

It's in the Water – Stephen Gross

It's been a long few months. It's almost as if the universe has decided that now was the perfect time for every single aspect of your life to go nuts. You haven't had a proper night's rest in weeks, and now you're pretty much running on empty. You feel like you've aged a decade, but finally the ordeal is over, and you deserve a break.

You were shocked to discover that the letter informing you that you'd "Won a free cruise vacation, all expenses paid!" was actually on the up-and-up, and decided that this was exactly what you needed to blow off some steam. You pack your bags, clear your schedule, and before you know it, you're climbing aboard the sparkingly white nautical behemoth.

The flyer for the cruise neglected to mention that a torrential downpour would begin not long after the *Tranquility* left the harbor, but you honestly aren't surprised. While you won't be basking in the sun and breathing in the crisp sea air, there's still plenty to do below decks. The storm's been strong enough to block out your cell signal, but you figure two weeks off the grid might actually do you some good. Worse comes to worst, you can always catch up on your sleep.

This much needed rest is rudely interrupted on the twelfth night, as you are flung from your bed as the ship rocks to the side. The horrible sound of metal scraping through metal fills your ears, followed by screams of terror from the other people in your compartment. Barely perceptible above the din, you can hear the captain urging everyone to quickly make their way to the lifeboats. Lacking a better idea, you decide to heed his advice.

Once you reach the deck of the cruise ship, the source of the problem becomes abundantly clear, despite the poor visibility. A large cargo ship, comparable in size to the *Tranquility*, has slammed head on into the starboard side of the cruise liner, and shows no sign of stopping. The high winds and pelting rain make the deck hazardous enough without the collision, but you manage to make your way safely to a life raft that's already got a couple of passengers. The raft drops into the water just as the cargo ship breaks all the way through the *Tranquility* with one last shuddering groan.

You're rapidly losing respect for the company behind this cruise. While the weather and the crash may not have been their fault, there's no way the life rafts on board would hold more than half of the passengers and crew. As it stands, you're feeling a bit cramped (Not to mention soaked and freezing) with only 3 others aboard. Introductions are made: you're stuck on this raft with Greg Danielson, doctor; Wesley Morris, accountant; and Maria Andrews, botanist.

You rummage through the supplies on board the raft and find a first aid kit, some collapsible oars, some food and water, a compass, some flares, some blankets, and a portable radio. Greg starts fiddling with the radio, to see if he can pick up a signal, and Maria grabs the compass to try and figure out which way you should start paddling.

There aren't enough oars for everyone to use at once, so you take shifts rowing, hopefully in the direction of land. The rain seems as if it has finally decided to let up, although Greg still hasn't been able to pick up anything on the radio. You notice now, much to your dismay, that even though the rain has stopped, the raft still seems to be sitting a little lower in the water. Closer inspection reveals a small tear in the bottom of the raft. The raft probably won't be sinking any time soon, but who knows how long you'll need it to hold together

All of a sudden, you hear a woman's voice come through on the radio. It's faint and choppy, so much so that you can only make out a few words: "...anyone...they're all...whatever you...don't...water...repeat...it's in the water...". The radio then cuts out with a ear-splitting screech of static. At least, you hope it was static.

Whatever it was on the radio, it's left all of you in an even worse mood than before. You continue rowing in silence, none of you eager to spend any more time in the middle of this ocean than you already have. The tear is looking a bit bigger, and you now see another smaller one in a different part of the raft.

A few days pass, and the weather has settled down into the form of a thick fog. You can barely see past the edge of the raft, but according to the compass you're still heading in what should be the right direction. The raft's deflated quite a bit since you first noticed the tear, and you worry that if you don't reach land soon you'll all be swimming. Maria seems confident that you'll be ashore before nightfall, but that confidence seems to be slipping.

Just as it seems that you'll have to abandon ship once more, you make out the end of a small dock poking through the dense moonlit fog. As you reach it you're more swimming than paddling, and the raft sinks not long after you've all climbed onto the dock. You collapse onto the damp boards, soaked, relieved, and thoroughly exhausted.

As you lie there, slowly regaining your strength, you realize why you didn't notice that you'd reached land until the dock was right in front of you. You can barely make out a number of buildings through the fog, but none of the lights are on. You suppose that the storms may well have knocked out the power, but you would have thought it would be back by now.

Eventually you all decide that relaxing in your respective homes would be more restful than on the waterlogged wood of the dock, and figure you should look for someone with a phone you can borrow, and see if you can call a friend to pick you up. You get up, arms aching from days of rowing, and start down the dock.

Now that you're on your feet for the first time since the ship, you notice that Maria is walking with a bit of a limp on her left leg. She's still got one of the oars from the raft, and is using it like a walking stick. When you ask her about it, she explains that she must have twisted her ankle or something in her rush to get off the *Tranquility*. Greg offers to take a look, but she assures him that she'll be fine. Greg looks like he's about to argue, then suddenly stops and peers into the fog ahead. Through the silence, you can hear sounds of erratic, ragged breathing.

The sounds are coming from a young woman huddled against a post at the shore end of the dock. She's hugging her knees, with her head down such that her long dark hair covers her face. Her skin is pale, so much so that you wouldn't think she was alive if you couldn't hear her breathing. She seems to be hyperventilating, and is shivering, probably from the cold. You also think you can make out a splotch of dried blood at the side of her blouse.

Maria approaches her, and starts to ask if she's ok, when the woman snaps her head up and stares at Maria, a feral look in her eyes. Then she lunges at her, and lets loose a blood-curdling, inhuman shriek that is at once both horrifying and eerily familiar. The woman bites at Maria's neck, but she manages to get her hand up and hold back the woman's head. Maria then screams in pain and there's a splash of blood as the woman bites down on her hand.

Maria stumbles back, clutching her right hand. As she does, her left leg collapses under her, sending her tumbling to the ground. The feral woman tenses to pounce on Maria, but is interrupted as Greg charges into her. The woman reels backward, then shrieks again and tackles Greg to the ground. He starts screaming in agony as she begins biting at his neck and tearing into his stomach with her long nails.

This all happens in a matter of seconds, and all you can do is stand paralyzed, your mind torn between helping Greg and getting the hell out of there. You watch helplessly as he's torn apart, when your trance is suddenly broken by Maria's scream of rage. She's regained her footing, and has begun slamming the oar into the woman's head over and over, screaming at her to stop.

Maria finally stops when it's clear that the bloody mess that used to be the feral woman is no longer a threat to anyone. She drops the oar, and stands frozen, splattered with blood and staring at the carnage. She's breathing heavily, and there's a sort of distant look in her eyes. Wesley is nowhere to be seen; you suspect he ran off when the woman attacked. Greg, on the other hand, is quite clearly dead.

You notice that Maria's right hand is bleeding, and she's starting to look a bit pale. On closer inspection, you see that her index finger has been bitten off above the knuckle. You tear off a part of Greg's sleeve to fashion it into an impromptu bandage; after all, it's not like he needs it anymore. Maria winces as you tie on the saltwater-soaked cloth, and seems to regain her senses a little.

You mention that it would probably be a good idea to find a phone, so you can tell the police what happened and get a doctor to look at her hand. She nods, still kinda out of it, and you continue into the city. Maria leaves the oar behind, and though she's still limping she barely seems to notice. Your stomach growls, and you remember that you've had nothing but food bars for the last few days, and your supply of those ran out hours before you reached the shore.

A lot can change in two weeks, apparently. The ghost town you find yourself in now bears little resemblance to the city you left. Most of the buildings are either boarded up or have had their windows broken, the street is littered with abandoned cars, and there's no-one in sight.

A shriek cuts through the silence, like the one the woman on the dock made just before flinging herself at Maria and Greg. To your horror, the cry is answered by a dozen others, all coming from deeper within the city. The shrieks continue, but they seem to be moving away, much to your relief. If whatever happened to that woman has happened to others, you want to stay far, far away from them.

Even if the shriekers aren't heading for you, it's becoming clear that all is not well in the city. You've still yet to encounter any other sane people, and now you're starting to see the bodies. Most of them look like they're been torn apart and partially devoured. You suspect that the cops might have more urgent matters to deal with, if there are even any cops still out there.

Maria seems to have come to a similar conclusion, and suggests that the two of you see if you can find some supplies. You agree, since you figure it might be better to hold up somewhere until this whole mess gets sorted out than to try and make your way home on foot. Maria is still looking unhealthily pale, but she looks like she's feeling better. She's moving at a brisk pace, given her injured ankle. When you ask her about it she claims it doesn't really hurt any more, but the limp is still noticeable.

Your search for supplies leads you to a convenience store that hasn't been completely looted. You're still hearing shrieks every now and then throughout the city, but you haven't encountered anyone alive, sane or not. The windows of the store have been shattered, and there's a lot missing, but you can still find some food. Anything canned or otherwise non-perishable is gone, but you can still see some food that doesn't look like it's gone bad yet.

You scoop up whatever you can, mostly bread. There's some salami that smells fine, and a bunch of snack food that no-one's bothered to grab. You aren't looking forward to living off chips and salami for the foreseeable future, but you figure that it's better than starving.

You're surprised by what you find when you go looking for water. Almost none of the bottled water has been taken, and there's still plenty of soda and energy drinks. The milk is all gone, as is most of the juice. Only juice from concentrate is left. You would be puzzled by the specificity of the looting, but someone seems to have left an explanation. Spray-painted across the front of the cooler, in big, block letters, is one word. "POISON".

It doesn't take much to put two and two together. The warning on the cooler and the cryptic message you heard over the radio earlier both point to some sort of contamination in the water supply. You figure whatever's in the water, it's responsible for the shriekers. Maria agrees with your theory, and the two of you decide to keep looking elsewhere. You'd like something to drink, but neither of you is willing to risk turning into a monster just to quench your thirst.

It's become clear that you won't be home any time soon, so you figure that an abandoned convenience store is as good a place as any to camp out while you catch some shuteye. You push some shelves up against the windows and door to deter any intruders, and fashion an impromptu bed in the back of the store out of some of the softer items left on the shelves. Maria doesn't look particularly tired, and offers to take the first watch. She seems a bit jittery, but that's not surprising given the circumstances.

You haven't had a good night's rest since the *Tranquility* sank, and tonight is no exception. You are startled awake by a shriek, and this one sounds like it's coming from nearby. You call out to Maria to ask if she sees anything, but you don't hear a response. You hear the shriek again, and realize that it's coming from inside the store. You head to the front of the store, and see that the barricades are still in place.

The shrieking continues, now accompanied by the sound of something banging against a door, and you determine that it's coming from the bathroom. You aren't sure how one of them got trapped in there, but from the sounds it seems that it won't be trapped for long. You look around for a weapon, and find an old baseball bat behind the counter.

You grab the bat and stand by the door to the bathroom, waiting for whoever's trapped in there to break out. The door is still holding, but it seems to be buckling and the shrieker isn't letting up. The door doesn't lock from the outside, but the mind of whoever's in there is clearly too far gone to operate a doorknob.

The banging at the door is getting more and more frenzied, and the door looks like it can't take much more. Your heart is racing as you grip the cold aluminum handle of the bat, and your knuckles are starting to turn white. Finally the doorjamb splinters apart, and Maria bursts through.

The familiar face almost stays your hand. Were it not for the feral look in her eyes, your swing would have faltered. You hesitate for a second, but you can tell from those eyes that the thing charging at you isn't Maria anymore. The bat connects with a sickening crunch, and the shrieker crumples to the ground.

You doubt that Maria would have risked drinking any of the water after the warnings you've seen, so you're wondering how she could have turned into one of those monsters. You're worried that whatever's been turning people into shriekers is contagious, and who knows whether you've been exposed or not. Either way, it clearly isn't safe in the store anymore, and there's no chance of you getting any sleep now, so you decide to grab what you can and move on.

You continue into the city, bat in one hand and a bag of supplies slung over your other shoulder. You try to keep to the edges of the street, and do your best to keep from being too visible. The advantage of all the abandoned cars is that they provide plenty of cover to help you stay out of sight.

You start seeing more of the shriekers, although you're careful to make sure that they don't see you. As soon as you hear them cry out from nearby, you hide behind a car or truck and wait until they pass. They seem to be travelling in groups, and stragglers seem to be drawn to the shrieks of a pack. If the thought of dealing with more shriekers was worrying, the idea of staring down a dozen or more isn't something you want to ponder.

You're hiding from one such pack when a gunshot rings out above the sound of their shrieking. It sounds like it came from a police station at the end of the street, which you can see has been boarded up. You wouldn't normally head towards the sounds of gunfire, but given that the shriekers you've seen aren't smart enough to open a door, you figure that whoever's using the gun must not be one of them.

You approach the station warily, still keeping an eye out for any other shriekers. As you get closer, you see that the upper floor windows are mostly boarded up as well, but you think you can make out the barrel of a gun poking through between the boards. Then your heart skips a beat as a bullet whizzes just past your ear.

A gruff voice calls out from the window, telling you that if you don't want a bullet in your brain you should stay right where you are. You tell him that you aren't one of the shriekers, and that you don't mean him any harm. He laughs, saying that you're living in the zombie apocalypse now, so you might as well call them zombies. He then launches into angry tirade, ranting about zombies, fluoride, and some sort of government conspiracy.

He's mostly just raving, but there's some useful information you can pick out from the rant. It seems like people started getting sick soon after you left on your cruise, and that whatever infected them had somehow gotten into the water supply. It sounds like it takes a couple of days to turn after drinking contaminated water, maybe more depending on the individual. However, the infection can also be spread by the infected themselves, through bites mostly. Apparently those bitten fall victim to the infection more quickly, probably since the contagion gets directly into their bloodstream.

You ask him if you can come inside, and tell him that you haven't had anything to drink and that you haven't been bitten. He laughs at you again, and tells you that if he didn't trust anyone before the apocalypse, he sure as hell isn't going to start now. He says he'll give you a minute to get out of here before he has to start wasting ammunition on the living. He doesn't exactly seem the type to change his mind, so you book it out of there.

You figure at this point that your best bet is to get somewhere isolated and try to wait things out. You've got food to last you a while, and if you can find a stream or something you should be ok for water, though you're already getting pretty thirsty. You raid a sporting goods store, and grab some gear and a good backpack to fit it in. You also take a padded motorcycle jacket, which you hope will be enough to stop bites. Plus, it's nice to finally have some fresh clothes. Last but not least, you find a crossbow, a nice lightweight axe and a bunch of knives.

You continue through the city much as before, and start getting closer to the suburbs. Before long, the shops and offices give way to parks and houses. Even though you're armed, you'd rather save your bolts and would prefer not to have any close quarters conflict, so you continue avoiding the zombies whenever you can. As you pass a house, one notices you, and you quickly fire off a bolt, aimed for centre of mass. It's a moving target, but since it's not making any attempt to dodge you manage to hit it square in the shoulder.

Unfortunately, this doesn't even seem to faze the zombie. It continues charging towards you, shrieking all the way. There's no time to reload the crossbow, so you pull out the axe just in time to swing it right into the zombie's skull. That stops it pretty definitively, but you can already hear the shrieks of more on their way. You dislodge the axe just as a group of over a dozen rounds the corner at the other end of the block, headed right for you.

You turn and run, sprinting as fast as your already aching legs will take you. Luckily it doesn't seem like anyone in the mass of shrieking bodies is a particularly fast runner, but based on what you've seen you doubt you can outlast them. Things get worse, however, as you see another, slightly smaller group coming from the other end of the street. With the road blocked, you change direction and dash into the backyard of the nearest house.

The fences in the yard look too high for you to scale in your current condition, but you see a sturdy looking cellar door against the back of the house. You're running out of options for where to run, and you're hoping that they'll eventually lose interest if you hide underground. The door's hinges are kind of rusty, but it isn't locked. Given the nature of your pursuers, you're pretty sure that this doesn't really matter all that much. You duck inside, and slam the door behind you.

The cellar is pitch black, so you fumble through your pack for a flashlight before beginning down the stairs. The cellar's pretty old and decrepit looking, and there's a musty smell to it. There are cobwebs along the walls, but it looks like someone's been down here not too long ago. You still have your axe in one hand as you descend the creaking stairs. You're almost at the bottom, when all of a sudden the step collapses under you and your left leg plunges through the stairs.

You feel a searing pain as you pull your leg out of the broken step. You'd guess that it's broken, and the jagged boards have torn a nasty gash along the side of your calf. You hobble down the rest of the steps, which fortunately hold up under you. You sit down against the wall, and use a part of your old shirt as a bandage for your leg. It turns out that putting salt on an open wound isn't exactly pleasant, but based on the condition of the wooden steps you think it's probably best to do whatever you can to disinfect it.

As you sit there, silently gritting your teeth against the pain, you hear sounds of movement coming from somewhere else in the cellar. You shine your flashlight in the direction of the noise, and see a pale figure staring at you. There's the feral gleam in his eyes that you've come to recognize, and he seems to recoil from the light. Then he picks himself up and starts moving towards you, a predatory look on his face.

You grab the crossbow and get a bolt ready as he's advancing towards you. You can hear the horde that was chasing you outside now, although they don't seem to have found the cellar. Remembering how little a bolt to the chest did to stop the last zombie you killed, you decide to aim a bit higher up this time.

It turns out that there's some merit to the cliché of shooting zombies in the head, as this one goes down as soon as the bolt hits it. You decide to check out the rest of the cellar in case there are any more down here, and start hobbling around on your good leg. There's some old boxes of papers, some jam, some canned beans, and a big package of bottled water. The food and water haven't been here long enough to start gathering dust, unlike the rest of the cellar. The only noticeable wound on the man is the one you inflicted, and you can see a couple of empty water bottles strewn around.

Things aren't looking good. You're trapped in a cellar, with a broken and possibly infected leg, and who knows how many zombies outside. There's food enough to last a pretty long time, but you're almost certain that the water is contaminated. You might be able to make it back up the stairs, assuming the remaining steps hold up, but you'd be kidding yourself if you thought you could get far in your current condition. You've already gone more than a day without water, and you have no idea if there's anything safe to drink anywhere in the vicinity. Already you've got a splitting headache and are feeling more than a little dizzy, plus your leg is naturally in a lot of pain.

You sit back down next to the food and water, and think back to Maria after she was bitten. You didn't really notice anything wrong with her other than how pale she was; the only other symptoms you noticed was that she didn't notice her injured ankle and seemed a bit jittery. Nothing that would have made you suspect she'd turn into the thing that attacked you.

You grab a bottle of water from the package, and turn it over in your hands. It's funny how something that looks so clear and pure could cause this whole catastrophe. Funny how something everyone needs to survive is the same thing that's making everyone die. You stare at the bottle for what seems like an eternity, then unscrew the cap, and take a long sip of the cool water. After all, there are worse ways to go, aren't there?