

“Animal Shelter Ahead.”

She read the sign as she drove past. She read it every time she drove past. It used to be she would wonder why you would need warning about an animal shelter. Back then there was nothing significant about an animal shelter.

Now when she read the sign it meant she had to be cautious. It meant she shouldn't stop until she was several miles away. It meant it might be wise to drive a little faster.

There were so many places that were dangerous now. Sometimes she felt like there was a dream reality. There was a reality in the past when all you had to worry about was the harm that could be done by other people. Don't go into bad neighborhoods or dark allies; stay where it's bright and heavily populated. Then there was the reality where you don't go into places that were heavily populated. You stay away from animal shelters, vets, ranches. You still stay where it's brightly lit, but only so that you have a chance to see something attacking you and escape. Which reality felt like the dream reality would change depending on the day.

Today, a world where someone would want to go to an animal shelter sounded silly and fantastical. But whenever she was outside she felt that way. It was safer. Those who still clung to their old ways, their old world, had already died with it years ago.

Only the holidays had survived the turn. Not all of them. Traveling for three separate occasions during the winter was far too dangerous. They now counted down and toasted to the coming year on Thanksgiving Eve and exchanged gifts and sang carols on Thanksgiving as well. Most people didn't make a trip to see relatives. Either they already lived with them, or all of them were dead.

But not Wendy. All but her uncle Danny had managed to survive. Mercifully, he had died from falling down the stairs as they had fled from an attack. Or so Wendy allowed her family to continue believing. She didn't have the heart to tell them she had seen him wandering around, sans an arm, two days later. A convoy had come to rescue them later that day, so she knew they would never find out.

That was back in the days when they still had convoys. Back when there were still plenty of survivors. Everyone was either already saved, dead, or trapped in some bunker.

There was a theory that every underground bunker was full of corpses. There were surely those who starved from lack of supplies, but more probably lacked the will to live. Years with nothing but four walls, artificial light, canned food, and if you were lucky, the same two or three people for company, was bound to drive anyone crazy. No one was ever going to be searching bunkers because everyone was assumed to be already dead.

Wendy felt bad for the ones trapped in bunkers. She'd rather get turned than slowly lose her mind in the confines of a self-made prison.

She was running low on gas, but she didn't want to stop. Being stranded on an empty tank was a far more horrifying option, so she pulled into the nearest gas station. All gas stations were regularly refilled and kept open. Nowadays people were too busy with survival to worry about money, so all you had to do was pull up and pump.

She wished she hadn't gone alone now; that she had taken Paul up on his offer to drop her off at her family's house. He was a mouth breather, but he was also another pair of eyes that could watch her back as she pumped gas. Now she had to keep looking over her shoulders and listening for the slightest sound.

It seemed to take forever, but finally her tank was full. She planned to fill up again at the next safe station whether she needed it yet or not. She couldn't risk being stuck in the middle of

nowhere. She scolded herself for being so impatient back in Clifton. She had left the lines at the pump because she couldn't stand to watch the bickering couple in front of her any longer.

She was driving for two hours when she realized she should have been in civilization again. She should have been surrounded by buildings and going through safe zone tests, but she was still surrounded by fields on either side of the road. Pulling over in an open area could mean life or death, especially alone, but she had no choice. Not finding her way and ending up on an empty tank in a dead zone would have been much worse.

She had already been headed in the wrong direction when she'd reached the gas station and had to risk another fill-up as she back-tracked.

She had just put her car back into drive when she heard a scream.

A scream only meant one thing. Someone was about to die.

Any sound in these parts, the uninhabited, meant that the turned were near. Any vocalization of any kind meant that something was still living. It also meant that they wouldn't be living for very long.

Usually you only heard the screams of someone stupid enough to be travelling by foot who was being turned. Years ago you could still hear the howls of animals, and when you did you headed in the other direction. All those animals were dead or turned now. You would be lucky to hear their footsteps as they came at you.

Wendy winced and closed her eyes. She wanted to go and help, but even if she hadn't been alone, that would have been a suicide mission. She started to count to ten before opening her eyes. She would feel better about leaving when she knew she wasn't leaving someone to die. By the time she got to ten they would be dead and she could leave.

She heard another scream on 6, but this one was closer. She opened her eyes and looked in the direction of the screaming. She didn't see anything for another minute, then she saw a woman about her age running and screaming. Not very far after, there were two wolves chasing her. No growls or barks, just silence and the woman's screams.

Wendy rolled down her window and yelled, "Get in!" She rolled the window back up immediately and unlocked the doors and pushed open the passenger's side. As soon as the woman closed the door, she pulled away. The wolves gave chase, but they were soon out of site. They were probably still running after them, following the sound of the engine, but it felt better not being able to still see them.

They drove for another minute before Wendy gave the woman the standard test. A lot of people had died by picking up a passenger about to turn. She wasn't about to become a statistic. Or at least she wanted to remain one of the living ones.

The woman recited the alphabet, backward and forward, for a full two minutes. It took at least five minutes to turn completely, but only two before you couldn't perform simple tasks that required concentration. The speed of the recitation didn't matter. But stuttering, missing letters, those were the danger signs.

After she passed the check she said, "I'm Amy."

"Hey, I'm Wendy," she glanced at the woman sitting next to her. Amy had finally gained some composure.

"What the hell were you doing out there?"

"Asshole boyfriend," said Amy. Wendy waited for more explanation but there was silence.

"What... about an asshole boyfriend?" she asked, not quite sure how to pose the question. She didn't want to seem nosy, but she really wanted to know how someone could end up running

through an uninhabited zone alone.

"My asshole- ex- boyfriend left me to die," said Amy. "We were fighting, as usual, and he said 'You think you're always right. Well, see how long you and your righteousness survive alone.' And he dragged me out of the car and drove away."

Wendy didn't even know what to say to that. She had seen people who hated each other in the midst of fighting stop to help each other get away from the turned, then go back to fighting. Despite any problems you might have with someone, leaving them to be turned was monstrous. "Well, he's probably lost somewhere and turned by now, and I'm still alive," said Amy after a few moments when Wendy didn't respond. "And good riddance, honestly. I mean, he dragged me out of his car!"

Wendy hesitated a moment before she said, "That is definitely unforgivable."

Even as despicable as this guy was, she still found it hard wishing a turning on him.

"Headed home for the holiday?" asked Wendy after they'd been driving a few miles.

Conversation always flowed easier when you knew there weren't two turned wolves in the immediate vicinity.

She saw Amy shake her head out of the corner of her eye, "No, all my family's dead," she said. "We were headed to Joe's mother's house. I liked his mother. She was a really sweet lady. Don't know how she managed to raise a bastard like him."

Wendy started to wonder if she and Amy got in an argument, would Amy think twice before dragging her out of the car.

"Oh," said Wendy. She hoped Amy wouldn't want to stay with her, that there would be somewhere else to drop her off. It was customary to take "strays" home with you. It was inhuman not to, really. And Wendy would if she had to, but she hoped she didn't.

Amy sighed, "I have to pee."

"What?" Wendy asked. No one had to pee on a road trip. No one drank anything before starting a road trip since a pit stop could be lethal.

"I have to pee," Amy repeated.

"You didn't go before you left?" Wendy asked in disbelief.

"Of course I did," Amy said, with the nerve to sound annoyed. "But I guess running for my life and all that adrenaline got my bladder going, too."

"We can't stop," said Wendy, "This place is full of the turned."

Wendy was throwing repeated glances at Amy, still in disbelief of what she was hearing. While she still wasn't on Joe's side, she thought she might understand how he could come to throwing Amy out of a car.

Amy rolled her eyes, "There's a town in another five miles. I'll just go there."

"Are you kidding? This is a completely uninhabited zone. Stopping in a town is suicide," said Wendy.

"We'll find a house that's all locked up and I'll just go there," said Amy, sounding as though she had done this a million times before and that Wendy was overreacting. Wendy knew she wasn't overreacting. In populated areas there were constant warnings on the radio warning of the dangers of making stops anywhere, let alone a dead zone.

"I'm not dying because you have bladder control issues!" said Wendy.

"Listen," said Amy, "either we stop and I pee, or we keep going and you get to smell piss in your car forever."

"Fine," Wendy said through her teeth, "we'll stop." One of the things that stopped after people started turning was car manufacturing. This car was literally irreplaceable. Only the military still made vehicles and no one would be willing to trade her for their car.

They pulled off the road at the town a few miles later. They drove for a few minutes before finally coming upon a house that didn't look like a broken ruin.

"I'll go here," said Amy, "Come on."

"What?" asked Wendy.

"Come on," said Amy with her hand on the door handle.

"I'm staying in the car," said Wendy.

"No, I need someone to watch my back in there," Amy said.

"I'll watch your back from here," said Wendy.

"Come on," said Amy, "This place is deserted. We'll be fine. It's just a precaution."

Wendy wanted to argue that if precautions were necessary, then there was a good chance they wouldn't be fine, but she wanted to get this over with and get back on the road. And besides, she was right. The place was deserted. They hadn't even seen the usual amblers that was typical in towns such as these. Everything would be fine.

She opened her door and headed toward the house. She heard Amy follow her. Then she heard running footsteps. She turned to see a group of five turned running toward them. There had been amblers, they just hadn't chanced to see them.

They had already walked far enough from the car that they wouldn't be able to make it back so they ran toward the house.

The door was unlocked and they ran inside. They were about to run down the hall, hopefully toward stairs, when they heard footsteps running down. They ran toward the back, toward the kitchen where, through the open door and broken windows, they could see turned ones running through the yard to join the quiet commotion. There was an open door to the basement and they ran for it.

They ran down the stairs to find what awaited them in the dark. They could be running to their deaths, but they had no other option. They ran into the dark. There was another door at the bottom of the stairs and Amy slammed it behind them.

They heard bangs and scraping from the angry and starving turned ones outside. Inside, they could only hear the sound of their own breathing but nothing else.

When they finally caught their breath and the noises outside the door started to subside, Wendy groped the wall for a light switch. While only the power for populated areas were still maintained, power was provided to all areas.

Sure enough, when Wendy flipped the light switch, florescent lights flickered on.

They were in a room full of shelving fully stocked with supplies. There was a shelf for everything; canned and packaged foods, bottled water, a water purifier, even a power generator. There were bunk beds up against one wall, so that occupants could shelve themselves at night. A door next to the bunk beds was presumably a bathroom.

"Someone could live in here for years," said Wendy, looking at the food on the shelves.

"I guess we're gonna survive after all," Amy said.

"Apparently," said Wendy.