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The Happy Couple

 I hate walking. It almost seems like that’s all I do anymore. It wears me out so that I don’t have much energy left for hunting, so I’m left to scavenge, which just means that I have to walk more. And forget about fighting – if I run into the mutants, I’m totally relying on adrenaline to keep me going, so I’d better make sure I keep myself at least mildly healthy so that my body can handle the stress.

 I’ve often tried to figure out if there are better ways to get around than just walking. I’ve tried biking, but my long coat gets stuck in the wheels, and I’m carrying just a little too much weight to balance safely. I’ve crashed so many times, and the back tails of my big coat are full of holes from where it’s gotten stuck in spokes. I was actually impressed – I didn’t think anything could get through that coat.

 Almost all motor vehicles are out of the question. The mutants are highly attuned to noise made by people, especially in cars or on motorcycles. On one occasion, with the mutants right on my tail, I commandeered a sweet motorbike and took off. They’re pretty fast when they get running, but not that fast. I rode until I was safely out of what I presumed to be their territory, but I knew they’d come looking for me so I rode until I was out of gas, and then I ditched it by pushing it off a bridge into a lake so that they would lose my trail. And of course I can forget about trying to find a car or something. I’m sure I could learn to hotwire a car if I took the time to do it, but I spend all my time searching for food and shelter.

 What I really need is a horse. I’ve decided to keep my eye out for horses. I almost laugh when I think about that. Yeah, I’m sure if I look hard enough, I can find a horse in suburbia. It’s probably not as ridiculous as it sounds, though. I bet there are some domesticated horses wandering the abandoned countryside and they find their way into housing developments. I’ll keep an open mind and two open eyes just in case.

 But right now, I can see the sun starting to set, so I know I have to find shelter for the night. I look around. I’m on a stretch of highway (don’t ask me which state, I can’t tell anymore) where there are no abandoned cars. I used to think that was weird, but I’ve come to find that now and then. I’m grateful when I do, because I can see a good distance in both directions, which means that the mutants can’t jump out from around a corner at me. I’ve never been ambushed from a car before, but I won’t put it past them.

 In the distance, I see a big, green exit sign. I can’t read it from here. I’m guessing I’m about a mile away from it, but the big green mile sign that says it’s a mile away isn’t here because some force I can’t imagine has taken the entire poll and ripped it out of the ground, leaving a huge hole in the concrete. I can see the end of it sticking out of some nearby trees to the right of the road. However, I can see some of the road signs between the exit and where I’m standing. There are a couple gas stations, some restaurants, and two hotels. Well, okay, one is a hotel and one is a motel. It’s hilarious that even now, there’s a still a big difference between the two. I also think I see a symbol for a pharmacy. Those places are almost always picked clean, but there is also almost always some gem that everyone else has overlooked, like a not-quite empty crate of bagged snacks in the back room or a forgotten case of bottled water hiding under a collapsed shelf.

 But that can be my job tomorrow. Now it’s time to find a place to camp out. Or camp in, whatever the case may be. I can’t see over the trees to my right, except for the blue sky above in the gap that the sign makes in the tree line. I’m almost curious enough to go look into that big hole where the poll used to be, but my growling stomach informs me that I have other priorities. Off to my left, the road breaks off into a steep grassy incline, with several large houses sitting at the top, several of them with windows overlooking the road. It’s a good vantage point, so I’ll start there.

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 I don’t expect houses to be unlocked, but I’m not surprised when they are. I just assume that people left in a hurry, or they figured they’d be right back when they stepped out their front door. Whatever the case, they’re gone now.

 I knew which house I wanted to use when I saw them from the highway. There was one that sat right on the edge of the hill, and I wanted to find the room with the window that gave me a full view of the road. If any mutants came down the road, in packs or alone, I would be able to spot them.

 When I get the top of the hill, panting a little bit from the steepness of the climb, I’m surprised to see that it drops down gradually about half a mile or so ahead into a bit of a valley. In the valley is a large neighborhood with a strip mall, fast food places, other houses, and even a large megastore. Maybe I’ll save the pharmacy for later and hit this place first thing in the morning. I remember the last time I found one of these mega-marts and what glorious treasures I discovered inside. My mouth starts to water as my taste buds recall the sweetness of the strawberry Pop-Tarts. That was a good day.

 The house is a two-story place with a large porch in the front. It’s very regal but in a homey kind of way, with most of its outside colors being deep, rich browns or faux gold. The front door is fancy, just like the fake stone columns holding up the porch roof, and the curved handle is stuck in a permanent open position.

 I make sure my backpack is secure and pull my hood down so that it doesn’t obscure my peripheral vision, then I stand still for a second and listen. After a moment of hearing nothing, I reach down to my left hip and feel the handle of my short blade. I silently pull it out, then use my foot to pull the front door open. It creaks, but not very loudly, and I step inside as quietly as I can.

 The inside of the house looks rather untouched, as if whoever had been living there before had just up and left, and no one had been back since. There is still furniture here, mostly in place, except for a giant bare spot in the living room where a big-screen TV had sat on the entertainment center against the wall. There’s a dark stain on the couch, but otherwise the room looks fine. Slowly, quietly, I move past the stairs and into the kitchen. This is where I find the whole place stripped bare. The dark wooden cabinets stand open, as if they vomited out their contents and then just sat there with wide-open mouths. There is a small table, and one chair. Anything else not bolted down or attached to something is gone. No dishes, no pots or pans, nothing. Not even the refrigerator is left. It’s about what I expected.

 I notice that there’s a door partway open at the end of the kitchen and I peer into it. It leads to the basement. Nothing good ever comes out of the basement. I open the door slowly, glance down at the old wooden staircase that leads into complete darkness, and listen. No sounds, and then…something moves! It darts across the bottom of the stairs right past the light! I take a step back and hold up my sword, but then it slowly meanders back into view. The raccoon pauses and looks up at me with two beady black eyes from within its dark binocular-looking fur, and it chatters its teeth at me. I roll my eyes and shut the basement door. I find a lock on the outside and I turn it. I hope you like your new home, stupid animal.

 I pause again and listen to the rest of the house. All I can hear are birds chirping outside. Once again I pause at the base of the stairs to the second floor and listen, but not hearing anything new I carefully ascend to the next level. The stairs make a creaking sound that’s annoyingly loud. If anything was up there, it would definitely hear me coming, and the stairs creak so loudly that I wouldn’t hear them sneaking around until it was too late.

 The hallway at the top of the stairs leads off in only one direction, thank God. I step up with my dark blade leading the way. It’s long enough so that I can run it through a body in front of me, but short enough so that I have room to maneuver in these narrow hallways. When I first started venturing into other houses to sleep at night, I became keenly aware how much tighter it seems inside when I’m wearing all my gear. My hoodie-coat, my backpack with all the stuff attached to it and inside it, my belt with everything that’s hanging from it, my swords and knives, my boots, my thick pants…it makes everything inside a residential building seem a lot smaller and more delicate.

 There are four rooms upstairs: two bedrooms, one office, and one full bathroom. The first bedroom, the one I encounter first along the hallway, is large enough for one person and it appears that it used to be where a young person stayed. The layout and what’s left of the decorations suggest that a young woman used to live here. I’ll have to check the dresser and the closet once I’ve cleared the rest of the rooms to see if I can find anything useful.

 The bathroom is next. It’s in the same shape as the bedroom – abandoned, but not trashed. The office across from the bedroom is the same way (except that any computer or tech has long since vanished), and the window in that room provides a decent view of the road. I’m starting to think I really scored well with this house.

 But then I get to the door at the end of the hallway, the master bedroom, and I stop in my tracks. That stench! That terrible stench! I’ve smelled that horrid smell enough times to know what it is. Even from behind the closed door I can hear the flies buzzing en masse. There’s a body on the other side of the door. Fortunately, I don’t hear any disgusting munching sounds, like I would expect if there were mutants on the other side, but I don’t let myself relax just yet. It could be that the cannibal monsters have already eaten their fill and are sleeping (or whatever their version of sleep is, which I think I’ve seen them do but they don’t lay down to do it). I tug the handkerchief I wear around my neck up to cover my nose and mouth, which usually is to keep my face warm when I’m outside but also serves a double purpose at this point. Then, I grip my sword tighter with one hand, point it forward, and force myself to breath as I push the door open quickly.

 The door bangs against the wall and comes to a stop, and I sigh with relief when I see no mutants inside. However, the sight that I do encounter churns my stomach all the same. It’s the master bedroom alright, and it seems that the masters never left. They’re lying on the bed together, snuggled into each other’s embrace, and they’ve been there for quite a long time. They’re about halfway decomposed, and the flies and other insects are very happy to have them here. The breakdown of our society is fueling the growth of theirs.

 On the bedside table, I see something that looks out of place even here. Two syringes, both empty. The box next to them contains some sort of chemical concoction I can’t pronounce, but it’s obvious what happened here.

 In that moment, I have to make one of those tough choices. Do I decide to feel pity for this deceased couple, or contempt? Pity, because they were too afraid to face what was coming, to suffer and possibly become something less than human and maybe one day have to devour someone they used to know? Or contempt, because they were too frail to face the world, too selfish to think of anyone other than themselves, and too weak to overcome their fear to do what was necessary to survive and not take the coward’s way out?

 After a minute of stillness, I choose neither. I can’t stay in the same place as these bodies – it could lead the mutants right to me. They’ll smell these rotting corpses from the road and make a beeline right to this house. My *real* choice is whether or not to stay in this house or find a new one. I look out the window. Yep, just as I thought – the perfect vantage point. I stick my head out the window and look around. The daylight is already halfway gone by now, but even in this dimness I can see that none of the other houses around have the same view of the road, or of the valley in general. I can even see some of the buildings in the distance past the exit I saw earlier.

 I need this perch. I take off my backpack and unclip my winter gloves from their place. As I wrap the bodies up in the blankets from the bed and try my best to hold my breath, I know I’ll need to soak these gloves in some water sometime in the future to get rid of the dead body stench. Not only is it a liability to me while I’m traveling or camping, it’s pretty nasty to smell. It appears the window has already been kicked out, so I don’t have to worry about the frame as I dump the putrid package from the second story to the ground below. The bundle of blankets and rotting flesh tumbles down the hill and comes to rest right at the side of the highway, opening up halfway down and spilling out all over everything. Disgusting…I’m glad I don’t have to touch that thing again.

 I swat away some lingering flies and then decide that even though this is a great vantage point, I’ll probably sleep in the other bedroom, across from the office. I’ll leave the doors open so that I can hear as best I can, but I just can’t stand the smell. It’s as if it’s oozing from the walls and the bedframe.

 Picking up my backpack, I make my way into the other bedroom. It’s getting dark fast, and I still need to eat, although at this point my appetite is shot. As I partially unpack, I take out some variety for my meal. I have two sixteen-ounce cans of Mandarin oranges, so I cut open one with my bowie knife and eat that. I force myself to put the slimy fruit into my mouth, but in spite of the distant smell it’s actually pretty delicious, and I quickly forget about the odor. Then, do I want walnuts, peanuts, or cashews? Eight-ounce containers, all three of them, and I won’t eat a full one tonight. Oh, First World problems! I go with the cashews, and I eat most of the can. I open up the peanuts and empty the remnants of the cashew can inside to save space in my backpack. Then, I grab my scratched and dented thermos and wash it all down with a few big gulps of water. Water – that’s one of the things I hope to find tomorrow at the megastore or at the pharmacy, or at some other place. I only have two bottles of water left in my backpack, and one of them is going into my thermos now. I need more of it. And I need some meat – it’s been at least seven days since I’ve had any real meat, but I haven’t caught anything and even if I had, I can’t build a fire inside this house. One of these days soon I’ll devote a whole day to hunting and cooking meat. I’ll have to find some way to store it…I’ll look for some plastic bags and some salt tomorrow.

 It’s been a long day, and I’m exhausted. Did I mention how much I hate walking? I take off my coat, my boots, and my gloves, and I climb into the bed. There are actually blankets on this bed! I hope I don’t sleep too well – I’d hate to doze through the morning daylight, but my body wakes me up at the crack of dawn nowadays anyway, so I’m not too worried about that.

 I fall asleep quickly, and I dream of a strangely satisfying experience: I’m trying to eat a fillet with a fork and knife while riding a horse through a grocery store.