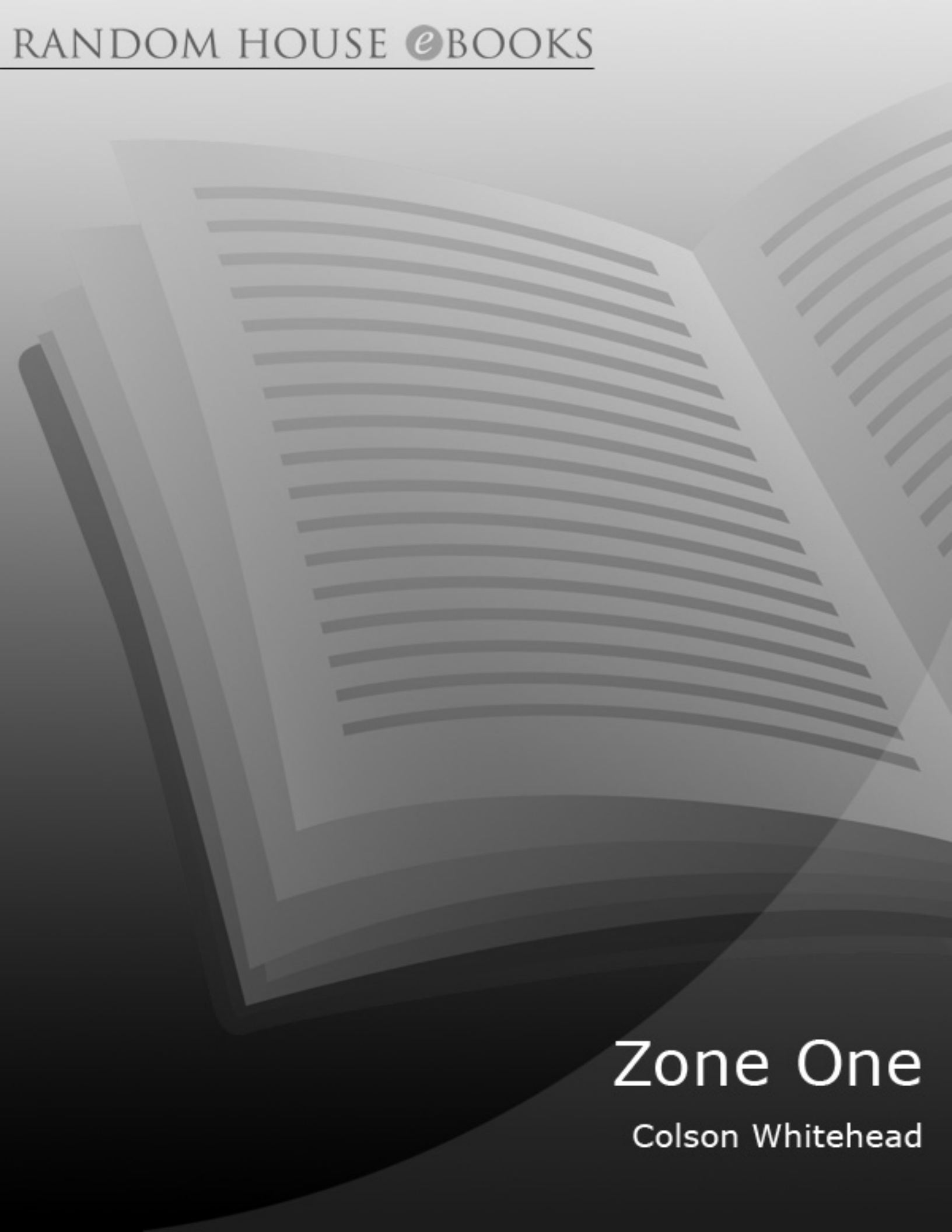
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



Zone One

Colson Whitehead

Contents

About the Book

In this wry take on the post-apocalyptic horror novel, a pandemic has devastated the planet. The plague has sorted humanity into two types: the uninfected and the infected, the living and the living dead. Now the plague is receding, and Americans are busy rebuilding civilisation under orders from the provisional government based in Buffalo. Their top mission: the resettlement of Manhattan. Armed forces have successfully reclaimed the island south of Canal Street – aka Zone One – but pockets of plague-ridden squatters remain. While the army has eliminated the most dangerous of the infected, teams of civilian volunteers are tasked with clearing out a more innocuous variety – the 'malfunctioning' stragglers, who exist in a catatonic state, transfixed by their former lives.

Mark Spitz is a member of one of the civilian teams working in lower Manhattan. Alternating between flashbacks of Spitz's desperate fight for survival during the worst of the outbreak and his present narrative, the novel unfolds over three surreal days, as it depicts the mundane mission of straggler removal, the rigours of Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder, and the impossible job of coming to grips with the fallen world.

And then things start to go wrong.

Both spine chilling and playfully cerebral, Zone One brilliantly subverts the genre's conventions and deconstructs the zombie myth for the twenty-first century.

About the Author

Colson Whitehead is the author of *The Intuitionist*, *John Henry Days*, *Apex Hides the Hurt* and *Sag Harbor*, as well as *The Colossus of New York*, a collection of essays. A recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award and a MacArthur Fellowship, he lives in New York City.

ALSO BY COLSON WHITEHEAD

The Intuitionist
John Henry Days
The Colossus of New York
Apex Hides the Hurt
Sag Harbor

TO BILL THOMAS

COLSON WHITEHEAD

ZONE ONE

a novel

Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

FRIDAY

“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 on 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 auntly 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? This 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 punch card decipherable only by defunct mainframes lodged in the crust of unmarked landfills. Pieces of citizens were on display in the windows, arranged by a curator with a taste for non sequitur: the splayed pinstriped legs of an urban golfer putting into a colander; half a lady's 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, stately named and midwifed 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 façades 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 cubicle 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. 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 gadget, 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 to 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 at their desks, where they had been tucked by the maintenance crew on their last night of work, the last sane evening in the world, only a few askew and facing the doors in trample-exit 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, no 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 their *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 doctors' 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. Their 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 competing 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 sent 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 fine 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 in 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 instruction 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 rooms, 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, thought “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 slam these keypad doors so that they popped open, presto. The mistake lay in succumbing to the prevailing delusions. Giving in to that pandemic of pheenie 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’d 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 novelty cocktails and laughing too eagerly.

The Marge nabbed Mark Spitz first, snatching his left bicep and taking it in its teeth. It 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 soupy 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, gory 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 harbingers, 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. It 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 pins, 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 places where human beings were paraphrased into numbers, components of bundled data to be shot 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 eyes 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 home makers 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 neck 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 that 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 cut through the clutch backyards, the hardwired shortcuts from his kid days, and crept and 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 mounds 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 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 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 zipped 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 in him 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