

Zombies Can't Swim

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The first time I saw the sign at the entrance to the boat yard I laughed so hard I almost crashed my car but once I regained my composure I figured it was nothing more than a great bit of advertising. Now as I smash through the gates in a stolen SUV, I wonder if the old man who ran it had somehow foreseen what was going to happen. Right now, it doesn't matter if he did or not, only whether he was right. I shoot past the sign with it's faded black letters standing proud against a once-white background that's now a dull, dishwater grey, proclaiming its message to the world: *Zombies Can't Swim, Buy A Boat!*. I glance nervously in my rear-view mirror to make sure I'm not being followed: zombies might not be able to swim but they sure as hell can run.

When the zombie apocalypse came it didn't happen in the way it was portrayed in the movies. Rather than the dead rising from their graves, it was, instead, caused by a virus that infected the living, stripping them of everything that made them human and leaving a body ruled by one single urge: to infect others. That in itself wasn't a problem rather it was the way they spread the virus – not through coughs and sneezes but by the infected attacking and biting others. If this reminds you of rabies that's because it was rabies, only it had mutated. It no longer killed; instead it just drove people mad, whipping them into a frenzy where they'd attack anyone who was near. It also acted much faster than rabies used to, taking over infected people's brains in hours or minutes rather than weeks or months.

It had built slowly, almost without anyone really noticing. It started with just a few cases in Haiti but with everything else going on there it was hardly surprising that no one pick up on what was happening until it was too late. After all, at first, it was hard to tell the difference between attacks by those infected with the virus and the violent protests against the US biotech firm that had sprung up across the country. The locals had found out it had been illegally testing it's new and highly controversial vaccine in the capital's slums and they weren't pleased. Then again, maybe the two weren't really that different since it was the vaccine that had caused the virus to mutate

in the first place. Regardless of what going on in Haiti, the virus didn't really take off until it reached Miami. I still wasn't quite clear about what had happened there but then again, it seemed no one else was either. All I knew was that the infected and the infection had swept through the city within hours, forcing those who survived to flee. Some of them were carrying the infection but were as yet unturned and that just spread the disease further and faster across the country.

Once I heard the rumours that the infected had reached Virginia I'd started getting myself prepared. At first I stayed put, after all it was what the government was telling us to do, and I set to work collecting the recommended supplies: canned foods, bags of rice, water, medicines. I also joined the ill-tempered crowds that queued for fuel at the town's only gas station and at the hardware store for plywood to board up the windows. It was just like what happened whenever a hurricane threatened, only ten times worse. With hurricanes people at least knew what they were dealing with, with this disease no one really knew what to expect.

As the virus and the infected that carried it grew ever closer, things started getting out of control. One evening as I was driving home, I saw the town's two deputies threatening a woman with their guns as her terrified kids huddled in the back of her car. It was clear they were after the food that filled every available space in her vehicle. By the time I'd passed, I could see her standing at the side of the road holding her kids and crying as the police officers drove off: one in their patrol car, the other in hers. That was when I started thinking it might be an idea to get out before things got any worse but I wanted to make sure this was the right thing to do. I figured I should sleep on it for the night before moving on. That turned out to be a big mistake and I woke in the morning to find the first of the infected among us. I was lucky, my apartment overlooked main street and I'd glanced through a crack between the boards I'd hastily nailed across the windows before going outside. What I saw shocked me. There were two people lying in the street with others huddled round them. At first I thought they were trying to help, then I realised they were clawing the peoples' torsos with their hands and ripping off strips of flesh with their teeth. I watched, horror-struck, as the abdomen of first one person and then the other was torn open. Blood and guts spilled onto the dusty pavement and I had to fight hard not to throw up.

Suddenly, a man appeared out of a side street carrying a small child on his back. He had his head turned, talking to the toddler so he didn't see the infected before they saw him. With a speed that was almost unbelievable, they leapt to their feet and raced towards him. They must have made a sound because his head suddenly snapped round. Seeing the infected racing towards him, he froze for a moment before turning and running but with the child on his back he barely moved faster than if he was walking. Glancing desperately over one shoulder

then the other he saw the infected rapidly closing on him. Then he did the only thing that gave him a chance of escape: he dropped the child. Unencumbered, he finally started to draw away while two of the infected descended on the screaming child, biting and tearing at it until there was little left but scraps of blood-soaked clothing and scattered lumps of flesh. The only thing that was still recognisable was the head and I could see the child's eyes frozen in terror as one of the infected gnawed on it's left cheek.

At that moment, I knew if I didn't leave soon I'd never get out but I needed a plan. I wracked my brains trying to think of somewhere I could go where the infected wouldn't find me. Then, as if out of nowhere, the sign popped into my head. I knew these weren't really zombies but surely if the virus wiped out everything human within them, they mightn't remember how to swim. After all, swimming's not like walking or running, it doesn't come naturally; it's something you have to specifically learn. With no other options coming to mind, I decided it was the best chance I had.

I slam on the brakes and the SUV skids to a halt at the end of the dirt track leading from the gates to the boat yard's single dock. I sit there with the engine idling, my eyes darting round nervously, trying to work out what to do next. There doesn't seem to be anyone around so at least I shouldn't have to worry about infected. I don't really know anything about boats so I don't know which one I should choose or how I'm going to drive it but I figure it can't be that much different from driving a car.

A movement in the rear-view mirror catches my eye; it's off in the distance and little more than dust being kicked up into the air but it means something's coming this way. It might just be people trying to escape but it could just as easily be infected and I'm not going wait around to find out. Leaving the engine running and the door open, I leap from the car and run down to the wooden pontoon that stretches out into the water. Boats of all shapes and sizes are tied up there and at first I'm at a loss as to which one to take. Then I see it: a long, sleek speed boat with two huge engines on the back, and I know it's the one for me. I run to it and jump onboard before racing over to the steering wheel. When I get there I'm surprised to see that you need a key and there's no obvious way to hot-wire it. I climb back onto the dock and scratch my head, wondering what I'm going to do now. As I do, I become aware of a noise that I can't quite place. It's like the sound of water rushing over the edge of a massive waterfall and

crashing into the pool far below; then I realise it's the sound of people, or more likely infected, pounding along the road towards me.

Growing ever more desperate, I try motorboat after motorboat, while all the time the noise grows louder and louder, but I can't get any of them started. Finally, right on the end of the dock, I see a sailboat, no more than twenty feet long, and I realise it's my salvation: I won't need any keys because I won't need to start the engine, all I'll need to do is raise the sails and I'll be away. I've never sailed before but I figure it can't be that difficult. I jump onboard and just as I start untying the ropes I glance up to see the first of the infected entering the boat yard. At first they don't know where to go but they must have sensed my movements because before I know it, they're hurtling towards the dock. By the time I get the last rope free and have pushed the boat away from the shore, they're streaming along the pontoon, mouths open, roaring and snarling. I feel a gentle breeze on the back of my neck as I stare at them, both terrified and hypnotized by the sight of the infected sweeping towards me. The first of the infected reach the end of the pontoon and stop while the ones behind them keep going, pushing those ahead of them into the water. I watch as they thrash around before sinking from sight. Just as the sign predicted, zombies can't swim.

Then I notice something: little by little I'm drifting back towards the dock. I'm not too sure what I should be doing but I figure I need to get the sails up. The mast seems a logical place to start since that's what the sails are attached to so I run forward but find there's ropes everywhere and I can't work out which does what. I try randomly pulling on them but nothing happens. I glance desperately back to the pontoon; it's only ten feet away now and the closer I get the more the infected are being whipped into a frenzy. I turn my attention back to the boat and I realise there are straps tied round the sail. I figure these are what's stopping me from pulling it up so I frantically undo them one by one and stumble back to the mast and I pull randomly on ropes again. This time I find one which raises the sail and I start pulling on it as hard as I can. The sail goes up and fills with wind but it pushes me towards the land I'm trying so hard to get away from. I let the rope go and with a crash the sail drops onto the dock. While the boat slows, it's still drifting inexorably towards the dock and the infected that wait for me there. That's when it finally dawns on me: while zombies can't swim, I can't sail so it's not really going to help me survive after all.

Author's Note: This story was inspired by a photograph of a real sign I came across in the web that was genuinely used as advertising in a

boat yard and proclaimed 'Zombies Can't Swim, Get A Boat'. Looking into this a further it seems such signs are not as uncommon as you might think. I don't know if several people have independently come up with the same slogan or if there was one original that all the others have copied but either way it struck me as a great title for a story, and it was one I couldn't resist writing.