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Slaughterhouse

 Last night was a welcome respite from the craziness of the last two days. I was able to get in another good meal and a good night’s sleep. I spent all my energy yesterday searching nearby houses for stuff and I found little of use. However, I was able to spot some larger houses down the road that sit across from a big metropolitan area, with signs for a strip mall, a construction site, and even a police station (it was all boarded up and looked like it had been through a war, which is entirely likely).

 The heightened sense of alertness that has been draining my energy ever since that fight in the last house has begun to calm a little by now. Thinking back, I can’t really say I’ve ever come that close to death, either at the hands of the mutants or from anything else. I was in a car accident once when I was ten, but that doesn’t even come close. In a way, I’m not really happy with the fact that I’m settling back down to normal, because it means that I might be taken by surprise once more. I don’t want to lose that adrenaline and then wind up needing it again in a situation like that. Though, I know instinctively (and I feel it every time I take a deep breath with my bruised ribs) that I can’t take too many more all-out brawls like that one. I estimate that I have maybe two more left in me before I just give it up. Life isn’t worth living like that.

 And yet, I also know just as instinctively that I’m going to fight on regardless, which doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. I’ve debated that with myself a few times since striking out on my own. Is it worth trying so hard to live when the life I’m able to win for myself isn’t all that appealing? What drives me to go on, to move forward? Why am I fighting and struggling so much for so little? I’ve been so well-prepared to survive out here, with my skills, my determination, my personality…but *why?* Why is any of it even necessary? Why not just give up and cease my pointless struggle? I’ve thought once or twice about the fact that I could be out here, put my gun in my mouth, pull the trigger, and off myself. No one would even notice the difference. There isn’t anyone else out here, and I haven’t seen another actual human being for months now. How valuable can my own life be to make me fight so fiercely for it when it doesn’t matter to anyone else *except* me? I remember knowing kids in high school who would complain that they didn’t matter to anyone, that no one would notice if they were gone.

Thinking back to those instances now just makes me mad, because those stupid kids had no clue what they were saying. They were a part of a society, of an interconnected social web of jocks, nerds, and cheerleaders, of English, Math, and Science, of peers, pimples, authority defiance disorder, and whatever else was thrown into that mix of students, teachers, and parents. What am I a part of out here as I move from one abandoned building to the other, getting just enough to scrape by? Nothing. There’s nothing and no one out here except me and the mutants. That may pass for society by cannibal standards, but not mine. When I say that no one would notice if I was gone, it’s actually true. And I’m not indulging in self-pity, either – I’m just stating facts. Those self-absorbed kids in high school wanted someone to feel sorry for them, but they actually had people around them. My situation is intolerable by comparison. If I had been one of those kids and I was stuck where I am now, I would have committed suicide months ago.

 But, of course, just the concept of suicide is ridiculous to me. Even though I’ve pondered over my purpose out here, I never actually entertained the possibility of ending my life. I have no idea what the reason for my survival instincts might be, but I’m not going to question them. It’s simpler that way. Plus, I’ve already concluded that God left me out here for a reason, so the best thing to do is just wait and see what that reason might be. Just because I don’t know what it is doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist, so it would be stupid of me to give up now. I’m sure everything will become clear at some point. Until then, I’ll just continue moving from one place to the next, fighting for survival while searching for my reason to continue living.

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 The wind is picking up as I descend the grassy knoll that separates the road from the suburban area. The large houses to the right side are impressive – larger than the ones around where I’m staying. I may end up moving to one of these later today if I find one that has a good view of the road (and doesn’t have a sliding back door). On the left, a large commercial district spreads out before me. The thick, broad buildings appear to have been fastened to the earth since the beginning of time, but the outer materials seem to be weighing down on the weary frames like thick, wet clothes weighing down an exhausted person.

 Right off the bat, several buildings catch my eye. I see a military surplus store as a part of a strip mall, the boarded-up police station that I might be able to get into, and in the distance a construction site that still appears to have some of its equipment left behind. There are plenty of other places besides these, including the larger houses, but those three stand out. It’s clear to me that if I want to make a thorough search of all these places, I’ll need to be in the area for at least a week. I scan the open areas in vain for any signs of deer or other wild game, feeling my stomach growl angrily at me for skipping breakfast this morning.

 I decide to save some time today to search one of those three places, but I start by going to the right, toward the houses. I just want to get those out of the way. From where I’m standing, I can see at least six of them – all along the same side of the road – and I’m sure that there are more farther back. As I make my way across the street toward them, I habitually scan the area for threats, but there are no signs of life anywhere.

 The first house I come to shows signs of wear and tear – the front porch roof has been completely torn off, and I think I can see part of it in the brownish colored grass of the side yard between this house and the next. All visible windows are smashed, but the largest window in the front is blocked by a big stack of household junk, apparently manifested from within. The doorframe is all scratched up, and the big wooden door has pieces missing from it, as if something was clawing to get inside. Looking closer, I find several old, discolored fingernails embedded deep into the wood. I shudder.

 I try the doorknob and it falls off. The deadbolt has been replaced with what looks like a crowbar that has been jammed into place from the inside. I make an attempt to use my own crowbar to pry the door open, but there’s no way that door is coming open. My guess is that there were people inside who were trying to keep the mutants out…could there still be people alive inside this house? I knock on the door and wait for a minute. No sounds. I knock again, and this time I dare to call out to anyone that might be inside. After a minute more, still no answer.

 I can’t get inside through the blocked window. It appears they’ve filled the space with old furniture, with a big heavy couch stacked at the top, somehow wedged in between the window frame and the crushed stack. The blockage isn’t airtight by any means and there are a few holes through which I try to shine my flashlight (carefully). I see…not much. I can tell that there’s a hallway just on the other side, but I won’t be able to get in this way. I try to call out through one of the holes just in case anyone is still listening. If any mutants are in there, I’m alerting them to my presence for sure, but I haven’t seen any signs of the cannibals in the area and so I’m more worried about being blown away by a shotgun-toting survivor who thinks I’m here to loot the place. I mean, technically, I ***am***, but I’d never steal another survivor’s stockpile. Plus, I’d be so happy to see another human being again I’d probably have a heart attack just listening to a voice other than my own. It’s worth the risk.

 Moving around to the back, though, my hopes immediately sink. The back door and the back window (along with the window frame) have been torn off the building and tossed into the yard. The back porch has collapsed, and it appears that the collapse was strategic. It fell off its posts and covered the whole back wall, obscuring all entrances, but the rusty metal roof was pulled apart and it looks like the mutants found a way in after all. Through the window, I can see what appears to be a kitchen, and there is a humongous helping of dried blood all over the wall. As I move closer, I see a pair of legs lying in the doorway. They belong to a long-deceased cannibal male. His skin is cracked and dry with exposure to the sun and the elements, and sags from his bones. He is missing his head and a good bit of his torso, as if it had been ripped away (a likely cause of death). Pulling out my short sword and keeping my flashlight handy, I carefully step inside.

 The place looks like an abandoned slaughterhouse, and the stench of rotting flesh assaults my senses, making my eyes well up. The kitchen connects to a dining area, and with a house this size, the ceiling is extra high to make room for chandeliers, large paintings, and a hanging pot rack. There does appear to be a place where a large portrait once hung, because there is a big square portion of the far wall that isn’t covered in blood. A broken chandelier lies lopsided in the dining room on top of a splintered dining room table, which is broken in half and has collapsed inward. I see old limbs and a head, the bodies having fallen into the center as they were crushed by the chandelier when it came down. They appear to be a combination of mutant and human victims. The thing I notice right away is the island in the middle of the kitchen, which sits directly beneath the hanging pot rack. There is something left of a dismembered torso on the top of the island, the ribs and chest cavity exposed. The reek of long-decaying tissue is overpowering. Instead of seeing pots and pans hanging from the rack, there are severed limbs of varying shapes and sizes. I don’t want to think about the ages of the people who those smaller limbs once belonged to. In a pot sitting on the dried-blood-covered floor beside the island, a human skull, with a half-decayed eye glaring up at me.

 My stomach lurches, and I excuse myself from the horror-house long enough to throw up outside and compose myself. Everything in me screams at me not to go back inside that kitchen, but I have to think rationally. If this was where a group of humans made their last stand against the cannibals, and the only food the cannibals eat is human flesh, then there’s every likelihood that these humans had a stockpile of food and other resources that was left untouched when the mutants finished their ugly, disgusting work. They probably would have stashed it in the basement (which makes me cringe at just the concept). I resolve to search the basement, and if nothing is there, I’m leaving and never coming back toward this house again (just wait – with my luck, I’ll probably have to run back in here and hide under that nasty chandelier to escape mutants tomorrow).

 Spitting the residual bile out of my mouth and taking a swig of water from my thermos, I pull the handkerchief from around my neck up over my mouth and nose and march back into hell’s kitchen. As I cautiously make my way back, I notice (with a little bit of surprised approval) that there are just as many mutant bodies as there are human bodies. The majority of the human corpses that are still intact are locked in a death-match with the fallen cannibals. Now that I’m paying attention, evidence of the final battle is everywhere – there are bullet holes in every direction, multiple calibers (although I can’t readily see any of the guns, which would be nice to have about now); also, melee weapons of every sort are embedded in bodies or walls. A cursory exam turns up two crowbars, three axes, two metal baseball bats, several kitchen knives…even the apocalyptically clichéd chainsaw. I even find one mutant body with three kitchen forks stabbed into her neck. The dead cannibal bodies that are still reasonably whole have been shot, stabbed, mangled, and bludgeoned to death. In the back, a mutant is pinned to the wall; through its diaphragm is an old-fashioned, decorative, medieval broadsword that looks like it was once part of a wall decoration. Another lies across a broken, overturned coffee table with a lamp cord wound tightly around his neck.

 “Holy…crap…”

 My heart swells with pride for my fallen fellow humans. These people did not go quietly into the night, cowering helplessly in a corner – they went out with a bang and made the cannibals pay dearly for their prize.

 There are cannibal weapons in here as well, made from sharpened bones, metal spikes, and other cobbled garbage tied or glued together. The manifest creativity displayed in the creation of these weapons is both impressive and frightening. I try to pull the broadsword out of the wall (and out of the mutant), but it’s in there too solidly and it won’t come out. That’s fine – I probably couldn’t carry it practically anyway, especially not without a sheath.

 The hallway to the left of the large murder room has a partially open door, and I see stairs going down when I shine my flashlight in that direction. Gotta be the basement – I quickly move to descend, but before I do, I stow my short sword and instead pull out my .22. No way am I getting caught by surprise in a basement again.

 Fortunately, the basement looks like it’s mostly untouched, albeit a lot emptier than I had hoped. It’s not as big as I expected, either, which I suppose is good since I’d prefer not to spend any more time here than—wait! Is that what I think it is?

 I rush up to the big, half-torn cardboard box and peer inside, lifting the lid so I can see it with my own eyes. It’s exactly what I thought it was: a collection of cylindrical containers of kosher salt! I’m staring at months of meat preservation and flavoring! Each container is one pound of salt, so I take three of them and quickly stuff them into my backpack. As I’m pulling them out of the box, I spot a larger can beneath them. It’s a gallon-size can of green beans!

 “Jackpot…!”

 I have to rearrange the stuff in my backpack, holding the flashlight between my teeth so that I can clearly see what I’m doing. In a few seconds, I have all four canisters in my backpack and I heft it over my shoulders. It’s quite noticeably heavier, and the weight is tremendously reassuring. I’m so glad I forced myself to come back inside this house.

 However, the smell is becoming overpowering and I feel like I’m ready to vomit again. I’ll come back here tomorrow just to make sure nothing else valuable is down here, but for now it’s time for me to head out and search the other houses.

 I hightail it up the stairs and try not to look at the carnage on my way out (in my haste, I almost trip over a body that’s missing both arms). I pull down my bandanna once I’m outside and take in a deep, gulping breath of clean air. I never thought I’d miss the smell of crumbling society so much, but I’m just so happy to be back out of that house. I look back at the dark doorway and reconsider my plan to return tomorrow, and then I just decide to put off that decision (which means I probably won’t ever decide, meaning I won’t come back at all). Moving on, I step over the old remains of a wooden fence that once separated this property from the one beside it.

 The second and third houses are less gruesome than the first one I inspected, but don’t turn up anything useful. These places were looted long ago, and thoroughly, too. It isn’t until I get to the fourth residence that I find anything worthwhile.

 The place appears mostly untouched on the outside. The door works fine, and it isn’t locked. Almost all the furniture inside is gone (which always amazes me – what sort of mindset do you have to have if you’re stealing furniture from a random house when there are mutant cannibals slaughtering people and feasting on them in the streets?), except for a card table in the living room that has several yards of coiled-up rope lying on it. It’s such a strange sight that for a moment I just stand there and stare at it, trying to make sense of it and convince myself that this lonely table and this lonely rope are, in fact, in the middle of the living room for no apparent reason. I look around, then quickly snatch the rope from the table. I’m not sure what I expect to happen, but nothing does, so I clip the rope to one of my backpack carabiners and decide to search the rest of the place. It has an upstairs, and the rest of the first floor is a waste of time, so with my short sword in hand, I make my way up the staircase. The building doesn’t creak like I feared it would, and so I reach the top of the staircase and peek around the corner to make sure I’m not about to stumble upon a mutant nest or something (do they have nests? I have no idea – I’m just assuming).

 I see nothing, except that the bedroom at the far end of the hallway hasn’t been looted – the bed is even still made, as if the family who lived here is on vacation somewhere and is coming back in a few days. The bathroom is also untouched – toothbrushes are still in their individual slots in the special toothbrush holder, the mirrors are clean, someone’s dentures are still in a cup (all the water is gone, though), and there’s even toilet paper! I take the three rolls that I can find and stick them into my backpack as well. It’s like from the first floor to the second floor, I entered a completely different building.

 I meander across the hallway and into one of the side rooms, which turns out to be a bedroom. I look around, but suddenly halt in my tracks when I see what’s lying on the bed. It’s a body. It’s the body of a woman. She’s clad in only her turquoise underwear and her bra, and she’s lying on top of a made bed, as if she put the entire room in order and then just laid down to die. She doesn’t look quite as thin as some of those pictures I’ve seen of Jews in concentration camps, but the similarities are startling. Her body is almost skeletal – I can see her ribs in detail, and also the angular formation of her other bones, especially her shoulders and hips. Her mouth is partially open, her head tilted back in a last-gasp posture, showing her skin stretched a little bit over her teeth. The last few inches of her hair match the color of her undergarments, but the dark brown color had almost grown completely back. She isn’t positioned in any sort of defensive manner or cowering with her head between her knees; she’s just…lying there.

 It feels strange to be in here – something feels off. I look carefully at her chest to see if she’s breathing (which isn’t as awkward as I would have thought it would be), but I can’t tell from standing in the doorway. I take a step closer, but then something happens that makes me freeze again, and my heart skips a beat.

 She turns her head and opens her eyes, looking directly at me.

 She isn’t a corpse – she’s alive!