

# Store-crossed

an EXPONENTIAL APOCALYPSE story

by Erik Sumner



## **STORE-CROSSED**

an *Exponential Apocalypse* story  
by Eirik Gumeny

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This story is a work of fiction. Any mention of business establishments and locations is done in whatever legally protected manner it is that doesn't get the author sued. Any resemblance to actual persons, living, dead, or otherwise, is entirely coincidental. Any resemblance to potential futures is... actually kind of disheartening, given the number of corpses it would take to accomplish that, but still, you know, pretty cool, if you think about it. We'd have robots.

## PART ONE: Subterranean Homesick Blues

The world had ended twice already 'fore the zombies sent us fleein' to the warehouse stores off I-25. And while those cannibalistic meat puppets came and went – the desert is a terrible place to be a walkin' corpse – we stayed, settlin' in to something resemblin' a way of life. The stores had everything a survivor could need: thick walls, easily defendable entrances, lots of space, clothes, mountains of food, alcohol, toilet paper. And thanks to some quirk of automation, those supplies kept comin'. Didn't matter much if everyone at the main warehouse in Whereverthehell, Oklahoma, had their faces eaten off when the trucks could load up and drive themselves.

Over time and a couple more apocalypses, though, things started to fall apart. The stores got more crowded, the trucks less so. Some stopped comin' altogether. We had to learn ourselves how to forage, scavenge. There was an abandoned communal farm up the road a spell, which helped consid'rably, and a long line of empty retail and restaurants to the east. Still, the high desert ain't the most hospitable of places – once things started to tumble down, wasn't long before the casualties started to pile up.

Them folks at the REI were the first to go. 'pparently there's only so long you can go livin' on Cliff Bars and roasted roadrunner 'fore something breaks in your brain. And with all the knives they had... It was a bloodbath. The rest of us barely even looted the place on account of how terrible things turned out. Just didn't seem right.

Next went the Sports Authority, then the Home Depot, the Frito-Lay distribution center... All of 'em fallin' like dominoes 'til only the Costco and Sam's Club were left. We – both of us – took in what survivors we could, started settin' up livin' quarters higher and higher in the shelving, like we was Tokyo or somethin'.

We made it a few years like that, 'out no problems to speak of. The world kept collapsin' and rebuildin' all 'round us – near as we could tell, anyway – and we kept doin' our thing throughout all of it. Wasn't 'til around the fifteenth end of the world, when the birds got together and rebelled, that the rift occurred.

Now, I don't rightly remember what it was or why it happened, but something went down that turned things sour 'tween us and those buttholes at the Sam's Club in a way that couldn't be fixed. Certainly didn't help matters we was right across the street from one another. Every time one group or the other stepped outside, for air or unloadin' a truck or what have you, there was the enemy starin' right back. Tensions mounted, fights broke out. Eventually, though, we settled into an uneasy truce. We got our areas to scavenge and harvest, they got theirs. We even set up a schedule, for supplies, harvest, pretty much for everything, all so we didn't have to so much as look at one another. Wasn't pretty, but it worked, and that's the way it's been ever since.

Least, it was, up until two teenagers went and fell in love.

Things started simple and innocent enough: Julian, one of ours, a Costco, he went down Montgomery to the farm to grab some corn from the old maze like he did every

week durin' harvest. He had his boys with him, had his bags and his blade; wasn't nothing to suggest this was goin' to be anything but easy.

Course, if catastrophes could be predicted, we prob'bly wouldn't be livin' out of a crumblin' warehouse in the ruins of an interstate truck stop.

Julian and his boys was halfway through the grab when a rattlerunner came crashin' through the stalks. Now, if you ain't never run into one of them critters, you should go out immediately and thank whatever god you got. These things are some mean sons of bitches – cross between a rattlesnake and a roadrunner and the size of a damn Buick. Don't no one know for sure how they got so big or mean, but most money was on all the radioactive garbage leakin' out of the old Air Force base. Personally though, I think we'd just done so much to Mother Nature that she was finally takin' a swing back.

Whatever the reason, the rattlerunner was on the boys 'fore they even knew what was happenin'. One of 'em, Pete, got his head bit clean off 'fore he could even get his knife out. The others started stabbin' and slicin' at the thing, but this was an alpha rattlerunner – all they was doin' was making it mad. Boys'll be boys though, stubborn and stupid, so they kept fightin'. Sam and Gregory were swallowed whole. Julian said you could see 'em trying to punch through the thing's skin on the way down. Olaf got clipped by a wing and was sent flyin' into the stalks, broke some bones in the process. Only one left was Julian.

The boy went after the rattlerunner with everything he had, bless his idiot heart. He was loyal to a fault – to Costco, his friends. He wasn't 'bout to let some animal get away with eatin' 'em, not when he could make it dinner in return.

There's a reason rattlerunner's a delicacy though. We ain't had a bite of it in years and it ain't for lack of tryin'. They was hard to bring down on a good day, and Julian, he'd seen a lot better days than this.

The boy got in a few good licks, but it wasn't long 'fore he was pinned to the ground under the rattlerunner's talons. Then that infernal critter, fangs flashin', reared its head back and let out a screech that shook Julian right to his bladder. He was starin' right up and into this thing's gullet, thinkin' it'd be the last he ever saw.

Then that monster's head just up and exploded.

After Julian wiped the blood and guts from his eyes and wriggled out from underneath the beast, he found himself face to face with a girl holdin' a smokin' scattergun on her shoulder. Now, the gun alone shoulda been enough to pin her as being from Sam's Club – us at Costco was much too elegant and civilized for a weapon like that – but wasn't the gun the boy was looking at.

Seein' as how they was both underage and I'm pushin' seventy, I ain't gonna get into what it was he was looking at, so let's leave it at there were plenty of reasons for the two of them to be lockin' eyes and gazin' longingly at one another. World like this, you grow up hard and you grow up right. The apocalypse is great cardio, if nothin' else.

Now, pretty a picture as that may have been – her and him, a couple of tattered and sweaty survivors, runnin' high on adrenaline and standing 'round a rattlerunner corpse stuffed full of their friends – 'ventually manners got a hold of 'em and they got to talkin'.

"That was pretty brave of you to go after a rattlerunner with nothing but a hunting knife," she said.

Julian shrugged from where he was on the ground and said, "Yeah, I guess." Then he added, "I like your gun."

"Thanks."

Look, they was teenagers. This was never goin' to be poetry.

"I'm Rosario," said the girl, extendin' a hand.

"Julian," replied the boy, takin' her hand and lifting himself up. He wiped off as much of the offal as he could. "Thanks for, you know, shooting that thing."

"Oh, yeah. No problem."

"Cool."

"Yeah."

They stood eyein' each other for a few more moments, tryin' not to be obvious 'bout it, then took to looking 'round at the scene of devastation. That's when Rosario finally noticed the spilled bags of corn ears scattered 'cross the ground.

"So... you a harvester?"

"Yeah," replied Julian, lowerin' his voice as much as he could. "You're a hunter?"

"Yeah. We were out after some jackrabbits when that rattlerunner showed up and ate some of my friends."

"Yeah, mine too." Julian furrowed his brow and looked 'round again. "I think one's just in the corn, though."

"Fat blonde guy?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I think he's OK. Ish. I saw him limping back towards the store."

"Cool."

Like I said, world like this, you grow up hard. Ain't much use in mournin' when whole cities can up and vanish 'fore you finished your coffee.

"So, uh, you gonna bring that thing home?" asked Julian, nodding towards the massive snake-bird.

"Much as I can." She gestured into the corn maze with her thumb. "I got a cart a little ways back."

"Cool."

A breeze ruffled through the stalks 'round the teenagers, blowin' through their hair and making 'em look all majestic. Unfortunately, the breeze also made Julian suddenly and acutely aware of the dampness soakin' into his pants after the earlier bladder-shaking shriek.

"Hey, so, uh," he stammered, twistin' his legs, "I gotta get this corn back..."

"Right," said Rosario, pretendin' not to notice the boy's awkward posturin' or the dark patch on his jeans he was inadvertently highlighting. "Yeah. You should –"

"Yeah."

"Sounds good."

Quickly and clumsily, Julian gathered up his and his friends' things, throwin' more bags than he could comfortably carry over his shoulders, while Rosario went over to inspect the rattlerunner.

Before he left, though, Julian said:

"So, uh, maybe I'll see you around the store."

"Yeah. Maybe. My mom and I have a place in the shelves behind produce."

"Cool. We're in electronics."

“Cool.”

The two teenagers smiled wide at one another, then stopped, neither wantin’ the other to know they was havin’ any kind of emotions of any sort. But then, as Julian trudged out of the corn maze back toward the street and Rosario watched him go, the two of ‘em started beaming again, ‘cause sometimes, well, sometimes you just can’t hide the way you feel.

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Later that evening, after arrivin’ back at Costco and unloadin’, Julian made quick work of gettin’ cleaned up, checking in on Olaf, and then fillin’ in the other families ‘bout the untimely digestion of their sons. His consolation offering of “at least there’ll be rattlerunner for dinner” was met with more strange stares and uncontrolled bawling than he had been expectin’.

But the boy didn’t have time for weepin’ or weird looks, he had more important matters to tend to. Namely, there was a girl he kind of liked and he had to go find a way to accidentally run into her.

Wanderin’ ‘round the produce section as nonchalantly as he could muster, Julian peered back into the old inventory hold behind the ‘frigerated vegetables, hopin’ to catch a glimpse of Rosario. Not gettin’ much in the way of anything, though, ‘ventually he gave up on the subterfuge altogether and just started pokin’ ‘round people’s digs – strollin’ up and down the aisles, climbin’ the scaffolding, cranin’ his head ‘round the hanging bedsheets and into private spaces. Not unexpectedly, the folks who lived behind those sheets didn’t take too kindly to this, and soon enough Tallahassee – a troubled and tattooed man that only barely escaped the sinkin’ of Florida – pulled Julian aside and asked just what in the hell he was up to anyway.

And by “pulled aside,” I mean he grabbed Julian by the scruff of his shirt collar and slammed the boy up against the metal support pile.

“Whatta you think you’re doing, kid?”

“I’m looking for a girl named Rosario.”

“Rosario?” Tallahassee scrunched up his face for a second. “Nah, there ain’t no one here named Rosario. You got the wrong neighborhood.”

“No, I don’t,” countered Julian, still being held forcefully ‘gainst the bracketed support. “She said she was behind produce. She’s tall, got brown hair. She killed a rattlerunner earlier. She should’ve brought in a cartload of it.”

“A cartload of rattlerunner?” The Florida man laughed, showcasin’ the handful of teeth he had left. “Now you’re just making shit up.”

“Maybe she’s just not back yet.”

“Look,” said Tallahassee, shakin’ his head, “I don’t know what you’re on, but, A, who’d you get it from? I’m the supplier for the entire western half of Costco and I deserve to know if someone’s moving in on my turf. And B, I know everyone here in BePro, and most of the rest of the store, there’s no Rosario. You got the wrong name.”

“I’m telling you, she said Rosario. I wouldn’t forget it.”

“Kid,” the Florida man began, easin’ his hold on Julian and oddly sympathetic all of a sudden, “I don’t know how to explain this to you, but sometimes women lie.”

“Maybe to a toothless backwoods meth addict like you.”

"I have teeth, damn it!" Tallahassee barked, shovin' Julian back up against the scaffolding.

"OK! Fine! You're not toothless."

"Thank you." The Florida man removed his forearm from the boy's chest.

"Look," explained Julian, "she saved my life. We talked. She smiled at me. Why would she lie about her name after that?"

"I don't know, but she musta had her reasons. I mean, 'less you can think of another reason ain't neither of us ever seen a Rosario 'round here."

The man and the boy looked at one another for a moment, then both their eyes went wide with realization simultaneously.

"Shit, kid," said Tallahassee. "You'd be better off if she was imaginary."

"Well, we don't know for sure..."

"Yeah, we do."

Julian hung his head for a second, then asked, "Is it really that bad?"

"She's a Sam's Clubber, buddy," explained the Florida man. "It couldn't get any more bad."

"Well, yeah, I know we all say that, but, I mean, why?"

"Why? Why?! Are you seriously asking that?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus, kid," said Tallahassee, shakin' his head. "Because they suck, that's why. They're the garbage fires of people – terrible, awful, and offensively malodorous."

"I thought she smelled nice."

"Sam's Club used to be part of Walmart, kid. *Walmart*. You do know what they did in the war of '25, right?"

"Yeah, but only to hipsters. And that was a long time ago anyway."

The Florida man sighed heavily. "Those damn Sam's Clubbers are using up all our resources, breathing all our air –"

"Can't we just, you know, split stuff with them? There's a ton of land and stuff and whatever out there and not that many people."

"Are you serious, kid? You want us to share? What is this, some kind of commune or something?"

"Yes?" Julian looked 'round at the expansive warehouse, loaded to the gills with people and open food banks and common areas. "I mean, technically it is, right?"

"We are a collective of *survivors*! Working together to keep ourselves survived! That is entirely different!"

"I don't really think it is..."

Tallahassee, in utter disbelief of what he was hearin', went ahead and lost his mind for a spell. His face grew incensed, spittle fleckin' at the corners of his mouth. He stared, growling, at Julian for a handful of seconds, then started stormin' around in large circles, swingin' his arms and punchin' the air and swearin' under his breath.

Then, just as suddenly as it started, it stopped, the Florida man walkin' calmly over to Julian and sayin':

"You're, what? Sixteen?"

"Seventeen."

"Close enough. Look, kid, there's a couple hot little pieces over in soft drinks that

—"



"Dude."

"What?"

"You're, like, forty."

"Fine, whatever, kid. Judge *me*." Tallahassee shoved Julian one last time for good measure. "Least I didn't fall for a God damned Sam's Clubber."

## PART TWO: Dancing in the Dark

That night, well past curfew, while the rest of us at Costco was slumberin' soundly, Julian slipped out and crossed the street toward the Sam's Club. He wasn't quite sure what it was he was plannin' on doin' just yet, but, with a little luck, it involved Rosario.

With the help of the werewolf moon hangin' in the clouded sky, the boy made his way up the grassy embankment and 'cross the parking lot to the front doors of the warehouse. Lookin' at the chain pulled down over 'em, and the security guard sleepin' in his chair behind that, Julian started thinking twice 'bout what it was he was about to do. Slowly and quietly, he slipped up 'gainst the wall of the massive building and crept to the receiving bay in the rear.

Hidin' himself 'tween two dumpsters, the boy stared up at the loading docks, mumblin' away the whole time.

"Better than falling for a Sam's Clubber.' Yeah, whatever, you toothless pervert. I'll fall for whoever I want! Just 'cause everyone else at the store agrees with you doesn't make it –"

There was a clatter then, at the nearest loading dock door, a ripple running up through the metal slats.

"Oh, crap." Julian crouched lower, just barely peerin' out from 'round the dumpster.

The door continued rattling for a few seconds more, slidin' up a few feet into the top of the dock 'fore stoppin'. A tall figure ducked 'neath it, a girl slidin' out from the shadows to sneak a cigarette while her mother slept.

"Well, damn, that's lucky," muttered Julian.

Rosario flicked her lighter, her little flame shinin' bright, bathin' her face in firelight and puttin' the mottled moon above to shame.

"God, she's got pretty eyes."

Julian watched her as she slid her lighter back into the pocket of her jeans and sat down, danglin' her legs off the edge of the loading dock. She shook her head, waved her cigarette through the air. Near as the boy could tell, his lady friend was havin' a conversation with someone who wasn't there.

Julian sneaked his way closer so he could hear what she was saying.

"You can't date him." Her voice was high, like she was makin' fun of someone else. "He's a Costco!" So what? I'll like whoever I want! They're just stupid stores. I'll just go over there and take down the damn sign. Then what? Still a Costco then or would it just a building? Would that be OK, mom? If he was just from some building?

"Or how about we go live in a cardboard box," she continued, "just the two of us. Then everything would be fine, I bet. Can't get mad at me for dating a guy who lives in a box if I live in a box too!"

"Well, OK," said Julian, inchin' out from behind the dumpster and into the darkness. "I mean, it's a little early to move in together, but I'm down."

"Shit," Rosario muttered, snuffin' out her cigarette. "Who's there?"

"If you can't even recognize my voice yet, maybe this cardboard box thing is a bad idea."

"Julian? Where are you?"

The boy stepped out from the piled garbage and toward the edge of the loading dock. Rosario saw him and smiled, absolutely outshinin' the weak starlight. Julian smiled back, the two of them stayin' like that, grinnin' like idiots, for the better part of a minute.

Eventually the girl spoke, asking:

"Why didn't you tell me you were a Costco?"

"Didn't seem important," replied the boy with a shrug.

"Well, it's not. To me anyway. But you're going to get your ass beat if anyone sees you." She added, "Why are you skulking around in the dark anyway?"

"I was trying to come see you," he explained, "but, you know, there's the whole hating each other ass beating thing you were just talking about."

"Oh, right, yeah."

"Do you know why, by the way? I couldn't get an answer from anyone."

"Nope. All I ever get is 'because.'"

"God, adults suck."

"Tell me about it."

"You know," began Julian slowly and not a little timidly, "it'd totally serve them right if, you know, we just started dating, or something."

"Are you asking me out?"

"Yes?"

Rosario beamed. "You might wanna not hide in garbage next time."

"I'll, uh, keep that in mind. Next time." He covertly, and unsuccessfully, tried to smell himself. Then, scrunching his brow, he said, "That was a yes, right?"

"Yes, it was a yes," she replied, slidin' over to the edge of the concrete dock. "It's not every boy who'll risk getting pummeled just to see me."

"Well," said Julian, putting his hand on hers, "you're totally worth getting a fist up my ass." The boy immediately removed his hand. "I mean, a foot. Shit, uh... I didn't mean any of that. It's just – You're just – You're really pretty and – Uh. You're – Crap. No, you're not crap, you're... Uh..."

Julian turned a shade of red usually reserved for art classes and ripened tomatoes. Rosario joined him.

"Emotions are kinda dumb, aren't they?"

"They're so confusing! And then you add in words and trying not to sound like a dumbass and –"

"Rosie!" called a voice from inside the loading area. "Whole lotta Rosie!"

"Shit," said Rosario, twistin' to look. "You should hide."

"Who's that?" asked Julian.

"My cousin Warner. He's been staying with me and my mom since that fire tornado took out the Frito-Lay plant. He must have realized I snuck out."

"Stand up and be counted for what you are about to receive," called Warner, gettin' closer to the half-opened loading gate.

"What did he say?" asked Julian.

"Get down, you dope," said Rosario, shoving the boy by the head. He ducked into the shadows beside the concrete dock.

"If you're name is on the guest list," said Warner, legs just visible in the darkness behind the gate, "no one can take you higher."

"Yeah, I'll be right in!" Rosario shouted back. "I'm just... getting some air."

"If she knew she could get you, she'd play 'em fast and she'd play 'em hard."

"Then don't tell her, OK? It's not a big deal."

"She could close her eyes and feel every card."

"She's not gonna know you found me! Look, I'll deal with mom, Warner. Just go back to sleep."

"Hell's bell's."

"Yeah, whatever."

The teenagers listened to Warner shufflin' away from the receiving bay and back into the warehouse proper.

"Was he... quoting AC/DC?" asked Julian, poppin' his head back out of the shadows.

"Yeah..." explained Rosario. "That's actually the only way he can communicate. It's a whole thing."

"Huh."

"Trust me, it gets old. There's only so many times you can hear a road called the highway to Hell before you start wanting to take a cast-iron skillet to the back of his skull."

"That is awfully specific."

"Well, it's heavy metal."

"Look, if you're going to make puns like that, I don't know if we can be together."

"Yeah?" She smiled, callin' his bluff. "So you're saying you're not gonna kiss me right now?"

Rosario and Julian made out for the next twenty minutes, pawin' at each other on that concrete dock 'neath the werewolf moon, right up until they heard Warner 'gain, recitin' the entirety of "You Shook Me All Night Long" from inside.

### PART THREE: Jack and Diane

So Rosario and Julian began datin' proper – if in secret – meetin' up in the corn maze or the old abandoned KFC down the way, always under cover of huntin' or harvestin' crops. They even started picking up shifts scavenging for supplies in the deserted dollar stores and drugstores nearby.

Now, most parents would be suspicious of their kids up and volunteerin' for extra turns at manual labor, and theirs weren't no different. An antsy, petulant seventeen-year-old suddenly startin' to want to be helpful rings all kinds of alarms. But the warehouses were, always, short-handed, and Julian and Rosario were good at what they did, even if that was only secondary to seein' each other. So their folks, they turned a blind eye, and their friends – them that was still alive anyway – let them have their fun. No one knew Rosario was datin' a Costco, or Julian a Sam's Clubber – everyone just assumed they was sneakin' around with someone from their own store, just for the fun of it. The kids never gave 'em reason to suspect otherwise, and, seein' as how they were happier and more productive, no one kept pickin'.

World like this, though, no good thing can last. Soon enough the two young lovers were found out.

The two of 'em was laying out on a blanket in a courtyard of dried-out grass, in an old hacienda 'bout a mile west of the corn maze, just being together, starin' up at the endless turquoise sky and watching the clouds drift by.

"That one looks like a hydrogen bomb."

"Huh. Yeah. Look at that."

They had a rabbit roastin' in the fireplace in the largest of the ranch's crumblin' buildings, a bottle of old and terrible champagne liberated from an abandoned liquor store sat warmin' nearby. The teenagers had been together for four weeks now and they intended on celebrating, takin' a stab at some real romance and lettin' things go as far as that led them.

"Runnin' round with the wrong crowd."

That was the plan anyway.

Rosario and Julian rolled onto their shoulders, twistin' toward the voice and findin' her cousin standin' in the doorway of the hacienda, a spiked baseball bat restin' on his hulking shoulder.

"There's no way that's good," said Julian.

"Not even a little," replied Rosario.

I think it goes without sayin' that Warner wasn't quite right in the head. 'side from the song lyrics, the young man had a severe aversion to change. He spent most of his time at the side of Rosario and her mother, and all of Rosario's recent time away wasn't sittin' too well with him. He'd followed her out to the ranch house, his every intention bein' to talk with her and bring her back home. When he found her rollin' around with a Costco, though, well, that's just something that wasn't done. That was 'gainst the rules. And don't no one get to go and break the rules.



Warner ran back to the Sam's Club, arguin' with himself and tryin' to figure out what to do. Unfortunately for everyone involved, the answer he came up with was mostly manifestin' as gratuitous violence.

"Leave us alone, Warner!" shouted Rosario.

"Caught with your pants down," countered Warner.

"We haven't done anything yet!" barked Julian.

"Well..." muttered Rosario.

"Well, OK, yeah. But we haven't done the thing he thinks we did that's gonna get my ass murdered."

"OK, yeah, that's accurate."

Her cousin approached, lifting the bat from his shoulder and holdin' it out.

"You're only young but you're gonna die."

"Holy shit, he really is gonna murder me," said Julian. "I was just exaggerating before."

"Warner! No! He hasn't done anything wrong!"

"And I knew there was no turning back."

"Warner!" she shouted again, running between her cousin and her boyfriend. She put her hands on Warner's chest. "Warner! No! Don't do this!"

"Don't try to push your luck, just get out of my way."

He shoved her to the ground.

"Oh, crap," said Julian.

"Blood on the streets, blood on the rocks..."

"Look, man, I don't want to fight you," said Julian, his hands up in front of him. "I really like your cousin and I feel like we should try to be friends."

Warner responded to this by swingin' his bat down viciously, narrowly missin' Julian and buryin' the nailed barrel in the ground in front of his feet.

"Jesus, Warner. I'm not gonna fight you. Can't we talk about this?"

"Blood in the gutter," replied the young man, wrenchin' the bat free, "every last drop!"

"This is going to make Thanksgiving really weird if you keep trying to kill me."

Warner swung the weapon wildly, gettin' closer and closer with each step backward Julian took. A frenzied look crawled 'cross the young man's face.

"Shit," said Julian. "Shit, shit, shit."

"Warner! Stop!" cried Rosario. "Leave him alone!"

"Every last drop!" shouted Warner.

As the bat came thunderin' down once again, Julian sprinted past Warner, runnin' toward the hacienda and only barely avoidin' a face full of nails. Not sure what else to do, the boy scrambled inside to his bag and started riflin' through it, lookin' for his blade. Holdin' it in one hand, he looked up and immediately saw the baseball bat swingin' towards him. Instinctively, he leaned his torso back, the bat swinging over his chest, a few of the nails catchin' his shirt and tearin' through it.

Julian spun the knife in his hand, holdin' the blade downwards.

"God damn it, Warner. I don't want to do this."

Warner stood, fumin', the bat lifted above his head. Then suddenly it was Rosario jumped onto her cousin's back, shoutin' at him to stop. He threw an elbow into her chest and sent her sprawlin' to the floor.

Seein' this, Julian leapt with all he had at Warner. Warner dropped the bat and caught Julian by the wrists, the knife less than an inch from his shoulder. They stayed like that for a moment, pushin' 'gainst one another, 'fore Warner slammed his forehead into Julian's nose.

The boy stumbled backward, blood pouring from his face, the knife fallin' to the ground. 'fore Julian could gather himself back up, Warner had his hands around the boy's throat, chokin' him out and liftin' him inches off the floor. Julian kicked, his feet landin' impotently against Warner's legs. He was startin' to black out.

"You're only young," Warner growled, "but you're gonna die."

Those ended up being the last words Julian ever heard Warner speak.

Just as the boy was about to slip into unconsciousness, he felt the massive hands gripped 'round his neck just up and let go. As Julian crumpled to the floor, he saw Warner spin 'round, revealin' Rosario standin' there, brandishin' a fire iron like a longsword.

"Warner," she said, "please."

The young man took a swing at his cousin, his hand sailin' through the space 'tween them like a brick in a riot. Rosario stepped quickly to the side, swingin' the iron into his shoulder as she did. All this did was upset him more.

Warner let loose a guttural roar, somethin' animal, and charged at his cousin. Not seein' any other options, Rosario swung the fire iron as hard as she could, fracturing Warner's skull and sendin' him tumbling to the floor.

"Holy shit," said Julian, lifting himself up.

"He was going to kill you," Rosario replied, dropping the iron. "And then, you know, me."

"We should probably still try to get him medical attention or something, right?"

"Yeah, I guess," she replied, puttin' her palms 'gainst her forehead. "I mean he is —"

Warner lurched from where he was layin' on the floor, his massive hand shootin' out for Julian's leg. The boy leapt back, fingers inches from his ankle. Then he and his girlfriend watched, horrified, as Warner lumbered back to his feet, blood streamin' down the side of his head.

"Warner..."

The young man, hate and betrayal still burnin' in his eyes, took a step toward Julian only to collapse entirely, his knees bucklin' 'neath him, his body fallin' backward. And then the final, fatal injury: the other side of his head this time, catchin' the jagged corner of the fireplace floor.

There was a moment then of silence and fear, the air itself frozen. Then the two teenagers ran to one another and embraced, holdin' each other tight for a good long while.

'ventually, heads and hearts cooled, the pair turned and stared down at the lifeless body of Rosario's cousin.

"This is not good," said Rosario.

"I am not going to be the one to tell your mom," said Julian.

"We gotta hide the body."

"What?" Julian turned to face Rosario.

"We need to hide the body."

The boy paused for a moment, then said, "God, I love you."

Now, for most folks, sayin' those three little words less than a fistful of weeks into a relationship was more or less sabotage. Not to mention it bein' right on the heels of an involuntary manslaughter. But in a world always on the brink, and bein' teenagers movin' at the speed of sound, there was really only one thing she was ever gonna say back:

"I love you too."

"But seriously," she added, "we've really gotta bury him or something before someone finds him."

"Can we maybe eat first?" asked Julian. "I think the rabbit's ready."

"Yeah, OK," replied Rosario, turnin' toward the fire. "I am kinda starving."

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The teenagers, havin' buried Warner in an old mulch pit out in the hacienda's gardens, settled back into the main room and began thinkin' out their next move. They leaned in close to one another in front of the fire, smellin' of sweat and roses and breathin' each other in.

"So," she said.

"So," he said.

Their young bodies still runnin' full of adrenaline, plus the champagne and rabbit to boot, Rosario and Julian, hearts poundin' and fingers entwined, looked deep into one another's eyes and decided, then and there, that it was finally time to make the trip to Bone Town.

Bone Town, a makeshift refuge for troublemakers and those otherwise unable to go home, was a solid day's walkin' however, and it was startin' to get dark out. The two'd have to wait 'til morning 'fore they could start their trek.

Rosario ran her thumb gently over Julian's busted nose.

"That looks painful."

"I've had worse."

In the meantime, though, there was plenty they could think of to keep themselves occupied.

"You know what we should do now?" he asked, runnin' his hand through her dark hair and pullin' it back from her cheek.

She leaned in, touchin' her forehead to his.

"I think I've got an idea..."

Still lost in one another, Rosario and Julian began slowly undressin', then proceeded to get down and dirty.

Rattlerunners, you see, have some mighty enhanced senses. And as they're primarily visual hunters, easiest way to stay safe from 'em is by layin' low to the ground, down and out of view of the windows. For added protection, rollin' 'round and coverin' up in dirt is usually enough to keep the beasts off any scent you might be leavin'.

Havin' done all that, Rosario and Julian were now filthy, mostly naked, and huddled together in front of a roarin' fire. The two teenagers looked at each other, figured what the hell, and went ahead and downed the rest of the champagne 'fore makin' quick and awkward love to one another.

It being the first time for both, and more or less the blind leadin' the blind, they did it a couple more times 'til they figured they got it right. Then Julian and Rosario fell asleep in front of the dying embers, thoroughly exhausted and wrapped up in one another's arms.

## PART FOUR: Exile on Main Street

Early the next mornin', the sun burnin' away the fog of dawn, Rosario and Julian packed up their things and made their way from the hacienda and all evidence of their wrongdoings. The teenagers was fairly confident they weren't goin' to get caught for what they'd done – most folks from the warehouses never trekked that far west, and there wasn't much in the way of serviceable supplies in the old ranch anyway – but they knew they'd never be able to go back to livin' in the warehouses, knowin' what they'd done to Warner. For one thing, dinner with Rosario's mother would be mighty uncomfortable. And then, course, there was the whole blood feud 'tween the Costco and the Sam's Club that started this whole mess.

Instead, the two lovebirds hit out for Bone Town, a community they knew only from rumor, built out of salvaged trash and the remains of ancient animal carcasses, way out on the west mesa. The place had a notorious reputation, only ever brought up when talkin' 'bout a guy who knew a guy who'd done something terrible. But once you peeled back the sordidness, what was left was a haven, willin' to take in all comers, 'gardless of their crimes. No one in Bone Town would care that the two was from different stores, or even that they killed a man. Julian and Rosario figured it was their best bet at startin' a life together.

Unfortunately for them, that future came with a price.

A monthly HOA fee, to be precise, something the rumors 'bout Bone Town failed to mention.

The two teenagers stood there, at the entrance to the tent city, lines of barbed and razor wire runnin' 'round the perimeter as far as they could see, black lava rock stretchin' back for miles, littered with makeshift huts and threadbare tents, lean-tos made of femurs, ribcages with tarps stretched 'cross 'em. And the only thing keepin' them from this Shangri-la was a tiny man in a booth, refusin' to slide open the gate.

"Are you serious?" asked a dismayed Rosario. "We've been walking all friggin' day just to get here."

"Tough, sister," said the man manning the gate. "Best you turn around and go home."

"We can't go home," said Julian. "That's why we came here, you moron."

"You really think insulting me is gonna help your case?"

"Sorry."

"Look," said the man, "I get that you got problems, I do. But unless you also got the fifty for the first month, I can't let you in."

"That's ridiculous!" replied Rosario.

"Honestly, it's a pretty reasonable price."

"It's the principle of the thing!"

"And, also, the price," added Julian. "We're broke as shit."



"I don't know what to tell you," said the man. "Bone City may be a refuge for the homeless and the troubled and the lost, but we gotta have standards. We can't just let anyone in."

"Doesn't Redbeard Robin, that serial killer who ate people's hair, live here?" asked Rosario.

"Yeah, but he had the fifty. One of our best tenants, actually."

After a few more minutes of attempted rationalizin' and beggin', the two teenagers finally gave up and turned 'round, startin' the long march back toward the warehouse district. They did it with great pride and indignation, stompin' off and cussin' and makin' sure the man in the booth knew just exactly how unhappy they was with him.

Once they'd put a few miles 'tween him and them, though, Julian and Rosario let their despair shine through, collapsin' to the dusty ground in the shade of some scrub and regroupin'.

"What are we supposed to do now?" muttered Rosario.

"I can't believe we have to pay for stuff," added Julian.

"I know, right? I've got, like, five bucks to my name. Most of it's in quarters."

"Maybe we can live off the land," suggested the boy. "I know what kind of plants are poisonous and which aren't. And you can hunt, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't have a gun. I usually borrow my mom's."

"I've got my knife." Julian patted his satchel.

"Oh, honey," said Rosario. "That's not a real knife."

"I know," he replied with a sigh.

"Besides, neither of us knows shit about building shelter."

"Good point."

Rosario sighed deeply, then laid her head on Julian's shoulder.

"This sucks," she said.

"Yeah."

He put his hand on her knee, rubbin' it gently. They stayed liked that for a spell, exhausted and defeated, starin' off at the mountains way out in the distance. 'ventually, Julian had an idea:

"So I guess now we just wander around the desert 'til we die?"

"Let's call that Plan B," replied Rosario, sittin' up straight and pattin' his thigh. "I was going to suggest we go back to the hacienda and start our new lives there. Maybe break into one of the stores at night and steal what we need to get set up."

"OK, yeah," said Julian. "That is a much better idea."

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As Rosario and Julian 'pproached the abandoned hacienda, the two young lovers could hear voices speakin' in the main room. Quickly and quietly, they ducked behind a crumblin' wall in the courtyard, listenin' to the strangers inside.

"They were here," said one of them, "day before yesterday."

"And it looks like they had themselves quite the time," said another. They could hear the champagne bottle bein' kicked.

"Can't believe she'd run off with a Costco," said a third voice.

"Well, that's assuming Warner was right," said yet another. "He was in and out quick, and mostly mumbling to himself."

"Warner was a lot of things, but he wasn't a liar. If he thought Rosario was up to no good, she probably was."

"Speaking of, any sign of him?"

"No."

"I hope he's all right."

"I don't think he is," said the first voice. "There was a lot of blood here."

A pang of regret trembled through the teenagers, their stomachs sinkin'. Quick enough, though, that was drowned out by a whole lot more fear.

"I recognize some of the voices," whispered Rosario. "Michelle, the best tracker we have, and Escalade, who's, I don't know, the judge and executioner of Sam's Club, I guess. When someone does something wrong, he's the one who gets called in to take care of it."

"So, what you're saying is, we're screwed."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Wandering around the desert doesn't seem so bad now, does it?"

"Nope."

Two more voices spoke up from inside the ranch:

"You can go sleep at home tonight if you can get up and walk away."

"Wanted a woman, never bargained for you."

"Was that..." began Julian.

"Two of Warner's friends from the Frito-Lay plant," explained Rosario.

"They also only talk in song lyrics?"

"Yeah."

"What the hell did they put in those corn chips?"

There was a bustlin' from the main room, the cadre of Sam's Clubbers startin' to fan out and sweep the rest of the hacienda grounds.

"Shit."

"This way," said Rosario, takin' Julian's hand.

Knowin' the road'd be watched, or least easily tracked, the two of them crept back to the outer edge of the ranch grounds, slinkin' 'round the back and hopin' to make it to the nearby farmlands 'out gettin' caught.

They was nearly in the clear, too, inchin' past the last of the hacienda's buildings, when they came face-to-face with Tallahassee and a whole pack of Costco folks, doin' the same as the teenagers was but comin' from the other side.

"Well, well, well," said the Florida man, smilin' his toothless smile. "What do we have here?"

"Oh, crap," said Julian, tiltin' his head back in aggravation. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, kid. Your parents are worried sick."

"Well, you can tell 'em I'm fine. Never been better. Now, if you'll excuse us..."

Tallahassee put his hand against the teenager's chest.

"No dice, kid."

Julian stared at the tattooed drug dealer standin' 'fore him, then the mess of miscreants he'd brought with him. Wasn't a hunter or scavenger in the bunch.

"How did *you* clowns find us?"

"You really think you two are the only ones to use this dump as a rendezvous for illicit sexy times?"

"Yes?"

"Well, you're wrong," replied Tallahassee matter-of-factly. "Now come on. We gotta get you home."

"No," replied the teenager. "That's not happening. I'm in love with Rosario and I'm not going back to Costco if she can't come with me."

"You know that ain't happening, kid. She's a Sam's Clubber."

"Then I'm not going."

"Let's not do this again," said the Florida man, rollin' his eyes. "You're young and you're stupid and you think you're in love, and I get that, but that don't change the fact that she's a putrid sack of filth and lies and no good'll come of being with her. Maybe you can sculpt a pile of dog shit into a fine looking statue, sure, but it's still dog shit."

"Screw you," spat Rosario.

"Look, kid," continued Tallahassee, "your folks want you back in one piece and we want the reward that comes with doing that, so let's go. You ain't doing no one any favors making some self-righteous stand here. So why don't you ditch this Sam's Club bitch and —"

Rosario punched Tallahassee so hard two of his few remainin' teeth came flyin' outta his mouth.

"Mother—"

"What in the hell is going on here?" boomed a voice from the other end of the outbuilding.

The two teenagers turned to find Escalade comin' 'round the corner of the shed, the rest of the Sam's Clubbers followin' and fillin' in behind 'im.

"We can not catch a God damn break," muttered Julian.

"You," said Escalade, pointin' a beefy finger at the teenager. "You're coming with us, you sackless Costco scum, for kidnapping Rosario and —"

"He didn't kidnap me!" shouted Rosario.

"I am not going anywhere with any of you!" barked Julian.

"Look, fella," began Tallahassee, noddin' to Escalade and pausin' to spit some blood. "You can't have the boy, he's coming with us. You can do what you want with this little skank, though, she's caused enough problems."

Rosario raised her fist again, but this time 'round it was Julian clobbered Tallahassee, sendin' the man reelin' to the ground. The teenager leaned forward to hit him 'gain, but his arm was grabbed by a surprisingly swift Escalade.

"Enough," he barked, pullin' Julian back. "You're coming with me."

"Get the hell off him," said Rosario, shovin' the enormous Sam's Clubber with both hands. Escalade grabbed her by the wrist.

"You're not blameless in this either, girl."

"Let go of me," she ordered, tryin' to shake her hand free. Julian, meanwhile, threw an elbow into Escalade's throat. The man coughed, gaggin', and stumbled a few steps backward, lettin' go of both of the teenagers.

"Attaboy," said Tallahassee. "I knew you weren't a complete disappointment to Costco." He reached out to put a hand on Julian's shoulder. "Now come on."

As Tallahassee's hand gripped the teenager's shoulder, Escalade grabbed the man's wrist.

"I can't let that happen," he wheezed.

The Florida man grinned, blood drippin'. "Then it looks like we got ourselves a problem."

Escalade grinned back. "Looks like we do."

The Sam's Clubbers and the folks from Costco stood just feet from one another, starin' each other down, years of hate and anger boilin' up and over. Julian and Rosario stood in the center of it all, holdin' hands and steppin' sideways, lookin' for a way out.

"Shotgun sings the song," said one of Warner's friends.

"See you swinging on the gallows pole," said another.

"Bring it on, asshole," replied Tallahassee.

Now, Tallahassee and the folks he brought with 'im were outnumbered a solid two to one. And them Sam's Clubbers didn't look like they was ones for foolin' 'round. Smart man woulda reconsidered startin' up a physical altercation with a group like that. But Tallahassee wasn't much one for book learnin', and him and the folks from Costco still had some pretty amazin' meth coursин' through their veins.

It was Nan from Costco threw the first punch. Though, truthfully, it was more she tackled one of the ladies from Sam's Club and started smashin' at her head with a rock. After that, things was just a blur of shoutin' and fists and blood.

And 'spite the mountin' casualties and maimin's, the fightin' never eased up. More and more reinforcements poured onto the property from the warehouses, people comin' to see what was goin' wrong, see why the search parties wasn't comin' back, and then becomin' part of the problem themselves.

At one point a young rattlerunner came runnin' into the fray, tore one of the Sam's Clubbers clean in two. Then the beast started in on some other folks, rearin' up and swingin' its tail 'round. A few others from Costco, though, newly 'rrived with a pack of devil cougars, sicced their own animals on the rattlerunner and brought the thing down like it weren't nothin'. Then they turned the cougars on the Sam's Clubbers, a few of whom had showed up with black bears of their own. It was a God damned nightmare of a brawl.

Hours and hours went by, bodies pilin' up, more and more weapons and animals turnin' up, each side provin' to be as resilient as an undersized Italian boxer.

"Guys, seriously," said Julian, slumped beside his girlfriend on the sidelines, "stop fighting."

"Why aren't they listening to us?" said Rosario. "Wasn't this whole thing because of us?"

"I think we're probably the last thing on their minds at this point." The boy from Costco nodded toward a pair of fighters. "Tallahassee's actually going at it with some other dude from our own store right now."

"Yeah... I'm pretty sure I saw Susan chasing after the chick who stole her girlfriend with a crowbar earlier."

"Maybe we should start a fire or something. Get their attention."

"Yeah, all right," replied Rosario with a shrug.

The two teenagers gathered up what tinder they could, stackin' it up 'gainst the smallest of the hacienda's buildings, the one closest to the sprawlin' melee. Then they lit

a match and watched it burn. Then they watched it keep burnin', the whole of the shed going up in flames, smoke fillin' the sky.

Nobody stopped punchin' anybody.

"What the hell?" asked Rosario, watchin' as the outbuilding collapsed with a crash, embers flyin' into the air. "Why are they still fighting?"

"Maybe we have to be more drastic."

"Burn down the rest of the hacienda? OK, let me get some more wood."

"What? No," said Julian. "How about... What if we just did it, right here?"

"Did what?"

"You know... *It*."

"Wait. What? Are you..."

"I'm serious. That's what pissed them off in the first place, right? Us being together? So let's *be* together, right here, right now."

"You're serious?"

"I figure it's that or we just let them murder each other," said Julian. He shrugged. "I could honestly go either way right now."

"No," said Rosario, lookin' at the bloody brawl, "this is getting way too out of hand. I couldn't live with myself if we didn't try to stop it."

"Then take off your pants."

"It bothers me how much sense this makes."

"Really?" replied Julian, undoin' his jeans. "Cause I'm stupid excited about it."

"Yeah," she said. "I can see that."

So the two young lovers went ahead with their ill-conceived plan, doin' all kinds of things you ain't supposed to do in front of friends and family. And when they'd finished, sweaty and flushed from this newfound exhibitionist streak of theirs, they looked up, expectin' to see a crowd of outraged parents and store-folk or, at the least, Tallahassee standin' over 'em with a camera.

Instead, they found that the battle had only gotten bigger. Nearly every last soul from the Costco and the Sam's Club was on the property now, swingin' and bitin' and tryin' to kill every other soul they saw. Rosario's own mother was usin' a burnin' board from the outbuilding to bludgeon an old man. Julian's uncle had hijacked a black bear and was ridin' it into a group of preteens armed with broken bottles and at least one flamethrower.

"What. The. Shit."

They could hear scatterguns firin'. An explosion in the distance sent hunks of someone's wolf sailin' 'cross the sky. The nightmare had turned into a fever dream of violence and gore.

The teenagers, half-dressed, sank to the ground, thoroughly defeated. They was watchin' everything they knew tear itself apart, and they was out of ideas on how to stop it.

As they stared at the carnival of carnage 'fore them, depressed and dismayed, a few of Rosario's friends came and joined them where they sat.

"Is this all 'cause you guys are dating?" asked Carrie.

"I mean, it's a little weird, sure, but whatever," added Natalie. "This is kinda overkill."

"Honestly," said Rosario, "at this point, I think they're all going at it just because."



"That's stupid."

"You're telling me," said Wren, a friend of Julian's, battered, bruised, and fallin' onto his butt beside the others.

"Dude," said Julian.

"What," he replied. "I have a lot of anger issues."

Julian shook his head.

"So," he said, "anybody have any ideas on how to stop this?"

"You try doin' it in front of them?" asked Wren.

"Yeah. Didn't work."

"Oh. Well, my dad's got these pills if you –"

"That's not what I meant." Julian shoved his friend. "Asshole."

"Why don't you guys fake your deaths?" asked Carrie.

"What?" asked Rosario.

"Fake your deaths. My sister did it to get back at my mom for... something, I don't remember, it was a couple years ago. Really freaked her shit out though. If that doesn't get their attention I don't know what will."

"Worth a shot," said Julian with a shrug.

"Yeah, but how?" asked Rosario. "Just lay here in a pool of blood and hope they notice?"

"No," said Wren. "I got a better idea."

And that's when the teenagers came to see me.

## PART FIVE: Mary Jane's Last Dance

I was livin' in the old garage of the Costco at the time, furthest bay from the front doors. Been there since the Zombie Holocaust first sent us all scramblin' and earned myself quite a bit of room by virtue of survivin' as many years as I did. Not dyin' 'came a bit of a luxury over time, and personal space was the reward.

Other thing you gained by livin' longer than you should was knowledge. We had ourselves a pharmacist back in the beginnin'. Gundeep. Good man, smart man. Liked to let everyone know it, too. I was bunkin' with him in those early days, and he'd talk my ear off 'bout every little thing he could think of. Learned myself a lot 'bout medicines in the process, all kinds, natural stuff, synthetics, the art of mixin' drugs and whatnot. Didn't think much of it at the time. But then Gundeep went and got hisself pecked to death durin' the turkey uprisin'. Wasn't pretty neither. Just blood and feathers everywhere.

That's 'bout when I became the de facto medicine man. The world kept endin' and we kept takin' in more and more folks, usin' up more and more space. 'ventually I had to move the whole of the pharmacy's supplies over and into my own room, 'long with a mess of plants and other things might be of use. Wasn't long for I had myself somethin' like an old-fashioned apothecary, right there near the stacks of tires and motor oil.

Unlike Gundeep, I didn't have no code or nothin', never took no oath not to use my knowledge in certain ways. If you came to me for help, I'd do what I could for you, 'gardless of how it might play out. Developed a bit of a reputation that way, I guess. Some people thought it mighty kind, others took to shunnin' me for what they thought was my less than scrupulous ways.

That's how Wren and I'd crossed paths. Boy wasn't kiddin' 'bout his anger. He wasn't big by any stretch, but he could be mean, dangerous. Nearly killed his own brother in a spat over a dinner roll once, that's when he came to me. I cooked him up a sedative of my own design, somethin' to help him take the edge off. He's been more or less all right ever since.

Julian and Rosario came to me that day lookin' like they'd seen better days. They'd been out, livin' it rough for half a week, and watchin' it all get rougher. They told me their plan, I could see the desperation. They just wanted to be together and they didn't want no one else gettin' hurt 'cause of it.

Now, I ain't got much in the way of love for the Sam's Club, but I don't much see the point in killin' each other neither, so I 'greed to help. Gave 'em a vial of distilled chupacabra venom, somethin' to get 'em as close to death as you can still walk away from. For six hours, you're all but gone – no warmth, no breath, no nothin'. And it'd get 'em the attention they wanted, too. Chupacabra venom's a big death, full of spasms and shriekin', foam in' at the mouth. Honestly, if they wasn't so high from it, it'd be downright painful.

Course, the best laid plans of mice and men always tend to wind up with a lacerated finger or two.

The way I heard it told, it started right, the two of 'em goin' down without a hitch. Didn't stop all the fightin' but it got enough of 'em paying attention – their folks, Tallahassee, Escalade – ones could call off the rest of the stabbin' and brawlin'.

There was tears, there was contrition, promises to rethink the blood feud 'tween the two stores. Everything the two young lovers wanted.

'ventually Rosario pulled out of it, played off the whole dyin' dramatically incident like she didn't know what happened. Some bad rabbit or somethin'. Folks was overjoyed. But not Rosario. Julian was still layin' there on the ground at her feet, playin' possum a little too well.

'Nother few hours went by, the fightin' finally cooled down, truces and pacts bein' made, but the teenager from Costco still wasn't movin'.

Rosario pulled aside her friends, the ones what witnessed them takin' the venom, asked what had happened after she blacked out. Turns out Julian doubled down on the dosage, either forgot what it was I told 'im or just got distracted.

Either way, the boy was dead.

Rosario kneeled, wet-eyed, at Julian's side, holdin' his hand in her lap. A crowd of grievin' store-folk, both Costco and Sam's Clubbers alike, had gathered 'round to share in her sorrow.

"Well, looks like he's dead," said Tallahassee, puttin' a sympathetic hand on Rosario's shoulder. "Guess you should start killing yourself."

"What?" she asked, turnin' and cranin' her head to look at him. "Why in the hell would I do that?"

"Because you're a teenager and teenagers notoriously make bad decisions?" The Florida man waved a hand at the corpse-riddled field surroundin' 'em. "Like everything that led up to this."

"We didn't ask you guys to start murdering each other. In fact, we told you to stop, numerous times."

"Well, OK, sure, kid, but, still. Wasn't he the love of your life?"

"I don't know, maybe," she said, snifflin'. "But I've got more sense than to tie up all of my self-worth in a guy I've known for, like, a month."

"Jesus." Tallahassee shook his head in disgust. "If you're not willing to pointlessly off yourself for your dead boyfriend, then I don't think you really loved him. I don't think you even know what real love is."

"I don't think *I'm* the one confused by it," she replied.

The Florida man scoffed at her and wandered off into the crowd, fumin' to hisself the whole time. He was quickly replaced at Rosario's side by a handful of her and Julian's friends, as well as a few of Warner's from the ol' Frito-Lay warehouse.

"I sometimes think I should just go home," said one of 'em somberly, "but I'm dealing with a memory that never forgets."

"Thanks, Angus," said Rosario, fightin' hard to hold back another wave of weepin'. "Thank you for understanding."

"Peace and trust can win the day despite all your losing," added another.

"That's a beautiful thought, Twain..." She wiped away a few tears. "Although less helpful in the moment than you'd think. I don't really care that the stores are getting along now. They killed Julian. They're the reason he's dead."

"Wait, wasn't getting the stores to stop fighting, like, the whole reason you guys, uh, 'ate the rabbit?'" asked Carrie.

"Well, yeah, I guess," said Rosario, sniffin' 'gain, "but we really only wanted them to stop fighting so we wouldn't feel guilty about inadvertently starting a war. All we *actually* wanted was to be together and not feel bad about it."

"So," said Wren, "Julian didn't die to be a glorious martyr for peace and unity?"

"What? No. He died because of a stupid mistake."

"Oh, OK. In that case, let's fix it."

"What?"

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Julian came back into my garage strapped to the back of one of the Sam's Club's black bears. Rosario and Wren pulled 'im down while I got to work powderin' down some jackalope horns.

Now, them horns is some powerful stuff. Cure pretty much anythin' what ails you, up to and includin' death. Hard as hell to come by, too. Jackalopes is rare, and tricky little buggers to catch. I was more'an a little hesitant to part with as much of the horn as I had to at first, but I'm nothin' if not a sucker for a good love story. Far as I'm concerned, every tragic romance deserves a happy endin'.

We worked the necessary 'mount of jackalope horn down the boy's throat and Julian sprang back to the land of the livin' within minutes. Rosario was overjoyed, just cryin' and blubberin' and kissin' all over him. All my days, 'fore and since, I've still never seen anyone near as happy as that girl was that day.

Me and Wren and the bear, we gave them some time, then, once they got past the miracle part of things, we asked 'em what was next. Was they goin' to be Costco folks or Sam's Clubbers?

Neither, they said.

Maybe there was peace now, maybe they could stay without trouble. But the teenagers didn't want to bother. Didn't really trust most of the store-folk to keep their word, 'specially not once it got out that Julian wasn't dead no more. Pull back on a sacrifice and you tend to lose what it was you gained by losin' the first time.

'stead, the two young lovers was goin' to set out and start a life together on their own, just like they'd wanted to 'fore everything went and got violent. Found an abandoned Albertsons out near the other side of the old city, still mostly intact. Wren and Carrie and a few of the others went with 'em, started their own little community in that grocery store, young folks bein' young folks, 'out all the baggage us old-timers couldn't quite let go.

As for myself, I couldn't help but feel they had a good point there. The feudin' 'tween the Costco and Sam's Club never did sit right with me – even with them bein' as unlikeable as they was – and the chances of it not startin' up again were slim. There was already scattered fistfights in the parking lot within days of their leavin'. So I took a

page from their book and skipped out my own self, headin' out for Bone Town. Figured, if nothin' else, my services might be more appreciated there.

As for Rosario and Julian, last I heard the kids was all doin' all right. Been a few years now, but they was still together. Even had a kid of their own on the way. The Albertsons was thrivin', Wren and Carrie and everyone else seemed to be doing just fine.

One might even say they was livin' happily ever after.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Eirik Gumeny is over six feet tall and enjoys sugar. Originally from the highway-choked suburbs of New Jersey, he now lives in the mile-high desert of New Mexico. He is very pale and it is very sunny, so he will probably combust any day now. He has still never seen a coyote, though he has eaten lunch with a roadrunner.

Eirik has often been told his work is most likely influenced by drugs, an excessive intake of coffee, or a lack of sleep, but he'd prefer to blame Douglas Adams, Kurt Vonnegut, Warren Zevon, and the many, many hours he's spent watching *Futurama*.

Eirik is the author of the *Exponential Apocalypse* series and the founding/former editor of *Jersey Devil Press*. He co-authored *Screw the Universe* with Stephen Schwegler and has been featured in several post-apocalyptic and bizarro anthologies. His short fiction has been collected in the e-book *We're Going to Die Here, Aren't We?* and his flash fiction has been published in two chapbooks, *Storybook Romance* and *Boy Meets Girl*. His plays have been workshopped in New York City, his resumes have gotten a number of his friends jobs, and his doodles occasionally make it onto the refrigerator.

Eirik has never been awarded a Pushcart, though he has twice been nominated for one. He's also never won a Nobel Prize, a Pulitzer, an Olympic medal, or the NFC East. He did win a camera at work once, though. When Eirik is not writing or daydreaming about being on his book tour with his wife, he's probably asleep and actually dreaming about it. Or in his living room teaching his dog it's OK to chew on shoes.

For more of Eirik's writing go to your computer and navigate your way to [egumeny.com](http://egumeny.com). To offer him huge sums of money, email him at [eirik.gumeny@gmail.com](mailto:eirik.gumeny@gmail.com).

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