

Commute

by Adam Sifre

Fred's ruined face stared back at him from a fractured, mold-spotted mirror. The remains of breakfast pooled around his feet and a pair of lace panties clung to his shoe, glued there by God knew what. Bits of flesh were stuck between his yellow teeth, along with the sodden remains of a "hand wash only" label. There was no denying that he'd seen better days.

Being a zombie is no picnic.

Compelled to pause and take stock of himself, he wiped his gore-stained hands on a filthy shirt, unsure if he was cleaning the hands or the shirt. His right eye looked like a crushed egg yolk and his left leg was broken in at least two places. A large splinter of bone poked through the skin above his thigh, fine dark lines etched across the surface like a bad piece of scrimshaw. The open wound on his neck had started leaking again, but at least the fluid was mostly clear now.

No use dwelling on negatives. Time to get to work. He turned away from his reflection, and limped out of the men's room of the Vince Lombardi rest area.

An overly bright morning sun assaulted him as he stepped outside. Fred gave a mental wince, wishing yet again that he could blink. Sunlight had no adverse effect on the undead, but he had never been a morning person. Rain or shine, today he had to shamble over to Terminal C of Newark Airport, where eight breathers were making their last stand. Zombies were lone hunters and rarely worked together. Every so often, however, a kind of collective broadcast signal went out over the undead grapevine, announcing the newest brain buffet - in a shopping mall, a church, or an airport - with predictable and satisfying results.

Dozens were already making their way down the New Jersey turnpike. By their mindless, "movie" slow pace, he knew they hadn't fed. Zombies weren't Jesse Owens on the best of days, but they tended to move a lot faster with a little brain in the old furnace.

If Fred could breathe, he would have sighed. There'd be hundreds of zombies, all ready to fight over eight brains and assorted bits. The breathers would probably take out 10 to 20% of the attacking hoard before being overwhelmed. That left about ten zombies per breather. With luck, however, he would still be the brainiac of the pack by the time he got there.

Having his wits about him gave a zombie an edge in the hunt. The effects of the virus or whatever it was that put the mojo in their mortified flesh varied from corpse to corpse. Most became textbook droolie ghoulies, but some could reason and even remember who they were as breathers. So far Fred hadn't come across any other "thinkers," as he called himself, but he doubted he was the only one.

By mid-afternoon he found himself enjoying his walk down the turnpike. Most of the fires had burned themselves out and although the air still reeked of burning gasoline, the skies were more or less smoke-free. He might be a walking corpse, but he appreciated a warm, spring day like this one. He pulled his lips up in what should have been a grin.

Death, ruin and destruction improved the New Jersey Turnpike.

Not that there wasn't a black lining to be found around his own little rainbow of a life. Most of the zombies were a few hundred yards down the road, but two lesser undead doggedly tagged alongside of Fred, putting a bit of a damper on things. The virus left them as nothing more than... well, nothing more than zombies. They were about as interesting as slugs and moaned so much that, were Fred alive, he'd be sporting a hell of a migraine.

All in all, however, the day was turning out quite well. He almost convinced himself being undead wasn't so bad. Sure, it was bad luck that he was 45 years old with a rather large potbelly when he had been bitten by that damned clerk. Being cursed to wander the earth in search of brains was bad enough, but why couldn't it have happened when he was twenty years younger and thirty pounds lighter?

He was imagining wandering the earth in search of fresh brains as a slimmer, sleeker and younger Fred, when the head of the zombie on his left exploded.

Shit!

He limped over to an abandoned Ford Explorer and crouched down, scanning the area for the source of the ambush. The other walking corpse stopped and stared at the ground, a low "Braaaaiiiiiinnnsss?" emitting from its drooling mouth. Fred felt a sense of relief when a bullet took the second one through its right eye. Those two had just about gotten on his last dead nerve.

A glint of light in the tall grass by a pond off the side of the road revealed the breather's position. It looked like he was alone.

The lone gunman on the grassy shoal, Fred thought with a mental smile.

He stood up from behind the Explorer, pointed at the area where the gunman was hidden, made the undead scream of discovery - then ducked back down behind the SUV and waited. Several zombies with lesser survival instincts turned off the road and converged on the field. A bullet dropped another one and Fred saw a figure pop up from the tall grass and start running. A collective moan escaped from the zombies and they began to shuffle a little faster. But unless the breather tripped, broke both legs and fell asleep, he'd be fine - for now.

Fred got up and started limping toward Exit 14. It would be another hour or so before he reached the airport. Most of the zombies were still on the road. After taking into account the ones that had left to chase the gunman and Fred's two undead groupies - now just dead - he figured there would be plenty of brains for everyone when they got there.

Fred was... well, he was - *I'm happy!* As he shambled down the turnpike, he began humming a song that was popular before he turned. In his mind, it was a happy, catchy tune. But when he hummed it, it sounded a lot like "Braaiinnss..."

