

# **Pick Your Poison**

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# Pick Your Poison

By

F.C. Schaefer



As soon as I got down to the lobby, the howl of a lone dog could be heard from outside, far off in the distance. Must be wailing for his master to return, I thought. That made me sad, because the master was surely dead and the poor beast would never understand how truly alone it was now.

It was my idea to go down to the first floor after sunset and talk with our visitors, nobody else would come with me, not even Beth. None of them would listen no matter how many times I explained that we were safe as long we stayed inside and didn't invite any of the new arrivals to cross the threshold. Won't say I wasn't disappointed because we had considered ourselves a group of tough survivors; it was exactly 106 days since the SA6 version of the flu had forced a state of national emergency to be declared and as far as we knew, our little group were the only humans left alive in this small part of South Carolina. That did not include the family of five currently standing under the spotlights, outside the front entrance of the Atlantic Blue Hotel, one block from the ocean in lovely Myrtle Beach. Humans they might have been once, but not anymore.

We had lights because Wendell, who had walked up from Savannah, was an electrician with Georgia Light and Power before SA6 and always spent one week of vacation every summer at the Atlantic Blue. That's how he knew it was equipped with an emergency generator system in case of a hurricane, which could provide all the electricity, not to mention running water, we would need. Because of the lights, I got a good look at them as I crossed the lobby.

Early in the epidemic, when the first wave of panic washed over the country, some looters had smashed out half of the glass door at the main entrance. Didn't matter, open or closed, a door was a door and whatever power kept them at bay still worked. The three children, a couple of teenage boys and a little girl who would be 10 years old forever, had their faces pressed up against one of the surviving glass doors at the main entrance, while the parents stood just behind them. About 10 feet was as close as I wanted to

get, so we stared at each other for a very long minute before the father said, "You should make it easy on yourselves and just ask us in."

"No way," I answered. "We'll just stay right in here until the sun comes up. And we can be very far away by the time it gets dark again."

Despite his bone white skin, the father somehow still retained the blow dried look and demeanor of the Sun Belt professional. "We can make it very quick," he said.

I had seen just how quick they could make it two nights before when the five of them jumped Wendy Mayhew on the beach, just after the sun went down. Joe and Charlie pillaged all the beer from a 7/11 down the street and we were going to have a party and make a big fire just after high tide. Up until three months ago, Wendy had been a kindergarten teacher, so maybe it was the sight of the little girl walking out of the dusk toward us that made her rush out there so fast. Beth had gotten up to follow, but something made me grab her at the last instant. From the light of the fire, we saw Wendy bend down to say hello to the child and maybe tell her she was safe now, but before the words were out of her mouth, the little blonde haired girl batted on to Wendy's neck. In an instant, the rest of the family appeared, each one grabbing an arm or leg, finding a vein and sinking their fangs in. I'm sorry to say the rest of us ran, leaving Wendy shrieking for help as they pulled her down in the sand and proceeded to drain her. We went back the next day, but we never found her body.

"I can't stand to go another day without the taste of human in my mouth," one of the boys said. "That woman wasn't enough," Both brothers were wearing Dallas Cowboys tee shirts.

"This Mexican standoff won't last," the father said. "It's time to be realistic in this world of rotting corpses, for we can smell the blood flowing in your veins from miles away. We will never lose your scent, no matter where you go."

"We can make a lot of time while the sun shines," I replied.

"You can't run all day and stay on guard all night, your weakness will trip you up in the end. Why prolong the agony?"

"You must have been a car salesman," I said. "Cause you sure know how to cover the angles."

"Close," he said with a smile. "I was a lawyer. In fact, the youngest junior partner in the fastest growing civil law firm right here in Myrtle Beach. I was responsible for over 25% of our gross revenues my first year with Murphy, Gavin, and Grossman." His wife, who must have been a striking looking blonde back when she could still go out in the sun, looked at him with pride as he spoke.

"That was before I found my true calling on the Dark Road," he continued. "Of course I couldn't think of not sharing this great gift with Carrie, little Sally and the boys." All of them gave me a big grin, saliva dripping from their fangs. The little girl was the worst.

"The family that sucks together, stays together," I said.

"You do not understand. He was the most unselfish man," the wife said. "My husband could have left us to wither and die, but he gave us the gift of eternity. We would have died in the epidemic like the

weak with their lungs filling with mucus and gasping for air like a trout that's been pulled from the water. We're beyond those things now."

"But you're still hooked on the taste of good old human blood," I answered her. "And because of SA6, we are in very short supply now and it looks like you're going to have to make do with...I don't know, maybe some other mammal like how now brown cow. If you're gonna stick around forever, then you'll exhaust the bovine population soon enough. How long before you have to settle for rat?"

The children snarled at this while their parents exchanged a look. "That will never be your concern for we can make sure none of you ever leave this building," the father said.

"The sun that's rising in six hours says you're a liar."

"And I think neither you nor your friends will have had much sleep when this night is over: Will any of you be in shape to travel far tomorrow? And the darkness will always return. Can you do this over and over, day after night? How many are upstairs? I counted less than half a dozen running away the other evening. Are they up to it?"

Up to it? None of us were anything special. Besides Wendell, there were Joe and Charlie, a couple of slackers who had found jobs as handy men for an apartment complex just north of Miami. They hit the road in the early days of the epidemic and made it up I-95 as far as the Carolinas before they ran into terminal gridlock as north and south fled in opposite directions, only to collide with each other. It was a traffic jam stretching for hundreds of miles, made up of about a million vehicles, all driven by corpses.

Jack was a tourist from Australia, who'd won a trip to America for being salesman of the year at a car dealership in Melbourne. He'd been stranded when all international flights were suspended after SA6 killed 40,000 Chinese in Hong Kong in three days. Shutting down air traffic had done little good in the end; the virus just hopped the Pacific into Canada and Central America, and then just walked across our big open borders before we knew it. Jack managed to call his wife before the phones went down, she'd told him everything was fine there and his three daughters were okay. That's what he still believed and the rest of us didn't try to tell him otherwise, we all needed something to hold on to, some more than others.

Ellen was a nurse at an assisted living facility until all of the residents died in one night, after that she locked herself in her apartment for a month, surviving jars of peanut butter and jelly, until she thought everyone was dead. We found her sitting in the middle of the street, nearly catatonic; she seemed better now.

Beth had been on the cheer leading squad at Thurmont High, which was in some little town about ten miles up the road. While she was asleep in the middle of the night, her mother and the man she was shacking up with packed up and left back when the main highways were still passable. She never heard from them again.

I was two years out of college, and with my grades, considered myself lucky to land an entry level job with the local BellSouth branch. A week after we met, Beth and I started sleeping together.

For some reason known only to God, we were immune to SA6 and had found each other, and had taken shelter in the Atlantic Blue because of Wendell's knowledge of the emergency generator. The father

was right of course, none of us had been thinking much more than a day ahead of time. Until these bloodsuckers showed up, just living it up on the beach and being thankful we were alive had seemed like a good idea.

“Besides, where are you going?” he continued. “Your world is gone, whatever is left of humanity is scattered to the wind, and those who didn’t cough and choke and puke themselves to death are hiding in holes, terrified the Grim Reaper will get them on the rebound. Your group is the only living persons with in a hundred miles of this place, if there were any more, we would have smelt them by now. It’s over: McDonald’s, Internet Porn and Wal-Mart. Is it really worth living in such an empty world? I bet it’s what your friends upstairs think in their heart of hearts.”

“We’ll do what we have to and we’ll always have the sun.”

“Don’t have a clue, do you?” the father continued. “What did you do before the flu came?”

“I was a computer technician.”

“Your usefulness ended the second the electricity went off. You have no purpose anymore.”

“Except to be your dinner.”

“Damn straight about that,” this came from one of the boys, both of whom still sported the modified suburban skater punk look they must have adopted while still alive. “Just let us in, you’re too damn good to get wasted on a pack of dogs.”

“Shut up!” the mother commanded. “Your father is handling this and you will not speak.”

“We are the ones with purpose now,” the father said, ignoring the outburst. “We have the strength and desire to live in this kind of world, while you are lost with no reason to go on. It is the inevitable conclusion you will come to, if not tonight, then one night very soon and we will have you then just as surely as we have you now. Why wait?”

He was good, given time he might have convinced me, but not this night, or so I thought. “We can walk in the moon light; we can walk in the daylight. You can’t say that,” I answered. “And we can always say no when you knock at the door like I’m saying no tonight and every night.” With that I turned to leave.

Then I heard it, an animal roar, deep and guttural, coming from somewhere close. It was not a lonely dog I had heard howling earlier, but something else. And it sounded big, like nothing you expected to hear in suburban North America.

Stricken looks swept across the faces of the vampires as soon as this beast announced his presence.

“We don’t have much time,” the mother hissed and was immediately silenced by the father.

“Sounds like something escaped from the zoo, friend of yours?” I said.

“Your ignorance is all too human,” the father answered. “You just assume we are the only things that come out in the night, but we have many so-called brothers in the darkness that hid in plain sight of civilization, which walked with man during the day, but feasted on him like a true predator when the sun went down.”

The roar was heard again, now much closer, and in a flash I made the connection. “Werewolf,” I said almost inaudibly, as though talking only to myself. The kids laughed at this.

“That’s right you stupid man,” the wife answered. “And they won’t be held back by ancient spells that keep us from crossing a threshold. They want your flesh as bad as we desire your blood; there is no wall thick enough you could hide behind that their claws cannot tear right through. Because of the flu, they must be as hungry as we are.”

It was almost enough to make me laugh, survive the end of mankind, only to have to choose between being drained by vampires or eaten by werewolves. I wasn’t about to let either one happen.

“Two pints of blood a night,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Just this, Mr. Lawyer of the night: we’ll guarantee your family two pints of blood a night if you can guarantee our safety.”

“Your safety?” For a smart guy, he just didn’t seem to grasp the situation.

“It’s like you said, we’re the only humans for miles around and if we get gobbled up by werewolves, you have to make do with bovine or vermin, so tell me how great their flavor is compared to us good old Homo Sapiens.”

“And we are supposed to fight this werewolf to protect you?” the mother said. “I do not think so.”

“Times have changed and there are no more free drinks. It’s strictly rationing from here on out, but I can guarantee you at least a taste of A Positive and on a regular basis. It’s that or nothing but cow and rat for a very long time. Since you are all fellow creatures of the night, you shouldn’t have trouble coming up with a way to put a werewolf down. I’d start with cutting his head off. Go find a Lowe’s, get a big ax or better yet, a chain saw.”

“You haven’t mentioned the rest of your group?” the mother asked. “They may not be so agreeable.”

“They’ll go along, I guarantee it,” I’d convince them, that I was sure of. Just remind them of what they’d seen when Wendy was devoured the other night. Add that to watching civilization evaporate around them and it was easy to understand why they were huddled together in a bedroom three stories above.

“Your proposal is acceptable,” the father said. “I agree to your terms.”

“I wanted a real meal,” the little girl whined. The boys didn’t look very happy either and were about to say something when a sharp glance from the mother stopped them.

“Not just your word, but the whole family,” I wanted no loopholes. The roar came again, very close now.

“There it is,” one of the boys said, pointing down the dark empty street running in front of the Atlantic Blue. As far as the eye could see, it was block after block of motels and hotels, black and empty, awaiting tourists who, through all the endless summers to come, would never arrive. But standing in front of a Best Western, three intersections away was the source of the howling. In the moonlight it appeared at least seven feet tall, covered head to toe in dark fur, with shoulders twice as wide as its waist.

“What I say goes for one and all,” the father said. “We’ll save you and your friends from the werewolf and keep you from being eaten, but in return, you will provide us with two pints of your blood every night. Are those terms agreeable to you?”

It might not seem right to bind the others to such to such an evil bargain, but sometimes you had to pick your poison. “Agreed by one and all,” I said.

“Then step outside and shake hands on it,” the father said. “Or would you rather ask us in.” The werewolf strode to the middle of the street and appeared to sniff at the air.

It was the moment of truth and I hadn’t survived the worst of SA6 just to end up coming out in the stool of some shape shifter. But there was no way I was going to let any of them on the inside, deal or no deal. So with my heart pounding, I stepped through the door and took the vampire’s outstretched hand.

They were as good as their word; the father took my advice about finding a chain saw and it took them the rest of the night, but in the end the werewolf went down.

The End