

## Outbreak Diaries: ice cream parlor

*Note: This is intended to be read aloud with different actors with different sounding voices. As such, dialogue tags are used more sparingly than usual because I think it sounds better. In most lines, it is obvious who is speaking. Where I think it might be confusing to the reader, I added the speaker in parentheses (i.e. "Are you guys starting to clean up?" (Cliff))*

It was 9:45, almost closing time. Alice and I were hoping and praying that no one would come in before closing. I wanted to get home and I didn't want to be delayed by having to do any dishes. My name is Jenna. I'm 17 years old. I'm just a small town girl working at an ice cream store hoping to save up some money for when I go to college. I'm not sure where yet.

Outside, it's hot and humid. Inside the store, it's downright chilly. My best friend, Alice, and I were wiping down scoops and putting away toppings.

"So anyhow, I totally think he's cheating on me. I mean, I don't believe he's busy with school. It's the first week of school. It's not like he's ever taken school seriously before." She said. As usual, Alice was regaling me with her boy troubles. Alice always had boy troubles. It was one of the constants in my life.

The back door opened and Cliff came in. As usual he smelled like vape smoke.

"Are you guys starting to clean up?" (Cliff)

"Yeah." I said.

"Alice losing another boyfriend?"

"Screw off, Cliff!" Alice threw a towel at him. Cliff laughed. Cliff was in his twenties. He was the manager and a bona fide stoner. The two of us laughed while Alice threw her hands up in a huff.

I happened to glance out the window. I noticed a figure milling about on the sidewalk at the far end of the parking lot.

“Hey guys. Hasn't that guy been there for 45 minutes?” (Jenna)

Cliff and Alice looked out, also noticing him for the first time.

“You're right. That's kinda creepy. Should we call the cops on him for loitering?” (Alice)

“Nah, he's not bothering anyone.” (Cliff)

“Can you at least walk us to Alice's car?” I said. Alice and I had driven together.

“Sure, if it'll make you feel better.” Cliff said.

“Now that I think of it, I think he's the only person I've seen all night. No one's been in tonight” Alice said.

“It's a week night. People aren't out tonight. If anyone needs anything, I'll be doing inventory.” He turned around and went back to the store room, leaving Alice and I alone.

“He's probably dropping edibles.” Alice said.

“It wouldn't be the first time.” We both giggled and went back to cleaning. For a few minutes, I was focused on plastic wrapping trays of toppings. Alice resumed the drama she was telling me about earlier.

“So, anyhow, I think he's a loser—”

“Hey, Alice. Look.” I interrupted her and pointed outside. More people were gathering. They weren't walking...normallly. They swayed, lurched.

“What in the—” Alice started. We then heard the screeching of tires and then a car slammed into a lamp post. Alice and I started in disbelief at the scene. Behind me, I heard the door of the store room opening and Cliff came out.

“What's going on?” (Cliff)

“A car just crashed outside.” I pointed outside.

“I'm calling the police” Alice started dialing her cell phone. I could see that the driver of the car was conscious and fumbling with a seatbelt. Meanwhile, the group, now almost a small crowd, had started walking towards the wreck. Walking...or it looked like shuffling.

“I’m going to help him.” Cliff went outside. Alice was waiting on her phone but put it down in frustration.

“I can’t get anyone.” (Alice)

The driver somehow got out of the car. He was a man, mid forties. Cliff called out to him. I couldn’t hear what was going on outside, but the man was waving his arms, pointing at the people walking towards them. Cliff and the driver were under a street lamp, but I couldn’t quite make out the people he was pointing out. The man started reaching inside his waistband and he pulled out a gun.

“Alice!” I grabbed Alice’s arm. She was still trying to get the police. I pulled her down so we were crouching behind the counter. I heard two, no, three gunshots outside.

“What’s happening?!” She said.

“That guy pulled out a gun!” The gun went off a fourth time. Alice and I hugged each other. This night had taken a crazy turn.

For two minutes, it was silent in the ice cream parlor. The only sound was the noise of the refrigerator. A beep from one of the kitchen appliances made us both flinch.

“We should see what’s going on...If Cliff’s ok.” Alice said. We both cautiously looked over top of the counter. Alice gasped. I just about fainted.

The car had caught fire, casting everything in an eerie glow. One of the crowd was lying on the ground, motionless. The man with the gun was also on the ground. Several of the people were on top of him. It looked like, no, it couldn’t be.

“They’re eating him!” I screamed. Alice grabbed me trying to calm me down. Then I noticed Cliff. He was in the middle of a group of them fighting them. He had blood running down his face.

“We have to help him!” I cried. Alice jumped up before I could and ran to the door just as Cliff broke free of his attackers. He ran towards the door of the store just as Alice locked it.

“Alice!” I yelled.

Cliff started banging helplessly on the door.

“Alice! Alice! Why would you do this? Jenna open the door!” (Cliff)

“Alice let him in!” I yelled. (Jenna)

Cliff yanked on the door handle as the people behind him slowly approached. They looked disheveled, bloody, mottled. Almost like...

“Zombies...” I said to myself.

Cliff tried the door one more time then looked at Alice and I with despair on his face. He turned from the door to run but one of the strangers grabbed him by the end of the hoodie he wore over his uniform. First two hands, then four, then eight hands grabbed him and pulled him to the asphalt.

I don't want to think about what I saw next. Cliff was screaming. I'd never heard anyone scream like Cliff did as those people...those things...began to sink their teeth into him. I stood there, in shock like a deer in the headlights, unable to move. I had never seen that much blood before.

“Jenna, come on!” Alice grabbed me roughly by my arm and pulled me to the back of the store. I found myself in the store room sitting with my back against a wall. “Jenna? Jenna, are you ok?” I gradually became aware of Alice waving her hand in front of my face.

“Cliff...” I said. I was still in a daze.

“Jenna, Jenna listen to me. we have to get out of here. Jenna!” She shook me. I snapped out of it and stood up. She was right. “We have to get to my car”

“Why did you lock Cliff out?”

“I don't know...look they were going to get in.” She paused. “He was going to die anyway...”

I could feel tears welling up. I didn't like Cliff but I didn't want him to die either. We exited the store room and I jumped when I heard a thud as one of the zombies struck the glass pane of the windows. I looked to my left.

They were all pressed up against the floor to ceiling windows. Cliff was with them although he looked...different. He looked like them.

"Let's go." Alice grabbed my arm and pulled me to the back door. She slammed against it and opened it. The ice cream store is positioned in the center of a strip mall. Alice's car was parked out back next to Cliff's truck. We moved quietly towards it. I could hear sirens in the distance. What was going on?

Alice unlocked the car. I got in the passenger seat.

"Where are we going to go?" I asked.

"I don't know. Home. The police station. Anywhere else but here." I supposed it was stupid of me to ask. Alice put the car in reverse and swung it around to get out of her parking space. It was pitch black out except for her headlights. She hit the gas, way too fast, towards the exit from the parking lot.

A figure came out from the tree line. Another zombie. Alice hit the zombie, swerved wildly to the right with the monster on the hood of the car, and hit a tree. The airbags deployed.

Both of us saw stars. I sat there, dazed for a moment, and then I suddenly became aware of a sound in the background. The sound of a car alarm. That would draw them, wouldn't it?

"Alice! Alice! We have to get out of here. The car alarm! Alice!" Alice was stunned. I saw blood dripping from her forehead. I got out of the car and went around to the driver's side. The zombie was trapped between the car and the tree, still moving. Still growling. I couldn't let it get to me. I had to help Alice. I opened the door. Alice Half got out, half fell into my arm.

"Come on. Come on, girl. We're going to make it." I put her arm over my shoulder. "We'll go into one of the neighborhoods. We'll hide in one of the houses." Around the building, I saw more of those figures. Shuffling, lurching towards us.

"Jenna, don't worry about me." (Alice)

“No, you’re my best friend. We’ll get out of this together.” (Jenna)

Inside I was panicking. Nowhere ahead of us. Beside the strip mall was a neighborhood. If I could get Alice over the chain link fence, we’d be able to hide in one of the houses or get help from the neighbors. Now that I think of it, I think there’s a gap in the fence

“Alice, there’s a gap in the fence over there. Can you stand on your own?”

“Yeah, I think so. Thanks, Jenna.” She had shaken off whatever had happened to her during the car crash. We both searched along the side of the fence, hoping against hope that I was right. It was difficult because it was so dark out.

“Here!” I said. A corner of the chainlink folded back. “It’s tight but we can get through.” I looked towards the approaching zombies. They moved slowly, but would be on top of us in a moment.

“Coming!” I pulled the corner of the fence back for her and she was able to throw herself on her belly and squeeze through. I followed her more easily. Alice is tall. I’m more on the petite side.

As soon as we were through, the fence began rattling and shaking in a way that made my skin crawl. Alice and I looked around. We were in the side yard of a typical three or four bedroom home. No zombies here and it didn’t seem like the ones in the parking lot could get through the fence. We both breathed a sigh of relief although I wanted to get away from the fence.

“What do we do now?” I said, getting up.

“I don’t know. Warn the neighbors? That’s if anyone is still alive here.” (alice)

We both started walking towards the door of the house.

“Alice, is your head ok?” I asked.

“I think I’m fine.” She said, She wiped her brow with the edge of her shirt leaving it blood stained. “Wait.” Alice put a hand up causing us to stop. “Doesn’t this street open onto the road going past the shopping center?” She pointed. “If we go around front, they’ll see us for sure.

Let's go around the back of the house." We changed course, going around the back of the home. It was a small brick colonial.

"We're going to need to get help." I said to Alice. "Let's knock on the back door."

"Sure. We'll need to warn people anyway." We went up to the door. The lights of the house were on "My family used to live in this neighborhood, you know." She said, "I wonder if old Mrs. Tannenberg still lives here. If she does, she'll need our help getting out of here." I saw a look on Alice's face. It was something that I didn't see very often. Guilt? Guilt for throwing Cliff to the metaphorical wolves. Or was that literal wolves? No time to worry about that now.

Alice knocked on the door and it swung open slightly. Alice pushed it gently open and stepped inside.

"Alice, wait."

"Don't worry, Jenna." She went inside. We were in a very dated kitchen. "Look." Alice pointed. On the counter was a gun, a first aid kit, and a bunch of canned food. "Looks like old Mrs. Tannenberg was prepared. I think that gun belonged to her husband. He was in the Marines."

We both froze when we heard a low moan. We turned slowly, not wanting to look, to see an old woman in torn and bloody clothes. She was changed. Changed like them.

"Mrs...Tannenberg." Alice said. We both started backing away. She lunged with a speed I didn't think these zombies were capable of and tackled Alice. Alice started screaming.

"Get it off me! Get it off me!" She screamed in agony. The zombie started mauling her. I looked around for the gun. I grabbed it, kicked the zombie in the ribs so it rolled off of Alice and aimed the gun, my hands shaking, at the thing's head. I fired and the zombie stopped moving.

I never realized how loud guns were. I had never fired a gun before. It was, well, loud. Louder than anything I had ever heard. My ears were ringing, but I couldn't worry about that now.

"Alice." I put the gun on the counter and knelt over her. "Alice, are you ok?"

"It hurts." She most definitely did not look ok. The zombie had taken a piece out of her shoulder. I hoped that in real life, zombie bites didn't turn you like in the movies.

"Come on." I helped Jenna to her feet and led her to the living room. I laid her down on the couch.

"Jenna...Jenna just leave me."

"No Alice. You're my best friend. Everything is going to be alright." I ran back to the kitchen to get the first aid kit and ran back. I didn't even know where to begin. I took some gauze and some bandages out and got disinfectant. The whole time, I was thinking of my memories with Alice. Our first playdate in kindergarten. The first day of middle school. Giggling and talking about boys at sleepovers. Telling each other what we planned for the future.

"Alice, this is going to sting." I put disinfectant on her wound.

"I'm sorry for everything, Mom." Alice looked like she was slipping into a daze.

"No, Alice, stay with me!"

"Mom...Cliff..." In a few moments, Alice had grown visibly paler.

"Alice, please!"

"Jenna..." She gasped and went still. What did I do? Perform CPR? In a flash, a conversation we had a few weeks ago came back to me.

We were in the pool at Alice's house. Alice was lying on a pool float. I was at the edge of the pool drinking a soda.

"Has your mom been getting on you about college?" I said.

"No. I already know where I want to go." She said.

"Where?"

"Duke."

"For what?" I took another sip of my soda. I knew I wanted to go to college but had no idea what I was going to study.

“Pre-med.” she said. “They have one of the best pre-med programs in the country. I’ve always wanted to be a doctor. Ever since I was a little girl.”

“Alice” I shook her. She was wholly unconscious now. I had to stop the bleeding. I fumbled with the gauze but flinched as I heard a crack at the door. They were outside. More of them. I couldn’t move Alice. The gun. I had to get the gun. I ran back into the kitchen and found it on the counter. Maybe it wasn’t too late for Alice. Maybe I could get her to the hospital somehow.

I felt a set of fingers close around my ankle. Mrs. Tannenberg was moving again. I shook my ankle free and stomped on her hand. I grabbed the gun off of the counter. I had to get back to Alice.

“Alice, Alice come on!” She was still unconscious. I’m a small girl. I can’t lift her. Another crash at the door. From the kitchen, I saw Mrs. Tannenberg crawling towards us. “Alice!” I shook her. Alice began to move a little bit. “Yes. Alice, Alice come on!”

She opened her mouth. A low, unmistakable moan escaped her lips. I stumbled back, almost dropping the gun. This wasn’t happening. None of this was happening. Alice stood up on her own power. She stretched out her arms towards me.

“Alice, are you still there?” I asked. No reply. I aimed the gun at her, my finger wrapped around the trigger. Did I pull it? I didn’t know what to do. “Alice...”

I pulled the trigger and missed, putting a hole in the wall behind her. The door broke off of its hinges. I swung my gun and fired at the zombie, a big male, who came in. More were behind him. The gun clicked and I didn’t know what to do. I looked for an escape. Zombies were on me on three sides. The only clear way was upstairs. I ran upstairs looking for a place to hide, what do I do, jump out a window? The zombies came up after me. I went into one of the bedrooms and slammed the door and locked it.

It was a teenager's bedroom from the 80s. It looked like it hadn't been touched at all since. I ran to the window and tried to get it open. It wouldn't budge. Then I noticed: someone had nailed it shut. This was cruel. Cruel on the part of the universe or whatever. I smashed my fist against the window pane. It didn't crack and I just hurt my hand. I hit it again. Still nothing and my knuckles began to bleed.

I turned around and started praying. My face was hot with tears streaming down my cheeks. I hadn't prayed in forever. The door broke off its hinges and a crush of zombies came through. Alice was at the head of the pack. I raised my hands to protect myself as my best friend's hands roughly grabbed me and pushed me against the window. I couldn't fight back. Not against that many. In front of me, half a dozen undead hands reached out towards me. Half a dozen maws opened.

Led by my best friend...