That would explain the stuff we saw in your room," Nellie said, sticking up her pointer finger in a state of declaration.

Carl, the only one who'd spent any time alone with her, shook his head with a laugh. He must have know this about her already.

"That's fair," Carl said, walking over to her and Benson. "We're being honest about what happened, but it's not really all that interesting. And maybe we don't need more people seeing it? I care about everyone in this room at this point, and even though it seems interesting, maybe hold off? Also, Comic Sans, you look really nice today." He hadn't complimented someone in at least an hour and a half and he was starting to feel it.

Comic Sans didn't look any different than she had any of the other 4 days they'd been in this room as far as I could tell, but she could still feel the blood rushing up to her face.

I later came to learn that she was the only one to whom Carl was actually embarrassingly attracted, and as such he rarely spoke to her.

"Listen," Carl said, now putting his arm around Tina's waist, "it's not nice outside, but it's not really all that interesting. Like we said, not sure if it was denial or what, but the only thing I processed as being a dead body was our teacher. I can't think of a way to relate any of this to a movie you might like, and don't think it'd be smart to look outside."

Was he ever wrong.

Unfortunately, Tina was not only a closet horror fanatic, but also a bit of an extremist who always looked on the dark side. After locking themselves inside, they'd been waiting to see if anything bad was going to happen, and now they had evidence of it.

But they only knew a fraction of what was happening. If they were to go out, they'd see what I knew of, and what the other strains of the virus were studying, and I didn't see their chances of survival as being very good.

I was a fairly new addition to the world, but there were the ones that came before me. They were smaller, and I don't think their lifespans were very impressive, but they changed this world. They had power, and they used it, but they worked in groups. But they grew. The same as all of these students and teachers, we all came from different backgrounds and experienced different things. We had different prerogatives and ways of getting things done.

I wasn't as interested in the hands on bits as some of the strains of virus were, but I did enjoy watching what it did to the humans. Even more than that, I liked knowing the humans who were attacked, actually seeing the change in their behavior, which is why I'd stuck with this group for a week now.

And why it was so freaking annoying that they were still here.

Checking back in with Tina and Carl, it now seemed that the girl was even more interested in looking out the window at whatever might be happening, so Carl came at it from a different angle.

“For my own records, you're not going through anything right now, correct? This is you being you.” From what I'd observed, this seemed like a very classic response from him.

“If you're trying to seduce me to keep me from wanting to explore, it isn't going to work,” Tina interrupted.

I was beginning to wish I was a hands on strain.

The day had really taken a lot out of my tiny, pathetic body, so I was forced to land on a table, out of the line of sight of everybody in the room. I pretty much dive bombed onto the desk, then shuffled around until I saw a cup that I climbed into.

Out of the line of sight, I could faintly make out a conversation between what sounded like Tina and Bradley.

“So what's your whole deal?” Tina (I believe) asked.

“My deal?” Bradley repeated.

“You never talk, unless it's during class discussion,” Tina said. “I've never seen you have a normal conversation with a human being, and it's just interesting to me, and I figure since we're all here now and Carl isn't going to let me go have fun, I'd bug you.”

I didn't enjoy her usage of the word *bug*.

“Okay, but you realize it's been four years,” Bradley said. More drama between the humans. There was a shift in knowledge of what they were dealing with, and now there was going to be a change in how they treated each other.

I listened closer.

“Four years, we've attended the same classes, lived in the same dorms and eaten in the same dining hall, yet now is when you want to know about my life?” Was this suddenly sci fi, not horror, and they were petty high schoolers or something? I wasn't close enough to see her reaction, but she didn't speak again for several moments.

When she did talk, she laughed as she did.

“You always hit me as the kind of student who, when you weren't locked in your dorm studying, were at the library reading for pleasure, or at the gym working out while listening to a true crime podcast. You know, the kind of guy who wants to be left alone and obviously hasn't done anything to change his social status.”

“Alien podcasts, but yeah,” Bradley replied. “Or stuff about reiki; I find that fascinating.”

“Well, what were you reading just now?” Tina asked, nodding at his phone.

“Oh, um, well when I feel overwhelmed I read horror. It calms me down. It was just a random biography of Ted Bundy, but it wasn't anything I didn't already know.”

As I rested, I thought about how these people could have all been friends.

As English majors, it seemed like most of them only knew each other on the surface level. From what I'd seen, if they weren't romantically involved, they weren't involved. And as much as they implemented the “show don't tell” rule in their short stories and poems, the opposite applied in their day to day lives.

“Also, you're weird, too,” Bradley said, interrupting my thoughts. “I mean, yeah, when given my way, I actively avoid people, but I didn't think anybody was ever going to call me out on this. There wasn't anything during freshman welcome week about what to do when you have to admit what's weird about you because you and your classmates are quite possibly living through a new apocalypse.”

“So you *are* weird!” Tina said. “That explains why you never talk.”

“I’m weird, yes, but I have my reasons for not wanting people to like me. Or know me.” I listened in to learn that he already thought he was living in his own apocalypse, but one involving car accidents.

This next bit comes entire from his mind: the closest he’d come to letting somebody in throughout his entire college career, in fact, was on that day when Charlie had come to the dorm he shared with Carl, in a bad state because Beth was on a date with Chase at the time.

“The two of them had been having make out sessions any time they’d had a bad day,” he explained. “College.” He rolled his eyes. The story went that it was finally hitting her that she wasn’t going to have Beth to herself any longer. She’d tried to belay the fact that she was there to see if Carl was around by asking Bradley to tell him about the first recorded alien abduction.

“Betty and Barney Hill, right?” she asked in the most seductive tone she could. He’d talked about it enough before class for her to know this.

Bradley, knowing full well why she was there, couldn’t ignore a girl who was willing to engage his interest in aliens and was fully going to take advantage of this, and launched into the whole story, after inviting her into the room.

In the retelling of their story, Charlie began to feel an attraction to Bradley, as he became very enthusiastic and animated. It was a new sensation for him to be allowed to talk about how interesting he found all of this information and not see massive eye

rolls or passive aggressive sighs or glances at wrists that did not actually have watches.

It came as a surprise to Bradley just as much as it did Charlie, but they then established a much more friendly relationship, involving Bradley being uncomfortably aware of when Charlie's roommate had dates with her new boyfriend, and Carl being asked not so politely to make himself scarce on those nights.

Aside from those nights, however, Bradley kept to himself. He and Charlie weren't dating (I believe the human term is "FWBs"), and he planned to keep it that way.

Ignoring the fact that Tina was being a total hypocrite since she'd been hiding who she was since they'd started here, Bradley decided to indulge her in his tragic backstory.

"So fun fact: the film *The Blues Brothers* set a world record for most wrecked cars in a single film," Bradley said, starting with a hook as if he were beginning an essay. "My life sometimes feels like the scene in the mall from that movie, since I've been in a lot of random, chaotic accidents. Except, I mean technically I wasn't at fault any of those times, but comparing it to one of my favorite movies helps it sting a bit less. I get in a lot of car accidents, so I keep my distance."

"You don't date or have any friends because you think you have some sort of a curse?" Tina asked after taking a second to digest how strangely he'd delivered this information. Bradley shrugged. He went on to explain that what it all boiled down to was that in the state he took his driver's training, you weren't allowed to drive past 7 PM if you were under 18 years of age, so he waited to take his test until he'd hit that

benchmark, but by that point all of his friends had been driving for a few years and he'd already started becoming the oddball since he couldn't go out when he wanted if he didn't have a ride set up.

After he'd taken the driver's training course and gotten his license at the age of 19, he discovered that while he enjoyed the sport, it didn't much care for him. Any leisurely drive downtown either to an appointment or just for pleasure invited distracted drivers or older people behind the wheel to go ahead and drive their vehicles into his. This in no way sullied his love of driving, or stopped him from signing up to work as a delivery driver on his own personal time, but he didn't like the idea of other people being in the car when he was behind the wheel.

“So not exactly the scene on Lower Wacker Drive, but I still have injuries from some of those accidents and I don't really care to bring anybody else into that world,” Bradley explained, establishing a pattern of referencing *The Blues Brothers*. Nerd.

“And you make a lot of references to the same movie, so you figure best to stay away from girls anyway?” Tina assumed, fully making fun of him.

“See, with me, it happens in phases. I just happen to be going through a period where I think that film is a masterpiece. At least I'm not Chase.” He glanced over at his fellow pop culture buff.

“He *has* gotten significantly worse since they relaunched it, hasn't he?” Tina agreed under her breath.

“So that's my story, in a nutshell,” Bradley finished, picking up a textbook to signal that he didn't feel like speaking with Tina any longer.

And since he didn't want to talk about it, it's up to me once again to narrate what happened.

Most of the people were getting to know each other, but Tina wasn't among them. It looked like she had other things on her mind.

I couldn't follow any of the other conversations the people were having, so I watched Tina to see if she'd finally do something.

After what probably wasn't long in human life, she casually got up and strolled over to the window, since everybody else was distracted.

She stood next to it for a moment and scanned the room.

Noah was on his phone, his thumbs tapping away, either texting, posting something, finally doing that Journalism assignment on Twitter, or arguing with another *Lost* fan.

Because that's *exactly* the kind of thing he should have been wasting his electricity on when he couldn't be promised how long he'd have access to working chargers.

Comic Sans was also on her phone, but I recognized the program on the screen as a text communication one. I found this to be a slightly more reasonable usage of such technology.

Carl was weaker than I thought, as he was in a chair, asleep. If the room wasn't so crowded, he would have been an easy mark.

Bradley was on his phone, back to reading about Ted Bundy, presumably. I could have gotten him, too.

Chase and Beth were in an embrace. The pheromones the two of them were setting off would

suggest that they weren't fully engaged in an emotional embrace, however, which I took to mean they were too stressed about what was going on to let their respective guards down.

Charlie appeared both happy and unhappy about what was going on between them. As she had a personal relation to both of them, I could imagine multiple reasons for this: she wanted her brother to spend time with her, she wanted her roommate to spend time with her, she didn't approve of them being together, or all of the above.

As I considered what I knew about this group, I thought about how each of them would react when they realized they wouldn't have access to their favorite thing any longer: communication cut off from friends, subscription tea boxes, trips to the weed store. I wasn't sure who'd break first.

Hell, even losing a daily routine was enough to make some people go crazy.

Already on the verge, Tina casually lifted up the curtain on the window ever so slightly, to see how far she'd have to look to see what her classmates had reported.

The girl jumped the second she glanced out the window, as if she wished she'd listened to her professor and accepted this as her new life.

I could tell she didn't like what she was seeing, yet she appeared transfixed, as she didn't stop looking out the window. I watched her scan the road, where I knew she was seeing parking spots open that always had cars coming in and out, no students leaving or entering buildings. It was uncomfortably deserted.

Presumably, there would normally have been a steady stream of people walking down the sidewalk,

going to the student center, and hanging out in the quad, but there weren't.

Knowing how you all work, either people already had everything they needed in their dorms, or they had just accepted their fates as being doomed. It was too early to tell, but I didn't have a good feeling for them.

Of course, being this early on in the apocalypse, most of the zombies who were up and around would have just looked like injured humans, and most of the bodies were still fresh.

It was only a matter of time before this group was as equally drenched in blood as any member of the undead.

But hey, a dead body was a dead body. As far as I knew, most of the bodies were freshly dead, few (if any) of them starting to show states of decay, although due to lack of blood, each and every one of them were already incredibly pale and dried out.

I considered what could have happened to the human Tina was staring at if one of mine hadn't gotten to it first: the corpse's eyes were open, and the body was laying flat without being positioned to look pretty, and being in the middle of the road, it could get hit by a car at any time.

Unless it got up and walked away.

The infection process was slow going: any time one of us bit a human, it would take time for the infection to get to the bloodstream enough that it would change him or her into the flesh eating monsters that had no function other than to hunt. And in order to even create these things, there was always the risk that whoever we were attacking would notice

us and smack us instinctively. We needed to find a source of protein that could not fight us.

I'd tried drinking animal blood, but it didn't work as well as human blood: if I had to compare it to something you might understand, it would be like only living off of junk food and never getting any real protein. It would keep you alive, sure, but only just. It gave me the shakes, kept me perpetually tired, and always wanting more.

And, I don't know, call me crazy, but there was something profoundly different from attacking and turning a human than doing it to an animal. Being as I was living in an insect's body, it felt much more invasive and taboo attacking a fellow animal.

But then I thought: the bites did kill them. Zombies came from the dead. If I found some dead bodies, could I turn them into my soldiers? It seemed as if the needless killing of humans was just that: needless. Unless there was zero nutritional value to their blood after they'd been dead for any extended period of time, I didn't understand why I hadn't thought to attack a corpse that I hadn't created. Sure, it may be an acquired taste, but as far as I could imagine, whether the blood was warm or not would only matter if the one consuming it was a zombie.

While I was going over all of this in my head, Tina must have been trying to process everything she saw too. The human mind can only take so many things at once, but she was in it now.

I watched her scan the road to see what else was happening. I don't know what she did see, but in my mind I hoped there were swarms of flies and flocks of birds hovering, some landing and beginning to peck at the bodies that would be standing up at any time.

To her, that would be a terrible vision, but to me it was nothing. It's all about perspective: to me, she needed to go and was the enemy. Or not *enemy*, exactly, but the different one who could change for the better.

Fully aware of how risky it was, I flew across the room, intending to land on the blinds of the exact window Tina was looking through. I'd have a different opinion of what she was seeing, but I wanted to know what it was.

Talk about anticlimactic.

There wasn't a lot of blood. I'd hoped their bodies would have produced a ton of the liquid, but then, if it had mostly been consumed, none of it would have been left *to* leak out.

If the humans figured this out, they may have some idea of the terror that lay ahead.

If I were in Tina's situation, I would have approached either Carl or Nellie and asked them if it looked the same outside as it had earlier. Carl was still asleep, but Nellie was pacing the room like a person who was trying to get all of his or her steps. Being assigned a task may not be the worst thing for her.

I guess I don't think all that differently than a human, as Tina walked up to the girl and asked how she was doing. Nellie laughed.

"I remember, as a kid, I would always drink hot liquids before they cooled down," Nellie answered. "Because of this, I developed quite the affinity for lukewarm drinks. Coffee, tea, heck I even call hot chocolate 'lukewarm chocolate'." I moved forward on the blinds, trying to understand the point she was making.

"You may have been a stand-up in another life," Tina said, as Nellie had completely deflected the question.

Tina cleared her throat. "So, I ignored Carl's advice and I... may have glanced outside. *Before* you say anything, I'm, uh, hoping you could answer some questions I have about what you guys saw? I'd ask Carl, but he's..." she signaled to Carl, who remained in a deep sleep.

"I can try," she agreed with a shrug. "But talk now before my subconscious completely blocks it."

I saw an odd dawning on her face that I attributed to her realizing how weird it is, when you're a human, to realize you're about to describe a dead body.

Based upon the strained tone in her voice, Tina was not enjoying herself as she told the story, and she probably reported a few details wrong. On purpose or

by accident, I don't know, but I took pride when I noticed she was describing what she'd just seen in the most precise detail: the body laying in the middle of the street looked as though scavengers had been enjoying what was left over to feast upon, some of the bodies had blood that had congealed but there didn't seem to be any bright red puddles, and there were a couple times she specifically noticed bits of hair that seemed to have either fallen or have been forcibly ripped off of someone's scalp.

“What do you mean by that, exactly?” Nellie asked, naturally assuming there were bugs or just things coming up and sniffing it. Tina had always been one to be a little free with her definition of words, so when she said things were “feasting” on the body, Nellie didn't immediately think “eating”, necessarily.

Tina squeezed her eyes shut. She held her thumb to her other fingers and shook her hand as she spoke. “I mean there are chunks of flesh missing and blood oozing from the body,” she said, her eyes remaining shut.

When they'd mentioned dead bodies, they hadn't mentioned mutilated dead bodies, so this probably *was* a new symptom.

“That's new,” Nellie confirmed. “All we saw were pale corpses that didn't belong where they were.”

“But weren't some of them in different states?” Tina pointed out. “I feel like some of them might have already been attacked. From something other than what originally killed them.” What Nellie didn't understand was how one of the bodies could have been bleeding. From what she'd observed, there was no blood left to leak. The corpses were little more than

the human version of raisins, drained of liquid entirely.

The infection was evolving.

Nellie confirmed that some of the bodies looked slightly wetter than others, that some of them seemed as though if you were to reach out and try moving it, the entire thing would disintegrate into dust, and that the fact that there was now physical blood coming out of the bodies meant things had changed quickly.

“Before we panic, I want to talk to Carl,” Nellie decided. “For all we know, you happened to see a dead body that was killed by something other than the mosquitoes; maybe it had been hit by a car.” She was being awfully cavalier, referring to a human's dead body as an “it” instead of finding out the gender of the person, just knowing it was no more a he or a she, but now just an object in which a soul used to live.

“That's fair,” Tina agreed. “Let's agree to wait until he wakes up and see what he thinks might be going on.”

It was a good enough plan, but it looked as though Nellie still wanted to do something active that wasn't just pacing the room. “How would you feel about a quest?” Nellie suggested, clapping her hands together softly.

Look at me, knowing exactly what a human is about to do.

“This quest of which you speak,” Tina said, “does it involve going for a walk? Because if so, I'm already in.” I had to imagine that being here was super weird for her; that normally her life was nothing other than going to class, back to the dorm, ordering food to her dorm room until the next class, class, then staying

in until the next day. I pictured her rarely going anywhere that wasn't class or her dorm (no, not even on the weekends), and yet somehow here she was, forced to do her favorite thing and no longer enjoying it.

It was the closest she thought (and hoped) she'd ever get to being tortured.

Nellie explained that she thought she'd seen some movement in the hallway, but she didn't feel like checking it out on her own.

"Also I have to use the bathroom," she explained. "It's a legitimate reason for us to leave the room."

"Okay, but we should let Bryan know," Nellie reasoned. "He should have a headcount."

I watched as Bryan offhandedly told the girls to "have fun" when they left the room. If only he'd been out there fifteen minutes ago instead of a full hour, he'd have been able to warn the girls not to leave the room.

The hallway contained a swarm of monsters, eager to feed and infect. And shortly following them, members of the undead, soon to learn their new favorite meal.

But Bryan didn't know any of this, and he appeared too distracted to think about it anyway. Probably thinking about the lessons they were missing and the assignments he'd have to catch up on grading once the world got back to normal.

Which, I can't stress enough, *is not going to happen*. There is no cure, and the disease is probably beginning to spread quickly, and we adapt quickly to changes.

It's incredible how these people are able to ignore what's going on around them.

As the girls left the room, they were casually chatting about how interesting it was for them to be spending all of this time together, uninterrupted.

"I never realized Benson was superstitious," Tina was saying. "I don't want to go into detail, but—"

And indeed she didn't, as when they rounded the corner, they saw something they knew neither how to comprehend nor how to fit into the picture: a cloud of mosquitoes hovering at the end of the hall.

"I thought that only happened in films," Tina said, slowly pointing toward the mass. She proceeded to laugh a very dry laugh and continue, "This would be funny, if I didn't think these caused what happened to those people out there." The girls stood in place, and I could see a silent exchange take place between them.

After that, Nellie whispered, "We really need to work out what to do."

"Well, I'm not Batman, so I don't conveniently have any bug spray on me," Tina blurted. A moment later, she continued, "If we play dead, they'll take us. If we run, they'll chase us. Stand here, it could go either way."

"So we run," Nellie replied.

"We run," Tina confirmed.

I followed as they turned down various hallways, clearly with no real idea of a path, and hoped they ran into the swarm again.

They didn't notice the bugs were behind them, not ahead of, and technically could catch up.

But it seemed as though the bugs had about as much idea of what they were doing as the girls.

I'd expected better.

I watched as Nellie reached for a door handle, checked it, finding the door unlocked, and pushed herself and Tina inside.

I wondered if they saw some of the bugs got into the room with them. They were large enough to be seen more clearly by the naked eye, but I felt like they could work together to stay hidden.

I felt nothing as I watched Nellie grasping blindly at the air, hoping to catch and kill some of the bugs.

It probably should have bothered me more than it did when I realized she'd had a bit of success in killing them, but I felt that I didn't feel bad since I had faith in the ones that remained.

Tina was already a ball on the floor, an easy mark for that exact group.

"You've gotta help me out here, man," Nellie said, her tone more suggesting annoyance than fear.

As her meltdown occurred, I watched one of the bugs creep up her leg, which was exposed about an inch between her sock and pant leg. She must have felt it, as I watched her reach down and pinch the bug between two of her fingers, effectively killing it.

Wiping the remains of it on the floor, Tina stood up, and I could see the gears turning in her head. I may be a bit biased against her kind, but it seemed like they hadn't been doing much in a while and were just now getting to work.

"Being in this room is a good idea on the surface," she was muttering, "but these bugs are evil, and if they have the capacity to be evil, they have the capacity to be smart." This coming from a human who had no idea one of these very bugs was actively trailing her.

“It’s not always going to be this easy,” Tina deadpanned. “They’re going to grow even bigger, and it’s going to take more than a quick slap to kill them.”

Nellie, having to be the voice of reason, blurted something about how yes, that would happen because life finds a way, but they had thumbs and would be able to figure out weapons with what they had at their disposal.

Thumbs and size were the only things they had on us, but once we turned their forms into zombies, that became a moot point.

Still, I had to consider myself lucky that I was in the form I was in and not one of the infected humans, living a life in a decomposing body, doomed to an existence of fighting off the exact thing I am while trying not to get killed by the very thing I feed off of.

It wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world to have come to being as one of the bigger mosquitoes that have more strength, but as one of the earliest iterations, I was able to stay under the radar a bit more than the newer ones, I guess.

When I hatched and came out of the water, I was small. I'd grown since then, and certainly that water wasn't getting any cleaner now that we existed as well as zombies, so now we probably came out of the water as bigger insects.

Turning my attention back to the room, I noticed the cloud of mosquitoes had followed the girls and were now hovering directly outside.

They'd noticed, also as Tina started pounding on the window of the door, as if that were something that would make us run away from something to feed from.

But we don't frighten as easily as bunnies or deer.

“Uh, we good to stay for a bit longer, then?” she asked when none of the bugs flew away.

“I hate you so much right now,” Nellie replied through gritted teeth. Her need for a bathroom must have been intensifying.

“Okay, okay, we can...channel our inner Emperor Domitan and catch and torture these little buggers?” Tina countered.

A sudden bit of knowledge I didn't know I had informed me that the early days of Emperor Domitan's reign were spent in seclusion, catching and torturing flies.

Evidently, Tina knew that also.

As Nellie processed that, I could see the terror in her eyes, thinking about how we'd somehow evolved to the point of actively hunting out humans.

Even the smaller ones like me: while just one of us weren't enough to suck them dry, a group of us could take a person down.

The problem here, of course, was that we weren't the only ones working in a pack, and it would be much more difficult for us to kill each and every one of them.

The explanation was simple, really: in much the same way as a weight lifter might want to have a large meal after an intense workout, we now had different nutritional needs and wants since our

biology had changed so fiercely, so when we could sense a meal, we'd just make our host take action.

This did not bode well for Nellie and Tina, who just needed to get to the restroom.

They knew this, of course, which is why they stood for a long while trying to figure out the safest way to get where they were going.

I watched them go through the options: cloud of overgrown mosquitoes in the hallway. Unsafe.

Random man shambling down the hallway. Unsafe.

Random man shambling down the hallway and stopping in the middle of the cloud of bugs as if he belongs there. Unexpected.

“He doesn't look great,” Nellie whispered, most likely noticing the gray tone of his face. Possibly also his dead eyes and blank face.

“The bugs both like and do not like him,” Tina added. “They don't want to bite him, but they want to be his best friend.” In their minds, it defied logic, but sure enough, after the mosquitoes had gathered, the man continued walking and the bugs followed right along with him, allowing Tina and Nellie to get to the bathroom without anything else bad happening.

They had not yet put together the whole “zombies” part of the puzzle yet.

I knew the two girls weren't going to be in any imminent danger during their bathroom trip, so I

drifted back to the room that had everybody else to see what they were getting up to.

Teri and Charlie were having a conversation, but it looked like they were just checking in with each other: Charlie had been completely spaced out, which she explained away as having been daydreaming about being back in her dorm with Beth.

“I don't do well out of my routine,” Charlie was saying. She then did a very human thing and added a comment under her breath, which was about how her routine would have involved not only being in the dorm with Beth, but getting intimate with Beth.

This comment was mostly covered up by the rustling noise that came from Teri sitting down next to Charlie as she placed her hand on Charlie's back.

“So you're saying we should get everyone to agree to leave this room,” Teri put together. No idea how she got that from that, but okay.

The way I saw it, none of them wanted to be there, so if Charlie mentioned this to any of them, they might decide to venture out and into what they didn't know. They'd see what we'd turned their kind into and have to deal with it.

As if they'd even think to bring defenses.

“Let's start by talking to our professor,” Charlie suggested as they, too, figured this out.

“Or Carl,” Teri suggested. “He's rather charismatic. He could probably do the dirty work for

us.” I had to laugh; in their minds, they were going to an outside that had corpses and big mosquitoes. None of them were going to have any idea that the corpses had come back as something else.

“Let's start with my brother, actually. Then his girlfriend'll immediately sign up. And everybody loves her.”

Chase was across the room, but he wasn't alone: he and Beth, who as far as I'd paid attention, was his girlfriend, and they were doing one of the things I neither enjoy seeing or describing.

It did not seem to be any sort of deterrent for Charlie (made sense, given her relationship with each of them individually), who cleared her throat in an exaggerated manner to get their attention.

“I wasn't doing anything,” Chase blurted without apparently bothering to see who had made that noise.

“It's just me,” Charlie deadpanned. “But I'd like to remind you: you're in a room surrounded by your peers, making out with your girlfriend during the apocalypse. And neither of you is particularly good at 'subtle'.”

Beth turned a shade of red I hadn't seen on a properly functioning human's face and got off of Chase's lap.

She still didn't have any shoes on. I admired her commitment.

As soon as the other girl stood up, Charlie started to talk.

“So, my girl Teri and I are both kind of not doing so great being outside of our routines, and haven't quite settled into this being our routines, so we wanted to propose... like, leaving here, I guess? I don't know, I guess we didn't really talk this over?” I'd put good money down that she'd failed her public speaking course.

She must have noticed Charlie appeared flustered, as she took over the pitch.

“I haven't really said anything because we've all been stressed, but I've been getting headaches since I haven't been on a treadmill in a few days. I've mostly just been trying to sleep it off,” Teri admitted. “The headaches take a lot out of me. Plus when I was able to do cardio on a normal basis, it kept me energized, and I don't have that now. If I can't get to the fitness center soon, I might have a problem entirely other than a mosquito bite.”

Alright, so far none of them had the change of personality symptom that comes in conjunction with getting infected.

Shit.

Chase's demeanor hadn't appeared to change at all. Charlie took over once again.

“You can't tell me you don't feel weird not going to class or working on your senior research the past few days.”

“So, I do a thing that's been helping me through this, and if you make us leave, I don't think it'd be good,” Chase said, beginning the sentence with his two pointer fingers in front of him, and moving them out twice as he spoke.

“Oh boy,” Charlie sighed in an exaggerated manner, “there's gonna be a story.”

“When I was... 12? 11? Preteen, I joined an after school baseball team,” Chase began. “Remember that, Charlie? Mom and Dad thought I was spending too much time on internet forums, discussing the *Ghostbusters* franchise, and they somehow thought putting me in sports would fix it?” His sister nodded in a manner that told me he centered most of his stories around the same event but always brought it to some conclusion that was helpful in his current situation.

His team had daily meets and ran drills for two hours behind the building directly after school had let out.

That kind of event wouldn't work today: we'd be everywhere, turning the children into zombies, getting the coaches or parents first only to bring it home to their children, all around chaos no matter how it went down.

He enjoyed it a lot, until the game he was positioned as the catcher to somebody playing their first game at bat, who swung the bat back too hard and hit Chase in the arm, effectively breaking it.

“I can still remember the blinding pain from when that bat hit me, and the crunching sound it made,” Chase said, practically shaking. “Not to mention the 12 minute wait for mom to even be able to get there.”

As he explained it, it had hurt so much that he had to essentially unmake reality so the pain he was in wasn't real. By convincing himself that nothing was real and none of it was actually happening, the pain seemed like a different creature and he could almost ignore it to some kind of extent.

It was a skill I could see him needing very, very soon.

“Is-is it possible to learn this power?” Charlie asked, never one to pass up a chance to quote Star Wars.

“Gather round, children,” Chase announced. To two individuals who already had his full attention.

This time, he told them that he had unmade reality to the point that he could almost believe that his life had only ever been here, making sure that Charlie was staying at least mildly sane, doing whatever he could to keep her surviving, and that college or whatever his life had been before this was a possibility that may happen in the future.

The next bit of it was filled with references, so I'll transcribe it here.

“I had summer,” Chase explained. “Over the summer, I met Beth, and we started dating and I introduced her to *Ghostbusters*. How we met is anybody's guess. Choose the form of the destructor. Charlie tested out of high school and she and I started college at the same time because she's so damned smart. Alas, right as we started school, this happened.

But hey, she would have been roommates with my girlfriend, so that's cool.”

“You've convinced yourself that happened,” Charlie said. “Interesting.”

“And as for my senior research, I mean I have it all written in my head, it's just not on paper yet,” he finished. “It's like that time in middle school that Mom got mad at me for going to the neighbor's party before I'd finished the tarantula project I had due the next day. Remember? I'd had it entirely planned out, so after we got home that night, I just put it all on paper and ended up getting full credit.”

“That was not a good night,” Charlie agreed.

I counted for a beat and figured out that it had been four full days since he'd even seen his computer, let alone opened the file containing all of his research.

Possibly more, if he hadn't worked on it the day before they'd gotten here.

Realizing he was honestly starting to stress about the inconsequential essay and accompanying picture book, his focus returned to his sister and what he could do to help her reprogram her mind. Suddenly, it hit him.

But those were just my observations of the situation. He then went on to make more references, so enjoy more transcription.

“Remember when Han landed the Falcon on an asteroid and there were those things flying around that were landing on it that freaked them all out, so

they had to stay inside the ship for a bit until they figured everything out?” Chase blurted.

“*Empire Strikes Back*,” Charlie said. “Best Star Wars ever. Yeah, what of it?”

“Just... pretend you're Princess Leia. You're staying on the Falcon right now because there are some freaky little animals out there right now, and we don't know what they want, we're pretty sure they can hurt us, and it probably smells bad.” Chase took a moment to allow his sister to process what he was suggesting. “Instead of deleting something, change something. Create a new identity for yourself. But don't be the version of Leia who would gladly go outside and fight whatever's out there. Please. Mom and Dad would kill me if anything bad happened to you.”

If my voice wasn't both unintelligible to them and at such a low volume, I would have said, “Your mom and dad killing you are the least of your worries!”

I know, I know, unless his mom and dad lived on this campus and were already zombies.

What actually went on is as follows: Charlie asked Teri for a quick side bar during which she informed her of Chase's rhetoric.

“So... Beth next and have *her* convince *him*?” Teri said.

I appreciated how the humans kept passing dirty work to the other humans. Charlie nodded and

the girls began discussing which of them should speak to Beth.

They painted a picture as they tried figuring this out.

Writing essays had always been one of Teri's strengths, but the ones she always enjoyed the most and got the fewest comments on from teachers were persuasive essays. She found pleasure in having to try to convince some "unknown" source (her teacher or whichever other student would be doing a peer edit) of what side she picked for an assignment that she ultimately couldn't care less about one way or another.

Or, in at least one case, blatantly lying because she wasn't there on the day the assignment was given out and she got stuck on the side with which she didn't agree but had to enthusiastically present that side for the class anyway.

I had to assume both of them had been studying English with a focus on story-telling.

"You and I had Freshman English together, right?" Teri said. Charlie shrugged: Freshman English had been a long time ago. "Okay, but remember how for the final project we were paired off to write persuasive essays that we then presented to the class and had them vote on?"

Charlie laughed. "That was a super chaotic assignment," she recalled. "She obviously thought we were going to go with simple choices like 'cats or dogs' or 'Mac or PC'. And I remember how... *angry* I was

that my partner was arguing that Star Trek was superior to Star Wars.” Under her breath, she added, “And that I had to watch Star Trek to argue my point and... didn't hate it.” Judging by her mood toward it, she hadn't become a fanatic, exactly, but if she ever ended up in a situation in which she was for some reason hooked up to a lie detector and had to admit it, she'd have to confess that she was known to watch the occasional episode of various Trek series... from time to time.¹

“Anyway, that was the year I found out I love—*love* writing persuasive essays. I know you and Beth are roommates or whatever, but if you don't feel like using that power you have, I'd be happy convince her. In fact, I'd be happy to do it.”

Why she needed convincing was beyond me; she'd struggled to get even her brother on board, but maybe she felt she had something to prove.

“Fine,” Charlie sighed, throwing her hands up in a way that would have stressed me out had I been in range.

You humans all come at things rather differently. While Charlie absolutely would have sugar coated the message, Teri just deadpanned what she said. “You know your roommate?”

“What about her?” Beth seemed concerned.

1 Author's note: please read that in C3PO's voice

"I'm worried about her." Blatant lie. So far, her technique wasn't that different from what I thought Charlie would have done.

"Tell me something, when you and she would be in the dorm, did she always stay in after class, or would she go places after she got out? Like to the fitness center, or the library, or just... out?"

"Freshman year, Chase had always had primary access to the car he and Charlie shared, so she wasn't going off campus all that often at first, and then came the invention of Uber, which allowed Charlie to leave campus provided she had the funds when she didn't have access to the car," the girl rambled off. "If she wasn't in the room watching something or over at Carl's, and we weren't doing something together, she did often come up with reasons to be out until late," Beth finally admitted. "I didn't mind doing classwork in the dorm room, but she liked going on walks and would often do her work either in the quad or the student center. Sometimes at the coffee shop, too."

"Oh, well that makes this *super* easy," Teri reasoned. "So here's the thing: she came to me and said she feels really uncomfortable stuck here. The lack of fresh air, and not seeing anybody other than this group can make a person go a little wacky. And we just spoke to her brother, and he's not doing so great."

"So what are you suggesting?" Beth asked. "Do you think we should all go back to our dorms, return

to life as normal, go to classes, visit our families, go our merry ways, or?..."

As I had several times since they'd decided to lock themselves inside that last building, I imagined a scenario in which they did the classic human thing of throwing caution to the wind and timidly stepping outside.

In order to keep myself more and more enthusiastic about this group, I altered what happened each time either slightly or drastically. In the best fantasies, they're overtaken by zombies immediately when they get outside, but today I toyed with the idea of them getting outside, finding a car, realizing it's unlocked, but right as they start to load in, the zombies start slowly taking them away.

It wasn't a scenario I hadn't already thought of, and sometimes the zombies got them all at once, but I enjoyed the image of it happening all the same.

But she wasn't suggesting this.

"Of course I'm not suggesting this," she confirmed. "All I'm saying is, that movie you like, *Frozen*, they basically resigned themselves to dying an icy death, and that's pretty much what they got. If we do the same thing, stay here and starve or wait until the bugs either evolve to the point they can get us, or we find out they're infecting humans to the point that they want to kill other humans, we need to get out ahead of it."

“Solid evidence, good introduction, fairly solid thesis statement and conclusion,” Beth replied. “Body of the essay could use work, but you played to your skills. Well done.” After a moment, she put in, “But I can't ignore the similarities here between us and the characters from the Hatchet franchise, either. The group sense of denial that we're in danger, excitement over skipping class, and the knowledge that we're perfectly comfortable in our little bubble of thinking it is just the bugs.”

She seemed to have forgotten about the grisly things Carl and Nellie had told them were also outside, or had decided that the pair had completely made that bit of it up.

Then again, as far as they knew, all the dead bodies were outside of the building and had been killed there. Nothing inside was a danger to any of them. I myself was only strong enough to turn them into zombies, and I wasn't sure if any of the killers were close by.

Armed with the assumption that nothing supernatural was happening outside the building, Beth agreed with the other two girls that it was in everybody's best interest to leave this building, be it to get off campus, to a more stable place that had better food, or straight up get in a car and drive to another location.

Because, you know, that never goes badly.

“I’ll come if we leave campus,” Beth half-agreed. “We need to find a car and get to a more stable location.”

Maybe exactly what I’d just fantasized would come true.

Charlie explained the situation with her brother not caring if they left, and Beth listened intently.

Officially caught up, I watched her walk up to Chase and put her arm around his shoulder. “Hey, you,” she breathed into his ear.

He appeared to have completely spaced out, but jumped back to himself in an instant. Typical human behavior again.

I could tell by watching them that she knew exactly how to get him in the mindset she wanted: she petted his arm, then moved towards his back. Each time her hand slid down, however, it would get closer but never close enough.

As I’d been privy to the events leading up to this, I knew she didn’t intend on hooking up with him, so knew she was faking when she complained, “We can’t do anything fun here. We should get out of here, but have everyone else join so it doesn’t look suspicious.”

Chase agreed without question, then suggested the two of them start getting the others to agree to leave.

“You were pretty much the last one we needed to convince,” Beth informed him. “Now we get Noah on board, and we have us all.” I sincerely appreciated how methodical they were being about this and imagined they'd act in a similar manner once they came across the zombies: if a member of the undead who hadn't begun the decomposition process attacked them again, their brains couldn't differentiate between it and a human, and they wouldn't be able to fight it.

Or they'd go out with absolutely no plan whatsoever.

In the vein of 'no plan whatsoever', Beth walked up to Noah, said, “Hey, we're all gonna head over to the fitness center,” and motioned for everyone to gather by the door.

As they were about to step outside, I had to check: sure enough, Beth still wasn't wearing shoes. She didn't make any indication that she'd change this fact, and they all started out the door.

I realized as they left that it would be difficult for me to keep up, but for the time being, I decided to follow at a distance.

Being a creature with a respiratory system, I was reasonably happy when we all stepped through the doors. While I had been outside just hours prior to follow Carl and Nellie on their trip across the street, this would be a longer time outside, and it was always nice anyway.

As I suspected, it looked as though the humans had agreed upon who would be looking for what as they traveled. Some of them had eyes in the air while the others only looked to the ground.

They weren't subtle in any way about who was assigned what: absolutely none of them were looking straight ahead, and eyes were darting as heads swiveled.

“Did you know “Cap'n Crunch isn't even his full name?” Beth said, speaking out of nowhere to fill the inevitable silence as the group started walking. Noah shot her a glance, but before either of them could process what the other was trying to communicate, I was thrilled to see a bird fly in front of them.

“Are they infecting animals now, too?” Brian asked.

It would be a reasonable thing for him to think. I watched them take a minute to let the unbearable dread sink: they knew all along, of course, that the bugs were a threat, but now they knew just how real it was. Anything they came across from here on out could be infected, attack them, and end their

existence.

On one hand, in the animal kingdom, predators take what they want from prey by killing them in a ruthless manner such as tearing out the weaker one's throat or breaking its body somehow. This wasn't technically any different, but somehow felt like a completely new universe.

Also, when you break it down into its most basic elements, these students weren't really that adverse to seeing the dead bodies of animals any time they went out; roadkill is everywhere.

“It was one bird,” Carl said, offhandedly. “It may have been dying of some natural cause, or maybe just doing some sort of Jackass stunt for his friends. Saw a group of humans and wanted to prove he wasn't... a chicken.”

“Chickens don't fly,” Benson said without missing a beat.

After a moment, Beth blurted, “His name is Horatio Magellan Crunch,” finishing her fun fact about the well known cereal mascot.

“My name is Benson,” Benson said.

“I mean Cap'n Crunch,” Beth returned. “I didn't get to finish my fun fact because we saw that stupid low flying bird.” A bit quieter, she added, “His ship is called the Guppy.”

I'm never going to not love how weird humans become in times of stress: the way Beth said what she said was so over-exaggerated, it was like she was

pretending she was a character in a television show. And just as I was having this thought, Benson started talking with great comedic timing.

“I’m still surprised you didn’t use mascots somehow in your senior research project, given how many you just randomly tell us about,” he said after a few seconds. “Not that *The Evolution of Adam Green’s Monster, Victor Crowley* didn’t come as a shock to most of us, that is.”

I didn’t have time or energy to process what this meant, as it occurred to me how far away the fitness center must have been from where they’d been hiding out. While they hadn’t gotten hit by any of the zombies, they hadn’t gone much further than a block and I was struggling.

As I had no way of keeping up with them at this pace, I landed as quietly as possible on the closest person to me. Bradley.

When I landed on his backpack, my drowsy brain had a moment during which it thought the student was transmitting his thoughts to me, as I could hear them clearly, and in his voice: “Maybe that wasn’t a bird. Obviously we’d think it was a bird, since birds make sense, but it didn’t move like one, but a UFO. Sure, maybe it was an ET that didn’t know how to function in our atmosphere. That would both explain why it flew like that, and prove the existence of alien life.”

Although he said all of this out loud, he was far back enough that nobody but me heard him.

I appreciated his shifting of the narrative to turn it into something he was able to understand and possibly enjoy better, but if it was aliens, his love for them would surely diminish quickly.

“Birds, bugs, bodies,” I heard Chase mutter to himself. “The list goes on and on. Also, I hate alliteration.”

That answered that question, anyway.

If he was talking to himself, why did he feel the need to add that second bit out loud?

His sister must have been listening in, as she immediately attempted to calm him down by pointing out that once they found a working car, they should be in much better shape.

“And you could have said 'dead bodies' to make it less alliterative...”

“Sure, but doesn't the term 'bodies' kind of imply lifelessness?” Noah felt obligated to point out. Charlie shrugged and they continued walking.

He also could have said corpses.

As I thought about other words he could have used to convey the message, I started really taking in how things looked outside.

True to Carl and Nellie's tales, it appeared as though it was fall and there had been a lot of rain and leaves on the ground, but there didn't appear to be any

raindrops on any of the cars or the pavement that I could see.

Cadavers.

All I felt was complete disgust and despair as I surveyed the surroundings. I didn't think I expected too much, just a few hundred zombies by now, but all we had to show for it was a few puddles of blood?

Remains.

But I'd forgotten about the weird girl, Beth, who had chosen not to don shoes or socks during this journey, and would undoubtedly soon be realizing she wasn't just trudging through puddles of water, but something entirely different.

Carcasses. I'll stop.

Eventually, it seemed to hit her that something was off. She'd been further back than most of the others, but she must have wanted to talk to them, as she began moving faster to rejoin them.

The increase in her speed caused her to register that something was wrong. I could see her piecing it together: she knew how it felt to step on pebbles, walk across puddles, and step in the occasional mound of dirt. None of these things came close to what she realized she'd been walking over since they left the building. Whatever she'd been walking through had not only been wet, but sticky.

There were reports of dead bodies that were no longer there.

Carl and Nellie spoke of blood.

They'd been walking on dark pavement that dark liquid wouldn't necessarily show up clearly on.

Beth had been walking across puddles of blood.

I laughed as the realization hit her too late, as they'd been walking for a while now.

"We need to stop walking," she deadpanned.

"What's going on?" Carl asked. "Did you see something?"

"So, mosquitoes, right?" Beth said. Yes, that's what changed your world. "They suck our blood." A very basic explanation of it, but I wouldn't have expected much else. "Which makes us itch." She made it a point to take a dramatic pause before she said the next part, which was completely deadpanned. "Thanks to my refusal to wear shoes, I just realized we've been walking through puddles of blood."

She'd figured it out.

I watched as each one individually checked the bottom of his or her shoe. The report was profoundly uninteresting, but Chase reported a possible abnormality.

Chase said that he felt the ground had felt like a strange texture under his shoes. He'd figured it was just more gravel, but now realized it might have been that they were sticky.

Running his finger along the bottom of his shoe, Chase's finger came away with a red substance on it.

Now, the red color wasn't the bright red one would expect from a fresh puddle of blood, but rather a dark red color. It reminded Chase of the pen his English academic writing teacher used to use to correct papers: it wasn't bright red, but a more dark red that is what would happen if dark grey and red had a baby. He never understood why the professor couldn't have just stuck with the classic red that teachers had been using since elementary school spelling tests.

In the midst of checking their shoes (and watching them check their shoes), none of us saw the rough looking person slowly coming up to the group. Nor did we see the epic plot twist that was about to come into our lives.

I'd been sitting on Chase's bag long enough that my strength had fully returned and I was eager to begin moving again. I could feel the energy pulsating inside of me, although looking back, it may have been my subconscious telling me not to get involved.

As I began drifting through the line of students, trying my best not to make too much noise, and to stay out of sight.

Teri stopped walking suddenly, which I quickly realized was because somebody was approaching them.

One of mine.

I landed on the girl's shoulder as she crossed her arms and spoke to (what, to her was) the human.

"You're still not taking care of yourself, are you?" Teri said in an accusatory tone. I assumed the two had been previously acquainted.

"Teri!" Bryan whisper-shrieked. "Teri, what are you doing? We don't know this guy, don't know what he's been doing since we've been locked in, shouldn't be instigating anything."

"It's fine," she said, waving him off. "He's my ex, Art; he's always looked like this." She gestured

vaguely at the man, who was pale, had a distant look in his eye that he hadn't seen produced from any sort of recreational drug, and whose body was already beginning to show classic signs of decay.

“He was a smoker, would normally eat one meal a day (not even a square one) along with a bunch of random snacks he enjoyed, and refused to do anything physical, using the excuse that since we lived on a big campus and he always walked to class, the gym wasn't necessary,” Teri explained to them.

The group stood, fully taking him in.

He must have turned relatively recently, as he made no move to attack any of them. When you've been infected long enough, you don't need backup, you just attack, never worrying what might come of you, only that you get a meal.

As he stood, though, a group of more decayed zombies began to gather behind him. They dragged themselves (one of them legitimately did not have a lower half of a body) in their torn clothing, covered in dirt and dried blood, waiting for Art to begin the attack.

“Holy shit, are you bleeding?” Teri asked, and I noticed a dark red stream slowly oozing from what was apparently her ex's shoulder.

Bryan put his arm over Teri's chest, and I realized he thought she was going to begin moving towards the zombie.

It appeared as though he felt responsible for people simply because they knew one another.

When Bryan did this, though, I saw Art's demeanor changed entirely. While he'd been standing and staring into the far distance prior to the action, now his eyes shifted directly onto them and he bolted forward, grabbing the professor's arm.

Living on a college campus and having many late night classes, Teri was prepared for multiple types of attacks, so now she instinctively reached for the pepper spray she kept on her keys and sprayed it in his eyes.

Zombies don't feel pain, though, and even so, he'd already been drained of so much body fluid through the blood the mosquitoes took, that his response was what sounded like a dry cough but was in fact his version of a laugh. His eyes had almost no liquid in them, so the impact was as ineffective as spraying any random body part.

His grip on Bryan's arm remained consistent, and a group was forming behind him. If I knew my zombies, they were only there to take whatever he didn't.

“Alien parasite that makes people decompose and attack others?” Bradley offered, putting words to what everybody already knew he was thinking.

As everybody considered what he said, I decided to move closer to where the action was taking place, as I could tell the scene would change shortly.

While I drifted toward the front of the group, I began to realize how much I'd been moving since the last time I fed. I was beginning to feel drowsy. I hadn't caught a glimpse of my reflection recently, but I hoped this meant I had grown. It didn't seem like it would be time for me to feed yet.

I got to the front as Bryan attempted to pull his arm out of the boy's grip. This only served to anger the zombie, who I could see now was about to attack.

All of a sudden, I noticed a new scent in the air: one of the humans had become so anxious that she'd begun to excrete a new scent that was making me go crazy. It was unlike anything they'd offered me so far, and I realized I had to get to her before any of the zombies killed her, making her blood useless for me.

I realized the one making this pleasant scent was Teri, who would be the perfect meal for me or my zombies: all that lean meat, plus whatever scarring might have been left over on her vocal chords from when she had a breathing condition, would be an absolute party for them, and all of it together would create a more sweet tasting blood for me.

Too distracted by this new smell, I missed what caused Art to do it, but all of a sudden he had pulled Bryan's arm up to his mouth and bitten a large chunk out of it, ripping the flesh directly off.

A geyser of blood spewed from the wound.

My natural instincts kicked in and I suddenly found myself flying toward the injured man, a steady flow of curse words coming out of his mouth.

As I got close to the man's arm, fate tried once again to convince me it wasn't on my side (as if), as the man's students began crowding around him, effectively breaking one of my wings, rendering it useless.

The pain set in immediately: I'd been in pain before, but this felt as if it would never go away. It was unbearable.

I took solace in the fact that the man I was trying to attack must have been hurting the same, if not worse, as he muttered, "That guy never even took any of my classes."

In order to not pass out due to the amount of pain that I was currently experiencing, I started taking in what I could.

I landed quietly on Chase's back, staring at the blood pouring out of the professor's arm. The blood that (I figured we both noticed) looked much more vibrant and healthy than that we'd seen on any of the zombies.

I saw Carl standing over the teacher, and I realized he was trying to stop the bleeding.

Understandably, Teri was the most impacted by the scene, as she knew both the attacked and the attacker. She watched, paralyzed with fear as her ex feasted. He was biting a large chunk out of the arm

that was protecting her, even though the zombie clearly was after the girl.

As blood continued to pour from Bryan's open wound, I saw Carl stop trying to help. He must have realized that any time he made any movement, the zombies would look his way.

"C-can we talk?" Teri stammered, walking up to the zombie. I was pretty sure he was fresh enough that he could understand what she was saying to him, but it didn't look like he wanted to say anything back, even if he were still capable of speech.

Instead, Art grunted and waved his hand dismissively toward the zombies behind him.

"Are you even capable of speech?" Teri wondered, watching the group disassemble. He said nothing, but blood oozed down his chin and ran down his shirt.

"You realize how rude it is to create a cannibal cult and then murder your ex's favorite teacher in front of them, right?"

The zombie replied with a shuddering breath and a slight retreat back. I braced myself and watched as he signaled once again to the group, apparently telling them it was time to attack.

The group lunged at the teacher and I watched as they each latched on to a different part of his body and began ripping off large chunks.

I don't know how the screams sounded to humans, but to me they were so loud and pathetic they almost just sounded like an act.

They did fade, though, as the life force began to drain out of his body.

I wished something would happen soon as the pain began to set in. I think I'd just been in shock when it happened, but my injured wing was beginning to cause me a lot of issues: I wasn't sure if I could stay airborne much longer, taking off was definitely going to become an issue, and I was in so much pain that I was beginning to start having trouble understanding what the humans were even saying.

He didn't die, though, and I knew that no matter how I was feeling, I couldn't let this wing problem get the best of me. I have a tiny body; any minor injury impacts me more than it reasonably should.

A few moments that seemed like hours to me (and, I'm sure, to the pathetic humans), the zombies staggered off without giving much notice to the rest of the living.

I stared at the steaming piles of blood and human organs that lay in the middle of the road, aware that now that they weren't in a human body, I couldn't consume the blood that surrounded them.

Meanwhile, the humans were trying to process all of this. I heard Benson asking what was going on, and watched as the teacher continued to fade.

I was beginning to feel numb to the pain in my wing, but realized one of the humans had done something to mess up one of my legs, too.

It was completely gone.

“The fitness center has medical supplies,” Carl said, although not in response to any of my thoughts.

“Let's go.” He grabbed Bryan's wrist and started pulling him.

I hoped they weren't planning on moving too quickly, as I was balancing on Chase's shoulder and didn't have the strongest hold on him.

“So, strange request,” Bryan said, “but can we play What Are You Doing until we get inside?”

The virus began taking effect faster than I realized. To them, coming from the improv-adverse teacher, this *was* a strange request, but you don't question a man who's bleeding out right in front of you. I, however, understood that the personality change was taking action.

He began moving his arms as if he were climbing a ladder, so Carl asked, “What are you doing?”

“Driving a tractor,” Bryan responded. I didn't understand the game, and I was terrified that Chase would join in on the game and begin moving rapidly.

Carl started doing what he imagined were the basic movements involved in driving a tractor (whatever that was), waiting for somebody else to ask what he was doing in order to continue the game.

I watched as the group all got involved, as they tried to distract themselves by the mindless activity, not thinking about what they were doing or why they were doing it.

But mostly wondering wondering why Bryan had asked to play this game.

When they reached the fitness center, I noticed the infected teacher perk up a bit. This, unfortunately, also meant he started to move faster, and if I stayed on Chase's shoulder, I'd miss something.

I still felt pretty woozy.

Chase wasn't wearing much of a protective shirt today.

Taking a quick nip of his blood, not enough to infect him, but enough that I had a slight rush, I flew up and landed on the infected man's arm.

The human's blood gave me energy that I loved, and I wished I could have more. I was trying to stay under the radar, and if I kept feeding, I would not only grow, but possibly turn one of them.

Whether or not they became infected really wasn't my concern; I hadn't taken enough that he

would have gotten the virus, but if he scratched there, it could get into his blood.

I started to fade, from my vantage point on the zombie's shoulder. While I had been seeing things clearly, it was now very difficult for me to comprehend the things that were moving past me, even though all I was dealing with should have been a minor injury.

I snapped back to the real world when I realized Carl was instructing his teacher to sit on one of the large chairs on the main floor at the gym.

“Sit here,” the student coaxed, guiding the man into the seat. A terrifying seven and a half seconds later and Bryan was in a reclined position, his arm elevated on the arm of the sofa.

I watched blood stream out of it, an ooze ultimately useless to me.

Had anybody else been observing the scene, there it wouldn't have looked any much different than a man being drained of his life force, but to me, I could see the subtle changes: the pool of his blood when he'd been attacked was a bright red, the shade of a perfectly ripe tomato or a very cliché shade of lipstick.

Within minutes, it had gone from that to a brownish red, and had gotten gradually darker as the man had walked, and had officially turned black as it flowed out of his arm. I didn't know if there was something about his biology that had caused it to

change this quickly or if it was a normal change, but the process was complete.

“You’re really bleeding a lot,” Carl felt the need to say. “I’ll go downstairs and find some stuff.”

I felt a cramp that I tried to imagine was just a sympathy pain as I watched Bryan’s eyes track Carl’s movement across the room, as stars clouded my field of vision.

The room was fairly dark, as nobody was using this place for safety at the moment, so it took a minute for me to recognize Chase and Charlie when they walked in. I think the only reason I was sure it was them was the height difference and the fact that it was two people arriving together: my vision was a bit fuzzy.

Bryan emitted a noise that sounded like relief, which I attributed to the fact that he was happy he wasn’t alone any longer. Of course, he’d have been much happier were he to have joined up with some other zombies, but this isn’t the kind of thing one would immediately think of.

As Charlie walked up to us, I watched as she removed her sweatshirt, which she proceeded to wrap tightly around the bit of Bryan’s arm that was gushing blood.

I was upset to lose that bit of stimulation to keep me occupied, so I forced myself to focus in on the shirt that had just been used as a life saving device.

It looked like it was an advertisement for something, but I didn’t know what it was, and there was a list on the back, but it was really hard for me to

figure out what it was, given how mushed up the picture was.

I did know that any minute, Bryan was going to change.

He knew it, too, and as if to confirm this, he asked Charlie to talk to him. "It's not that I'm in pain anymore, but I'm... I'm really tired," he was saying. "I feel weirdly like I'm fading. There's definitely something bad happening with my body."

It depends what you define as "bad".

"Yeah, that was some crazy stuff out there," Chase blurted. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, I've normalized the pain," he said, "but it hurts."

It was just a waiting game now: any moment and he'd be gone for a few minutes and come back as a zombie.

All I had to do was not fade away from the pain I was in from my injured wing. Maybe another sip of Chase's blood was what I needed...

Before my mind could articulate a plan to get over to the guy, Carl interrupted my brilliance by rushing over, his arms full of medical supplies, many of which he was dropping as he walked.

Looking at what he had, one might assume he'd just grabbed everything there was downstairs in the nurse's office without even looking at it or thinking about it as the contents included everything from gauze to condoms.

I'd reason that one would be right, were one to think that.

I gently flew to the table next to the sofa Bryan was on, as I didn't want to be anywhere near the botched first aid I knew was about to take place.

“Let me know if this hurts you,” Carl said nervously, extracting the sweatshirt Charlie had wrapped around the wound on the professor's arm. I saw Bryan tense up, expecting pain, but judging by his reaction, he only experienced mild discomfort.

“I'm not sure anything would hurt in comparison to what that kid did to me,” Bryan scoffed once Carl had removed the shirt.

“How's he doing?” Noah asked, walking up to them. Carl gestured towards the shirt on the floor, unsure if they were doing well or not.

The shirt was now covered in a substance that would have made me smile, were I a creature that had lips.

Humans have a way of being particular about food. “BK, have it your way”, “Subway: Eat Fresh”, and all the freaking styles of nut butters that can be combined with jams or jellies.

Jellies that were the same consistency as the man's blood that had leaked onto and was freely flowing from his arm. If any of the students were to examine it closely enough, they'd see that it was no longer a red gush, but a dark red sludge with large chunks not unlike the boba people seem to put into their teas.

And it wouldn't have been sticky, but more of a slime like feel. It wouldn't make your fingers stick together, but you'd feel the remains of it on your fingers, if you were to get any of it on you.

While the students didn't know any of this, they did know the teacher needed help. Carl immediately wrapped an Ace bandage around the injury. I saw him rushing to cover the wound, totally in the dark that the body was no longer human.

Far from it.

I watched with a sense of envy as the students took care of a man I knew couldn't be fixed, wondering if there was any being on this planet who could help me with my poor wing. The more intense the pain, the slower my comprehension.

“We need to stay calm,” Carl was saying, and I realized that all of the English majors had gotten there at some point. My wing was really getting worse than I realized.

“Tina, you like gore, do you know anything about how to treat Bryan's arm?” Carl blurted, after very obviously thinking this through very meticulously.

“Can someone hold my cat for a while?” Tina groaned, holding her cat slightly higher.

“I'll do it,” Noah immediately jumped in. Tina passed her cat to the student, then approached Bryan, muttering something to herself.

In Carl's words, the blood had started a bright red hue, then turned that darker color, and now it was a chunky, slimy sludge that was hardly even flowing anymore.

“I mean, I don't think it even needs to be wrapped,” he ended. “I hate the idea of him bleeding out, or of letting him go, but I don't want these supplies to go to waste. As weird a thought as that is, we don't know what's going on, and we should probably ration things.”

Finally, Bryan started communicating with them. All he did was inform them that he was hungry, but if he ate something, it'd give me an even more in depth look at where he was in his transformation, so I hoped they'd feed him.

“The two of us will get you food,” Carl said, standing by himself.

Carl seemed to have taken Chase's position as leader, as he jumped into action when Bryan got attacked, trying to help him not bleed out as they walked. I had to see where this was going.

Ignoring the searing pain in my wing, I clumsily fluttered over and landed on the boy's shoulder, as (without explaining what he was doing or where they were going) he grabbed the other student by the arm and brought him to the door that led to the nurse's station.

Noah just went with it as he and I were brought through the door leading downstairs.

The stark contrast between the two rooms was impressive: the other room contained people each occupied with some sort of activity (in Bryan's case, it was *becoming a zombie*, but I digress), and there was a sense of togetherness that hadn't been present before, but seemed to have formed out of a sense of inevitability. It seemed that humans grew accustomed to their new environments quickly, and this group had found themselves considering this version of life their new normal, even though they didn't know every detail about it or what it would mean for them.

The feeling was probably similar to those college courses nobody wanted to take but they were required to for either pre-reqs or some bit of the student's major: they were all in it together, hating it for different reasons, wishing they were doing whatever thing they wished they were doing instead, but ultimately sitting there for whatever period of time until the class ended and then met again.

I noticed that Carl had slowed down, which I attributed to the fact that we were now through the doors. "Honestly, I needed away from that blood for a second," he admitted, confirming my thought.

"I get that," Noah said, nodding. "Yeah, you jumped in without any hesitation to take care of him. That was interesting."

Carl explained it was nagging in his mind that he couldn't have helped that guy, Art, so he had to do what he could for the teacher.

“We're going to get him food,” he finally explained.

As they talked, they opened and closed cabinets, discovering empty baskets, and then some boxes that my starry field of vision couldn't make out in the already dim light.

I had to think, though, that they wouldn't be able to fix a virus with any of these supplies.

Apparently satisfied he hadn't missed anything on his first trip down, Carl motioned to Noah to let him know that it was time to start searching for things to feed the teacher, unaware that *they* were the things that were meant to feed the teacher.

The obvious first place to check was the mini fridge directly outside the office, which contained several containers of what the guys assumed to be forms of medication that needed refrigeration.

“We probably shouldn't touch it,” Carl pointed out.

“What else is in there, though?” Noah asked. There wasn't a light in the fridge, and he couldn't see fully into it.

“Could be good for Bryan, actually,” Carl said, removing the medication and placing it all gently on the floor. “Couple gross salads from the cafe, and

some sandwiches it looks like the nurse brought from home.”

Neither student knew if Bryan had any type of dietary restriction or preference (not knowing his sudden change in hunger), but at this point, any food probably would have made him happy, so they grabbed what they could, and went to carry it up the stairs.

As they reached the doorway, though, Noah stopped Carl from moving on by blocking the door with his arm.

“We should return the medicine,” he said. “In case any of us take it.”

Impressive processing from the stoner, of all people.

Straight up dropping all of the food he was carrying instead of gently setting it down, Carl went and began putting all of the medicine back into the fridge.

I regretted that I'd chosen to take the return trip on his shoulder, as there was a lot of uncomfortable movement and I could feel my injury getting worse.

Carl started giggling as he put the medicine back, to which Noah asked why.

“Do you remember those small juice things that were in tiny plastic barrels from the 90s?” Carl asked. “These are packaged similarly to those.”

“What were those things called?” Noah asked enthusiastically. “I both loved and hated them. They tasted so bad, but were so... neat. Is *neat* still a word?” Carl shook his head in disbelief and laughed. Noah, he remembered, had always had a strange way with words, and he himself always had the temptation to use the cliché, “1920 called, it wants its lingo back” during their Creative Writing classes.

It seemed like it had never occurred to either of the boys that those juices had an actual name, as neither could produce such a thing. They continued their project in silence.

The medicine now back in the fridge, Carl returned to the food that was now scattered on the floor which I highly doubted was ever sanitary and was definitely very questionable now.

The boys likely reasoned that it was all neatly packed up anyway, so all anyone would have to be concerned with was if there were any germs on the packaging that could cause infection if touched.

I love the minor changes that aren't always so obvious to those who aren't in the know when it comes to the apocalypse. The example here was that in the time it had taken the boys to go downstairs, get the food, and return back up, the light had already started to fade.

As a dying insect with the power to turn humans into flesh eating monsters, it is possible (if not *probable*) that I was more tuned in to the

environment and able to see the changes in light than the humans were, but I did. I saw them.

Noah might have seen them, too, as he seemed on the verge of a panic attack.

“Let's get out of here, dude,” I heard him saying as he reached for the door. “Before that locks and we're not able to get out, and everybody leaves without us.” As much as I would have loved to make fun of his paranoia, they *would* leave without a second thought the moment Bryan turned.

They'd been away for a good few minutes (although time meant next to nothing at this point), so there was no telling what might have transpired with Bryan, and the others. I took a second to envision that the professor had turned and already started turning his students into zombies.

“Are we stuck?” Noah asked, although it was more of a statement than a question. In all honesty, I'm not even sure he intended for there to be a question mark implied at the end of his sentence.

Carl shook his head quickly, then explained that he was thinking about the fact that they hadn't thought to barricade the doors and he was worried that people had started to come through.

“But even if they had, it seems like people weren't leaving their general study areas,” Noah pointed out, pushing on the door. Still unlocked, it opened immediately.

There wasn't a lot of change in the room other than the light: Benson was having what appeared to be a one sided conversation with Beth, Comic Sans and Charlie was on the floor playing with the cat, and Tina and Chase were watching over Bryan, who looked to be sleeping.

He wasn't sleeping, he was dead, but he'd faded so slowly, the change went unnoticed.

Plus, in this case, dead wasn't dead™, and he'd be back.

I could feel a sense of relief wash over Carl's body as he took in the scene. Where he had been filled with adrenaline, shaking with nervous anticipation, it was starting to wear off.

Carl strode across the room, returning to his post at Bryan's side.

“How's he doing?” Carl asked Tina in a hushed tone.

You have a way of ignoring the obvious when it doesn't suit the narrative you want, which Tina proceeded to do.

“Well, he's not bleeding anymore, so I think he'll pull through,” she responded.

The wounds that Bryan had, which completely saturated a bandage when Carl had left to gather food, were no longer bleeding.

You know, because once a body is dead™, the blood flow stops.

“I can't explain it,” she went on. “Five minutes ago, that happened” she signaled the red gauze “but now...” she pointed to the wound and shrugged.

“We, uh, we brought food, but he appears to be asleep,” Carl said, and I could sense in the tone of his voice that he didn't think the man was sleeping, *per se*.

If he took even a casual glance at the man's chest, he'd notice an obvious lack of a rise and fall.

“How long has he been like this?” Noah asked, as if he'd be able to understand time normally right now anyway.

“Uh, he passed out about two minutes after you guys went downstairs,” Tina answered. “So then up to now. I didn't try CPR or anything, since I don't know it and... well, it didn't... seem smart.”

“He's dead, Jim,” Charlie muttered.

Bryan's eyes snapped open before they discussed anything else, and I could tell that although he wasn't yet fully transformed, he was almost there.

Before he'd gotten attacked, the man had had blue eyes, that were now a shade of grey more along the lines of concrete, the whites now more red. There was a wheezing noise coming out of him that wasn't known to come from any healthy human being. And he showed absolutely no sign that he knew any of the humans standing around him.

Funny, given that I knew each and every one of them.

I felt pain in my shoulder as I heard Carl say, “Bryan, we all love you, and your classes were the high point of our college careers. We're all here with you, and nothing bad is going to happen. It's okay. Everything is okay. You're okay. You're okay.”