Everything went black. When Dennis's eyes reopened, Mac was gripping the wheel and yelling his name. Like a grotesque puppetmaster, Anna's leg wriggled into the cab, pulling the rest of her along with it.

With a final heave, Anna landed squarely on the seat next to Dennis, her eyes again glowing red. Head throbbing, he braced for a blow, but none came. "Anna, it's okay," said Jeremiah, his voice shaking. "We're your friends. We want to help." She didn't respond but didn't lash out, either. They sat in tense stillness while the bluegrass played insistently on, a reminder of the radio station they were headed to and the station DJ they hoped was somehow still alive and safe.

Then Anna's right arm swung forward, whacking the radio console. She struck it again, but her clumsy movements only nudged the volume louder. "I guess zombies don't like bluegrass?" Mac joked weakly.

Anna's left arm shot out and grabbed the right. She wrenched it away from the radio and clutched it to her chest, shaking. Jeremiah peeked out from behind his hands. "Anna, can you hear us? Are you a zombie?" he asked tentatively. Miraculously, she seemed to be regaining control.

"I . . . don't know." Her voice was low and raspy, as though unused for days. Mac reached to turn off the radio so they could hear her better, but she protested, "Leave it, please. Somehow the music helps."
"You're still Anna," said Jeremiah decisively. "I can tell. Keep the music on. She likes it," he told Mac firmly. Mac wasn't sure, but he thought the red in her eyes was clearing.

Before they could ask any questions, Dennis yelped, "We're here!" Giddy with relief, he swung the truck into the station's large parking lot. It was strewn with debris, and he had to park at the very entrance.

The only other recognizable object around was an old truck even more beat up than theirs. Dennis hoped desperately that it was Petey's.

"What if it's a trap?" whispered Dennis.

"I'm not sure we have any alternatives," Mac replied, eyeing Anna warily, "but let's stay quiet."

Dennis pulled the keys from the ignition, and the group clambered out. Mac saw Anna's right limbs twitching. They moved as quickly and quietly as they could, peering nervously at the dark woods surrounding the lot. Suddenly, Anna's rogue leg kicked out and sent an empty can clattering across the concrete, deafening in the silence. They froze. For a moment, nothing seemed to happen.

Then Mac noticed the debris around them stirring, as if blown by distant wind. "What the--" he started, but Dennis pointed wordlessly. Mac gasped. From every direction, figures were emerging from the woods. A sea of zombies was closing in, slowly but steadily. They had nowhere to run.

Mac picked up a long slat of wood, and Dennis grabbed a dented garbage can lid. Neither had much faith in their makeshift weapons.

Suddenly, Anna's right arm again reached for Mac's throat. Dennis dropped the lid and struggled to pull her arm away, desperate to save Mac. "Careful!" squeaked Jeremiah. "Don't hurt her!"

"I'm trying," Dennis protested, "but she's gonna kill Mac!"

They remained at an impasse, Anna gripping Mac's neck and Dennis pulling at Anna's arm while Jeremiah stared into her crimson eyes. "Come back, Anna," he implored. "I know you're in there!" She held his gaze but didn't ease her grasp.

Just then, from the door of the radio station burst out a heavyset, wild-looking man lugging an enormous speaker. The speaker blared riproaring bluegrass, so loud that Dennis could feel his teeth vibrating. Jeremiah kept his focus, though, still speaking to Anna. The crowd of zombies had come to a standstill, almost as though they were observing the standoff. Anna's arm didn't budge.

Mac's eyes bulged, and his wood slat clattered to the ground. Twangy guitar and thumping drums rang out. Dennis's head spun with panic. "Anna, come back!" cried Jeremiah. Despite the music, the air felt frozen. "Come back to us!" He threw his arms around her waist-half restraint and half embrace.

Finally, just as Mac's knees started to give out, an especially loud twang rang from the speaker. Anna dropped her arm with a loud gasp. Mac stumbled backward. As quickly as it had gathered, the zombie horde began to disperse, loping back into the woods. Two zombies lingered, looking confused.

"I guess they really don't like bluegrass," Mac commented weakly, rubbing his neck.
"Depends which 'they' you mean," the man chuckled, lowering the volume slightly. "The zombies hate it. But the people inside love it. You okay?"

Mac nodded, and the man continued. "Yup, they're still human at the core. Looks like your friend there might be somewhere in between right now." Jeremiah put a protective hand on Anna's back. "Petey Coltrain, by the way," the man said.

The group made its introductions and watched in amazement as Petey clapped a hand on the shoulders of the two lingering zombies, spoke briefly, and ushered them into the station.

"How are you still alive?" blurted Mac. "I mean, with all these zombies around?"

"Pure dumb luck and stubbornness," Petey said proudly. "At first I tried to stay quiet and hide like everyone else--but that didn't work for most folks," he grimaced. "Decided if I was gonna go, it'd be playing bluegrass. Turns out, that's the secret weapon."

"Bluegrass?" Dennis was incredulous.

"Well, music. I've tried classical, country, rap--it all worked, but I'm partial to bluegrass. It confuses them and eventually breaks through the infection. But it's not enough just to blare music at 'em. You need to engage, talk to them. The more you can make them realize you're a person, the better they'll remember that they are, too."

"That's exactly what you did, Jeremiah!" Dennis again felt a flash of pride at the boy's brave compassion.

"That's right. Well done, fella," Petey gave Jeremiah a firm handshake. "Your help will be most welcome if you're willing to stay and give it."

"I am!" Jeremiah glowed. Then his face fell. "So . . . things will never be like they were before?" he asked sadly.

"Afraid not," replied Petey. "But hopefully we'll all understand the world and one another a little better from now on. The zombies are here, and we can't change that. And there's no going back to how life was before the plague hit. But it's literally going to be the end of the world if we don't work through it now."

Anna was looking abashed. "Can you ever forgive me?" she asked Mac, unable to meet his eyes.

"There's no shame," Petey declared, and Mac nodded vigorously. "You fought it, and you're still here. Now that a few zombies have recovered, they're helping me reach others. You can help, too." Turning to the others, he said, "You're all welcome to stay and join the effort. Not that you've got a ton of options."

They laughed wryly, remembering the horde outside. "We'd love to," said Dennis as the others added their agreement. He put his arms around Mac's and Jeremiah's shoulders, and both extended theirs around Anna's. Slowly, her arms--left and right--lifted to join the embrace.

"---

The End.
**compassion** com·pas·sion

**Advanced Definition**

*noun*

1. a feeling of sharing another's suffering, prompting a desire to relieve that suffering; commiseration; clemency.

> Her compassion for the orphans led her to look for ways to help them.

> The ship's captain was a brutal man with no compassion.

**Spanish cognate**

*compasión:* The Spanish word *compasión* means compassion.

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**These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:**

1. Those include things like being great at telling jokes, *compassion*, intelligence, warmth, and creativity.

2. Having *compassion* for others is a valuable skill that everyone should work to improve, she says.

3. We did not know anyone in Saratov, but the people were nice and *compassionate*. A woman whose husband was also in the war took us in.

4. She said, "even if my character is really different from me, figuring out what we have in common, and actually learning how to be her in the play, teaches me *compassion* and understanding."

5. Someone with great character may also be *compassionate*. A compassionate person cares about others and works to help them.
engage  en·gage

Definition
verb
1. to make a set of things start to work by fitting them together.

*Use the lever to engage the gears.*

2. to get or use the service of someone; hire.

*The company engaged ten new workers.*

3. to involve yourself in something; to take part in.

*You should engage in more activities on the weekends.*

Advanced Definition
transitive verb
1. to obtain or use the service of; employ.

*We engaged a chef for the party.*

2. to reserve.

*Her parents engaged the hall for the wedding reception.*

3. to gain or hold the interest of; occupy.

*The controversial subject engaged their attention.*

4. to come into conflict with.

*The American troops engaged the British troops on this hill in 1778.*

5. to mesh.

*Use the lever to engage the gears.*

6. to promise (oneself), esp. in marriage.

*She immediately regretted engaging herself to him.*

intransitive verb
1. to participate (usu. fol. by "in").
How long have you engaged in this type of volunteer activity?

Many individuals engaged in the effort to help the victims of the hurricane.

The guests engaged in small talk before dinner.

2. to pledge or commit oneself; assume an obligation (usu. fol. by "to").

She engaged to cater the receptions.

3. to become meshed, as gears.

4. to come into conflict.

These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:

1. Groups of flamingos also engage in elaborate collective displays that look like the dance numbers on Glee.

2. "[Skateboarding] is a great activity that keeps kids engaged in physical movement and gives them new skills and interests," says West Middle School's after-school program coordinator, Lindsey Johnson.

3. It is one of the best means for humans to engage with time, for memorializing the estimable, for celebrating the beautiful and the experience of living in the world.

4. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war.

5. Even Mom was engaged, joking around with Dad about the sad contents of the tiny mini-mart, and how she didn't know if they'd be able to survive off of canned foods and whatever they could forage from the state park. After dinner, and after everyone else had fallen asleep, Adam thought about waking Julia up to tell her about the phonograph.

6. The Japanese tea ceremony engages all five senses: you can smell the woody scent of the surrounding garden, hear the wind in the trees outside, feel the teabowl and chakin (napkin) in your hands, see a beautiful painting or ceramic pot in the tokonoma (alcove), and taste the hot green tea and sweets. During this detailed and elegant ritual, each movement is performed with careful attention to four spiritual qualities: respect (kei), harmony (wa), purity (sei), and tranquility (jaku).
1. Where are Dennis, Mac, Jeremiah, and Anna heading to at the beginning of the text?

   A. Petey Coltrain's radio station
   B. Jeremiah's family's house
   C. the nearest big city
   D. a different part of the woods

2. When is the climax of this story?

   A. when Anna wriggles her way into the front seat of the car, next to Dennis
   B. when Petey's speaker gives out a loud twang and the zombies begin to disperse
   C. when Anna is gripping Mac's neck, and they are surrounded by a horde of zombies
   D. when Mac, Dennis, Jeremiah, and Anna finally embrace, after Anna has become human again

3. Please read these sentences from the text:

"Anna's right arm swung forward, whacking the radio console. She struck it again, but her clumsy movements only nudged the volume louder. [...] Anna's left arm shot out and grabbed the right. She wrenched it away from the radio and clutched it to her chest, shaking. Jeremiah peeked out from behind his hands. 'Anna, can you hear us? Are you a zombie?' he asked tentatively. Miraculously, she seemed to be regaining control."

What conclusion can be drawn from these sentences?

   A. Anna cannot stand the sound of bluegrass music.
   B. Anna has almost completely become a zombie, and there's little her friends can do to save her.
   C. Jeremiah thinks he and the others should leave Anna behind if she's becoming a zombie.
   D. Anna is partly a zombie, but part of her is still human and is fighting for control.
4. How can Jeremiah best be described throughout this text?

   A. compassionate and determined
   B. immature and frightened
   C. daring and reckless
   D. confused and upset

5. What is the main idea of this text?

   A. A group of friends try to find help as their friend turns into a zombie, only to learn that almost no other humans are left in the country.
   B. A group of friends try to find help as their friend turns into a zombie, and learn that music and human engagement could be the solution they need.
   C. A group of friends try to find help as their friend turns into a zombie, but manage to find the solution they need on their own.
   D. A group of friends try to find help as their friend turns into a zombie and almost don't make it to Petey Coltrain's radio station in time to help her.

6. Please read these sentences from the text:

   "Mac's eyes bulged, and his wood slat clattered to the ground. Twangy guitar and thumping drums rang out. Dennis's head spun with panic. 'Anna, come back!' cried Jeremiah. Despite the music, the air felt frozen. 'Come back to us!'"

   Why might the author have used so many short sentences in a row in this part of the story?

   A. to heighten the tension and excitement of the story
   B. to make sure the events of the story were especially clear
   C. to give the reader a sense of calm and peace
   D. to give the reader a sense of confusion and anger
7. Please choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Anna regained control of herself ___ the music on the speaker gave a loud twang.

A. when  
B. before  
C. although  
D. so

8. What does Petey say is the key to breaking through the infection helping the zombies become human again, aside from music?

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9. Explain Jeremiah's special importance to the story's resolution. Support your explanation with details and evidence from the text.

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________________________________________________________________________
10. What is a major theme or message this story conveys? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

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8. What does Petey say is the key to breaking through the infection helping the zombies become human again, aside from music?

Engaging with and talking to the zombies is the key to helping them become human again.

9. Explain Jeremiah's special importance to the story's resolution. Support your explanation with details and evidence from the text.

Jeremiah is especially important to the story's resolution because he was the only one who really treated Anna like a human, and engaged with her and talked with her. This, as Petey said, was the key to breaking through the zombie infection. Even when Mac was being strangled and Dennis was panicking and trying to pull Anna off him, Jeremiah's approach was to embrace Anna. This shows how compassionate he is, which turned out to be the solution to their problems.
10. What is a major theme or message this story conveys? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Student answers may vary, but must be supported by evidence from the text. Students may say that a major theme is the importance of compassion and engagement, as evidenced by the solution to the zombie plague being talking to and engaging with the zombies. The shared experience of humanity may also be a theme, as even the worst zombies still had a human core and could be reached by engagement.