

# The Horde

*L'Orda*, translated from Italian by Yusuf Zuccherò

Zombie movies got him used to certain basic rules: it was necessary to aim for the head to eliminate them, and not to get bitten to avoid the risk of contagion. But he thought that in those films there was always a "scientific" reason behind the existence of walking and bloodthirsty corpses; while at that moment he felt much more like in Romero's early films, where the reason for zombism is unknown, implied in a cinematographic "magic". Scientific explanations or not, now

zombies existed and dominated the world. Before the invasion began, war and despair were the prerogatives of television and the Middle East. At most, some bomber sparked in an important European capital, but not there at home. Who would have thought that any civilian, employee or banker, would have had to wield an umbrella, or a briefcase, like a sword to fend off the "undead"? And this was true also for him and his friends, relatives, loved ones. At first, it was thought that zombism would not even arrive in that town; it had no reason to manifest itself in such a small province... yet the "non-living" had dragged themselves down there anyways, in a gigantic Horde. He had noticed that it was not necessary to hit them in the head like in the movies; they were "infected" and therefore eliminable, and not walking dead animated by some secret curse. Another thing that did not go as in the movies was contagion only by bite: in reality, a touch was enough; to be touched, not even scratched. He had never seen one of those monsters try to bite someone. Minutes after the "touch" anyone was potentially a zombie, but only potentially.

He had been touched a few times and had not been infected. Others also seemed immune, but had been dragged away by the Horde before his eyes; by now they were certainly zombies. To avoid the same fate he had barricaded himself on the roof of the courthouse. Craving his body, the Horde, marched around the palace undecided on how to proceed. None of the zombies were able to climb so high but now he was trapped: they would have starved him. That small part of ex-humanity continued to go around the building and he was sure they secretly confabulated a way to capture him. Thus began the siege: some zombies shouted against him the worst insults; some others, in a gentler way, invited him to come down and take part in the Horde. Every time those monsters addressed him directly his blood would freeze and his heart would skip a beat. As long as Laura was there, he hardly ever heard the voices of the "non-living". He had started to think that it was the first indication of mental instability given by imprisonment, but

Laura had later revealed that she too heard voices, and she heard them constantly. A few days later the girl had thrust herself down suddenly and was swallowed up by the mass of the Horde, disappearing like a ship swallowed by the waves. He burst into a desperate cry; he didn't want that extreme gesture to sound like a surrender in his head, he denied himself the possibility of committing suicide in the same way. A new voice had joined the chorus of the "undead", and requests became more insistent. They invited him to give in and not to starve, or encouraged him to strange masochistic thoughts, terrified him with targeted insults and tried all the time to demolish his will. Sometimes when he was particularly discouraged by the voices he started to rant senseless sentences against the mass of the "non-living"; it seemed to him that they laughed at them.

Then he unbuttoned his pants and pissed on the heads of the zombies, filling the action with insults and blasphemies addressed to them; soon after, however, he repented and for a while tried to avoid looking at the Horde below. For two or three days he remained on an empty stomach, shortly after the water ran out. But with their slow and steady gait, the zombies did not seem to give up, they continued in an infinite round tour of the palace walls. They would never have reached the roof because the passage from the stairs was narrow and obstructed, the zombies were unable to overcome obstacles and rather "died" on them, without being able to move. Night had come and his stomach was bubbling more than ever, just as his dry throat begged for rain or at least a dirty puddle. But the sky was calm and even the Horde had become strangely quiet. None of the "undead" looked up in search of him or went on that tiring round. They were all good and sitting on the ground or leaning against a wall as if they too needed peace. As darkness began to take hold, the automated system of street lights activated and the surrounding streets began to illuminate with that yellow-orange light. All the spotlights of the courthouse came on in one fell swoop and also the street

lamps of the parking lot in front. Finally, he had a clear vision of the "sleeping" Horde. This wave of light covered the sky and the stars, the air was flat and relaxed and no noises were heard even in the distance; excluding the sighs of the thousands of zombies who had given themselves that evening of rest under the palace.

He thought a lot about what to do, he should have at least tried to escape. They had already "touched" him several times and never managed to infect him. Was there any possibility if he acted by surprise and found a way to leave them behind? Maybe he could go downstairs and sneak out: if he took advantage of the right moment they would have noticed him too late and in the meantime, he would have had the necessary time to run away! Or maybe the zombies, at the first sound of footsteps, would wake up from the numbness and surround him in no time? He was convincing himself to do it, then his eyes became heavy and he found no valid reason to get up. He fell asleep with these thoughts and upon his awakening, the "undead" had started calling him again and traveling the perimeter of the building with their tireless and eternal gait. By now he was too weak to escape and had lost his good chance. He thought it would be easy to close his eyes and drop into the Horde, become part of it and forget about it. Something strong held him back from the inside and he did not actualize this thought. He spent another day cooking his head in the sun without water or food, with his stomach stinging and his brain continuing to make him hear those voices calling and inviting him to throw himself into their arms. By now he found it hard to keep on his feet and his sight clouded over and over again, at any time he risked slipping off the roof and ending up as a meal for those monsters. The coming of the evening did not calm the zombies as the previous day and he realized that he was on the verge of a psychological collapse. The hint of impending death from dehydration encouraged him not to do something as stupid as giving up and becoming one of THEM; he wouldn't have ended like Laura. While trying to exclude those damned

voices from his mind he heard many noises coming from the staircase leading to the roof, opened the door and looked towards the stairwell already knowing what was waiting for him but hoping 'till last, in his heart, that it would be yet another auditory hallucination.

Instead, the zombies were really moving forward, trying as hard as they could to get around obstacles. Some stumbled in some boxes, on the chairs, some could not cross a bench positioned like a bar between one floor and another. But their number helped them to overcome all obstacles while trampling on each other and leaving behind the "undead" comrades. He felt his heart begin to pump adrenaline in his body and then abandonment of all sorts of tiredness. He started to throw everything he had to hit the zombies that were a few flights away from him and slowed them down for a while. All kinds of vases, plants, newspapers, shoes, jackets, tiles, shelves and other things were available down the stairs; and this is how various zombies lost "life" and fell under his fierce blows, but others continued to call him and demand his flesh. He would never stop them. When they had reached the top of the stairs he tried to hold the door with his back and not let them go out on the roof, but after a little resistance he gave in and the door swung open. He managed to push them away for a few more minutes with kicks and punches as he had never done before. The breath took over and he felt weak, his legs were shaking from the effort and because he hadn't eaten or drunk for days. He smiled certain of the defeat and before the zombies could approach him he decided to throw himself. It was enough to approach the protrusion of the roof and close the eyes and the rest happened outside of his will. He felt the air pass for a moment next to his face as he fell and then that beautiful sensation was replaced by the horrible one of the hands of the crowd, those hands that touched him and passed his body with each other.

Then came the voices: "Finally one of us, finally with us ..." "... we took him" "he is one of us ..." "no!" "What? Don't you want ?!" "... don't accept us ..." "Don't you want to be like us?" "No, he's not." "He's not like us! He's not one of us!" "Boy .." "... throw it away, we don't need it" "gradually, go back to the roof!" "... sorry boy, but that's not good .." "If we don't need him, kill him!" "Leave him here to die alone. "

When he opened his eyes he was unable to say whether he had been infected or not but the Horde was gone, leaving him on the surface of the road. He heard thousands of footsteps moving away from him.