

When the Stars Disappeared

a novella

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to Annie
for whom it all started,
and without whom it ended

~

i am dying; through my fingers
cascades the soil of a billion stars.
but in my mind only one thing lingers:
i am it, and it is me.

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One

Dear Kara,

Perhaps you are the lucky one, not being here...

"Eh, what's the point..." he whispered and crumpled the piece of paper in his fist and put it in his pocket. The wind howled cold; an amber sky glooming over. As the pallid sun fell adream behind the horizon voices grew louder from the shades of trees and umbrage of the underbrush.

"Time to go."

"Right behind you," the girl replied.

Timeworn boots hit the grassy asphalt and on they went, with each stride an orchestra of clatter from their backpacks. Moss-grown cars on the road like metallic beasts made to sleep. They approached a town and could see a hint of smoke with an amber glow.

"A campfire?"

"Too big for a campfire," he replied, making sure the pistol remained snug in his pocket. Decayed window frames croaked and swayed in the winds; forget-me-nots sprouted from the curbsides. A thick blanket of autumn leaves lay over the streets and cars and building tops as if stockpiling over eons; yellow weeds as tall as the girl played in the breeze. An ancient water tower rose high. Rusty cars lay strewn about building walls and pavements, with squeaks and other sounds coming from them as if housing critters. Greens sprout from bones of dead things. Bug buzz.

They carefully snuck through damned and broken things to get a glimpse of what burned. Peeking around the quoin of a brick house they spotted the charred ruins of a building still smoldering. Inside sat a silhouette that blurred by the heat of the dying flames. They approached curiously as it rose out of the scorched remnants of walls and pieces of roof strewn about and its features unveiled: a man in a long dark monkish robe stared vaguely at them, with black sunglasses nestled on his nose and a rice-straw hat adorning his temple.

"Who approaches?" the figure uttered with a calm, smooth voice.

"Uh, just us," replied the man, surprised.

The figure seemed to look not at them but at a certain nothingness; his face tilted in their direction but off, like a scarecrow fluttering in the wind.

"Keep your distance."

"Why? Are you okay?" the girl asked with concern.

"It's still much too hot," he simply uttered as he rose; the falling ash seemed to avoid him. He looked about eighty winters old with a silver beard drooping from his jawline.

"The flames...brought you to me," he spoke, shuffling through the sooted doorframe.

"What were you doing there? How did you survive?" the man asked with certain disbelief.

"I was...simply meditating and fell asleep. I awoke...heard you two approaching...and here we are." He spoke slowly and with a thick accent the girl had never heard.

"But how are you alive?" asked the man.

"Some things we will never know," the elderly man replied as he took a candle out from his robe pocket and slowly knelt and lit it by touching the string to a small piece of smoldering wood afore creaking back up again.

"The dark is close," he said with a grunt as rumors of children laughing emanated from shadowed nooks and strange women ushered them into darkness. The candled monk began walking as though he knew exactly where to go.

"Where are you going?" the man asked concernedly.

"No idea," replied the monk.

"Do you need help?" asked the girl.

"Help would be nice."

She took his wrinkled hand and led him toward some houses. In his other hand the glim flickered and trembled in the wind as if a great wood-mad beast was trying to blow it out from the murk. Rows of wooden double-storey houses sat on each side of the macadam with lawns knee-high and mailboxes that squeaked with each push of the breeze. The nearest one—a little house with overgrown golden-green vines and a grass roof like hair. Dark whisperings called the girl through the basement windows. The man opened the squeaky iron wrought fence and led the way up the rotted wooden stairs. Winds blew stronger now and the candle flickered with vigor. Her flashlight clicked on and shone through the dusty kitchen windowpanes as the voices crawled closer with each step of dying daylight. He knocked on the front door.

"Hello?" he asked loudly, hoping for silence. The whispers got louder, now repeating, **"Hello, hello, hello..."** with voices imitating his like an ensemble unholy and inhuman. They went inside the dust-filled house and he deadbolted the door behind them. Family pictures, a tall grandfather clock, chestnut stairs, red divans, a dusty television. Decayed plants hung in pots, floorboards creaked and croaked under their steps. Dust in their throats, cobwebs in their hair. He checked the entire house; it seemed safe. The girl shone her light through the window outside and it melded with the dark after a few steps. The night seeped closer and closer, bringing the voices with it.

The man locked all the doors and prepared the grimy divans. Sounds of an elderly woman's mumbling came from the upstairs bedroom amid the circus of wretched voices. He put the monk's glim in a glass jar with holes in the lid and fashioned many such glims to keep the room alight. With all the windows and doors closed there remained still an ominous breeze—a darkness that oozed through the cracks as if to smother the lights with a personal vendetta. In the room the shadows danced with the candlelight: an eternal game of the light and the dark. The man opened a can of beans and put a spoon in it and put everything in the monk's hands; the old man returned a smile and dug into the beans with childlike joy.

"How have you survived for so long?" the girl asked with a curious brow.

"I don't know, child," he replied with a mouthful of beans.

"What kept you going?"

"This..." The monk slid out a smoky black book from his wide sleeve—its cover faded and the title with it. He extended his hand toward the girl with the book in it and she opened it and found the pages littered with dots.

"What kind of book is this?"

"A book...for the blind," the monk said. "A book for the darkest days and the loneliest nights. A book of hope."

"Blind..." the girl muttered. The monk took off his sunglasses and revealed the two snow-white pearls sitting in his eye sockets. The pair sobered. *How could a blind man survive in such a world?*

"You should come with us. What's your name?" she asked with an innocent smile.

"In the old world..." he paused as a wave of memories hit him, "...they called me Reo."

"I'm Nura, and this is Sam. We haven't met anyone in a while..." Her smile faded.

"When was the last time you met someone, Reo?" asked Sam.

"Someone real? Too long..."

"What do you mean?"

"I can see...them, the shadows in the dark...flickering, frail. Hundreds, thousands, countless. They try to look like us. They try to sound like us. I can see them now."

"See them?" asked Sam almost mockingly, convinced the old man had lost his mind to the darkness long ago.

"I see only them. Maybe...that's why they don't take me," said the monk, looking at a dark nook behind a cabinet out of which came whisperings of a little girl.

"What is it?" asked Sam.

"Nothing," he murmured, turning his pate toward the couch where the two rested. In the silence now became apparent all kinds of eldritch rumors around the house and in dark places inside it. Only mimicries, as if the jesters of the devil had nothing finer to do. Afore they could ask anything else, the monk let out a roar of a snore.

"So what was that all about?" she asked, a bit dispirited.

"I don't know. His mind must have betrayed him long ago. There's no room for a man of his age in such a world. It must have broken..."

"But how is he alive then?"

They both turned a gaze toward the snoring man.

"How indeed?" he replied broodingly. "Maybe we'll ask him tomorrow. You should rest now, kiddo."

They ate and brushed their teeth and spat the paste in dusty cups, for oral hygiene was important now that dentists were extinct. She put on her ears seashells held together by duct tape, the body of a headset, cushions, and warm wishes, which she referred to as shellphones. She then wished him a good night and hugged him and tried to sleep.

He spent the night pondering the happenings as the voices raged on relentlessly like demons lost, speaking under the bed, in the shadowy corners, inside walls, upstairs, in the basement, outside, and twisting thoughts in his head. "**Sam... Sam... Come here, Sam...**" one repeated under the divan as if a hundred voices speaking at once. Some laughed in closed cabinets while others wept in unseeable corners.

He closed his eyes for a moment and awoke to birdsong and morn light; the monk no more.

Two

Birdsong symbolized a certain peace and comfort. Gusts pressed the windowpane against its cracked frame and made it whistle. An empty can and a spoon licked clean. He took a sip out of his water canteen and woke up the girl who had been dreaming deeply, running through meadows of daffydowndillys and catmints in summertime.

"Hey," he said with a smile.

"Hey." She rubbed her sleepy eyes. "Where's Reo?"

"Gone."

"Is something stolen?"

"I don't think so."

She sighed; he checked their ragged map: in it were circled all the nearby nuclear power plants with two circles around each plant, one in red about ten miles and the other in yellow about fifty miles. They grabbed their things and collected their thoughts and set out yet again.

Sam, resembling more a camel than a man, strode like a beast with saddlebags of a thousand things dangling from his rear. He trundled a large mountain backpack upon which nestled a rolled-up sleeping bag, while a sleeping mat and a mess-tin dangled under. The bag's side pockets carried plastic water bottles and a wood axe. To his left strapped a collapsible fishing rod and to his right his hand-fashioned bow and arrows and a battery lantern. His favorite cloak had seen better days: its bottom filthy with mud stains and other things.

Out of the pavement cracks glistened dewy rebellious grasses like little spears of nature waging war against man-made things. Smoke from the church almost ceased. The sky gloomed amber like an eternal sunset as pigeons cooed from the nearby buildings' riven windows, the walls alow gathering bird goop. Packs of deer curiously roamed the asphalts and lawns of the small town as casually as any person would a park.

An ominous feeling. *It's too early for that*, he thought. Behind a half-collapsed masonry fence he marked what looked like half of a head from the nose up, the eyes of which intently observed their every step. He stopped and took a second to focus his eyes as if he imagined things.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The half-head lowered behind the red fence and came crawling out a woman on all fours in a dirty white nightgown, her smile and missing teeth flashing through the black curtains of hair. Like a nightmare she approached them swiftly, murmuring something as she did; his revolver already pointed at her through his pocket.

"Hey! Stop!" he yelled; Nura took a step behind him, clutching his arm while peeking with her right eye.

As the woman approached her murmurings became clear.

"A light for a night. A light for a night," she repeated incessantly. Her frizzy hair looked infested with something and her palms and bare feet left a trail of blood behind them. A pungent odor of rotting bowels pervaded as she crawled closer.

"Stop or I will shoot!" he yelled again as he cocked his revolver; the woman stopped and fell quiet, still grinning and now moving her pate like a bewildered dog. The brick fence lay around a small two-storey house from which rushed out a man in a bathrobe and slippers.

"Don't shoot! Stop! She's sick!" he yelled. The man's voice quaked with fear as he rushed to the crawling woman and put her left arm around his neck gently and grabbed her side with his right arm.

"Dear, dear, hush now. Let's go inside," he said as they walked back to the house.

"A light for a night. A light for a night." Her voice quietened as they walked farther; Sam uncocked his revolver.

"It's okay," he murmured to her who stood still with fear in her eyne. They continued east.

"What did she mean, a light for a night?" she asked.

"She must have set the church on fire."

As they neared the edge of town they marked two ropes with nooses tied to an oak's branch swaying in the wind. In rushed etchings on the bark lay a note barely readable and aged:

*"We're tired of being afraid
If anyone reads this, may God bless you
If he doesn't, they will take you too
Please bury our remains"*

"Must've taken a long time to write all that," he spoke as if undeterred by the engravings, but in his heart—pain; a tear fell from her cheek. *There's nothing to bury*, she thought.

They continued to Ashtown. Behind them ropes swayed and the oak rustled in the breeze as if weeping. Large pines and maples covered the barren stretch of road upon which they trod, their rucksacks and gear clattering with each step. A howling in the distance: his hand around the handgun in reflex.

She often asked questions about his past, about the way of the old world, about governments and politics, jobs and public transport, large buildings of learning, hospitals—like fairytales to her, much like the fairytales parents had read to their brood before bedtime.

"Why did people war with each other?" she asked as she read yet another book on their walk.

"I don't know, kiddo. Sometimes old men got bored and wanted more land, more things. Sometimes old men wanted to come and kill you for no good reason. Kill what you love, who you love."

"But they never went themselves?"

"No reason to. They were good at talking others into doing their killing. And they were great at conjuring enemies out of anyone. From thin air. Like wizards."

"Like Voldemort."

"Yeah, like Voldemort. But even he who shall not be named had more guts."

"Did we ever stop fighting?"

"Not really."

"Why?"

"Perhaps it's in our nature. Maybe why the other human species went extinct is because we killed them off. Time came when we could kill us off too, with a few bombs that we really had no business messing with."

"The nukes."

"Yeah. Time came when our planet almost took revenge on us too, for waging war with it."

"How did we war with it?"

"By poisoning it. Killing everything that lived on it. Killing each other."

The winds kept howling and boughs of sweetgums and maples swayed and cracked all around them. Starlings sang their sweet tunes as if narrating nearby life and its happenings. She much enjoyed the peaceful mornings and noons where she could almost forget what awaited them at nightfall.

He heard what sounded like leaves crunching under footfall in the nearby wood and stopped and looked over his shoulder.

"What is it?" she murmured, now also looking with him behind a thicket.

"It's nothing," he replied with a doubt.

Sometimes it was hard to distinguish reality from imaginings, as if life itself a perpetual dream without beginning or end.

They approached a bend in the road where a gentle river washed by while fields of green danced in the breeze behind it.

"Wow," she exclaimed as she saw wild horses running in the meadows; he smiled.

He looked at her from time to time: the eyes of her like oceans and the face like an angel and so of light—as if in aureoled. *If she's not of Heaven then Heaven is not for me.*

After some more walking they found a quiet place to rest their weary legs and backs. A short dirt trail split from the road under the shadows of tall maples and olden oaks and led to hand-carven cedar benches that sat like a sightseeing spot for the grassland. He opened a can of sliced pineapple; they slurped the juice and munched on the yellow slices.

After playing some songs and lifting spirits on his guitalele they rose and walked and left behind the empty can for the many-legged crawlers of the earth. Before they could get back on the road a man approached from behind a tree. He donned a long dirty beard, with shoes used to the point his long fingernails protruded from their tips. *It wasn't that hard to find good shoes*, he thought. The man limp and stumbling. A liquor reek. The gaze of him set on her who was now yet again behind Sam.

"Hey, you okay there?" Sam asked with his hand on the gilded revolver in his pocket. A long silence. Birds and winds sing their songs.

"Food."

His awkward gaze never left Nura.

Silence again. Branches cracked and fell in the strong winds; Sam reached in his left pocket for something.

"Here."

He threw an apple at the man and he caught it and returned his gaze to the girl.

"Plenty of orchards thataway." Sam pointed westwards.

"What's your name, dear?" the man slurred with his crooked yellow teeth and pallid smile.

"Best get on your way now," Sam said stiffly.

"And who's talkin' to you?" he said as his smile blurred into a grimace.

"All right, bye now."

Sam grabbed her hand and they started walking past him; he lunged toward them, now holding a knife instead of an apple. In a split second Sam turned toward the man and aimed his handgun from inside his pocket and cocked it. Bang. A gunshot echoed through the wood as birds soared skyward hastily like fleas escaping a drowning dog; a smell of sulphur. Her ears ringed and Sam's pocket now bore a new

hole and the man lay on the dirt trail gargling his last breaths through the crater in his throat spurting blood, his eyes goggled and hands grasping for something that wasn't there. Sam picked the apple from the dirt, cleaned it with the sleeve of his jacket and put it in his pocket, all the while she stood motionless as the man struggled for his last breath. Only the wind spoke now.

Her face that of innumerable thoughts like artillery shells bombarding her skull. She watched the dead man lay there as Sam called her name as he sat crouched beside her with his hand on her shoulder. She looked at him and he seemed to talk but no sound came out. In her heart she knew that if not for him she would have died many times over. And yet no words could express her gratitude. But he knew. In her eyes the tears of thankfulness in countless languages welled up. *A few tears fall but you are my hope for all.* He took her hand and they trod toward the barren stretch of road.

It lay darker than they had left it. A calm breeze; distant white lilies and daisies to their left. The howling ceased. *Perhaps the gunshot scared the hounds,* he thought. Wind-swayed branches cracked. Wren-song. A river bubbling as it skips over smoothed rocks next to the road.

They spotted a lifeless barn to their left.

"That should do," he muttered.

Near the barn lay flocks of large skeletons in a pasture. They hid in the tall grass. Weeds grew wildly around the barn and could hide many things. On the roof and sides crept kudzu. Middens of unknown origins. The mossy weatherboards sprung from the wall studs and rusty nails and creaked each time the winds picked up. Big enough to house a family of mammoths and dim enough for darkness to speak and speak it did. Echoes of disturbed laughter and the mockery of words spoken by him earlier reverberated through the rotted walls and cracks. ***"Hey... You okay...there? Hey. You okay...there?"***

They clicked on their flashlights and went in and closed the heavy wooden doors behind them. Stale ricks and rotted planks. They collected some firewood outside and made their bedding of sleeping bags and ate the last of their apples as the rainfall trickled inside through the roof holes and cracked clapboards. A storm gathered. They found the sound of rain comforting; the crackle and smell of fine wood burning eased them.

She looked at the flames with brooding eye; he tried to calm her.

"I had seen many monsters back when I was a cop. One of them killed his entire family. Two kids, the wife, the dog... And when I asked him why, he just smiled and said, 'The voices told me to do it.' This was before the world went to shit. Before the voices. What I'm trying to say, kiddo, nobody knows why they do what they do. They can define all the reasons: the devil made me do it, I'm evil, I hated them, they did this and that to me. But they can never say the real why. Why they are what they are. Why they do what they do. Only excuses. It's because there is no why. The same with me, kiddo. I can tell you an excuse for why I did what I did: it's 'cause I love you. But do I know why?"

She welled up and hugged him tightly.

"It's 'cause I'm amazing," she said while smiling through tears; he smiled with dewy eyes.

The sun spoke its last goodbyes and sank behind the edge of distant earth. As its light faded so too did the songs of nature. Owls and crickets and wolves fell quiet,

grasshoppers and winged things hushed—only the winds dared to sing in the godforsaken night. The blackness crept upon them and met a roaring blaze.

Nights always felt darker than they should be. If you were to put your hand in front of your face in the dead of night, you wouldn't see a finger. The fire lit up a mere few steps around itself and then melded with the sable void as if looking at the sun through a telescope and seeing all the empty cosmos around it. Fake footsteps and knocks imbued the barn; soft whispers and cries called out for unknown peoples; he thought he heard mooing from where the skeletons lay.

The voices got as close as possible to the firelight and whenever it crackled and flickered they crept back to the dark like hungry mindless demons in the umbrage with no form or feature, waiting for the light to drown like sharks circling a stranded boat. If not for the flame, the night would take them and there would be no other tale to tell.

Three

He awoke to the heavy rainfall pattering against the metal roof sheets. She still slept. The morn dim and gloomy; the rotting doors creaked in the winds. Sea smoke had rolled in through the gaps in the walls and surrounded them like a moist embrace.

He unzipped his sleeping bag which he had used only partly while stoking the blaze throughout the night and shuffled out of it; his breath flowed like a cloud in the dewy air. Inside the barn lay wall-mounted boards like a ladder up to the roof hatch; he climbed up it and lifted the creaky hatch and peeked outside—woods, a water tower, pasture fences, a well.

It poured so hard he worried they would be stuck here for days. He climbed down the dodgy steps as the rains and winds kept barraging. Outside branches cracked and fell from the imposing trees and low rumbles of thunder echoed in the distance; puddles gathered on the floor. *A perfect time for coffee*, he thought as he rummaged for an instant coffee packet. He placed his mess-tin under the hole in the roof. After a few minutes he placed it on the red-hot coals of the hearth and watched it sing as the wet metal sizzled on the small blaze.

"Hey, kid," he said with a smile as she awoke. "Want some tea?"

"Yeah." Her face lit up.

They enjoyed their beverages and pondered. He worried. *Did we have enough food? How far is the nearest town? What if she got sick?*

He rummaged for the map held together by duct tape and fortune.

"This road isn't even marked on the map," he uttered.

"How can that be?"

"Eh... Whatever, guess we'll see soon enough."

He always had a compass around his neck—a gift from Dad long ago. "May you always find your way home," he had said to Sam. He opened the tarnished argent case and tried to make sense of the confused gadget: the pointer kept slowly spinning around in circles; he grunted. Something odd and ominous about the barn: it awakened in the storm as it moved and creaked, as if they sat in the belly of an olden beast that had seen many things and housed many secrets.

Nature continued to batter the barn; raindrops and winds seeped through the cracks. Great towering trees brushed their lengthy arms on the sides and temple. They heated and enjoyed tins of pumpkin and smoked mackerel with sprinkled salt and herbs from the wood. The feeling of time seemed to slow down and stretch.

She always carried books from town to town and replaced them with new ones with every chance like some small and wild bibliopole. On this particular day she read the heavy "Reform of Public Education by James H. Gafferson"; he checked the barn and again decided to open the roof hatch. The air a blend of wood-rot and fresh rain. He opened the dripping hatch and grabbed the mossed ledge: the scenery lay unchanged.

After a few moments of glancing around the fog like in a sweven he marked a feminal figure in a white dress in the middle of some ravenagrass, hair as brown as bark and skin wan as snow. The harsh elements unaffected. A scent of lilacs; the odor of the dying barn disappears. *Just another hallucination*. He blinked; she's gone as fast as she had appeared. Lilacs faded. He closed the hatch and returned to the fire with wide eyes.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing."

Nightfall neared and with it came the mocking voices and timeless echoes of humanity's past. The pecking of a woodpecker seemed to circle the barn slowly as if the bird floated around them carrying a tree. Tap, tap, tap. Like mockingbirds the voices flew around the darkness as if drolls of the devil, sounding much deeper than any living thing. Many whispers flooded the darkling nooks like that of a dead choir, and mangled songs of ensembles insulted their ears and their hearts. Not even rats or mice would come to seek refuge in such a wretched barn. The closed doors seemed to be a sigh away from busting open; the planks nigh succumbing to the bombardment. He worried it may flood, leaving them in the middle of nowhere at the heart of the night storm.

He told her a bedtime story about his favorite childhood hero—a man dressed in a bat costume saving the world from countless villains. She was always amused by the comically-dressed heroes of the old world, for her hero didn't need any costume to save her.

The faint sounds from the seashells sparked her soul nightly: she imagined a turquoise sky and clear waters as far as the eye could see; they seemed to blur the horizon completely as if it didn't exist—a mere invention by pompous gray scientists. White sandy beaches and laughter. Birds chirping. A gentle breeze that cooled from the searing sun. She fell asleep with a smile and dreamt innumerable joyful dreams; her smile always brought a smile to his face.

Sometime later in the midst of the night something cracked with a heavy thud, thumping and shaking the walls. A cold wind hit them like arrows of ice and they awakened full with adrenaline. The barn wailed and groaned like a ship drowning in a seastorm of sky-reaching billows. He clicked on his flashlight to illuminate the door frame from which voices seeped in with the winds and rains; they dried out in the light. He closed the doors and placed one half of the cracked plank through the two metal handles, then tied a bit of rope around them.

"Are we safe?" she asked with eyes wide.

"Just the wind. Try to get some sleep."

She grunted and laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes; he continued to keep watch and stoked the flame, hearing deep footsteps on the roof and scratches near the walls, among other things. After what seemed like days he rested his eyes for a few seconds and the morning had come.

The dirt had turned to mud and the storm outside only seemed to get angrier with each passing hour. More cracks in the walls and roof than afore. Fat branches scraped agin the top of the barn and peered inside like annoying swindlers. Their throats dry and their nostrils clogged with snot. Provender nears its end. The barn continued its usual song of cracking and swaying in the wind and the splashes of sharp rain still bombarded the metal roof sheets—a constant ambient cannonade day and night. Thick fog shrouded the surroundings in mystery and thunder roared above. Something scratching at the walls; she awoke and sighed.

"Should we go?"

"Maybe," he replied, brooding over the sizable puddle that had collected under the leaky roof. "But the storm is still raging. Let's try to wait it out."

"Yeah." She sighed again.

After a warm tinned tomato soup that had seen better days and some light reading, she spoke.

"What are you thinking about?"

“Oh,” he muttered, looking in the distant nook of the barn. “Her.”

“Did you see her again?”

“Yeah...in the fields,” he said, stoking the fire and watching the red sparks rise into the air and disappear like magic.

As the storm raged on bits and pieces of the barn kept chipping away as if the storm some colossal airy beaver. They huddled around the fire singing cheery tunes while he played his guitalele. Time seemed to slip; after a few dozen performances the darkness neared once more.

Perhaps it's for the best that she couldn't remember her family, their voices, their smells. Perhaps it's for the best that the things whispering her name in the dark could be things of any making. Sam—not so lucky. Since the stars disappeared the night came wearing the voice of his wife like a puppet of the devil or some such unearthly thing. Like something from the nethermost depths of purgatory calling him to the nightshade with no soul nor remorse making jest of it all. With time it became plain everyday noise, like birdsong, like rain, like the winds and the pain.

Nura adream; he dozed off while stoking the cinders. They awoke to loud sharp bangs and flashes of light as if daytime had peeked through the curtain of the night for a moment; a smell of brimstone. Dazed and confused he felt for a split second to be back in his military gear, downtrodden in the mud. They looked around in a panic—the roof and side on fire and spread fast.

“Put on your raincoat,” he said while rummaging for his own. The mud floor nigh flooded entire and the campfire close to drowning. Around them the flames quickly roasted the barn alive: the wooden beast roared and cracked and bellowed and hurt their ears.

They put small plastic bags over their boots and tied the ends together to keep their feet dry in the wet muck. Head torches sat comfy on their pates while lit lanterns dangled from the sides of backpacks. With eyes sticky and minds rattled they clicked on their flashlights and hid them in their sleeves and opened the doors and headed into the unknown nightshade. Voices quickly crept around their lights like hellish mosquitoes as they watched the burning barn getting murdered by the tempest and the night. Charred planks thudded where they had slept. Their eyes played tricks on them and conjured shadowy shapes around the lights and flames as if the dark burned as well. No stars shone in the sky, no moon greeted them. The winds blew so hard that the nearby trees caught fire and the rain peppered their faces like needles.

“We need to go,” he uttered with a hint of panic in his voice and grabbed her hand and headed back to the main road as the crackling of fire behind them faded with each passing step. Their boots stuck in the mud; their surroundings unseeable. Whispers circled around them like blind vultures. **“No lights. Come. Come...”** In-between each whisper a short pause, then a whisper again—a distorted record on an endless loop. A sinister laughter of a madman came from their left, and behind them a thrawn voice like Sam's uttered: **“Nura... Come back... That's not me...”** She took a scared look at Sam—his face and shape vague and benighted; she tightened her grip around his wet palm.

“It's okay, kiddo.” He reassured her in-between tired breaths. “I'm right here. We're almost at the road. Watch your step.”

After what felt like hours they reached the asphalt outworn and with faces wet and turned left toward what should be Ashtown. Their lights mostly met their feet and the

ground upon which they trod, lighting only a few steps ahead afore melting into the unseeable. The flaming barn had already vanished somewhere behind the trees. **“Kiddo... Come back. Come to me,”** the night spoke as her grip tightened around Sam’s palm.

“Shut up!” she yelled.

Thunder roared above like a gargantuan beast bellowing from a mountaintop while lightning zipped around them without grace; the snapping of tree spines and thuds echoed in the wood. It seemed as if she would be carried away by the wind like a leaf if not for him pulling her forward.

They came upon an overgrown car, almost bumping into it.

“Get in,” he exclaimed as he opened the back door. A cackle from underneath, a weep from behind. She threw her bag in the back and got in, as did he. The doors so rusted they wouldn’t shut completely. Rain pelleted the corroded beast while their heavy breaths lit up in the lights like smoke.

“Damn,” he exclaimed.

“I agree.”

Some squeaks came from the back and the unrelenting weather still seeped in through the marred windows; they tried to shut them with tarps. After long hours the storm passed and the dawning sky awoke.

Wet plastic rubbed and knapsacks rustled as they marched toward the hope of a cozy bed or two. Countless branches and twigs of pine littered the macadam like a coat of green-brown paint. The winds returned to a gentle breeze, softly swaying the leaves and pinetops. A still silence.

With each passing rustle of a step they left the night’s happenings behind; the pallid sun warmed their cheeks like a soft kiss.

Four

The banks of the long winding road lay with thick pines and evergreens and they towered over them and shook in the wind like ancient beings of wisdom; the veil of the dark lifted and revealed distant mountains shining their snowy heads in front of them. Songbirds returned and sang their joyous morning greenwood hymns as wildlife sprung back to life. The sun lay tucked away behind the overcast of royal blue and timid amber. He often pondered the cause of the changed sky: perhaps the aftermath of countless nuclear reactor meltdowns, perhaps something supernatural.

In their wake they left the lawn of the cracked macadam bent.

“We’re almost there,” he said as he began to see some buildings through the gaps of trees ahead. They moved slow as snails; she looked sickly.

“Thank God,” she uttered in a frail voice. They met a corroded sign:

*“Welcome to Ashtown
Enjoy your stay”*

Some letters were missing.

They sought refuge in the nearest building left of the road—a coffee shop. Shards of glass decorated the entrance and the pavement littered with grass-patches and rubbish. To the right of the road a gas station, then a bar, then something else. The town lay tucked in the shadow of a towering mountain, and to the left of it a heavenly valley with pines and evergreens as far as the eye could see. *God’s unmowed lawn*, he thought.

They made their way inside the coffee shop, cracking the small pieces of glass with their boots. *It is perfect*, he thought: a coffee enthusiast’s paradise. Moldy coffee beans littered the zebra-tiled floor while liquids of weird growths sat quietly in espresso cups. They found some dusty couches in an employee resting area and locked the door behind them and took off their boots and laid onto the brown couches with a heavy sigh.

“Ah, finally,” he moaned; she thudded on a davenport next to him and fell adream before he could blink.

The windows high up and narrow yet with fair daylight. A water cooler half-full. Rotting foodstuffs emitted a stink from the closed fridge. He rose and laid some blankets on the sleeping girl and sat beside her and smiled, then checked the rest of the room. A bunch of pens and cups, yellowing papers, dust and junk everywhere. Some windows open; pigeon nests upon closet-tops like crowns of twigs. Vines came from the outside and in through the windows as nature took back what was hers.

He dozed off in a divan and dreamt fond dreams of childhood. A whisper went by his ear and he awoke, confused if he dreamt it or not. Daytime; she snored cutely. Something sniffed behind the closed door; he sat up with his pistol in hand and waited. He waited and waited and waited some more. Soon he heard soft paws walk away.

As it got dark he took out candles fat and long from their plastic bags and lit them and placed them in jars with holes in the lids. One on the fridge, one on the table, a few around the couches, a few near the windows. He shut the windows as best he could and taped yellowed newspapers over the cracked ones. He washed out a dusty cup with water from the water cooler and took sips of bourbon as the unearthly lullabies sang. He meditated some passed words of wisdom, recent happenings, possible misfortunes, and acts of misguided goodwill. He pondered the monk they had met some days ago and if

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