

# EVERYTHING IS BETTER WITH ZOMBIES

by Hannah Wolf Bowen

Hannah Wolf Bowen's fiction has appeared in *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Polyphony 6*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Ideomancer*, *The Fortean Bureau*, and *Alchemy*. She is also currently one of the fiction editors of *Chiaroscuro*, a webzine devoted to dark fiction.

"Everything Is Better with Zombies" began as a joke. "I had a list of things that everything was better with," Bowen says. "Monkeys was on the list. Also, pirates. One day in the summer of 2004, I was in a chatroom with several writer friends and I said (for reasons not clear to me now), 'Everything is better with zombies,' and then thought, 'Hmm.' One of those writer friends, I believe, challenged me to make a story out of it, and so I did."

The story deals with the idea of loyalty, and with the question of what you do when what seems like the loyal, faithful thing conflicts with what's the right thing for you. But when it came to researching the story, Bowen just googled a bunch of zombie facts and played a lot of *Resident Evil*.

Everything would be better with zombies. Take my junior high school graduation. Everything would have been better if zombies had shuffled in to "Pomp and Circumstance." They would have lurched into the gym, devoured the principal's brains, and shuffled out again.

There were no zombies at graduation. We walked in line. We took our seats. Living dead.

I've long suspected that I might be a zombie. If I were a zombie, how would I know? I study scary and not-scary movies. I read books. I play the relevant video games until my thumbs ache and my eyes grow tired and dry.

My best friend Lionel says that he would know. "You'd walk," he says, and demonstrates, shambling gait and arms draped in the air. He lists left, which helps to make it work, but Lionel's walked badly for a while now. He's not doing it for effect. "And you'd go 'Braaaains!' and everyone would run away."

Lion scowls and sits down beside me on the crumbly step. He picks at the grass

growing up through the cracks. He would be out of luck, if it came to running from the zombies.

Besides, he's described half the town. If I were a zombie, I don't believe Lion would know.

There are lots of ways to end up with a zombie. You can start with a dead person, or you can start with a live one, or you can start with a live one and turn him undead. That's part of what makes it so confusing. I know what a zombie is supposed to be like, but I could be wrong.

I spend my days reading up at the library instead of packing for the move. Late afternoon, I ride my bike past the stoplight to the hardware store where Lion works. He fetches his bike from the alley and we pedal, not talking, up the road, across the tracks, and out of town.

If we lived other than where we do, maybe we could explore. Turn left instead of right. Ride a little further than ever before. Or keep going through the cornfield that's grown up tall, bumpity-bump to the other side with the wind around us like the sea.

But we live where we live and we have all our lives up until now, and the other side of the cornfield looks a lot like this one. So we stand on the pedals and creak up Salt Hill, then over the spray-painted bridge to gravel-topped Strawberry Road, which curves sharp to the left and down and if you're not careful, you'll fly off into the air with the creek down below. I almost did, the first times that we came this way, and then some other times later when I thought I knew how to ride it, but was wrong.

I have it now. I lean and the bike swings left beneath me, and Lion yells but his words are shredded by the wind. I coast all the way down to the cemetery, and there I stop.

You can make a zombie with a disease. You can make a zombie with a potion. You can make a zombie with the right chants and voodoo charms. You may be able to make a zombie in other ways, too. It's hard to be sure.

What we can be sure of is that some of the graves in the cemetery aren't as neat as they ought to be. The town isn't all that big. You'd expect that we'd know everyone, and you'd be right. But sometimes we find headstones we haven't found before and Lion lingers to read them over and over aloud.

I head down to the creek because the cemetery is a lot like the town and barring unexpected headstones, I know every corner by heart. So I sit on the muddy bank on a rock or on a fallen log and listen to the creek go splish-splashity by.

I see the footprint there. I'm still studying it when Lion comes up, muttering, "Emily Fitzhugh, '87 to—what's that?"

He spots the footprint right away. It's hard to miss. The water is edged in mud, speckled with raccoon fingerprints. But this print is in a smooth empty spot and clear as if I'd stamped it there just now. One left footprint, deeper at the ball of the foot and the toes, like she stepped down from the grassy tree-shaded bank,

dropped and sank, pushed off against the yielding muck and landed her right foot in the creek, or on a stepping stone.

“Not me,” I say. “Do you think it’s Emily?” But my name is Emily, too.

Lion gives me a hand up, long chilly fingers wrapping my wrist. I kick off my sneakers and pick my way through the mud to the stepping stones, cool and rough beneath my toes. I crouch down, teetering, to examine the others ahead. There’s another print, imperfect, rubber stamp in need of ink. And on the far bank grass, a smudge of mud on a flattened dandelion. I stand and wave to Lion. “She went this way.”

**End of Excerpt**