

AN EXCERPT FROM *APOCALYTOPIA*

by

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As a creative writer, I initially pursued a Master of Arts degree in order to improve my writing process and network with other writers who could help shape my work and my worldview. While I also looked forward to the prospect of reading literature more deeply and understanding the dialectic relationship between literature and cultural developments, process improvement and peer interaction were my primary motivators.

However, as I learned to analyze literature and think critically about narrative works as reflections of the conditions that produce them, I became a more passionate person. Not only did I enjoy reading more and see the improvement that I had hoped to see in my own writing, but my understanding of the world around me deepened: my perception of social inequities, my appreciation for goodness in the midst of upheaval, my respect for the opportunities that other peoples' sacrifices have made available to me, and my ability to recognize and appreciate each and every life, job, and viewpoint as a binding molecule in the matter of life.

I owe my self-actualization to the faculty of the Department of English, whose patience, sincerity, and wisdom over the last 10 years have made me proud to see the world as I do.

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ABSTRACT

AN EXCERPT FROM *APOCALYTOPIA*

Eric Joseph Angeletti

This thesis is an excerpt from a full-length frame narrative that I intend to call *Apocalytopia*. In this frame narrative modeled after *The Canterbury Tales*, a group of survivors traveling to a safe haven after a global catastrophe pass their time on the road by telling stories about their new world. The excerpt submitted here begins with a former photographer telling a story about a lone survivor's struggle to cope with solitude. The questions his tale raises about the nature of loneliness, wonder, and the definition of community initiate a conversation between some of his companions, whose subsequent banter and storytelling not only presents three starkly different depictions of human interaction, but questions the travelers' own sense of community and the nature of storytelling as well. These layers of interpretation are a hallmark of frame narratives, and the goal of this thesis is to suggest that each traveler's role as both a character and a storyteller is analogous to real authors' participation in the evolution of literature and the diversity of literary styles.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S TALE

The scavenger emerged from the underbrush and queried the evening air for signs of life. In front of him was a plain of jagged asphalt that had been a parking lot before the calamities, and across it were the ruins of a thrift store he'd waited the entire winter to exploit. Like a deer minding creaking branches, he rolled forward, each step caressing the dying earth, his head swiveling on a pivot, ready to vanish back into the thicket at any unexpected sign of life.

Fifteen years earlier, when the world had just changed and his mother was still alive, she had warned her son that people could not accept him. She'd said she loved him with all her heart, and she did, but she had no faith that the people bold enough to survive the world's end could see a grown man with a child's mind as anything but a liability. *Remember, sweetie, no one will understand you like your mother. Promise mommy you'll remember. I want you to promise.* He'd outlived her by a decade, but he'd remembered his promise, and he savored days like this one when the stillness let him listen so closely for danger.

When all of the people began to die, only then did the scavenger learn how to meet them. He had spent his adolescence confined, watching his mother's finger bend the crack between the curtains like a harp string while she kept an eye on the little heathens who might harm her child. But now, without her and without so many of the people she'd distrusted, all things once denied to him were treasure. The shattered remnants belonged to no one, and their contents were a survivor's to explore. And today, the prize was a long-anticipated tomb.

Content with his assessment of the air, the scavenger slinked toward the ruin, and when he arrived, he realized he'd underestimated the extent of the damage, and so he let his mind drift from security to ingenuity and eventually surmised that he should admit himself through what was left of the roof.

From beneath his overcoat, he produced a pry bar and a claw hammer and prepared to climb, analyzing the rubble for a sure route to the top, but the promise of exploration ruined his concentration. The winter had been hard, and it had been weeks since he'd satiated his desire to explore. His mind began to imagine in too much detail what riches awaited him, and excitement overwhelmed him. His carefulness melted away. His knees began to shake, a sneer crept across his face, and he surrendered himself to anticipation. He charged the rubble and scaled it in a heartbeat, and once atop it he shrieked at the sky with his arms akimbo like a warrior in bloodlust before looking down and mauling the rubble beneath him mindlessly, violently, as if the earthquakes hadn't finished their job and he was their second coming.

When the adrenaline faded, he grew uncomfortably aware of his fit and scolded himself with something like a whimper. As wariness returned, he was relieved to detect no sign of witnesses, and when he had sulked enough to catch his breath and chase away embarrassment, he reexamined the remnants of the roof and quickly found a wide enough hole that ran straight to the floor. Hitching a rope to a piece of rebar, he repelled into shadow.

For the scavenger, treasure took many forms. He could imagine a story for every trinket he'd ever found, and anything that could be turned into a work of art would grab his affection for at least a moment. As long as he looked hard enough, nearly every home and store contained something he'd never seen before that deserved to be collected if for no other reason than the scavenger's unfamiliarity with it. But there was one kind of treasure he could never see too often. Emotions like joy and expressions like laughter were among the few complexities that the scavenger understood, though he'd rarely experienced them before his independence, and in the photographs he found in homes, only happiness ever seemed to be immortalized. House after house for years on end, he'd seen thousands of photographs, sometimes entire books filled with

them, and no one in them ever seemed to be unhappy. The people in them were exactly as he'd imagined they would've been when he was a child: warm, welcoming, and thrilled to become his friend.

So it was no doubt a blessed fortune that when the scavenger wound the crank of his flashlight and flicked it on, he immediately found its beam resting on the most beautiful photograph he'd ever seen. It was a three-foot-tall portrait of a family of five, relegated to a thrift store shelf for reasons he couldn't imagine, the nonsensicalness of its presence irrelevant. By virtue of some miracle, it had survived the quakes and years of weathering, and though the glass was dusty, the joy in its occupants' eyes pierced through the haze. Nothing else had been so lucky, and the image now hung on the wall alone like a single, glorious note on an otherwise blank bar of music.

The scavenger shuffled forward, one unencumbered arm outstretched. When he arrived at the thing, he gently pawed away the dust and scanned the faces beneath his wandering fingertip and imagined what their lives had been like.

The father stood in back, his hands on his seated wife's shoulders and something even better than a smile on face. He was wide-eyed and open-mouthed with no tug at the corners of his lips. Just a portal to his heart framed by teeth. He did not look at the camera but instead beyond it and away, as if savoring a liberating realization that his life in that moment couldn't be more perfect.

His wife wore a black dress and string of pearls. She sat at the edge of the family's couch, leaning forward to be as close to her children as possible, and though her hair was a different color and her face was of different descent, she reminded the scavenger of his own mother,

because the way she grasped one of her son's hands with both of hers and showed her teeth as she stared at the camera meant she must've loved him dearly.

Despite his mother's joy, the son was stern and bothered, but who could hold angst against a boy of 9? Surely his mind was on whatever adventure in the trees beyond the cul-de-sac he and his friends would have when his commitment to the portrait was finished.

The eldest child had a hand on the perturbed boy's shoulder, and the scavenger was ashamed that it took him a moment to discern that the child was a girl. He looked away from her at the darkness, confused by her androgyny and afraid to look back for fear that he'd have offended her, but when he summoned the courage to engage her eyes again, she was still smiling and hadn't seemed to take offense.

Lying on the floor in front of the family with her legs outstretched and her torso curving up toward the asymptote of her mother's forward leg was the youngest child, a radiant little girl with her hair amassed in a bow too large for her head. She had each arm around a whippet, and together with the tilted heads of those creatures she was positioned as if somehow she had existed before them all and the family had been constructed upon her.

All other treasure fell away. The scavenger's head instinctively swiveled to take stock of what else lay about, but there was nothing behind the gesture but habit. He needed nothing else at that moment, and he resolved to return to the ruins another day.

He eased the portrait off the wall and carried it back to the hole in the roof, fastening the end of his rope around the hanging wire and hauling it up behind him after he'd shimmied back into the light. Exposed once again, he scanned the horizon. Still alone, and still safe, he packed away his rope and light and carried his prize on his back into the bushes.

By the time he reached his camp, it was too dark for the new family to truly appreciate his handiwork, and he was disappointed that he could not yet show them the compound he had built around an old two-story farmhouse that had survived the calamity. They'd have to wait another day to see his assortment of crops and junk, the maze of sustenance and clutter that had kept him occupied for so many years. Another day to see the necklaces and fishing lures that dangled from rusted bicycle tires and tinkled with the wind, the rock gardens of building blocks and bottle caps, the dollhouse cities made from modeling toys and the shells of electronics, the seemingly infinite rows of bookshelves adorned with knickknacks of every conceivable purpose and design. No, for now, they'd have to settle for what waited inside.

As he carried his new friends across the threshold, the scavenger beamed at his greatest collection of all: an endless collage of smiling faces. In that home, every inch of every wall was filled from floor to ceiling with bright faces frozen in time, each of the hallways and every room bearing thousands of identities existing outside their reality, surviving the end of the world if only as the two-dimensional company of a madman. The scavenger had run out of room for his pictures quite some time ago and had brought in junk that he'd stacked into piles and covered with the overflow, and he weaved his new prize between these stalagmites, nodding his head in acknowledgment to as many of the faces as he could as he made his way to what had once been the living room.

With years of work, the scavenger had turned the living area into something of a stadium, emptying it of all furniture, removing most of the ceiling and floor of the house's second story, and rigging up rounded walls so that the room reached twenty feet up, all the way to the attic, every inch of the tower covered with faces, each one of them having a perfect view of the master of the house.

He propped his new friends up against the fireplace and started a fire. When the kindling ignited, he smiled again at each face in the portrait before turning to introduce them to all the other friends in attendance. Raising his arms, he vocalized something jubilant that echoed through the house, to every corner and to every face he couldn't see but wanted to include in the welcoming. And then, the ceremony began.

The scavenger pointed to a photograph of a drum line cut from a high school year book and vocalized again as he began to tap his foot, and a trickle of rhythmic snaps and taps began running through his mind as he imagined them setting a beat. With the drummers' sticks in motion, it was time for some horns, and he pointed to the brass band of a New Orleans second line and summoned puffs and blasts out of the frame and into his head for a rhythm.

The scavenger started bouncing. He looked over his shoulder at the new family, their faces locked in anticipation and awe, and he grinned. *We'll make you feel at home.* He turned back to the bands and swayed as he bounced, his body bobbing left and right. *Louder!* The drums and brass crescendoed. Again and again he pointed, each time to a new image, each time drawing in another instrument or a voice, each one making the song in his head play louder and faster.

The fire behind him continued to grow as he pointed and moved, and soon he couldn't bear his coat and let it slide from his arms to the floor. Still not content with the volume and pace of his symphony, he invited his audience to dance. For each face in the crowd, he knew a favorite move, and he performed each one tirelessly to appease them. Now and then he would stumble or fall, but there was no shame, because all he had to do was look up to see that everyone was still smiling. Everyone still approved. Dozen by dozen, the faces poured off the

wall onto the dancefloor, every one of them begging him to dance forever. *We need more! More! Louder!* He let his mind run wild.

The fire was roaring now, the tips of each flame licking in time with the rhythm but still burning with less intensity than the music that fueled the man's frenzy. He looked again to his newest friends—the guests of honor—and found them having a wonderful time. In the midst of his convulsions he extended a hand and beckoned for them to join. Then he closed his eyes, threw his arms at the sky, and continued his gyrations, confident that they would find their courage and come along soon.

As the sweat poured out of his body, he peeled his shirt away. He moved harder and faster as he heard friends begin to dance in each of the other rooms. He jumped and twisted and wiggled and flailed. Drums like thunder, trumpets played by angels. *More! More! More!* Piece by piece, he shed his soaking clothes until there was nothing left. He waved his arms and flexed his fingers. He curled his toes, closed his eyes, and threw back his head to scream for more music, blissfully unaware that a passerby would've heard only the crackling of a fire and the stomps and grunting of a man possessed. He opened his eyes to see his shadow writhe and pulse across the fire-lit wall of faces, each one locked in eternal approval at the man who had gathered them together to live again. Every eye was on him, every smile loved him, and no one had ever seen a spectacle so grand. He closed his eyes and carried on, basking in the admiration, dancing naked in silence for the greatest friends in the world.

THE BRICKLAYER'S PROLOGUE

"That's autobiographical, right?" asked the barman as he slammed a fresh beer into the photographer's hand.

"Of course! Don't I give off that 'crazy loner man-child' vibe like a champ?"

"I don't know about that," said the bricklayer, "But the way you talk about missin' your trade, I wouldn't put it past you to dance naked in a room full of pictures if you found one."

"You got me there."

Relief spread around the fire in the form of laughter, and the tone set by the veteran's memories began to give way to the good spirit that began the contest in the first place. To that end, the photographer had done what was asked of him.

"I feel bad for your man there, though," the bricklayer added. "I'd hate to be so afraid of people."

Before the photographer could answer, a reply came from a man who heretofore had kept to himself, and he was one of the few among us that I hadn't formally met, though I knew through one of my many new acquaintances that he'd made quite a successful living writing software for a company in Dallas.

"There are some pretty good reasons to fear real people, aren't there?" the programmer asked. "Especially these days."

"Sure there are," the bricklayer replied, "but we still need other people. Maybe not the guy in 'at story, but the rest of us do. S'why we're all in this room together. If we just figure everyone for a robber, no one's gettin' anywhere."

"True. But we're not all as stupid as that scavenger," the programmer said.

“Now hold on. Sure, he’s dancing, makin’ up stories about people, and actin’ afraid, but he ain’t stupid. He’s got food, he builds, he makes a fire—”

“You know it’s a story, right?” the programmer snapped.

“I know that. Ok? I might not be good with art, or whatever, and I don’t even know if these things we’re tellin’ is art, but the guy in the story ain’t stupid. Trust me, you can’t just make assumptions about every kooky person, ‘cuz sometimes they’ll surprise the hell outta ya.”

“Sounds like a story!” the barman cried, seizing his first opportunity to defuse the two.

The bricklayer shied from the offer. “I’m no storyteller, Doug.”

“The hell you’re not,” the barman answered. “Tell that to any poor girl you try to buy a drink.”

“Give it a shot,” the photographer added. “How bad could it be?”

Eventually, the pressure came from too many people for the man to do anything but comply. “All right, damn it,” the bricklayer conceded. “Here’s what I know about it.”

THE BRICKLAYER'S TALE

City folks might not understand it, but in the country, a lot of quiet roads are timeless. They may not be glamorous—made with that kinda yellow concrete that packs about sixty different colors in a square foot instead of that smooth blacktop—but they last damn near forever, and when the tall grass on the shoulder starts to meld into the sides of it, hidin' the clean edges and growin' up through the frost heaves and other cracks, you almost forget there's a road at all while you're on it. They roll up and over one hill after th'other, dippin' and curvin' into blind turns that make the 24-foot legal width look a lot more like 10 feet, and they make you wonder if the people who put 'em down in the first place ever guessed that they'd be driven by anyone at all but the occasional old pickup on a once-a-week run into town. Now, I don't know if you all know what I'm talking about, or maybe I just can't explain it, but there's a charm to 'em, and in a world where there's no gas left to run cars up and down 'em, I imagine an encounter on one might go something like theforeis.

On a worn old highway headin' southwest into Houston from Beaumont, the kind of highway that needed repavin' a decade *before* the quakes more or less a decade after, an old man shuffled along with a cart full of junk hauled by a yoked up horse and ass. It was an East Texas summer, and except for the scrub pines along the road sparin' a little shade on either side of noon, the sun was brutal. And since shame had died along with everyone else when the world went to shit, the old man was naked except for boots and a queen-sized bedsheet that fixed to his head with an Oriental's wicker paddy hat.

Forty miles earlier, the man had been singin' to himself, perched on the front of his cart and runnin' it like a carriage, but his backside started to get sore bumpin' over rough stretches of the road, and the horse had got the runs from some berries it hadn't eaten in eight months, and

that about turned its wake into a trail of tears. So now, right about near Liberty, he just walked alongside the thing. In his own mind, he was still singin', and there was still sound pourin' out of his mouth, but the onset of a heat-induced trance had killed his vocabulary, and for the last five miles he'd just been babblin' an unholy moan that happened to change pitch from minute to minute. Sometimes, he'd get snapped back into reality and bleat out something intelligible, but that was only in lucid little fits of frustration, because a downside of yokin' a draft horse to a donkey is that one is taller than the other, and the shorter one of those two runs on its own damn time, so every now and then the cart would start to swerve to the right in favor of the ass, and the old man would have to slap it with his walking stick and yell, "Go fuckin' straight, ya stupid!" And then he'd get on back to moanin'.

Eventually, the old man came around a bend and found a solid 20-degree incline up something like a tenth of a mile's worth of hillside, and it shouldn't have really surprised him considering the trips he'd made before, but being a little more under the weather than he'd been those other times, he'd forgotten all about it, and seein' it there burned any last hint of contentment out of him for the day. But bein' close to the evenin' anyway, and assuming that a rough hill climb is a shit way to start a morning's push, he figured he'd go on and climb it and then scout out a good place on the downslope to rest the night. So after a check of the water supply and enough of a rest to keep the animals from cashin' out halfway up the hill, he went for it.

Before he started, though, he had to apologize to the animals. See, he was confident enough in his old hips to trust 'em walkin' the straightaways, but damned if that hill wouldn't have been the death of those old bones, so he climbed back on the seat on the front of his cart

and told the horse, “I ain’t all that heavy, and I’m sorry you gotta pull me too, but I ain’t walkin’ this’n.” Then he gave the reins a snap, and the horse and ass started cloppin’.

Now stress is a funny thing. Because even though no one likes it all too much, it has a funny way of snappin’ you into focus. Wakin’ ya up. And after sufficient paranoia that the yoke was gonna unravel or a pin was going to snap or some other act of God was going to send that shaky old cart with him aboard it careening down the hill and off into a tree, the old man was pretty well yanked out of the trance that’d gripped him the last several miles. If you hadn’t seen just how far that old man’s wits could slip, then in that moment of clarity, you’d have been hard pressed to imagine just how close to unhinged he could really be, though I admit his outfit would lead you to guess quite a great number of unfavorable things, so who knows. But my point is that by the time he reached the top of hill, he was thinkin’ pretty clear, and the hours of singin’ that dull babble were over. And that was a damn good thing, too, because across another dip in the road, at the top of the old highway’s next little hill was a lone rider on a spotted saddlehorse, and the old man could tell in a heartbeat that the rider was armed to the teeth.

Thanks to his newfound presence of mind, the old man dove off the wagon, but since nothin’ about his body was anywhere close to newfound, it was really more of a controlled fall that he managed to execute without landing on his face or otherwise breakin’ some part of him on impact. Then he got up, fumbled under the cart for his old lever-action .30-30, and laid it out across the donkey’s back. He racked the lever hard and sent a perfectly good shell off into the ditch since he couldn’t remember if there was one in the chamber—but let’s be honest, and I speak from experience, you can’t afford to make the wrong assumptions about a rifle in a spot like ‘at one—and he shoved his body hard into the donkey’s ribs and his shoulder against the weapon.

Across the way, the rider that'd spooked him hadn't really known what to think about the naked coot in a bedsheet at first, but once there was a rifle pointed at him, he got his boots on the ground and had a rifle pointed back pretty damn quick. And while it's true that a bullet comin' outta that old man's rickety rifle—supported by arms of questionable fortitude, guided by a cloudy eye from a couple hundred yards down iron sights, from atop a donkey that was liable to kick the old man to death when it heard the blast—would've been very unlikely to hit its mark, the rider hadn't made it that far and lived that long by failin' to react to the barrel of a gun. As I said before, you can't make the wrong assumptions. And given that the rider was indisputably spryer and much better exercised than the man he'd spooked, the moment he saw the old man react, he was off his horse and lookin' down the sights of his own semi-auto .223 well before the old man was ready to fire.

Now to the old man's credit, seein' as he'd conjured some muscle memory and instinct from his days as a more formidable opponent, he recognized pretty swiftly the inferiority of his position and never really got that close to shootin'. And lucky for him, the rider was sympathetic to a clearly encumbered soul who was so easily spooked by the sight of another person on a road no one traveled all too regular.

“Is ya friendly?” the old man shouted.

“Well, I ain't shot you have I?” the rider called back.

“Not *yet* you ain't!”

“The hell you mean ‘yet’? You're aimed for me first you crazy old bastard!”

The old man chewed on that for a second or two.

“I supposed I did.”

The old man's acknowledgement lingered, echoin' between 'em for a few more seconds than was comfortable, and the rider got bored of the hesitation pretty quick.

"What now?"

"Meet in the dip," the old man said.

With that, the rider let his right arm slack just a bit, the stock of the rifle falling low and the barrel raisin' up and away from the old man, though he still had plenty of hold on it to resume a firing position if the old man didn't follow his example. But the old man did, and over some bit of time each of 'em managed to shuffle his way down his own hill to the cracked and washed out concrete in the dip between 'em, and by the time they were face to face, neither had kept any acrimony.

"Whatcha sellin?" asked the rider, buckin' his chin toward cart.

"Whatever shit I scrounge up that's good for something."

"Can I take a look?"

"Go on."

The rider walked to the side of the cart and pulled back the tarp to find what you might call an homage to material chaos. Up to the brim, that cart was a collection of every object you could think of that was less than two pounds, like the old man just wandered into the first two or three rooms of every standing structure he could find and grabbed everything. Hairbrushes, screwdrivers, duct tape, desk fans, pencils, flip lighters, oil cans, picture frames, porcelain dolls, dish rags, teddy bears, wall clocks, baseballs, scented candles, dog bowls, textbooks, phone cases, broom handles. The list went on and on, from the mildly useful to the generally asinine, and funny enough, the rider wasn't exactly surprised given the old man's—we'll call it "creative"—disposition.

For his part, the rider was a hard man, but not a mean one or uncaring, and he didn't have the heart—or maybe having heart is what made the difference—to tell the old man that the only thing he'd get for his trouble haulin' all that garbage around was just enough food and water to get him back home, wherever that might've been. At least it wouldn't get him much in a city, where a good day of diggin' would turn up much of the same.

“Whatcha think?” asked the old man.

“I don't really have anything to trade, if I'm honest,” lied the rider.

“Then I guess we shouldn't be keepin' each other.”

“Guess not,” the rider said as he flipped the tarp back over the load and started toward his mount. “Where you takin' all that treasure?”

“Old Houston. Still there, ain't it?”

“Yep. S'where I came from.”

“Doing what?”

“Bodyguard.”

“Got bored of it?”

“Boss died.”

“Shitty bodyguard?” asked the old man, showing the few teeth he had left to smile with.

The rider laughed and looked away. “Nah. He, uh. It's complicated.”

“Still got the market?”

“It's there.”

“They got women?”

The rider turned his eyes back from the horizon to look the old man over, not necessarily in disgust over the request itself, since the rider also compromised a fair number of scruples

when he walked into a tavern these days, but with a bit of surprise that a man who hadn't appeared to have bathed or shaven in a month or so would be so daring as to wander into the Houston ruins with a straw hat and a bedsheet and a half ton of garbage and think he'd make an easy lay his first order of business.

“Yep.”

Hearin' this answer, the old man seemed to drift in thought, and though coincidence or the high heat could've been a good excuse for him to lick his lips, it was clear by the slight twitching and subtle inflation of his exposed member that coincidence had nothing to do with it, and rider put his eyes back on the field and cleared his throat with impressive emphasis.

“Just be careful in these last miles,” the rider cautioned. “Lot of robbers the last two weeks.”

“I can take care of myself.”

The rider hid his smirk the best he could. “Just lettin' ya know.”

“And I appreciate 'cha.”

The rider goaded his horse on, and the old man climbed onto the front of his cart, but as they started in their opposite directions, the rider couldn't ignore a clamor of swearin' that rose up behind him about 30 seconds after their parting. Lookin' back over his shoulder, he found that while the old man's horse had been excited to move again, the ass had sure enough cashed it out for the day halfway up the new hill, and the cart was turning about, coughing out handfuls of clattering junk whenever the revolutions pointed the front up the hill. Just a spinning cart with an old man hanging on for dear life, swearin' up a storm and beatin' his donkey with the tip of a walking stick to prevent what little fortune he had left to his name from being cyclically shat out all over the highway.

Eventually, the codger regained control and then climbed down to collect his mess from the street, and the rider dismounted to lend him a hand.

“You ain’t gotta do all that,” the old man spewed.

“Happy to help, actually.” The rider couldn’t say it without a chortle or two, and the old man wanted to be angry about that but ultimately embraced it with a laugh of his own.

When they’d gathered all the junk, the rider mounted a final time and made the old man an offer. See, it’d been a while since the rider had acted on a sympathetic feelin’, and in the span of 20 minutes, he’d seen enough spectacle to believe that if the old man made it to the Houston ruins without robbers making off with his horse and donkey (since they wouldn’t have much interest in his garbage), he’d still have some trouble being more than a laughing stock or the fool of the week for a settlement of people eager for any entertainment, however defenseless that entertainment may be.

“How about I take you the rest of the way to market?” asked the rider.

“You picked up my shit, you ain’t gotta do that too.”

“And what if you need it picked up again? Or need another gun?”

“You just made a two-day ride outta there.”

“Don’t matter. I’m a bodyguard with nobody to guard. I got nowhere else to be. It’s no problem, I mean it.”

The old man stared into the rider’s face to the point that the rider didn’t know whether he was about to get punched for over-insistence, but ultimately the old man smiled and walked on back to his cart.

“You’re a good kid,” the old man said. “Let me give you somethin’.”

The rider suppressed the smirk that crawled across his face as he wondered what kind of treasure the coot would give him. Coffee mug? Stack of hangers? Ashtray? Hard candy? No, nothing so simple these days, is there? Instead of reachin' into the pile for a trinket or a piece of junk, the old man started tuggin' on a couple of boards along the bottom of the cart until a loud clunk rang out when a latch came free. Then the old man slid aside an underlying panel of plywood to reveal a deep, wide compartment packed full of Mason jars and dark brown bottles.

The old man looked back to his new traveler. "Wine or liquor?" the old man asked with eyes wide.

The rider laughed. "Really? That's your hustle, you old bastard?"

"Damn right, kiddo. I ain't as helpless as I look."

The rider laughed. "Dealer's choice. Whatever's better."

"Nothin's better than either of 'em. Guarantee it."

The old man grabbed one of the Mason jars and tossed it to the rider, who caught it, unscrewed it, took a long deep breath of it, and sipped a half shot of the best moonshine he'd ever had.

"All right, then. Let's get on," said the rider.

"Nah. That's for being a good sport. I ain't boggin' you down. Go on an' keep bein' good."

THE PROGRAMMER'S PROLOGUE

When the bricklayer had finished, there was a smattering of applause and a number of glasses raised, and the barman in particular enjoyed it enough to start musing.

But upon seeing the barman's warm appreciation for the tale, the programmer, afraid that one of his competitors was on the verge of securing an early advantage, dissented.

"Is that it? Is that all there is?" the programmer asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Is that the end of the story?"

"Well that's the only part I was plannin' on tellin'," the bricklayer said through a laugh. "Technically, the story's still goin' on, and I damn sure hope it don't end soon."

"So the rider was you?"

"What difference does that make?"

"If it made a difference, you'd just answer the question," the programmer insisted.

The bricklayer's smile faded as he bristled. "Well it don't make a difference to me. I'm just trying to figure out how you're gonna bitch about the answer. Frankly, I'm not really clear on what your problem with me is."

A few of the others tried to intervene, but the bricklayer waved them away with one hand and used the other to beckon the programmer to make his point.

"Don't misunderstand. I don't have a problem with you," the programmer explained. "I just want the circumstances of what we're doing here to be clear. This is a storytelling contest, right? So where's the sport in it if we just all going around talking about crazy things that have already happened to us? That's a different kind of game, isn't it?"

“Look, I said before I started that I’m not any good at this, so that’s what I gave y’all. Some people seemed to like it. You didn’t. I don’t see why there’s more to it than that.”

“Because our own experiences are limiting!” The programmer’s face lit up like he’d already begun to tell a tale of his own. “You just talked about something from your past, so you’re confined to that space of memory. I mean, no offense, but your whole story was two people meeting and talking for 20 minutes, and then they just—we don’t even know what they do. You’re limited. But what if that rider armed to the teeth could be anybody? Then you could make a *real* story. With action and depth and excitement. A story with a lesson.”

“Sorry I disappointed you, brother,” said the bricklayer, “but the stories I got that you’d call exciting aren’t somethin’ I plan on sharin’ over a beer. So if you think you can do better, have at it.”

THE PROGRAMMER'S TALE

As the hunter rolled his sleeping bag, the creeping line of the breaking dawn moved along the ground like a curtain rising on a performance. He'd camped the spot near the crest of a foothill for two full days and this, the third, was the day his knack for thorough preparation would pay off. And frankly, even if he had more planning to do, he couldn't afford to wait another day since the last of his clean water had already chased his last handful of jerky into his stomach.

Once his bedding was rolled, he fastened it to his ruck and checked his roost for any items he'd left unpacked, but the ground was pristine. Then, he continued to the top of the rise, put his pack on the ground in front of him, took a knee behind it, and looked through a pair of binoculars at a house on hill nearby. And right on cue, it came to life.

The front door opened, and a girl about 20 years old emerged with a pail that she would fill with water from the pump well that had been dug some 30 yards from the house. If this were his only opportunity to act, he'd have been ready for it, but it was only the first trip she'd made both mornings prior, and he knew that her next trip would take her much further from the house. Taking her now would've been a poor tactical decision, even though her availability in the open—her body fixed in place as she worked the handle—would've been too tempting of a target for a less disciplined hunter. But his efficiency had been honed from a long career of hunting.

He'd grown up in southern Alabama in a town of a couple thousand where the nearest grocery store and stable job were just far enough away to make hunting a way of life. If it hadn't been for meat that cost little more than a bullet, then there wouldn't have been any food on the

table, and he had always learned that if you're going to kill something, you'd better use every part of it that you can.

As a trade, he'd learned about cars. His father ran a shop out of a garage on the two acres of land they called a farm, and in it he learned everything he'd ever needed to know about real cars: the kind that didn't need computers and sensors and blind spot monitors. The kind that did real men's work. And by the time he was 18, he'd felt like there was nothing left to learn, and the thought of rolling out of the bed he'd grown up in and walking over the same old three-car steel building garage that had been good enough for his dad for twenty-five years drove him crazy. So he'd moved away and gotten a job at a service center in a bigger city where he earned him enough to live comfortably.

In the city, he'd started building a life, but the more dependent on the city his obligations became, the more he missed the hunt. The asphalt didn't breathe like a dirt trail, the shade of the buildings was denser than the shade of live oaks and ash trees, and the noise of the cars rising up to his apartment balcony when he rose each morning were much harsher than the birdsongs that had filled the crooked wooden porch of his youth. So every chance he could, he looked forward to a hunt. Eventually, over years, he and his father had hunted all over the country for deer, boars, bears, birds, elk, and whatever else they could find in season. He learned to adapt to each wilderness he occupied—to take whatever the land offered him—and just as the lessons he'd learned in his father's garage had served as the foundation of his career, his knack for the hunt now served him well through the end of the world.

When the world collapsed, he lost his family, and when gas ran out and cars had no more value, he had nothing but his ability to hunt: to live off the bounty that each wilderness offered him. And now, he had a doe in his sights, but it wasn't the right time to take her.

Trading the binoculars for his rifle, he watched her fill the pail and stop her pumping, the excess water spilling out of the faucet into cupped hands that she brought to her lips. Then, she took the pail and went back to the house for the rest of her family to get their fill. Eventually, she reemerged with a basket full of linens, and she strolled down to the stream at the bottom of her family's hill, her back sloped gently backward as her feet felt their way through the knee-high weeds, the hunter's crosshair drifting somewhere about her bosom: center of mass. For a moment, he shifted his gaze back to the farmhouse, and as if the family operated on a switchbox he could manipulate at will, the girl's father opened the front door and walked toward the latrine, finally giving the hunter his chance.

As the outhouse's shanty door closed behind the father, the hunter swung back toward to the young woman at the stream, now kneeling in the water and fully invested in her task. She would have it easy, because the hunter knew that if his scope was properly sighted and his shot hit its mark, then she'd never even know that she'd been shot. In fact, at 500 yards and with a 7mm, 158gr bullet, the round would strike her temple before the soundwave would strike her ear.

He fired, and when the bullet passed through her brain, she recoiled. Not because of pain, mind you, but nerves. Movies like to make gunshots to the head seem rather simple, like the body is simply unplugged and falls limp, but the reality is there's quite a reaction when metal tears apart the central nervous system. It's a sort of seizing like you'd expect from sudden electrical shock, with the back torquing in one direction or the other and the head snapping back for a moment like the death pose of a lizard shriveled in the sun. *Then* the body falls limp. And when this specimen's half second of seizing was over, she plopped into the water, and what happened to her body thereafter was inconsequential to the hunter who, content with his efficiency, had already swiveled his weapon back to the house.

No one else emerged. And why should they? At that range, the gunshot would be little more than a muffled pop, like the snap of a nearby tree limb. Maybe several would have raised curiosity, but only one shot far enough away and fired efficiently would've been inaudible to someone who wasn't listening for it. So with no new variables, the hunter trained his scope on the latrine and waited for the father to finish, and when the door swung open, the hunter fired again aiming low.

He'd killed the young woman quickly not only for the convenience of her position but also because her screams would've been a liability if he'd aimed poorly. In general, the screams of a woman tend to arouse a defensive passion in the men of the herd, heightening their senses and readiness to react to a threat, and so her cries would've been a disaster. But the hollering of this buck would have a different effect, sparking interest instead of fear for the first few seconds until he could find the fortitude and focus to make words.

To that end, the hunter would've been content with any hit that made it difficult for the father to run, but fortunately for the hunter, the bullet punched straight through the man's patella, blowing out the back of the knee joint and resulting in a bellow that would easily mask the sound of the shot, not only to the man himself but to the occupants of the house as well. And in response to that bellow and the screams that followed, the man's son came charging out of the house half-clothed, unarmed, and completely unaware of what awaited him. By the time the father realized what had struck him and began waving the young man away, it was far too late. "Get back in the house! Get back in the house and protect your mother!" The words struggled to slide over tides of snot and saliva, and by the time the son processed them, the hunter had already drawn two full breaths.

In his moment of hesitation, that young man died. With his arms outstretched in confusion at his father's cries, he'd left a clear path through the heart and lungs, and the hunter—pausing halfway through his third breath to steady the rifle—put the bullet through expertly, ripping through the cavity with the kind of efficiency that would've elicited a high five from another hunter for its cleanliness and the lack of suffering.

If “thunderous” would have properly characterized the father's screams of agony when his knee had exploded, then there may be no adjective sufficient to describe the cries that escaped his lips when his son crumpled into a heap in front of him, and the hunter—with the closest thing to sympathy he could muster now that the father had served his purpose—ended the screaming man's misery with his next shot. In all, this sequence hadn't lasted more than several seconds, but as adrenaline and stress can inspire their own special brand of exertion, the hunter shut his eyes and took a long breath to calm himself and slow his heart. “So far, so good.”

With three of the house's occupants now dead, the hunter switched back to binoculars and examined the house just in time to see blinds slamming shut behind the windows. By his count over the last two days, only two remained: a teenage daughter and her mother. He felt certain that if there was a safe room, the two would already be in it, but without the help of their men, it would be little more than a cage that someone as well equipped as the hunter would find little trouble dismantling. So after three or four minutes of careful observation and no sign of resistance, the hunter packed his gear and made his way to the property.

Growing up, the hunter had been a talented clay shooter, though he had little affinity for shotguns in hunting. However, there are few good arguments against the weapon's usefulness for clearing out a stubborn nest of settlers, so the hunter now approached the cottage with a smooth heel-toe gait and the butt of his Model 870 pressed against his shoulder. Fastened to his hip was

a snub-nosed revolver that had earned his trust in a variety of complicated situations, though he assumed it would simply be along for the ride since he hardly expected the young doe and her mother to be superiorly versed in gunplay. Nevertheless, an unused contingency is preferable to a dying regret.

He'd chosen to approach the house from the bottom of the hill, ceding the high ground. It's true that the high ground is preferable if you know where the enemy is coming from and how they plan to attack, but confined inside of a house, using slits in windows alone for visibility, there was no way for the women inside to properly track his movement, and staying out of the line of sight was preferable. Now and then, he poked up in plain sight of the home, gun sights trained on the windows as he rose, examining every possible vantage point and staying ready to fire the moment he recognized a face behind a pane. But he never saw one, and he reached the front door without ever hearing a sound or glimpsing a shadow. His best guess was that they'd retreated into the house to fortify or were hoping to ambush him at the door, and while a standoff would undoubtedly increase operational risk, he felt encouraged to have made it this far without resistance, so he simply checked his gear and prepared to enter.

Before he breached the door, the hunter looked behind him to ensure that his previous targets weren't playing an impressive game of possum. They were not. The father's mess had already attracted a few crows who bobbed about the corpse delighted to have such a big meal so early, and the son remained crumpled in a pose no living person could reasonably sustain, his right leg drawn up to his chest and kept perpendicular to the ground by the weight of his collapse, the other leg stuck out to the left and twisted, one side of his face pressed against the dirt, his eyes gathering dust, and fresh trails of blood seeping out of his nose and mouth, initiated by the hydrostatic shock of a bullet and now sustained by gravity.

The hunter put his back to the house, standing between the door frame and a window. He struck the window glass with the shotgun's stock and crouched, waiting for movement or even suppressing fire. Neither came. He repeated his strikes more heavily on the hardened plastic blinds, knocking them loose from their brackets after a half dozen swings. Still no response. Able to see clearly into the house now, the hunter swung to face the window and sliced the pie with his weapon ready, unveiling the contents of the living room inch by inch, ready to fire on whatever came into view as he completed the scan.

It almost annoyed him that he saw nothing, and tactically at ease but strategically perturbed he strafed to the door and tried the handle. Honestly, an unlocked door would've made him nervous since the most devious traps are often the most welcoming, but this door was shut tightly. Three families ago, the hunter had relearned the importance of a swift, clean breach, as his delay getting into that house got him clipped by a round fired back through it, and while he had reason to believe this one was a bit safer, there was a pang of nervousness when the time came to enter. It was a relatively average door, built to code, so while it probably had a fair share of deadbolts or chains along one or two sides, the locations of the hinges were relatively easy to surmise, and with three blasts in as many seconds, there were gaping holes in the frame where the hinges had been fastened. Then, with his weapon still trained on the door, he led with a powerful forward kick to the compromised side, and the door fell in easily, the locks on the other side sliding effortlessly out of their stations.

In most circumstances, he'd have taken a moment to appreciate his own efficiency while he regained his balance, but today, there was an axe head slicing its way through the air toward his face that forbade him such recuperation.

Where exactly the girl had been hiding or how she'd moved so stealthily into an attack position would've made a great topic of conversation if there ever could've been a civil ending to the encounter, but all that mattered in that moment is that somehow, she'd nearly managed to outmaneuver him.

Nearly.

As if his incredulity could slow time, the hunter managed to sidestep the swing and allow the blade to splinter the wooden porch. Then, in a fluid combination, he kicked her wrists away from the handle and re-gripped his shotgun with both hands on the stock, swinging it like a bat and putting the sweet spot of the barrel right above the girl's left eyebrow, splitting the skin wide open and sending her straight down to the floor like a dropped plank. For a fraction of a second, the hunter's adrenaline led him to think that she was attempting to rise again, and while the reality was that her body had simply been so rigid from the knockout that her torso bounced back for just a moment to nearly a sitting position, his instinct was to deliver the toe of his boot to her maxilla, where the distributed force broke her nose, split her lip, and dislodged a couple of teeth.

With his assailant supine and unconscious, the hunter put his weapon to his shoulder again and scanned the room, wary that if the girl could make such a move then the mother could as well. But the house was quiet, so the hunter fed new shells into his weapon and then took a closer look at the girl. With his wits regained, he realized that despite her injuries, she'd probably live the rest of the day or longer, and that was a lucky thing for him. His policy, in general, was to kill, and while that policy was good for his success rate, it inevitably made him a very lonely man, so as he saw her there—her chest heaving as she gasped, her body writhing and her hands and feet curling as she moaned—competing instincts rose within him, and for a moment he could not resist indulging a less violent appetite than hunting. Despite the crudeness of her face under

the present circumstance, he could tell that she was beautiful and would've grown to be a very striking woman. He slid the tip of the gun barrel under the bottom of her shirt, using the weapon's jagged breach choke to get a good grip on the cotton. As he slid the shirt up her body, the frequency and labor of his own breathing began to match hers, but before he could get much more of a preview of this spoil of war, his ears caught the hint of a sob followed by a single question called out from a bedroom down the hallway: "Why?"

When he heard the mother's question, he relaxed. At that moment, he realized that there was no safe room. There was no backup plan. There would be no resistance. These people had trusted the world and their own goodness and had decided at some point that if people like the hunter could make it out of the madness of the calamity without having killed each other off, then there was no way to fix things or move on from the world that was. They were good people who didn't understand the unnaturalness of goodness, and they'd never stood a chance against hunters.

He followed the sobs and didn't even bother to ready his weapon. In the bedroom, he found the mother weeping in a corner between the bed and the window, and when she turned to look at him, her cry and her expression remained the same, as if she had not only embraced her fate but welcomed it now that everything else was lost, so he shot her and then turned away.

Back in the living room, his hunt completed, his prize still writhing on the floor, he took a final deep breath and tossed his shotgun on the couch beside him. After removing his belt, he stepped toward the girl with his thumb prying back the top button of his pants and small, satisfied grunts bubbling up from his throat. But as he began to unfasten the next button down, he heard something very familiar and paused.

Since his childhood, he'd pumped thousands of rounds into the chamber of the weapon he'd just used to dismantle that family, not including the times he'd pumped it after a fresh cleaning and some oil. Certainly, his shotgun was one of millions, produced on the same line, by the same machinery, but there's still a familiarity and a bond, or at least the illusion of a bond, that enables a man to recognize his gun chambering a round, the same way a mother recognizes her own child's cry rising out of the masses at a daycare. But this time, instead of hearing it beside his right ear, he heard it behind him.

Alone beside campfires and in the beds of the houses he'd claimed, he'd wondered what it would be like if he ended up on the other end of a gunshot. Would he remember his family? Would he feel regret? How much would it hurt? But if the hunter had used his own efficiency as a benchmark, he'd have realized that those questions serve little purpose beyond introspection, because a mind is capable of very little reason when the chest is suddenly filled with buckshot.

He had no grand reflections as he crumpled to the floor. No remorse or shame or memories came to mind, and nothing as painful as genuine empathy would've been could match the sting of that wound. He was unable to process the image of a boy, six years old, who'd emerged from a linen closet and picked up his weapon. He was incapable of regretting that his hasty observations had overlooked the smallest member of the herd. There was no grand, soul-searching realization that he'd lost. His final stimuli were simple and universal: panic and pain.

When the hunter was dead, the boy who'd shot him let the gun clatter to the floor and began to scream. He'd wanted to scream ever since he saw his father clutching his leg and saw his brother fold into the dirt, but his sister had told him to be brave so that bad people wouldn't be able to find him. As his screaming turned to sobbing, the boy ran first to the bodies outside, shaking his brother to no avail and finding the cloud of crows around his father too frightening to

approach. So he teetered back inside and fell beside his sister, whose face had now swollen to something alien and whose heaving chest was much more erratic now, the pool of blood in her mouth and nose putting too much weight on the rising air. All he knew how to do was beg her to be all right.

What else could he know?

When her breathing stopped, the boy splayed out on the floor, flailing and screaming, too young to understand it, too young to be alone, and too young to already be a killer of men.

THE MECHANIC'S PROLOGUE

The programmer stretched his last line as long as a single breath would allow, and when he was finished, he seemed to expect applause. I don't know what it was about the group's disposition throughout his telling that led him to believe the story would be received warmly, but it was clear from his raised eyebrows and nodding head that he expected us to be riveted. And maybe there was a time would we would have been riveted and the story would have had its place, but that would have been when the kind of scene he'd just described wasn't commonplace and everyone in the room had not heard of or wandered upon some evidence of that kind of cruelty.

In the man's defense, none of us really knew what kinds of stories we expected to hear in this contest or which ones would most enthrall or revolt us, and neither did we know just yet what we would gain from the acts of being enthralled or revolted. So, at the very least, he had done us the courtesy of setting a benchmark.

The lack of awe seemed to incense him, and he jeered. "Come on, that was better."

"What makes it better?" asked the barman.

"It actually says something about this world. It actually told a story."

"Do you think the ones before you didn't?"

"I think if we're going to tell stories about the world we live in, we've got to accept the harshest parts of it along with the cutesy crap."

"And you know what I think?" The challenge came from Tom, one of our group's three mechanics, who had taken his son off to scrounge up their last ration for the day when the stories first began and who I had assumed had no interest in the contest until now. "I think you're just pissed off that nobody patted you on the back for your little gore story."

The programmer scoffed. “It’s not my fault people don’t like reality.”

Tom pressed his point as he and his son returned to the fire. “So you want to talk about reality but you don’t want anyone to speak from their own experience?”

The programmer declined to answer.

“Here’s a question,” Tom continued. “Why’s the character in that story a mechanic?”

“What does it matter?”

“If it didn’t matter, you’d answer the question.”

The programmer cocked his head and sneered. “He just needed a backstory. The last story was just two guys standing in the street. We didn’t know anything about them or what their motivations were. At least the dancing naked guy had a mother. I wanted something deeper.”

“But why a mechanic?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let me guess. It’s because if you’re a poor guy in the South who’s good with cars, you must be good at hunting too, right? And us poor ole country boys who grew up shooting guns and working on trucks can’t possibly end up being the good guys when the shit hits the fan, right?”

Tom stood in front of his seat, staring over the fire at the programmer. The programmer remained still, getting halfway through “that’s not what I meant” before Tom carried on.

“Now look. You picked a fight with Bryan, a hard worker who helped put down the cement that’s holding up this structure you’re sleeping in, and you did it for no other reason than him saying it’s good to trust people. Then, you tear him down because you think he’s too dumb to tell a story of his own, and when you need to tell your own story about how shitty some people can be, you pick another blue-collar boy to be the bad guy, and you tell us we don’t like it

because we don't know 'reality.' Well I don't think you know a damn thing about reality. I think the reason you don't want anyone to tell a true story is because you ain't done shit."

"It wasn't my intention to insult you."

"Oh, I know that. I know it's not on purpose. You just can't help yourself, can you? And I'm not trying to make an enemy of you. I just want you to understand something."

And with that, the mechanic began his tale.