A Walk in the Park

by Sateevah

 Pam lounged in the passenger seat of her boyfriend’s old Ford Focus and exclaimed, “What a beautiful day for a drive through the country.”

 “Not from where I’m sitting,” snarked Charlie. “Let’s trade places and see how you like being crammed into the backseat of this little two-door jalopie, with your feet on old beer cans and burger wrappers.”

 “But Charlie, you’re such a gentleman for letting me have this spacious shotgun seat all to myself.”

 Charlie was a 220 pound, 6’ 3” rookie cop and the best friend of Michael, the driver and owner of the beat up old car.

 “Calm down you two, we’re almost there,” soothed Michael.

 He and Pam were both grad students at the university about an hour away. Pam had asked him to drive her to the mall so she could do some shopping and get her hair done at a cheap franchise place. Charlie was tagging along on his day off with hopes of visiting a nearby sporting goods store to check out some of the guns and equipment they had on display.

 As they exited the interstate Michael let out a low whistle and asked, “What the hell has happened here?”

 Charlie popped up, scanned the landscape and said, “Looks like some sort of flood.” He and Pam instantly grabbed for their phones to see if there was any news about a disaster.

 “Charlie, are you getting anything on your phone? Mine doesn’t have a signal.”

 “Nope, no bars here either.”

 “Do you think a dam burst, or maybe a levy broke?” wondered Michael.

 “I didn’t hear anything like that,” said Charlie, “and I certainly think I would have.”

 “Well let’s run into town and see if we can find out what’s what,” said the driver as he eased the car through a big puddle in the middle of the road.

 “Don’t you know you’re not supposed to drive through standing water?” his friend observed in a mocking, know-it-all voice.

 “What do you want me to do, turn around and go home?”

 “That sounds like a really good idea,” chimed in Pam.

 “Naw, let’s take a good look around first. If it gets too dangerous we can always head back.” Charlie retorted. “I sure wish we had cell service though. I don’t like the look of all this water. Isn’t there a swamp somewhere around here?”

 “Yeah but it’s further north, and I’ve never heard of swamp water escaping to cause this much flooding.” He continued down the road toward town threading the large puddles with more caution than before.

 A few minutes later Pam said, “That looks like smoke up ahead.”

 “Oh great, fire and water,” observed Charlie. “Some Sunday drive this has turned out to be.”

 Then they saw the body. Michael spotted it first just off to the side of the road. He eased the car to a stop. Then he and Charlie got out to take a look. Pam elected to stay where she was, keeping an eye out for signs of danger.

 “Looks like he was partially eaten by some animal,” said Michael. “His face is half gone and his torso is ripped apart.”

 Charlie knelt down to take a closer look. “Oh man,” he said, croaking through the stench, “these look like human bite marks.”

 “Uh, Charles, I think we better get back in the car fast”. He pointed to several figures staggering and loping in their direction. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say those look like zombies.”

 It was true. There were three men and two women, but they only looked half human. They all had stringy hair over pale, gray faces. Some had blood all over them, with torn clothing and strange bulging eyes. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Even from a distance the two hapless travelers could see distorted limbs and even claws growing from their fingers. Then one of the monsters who stood a good two feet taller than the others began bellowing and running in their direction.

 Pam screamed from the car for the men to get back in. They didn’t waste any time in doing so. Michael fired up the engine just as the hideous brute ran up and started hammering on and clawing at the closed windows. Throwing the Focus into gear, Michael tore off down the road leaving disappointed zombies in his wake.

 “That was a close call,” gasped Charlie in the back seat.

 “Too close,” said his friend.

 “What were those things,” Pam asked, her voice rising in panic.

 “Mike thinks they’re zombies.”

 “He might be right,” agreed Pam, “but where on earth did they come from? I thought zombies were just a myth, or fictional characters on TV.”

 Those don’t look fictional to me. Neither do the scratch marks on my car.”

 “Now I really think we should go home,” pleaded Pam.

 “Um, I’m not sure we can,” said Michael, his eyes on the rear view mirror. The others craned their necks around to see a whole horde of zombies, including men, women, dogs, and even little children pursuing them and clogging the road. They seemed to be converging from all directions.

 The car passed through the outskirts of town where they saw more lurching figures pursuing them and smoke rising from at least a dozen fires. They came to a bridge that was completely blocked by wrecked cars and pulled up right before it. “Now what do we do?” Pam’s voice shook and her eyes were wide with terror.

 Seeing the zombies coming up fast from behind Charlie shouted “we need to run for it. Quick, follow me.” He burst out of the car and started running across the bridge.

 Michael looked over at Pam and yelled, “He’s right. Let’s go.” They scrambled out as fast as they could and leaving his car where it was, dashed after Charlie.

 In order to cross the bridge they needed to thread their way through a maze of tangled up cars and trucks, some with mangled bodies still inside.

 At the far end of the bridge Charlie stooped over a huddled corpse and retrieved an object with a shout of triumph. “It’s an assault rifle. Looks like an AK47.”

 As Pam ran past the same corpse she saw it was covered with black and blue flies. If she had any breath to spare she’d have screamed, “Oh my god!” but she just kept running for her life behind the men.

 They passed a restaurant on their left with a sign announcing that it was, or had been, a steak house. From the sounds escaping it the place was now filled with zombies. Four of them burst out of the front door hoping to make steaks of the three humans. Charlie turned and sprayed them with a quick burst from his borrowed gun. Two of the screaming beast fell dead while the others staggered and slowed from their wounds. “Run faster,” he urged, “I think I see a place ahead where we can make a stand. Look up on that roof. Those look like normal people.”

 It was true. Just ahead and to their right they saw a collection of tents with people milling about on a rooftop.

 They made a beeline for the steps to the roof but before they could get there an ugly creature that looked like it might have once been been a young woman came out of nowhere and sunk its claws into Michael’s left shoulder. Pam screamed, causing Charlie to spin around, take careful aim, and shoot the monster in the head. It exploded in a cloud of blood and brains. The two of them disentangled their friend from those nasty claws and helped him up onto the roof. On the way they passed a young human woman about their age wearing some sort of uniform and manning a large machine gun on a tripod. She looked them over and waved them through. Just after they passed her she fired a long burst into the horde of zombies that had been chasing them, nearly disintegrating the vile things.

 In the makeshift camp on top of the building, they spied fewer than two dozen survivors, and discovered that These folks were about as clueless as they were about the cause of either the flood or the zombie invasion. But they learned one horrifying fact. If Michael’s wounds weren’t treated soon then he was likely to turn into a raving zombie himself. Pam let out a cry as her legs collapsed beneath her. She would have fallen if Charlie hadn’t caught her by the arm and held her up.

 There was a tiny shred of good news though. They learned that a clinic had been set up in the mall about a mile away. If they could get Michael there safely, the clinic had meds that could treat his infection and save him from that unthinkable plight.

 They learned one other thing. Just down the seps at the back of the roof was the sporting goods store where the trio might find more guns, ammunition, and other supplies they might need. However, the store was riddled with zombies and none of the other survivors were willing to accompany them down into the store to retrieve what was needed for the trek.

 “I’ll go,” announced Charlie, checking the load in his gun. “You folks wouldn’t happen to have anymore 7.62 rounds would you? I’ve only got ten left.” Someone handed him a full clip but said it was just a loan until he found more downstairs. He thanked the man and exchanged the fresh magazine for the empty one on his gun. This he slipped into his belt expecting he might need it later.

 “You’re not going down there alone,” said Michael. “These are just a few scratches and they said I have something like six or eight hours before I start to show signs…”

 “I’m going too,” said Pam, a look of determination on her face but a good deal of fear in her eyes. “And those don’t look like scratches to me. Blood is dripping down your arm.” As the words left her lips a middle-age woman with a haggard look about her came over and offered to help Pam put a dressing on the wounds, and soon they were ready to make the descent into the zombie-infested store.

 A couple of men opened a gate at the top of the steps for them and the three travelers crept down into darkness, a chorus of well-wishes followed them. Charlie took the lead with the others close behind. He stopped them on the last step where he peered around the corner before stepping into a deserted hallway. They heard grunts, growls, and even animal sounds coming from elsewhere in the store, giving all three of them second thoughts. But they moved forward anyway.

 Charlie stopped them again at a bend in the hall and took another look around the corner. In One quick move he stepped out and began firing. A giant wolf thing was charging at him out of the vague half light. The thing snarled and was nearly on him before he killed it with three accurate shots. . The sound of his weapon drew other things toward them. With calm precision he aimed and fired at each monster, not wasting a single shot. He killed five more zombies and then all was quiet except the ringing in their ears.

 Beckoning the others forward he moved deeper into the darkness on stealthy feet. He breathed a sigh of relief when the first place they came to was a display case with guns and weapons of all sorts. These had barely been picked over, probably because the people on the roof were afraid to come down there. Pam was posted as lookout while the two guys gathered all the stuff they would need.

 In a half-whisper Pam asked, “Are there any hunting bows? I was on the archery team as an undergrad.” Charlie snagged a bow and three quivers full of arrows with tips as sharp as razors. She took the bow and strung it in one smooth motion, then each of them slipped a quiver over their shoulders so she wouldn’t have to try to deal with all three herself.

 Once they’d collected as much as they could reasonably carry they made their way back up to the roof to sort out their booty. Charlie repaid the loan of the magazine. Before long each of them was fully armed and even lightly armored. Among the other treasures were several items of body armor, along with technical .belts and vests.

 They were ready to head out within minutes. Charlie said, “I’ve been talking to some of the survivors here. They said the mall is about a mile southeast of us. The shortest route takes us directly through that park across the street. There’s no safe way to get there so lets just head that way and hope for the best.”

 Pam cocked an ear toward the park and said with a shudder, “I don’t like the sounds coming from those woods.”

 “It can’t be helped if we want to save Mike. I figure stealth is our best option. Pam, you take the lead with your bow ready and an arrow notched. Shoot anything that doesn’t look fully human. Michael, I gave you the Uzi with a suppressor and a silenced Glock. Try the pistol first and if things get too hairy go for the Uzi. Set it on single shot. We need to save as much ammo as we can. I’ll use this silenced MK23 and as a last resort I’ll go to the AK. Okay, everyone set?”

 They set off with a few low calls of “Good luck” from the survivors, but in voices that didn’t hold much hope for their success. Screwing up her courage Pam led the way down a forest path through the trees, alert to the slightest sign of danger. Michael followed with Charlie taking up the rear.

 They came out into a clearing and Pam spotted what looked like a rabid dog racing in their direction. It was growling in the kind of voice you’d hear in a monster movie. Without hesitation she loosed an arrow that struck the beast in the chest. It fell kicking, then went still.

 “Nice shooting,” whispered Charlie with a low whistle.

 She wiped a tear from her eye saying, “I love dogs.”

 “That was no dog. It was a monster,” Michael reassured her. “”did you hear its growl and see those bulging eyes?”

 They moved forward with caution until coming to a winding paved road. “Which way?” Pam paused in indecision. Charlie gestured to the left and she turned that way. Suddenly they heard a chorus of growls and unearthly cries from a stand of trees only a couple dozen yards away. Out of the foliage emerged three zombies looking like some hideous parody of a family. There was a tall man with blood all over his ripped shirt and a crazed look in his one bulging eye. The other eye had come completely out of its socket and was dangling down his face. The female didn’t look much better. Her face was split wide open by what looked like a blow from an axe. She should have been dead but instead ran screaming toward Pam. Most awful was the little child. It had gore all over its face and long, sharp fangs dripping with saliva, and god knows what else. One of its hands was missing several fingers while the other one sported long razor-like claws. The high pitched screech it made caused everyone’s blood to freeze.

 Pam stepped to the left to give Michael a clear field of fire, then sent an arrow directly into the chest of the tall male. He barely slowed, so Michael put a bullet into his brain, stopping him cold. Meanwhile Charlie shot the female twice, once in the head then again in the neck. The second shot must have completely severed her spine because the head came almost all the way off, flopping to one side as she fell.

 By this time the little creature from hell was nearly on them. It’s clawed hand was raised to eviscerate Pam who leaped back giving Michael a clear shot. He missed the first one but blew away most of its head with the second. The whole skirmish lasted mere seconds and was as quiet as the trio could have made it.

 “Let’s move out.” This time it was Pam taking charge and giving orders. “The sound of our little encounter is sure to attract unwanted attention.” Without as much as a glance at the dead zombie family she headed down the road at a jog, the others on her heels.

 They came to an intersection with another road that seemed to curve off in both directions as if it were part of a circle. Through the trees, across the circular road Pam could make out some sort of structure. “let’s head over there to that building and take stock of our situation.” Before she even crossed the road a whole horde of zombies erupted from all directions.

 “Run!” shouted Charlie and Michael together. But it was unnecessary. All three of them were already dashing toward the light green building. It was obvious, however, that they had no chance of getting there before the howling mass reached them.

 Pam put her back to a thick tangle of trees, hoping nothing could get through it, and began loosing arrows at the nearest of the charging creatures. The two men took positions on either side of her and aimed their big guns. Charlie knocked down seven or eight creatures with a sweeping spray of bullets from his assault rifle. Michael switched his Uzi to burst fire taking out one or two with every squeeze of the trigger.

 “Charlie, look out!” Pam squealed.

 A skulking wolf-thing had crept around the trees and was about to lunge at him. In a flash he reversed his weapon and clubbed it in the head, then drew his pistol and killed it with a single shot.

 Despite the carnage the zombies kept coming. Pam was down to her last arrow. Almost calmly she said, “Last one,” meaning her arrows, not the zombies. Michael stripped off the quiver he’d been carrying and handed it to her. With barely a pause she put it between her knees, drew out a black-fletched arrow, notched it and killed a dog not ten feet from them.

 “Out of ammo,” cried Michael. “Cover me while I reload.” But by that time the ferocity of the attack was on the wane. Pam and Charlie continued to pick off a few target some 40 or 50 feet away.

 “Let’s get inside that building,” ordered Charlie as he led the way around the thick stand of trees. But when he reached the open door he found the place was inhabited. Three large wolves came boiling out in his direction. The first one got to him before he could fire and clamped its massive jaws around his lower leg. He shot it twice in the spine then once in the head, spraying blood all over himself, but the thing fell dead at his feet, releasing him. Pam and Charlie took care of the other two with a few well-aimed shots.

 “That was a close call,” Pam remarked as they dashed through the door and turned to see what was following. Thankfully, nothing was. They searched the place which seemed to be a visitor center. Pam found a dead body while Charlie found nothing but a bag of trail mix. The body was what appeared to be the remains of a man who had backed into a stall in the women’s restroom, then was killed and mostly eaten. Charlie took a close look and found a couple of boxes of 9mm ammo in a pocket of the corpse. He handed them over to Michael saying, “Here you go, reload those empty magazines of yours.”

 “Charlie, what about that bite on your leg?” asked Pam with concern.

 “oh, don’t worry about it. He didn’t get through my shin guards. But we’d better get moving. I suspect that little battle we just fought pretty much attracted most of the zombies within earshot.”

 “Yeah,” added Michael, “but I’m guessing we cleared out most of the nearest ones, so any we attracted will take a while to get here.”

 After looking out all the windows and not seeing a single undead monster they filed out and continued on their way. “Wait a minute,” Charlie stopped them. He proceeded to pull a number of bloody arrows from the nearest corpses. Then being an almost proper gentleman, placed them in her empty quiver without blotting off any of the blood.

 “Thanks... I think,” dead panned Pam as she slung it over her shoulder and marched away to the southeast.

 Soon their way was blocked by a small lake. “Hey, is that an island over there? I think I see a tent on it and some guys inside,” said Michael. “It’s hard to tell, but they’re not acting like zombies.”

 ?Maybe,” agreed Charlie, “but there’s no way to get there from here, and we need to get you to that clinic as soon as possible. Let’s go around the lake this way.” He gestured to the right and Pam once again led the way. They eventually came to a road running east/west. Some buildings on the opposite side looked as if they’d seen better days. Then trouble appeared again.

 From down the road a car came toward them, the engine revving and the vehicle swerving wildly. With several precious rounds from his pistol Charlie managed to shoot out both front tires. The car rolled a little further before crashing into a tree. “what a shame, that looks like a Bentley,” noted Michael.

 “I’m more concerned about those things inside of it,” Pam said, raising her bow and taking aim. As she did so four gigantic monsters poured out of the old luxury car and charged in their direction. Pam cursed as her first arrow flew wide. She notched another and hit the closest one smack in the eye. He crashed down tripping two others.

 “Nice shooting,” commented Charlie as he and Michael used their silenced pistols to finish off the rest with head shots. “let’s get going.”

 It soon became apparent that the pistols weren’t silent enough because a pack of howling zombie wolves came streaming toward them from the east. “They look much bigger than the others. Michael, go to your Uzi,” urged Charlie.

 Pam launched arrow after arrow. It took several good hits to bring down a single one. The Uzi spat out rapid bursts doing some damage but not stopping a single one. Charlie fired three short bursts from his AK47, tearing huge chunks out of and killing all but two. Pam finished off one with her bow and Michael the other with two shots from his submachine gun.

 “That means the way should be mostly clear. But not for long. My shots will draw them to us like flies,” said Charlie. “keep moving. I think that’s the mall ahead to our right.

 Sure enough, it was the mall and they saw no creatures between them and the nearest entrance. Pam quickened her pace to a run. When they were just a dozen paces away Charlie called a halt. “we don’t want to charge in there blind.”

 Breathing hard they came to a stop on either side of the entrance, Charlie to the left, Michael and Pam to the right. She said, “someone on that roof told me the clinic is just inside this entrance and a little way to the right.”

 “good,” said Charlie. He took a quick glance inside and swore. “The place is crawling with creatures. Pam take a few steps back and see if you can thin them out with your bow.” She tried, but her first shots did little but draw their attention. A massive wave of zombies including wolves, dogs, and former humans erupted from every corner, racing toward them.

 “Time again for our big guns,” charlie directed. It was fortunate that both he and Michael had just loaded full clips into their weapons. “Step back and try not to let any get through the door.”

 Then Pam discovered she was almost out of arrows again. “Charlie can I get the quiver you’re carrying?” But he had already begun spraying a lethal barrage of rounds into the storming zombies within. Not having any arrows to fire she took the opportunity to watch their backs. It was a good thing, too. No more than two dozen feet away were a pair of those over-sized wolves tearing toward them, mouths wide open and ferocity in their bulging red eyes. “Look out behind!” she screamed into the din. Both guys spun around as one and fired into the charging monsters. The last one to go down landed twitching right at Pam’s feet.

 “Thanks for the warning,” gasped Charlie. “Here, looks like you need this,” noticing her two empty quivers. Michael had already turned and was firing short bursts into the crowd of creatures trying to get to them from inside the mall. Charlie pivoted around to join him.

 Pam sent two arrows into the mall but they seemed ineffectual so she turned to scan around them. In the distance she saw what looked like a zombie walking a dog, only there was no leash and they were loping straight toward her little party. They were still a good distance off but she tried a shot anyway. It struck the two-legged one right in the chest and he went down. The four-legged one let out a fierce, bone-chilling growl and ran at her.

 It didn’t run in a straight line though, but zigzagged in a most disconcerting way. In fact it almost seemed to disappear from one spot and reappear in another. She didn’t waste time pondering this weird phenomena, but fired a few arrows at it. Of course these missed. When it was practically on her it paused in its run and crouched for a leap. That’s when she put one white arrow straight into its open mouth. The thing tumbled into the corpse of a dead wolf and died alongside it.

 Behind her the firing had ceased. Charlie said, “That’s most of them. Let’s go.”

 He led the way through the mall entrance, swept the area with the sites of his rifle and took up a position some ten feet inside with his back against a wall. The others stepped in behind them and all was quiet. Bodies of dead zombie carpetede the tile floor. Picking their way through them the trio moved deeper into the nearly pitch black mall.

 I think I hear voices,” said Pam. “And I even think I can hear morse code or something coming from a radio. It’s around that corner.” She pointed ahead and to their right.

 They rounded the corner to see light coming from a doorway off to the left.

 Just then bullets whizzed over their heads sounding like angry bees. “Someone’s shooting at us,” yelled Charlie in a voice of disbelief. “”Run!” The others didn’t need any further encouragement as all three dashed forward and ran into the partially lit room.

 Just as on the roof over the sporting goods store they found people in various states of shock, grief, and disarray. Thankfully none of them looked like zombies and no one tried to shoot them. “Who on earth was firing at us,” Pam blurted out to the room in general. This was met with shrugs and sad shakes of heads.

 Charlie explained about Michael’s injury and that they’d been told he could get treatment here. A young woman with green hair and a ring in her nose looked Michael over and asked, “How long ago were you wounded?”

 “maybe two or three hours. I sort of lost track of time,” Michael answered.

 “Good, you’re here in plenty of time.”

 “Uh, what would happen if we weren’t?”

 “Then we’d have to kill you.” it didn’t sound like she was joking. “Follow me.” She took them down a dark hall, turned several corners and ushered them into a makeshift clinic.

 A forty-ish year old woman in an almost clean lab coat looked up and asked in a tired voice, “Who’s hurt?”

 Some time later, after Michael had been treated and they were assured that he was now out of danger, the trio hunkered down in a corner to rest and eat some of the trail mix from the visitor center. In a voice dripping with irony Charlie looked at Pam and said, “What a beautiful day for a walk in the park.”