

“Unnamed Zombie Apocalypse Novel”
Forthcoming
Co-Authored by Andrew Bunton

Note:

For over a year now, a good friend of mine, Andrew Bunton, and myself have been collaborating on a novel. Set in modern day in Ontario, it follows two age-old friends (Jay and Andy) as they struggle to survive the zombie apocalypse. Erupting in Canada and spreading rapidly, we find ourselves sealed off from the Americans through an emergency Cold War contingency plan. Jay is living in Durham Region and fending off “drones” (mindless infected persons, the shambling dead) with his friend Bryant and his girlfriend Viktorya. Andy, living on a large prepper-style property in rural Renfrew County, makes the arduous trek to try and rescue his friend in the red-zone of Toronto and surrounding area.

This selection is the first chapter. We’re about two-thirds of the way through the writing process, with the ending planned out. We’ve both been having a blast writing this, and we look forward to finishing the first draft in the near future. As to publication, I have no estimates on how soon this will be available. Given that we’re still working on the first draft, there may be changes to this excerpt in the end.

*

“No, don’t waste the bullets,” Andy says as he swerves around the charred remains of a semi on the 401. “It’s virtually impossible to hit anything with any gun from a moving vehicle, despite what Hollywood says.”

I feel like doing a bad Arnie impersonation and saying something ridiculous. Let off some steam or what have you. Or perhaps doing Connery. But this isn’t a Walther PPK I’m holding, and I’m really not in the right state of mind. I stare absently out the window.

We’re currently going about one-sixty, the landscape flying by. XS Project is on the stereo. We’re just past Cobourg. The road – excepting the abandoned or charred remains of vehicles – is empty. This part of the highway is clear terrain, wide-open space before between the road and the trees. It’s eerily quiet, save the Russian hard bass blaring as we whip down the road.

“Oh yes, you’re so brave,” I distantly hear Viktorya saying in the back seat. “It won’t be long now. Great big house, and plenty of field mice, yes. Dear, how do you say ‘You’re a good cat’ in Korean?”

Korean. A lot of good that will do me now. I’ve spent the better part of three years trying to learn it. I can read and write *Hangeul*, I’m pretty good on the grammar (I still confuse past and progressive tense), and I know a handful of useful phrases. It’s slow going. A very tough slog. But now...

“Dear?”

“Hmm? Oh, *joemun goyangi ieyo.*”

She repeats it to Rain and Destiny, crammed together in the too-small cat carrier. They haven’t shared that thing since I had them fixed, and they were much smaller back then.

“Soy sauce!” proclaims Andy, who I’ve annoyed over the years, making him enunciate increasingly more difficult Asian names during the production of my audiobooks.

I look back. Destiny meows at me from behind the plastic cage, her little Kitler ’stash twitching curiously.

I soften my expression, reach back and poke my finger in for her to lick. “*Ne, ne, gwenchanayo. Gwenchanayo,*” I say.

I’ve been speaking Korean to the cats for months.

I look over to Viktorya. She’s just as scared and distraught as I am. I should be back there, my arm over her shoulder, but between Bryant, Viktorya and myself, I’m the only one to have fired a gun before. That was an AK-47, six years ago, at a range in Vegas, a scantily-clad range employee standing by. Currently in my lap is a twelve-gauge coach gun – loud, easy to use, and with two twelve-inch barrels, a lot of stopping power, and a lot of spread. It looks like a sawed-off rifle. Not quite the same thing.

Beside me, in the driver’s seat, Andy has his in his hand on a Ruger GP100 – that’s a 357 magnum, which is a classification that actually means something to me. He’s the gun expert amongst us – or, rather, the gun fetishist.

“Where’s Darlington?” Andy asks.

“Miles behind us,” Bryant answers from the back seat.

“So we’re out of the military safe zone?”

“Long gone,” says Viktorya.

“All right, boys and girls.” Andy looks to me with a sultry grin. “And you’re the girl I’m talking about. We’re out of the frying pan and into the fire. No more of Thompson’s men, now we just need to worry about the...” he shudders slightly, “drones.”

He looks to me. The coach gun is still in my hand. “You’d never hit one of them. Not at this speed. Not unless you were JTF2 and the gun was mounted to the truck bed. This thing’s four-wheel drive, off-road... if we come across any roadblocks, I can just go around them.”

We whip by the OnRoute at Trenton. Three dozen tractor-trailers are lined up the on and off ramps, some of the doors still open. The trailers have been completely plundered.

“Not a drop of gas left,” Andy says.

“How are you for gas in Golden Lake?” asks Viktorya.

“Oh, we’ve got plenty, but if we come across a gas station that we can assume hasn’t been sucked dry, I’ll fill the truck up. And I’ve got a couple military-grade jerry cans, too, we could fill.”

“I saw those as we were loading,” says Bryant.

The bed of the truck is completely filled. The rear-view mirror is useless at the moment, the gear piled high and strapped down with a web of ratchet straps.

It had just been the three of us – Bryant, Viktorya and me, plus the cats. Bryant had walked the ninety or so minutes to get to my place. We were low on food, low on water. I’d used almost every bottle of water I had, plus the club soda I had in the fridge for rum Riqueys and Soviet sunrises. Plus I’d used every nail boarding up the windows with the half-sheets of plywood my dad had stored in my shed. You never think to grab some nails from work until you’re completely out.

Andy had shown up completely unexpectedly. He knocked on the door, but of course I wasn’t answering it. Then he booted in one of the boarded-up windows and I nearly skewered him with my decorative Korean *hwando* sword.

“We’ve got plenty of food and water, and there’s no reported cases up where we are,” he’d said.

And so the three of us loaded up everything we thought we could keep: sheets and pillows, tools, the sword, various books – including a handful of copies of my own – my laptop, pots and pans, the cats’ food and water bowls, the remainder of the pills and supplements under my kitchen counter, pens, paper, all the empty journals I’ve collected over the years, what remained of the twenty-pound propane tank beneath my barbecue, toothbrushes and toothpaste, deodorant, mouthwash, my first aid kit, the half-full bottle of isopropyl alcohol I had beneath the bathroom sink, and, for that matter, all the rest of the liquor I had in my cupboard. Other things, too. It all got stuffed into boxes, tool chests and the plastic totes I use to take my books to shows.

And to think, I was this close to releasing Rain and Destiny into the wild, hoping they could fend for themselves on birds.

We practically spin around the corner on the off ramp for Highway 37/Cannifton Road in Belleville. Quickly over the 401 bridge and then we’re off, into the rural countryside north of Belleville, zipping up towards Tweed. Didn’t see a soul while passing through.

By now the stereo is blasting The Hu. They’re just in the lull of *Wolf Totem*, about to pick back up and give it their all in the closing sequence, where Enkush will fiddle that *morin khuur* so hard you’d swear he’s about to start a fire. Andy turns down the volume just as they’re about to go all in, however. “Viktorya, did Jay ever tell you the Blue Monday story?” he asks.

I realize he’s doing this to ease the tension, dissuade some of the fear. Andy and Viktorya have met only once before, and it wasn’t for long. And here she is, her sister missing out in Alberta somewhere, being whisked away to the Québec border by a bearded, tattooed, gun-toting, Christian conservative, crass and vulgar, self-proclaimed redneck.

“No,” she says. “What’s Blue Monday?”

“It’s the coldest and darkest day of the year, or something like that. Near the end of December. All the movie theatres in Ottawa are free, I guess as a way of boosting people’s spirits. I told Ivy, you know, I used to love just getting loaded and watching movies. So we decided to go for Blue Monday. We stopped by LCBO after work, picked up a couple of six-packs of beer, and one of those seven-hundred-and-ten-mil bottles of the seven-year Havana Club. We head to the scuzziest theatre in Ottawa – like, meth heads were watching us pre-drink in the truck in the parking lot and were like, wow, those people are successful enough to own a truck.”

We’re whipping along 37 now. There’s more tree cover here, and the road is windy and twisty, so Andy hasn’t pushed it back to one sixty, but we’re still jetting along at breakneck speed. There’s a few traffic lights, but they’re not lit up.

“So we go into the theatre, smuggle whatever we didn’t pre-drink in our jacket pockets. The theatre is packed. Now, I have this thing where under no circumstances do I leave the theatre to use the washroom. It doesn’t matter what movie it is. It could be the worst movie – it could be *Fifty Shades* – I refuse to miss any of the movie going to use the washroom. So I almost always use the washroom on the way into the theatre. But on this particular night, I was already halfway loaded, I’d drank three-quarters of that bottle of Havana Club, and I completely forgot to piss before the movie began.”

He suddenly slams on the brakes. We’re nearing Tweed now, the road winding, and there’s a roadblock ahead. Two vehicles are parked end to end, blocking the road on approach to tweed, with numerous sandbags, pallets and other materials built up, connecting the two. The lake is to the right, and the roadblock, consisting of upturned dumpsters, extends right to the water’s edge. The same thing on the left to the treeline.

“Shit,” Andy mutters. He quickly throws the truck in reverse and whips around. “The road we just passed, does it go through?”

“I have no idea,” I say, panic-stricken now.

“What’s happening?” Bryant asks.

“I didn’t come down this way,” says Andy. “Came down 62, but ran into some Pilgrims. Thought this might be a better option going back.”

He floors it back to a road we had just passed, whips around the corner. It’s a dead-end street, of course, but we can see someone’s backyard on an adjacent street at the end. There’s a few trees, but–

I guess Andy thinks we can make it, because he goes off road, through the ditch, weaves through a few trees and emerges onto someone’s side yard, and then to that adjacent street.

“Keep that gun ready,” he tells me.

“Drones?”

“No. They’re not erecting roadblocks. It’s the locals. Everyone’s cut off. No gas, nothing’s shipping, no food other than what you’ve got stored.”

“So they’re trying to keep us out?” Viktorya asks.

“They’re trying to pin us down, herd us into a trap.”

“So they’re... bandits?” she asks.

Banditry is a topic that’s come up in my books, which she’s read extensively. Villains out in the rural wastes. Sex trafficking and drug running and mafioso warlords. Never did she imagine such a thing could come to pass in modern Canada.

“So the movie starts and we keep drinking,” says Andy, continuing the story as we weave through suburban Tweed neighbourhoods. “I finish off that Havana Club and set the bottle on the floor, crack open a can of beer. About halfway through the movie, it hits me. I really need to piss. And I realize I forgot to use the washroom ahead of time. But, you know, my drunkard’s reasoning kicks in, and I think, if I can cover my crotch with my jacket, maybe I can pee smoothly enough into the empty Havana Club, and I won’t miss any of the movie.

“But I’m wasted, right. I drank that entire bottle of rum by myself. So in my mind, this all makes sense. I reach behind myself, and very slowly pull my jacket off the back of my seat. I did it slow because I was trying to be all inconspicuous. If I had have just grabbed the thing, the guy next to me might have thought, oh, he’s just cold. But instead I’m all slow and conspiratorial, deliberately trying to hide the fact that I’m covering my crotch, like I’m pounding one out.”

I’m not too familiar with the layout of Tweed, and Andy even less so. Most of the businesses are along 37, which is to our east, but we’re trying to avoid that. If there’s... bandits out there, that’s where they’ll be. As a result, I can tell he’s a little lost. And we’re not going that fast – it’s all small subdivisions, with cemeteries and schools and churches breaking up any straight runs. Most of the houses, like my own in north Ajax, are boarded up with plywood and two-by-fours. One is a burnt-out ruin. Grass is overgrown and untended.

We come across a church and what looks like another dead-end road. The church has its doors open. It was probably a place of refuge in the recent past.

I interrupt the story to say, “I know 37 crosses the river at one point. We’ll need to cross with it.”

“Fuck, are you sure? Goddamn, I hate situations like this.”

“I really do appreciate you coming down for us,” I say for about the hundredth time.

Suddenly there’s a gunshot. My eyes go to the side-view mirror. Less than a hundred meters behind us is what looks like a police officer, stocky build, a somewhat dishevelled uniform, bushy black moustache, wearing sunglasses and holding a rifle. He’s astride a horse.

“I’m afraid you’re not going any farther,” he bellows.

We’re still stopped in front of the church.

“You see anyone else around?” Andy whispers.

My eyes are already combing all the neighbouring houses, side streets.

“He’s a cop,” says Viktorya.

“What are we going to do? What are we going to do?” I mutter repetitiously.

Suddenly Andy, his eyes on the mirror, begins doing a Schwarzenegger impression. Half-murmuring, he says, “Yeah, yeah, ya know, Comrade Stalin, you think you’re a man of steel, well I show you my man of steel.” He’s clutching his 357. “I’ll jam it right up your peehole and the bullet will eviscerate your prostate as it flies out your asshole, and the tasty bits will go all over the room.”

I had not noticed the resemblance between this officer and Stalin, and I’ve read thousands of pages on the history of communism.

A quaver to his voice, Bryant says, “Did you just refer to Stalin’s prostate as ‘tasty bits’?”

“All right,” bellows Officer General Secretary from horseback, “Now you throw your weapons out the windows, open the doors and come out with your hands—”

“Hold on,” Andy snorts.

He guns it. We jump the curb and blaze into field between the church and the small cemetery. I hear another gunshot. Viktorya and Bryant are ducking with their heads between their knees. I get a look in the mirror – the horse is now in full charge and the officer has his rifle aimed our way.

We fly over a hillock, get some air beneath us, then plough through the chain-link fence at the rear of the property. Swerve to miss a tree, swerve again to miss someone’s inground pool, then bulldoze through a wooden fence, which is quite jarring. I can hear Viktorya yelp in the back seat, and the cats are meowing feverishly.

Now we’re out on 37. Andy’s clutching the wheel, whirling us around. The bridge is just ahead, half of it blocked with abandoned vehicles. The cop is far behind us now.

He says, “I told you it’s impossible to hit a moving target from a moving vehicle.” He’s almost smiling. “Or, in this case, from a moving horse.”

He slams on the brakes once more. Just the other side of the bridge is a young woman probably younger than Viktorya, as well as a six- or seven-year-old girl, whom she’s clutching to her body. They’re standing right in the middle of the road, blocking our crossing. Our windows are still down.

Tears streaming down the woman’s face, clutching the child to her, she pleads, “Please. There’s no food. There’s

nothing. You have to help us. She has asthma, you have to help—”

Andy removes the safety from his 357, points it right at her. His voice is half a growl. He snarls, “Get... the fuck... out... of our... way.”

There’s murder in his eyes. The woman sees it too, loses some resolve. Andy fires into the air, then guns the gas. The woman and her daughter dash out of the way, and we’re whipping up 37 once more.

In a minute of two, we see the roadblock at this end. It’s up near 7. But there’s no lake here, and, while the roadblock covers the highway and shoulder, it doesn’t extend into the ditches, and Andy swerves us down, around and then back up. We nearly fishtail going onto 7, now going east towards Kaladar.

The smoothness of the truck levels out. Andy puts the safety back on the 357, and, back to his calm, jovial self, continues with the Blue Monday story.

“I unscrew the bottle cap, and position the head of my cock at the mouth of the bottle. And I try to slowly open the floodgates so I can control the outflow, right, because I’m doing this all under a jacket in a dark theatre. At first, when it comes, all goes well. It’s going into the bottle. But then there’s like a back flow, right. Like I’ve created a vacuum seal with the my penis against the bottle, and now the pressure differential—”

I must admit I’m smirking now. I’ve heard this story before. Looking over my shoulder, I can see Viktorya’s into it and has the hint of a smile on her face as well. Her nerves still shot – I can see she’s gone white, and has a tremor to her hand – but she’s putting on a brave face. I reach back and squeeze her knee.

“So there’s this like back flow burst of piss, right. You can imagine trying to fill a water bottle at the kitchen tap and you press the bottle right to the faucet. It creates a seal and the air inside can’t escape, so you get that spray. It goes all over my hand, and now I’ve broken the seal, and I’m not a Tantric yogi, so I can’t stop the flow of urine on a dime. So I wind up pissing all down my pant leg.”

At the turn off for Highway 41, he just taps the brakes and then swerves, barreling north now.

“But I get control of it, back in the bottle, I leave a gap, there’s no pressure differential, and we’re back on track. Well, like I said, I was drunk, so I suddenly found this hilarious. I’d just pissed all over my hand and pant leg, under my jacket in a movie theatre, and I found this riotously funny. And I’m still pissing in this rum bottle, so I don’t want to draw attention to myself, so I’m silently quaking with mirth. Now, I’m a big guy, right, so if I’m trying to hold back laughter, it doesn’t go unnoticed. The whole row of seats starts shaking as I’m silently laughing to myself. So if it wasn’t conspicuous enough already, now everyone in the entire row knows there’s something not right with this guy.

“But now here’s the problem. This is all under my jacket, in the dark. Normally, I would be able to tell when the bottle is getting full, because I’d feel the warmth rising up the bottle where I’m holding it. But my hand is already covered in piss, so now I can’t tell how full it is or not.”

“You didn’t overflow it?” Viktorya asks. “A seven-hundred-and-ten-mil bottle—”

“Oh, I’ve got a camel-sized bladder. Yeah, it overflowed, and it starts running down the side of the bottle and onto the floor. And the worst part was I’d been dehydrated all day, and then got loaded coming into the theatre, so it’s that rancid, dehydrated piss, and it stank. The next three rows could easily tell someone had just pissed in the theatre. But then – you know there’s that grate at the base of the stadium seating. That drain that all the spilled soda goes into. Well, that’s like three or four rows ahead of us, and it reaches a quiet point in the movie, and you can hear that drain just guzzling away.”

“So you pissed enough to soil on yourself, fill the bottle, and create enough of a stream to run down four rows and torrentially into the drain?” she asks, her calm gradually returning. We’re out in the wilds now, and getting away from it all.

“And by now I’m just cackling like the Wicked Witch of the West. As soon as the movie was over, we just up and bolted. Ivy was collecting her jacket, I stood and said, ‘Move, move, just go,’ and we evacuated as fast as humanly possible – me wearing my jacket tied around my waist like I wore white pants to school and got my first period.”

Viktorya is guffawing now. “So you pissed yourself in a movie theatre?”

“In a *packed* movie theatre. And the worst part was, we got out to the lobby, and Ivy realized she forgot her favourite mitts in the seats, so we had to go back to get them. We went back in, right to the scene of the crime, and embarrassingly had to see the kids mopping up the piss, and picking up the beer cans and rum bottles.”

My girlfriend is almost snorting with her laughter now.

We start slowing down.

“What’s going on?” Bryant asks, leaning forward to see if there’s another roadblock up ahead.

I can hear Rain meow.

“Gas station,” says Andy. “I think we’re far enough into the backwoods that we might be in the free and clear, and I know a little locally-owned place that might possibly have some gas left.”

We’ve just passed through Bon Echo area, and a road sign identifies the town or village or hamlet of Vennachar. There’s evergreen trees all around and occasional rocky lakes that hove into view. The landscape is rough, hilly.

We turn off 41 towards Vennachar. Then we take another turn, and we disappear onto some back country road, nothing but pines and hilly terrain around.

We come across Vennachar Pit Stop, a small gas station, out in the middle of nowhere. The windows are not boarded up, but two of them are smashed. We cruise by the store slowly, Andy with his gun drawn and aimed. Some chips and snacks look like they’ve been grabbed, but the place hasn’t been picked clean. It’s dark inside.

“How are we going to pump if there’s no power?” Bryant asks in a whisper.

We continue cruising, down past the side of the store. “There,” Andy says.

There's a generator in back, mounted on a concrete pad.

We do a loop around. It's vacant. Bryant jumps behind the wheel while Andy and I hop out. Andy checks the store while I cover him. Most of the food that remains has been ripped open by raccoons, but we do get a couple cases of soda, some chips, a container of peanuts, and five or six canisters of canned beef. The ice cream freezer has defrosted and melted ice and ice cream all over the floor, which has gone rancid. There's some fishing supplies in back – lures and tackle boxes and a rod – which we scoop as well.

Signalling Bryant, he pulls back around and parks next to a pump. Andy goes around to see if the generator will start, and I cover him once more, while Bryant and Viktorya load up our supplies. There's no splitting up here.

After kicking and spitting and cursing and priming the thing three damned times, the generator did, in the end, start. There wasn't much fuel left in the thing.

"Bryant! Bryant!" Andy calls. "Fill her up."

From where I'm standing, I can see Viktorya up on the truck bed, playing Tetris with all our stuff and the cases of soda. Bryant has the military-grade jerry cans at his feet and is filling the truck.

Andy says, "I'm going to go down this way, guard that trail over there." There's a gravel path that probably leads to a campsite or storage shed at the other end of the building. "Can you handle that thing?"

He reaches out and takes the coach gun from me. "I've got you set up with three-inch shells loaded with double-ought buck," he says, checking the gun. "That fires fifteen pellets like a son of a whore. With this, you can actually cock both hammers and pull both triggers simultaneously, firing all thirty pellets at once. Both barrels at once, with double-ought buck, it would be unholy. Blow away anything without even trying. Never aim it at one of us, right – whatever you point it at, be prepared for it to die. Here, you guard the main road." He hands the gun back to me.

I nod solemnly. Marching up past the truck, I clutch the coach gun white-knuckled. I head up to the driveway entrance, which is a good fifty meters or so from the front of the building. When I pass the truck, Viktorya, holding up one of the things of canned beef, says, "Where's the can opener? I'm going to feed one of these to Rain and Destiny."

"Uh, I'm not sure. Don't go ripping the whole thing apart. I've got to stay on guard."

I keep walking.

The poor cats. They've barely eaten in the past week. I had a huge bag of dry cat food in my basement, but that quickly dried up after the stores closed and social order broke down, and the power went out, and Thompson blazed in with tanks and armoured personnel carriers and cordoned off half of Durham.

Poor Viktorya. Poor Bryant. Her sister – God only knows what's happened to her. At least with Bryant and myself, our families got out. His folks were down in Texas for various conferences and executive meetups, and they were going to stay an extra week for golfing and relaxation. In my case, my dad dragged the whole family off for a five-week tour of Europe, which he'd been wanting to do ever since he retired. My brother went. My sister and her fiancé jumped at the opportunity to return to Ireland and show my parents the Cliffs of Moher. They might have been in the air when the story became national news. To the best of my knowledge they're still over there, but of course I have no way of contacting them. I hope they stay. At least until this bullshit is–

I see something out of the corner of my eye. I turn. There, emerging from the trees to my right, it's one of them.

A drone.

She's in a bad state. She's perhaps twenty-five or so. Her skin is palled, her hair frizzled and knotted. She has cold sore-like pustules all around her mouth and nose. Her eyes are all pupil – utterly black, with discharge crusted over and pasted to her lashes. Her blouse is ripped and torn and hangs off her like a tattered vest. The breasts are clearly seen – her entire torso is pale and leathery and blue-streaked with veins.

And the antlers. Her elbows, the tops of her shoulders, her upper back – she must have six or eight long, wavy, dagger-like growths, deep orange in colour, bursting from the skin and sprouting upwards. She almost looks like she's on fire. They must rise two feet out of her.

This is my first time seeing one in the flesh.

She's drooling, her mouth agape. She has a vacant, distant look on her face. She's ambling, slow-moving, about ten meters or so away. I can't take my eyes off her.

I level the gun. If Andy were at this end, he'd blow her away without a second thought. But...

She's still human.

Isn't she?

"Get away," I say, almost as a whisper.

Maybe there's still some reasoning left to her. Maybe she hasn't been completely taken by the virus.

Her face is vacant, impassive.

"Get away," I repeat, a little louder this time.

She shambles forward. I startle, the gun shaking in my hand.

I cock the gun – both barrels. "Leave this place now," I very clearly enunciate.

She continues shambling, her arms mostly inert at her sides. She's drooling on herself. I can see the indentations of her ribcage beneath drooping breasts. She must be as starving as the cats – more so.

My voice quavers. "This is your last... last warning." I swallow, say, "Please."

In her broken, shambling movements, she picks up speed, drunkenly stumbling in a half-jog. She's coming for me, hungry – mad for human flesh, or just... something.

I pull the triggers – both of them.

The gun slams back into my shoulder.

I get her in the chest. She collapses backwards like a house of cards.

What's left of her blood sprays from her. Its watery, putrid. Her whole torso is blown apart like a caved-in watermelon – it just comes apart in an unholy mess. Her left arm is practically blown off.

I can tell she lives for another five or ten seconds, the virus still animating her. It can do that. But then even that can't hold her together any longer, and she stops twitching.

This is my first murder.

*

Copyright © 2021 by Jason Shannon and Andrew Bunton

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without prior written permission by the author, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or locales is purely coincidental.