

## ZOMBIE NATION OR PATION?

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Five years in, the gutter didn't have rain running through it anymore, but the fluids that run out the rotting corpses meandering the street. Fallen nostrils leave some of them with gaping holes they turn to the sky in a vain attempt to smell the living, but after a couple of days all that's left is the tastebuds of their swollen black tongues, cracked down the middle and the sides, that they can barely keep inside their mouths.

My barrel smoked even before I fired a round with the cutting rays of sunlight hitting us full on. My skin withered and died on sight if I didn't cover it up properly. New York had turned into a desert wasteland hit by Monsoon rain once a year, but the seeds that desert soil holds couldn't find a hold between all of the concrete that marked the pavement and the sidewalks. It ran straight out into what used to be Central Park, that would briefly turn green, allowing us to grow and harvest to sustain us during the rest of the year.

New York was our home and we would take it back. Broken bone only bent under my foot without breaking into even smaller pieces and as I lifted my foot for the next step, it sprang aside a bit. A rat crawled out from a hole in the wall and walked up to the gutter, which was once its home. The stench of it alone sent it running back into the hole. Even the rats couldn't take it anymore.

I checked left and right, nearing the end of the block. Zombies didn't pick up on anything but each other when nothing else was nigh, so until they finally did spot you, they tended to group together. Somewhat ironically they had a major distaste for rotting meat, meaning they had an almost permanent frown of disgust painted onto what was left of their faces, a frown that I was sure to blow off with my shotgun as soon as I marked their position.

A bang and a fizz and guts sprayed from around the corner. Even zombies were left to the whims of their gasses like rotting whale corpses on the beach. At some point they were bound to explode and you didn't want to be anywhere near when that happened. I jumped back and put my hand in front of my face mask, blocking the air, making sure I kept my eyes open and stayed alert. I counted to ten.

Aiming my barrel at the corner of the street, I racked my shotgun. I never worried about them hearing me, because their ears would be the first to fill up with fluids. We used to be scared, but soon we learned not to run but just stand by your gun. If you just shoot them, you're fine. The rubber of my shoes barely whistled as I stepped forward, through the air cushioning that had broken down.

Wind caught dead eyes hanging from sockets and a single strand of hair as a newspaper page blew against my leg. I shook it off. My friends always said I

should drop the punchlines, so I dropped one, "I got some news for you stray pecker searching bastards. You should have never more let it out of your pants." My friends would always go, "Really?" They never got where I got my lines. Language of war. The zombies turned to me and I raised my gun against my shoulder.

A door swung open to my left. My aim dropped a little as a scarfed young lady jumped out with her friends, shouting, "Leave them be! That zombie could be you and me! Leave them be! That zombie could be you and me!" Raising protesting signs they jumped into the gap between me and the group of zombies that licked their missing lips with their swollen rotting tongues.

"I heard you the first two times. Where the hell do you come off protecting zombies?" They just looked at me as if I had spoken the most horrendous phrase thus creatively insane that no Montague and no Capulet were ever to speak of it. They didn't answer. "Can you please explain to me why I shouldn't shoot them? Here, look, that one's trying to eat one of your friends." It was true, they all slowly crept up on the protesters.

I estimate they hadn't eaten for more than a week. First five days they were faster than you and me, but without food, after that they quickly slowed down. A man may make it without food for thirty days, but a zombie's decay was thus far progressed that it never lasted longer than twenty-five and these were the last stages. Why didn't I just let them wither and die? Mostly because I didn't want any of these idiots to be infected.

"Jake! Get off of me!" I knew the lady that shouted that, her name was Mary and she cried out to her husband. I knew him too. He had gotten infected nine days ago. I knew that too. Whenever they did, the protesters locked themselves inside for six days until they slowed down again. They weren't too heart broken about it, as long as it didn't happen to themselves.

They did always try to have a bit of a ceremony the sixth day. When we still had flowers they would make flower necklaces and put them around their necks. Now they just sang a song to them, tried not to get eaten, and would run back inside with a bit of a smile on their faces. As long as it wasn't themselves, even with their wives and husbands, they didn't really mind, but hey, don't do onto others what you don't want them to do onto you?

"Leave them be! That zombie could be you and me! Leave them be! That -- Jesus, Jake! Get off of me, you old fuck zombie bastard!" She pushed Jake away but he caught her sleeve and spun around as he toppled, finding part of his wife's calf exposed by her torn pants. Somewhat of a grin formed on what was left of Jake's face as he bit into her. She cried, "Ow!"

"Jesus! He got her!" Fresh powdered face Tonya pulled on all the others to hurry back inside. "Leave them be! That zombie could be you and me!" The door closed behind them and Mary ran around a corner, keeping an eye on my shotgun until she disappeared.

In a minute from now she would be swift like the wind. It would take another five days for her to slow down and they could be dangerous during the first phase after their transition, so it was safer for me to leave and come back later. I looked at the others as they slowly ambled toward me, but even walking at a fast pace I would out-walk them easily.

Pointing my gun I blew three of them away in quick succession. The others staggered back. There was something about them doing that, not attacking, that made sure I could never pull the trigger. A week from now, those that were still alive would have forgotten about my gun and come for me again. Then I could shoot them.

As I trotted back around my corner, back to where I came from, from the windows up above I could hear the protesters, "Really? Really! Murderer!" I shrugged. We had set up a fortified camp in what used to be Central Park Zoo. The bars to the cages kept the zombies out. Even the first few days they weren't smart enough to open the cage doors and we held all of the keys. We easily held our own out there and as long as you weren't born an idiot like these protesters, you didn't become infected anymore.

"A couple of more months and the plague will have passed," that's what we have been saying for years now. Unfortunately, the number of idiots out there greatly outweighed our numbers, but as long as the idiots didn't attack and it was just the zombies, we wouldn't have a problem. That's what I was always told and that's what I always stuck to.

Three nights from now, I would face the fiercest battle and it wouldn't be us fighting the zombies, but I didn't know that yet. So, as always, I just grabbed my guitar, looked out into the desert wasteland that once was Central Park, and waited for the sun to set as I strummed what I had always imagined would be a *baliset*.

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