



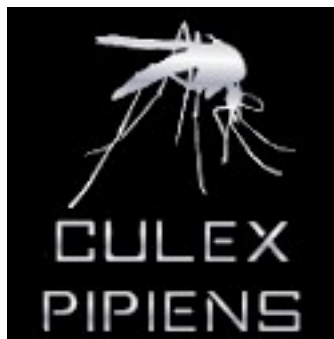
INCESSANT

HUNGER

BY GULEX PIPIENS

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Survive. A simple word, a nearly impossible task. Ever since the dead began once again to walk the earth it has been a constant battle to stay alive. Overnight the stores were emptied of anything edible and within a few weeks all of the less than obvious sources, like distribution and supply warehouses, were raided and looted of anything edible or useful.

After a few months those still alive began to stage excursions into the surrounding areas, be it homes or businesses, in an attempt to find more food. A few banded together establishing small farms that more resembled prisons in their construction.

Each of these farms would, at a minimum, have a double eight foot fence, with both topped by barbed or razor wire. Between the fences was a ten to twenty foot kill zone. Anything, or anyone, found moving in it was killed, no questions asked. The defenses were just as much to keep out the zombies as to keep out the other humans. Multiple armed guards and even guard towers were quite common with more people dedicated to defending the farm and food than to actually tending the fields.

The few brave enough, or stupid enough, to try to breach the defenses to reach the food quickly found overwhelming firepower driving them back, if they were lucky, or ending their existence, although that might have been considered lucky too. After the first few attempts at ramming through the fences with vehicles word got around and physical barricades and moats were added just outside the fence lines.

Once the farms, no, compounds, were established you were either in or out. Most were based around families, previous friendships and groups with outsiders rarely allowed it. Only those fortunate few with highly desirable skills were provisionally invited in for consideration. I'm not a doctor, I've got no military experience, my thumb is not green and 'keyboard jockey' aka programmer, is no

longer a highly desirable skill. I, like millions of others who survived the first few months, was not invited in to any of them.

I was left to compete with the rest of the others over the dwindling scraps of society. Hunger was a way of life. In between putting down zombies, you nearly constantly searched for food.

Our collective existence was miserable but around five months after the initial outbreak it got even worse. I was gathering a few bitter red berries from some bushes a bit off the edge of the road when I got blindsided by three zombies. The rustling of the branches and leaves covered the sound of their shuffling feet and they were nearly on top of me before I noticed them.

All those movies about zombies? They got it wrong. In them the zombies, fast or slow, moved around moaning, sometimes even screeching like animals. You've got to pass air through the larynx and over the vocal chords to make sounds. Being dead, zombies no longer breathe and thus make no vocal sounds. Sure, if you hit one in the abdomen hard enough you hear a bit of a whoosh as the air in their lungs is expelled, but they don't actually pass air in and out of their lungs any longer, at least not of their own accord.

So these three zombies were reaching for me, perhaps only a yard away, when I first noticed them. Turning and trying back pedal I was up against the shrubs and bushes with no way out. Reacting on pure adrenaline, I dropped and threw myself like a giant bowling ball at their legs continuing to spin and turn after impact. It worked in the sense that I knocked them out of the way and wasn't bit.

With some space to work with, I pulled the machete from the scabbard on my thigh and opened up on them. Very early on we all learned that guns were not very practical. In this case the movies were pretty accurate, head shots did kill them, or at least disable them, but the sound would draw in everything within ear shot. In some areas this would get everything in a few mile radius heading right

towards you. Hand weapons were quiet and if you survived the first few encounters you could pretty much be considered an expert in their usage.

Many went with the traditional swords, crow bars, sledge hammers and garden tools like pitchforks and spades, others preferred older weapons including spears and bow and arrow or crossbow. In all cases, these were quiet and efficient. I, as already mentioned, preferred a machete. Quick slashing and dodging enabled me to decapitate the first one. The second grabbed my arm as I took the head from number three.

His grip was surprisingly firm but I kept pivoting and avoiding the snapping jaws until I was able to plunge the blade under the jaw and up into the brain ending it's miserable existence. I pried the hand off of my arm which, even in death, did not want to release. The nails left three scratches on my arm which I treated with some antibiotics I carried in my backpack and bandaged them up. I wasn't bit so turning into one of them wasn't a concern, but a common infection was.

As I said, it was around this time that things got even worse. Until now I had always been able to scrounge food, but the last few days had yielded nothing and I was resorting to eating unknown berries and even tree bark just to fill the aching pit in my stomach.

Before all of this I was a healthy six foot two and around two twenty with a small bit of a gut. Now I was at barely above one fifty, still dropping, and the clothes hung on me like rags on a scarecrow.

Food was so scarce that I ate things I never would have considered before. I would have given immense thanks to find day old road kill, instead settling for anything that came along. A good find was an empty house with a few dead pets. Between what little rotten meat remained on the carcass, the maggots and some moldy food in the now dead refrigerators it was a veritable feast.

Despite my best efforts, the arm must have been infected as it continued to bother me and was red and inflamed. I'm quite certain I was running a low grade fever as I just felt off.

The gnawing pain in my stomach from lack of food soon became the driving force behind nearly all of my actions. I still wandered from place to place looking for food and even attempted to approach some of the farms once more but like last time, I was driven off by a hail of bullets. Unlike last time, they didn't even warn me first before opening fire.

I saw others in my travels who were also desperately hungry and searching for food. Had I suspected they had any I would have surely attacked them and maybe even killed them just for a few bites to eat and I have no doubt they held similar sentiments towards me.

Around this time the military became more bold. Until recently I had rarely seen any signs of them, but now they seemed to be out in greater numbers but in usual military fashion, they were shooting anything that moved. Zombie or survivor, it didn't matter. If they saw you they shot at you.

My miserable existence went on for almost two more months before that fateful day arrived. It started like most other days. Waking to a growling stomach wracked by hunger pains and slowly dragging myself to my feet and shuffling off to search for food, today seemed no different than any other day. If only I had known how different today would be.

I was walking down a rural road, wooded on both sides, heading towards the next town with the hope that perhaps I could find some untouched houses with food still in them. I really don't remember the last time I opened a can of something or turned the lid on a jar or even something as simple as tearing open a bag of chips. Hell, I don't even remember the last time I ate. Was it two days ago? Three days? For that matter I don't remember the last time I saw a zombie either. Perhaps

the military has been successful in putting them down and it's just us survivors out and about now, clinging to our existence.

At first I didn't even recognize the smell but it finally cut through the hazy fog in my head. I was smelling coffee and fried eggs. I followed my nose and plunged into the woods alongside the road and the smell got stronger. Pushing aside branches and plunging through bushes I tried to find the source. Probably a camp I thought and already knew if they wouldn't share that I'd be forced to kill the inhabitants to get their food. The hunger pains were driving me crazy.

I burst through a final thicket and was on the edge of a clearing. A half dozen tents, some canvas and some of a more modern synthetic material were arranged in a rough semi circle around a fire pit ringed with rocks. Seated near the fire was a handful of men and woman with a few kids playing what appeared to be tag nearby. Sitting on a grate over the fire was a coffee pot and a large cast iron skillet with something sizzling and crackling inside.

They hadn't seen me yet and, driven by the hunger, I took a step towards them but something was wrong. My legs wouldn't respond. They felt wobbly and weren't able to support my weight. At the same time a massive migraine headache came on out of nowhere. It had to be the hunger coupled with the exertion of running through the forest towards this camp. My body, in its deteriorated state, just couldn't handle it anymore.

I put my hand up to my temple as the pain was simply excruciating but it didn't help. Falling to my knees I lowered my hand and noticed two things, One, it was pale almost grey in color and two, there was a thick dark brown, almost black, sticky appearing fluid all over it.

The exhaustion finally won out and I collapsed from my knees to the ground and just lay there on my side with my eyes closed.

“Damn Zeke, I thought you were on patrol? I just got one at the edge of the clearing. Over.”

“Zeke? You there Zeke? Over?”

A sound in the forest caused Martha to drop the radio and raise her rifle.

Zeke came bursting through the trees at almost the same point the zombie did. Martha, seeing who it was lowered her rifle.

“Sorry, I picked up the trail a ways back and thought I could catch it before it made it to camp. My bad.”

“Next time radio it in. We can't be too careful. We could have been waiting for it instead of reacting to the sudden appearance.”

She walked over and saw the entrance wound of the bullet in the temple. She gave the body a shove with her foot, rolling it onto the back and did not see an exit wound. The 22lr round did it's job ricocheting around inside the skull tearing up the brain instead of just passing through the head.

Zeke spoke up, “Look at the arm, there, those scratches. It must have gotten infected that way as I don't see any bite wounds.”

“Yep,” said Martha nodding and then gesturing towards the tents where a large man lifted a pick axe and approached them.

Arm. Infected. Am I a zombie? Did I get infected and not even know it? How long have I been infected? Or for that matter, how long have I been a zombie? I haven't seen another zombie in weeks, just survivors... or were they all zombies and I was the one imaging we were the survivors? I laid there with question after question somehow churning around and around in what was left of my brain.

My body no longer responded to my brain and all feelings of pain and hunger were gone. I felt a heavy object penetrate my head and then blissfully felt nothing else as my last thoughts drifted away and my infected and nearly liquefied brains slowly leaked out onto the forest floor.



Culex Pipiens (pen name) is an amateur fiction writer focusing on PAW (Post Apocalyptic World) themed stories. Culex's work can be found on www.culexpipiens.com where many of the stories are available as free downloads. A number of Culex's stories are also available in the Kindle format on Amazon.com (search Kindle books for 'Culex Pipiens'). In addition, select stories are only available in Kindle format. If you like the stories and want to support Culex's work, consider buying one or more in the Kindle format which is readable on Kindle devices along with the free Kindle app for PC, Mac and many different tablets.

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