

STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

by David Tallerman

David Tallerman's stories have appeared in a variety of publications, such as *Flash Fiction Online*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, and *Pseudopod*. He's also sold work to *Aoife's Kiss*, the anthology *Barren Worlds*, and the British comic *Futurequake*. He is a graduate of York University, where he specialized in the literary history of witchcraft.

"Stockholm Syndrome" follows an unnamed protagonist who has survived the beginning of the zombie apocalypse, but at the cost of his family, his home, his whole way of life. "While he's not a bad guy, he's not really a good guy either," Tallerman says. "Stuck on his own with no one to talk to and not much to do, he has to confront that for maybe the first time in his life. He sees some uncomfortable similarities between himself and the walking corpses out in the streets, which has to be a harsh awakening for anybody."

Tallerman argues that facing a single zombie is usually just funny, but if you get a hundred of them, or a thousand, then suddenly they don't seem so funny anymore. On the other hand: "It's easy to forget the threat of a lone zombie," he says. "At least until he's chomping on your guts."

One of them, I called him Billy—he was more, what'd you call it? More *animated* than the rest. Mostly they just wander about. Occasionally they'll pick things up and then get bored and put them down and go back to wandering again. They don't make much noise. I guess they know that there're people around, for a few days at the start they bashed at the boards up over the windows and tried to push against the doors. They can't climb and they ain't got much in the way of strength, so eventually they gave that up. And after that they just shambled about, or sometimes just lay there.

It's funny how sometimes they look like people and sometimes they don't. The first ones, the ones who came up out of the ground or wherever they were, guess what you'd call the first generation—some of them are pretty normal looking. But the way they walk, that lumbering, slowly like they're taking baby-steps and watching their feet all the time, that's what makes them so different. 'Course, the other ones, the ones that the first generation got to, some of those are real messed

up: bits hanging off and big messy wounds, sometimes their faces are half off. They're just like dead people who're up and walking about. They're easier to deal with I guess, even though it's pretty crazy to see them like that. But at least you know where you stand.

So anyway, I was talking about Billy. Billy, he was first generation through and through. I don't know what his story was, but when he turned up about two weeks ago he was wearing a suit, a real nice suit, he even still had a carnation in his buttonhole. I don't know, maybe they was burying him when it happened. You've got to wonder what they'd have thought, when they was burying him and he got up like that.

Anyway, he cut quite a figure when he walked up of Main Street in that suit. Well, not walked, y'know, I guess he shambled as much as the rest of them, but somehow he seemed kind of smarter than the others—more alert. And in that suit, he reminded me of my kid, when we buried him. That's why I named him Billy.

Billy made himself at home pretty quick. It didn't take him long to figure that there were just two houses with people in, mine and the place over the road. Both of us had boarded ourselves in pretty good. Actually, I shouldn't go taking the credit for that—when I got here, after my car came off the freeway a couple of miles up, I found this place pretty much like it is now. They'd got in through a window and it was still left open—a couple of them had got in and then I figure the other two must've been the ones whose house it was. Four's about as many as you could handle, up close like that—I had my old revolver still on me. I guess I was lucky though, getting them before they got me. Guess it could have easily gone the other way.

I hauled the bodies out the window and boarded it up again before the others figured out what'd gone on. All in all, I was real lucky—there was a rifle here with one of those telescopic sights, and a whole load of tins, all sorts of things. They was all set to wait it out, and then they just must have got careless. It can happen. It ain't easy to keep concentrating all the time, not with things the way they are. I've tried not to mess with their property too much—it wouldn't be decent. That gun and the food's all I really need.

But I'm getting off the subject again—this is Billy's story, it ain't mine. And the thing was, as soon as he'd walked into town like that, you could see that something was different. I guess I should have known that he meant trouble, but you get bored, with nothing to do all day and the radio and TV giving out nothing but static. I should have just shot him right then. At first, y'know, you take every shot you can get—but after a while you get to realizing that there's always gonna be more of them than you got bullets. However many bullets you got there'll always be more of them.

So, maybe that's what I was thinking when I didn't take my shot on Billy. Or maybe it was because he'd looked so much like my kid when he was walking up Main Street. Or maybe it was just that I was bored and here was something happening. I suppose it don't matter much.

Either way, you could see that he was a bit smarter, that he wasn't just gonna

settle down to blundering about with the rest of them. First off, he walked all round the house across the road, and every so often he'd bang on a board or something, like he was testing the place. Then, when he got done with that, he came and did the same to mine—I could hear him scratching on that window where I'd got in. I got to say, I was impressed. You get sick of the stupid way they act, they're like dumb, lazy children, and it starts to grate on your nerves after a while. It was nice to see one of them showing a bit of initiative; even if it did look like it was gonna spell trouble.

I wasn't too worried for myself—I checked the boards every morning, and every so often I'd hammer up another couple, more for something to do than anything, 'cause like I said they'd pretty much given up on trying to get in. But I didn't know about the family across the road; I didn't know whether they were taking precautions or not. The place looked okay from the outside. Sounds kind of stupid now, but I didn't like to pry too much. I knew that there were four of them, I figured they were a husband and wife and two kids, but that was as far as I'd got. It's a wide street, I couldn't see much without the sight, and that just felt too much like—I don't know—like I was some kind of pervert. Even with everything all screwed up like this, people have got to have some right to privacy, haven't they?

There wasn't any way we could talk to each other, if the phones had been working then I could have just looked them up in the book I guess. Or maybe I could've put a sign up, but I didn't know if they'd have any way to read it. So, I just tried to leave them alone as much as I could.

Billy obviously got it into his head that they were a better bet, because after the first day he didn't bother with me too much. But I kept my eye on him, 'cause he was interesting—least he was compared with the others, and because they were everywhere, as far as you could see, they were about all there was to look at. It was the same for them, they were curious, as much as they could be—who was this, walking around like he had some kind of an agenda or something?

In the meanwhile, Billy had taken a project on himself—the second day after he walked into town, he picked himself out a particular window, round on the right-hand side of the family's house, just after where the porch ended. Even with the scope, I could barely make him out there. There was the porch, and a big old tree in the way, and I could just about see him moving around but that was it. 'Course, I could guess what he'd be up to—he must have decided that there was a weak spot, he thought maybe if he kept going at it he'd be able to get in sooner or later. I didn't give much for his chances. There was no way they wouldn't have heard him there, and if they thought there was any chance of him getting through they'd be hammering up two new boards for every one he managed to get off—least, that was what I'd of been doing.

Probably he'd get bored after a day or two, and go to sitting and wandering like the rest of them. That thought made me kind of sad, somehow. I mean God knows it wasn't like I wanted him to succeed or nothing—I just didn't want to have to watch him give up either. Shit, I don't know, maybe it was like I wanted to see him make something of himself; I didn't want him to wind up like my Billy did. Yeah, it

sounds pretty stupid, I know that. I guess I don't know what I was thinking—just seemed like it would of been a shame is all.

When I got up the next day, he was still at it. But it wasn't just that—he'd gathered himself an audience as well. A lot of the others—maybe there was a hundred, maybe even more—had gathered about on the lawn. Some of them were standing but a lot were just sitting around, like he was putting on a performance for them or something. I still couldn't make out exactly what Billy himself was up to. It got to be frustrating—what could he be doing to get all of their attentions like that? After a while I started hunting around for a better view, and then I remembered there was a ladder to the attic, and sure enough once I got up there, there was a big window looking out over the street. The room had been converted, looked like it was a kid's room but then the kid had left and the parents hadn't wanted to change it any.

The window was so big that I could sit up on the ledge. And from there, sure enough, I could see Billy pretty clear. It was quite a shock. I ain't ever seen one of them go at anything the way he was at those planks—tearing at them with his hands, over and over. His fingers were all bloody; with the sight I reckoned I could make out bits of bone where he'd torn the ends clean off. He was a mess, but that wasn't slowing him any—I guess he wasn't even feeling it. He just kept tearing at the planks, not paying any attention to anything else. He'd got a couple down already; they were lying on the grass next to him. I didn't figure it was gonna do him any good though—the family would put up more on the inside, and if he started on those they'd just have to put up some more. Even if he was a bit stronger and a bit smarter than the rest, he still wasn't about to keep up.

Still, the way he was going at it, it was hard to take your eyes off. Apart from a break at lunchtime I watched Billy all day, 'til it started to get too dark. The last I saw, he was about halfway there on the outside planks. He was still at it when I left him—I suppose the dark didn't bother him too much.

I got up early the next day, and shifted all my supplies up into the attic room, along with a gas stove I'd found. It was like he'd become the center of my life all of a sudden—I remember thinking how I was just like those other dumb bastards who were sitting out there on the lawn with him, watching him like he was the star attraction in a freak show.

Only, when I got up to my perch on the sill, they weren't sitting anymore. They were in a big mass now, with Billy right there in the center in that nice suit of his, and every single one of them was after getting into that window. Maybe twenty of them were clawing at the planks, all together, and I could tell straight away that whatever the family was doing on the inside there wasn't anything that could stop that—the sheer weight of all those bodies all together.

Sure enough, it was only about a minute after I got up there that the whole thing caved in, planks and bodies all falling in together—I remember some crazy part of my brain thinking, it was like Billy had been waiting for me, as if he liked that he'd got an audience.

I didn't do anything, what would've been the point? If the family had been on

the other side, and I figured they must've been, then they'd have been dead about the moment those planks gave up. I wasn't feeling much either—like maybe I was in shock. They kept on climbing through the window, all of them, fighting each other to get in like it was the only thing that'd ever mattered to them. Even once the room was full they kept on going, 'til there were just a few left on the lawn, and even they were still pushing and shoving.

It was quiet, a weird kind of quiet considering what'd just happened, but I didn't even notice it until the screaming started. And then it seemed strange there being a noise, 'cause I'd gotten so used to it being quiet all the time. I had to put down the rifle for a second, just so I could look to see where it was coming from. It was up on the second floor, on the far side from where they'd got in—the little daughter, maybe she was about twelve years old. They must've locked her in there, thinking she'd be safer maybe. She was hanging half out of the window, and she was screaming—she wasn't looking at me, I don't know if she knew I was there, if she was screaming for somebody to help her or just screaming. There wasn't a thing that I could've done for her. If she'd gotten out onto the porch and down to the road, maybe then I could've done something, but there was no way to tell her that. I picked up the rifle again, I don't know why, whether I was thinking to get some of them before they got to her, or whether I thought I'd make it easier on her. That's what I should've done, I guess—I don't know if I even thought of it then, it's a hard thing to think.

And, y'know, I think I'd guessed that it was going to be Billy that got to her first, least I wasn't a bit surprised when he appeared. The girl didn't even realize he was there she was so caught up with her screaming. It was a long double window, and there were a couple of feet between them still. Billy was shuffling up like he had all the time in the world, and I had a good clean shot, would have taken his head right off.

I squeezed on the trigger—and then I stopped. All I could think about was how I'd been happier since Billy had walked up of Main Street, about how much he'd looked like my kid. Maybe he was one of them but he was smart, and did I have the right to kill him? And somewhere, there was a voice in my head saying, you can't get them all, there just ain't the bullets, one of them's going to get her and why shouldn't it be Billy? I knew that I was wrong—if I could buy her a bit more time then maybe she'd wake up and get out onto the porch.

I went to take the shot again. But by then, it was too late.

Billy lurched forward, and he got hold of her head with those bloody stumps of hands that he had left, and he bit down hard into her cheek. Then he just stayed like that, with his mouth covering half of her face—almost like he was kissing her except for the blood streaming down between them, pouring out all over his nice suit. I could see his jaw moving through the sight. Suddenly, he didn't look like my kid no more; he just looked like a monster. I pulled the trigger—and for a couple of seconds his head was just a red cloud, with the blood raining down over everything. When it cleared he was still standing there, and even though there wasn't anything to hold it up, his face was still clamped over hers. I pulled

the trigger again, and then they both crumpled down. I knew she was dead any way, but that didn't make it feel any better.

So, that's the end of Billy's story. And I guess it's the end of mine as well. Yesterday, I found this old tape recorder, and I just wanted to talk it all through I suppose, get it out in the open. Probably no one's ever going to hear it. But maybe there'll be a day when this is all over, and maybe there's something we could learn from it. Maybe everyone will try to forget as quick as they can when they'd be better off remembering. 'Cause, what I've been thinking is, the worst thing that they've done to us, it ain't killing us. It's making us like them—making us so we can't feel anything. Whether they get to you or not, you start to getting a little less human every day, you get deader inside.

Or, I don't know, maybe I was always like this. I haven't ever cried for Barbara and my little girl, not once, even though I miss them so bad it hurts—something in me just can't do it. But then, I didn't cry for Billy either—seeing them put him in the ground I was just angry, and wondering why he had to do a stupid, selfish thing like that. Shit, I know I wasn't a good father to him, but if he'd just talked to me then there's got to have been something I could've said.

But I guess that I understand Billy a little better now—I wish he was here and I could tell him that, instead of talking to this dumb machine. One of the policemen said to me, Billy didn't really know what he was doing, 'cause nobody shoots themselves in the chest—in the mouth he said, with the barrel facing upwards, that's the best way.

It'd be hell to do with that rifle, but I was lucky, there're a couple of bullets left in the revolver—and I'll only need the one.

I guess what I was trying to say before, what they've taught us—it's that being alive ain't the same thing as living. And me, I figure that I'm already dead.

At least now I'll get to stay that way.