

Across the Ashes

By Robert Norton

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I traded my shotgun for a handful of pills

I am watching the zombies march up the ramp and fall into the shredder on a television mounted on the dashboard. Clyde is going to bed and since I've never driven the grinding tank unsupervised, he's pouring on the advice.

"Remember, we're running low on power, so try not to run over any trees or power lines," he begins, but I'm not paying attention. I'm staring at the faces of the zombies on the screen. I've been trapped inside this rumbling steel machine for two weeks, seen thousands of zombies fall into the shredder, and not one of them has looked hurt or even surprised as their decomposing bodies are ground up into a rotten black mulch. They just continue to stare at Felix, the tiny Guatemalan in the bait cage above them, with a desperate, almost pathetic longing, and I realize that I feel nothing for them. "And if you see a stadium, stay away from it."

"Clyde, I doubt I'll see any of those tonight."

We're slowly rolling across desolate Central Oregon, surrounded by thousands of acres of ash and charred trees. A few months ago, a small compound of survivors just outside of Redmond ignited a brush fire hoping to incinerate a horde that was piling up against their defensive walls. It had been a dry summer so the fire spread, cooking the zombies and turning this place into a barren wasteland that smells like rancid fried chicken.

"You're missing the point. I'm telling you that I don't want to stumble across a crowd of deadheads tonight. The batteries are almost drained so we

don't have enough power to process them all, and then they'll clog up the shredder and we'll be stuck out here. Do you want that to happen?" Clyde asks, poking me in the shoulder with a stubby finger. The wind has been howling the last several days, creating an impenetrable storm of ash and soot that has kept the solar panels from recharging the batteries. That's why we're low on power and limping back home.

Clyde is in his early fifties and has short grey hair that he styles into a severe flattop. He was a long-haul trucker before the outbreak, but now he's in charge of the tank and he swaggers around and barks orders like a hardened general even though this is a ridiculously easy job. The tank has a cruising speed of only three miles an hour and it is controlled using just two levers, one for each tread, so it's about as complicated as operating a riding lawnmower. We're supposed to patrol around for a couple weeks, reducing the zombie population to make the settlements safer, and then return to Bend. This is my first time out.

"Clyde, I don't think I'll see any strip malls or movie theaters tonight. You said we're still twelve hours from Bend. It looks like I'm going to have a quite night," I say, pointing out the narrow window. It's dark and the headlights are dim, but I can still see miles of flat, dead land.

I can't wait to get out of this tank. Despite its massive size (it's five stories tall and a hundred feet long), the living area is cramped. The low ceiling is veined with rattling pipes that I constantly bump my head into and every doorway is a narrow bulkhead that I have to crouch down to step through.

There is only one bunkroom for all four crewmembers and it's the size of a prison cell. The kitchen is a square metal table that only seats one, and the bathroom is a coffin with a drain in the floor and a single spigot of cold water that functions as both a faucet and a showerhead. I swear the asylum green walls steel walls are closing in around me.

"Yep, we won't see much of anything until tomorrow. But still, stay away from any place that people used to gather. Usually deadheads still congregate there," he says. He has an annoying habit of explaining the obvious. Every survivor knows that.

Two months ago, my wife and I were living in a huge plumbing supply warehouse just north of downtown Portland. We had sealed ourselves in there just after the initial outbreak and had a nice setup. We had broken open most of the roof and had planted a large garden with corn, potatoes, and squash, and we had a few apple trees. We even had a bicycle that we used to generate electricity, and thanks to all the plumbing supplies, we collected rainwater and had a working hot tub. The zombies never bothered us because the cement walls were forty feet high, and the place looked abandoned, so we thought we were hidden from other survivors.

But then one day we heard footsteps on the roof. It was a gang of kids that must have seen our garden from the top of a downtown skyscraper. Those towers had become the lairs of crazed individuals that were more animal than human, ruled by sadistic warlords that sent their minions out to rape and kill as they foraged for supplies. I wounded two of the kids with my shotgun, but

the rest kept coming. A dozen dropped into our home carrying knives, swords, and homemade spears, and they were growling and barking like a pack of wild dogs. My wife and I jumped into the truck that I had converted over to electric using parts from the warehouse forklifts and escaped through a loading door, heading east and fleeing the city.

We made it over the Cascade Mountain Range and almost to Highway 97 before we came across a group of zombies shuffling towards us down the pavement. The road had no shoulder, so we tried to plow through them. The first few exploded against the bumper, but as we lost momentum, they began to pile up on the hood, pounding on the cracked windshield with their decomposing fists. I hit the brakes, sending them tumbling, but when I pressed on the accelerator, hoping to flatten them under the tires, nothing happened. Something must have come loose in the collision. My wife and I grabbed what we could and ran into the woods.

A week later, I was alone, staggering along Highway 97 and headed south. I only had a few shotgun shells left and I'd been living off some potato chips and soda pop that I'd found in a some vending machines in the breakroom of a fabric store. I was exhausted and hadn't slept in days, so I thought I had gone crazy when something that looked like a tugboat on tank treads came rolling up. It was a grinding tank out on patrol, and they nursed me back to health and gave me a ride to the settlement near Bend.

After years of being self-sufficient, living in the settlement was difficult. I hated taking orders and doing communal chores, but the regular meals and

sleeping soundly behind layers of defensive walls was nice. I agreed to join a crew on a grinding tank to repay their kindness, but I'm leaving once we get back – setting off on my own again.

"And I'll tell you one more time just so you remember. Stay away from large public places," Clyde replies, staring at me with his small round eyes that are so dark they look like bullet holes. "I've been doing this for almost a year and I've never lost a crewmember, and it's not going to happen tonight."

"Clyde, they'll be fine. Felix can help if he has any problems. Now come to bed," Rose calls from their bunk. I turn around and see that she has already stripped down to her bra. She is a thicker woman in her early forties, and maybe I only notice because I've been stuck in here for too long, but her breasts are large and shapely.

"Alright, be careful and take it slow. Remember, there's no one out here to help us," Clyde warns as a pale zombie stumbles towards us out of the gloom and blowing ash.

"Clyde, we'll be fine," I say but he doesn't leave. He hovers over my shoulder, staring out the narrow window and I can hear his loud, sloppy wet breathing over the hum of the engine. It is a noxious mix of homemade vodka and strong coffee, and he has this thing where he smacks his lips even hours after eating, like he's chewing cud. He started doing it next to my ear and I want to punch him in his stupid mouth.

"We'll be fine, Clyde. Go," I say, but he still doesn't move.

"Clyde," Rose seductively beckons from the bunkroom. The door is cracked and I can see her reflection in the narrow window. She has removed her bra.

"I know you'll do fine. Just keep this heading," he blurts and hurries to her.

Then he slams the metal door of the bunkroom and Rose giggles.

"Felix, I think they're going to do it again," I say into the Com system. I adjust the seat into a more reclined position and prop my feet up on the dashboard.

"I am glad I am out here," Felix sings. He is working the cage tonight, enticing the zombies up the ramps and into the shredder just below his feet. I switch cameras so the television on the dashboard displays him. He is inside a white HAZMAT suit that is splattered with the infected guts that are spraying out of the shredder. He smiles and waves a gloved hand at the camera.

"Maybe we should play Clyde and Rose something to get them in the mood," I say. There are speakers mounted on the outside of the tank to attract the deadheads when business is slow, but Clyde has a limited selection of recordings: fire and brimstone sermons, and a collection of calliope music, the same songs that the ice cream truck in my neighborhood played when I was a kid. I drop in the calliope CD and crank it full volume.

"Do your ears hang low? Do they wobble to and fro. Can you tie 'em in a knot, can you tie 'em in a bow," I sing into the Com as the music blares out of the tank and over the grim landscape.

"That music makes me happy. You sing good," Felix laughs and I know that he's lying. When he drives, he sings sad Guatemalan love songs with his rich, smooth voice and broadcasts them out of the tank. I swear the female zombies swoon for him as they fall into the shredder. He was working on a ranch when the outbreak began and he still wears a pair of cowboy boots and tight Wrangler jeans.

The song finishes and the bleak land is silent again. Felix settles in and begins to read a book. It's inside a clear plastic bag and he's sitting on the floor, calmly flipping the pages as a zombie reaches up to grab him. I worked the cage every night during the first two weeks of our tour and after a couple minutes, the novelty of being human bait wears off. Even a zombie seven feet tall can't reach the cage, so I spent most of my time sleeping.

I stare out the front window, scanning for hazards, but the ground is flat and featureless except for the occasional farmhouse or barn. Their torched skeletal remains protrude from the soot like the ribcages of prehistoric animals and I go out of my way to smash them under the treads of the tank. Clyde intentionally gave me a boring stretch to drive, afraid that I would post up the tank on a boulder or drive off a cliff. I take off my boots and socks and steer with my naked feet, which allows me to sit even farther back in the chair. Now I'm almost lying down and all I can see through the narrow window is the smoky sky and a row of powerlines just before I knock them over. The monotonous, almost soothing hum of the engine and the warm, recycled air begins to loll me to sleep. Felix has already stopped reading and

has curled up into a ball on the floor of the cage. I can also hear Clyde and Rose snoring and I begin to feel very tired.

I mess with some buttons to stay awake and then watch a lone zombie climb into the tank. It's a woman with dyed chestnut hair, just like my mother's. Her face and skin have rotted off, but her height and gait seem familiar. I don't know what's happened to anyone in my family since the outbreak. She stumbles towards the shredder and I close my eyes so I don't see her fall in, but I can still hear the shredder chop up her bones. The military is working on a cure, trying to restore the humanity of the zombies and I wonder what it would mean if they're successful. I've killed so many.

I grab the spent shotgun shell I have strung around my neck and pull the duct tape off the top. I shake out a dozen tiny, two milligram pills and pop two into my mouth. It's expired clonazepam, an anti-anxiety drug, and I traded my 12-gauge for them when I got to the settlement in Bend. I carefully pour the pills back into the shell with my shaking hands and the drug begins to take affect, melting the edges off my thoughts. I close my eyes and feel like I'm sinking into a pool of black tar.

The drug has hit me harder than usual. I'm having trouble focusing and shouldn't fall asleep, but I'm fading fast and know I can't fight it. I check our heading with blurring vision and then tie my shoelaces into loops and sling them over the steering levers to keep the tank headed in the right direction. As soon as I slump back into the chair, I pass out.

If that stops, we're done!

There is a strange sound and I bolt upright.

The drug has worn off so I'm wide awake and my shirt is soaked in sweat. I'm not sure how long I've been out. An hour? Maybe two? I check the heading and everything is fine, but when I sit up and look out the narrow window I realize that we're plowing through the ruins of a suburban neighborhood. I slow to a crawl just as the tank crashes through a garage, flattening the car inside. I stuff my shoelaces into my pocket and hide the evidence.

"Felix," I call over the Com system. He doesn't respond.

"Felix," I yell, trying to wake him up.

"Ian. Hello," he sings.

"We're lost. Clyde has our position wrong. We're in a town."

"Which town are we in?" Felix asks happily, like he's about to suggest that we roll down Main Street and grab a beer.

"I don't know. Bend maybe, but we're not supposed to be here until tomorrow."

"Did you see the fort?"

"No," I say, worried that I passed it while I slept. But even if I did, this isn't my fault. We're not supposed to be anywhere near Bend until tomorrow. Navigation is Clyde's responsibility. This is his fault.

"Are we headed the right way?"

"Yeah."

"Were we headed the right way the whole time?"

"Of course," I say, but I could be wrong. Maybe I kicked the steering levers in my sleep and sent us off course.

"We should wake up Clyde."

"Maybe we should just turn around," I say, afraid that Clyde will ask too many questions and discover the truth.

"I think we should wake him. That way he will have to take the blame if something is wrong. He is in charge. Let him get in trouble."

I'm still sweating. What if I screwed up? Maybe I should just turn around, go back to the edge of town, and look for the fort. And if it's not there, I'll wake Clyde.

"Felix, what if we just turn around?"

Felix senses something is wrong.

"Clyde is wrong about where we are. This is his mistake. You should wake him up."

"Alright. Alright."

I stop the tank in the middle of a small field and then knock on the bunkroom door.

"What's wrong?" Clyde barks as he cracks the door open.

"I followed the heading you gave me but we just ran into a suburb."

"Jesus. We're lost," he yells, glaring at me as he pulls his pants over his stained and crusty white briefs. "How many customers are we getting?" "Felix, how's it looking?" I ask over the Com system.

"There is nobody down here," Felix sings. "Maybe they don't like me."

Clyde runs to the controls and checks the heading. Then he looks out the window and checks the heading again.

"Have you followed this heading the entire time?" he asks. "And I mean the entire time."

"Yes," I say, trying to conceal my doubt. He stares at me for a few seconds with his bullet eyes, breathing loudly, and then he moves over to the map on the kitchen table.

"I don't understand. There is no way that we can be anywhere near a town," he says as he checks the time on his watch. "Move over."

He rudely pushes me out of the way and looks out the narrow window again, pressing his face so close that he leaves condensation on the glass.

Rose slips out of the bunkroom and whispers, "What's going on?"

"We're lost," I whisper back, conscious that she is standing very close to me in her thin white t-shirt and pink panties. Clyde glares at us over his shoulder and then increases the power to the headlights.

"Jesus," he yells. "Ian, you parked us right in front of a school. We've

got to get out of here."

A school? I move over to the narrow window and see a couple hundred pint-sized zombies stumbling towards us across the ruined playground.

"Hurry. Seal the tank so they can't get in and clog up the shredder.

Raise the ramps," Clyde commands, referring to the ramps that lead from the ground up to the shredder inside the tank. I rush over to the port side ramp controls and engage the motor, but the ramp barely moves. There isn't enough power to raise them in time.

"Ian, lift it manually," Rose screams as she works on the other. I hurry over to a lever on the wall and frantically begin pumping it up and down with my sweating hands. There is a small porthole in front of me and I can see the ramp slowly rising, but it's not enough. Some of the children are already climbing inside.

"Forget it. I'll squish them under the treads," Clyde yells, then presses on the accelerator. The tank jerks forward. Some of the child zombies are crushed, but the rest are just scooped up by the ramps and crammed into the hallways leading to the shredder.

"Jesus. Turn everything off. We need all power going to the shredder. If that goes, we're done for," Clyde barks as he shuts down the tank and turns off the headlights. "Where's Felix?"

"Still in the cage," I say.

"Well, get him out of there. Now!"

I look at the television mounted on the dashboard. There is a turnstile, like a revolving door, right before the shredder so that only one or two zombies can fall in at a time, but dozens of bony little kids are squeezing through and falling into the grinding wheels. I hurry down a maintenance corridor, passing the giant electric motor that powers the tank and shredder. It's already beginning to falter.

"Felix, I'm coming," I say over the Com but he doesn't respond.

I slide down a ladder, landing on top of the hatch that locks him inside the cage, and start to twist it open just as the shredder screeches to a stop. For the first time in two weeks, the tank is silent. I open the hatch and Felix immediately grabs onto the edge of the opening. I look down and a dozen hands are reaching through the bars and grabbing onto the folds of his HAZMAT suit. With the shedder shut down, the zombies have already piled up and surrounded the cage.

"Jesus!"

I grab his wrists and yank him through the opening, and then slam the hatch shut. We both collapse onto the floor and sit for a minute, listening to the mumbling zombies trying to force their way between the bars of the cage below us.

"Thank you," Felix says. "We need to clean you up and get you into isolation."

He points at my hands. When I pulled him out of the cage, the zombie

guts on his HAZMAT suit smeared all over my hands, arms, and shirt. I'm infected if I have a cut anywhere on my body. What did I just do?

Felix turns on an emergency showerhead and pushes me in. Frigid water and disinfectants pour onto us. I take off my cloths and start scrubbing myself with clean as I check myself for wounds in the harsh florescent light. Felix shuts the shower off and dumps some white powder onto me.

"Clyde, Ian has been exposed but I don't think he is infected," Felix calmly states over the Com.

"What the hell was he thinking. Send him up and we'll lock him in the bunkroom," Clyde responds.

"Don't worry. You will be fine. I will be up in a few minutes to check on you." He smiles.

In a daze, I return to the cab naked and still covered in the white powder. Clyde and Rose have hidden in the bathroom to avoid me, which for some reason makes me angry.

"Ian. Go into the bunkroom," Clyde barks through the door.

I notice that they have already activated the distress beacon and I consider locking them in the bathroom while we wait for help. It could be days before another tank arrives to rescue us.

"Fine. I'll just get out of your way, but I'm not infected," I shout like a moody teenager, trying to convince myself as much as them.

"Don't worry, it's just a precaution," Rose reassures.

I flip them off, knowing of course that they can't see me through the metal bathroom door, but as I am about to go into the bunkroom I hear something coming down the hallway.

"Felix, tell them I'm not infected and I shouldn't be locked up," I begin, but stop.

There are several zombies coming towards me down the hallway.

They're small, maybe five or six years old, and the skin on their faces has peeled off, exposing their dirty white skulls. They must have squeezed through the bars of the cage. Oh my god. Felix and I never locked the hatch to the bait cage.

"Clyde, we've got zombies in the tank," I yell.

"Don't let them get in here," he yells as he bolts out of the bathroom.

"Felix is still down there. I'll kill them," I shout as I grab a pike off the wall. It's the standard zombie fighting weapon but it's six feet long and not suited for the tight quarters of the tank.

"He's already dead if they're up here," Clyde shouts back as he tries to slam the steel door to the hallway, trying to lock the zombies out, but one of the them throws its small body through the opening and begins clawing at his face.

"Get out of the way. I'll kill them all," I yell at Clyde, pointing the pike at the back of his head, but he doesn't move. He keeps smashing the door into the torso of the zombie wedged in the opening. He's already broken through

its ribs, spilling its smelly guts on the floor, but he can't sever its spinal column and the other zombies are flinging themselves against the door with dull, wet thuds.

"Get out of the way," I yell again and poke him in the butt with the pike, but he doesn't move. He's losing but he won't give up.

"No. Get out of here," he says and turns around. The zombie has spit putrid blood onto his face and cut deep lacerations into him. He's as good as dead.

I think about killing him before he turns, but then slam the point of the pike through the skull of the zombie pinned in the doorway. It dies immediately and Clyde falls down, exhausted from the effort of holding the door closed. Undead children begin flooding into the room. I still don't see Felix. I don't want to kill him. I reflexively touch the spend shotgun shell strung around my neck, making sure it's still there.

Clyde is already feeling the affects of the disease and the zombies ignore him. I swing the pike and cut through a few kids, but they keep advancing and I'm running out of room. Just as I'm about to take another swing, four loud clacks rip through the cab.

Blat. Blat. Blat.

Rose is out of the bathroom and firing a pistol.

"Stop. You'll kill us all," I yell as she wildly squeezes off another five rounds, bullets ricocheting off the steel walls.

Blat. Blat. Blat. Blat. Click. Click.

She runs out of ammo and I can't believe that I haven't been hit. The barrage injured a few zombies but they're still coming. I stab a kid lunging at Rose but the blade deflects off its collarbone. The zombie snatches at Rose's legs with its little hands and tries to bite her feet, but she frantically kicks it in the chest and sends it flying across the room.

"Get in the bunkroom," I yell but she's already headed that way.

I plunge the pike into the chest of a tiny girl with pigtails and push her back against the crowd. The pike is pulled out of my hands as she falls and Clyde looks at me. I see the hunger in his small eyes as I run into the bunkroom and slam the door, making sure it's locked.

Rose is in the corner pointing the gun at me and I realize that I'm still naked and covered with white powder.

"Please be calm. I'm not infected," I say, wondering if she reloaded the gun.

She doesn't say anything, but she lowers her aim. That is when I notice the bite on her calf. It has punctured the skin and is already beginning to fester. I casually look around for a weapon. She follows my gaze and looks at the bite on her leg, and then we look at each other, panting heavily. The zombies have begun to pound on the door.

"Will you hold my hand," she asks just before breaking down into tears.

I sit next to her on the cold metal floor and put my arm around her. The

infection quickly spreads and soon her entire leg is a foul black. We don't have much time.

"It doesn't hurt," she says and smiles, rubbing the tears off her cheeks. Then she takes a black pill out of a locket around her neck and holds it in front of her eyes. I have one just like it in the spent shotgun shell strung around my neck. She squeezes my hand, her tears dripping onto my naked chest, and then she pops it into her mouth. It takes two minutes and I count down every second. I squeeze her in my arms, trying to reassure her, but I can't think of anything to say.

When it's done, I let go of her dead hand and begin to wait.

Clyde and another zombie are taking turns throwing themselves against the door.

Boom, boom. Boom, boom.

It must be Felix.

I hope another tank gets here soon.

THE END