

Anything But Lonely stories about the end of the world

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Scrawler's Last Five Miles to Fate

Scrawler slammed his fist against the radio button because the story was bullshit and he didn't want to hear it anymore.

He wiped a tear and punched the steering wheel. He thought about the air bag and punched the wheel again, softer this time. He had to take a leak. Thank God for small favors. He was drowning.

He caught sight of an exit sign and flipped on the blinker. Interstate 30, Dallas to Texarkana was a long, painful stretch of nothing, empty, flatness, and a gas station. You're lucky to find a crummy Mexican joint and once every three nothings and a flatness, there's a truck stop. Scrawler didn't believe in luck. He might have, if luck did anything for him.

He punched the radio back on as he pulled into the truck stop parking lot. A commercial for wholesale gold. Punch off. He threw the parking brake and sat there watching an obese woman hobble past his car. She looked like a giant sack full of water stuffed into Capri pants and reeking of the

human condition. He checked himself in the rearview. His eyes were red and puffy around the edges, but the tears had dried. He thought about buying a sandwich. He thought about low-fat mayonnaise seeping out the bottom of Capri pants. He punched the steering wheel.

Texas truck stops are lit like Purgatory would be if God owned a K-Mart. Aisle after aisle of fried pork skins and Indian trinkets, colorful toys made of Chinese lead and resin busts of crying eagles. Scrawler loved knick-knacks because Shelly loved knick-knacks. He had never taken her to a truck stop, but she would have loved them. Probably.

Texas truck stop bathrooms are lit like Hell would be if the Devil liked trinkets and mayonnaise. Beefy truckers pissed, coughed and didn't wash their hands. Their musk was that of the unwashed, ignorant, helpless masses. Lost and wandering and smelling so thickly of cigarette smoke that you could taste the color yellow in the back of your teeth when they walked by.

Scrawler picked a stall and shut the door. He used his boot to kick the flusher and tried not to look at the three pounds of beefy trucker as it swirled its way down the tubes and out into the water supply. He thought about trace contents of meth amphetamine. He thought about baby formula. He pulled the Magnum 44 marker out of his pocket,

uncapped it and sniffed it like a flower.

Step 1, evaluate what's there. Two phone numbers, one feebly scratched out *If you're looking 4 a good time...* Scrawler blacked them out. No one deserves a late night call from the cranked-up and lonely. Even the cranked-up and lonely. They'd never know. And they'd never thank him. *Xanax- I can't remember all the fun I didn't have!* Scrawler thought about this for a while and decided to leave it be. If that makes even just one kid think twice about trying drugs, then it's worth it. He thought about benevolence. He thought about kindred spirits.

There were some crude drawings of penises and several solitary, floating obscenities. In Scrawler's Unwritten (and Understood) Rules of Charity, those were counted as a wash. Biology and vocabulary. Harmless. He thought about Shelly. He breathed deep from the black tip of the Magnum just to get the stench out of his nose. He kicked the flusher again.

Step 2, make a difference. Quotes from Gandhi, though his favorite, had no relevance in a place like this. These people were uneducated and desperate. Charity had to be phrased in a way they could understand. Simple words. Legible block letters. Pictures, if necessary. It is an Unwritten (and Understood) Rule that any town with more

than one A-Frame building was too fucking stupid for quotation marks. He was thinking too much. A trucker in the next stall made sounds that couldn't be kick-flushed out of the skull once they had creeped in.

He had written *For Shelly* on the wall without realizing it. Or without recognizing that he realized it. Or something. He scratched it out. He no longer needed to take a leak. He wrote *Recycle your plastic!* and ran out the door.

He bought a small porcelain statue of a wolf baying at the moon. The woman at the counter probably did not recycle her plastic. She probably put Menthol Lights in the church collection plate on Sunday. He made her wrap the wolf in a bag. He thought about Shelly. He wondered if she liked wolves.

Punch on. Stock market updates. No emotion, no humanity. Just numbers and greed and suffering. The daily sermon of those he was fighting against. They didn't want the world to change. They hated Charity and felt nothing. Punch off. He unwrapped the wolf and threw the bag out the window. The sculpture was beautiful. Scrawler thought about the artist who made it. It must have taken hours. Days, maybe. Years. The artist was probably poor and alone, exploited by the Truck Stop Stock Gods who cast spells in dividends and shot the world to shit. The artist was probably

dead now. He wept.

Two miles passed before he pushed Shelly back into the shadows of his mind. Punch on. A non-profit PSA. It was an old man telling an anecdote about granting a child's dying wish. The man wasn't selling anything, and Scrawler's heart twisted and tried to rip free from his ribcage. He punched the steering wheel. He bawled openly. *God's daily work*, the man said. But the child still died. The man wasn't selling anything. But the man was selling nothing. Scrawler didn't believe in God. He might have, if God did anything for him.

Fate – 10 Miles said the sign. He thought about stopping to take a picture and laughed. He thought about Shelly and stopped. He thought about the last time he saw her. At the bar. She was alone, but she was with someone. Some guy. *Someone who has real prospects, a career. Someone with a heart*, she said. He fought back tears. She rolled her eyes. *You used me*, she said. Scrawler had a heart. Oh, yes he did. Until he met Shelly. That guy. Some guy. He wasn't changing the world. He was just another part of it, the whole damn whatever.

Punch on. Conflict in the Middle East. A rebellion against oppression. The reporter was interviewing a civilian who had been shot in the gut by a soldier. The man, dying, had been unarmed. He described the pain. The horror of

watching his countrymen die all around him. The reporter asked- impolitely, if you asked Scrawler -if it had been worth it. The man, dying, suffering, paused only a moment and said *I would be shot one hundred more times if it meant freedom for my country.* Scrawler pulled over right there on the highway, ten miles from Fate, and lost his shit.

The world was a beautiful place. People were beautiful and deserved to be happy. He thought about this and decided it was a beautiful thing to say. He had to take a leak. The next exit up led to a sports bar called Winston's Saloon. Scrawler loved sports bars. Or rather, he loved that they existed. Or rather, he loved that their existence provided a captive audience of the ignorant and disgusting for his Charity. He pulled into the parking lot and threw the brake. Punch on. *Leader of the Pack* by the Shangri-Las. Punch off. Deep breath. *Look out! Look out! Look out!* would echo in his head for the rest of the day. He got out of the car and spit on a rust-red Excursion parked nearby. The world was a beautiful place. People were ungrateful monsters and deserved to be miserable.

He hated sports. He hated people who watched sports and drank cheap beer and talked about cheap women. He wanted to help them. If he could change the minds of the rotten scum of the earth then it was worth spending time in

these places. He spent a lot of time in these places. The last time he saw Shelly... That guy. Some guy. He probably loved these places. Some people are beyond Charity. The first Unwritten (and Understood) Rule of Charity is that you can't help those who don't want to be helped. He thought about willful ignorance and ordered a beer.

The bathroom was dark but mercifully well-kept. There was a newspaper front-page posted over the urinal. It was three weeks old and the headline was bullshit. There was only one stall and he locked himself in. The Magnum fumes put him at ease. The beer tasted like tin. Step 1. Every wall was covered top-to-bottom in illegible street gang scribbles. The kind you'd see on a freight train car, bubbly and hideous. He thought about creativity. He thought about conformity. He was glad the toilet was empty.

The world is a beautiful place, he wrote. He thought about living with Shelly. Married, happy, kids. He thought about the three nights they spent together. He thought about distance. He looked at what he wrote and looked at the floor. He spent the next forty-five minutes turning the walls of the stall solid black, 'til the Magnum ran dry. Scrawler didn't believe in love. He might have, if love did anything for him.

5 miles to Fate, the sign said. It wasn't funny this time. He thought about irony. It was a tool for the weak to use

when they couldn't rightly speak their piece. Like cynicism. Or alcohol. Punch on. Someone's kidnapped. Someone's dead. The rest was details. Punch off. He thought about suicide. It was selfish. It was a waste. Why die when you could run away? He punched the steering wheel. Shelly had wanted to get coffee. She had wanted to get dinner. See a movie. Walk in the park. He had wanted her to leave in the morning. Then when he wanted her to come back, she didn't. Scrawler had a heart. Oh, yes he did. Until he lost Shelly.

Fake, planted forests rode the access roads in perfectly unnatural lines like a big pine phalanx. They gave way to vast fields fading into the horizon. They gave way to factories spewing godknows into the sky. They gave way to alien suburbia, empty and waiting for enough chain stores to justify inhabitation. They gave way to trees. He thought about hopelessness. He thought about trying not to think.

What was in Texarkana anyway, besides more of the same? Maybe even less. It was a pilgrimage. He was a missionary. He had to take a leak.

The next exit took him past the Rockwall county line. The man at the counter of the gas station told him it was the smallest county in the state. He seemed proud. Scrawler bought a box of caffeine pills. He thought about appreciating

the little things. He thought about squander and toil. He wrote a Bradbury quote on the bathroom wall. *And out of that love, remake a world.* He thought about A-frames. He thought about belief.

There was a man sitting on the curb. He was drinking some kind of bum wine from a paper bag but he didn't look the part. His clothes were clean and his face was freshly shaven. He wasn't filthy, not at all, and his eyes were sharp. A thinking man, maybe.

"Drink with me, son?" he asked. There was something almost like pleading in his voice. Scrawler couldn't quite figure his angle. He was pleading from a high place. It was an inquisitive demand. It was... Charity. He thought about serendipity and the man did, too. He sat down on the curb.

The man offered his drink and Scrawler took it, swallowing three of the pills in a gulp of the bitter, syrupy whatever. It tasted like medicine and that felt somehow right. "What'd you lose, son?" Scrawler's eyes begged clarification. The man's eyes were sharp and cut like diamonds. They stared at one another and Scrawler said nothing.

"Nothing."

The man laughed and gulped from the bag. "Don't bullshit me, boy. You ain't a bullshitter."

“I guess not.”

“So?”

“I’m just... “

“Runnin’?”

He thought about this. He thought about Shelly.

“I’m just... not dying.”

The man laughed so hard he spit. “Fair ‘nuff. But you scared, ain’t ya? You got it on ya like a stink, boy. Poor man’s fear.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t s’pose you would. Elsewise, you wouldn’t be here, now would ya?” The man slapped him on the back and drank some more. “You ain’t all bad. But you know that.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Do you want to change the world?”

The man laughed, hacked and spit.

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are, son.” He slapped him on the back again.

“So?”

“So what? Do I wanna change the world? No, sir. I can’t say I do. I like it just the way it is. The world’s a beautiful place. A big, damn beautiful place.”

Scrawler thought about this and rocked back and forth on the curb, watching the pavement sit still. “No, it’s not.”

“No?”

“No. And you, people like you, are the problem.” The man looked over at him, eyes like knives. “No one does their part. I’m doing my part. I’m trying to make a difference. What do you do?” There was no malice in his voice. It was a whimper. The pavement returned his stare, indifferent. The man’s eyes cut deep and drew blood.

“What do I do?” He tasted the words. Let them swill and swish around in his mouth, mixing with the bum wine and tasting spoiled in the swallow. “What do I do.”

“People are ignorant and selfish and hateful. They just eat up everything around them, giving nothing back. They can’t love and they can’t...”

“Can’t what?”

“They just... can’t.”

The man finished the bottom-swill of his paper bag and tossed it aside. He stood up and stuck out his hand. Scrawler took it and pulled himself to his feet.

“People,” said the man, “are good. I’m good. Yer good. We’re all good. We just got a diff’rent idea of what good is. And there ain’t a damn thing wrong with that, son. Ya get me?”

Scrawler broke stare with the pavement and impaled himself on the man's eyes. "Do you think I'm a good person?"

The man smiled. His teeth were brown, if they were there at all. "Yes, I do, son." And he punched Scrawler hard in the gut. He doubled over and did not feel the blow to the skull that sent him reeling into darkness.

He thought about Shelly. He thought about dying. He opened his eyes and it was dusk. The man had taken his wallet but not his keys. He was a good person.

Punch on. A human interest story about a toddler reporting a fire to 911, saving the family dog. For the first time in a long time, Scrawler felt nothing. Punch off. The highway was lonely. He was lonely. Shelly was as kind as she could be, given the circumstances. She didn't throw a drink in his face or tell him she never wanted to see him again. She was a good person. We're all good. He thought about suicide.

Fate City Limits, the sign said. He had forgotten why that was ever funny to begin with. The night sky turned the trees to monoliths and walls, but the factories still plumed. Ghost town suburbia, patiently waiting for someone to haunt it. Scrawler tossed his empty Magnum out the window and

steered with his knees as he unwrapped a new one. He uncapped it and breathed deep. It was beautiful. He thought about why. He thought about why he didn't care. Inhale. Exhale. Punch on. *Running Bear* by Johnny Preston. His tears were forced and he knew this. Shelly was no Indian squaw.

He choked down three more caffeine pills without water. He thought about taking up smoking. He thought about suicide. His head was pounding. He had forgotten to check for blood and decided not to. What you don't know won't kill you. Scrawler didn't believe in fate. He might have, if he weren't already there.

He thought about the Poor Man's Fear. He thought about Shelly. He had to take a leak. The next exit passed him by with indignation. He thought about animism. He thought about insanity. The Magnum rode shotgun, uncapped and leaking on the seat. It smelled like roses. Shelly was back in Dallas with some guy. A guy with a heart. He picked up the marker and forced its floral beauty up into his brain. Scrawler didn't believe in himself. He might have, if...

Fate passed him by. He watched it go, said a silent goodbye, and crossed into Royse City. He hadn't argued with Shelly, not really. He had cried. He had embarrassed them both. But he had accepted it. She was so kind to wait it

out. She was a good person. Inhale. Exhale. He thought about the nature of selfishness. He thought about suicide. He thought about the last thing she ever said to him. *You used me. We hardly even knew each other. Do you even know my last name?* He had answered her with tears and she had left, drink unfinished. He had watched her go. He thought about love. And she was gone.

Scrawler picked up the statue of the wolf and turned it over in his hands. It felt suddenly cheap, and he was acutely aware that the artist was still very much alive, well-paid, and kind of a dick. He tossed it out the window and heard it shatter on the indifferent pavement.

Champlain. Shelly Champlain. Punch off. And this time he really did have to take a leak.

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The Last Goddamn Place on Earth

The bastard drunk toppled a stool and cracked-skull on the edge of the faux wood bar. He was bleeding before his

knees caught the floor and his free hand slapped the bootfilth and godknaws on the checkered tiles before he used it to wipe the wound. He didn't cry out, just made an *oof* of inconvenience and after a few seconds of consideration, staggered to his feet. He didn't spill a drop of his beer.

He studied his dripping hand for a moment with a comical grimace that said *well this will never do* and he lifted his shirt to soak the blood from his face and hands. The Mexican by the jukebox whistled loudly and yelled some sharp note of Spanish congratulations. I turned back to the TV and sipped my whiskey.

The news man was sweating and kept straightening his tie, trying to look dignified and unaffected. Poor bastard didn't even have a drink. Just a pen he kept shifting between his fingers, rubbing and squeezing it like a stress ball or some fortune-teller's talisman. Words flashed across the bottom of the screen but I wasn't reading them. It didn't matter.

...it is unclear at this time whether the President has arrived or if there will be a press conference or an official address. We do know that the President was en route to an undisclosed military location as of 9:43PM Eastern time...

The bastard drunk slammed his red-stained palm on the bar with a BANG and I think each and every person in that

place jumped halfway out of their chairs, myself no exception. The Mexican started to yell something, but all ears fell on the drunk as he raised his glass to the sky and looked around the bar with glassy-eyed self-importance.

“This!” His voice half-cracked, half-burped. “*This* is the last *god damn* place on Earth!”

Someone yelled for him to shut the fuck up, Danny, you shit.

“*This*, man. Here we are and then we aren’t. The last goddamn place.” He tipped his glass a bit as though to cheers us then gulped it down, nodding slightly with satisfaction, acceptance, I don’t know what. Someone muttered *sonofabitch* and we all went back to our business.

I looked at the missed calls on my phone, scanning the area codes on unknown numbers, all 972 and 214. Dallas. I didn’t know anyone in Dallas. But there were a whole helluva lot of people in Dallas who knew me. Creditors, banks, hired phone goons. Companies and groups and affiliations, LLCs and organizations. But the phone hadn’t rang in a while. I wasn’t thinking about the money. Every area code on that list was from Dallas. For the last two weeks. She wasn’t going to call. Why would she call? I should have just turned the damn thing off.

I killed my whiskey and thought about dying. Not so

bad. It would be fast. Probably wouldn't even notice. He we are and then we aren't. I wondered if she was safe.

Somewhere in one of those underground boxes with the canned beans and water bottles. She probably went to the army camp. Probably went with Jake. Goddamn *Jake*. But he'd keep her safe. That's the main thing. As long as she's safe.

I thumbed my wedding ring and stopped thinking about dying. The Mexican shoved another dollar in the juke and whistled. I poured another drink. It took the end of the goddamn world to get my hands on a bottle of Special Reserve. Tasted like everything else I'd ever had.

The bastard drunk stumbled up next to me, humming. I grabbed a dirty shot glass off the bar, sloshed some in and threw it to Danny the Bastard Drunk Shit. He looked at it the way my neglected, scorned, desperate, cheating wife used to look at close-up card magic. Wonder and skeptical awe. He slammed it and caught my eyes like a concerned doctor about to tell a cancer case he's gotta stop smoking. He stared for a second, sizing me up. Or maybe just fighting off the nightspins as the Reserve hit the pot and stirred. The blood running down his face was drying brown.

“Hey.”

Hey, I said.

“What...” burp “Just what the fuck are you doin’ here?”

It wasn’t a threat. He sounded concerned.

The Mexican screamed a battle cry and shot the juke out with his pistol. There was a commotion and I think some older cowboy fellow stabbed him. I don’t really know. The Tejano jangle beat snap crackle popped and was gone.

“I mean. Really, man. What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

...we have been told by the government that we are to cease broadcasting immediately. For the sake of integrity we have decided to lock down the station and continue to transmit until... we are no longer able to do so. I will continue to report and stand by the people of this great nation the only way I know how. We will keep you informed and updated as best we can. God bless America. And God keep our love ones safe. Keep us all...

I was thinking about dying, I said.

Danny burst out in fits of laughter.

“You, man.” He pointed at me, still holding the empty shot glass. “*You!* You’re funny, man.”

And he stumbled away.

I wondered if she’d make it through this. Really I was wondering if she’d still think about me. How long from now? A year? Ten? Scavenging some blighted shitland that

looked more like hell than Cleburne. Would she look for me? Jake wouldn't let her. Hell, I wouldn't want her to.

Someone was dragging the Mexican out of the bar. I'd never seen someone die before. It felt like nothing. I poured more Reserve in my glass and looked up at the TV. Below the sweating, straining news anchor was an animated countdown clock. It said ten minutes and change. Last call.

Part of me wanted to run and head for the army camp. Try to wait this out. Maybe I'd get to see her. Jake would stand between us, but she'd be cordial. Under the circumstances she might even give me a somber hug. Some kind of mutual pity and recognition of the Big Shit that made our problems seem years past and half-forgiven. Let bygones be bygones and let the bombs fall where they may.

I looked over my shoulder at the last goddamn place on Earth. Twenty some-odd heathens swilling and swaying, counting down the minutes til they meet their maker, the Universe, the Big Shit. Waiting for their chance to say *Sorry*. I'm sorry for everything. I'm so damn sorry, Janie.

The last drop of Special Reserve poured into my glass. The drunk was passed out on the pool table, still holding the empty shot. The old cowboy fellow was praying. Some were crying, some were repenting, some were toasting, laughing, shrugging, dialing, dancing, hugging, screaming and all of

us were waiting.

The news man straightened his tie and put down the fortune-teller's talis-pen. There were no more words flashing across the bottom of the screen. There wasn't going to be any Presidential address. Janie was safe with Jake. I finished my whiskey and savored the burn. The Mexican watched the stars outside, unseeing. The old woman in the corner rose to her feet. The last goddamn place on Earth broke into a harmonious, miserable, broken, joyful, perfect countdown.

10. 9. 8. 7.

She'll think of me. Bad or good, in passing, in pity, in regret, in love, but

5. 4. 3. 2.

She'll think of me.

Here we are

And then we weren't.

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Manifesto

Bombs are ugly little things, the typewriter said.

The words were ugly on the page. The letters were too sharp. They looked like a stain. He twisted the knob and let the paper fall onto the desk.

The three wooden boxes lined up on the floor were sanded smooth and adorned with paint flourishes here and there, but the twisted wires and bits of metal junk scarred them beyond redemption. He had painted the batteries a soft green to hide their gaudy logos, but they were still batteries. Bombs were ugly little things and there was just no getting around it. The sooner they were gone, the better.

He grabbed his notebook off the desk and stood up. A man thought most clearly on his feet. The list of potential pseudonyms was three pages of wretched, jagged lines cutting through hundreds of letters, words and inkblots. Frustration as punctuation. Each was a horror in its own right and he wished they bled when he cut them through with his pen.

The name he would choose was of the utmost importance. It would soon be on the front page of every newspaper and dancing quietly on the lips of every wicked soul who wondered in secret if they would be next. They would wonder because they would Know. His Recipients didn't know guilt or regret. He would make them Know.

The only name on the list that hadn't been cut down by the pen was simple. Simplicity was elegance. Symmetry was beauty. *VOV*, the notebook said. The letters stood for nothing, yet they stood for everything. Of course he could do better. He could always do better. But time was short. Was it?

He sat back down at the desk and loaded a blank sheet in the typewriter. The words he would write there were more important than the name that signed them. He was beyond frustration. He was infuriated. The words were ugly. They were ugly long before they could even stain the page. Bombs were ugly little things and there was meaning in that.

There were three wooden boxes on the floor. They were sanded by motive and made ugly by need. But the words that gave them purpose stood defiant on a blank page. What was holding them back?

The typewriter said nothing and he agreed.

The world would ask *why*. They would cry out to the heavens, arms in the air, and declare his actions an atrocity, a tragedy. A senseless, unprecedented, unfathomable act of evil that shook a decent, loving, undeserving world and ended the lives of good, innocent people. It was beautiful, when he thought about it. But insincere. Insincerity was asymmetrical. Insincerity was ugly.

Others had come before him. Mad men with vendettas against a world they saw as wrong. Their hatred, their purpose, had manifested itself on hundreds or thousands of blank pages that answered the Insincerity with motive. But their motives were wrong. Their words were confused, contradictory, complex. They were insincere. They were ugly. They were a mirror image of the world they so despised. They were their own Recipients, and the wicked were never made to Know.

Tragedy unites the world. When a bomb detonates, the wicked step back from their own atrocities and come together to decry the unimaginable evils wrought by man. They cry together. They shake their heads and ask *why. Why why why*. Then after a mournful moment of silence, they return to their business. They forget that they had ever caught eyes were their own reflection and, disgusted, turned away. Tragedy unites the world, if only 'til the smoke clears.

He looked down at the three wooden boxes on the floor and thought about the Recipients to which they were addressed. He thought about their families, their spouses, their children. He thought about how long it had been since he had owned a mirror.

He pulled the blank page from the typewriter and signed it *VOV*. It wasn't ugly. Not at all. He picked up the day's

newspaper that he had tossed on the floor in a rage only hours before. The headline spoke of corruption. He sat down on his tiny cot and read the article aloud, tasting every word as it fell off his tongue. They bounced off the walls of the cabin and collided with one another. It was a hall of mirrors, and for a moment he was lost. The guilty *must* punish the guilty, and not a one will ever Know. He would make them Know.

Bombs were ugly little things and so was he.

It was twelve minutes before the scheduled pick-up time when he dropped the packages in the mail box. They were wrapped in smooth, brown paper, tied with soft green twine and meticulously addressed with a fine calligraphy pen. They were beautiful.

He closed the mail box door, put his hands in his pockets and began walking. He passed a storefront and caught his reflection in the window. It was asymmetrical. It was ugly. He kept walking.

The world would ask *why*. Tied to the top of each package was a folded piece of white paper containing a single typewritten sentence.

My name is VOV and this is completely insincere.

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Drinks With a Friend

The Luckster was a lucky bastard, but he still threw the handbrake every time he parked. Strange habit. Parked on a flat level concrete slab, no car on either side, back, front or otherwise. Not gonna roll, this baby's not goin' anywhere. But the Luckster threw the handbrake. Strange habit.

The Luckster didn't smoke, but if he did he wouldn't get the cancer. Not a chance, chimney or no. If the damn thing went airborne, he'd be the one in a million walking the big blue earth hitting golf balls off a rooftop, soaking up midsummer sunshine. He'd be right skipping down the block, leaving God Himself scratching his noggin and saying *Luckster, old friend, how in my name did you get so damn lucky?* And the Luckster'd shout back, *Lord, what say we go double or nothing, cuz I think I'm on a roll!*

He slicked his brows and took time in his saunter toward the Twice Lucky Ballroom, a haunt better named this world's never known. Stopped halfway, forgot to lock the

car door. Strange habit. If an army of highway thieves laid siege to the lot and left no survivors, cut all the tires, smashed the glass, cut the wires, took it all and then some, his spotless clean sedan would be immaculate, invisible and ready waiting intact when he came strolling out at last call, counting his winner cash and drunker than a slop-rollin' pig. He locked the car door and pulled the handle to check. Strange habit.

The Luckster yanked open the Twice Lucky doors and stepped on up to the bar. Bartender had his Usual poured and lined up. *Some fool ordered one up and ran out*, the bartender says. *Guess it's your lucky day*. Is it ever and isn't it always? A tip of the hat and a tip for the jar! Keep 'em comin', barkeep, nowhere I'm goin'.

Card players hadn't showed up yet. They shouldn't, cuz they know what's good for them, but they always came back. They'd show. They'd show, place and whine and cry and say *dammit yer stackin the deck even when I'm dealing!* and the Luckster would count his winner cash and say *better luck next time, boys!* Better luck.

The Luckster downed a few, waiting. Still waiting. Waiting too long. Had they finally gotten wise? Had they finally reckoned there *was* no Better Luck? Not next time, not now, then, ever or soon, when he himself claimed every

last drop of it for his own. *Mine all mine.* He drank some more.

Half past giving up on cards, Old Brinkley walked in through the Twice Lucky Ballroom doors. The Luckster recognized him right away, no matter he was a skeleton. Bones jangle when they move, like a windchime made of click-clock blocks. He didn't look so good. Little rough around the edges. Old Brinkley. The Skeleton. What a sight. How long had it been? Ten years? More.

The bartender gave him a gin and he jangled (click-clock) over to the Luckster's table and pulled up a chair.

Been a while.

“What luck! What luck! Brinkley, where have you been?”

Been dead.

“What's that like?”

It's not.

The gin ran down his spine and poured out his ribs. His hollow eye sockets glared dead serious, no pun unintended, well-intentioned, unamused. The Luckster got a chillshake up his spine, sparking him suddenly sober. Damn waste of a Usual, fool or no.

“What brings you by these ways?”

Drinks. Drinks bring me by. Drinks with a friend.

“Great! Glorious! Grand! Drinks we have in spades and friends we have in hearts! A toast! A toast, Old Brinkley! To you and me, your bones and the bones the cards will bring to buy the drinks for friends in spades!”

You're drunk.

“And you're dead! What a pair, what a team!” The Luckster flagged the bartender. The Usual and a gin for an old friend. Old Brinkley. How long's it been?

It's cold where I am, friend. Cold and dark and deep and gone.

“The gin warms! A toast!” The bartender left the drinks and they lifted them to

Drink and death and what little between.

“What little, what lots, what luck! Old Brinkley!” Glasses clinked and they drank. The Luckster called for another.

Do you remember the night I died?

The Luckster's shining grin shrugged into a frown. That happened to him when folks went dark and far. Strange habit.

Eleven years it's been. To the day. The hour. The minute only a bit away.

“Eleven years...” The Luckster drank the words back down his throat. They burned and unsettled his gut.

It's cold where I am, friend. Deep and dark. It's not and gone. You're a lucky man. Very lucky indeed.

The Luckster's grin struggled to regain its ground but stayed wary, awaiting the dark to push it far.

I don't blame you for letting me off into the night. It was standard.

“Routine. The norm. An everyday no biggie. Easy as pie in the sky...”

Easy. We know easy better than most. Bedfellows, us and easy. And luck.

“A blessing!”

Taken for granted. Abused. And vindictive.

The Luckster sipped and stared. Some strange something made the dark feel not so far. Creeping closer. And counting the minutes.

I died quickly. Without pain. Luck stayed and let me not alone that night.

“Is it luck to have...?” The Luckster coughed.

Not died sooner. Yes. Much sooner.

“What's this talk? It was an accident! A freak, unpredictable something!” counting the minutes.

You come to find there are no accidents on the deep and darkdown far. It's not luck, chance or happenstance, but consequence that marks the end.

The bartender set another gin in front of Old Brinkley. The skeleton. But Brinkley let it lie.

Luck rewards. Luck prolongs. Luck abandons. Easy as pie in the sky.

The Luckster drank deep and slammed his glass.

“It wasn’t your fault. The truck... What could you have done?”

The skeleton broke into a ghastly laugh. The Luckster’s shrugging frown returned. The laughter sounded like shovels, rust, and stone cracking, teeth clacking (click-clock). Dark and near.

It’s good to see you. I always did enjoy drinks with a friend. In spades.

“In hearts,” said the Luckster and he raised his glass to Old Brinkley, but the frown didn’t fade. The skeleton got to his feet and jangled, clicked, clocked and was gone.

The Luckster finished his drink and impulsively checked to make sure he had his wallet. Of course he did... Strange habit.

Tab? said the bartender.

The Luckster looked at the Twice Lucky Ballroom doors, counting the minutes.

“One more for the road, barkeep. Double or nothing.”

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Clark

Superman stared at himself in the bathroom mirror and saw Clark Kent. The single curl of black hair in the center of his forehead was immaculately formed by twenty minutes of gel, water, cursing and fatalism, but it was wispy and thin and there was pale flesh visible where it met the hairline. He turned his head to the left, then to the right without noticeable improvement.

He shifted to look at his profile. His posture was getting worse- it was embarrassing –and he felt a dull soreness when he rolled back his shoulders. Standing straight, the red ‘S’ on his chest became misshapen and jutted out at the nipples. He put his hands over them and pulled back the fat. Turning slowly from side to side, he glared at the ghost of his once-sculpted pectorals, lately hiding themselves under a layer of liquor carbs or age, neither more pleasant a notion than the other. When he let go of his chest, he sighed. Superman didn’t have tits.

He ran his hands over his stomach, up and down, feeling the curve of his body and letting his fingers curl under the inch of carbs- or age -that hung over his red underwear. He pulled on the fat gently, pressed the alien texture between his fingers, and let it fall. It didn't feel like a part of him.

Whenever he loosed his tie, pulled off his spectacles and tore open his shirt, Clark Kent disappeared. He became nothing more than a name, a costume, a lie. When he emerged from the phone booth- or bathroom stall, as the case may be –he was Superman, the Man of Steel, hero of heroes. But these days Clark Kent didn't quite disappear. He had to be tucked in, sucked in, covered with strategic combing. Superman put his hands on his hips and pulled in his abs. It made his tits look bigger.

The door to the bathroom burst open, sending a shock of surprise and embarrassment through his entire body, and he scrambled to turn on the sink and pretend he had been washing his hands. Aladdin walked in and caught Superman's eyes in the mirror. Or Clark Kent's eyes. He was smiling. It was obnoxious. Superman hated Aladdin.

“Soopa-mayyyyn! Wassup, man? Man o’ Steel?”
Superman nodded to him politely and kept his head down. His hands were very clean. Aladdin stepped up to a urinal and looked over his shoulder. “I’m psyched tonight, man.

Pippi just sat my first table and these chicks are *bangin'*, man! Gonna show 'em a whole new world. Know what I'm sayin'?" His laugh was a screeching faux chortle that Clark Kent chalked up to insecurity. Superman had no comment. He turned off the sink and dried his hands quickly.

"Well, have a good night," he said. He folded up a paper towel and used it to pull open the bathroom door. Aladdin said something that he didn't hear.

"Alright, everyone. Welcome to our Super Salad Bar. Over here you'll find Kyrptonian flying saucers to hold your greens, and here we have a huge variety of fresh fixin's grown in my hometown of Smallville, Kansas. These cheesy croutons used to belong to Lex Luthor, but worry not! Thanks to yours truly, he'll be in jail for a long, long time. We also have tortilla soup down on the end. Come back as many times as you want, but if you're gonna stick your fingers in the dressing, only do it once. Double dipping is just plain gross!" The kids laughed and clapped and their parents smiled. "Alright, folks, have at it and I'll meet you back at your table soon to take your orders."

"Thanks, Superman!" Dad said, handing a plate to his daughter. Superman gave him a polite salute and headed back to the bathroom. He threw open the door and let his

posture collapse. He turned on the sink and let the water run, staring at the bags under Clark Kent's eyes. There was a time when he genuinely enjoyed Lex Luthor's Cheesy Croutons. Clark Kent was wondering if he remembered to pay the electric bill and there was no fucking magic left in the world. He splashed his face with water and adjusted his single black curl. He was losing his hair because Clark Kent was losing his hair. He was losing his hair because there was no fucking magic in the world and no amount of whiskey was going to bring Lois back.

He dried his face and locked himself in a stall. He could sit there for at least ten minutes if people thought he was taking a shit. He pulled several feet of toilet paper out of the dispenser and laid it meticulously around the seat before sitting down. Superman put his hand on the crown of his head and it felt cold. He had never had the courage to hold up one mirror to another to survey the extent of it. Superman wasn't a coward.

"Thanks again, folks, and have a Super night!" He waved at the children as they bounded after their parents, pulling on their shirt tails and asking if that really *was* Superman who brought them their chicken fingers. He stood there waiting for their parents to tell them *Yes*. Yes, that *was*

Superman, hero of heroes. But whatever they said was lost in the noise of the restaurant and he watched them go. He looked down at the tip line on the receipt and tried to remember if he had finished the handle of Jack the night before. If Clark had. He caught himself slumping and threw back his shoulders. Marilyn Monroe was chatting up a booth nearby, swooning and swaying away, and they briefly caught eyes. She was looking at Clark Kent and her eyes were full of pity.

As he locked the stall door, he wondered if they'd believe him if said he had a stomach virus.

Superman found himself standing in the room decorated with cupids, satin and heart-shaped chocolate boxes. The table inside was made of a beautiful, deep mahogany and he let his fingers dreamily trace the contours of the grain. The room was intended for anniversaries and happy couples who still believed in magic. He had taken Lois there once. He had reserved the room a month in advance. He had had Buckwheat bring a dozen roses to her at the table after champagne was served, and he had smiled at her lovingly as Buckwheat said "O'tay!" and skipped away. She had smiled back, but it was false. They ate in silence, and when they got back to his car she had nothing to say other than a weak,

obligatory *Thanks for dinner.*

He had been with Lois Lane for only a month before he told he loved her. He had meant it.

“Superman!” He jolted and stood up straight on instinct. The general manager was standing behind him. He was new, having started only a few weeks before, and his name was elusive in its mundaneness. He was young and thin and had good hair. Superman hated General Manager.

“You got a sec? We need to talk.”

“Sure,” Superman said.

“Have a seat.” They sat and Superman tried not to look at the soft satin walls. General Manager sighed with purpose and clasped his hands together on the table. “How are you doing?”

“Decent. The last table tipped only five percent, but it’s shaping up to be a Super night!” He smiled and thought about Lois. General Manager sighed.

“No, I mean. How are *you*, doing? Is everything alright at home? Are you feeling well?”

Clark Kent swallowed hard and looked down at the table. Superman said, “Of course. What do you mean?”

General Manager sighed again. “Look, it’s just... Okay. Here’s the thing.” He brought his clasped hands up to his mouth like he was trying to pull the words out. “Have you

considered another character?”

He remembered just then that he had indeed finished off the handle of Jack. “Another character?”

“Yes. Have you considered... We think maybe it might be time for you to be someone other than Superman.”

I am, thought Clark Kent. “Wha- But... *I am* Superman.” The satin walls suddenly looked old. Unchanged in thirty years, yet... changed. He wondered exactly how long he had worked there.

“Yes, yeah, I know. But we feel-“

“Who’s *we*?” Truth, justice and the American Way.

“*We* feel it might be time for you to make a change.”

“But-“

“Look, I’m not a bad guy. And I don’t want to have to be the one to tell you this, but it’s my *job*. You understand? You’ve been so... vacant lately. You don’t seem happy here anymore. I’ve been getting complaints. Not many! *But*, enough to raise some bells, you know? And if I can be frank with you for a sec, you’re not really... looking the part anymore.”

This just isn’t working out... this thing between us. I’m sorry. I know how much you care about me, but... I just don’t have those feelings for you...

“What are you saying?” asked Clark Kent, already

knowing the answer.

“What I’m saying is... Look, I, uh... You need to consider a character change... or you need to consider looking elsewhere for employment. Look! I’m trying to be as fair and reasonable as I can, given the circumstances. Some of the higher-ups want me to let you go, but I’m giving you a chance here! Shape up. Get your sh- stuff together. Come in on your next shift with a better attitude and a, uh, more... age-appropriate character. Look, I’m not trying to be the bad guy, you understand? You’ve been a great Superman, *really* great, but those days are *over*, you understand?” General Manager looked like had more to say but didn’t know how to say it. Or didn’t want to. Superman didn’t want him to.

“I understand.”

“Great.” General Manager rapped his knuckles on the table and hobbled off. Superman sat still, and Clark Kent stared at the heart-shaped boxes on the wall, wondering what Lois was doing right then. Or who she was with. He looked to his right and saw Aladdin and Shaggy watching him. Their faces were expressionless but somber. He didn’t know why, but he wanted to believe that they thought they were seeing him for the very last time. Maybe it *was* the last time. Either way, Clark Kent felt small, beaten, mild-mannered

and hurt. He smiled at them weakly, falsely, and went to the bathroom.

He finished his shift with sixty-five dollars and made a mental note to check this week's special at Buck's Beverages. The Joker was taking an especially long time to piss, so Superman gave up washing his hands and left in his costume. That was the first time he had ever thought of it as costume. Because Marilyn Monroe didn't look at the floor when *Superman* made his way to the door. Aladdin didn't stifle his insecure laugh when he waved a knowing goodbye to *Superman*. *Superman* didn't drive a 1998 Honda Civic.

He slammed the car door and held onto the wheel with both hands. Lois Lane and Superman. They were meant for each other. They were one of those perfect couples that... that never... He looked at himself in the rearview mirror and saw Clark Kent. Fat, balding and old. Alone.

Clark Kent, dressed comically as Superman, sitting in his Honda Civic, wondered if there was a God, hero of heroes. He dug under his seat and pulled out a beat-up metal flask. Superman didn't own a gun. He didn't need one. Clark Kent drank deep from the flask and tossed it onto the floorboard.

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The Tasked

The man rested on his shovel amidst the sea of white wooden crosses, hundreds by the thousands, touching horizon on all sides. He wiped the sweat from his brow with hands so calloused he could scarcely tell where they ended and the shovel began. Every day and countless times he'd pray, *How many more, Lord? How much longer before I come home to Glory?* And then he would feel shame and be humbled. The dog would lick his near-wooden hands and the man would know... Something. The Reason, perhaps. Or maybe just a word he had forgotten. But he *knew*, and he would start digging once again.

God had made Man of ash and dust, and Man had made the world in his image. Of this he was certain.

The man pulled the bodies out of houses, stores, offices and trains. He dragged them from churches and drink houses alike. There was no discrimination by the hand of God. All had sinned and all had perished. The man was a sinner, too,

and his penance was just. The Lord was just. He took the body of a woman pregnant with child and put her on the cart with the others.

The Dog trotted alongside the cart as the man struggled to pull. He found himself stopping to rest more every day. His cough was deep and it rattled his ribs. The Dog stopped, patient and panting, watching the man 'til he recovered and once again pulled taut the ropes. The wheels turned and the fierce heat of the sun made the stench of sin unbearable.

The Dog curled up around his feet as he worked. The day's bodies laid to rest, he carefully cut and sanded the wood and painted it white. He wasn't sure why, but it felt pure. White as the light of the Lord. The Dog breathed slowly, rhythmically. It calmed the man and kept steady his hands as he nailed the bits of white wood together. Twenty-two crosses today. One smaller than the rest. The man placed the crosses in a wheelbarrow one at a time, and when he was finished, he wept.

The Wrath of God had come in silence. The skies had not opened. The fires not rained down. Satan's kingdom come, but maybe gone in a quiet not so unquiet as the Prophecy would have it. The Lord's grace would bring peace to the world. Of this he was certain.

The rubber mallet was growing soft and worn.

Tomorrow he would go into town and procure a new one. The man enjoyed these rare excursions, as did the dog whose tail sways and leaps became gratitude manifest at a break and distance from the sinreeking flesh of the Task. The man would find the perfect mallet, bless it in somber thanks, and the cart would roll on. But for now, he hammered. The light was growing dim over the hillside and shadows, hundreds by the thousands, grew long East in the dusk. The man decided to lay the tiny cross on the fresh-turned dirt where the mother was at rest. In Heaven this child had a name.

The man was not Chosen, Anointed or otherwise deserving of blessing. The man was merely tasked. He was Man, the last of Man, ash and sin, and though he walked now through the valley of the shadow of death, he would fear no evil. For there was no evil left to fear. Of this he was certain.

The dog would whine when the man coughed blood. The dog whined often these days. Finding a new mallet had taken much longer than expected, and the man knew this was not entirely due to poor circumstance. He begged forgiveness for his selfishness and coughed blood. It tasted of copper and spitting it let loose a flood of pain and memories. He could no longer rightly distinguish between the two. He had been a bad man. Perhaps no worse than any

other, but surely no better. He was Man, the last of Man and thusly his spirit incarnate. A symbol of the old ways, the epitome of the mundane, carnal, toiling and the loved gone astray. His knees gave as he lifted a large, dark-skinned man into the cart. The body fell upon him, its weight bearing down on his feeble frame. Pain- or memories -shot through him from top to bottom. He cried out, coughed, spat and wept. The dog whined, licked his face and barked at the sun, the sky, the Lord, the Heavens. It rebuked the Task for it knew no better. The dog could not pray or rightly know the God it cursed. But it also could not know sin. The man struggled to free himself and stand. He saw the sun racing away from him and it gave him the strength to move the hulking cadaver off his straining chest and he breathed as deep as his lungs would allow. The dog lay beside him and licked his near-wooden hand. The man held the dog close and, for the first time since the End, he felt solace and peace in something other than Grace. He was too weak to beg forgiveness.

Heaven was nothing more than the perfect love of God. It was not rest. It was not comfort. It was not a reward or a reprieve from the pain and memory of a life so broken, squandered and sadly fleeting. It was not an end to the days of bleeding hands and a back so strained as to make sleep a

blessed and rare stay of torture. The man wished more than anything that it were. Of this he was certain.

Night had already taken hold of the sky by the time the man had patted the last of the day's dirt with his spade. His knees were shaking and the dog stared at him warily. There was something in its round, dark eyes that the man had not seen since the End. Something he had nearly forgotten once the sin of Man had been purged by godsend sickness. It was fear. The man returned to his workshop, a shack as humble as could be managed. A workbench, a tiny bed and a pile of blankets upon which the dog would nightly doze. He tried to eat from a tin of beans, but the food felt strange on his tongue and tasted of copper. He poured the can into a bowl and set it out for the dog, but the dog only sniffed it and continued to watch the man with that distant, alien look from the times Before. The fear.

The man set to work. He nailed together a cross and painted it white, but the shaking and the pain caused it to fall from his hands. It clattered on the workbench and the dog rose to its feet, watching. *Lord, forgive me, but I can do no more this night.* He was not sure if it was the pain or the memories that kept him awake, but the sun was already cresting the eastward horizon before he drifted off. The dog, an unknowing angel, without Grace but likewise without sin,

did not lay down its head until the man's moaning and coughing had faded into sleep.

There was no Hell. There was only the white light of the Lord, giving life to a perfect world wrought imperfect by Man who let his paradise burn, ash and sin. The world of Man was the only Hell, and God had struck it pure once more. When the man was gone, there would be Eden. Of this he was certain.

He awoke in fits of cough and spitting would not suffice. He heaved and the dog whined. The Task called him and he leaned on the spade as a walking staff, carrying a lonely white wooden cross to the hillside. The sun was high but running downhill. Another day had escaped him but he felt no guilt. He kneeled slowly, painfully, and patted the dog's head. He remembered happiness and the memory did not hurt him. For all of Man's greed, powerlust, waste, arrogance and hate, there was something in the world that was never lost, forgotten, or paved over for progress. Something he saw in the eyes of the dog and the trees and the sky and every person he had laid to rest in Task. He had long since forgotten the word for it, as perhaps Man had done in his headfirst race to the End, but it did not hurt. Not at all. He hammered the cross into the hillside, another amongst hundreds by the thousands, and lay down upon the

soft grass. The dog curled up beside him and together they watched the sun set on Eden.

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