

COLSON
WHITEHEAD

A NOVEL

ZONE
ONE

The Intuitionist

John Henry Days

The Colossus of New York

Apex Hides the Hurt

Sag Harbor

COLSON WHITEHEAD

ZONE
ONE
a novel

DOUBLEDAY

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND



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www.doubleday.com

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The epigraphs are by Walter Benjamin, Ezra Pound, and Public Enemy, respectively.

Jacket design by Rodrigo Corral Design

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Whitehead, Colson, 1969—

Zone one : a novel / Colson Whitehead. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Zombies—Fiction. 2. Virus diseases—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3573.H4768Z36 2011

813'.54—dc22

2011008339

eISBN: 978-0-385-53501-4

v3.1_r1

Contents

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

About the Author

“The gray layer of dust covering things has become their best part.”

He always wanted to live in New York. His Uncle Lloyd lived downtown on Lafayette, and in the long stretches between visits he daydreamed about living in his apartment. When his mother and father dragged him to the city for that season's agreed-upon exhibit or good-for-you Broadway smash, they usually dropped in on Uncle Lloyd for a quick hello. These afternoons were preserved in a series of photographs taken by strangers. His parents were holdouts in an age of digital multiplicity, raking the soil in lonesome areas of resistance: a coffee machine that didn't tell time, dictionaries made out of paper, a camera that only took pictures. The family camera did not transmit their coordinates to an orbiting satellite. It did not allow them to book airfare to beach resorts with close access to rain forests via courtesy shuttle. There was no prospect of video, high-def or otherwise. The camera was so backward that every lurching specimen his father enlisted from the passersby was able to operate it sans hassle, no matter the depth of cow-eyed vacancy in their tourist faces or local wretchedness inverting their spines. His family posed on the museum steps or beneath the brilliant marquee with the poster screaming over their left shoulders, always the same composition. The boy stood in the middle, his parents' hands dead on his shoulders year after year. He didn't smile in every picture, only that percentage culled for the photo album. Then it was in the cab to his uncle's and up the elevator once the doorman screened them. Uncle Lloyd dangled in the doorframe and greeted them with a louche "Welcome to my little bungalow."

As his parents were introduced to Uncle Lloyd's latest girlfriend, the boy was down the hall, giddy and squeaking on the leather of the cappuccino sectional and marveling over the latest permutations in home entertainment. He searched for the fresh arrival first thing. This visit it was the wireless speakers haunting the corners like spindly wraiths, the next he was on his knees before a squat blinking box that served as some species of multimedia brainstem. He dragged a finger down their dark surfaces and then huffed on them and wiped the marks with his polo shirt. The televisions were the newest, the biggest, levitating in space and pulsing with a host of extravagant functions diagrammed in the unopened owner's manuals. His uncle got every channel and maintained a mausoleum of remotes in the storage space inside the ottoman. The boy watched TV and loitered by the glass walls, looking out of the city through smoky anti-UV glass, nineteen stories up.

The reunions were terrific and rote, early tutelage in the recursive nature of human experience. "What are you watching?" the girlfriends asked as they padded in bearing boutique seltzer and chips, and he'd say "The buildings," feeling weird about the pull the skyline had on him. He was a mote cycling in the wheels of a giant clock. Millions of people tended to this magnificent contraption, they lived and sweated and toiled in it, serving the mechanism of metropolis and making it bigger, better, story by glorious story and idea by unlikely idea. How small he was, tumbling between the teeth. But the girlfriends were talking about the monster movies on TV, the women in the monster movies bolting through the woods or shriveling in the closet trying not to make a sound or vainly flagging down the

pickup that might rescue them from the hillbilly slasher. The ones still standing at the credit roll made it through by dint of an obscure element in their character. "I can't stand these scary stories," the girlfriends said before returning to the grown-ups, attempting an auntie emanation as if they might be the first of their number promoted to that office. His father's younger brother was fastidious when it came to expiration dates.

He liked to watch monster movies and the city churning below. He fixed on odd details. The ancient water towers lurking atop obstinate old prewars and, higher up, the massive central-air units that hunkered and coiled on the striving high-rises, glistening like extruded guts. The tar-paper pates of tenements. He spotted the occasional out-of-season beach chair jackknifed on gravel, seemingly gusted up from the street below. Who was its owner? The person staked out corners of the city and made a domain. He squinted at the slogans cantering along stairwell entrances, the Day-Glo threats and pidgin manifestos, a.k.a.'s of impotent revolutionaries. Blinds and curtains were open, half open, shut, voids in a punched card decipherable only by defunct mainframes lodged in the crust of unmarked landfill. Pieces of citizens were on display in the windows, arranged by a curator with a taste for no sequitur: the splayed pinstriped legs of an urban golfer putting into a colander; half a lady torso, wrapped in a turquoise blazer, as glimpsed through a trapezoid; a fist trembling on a titanium desk. A shadow bobbed behind a bathroom's bumpy glass, steam slithering through the slit.

He remembered how things used to be, the customs of the skyline. Up and down the island the buildings collided, they humiliated runts through verticality and ambition, sulked in one another's shadows. Inevitability was mayor, term after term. Yesterday's old masters, state named and midwived by once-famous architects, were insulted by the soot of combustion engines and by technological advances in construction. Time chiseled at elegant stonework which swirled or plummeted to the sidewalk in dust and chips and chunks. Behind the façade their insides were butchered, reconfigured, rewired according to the next era's new theories of utility. Classic six into studio honeycomb, sweatshop killing floor into cordoned cubic mill. In every neighborhood the imperfect in their fashion awaited the wrecking ball and their bones were melted down to help their replacements surpass them, steel into steel. The new buildings in wave upon wave drew themselves out of rubble, shaking off the past like immigrants. The addresses remained the same and so did the flawed philosophies. It wasn't anyplace else. It was New York City.

The boy was smitten. His family stopped by Uncle Lloyd's every couple of months. If he drank the seltzer, he watched monster movies, he was a sentry at the window. The building was a totem sheathed in blue metal, a changeling in the nest of old walk-ups. The zoning commission had tucked the bribes into their coats, and now there he was, floating over the tapering island. There was a message there, if he could teach himself the language. On rainy day visits the surfaces of the buildings were pitiless and blank, as they were this day, years later. With the sidewalks hidden from view, the boy conjured an uninhabited city, where no one lived behind all those miles and miles of glass, no one caught up with loved ones in living rooms filled with tasteful and affirming catalog furniture, and all the elevators hung like broken puppets at the end of long cables. The city as ghost ship on the last ocean at the rim of the world. It was a gorgeous and intricate delusion, Manhattan, and from crooked angles on overcast days you saw it disintegrate, were forced to consider this tenuous creature in its

true nature.

If you'd asked him on any of those childhood afternoons what he wanted to be when he grew up—tapping his shoulder as the family car inserted itself into the queue for the Midtown Tunnel or as they hummed toward their exit on the Long Island Expressway—he would have had nothing to offer with regards to profession or avocation. His father wanted to be an astronaut when he was a kid, but the boy had never been anything but earthbound, kicking pebbles. All he was truly sure of was that he wanted to live in a city gaudy with something well-stocked and white-walled, equipped with rotating bosomy beauties. His uncle's apartment resembled the future, a brand of manhood waiting on the other side of the river. When his unit finally started sweeping beyond the wall—whenever that was—he knew he had to visit Uncle Lloyd's apartment, to sit on the sectional one last time and stare at the final, empty screen in the series. His uncle's building was only a few blocks past the barrier and he found himself squinting at it when it strode into view. He searched for the apartment, counting metallic blue stories and looking for movement. The dark glass relinquished nothing. He hadn't seen his uncle's name on any of the survivor rolls and prayed against a reunion, the slow steps coming down the hall.

If you'd asked him about his plans at the time of the ruin, the answer would have come easily: lawyering. He was bereft of attractive propositions, constitutionally unaccustomed to enthusiasm, and generally malleable when it came to his parents' wishes, adrift on that gentle upper-middle-class current that kept its charges cheerfully bobbing far from the shoals of responsibility. It was time to stop drifting. Hence, law. He was long past finding it ironic when his unit swept a building in that week's grid and they came upon a den of lawyers. They slogged through the blocks day after day and there had been too many firms in too many other buildings for it to have any novelty. But this day he paused. He slung his assault rifle over his shoulder and parted the blinds at the end of the corridor. All he wanted was a shred of uptown. He tried to orient himself: Was he looking north or south? It was like dragging a fork through gruel. The ash smeared the city's palette into a gray hush on the best of days, but introduce clouds and a little bit of precip and the city became an altar to obscurity. He was an insect exploring a gravestone: the words and names were crevasses he'd get lost in, looming and meaningless.

This was the fourth day of rain, Friday afternoon, and a conditioned part of him submitted to end-of-the-week lassitude, even if Fridays had lost their meaning. Hard to believe that reconstruction had progressed so far that clock-watching had returned, the slacker's code, the concept of weekend. It had been a humdrum couple of days, reaffirming his belief in reincarnation: everything was so boring that this could not be the first time he'd experienced it. A cheerful thought, in its way, given the catastrophe. We'll be back. He dropped his pack, switched off the torch in his helmet, and pushed his forehead to the glass as if he were at his uncle's, rearranging the architecture into a message. The towers emerged out of smudged charcoal, a collection of figments and notions of things. He was fifteen floors up, in the heart of Zone One, and shapes trudged like slaves higher and higher into midtown.

They called him Mark Spitz nowadays. He didn't mind.

Mark Spitz and the rest of Omega Unit were half done with 135 Duane Street, chugging down from the roof at a productive clip. All clear so far. Only a few signs of mayhem in the building. A ransacked petty cash drawer on eighteen, half-eaten takeout rotting on scattered

desks: superannuated currency and the final lunches. As in most businesses they swept, the offices had shut their doors before things completely deteriorated. The chairs were snug against their desks, where they had been tucked by the maintenance crew on their last night of work. On the last sane evening in the world, only a few askew and facing the doors in trample-excess disarray.

In the silence, Mark Spitz signed off on a rest period for himself. Who knew? If things had been otherwise, he might have taken a position in this very firm, once he completed the obstacles attendant to a law degree. He'd been taking prep classes when the curtain fell and hadn't worried about getting in somewhere, or graduating or getting some brand of job afterward. He'd never had trouble with the American checklist, having successfully executed all the hurdles of his life's stages, from preschool to junior high to college, with unwavering competence and nary a wobble into exceptionality or failure. He possessed a strange facility for the mandatory. Two days into kindergarten, for example, he attained the level of socialization deemed appropriate for those of his age and socioeconomic milieu (sharing, not biting, an almost soulful contemplation of instructions from people in authority) with a minimum of fuss. He nailed milestone after developmental milestone, as if every twitch were coached. Had they been aware of his location, child behaviorists would have cherished him, observing him through binoculars and scratching their ledgers as he confirmed their data and theories in his anonymous travails. He was their *typical*, he was their *most*, he was the *average*, receiving hearty thumbs-ups from the gents in the black van parked a discreet distance across the street. In this world, however, his reward was that void attending most human endeavor, with which all are well acquainted. His accomplishments, such as they were, gathered on the heap of the unsung.

Mark Spitz kept his eyes open and watched his environment for cues, a survivalist even at a tender age. There was a code in every interaction, and he tuned in. He adjusted easily to the introduction of letter grades, that first measure of one's facility with arbitrary contests. He staked out the B or the B chose him: it was his native land, and in high school and college he did not stray over the county line. At any rate his lot was irrevocable. He was not made team captain, nor was he the last one picked. He sidestepped detention and honor rolls with equal aplomb. Mark Spitz's high school had abolished the yearbook practice of nominating students the Most Likely to Do This or That, in the spirit of universal self-esteem following a host of acrimonious parent-teacher summits, but his most appropriate designation would have been Most Likely Not to Be Named the Most Likely Anything, and this was not a category. His aptitude lay in the well-executed muddle, never shining, never flunking, but gathering himself for what it took to progress past life's next random obstacle. It was his solemn expertise.

Got him this far.

He burped up some of that morning's breakfast paste, which had been concocted, according to the minuscule promises on the side of the tube, to replicate a nutritionist's concept of how mama's flapjacks topped with fresh blueberries tasted. His hand leaped to his mouth before he remembered he was alone. The attorneys had leased four floors, a sleek warren, and hadn't been doing too bad for themselves from the extent of their renovation. The floors above were chopped up into drab and modest suites, with dreary watercolors hooked into the spongy drywall of the waiting rooms and the same scuffed puke-pink tiles underfoot.

Amenable leases made for a varied group of tenants, as motley as the collection found in the average rush-hour subway car. His unit swept consulting firms with fleet and efficient-sounding names, they poked through the supply rooms of prosthetics dealers and mail-order seed companies. They swept travel agencies nearly extinct in an internet age, the exhortations and invitations on the posters hitting shrill and desperate registers. On nineteen, they walked in formation through the soundproofed rooms of a movie-production house that specialized in straight-to-video martial arts flicks and in the gloom mistook a cardboard cutout of an action hero for a hostile. They were in the same kind of places day after day. Keys for the communal bathrooms down the hall hung on His and Hers hooks in Reception, affixed to broad plastic tongues. Recycled paper stretched expectantly across tables in doctor's examination rooms like a smear of oatmeal and the magazines in the waiting rooms described an exuberant age now remote and hard to reconcile. It was impossible to find a gossip magazine or newsweekly that had been published beyond a certain date. There was no more gossip and no more news.

When they stepped into the lawyers' suite they stumbled into a sophisticated grotto, as if the floors had been dealt into the building from some more upscale deck. In the waiting room, their helmet lights roved over the perplexing geometric forms in the carpet that they sullied with their combat boots, the broad panels of dark zebra wood covering the walls with elegant surety, and the low, sleek furniture that promised bruises yet, when tested, compressed one's body according to newly discovered principles of somatic harmony. The three lights converged on the portrait of a man with flinty eyes and the narrowed mouth of a peckish fox—one of the founding fathers keeping watch from the great beyond. After a pause their lights diverged again, groping for movement in the corners and dark places.

Mark Spitz felt it the instant they pushed in the glass doors and saw the firm's name hovering in grim steel letters over the receptionist's desk: these guys will crush you. Tradition and hard deals, inviolable fine print that would outlast its framers. He didn't know the nature of their practice. Perhaps they only represented charities and nonprofits, but in that case he was sure their clients out-healed, out-helping-handed, overall out-charitied their competitors, charities, if it can be said that charities competed with one another. But of course they must, he thought. Even angels are animals.

Once inside, the unit split up and he swept solo through the workstations. The office furniture was hypermodern and toylike, fit for an app garage or a graphic-design firm keen on sketching the future. The surfaces of the desks were thick and transparent, hacked out of plastic and elevating the curvilinear monitors and keyboards in dioramas of productivity. The empty ergonomic chairs posed like amiable spiders, whispering a multiplicity of comfort and lumbar massage. He saw himself aloft on the webbing of the seat, wearing the suspenders and cuff links of his tribe, releasing wisps of unctuous cologne whenever he moved his body. Bring me the file, please. He goosed a leprechaun bobble-head with his assault rifle and set it wiggling on its spring. Per his custom, he avoided looking at the family pictures.

He interpreted: We are studied in the old ways, and acolytes of what's to come. A firm home for a promising young lawyer. For all that had transpired outside this building in the great unraveling, the pure industry of this place still persisted. Insisting on itself. He felt it on his skin even though the people were gone and all the soft stuff was dead. Moldering lumps shot out tendrils in the common-area fridges, and the vicinities of the dry water coolers were

devoid of shit-shooting idlers, but the ferns and yuccas were still green because they were plastic, the awards and citations remained secure on the walls, and the portraits of the bigwigs preserved one afternoon's calculated poses. These things remained.

He heard three shots from the other end of the floor, in familiar staccato—Gary shooting open a door. Fort Wonton warned them repeatedly about brutalizing, vandalizing, or even extending the odd negative vibe toward the properties whenever possible, for obvious reasons. For convenience's sake, Buffalo printed up No-No Cards—laminated instructional squares that the sweepers were supposed to keep on their persons at all times. The broken window with the red circle and diagonal line across it was at the top of the deck. Gary couldn't restrain himself, however, future tenants and the grand design be damned. Why use the doorknob when you could light it up? "They can fix it when they move in," Gary said, as the smoke cleared from the C-4 he'd used to vaporize the door of an Italian restaurant's walk-in freezer. His crazy grin. As if cleaning up after semiautomatic fire were the same as touching up dings in the plaster where the previous tenants had hung their black-and-white landscapes. Gary dematerialized the half-closed curtains of department-store dressing room, converted expensive Japanese room dividers into twisting confetti, and woe to bathroom stalls with sticky hinges.

"Coulda been one of them in there trying to remember how to take a piss," Gary explained.

"Never heard of such a case," Kaitlyn said.

"This is New York City, man."

Kaitlyn rationed him to one unnecessary act of carnage per floor and Gary made the appropriate adjustments, even applying timeworn principles of suspense to when he attacked his targets. They never knew when he'd strike next. He had just made his selection for the fifteenth floor.

Mark Spitz got in gear. Gary was close and he wanted to look busy in order to head off any wisecracks about his work ethic. He turned from the window and briefly caught an edge of last night's dream—he was in the country, undulating farmland, perhaps at Happy Acres—before it squirmed away. He shook it off. He kicked in the door to Human Resources, though "Maybe I'll come back and ask for a job when this is all over," and saw his error.

The door was not the issue. After all this time in the Zone, he knew the right place to slash these keypad doors so that they popped open, presto. The mistake lay in succumbing to the prevailing delusions. Giving in to that pandemic of phoenie optimism that was inescapable nowadays and made it hard to breathe, a contagion in its own right. They were on him in an instant.

They had been there since the beginning, the four of them. Perhaps one had been attacked down on the pavement by "some nut," that colorful metropolitan euphemism, and was sent home after getting a few stitches at the local underfunded ER—Do you have your insurance card handy?—before they understood the nature of the disaster. Then she turned feral and one lucky coworker made it out in time, locked the door, and left her cubicle-mates to fend for themselves. Some variation on that story. No one came back to help because they were overcome by their own situations.

He was the first live human being the dead had seen since the start, and the former ladies of HR were starving. After all this time, they were a thin membrane of meat stretched over bone. Their skirts were bunched on the floor, having slid off their shrunken hips long ago.

and the dark jackets of their sensible dress suits were made darker still, and stiffened, by jagged arterial splashes and kernels of gore. Two of them had lost their high heels at some point during the long years of bumping around the room looking for an exit. One of them wore the same brand of panties his last two girlfriends had favored, with the distinctive frilled red edges. They were grimed and torn. He couldn't help but notice the thong, current demands on his attention aside. He'd made a host of necessary recalibrations but the old self made noises from time to time. Then that new self stepped in. He had to put them down.

The youngest one wore its hair in a style popularized by a sitcom that took as its subject three roommates of seemingly immiscible temperaments and their attempts to make their fortune in this contusing city. A crotchety super and a flamboyant neighbor rounded out the ensemble, and it was still appointment television, a top-ten show, at the time of the disaster. The hairdo was called a Marge, after Margaret Halstead, the charmingly klutzy actress who trademarked it in the old days of red carpets and flirty tête-à-têtes on late-night chat shows. She hadn't done anything for Mark Spitz—too skinny—but the legions of young ladies who fled their stunted towns and municipalities to reinvent themselves in the Big City recognized something in her flailings, and fetishized this piece of her. They had been reeled in by the old lie of making a name for oneself in the city; now they had to figure out how to survive. Hunt and-gather rent money, forage ramen. In this week's written-up clubs and small-plate eateries, loose flocks of Marges were invariably underfoot, sipping cinnamon-rimmed novel cocktails and laughing too eagerly.

The Marge nabbed Mark Spitz first, snatching his left bicep and taking it in its teeth. He never looked at his face, ferocious on the mesh of his fatigues and aware exclusively of the meat it knew was underneath. He'd forgotten how much it hurt when a skel tried to get a good chomp going; it had been some time since one had gotten this close. The Marge couldn't penetrate the intricate blend of plastic fibers—only an idiot cast aspersions on the new miracle fabric, born of plague-era necessity—but each rabid sally sent him howling. The rest of Omega would be here soon, tromping down the halls. He heard the sound of teeth splintering. The sweepers were supposed to stay together, the Lieutenant was firm about that to prevent this very situation. But the last few grids had been so quiet, they hadn't stuck to orders.

The Marge was occupied for the moment—it took time for their diminished perceptions to catch on to the futility of the enterprise—so he directed his attention to the skel charging from two o'clock.

The bushy eyebrows, the whisper of a mustache—it was hard to avoid recognizing in this one his sixth-grade English teacher, Miss Alcott, who had diagrammed sentences in a soup-broth Bronx accent and fancied old-style torpedo bras. She smelled of jasmine when she passed his desk, plucking vocab quizzes. He'd always had a soft spot for Miss Alcott.

This one was probably the first infected. Everything below its eyes was a dark, gormless muzzle, the telltale smear produced when a face burrowed deep into live flesh. Just another day at the office when she gets bit by some New York whacko while loading up on spring mix at the corner deli's Salad Lounge. Full of plague but unaware. That night the shivers came and the legendary bad dreams everyone had heard about and prayed against—the harbinger of the nightmares that were the subconscious rummaging through a lifetime for some kind of answer to or escape from this trap. With those early strains, you might last a whole day

without flipping. She returns to her cubicle the next day because she hadn't taken a sick day in years. Then transformation.

It happened every so often that he recognized something in these monsters, they looked like someone he had known or loved. Eighth-grade lab partner or lanky cashier at the mini-mart, college girlfriend spring semester junior year. Uncle. He lost time as his brain buzzed on itself. He had learned to get on with the business at hand, but on occasion Mark Spitz fixed on eyes or a mouth that belonged to someone lost, actively seeking concordance. He hadn't decided if conjuring an acquaintance or loved one into these creatures was an advantage or not. A "successful adaptation," as the Lieutenant put it. When Mark Spitz thought about it—when they were bivouacked at night in some rich fuck's loft or up to their chins in their sleeping bags on the floor of a Wall Street conference room—perhaps these recognitions ennobled his mission: He was performing an act of mercy. These things might have been people he knew, not-quites and almost-could-be's, they were somebody's family and they deserved release from their blood sentence. He was an angel of death ushering these things on their stalled journey from this sphere. Not a mere exterminator eliminating pests. He shot Miss Alcott in the face, converting resemblance to red mist, and then all the air was wrung from his chest and he was on the carpet.

The one in the candy-pink dress suit had tackled him—the Marge wrenched him off-balance with her aggressive pursuit, and he couldn't right himself once this new one rammed him. She straddled him and he felt the rifle grind into his back; he'd slung it over his shoulder during his pit stop by the window. He looked into the skel's spiderweb of gray hair. The jutting pinched the dumb thought: How long did it take for its wig to fall off? (Time slowed down in situations like this, to grant dread a bigger stage.) The thing on top of him clawed into his neck with its seven remaining fingers. The other fingers had been bitten off at the knuckle and likely jostled about in the belly of one of its former coworkers. He realized he'd dropped his pistol in the fall.

Surely this one possessed the determination befitting a true denizen of Human Resources, endowed by nature and shaped by nurture into its worthy avatar. The plague's recalibration of its faculties only honed the underlying qualities. Mark Spitz's first office job had involved rattling a mail cart down the corridors of a payroll company located in a Hempstead office park not too far from his house. As a child he'd decided the complex was some sort of clearinghouse for military intelligence, mistaking its impassive façades for clandestine power. The veil was lifted the first day. The other guys in the mail room were his age and when his boss shut the door to his office they got a splendid doofus chorus going. The only downer was the ogre head of Human Resources, who'd been relentless about Mark Spitz's paperwork, downright insidious about his W-this, W-that, the proper credentials. She served the place where human beings were paraphrased into numbers, components of bundled data to be shipped out through fiber-optic cable toward meaning.

"Your check can't be processed without complete paperwork." How was he supposed to know where his Social Security card was? His bedroom was a dig. He needed special excavating tools to find socks. "You're not in the system. You might as well not exist." Where was The System now, after the calamity? It had been an invisible fist floating above them for so long and now the fingers were open, disjoined, and everything slipped through, everything escaped. By August he'd scurried back to the service industry, doling out pomegranate

martinis on Ladies' Wednesdays. He tried to heave Human Resources off him. The skel's eye dipped to the soft meat of his face. It went in for a bite.

Like most of the grunts in the sweeper units, he declined to wear his faceplate, despite the regulations, No-No Card, and all the times he'd witnessed that decision turn out poorly. You couldn't hump forty pounds of equipment up a New York City high-rise while fogging up a plastic faceplate. Supply lines were still a broken mess all around, and the sweepers were the lowest priority in everything except when it came to bullets. Everybody had enough bullets from the Northeast Corridor to Omaha to Zone One, now that Buffalo had Barnes up and running, the former homemakers and chronic asthmatics and assorted old biddies on the assembly lines cranking out ammo day and night. Nowadays, Rosie the Riveter was a former soccer mom who had just opened her own catering business when Last Night came down and her husband and kids were eaten by a parking attendant at the local megamall's discount appliance emporium.

Priorities: First Buffalo got what they needed, then the military, then civilian population, and finally the sweepers. Which meant Mark Spitz didn't have proper face gear, one of those fancy marine numbers with the lightweight impenetrable wire, proper ventilation, and neoprene sheathing. He'd seen one sad sack who patrolled in a goalie's mask—an affectation, really, because it was too easy for one of the skels to rip it off. Some of the guys in the other units had taken to drilling air holes into the thick plastic faceplate, and he made a note to try the last trick if he made it out of this mess. Face gear or no, however, you never wanted to get pinned.

First time he saw someone get pinned by a group of them was in the early days, must have been, because he was still trying to get out of his neighborhood. An invisible barrier surrounded his zip code, each opportunity for escape was undermined by his certainty that things were about to go back to normal, that this savage new reality could not hold. He was wending to the strip mall half a mile from his house—civilization's nearest representative consisted of the 24-7 gas-and-cigarette vendor, the famously grim pizza-and-sub place, and a moribund dry cleaner, that reliable exacerbator of stains. Mark Spitz had spent the night up in the arms of an oak, the first of many tree-limb slumber parties to come. It occurred to him that if anyone was equipped for this "new situation," it was Mr. Provenzano and the reputed arsenal he had stashed in the basement of the pizza shop. The basement weapons stash was a sturdy and beloved topic of speculation among mayhem-adoring kids and insinuating grown-ups alike, fed by rumors of mob-induction ceremonies and a robust lore centered around the meat grinder.

Mark Spitz didn't know if the pizza shop was accessible, but it was a better prospect than the silenced lanes of New Grove, the subdivision his parents had moved to thirty years before, their wedding gifts sitting in the foyer when they returned from their honeymoon. He waited for daylight and beat his numb legs and arms to get the blood into them. Then he crept through the clutch backyards, the hardwired shortcuts from his kid days, and crept around the scrambled around the half-finished mini-mansion on Claremont trying to get the lay of the street before making a break for the main road. The construction company had lost liquidity the year before and his parents complained about the eyesore as if under contractual obligation. The plastic sheets rippling where there should have been walls, the great mound of orange dirt that seeped out in defeat after every rain. It was a breeding ground for

mosquitoes, his parents fussed. They spread sickness.

The old man came jogging down the asphalt. A gray cardigan flapped over his bare chest and green plaid pants cut off a comical length above his slippers, which were secured to his feet with black electrical tape. Six of the devils congregated on the lawn of a mock Tudor house halfway down the street, and they turned at the sound of him. The old man ran faster, veering to arc around them, but he didn't make it. Dark aviator glasses covered his eyes and he had a wireless rig stuck in his ear, into which he narrated his progress. Was the old man actually talking to someone? The phones were dead, all the stalwart and dependable communication networks had ceased to be, but maybe the authorities were fixing things out there, Mark Spitz remembered thinking, the government was getting control. Authority laying on hands. Two of them got the old man down and then all of them were on him like ants who received a chemical telegram about a lollipop on the sidewalk. There was no way the old man could get up. It was quick. They each grabbed a limb or convenient point of purchase while he screamed. They began to eat him, and his screaming brought more of them teetering down the street. All over the world this was happening: a group of them hears food at the same time and they twist their bodies in unison, that dumb choreography. A cord of blood zippered up out of their huddle, hanging—that's how he always recalled it, that's what he saw as he ducked down behind the cinder blocks and watched. A length of red string pinned briefly to the air, until the wind knocked it away. They didn't fight over the old man. They each got a piece. Of course there couldn't have been anyone at the other end of the call because the phones never came back on. The old man had been barking into the void.

Let them pin you and you were dead. Let them pin you and there was no way to stop them from ripping off whatever pitiful armor you'd wrapped yourself in, stuck your hopes to. They'd get you. He had wafted through damp summer afternoons at Long Beach, amid the chewy scent of fried clams. Cartoon lobster on the thin plastic bib, the stupefying melody of the predatory ice-cream truck. (Yes, time slowed down to give those competing factions a little room to rumble, the dark and the light.) They'd wrestle Mark Spitz out of his fatigues the way he'd pried meat out of claws, tails, shells. They were a legion of teeth and fingers. He grabbed Human Resources' wispy hair and yanked its head out of its advance toward his nose. He didn't have a free hand to grab his knife, but he pinpointed the place in its skull where he would have stuck it. He looked after his pistol. It lay near his waist. The Marge was on its knees, creeping down his arm to the gap between the mesh sleeve and glove. The light was such that he saw his face reflected in Human Resources' milky eyes, fixed in that mindless void. Then he felt the fourth skel grab his leg and he lost himself.

He had the forbidden thought.

He woke. He bucked Human Resources off his chest and it tumbled onto the Marge. Mark Spitz grabbed his pistol and shot it in the forehead.

The fourth one tried to grit down on his leg and was thwarted by his fatigues. Most of the meat in its face had been chewed away. (He'd seen, in that first week, a Samaritan administer chest compresses to a stricken fellow citizen, lean down to give mouth-to-mouth, and have his nose ripped off.) Thin, wide loops of gold dangled from its earlobes, chiming against each other as it scuttled up his body, and he aimed at a place at the top of its skull and put it down.

Gary said, "I got you." Gary kicked the Marge off him and held its shoulder down with his

boot.

Mark Spitz turned his face to avoid the spray, squeezing his lips into a crack. He heard two shots. All four were down.

“Mark Spitz, Mark Spitz,” Gary said. “We didn’t know you liked the older ladies.”

• • •

They started calling him Mark Spitz after they finally found their way back to camp after the incident on I-95. The name stuck. No harm. Affront was a luxury, like shampoo and affection.

He rolled away from the bodies toward the paper shredder and tried to catch his breath. He heaved, sweat riveting his brow. The faceless skel’s foot swished back and forth like the tail of an animal dozing on concrete in a zoo. Then it stopped at the end of a circuit and did not stir.

Mark Spitz said, “Thank you.”

“Mazel tov,” Gary said.

In the last few weeks Gary had started employing the vocab of the polyglot city, as it had been transmitted through popular culture: the eponymous sitcoms of Jewish comedians; the pay-cable Dominican gangster show; the rat-a-tat verses of totemic hip-hop singles. He didn’t always get the meanings right, but he had the delivery down, the correct intonation reinforced by countless exposures.

In the aftermath of the engagement, Gary’s body withdrew into its customary scarecrow posture. In his mastery of technique, the man was an exemplar of the new civilian recruit: memorizing and then implementing the correct assault-rifle and blade technique, and melding his homegrown survival skills with crashcoursed military lore. Mark Spitz was lucky to serve in his unit. But he looked horrible. Each morning when they woke, Mark Spitz marveled anew at how his comrade was scarcely in better shape than the creatures they were sent to eradicate. (Discounting the ones missing body parts, of course.) Gary had a granite complexion, gray and pitted skin. Mark Spitz couldn’t help but think that something bad roosted deep in his bones, uncatalogued and undiagnosable. His eye sockets were permanently sooted, his cheeks scooped out. His preferred gait was a controlled slouch, with which he slunk around corners and across rooms, the world’s last junkie. Like everyone, he had skipped plenty of meals over the last few years, though on Gary the weight loss registered not as the result of scarcity but as the slow creep of a subcutaneous harrowing. Mark Spitz was disabused of this theory when Gary showed him a picture taken at his sixth birthday party, the same ill demeanor evident even then.

Whatever the sickness, whether it was biological or metaphysical, its discharge leaked out of his hands, more specifically his fingernails, which were seemingly constructed of grime. As if he had clawed out of a coffin. Their first week at Fort Wonton, there had existed a certain Sergeant Weller who rode Gary about the disreputable state of his fingernails, bringing up pre-plague regs of military comportment etc. and threatening to “rain hell” on him if he didn’t shape up, but Weller got his throat ripped out during a recon trip in a Newark railway station, and that was the end of that. The other officers’ priorities did not include persecuting volunteers over dead standards. For his part, Gary didn’t understand the fuss. Before the world broke, he’d dropped out of school to crank bolts full-time in his father’s garage with his brothers, and he stood by this explanation for his appearance even though it had been years

since he'd worked on a car or truck. Which left Mark Spitz to opine that what they were seeing was the *original* grime, the very grime of Gary's youth preserved as a token of home. It was what he'd scraped off the past and carried with him.

Gary prodded the Marge with his rifle. "No one told me it was Casual Friday," he said. Whether or not you agreed that Gary looked worse than your standard-issue plague-shriveled skull, it was indisputable that he had worse manners.

Kaitlyn materialized, running in from the hall and then slowing down and shaking her head as she took in the mess. She asked Mark Spitz if he was okay and surveyed the office. "Four of them and five desks," she said. She padded over to the supply closet. Any creature trapped inside would be making a racket at the commotion, but Kaitlyn was a stickler. From her stories, she'd been a grade-grubber before the disaster, and Mark Spitz had watched her maintain a grade-grubbing continuum in the throes of reconstruction, rubbing her thumb over the No-No Cards and applying a yellow highlighter to the typo-ridden manuals from Buffalo. If she survived, she'd doubtless continue to be a grade-grubber in that coming reborn world they crawled toward, paying her bills in a timely fashion once goods and vital services and autopay reappeared, first in line to pull the lever, if not manning the polling booths, once they could again afford the indulgence of democracy. The Lieutenant put her in charge of Omega Unit for her constancy, although given his other two choices it didn't rank among his more visionary commands.

She mumbled "Sit-rep, sit-rep" under her breath as she opened the door. Inside the supply closet, cartons and stacks of adhesive notepaper, tax forms, and incomprehensible health-plan packets awaited Business as Usual. No lunging adversary waited inside among the paper plates and Styro cups cached for the miserable office birthday parties and farewell get-togethers. Kaitlyn sat on the edge of a desk. She grimaced at the bodies, distressed by the number and the reminder that she'd let her unit stray from procedure. "Thought it was too quiet," she said.

The owner of the desk had been drinking a diet cola and reading a best-selling romance/thriller Mark Spitz remembered from bus advertisements. Which one had it been? Mark Spitz speculated: Faceless over there? He corrected himself. There were five desks and four bodies. One of them had made it out. Not everyone perished. Perhaps the owner of the desk was doing chores at that very moment in one of the settlement camps, Happy Acres or Sunny Days, replacing the toilet paper in one of the chemical lavatories, eliminating dented cans of beets from the larders, and sipping whatever regional favorite diet cola the scouting teams had scrounged. The insipid slogan popped up in his head, insistent as malware—"We Make Tomorrow!"—and he flinched as he pictured the camp's administrative assistant handing out the buttons, which were then obediently pinned to scavenged clothing one size too big or too small. Resist. He had to get all that crap out of his head or else it would turn out bad for him. To bolster this argument he made a glum appraisal of the bodies on the floor.

"We got here just in time." Gary lit a cigarette. He'd rescued a carton of sponsor cigarettes from a bodega the day before and had acquitted himself nicely so far. They were an economical brand that hadn't been advertised in thirty years; it sufficed that parents and grandparents had exhaled its smoke into cribs, and the acrid scent of the blend and the cherry-red packaging were imprinted early, reminding its aficionados years later of a happier, less

complicated time. “Had him on the ground about to give him a nose job,” Gary added, using the tone he reserved for recounting particularly grisly and epic ways in which he’d seen people expire—he was an almanac of this field of study—and for deriding Mark Spitz’s so-called survival tactics. Despite their friendship, the mechanic was not reluctant in sharing his bafflement that Mark Spitz hadn’t been cut down that first week, when the great hordes of unadaptable had been exterminated or infected, too ill-equipped to deal with the realignment of the universe.

Gary didn’t have much sympathy for the dead, a.k.a. the “squares,” the “suckers,” and the “saps.” When using the word “dead,” most survivors signaled to the listener, through inflection and context, whether they were talking about those who had been killed in the disaster or those who had been turned into vehicles of the plague. Gary made no such distinction; with few exceptions, they were equally detestable. The dead had paid their mortgages on time, and placed the well-promoted breakfast cereals on the table when their offspring leaped out of bed in their fire-resistant jammies. The dead had graduated with admirable GPAs, configured monthly contributions to worthy causes, judiciously apportioned their 401(k)s across diverse sectors according to the wisdom of their dead licensed financial advisers, and superimposed the borders of the good school districts on mental maps of the neighborhoods, which were often included on the long list when magazines ranked cities with the Best Quality of Life. In short, they had been honed and trained so thoroughly by the extinguished world that they were doomed in this new one. Gary was unmoved. From the man’s description of his life before, the portrait Mark Spitz gathered was of a miserable, befuddled and banished by the signs and systems of straight life. Then came Last Night transforming them all. In Gary’s case, latent talents announced themselves. He prided himself on how effortlessly he had grasped and mastered the new rules, as if he had waited for the introduction of hell his whole life. Mark Spitz’s knack for last-minute escapes and improbable getaways was an insult.

“I got distracted,” Mark Spitz said. He didn’t feel the need to defend himself beyond that. He gave himself his usual B. Would he have bested his attackers if Gary hadn’t arrived in time? Of course. He always did.

Mark Spitz believed he had successfully banished thoughts of the future. He wasn’t like the rest of them, the other sweepers, the soldiers up the island, or those haggard clans in the camps and caves, all the far-flung remnants behind their barricades, wherever people struggled and waited for victory or oblivion. The faint residue of humanity stuck to the sides of the world. You never heard Mark Spitz say “When this is all over” or “Once things go back to normal” or other sentiments of that brand, because he refused them. When it was all done, truly and finally done, you could talk about what you were going to do. See if your house still stood, enjoy a few rounds of How Many Neighbors Made It Through. Figure out how much of your life from before still remained and how much you had lost. This is what he had learned: If you weren’t concentrating on how to survive the next five minutes, you wouldn’t survive them. The recent reversals in the campaign had not swayed his optimism, nor the T-shirts and buttons and the latest hope-delivery system sent down from Buffalo. He scolded himself for succumbing to a reverie, no matter how brief. All the phoenie bullshit had clouded his mind. The tranquillity of 135 Duane Street, however, and the vision of what might be made him slip.

“The man gets distracted,” Gary drawled.

Kaitlyn’s standard op directed her to ignore their razzing and bickering. She came over and inspected Mark Spitz. She got on her knees and gently pushed on the underside of his jaw which still throbbed. He shook her away. She told him to knock it off. He had been trembling; he stopped as soon as she touched him. Her fingertips brought him back to playground mishaps—tumbling off a swing, launching from a seesaw—where the teachers scampered forth to check the damage and make sure the school wouldn’t get sued. Teachers—why did he think of that? The skel on the floor that resembled Miss Alcott. He took a deep breath and fixed his attention on a dark slab beyond the window: a building that had been swept clean or had yet to be swept, full of shapes moving or not moving in the darkness. The steadfast binary. Kaitlyn looked for broken skin. He waited.

Finally she nodded and reached into her breast pocket for an adhesive bandage. A tiny scratch wasn’t going to give the plague an entry, but conditions in the Zone gave Kaitlyn license to worry about the old run-of-the-mill bugs and infections. The familiar face of the popular cartoon armadillo grinned maniacally on the adhesive strip. “There.”

Gary opened the blinds some more and gray particles twisted through the air. The smoke from the gunfire was perfume hiding the stench of the dead, reassuring Mark Spitz as he hovered in a dreamy layer. These aspects of the mundane, the simple physics of the world always meant that the latest engagement was over. Safe until the next eruption.

“No indication they were in here?” Kaitlyn asked.

He doubted himself for a second and then told her no. He’d been foolish and let himself daydream, but he hadn’t been that sloppy. You rarely got surprised by a group of them pinned in like that—a jumble of file cabinets pushed up against a conference-room door or a busted-up table nailed to the kitchen door had a way of tipping you off. Little things like that. A barricade was a welcome mat these days: you knew what kind of reception you were going to get. There had been no barrier.

He stepped over the Marge and examined the lock. He hadn’t noticed it was smashed when he kicked it in. Some quick thinker had busted it after locking the four of them in. The dead could turn a doorknob, hit a light switch—the plague didn’t erase muscle memory. Cognition was out, though, once it overwrote the data of self. These creatures had been stymied for years by the broken lock. Bumping into each other and ricocheting around the desk and chairs and cabinets, losing wigs, rings, and watches as they grew more and more emaciated. Prtfalling over their accessories and then rising again like the mechanical entities they had become.

Kaitlyn pulled out her notebook. “Not trying to get on your case.”

“For the Incident Report,” Mark Spitz said.

“Gotta make sure the paperwork is right,” Gary said.

“What’s she, fifty?” she asked, scrutinizing Human Resources and scribbling. “Fifty-five. Can you look for IDs, Gary?”

The info-gathering directives came down from Buffalo a week after they were deployed to the island. The ten sweeper units were crowded into a dumpling joint on Baxter Street, the restaurant the Lieutenant staked out for his briefings. All the COs had annexed Chinatown turf for briefings and strategy sessions, spreading out from Wonton Main at Broadway and Canal according to their disparate appetites. General Summers, for example, claimed a

elegant and cavernous dim sum palace on Bowery, rescuing it from the enlisted men amusements. For months, the establishment had been used as a drag-racing track, the dim sum carts caroming across the linoleum. Friday nights became quite bleak when Summers put a stop to the competitions, until the marines relocated their arena to the roller rink. (Mark Spitz came across the roller rink's gigantic disco ball at random intersections as it made its journey through the metropolis, their scapegoat tumbleweed, kicked and shoved and rolled around the streets by the inebriated soldiers, shedding squares like mirrored tears.) Corporal Brent of the U.S. Army Corps, for his part, conducted his daily planning sessions at a noodle house, addressing his men and women from behind the counter as if serving up strands of udon instead of baroque strategies of city planning (or, more accurately, reconfiguration). The officers spread out, homesteading. Manhattan was empty except for soldiers and legionnaires of the damned, Mark Spitz noted, and already gentrification had resumed.

The signage was in Chinese save for the Health Department regulations hectoring beneath the pictograms. His mother's logic held that a strong congruency between patron and cuisine signaled an "authentic place" and that they must serve up primo Chinese, Greek, or Lithuanian cuisine, what have you. Which had never made sense to Mark Spitz: Plenty of American restaurants with a majority-American clientele served crap American fare. Perhaps the emphasis was on the authenticity of its mediocrity.

In their meager bid at becoming regulars, Mark Spitz and Kaitlyn returned to the table they'd occupied at the previous briefing. Gary joined them in the coming weeks, but at that point they'd only been together for one grid, a bland residential stretch on Water Street. Omega hadn't clicked yet, hoisting their own personal three-person foxhole around wherever they went. That afternoon, Gary squeezed in with some guys he'd served with in Stamford securing abandoned gasworks. The majority of those in the sweeper units had been stationed in the Northeast doing infrastructure work, cleaning out the Corridor as Mark Spitz had been or doing recon in the key metro areas and industrial clusters, which had been Gary's previous posting. Mark Spitz arrived at the island without a crew, the only one from the I-95 detail to transfer to the sweep.

The dumpling joint was prepped for service when they shuffled in for their first briefing, but the soldiers knocked the settings into incremental disarray week by week, as if across a single, slow-motion lunch shift. There were thirty of them, teenagers and men and women in their twenties, with exceptions in the form of characters like Metz. Metz looked fifty or something, but of course the late miseries had aged them so Mark Spitz couldn't say for sure. He had what Mark Spitz had come to call the Wasteland Stare. On special ops, the sweepers were equipped with night-vision goggles that featured gecko protuberances allowing them to see into different spectra; Metz and his brethren were equipped with additional lenses, and through them they gaped at stumps, shreds of structures, a blasted plain, as if through a vision of devastation. Whatever Mark Spitz saw—a typical downtown slop joint, fly strips twisting in the corners—Metz gazed upon an entirely different and cruel landscape. Given the vast galaxy of survivor dysfunction—PASD in its sundry tics, fugues, and existential fevers—the Wastelanders' particular corner of pathology was, Mark Spitz decided, unremarkable. Everyone was fucked up in their own way; as before, it was a mark of one's individuality.

Steady raids had depleted the back room of sponsored energy drinks, but there was good word of mouth about the medicinal properties of an enigmatic foreign beverage, bright

emerald cans of which were piled in formidable stacks in the kitchen. The sweepers settled the tables and crammed into the banquettes, sliding across bloodred vinyl. The menagerie of the Chinese zodiac pursued itself on the place mats beneath glass tabletops. Mark Spitz saw that it was the Year of the Monkey. Attributes: Fun-Loving Witty Entertaining. Dead fish bobbed in a chunky murk in the tank by the entrance.

The Lieutenant took his roost at the host's station and informed them that from now on they had to fill out Incident Reports on every engagement. The decor flashed in his aviator glasses in sparks of crimson and gold. Considering the Lieutenant's nightly bourbon flight, the sunglasses were precious cover for his sensitive retinas, even in the half-light of the restaurant.

Buffalo, he explained, wanted information on the general outline of each engagement, but in particular they were keen for the sweepers to record demographic data: the ages of the targets, the density at the specific location, structure type, number of floors. Fabio, the Lieutenant's second, had rummaged Canal Street after special equipment for this very purpose. Fabio handed his boss the carton of kiddie notebooks, and the Lieutenant brandished it over his head, pointing out that they were equipped with convenient loops that held tiny pencils. The plastic-covered notebooks were candy-colored and palm-size, brimming with the characters and arcana of a prosperous and long-standing children's entertainment combination. The creation myth of the product line concerned the adventures of a clever, effeminate armadillo and his cohort of resourceful desert critters. Although the parent company was one of reconstruction's first official sponsors, until now Buffalo had found little use for their tie-dye merchandise, apart from the well-branded adhesive bandages. "Doubtless you will appreciate this example of superior Japanese engineering," the Lieutenant said, sliding the pencil back and forth.

The sweepers groaned and dislodged belches redolent of the mysterious Far East beverage smudging the air with ginger. The Lieutenant tendered his regrets over the hassle, in his custom. The Lieutenant preferred a light touch, ditching protocol when it served his purpose. Casting himself as the hip young teacher in the high school was part of his strategy for keeping them alive, Mark Spitz theorized. The Lieutenant's sweepers were a nontraditional brigade to say the least, volunteers from civilian pop. and untutored in the routine malevolence of military code. The training courses and drills of their boot camp had been the split-second decisions and pure, indifferent chance that had permitted them to survive to the present moment. (Although it should be added that most of them had received a crash course in basic gun use since the advent of the plague.) Soldiers of the new circumstance. What did it serve to hold them to strict military standards when they were such an unlikely lot: unemployable man-children, erstwhile cheerleaders, salesmen of luxury boats, gym teachers, food bloggers, patent clerks, cafeteria lunch ladies, dispatchers from international delivery companies. People like Mark Spitz, seemingly unsmuffable human cockroaches protected by carapaces of good luck. The Lieutenant's first priority was keeping their limbs and assorted parts attached to their bodies, free of teeth; then came the trickled-down objectives; and, finally, servitude to the obsolete directives of an obsolete world.

The Lieutenant's casual attitude was facilitated by the fact that the sweepers' primary targets were stragglers. Compared to what the marines encountered in Manhattan during the initial, mammoth sweep, those assembled in the dumpling joint had it easy. Mark Spitz

wouldn't have signed up for the island had it been otherwise, New York homesickness or no.

"Buffalo, as ever, has great plans for you guys," the Lieutenant said. He tossed the box of notebooks to the mule-eyed hulk slouching at the closest table, a man who went by the handle of the Professor, an appellation that contradicted his dumbfounded mien. He'd been mate on a sport-fishing boat in sunnier times, steering rum-addled vacationers to schools of snapper via sonar. The Lieutenant motioned for him to pass the box around. "I know what you're going to say—we need boots and they talk to us about numbers."

Actually they had boots, and most of the sweepers had raided sneaker stores for more comfortable designer footwear after a round of death marches up high-rise stairwells. Fortunately for them, the sneaker sponsor had manufactured several product lines for different ages, aesthetic appetites, and athletic inclinations. It was comforting, in the recesses of buildings, to see your buddy's heel blink from the tiny red LEDs in a novelty running shoe, although Mark Spitz did not partake because of the obvious ankle-exposure issue. *Boots* was the Lieutenant's catchall term for truly clutch materiel, the elusive, the vital. Mark Spitz heard the others shifting in boredom at the reference. What did boots symbolize for the marines? Order. Sturdy rules. His trove of by-gones. All survivors had them, the pet names and metonyms they used to refer to their pasts. Bagel, java, baseball cap, the object that was a symbol, the furnishings of the good old days. Why couldn't the Lieutenant maintain his shrine? Everyone else did.

Mark Spitz flipped through the pad. Faint pink-and-purple cacti sprouted in the margins. He recognized the sense of Buffalo's plan. With the assembled data, their supply of eggheads could start projecting how many of the dead they'd find in your typical twenty-two-story corporate flagship, five-floor tenement, fifteen-story apartment complex, what have you. Every structure sheltered its likely trajectories and scenarios; they'd figured that out early. Take residential buildings, for example. Walk into one of the wizened tenements of downtown Manhattan and you could bet on finding at least one citizen who'd barricaded himself inside, turned, and then couldn't get out. In the first wave, people got infected, barely making it home ahead of collapse. Then the plague wiped and reformatted their brains and they were trapped in their abodes, the most pathetic kind of city shut-in, their hands eventually groping their way toward expensive security locks but incapable of reaching them for the passel of splendid contemporary furniture they'd piled against it. Mark Spitz cursed his luck when he realized they were going to have to remove the door and get all that stuff out of the way before they could put the skel down: the particle-board media centers laden with layaway plasmas, limited-issue replicas of Danish-modern wardrobes, the beloved go-to recliners grimed at the armrests from summers of sweat. These specimens were your average skels, not harmless stragglers but a reliable if small percentage of what you'd find in Zone One, so you had to stay frosty.

By now, Mark Spitz could look at a building and know what kind of weather was brewing inside. Office towers were the least populated. The nine-to-fivers had stopped coming to work when it went down, and most of the rabid skels were lured out by the marines, which left stragglers. (Perhaps, he thought, there will be a study of the farthest a straggler has traveled to its haunting grounds—across streams! quicksand! perilous canyons!—but that was far in the future.) A building like 135 Duane, with its panoply of enterprises, had its own idiosyncrasies but nonetheless conformed to the prevailing narrative. Department store

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