

The Dead Man Standing Upright At The Final Roundabout

Hunched over the reflecting pool, the stranger in white heaved up sins and was silent. The smell that rose in response to the ejection was not so much rancid as it was overwhelming; the odors of butterscotch, cream, spiced almonds, and personal loathing lingered with all the grace and charm of an unhygienic guest in a bad luck hotel with hidden bodies.

Surrounded by walls of names and dates of expiration, the stranger had lost consciousness. While she remained erect, she had slipped away from reality in a temporary coma of despair. Below her, in the once clear and pristine water, swirls of offensive color now mixed in an inopportune oil painting repelled by the very canvas it had been sprayed upon.

She had been kneeling in the No Man's Land Memorial site for well over two hours now. It was actually the Joseph Thatcher Memorial, named after a sergeant in the U.S. Army who was held solely responsible for saving thousands of men and women during the war. He hadn't been able to spare multiple nations from nuclear annihilation, no - nor had his sacrifice prevented the vast casualties of innocents by air and sea. And he had not been capable of stopping the endless tide of climate's wrath once the literal and figurative smoke of the final battle had cleared. But he had protected a middle-sized town close to the new capital of the country from death by malfunctioning New Age Gatling. And that had been enough for some statues and a reflecting pool.

Abraham Lincoln, who also had the honor of a shallow basin that held the souls of former slaves and millions of dead soldiers, would have been proud.

The stranger in white stood up, and her legs shook violently. The taste of stale, alcoholic bile in her mouth was familiar to her, but not exactly comfortable. She had waited for the last of the afternoon round of visitors who routinely "paid their respects" to leave, only so she could upchuck the last of her spirit into what was supposed to be a symbol of meditation and calm and stability.

Tomorrow would be her Reckoning. And she was not ready for it.

World War III had officially ended midway through the twenty-first century, but the repercussions of this conflict would last for millennia, according to those scientists who hadn't died quickly from radiation poisoning. In the end, one hundred forty-six out of one hundred ninety-five nations had

been removed from the map as if by a Clorox disinfectant wipe. Most of them were in Africa and Asia. So it went.

When the ceasefire had been signed and the corpses that hadn't been blasted into subatomic particles had been carted away, the remaining superpowers set to work reconstructing. It didn't help that half of the United States was now uninhabitable, due to both nuclear recklessness and already risen sea levels. Scotland was now the new London, so the prime minister was still getting used to that. Those who had survived learned to live frugally, sparingly. Luxury, to most citizens, had always been simply out of reach; now they had been taught that it was a thing of the past, an artifact to be admired from a display case in a museum. Everyone lived with humility, fortunate to be alive.

The stranger in white had been an exception. She did not live frugally or sparingly: she *was* Luxury. She had been raised in a Tudor-style mansion on the west end of San Francisco, and she had basked in the tanning bed heat that was affluence. All the tutors and private lessons bestowed upon her made her an exemplary student, and a full scholarship made her, well, an exemplary scholar, and a bachelor's and master's had helped her become an exemplary professional. She had raised businesses up and then carelessly driven them into the ground with the stamp of her foot. Luxury does not look kindly on neurological maturity. It makes the rich think too much.

That was all long gone. California had been half-razed by bombs, half-swallowed by warm sea foam and water where the skeletons of marine life floated and bobbed along shorelines without anyone around to clean them up. She lived now in the new capital of the preserved United States, right in the buzzsaw beak of what had once been known as Minnesota. Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New York - and all the other hapless borders of the east coast that had once been the home of millions - were long gone.

The stranger in white spent most of her days drinking: Sweet stuff, usually, mixed, cocktails made from inferior liqueur and schnapps (though how it can be deemed inferior when nothing better than that exists anymore all boils down to unreliable memories), drinks that tasted good but still had the deftness of a horse's hoof planted straight into the back of the head, just above the spine. She drank herself stupid, then dragged herself out of Clinton's Pub after leaving a stack of withered greens on the counter, then walked for miles, in circles, all around New Washington, D.C. And most nights, she would end up at the No Man's Land Memorial.

Many of the names written on the walls of the memorial were not real names. And many others were simply logistical details. Numbers, ranks, units. A sizable portion of those who were commemorated

here could not be identified. You can't blow on a pile of dust and disintegrated bone and expect a name to form in the ashes. No man's land, indeed.

The stranger in white knew fear from a perch on a pedestal. She knew it from the bosom of Privilege. It had held her like a child and squeezed her as if to wring out all the paranoia and discomfort that Luxury ever felt. Poured out, sugar-rimmed, and served with a mint garnish.

The stranger in white sat where rain still fell without burning, the air crisp and cool like fresh autumn in January. The lingering taste of protein and dairy and whiskey all stirred together in a smoldering cauldron. Wet hands. Shaking legs. She sat.

And she thought of Anna.

Up seven stories in the air, and overlooking the No Man's Land Memorial as if an owl were eyeing a mouse in the dead of night, a chandelier in a penthouse glowed. It was lit in soft blues and yellows, mellow in the large loft space, as if the evening sun were brushing its lips consensually against an oily ocean. The electrical grid had been fried for over sixteen years and had yet to be restored in over seventy-five percent of the new United States. EMPs from neighboring enemy nations. Sayonara, satellite reception. Ciao, cellphones. In a while, Internet crocodile. And all that jazz.

Within the chilly vacuum that was the sparsely furnished penthouse, Peyton Loving made herself an early dinner. It wasn't much: Beans, crackers, cold cheese on dry bread (obviously, she couldn't use a toaster, and she wasn't in the mood to heat anything up on the gas stove besides the beans). She had lit a match and set the mess in the tin can bubbling. The smell reminded her of a taqueria she had frequented as a child. She remembered onions and cilantro. And avocado. Fresh.

Food wasn't as scarce these days; there just wasn't as much variety at the grocery stores anymore, at the tiny markets that clustered around dusty city blocks like termites, where everyone itched for a bite of something that wasn't just pork and wheat. New Washington, the artist formerly known as Minnesota, had lost over ninety-five percent of its bee colonies in the final year of World War III - which New Washingtonians called the "Worthless War," a far cry from the Great War of the previous century - and no other states could offer back-up.

Whatever fruits and vegetables one could get were grossly expensive, so Peyton enjoyed the small quantity of laboratory processed cheddar she could snag, and the beans, and the crackers, the latter of which being at least flavored with the slightest scintilla of flaky parmesan.

She lived a solitary life, and willingly so. A few months prior, a squad of squatters had accompanied her, and the days that slogged by were filled to the brim with the aroma of bad marijuana, the sight of half-naked bodies hungover from black market booze, and the sound of continuous arguments over who kept eating the goddamn plums out of the icebox, for Christ's sake - they were being saved for breakfast. The fighting had gotten so nasty that Peyton had grown used to seeing a "roommate" with two smarting black eyes, or another choking down ibuprofen like mints, or yet another splinting their own arm with cardboard and masking tape because the healthcare system had already been broken before the war: why the hell would it be better now? She was grateful when, one by one, the others departed for "better places." And she was left blissfully, and comfortably, alone.

When the beans had threatened to devolve into a hot, soggy mess, Peyton carefully removed the red hot tin from the stove and let it cool on a broken china plate on the marble counter. She ate the cheese bread and crackers while she waited for the main course, nibbling on fake dairy and wafers that still surprisingly held up in crispiness.

Peyton Loving was thirty-one years old - stout when younger, now toned with a kind of muscle that would help her temporarily survive another nuclear winter. She had dark brown skin, short curly hair, and a tarnished silver nose ring that descended toward a perpetually arched upper lip. When she worked, she sat on the stool behind the counter with her back straight and her head up; her father had literally beaten her out of bad posture, citing the sin of an arched back. When she smiled, it was crooked on one side, the left cheek refusing to pull into proper symmetry.

Once, in the middle of the war, Peyton had met and fallen in love with a discharged soldier - a lance corporal named Mika Lang, who had lost her right arm below the elbow in the First Siege of Manhattan. While ground forces had rarely been utilized in World War III, she had been on the frontlines, and the sights she had seen had done wonders to her mentally. Instead of curling up in the fetal position every time someone miraculously got their hands on fireworks, she danced and sang and screamed as if it were the Fourth of July. Instead of suffering insomnia or night terrors, she hogged the blankets and made a fort for herself on the mattress. Instead of jolting at the slightest touch that could be misconstrued as an assassination attempt, she took in every stroke, every hug, every kiss. The date nights were jubilation: The sex was catharsis. All bursting like champagne from a bottle, the cork sailing into the stars: Stars. That was what they watched together, before the unending haze of smog,

and the smoke from burning fires in trash cans, and the lamps that had once been run by electricity. They lay on the rooftop of Mika's squat, one-story house that she had been bequeathed by the U.S. Military, and they watched the stars.

The infection that Mika had contracted from accidentally stepping on a goddamn nail had spread too quickly for even the last good doctors to treat, and she died of sepsis on an operating table, where they had been working to remove her left leg. Peyton knew, deep down, that even as a double amputee, the corporal could have taken it. True, she would have whined like a little bitch over using a wheelchair, but she got over things quickly, like an itch. But this itch had grown too large and irritating to scratch, and thus, Mika Lang's flesh was ripped apart by scalpels, only to have her mutilated corpse radiate, like phosphorus at the bottom of the sea, on stainless steel. That had been before the first of the EMPs, before the transformers were reduced to useless tangles of permeable silicon steel. Mika died, and the power went out with her.

Peyton had adjusted to the smokiness of the chandelier. The oil that lit the penthouse smelled of salt and fat and just the slightest hint of krill - whatever was left of it. The fact that whale blubber was even still around was shocking. Or maybe not. Whatever could be produced in a petri dish, whatever could be replicated from cells on a slide, whatever the last of the scientists huddled in those cities that belonged to the twenty-five percent that managed to hold onto electrical power...was produced. Expensive. Scarce. But still produced.

Fetching the now thoroughly cooled can, Peyton walked to the nearest large window, scooped the beans up with a large wooden spoon, blew on them, and ate them as each little fireball was reduced to a damp and tasteless ember. Beyond the penthouse, she could see two specific things, or "landmarks," as she called them. One was the Joseph Thatcher Memorial, a spiral of walls similar to the Vietnam Memorial, all circling like pinwheels of dark, stony ants toward a long and pristine reflecting pool. Or at least, it should be pristine. People pissed and shat in it all the time. Some as an act of rebellion, some out of anger and grief, some because they just couldn't help themselves. Public mourning at its finest.

To the right of the memorial was a roundabout, or as her childhood friend Reggie called it, a "turtle circle," which she always chuckled at. It encircled a statue of a Native American chief, as if an image of the original inhabitants of the North American continent would make the present any more digestible. A few cars, once in a while, coasted through it; sometimes, a Jeep or a jalopy would loop and loop and loop as if stuck on the groove of an old vinyl record. At first, Peyton found it silly, but then it occurred to her that perhaps swerving forever in that roundabout gave the illusion that the cycle of life would never end.

The roundabout didn't lead to much; New Washington D.C., yes, was the capital and home to a handful of representatives and senators and a president who actually clung to the Constitution rather than shredding it. But there wasn't much else. Capitol Hill was now a literal hill, narrow winding roads squiggling their way up to the brick buildings like sad, malnourished snakes. The offices of politicians were old schoolhouses, old warehouses, old garages - warm in the summer, warm in the winter, fans operated by hand. Those offices with power used it sparingly. But there wasn't much else.

There were a few reasons to go out and take a stroll at night; November afternoons and nights could be quite lovely, especially when it rained. And it was raining now, and the water splattered the penthouse window like spit, the saliva of an unforgiving God. He made it very clear that He had abandoned his sinful children. They had been the ones to nail themselves to the cross this time around.

Peyton decided to observe a man standing on the curb by the roundabout. He couldn't have been much older than her: Heavier, yes, and balding, but even from seven stories up, she could tell, yes, not much older. Dressed in an old, ratty brown suit, a briefcase dangling from a limp hand, he stood as if waiting to cross the roundabout. But there was barely any traffic, and the nearest pedestrian section was still about twenty feet away, and the man simply wasn't moving. He stood still - quiet, somber, like he belonged in the memorial nearby as a new monument.

Business was not booming in New Washington, D.C; any skyscrapers that remained were overall empty. People needed their supermarkets. They needed their clothing boutiques, their thrift stops, their autobody shops, their watering holes and their fine dining. They needed dollar stores, gas stations, ice cream parlors, fast food joints, hotels, souvenir stands, and pharmacies. They needed parks, playgrounds, public bathrooms patrolled by a single guard in a blue uniform with a cheap-ass plastic-looking badge; they needed dentists and optometrists and dermatologists, and police stations and the fire department and at least one ambulance that was able to navigate streets cleaned up by very necessary garbage workers. They needed theaters that once again relied more on live actors than film stars, and the post office that was no longer scrounging for business, and even the odd little novelty bookstore that sold more bobblehead action figures from forgotten pop culture than actual novels and anthologies. And of course, if the town was lucky enough to have working copper wiring, people needed their electronics. What they did not need were salespeople.

And yet, there was a salesperson, and he almost looked snipped out of a faded magazine, even down to the floppy necktie he probably inherited from his father. And he was still standing by the roundabout. And he was still very, very still.

It was already odd enough, to Peyton, to see a man in what looked like hand-me-down Wall Street attire holding a fake leather briefcase pacing the streets as if he were a fisherman wandering in the desert. The fact that he hadn't moved was more than odd. It was eerie.

She turned away from the window for a moment, if only to dump the miserable scraps of her hobo dinner into the sink. Because the electrical grid had also been responsible for running water, Peyton had to pump a lever for the liquid to pour out into the tin. If she were to drink it, she would boil it first. Cholera had returned with a vengeance to America, and she was not in the mood to travel to the only hospital in the capital, which was already packed to bursting because it was in a pocket of power innage, not outage. She had no interest in dealing with the tired nurses who probably wished they were dead. And she could never afford the bills.

Peyton was about to return to her "observation tower" when she heard the scream. It sliced into the woman's ears with all the tenacity and infectious nature of a rusty X-Acto knife. It jammed its shrieking fingers into the fissures in the window's glass and pulled, hard, just to get the sound to squeeze itself in. It penetrated Peyton's soul. It violated her.

When the scream subsided, she heard chittering. She heard weeping. She heard moaning. She heard...sirens. The police force in the capital, regardless of the meager population and the lack of funding, always appreciated having something to do. The few cars they had (most of them opted to ride bicycles, with bells instead of sirens. Very intimidating) would weave their way through the capital that was once Duluth just to snag any perpetrator, or question any dissenters, or drag away any altercation. Again, there wasn't much out there. And then the scream began again in earnest - not as loud as before, not as primal or mad or jarring - but it was there. Peyton heard it but couldn't understand the words.

The man in the suit had not moved from the roundabout. Beside him now was a woman dressed entirely in white, though the front of her shirt looked stained with...wine? Vomit? Purpled blood? There were two beaten up police cars now, beached against the curb like dying orcas. The officers who had stepped out of the vehicles wore gray uniforms. Their hands were planted firmly on the butt of their revolvers.

It occurred to Peyton, finally, as she watched the scene unfold in front of her like a cheap graphic novel, what had actually happened. The salesman, whoever he was, wherever he had come from, wherever he

was going, was not well. And Curiosity sank her teeth hard into Peyton's neck, and the vampiric allure of "needing to know" was too overpowering.

So she abandoned her penthouse, for the time being. Bounded down seven flights of stairs because the elevator was out of order (it had been electric, and no one was going to make that concerted effort to replace it with something mechanical), and she needed the cardio, anyway, so she didn't mind. She abandoned her queen-sized bed and decaying couch, and her oil-lit chandelier and pump-operated sink, and her icebox. And she stepped out into the cold, misty air of a late November afternoon, where what remained of the rain peppered her, seasoned her, like she was meat for the gods to feast on.

"What's happening?" asked Peyton Loving, a little loudly, a little boldly.

The police officers were both men, portly and bearded, and wore sunglasses, even though the overcast sky made it very clear that they didn't need them. They didn't take their eyes off the man, nor the woman who was still nearly convulsing as she cried, though quietly this time, her body jerking and shoulders shaking in order to compensate for the lack of noise.

"Not sure, ma'am," said one officer, not shifting his gaze from his prime suspect, who still stood very, very still. "This lady started screaming, and someone called us. We're just here to investigate."

"You *bastards*," wailed the stranger in white. Her hands were in front of her face. Curled, stiff, like a defensive hawk's talons. "You stupid sons of *bitches*. He's dead. I told you, that man is *dead!*"

Peyton stiffened. It was as if she had achieved rigor mortis just from the mere thought of it, from the mere *thought* that the man who stood at the roundabout, now only a few feet away, had been rendered a still, rigid husk. The second officer, the one who hadn't spoken, approached the man rapidly. It was then that Peyton finally got to take a good, hard look at the eyes.

The eyes. Meant to glisten, meant to water, meant to flicker and roll and twinkle and weep and provide that ever open window into the soul. Meant to hold *life*. Instead, the man's eyes were dry, bulbous, like marbles left out in a heat wave to crack and blister. The red veins had gone to pink, gone to gray, gone to stark, staring white. The pupils were small: Needle points. Microscopic black holes.

The man had died standing up. And for some reason - be it equilibrium, be it the weight of the rain and fog, be it the lack of wind, be it the very air that still harbored the poisoned nectar of Caesium-137 from miles away - he had not fallen. Gravity had not claimed him yet. But mortality had.

There, at the final roundabout, a corpse was held up by an invisible puppet master. What was left of his soul had departed, and now the officers had to call back-up.

So they called the local morgue. And the hearse arrived when the rain started pummeling the street again. And the stranger in white fell into Peyton's arms and bawled, because there was nowhere else to fall.

The stranger in white wound up in Peyton's penthouse that evening, and Peyton prepared her a cup of peppermint tea. It was easy to boil the water on the gas stove, and when she proffered the chipped ceramic mug to her guest, the woman took it gratefully. She held it between her palms, as if waiting for the heat to extend her life lines, and intermittently blew at the offending steam.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Peyton said to her, not knowing what else she could have said in the moment. When she wasn't in customer service mode, she didn't exactly know how to respond to such a disconcerting situation.

The stranger in white said nothing - at least, not at first. When Peyton sat down across from her - stranger on the couch, her on a dilapidated easy chair that looked as if it had been exposed to the worst of mankind's trespasses - they both sipped tea silently. For Peyton had also felt the need for mint, as if cleansing her palate with the flavor of her meager toothpaste would erase what she had witnessed seven stories below.

"Tea's good," said the stranger in white.

"I'm glad."

"He was so young," said the stranger in white. "Thirties. Maybe even twenties. He died right there. So fucking young."

Peyton's knuckles were as pale as the blazer that her unexpected guest wore. She clenched the mug's handle as if it were the grip of Mika's fingers - thin, bony, as the infection had taken hold of her like a swaddle wrapping around an unassuming baby. Her knuckles were stark, translucent, in the oily light of the chandelier. She drank tea. It spread weak mint and apologies across her tongue.

Outside, the morgue and the police had done their work. They had swept up the body as if it were a feather or leaf, locked it in a box, embalmed its memory with the perfumes of car exhaust and single stationary bulbs. Plastic. Burning. It smelled of tupperware parties. It smelled of the past. It smelled of mass manufactured regret.

Funny how such an odor could creep up the walls of the building like an old arachnid superhero, could wedge its way into the nostrils of unassuming tenants. The artificial, charred smell of childhood trauma, of fraying neuroses, of breakdowns. Of breakdowns. Before the war even started. Of breakdowns...

"He met his Reckoning today." The stranger in white had said this with the bounce and clicking of some other haphazard woodwind threatening to leave its footprint on the bare chest of a non-consenting orchestra. "His Reckoning. Do you know what that is?"

Peyton didn't know how to answer. She had heard of rapture, of a second coming. Her father had been a born-again Christian - bursting from Jesus's womb, clawing the umbilical cord, gnawing at it. But beyond that, reckoning meant something else. Something deserved.

"I suppose," she said slowly, almost thoughtfully, "it's the moment you are meant to die?"

She must have gotten it right, for the stranger in white's eyes grew very wide, and the half-opaque, half transparent nature of her sclera glowed beneath the chandelier.

"You know," she murmured. "You know. By God, you *know*. See, don't you understand? It has been so, so long since I knew anyone who could *understand*. Yes, the moment...yes, the reckoning...yes, you see...myself, my Reckoning is tomorrow. I will not speak to it, but I will greet it, and shake its hand. Because I was meant to die sooner, you see, much sooner. Before Anna, even. Before..."

The stranger fell silent, and she collapsed into the ashen cushions of the couch, barely able to hold her marionette-like body up. And she was white - all white. All pale and bereft of color, save for the stains on her shirt and jacket. And all through her brief rant, Peyton had stared, had wondered, what in the bloody fucking hell had I been thinking, man, inviting her up here. Inviting a crazy goddamn loon up here. To drink my tea and sit on my couch and breathe in my air, as if she deserved it, as if she had wished to die before that damned salesman had, out at the final roundabout...

She had said she planned to die the next day.

Could Peyton stop it? And did she even care that much?

"You see, Anna," the stranger suddenly interjected, "was my one true love. And she died of pneumonia. The doctors couldn't save her, you see. Not with the EMPs, and what was happening in California, and what happened...have you ever had a true love, honey? A real, madly deeply, true love?"

"Yes," Peyton couldn't help blurting out. "Lance Corporal Mika Lang, of the seventeenth battalion, hero of the Siege of Manhattan."

She had not shared that with anybody, not even her family. Nothing was sacred in the land of eternal violence. And now, there she was - and there the stranger was - and she was spilling her guts out as if they were as free and loose as tissue in a wicker basket. She had said it. Declared it. Owned it. Mika Lang. Lance corporal. Miss you, boo. And that was that.

The stranger in white's Reckoning was tomorrow. And she made it clear that she wanted no one there with her.

"I'll be traveling," she explained. "By the train, the one train we got. I'll be going back to where my mansion was. To where San Francisco used to be. And I will bury myself in sand, and let the tide roll in..."

"Would Anna be okay with that?" asked Peyton.

She did not even know who Anna was, and yet, she had a feeling. Kindred spirits still existed, in this day and age. Still thrived and writhed within polluted landscapes and no man's land. Within a land of uncertainty. Within...

"Thank you for the tea," said the stranger in white, and she stood up to go, and she left Peyton alone in that penthouse, like a simple breeze had wafted in. A breeze that smelled of butterscotch, and cream, and spiced almonds, and personal loathing. And peppermint. The new addition of peppermint, the new ingredient, stirred in.

Outside, the roundabout was empty, a circle that had no end and yet no further purpose beyond the lack of ends - the illusion of no ends. The memorial's reflecting pool rippled with rain. And around the

globe, more people met their Reckoning. More people were eager to meet their celestial maker. To be forgiven. To be forgotten. To be sated. And to be numbed.

And they died standing upright.