

Those Left Behind: The Tucker Brothers' Story

The road was quiet despite the constant hum of the engines beneath their seats. Only every once in a while was there a glare of headlights from oncoming traffic or the hazy red glow of taillights as the Tucker brothers approached, overtook, and eventually left cars far behind. It was eerie, the quiet. It made them feel as if they were alone in the world despite these occasional interactions with faceless others. Perhaps that was the way it should be. After all, this trip was hardly one of recreation. They were heading home, home to say goodbye. Their mother, the good Edna Tucker, had had a stroke. Whether or not it had anything to do with the Alzheimer's that had been shredding her mind more and more quickly over the past year, neither of them knew. What they knew was that they needed to be there, more to comfort their father during these terrible last days than for their mother, who wouldn't know them.

Nor would they really know her anymore.

Moose and Devin had been born two years, two days, two hours, and two minutes apart. There was some tremendous significance in those numbers because their relationship could not accurately be described by the word brothers. To call them so was to diminish what they meant to each other. Devin, the younger had deferred to his brother on almost all things until joining him in high school. At that point, automatically, they had become equals. From then on, what one , the other supported. They went through their lives trading events and decisions back and forth as if conjoined twins. What one chose to do, the other remained at his side. When Devin had gone to purchase a motorcycle, Moose had chosen one as well. When Moose turned their short distance excursions into cross country trips, Devin had joined right along. They had laughed together. They had stood back to back and fought for their very lives. They had cried together when Moose had buried his wife. Now they would do so again as they watched their mother suffer and die.

Physically, the Tuckers were an imposing pair. They both shared the same husky frame, Moose filling it out at six feet and two inches while Devin stretched it another two inches. Somehow, Moose had managed to keep his reddish hair. It sat like a tangle of wire atop his head, only slightly more kempt than the scraggly beard on his face. Devin's hair had gone in a rush when he'd reached his mid twenties. Now he kept his head shaved, the only hair of which he could boast sitting neatly trimmed around his mouth. If Moose was an intimidating figure, Devin was absolutely terrifying. His eyes were like steel and he had been known to plough through men like they were stalks of wheat. Some called him The Juggernaut.

An hour or so from home they turned off the highway by mutual consent and headed for Jack's. Jack's was the model biker bar. It was legendary across the States and yet Moose and Devin, who were also somewhat legendary, had only been there twice. On a silent and sad night like tonight, a night that was going to be all about goodbyes, they

needed to go to Jacks, have a beer and say hello to an old friend.

It was, of course, a gamble that they would find Wilfred Python there at all. They knew it was close to his home and one of his regular hangouts, but Wilf was a restless soul. He traveled often. Tonight, though, fortune was in their favor.

Somewhere in his sixties, Wilf was a good thirty years older than Moose. He was at least a head shorter than the big man and dwarfed even more by Devin. He wore a crown of white hair that spread down into a beard on his face. Wilf was one of the most dangerous men the Tucker brothers had ever met, and yet he was also one of the kindest. When he caught sight of the Tucker Brothers, his face lit up in a smile. He was over at the pool table, shooting stick with a lady who looked to be in her mid fifties. She seemed to be having some trouble keeping herself awake. Devin was going to make a sly comment about Wilf losing his prowess with the ladies, but it wouldn't have meant much. In all the time they had known Wilf they had never seen him with a woman. Besides which, it looked as if most of the crowd was similarly unraveling. There was one guy who was asleep in his chair.

"Wilfred!" Devin shouted, coming forward and grabbing the older man in a giant hug. As big as Wilf was, Devin had about six inches on him. He was a bear of a man with a bald head and bushy red beard. There was some grey in the beard now, but not a lot. Devin was in his mid forties, Moose approaching fifty. He lifted Wilf clear off the ground and gave him a big scratchy kiss on the cheek before setting him down again. Moose, by far the more reserved of the two men, shook Wilf's hand vigorously.

"Let me buy a round," Wilf offered.

The two men agreed, but didn't have much time.

"Mom's taken ill," Devin confessed. "Alzheimer's."

"Jesus," Wilf moaned. "Sorry to hear that."

"We've known for a while," said Devin, "but things took a turn for the worse a few days back. Dad called us to come home."

"I didn't know your parents lived around here."

Devin nodded. "We're still about ninety minutes out. Since we've never actually been to the legendary *Jack's*, we thought this might be our best opportunity to check it out."

They talked for a while, Wilf and the Tucker brothers. It did them all some good to sit with friends who weren't falling apart. Finally, Devin signaled that it was time for them to hit the road. They wanted to get to their mom before midnight, but that already didn't seem likely. The three men exchanged their goodbyes, which included

Devin lifting Wilf into another bear hug. Drinking water now, Wilf watched them depart with a smile.

Devin and Moose didn't leave the bar in as good of spirits as they had hoped. Having a beer with an old friend should have been just the thing to buoy them against the coming pain of watching their mother suffer and yet they felt sullen and depressed. The next hour of riding down the dark and empty highway only served to reinforce their declining moods.

Horace and Edna Tucker lived in one of the oldest neighborhoods surrounding the city. Horace had bought the house even before he'd met their mother because the neighborhood was quiet and the space was good. Over the years, a lot of that space had filled in, but you could still stretch out your arms and not have to worry about brushing the houses on either side of you with your fingertips. Even someone with a wingspan as large as Devin's. The boys had grown up in that house, playing on the grounds and exploring the construction sites of the other houses as the development sprang up around them. In a country where communities were composed of houses that all matched in some way or another, the Tuckers' home town stood out as a place of rich history. The two men had good memories there and feared the passing of those memories into what would now be an era marked by pain and death.

It was almost eleven when they pulled up in front of the house. They could see lights shining in the windows of other houses, shadows moving behind the curtains. There was a feel to it that made Moose shiver. They knew their mom was sick, but why did it seem as if everyone else was as well?

Horace came to the door looking worn and sunken. No doubt, caring for Edna had taken its toll on him. Moose felt a pang of guilt at not having come sooner. Devin had had to finish up a contracting job and get paid. He didn't normally do contracting work. It was hard and, as he got older, all of the riding and fighting had given him a perpetually sore back. But the design for the new yard had been his and he had wanted to follow through.

"You look terrible, Pop," Devin said as they came through the door.

"Yeah," the old man sighed. "Whatever's hit the nation has hit me, too."

Moose looked a question and Horace sighed again.

"Don't you boys watch the news?"

"We've been on the road all day," Devin laughed.

Horace grumbled a reply and then shuffled into the living room where the television was glowing but muted.

"I just couldn't listen to it anymore," he wheezed.

On screen, they were showing scenes of people spilling out of hospital doors and piling up at urgent care centers.

"You boys aren't sick are you?" Horace asked, looking them over.

Moose and Devin looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Well thank God for small favors," Horace said. "Your mother didn't get it either as if it matters much at this point. Maybe it's a family immunity you both inherited from her."

While that was meant to be reassuring, Moose was suddenly wondering if he and Devin had also inherited Alzheimer's.

"Can I get you something, Dad?" Devin asked as Horace lowered himself down onto the couch.

Horace shook his head. "Just go up and see your mom. Damned Hospice worker didn't show up tonight. She's probably got this damned virus, too."

"Why don't you just go to bed?" Moose asked, his voice a much deeper baritone than either his brother's or his father's.

Horace laughed without mirth. "I am in bed, son. I can't bear to sleep up there anymore. The whole room smells sickly."

Moose's lips went thin underneath his beard. He had never thought his father to be a particularly sensitive man, but he was being especially callous. It took a real effort for Moose to remind himself that Horace had been caring for his wife for a long time and was now ill himself on top of all of his other frustrations.

"It's okay, Dad," Devin said, touching Moose's elbow. "Let's go see mom."

The steps creaked under their boots as they marched upstairs. Their minds flooded with thoughts of their shared childhood, running up and down these very same stairs, wearing through the carpet until their dad had just had to give in and pull it off.

Upstairs, they passed their old bedrooms, each having been converted into something else long ago. Devin's room had gone from photography studio to gym to family shrine. It was now covered from floor to ceiling and wall to wall with pictures and souvenirs of the Tuckers dating back to well before he'd been born. Horace had sound proofed Moose's room and put in some recording equipment. Edna had been a fair guitar player in her day and had been interested in rekindling that in her fifties. It hadn't lasted long, but so much work had gone into the room that they had decided to leave it.

He lingered there a moment as Devin went on. His mind wandered back to a childhood filled with happy memories. He had faced death before, Moose Tucker. He supposed

he would face it again many times before having to experience it himself. Still, he shied away, frightened to look upon that mask as it covered his mother's face.

At the end of the hall, Devin stopped, sensing that he was alone. "Can you do this?" he asked, stupidly. Was there any real choice?

Moose nodded his head, his beard folding against his chest.

Devin opened the door and stepped inside. Two seconds later, Moose followed.

She had lost weight. Wrapped under the blankets, they could hardly see the frail creature she had become, but the thinning was evident in her face. Her eyes, though closed in a troubled sleep, looked smaller and weaker under the lids.

What do you dream about? Moose wondered. Are there images of happy times that simply flit away when you wake? Or are you tortured even in sleep by nightmares full of monsters you can't even recognize.

"Don't wake her," Moose said abruptly. She shifted at the sound of his voice but didn't wake.

Devin looked back at him once and nodded. They stood together for a time, both wondering the same thing. How long? How long would they have to care for her, watch her deteriorate? How long would they all be tortured.

With their dad on the couch, it would be the inflatable mattresses for the two of them. That was all right. They'd slept on worse. They would set one up in the shrine and the other in the studio. Moose in his room and Devin in his. The mattresses were in the basement.

Horace was already sleeping when they crept downstairs. The television was still on, but the screen was black. Each of the Tucker Brothers thought that was odd but dismissed it in favor of continuing with their own needs. They brought the mattresses and pump up from the basement and took thirty minutes getting them inflated and dressed with sheets and blankets. They were just about done when they heard something from downstairs.

The noise took them by surprise. They didn't know what to do at first. It was this high pitched whining that sounded so familiar and yet so out of place.

"Is that the Emergency Broadcasting Signal?" Devin asked finally.

Moose nodded in sudden recognition. The sound sent such a chill up his spine. Suddenly, all of the irregularities of the night pressed in on them like demons out of a nightmare. The quiet road. The sick people at Jack's. The absent hospice worker. Their dad. Their mom, whose condition was all that predated this quiet and ominous evening.

Heading downstairs, Moose and Devin saw that the television screen was glowing with the simple sign of an emergency. No calm voice overrode the signal to warn citizens that this was just a test. Instead, along the bottom of the screen, local evacuation points scrolled along as if this was nothing more than a sunny day. Still, even with the signal, something was out of place. The instructions were all automated. There was no real information.

Horace stirred on the sofa and then settled back into a troubled slumber.

"Let's check the internet," Devin suggested.

Their parents kept a computer in the kitchen. It had a small monitor, but the hardware in the box was fairly recent. Horace loved technology. The brothers found it on but sleeping. A few seconds later, they were surfing the major news sites. What they saw was unbelievable.

It was just after two in the morning, from time having slipped away from them as they'd prepared for their stay. The numbers of the ill were staggering. The event was not isolated. From all over the world, reports were coming in of citizens showing up at hospitals and urgent care centers. People on night shifts had shown up sick or not at all. There weren't enough people to man the ambulances or the fire trucks or the police force. The healthy population of the Earth had been reduced to a tiny fraction of normal.

"It'll blow over," Devin said. "Tomorrow, everyone will start to feel better and we'll all be laughing about this."

Moose looked up at the ceiling. Just above, their mom was suffering from something that would never blow over. They would never laugh about what was happening to her.

"Should we take dad to the hospital?" Devin asked.

Moose shook his head. What would be the point? Even if they could get inside, they'd be standing or huddled on the floor. At least on the couch, he was as comfortable as he could be.

They checked on him before going to bed. They were both exhausted from their long ride and all of what had happened throughout the course of the night. They were also both afraid.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Moose was awakened by footsteps in the hallway. He thought it must be Devin, up to check on their mom or their dad. He didn't expect his brother had slept. Despite all of their similarities, Devin had never quite been able to compartmentalize his fear the way Moose did. Devin didn't like a situation in which he was utterly helpless. He was always afraid of being unable to take charge.

There was a thump on the door and Moose jumped. He listened, too startled to do anything else at the moment, but the moment passed. Sliding off of the air mattress, he stood his full giant height. His shirt and pants had been discarded on the floor. In his boxers, he presented the image of a slightly less dignified sasquatch in his boxer shorts. There was hair on his chest and on his back and on his legs. For one of a very isolated few times since being a child, Moose wasn't sure what to do.

The moment passed.

Stepping forward, he opened the door to an empty hallway. Devin, still dressed in his jeans and a white t-shirt, was also coming into the hall.

"What's that smell?" he asked and Moose shrugged.

In the dim light, they could see that Edna's door was ajar. She must have gotten up and been wandering about. There was no telling what she might have done.

Moving past his brother, Devin went to the room and stepped inside. The smell was much stronger in there. What he saw was his dad hunched over her. He was making strange noises. Devin thought he was crying.

"Dad?"

Moose, just behind him, put a hand on his shoulder to keep him from approaching.

Horace looked up at them, his eyes wide. There was something on his face. It was all over his face. And then they recognized the smell. They smelled it before. Moose and the Juggernaut had been in countless brawls. They had suffered wounds that would have taken other men down and inflicted same. Never before, though, had they been so overwhelmed by it.

Blood.

In a torrential rush of understanding, they realized that Horace had torn his wife open and was feasting on her.

"Dad, what the hell?" Devin cried, trying to shake his brother off and approach. But Moose held on tight and grabbed his brother's arm with his free hand.

Suddenly their mother sat up. Despite the Alzheimer's and despite the open wound in her belly, she lifted herself into a sitting position and glared at them. Devin started to say something, but Moose pulled him from the room and shut the door. In a moment, there was banging. Their parents were trying to get out.

"I don't understand," Devin said. "I don't understand."

"Get your things."

Moose went back to his room and dressed. Then he pulled his back from the corner in which he'd stashed it and headed down the stairs.

"Don't go in there," he called out to Devin when he heard his brother come into the hallway.

Devin leaned over the railing. "We're just going to leave them then?"

"Just leave them," Moose confirmed, heading into the kitchen. Going right to the computer, he woke it up and logged onto the internet. As he expected, there was a lot more news than there had been before, but most of it didn't come from the news sites. Instead, social media was teeming with people asking questions, crying for help, saying goodbye. Three hours had gone by since the Tucker brothers had gone to sleep. In that time, the world had gone to sleep with them...and the slipped quietly into death.

Devin came up behind him. "They're making some fuss up there."

Moose noticed the banging from above. "They're together." Standing up, he let Devin sit down and read what he'd been reading. He didn't need to watch as his brother's expression went shocked to fearful to horrified. It would end with determination. If the dead were going to come at them in ravenous droves, the Tucker brothers would do what they had always done. They would stand back to back and persevere.

As Devin took it all in, Moose rummaged around the kitchen for canned goods and anything else that would travel.

"Do you have a plan?" Devin asked.

"Survive."

It was about as much as could be expected.

The subject of their parents didn't come up again. According to everything they'd read, the elder Tuckers couldn't be saved. Some may have felt that putting them down would be a mercy, but neither Moose nor Devin had the stomach for it. As they left the house, Moose realized that Horace had taken a tremendous decision out of their hands. If they had gotten to him before he'd gotten to Edna, she'd still be alive. He didn't want to think about what that might have meant.

They stepped out into the dark street and revved up their bikes. Taking one last look around the neighborhood, they said goodbye not only to their childhoods, but their childhood memories as well. Entering what appeared to be a completely new world, it didn't seem as if there would be any room for the past.

There didn't seem to be a need for either of them to ask the other directions. Moose's plan was as solid a plan as could be. For two men such as the Tuckers, though, survival didn't necessarily mean holing up in a cellar somewhere. Survival meant taking

control of their situation and their world. And they could think of no better ally in this world than Wilfred Python.

Jack's was a longshot. Though Jack and Wilfred hadn't been ill, it was well past the time when the bar would normally be open and it seemed unlikely that the two men would have hung around. Still, it was their only possibility. When they arrived at the bar, however, they discovered it burning in the sunrise. There were some people wandering about. Many of them were badly burned. Others had violent wounds all over their bodies. They were all dead.

Moose and Devin didn't even stop. They just turned their bikes around and went back to the highway. It would have been easy for the two men to simply stay on the highway, riding until their tanks were empty and their muscles weary. It was a comfortable and familiar scenario for them. Yet, they didn't. Devin and Moose Tucker weren't the kinds of men who set down roots. Even throughout his short marriage, Moose had traveled with his wife and brother. But the world had changed. They could see the evidence of it now. There was a quiet to it despite the presence of the restless dead. With the altered world, so must the Tuckers have been altered as well.

Just before getting on the highway, Devin pulled over to the side of the road. Moose followed him and cut his engine so they could talk.

"It doesn't matter," said Devin.

Moose shook his head, instantly understanding what his brother meant. Their lives didn't necessarily need to change. They could still travel on the roads. They could still go on as they had for almost their entire adult lives.

"Money won't be any good anymore, though," Devin amended. "At least not for a while. We'll have to scavenge for a few things, I suppose."

"Food," said Moose.

Devin nodded. "And medicine. We'll have to be careful."

Now Moose nodded. "Gas."

Gas would be a problem. They knew how to siphon a car, if need be, but the electric pumps would be useless when the power went out. Ultimately, they'd have to replace their motorbikes with the pedal kind.

"We should go get gas now."

Moose agreed and they were off. Hitting the highway, they looked for the first town with more than one gas station. Pulling off the road, they maneuvered under the canopy and parked their bikes next to the pumps. There was a car parked near the entrance to the store. Otherwise, the lot was empty. Using their credit cards, they

topped off their bikes and went inside to look for gas cans. For as long as there was power, the world of machines would still whirr on.

As they passed the car, they noticed movement inside. Moose jumped back startled when a woman pressed her face and hands against the glass. She seemed feral, looked as if she trying to bite her way through the window.

"She's one of them," Devin said quietly.

Like dad, thought Moose.

They left her alone.

Inside, the store looked the same as every other convenience store. There was no one wandering the aisles, but a young man was behind the counter. He was sitting on a stool with his head down. To the Tuckers, it looked as if he was sleeping.

"Hey," said Devin. "Hey, you okay?"

The young man looked up, startling all three of them.

"Praying," he said.

Devin nodded grimly. "How's that working out for you?"

The man gave sort of a wry grin.

"Do you have gas cans?" Devin asked.

The man nodded and pointed.

While Devin went for the gas cans, Moose approached the counter. He took a candy bar, tore it open, and began eating it.

"Dollar twenty five," the man said. Moose smiled through chocolate covered teeth and fished in his pocket for the change. He didn't have to pay for it. There weren't any police coming, even if the young man called them. Still, there was fighting in his future and he was loathe to waste any energy on a candy bar. Besides which, the money was worthless.

Devin came up with three one gallon gas cans and deposited them on the counter. Then he went back for more.

"You been watching the news?" Moose asked the man.

He nodded. "And praying."

Suddenly, the man looked past Moose and out toward the lot. A woman was stumbling

up the road and onto the property. It looked like several people were following her. Her clothing was torn and there was a gash on her head. The dried blood covered much of her face.

"Devin," Moose called out.

Coming forward, Devin took a quick look and then turned back to the now frightened clerk. "Do you have any weapons?"

Fumbling under the counter, the man pulled out a small caliber pistol. Devin took it, popped the magazine and checked the load. There wouldn't be enough bullets. That was right. The Tucker brothers weren't much for guns anyway.

The group following the woman was composed of all dead people. There were at least thirty of them. Some were badly wounded, but didn't take notice of their injuries. Others were covered in gore, but were completely without wounds. Moose pointed at a man whose belly had been torn open just like their mother's. Devin nodded, understanding instantly. If damage like that didn't phase him, then what good would a bullet be?

He was Devin's first target.

Despite favoring just about anything over a gun, Devin was a decent shot. The approaching dead were moving pretty slowly, presenting themselves as excellent targets. Devin's bullet went right into the dead man's left eye. He toppled backward and hit the pavement with a crunch.

"Head shots then," Devin surmised.

Moose nodded.

As the younger Tucker began thinning out the ranks of those closest to them, Moose went forward and put himself between woman and the approaching mob. She muttered a breathless thank you as she tottered past.

"Out," called Devin from behind.

That didn't matter to Moose. His fists never emptied of ammunition. He found himself wading into the fray with a determination he had not previously known. Moose had been a fighter all his life, but had never relished the feel of putting someone down. Generally he fought without hate. Most people would have thought that would weaken him, but this emotional detachment had served him well. Here, though, against these things, it could not be so. There was something unnatural and repulsive about them that what he felt transcended hate. He didn't just want to beat them back. He wanted to pound them into meal.

And so he did. As they had realized that bullets would only work on the head,

Moose knew that he would have to cave in skulls in order to put them fully out of commission. Even with fists as powerful as his, though, bashing in a skull was not easy. He could give a man a concussion with a well placed blow, but he doubted that these monstrosities would react to anything less than substantial damage. Still, there was more than one way to break a zombie.

Clumsy as they were, Moose found it easy to shove them into one another. Using them as weapons against each other was a tactic that bought him enough time to do more permanent damage. He found himself breaking legs as often as possible. The dead people couldn't seem to get off the ground on broken legs. That didn't stop them from trying to claw their way forward. But once they were on the ground, it was easy enough to stomp down on one's head and end its miserable existence.

"They kept trying to bite me," Devin said, when the last of them was no longer moving.

Breathing more heavily than he would have liked, Moose nodded.

The woman was sitting on the ground near one of the pumps. The young clerk had come over to her with a bottle of water and she was drinking from it in large gulps.

"Everyone on the bus was sick except for me," she said. "The whole tour. Even the driver. He passed out and we rolled over. I managed to crawl away from the bus. I got out through an emergency window. But, my head. I passed out."

"You're lucky they didn't eat you alive," Devin said.

"They tried," she sobbed. "The dead ones were eating the people still alive. One of them took a bite out of my leg. That's when I came to. I..."

The clerk got up and ran into the store. He came back a moment later with a first aid kit and started disinfecting her wounds.

Devin looked up to see Moose filling the gas cans. He walked over. "Are we just going?"

Moose looked at him as if that was the dumbest question in the world.

"All I'm saying," Devin said, "is that those two won't last very long without us."

Moose looked at them. Then he looked at Devin. "Will we be protecting everyone?"

Devin hesitated, then said, "Yeah. I guess so."

Putting down the gas can, Moose went to the car. The woman inside began clawing at the window with renewed vigor when she saw him. He grabbed the handle and pulled the door open, confirming that the dead were too stupid to open a door. The dead woman spilled out onto the ground and Moose stomped on her head. Then he got into the car, started it up, and pulled it over to one of the pumps. She had three quarters of a

tank, but he topped it off.

There were all sorts of logistical problems when it came to taking on others and forming a group. For one, it made it much harder to travel. Though there would probably be an abundance of cars, it wasn't likely that they would be able to keep them all fueled. They would need a renewable source of food and water. The nomadic life that Moose had envisioned for him and his brother just wouldn't work under these circumstances. Looking up at the convenience store, he considered it as a possible stronghold. He just as quickly dismissed the idea. If there were to be more attacks against them, wither from the dead or other survivors, they would be destroyed. The place was virtually indefensible. He could see Devin looking up at the store as well, thinking the same thing.

In a few minutes, they were back on the road. Sadaab, the store clerk was driving the car with the woman, Fran, in the passenger seat. Moose and Devin rode their bikes on either side of the car. It had taken a fair amount of convincing to get Sadaab to abandon the station. The place was owned by his uncle. They had tried to call, but there was no answer. Another visit to the internet had proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that the situation was grave. Even if the remaining authorities were able to sort it all out, it would be quite some time before any sort of normalcy returned to the world. They loaded up the trunk and the back seat of the car with absolutely anything of value that they could scavenge from the store. For a lack of space, they had to leave an awful lot behind.

Their first stop was Sadaab's house. He was intent on checking on his family. Devin and Moose cautioned him. He wasn't likely to like what he found. But he was intractable. Not knowing would be worse than finding them dead. Since the Tuckers had yet to come up with a plan, they acquiesced. Sadaab led them back to the highway, south for three miles, and then into a middle class suburban area. They pulled onto a quiet street, the roar of the bikes cutting through the stillness like the rumble of thunder on a deserted plain.

Sadaab got right out of the car and ran into his house. In the meantime, Devin went over to have a look at Fran. She was dozing in the front seat, a light sweat covering her forehead.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

She looked up at him with glassy eyes and nodded. "It's the stress," she said. "I'm just worn out."

He nodded to her and went back to Moose. "She looks like dad," his older brother said.

Devin nodded, wondering how she could suddenly be sick only now when everyone else who had contracted the disease had died and been reborn hours before.

"It's the bite," said Moose.

Devin nodded again, knowing that his brother was right. It was something to consider. If Fran was sick from a bite, then any one of them could just as easily get sick as well. They each thought back on the battle they'd had at the gas station.

"You weren't bitten, we're you?" they asked each other simultaneously. They laughed a moment together, but then remembered poor Fran. What were they to do about her? It would probably be kinder to put her out of her misery, but the Tucker brothers were not murderers. They had no idea what the course the illness might take in someone who was initially immune. Perhaps she would recover.

They were just thinking this through when there was a commotion up the street. Looking up they saw a small group of survivors supporting each other as they slowly approached. Hobbling after them, perhaps a dozen yards behind, was a much larger group of the dead.

Moose and Devin looked at each other. A few minutes before, they wouldn't have thought twice about wading in and taking down the mob. Now, though, they would have to be cautious.

"Sadaab!" Devin called out loudly. "Sadaab, we need to go."

The door to the young man's house remained empty. Moose made to go inside, but Devin held him back. Instead he went to the car and opened up the driver's side door. Without thinking about it, he began honking the horn loudly.

Bad idea.

Faces began to appear in the windows up and down the street. Dead faces. Hands began to pound on glass. Dead hands. Moose looked over at Sadaab's and saw a middle aged woman appear. Perhaps she was his mother. Perhaps she was his sister. There was blood on her shirt front and all around her mouth. She was as dead as whoever's blood it was.

It was probably Sadaab's.

As Moose went to his bike and revved it up, Devin started waving the crowd over to him. There were eight or nine of them, too many to fit comfortably, but they could sort that out after they'd found a safe place to stop. As he reached over to start the engine, though, Fran suddenly lashed out at him. Snatching his hand away quickly, he reeled out the driver's side door, tripping on his own feet and landing on the asphalt.

Moose caught sight of it and rushed forward, abandoning his bike. The woman from Sadaab's house was too close. Moose was forced to fight her, quickly putting her down. Meanwhile, Devin kicked the car door shut with his boot.

The group pulled up near them and stopped. Among them was a fat man with large eyes and an unkempt beard. He was huffing and puffing and smelled of body odor. He leaned against the car, oblivious of the zombie inside. By far the strongest of the group was a tall and lithe blonde woman. She was the only one of the who didn't look winded. She was dressed in a pair of tights tank top despite the chill.

"Keep moving," Devin told them.

"We can't outrun them forever," the blonde woman said. "With you two flanking me, we might be able to take them down."

"If you get bitten, you'll become just like them," Devin said. Then he pointed to poor Fran in the car.

"It happens quick, too," said Moose.

Devin looked at the bikes. "We can buy you some time, though. Then we can catch up."

The woman seemed to understand and led the group further down the road. Devin and Moose went to their bikes and started them up.

"Stay on the outside," Devin told his brother. "Try to knock them inward."

"Worry about yourself."

Devin didn't have an answer for that. The two revved their bikes as one and rode right up to the mob of the dead. The noise of the bikes seemed to both attract and confuse them. They couldn't seem to decide which of the two men to go for. The Tucker brothers sped past, delivering kicks as they rode. It was a practiced maneuver, one they'd been forced to employ a number of times against rival bikers or gang thugs looking to make their marks. The zombies, though, were particularly unbalanced. Knocking them into each other was a piece of cake. Still, Devin's horn honking episode had really riled up those behind closed doors. They did not stay locked up for long. Before they knew it, the brothers were surrounded by an angry throng of the undead. They had clawed their way through jagged windows and fiberglass doors. They were battered and scraped and bloody. And they were very very hungry.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Devin shouted. They brought their bikes around in a circle and started off after the group of people. They weren't very far ahead. The big guy was really struggling and there was a small boy whose little legs seemed likely to give out. The fight had bought them maybe a hundred yards. Behind them, the zombies were still following.

They slowed as they reached the small group. The blonde woman was trying to coax them to move faster, but they just couldn't do it. Somehow, they needed enough time

to out some real distance between them and the horde.

Down at the end of the street, the houses ended and the road swept away toward the highway. Devin and Moose had come that way as they had arrived. There was an overpass that spanned a sewage canal. If they could lure the zombies in there, one or two of them could hold them off while the others got out of line of sight.

"Follow me," Devin said, revving his bike and heading to the end of the street. From there, he could see the overpass. It wasn't that far. "This way!"

His enthusiasm seemed to inject the people with the same. They quickened their pace, made a turn at the end of the road, and followed him. Abandoning his bike, he skidded down the dirt hill on the side of the canal on his heels.

"Down here," he coaxed.

"Devin!" Moose cried.

Devin whirled just in time to see a zombie approaching him. Behind it, laying on the ground was young man. He was torn apart. There was blood everywhere. The zombie had been feasting on him. None of this made any difference. Devin swept the legs out from underneath his would be attacker and stomped three times on his head. The creature went still.

Moose came scrambling down into the canal, the others still several yards behind.

Panting, Devin said, "Once the things start coming down here, you'll lead them up the other side and get them someplace safe."

"No," said Moose.

Devin pulled a face. "Someone has to stay and fight and someone has to lead them."

Moose shook his head again. "Let's take our bikes and go."

But Devin wasn't having it. "It was nice dream. The world needs people like us now, Ken."

Moose went silent. No one ever called him by his given name. It made him think of his parents. "I'll stay."

Devin shook his head. Though younger, he often felt responsible for his brother. Ever since Moose had lost his wife, their roles had been altered.

"Why?" Moose asked.

Devin smiled. "Because you're just a moose, and I'm the Juggernaut."

But Moose only shook his head. "Why are you throwing your life away for these people? You don't even know them."

Devin swallowed hard, unhappy with what he was about to show his brother. Then he held up his right hand where a fierce red welt was glowing.

"What's that?" Moose asked. "What's that?"

Devin looked at it as if it were something he cherished. "It's a present from Fran," he said. "She caught me when I tried to start the car."

Moose looked suddenly panicked. "You got bitten?"

Devin nodded. "Sorry."

"Maybe you'll be okay. Maybe it was just her."

"No," said Devin as the others arrived at the base of the canal. "I can already feel it."

"I won't go," said Moose and the others could hear him now.

Devin grabbed his brother by the front of his jacket and pulled him into a giant bear hug. It was a Devin Tucker specialty. Moose hugged him back.

"Take these people somewhere safe," Devin said. "I'm going to fight like I never fought before."

Moose pushed back to arms' length and looked his brother dead in the eye. Then he pushed himself away and started up the other side of the canal. Devin watched his brother's back sadly. When he noticed the small group not following, he told them to hurry. "I wouldn't count on him to wait for you."

The blonde woman lingered a moment after the others left. She was looking at him curiously. Devin looked back.

"Good luck," she whispered. "I don't think we're going to meet a whole lot more like you." Then she leaned in, stretched up, and kissed him on his bearded cheek.

When she was gone and the first of the zombies was peaking over the lip of the canal, Devin went back over to the body. It was moving, struggling, but too badly damaged to be any danger. Laying a couple of feet away from it was what appeared to be a cricket bat. Devin had played cricket avidly for about two months when he and Moose had biked across Europe. Those had been fun times. Moose never cared for the game, but he'd liked lounging in the grass and drinking beer.

To each his own.

Behind the big biker, the ravenous horde was slipping down the side of the hill. They

weren't coordinated enough to get to the bottom without falling all over each other. It was comical. Ultimately, though, they gained their feet. Reaching down, Devin found the handle of the bat. With one fluid motion, he pulled it from the ground and swung it in a wide arc. The bat connected with the head of the nearest zombie, practically taking it off. The zombie fell away and the arc continued connecting with not one, but two more heads. As he faced them, the zombies seemed to hesitate, staring him down and snarling at their dangerous prey. Devin took the cricket bat in a two handed grip and set his feet in the dirt. The pause was endless yet momentary. Then it was over and the battle was joined.

The endless.horde was no match for the furious Juggernaut.

Already safely away, Moose walked several yards ahead of the group. His thoughts were dark and bitter. He was focused only on what he had lost that day. Three people. One entire family. When his wife had died, he had withdrawn. Pauline had been a surprise for him. He had never believed himself capable of giving so much of himself to another person. When she had died, she had taken all of the with her. But Devin had the backup. Devin had brought him back from the brink. With Devin at his side, he had been able to cope with had happened to their parents. Without him, though, Moose felt so alone. His anchor was gone and he was now drowning in the sorry of his losses. Even Pauline's death, now so long ago, was creeping back into the fore. In his imagination, she stood next to his mom and his dad and his brother, all taken by this ugly plague.

A hand touched his shoulder. "I'm sorry," said the blonde woman.

He didn't say anything.

"My name's Nadya. I know it can't mean much, but thank you." If it wasn't for the two of you, that group would have eventually gotten some of us, if not all of us."

Moose nodded. "It doesn't mean much."

Nadya frowned, trying to remember that he wasn't so much devaluing their lives as he was consumed by his grief.

"We should try to find a car," she said. "We need to..."

"I have to go back," Moose told her.

"What? Now?"

He shook his head. "After you're safe. Nearby."

"Oh," she said. "I see."

"Good," he said, but that was the last.

They walked up the road for a while until they discovered the entrance to the interstate. There was a sign that said it was about two million les into the city along the road they traveled. The way Moose saw it, there was little reason to brave the highway. There was no guarantee that they would reach anyplace reasonable by nightfall, which would force them to camp out. Toward the city, they might find a more suitable place to hole up.

There were cars along the way, but not one of them knew how to start one without the keys. They were mostly surprised when Moose confessed that he had never learned it. He was offended. He wasn't a criminal. He could handle most of the regular maintenance on his bike, but that was pretty much it. He didn't bother to respond to them at all.

"Where are you taking us?" the fat man complained.

After a while, Moose had scooped up the child and was carrying him. His feet ached as well.

The hour's march took closer to an hour and a half. The people were hungry and thirsty. Their initial panic had dulled into an aching fear. It was the kind of fear that someone got by leaving something undone. You know you have to take care of it or be held accountable. In this case, they all felt as if they were going nowhere. Without their feet on solid ground, what would happen to them? Would they be held accountable by a horde of angry dead people?

Finally, Moose stopped and pointed. Nadya and the rest followed his gesture to the outskirts of the city. The road led around to the far side, but if they cut across a field, there was a church. They were facing the back of it and there was a park on the other side.

Moose started walking forward again. The others hesitated, but ultimately came on after him. What else could they do? There wasn't one among them with Moose's fortitude, even grieving as he was. Despite the fact that it was clear he was no leader, they clung to him. At least he could fight. Of all of them, only Nadya seemed to have the strength to survive.

Halfway across the field, he noticed a figure straggling toward them. Moose slowed, watching the figure with narrow eyes. Behind him, his flock also slowed. The man, and it was definitely a man, seemed to catch sight or scent of them and was coming their way. In the distance, Moose could pick up faint sounds that resembled grunts and snarls. The man was rabid or dead. Moose was betting dead. That was fine. He was in the mood to pulverize something. Changing direction, he started toward the figure. As he got closer, any doubt about the state of the man was abandoned. When Moose reached him, he didn't hesitate. He grabbed the zombie by his bloody head and thrust him into the ground. Then he began stomping with the heel of his boot. The thing clawed up at his leg as whatever kept it going was snuffed out of it, but its

fingernails were no match for the denim of Moose's pants. When it was over, a silent end in a world screaming with death, the others had come up next to him.

Moose looked at them, grimaced, then continued on toward the church.

Going around the front was like entering a different world. All of a sudden, they were in the city. The park was empty. Across the large area they could see where a few brownstones broke out into stores and, eventually, buildings. The great entrance was closed but not locked. Moose pushed open the doors with both hands and stepped inside.

The church was undamaged. Rows of pews stood arranged as always. In the front, candles were lit and two people were on their knees praying. They looked up, stricken, as the big biker came inside.

Nadya came through quickly and reassured them that they meant no harm.

"Is there any food or water?" she asked.

The two people didn't know. They had come to pray until the Lord decided it was time to take them.

Nadya nodded, understanding.

Once everyone was inside, Moose went back out through the doors. He was barely down the front steps when Nadya came rushing out after him.

"You're going back?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

Moose frowned. "For my brother."

"But, he...the bite..."

The frown turned into a scowl. "Maybe," Moose said. "Either way, I have to save him."

Nadya wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but didn't ask. Clearly, Moose Tucker was not the most articulate man she would ever meet. "Are you coming back?"

He hesitated, but nodded just the same.

As he walked away, she watched him. He didn't head straight around the back as she had expected. Instead, he made his way through the park and into the city. She didn't know what he was looking for. A weapon, maybe? It didn't matter. Once he was

gone, her resolve went with him. Tough as she was, she was no leader. She didn't have the capacity to formulate strategies and make decisions. So she turned around and went back into the church. Her group was sipping apple juice from plastic cups and snacking on finger foods. She joined them and began to pray.

Moose marched into the busy streets looking for transportation. He refused to admit, even to himself, that he was exhausted. The thought of Devin becoming one of those things and feeding off of the living made him so sick that he had to go on. He felt so differently than he had about his parents. At least they're together, he'd said. But who was with Devin? If he became a zombie, he would be formidable. Somehow Moose knew that his brother would be different than the rest of the walking dead. He would be more powerful and more dangerous. The number of lives he would take could very quickly exceed the number of lives that he had saved, and then what was it all for?

Moose found what he was looking for three blocks in. A group of zombies was gathered around a car parked hastily on a corner. It seemed to Moose that if they were that interested in it, someone must have been alive inside. Ducking into an all night pharmacy, he began rooting around for something to use as a weapon. He found numerous brooms and mops but they weren't heavy enough to be effective. There was a tools section, but none of the wrenches were large enough. In the back room, he discovered the clerk. He was lying on a cot and turned his head when Moose walked in. With a strangled hiss, he lifted his dead body off of the cot and started forward. The first thing in reach was a fire extinguisher. Moose grabbed it and slammed the bottom of it into the zombie's face. It didn't finish the job. Two more similar blows did.

Fighting zombies was easy.

After a few more minutes, Moose found a tire iron. He couldn't imagine why there was a tire iron in the back of a pharmacy unless it was being kept there for defense, but it would certainly serve his purposes. Grabbing it up, he went back to the front of the store. He shoved two candy bars into his mouth, practically swallowing them whole, and went back to the car.

There were only seven zombies around the car. Three of them were down before the others even knew he was there. The other four were cake. The tire iron made a good weapon.

When he looked inside the car, he was surprised. A dog was huddled and whimpering in the back seat. It was a beautiful dog, a grey and white Husky. It looked up, sniffing a live human through the cracked window. Moose tried the handle, but it was locked. He tried all four and then lost his patience. He was about to smash the window with the tire iron when he saw the keys. They were sitting in the windshield wiper trench. Why would someone leave his dog in this car with the window cracked and put his keys on the hood? Moose didn't have an answer to that. He was just thankful. He took the keys and opened the car.

The smell inside was awful. The dog had pissed at least. Moose let it out of the car and tried to shoo it off, but it stayed near, sniffing him. There was a collar around its neck. Kneeling down, Moose looked at the license, feeling warm inside as the dog's rough tongue licked his hand.

"Jonathan," he said. "I'm Moose."

The dog looked up at him. He patted its head and scratched it behind the ears. Then he smacked it on the flank and it jumped back into the car.

Moose Tucker had a dog.

Starting the car, he drove away from the city and back to where he had left his brother. As expected, the battle was long over. It had been two hours, after all. How long does it take for a zombie horde to overwhelm a single man? Even when that man is a juggernaut?

Jonathan followed him down the hill, a soft whining coming from its throat. The stench in the air was awful. Moose gripped the tire iron with white knuckles as he looked among the sea of bodies for his brother. Some of the bodies, though ruined, still struggled in undeath.

Jonathan let out loud sudden bark. Moose looked first at the dog and then to where the dog was staring into the distance. At the top of the hill, about fifty yards away stood a figure. Even at that distance, Moose knew it was his brother. He watched him for a moment, but the figure didn't move. His jacket was gone. He was just standing there in his t-shirt.

"Devin," Moose called out finally, adjusting his grip on his weapon.

His brother turned so that he could better see him. His movements were awkward.

Moose called again, but this time the Juggernaut turned away from him and started walking. Frozen in place, Moose could do nothing but watch as his brother disappeared over the horizon. All the while, Jonathan stood patiently and waited.

Several minutes later, Moose broke from his reverie and looked around. At his feet was a dented and bloody cricket bat. He knew right away that Devin had used it to fight off the straggling horde. Dropping his tire iron to the ground, Moose picked it up and tested its weight. A few paces away, a man with crippled legs and a broken spine tried desperately to make his way toward Moose. Moose saved him the trouble. The cricket bat was a good weapon.

Heading up the other side of the canal, Moose found their bikes where they had left them. There was still gas in the tanks and supplies in the carriers. He looked across gap at the car parked on the hill. Then he looked at the bikes. Deciding without conflict, he opened the carrier from Devin's bike and began to empty. Then he got on

the bike and started it up.

"Come on boy," he said to Jonathan. The dog obediently hopped into the open carrier, settling down as comfortable as he could. Moose nodded to himself. He would work something better out for his dog later. For the time being he just wanted to be on the go. A lot had happened on this first day of the ApocalypZe. He was tired, but couldn't rest just yet. There was still one more zombie to kill. Just one.

The Juggernaut.