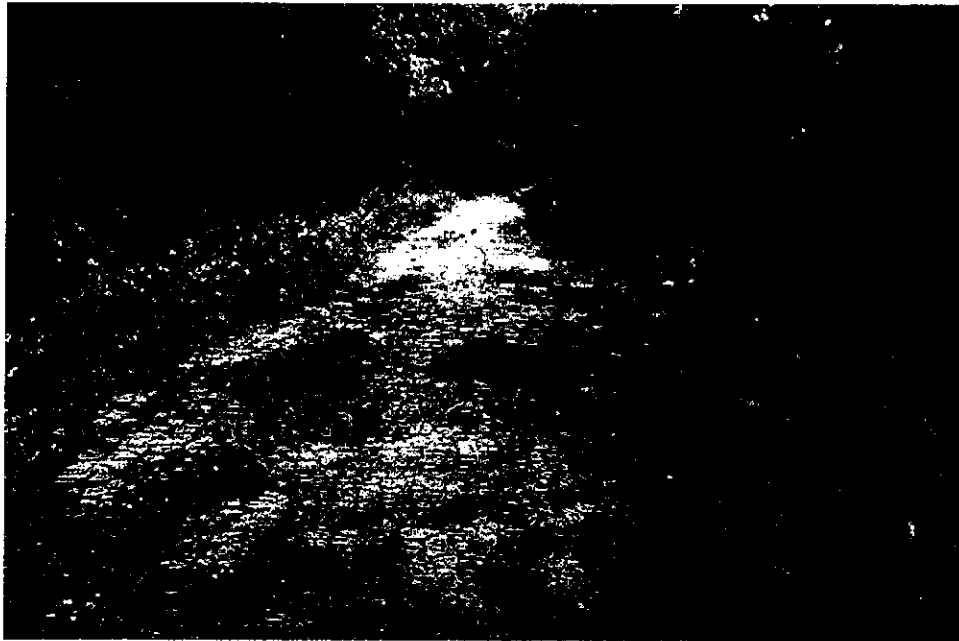


The Run [The Run Series, #1]

by ReadWorks



Dennis and Mac had been driving for almost a week, and they hadn't seen a single soul. They were worried. When they'd left the ranch, they'd thought maybe they'd run into someone, another survivor. But there was no one. The roads were almost empty. There was the occasional abandoned car, but that was it. They drove mostly on highways, to make better time. Mac wondered if they might not have better luck on the smaller country roads, but Dennis wouldn't have it. Those roads had curves and were thick with trees. There was no way of seeing danger coming. If someone wanted to spring a surprise on you, you wouldn't know it until it was too late.

When the plague came, Dennis and Mac had been working as ranch hands on a cattle farm. Both had just finished their first year of college. Dennis went to school on the East Coast, Mac on the West. They found that they were very similar people. They both studied hard and read a lot of books. But they also both liked being outdoors. At the end of a good day, they came home smelling of sweat and dirt. They quickly became friends.

The ranch was a small, family-run operation, with only about 50 head of cattle. The family that ran it, the Greersons, would advertise in college newspapers in the spring. There were plenty of ranch hands in the area who needed work, but Bucky Greerson felt city kids could benefit from an exposure to country life. Young men would apply, and then the Greersons would hire about a half-dozen hands every spring to help them run cattle. It was tough work, but Dennis and Mac felt lucky to be picked.

The farm didn't have a TV or the Internet or a telephone. As a result, the first they heard of the plague was on the radio. Every night, the ranch hands liked to gather in the mess hall and play cards. While they played, they listened to the radio. The ranch was so far up in the hills that the radio only got one

station. At night they listened to the station's best DJ, Petey "The Muskrat" Coltrain, who spun old bluegrass records. Sometimes, between records, The Muskrat told stories. Dennis and Mac thought he was hilarious.

One night, though, The Muskrat's radio show was very different. It couldn't have been more than six months ago, but to Dennis and Mac, thinking back on it now, it felt like another lifetime. The Muskrat had been playing a cheery Bill Monroe song, "Footprints In The Snow," when he cut out the record halfway through the chorus. The ranch hands stopped their game of Gin Rummy. They turned and looked at the radio. The Muskrat always played a record all the way through. What could be wrong?

"Folks," said the Muskrat. "I don't know how to tell you this, but I'm going to ask you to stay very calm. The manager of my station has just passed me a note. It seems that the local health authorities are asking us radio folks to tell you, our listeners, that... well, a disease is spreading."

The ranch hands put down their cards. Dennis and Mac exchanged a glance.

"Now," The Muskrat said, his rich voice sounding uncharacteristically shaky, "they don't quite know what this disease is, but it's real bad. It's very contagious, and people who get it don't have a lot of luck recovering. Now, doctors are trying to figure out a cure, but there's been no luck yet. So, in the meantime, we're asking that you stay in your homes as much as possible and avoid public places until the disease dies down."

One of the ranch hands, a big, cocky boy named T.J., laughed. "Like heck I'm not going into town," T.J. chuckled. "I got a date." The other ranch hands stared at him. T.J. stopped laughing.

"Please, folks, do what the doctors say," The Muskrat pleaded. "I'm sure it'll just be for a few days." He was quiet for a moment. Then the ranch hands heard the sound of a turntable needle hitting the record, and an old Earl Scruggs song came on.

That was the beginning of it. For the next few days, the ranch went about its business. The Greersons told the boys not to worry, that this would all be over soon. They had enough food on the ranch to last months. In the meantime, there were plenty of new calves that needed branding. At night, everyone gathered around the radio and listened to updates. The news seemed only to get worse. More and more people were getting sick. The symptoms were strange. People would become violently ill, then fall into a long, deep sleep. The big cities - New York, Los Angeles, Chicago - had become like ghost towns. No one would go out into the street for fear of catching the disease.

The news kept getting worse until, finally, the radio station stopped transmitting. The Greersons called a meeting in the dining room of the main house. Everyone sat around the big dining room table where Ann Greerson served Sunday supper. After everyone was seated, Bucky Greerson stood up. He was a short, plump man with a droopy handlebar mustache. You wouldn't think it looking at him, but his voice boomed.

"Now," he said, "I know you're worried about your families, and I don't feel right chaining you here while you don't know what's become of your people. So, anyone who wants to leave is free to go. Ann and I will make do."

Dennis and Mac looked at each other. They'd talked about leaving but had tried to pretend they wouldn't need to. They had hoped the plague would be over soon, that the world would return to the way it was, that it had all been a strange hallucination. Now that they had the option to venture out

into the world, to see how bad things really were, they weren't sure they wanted to know.

"By a show of hands," Bucky Greerson asked, "how many of you want to leave?"

Mac and Dennis looked around. They were the only two with their hands up.

The Greersons gave them enough food to last a couple weeks - corn bread and apples and cured ham and syrupy peaches in mason jars. Mac and Dennis packed up their things and loaded everything into Mac's truck, a sputtering old pickup. The Greersons and the ranch hands gathered around to see them off.

"Be safe, boys," said Ann Greerson, kissing them each on the cheeks and hugging them hard. "And remember your manners." As Mac and Dennis pulled away, they saw her husband holding her, her body shaking with sobs.

A week later, Mac and Dennis had zigzagged through dozens of small towns and a few larger cities. What they found frightened them: every place was empty. Not a person was out. Sometimes, they would stop and knock on doors. No one would answer. If they went inside, they wouldn't find a single soul home. Sometimes they'd find the dinner table set, plates piled high with molding food. Every time they entered a new room, they both winced, thinking they'd find a dead body. But they never did. It was indescribably eerie.

Sometimes, if the place still got electricity, they'd try to use the phone. Every time, no matter what number they dialed, the same recorded message came on: "The number is not in service. Please check the number and try again."

Finally, the young men decided to make tracks to the nearest big city. It would be a full day of driving, but there had to be someone there. You can't abandon a whole city.

Dusk had come, and Mac was at the wheel. Dennis had been driving for the last eight hours and was taking a nap in the passenger seat. They were passing through a long, flat piece of pastureland when Mac saw a flicker of movement in the distance. He stopped the car, turned off the engine and shook Dennis awake.

"Look," Mac said excitedly. "I think someone's coming."

Dennis squinted his eyes. The flicker of movement was becoming larger. What had been a dot of motion became a long line, stretching across the horizon. Mac and Dennis strained to see.

"I think it's some people," said Dennis. "Let me get my binoculars."

He rustled in his backpack and pulled out his pair. Dennis put them to his eyes and looked through them. Mac heard him gasp.

"My gosh," whispered Dennis.

What he saw was people. Thousands of people. Hundreds of thousands, maybe a million. A swarm of people like the world had never seen. And the people were all running. They were running as fast as they could go, like something was chasing them, or like they were chasing something. As they grew closer, Dennis could just make out the people's faces. Their eyes were wild.

"Start the car," said Dennis.

Ed.: *The tale continues in Part 2, "Refueling".*

Refueling [The Run Series, #2]

by ReadWorks



The swarm of crazed people was rushing toward them. Mac turned the keys in the truck's ignition. The engine sputtered but refused to turn on. "Try again," said Dennis. Mac turned the keys again. Again the engine coughed, and the emergency lights flickered before it cut out. Mac tried to stay calm, but he felt a wave of cold panic.

"Keep trying the engine," said Dennis. "I'll hop out and try to push the truck to start."

Dennis jumped out of the truck and ran to the back. He shoved the truck's bumper, pushing all of his weight against the vehicle. Inside the truck, Mac kept turning the key in the ignition. Dennis could hear the angry roar of the mob as they grew closer. Dennis gave one final push and felt the truck move. He scrambled into the truck's bed. "Go, go, go!" he screamed at Mac.

Mac turned the truck into a U-turn. The wheels screeched as the back of the truck swung around. In the truck's bed, Dennis directly faced the people running at them. He no longer needed binoculars to see their wild eyes. The crowd was only twenty feet away.

"Go!" Dennis screamed again, and Mac slammed on the gas. The truck sped forward and Dennis clung to the sides of it to keep from falling off the back. He was drenched in sweat, and his hands were still shaking.

Mac and Dennis drove back the way they had come, away from the city and the hordes. Once they had driven far enough that they thought it was safe to stop, Mac pulled over to the side of the road. He paused the truck just long enough for Dennis to jump back into the passenger seat.

"Were those zombies?" asked Mac.

"I don't know," said Dennis. "Whatever they were, they didn't seem completely human. That must be what the plague does to people."

The young men talked over their next move as they drove. Big cities seemed dangerous but the small towns were abandoned. Should they head back to the ranch? Go deeper into the wilderness? Or try to find other survivors who were also on the run? There was no easy answer. No matter what decision they made, it would be risky.

"Let's stop at the next gas station and fill up some extra containers," said Mac. "We need to get more gas. I don't want to be low on fuel the next time we come across a group like that." Dennis stared out the window silently. He was hoping they would never come across a group like that again.

They passed a gas station a few miles down the road. They approached the gas station slowly, checking for signs of life, but there were none. Dennis hopped out and opened the gas cap. The gas pump seemed to be working so he filled up the truck's tank. Once the tank was full, Dennis began filling up extra containers and putting them in the truck's bed.

Mac decided that he would go inside the gas station to look for additional food and supplies. They still had some cornbread and apples from the ranch, but he didn't know when they would be able to stop again. Mac was beginning to realize that life as he knew it was over. They needed to be ready to survive.

"I'm going to head inside to find extra food," Mac said to Dennis. "Here are the keys to the truck. Be ready to get in and drive away quickly if we have to make a fast escape."

Dennis nodded and took the keys. "Be careful, Mac," he said. "Who knows what you'll find in there."

Mac opened the door to the gas station slowly. The inside was dark and silent. "Hello?" he called, "Anybody there?" Mac flipped a switch on the wall and fluorescent lights flickered on. He looked around at the empty store. There were signs of a struggle. Bags of chips and candy were trampled on the floor. One of the glass refrigerator doors had been torn off its hinges. Mac stood, holding his breath, listening. All he heard was the hum of the refrigerators and the sound of Dennis filling up outside.

Mac grabbed a few plastic bags from the counter. He filled them with enough supplies for a few more weeks: trail mix, bottled water, medicine, granola bars, and jars of peanut butter. Mac wondered if he should pay for these things. He wasn't sure if the owner of the gas station was even alive, and Mac and Dennis might need the money later. Then, Mac remembered Ann Greerson's goodbye back at the ranch. She had told them to remember their manners. Mac didn't want to let her down. He reached into his wallet and found a twenty-dollar bill. He had just placed it on the counter, when he heard a sound behind him. Mac froze. He wasn't alone in the store.

Outside, Dennis had filled up six containers with gasoline. He climbed into the front seat and put the keys in the ignition. He turned on the radio, but all he could find was static. Dennis kept moving the dial and searching for a station. Suddenly, the static cleared and he heard a voice.

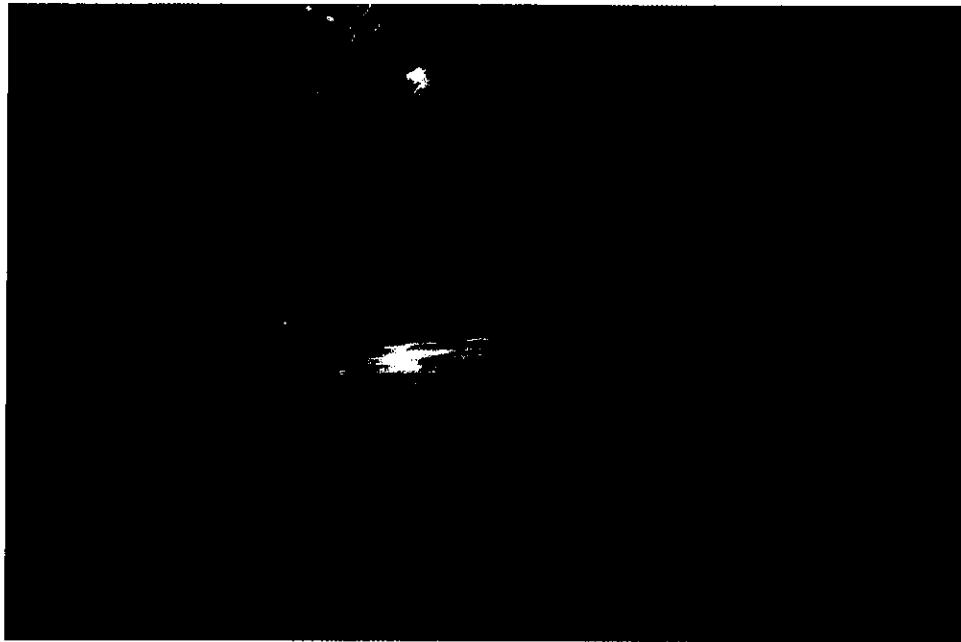
"Is anyone out there?" the voice said. It was a girl's voice. "My name is Anna Johnson. This is my father's radio kit. He's gone now. The plague arrived in Sunnydale one week ago." The girl's voice shook with sobs. "I just want to know if there's anyone else out there. Anyone who's still human." Dennis felt horrible for her. He and Mac had each other, but Anna was all alone. Dennis looked at the clock. It had been fifteen minutes. He felt uneasy; it shouldn't have taken Mac this long to grab a few supplies.

Suddenly he heard his name. "Dennis! Dennis!" Mac was crying out for him from inside the store. Dennis jumped out of the car and ran toward the entrance.

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Ed.: *The tale continues in Part 3, "Searching for Survivors".*

Searching for Survivors [The Run Series, #3]

by ReadWorks



"Dennis! Dennis!" Mac sounded frantic. Dennis raced across the parking lot toward the gas station. "I'm coming, Mac!" he yelled to his friend, and burst into the store.

Mac was at the counter. When Dennis walked in, Mac pointed to the back of the store. The door of the men's bathroom was slowly creaking open. Just then the door swung wide, and a man appeared. The man's hair was matted and disheveled. His clothes were ripped and dirty. Parts of his skin were covered in deep purple and black marks. Even from the door, Dennis could detect the man's stench. He smelled like the fermented slop that they fed to pigs on the ranch. It was obvious that the plague had gotten this man.

The man hovered in the doorway of the bathroom, looking first at Mac and then at Dennis. His eyes were red and bloodshot, and they rolled around in his sockets, unable to focus. "Argghhh," the man growled. Drool dripped down his chin as he stepped forward.

"Mac," said Dennis quietly, backing toward the front door. "Let's get out of here."

Mac began edging toward the door, too, taking the bags of food and supplies with him. Suddenly the crazed man lurched forward and started running toward the two younger men. Thinking quickly, Dennis reached out to the shelves of soup behind him. He threw the cans at the man as hard as he could. Back when he and Mac lived on the ranch, Dennis used to throw stones to scare off the coyotes. He had a strong throwing arm and good aim.

One of the cans hit the crazed man square in the face and he crumpled to the ground.

"Don't go near the body," said Dennis. "We don't know if he's contagious."

"Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere near it," said Mac. "Let's get out of here." They turned to exit when they heard another slow creak. Mac and Dennis paused. There was still someone else in the gas station. They turned around and saw that now the door to the women's bathroom was opening. Dennis picked up more cans and handed a few to Mac. They watched the door and readied themselves to throw the cans as soon as a target came into view.

"Hello?" A young boy stuck his head out from the bathroom. He couldn't have been more than six or seven years old. "Is it safe?" he asked.

Mac and Dennis looked at the boy. He seemed healthy but scared.

"How long have you been in there?" asked Mac.

"A day or two," said the boy. "I locked myself in. I saw a group of people coming; they looked dangerous. So I hid. There's no one else around anymore."

Dennis and Mac exchanged a look. They couldn't leave this kid here alone to fend for himself. He wouldn't last a week.

"Grab some supplies and come with us," said Dennis. "We're looking for other survivors."

The boy followed the two young men to the truck and climbed between them. As they drove, Dennis and Mac learned that the boy's name was Jeremiah. His parents had worked in one of the big hospitals in the city. When the plague hit, they had volunteered to help nurse the first victims. His parents had never come home. Jeremiah had waited a week and then tried to go to the hospital. No one was there. The entire building was abandoned and vacant.

"I don't know what happened to them," said Jeremiah. "So I left the city on my bike. I rode and rode until I came to the gas station. I thought I was safe until a new group of plagued people showed up."

Dennis and Mac nodded. Who knew how many families had been ripped apart by the plague? The important thing now was figuring out their next step. Dennis told Mac that he had heard the voice of a girl on the radio. "Her name was Anna, and she was the last one alive in her town, Sunnydale. She was on her father's radio kit, looking for others," said Dennis.

Mac looked at Dennis. "We're going to Sunnydale, aren't we?" he asked. Dennis nodded.

"And then?" asked Jeremiah.

Mac cleared his throat. He had an idea. Mac pointed out that it was too dangerous to go to the cities and that they only had enough gas to drive another four hundred miles. The safest thing to do would be to go somewhere rural. They should head to a place where they could set up a strong defense. Then they could wait out the plague for a few more weeks before trying to find other survivors.

Dennis thought about Mac's plan. It made sense. "Okay," he said. "But we look for Anna first. We might be her only chance at survival." In his head, Dennis could still hear the girl's voice and her sobbing as she made her radio broadcast.

The sun was setting when the truck pulled onto the main street of Sunnydale. "How will we find her?"

asked Mac. "We can't just knock on every door in this town."

Dennis was fiddling with the radio again. "Let's see if we can hear her," he said. "Maybe she'll say her address." The static cleared, and there again was Anna's voice. She was still broadcasting.

"Is anyone there? Anyone liste-"

Suddenly, Anna's voice stopped. The young men heard a pounding on the door in the background. There was a crash and then sounds of a struggle. Dennis gripped the wheel so hard that his knuckles turned white. They were too late.

"Look!" cried Jeremiah. On the main street, the doors to one of the houses had opened. A teenaged girl was running out. She looked terrified, but not like the wild members of the swarm. Something else came out of the house, chasing her.

"Jump in the truck!" screamed Mac. The girl ran and leapt into the back of the truck, and Dennis hit the accelerator. There was a howl of frustration from the plagued person as his victim escaped.

"Uh-oh," said Jeremiah. "That doesn't look good."

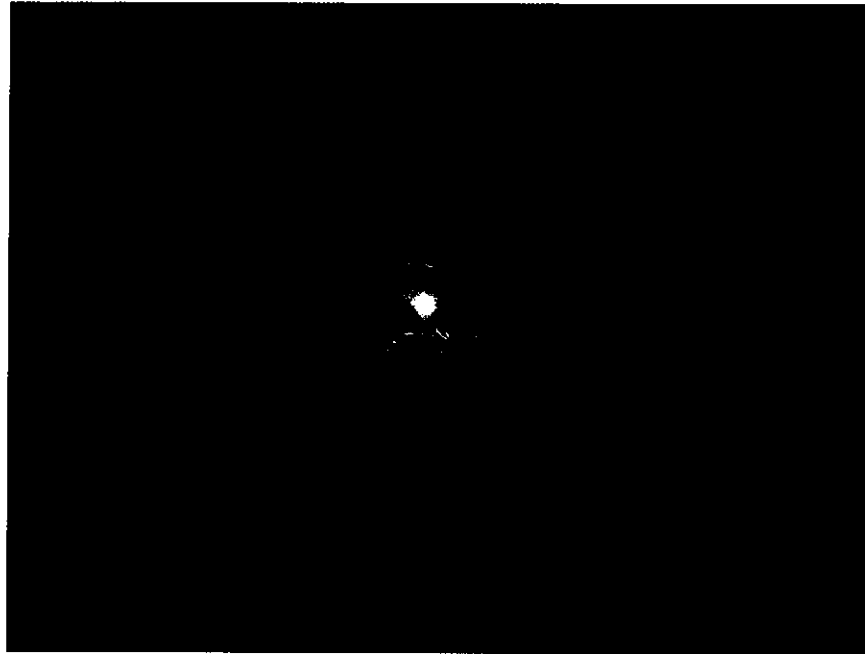
He pointed to the girl's leg. The zombie had cut a long gash in her shin. The wound was already turning dark purple.

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Ed.: *The tale continues in Part 4, "On the Road".*

Missing [The Run Series, #5]

by Lynne Stahl



Anna was gone.

Mac sat bolt upright and threw off his blankets. All traces of sleep had disappeared from him instantly, replaced by a rush of panic. Where could she have gone? Maybe she just needed some time to herself, he thought, but the idea rang hollow in his head. His creeping doubts from the night before returned.

Anna had been wounded by a zombie. Was she infected? Was she already one of them? What should he do? What *could* he do?

"I have to find her," he said to himself. But did he have to go alone? Mac thought for a minute. He definitely didn't want to bring Jeremiah into harm's way, but he also knew that he and Dennis should not leave the young boy all by himself.

Mac gritted his teeth, clenched his fist as if to prove he could use it, and let out a sigh. It was now or never.

He fumbled around for the tiny keychain flashlight they had grabbed at the gas station. He wished desperately that he had something bigger. The light of the tiny beam barely reached his own feet when he pointed it down at them. Kneeling, he swung the flashlight across the dirt around Anna's blankets and finally saw the footprints she had left in the soft ground.

The footprints looked strangely uneven, and he felt his stomach drop when he realized that she must have been dragging her injured leg heavily to make such long, deep marks. He wondered if she was as scared as he was. He began to wonder if people stopped being scared once they turned into zombies, then shook himself and stood up. If there was any chance that he could still help Anna, he needed to move fast.

Walking parallel to the footprints, Mac set off into the woods. He took one last look back at the pile of

blankets were Dennis and Jeremiah were still asleep, trying to will them not to notice his absence. He crept along slowly as the trees grew thicker around him. He moved slowly to avoid making noise, but thoughts screeched through his head at dizzying speeds. He tried to convince himself that it might not be too late. Maybe Anna was fine. He worked to summon his earlier hope that she had just gone for a walk, but it seemed less and less likely. What would he do when he found her? If worse had come to worst and Anna had become a zombie, would he be able to bring himself to fight her? Even scarier--did he have any chance of winning?

As he walked, Mac began to hear the faint sound of running water in the distance. He realized that he must be nearing a stream or a creek. He followed the noise and was soon able to make out a soft glow: moonlight reflecting on water. He drew in his breath when the beam of his flashlight passed over what he knew instantly was a human--or zombie--shaped figure. Mac stood as still as he could, trying to decide what to do. The figure was bent over and seemed to be looking down, unaware of his presence.

Mac paused. If the figure was Anna, he didn't want to startle her. But if it was a zombie--or worse, a zombified Anna--he didn't want to get within arm's reach. He checked his shoelaces to make sure they were tied and braced himself to run away if necessary.

"Anna?" he called softly.

Dennis awoke with a start. It took him a moment to figure out where he was and why he was sleeping on a pile of dirty tarps. "Should've stayed asleep," he mumbled to himself as the grim details of the previous day came back to him. He thought about trying for some more rest, but his stomach objected with a loud growl. They had been too exhausted to eat before bed, and now he was starving. He shook Jeremiah gently. He could use the boy's help to get a fire going. Jeremiah only muttered and rolled over. Maybe Mac would be more cooperative.

The hunger in his stomach turned into cold fear. Mac's blankets were empty, and he was nowhere to be seen. Anna was gone, too. He knew that Mac wouldn't have left without telling him unless something was seriously wrong.

"Jeremiah," he hissed, "you have to get up now. Something's wrong."

The boy sat up and rubbed his eyes, hair sticking out in all directions. "What is it?" he asked in confusion.

"Mac and Anna," Dennis replied, "they're gone."

Jeremiah blinked. "Maybe they went for a walk?" he suggested hopefully.

Dennis shook his head. He didn't want to alarm Jeremiah, but there was no time for false hope. He considered the possibilities. Had zombies gotten to Mac and Anna while they were sleeping? He doubted it. Zombies weren't known for their stealth--he definitely would have woken up to their loud groans and heavy, clumsy footsteps. That meant that Mac and Anna must have left of their own will. But why?

He shook his head again. At this point, all that mattered was finding their friends. "Let's go," he told Jeremiah, pointing to the truck. Sensing his urgency, the boy cooperated without further protest. He gathered an armful of blankets and secured them to the bed of the truck with the ratty old rope that had held the bundle together.

Dennis paused. Which direction should they go? As Jeremiah hopped into the truck's passenger seat, Dennis strode over to collect the blankets that Mac and Anna had slept in. There was no point in abandoning their few supplies. As he bent to gather them up, he spotted the imprint of a shoe in the dirt.

Tracks! Just one pair of footprints at first, starting from Mac's blankets, and then another starting from Anna's. Dennis frowned. Where they joined up, the two sets of footprints were strangely close together--too close for two people to have been walking next to each other at the same time. One of them must have left the camp first, then the other followed later. But why?

Brow furrowed, Dennis hurried to the truck. He remembered how worried Mac had been the night before, even after they had used the hand sanitizer to clean Anna's wound. He hadn't seemed to share Dennis's relief that the sanitizer would kill any germs that might cause an infection.

Infection. The word rang in Dennis's head. Of course! Anna had been injured by a zombie. Wasn't that how the plague spread? Was she a zombie now? If so, could she--would she--infect Mac, too?

Dennis leapt into the driver's seat and peered out, tires whirring against the soft dirt. He steered the truck along the path of footprints as quickly as he could amid the thickening trees. The bumpy ground jolted the old truck around, and Jeremiah squealed as a particularly nasty bump lifted him straight off his seat and practically out the window.

"Buckle up," Dennis ordered, "this ride may get even bumpier."

As they progressed, Dennis felt breathless--a combination of the truck's jostling and his own rising panic. They had no weapons, no way to defend themselves. He ran through a mental list of the items they had grabbed from the gas station, but none of them would help. Out of habit, he punched on the radio, then remembered that it would just produce static. Petey "Muskrat" Coltrain's bluegrass station and all the others had ceased broadcasting weeks ago as the plague intensified.

But it wasn't static. Somehow, it was playing music! And not just any music, but a lively bluegrass tune that he recognized from his time listening to the Muskrat's station while he and Mac were back at the farm.

"Well, at least we have a soundtrack," he said to Jeremiah, strangely cheered by the familiar song. Jeremiah seemed unimpressed. Turning his full attention to the path ahead, Dennis focused his gaze and braked slightly. Ahead and to their left, he could make out a stream flowing through the trees in the distance. He squinted. Something was moving next to the water. Were those people? They were--it was Mac and Anna!

Dennis and Jeremiah stared in horror. Anna had a hand firmly around Mac's throat.

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Ed.: *The tale continues in Part 6, "Changes".*

Changes [The Run Series #6]

by Lynne Stahl



Dennis and Jeremiah stared in horror from the truck. Anna had a hand firmly around Mac's throat.

"What is she *doing*?" Jeremiah squeaked in fearful confusion.

"Her wound," Dennis gasped, "She must be infected." But as he spoke, something strange happened. Anna's left hand reached up and gripped her right arm by the wrist, wrenching it away from Mac's neck. Mac retreated hastily, maneuvering so that a boulder stood between himself and Anna, but he seemed unhurt. What in the world was going on?

Dennis stomped on the gas, launching the truck forward. Hearing the noise, Mac and Anna looked up. Relief flooded Mac's face, but Anna just seemed scared. Dennis pulled up a short distance away and hopped out, strains of bluegrass still trickling from the now-functioning radio.

"Unbuckle yourself," Dennis told Jeremiah. He was reluctant to put the boy in harm's way, but they'd be safer together if they needed to fight--or flee--Anna. "Stay near the truck, but be ready for anything."

Jeremiah nodded bravely, making Dennis proud and a little sad--they'd all had to grow up quickly to survive this zombie plague. Only a few weeks ago, he, Mac, and the other workers had been sitting happily around the table in the Greersons' kitchen, listening to Petey Coltrain and playing poker with hardly a care in the world. And now--now one of his friends was trying to strangle another.

"Mac!" Dennis yelled, sprinting toward them, "Are you okay?" Maybe it was his imagination or the rising sun's reflection, but he thought Anna's eyes held a glint of red. She didn't look hostile, though, just shaken and confused.

"Great timing, Dennis," Mac said, keeping a wary eye on Anna, "We may have a slight problem." He

gestured toward Anna, whose frightened gaze was back on her hand.

"Anna, are you okay?" Dennis asked her, "What happened?"

"I think . . ." Anna's voice trembled, "I think I'm turning into one of *them*."

Dennis and Mac exchanged a glance. Neither needed to ask who "them" meant. They looked at her bandaged right shin and noticed angry purple streaks creeping upward from it.

"It started with my leg," she continued. "It was tingling all night, and then it began pulling me."

"Your leg pulled you?" Dennis asked, his stomach tight with fear.

Anna nodded. "My arm started feeling funny, too. Almost like it was asleep, but also like something else was controlling it." Her right arm twitched violently when she spoke, as if to prove her point.

Mac felt desperate. It seemed evident that Anna was infected and slowly turning into a zombie--one who wished them harm. But she was also still *Anna*, and Anna was their friend. How could they help her? How much time did they have? Dennis's troubled face suggested that he shared these conflicted thoughts.

"Don't worry," Jeremiah piped up suddenly. "We'll find a way to help you." The others looked surprised but appreciative of his clear determination.

"Thank you," she replied, her eyes now clear, "I promise I'll try not to . . . you know." She regarded her rogue arm fearfully.

"Let's start driving," Dennis said. "If we can find more survivors, they might know what to do. We've made a lot of noise--it's probably not safe to stay here any longer."

They started toward the truck. As Mac passed Anna, her right hand leapt out and grabbed his shirt. He yelped, yanking himself free. "I'm sorry!" Anna said, horrified. She grasped her right wrist with her left arm and stared down at her right leg, which was kicking out toward Mac.

Dennis gripped her gently by the shoulders. "Um, not to be rude," he said, "but maybe you should ride in back, Anna."

She nodded mutely and climbed into the truck bed. Jeremiah arranged the tarps into a makeshift seat. Mac hated isolating her, but he worried about her rebellious limbs interfering with Dennis's driving. Jeremiah squeezed her hand before hopping into the truck.

"Everyone buckled?" Dennis asked after Mac hopped in, "This could get bumpy." He threw the truck into gear and they rumbled back toward the highway. He fought the impulse to speed away, not wanting to jostle Anna.

Dennis suspected Mac was casting his brain around for solutions as wildly as Dennis was--and without success. Uncomfortable in the silence, Jeremiah turned the radio back up, and Petey Coltrain's lively bluegrass rushed in.

Mac's head snapped up. "Since when is the radio working?"

Dennis shrugged. He'd forgotten about it. "I'm not sure. I turned it on out of habit when we left this morning, and bluegrass was playing. Why--"

"We have to go there," Mac interrupted. "Don't you see?" When Dennis looked blankly, he continued excitedly. "If Coltrain's playing music, that means he's *survived*. And if he's taking the time to spin bluegrass, his life must not be in danger. Right? Maybe he can help!"

Dennis wasn't sure Petey Coltrain could help them--or Anna--but felt relieved to have a clear destination. Mac was already poring over the maps that had resided in the glove compartment. "Okay, co-pilot," Dennis said, "just tell me which way-" but his words were drowned out by a violent thump on the rear windshield.

The boys' heads whipped around, though Dennis quickly turned his eyes back to the road. "What was *that*?"

Mac looked sick. "It's Anna," he replied, "Well--Anna's leg."

Another thump shook the rear window, so forceful that Dennis felt the impact through his headrest.

Anna had twisted herself around in the truck bed and was pounding the thick heel of her right hiking boot into the glass. Or rather, Mac suspected, Anna had lost control and the zombie was taking over.

"We're going the right way!" Mac jabbed triumphantly at the map, "I recognize this stretch of highway from when we left the Greersons' ranch. The radio station's only 30 miles ahead."

Thirty miles didn't sound like much, but Dennis felt as though he was barely inching along. He was tempted to slam the gas to dislodge zombie Anna, but he knew their friend was still inside. He couldn't do it. As Dennis drove, the heel kept coming down, its rhythm an ominous contrast to the bright bluegrass still playing. The glass was strong, but how long could it hold?

The answer came quickly. Dennis gritted his teeth at the unmistakable noise of shattering glass. Cold air whooshed against his neck as the rear windshield gave way. Anna's leg, now a hideous purple, kicked through the remaining glass, and her boot's motion continued directly into the back of Dennis's skull. Dennis felt his head zoom toward the steering wheel, and then everything went black.

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Ed.: *The tale ends with Part 7, "End of the Road,"*