

Better

Off

Dead

By Jackson

Horvat

My knife, rusted from years of use, slides easily out of the skull. Slick, without protest. Like it's such a perfectly normal thing to do. With a grunt, I angle myself up once more, sheathing my blade at my side. And I look at what used to be a man.

What used to be a human being. With loved ones. With aspirations. With a life.

Now just another rotting corpse left to the devices of nature and any passerby kicking at the thing for evils it never really committed.

To them anyway.

The eyes are still open. Glossy. This milky white that begs to be looked at but holds nothing behind it except fear.

I sigh. Stand. Look around. All else is quiet.

In front of me is a cul-de-sac, populated by about five houses. These will be either potential gold mines or death traps. I already hear the groans. The shuffling of feet.

But my eye latches onto something else. In the middle of the circle of asphalt, idles a trike. It's bright pink, handlebar streamers whispering in the wind, a seat sporting peeling images of stars and hearts interluding within each other.

This sight is one that should be happy. Reminiscent.

Instead, it is frozen in time. A memory of what once was, and a reminder of what now is. A small smile of remembering, now a casting down of the eyes to the ground in longing.

I sigh again. One that tells a million stories in a singular second.

With a whistle to everyone waiting for the go ahead, I shake my head as I trek into the ruined neighborhood roundabout.

No one's ever ready for the world to end.

BEFORE

"Good morning, Starshine." I whisper gently, giving a slight nudge to her shoulder. Without hesitation, her little eyes pop open, flashing the sparkly blue I can't get enough of. Also without hesitation, she grunts and throws her fluff of a blanket over her head.

"Hey now," I protest with the largest grin ever. I pat the lump of a little body under the blanket. "Come on, Elle, we got a big day ahead of us."

"Don't wanna" a mumble escapes from within the blanket. A soft voice, still babyish, but forming the beginnings of her sound.

"Ellie," I say, very drawn out, "I know you don't want me to use my secret weapon." The lump of her head, under the cover still, flicks right towards me.

It swivels from side to side ever so lightly. "No," she states matter of factly.

"Well are you going to get up?"

No answer.

I sigh, "Well then I guess you leave me no option-"

Just as my hands were reaching to pull the blanket back, Ellie, hair matted and sticking out in every direction imaginable, springs up out of the bed. She latches onto my wrists with her hands, and I let her hold them away. Her eyes are squinted and I swear this girl is looking into my soul. "No!" she says sternly, "No belly tickles."

We face off for what seems like an eternity; my eyes relaxed and crinkled from smiling, hers squinted in intense ferocity. Finally I give in, "Alright, Starshine, you win." She smiles and nods, like it's obvious. I offer an eskimo kiss and she happily obliges, giggling as our noses touch.

Straightening up, I start gathering her clothes for the day. I stop dead as she speaks. I know what she's going to say. I was dreading it, hoping in vain she wouldn't realize, or wouldn't understand. She's still little, but she's beginning to get ahold of the world. Of life. And something is very much missing from hers. "Dada?"

I set her clothes down slowly. Motioning my head slightly towards her I address the questioning, innocent voice, "Yeah, Elle?"

I turn now, and watch as her little face, at the young age of five, struggles and thinks about what she wants to ask and how to ask it. Finally she settles on up front and heartbreaking, "Why don't I have a mama?"

I can feel the tears welling, my mind screaming at me that this is the time a human being should cry. The time a father, a husband cries for the loss of his wife and the child who never got to see her. Born into the world while the woman who allowed it to happen, slipped away. Life for death.

It wasn't anything extravagant. Complications during birth. Simple as that.

I've never been the same man since that day. But I never let it take ahold of me. I kept the grief, I wished things were different, but I had a greater responsibility. When the doctors told me what happened to my wife, my Annabelle, I thought I was going to lose myself.

But the next thing they were sure to do was hand me the next love of my life; my Ellie. Electric blue eyes stared up at me, her hands grasping at my thumbs. And I made a promise to myself, to Annabelle, to Ellie, my Starshine, that I'd always be there for her. I'd always protect her. And always make sure my love for her was stronger than my longing and grief over how she came to be.

Now I must face her question, a little over five years later. I walk over slowly, and kneel down on the ground. Her hands clasp to each other, and then open up. Close, open, close, open. A nervous habit I happen to love. Her eyes look a bit darker shade of blue. I stare right into them, "You had a mama, Elle. You did. But with you . . . she had to go, for you to arrive. She understood, I understood that in order for you to be here, she couldn't. And so when you were born, Mama went away." Ellie looks confused so I add,

“But she loved you so much. So, so much. And you have to know that she’s always with you, even if you don’t see her. Does that make sense?”

Ellie tilts her head. “I guess so.” She then promptly hops out of bed, and trots out of the room to brush her teeth, humming some unidentifiable song.

I watch her go. And I smile. One that’s not quite happy, and not quite sad.

Two around the back. I can hear them, smell them. The stench of rotting flesh permeating everything else in the air, more so than just the usual aroma of the world these days. I round the corner of my chosen house, past the peeling siding of a structure standing but looking like it’d prefer to fall.

In the midst of fallen leaves, and brown-green grass, I find them. They sigh, and shuffle about, heads lolling around, listening for any living thing to sink their teeth into. I decide to play it safe.

Crouching down at the corner of the house, I let out a sharp whistle. It catches both of their attention, but one more so than the other. A growl escapes the first, taking off a bit quicker, as if it’s smarter than the other even though I know all thinking capability has escaped these things. Appearing to almost fall, it stumbles over, one foot sliding behind, arms swatting at nothing but pure air. As it reaches the corner, I unsheathe my knife once more, and jolt upward, knife jabbing right into the head through the neck. The other one, with a jaw hanging on by a thread of flesh, protests with a guttural wet sound. I push his buddy into him, toppling the two straight to the ground. As soon as he hits, I pop down onto one knee, and stab him right between the eyes.

Just like that.

I stand, breathing in heavily. I’ve done this a million times, but still wonder if maybe I still don’t have enough experience. That’s good though. It’s good to be afraid. It makes you cautious. Overconfidence, recklessness will get you killed out here. Fast.

I move over to the back sliding glass door. With three loud knocks on the glass, and a few minutes of waiting to hear the sweet sound of nothingness, I slide the door open. I allow another second to listen for anything; a creak, a footstep.

Nothing.

With that, I calm my head, and step into what used to be my home.

BEFORE

“Mason, you need to get out, man. It’s not looking good. No one’s really sure what’s going on, but I don’t like anything I’m hearing.”

I nod, mumble “I know” a few times as I listen to my brother’s concerns. But I’m not really listening. Just acknowledging.

My attention is instead focused on two things. About a fourth of it is on the TV. There have been scenes of fires, riots, complete chaos in the streets. We've been told it all; terrorist attack, wildfire, gang fights, protests gone wrong. None of it really adds up, and none of it really makes sense.

Reporters, officials, anyone really with a nametag, and position of power, has been constantly issuing warnings across all of the news stations to remain calm, and remain indoors. Clearly neither of those two pieces of advice have been taken to heart. There's been a steady flow of traffic leaving the city, shooting out of driveways, booking it out of the city, much as my brother keeps telling me to do. And from the too bright lights of obvious fire in the city at night, calm is on no one's agenda.

And then there's the rest of my attention. A man was thrown out of one of the aforementioned cars about fifteen minutes ago; I knew him. He was my neighbor, together with us on this cul-de-sac. He now lies on the side of the road, directly in front of my home, head twisted a bit too far around, unmoving. Dead.

I just can't figure it out . . . why? Why did his family do that? He had a wife, three kids, all young girls. Why would they abandon him, hurt him . . . kill him? And I keep looking at him, his eyes staring right into me through the window, still twinkling with the fading of life in the shine of the moon.

"Mason!"

I've been ignoring my brother completely now. I mutter an apology, and he begins ranting again, but now my mind is racing. Something is happening. Something bad. Something no one has a single clue about.

I look over to Ellie. She sits in front of the TV, not watching, but entertaining herself with some Legos. She's building up a tower, higher and higher, her little feet beginning to perch her up on tiptoes. All the while she's humming, a soft, relaxing melody.

Just like her mom . . .

She seems to be unfazed by all that's happening on the screen, in front of our house, anywhere. An innocent child's mind ignoring the world for their own. I can't bring myself to ruin that. To listen to my brother's advice, and snap Ellie back to whatever the world is becoming outside.

I still hear him ranting into my ear as I turn back to look at the dead man in the street. And that's when all of my attention snaps to one thing.

I tell my brother I'll meet him soon.

I grab Ellie, scooping her up into my arms as she protests and questions.

I look out the window to make sure my eyes are not betraying themselves.

No.

The man is gone.

I do as my brother told me to.

My mind is threatening to burst. To cave within itself, unleashing the darkness outwards to poison every inch of myself and those around me. But I hold it at bay, I place my fingers over the cracks in the dam.

I told myself I could do this, that I'm strong enough.

I recognize it all.

As the door swings shut behind me, darkness fills the house, interspersed with ambient light of the outside, dust particles lazing back and forth in the beams coming forth from the window. Everything is still as it once was, among obvious clusters of items left behind by refugees trying to find a safe haven from the world.

My heart is in my throat, and my eyes are like waterfalls as I approach the stairs. I take them one by one, vision glued to the pictures lining the wall. My hand brushes the peeling frames, dust accumulating rapidly.

Longing tugs at my heart, but I let myself know that these aren't what life looks like anymore. Life is much like the condition of these photographs; bleak, fading, cracked. A constant reminder to what you no longer have, but what maybe can be once more one day.

I steel myself, wipe tears from my face, and venture further in.

BEFORE

I'm following a six year old into the apocalypse.

A year after the world ends, and Ellie still holds the light within her. We walk hand in hand, Elle skipping along, and pointing at birds as they fly overhead, and little skitters in the darkness of animals taking over what used to be our domain.

She giggles, jumping up and down when a raccoon shoots across the street. I laugh, "Watch it, Starshine. Crazy little things."

Ellie matter of factly shakes her head, her light brown curls swaying this way and that, "No. Snuggly."

I laugh, "Sure, Elle. I ain't gonna' be hugging one of em'." She shrugs like that's a me issue, and continues skipping along.

"Dada?" she asks after a few rare seconds of bliss and sunlight in between run down behemoths. "Are we gonna' find them again?"

I smile down at her, making sure not to show an ounce of doubt. "Of course, Ellie. They're out there. It's only been a few nights."

My brother . . . some close friends. We've been with them since the start. A few nights ago, a sizeable group of the dead wandered into our camp, and we split off. I know my brother, he's probably gathering everyone up as I let my mind wander and worry. He'll be searching for Ellie and me last; he probably figures I can handle it out here more than anyone. While I don't disagree, I still have concerns.

And I hate bringing Ellie out here to get food. Runs aren't incredibly dangerous, not anymore as we're growing accustomed to what's worth it, and what's manageable in terms of how many we have to get past. But no matter what, since we first realized the dead were getting up and roaming the streets, I've made sure Ellie is always in the safest place. With the group, inside, the safest spot in an endless sea of dangerous places.

She's been rather difficult herself though. It's amazing really. She's seen a few of them, and the little girl doesn't show an ounce of fear. These past few days especially I've finally subdued by fatherly protection some, and decided to start teaching her a little. She's six, so it can't be much but I hope it's enough. I've explained what they are to the best of my knowledge, I've shown her how to hold a knife. Where to stab them, how to build a fire, what plants are safe to eat, to not trust people she doesn't know. To be strong. To be her.

It's gone well. I just hate that this is her childhood. This is what she's growing up in.

It's a sadness I can't quite understand.

A few blocks down is a small, family-owned market. I used to take Ellie there when she was just a baby. Knew the owner well; older gentleman, real nice guy. Always watering his flowers up front, and talking to any folks happening to wander by. As we approach the front of the store I now see nothing but broken pots, and wilted flowers and plants scattered left and right.

Blood stains are on the windows, surprisingly still intact. The door slowly swings open from a light breeze, revealing a ransacked interior lit up by natural light.

"Dada . . ." Ellie tugs on my sleeve. She's clasping her hands together. Then opening. I look up in the direction her head is pointing. There's a few dead rounding the corner. Feet dragging, eyes aimlessly looking about and then latching onto the pair of us. Flesh peeled off in odd areas, and the stench settling in like a thick humidity.

Then I see more, flowing in from the other side of the street. They don't see us though. I squat down, Ellie instantly pops onto my back, and we trudge inside the small little store.

"It's okay, Elle. Sing for me?" She begins humming, hesitant at first, but then a soft melody I'm so used to. I've begun to think it's more comforting for me than her.

As I set her down on the nearest counter, and she allows her legs to dangle back and forth, I walk back to the door. There's a lot more of them now. I close the door. Lock it. Start barricading.

"It's okay, Starshine . . . it's okay." Not even close to loud enough for Ellie to hear.

The dam is cracking. And soon I won't be able to stop all the leaks.

I walk down the hallway . . . the rug black-gray from mold and dust and filth. Holes pierce the dirty white walls every few inches, and doors hang off their hinges. How much did we take for granted.

Every piece of food, every lightbulb, every footstep, every breath. How goddamn much did we just assume was a part of life. Like we deserved it. We didn't deserve any of it with the lack of work, and gratitude we put into daily life.

My room. Door closed. It's going to stay that way.

The study. I walk in for a second. Books lie on the ground, obviously used a kindling. The room has clearly been occupied on numerous occasions and I suddenly feel defensive. People slept in my home. Burned my books. Used what once was my life. My mind tells me to scream, hit something, hunt them down. But I turn, walk out, and keep going.

Keep going to the place where I know the dam will crumble and spill.

BEFORE

My world didn't end the day the world ended.

It was merely thrown off course. An anomaly that had to be adjusted to, and overcome. And for a year we had. For a year, Ellie, my brother, and I made it. Found people, food, shelter day after day. A new family in a new world. Conquering the impossible. Almost enjoying hell on Earth.

But my world did end.

It started with my Starshine singing me a song. It started with me gathering some food, and feeding the light in my life, watching as she happily munched on a protein bar left under a counter. Staring up at me with her bright blue electric eyes, and smiling her toothy grin.

It started with me lifting her into the air, and us spinning so fast, and laughing so much. Twirling around, and belly tickles, and protests to belly tickles. Piggybacking, and picking a supposed jackpot of a small little grocery store clean. Hopes of finding our ragtag family after a nice meal, and almost enjoyable evening as the sun went down outside, turning the light of the store into an orangish tinge.

It started with naivety. It started with me taking the world for granted. My comfort was all but a middle finger to the current state of life. And it got angry fast.

The end of my world started with a little girl's scream. As thumps hit the window. And those thumps attracted growls. And those growls attracted the slumping of feet ever onward. And the thumps grew into pounds until the pounds grew into the subtle sound of breaking glass.

It started with the dead pouring into a small store containing a father and daughter ignoring the apocalypse.

The end of the world really started as they dragged themselves over each other, and past the aisles and counters and towards myself and the love of my life.

We ran to the back. I kicked and kicked and kicked at the door. It broke, and we ran some more. But the kicking attracted more, because that's how this world treats resourcefulness, that's how this world repays the will to live.

My world ended when the undead surrounded my Starshine and me. When I hacked mercilessly with an axe, screaming Ellie as she hopped off of my back. Screaming my throat to shreds as I felt her little hands slip off of my leg, and heard her own screams echo back at me.

And I killed and killed the already murdered, covering my face in blood and tears, as I heard her footsteps and oh so little yells go in the opposite direction of me.

My world ended when I ran in the opposite direction.

My world ended when I couldn't hear her anymore.

My world ended when I lost my Starshine.

And there it is.

Eerie, broken, and ruined like the rest but obviously her's. I step into Ellie's room, having not been in here for twelve years now. But it feels like yesterday that I stared her ferocity down with a crinkly smile.

I shuffle in, my composure decomposing. I spot books I used to read, skirts she once wore to family affairs. A medal she earned in preschool for a talent show, a pink blanket turned beige, stuffed animals, stickers, crayons, Legos.

I see Ellie. All around me.

And I grab the edge of her bed as I fall.

BEFORE

I run. And I run. And I run.

I kill anything that approaches me. Even if the job is almost done already.

I told her where to go. She knows where to go. She's okay.

I breathe, in and out, in and out. My hand grips my axe so hard, I swear I'll break it. My legs feel numb. I feel numb.

I run so fast, as the world gets so dark. All the way back to the place we've lived on the precip for the last year, but the place we swore never to go back to.

I see my home.

And I run in. And I run upstairs.

And I scream her name. I scream her name so loud, it'd curdle her blood. It'd scare her. I shouldn't, I wouldn't scream like that because I don't want her to hear that.

But I think my brain is giving me the answer I'm trying to avoid by doing that.

I scream for hours, search every nook and cranny. I call to her, I beg for her to come out, that it's me, dada's here, it's okay. I'll hold her in my arms, and everything will be okay.

And finally the tide of insanity stops.

I'm back in her room once more.

And I drop to my knees . . . I can't make a sound.

My hands clutch together, they don't open. I punch the ground. I pull myself back up. I fall instantly. Onto her bed.

I lay back . . .

And I cry, and I sob, and I let the river of tears leave my eyes as my world comes crashing down around me.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

I've been in here too long, realizing it as I hear a knock at the entrance to Ellie's room. I look up to see Will, eyes full of sorrow, but not quite as much as the ones I wipe tears away from. He asks one simple question, "You good?"

Twelve years and I want to say no. But I answer for him, not me. "Yeah . . . I'll be out in a second." He continues to stand there so I add on for reassurance, "I'm okay."

He nods. Leaves. He understands.

I stare at the ground, and prepare to leave. Patch up my head. I allowed it to break for the first time in a new infinity, but now it needs to steel itself once more. I can't let it do anything else.

I allow one more singular moment. "I'm sorry, Elle." Then I get up.

Something falls from within her closet though, a hanger most likely. And I then allow my mind one more moment.

I throw open the door, knife raised, prepared to kill whatever thing dares to rest in my baby girl's closet.

My knife quickly drops, though.

Before me is a young boy. Bright blonde hair, stormy gray eyes, tears on the verge of spilling, and arms shaking as they're raised to block whatever he fears is coming. I instantly shoot down, "Whoa, hey . . . it's okay. Look." I set the knife down. He sets his arms down. "Come here, buddy, it's okay. What happened?"

There's an ancient sadness behind his eyes. A few seconds, maybe even minutes pass. But I wait until he finally whispers, "The monsters came."