

The Wall

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I stand staring north along the broad road as it disappears off into the distance. I'd always wanted to visit Scotland but now this is as close as I'd ever get; it's as close as I'd ever want to get. Infected swarm around the base of the wall that has become our latest line of defence against them. I hope it will hold; we all do. It's our last chance of keeping the disease contained. I hear the sound of an engine racing even above the groaning and shuffling of the infected that push against the wall in their hundreds, possibly even thousands. Those are just the ones I can see and I've no idea of how many others there might be out there, attacking the wall along its entire 73 mile length. I search for the vehicle but it takes me a while to find it; an RV, off in the distance, hurtling down the deserted northbound carriageway of the M74; the road that once connected Scotland and England and that the wall now cuts in two. I wonder how they've survived so long out there in what has become the badlands; where they think they're going. Surely they must know that even if they make it past all the infected, we can't let them through. Not wanting to watch what will happen to those inside, I turn away and light a cigarette. The smoking's new. Before, I'd always been scared of getting cancer but now there are worse things to worry about, much worse, and anyway it gives me something to do with my hands while I'm on guard duty; just like drinking does when I'm off. I watch the end of the cigarette glow as smoke spirals up into the sky and I wonder at how much the world has changed in such a short space of time.

There'd been outbreaks all over the world but ours had started in Glasgow the week before. At first they'd tried to contain it there but the soldiers on the barricades couldn't easily distinguish the infected from those that were just trying to flee and there weren't enough of them to stop the mass of people who wanted to get out. They'd seen on the news the day before what'd happened in Miami when the infection, and the infected, over-ran the city and they weren't about to wait round for the same thing happen to Glasgow. That just made the job of containment all the more difficult for those on the front lines; in fact it was impossible.

I think the Generals must have known this from the start because even before they'd ordered the first pull back they'd set us to work resurrecting the ancient wall. It had originally been built to guard the northern frontier of the mighty Roman Empire against wild Pictish warriors who tried again and again to expel it from their homeland. Now we'd rebuilt it to keep at bay a much more frightening enemy: a virus. It didn't sound scary until you saw what it made people do to each other. It took over their brains and their bodies, extinguishing all traces of who they'd once been, turning them into something altogether different. Driven to pass it on, the infected would attack anyone without the virus but often they'd go too far: killing them, tearing them apart, even eating them. That was what happened if the infected found you one on one but if they got into a crowd it was different. All those people running around, panicked, screaming and shouting; it seemed to confuse them. They'd attack one person but only long enough to bring them down before running after another then another. In crowds, they wouldn't kill; instead they'd just infect. This allowed the virus to spread and spread rapidly. That's what had happened in Glasgow and what was now happening everywhere north of the wall.

When we were re-building the wall, it seemed like almost every soldier and reservist in the country was there, well all those not directly fighting the infected on the front line. Whether they knew it or not, their job wasn't really containment, as it was being reported on the news, but rather to slow the spread of the virus and buy us enough time to get what we hoped would be our new frontier finished. Yes, the Generals were condemning anyone north of the wall to death, or worse, but what choice did they have? They were sacrificing five million but they were doing it to save 60. It was a tough decision but it was the right one; it was the only logical one.

It was amazing to watch the wall go up. Twenty-five feet high and ten feet wide, it had a scaffolding skeleton lined with almost anything we could get our hands on: plywood, tarpaulins, sand bags, bales of hay, anything that would hold back the rocks, the rubble, the earth and the sand we filled it with. Like the Romans before us, we used the natural features of the land to help make the defences as impregnable as possible. In some cases, we even used the remains of the Roman wall itself to help speed up the construction but unlike the Romans, we didn't need to worry about gateways or forts: once it was completed, no one was going to be allowed through from the north, no matter what.

We completed it in two days but with nearly thirty thousand of us working on it, it wasn't nearly as impressive as it sounds. That was when they started what they were calling a *phased withdrawal*. Well that's what they were calling it to us; to the media and the public they were still talking about containment. They airlifted the troops out, starting

with the ones closest to the action, but left the civilians behind. Three days later even that stopped: it was getting too risky. By then the gradual trickle of people fleeing southwards from the infected had grown into a raging torrent but we had to hold firm. We couldn't tell who might be infected, but as yet unturned, and who was infection-free, and there was no way we could risk the virus getting through the wall. As far as I knew, there was no plan B so if that happened, the whole country was finished – that was how important the wall was.

If the ever-building crowds came too close to the wall, we'd fire warning shots to keep them away. It was heart-breaking to see them: men, women, whole families all trying to get away from the infection but there was nothing any of us could do. As we watched helplessly, they set up makeshift camps all along the northern edge of the wall; some with tents, others making use of cars, caravans and whatever else they could find. At night all I could see were thousands upon thousands of fires, burning in the darkness, stretching as far as the eye could see both along the wall and off into the north.

Then the infected started to appear. I don't know where they came from, maybe they'd followed those trying to flee south or maybe it was people who'd been bitten and had got this far before finally losing their battle against the virus. At first we tried to take them out, shooting at anyone who had clearly turned before they could attack too many others. When it was an adult it wasn't too hard but when it was a teenager or, even worse, a child it was gut-wrenchingly difficult; yet it had to be done. Even then it didn't really make a difference because soon there were just too many of them. Pandemonium broke out amongst the refugees. It was horrific watching all those people as the infection and the infected surged through the crowds below the wall but I couldn't take my eyes off it. No one knew what to do; where to go. Some tried to climb the wall or tear it down and we were ordered to shoot them. Others called up to where we stood, asking for our help or holding up their children pleading for us to save them. Even if we'd been allowed, they were too far below to reach without risking our own lives and none of us were willing to do that. Then there were the ones that ran. They didn't know where they were heading, they just took off and when one person started, others around them would follow, turning a frightened mob into a stampede that swept across all in its path. Anyone who fell or got in its way was trampled under foot.

That night almost no fires burned in the darkness and by dawn there were none. As the sun rose it revealed what was left of the refugee camps. Gone were the clusters of tents and people; in the night they'd been replaced by a roaring, swirling sea of infected. They lined the wall, forty or fifty deep all trying to get to the uninfected they could sense on the other side. They attacked the makeshift structure, beating and tearing at it until their hands bled.

As I finish my cigarette, I hear the RV screech to a halt. I turn to find it's now close enough to the wall that the occupants must be able to make out the swarm of infected that line it as far as the eye can see. I watch as it sits there, its engine idling and I wonder what the driver's thinking. The engine roars again and the RV leaps forward. When it reaches the first of the infected it doesn't slow; it just plows through them. It doesn't even slow as it approaches the wall itself; instead it slams into it. I feel a tremor pass under my feet. For a moment I wonder if the wall will hold but then I realise that one RV would have little impact on the tons of earth and rock on which I stand. I peer over the edge and see the infected crowding around the vehicle, trying their best to get in. Then the skylight on its roof opens and a pair of hands appear. A moment later, they're followed by a head and then the rest of a young boy. Soon another person appears, then another and another. The last must have been the driver because he's bleeding from a gash across his face that looks like it's been caused by his head hitting the steering wheel. They glance around frantically, seeing that the RV is surrounded by infected on three sides whilst the front end is crumpled against the wall. They're only a few feet below me but before they can do anything the RV shudders, causing one of the kids to lose his footing. As he scrambles back to his feet, the vehicle starts to sway violently as the infected attack it, trying to get to the people huddled on its roof.

Shielding his eyes with his hand, the man looks up and sees me watching from the top of the wall. He's got a scrawny beard and lank, unwashed hair. There's dirt ingrained into the lines on his face and his clothes are stained and grubby. At first, I'm disgusted, then it occurs to me that I probably look pretty much the same to him. He calls out, 'Hey, can you help us up?' His accent's Scottish but I can't narrow it down any further than that.

'No.' It sounds harsh but we have our orders.

'But you've got to.' The man urges me.

'The sergeant made it very clear, we can't help any one from north of the wall.'

'Are you just going to stand there and watch them kill us?' The woman shouts incredulously. Her dark hair's tied back in a ponytail, revealing a pale, pinched face and sunken brown eyes. The two boys hiding between the adults are caked in dirt and are so skinny it looks like a light breeze would blow them away. I'm guessing survival rather than food has been the number one priority for this family since the outbreak started.

I turn and walk a few feet away from the edge of the wall to give me time to think.

'Hey come back. You can't just leave us here. Come back!' There's fear in the woman's voice and kids start crying.

I blot this out as I try to work out what to do. It would be directly disobeying orders if I helped them but unlike all the others I could reach these survivors without risking my own neck. Surely I couldn't let them get torn apart right there in front of me?

Suddenly there's a scream. I run forward and look down. The weight of the infected pushing on the RV is now so great that it's rocking wildly from side to side. In the commotion, the smaller of the two boys has been thrown from his feet and is now dangling over the edge of the roof. One of the taller infected has hold of his legs and is pulling the boy towards his gaping mouth. The only thing stopping the boy being dragged into the horde is the fact his mother and father have a hold of his arms and are pulling in the other direction. The boy's screaming both in pain and in fear. Without thinking I shoulder my rifle and shoot the infected through the head. Instantly the boy is released, sending his parents tumbling onto the RV's roof as they finally get him clear.

Lying on his back, the man looks up at me hopefully, 'Does that mean you're going to help us?'

'I haven't decided yet.' I pause for a moment so I can think. 'How do I know you're not infected?'

'We're not. We're all okay.'

'That's what everyone says, even those who've been bitten.'

'But we are. How can we prove it to you?'

'You can't.'

'So you're just going to leave us here?'

'There's nothing else I can do.'

'There must be something you can do!' The woman sounds desperate.

The RV tips sharply to it's left, sending them all sprawling across its roof. This time only the man and the younger of the two children manage to hold on. First the older boy and then the woman slips over the edge and disappears into the arms of the infected waiting below. Blood and guts fly in all directions as the infected tear the screaming mother and child to pieces. The man gets up but the RV is shuddering so wildly he's having trouble staying on his feet.

'Please. You've got to help us. Or if not me, at least help him.' he points to where the boy's clinging to the roof. 'He's not injured, I promise you, he's clean. You can check for yourself once you get him

up there. Look.' He pulls the boy to his feet and jerks up his jacket and shirt before spinning him round and round. I can see there are no bites on his slight torso.

I avoid the man's eyes, 'I can't. How would I explain where he came from?'

'I don't know but surely you must be able to think of something?' He shouts desperately.

The RV tips again and I can see from his face that the man knows it's only a matter of time. He grabs the boy and holds him up. His eyes meet mine, 'Please. Save him.'

Against my better judgement I sling my rifle across my back as I throw myself down and lean the edge of the wall. I stretch my hands down towards the boy but he's too frightened to reach up and grab them. The RV lurches and the man only just manages to stay upright.

'Come on, boy, take my hands,' I shout as I slide as far forward as I dare. 'Please,' I say more softly and then smile.

This seems to do the trick and he unfolds his arms. I feel his tiny hands close on mine just as the man finally loses his footing and falls, yelling, from the RV. The boy squirms, trying to see what's happened to his father.

Below him, I can see the man being ripped apart by the infected. 'Don't look down, boy, just look at me. You're almost safe. I'll have you up here in a jiffy and then you'll be safe.'

Behind me I hear the distinctive click of a bullet being chambered in an assault rifle. 'You'll do no such thing, soldier!'

I know the voice and I know I'm screwed. 'But Sergeant, I can't just let him go.'

'Well, you can't bring him up here either. It's too risky. What if he's infected?'

I glance down at the boy. The left sleeve of his jacket has slipped and I can see blood on his forearm. I can't tell if it's from a bite but it's definitely blood. Yet this is a living, breathing little boy, I can't just drop him into the mass of infected that are seething around the base of the wall, the nearest reaching their arms up towards him. I can see tears welling up in his frightened eyes as he silently pleads with me to pull him to safety. I don't know what to do next: no matter what, I know it'll be the wrong decision for someone. All I can do is lie there, unable to decide one way or the other, the terrified boy dangling from my arms, the Sergeant standing behind me with his gun and the infected swarming below.

Author's Note: This is story connected to another one I've written called *Last Flight Out*, which is also available from http://www.forthoseinperil.net/Free_Stories_From_Colin_M_Drysdale.htm. In that story, the concept of re-building Hadrian's Wall (which is the name of the Roman wall that used to separate modern day Scotland and England more than 1,700 years ago) is introduced for the first time. Both these stories are based on extra ideas I had while working on the first draft of the sequel to *For Those In Peril On The Sea*. They didn't really fit into the main story, which is about a group of people escaping from Glasgow during the very early stages of an outbreak of this virus, but I found them intriguing enough that I wanted to do something with them rather than just abandoning them altogether.

If you want to see where Hadrian's Wall is and also see the exact location where this story is set, you can download a map overlay that will allow you to plot these on Google Earth from http://www.forthoseinperil.net/files/The_Wall.kmz. In order to view this overlay, you have to have either Google Earth or a Google Earth Mobile app installed on your computer or ebook device. These are free and you can find the one that's best for you by entering the phrase 'Google Earth' into an internet search engine.