

In one crushing wave, they descended on the city. The virus had spread faster than expected by the CDC. Whole communities condemned to a horrifying fate as it ravaged the land, bringing down populations in hours, not days.

Like the infection, once bitten, the undead moved fast; masses of ghouls with rotting dead limbs reanimated. The horde hit the once peaceful home of Samuel and Josh. Residents fled as groaning cadavers with entrails dangling from stained gnarly teeth dove through windows and smashed doors, mindless corpses able to maintain a staggering agility, driven by a voracious appetite.

A swift attack ensued as dense concentrations of the undead shuffled from city to neighboring towns to seek food elsewhere. The packs of undead moved in droves of sprinting, moaning flesh eaters—braindead beings with a purpose.

And now, the survivors drove away with haste as Sam's Subaru outback fled for safety; fleeing from Bakersfield, heading south-east.

Samuel turned up the radio station for news of the pandemic progress.

"Reports of reanimating corpses continue to come in. All we know is what our reporters, those able, have reported back to us. The outbreak spread with rapid ferocity. May be airborne is the latest terrible update, be warned. Lost contact with many major cities. Military troops man, where are you?"

Samuel strained to prevent tears as he gripped the steering wheel; he watched helplessly as the undead devoured Mom and Dad as they made a break for the car.

"The bitten, turned, fucking, fast," a teary-eyed Samuel spoke in brittle words.

In the front passenger seat, brother Josh, head bowed as he tried to erase the gnawing from memory, the crunching, the screams. "Bakersfield...all of us, had no chance."

A slim arm from behind reached forward and caressed Josh's shoulder; Kiki, the other half. "Nothing we could do." She paused for thought, her crystal blue eyes peered out the window stained with putrid human goo after Josh bashed one with a crowbar during a frantic escape.

The radio broadcast continued.

"Our reporters advise residents to head for the nearest military base or secure location. Anyone bitten must be avoided, the incubation period is quick folks. Don't forget, get indoors somewhere safe fast as the disease may be airborne. The CDC works as best they can on a vaccine, so they inform us, for this pandemic. Myself and my team here also need to evacuate soon."

"Should hide, closest hiding place." Josh clenched sweat-drenched, mussed hair.

"Bro, let's stick to what the broadcast says for now." Samuel winced as he noticed Josh, sullen, far gone and not listening. "Yeah bro? There are bases around. Irwin is our best shot."

"Ok, ok." Josh wept again as Kiki continued to caress his shoulder; a broken man, unable to focus. Grimy hands trembled, stained with the putridness that spurt like a geyser when the crowbar struck the undead man's skull.

Felix, a Bakersfield resident, rescued during the escape, squirmed in the back alongside Kiki. "My phone signal, not good. Networks may be failing."

A lucky break for the young Brazilian; he clambered inside the vehicle as the boys and Kiki sped off from the attack.

Samuel ignored Felix. "Shape up, Josh."

Kiki threw Samuel a scowl. "Chill Sam."

“Both lost our loved ones, Kiki,” Samuel glanced at the passengers, “All of us but to get through this, we have to focus. Got to make it to a base. There will be armed soldiers able to defend us, so safety in numbers. Sorry bro, but right now I need you strong, okay?”

Josh lifted a weary face. “Got it.”

Samuel pursed his lips glancing at the fuel gauge. “Fort Irwin, only an hour away from here...” A quieting voice trailed off on inspecting the gauge again, “Shit, need gas much sooner, like now.”

The broadcast continued, broken up as unrest hit the station; muffled yells emerged from the studio as the occupants fought for their lives.

“The bases report...low numbers heading their way...not expecting many survivors. If you make it, and I hope you can...quarantine zones will help shelter you from the madness...”

Dying screams filled the speakers, background cries, then the broadcast ended with few words.

“Oh no, they are here, must leave now. Godspeed.”

Silence.

“Fuck, okay, unless anyone knows better,” Samuel wiped droplets of sweat from a leaky forehead, “I am heading for Irwin, Mojave right ahead to stop for gas.”

Mojave, silence.

Pockets of wind stirred the sandy desert roads. The stores empty. Torn bodies lay strewn across store and house doorways and sidewalks. One groaning cadaver, unable to move, severed at the waist, crushed with tire markings that told the story of its demise.

“There is a gas station along here.” Samuel, a little more cheery despite a strong sense of foreboding in the air.

Kiki nodded and pointed ahead. “One close now, stay on this road.”

“Shit. Really need fuel.” Samuel rocked in the driving seat.

Josh raised his head, puffed cheeks streaked with tears. “What’s needed is a place of safety.”

Samuel exhaled. “Damn it, there was no time to do shit when we got outta Bakers.”

“Be thankful you made it this far, more than I can say for your home or here,” Felix mumbled.

Josh sprung to attention and half spun on the seat as fear and fatigue boiled. “Fuck. Military bases? They won’t be able to let everyone in. We should have headed for the forestry, sheltered under the canopy of the trees.”

Samuel huffed. “There was no time to think, Josh, scarcely got the hell out of there.”

Kiki spotted something, not too far behind them on the highway, dust clouds billowing and moving towards Mojave town. “Anyone see that?”

“What, Kiki, kinda driving.” Samuel with haste, checked the left and right views for whatever Kiki squealed about.

“Behind us, what’s that dust, wah...” Kiki started a series of short breaths.

Samuel followed Kiki’s line of sight through the rearview, trails of dust darting towards them, just minutes away.

Felix held up his phone, and switched to its camera, and zoomed in on the dusty movement.

He stuttered, face lit with fear, mouth wide open. "Oh, God."

In the phone camera view, hundreds, starved corpses racing towards Mojave.

"They come, really come," Felix yelled and swept a hand across a sweaty forehead to wipe away the eye burning streams.

"Shit, I see them," Samuel cried out, "We have to get further away very soon. The gas station is along here. But be vigilant while I fill her up."

"How the fuck do they move so fast?" Josh whimpered.

"Perhaps these things can smell us, who knows, but coming this way." Felix's eyes stayed on the horrifying phone view.

Samuel checked the road ahead, a keen eye for trouble. "Keep your eyes open, let me know if any are close."

The gas gauge needle hovered closer to the red E.

Kiki and Josh screamed.

Samuel braked.

An onslaught of marauding undead pelted for them from a dozen feet ahead. Empty staring gray eyes, drooling, a hungry pack.

"Where did they come from? Fuck it, the air and space port, we can make it, cannot stop."

The car whirred into acceleration and steered away onto an intersection.

"Could be overrun with these things, radio said military bases." Josh slapped the dashboard as he shouted.

"No time, Josh! Just minutes of gas, hope the airport is secure."

Felix nodded, anything worked if it meant leaving charging zombies in the rear view somewhere more distant. "Need a place more secure than a gas station, cannot stop till

then, too many of those things.”

Kiki wrapped her arms around Josh from the back seat. He whimpered. “Oh God, we’re gonna die, fucking die out here in the desert.”

Samuel grimaced, no acidic tongue response, no hollering at Josh - this time he agreed.

Josh’s whimpers flowed as streams of sweat forked down his forehead. “What if the airport swarms with those things? There may be nobody, infested with the undead, fucking zombies.”

“I am aware. But we have to try, must find a secure place.” Samuel returned a calm tone to a shaken brother; as the world fell apart, he wondered if hope could ever be in reach.

They sped past a signpost to the airport and along a road to the main entrance gates.

Shudder. Sputter. Sputter.

The quiet hum of the engine lowered to a grumble as the struggling escape vehicle halted.

Samuel and Felix checked window views for any danger, checking for flesh-eating cadavers. The airport entrance ahead; the iron gates were twisted and bent inwards, someone had already driven through without stopping.

Trailing clouds of dust came into view near the signpost passed a minute ago.

“Gotta run for it. That’s it, the car is done. Let’s go.”

Without hesitation, the four leapt out and ran for the smashed gates.

Samuel skidded to a stop; a keen eye for survival inspected the administration building, tower and parking lot ahead. Below the tower, arrows on whitewashed walls pointed one way to a meeting room, the other to an office. Next door, the entrance to a restaurant.

Empty. Not a whisper.

Josh kept spinning around to check every direction.

Felix panted for breath, and his skin had paled.

Kiki kept an eye on the approaching dust paths as gangs of undead raced for their position.

“I think we will be safe in there, let’s get...”

Before Samuel could step forward, a series of snarls from the restaurant entrance, shattering any hopes of respite and freedom.

Then they came.

A file of marauding corpses poured from the entrance to the restaurant and from the office doorway.

“Run. Get back.”

A shriek from behind. Felix snarled; demonic, feverish eyes fixed on Josh.

Kiki already made for the safety of the car.

Felix lunged at a stunned Josh.

Chomp.

Felix sank into Josh’s neck and ripped out a meaty chunk, he fell, spitting blood.

“Josh!” Samuel ran for the car, the undead gave chase; he ran, crying, arms flailing.

Kiki hovered over the hood, swaying side to side, fingernails scratching the paintwork.

“Kiki, what you doing? Get in for God’s sake.”

Samuel pushed her to one side as the snarls of the hunger-driven undead closed on him from the rear.

Kiki spun around, her mouth open as a loud growl bellowed, a face that of a hellish maniac.

Samuel pushed Kiki away but within a few seconds felt the force of several rows of teeth in his skull and shoulders as the zombies indulged their lunch.

Kiki sunk into Samuel's neck, tearing away clumps of throat flesh.

Samuel's eyes rolled as he sighed. "Okay, guys, stop, another fail."

The attacking zombies froze to a snarling still image.

The images then pixilated and fell away.

A gentle digital female voice spoke.

"Thank you for taking part in simulation 248, Zombie Road."

Samuel removed a virtual reality headset, chest heaving from mental exhaustion. Around him in a spacious studio, a mixture of men and women in office attire raised a smile. Then they clapped. Josh, more happy and relaxed, gave Samuel a thumbs up.

Samuel held out his hands. "Oh, woah, woah guys, I failed, why are you clapping? I got eaten, again."

Josh smiled. "Yes, but you lasted longer on this one."

"Josh, the previous simulation had me trapped in a gas station, this one was easier, I should have lasted longer." Samuel dropped the handheld touch devices and hurled the headset at Felix's waiting hands.

"I really don't appreciate my avatar in that sim, such a whiner, a coward." Josh then brayed.

"I quite like me in that sim, just cool, no fear." Kiki strode forward and kissed Samuel.

Josh, a smirk on his face. "You squealed, and hey, in that sim, you are my girl."

"Yeah right bro, in the sim, and your dreams." Samuel lifted Kiki, holding a kiss.

Occupied with chin scratching and murmuring CDC associates in the studio, the crowd flipped through tablet pages as they analyzed the demonstration. A freeze frame of

Samuel in the simulation on an overhead display being eaten nurtured some further chuckles.

Felix, hands slipped into deep jacket pockets, edged forward closer to Samuel and Kiki. “Ok guys, let’s not laugh, I need not remind you all the seriousness of these simulations.”

“248, in total,” Josh added.

“Yes Josh, and so far, we have survived, none.” Felix’s tone stern.

The room fell silent.

“This CDC project benefits from a large fund to figure out the best escape plan from what is sure as shit, coming our way.” Felix sent a steely glare to the gathering, one of intent, no time for pleasantries. “Epicenter is unknown. There are outbreaks in New York, in Florida, and some claimed sightings of undead activity in San Diego and L.A. None of this is good news.”

Samuel cleared his throat. “Yep. Of course.”

Kiki slapped his chest. “Josh’s avatar. The right one, forest shelter closer. A lodge there, good hiding spot.”

Murmurs emerged.

“Why so fast? Why are zombies running? The Walking Dead, erm, they walked, not ran. That is why the show is called The Walking Dead, right?” Someone quizzed.

Samuel narrowed his eyes. “Dude, Dawn of the Dead, Zach Snyder, the zombies were chasing their victims.”

Murmurs and nods again from the CDC guys, nodding and regarding Sam’s fiction factoid with more interest than Felix cared for.

Felix waved, a dismissive gesture at the irrelevant tangent in the studio. “Guys, guys, this is reality, not fantasy. This is happening, and we have to test multiple scenarios. That is our project and it tasks the CDC to see the sims through. Virtual reality is providing the means to test hundreds of survival scenarios so much needed useful intel is passed to millions of civilians. This project started before any outbreaks. Guys, still testing while the

virus spreads as we do not, people, have all the answers. Not concerned with fast or slow, but every possibility, that is why so many sims must be tested.”

“The CDC needs to prevent the spread of infection now before it’s too late for sims.” Samuel’s words ignited more murmurs.

Felix continued. “Cannot yet Sam, still. Incubation period being analyzed, vaccine not effective yet. They want their zombie survival guide at least to help millions when distributed in just a few days time.”

The lab crowd fell silent again.

Samuel, Josh and Kiki regarded a second television display. CBS News on 24/7 with updated reports on zombie sightings from the cities mentioned by Felix. Samuel and Josh both sighed and nodded to each other; this was no game, the group knew it.

Felix approached the crowd in wide steps. “The doomsday clock is ticking folks. The zombie apocalypse is coming.”

A somber mood fell on the studio, weary heads shook in dismay.

Felix peered at Samuel. “Let’s help save humanity.”