

# The Survivor

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John Boston

The first time Aubrey saw the strange-looking man, he was in the outskirts of Chicago, trying to escape the chaos as best he could. Downtown Chicago was a war zone. The Illinois National Guard had set up a perimeter around the city, trying to keep the infected out of the suburbs. It wasn't working.....nothing seemed to be working.

The man looked like a hobo. He had on a cheap suit and wore a hat. He was gaunt and fairly tall. He was hitchhiking. Aubrey didn't even slow down. One wrong move and you could die a very painful death.

Aubrey camped out near Galesburg. He stayed there for two months. There were still people alive and trying desperately to hold onto their old lives. Once the grocery stores closed their doors, he knew it was time to move on. He lost track of time. He found an old farmhouse and decided to camp out. There was still power on in this part of the state. He spent weeks there as well as the deadly COLUMBUS FEVER continued to spread across the globe. Every day, it took more lives. Every day, the country became more chaotic. Every day, he just wished he wasn't so alone. The loneliness made everything worse. It was just him and his thoughts, echoing off the farmhouse walls. He had a radio with him. Most of the time, it just played the same message, over and over again. As if it was going to do any good. *Everyone was dead.*

Well, not everyone. Only about forty million Americans. Some got the fever and beat it but they were few and far between. Some were exposed but never got sick. Aubrey was one of the lucky ones. He had type AB blood. For reasons unknown, the virus could not survive in someone with type AB blood. It was the most minute details that made the most impact on his life. Up until that day he was tested, he didn't even know what his blood type was. He remembers the look on the nurse's face. It was like they had won the lottery.

"*Jesus.....we finally have somebody who's immune!*" she screamed. Everyone on the floor wanted to see the results for himself. The rumors were true. Aubrey had brought his boss to the hospital when she started bleeding from her mouth. By the time he got her in his car, she was barely conscious.

"*Christ Aubrey.....it feels like I'm on fire.....please don't let me die.*" she whimpered.

He couldn't get near the hospital. The sick and dying were everywhere. The Army and National Guard were *assisting*. Aubrey knew she was going to die, there was nothing anyone could do. They helped her into an ambulance and took her.....*somewhere*. He figured they just shot them and dumped their bodies in a mass grave. He figured he was going to get sick as well. He had heard if you get the medicine inside of you in the early stages, you have a good chance of beating it. He was at the hospital for two days before a nurse finally saw him. She had somehow survived

the virus and stayed on. He told her he wasn't sick at all. He felt fine. She put him in a giant tent out back where the infected were saying. After a week of still not showing any symptoms, he was finally allowed to see a doctor.

"Aubrey.....you have a very rare blood type. AB negative. Only two percent of the population has this blood type." he said.

That was all he needed to hear. He left the hospital and drove back to his apartment. He packed a few things and knew it was time to get the hell out of dodge.

*Things were beginning to deteriorate very quickly. The crazies were coming out of the woodwork.*

He had a small pistol with him and two boxes of bullets. That was all. He managed to get out of the city before it was sealed off. He was lucky....very lucky.

He made his way down to Southern Illinois for the winter. Past Marion and Anna. Into the little towns and villages that dotted the landscape. Most of the towns were quiet. Some had escaped the virus completely. Others had been devastated. In Golconda, he drove past several dead bodies in the streets. There was no one left alive to bury them. He struck gold when he found the camper in the Shawnee National Forest. It had been abandoned, along with several others. There was blood on the ground. It had a generator and plenty of gas. There was even some rice and beans in the pantry. It was raining hard and he was exhausted. He kept the pistol by his pillow and went to sleep. He hoped it wasn't a trap. He hoped no one would even know he was there.

It had been six months since he had left the chaos of Chicago. Millions more had died. Millions more would in the coming months. For the first time in almost two years since the virus first appeared in Columbus, Ohio, the death toll was falling. New cases were also falling. The virus had finally run its course.

*Forty million dead. That was the official estimate. Forty million Americans who are no longer with us.*

There were still a hell of a lot of people left alive. The virus hadn't taken everyone. Problem was, the supply chains had been destroyed. The crops weren't being planted. No one was left to repair water lines, or electrical lines or care for the sick, or police the streets. It was every man for themselves.

He stayed at the trailer for almost two months. He was running out of food and getting desperate. He would take walks in the woods. He saw hunters and fishermen, even lovers, making love in the woods under the moonlight. He never approached any of them. He couldn't take the chance. He had never been a people person before the virus and he certainly wasn't going to change his ways. He heard horror stories about what had happened when you trust the wrong person. There were some very sick, evil people in this world, who now had free reign to do whatever they so desired. He thought of taking a boat down the Ohio and Mississippi River until he reached warmer climates but no one had a boat nearby. His car still ran....at least he could be thankful for that. He made a snap decision one morning to leave the safety and security of the forest and try to reach his sister in New Jersey. He hadn't spoken to her in months. His calls went to voicemail.

He wasn't sure the networks were even running. He packed what he could into the trunk of his little Honda and headed down the deserted, dirt road. He nearly had a heart attack when he saw him.....the same man he had seen months ago hitchhiking outside Chicago.

*No way.....it can't be him.*

Except, it was him. The same gaunt-looking man with his thumb stuck out, trying desperately to flag down Aubrey. He drove right past the man, who was waving his arms frantically.

*What are the chances? They've got to be one in a million.*

He pulled into a little gas station outside of Vienna. An elderly man came out. He was wearing a sidearm and didn't look like he would hesitate to use it.

"Son, you're the first person I've seen in almost two weeks," he said.

The man didn't have much gas but gave him what he could. He could tell by the look in the man's eyes that the virus may have spared him but not those closest to him. He looked like an empty shell of a human being. Aubrey hadn't spoken to anyone in months. He didn't say anything to the man and just put his hand on his shoulder. The man sobbed for nearly ten minutes. Aubrey never said a word, he just let the man have a good cry. He knew he would talk when he was ready.

"National Guard....or what's left of them came, by here about a month ago. It was bad.....real bad. We had power but no food.....I mean nothing. We were starving. They took everyone they could and were moving them to the East Coast. That's their plan.....control the coasts and let the middle of the country go to hell.....and they wonder why we hate them."

"So, there's no one left around?"

"You might find a few people.....old die-hards like me but, for the most part, no. Everyone that could leave, did leave. The government has moved to Roanoke. What's left of the military is being assembled there. Sacramento is the other capital. Everything between those two cities is pretty much deserted. There were no crops planted this year. We're going to starve to death."

"You think I could make it to Roanoke?" asked Aubrey

"It's 590 miles from this gas station to Roanoke. That's a long way. Oh.....stay out of Kentucky. There's some kind of crazy National Guard General named McManus who's killing everyone in sight. He's got a lot of followers. Too stupid, or too scared to think for themselves. I don't know son. I guess you don't have much of a choice."

"Yeah, I guess I don't," said Aubrey.

The Paducah Bridge had been blown up by the Army. He couldn't get anywhere near it. He only had enough gas for about four hundred miles. He was going to have to either find more gas or find some other way to Roanoke. He pulled into a rest area with several people. He kept his distance and made certain his pistol was nearby. He watched a military convoy of hundreds of vehicles carrying dead bodies drive past him. Everyone had just pulled over to let the convoy go

by. He got a soda from the vending machine and sat on the hood of his car. Every rest stop and billboard for miles around had the same message written on it.

DO NOT GO TO WASHINGTON DC. IT HAS BEEN COMPLETELY DESTROYED. HELP IS AVAILABLE IN ROANOKE VA. THE NEW CAPITAL OF THE EASTERN UNITED STATES.

There it was. The promised land. The Emerald City. All he had to do was get there in one piece. He noticed the gaunt man in the crowd. He was looking right at Aubrey. He couldn't figure it out.

*How the hell did that old bastard beat him here? It just didn't make any sense.*

The man was looking right at Aubrey. His intense glare was almost overpowering. He looked like he didn't belong in this time. He didn't belong here, with people. He was like an apparition, a ghost, and Aubrey was his victim. He got a chill down his spine. Aubrey hopped back in his car.

The Shawneetown Bridge had almost been destroyed.....almost. Some of the explosives didn't detonate and blew up the engineers. He had caught a break. He drove for hours, staying on Interstate 64 until he hit Louisville. The city had been purposely destroyed by the government. It was nothing more than a giant graveyard. Not one gas station was open. He drove by other cars, campers, even military vehicles. No-one stopped him. No one cared anymore. He took a detour around the city and used what little gas he had in the cans. The rain was hitting his windshield. Aubrey wasn't sure but he saw a figure approaching him in the distance. It was raining so hard, he could barely see.

*No way.....you got to be fucking kidding me.*

It was the gaunt man. Aubrey had never been so scared in his life. This was like something right out of a horror movie.

He got back in his car and sped away, just as the man was about to approach. He looked up at Aubrey and was still waving his arms, in a frantic motion to get him to stop.

Aubrey was shaking. He wasn't just following him, he was stalking him. He had to be a ghost or a boogeyman. He couldn't be real. Maybe he wasn't really there. Maybe Aubrey's mind had snapped. He knew he had to get around people and escape this horrible loneliness that engulfed his universe.

He had to get to Roanoke before the thin man got him.

He kept driving straight through on I-64. He knew it was dangerous but it was the most direct route and he didn't have the gas to spare. One empty travel plaza after another. One empty town after another.

*One empty life right after another.*

He was just outside of Huntington, WV. The low fuel light came on his little Honda. He drove into an empty shopping plaza and parked the car. He had two candy bars left and one bottle of

water. He was in the suburbs of the city. Wondering who had seen him drive in and what they might have in store for him.

The nights were lonely. That time between closing your eyes and falling asleep. He would wonder if his parents had escaped the virus, or if his sister and her family were still alive. He and his sister were both put in foster care when he was ten. He saw little of his mother since and he only had sporadic contact with his father. It was probably for the best, they weren't very nice people.

He didn't want to sleep in the car. His was the only car in the giant parking lot. He needed to hide the car if at all possible. He drove around back to the loading dock and noticed one of the bay doors had been left open. He parked the car and grabbed his backpack and sleeping bag. He walked up to the door and looked inside. He saw blood on the floor and some shell casings on the stairs. He could smell something very foul. He turned on his flashlight and could see several rotting bodies on the floor of the loading dock. The virus hadn't taken this bunch. One of the bodies was holding a shotgun. Aubrey picked it up and looked inside. It had some shells inside. He held his breath and searched the dead man's pockets for shells. He found several. Eight in all. More than enough to do some damage. He opened a metal door and walked down the hallway. He was in some kind of furniture warehouse and showroom. He turned off his light and used his glowsticks. He found a sofa and put his sleeping bag on it. He looked at the price tag. It sold for nearly four thousand dollars before the virus. It wasn't worth forty cents now.

He tried to fall asleep but the silence was almost deafening. Every little thought was only amplified inside the empty showroom. Every mirror and bedroom set only added to the eeriness of his situation. He was alone and getting more alone by the minute. He wanted to be in a bar, drinking a beer and hitting on girls. He wanted to be back at work, in a pointless staff meeting, trying not to get caught staring at the hot intern from Northwestern. He wanted to be anywhere but here. It was like he was in a giant cemetery with no way out. So much silence.....*so much emptiness.*

He didn't sleep, as much as he did fade in and out of consciousness. Quick, fleeting dreams, followed by more quick, fleeting dreams. Sometimes he would be running, sometimes he would be back at home with friends. He fell asleep and woke up about four hours later. The sun was beginning to break over the horizon. The store was still dark but he was adjusted to the low light level and made someone.....*or something* walking about the store. He grabbed his pistol. He was now wide awake. Whoever was walking around the showroom didn't notice him. This person seemed to be looking for something. Aubrey slid down off the sofa and crawled around the other side to get a better look. Once the sunlight came up on the glass, he could see who it was.....*it was the gaunt man.*

Aubrey knew he had to do something. He had to confront the man. They were going to have it out, right here in the storefront. If he really was a boogeyman, bullets wouldn't do much good but they were all he had. He had to put a stop to this madness right here, right now. In one swift motion, he decided the man's fate. He ran up behind the man.

"WHY ARE YOU FOLLOWING ME?"

The man turned slowly. Aubrey could see that the man's face was now almost completely rotted off on one side. He looked like a corpse that had been brought back to life, with the sole purpose to make his life a living nightmare. They stood motionless for some time. Finally, the man tried to speak.

"Be careful Aubrey.....the...." the old man mumbled.

Aubrey unloaded his pistol into the man, who stumbled backward and collapsed over a table. He quickly reloaded and emptied the cylinder. The man had quit moving. Aubrey didn't stick around to see if he were dead. He didn't know who heard the gunshots. He quickly rolled up his sleeping bag and grabbed his backpack as he ran out the loading dock door. He was at his car when he saw two men on the other side of the fence. The men were not very *friendly-looking, by any means.*

"What you doing in there?" said one of them.

Aubrey ignored the man and unlocked his door.

"*I axed you a question!*" said the other man.

He stopped when it occurred to him, the men could easily identify his license plate and car. He wasn't sure if there were any cops around here but, it was a chance he couldn't take. He couldn't be on anyone's radar. Not if he was going to make it to Roanoke. He decided their fate in an instant. He calmly walked over to the men and shot both of them. They were dead before they even realized what was happening. He stood over their bodies, recoiling at what he had just done. He was now a murderer, the worst of the worst. If he were caught, he'd go to prison. He could only imagine what life was like for those poor bastards on the inside. It must be like hell on Earth. He pulled their bodies into the tall, overgrown bushes and drove off as if he had never been there. It was as if none of this had ever happened.

He knew he didn't kill the boogeyman. He knew he would just take some other shape or form and continue to stalk him. He was the summation of all of his fears and insecurities. The boogeyman had made him into a murderer. He had killed those men, not Aubrey. He was somewhat regretful that he did not let the boogeyman speak. Perhaps, he should have tried to talk it out with him? See who he was and why he was doing this. He also had a much more serious problem at hand.....he was out of gas. He was only 155 miles from Roanoke. 155 miles from happiness. 155 miles from the start of his new life.

*155 miles was all that separated him from this insanity.*

He had no idea how far he could walk in a day. Ten miles? Maybe twelve? It was probably safer this way. He walked in the bush, away from the edge of the road. He was close to the road but safely away from it as well. The bridge between Ohio and Huntington was named after Robert Byrd. It was also surrounded by dozens of men with assault rifles and humvees. Aubrey quickly hid and took cover. He saw some cars up on the hill. He had to watch the situation carefully before approaching. He could see several children playing in the grass. The men were all heavily armed, even some of the women were carrying guns. He was only five feet away from some of the women. He was able to piece together what was happening.

If you wanted to cross the bridge into West Virginia, you had to pay a toll. The toll was never really made clear. The women figured it meant them, as long as they were young and good-looking. Both sides came very close to a major battle but they had decided to fall back at the last minute. Aubrey knew this was going to be a problem. The people on the West Virginia side of the bridge were much better organized and were not letting anyone through that might be infected. It was a bad situation for both sides. Ohio was ground zero for the virus. It had killed hundreds before anyone even realized what was happening. By the time the government reacted, it was far too late. The virus had spread like wildfire across the state and beyond. He knew it would be pointless to stick around. He had to cross the river on his own. He had to somehow find a raft or boat. He just needed to get to the other side, which was almost half a mile away from shore. He walked through the woods, past a warehouse, past a parking lot, down to the edge of the river. He walked for miles and miles up and down the shoreline, looking for any way to get across. He knew any boat or canoe would be long gone. Thousands of people had been faced with the same problem he was. It wasn't a river, so much as it was a barrier. The river may have been a thousand miles wide. It was far too big to try and swim. The weather was still pretty chilly. He sat down on some rocks and tried to collect his thoughts.

He was still worried about the boogeyman. He knew it would not be the last time they would meet. Once the boogeyman has you in his sights, he doesn't let you go. He felt so alone. So alone and scared. He was also angry. He figured his best plan was to try and find an abandoned house or trailer in the area. Someplace where he could hold up for a while until he figured out his next move. He was almost completely out of food. He didn't have many good options left. He had to find food, then find someplace to crash and hopefully, not get killed. Things everyone took for granted before the virus hit.

The motel was about half a mile from the shore. There was a large state park nearby. It looked completely abandoned. Motels were risky. They were everyone's first choice when fleeing. He spent half an hour just walking around the motel, looking for signs of life. He saw one car in the parking lot that looked as if it hadn't moved in quite some time. He had his pistol in his jacket pocket as he approached the office door. It was locked. He walked around back to one of the rooms and began working the window. It took some effort but he finally got it open and lifted it up. He threw his backpack and sleeping bag in. He hoisted himself up and climbed inside. He wasn't in the room for more than a minute when he saw them. Dozens.....maybe hundreds of dogs in a giant pack, running across the parking lot, looking for anything they could eat. They were starving as well. Some of them broke off and went around back, where he was standing only minutes ago.

*A starving animal is a dangerous animal.* Would they have left him alone?.....or tried to mob him and kill him? He'd rather not know. He looked out the window and saw several people standing there, staring at him. The gaunt man was now joined by others. He didn't have just one boogeyman to contend with.....he now had four or five. They looked much the same way the gaunt man did. Torn clothes, rotting flesh, that horrible look on their faces.

*Cause no person could have a look like that on their face.* No, these were not people, they were something else entirely. Sent from the depths of hell to take Aubrey back with them. They stood motionless, as if they were just drawings, or ghosts. He could almost run right through them. He closed his eyes and reminded himself that none of this was real. The boogeyman could not get

him. The demons were not going to destroy him. Maybe they were just focusing their attention on survivors like him. Maybe they had run out of regular people to torment since they were all dead. He opened his eyes and saw just the gaunt man, standing there pointing. Aubrey had this weird feeling. It was as if the boogeyman was trying to tell him something.

*Like he was trying to warn him.*

That's not what boogeymen are supposed to do. They're supposed to scare children and haunt our dreams. What the hell was the gaunt man trying to do? Aubrey broke away from the window and made his meal. He was now officially out of food. A bad situation getting worse by the minute. He had one can of pasta left. 450 calories. It was going to be a long night.

*In his dreams, he is with his sister and her family. He has a new life in New Jersey. He's dating a Jersey girl and sampling all that great Jersey food. There is no more virus, no more death, no more sadness. No more having to burn your loved ones once they succumbed to the virus. No more pouring gasoline on their dead bodies. No more burial detail. No more shoving hundreds of corpses into a ditch with a tractor. It was all over now. The horror was gone and things were returning to normal. Everyone alive was grateful to be alive. For the first time in his life, he was happy.....even if it was just in a dream.....it was a beautiful dream.*

He woke up hungry. He knew it was not going to be a good day. He was simply out of fucks to give. He didn't even care if he survived or not. He had reached his limit. He didn't care if the dogs got to him, or the boogeyman got to him first. The lack of food was going to kill him first. How long could he go without food? He was down to just one meal a day.

He opened the door to his room and watched the sunlight fill up the otherwise drab motel room. He made himself a cup of instant coffee and poured the creamer inside. He had bought a pack of smokes at the last gas station that was still open, months ago. He had two left. He figured now was the time to use them. He sipped his coffee and smoked his cigarette. He sat on the rail of the motel and tried to enjoy his morning. He was going to have to find something to eat. Crossing the river was going to have to wait for another day.

"You got another smoke?" she said.

He spun around and was amazed to see a cute girl standing behind him. He didn't say a word as he handed her his last smoke and lit it for her. She took a deep breath and exhaled the toxins and tar.

"That hit the spot. You're a lifesaver. My name is Zolie. My parents owned this dump." she said.

"Aubrey. Nice to meet you," he said and extended his hand. He touched hers and felt something he hadn't felt in months. Warmth.....tenderness. Zolie smiled. She had a pretty smile.

They sat and talked for the next hour. Her parents had both died of the virus. They never came home from the hospital. She had no idea how she survived. She wasn't sure if she was AB or not. He couldn't believe he was having a real conversation with a real girl. It was as if he had died and gone to heaven.



"You got to be careful around here. Lots of crazy people. Lots of crazy people with guns. There are still some good people left alive in this town. They bring me food and supplies when they can."

Aubrey didn't even talk. He just let her continue. She began to break down and sob. He noticed she wasn't even wearing a bra. She was cute but slightly chubby. Still, in these times, a girl like Zolie was worth her weight in gold.

"I'm trying to get to Roanoke. I just have to cross the river."

"A bunch of people from town left with the government came into town. I don't know, I just couldn't go. This place is all I have left. My parents bought it and fixed it up. It just didn't seem right to walk away from it and let it go to hell." she said.

"You need customers, don't you?"

"Yeah.....I got a good group of people who keep my spirits up. We meet every morning and have breakfast and talk. They're the people who have kept me going throughout all of this. Would you like to meet them?"

"I don't know. I'm not very good with people."

"Oh, come on.....you'll love them," she said and put her hand on his.

"I've never held a boy's hand before. I could die and never have experienced love. Isn't that awful?" she said looking into his eyes.

Aubrey got the hint and followed her to a trailer behind the motel.

"I saw you yesterday. I just had to make sure you were alone," she said, holding his hand as they walked.

The smell hit Aubrey as they were walking. It was getting stronger and stronger as they approached the trailer. By the time he got to the door, it was almost overpowering. He really didn't want to go inside but, this could be his only chance to score with a pretty girl. He couldn't pass it up. Zolie opened the door. It was dark inside. He could make out several people sitting on a table and on a couch.

"Everyone, this is Aubrey. Aubrey, this is everyone," she said as she closed the door and turned on the lights.

Aubrey recoiled in horror as he saw several rotted corpses throughout the room. Some looked as if they had been dead for months. She had some of them arranged as if they were playing cards as she stuck the cards between their rotted figures.

"What the fuck is this?" he screamed.

"These are my friends and neighbors. Mr. Hanson, Mr. Wolcott, Mrs. Gresham."

"Zolie.....these people are dead! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Now Aubrey.....mind your manners. We still expect you to act like a gentleman."

Aubrey turned and walked towards the door. He turned the knob but it wouldn't move. He was locked in and his pistol was back in his room.

He turned and saw Zolie aiming a gun right at his chest. She fired four times, hitting him in the chest. Aubrey collapsed backward and fell on the floor. He knew he was in big trouble. He could barely breathe. Zolie walked over to him and grabbed his wrist. She helped him up and threw him on the couch.

"I think we'll watch a movie this morning. Maybe something from the '80s. Let me see what I've got here." she said as she began going through a pile of old VCR tapes.

Aubrey looked over and sitting to his left was the corpse of the gaunt man. His face was almost completely decomposed. Aubrey tried to scream but his chest hurt too bad. He was bleeding badly. He tried to get up and hit her but he was too weak to move. Aubrey was screaming and flailing wildly. He knew he was dying.

"Just a few minutes Aubrey, then you'll be dead. You'll be dead and be a part of our little group forever," she said as she put the VCR tape inside the old VCR.

Aubrey just pointed to the gaunt man's corpse and began screaming. Blood was now coming out of his mouth.

"Oh....I see you've met Mr. Curtis. He's such a sweet old man. I'm sure you two are going to get along, great."

Aubrey was getting very weak and very cold. He was now struggling to remain conscious. He looked over at the gaunt man, who had suddenly come to life. He turned and looked right at Aubrey.

*You should have let talk.....you should have let me talk. Now you are going to be with us forever. Forever is a very, very long time.*