Ash sticks her hands outside of her makeshift shelter, watching as the rain washes the last few days worth of blood off of them. There’s been a frustrating lack of rain recently, leaving Ash with a backup water supply that is dangerously low and her hands and arms unwashed.

On her left wrist her watch gives a quiet <i>beep</i>.

Surprised, Ash pulls her wrist back under the shelter. It’s blinking 12:00 AM at her, midnight. In the corner of the screen is the date; April 25th. It’s now officially her birthday.

She used to stay awake until midnight on her birthday on purpose, counting the seconds until she turned one year older. Nothing ever changed when the clock ticked over, but it always made her feel excited to see her birthday arrive. This year, of course, Ash hasn’t been waiting eagerly for her birthday. In fact, other than seeing the date out of the corner of her eye on her wrist she hasn’t paid much attention to the passage of time, at least not after the first few days.

It just hadn’t seemed important.

But **one year** since the end of the world seems like an occasion worth marking.

One year ago two things happened. The first thing was that Ash turned eighteen. **And while it may have started normally enough**, the second thing, the end of the world, soon made sure that it was her worst birthday ever.

Ash wakes up in her bed, still groggy from sleep. There are mourning doves cooing outside, a calming, familiar sound. It takes several seconds for her to convince herself to lift her head from its nest of pillows, and several seconds more for her to look over at her beside clock. It’s almost eleven, which is odd. She was supposed to go to school today, but apparently she’s slept through not only her alarm but also any attempt by her parents to wake her.

Frowning, Ash checks her phone. The upper left-hand corner says <i>*No Service</i>* and it’s been disconnected from the Wi-Fi, which must be why she has no missed messages of any sort commenting on her absence. She gets out of bed intending to go downstairs and whack the router until the Wi-Fi comes back on, but she’s brought up short by what she sees outside her window.

**There are dead bodies littering the street**.

In an instinctive moment of panic and revulsion Ash yanks her curtains closed and backs away from the window. She shuts her eyes and takes several deeps breaths before she can bring herself to open the curtains and look out again.

There’s not actually that many bodies, but there <i>should</i> be zero dead bodies on Ash’s suburban street, and not the ten or so she can see from the window.

Everything is eerily still outside, only bodies lying there. Ash watches the street for several long seconds, and nothing changes. Just as she pulls back to leave the window something out of the corner of her eye catches her attention. At the end of the block **something** is moving.

Ash looks closer. At the corner of Miller and Chapin she can see someone actually standing up. They’re wavering, clearly injured and listing dramatically to one side. Ash puts her hands on the window, **pressing into it in an instinctive move to get a better view**. It could be her mom, or her dad, or any number of people who live in her neighborhood.

The figure takes a jerky step forward.

It’s a completely inhuman movement. The figure doesn’t lean into the motion, almost like the fact that it’s moving comes as a surprise. Its knees are barely bending, and its upper body is rigid and stiff.

Ash watches, morbidly fascinated, it as it takes several more of these jerky steps, still not rolling its ankles or bending its knees. It continues down her street, slow and creepy, until its feet run into one of the bodies strewn about the street.

It falls face first onto the pavement, not even bothering to lift its hands to break the fall.

Ash almost winces out of reflex at the impact. The creature’s skull cracks against the pavement, and although distance and the walls of her house and the glass in the window mute the sound, Ash can still imagine it.

The figure makes no move to get up again, but its feet continue to move against the pavement, as if it thinks it’s still walking.

It’s very weird and confusing and Ash watches it struggle for several long moments. It certainly <i>looks</i> like a human being, but people don’t move like that, and people pick themselves back up when they fall over.

From the left this time Ash seems more movement, **another figure** with the same lumbering movement.

This one is much closer, on the sidewalk that runs in front of Ash’s front yard. It seems to be making its way over to the fallen…thing. At least, its body is pointed that way, although, disturbingly it’s head is tilted backwards. It staggers into a position that gives Ash a look at its **face**, and this time she yelps and physically jumps back from her window.

It’s Mr. Lewis, from next door. Only, it’s <i>not</i> Mr. Lewis, because Mr. Lewis’ face wasn’t gray when Ash saw him yesterday, and his eyes weren’t leaking something that looks like blood. But most of all, as of yesterday Mr. Lewis had skin covering the left side of his torso, and yesterday when she passed him at the mailbox Ash couldn’t see Mr. Lewis’ ribs.

<i>How is he even alive with a wound like that?</i> Ash wonders for a brief second before **the terrible truth** occurs to her.

He’s not.

Mr. Lewis is clearly, obviously dead, yet still on his feet and walking.

Panicked by the realization, Ash practically runs to the front door and locks the deadbolt. After a moment more of hesitation she grabs the hallway table and drags it over to block the door. It’s probably at best a token gesture but Ash doesn’t want anything into **her house** any time soon, especially not Mr. Lewis’ surprisingly active corpse.

The first thing Ash does when her racing heart calms and her makeshift barricade stays in place is look through her empty house.

She finds nothing.

While it had felt normal in the first few moments, the early morning-esque stillness becomes more and more unsettling as the day progresses.

The ambient noises of the house are there: the <i>swish</i>es and <i>clunk</i>s of the plumbing, the almost indistinguishable <i>hum</i> of the lights, the occasional <i>creak</i> of something settling. Occasionally, she can still hear the birds <i>coo</i>. It’s a weirdly haunting sound now; an uncomfortable reminder that she can hear them only because things are unusually quiet.

There’s no hint of distant traffic, no muffled noise from her neighbor’s television.

**Ash is alone** with the sound of her own breathing, her own footsteps, and the beat of her own heart

It all makes Ash feel very aware of being utterly alone in a strange new way.

Several hours pass, and still her **[[parents|parents]]** don’t return. It takes her until sunset to gather enough courage to take a long, close look at the bodies she can see through the windows. It's not the closest inspection, but it's enough for Ash to determine that her parents are not among **the bodies in the street** either.

Parents

She hadn't been surprised to wake up and find her parents gone, after all, they'd been out the night before. She's not even surprised when the day continues to pass and they still don't return; what with the bodies in the streets it's not surprising that no live people have come around.

It still leaves her feeling unsettled, to be a lone person in a house made to house **a family**.

Family

“Why are we watching this?” Ash asks, stretched out on the couch between her parents with her head and shoulders against her mom’s side and her feet in her dad’s lap.

On the TV plays a dumb action movie one with lots of explosions and dudes pulling off unbelievable acrobatic feats. It’s not particularly to any of their tastes.

“Because it’s on,” her dad says at the same time her mom says, “Would you rather be watching the news?”

“There should at least be popcorn,” Ash says as the generic white male lead crashes yet another car before leaping improbably free from the wreckage.

“Go make some,” her dad suggests.

Ash just sighs and **settles down** further. “Too much work,” she says idly. The movie isn’t particularly captivating or interesting, but she’s far too comfortable here, right now, in this moment, to move.

Over the next few days, Ash finds herself settling quickly into a routine that is strange only for its appearance of normalcy. While any sort of communication seems to be down; only static from the TV and land line, and disconnected warnings from her cell phone, the electricity and plumbing continues to work.

The first afternoon Ash makes herself a sandwich from the fixings in the fridge and takes it over to the window, eating as she watches the creature she saw earlier stumble around the street. Other than the pervasive silence, it’s the only thing that reminds her of what’s happened.

After her sandwich Ash goes through the fridge and the pantry, taking stock of what food is in the house. For three people, there’s probably enough groceries for a little over a week. For Ash alone, if she’s careful? She could survive for a long time without leaving.

She makes sure to ration the food. She still eats three meals a day, but she keeps them small. She uses the perishables in the fridge first, before it has a chance to go bad. It’s not like she has much to do, so she’s able to put more effort into cooking than she normally does. It’s not that terrible an effort to cook vegetables instead of just eating cereal for every meal.

Eventually though, reality becomes harder and harder to keep on the outside. The plumbing and electricity both shut down within hours of each other, and it’s amazing how quickly household garbage accumulates when the best Ash can do is chuck the bags out a kitchen window. While the first zombie Ash saw has long since wandered off, many more have wandered into her neighborhood to take its place.

And, of course, Ash’s food supply dwindles day by day, until it’s bad enough that she knows **it’s time to leave**.

Having seen and read her fair share of apocalyptic media, Ash knows that she has to prepare carefully. She actually leaves her house slightly before the food really runs out, packing the leftover granola bars, baggies of cereal, jerky, other easily preserved foodstuffs.

She will need food for travelling, she knows, and **something to protect herself with**.

In the hallway closet Ash finds her old softball bat. She stopped playing once she entered high school; a decent player but not good enough to make the school team, but all her old gear is still here. She takes the bat in her hands and swings it through the air a few times, listening to the <i>whoosh</i>.

With her bat in hand, and her backpack filled, Ash stands in front of her own front door. She drags the table aside, clearing space for the front door to open. She unlocks the door and wraps her hand around the knob, hesitating for several long seconds before she **pushes** the door open.

Backpack

**Walkman**

After digging around for a while in their old “trunk of junk” as her dad had called it, Ash is able to find the old Walkman her parents had given her when she was ten, before iPods had become all the rage. Where her first iPod is she doesn’t know, and it probably wouldn’t charge anyways. But the Walkman…in the kitchen there’s a drawer full of batteries, and as soon as Ash puts two AAs into the Walkman she can hear it start spinning when she switches it on.

The CDs are trickier to find, but there’s still a stack of them by the computer. Most of the cases are broken and almost everything is in the wrong case, but Ash is still able to find a few albums that she enjoys. She sticks one into the Walkman, making sure it works, and early 2000s pop-rock comes through the headphones, tinny sounding and she remembers how the CDs would always skip as you walked with them, but it’s better than having nothing.

For good measure, Ash also takes the rest of the batteries as well. Just in case.

**Fritz the Bear**

Ash hugs Fritz the Bear close to her chest. He’s an old bear; he’s been with her since she was still in a crib, so her parents say. His fur is worn and his head is slightly misshapen, but Ash still loves him. At ten now she might be too old for stuffed animals, but on the other hand, Fritz has seen her safely through those ten years.

She rests her chin on the top of his lumpy head and tries to ignore the pain in her knee as her dad swabs it with rubbing alcohol.

It had been a silly accident; she’d just tripped on the steps on the back porch, but she’d landed on her knee and left it a bloody mess. Her dad had carried her inside the house and set her on the bathroom counter, carefully dripping water over it while her mom had fetched Fritz for her.

Tears are still drying on Ash’s face but she’s much less scared now with Fritz in her arms and her mom’s hand running soothingly over the top of her head.

“We’ve got you, honey,” her mom assures her.

**Frankenstein**

Her paperback copy of <i>Frankenstein</i> had been a gift. Ash’s aunt and uncle had given it to her for her birthday one year, warning that it might be a bit beyond her level as an eighth-grader. Ash had read it anyways, and then again, and again, quickly becoming fascinated with it.

It’s a start of an obsession with monsters, and Ash dives right into the depths of monster stories; films, books, anything and everything about non-humans.

“Doesn’t this scare you?” her dad asks once.

Ash just shakes her head. “Just because things seem scary doesn’t mean they are,” she says.

Her parents leave it at that, though Ash gets the sense that they don’t really understand it.

**Family Photo**

Ash squirms uncomfortably in her nice clothes. Her mom had picked out clothes for their whole family, so they’ll be color coordinated in the picture. Ash and her dad had both grumbled about it, but had both ultimately agreed to go along with it.

“Alright now, smile,” the photographer says with a fake smile of his own.

Her father pulls a goofy face and Ash laughs as her mom scowls at him.

“Please, I want a nice picture of the three of us,” she scolds.

“Sorry, dear,” Ash’s dad says, but he gives Ash a secret wink as he turns his attention back to the camera.

Ash’s smile at the very least, looks genuine in this photo, and it’s the one her mom eventually gets framed and puts at the top of the mantle.

Ash steps out of her house with an odd feeling of finality. She can always come back, she knows, but standing out on her front step it still feels as though she's leaving her home forever.

<i>I'm just going to get food,</i> she tells herself. <i>Just **[[going to get groceries|shopping]]**.</i>

It’s useless, she knows, but years of habit have her locking the door behind her as **she heads out**.

Shopping

“Ash, honey, do you want to go grocery shopping with me?”

Ash pops up from her chair. “Yes!” she says, bouncing excitedly.

Her dad gives her a smile in return. “Excellent,” he says. “You can be in charge of the list.”

Ash beams at him. She <i>loves</i> being in charge of the list. Searching through the grocery store for the items they need feels like a treasure hunt, and finding those items and being able to cross them off the list is a sense of satisfaction that she doesn’t get anywhere else. Occasionally her dad will even go off list and get her a treat, special little snacks just for Ash. It’s an adventure, like a [[**treasure hunt**|outtransition]].

<i>Just like that,</i> she says to herself, trying not to step over the bodies. <i>A treasure hunt.</i> She carefully doesn't think about how the mess is made up of what used to be [[**people.|out**]]

The streets are almost eerily silent as Ash picks her way to the grocery store. Nothing else moves, there's not even wind in the trees. One of her hands clings nervously to the strap of her backpack while the other clutches her bat. She's glad the grip is worn from years of play; it's less slippery as her hands sweat. The more she walks, the less able she is to keep herself convinced that she's just on a grocery run.

She hadn't been prepared for the reality; the stench of piles of dead bodies and the heaviness it lends the air. The feeling of **death** that hangs over everything.

It's not until several blocks along that Ash finally sees signs of life.

Or well, not-life.

She grips her bat tighter as the creature comes toward her. Now faced with one of them coming at her all jerky motions and decaying flesh, she feels weird likening this...<i>thing</i> to the zombies she's experienced safely behind screens and paper.

It's slow, but it's clearly seen her, and is interested.

Ash hesitates, deciding. Should she bob to the left or weave to the right?

Left

Ash takes several quick steps to the left. It confuses the creature, but only for a few seconds before it adjusts to Ash’s new trajectory.

Ash bites her lip as she thinks. Stepping forward will just take her closer to the creature. More steps to the left aren’t likely to confuse it anymore than it had the first time. Stepping back to the right will put her back where she was, but maybe it will confuse the creature just enough. It doesn’t seem particularly smart. Or, she thinks, she could stand her ground and fight this thing.

Forward

A step forward brings the creature almost uncomfortably close. With a surge of panicky sureness, Ash **raises her bat**.

Return

Stepping back to the right doesn’t do what Ash had hoped it would. The creature once again adjusts its path to meet her, and with a sinking stomach Ash knows she has **no other choice**.

Right

Ash takes several quick steps to the right. It confuses the creature, but only for a few seconds before it adjusts to Ash’s new trajectory.

Ash bites her lip as she thinks. Stepping forward will just take her closer to the creature. More steps to the right aren’t likely to confuse it anymore than it had the first time. Stepping back to the left will put her back where she was, but maybe it will confuse the creature just enough. It doesn’t seem particularly smart. Or, she thinks, she could stand her ground and fight this thing.

Return

Stepping back to the left doesn’t do what Ash had hoped it would. The creature once again adjust its path to meet her, and with a sinking stomach Ash knows she has **no other choice**.

Stand ground

With a sort of grim determination Ash plants her feet and angles her hips into a proper batting stance, **waiting** for the creature to come into her range.

The creature ambles closer.

Ash swings.

<i>Clang!</i>

The sound reverberates in Ash's ears as the shockwave travels down her bat and into her hands.

She drops the bat and runs, cleats turning up dirt in her wake. The first base coach beckons her on, and he doesn't give the signal to slide, so Ash keeps pushing until she feels the base beneath her foot, and the coach holds up a hand to **stop** her.

The shortstop fields the ball back to the pitcher as Ash's teammate stands on second, clearly safe. She catches Ash’s eye and gives her an approving nod.

Ash adjusts her stance, **ready to run** should her teammate Sam, just now stepping up to the plate, hit the ball.

<i>Crunch!</i>

The shockwave that results when Ash's bat hits the creature's skull is completely different from the shockwave of it hitting a ball. Instead of a single, solid <i>whack</i> it's a messy sound. Not to mention that the creature's head doesn't go flying off the bat the way a softball does, but instead when Ash follows through on the swing she rips away parts of its soft, decayed flesh before the bat hits the bone with a sickening <i>crack</i>.

It's so different that Ash nearly drops the bat in shock. Her palms tingling, Ash stumbles back from the creature as it staggers and falls, eyes wide, heart racing, and stomach churning as she takes in the **gore** that's resulted.

The creature lies on the ground, blood and brains leaking out of its skull and onto the pavement. It's all thick and congealed, forming puddles on the cement street.

The creature twitches still and Ash approaches it once more, her stomach in her throat and her lip between her teeth. The mess of blood and guts clings to her shoes and sticks her feet to the ground as she steps through it to stand by its head.

Ash takes a deep breath, shuts her eyes, and takes her bat in both hands before bringing it down with another loud [[**<i>klunk</i>|**killaftermath]] as it hits the creature followed by a <i>clang</i> that travels all the way up her arms.

It's nothing like the [[movies|media1]].

Media 1

No amount of media could have prepared her for the reality she's found herself in. No movie had never mentioned how heavy the air gets with the stench of rotting corpses. Books had never described what it feels like to have cold blood dry tacky on your skin or that walking through miles of blood stained streets makes your shoes stick to the ground. Games hadn't prepared her for the necessity of cleaning the remnants of dead flesh off her bat, or for how numb her arm feels now.

But most of all [[no piece of fiction|mediafb]] had ever conveyed how unsettling it is to look at the streets you've been walking as long as you can remember and see them full of bodies instead of cars, what it’s like to navigate through puddles of blood and gore instead of rain and garbage, and how crushing it is to realize that your old, normal, boring life is <i>right there</i> and yet completely [[**out of reach**|killaftermath]].

Mediafb

"How can you watch this stuff?"

Ash looks away from the TV, where a zombie is busy decapitating a foolish extra. In the doorway to the living room is her mom, looking at the same scene with a frown on her face.

"It's not real," Ash points out.

"I know that," her mom sighs, sounding annoyed. "But it <i>is</i> rather graphic."

Ash shrugs. Sure the blood looks life-like and the prosthetics are award-winning, but she also knows that the heroes will triumph, like they do every week.

"I just don't think I'll ever understand your monster obsession," her mom continues.

Ash refrains from rolling her eyes. It's an oft rehashed conversation between the two of them. "It’s not a monster obsession,” Ash argues. “Besides the monsters in this are just monsters, **it’s the people** that are interesting.”

Ash stands there, over the fully dead corpse of the zombie, breathing heavily for several long moments while her vision swims.

Were the ground any less disgusting, she would sit. As it is, she remains standing until her vision stops swimming and her breathing evens out.

When her legs no longer feel like jelly, Ash gathers herself and takes **the next few steps** on towards the grocery store.

The closer Ash gets to the parking lot of her local grocery store the more she realizes that the bodies here are different. There's something about them that seems...[[**fresher**|os2]], though she can't explain it satisfactorily even to herself.

Uneasy, she steps more carefully through the bodies as she gets closer to the store, paying closer attention to them.

Some of them were clearly injured before they died. Cuts and bruises that couldn't have formed after death, legs and arms bent at weird angles, wounds and marks that couldn't have come from the creatures. Some are abnormally close together, limbs thrown over each other, as though they died in close contact.

But that really stands out is the looks on their faces. The faces that are intact look angry and afraid and not nearly as surprised as the ones Ash had passed earlier. She comes to a halt at a particular couple that catches her eye. It’s two men, and one of them has his fingers locked around the other man’s throat while the second has his fingernails practically embedded into the skin on the back of the first’s hands.

It’s obvious **what happened**, but even so, Ash has trouble internalizing it.

<i>These people killed each other...</i>

In panic and desperation, these people had killed one another before the creatures even got a chance to.

The wave of grief hits her, strong and hard enough that Ash [[**stops**|os4]] in her tracks.

She feels silly, standing in the middle of a bunch of dead people, mourning their mistakes, but she can't help it.

The world remains silent and still as Ash [[**fights back**|os5]] tears.

Suddenly, Ash wants nothing more than to go home. To go back to her old life. She's struck by the desire to turn around and run until she reaches the safety of her house where she can lock the door and never venture back out into the world ever.

She absolutely [[**hates**|fuckdis]] this.

The thing is, Ash <i>could</i> go home. She could just decide to leave the grocery store, **go home** and huddle in a corner.

Briefly, she imagines it. She imagines running home, unlocking the door, and finding her parents miraculously just inside, **waiting for her with open arms**.

But even as Ash imagines it the fantasy starts to fall apart. She hasn’t seen another truly living person in weeks, and if her parents haven’t made it back to their house now, she knows that they probably never will. She screws her eyes shut against the prickling of tears, but a few escape and run down her cheeks. Ash has always hated crying, but she can’t help it.

Besides, **there’s only the dead** to see her.

All that’s left is Ash, the dead, and the monsters. And if Ash ran home the monsters would still be there, and Ash would run out of food.

There's only one choice. She has to **keep going forward**.

She gulps down the rest of her tears and wipes at them, smearing the blood from her hands on her cheeks. As she crosses the rest of the parking lot she manages to compose herself, at least a little bit. She’s only trembling a little bit by the time she reaches the door and [[**pushes**|opattempt1]] them open.

The doors stick.

Ash pulls back and then **pushes harder**.

The door only budges a little bit.

The third time, Ash puts her whole body weight behind her push, and, with an unsettling <i>squelch</i>ing sound, the doors [[**open**|insidestore]].

The noise the doors make when they open give Ash a bad feeling, and sure enough, when she gets them open enough to slip into the store she sees another dead body.

It's been pushed aside by her opening the doors, smearing fresh blood on the ground over the congealed pools that were already there.

She takes a moment to look at the body, and notices that the side of what used to be this person's skull is caved in.

"I'm sorry," Ash tells them, before [[**moving further**|is1]] into the grocery store.

<<if visited("a1", "a4", "refrigerators", "a10", "a11")>>Eventually Ash realizes that she’s likely gotten all she can from the grocery store, and she steels herself to [[go outside|return1]] once more.<<else>>Ash sighs when she sees the state of the grocery store. The aisles are mostly empty, picked clean of most of the useful stuff by people who had gotten there first. By people who had maybe killed to get there. Still, Ash enters an [[aisle|either("a1", "a4", "refrigerators", "a10", "a11")]] , determined to find something of use. <<endif>>

A1

More death, more decay.

That's what remains of what was once a nice vegetable aisle. It's been long enough that whatever food was left behind by the people who had gotten here before her has turned foul.

It adds to the smell of corpses enough to lurch Ash's stomach and she **leaves** the aisle as fast as possible.

A1fb

"Daddy, it's starting," Ash says, tugging on her dad's hand.

Over the rows of fresh fruits and vegetables there are lights flashing and the store's speakers are making low, echoing sounds that imitate thunder.

In a few seconds the water will turn on, misting over the produce, and complete the mimicry of a lightning storm. Real lightning storms rarely happen in this climate, so this is as close Ash can come to experiencing a storm.

Her dad lets her **tug him over**, amused, as he puts their shopping trip on hold as lights flash and the fake thunder crackles over the speakers.

A4

"Chips aren't on the list," Ash says uncertainly, frowning at the grocery list. Her dad has pushed the cart down the chips and snacks aisle, even though nothing here is on the list.

Her dad gives her a smile as he throws the bag of chips into their cart. "No, but we can get them anyways," he assures her.

Ash frowns thinking about this. "Okays," she agrees eventually, "but only if we get Oreos too."

Her dad laughs. "You drive a hard bargain, Ash," he says. "But alright. One pack, and you have to share them with your mom and I."

Ash nods in happy agreement as her dad **pushes her down the aisle.**

Refrigerators

Once again, Ash starts watching her feet and stepping carefully as she notices bits of broken glass littering the floor of the refridgerated aisle. The floor is especially sticky here; spilled alcohol and soda coating the floor in addition to the tracks of blood that now decorate the grocery store tiles.

There's more corpses here than there were elsewhere in the store, and it looks like they'd been fighting. Probably over the beer, Ash supposes, judging by the labels on the bottles that surround most of them.

Smack in the middle of the aisle lies the corpse of a man in a pool of his own blood. It's not that unusual for Ash anymore, not after the last few hours, but what draws her attention is **the beer bottle sticking out of his head**.

It's the way that the beer bottle is lodged in his head that's so morbidly fascinating. Half of the bottle is broken off and lying in shards next to the body. The other half looks like it's been stabbed into the man's face, right at the soft spot around his left eye.

Blood has dried down the left side of his face and onto the floor, creating a sizable pool.

It doesn't look like the type of wound that could have killed him; Ash isn't exactly sure how it works, but it doesn't look like the bottle could have pierced all the way to the man's brain. She wonders what it was that ultimately killed him. Was it slow bleed out from the bottle? Did he fall and hit his head?

It seems sad in some incomprehensible way that she will never know. Equally sad is that he must have died from fighting over a bottle of beer.

Ash shakes herself free of the melancholy, and [[**leaves the aisle in a rush**.|is1]]

A10

Ash wanders through the freezer aisle, thinking vaguely that she might as well sit down and have some ice cream if there's any left. It will be melted, of course; it doesn't look like the freezers are still functioning, but it will still be sugary comfort. Judging by the empty cartons that litter the aisle, plenty of other people have had the same idea.

Several of the freezers are cracked open, the glass shattered, and it gives the whole aisle a slightly chilly feel despite the fact that there isn't actually cool air being pumped out of them.

No, the chill down Ash's spine has much more to do with the fact that some of the jagged edges of the broken doors are stained with blood.

Ash turns to leave the aisle, when she's brought up short by the sight of a [[**face**|frozenface]] staring out at her from inside one of the freezers.

Carefully, Ash approaches the freezer.

The eyes are closed now, but the face inside is turned towards the aisle, as if the person had been watching from inside the freezer as they died. The face is bloodless, an eerie pale white. The effect is more ghost-like than zombie-like, and Ash takes a few steps even [[**closer**|bodycloseup]].

Close up, it's obvious that without power to the freezers, this body too has started to decay. Even so, it seems less decomposed than the rest of the corpses around her; most of its skin is still on and Ash doesn't see any pus oozing from it, at least not yet.

Her attention lingers on the closed eyes. A lot of the dead that she’s seen so far have had their eyes wide open, either because they're still up and walking or because they'd died that way, eyes wide with terror, and there's been no one to close their eyes for them.

But this person, with their eyes closed and their head resting on the door to the freezer, looks almost peaceful. As if they had died sequestered away from the chaos that must have surrounded them.

<i>It's not a bad idea</i>, Ash finds herself musing. [[Freezing to death|winterfb]] is supposed to be peaceful, isn't it?

Winterfb

"Ashley, come back inside!" her mom yells. "You're going to freeze to death!"

"No, I won't!" Ash calls back, flopping back down into the snow. She's taking full advantage of a rare snow day. She's well prepared with her biggest coat, her hat, her gloves, and her boots.

Her mother, back in the doorway of their house with her arms wrapped around herself, shivers. "You'll catch a cold!" she says, shouting from behind the safety of the screen door.

Ash laughs. "Snow doesn't have germs, Mom!" she says, making a snowball in her gloved hands.

"Don't be a smartass,” her mom snaps, “and get inside!"

With a mischievous grin, Ash throws the snowball at the door. It lands with a **[[<i>thump</i>**|freezerlast]] and Ash's mother startles backwards.

With a <i>thump</i> the body inside the freezer shifts, and its head falls farther forward on its neck, sliding down with a wet sound.

Ash jumps back at the noise and tears her eyes away from the frozen corpse. Unsettled, she [[**leaves**|is1]] the freezer aisle behind her.

A11

Ash isn't sure how much grooming products will help her at this point, but she figures it can't hurt to try to smell and look a little less terrible than the world around her. She snatches up a few sticks of deodorant and a bottle of dry shampoo and is just wandering aimlessly down the rest of the aisle when her eyes land on a mess of pads and tampons. It feels like the first stroke of luck Ash has had since this whole thing started.

There are so <i>many</i> of them left, hadn't other people thought about this? The world may have ended, but it’s not like Ash’s body has changed or stopped any of its functions. Besides, she's not sure yet if the creatures have a sense of smell, but if they do it makes sense that they could smell blood, especially fresh blood, and she doesn't want to give them any more reason to attack her. Bugs already attack her enough when she's [[on her period|periodfb]], she doesn't need zombies doing it too.

Ash makes sure to take several boxes of each. Not only does she expect periods, but she's pretty sure that she once read about people using tampons to plug bullet wounds too, so they might even be extra useful. Their purpose <i>is</i> to soak up [[**blood.|**a11pt3]]

Period fb

"It's not gonna work, Mom!" Ash wails, knocking her mother's hand away.

She's sitting on the toilet sobbing and shaking as her mom desperately tries to teach her how to use a tampon. It hurts and it's difficult and it’s <i>messy</i>. There's blood not just on the toilet but also smeared on Ash's hands and the inside of her thighs. She wants to wipe the tears from her face, but she can't, not with her hands this dirty.

"Maybe you should just use pads for a while," Ash's mom suggests.

But Ash lost patience with her mom's platitudes an hour ago. Her mom had been excited about her period just a few hours ago, when Ash had come into her room, scared, to tearfully tell her what had happened. "We should go out for dinner," her mom had suggested, "anywhere you'd like."

And then Ash had reminded her of the swim meet that was in just three hours. She can't swim like this.

Ash cries even harder, ashamed of both the blood and the tears.

"I'm sure your coach won't mind if you miss one meet," her mom says.

"That's not the point!" Ash cries. "You don't get it, leave me alone!"

Her mom hesitates, clearly awkward and unsure as Ash continues to cry. After several moments she does leave, placing tampons and pads on the counter should Ash want to try again.

With her mom gone and her dad banished from this part of the house for the time being, Ash is alone, and she finds that it just lets her feel free enough to cry <i>harder</i>, as she lies her head on the counter, sobs, and [[**bleeds**|a11pt3]].

Being in this aisle makes Ash hyper aware of the blood and grime that’s still clinging to her skin. It’s especially bad on her hands and forearms, even though it’s dried and is starting to peel. Absentmindedly, Ash starts picking at it, peeling the dried blood off. She drops the flakes onto the mess of the aisle floor as she **leaves** it.

Return 1

Ash hadn’t expected there to be a ton of stuff left in the grocery store, not after so much time has passed, but she still leaves feeling largely dissatisfied. There wasn’t enough food left in the store for her to feel comfortable about holing back up in her house for a few days, like she’d intended.

But she can’t stay here, she knows that. It’s far too exposed and there are already more creatures headed towards the parking lot.

Ash walks the long way around it, giving them a large berth as she **heads for home**.

She gets as close as turning onto her street before her journey home is interrupted. Ash has been watching the creatures through her windows for long enough now that she knows that they tend to come and go in waves and right now, there is a clear wave of creatures on her block.

She swallows. Five is more than she really wants to deal with; unsure as she is still about their strength and what exactly will happen should one of them get her. There doesn’t seem to be any good way past them; they’re spread out and one of them is even in Ash’s front yard, bumping up against her swing.

Moving fb

“This is it, Ash,” her dad says as they slow to a stop in the street. “Our new home.”

Ash tilts her head further to the side, looking further out of the car window. This new street looks almost exactly like the one they’ve moved away from. Her parents have assured her that she’ll be happy here, that the schools are better and it’s closer to both Mom’s and Dad’s jobs, but at first glance it looks like just another neighborhood.

Her parents are excited though, so Ash doesn’t say any of her thoughts aloud. “Alright,” she says instead. “It looks nice.”

Her dad looks back and smiles at her.

“Come on, let’s get out and take a closer look,” her mom says.

“Okay,” Ash agrees easily, slinging her backpack over her shoulder as she gets out of the car.

Up close, the house looks as ordinary as the rest of the neighborhood. It’s a standard off-white color, with two stories and a decently sized front yard. The only thing that Ash likes about it is the large tree in the yard.

Her dad catches her looking at it as he took gets out of the car, grabbing some of their moving boxes from the trunk. “I was thinking I could build you a swing off that tree,” he says.

“That sounds cool,” Ash says, honestly this time.

“I know moving is hard,” her mom says, “but I think **we’re going to be happy here**.”

Her heart sinking, Ash quickly back away, turning back down Miller Street before any of the zombies can catch sight of her. Once she rounds the corner she feels safe enough to turn her back on the creatures and she takes off **running**.

She runs for several long minutes, down once familiar streets. She quickly loses track of where she is, taking random turns through alleys and backyards whenever she sees a figure on the horizon. Eventually she stops seeing any and the fear fades, along with the adrenaline.

Ash slumps against the side of the closest house and gasps for breath, grabbing at the painful stitch in her side. As she slowly gets her breath back an odd sort of finality settles around her. Her home is truly gone now; even if she were to work her way back and wait for the creatures to clear the area it wouldn’t be the what it was, what Ash desperately **wants it to be**.

Birds

Her first morning in the new house, Ash wakes up to the sound of birds. They sound different than the birds she’s used to; less of a chirp and more of a coo. Kind of like pigeons, but more musical. She lies in bed for several extra minutes, just listening to them. When she does finally go downstairs for breakfast, she resists the temptation to ask her parents about the birds. She curious, but something about listening to them seems private, and she ultimately decides to research them on her own.

When she learns that they’re called mourning doves her first thought is that it’s too sad of a name. The bird’s calls are beautiful, and lying in bed for several extra minutes in the **early mornings** on the weekends quickly becomes part of Ash’s routine.

The sun has begun to set. Ash has a flashlight in her bag, but she’d rather not be stumbling around in the dark with zombies. She’s getting tired anyways, and desperately wants to curl up in bed, shut her eyes, and pretend that this isn’t happening for a few hours. But her own bed is no longer an option, and Ash is resigned to settling for any old bed as long as it’s behind a functional door.

A quick look around lets her recognize Cherry Street; one of the many other streets that make up her neighborhood. Ash actually knows Cherry quite well; her friend Jaime lives on it. Well, live<i>d</i>. She doubts that Jaime and her family are still around, no one else is after all. But Jaime’s house is at least familiar, and it’s a goal, so Ash decides to **make her way there**.

In a stroke of luck, Jaime’s house looks to be largely unaffected. There’s a downed zombie in the front year, and some blood spatter on the side of the house, but a quick walk around it shows no broken windows, and all the doors look shut. In fact, when Ash tries the front door, it’s locked.

Ash knows where Jaime’s parents keep the spare key though, and sure enough, when she turns over the vase on the front porch there’s a key still taped to the bottom of it.

Ash smiles and takes the key, fitting it easily into the lock and **heading inside**.

The inside of Jaime’s house is pretty much the same as its always been, though both darker and colder than normal. Ash brings out her flashlight for the illusion of warmth it provides and **heads for the stairs** up to Jaime’s room.

Sleepover Flashback

“Shh,” Jaime says, a finger pressed to her lips.

Ash nods and creeps after Jaime down the stairs. They’re supposed to be asleep, Jaime in her bed and Ash on the blow-up mattress, but instead they’re creeping downstairs to the TV room. Jaime’s parents had kicked them off of Jaime’s brand-new PlayStation at only 10 PM, sending them to bed, but now it’s the middle of the night and Jaime’s parents are asleep, so Ash and Jaime are creeping back down to finish their game.

Once they’re down the stairs Ash whispers, “What if they hear the TV?”

“We’ll keep the volume down low,” Jaime assures her, deftly hopping over **the creaky spot on the floor**.

Automatically, Ash hops over the creaky spot on the floor at the base of the stairs. Jaime’s parents might not be asleep upstairs, but Ash is still on edge, and the dark, empty house makes her feel the need to keep as quiet as possible. But the second floor of Jaime’s house is as quiet and empty as the first, and Ash makes her way to **Jaime’s bedroom** without incident.

The bedroom is almost exactly the same as it was when Ash was here last, only a week before the world ended. Jaime’s posters still hang on the walls, and there’s dirty laundry overflowing from the hamper in the corner. Jaime’s laptop is still on her desk, closed and dark, but her phone is gone, likely with Jaime, wherever she is. Ash sighs and sits on her best friend’s bed, unmade of course, because Jaime never makes her bed. Ash wonders idly if that’s something that even matters anymore in this new world. Jaime’s mother would be complaining about Ash sitting on the furniture while dirty, and she wonders if that matters anymore either.

But it doesn’t matter to Ash; she’s tired and all of a sudden everything about the terrible day comes crashing down onto her, leaving her utterly exhausted physically, mentally, spiritually. The only concession she makes to propriety is to kick her shoes off before she tucks herself underneath Jaime’s covers and **falls asleep**.

Something abt ash and Jaime hanging out

Ash dreams. Her dreams are disjointed and weird…

…there are zombies in front of her before they shift into her parents…

…who run away when Ash tries to reach out for them, turning a corner and ultimately disappearing…

…into the bread aisle of the grocery store, now stocked only with rows and rows of plain Wonder Bread…

…that becomes drenched with blood as Ash continues down the aisle…

…until she is drenched in blood, it’s pouring over her hands, down her face, and seeping out from under her pants**…**

Ash wakes up with a shout strangled in her throat and curls into a tight ball under Jaime’s blankets, shutting her eyes and trying to breathe. In and out, in and out. One and two, and three and four. As her heartrate settles Ash can start to hear other noises over the sound of her own breathing. It must be windy outside; she can hear the soft <i>whoosh</i> and the soft creaking of tree branches. Over the top of it she can hear birds, a strange mix of <i>chirp</i>ing from the sparrows and <i>coo</i>ing from the mourning doves.

Ash listens to them until she feels more settled and she sits up, sliding out of Jaime’s bed to look out her window. Down in the street she sees one or two of the creatures ambling around, clearly aimless. The tree branches are indeed moving in the wind, but otherwise there’s a sense of desertion about the world outside.

Ash sighs. She doesn’t want to go back out into it, but she knows she must. She simply didn’t get enough food from the grocery store to camp out for several weeks again. So she tugs her shoes on and heads downstairs, bracing for **another day**.

In the light of day it’s easier to see things that Ash had missed coming in last night. Spread out on the dining room table are a bunch of supplies, clearly considered by Jaime’s family for packing and then deemed not worth the weight. Among the scattered items are parts of mountaineering sets. Which makes sense, given how Jaime’s parents had been such avid outdoors people.

Ash looks at the gear and thinks. While mountaineering gear might not be specifically useful, it clearly seems that Jaime’s parents were on the right track. An outdoor recreation store isn’t as obvious a place to go as a grocery store and might still have things in it that Ash could make use of. **It’s quite a bit of a walk** to the nearest store, easily several miles, but it is at the very least some kind of plan.

Like she had with her own house, Ash takes care to lock the door to Jaime’s house behind her, pocketing the key. She’s not sure why, but she feels better knowing that Jaime’s house is an option. However, there at the end of Cherry street is one of the creatures, walking almost mechanically from one side of the street to the other. The street isn’t wide enough for Ash to slip past it unnoticed.

Ash sighs. At least it’s only one, she’s killed one of these already there’s no reason to think she should be unable to kill another.

She **grips her bat tighter**, preparing.

The zombie staggers back and forth like it’s stuck in a loop.

It’s still too far away for Ash to hit, so she **steps closer**.

When she’s about five feet away from it the creature seems to sense her. It breaks out of it’s loop, weaving towards Ash.

It’s staggering but it’s not particularly fast, so Ash is still able to line up with her bat and **swing**.

It’s not the perfect hit her swing at the earlier zombie had been, but it’s still enough to take a bit of skin off, to make some blood fly, and to send the creature stumbling. With it clearly dazed from the hit it’s easy for Ash to line up the next hit, and this time when she **swings** it’s both powerful and dead on.

The creature’s skull shatters, and Ash ends up having to screw her eyes and mouth shut as she dodges quickly out of the way of the spatter. It still coats her, staining her clothes, neck, and hair, but at least when she opens her eyes she’s not blinking zombie blood out of them.

The creature’s body tumbles to the ground, into a pool of its own gore. Ash has seen more gross things since leaving her house only yesterday than she had in the entirety of her life before, but this is almost so gross she can’t even comprehend how gross it is.

She hurries away from the scene, eager to **leave it behind her**.

If only getting the blood and chunks of dead flesh clinging to Ash were as easy to get away from. It all dies quickly, turning tacky and uncomfortable quickly in the summer heat. She desperately wants to wash, but plumbing has been down for two weeks and water is too precious a resource for her to waste it.

So Ash soldiers on, trying her best not to think about it. It’s hard; the equipment store is several miles away and the longer Ash walks, the more oppressive the heat starts to feel, even though it’s not as hot as it could be. Sweat soon starts to mix with the blood and dirt that’s already covering her and the mixture starts to harden, pulling uncomfortably at her skin.

After about an hour of walking she loses patience with it and as much as she’s loathe to, pulls a water bottle out of her bag and pulls her t-shirt off. She has to turn it inside out to find a clean spot which she pours water on before running it over her arms.

It takes time and focused scrubbing, and by the end of it Ash’s arms are red from all the rubbing, but eventually the water starts to run clear when she pours a little on her arms instead of the mix of red and black of congealed blood and dirt.

Her face, which she can’t see, is harder to do. Once her hands are clean she wets them again and starts rubbing at the spots on her face that feel tacky and uncomfortable until they feel less so. Her hair she gives up for as a loss, at least until she can get to a proper place to clean.

She leaves her dirty t-shirt on the sidewalk where she’d stopped, giving it up for a loss. She takes a clean one out of her bag and pulls it on. She had really hoped to make her clothes last more than one day, she didn’t want to weigh down her pack with too many clothes to start with, and now she’s already ruined one shirt.

Well, maybe there will be some clothes left in the **outdoors store**, even if they are all ugly athletic attire.

Ash feels better as she continues on, fresher and cleaner, but having less blood on her doesn’t do anything about the heat or the distance. It also doesn’t do anything about the creatures that dot the landscape which she goes out of her way to avoid, no point in getting dirty again if she doesn’t have to. Ash herself might not smell like rotted flesh and blood, but the very air itself does, and the smell seems to get worse and worse the longer she spends outside. Every corpse she passes makes the stench sharper, harder to ignore, and in some spots where the bodies are clumped together in groups Ash finds herself running past; not only trying to escape the smell but also afraid to look too closely and see whatever tragedy befell these people.

It’s a hard journey, especially one that used to take her only fifteen minutes by car. But by the time Ash gets to the outdoor equipment store more than a couple of hours have passed and she’s not only exhausted, but can also feel the back of her neck and arms burning and starting to peel under the sun. When she sees the **three zombies** wandering around the parking lot she almost sits down right there and cries.

There’s one zombie walking in circles around where the sidewalk is indented and turns into parking lot. On the far side of the parking lot is another one, stumbling around in a lurching manner. And, of course, a third one is loitering directly in front of the door that leads into the store.

Zombie 1

Ash isn’t too far away from the zombie at the front of the parking lot, though still far away enough that it hasn’t seemed to notice her. She could ignore it, but it might be worth her while to leave one less zombie walking around.

Ignore it

Deciding that it’s not worth the risk, Ash carefully takes several steps away from the creature, until she’s sure that she’s out of its range.

That just leaves the zombie on the far side of the parking lot and the one in front of the store.

Fight it

Zombie 2

Ash considers the zombie at the far side of the parking lot. It would be so easy just to leave it alone, but just as she’d thought with the first, it might just make her feel safer if she knew that it was down and unable to come back to haunt her.

It’s got a bit of a strange path that Ash tries to figure out as she wakes her way across the parking lot towards it. But there doesn’t appear to any pattern to its movement.

When Ash is close enough for it to sense her, it gives a sudden lurch in her direction and practically lunges for her.

Ash takes a few steps back on instinct but the creature follows after her, still moving in awkward bursts.

Ash readies herself and swings.

She connects, but not as solidly as she meant to. The creature’s odd movement pattern has worked in its favor, and while Ash has taken off what is roughly half of its face, it’s not enough to knock it down. It makes another wild lunge for Ash, hands outstretched as if to grab her.

Ash darts backwards, her heart in her throat and pure fear pounding through her veins.

She **swings** again, catching it in the chest this time.

There’s a more solid sounding <i>thump</i> when Ash hits it in the chest.

The creature stumbles, bending over now, and Ash sees her chance.

She takes the bat in both her hands and swings it above her head before bringing it down **hard** on the creature.

Finally, it hits the ground fully. It lies there, jerking unsettlingly until Ash **brings her bat** down on what’s left of its head.

The zombie stops moving completely.

Ash kicks it, just for good measure.

She refuses to think about how she was almost killed by a zombie because she knows that it will only freak her out and make her lose her focus.

Besides, there’s still the matter of the zombie in front of the door to the store.

Avoidance

Deciding not to bother with the creature, Ash quickly realizes that if she stays far enough to the right of the parking lot, she can probably avoid the it completely. With this in mind she gets as far away from it as possible without leaving the store area entirely before she starts creeping forward. She keeps an eye on it as she creeps closer and closer to the store, until she’s far enough way that she’s comfortable focusing solely on the one in front of the door.

Zombie 3

This one Ash will have to kill if she wants to get into the store, there’s no way around it. It’s too close to the door for her to sneak past.

<<if visited(“zombie 1”, “avoidance”)>>Ash sneaks up to it, holding her breath. The creature hasn’t moved, swaying in one spot. She gets closer to this one than the ones she’s killed before by the time it notices her, and it barely has the chance to stumble towards here before Ash is swinging her bat to meet it.

Unlike the last one this one goes down hard and easily, and Ash is able to move away from it fast enough that she only adds a few new spots of blood to her clothes.

<<else if visited(“avoidance”)>>Ash sneaks up to it, holding her breath. The creature hasn’t moved, swaying in one spot. She gets closer to this one than the ones she’s killed before by the time it notices her, and it barely has the chance to stumble towards here before Ash is swinging her bat to meet it.

Prepared now for the gore show that results, she takes several quick steps backwards from it as soon as she finishes the swing, and neatly avoids the falling body of the creature, and only gets a few new spots of blood on her already covered pants and new shirt.

<<else if visited(“zombie 2”)>>

<<endif>>

She waits a few seconds, catching her breath, before she **pushes open** the door to the shop.

The interior of the store has always been open and airy, but in these circumstances, it just serves to make the place feel overwhelming large and barren. On the plus side, it gives any creatures very few places to hide, so Ash is reasonably sure that she’s not going to be getting any nasty surprises as she sets about **exploring**.

Overall, the place in reasonably good shape. Sure there’s some overturned racks and various merchandise strewn across the floors, but there’s no large pools of blood, which is a huge plus.

Directly in front of the entrance, in the middle of the store, is the apparel section. There’s lots of clothes strewn on the ground around it, along with clothing racks and hangers, but there seems to be a pretty sizable selection left.

In the rear left of the store is camping gear; tents, sleeping bags, all sorts of things that could prove useful.

The rear right is walls and walls of shoes. Hiking shoes, running shoes, work shoes, boots. Some of them have been knocked off the wall display, and even from afar Ash can see the shoe boxes flung all over the section, but there still seems to be a lot of shoes left behind, she can probably find some to fit her.

Her mind on the ruined shirt she left behind, Ash heads towards the apparel section of the store. She starts by digging through the piles of clothes on the floor, looking for things that might fit her.

She hadn’t expected there to be underwear, but there is, and Ash eagerly grabs several packs, to tear open so she can roll up the underwear inside and shove them into the empty spaces in her bag. Without a good way for her to do laundry, she’s definitely running out of underwear the fastest.

Similarly, she also takes quite a few workout tanks; they’re small and can easily rolled up and stuffed alongside what she already has in her pack. And given how fast she seems to be going through clothes, it can’t hurt to have **alternate layers**.

She hesitates longer over the winter gear. It’s bulky and she wants to travel as light as possible, and it’s hard to imagine the realities of cold weather when she’s stills aching with sunburn from the summer sun.

In the end he ends up taking one thermal hoodie; the tag boasts that it’s made of temperature regulating fabric and will keep warm even in cold weather, but it’s still thin enough for her to fit in her backpack.

She also exchanges her gross, ruined jeans for a pair of hiking pants. They’re made of an material that feels just as sturdy as her denim, but as the advantages of actual, functioning pockets, plural pockets, as in more than one, unlike the majority of girls’ clothes.

Clothes shopping done, Ash considers the rest of the store. <<if visited(“camp”, “shoes”)>>All that’s left is the front section of the store, primarily taken up by the sales counters along with small paraphernalia designed to entice customers waiting in line. However, next to the sales counters are glass display cases, inside which wearable gear and cameras gleam.<<else if visited(“camp”)>>There’s still the wall of shoes in the back section of the store, and a glance down at her own blood and muck covered shoes makes a brand-new pair sound awfully appealing.<<else if visited(“shoes”)>>The camping display is both intact and incredibly inviting, and in retrospect seems like the obvious thing she needs.<<else>> The camping display is both intact and incredibly inviting, and in retrospect seems like the obvious thing she needs. And the wall of shoes… a glance down at her own blood and muck covered shoes makes a brand-new pair sound awfully appealing.

Ash heads to the camping display, where a tent is still miraculously standing, surrounded by shelves of alternates and all the camping gear Ash could ever want. There’s not only tents, but also sleeping bags, thermal blankets, portable cooking supplies, and those fancy hiking backpacks with millions of straps coming off of every bit of them.

Delighted, Ash drops her old backpack and starts trying on the expensive fancy ones. There’s different <i>sizes</i> of backpacks, optimized for different torso sizes (according to the tags), and they’re clearly better quality than her beat up school backpack. It even has specialized buckles on the bottom to attach a sleeping bag to, which Ash does, oddly excited at this simple functionality.

Eventually she settles on one and starts the process of moving everything over to the new, blood stain free backpack. She shrugs it on and buckles it around her hips, shifting the weight off her shoulders, and the **relief** is both instant and immense.

She goes through the rest of the camping section with a lighter back and a lighter heart. The display tent is open and set up in inside with its own sleeping back, lantern, and portable cook stove. It looks like the perfect place for Ash to spend the night, or even a few nights if she can manage it.

With that in mind, she starts combing through the portable cooking supplies. She finally finds what she’d wanted in the grocery store; lots and lots of food. There are buckets of emergency rations, boxes full of meal bars, shelves and shelves full of dehydrated emergency food supplies. Ash grabs as much of it as she can fit in her arms and takes them back to the tent, where she stacks them near the portable stove.

She smiles. She could make this **a nice permanent place to stay**.

Further digging through the supplies reveals water filtration pumps. There’s a few bottles of water left in her own backpack, and more in the defunct fridges by the registers, but she also knows that there’s a river only about a twenty-minute walk away. Local wisdom taught her as a child not to drink from it, or go swimming in it, but Ash figures that the water filtration will probably make it safe. That’s their purpose, after all.

As the daylight from the windows starts to fade as dusk approaches, Ash takes some of the portable lanterns (batteries included!) and sets them up around the store. One goes in the tent, and she places a second in the middle of the camping section. Then she considers the rest of the store. <<if visited(“clothes”, “shoes”)>> All that’s left is the front section of the store, primarily taken up by the sales counters along with small paraphernalia designed to entice customers waiting in line. However, next to the sales counters are glass display cases, inside which wearable gear and cameras gleam.<<else if visited(“clothes”)>>There’s still the wall of shoes in the back section of the store, and a glance down at her own blood and muck covered shoes makes a brand-new pair sound awfully appealing.<<else if visited(“shoes”)>>Now that she has a nice, clean area to stay for a bit, her grimy clothes start to feel less and less comfortable. She eyes the middle of the store, and the apparel section strewn around it.<<else>>There’s still the wall of shoes in the back section of the store, and a glance down at her own blood and muck covered shoes makes a brand-new pair sound awfully appealing. Likewise, her clothes feel equally grungy and uncomfortable, and the apparel section has the promise of fresh clothes.<<endif>>

Picking through the disorganized chaos of the shoe display proves to be both annoying and time consuming. It’s hard enough for Ash to find shoes in her size among the mass, and even harder to find a pair of matching shoes. It strikes Ash as strange: why would anyone just take one shoe out of a pair? Maybe the missing shoes are somewhere else in the store, but regardless, Ash eventually ends up with **one pair of hiking boots** in women’s size seven.

The boots are a truly ugly shade of green, so ugly that Ash wouldn’t even be considering them if she had any another choice. She discards her gross sweaty socks for a fresh pair, but she keeps her old shoes, carrying them in her spare hand. She knows that breaking in these boots might be unpleasant, and if she has to run, she’d rather not do it in stiff, painful shoes. So she keeps her old ones as backup, but tries to break in the new ones by wandering around the store.

<<if visited(“camp”, “clothes”)>> All that’s left is the front section of the store, primarily taken up by the sales counters along with small paraphernalia designed to entice customers waiting in line. However, next to the sales counters are glass display cases, inside which wearable gear and cameras gleam.<<else if visited(“camp”)>>Now that she has a nice, clean area to stay for a bit, her grimy clothes start to feel less and less comfortable. She eyes the middle of the store, and the apparel section strewn around it. <<else if visited(“clothes”)>>The camping display is both intact and incredibly inviting, and in retrospect seems like the obvious thing she needs.<<else>> The camping display is both intact and incredibly inviting, and in retrospect seems like the obvious thing she needs but the appeal of fresh clothing is hard to ignore.<<endif>>

Ash wanders to the front of the store, making sure to grab the bottles of water from the register displays. She can’t see a use for money in this world, but her attention is drawn by the personal items in the cases nearby.

In the first case there’s all sorts of cameras, normal digital ones and ones that are made to be attached to a helmet or a bike.

The second case has a display of pocket and Swiss Army knives, and Ash feels silly for not thinking of grabbing one immediately. The cases are locked, but Ash figures it doesn’t really matter at this point if she **smashes the glass**.

Her bat makes short work of the glass case, the shards collapsing into the display. She thinks that if the electricity was still working she probably would have triggered the alarm, but when the crashing sound of glass dies down there’s nothing but silence.

There’s several different knives inside, but Ash picks a Swiss Army with what looks like at least twenty different attachments. She’s not sure what they all do, or even how to use most of them, so she takes a switch blade as well for good measure, tucking both into her brand new deep pockets.

Next to the knives lie a collection of watches. Ash hasn’t worn a watch since she was small, but with her phone dead and back on her bedside table, she’s spent the last few days just guessing at the time based on the sun. But in the case all the watches are still <i>tick, tick, tick</i>ing away. She settles on a black one, bulky yet sleek with its color. It displays the date, the temperature, and it even has a compass on the watch face. There’s more meters whose purpose Ash isn’t even sure of in addition to, of course, displaying the time. It’s a ridiculous amount of features for a truly ridiculous prince; more than $350 for a watch.

It’s not something Ash can even imagine thinking of owning if she had to pay for it, but as it is…she takes it and puts it on her wrist. Underneath it, in the case, is a **folded piece of paper**.

“It’s…three-forty-five,” Ash says, squinting at the watch. Learning to tell time has been one of the skills she’s been working on at school, and her parents have gotten her a watch to help her practice.

The watch looks like the old clocks; the non-electronic ones with the numbers along the outside instead of in the middle. It’s harder to read these, but even as Ash frowns about it, she knows that her parents will only tell her that it’s important to learn anyways.

Ash takes the paper and reads it. It lists the full features of the watch (in addition to the features Ash had recognized it also has a barometer and recharges with solar power) as well as a **one year manufacturer’s warranty**.

It hasn’t been quite a full year since Ash found her watch at that store, but as she sits under an awning, looking at the little digital numbers that represent her birthday, she thinks randomly that the manufacturer’s were right to give the watch a yearlong warranty. It’s still keeping the time, and the date, and telling Ash that it’s currently fifty-two degrees out and raining.

They could have even advertised that it can stand up to just about a year of being spattered in not only dirt and weather, but also zombie blood, if they could have foreseen such a thing.

She’d left the store where she’d found it after a few months; a zombie had made it through one of the windows and Ash didn’t want to be caught sleeping by any that crawled through the hole.

Still, a year later and both Ash and the watch are still here, still breathing and ticking.

Being grateful that you’re still alive isn’t probably what most kids feel on their nineteenth birthday, but here Ash is, still breathing, just as her watch is still <i>tick, tick, tick</i>ing.