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Downfall...

The wind was sweeping across the road and down into the ditch where Jesse had huddled in to get some sleep. The sudden burst of cold air woke him from a not so sound sleep. Out of reflex his right hand shot out and grasped the machete laying nearby to verify it hadn't been stolen in the night. Not that there was much of a chance of that happening but old habits die hard. It was still there but the sudden movement and slap of his arm against the ground sent agony through his body as he came fully awake.

Opening his eyes and sitting up Jesse glanced at the pile of belongings on the other side of the dead fire from the night before. Not a thing was out of place. The backpack, water skin, and a gas can sat where Jesse had dropped them the night before. More importantly, his right arm was still in bad shape.

It had been almost a week since the run in with another survivor. In almost nine months, he had only seen three other "people." Every single one of them had acted completely insane. Jesse had managed to skirt around the first two because when he had spotted them and witnessed their antics it was early enough to know it was best to not have anything to do with them.

That third guy had come out from behind a Honda dealership in Charleston, West Virginia while Jesse was trying to syphon gas from the cars on the lot. The guy seemed to come out of nowhere and attacked Jesse for no apparent reason. The form of the attack had been more surprising than painful, at first anyway. The guy had run up, grabbed Jesse's arm and clamped down on it with his teeth. The guy's teeth kept chomping down even as Jesse managed to get his machete out. After a swipe at the guy that cut his hand, his teeth released Jesse's arm and he ran off to hide between the rows of vehicles.

After that, Jesse had been careful as he got more gas and went back to his vehicle to fill it up. Once it was started and he slipped it into gear the crazy guy was suddenly back. He attacked the outside of the car, starting with the passenger side. Slamming the car into gear caused pain to lance up and down his wounded arm. Jesse gunned the motor and the car lurched forward and out of the grasp of the guy. Looking in the rear-view mirror Jesse could see the guy running after the car. After months of being alone and sure that someone was watching every move he made, Jesse made a decision that had troubled his sleep ever since. He stopped, put the car in reverse and backed over the guy.

Of course, that hadn't killed the guy. Just broke his leg and likely caused some major damage to his insides. But, the guy wouldn't be following him anymore. Jesse didn't know it at the time but when that guy died later that night Jesse became the last man on earth.

Trying to forget that encounter, Jesse looked around and found that the sky was still that weird shade of green but there were areas in the distance where it looked to be turning blue again. With no idea what had caused the color change or why the stars were no longer visible at night, it was difficult to get to sleep at night. The sun seemed dim and so did the moon when it rose, so he assumed something had happened to the atmosphere that affected light's ability to be seen through it. It might also be blocking the heat from the sun, since most days seemed cold.

After rolling up the sleeping bag and adding it to the stack of belongings, Jesse moved to the edge of the ditch and slowly raised his head so his eyes were level with the roadway. Looking back the way he had come the car that had died on him suddenly the day before was barely visible. It had enough gas, the problem was something mechanical he had no idea how to fix.

Looking the other direction showed what appeared to be an endless stretch of asphalt running north. There was no movement or signs of life anywhere but just like every day for the last eight months that pressure on the back of his neck that made him think someone or something was watching him stayed with him. Worried that so long being alone had made him paranoid had become a normal thought.

It didn't help that he had spent time in a health care facility before everything changed. After his abduction by aliens, no one would believe his strident pleas about the coming invasion. His family and friends had first staged an intervention that did nothing but cause him to become more agitated. That had led to their drugging his food so they could get him to the "hospital." Once he had been admitted, the meds and guards kept him from harming others or himself.

Then, the day of his deliverance had arrived. While eating a pudding cup and watching *Family Feud*, he had noticed that the ambient light changed and looking up watched in horrified fascination as the other people in the room disintegrated before his very eyes. It was only their bodies that dissolved slowly in front of him, suddenly there were piles of clothes draped over the front of chairs or strewn across the floor. But the important thing is that the door to the outside world had been open when the nurse had turned into dust.

He had run outside only to find that the sky had turned a verdant green and piles of clothes littered the sidewalk while the dust that had been people scattered in the wind. A cacophony of crunching metal came to him and he turned to see that two vehicles had slammed into each other with no one behind the wheels. He could not see another living person and other than those three nut jobs that had crossed his path he hadn't seen anyone else.

After several more minutes of staring back and forth down the highway, Jesse pulled out his map and regarded his destination. It was circled on the map and in his mind's eye he could see his dad talking about going there someday. For him, today was the day so he grabbed up the gear, took a swig from the water skin, and began the day's walk.

In the shadow of the overpass, Jesse sat staring at the convenience store that was just off the highway. There were two cars, an old Ford pickup and an eighteen-wheeler at the pumps. Several other vehicles were parked around the store. Bringing the binoculars to his eyes for the tenth or eleventh time allowed a closer look through the glass windows and into the darkened building. A shirt blew across his line of sight for a moment and made him drop the binoculars and grab the machete. But no one was there to endanger him and he slowly relaxed again. Well, as relaxed as he ever got.

That feeling of being watched was even more present now than it had been that morning. It pushed down on him constantly but he got up the courage to go back out into the open and approach the store. Getting down as low as possible in a crouch while still being able to move quickly, Jesse began hustling his way up to the closest car. It was a fairly new cobalt blue Camaro. A smile cracked his face thinking of the fact that older muscle cars had made a resurgence over recent years. Looking around he noticed a pair of dust covered boots laying on their side by the pumps. Hmm, maybe it was already gassed. Reminding himself to check it later he made it to the first set of pumps.

Leaning back against the side of the Camaro, he tried the passenger side door and found it unlocked. After removing the pack and gear as quietly as possible and placing them on the floorboard while keeping the machete. Shutting the Camaro door, Jesse moved toward the building.

Luckily, this was an older rest stop. Instead of the usual floor to ceiling glass windows of the more modern stores, this one had a nice brick wall that was around waist high before the windows started. Kneeling against the bricks near the door and slowly rising up to look inside through the windows. Other than the fact that all the lights were off, the store looked normal. Shelves filled with candy, chips, and other snacks sat closer to the front. The old impulse buy method that stores had always used to drum up more sales. Jesse remembered road trips from his youth where he hadn't wanted candy until it was suddenly right in front of him in stores like this one. His mom had let him occasionally have a *Milky Way* or even a pack of *Starburst*, but now all those kinds of snacks were usually his main diet, his mother would have been shocked. At least, there was no need to visit a dentist anymore. Who needed pearly whites when there was no one to see them?

Finding undisturbed places like this one still surprised him. In most apocalypse books or movies, every place had been picked clean by roving bands of survivors. The main protagonist would always find empty shelves and smashed windows, while he continued to find almost pristine places like this one. It was still eerie to walk the aisles of an empty store. With the smaller ones, it was a bit more bearable, there was only so much space to cover and the exit wasn't too far away. The larger stores, like *Target* or *Wal-Mart*, were much more nerve wracking even if they did give the chance of a more varied diet. They had less windows and, therefore, a lot less light. Being hungry still drove him into them, but memories of zombie movies still danced in his head, making him wish there were enough people left to form groups for safety.

Still, Jesse had that itch that told him someone might be watching, so he spent several minutes glaring at the shadowed interior of the building. As usual, there was no movement or sign of occupancy. After what felt like an eternity, he slowly stood and tried the door. It swung open without the usual bell ringing that would tell a clerk that a customer had shown up. Jesse unclipped the flashlight from his belt and began the process of clearing the store.

The smell hit him all at once, when the freezers had lost power the mix of ice cream, milk, and other perishables had begun turning. The stench was stronger here than in a larger supermarket. It was a much more enclosed space. He went back outside for a moment to catch his breath and grabbed a sweater that sat on the ground to wrap his face in to help deal with the stench. It didn't help much, just enough to make the smell almost bearable.

Once Jesse was sure there was no one else around, he retrieved his backpack and began to rebuild his dwindling supplies. Avoiding the back wall where the stench was strongest he raided the shelves. Chips, candy, beef jerky, canned goods and other odds and ends found their way into his bag.

While searching the store, the glare of his flashlight showed a glimpse of his reflection in the glass of the units that normally kept the drinks cold near the register. It was obvious it had been a long time since his appearance had mattered. The reflection showed a man that looked like a crazy homeless man. Hair splayed outward at weird angles from the many nights sleeping outside and walking down windy highways. The beard was long and tangled and might have scared children or small dogs if Jesse approached them, if there were any children or dogs to scare. The clothes were faded and torn from being worn for days on end. His t-shirt was torn in a half dozen places and his jeans which had been a bright blue at one point were faded and torn as well.

Deciding that it was time to fix some of the issues that were visible found him on the hygiene aisle looking for items that would be useful. Jesse soon found himself standing outside

with a can of shaving cream, a disposable razor, and several bottles of water using the window to see how close his shave was going. After that running a brush through his hair hadn't been a bad idea either. It took some time to sort through the piles of clothes on the floor of the store but he managed to find a red and blue flannel shirt that he liked and a new pair of sneakers that sort of fit. Keeping his old jeans since nothing else had fit, he looked like a new man.

He had considered taking the Camaro, but there had been that old Ford pickup with lots of space in the back for more goodies. He had loaded up the back of the truck with almost everything that wasn't tied down in the store. He now had enough foodstuffs to last him a good while. The old truck made the rest of his trek to Canton fly by.

Driving through the empty towns would have been depressing if this was the first-time Jesse had seen the like. However, the sight was far to normal to his new life. Again, the movies and TV shows had gotten it wrong. There were no long lines of stalled cars blocking the roadway as people had tried to either get in or out of the cities. If anything, it looked more like something out of a Twilight Zone episode where everything looked normal, too normal. Nothing was out of place but the lack of any people or animals made it eerily quiet and empty.

Driving down highway 77, the excitement of fulfilling his father's dream was building up. Following the signs brought him to the right exit and after pulling off the highway to enter the hallowed ground there was a feeling of anticipation. After parking the truck slantwise at the foot of the broad, brick steps, he jumped out and looked at the building before him.

The NFL Hall of Fame was a weirdly shaped building. It's only spire rose looking like the top of the Pope's hat. It might be meant to look like an old leather helmet from the early days of the sport yet it was a weird thing to be the first memory for visitors to the Hall. There were banners hanging outside announcing the 75th Anniversary of the Hall's opening. Those celebrations meant to set off the season of 2038 had never happened.

There was still the feeling that he wasn't alone, but Jesse had come here hoping to relax and forget the growing paranoia for a time. So, without his usual care, Jesse strode up the steps and approached the doors, which surprised him by being locked tight. A year ago, the idea of smashing in a window or breaking down a door would have been anathema to Jesse. Having done the deed so many times already, it still felt like sacrilege when he hefted a rock from the garden in front of the hall and broke the glass of the door. Careful not to cut himself on the jagged glass, Jesse reached through and turned the lock on the inside.

Once inside he flipped on his flashlight to light the way through the various exhibits. Just like his visit to various other museums and Graceland, Jesse walked slowly, reverently, through the rooms. Staring at the many old images while making his way deeper into the hall told the story of the sport. Taking his time to enjoy the exhibits when there was no crowd to fight through and an almost complete silence made him feel as if it was a Holy site. All that was nothing compared to the loss of breath as he entered the inner sanctum, The Hall of Fame gallery.

Here 452 legends had bronze busts of themselves placed together for all time. His dad had told him that John Madden, who the video games were apparently named after, had alluded to the busts talking to each other in the dark of night when no one was around. His dad had told that story to him a few years ago, when Madden had passed away from congestive heart failure and ESPN was showing around the clock coverage of his legacy.

After being alone for so long, being in the room with them almost gave him the impression of being in a crowd. The stench of what was likely an unemptied trashcan had

assailed him when entering the room, but after several minutes it stopped bothering him while making a circuit of the room. After a long time strolling around and looking at each of them in turn, he left the room and didn't see one of the busts being removed from its shelf and pulled back into the darkness by a grubby looking hand.

As the day wound down, Jesse looked up at the sky and realized that more blue was visible than earlier in the day. Tears welled up in his eyes as he saw the faint glimmer of a star in the darkening sky. It had been so long since the familiar night sky had been visible that the idea that some normality was returning overwhelmed his emotions.

He was sitting in the upper stands of the stadium next to the Hall of Fame. Jesse had never made it here to see an actual game or Induction ceremony, but watching them every year on ESPN and NFL Network it felt like he had. Maybe the tears were from knowing there would never be another live game here or anywhere else. There would be no more preseason, no playoffs, and no Super Bowl. Not that that loss was any more heartbreaking than the loss of life that caused it. But it somehow seemed more personal. Walking or driving through empty towns and cities made him feel like a knife had suddenly been thrust into his chest but knowing he would never see another goal line stand where the shortest guy on the team would make a quick spin move and change the outcome of a game or a field goal from 56 yards at the last second actually dug in that knife and twisted it.

Jesse let himself wallow in his sorrow for a good while before rising and heading down to the field. Feeling hollow inside after letting his emotions out for the first time in so long distracted him so the sound of furtive movement coming from underneath the stands didn't reach his ears.

It was only when stepping onto the field that Jesse noticed something was wrong as the sound grew closer. Turning toward the sound the crazed eyes of a woman filled his gaze as the bronze statue of John Elway's head struck his own. The last thing visible was his assailant standing over him and then he knew nothing.

The first thing Jesse felt was a mountain of pain. As that pain crystalized into the worst headache of his life came the realization that life still flowed through his veins. The problem is that flow gave him more pain as it reached his brain. It seemed that he had fallen on his already wounded arm. The first order of business after getting to his feet would be finding the first aid kit and getting a couple aspirin in himself. He was sure there were some anti-biotics in his bag. Not thinking it would fix things but it might help him focus past the pain. Reflexively reaching out his hand to grasp his machete and found nothing there. That caused his eyes to suddenly open fully, which did nothing to help his headache.

Feeling like spikes were being driven through his brain from the inside he was thankful for the darkness of nighttime. The moon and a few recently returned stars allowed him to see that no one else was on the field. Slowly sitting up and noticing the Elway statue sat a few feet away on its side. Seeing some blood on it, made him gingerly reach up and touch the side of his head. His fingers came back with spots of blood on them but he could feel that the wound had matted up since being struck. Some bits of grass were stuck to his fingers, which he quickly rubbed off against his jeans.

Slowly thinking that his gear was not too far away crossed his mind as the pain cascaded over him in waves again. If she came back, he would need to protect himself. The machete and a gun were with his stuff back in the truck parked out front. Jesse struggled to his feet before

realizing the important part of his thought.... the woman. Jesse had found those few other survivors during his travels but all three had been men. They had mostly been violent and paranoid, as well. It hurt his brain to think that maybe his paranoia was an aftereffect of whatever had caused the loss of so much life. Maybe whatever had made the sky change colors had done something to the minds of anyone who survived the dissolution of society and the end of the world.

Yet, part of him thought back to his trip and saw how still having a purpose that wasn't territorial or violent in nature seemed to mean sanity hadn't completely left him. Maybe the amount of exposure to whatever caused this mattered. His mind reeled as the thought that people had dissolved in the room he had been in at the beginning meant that was unlikely. Jesse had no way to know the truth, but it gave him some hope that he would not end up like the few others that had crossed his path. There was no time to figure anything out, his mind kept wandering since she hit him. The irony of having a probable concussion at a building filled with those that had suffered from variations of that injury was not lost on him.

Slowly, with a great deal of effort Jesse made his way back to the side of the Hall and looking around the corner showed him the reason for waking alone on the field. The woman was sitting on the pavement next to the truck tearing through his supplies like a rabid, wild animal. Even in the dark, her hands were visibly covered in melted chocolate from the many candy bars in his bag. Wincing from a fresh stab of the ice pick inside his head Jesse saw his sleeping bag had been shredded, she must have thought something was hidden in its lining.

But hope sprung up when he saw that she had flung the machete over into the grass. Jesse couldn't see the gun but it was likely still hidden in the bag. If Jesse could get the machete maybe he could scare her off long enough to gather his things and get away. The only problem was that she was still closer to the weapon than he was. If he could find a way to distract her, maybe he could get to it first. Looking around he noticed that a small rock garden ringed the side of the building.

Jesse hefted several of the rocks until finding one that seemed light enough to throw but heavy enough to make some noise. Figuring his best shot was to get her attention deeper into the parking lot, he picked out a group of cars and threw. It must have made some noise as it hit because she suddenly jumped to her feet and glared off into the darkness toward the parked cars. However, the exertion of throwing that rock had suddenly made him dizzy and so a few seconds passed as his vision blurred and the world started spinning. After a few moments he regained his equilibrium. Once the world came back into focus, moving to get the machete wasn't easy but he managed. She was so intent on the area the noise had come from that he made it to the machete and managed to not only draw it but move in close to the woman.

The smell coming off her should have given him ample warning in the stadium. Raw sewage was a kind description of her odor. Now that Jesse was close came the realization that the scant clothing he had thought she was wearing was really dirt and excrement that covered most of her body. As she finally heard the noise of his approach she turned quickly to face him.

By reflex, she was bringing her arms up for some kind of attack and that crazy look in her eyes had not gone away. In that split second, the idea that any kind of human still lived behind those eyes was dismissed. The machete plunged forward and into her bare chest as her hand came up holding the gun. She had been holding the gun when he threw the rock and her own instinct of self-preservation had brought her to pull the trigger at point blank range.

Unfortunately, for her, the gun had not been loaded. It clicked several times as he drove the machete deeper into her body. He watched numbly as she fell to the ground and after several

labored breaths and gurgles that produced blood from her open mouth, she suddenly stopped moving. She was dead.

Jesse sat on the ground just a few feet from the woman he had just killed and watched the sun come up over the horizon. He had no idea that not only had he killed a woman, he had killed the last woman on earth.

Staring at the gun that lay just a few feet away, his thoughts were a jumble. It was partially mixed up because his guilt over killing another person to stay alive but it was also a side effect of his head injury. He had only gotten the gun to scare off people, he didn't even have any ammo. Figuring if it was waved around people would give him a wide berth had seemed like a logical idea at the time. The only problem had been his personal dislike of firearms and that it never felt right in his hands.

It had sat in the bottom of his bag for months, untouched. Now, without being loaded it had indirectly caused the death of the woman. In that moment, Jesse decided to leave the gun where it lay.

As the meds finally started to hit his system his mind cleared enough for him to think about what to do next. Rummaging through the few items left in the bag after her search for food had scattered his belongings found him once again holding his map. Canton was still circled and he found it hard to remember the excitement he had felt the day before. But looking a bit north he felt the excitement come back as he saw his next destination. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland was only around sixty miles away. He remembered how much his little brother loved U2...