

THREE CANS

by Bryan Erdy

Three cans.

That's all there's left.

Three cans of full of something I've eaten so many times that I can't even recognize anything resembling flavor.

There's no way to heat it. The power has been off for almost ten years. No heat. No lights. No music. Television. Computer... nothing. Just the light.

In the endless heat of summer, I get sixteen hours a day. Then eight hours of darkness and void. No Beatles. No game shows. No Madden. Nothing but the endless moan. The soulless wails of something that is little more than decaying flesh and instinct. It never stops... and there's no way to hide from it.

That's what the world has become to me.

It used to be better.

When the shit hit the fan, I didn't mess around. I'd seen too many movies. Read too many books. If what was happening was real, seriously real... then I had to act and act fast. Before anyone else took the threat of a "plague of the undead" seriously, I barricaded my house.

Multi-levels.

Fortifications.

I spent every dime I had and bought canned food, water, batteries, alcohol, candles... anything I could think of. I grabbed every book and magazine I could find.

After things began to get out of hand and everyone else around me scrambled for supplies, I was hauling books away from the library in a grocery store cart.

When things became dangerous, I barricaded my doors and settled back.

Safe, secure and ready.

Ready to wait it out.

In the beginning, it was great. Nothing about my life changed much from before the plague. I was smart. I strictly rationed my supplies. I had forty boxes of canned food. I was fine... but never feasted. Just in case.

The power was out in a week, but I had a generator.

Within a month, the broadcasts stopped. First television, then the radio.

Like the decay of those things wandering the streets, the life I knew slowly eroded.

After a year, the gas and the batteries were gone. There was no more hot food. Lighting a fire was an unnecessary risk. It was then that I realized that there would be no "waiting this out".

This... was my life now.

Everything I knew and everyone I loved were gone. I could never leave this house. I had at least ten years worth of food and water to survive on. When that was gone... well, I'd worry about that when I had to.

For five years, I existed.

As the days and months went by... so did the number of those things walking around outside.

At first, you'd see three or four stagger by. Then there were more. Sometimes twenty at a time.

When there were too many to count... I stopped trying.

I dropped a glass one day and the noise attracted one of them. I could hear his moaning get closer and it pressed against the house. Once the hoard caught on, they never left.

I have no idea how many are out there now. Five hundred? A thousand? Enough to fill my days and nights with their never-ending moans. Still, I was alive.

And as hellish as my reality had become, I meant to stay that way.

The closest I ever came to disaster happened two years ago. A storm blew over the massive oak tree in my neighbor's yard. It caved in the side of my house and it didn't take long for those dumb fucks to realize they had an "in". I had seconds to act, but I had prepared. I had both the basement and the attic stocked with rations. If I had to act fast, that meant two options. The attic was the safer of the two as it was elevated. The basement? One way in and one way out. Not so ideal. They started crawling in through the damage and I ran to the laundry room. I pulled the cord, sprinted up the ladder and pulled it shut. I'm sure they saw where I had gone, but there was no way they could reach me. My house was breached, but I was safe and would stay that way.

Once they were in the house, they never left.

My attic isn't small. It runs the length of the house. I can even stand in certain areas. But there is no bed. No chairs. A handful of magazines and the food. I've been stripped down to the barest of elements.

Tapped but alive.

I can handle the drone. The dark. The loneliness. All of it. I can handle it because I'm alive.

Laying on the wooden floor, in the dark, I exist now in the memories of what once was.

The people I knew.

The games we played.

I dream of crispy chicken burgers. Of chocolate milk and showers. Of movie theaters and flip flops.

I cannot feel the dirt on my body... the hair matted to my face. I think my vision is getting worse, but there's nothing to look at to really know for sure.

I wear my blanket like a cloak. It's thick from the dirt.

When there's light, I stare at the pages of a magazine I've looked at a thousand times. The pretty faces, laughing as their picture is taken before a big premiere. I wonder what they're doing now.

Are they alive? Living in some bunker? Maybe a big mansion, better protected and better stocked than the closet I'm living in now?

The woman smiles for the camera. Does she get to wash? Is she touching someone right now? Or was she killed during the panic? Shot trying to escape from the city?

Was her beautiful face torn apart and eaten?

Is there anyone else alive? Is there anyone alive now who has even thought of me once?

I think I'm hungry. I have to be. It's been days, but I'm waiting.

I have to. I'm down to three cans of food. I can probably make that last a week. Maybe two. But once it's gone, it's decision time.

Do I let myself starve? Do I end it quickly and put a bullet in my head? Do I break the attic window and make a run for it? There are too many. I have no strength. Even if I got past the hoard outside, how far could I make it? Where would I go?

I've lived this long... I cannot just give up.

But do I want to die by my own hand or by being torn apart?

Consumed.

I had it all planned out. I could survive for ten years, and I have. If I had just bought more. More food. More water. I shouldn't have wasted my money on the batteries and gas. I knew they wouldn't last long anyway. I could have bought another five years worth of food.

Maybe I should have run for it. Gone to one of the camps.

Coulda shoulda woulda.

I keep telling myself that I won. That I've survived for ten years when no one else has. That I wasn't some damn fool who let themselves be killed. But what does it matter? Is this living? Twenty feet of hot, stinking darkness full of bugs, trash and filth?

Perhaps I've already made my own tomb. Ready-made and waiting for the moment.

I am down to three cans. When daylight hits, I'll open one.

Light pours in through the window. I wake up and feel something pasted to my face. I pull it off. It's her. My celebrity friend. Half the picture is gone now, but I can still see her face. If I try to make a run for it, do I take her with me? I have no clothes... no pockets to keep her safe.

Time to eat. I open one of the cans and pull out three noodles. I'll eat a few more tonight. In this heat, it'll only be good for a day or two.

That means I have a week.

Maybe more.

I can eat the bugs. I can attract more with some spoiled food. I'll save one noodle for that.

That might buy me a few extra weeks.

No matter what, decision time is coming soon.

I close my eyes.

Decision time is coming...

I drift off to sleep.

I dream of my fourth grade teacher. I wonder if she is alive.

I wake to the moans.

It's still light out.

Light enough for me to see what's left... to see what's left before decision time.

Two cans.