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Myra Nour

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Review

5 Stars!

This is a great scene, that's the best way to describe this short story, and what a ride! Joe wakes up in a garbage heap in an alleyway, having no idea how he got there, or even what his name is, except for a name tag on his shirt. As he finally gets up and starts to move toward the street, he hears sirens and screams. Thinking it's an accident, Joe moves towards the street. What he sees, is people running and total chaos on the street, and several people lurching his way. As they get closer, Joe begins to believe he's stumbled into seeing a film with zombies. But as Joe continues to watch, he realizes that it's not a film. Joe is weak, hurt and tries to follow the people that were running away.

This is a short story, and it's described in such beautiful, gory detail, that you may lose your appetite. Myra Nour is a master at endings that you don't always expect, and this story is no different. This is a terrific short that could easily be a scene from a longer novel.

Cyrene Olson, *Uncaged Book Reviews*

<http://uncagedbooks.blogspot.com/>

Author appreciates reviews at Free-Ebooks.net

Joe's Choice

by Myra Nour

Waking and not recognizing where you are is disconcerting enough, but nothing familiar met his eyes. Blinking, he peered through the gloom. Darkness and a suffocating feeling as something clung to his face and body. Shoving desperately, he cleared a space, his hands moving across the surface of the substance he'd pushed off his face. Plastic.

His attempt at further movement brought sharp pains to his head and he took several deep breaths. And wished he hadn't. The smell was atrocious. Rotten fruit and decaying meat were only part of the putrid mix. The stench of garage left too long in the sun pelted his senses with its own unique blend of foul odors.

He stared down at his body, and then around him. Bags of trash were piled beneath him and all around his body. Tentatively, he moved his arms and legs. They worked. Getting to his feet was a nauseating struggle, tempered with a quagmire feeling as the bags shifted beneath him. Frustrated, he kicked and threw them out of his way.

Once on his feet, he massaged his temples and thankfully the pounding headache dulled to a throb. He stared at the huge

mound of trash bags. *Where am I? What happened to me? Was there a garbage strike?* All these thoughts whirled in his head, making him even more lightheaded and queasy.

Glancing around, he noted a brick wall in front of him, another behind him and one ten feet to his right. The other direction was a long, dark alleyway. Staring upward, he noted the buildings reaching for the clouds overhead. Paired with the brick walls being a ruddy-brown hue, daylight barely pierced the gloom.

OK. He had been lying in a stinking alley.

Something drew his eyes toward the dead end; almost hidden in the murky darkness, a door with a sign that read "Mick's Pub." Something about that felt familiar, like when you almost had the name of something you'd forgotten, but it escaped you.

Touching his head lightly, he grimaced as his fingers found the large lump. Must be a concussion. *Did I fall?* After he asked himself that question, vague images flowed through his mind. Men scuffling outside the pub door and his body being pitched onto a few trash bags. Then as he was swept down into darkness, after being struck on the head, the sensation of something being heaped on top of him. More garbage bags apparently.

Mugged.

Great. *Only, I don't know anything else.* Heading down the backstreet, he didn't try the pub door to see if it was open. He wanted daylight and to hopefully recognize something once he reached the thoroughfare. The promise of dim light drew him toward the alley's open end.

He stumbled, having a hard time getting his feet to work

properly. To add to his confusion and misery, he was starving, plus his thirst was insane, as if he'd been in the desert for days. At the end of the alley, wobbling toward sunlight and swaying like a drunk, he almost fell. He was really weak.

Reaching a building with a large window on the side, he stared at himself. Oddly, he remembered this was an antique store on the corner, and that there was a tall mirror in the display window, facing the alleyway. But he didn't have a clue as to who he was. Whoever reflected back, he was shocked at the image.

A tall, thin man met his gaze, with blue eyes so bloodshot he looked like he had been on a weeklong drinking binge. He touched his face. So pale. A three inch cut above his right eyebrow looked puffy and irritated. It probably had needed stitches but now all he could do was find first aid and have it cleaned up. It would leave an ugly scar.

Blood had leaked down his face from the wound, even dribbling in several rivulets down onto the shirt. It was amazing how much you could bleed from a cut to the head or face. Why he remembered this and nothing else was a mystery. Perhaps he had been in more than one fight in the past. He looked a fine mess.

Running one hand through his short hair, his fingers stuck in the crap clinging to spiky chunks. He winched at the pain in his scalp. That was some nasty bump.

He stared at a name sewn onto the pocket of the gray clothes he wore. *Joe*. It didn't ring a bell but at least he knew what to call himself now. Joe finished his perusal. The shirt and pants looked like something a mechanic would wear. He

shrugged; his career path didn't matter at this moment. He needed to get help.

Thumping a banana peel off his thigh, he frowned. He smelled really rank. Joe's hand paused after he flicked dirt and scum off his shirt. It wasn't doing much good, just seemed to move to another part of the material, as if it were an animal fleeing a predator instead of filth. While he had been staring and accessing the stranger in the mirror, he hadn't paid any attention to his environment.

Piercing sounds filtered through his self-absorbed thoughts. Police sirens screeched from multiple locations and gun fire filled the air with a continuous ear-shattering commotion. Mingled among these unexplained noises were torturous screams that had to come from many throats.

Joe whirled, almost fell again, but then was paralyzed with terror. The street was filled with scenes of confusion and mayhem. Multiple horrors unfolded as he stared. People ran back and forth in a mad dash that seemed without reason.

Three different car accidents blocked the street near the stop light. Two were clearly fender benders, but both cars in the third wreck were twisted heaps. No people, EMT's or police were gathered around the accidents. *Weird.*

Even as he examined the carnage, a truck sped by him, honking the horn in a continuous, annoying blast. A small car flashed from the area behind the accident and the truck rammed its side. The car was pushed by the momentum across the street, crashing into a store window.

The driver of the truck jumped out, cursing. He was a big man with a beer belly. Stomping over to the car, he jerked the

passenger door open. Mouth dropping open, he slammed the door shut, turned and ran toward the scene of the car pileup.

"Hey." Joe tried to yell at the fleeing man, but all he could do was croak. Man, he needed water so bad. His throat was closed up and his tongue was swollen.

He saw movement on the driver's side and the shadow of a figure in the back seat. Joe squinted. His eyesight wasn't that great and he wondered if he wore glasses. Maybe they lay amongst the trash bags.

It looked like the two people were struggling with each other, but he couldn't be sure. What had terrified the big man when he opened the door? Joe had thought it was leaving the scene of an accident, but now he wasn't so sure.

Joe was numb with shock. He'd never seen such a violent accident happen right in front of him. *What should I do?* He was weak-kneed, still suffering the after effects of the beating. Joe's inaction seemed to make the decision for him. Not doing anything seemed a safer choice.

His attention was grabbed by more strange activities nearby. Gangs of people stood and knelt over something lying on the sidewalk in several locations and red splatters spread out on the concrete around the grouped figures. Some of the gut-shriveling screams burst forth from the clustered figures, as well as moans. Had there been a massacre or horrific accident on a larger scale than the cars?

Other people ran past him shrieking. He frowned. What were they running from? A woman in a gray business suit hurled by with a pistol clutched to her chest. Holding a toddler in his

arms, an elderly man huffed past him, glancing fearfully behind as he apparently struggled to move faster.

In the distance intermittent gunfire blasted into the already chaotic noise on the street. Mingling with the screams, and moans, gunfire close by kept up a constant barrage on the senses.

A column of black smoke coiled lazily upward from an apartment building in the next block and fire flickered upward greedily from a window, spreading even as he watched. Two windows in the building caught his attention. With a chill he realized there was broken glass and blood leaking down from both.

Had people jumped from the windows and cut themselves? He eyed the edifice. One of the windows was four floors up, the other on the sixth level. No one could survive plunging such distances. Cars lined the apartment's perimeter so he couldn't see if any bodies lay on the sidewalk below.

Joe stood in indecision. Should he go take a look? Offer help? Where were the fire trucks, firemen and the police?

While he didn't have his memory back yet, somehow he knew that being a Good Samaritan was not his strong suit. Not that he didn't want to help. Joe knew that he felt inadequate when it came to people being injured. It wasn't the blood or wounds, but not knowing what to do.

It was funny that one of his personal weaknesses had stuck in his mind. He eyed the building again. The fire had spread. The gunfire, screams and burning building made him think terrorism.

Where were the authorities? He could let himself be ripped up by guilt over his inertia, but it really wasn't his job. The people trained in trauma should be here.

The eruption of exploding glass drew his eyes down the block where people were milling about a mom and pop grocery store. Some were plunging into the small building, while others ran out with their arms full of bulging bags. There were several small groups of figures fighting outside the store. Clearly, looting was happening. But why fight others when the store was wide open?

Tottering away from the store, a petite, frail older woman held her hand over a bloody spot on her forearm. "Help me," she cried as she staggered in his direction.

Joe took a step toward her, but then several people surrounded her and his vision was blocked. Loud screams erupted from the circle and he shuddered.

Again, he started in the direction of the poor woman's screams but then movement near him brought Joe's attention to a man in jogging clothes speeding by him, a look of utter terror splashed across his face. Behind the man, several people lurched slowly toward Joe, but their eyes were fixated on the fleeing man.

They looked homeless, their clothes dirty and ripped, except they were splattered with blood. Maybe they were involved in the incident that was causing such terror?

Joe concentrated on the woman in the middle, whose appearance was the most gruesome. She dragged one foot behind her, a standard undead walk. This couldn't be real. Joe shook his head. Had he barged into the middle of a zombie walk?

Turning his gaze to the men on either side of her, he thought they looked as if they'd been in a car accident. There were no obvious signs of injury except for blood dripping down their mouths.

His eyes went back to the woman. Her skin was a washed-out white, even paler than he had looked in the mirror. Her chin was covered in blood, which had dribbled down onto the bright yellow sundress. One strap hung down, revealing her breast. Joe's stomach clenched.

Half of her flesh had been torn out, including where the nipple would have been, leaving a ghastly, bloody wound. His shocked eyes crawled over her form, stopping on the left arm, or what was left of it. Jagged flesh hung below her elbow and no blood flowed, or even dripped from the raw wound. Surely a participant in a zombie walk didn't have the skills to replicate such deadly injuries?

The three dead looking people were within feet of him. Joe stood frozen in place, held by his disbelief and terror. The young woman who had been attractive at one time, with a lovely face and long, dark hair, halted while the others continued. She stared at him, her nose came up and she sniffed the air like a dog. This close he saw her eyes were glazed, as if covered by cataracts. Her unblinking milky stare stayed on him a few long agonizing seconds, and then she started her lurching, dragging steps after the man she pursued.

It hit him that being absorbed in the group approaching him, he'd forgotten about the elderly woman. Glancing toward the area where the group had formed, he saw they were kneeling, but there was no sight of the woman. Maybe she'd fallen and they were giving her first aid.

Everything seemed surreal. Joe shook his head at himself. Had he intruded into the making of a zombie movie? That would explain the absence of EMT's, firemen and police if a zombie apocalypse was in progress.

Zombies were impossible, the stuff of nightmares and Hollywood. Still, he wondered why the actor smelled so rank, as bad as he did, with just a bit more of a decayed odor than had clung to him by being buried in a trash heap. *Must be one of those method actors who believed in living the part they played.*

Positive he had discovered the reason for the madness around him, Joe walked toward the nearest group of actors. For a second he wondered why no director had screeched at him, but then maybe they thought he was one of the extras. Fun. He'd always been curious about movie filming.

When he drew closer, he saw a pack of six corpses had backed a terrified man against a storefront. Good actor. His eyes bugged out in pure horror and his screams rippled through the air. The man was pushed by a zombie on one side, and then the others fell on the man as his body crashed to the sidewalk. Moans mixed with tearing and crunching sounds as Joe edged closer, peering over the shoulder of the nearest undead actor.

He almost left, the smell was so horrendous. *Were they all method actors?* But the stench didn't detour him, Joe wanted to see what they were doing. A horrid action scene ensued as they ripped chunks of flesh with their teeth and hands, and then shoved the meaty substance into their bloody mouths. Glistening intestines were spilled as decayed looking hands tore them loose.

Fantastic special effects. In The Walking Dead, they used

barbeque meat when zombies devoured people and Joe wondered what this director used to make it look so real. The undead actors were gorging themselves and seemed to enjoy the food. Shrill screams rose in volume from the victim, as something that seemed impossible was enacted; a zombie on each side of the man ripped open his chest. One of the foul looking performers tore the beating heart out and ripped a chunk out of it with his teeth.

Joe's stomach flip-flopped and he took a few steps back. How could special effects create that scene? That was a live man, not a mechanical humanoid or computer generated human. Horror so deep it ran through his veins like a black malaise flowed through his whole body. He trembled violently. While his mind reeled and refused to believe the evidence, his body seemed to have already accepted the truth.

Continuing to back away slowly, Joe quickly glanced around. There were no more zombies nearby except the crowd tearing the poor man into bite-size pieces. Unfortunately, his movement drew one of the corpse's attention and it stood up, staring at him with its chilling white-filmed eyes. It sniffed the air, just as the girl had done earlier, but this one staggered toward him. *Why was it interested in him when the girl had not?*

As he progressed slowly backward so as not to gain more attention, but ready to bolt if the curious zombie came toward him faster, Joe examined the dead man stalking him. He would describe the corpse as *fresh*, with no decayed skin. Only one injurious wound was visible, a jagged rip of his right, bottom lip. Yellow teeth protruded from the torn flesh, giving him a lopsided, gruesome grin. *Perhaps a good morning kiss from his undead wife?*

Joe shoved down his dark humor and noted the zombie walked

a bit faster and with more ease than the girl he had encountered earlier. Maybe this corpse's senses were sharper than the girl too, who had clearly been dead longer.

Glancing around again, he sought escape from his determined pursuer; he was getting too close for comfort. Thankfully there were no other undead nearby.

The explosive volume of multiple guns firing drew his eyes toward the end of the street, where police were barricaded behind cars. That is where the source of nearby shooting was located. Joe turned and started walking as quickly as he could toward the blockade. Flicking a glance behind him frequently, Joe kept a safe distance from the dead man, who had shuffled into a sprint as Joe sped up his pace.

The zombie was only twelve feet behind him now. Joe had used the last burst of his energy trying to escape or at least pull ahead of the beast. His feet dragged and his body ached. He must have been without food and water for days and his body was shutting down. *Bad timing.* His strength flagging and his feet faltering, Joe imagined he could feel the nightmarish thing's breathe on his back. Terror gripped him anew. Was he going to fall within a few feet of safety, lying there like a fatted calf, an open invitation to the cannibalistic undead thing?

Desperate, Joe lunged forward, almost tripped and stretched his arms in front of him, as if reaching for the officers peering over the barricade. He tried to call out for help, but his throat was closed, not enough spit inside to form a word. A gurgling sound was all that escaped his chapped lips.

He had almost reached the safety of the roadblock when his body was slammed backward forcefully. Joe groaned, not sure what

had happened for a few seconds. Pain like a red hot iron centered in his chest. Fumbling one hand across his torso, his hand encountered liquid. *I've been shot!*

Several seconds passed while he struggled to breathe and he wondered why they had shot a civilian.

Then it hit Joe. He probably looked like the undead; stumbling, pale, blood on his clothes, and mute. Not being able to ask for help had been his final undoing, otherwise the cops would have known he was human. It was horribly ironic. Joe's misplaced humor emerged for a last volley. He'd been running from a zombie, while at the same time he looked like one of them.

Another gunshot shattered the air near him and a body flopped next to Joe, so close he could have reached out and touched it. It was the creature that had been chasing him. The truly dead zombie seemed to be staring at him. A hole was smack in the center of the thing's forehead. *Nice shooting officer.* Joe wished his misplaced humor would shut up.

He noticed with detached interest there was no blood seeping from the bullet hole, and he wondered if blood would not flow through dead veins. Even though the corpse was fresh, he was really horrifying this close up.

The terrible face wound had leaked blood down its neck and chest from the attack that transformed him, turning a blackish-red hue. Joe's eyes skittered over the fresh, bright red blood and small goblets of flesh splattered down its chin, signs of its recent feeding frenzy. This close the smell was overpowering. *And I thought the fresh ones didn't stink that much.*

If he could move, he would have dragged himself from the zombie's side, but he couldn't move a muscle. Those milky-dead eyes really creeped him out and he wished he could reach over and close them. Joe was too weak to do even that, and neither did he have the courage to touch the thing.

Courage. That thought had his mind spiraling back to a recent movie night with three of his buddies. Why this memory came to him and no others he couldn't fathom. Barry, Greg and Darren were his best friends. They often watched action flicks or zombie movies together. That night had been a really terrifying undead choice.

Joe loved watching the scare fests, but they gave him nightmares. At that time he had been glad such a world wasn't possible. His buddies started the typical discussion after the movie, "what if and what would you do if it did happen?"

Barry would head for the coast and use his boat to look for an island, Greg would drive to his cabin in the North Carolina Mountains and hole up, while Darren would stay put and fortify his house.

He was pleased that his memory was coming back in flashes, some clear, some vague images. Maybe being shot had knocked the cobwebs off.

His friend, Barry, had been a sailor in the Navy for four years, and was a natural to survive using a boat. He'd grown up around the North Carolina coast and knew many small islands offshore. His dad had taught him how to catch fish even when the weather was not agreeable for such activity.

Barry knew great spots in the marshes and the ocean to catch a variety of fish; very essential information for survival

on an island or a boat. He knew how to sail a small craft well, and his boat was a catamaran.

In a totally different lifestyle choice, Greg owned a small cabin in the North Carolina Mountains that was very isolated. Joe had been there once years ago. There had been a small garden area next to the cabin that was overgrown and neglected, since no one had lived there for a decade. But it would be easy to restart growing vegetables. There were also several fruit trees in their producing years; including apple, pear, cherry and peach.

A spring-fed well supplied the water to the cabin and would be one of the most important elements to survival. An old hand pump outside still worked, which would be a vital key once the electricity went offline. Of course the generator could be used to keep the water running, but why waste propane if you didn't need to?

These were all things that Greg pointed out to his friends when discussing surviving in his bug out location. Some critical items Joe certainly had never considered.

Such as an old outhouse in the back yard. Greg had planned on tearing it down, but now he could put it to good use once again. Not a pleasant prospect, but when the water stopped flowing through the pipes, a secondary choice.

His friend had been a prepper as long as Joe knew him. The storage room was filled with big bags of rice, flour and various types of beans, while many canned goods filled a large shelf. A five hundred gallon propane tank would go a long ways to power his needs as long as Greg was conservative with its use.

Yes, Joe remembered admiring his friends greatly. Their

forethought, ingenuity, and actually following through with preps, just in case, had an eerie feel to it now. Almost like a premonition.

That left Darren, who was the closest to Joe in his personal circumstances. His friend owned a brick house like he did, though it was a bit larger. While it wasn't built high off the ground like Joe's house, which would make it easier for zombies to break through Darren's windows, it had one big advantage.

A new farm house style, it sported a porch that wrapped around the whole house. Only one set of steps led up to the front. Darren had the house constructed, and being a prepper at heart, he had planned the porch that way. Only one way in.

The deck, with railings, was high enough a zombie would not be able to climb over it. During their discussions, Darren had played with different ways to block his one entry point, including fencing that could be quickly thrown up, barbed wire, and electrifying the fence.

When they asked him, Joe answered fortify his house too. He lived in a small, but well-built brick house with windows that were high off the ground. It really would make a great place to sit out a disaster. It would be impossible for zombies to reach the windows, they were above head height.

Even looters would have a more difficult time, but of course with a thinking human being, he would have to fortify more against break-ins.

Not being a prepper, Joe would be sunk as far as supplies. He probably had a week's worth of food stored in his cabinets, and he was on city water. Once the water treatment plants

stopped running he'd be in trouble.

He had to smile inwardly when he recalled a conversation that Barry had started about toilet tissue. People went to the store when they ran out, but what would they do when the stores closed and the trucks stopped running?

Barry talked about what people used to do long ago. The cowboys seemed to like pages ripped from Sears Roebuck catalog. Course, those huge catalogs were no longer produced. Joe had cringed during the conversation. Paper on the inner parts of your butt? Not pleasant to think about, much less if you had to actually use them.

Then Barry laughed as he discussed using leaves to wipe your ass. Joe had felt horrified at the thought. The paper didn't seem so bad in comparison.

Leaves could be rough, covered with bugs, spider webs, just all kind of nasties that crawled through the woods.

Barry waxed on, bringing up the real dangers of using nature's toilet paper; poison oak and poison ivy. If you didn't know what you were picking, you'd be in for a world of hurt.

Popping into the local pharmacy for Calamine lotion or other remedies might be impossible, especially if the outbreak spread everywhere.

Naturally, Barry informed them he had all kinds of medicine stored up; Calamine lotion, vitamins, Pepto Bismol, Tums, pain pills, and many more meds that Joe couldn't remember.

Barry also had a small surgical and dental care kit. He was more prepared for a disaster than anyone Joe had ever met. And it made him realize at the time how ill-prepared he was for the

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