

THE ROT

Pulling my hood on, I close my eyes and lean back. I try to breathe easy, but the gas mask strapped to my face is stifling. Then, my eyes are open again, staring at a pair of hands that aren't mine. Three years we've been together through all this, Pat and I, and many times I came close to killing him but, here we are. Sometimes it wasn't me who was trying to kill him. Sometimes it was others, and sometimes it was the world. Even so, I never expected things to end up like this. We weren't exactly buddies before the end of the old world. We were just coworkers who happened to be getting a drink together, not my idea of course. He was a quiet guy in the office; no one really knew him. I'd helped him with some work, and he offered me a drink afterwards, so I humored him and agreed. It was subtle at first, y'know, sirens and missed calls. It's funny how things can be physically falling apart outside, people even, and you're ignorant to it. When we both stepped outside, it suddenly wasn't sounds of the city or my wife nagging me. It was everything.

This house is infected with Rot, and if we stay too long we'll be too. Even with the protection of our masks, and a buffer between our skin, the sick surfaces of this house cuts our stay to a few hours at most. With the food in my bag depleted and only an afternoon's worth of water, today is going exactly the same as the past few months. Just thinking about it, I want to just sit and let the Rot eat away at me, dissolve me into human soup, but I'll be damned if my last few moments are spent listening to Pat sniffle across from me. With his crying, my insides twist with what I wish was irritation. I mean, I get it, but he's seen it before. We've all seen someone fall apart. We've all seen it.

He was with me when I was heading back to my house, going to pick up my wife and three girls, though I made him stay in the car. I remember how our yard of green grass had turned to black mush, and the way our house seemed to sag. I went in anyway. I knew I shouldn't have but I did, and I saw them, or what was left. The kitchen floor sank where they were pooled in a soup of decay and the smell...It wasn't the first time I'd seen it, so I knew I couldn't touch any of it or breathe the air too long. So I only saw it and then I had to leave them. I had to. Two years ago that was, and the last time I spared tears. I'm not gonna start again, not now.

I look up at him, and his shoulders are shaking as he cries. I put my head in my hands and think that I should have killed him a long time ago. I should've. I should've. I should've. Sighing loudly, I tilt my head back and look up at the blackened ceiling. The wood's rotting, and whatever sunlight that streams in through the broken window reflects off the spores hanging heavily in the air. Splinters threaten to assault me along every surface, and just beyond myself, a large hole opens up the floor in the middle of what might've been a living room, a probable source of the Rot in this house. We sit across from each other, against the walls of the rickety structure on either side of the hole.

Sweat has soaked through my shirt, and dirt has been made part of my denim. He wears a mask too. It was a rule we'd made. We don't take them off unless it's to eat. We don't take off any gear unless absolutely necessary. The mold is ruthless now, made stronger by time and even with our gloves and scarves and layers of clothing, a few hours is all it needs to turn somebody into soup. Watching him in grim silence, I accept that only one of us is going to leave.

“You know,” I begin to say, leaning forward, “-this would be so much easier for me if you’d never invited me to drinks.”

Silence falls over us again, but it hums and creaks, all while Pat chokes on sobs and such. I sigh and clasp my leather clad hands before opening my mouth again.

“I should’ve killed you a long time ago, bud.”

The words are strange coming from my mouth, betraying my thoughts that saying them will convince me that that’s what I really want. Instead, it makes me want to shift where I sit, or just scream. It makes me restless. My eyes fall further down till finding the dull floorboards, and then I sigh again. Sweat’s rolling down my face, and my stature sags like this very house. He’s still crying, trying to be quiet, like he doesn’t want anyone to know how pathetic this whole situation is. How pathetic he is. How pathetic we all are. People like us, who live long, reach a point where we can no longer save face from the humiliation of being what we are. I open my mouth again, but then I close it. It’s funny how you can never find what you want to say in these kinds of situations, these hopeless situations.

We shouldn’t have gone in that convenience store. All the food we’ve found before then had been rotted through. I don’t know why he thought this time might be different. I guess, he was just...he was hopeful, and I was hopeful right along with him. I just don't know why things went down the way they did. Why that woman was there and why he took off his mask, and I never will, but now ‘why’ doesn’t matter. Nothing matters to me now that we sit here with nothing, and less than what we had. She took it all away, that woman in the convenience store.

Shifting, I stand up, the house creaking as I move like a man aged by time. I’m not, or at least I don’t think I am. The concept of time has become elusive. If anything I’m tired, which

makes the days seem long as they all come one after another. The days morph into weeks, into months and eventually years. All that time spent with Pat...maybe that's what tears my heart out about all this.

I walk around the room and stand in front of him. He removes his hands from his face and looks up at me. The gun in my pocket feels heavier than ever before. I'd used it, but I never thought I'd be...no never.

Through his visor, I watch him squeeze his eyes shut, all the creases form between his eyebrows as he takes a sharp breath in through his nose. Then his eyes are open and he's looking at me again.

"It's okay, I'm okay now," he murmurs, dragging his mask from his face. "Just do it."

I try to be aloof, distant, but my brows pull together. I even step back, and I can't stop myself as I raise my hand to where my mouth would be. I feel like my own body is betraying me. I don't want to feel this, I don't, I can't, but I do, and I have to close my eyes because I can't remember what his face looked like before. I can only see what it looks like now. The place where the woman's blood had touched his face is already eaten away. A hole, much like the one in the middle of the room, pulls back the curtains of his flesh, showing his decaying molars. For a moment, I imagine the stench.

I still can't find any words to say, and whatever's coming to mind, I don't want to say. I reach into my jacket and pull out the small handgun, but I don't take aim. The weight rests in my grip like lead.

"Why'd you...why-"

"I knew her," he cuts in, staring at my feet. "I thought she'd recognize me."

I vaguely recall her back, not her face for the Rot had eaten it away entirely. I recall her thinning black hair and the dress she was wearing, and how, when I looked at it, how it was like driving by a place you drive by everyday, but if you ever try to call out the name, nothing comes to mind; but you're sure you know and it's somewhere inside you, if only you could just turn and look, but you can't. You've already driven past it and it's far behind you now. The woman whom I also thought I knew, she would've been the last thing we had to hold on to, but now I know that wasn't right. Before her, I had Pat to lose, I had me.

“Come on, I don't have all day,” he chuckles, his eyes still on my feet.

I want to kick him for his joke, but I don't. I wish I could just kick him, and this could be done, but I know better and I do what I don't want to do and point my gun at his face. I have to use both hands to try and steady my trembling aim, the dark greys around us beginning to blur together as the air seems to thicken, and then I can only see him at the end of the barrel. Beaded sweat rolls down my face, my heart is pulsing in my ears and my mask is suffocating. I can't laugh at his joke now even if I want to. My hands are numb, even with the gun fitted snugly in their grip. He lifts his face, and it takes me a second of staring into his reddened eyes to realize I'm shaking.

“You were always a little shit to me, you know?” I say, my voice coming out unsteady and foreign.

He snorts, half smiling and he says real slow, “I know, I'm sorry.”

My eyes close as the hammer clicks, but I open them taking one last look. I stare into his eyes, and for a moment, I want him to tell me to wait, and I would. I'd just take a seat next to him and wait this out, even if that would be more screwed up, I'd do it. I'd do anything right

about now if it wasn't saying goodbye. But he says nothing. He doesn't tell me to wait. He just returns my gaze and then...he closes his eyes.

"Fuck you," I try to laugh, but my voice breaks and I can't tell if it's sweat or tears rolling down my face.

He laughs for me instead, even if it's small and barely audible, and I want him to do something else, tell me something, show a break in his resolve, but he keeps his eyes closed. My vision is blurry, but I can't wipe them and my heart is pounding, my ears ringing loudly like a parade of hell but even so, I keep my eyes open when I pull the trigger.

The bang dies off in silence and then everything is just that. Silent. I almost expect him to move, to talk, and for all this to not be real, but it is. He was here and now he isn't and he'll never be back. Nothing's ever coming back. My world is dying, if not already dead. I take my leave and stand outside, taking my mask off and feeling the brisk air against my wet skin. I look up at the clear sky, and it seems unreal. While blue, it's much too bright on a day like today. I continue to stare away from the Earth, waiting to fall apart in one way or another, hearing nothing in my ears, not birds or even the wind. I can't remember what cars sound like. I sigh. I may not be alone, but I'm lost. Me, my mind, lost, rotted.

