

The rain felt heavier today. Maybe it had soaked in past my jacket or it had begun to come down harder than before. Either way, one thing was for sure, it had been weighing us down and slowing our pace for the past few days, and today it just seemed to drag me down more than usual. This rain wasn't much heavier than what we've been used to, I was just over and done with it. I was sick and tired of just dealing with the rain and the idea of mud and the never-ending, damp darkness. This feeling and reality had been dragging us down ever since we came down from the mountains. Rain, usually the giver of life, had begun to take so much more away from our spirits than it had given us back.

In the distance, blasts of leftover minefields and homemade blast devices boomed, most likely caused by the endless supply of street rats and other pests scurrying through the city's dark, desolate streets. When we began crossing the bridge, is when we started hearing the blasts. And as the rain continued to fall, the explosions became less and less startling. Every so often, when I listened closely, the bombs sometimes exploded in time with the rainfall on the pavement. It was if we were in two different locations at the same time. One of misery, hopelessness, and isolation and another comparable to that of a symphonic orchestra depicting devastation and destruction of war. The night sky loomed overhead, occasionally allowing the stars and the moon the chance to shine and help guide our journey. We paid attention to the sky, it was our compass, our assurance that our journey was in fact meaningful.

We moved slowly and cautiously through the empty streets and war-torn alleyways, pausing only to readjust our packs and check our bandages. We had been on the run for years, dodging catastrophes and checking our coordinates. Our current destination - Prague. The last of our stops, and in my mind, our last hope.

She was hopeful and always emotionally strong, even though she was still physically weak and vulnerable. I had been carrying her on my back since we were about 50 kilometers north of our current location, Dresden. Now that we've entered the city, my adrenaline slowed and once again I started to feel the same nagging, throbbing pain in my shoulders and lower back. If we were to continue to work our way through this city, this god-forsaken, war-ridden city, I'd have to set her down and rest for at least a few moments. But stopping now, would only hinder our pace and put us in more danger. She needed the rest more than I did and I knew that if I could only push myself to go on for just a few more kilometers, we could find refuge and lay up until morning. I pulled her arms down from around my neck and re-positioned

them on the straps of the backpack, which I now wore in the front of me. It helped a little.

She was the only thing I knew that provided me hope and light. Everything else I've come to encounter gave me nothing but misery, despair, or small, quick glimpses of found old, faded memories. I knew that one day she would be stronger than even I, but for now she needed me to keep her alive. And I needed her, her presence and smile to remind me that there still is good in this world and I was lucky enough to have this small piece of it. I needed her laugh and voice, as small and weak as it was, to give me enough strength and will power to push on. "One more mile," I'd say.

"Just another block," she'd reply leaning over, gently grabbing my neck.

"One more step," I'd add. She'd laugh and add something like, "Just a few more hops," and I'd do a few bunny hops with her on my back. We'd both laugh and before long continue our quiet, often silent journey south. She was all I had and I was all she knew. We made it work.

"When was the last time we ate?" Avella asked. I did not respond knowing that the depth of that question weighed more than the answer. We hadn't eaten anything in the last 3 days, aside from a few dead bugs and boiled, crater water. I held her hand tightly, assuring her that we'd be eating soon enough. She was becoming more fragile by the day. Her body felt lighter than the last time I held her, even though I too had lost weight. The dirt on my hands and the wetness of the rain, made it hard to keep her steady on my back.

A light flickered in the distance. A lot of lights flickered in the distance, but this once was slightly brighter and of a darker, denser yellow. It's warming glow beckoned me to come closer. I tended to follow unusual lights and signs in our journeys. For the most part, they've lead us to good fortunes. Once, I saw a sign on the side of the road that read, "Snake Farm, We Have Been Hssspecting You." I read it to Avella and we both laughed out loud so hard we coughed for minutes afterward. We decided to investigate the strange building and believe it or not, we not only found a whole nest of garden snakes, who had been eating one another and barely surviving, but also two, sealed gallons of water. That nest of baby snakes fed us for almost 5 days straight and we just finished the last of that water about 30 miles back. It was partly luck and I am slightly superstitious. If you knew my past, you'd know why.

This time my attention had been captured by the soft, bright glow of this distant yellow light. Avella was asleep, at least it felt like she was, so I decided to deviate from following my coordinates and instead walked toward the beckoning light. As I changed direction and began walking toward the mysterious, yellow light I began fantasizing about what we might find there. Canned peas and carrots were my personal favorite, but were extremely rare. They weren't always my favorite, but they became that way over time. They were healthy, sweet, and easy on the stomach. Every few steps I closed my eyes and pictured myself taking the can and chugging the contents right out of it, like a Frat boy would with a Coors or Bud Light. The thought of the taste, made my mouth wet.

As we approached the door on which this particularly bright light hung, I lowered Avella to the ground and signaled to her to stay quiet and still against the soaking brick wall. We glanced at each other and slightly nodded both our heads. She knew her role was to keep watch and that my role was to investigate. Creeping ever so lightly toward the front door, I noticed a worn, faded poster hammered to the front door. In bold, handwritten letters it read, "CLOSED! STAY OUT! I WILL SHOOT!" It looked so old and weathered that I didn't bother to continue to read the fine print below. Instead I continued pushing and testing the strength of both the door and the two front windows, seeking some sort of quiet way in.

The windows, I tested, seemed to be boarded up from the inside, so I wasn't able to peak in to check the current condition of this residence. I looked back at Avella. The whites of her eyes stared back at me, unmoving. She was watching my every move, like a dog waiting for the next command from his master, her body- both steady and still. My hand moved slowly toward the rusty door knob, glimmering slightly beneath the light. Turning it gently, I was surprised to find it unlocked. I pushed carefully and as quietly as I could, causing only a gentle creek. The knob turned and the door crept open.

The room was, for the most part empty. There wasn't any furniture, no televisions, and nothing on walls. There was a burgundy, dusty rug on what felt like the original hardwood flooring. The light from outside shone steadily through the cracked door. I made a slow whistling sound and Avella was by my side by time the sound had faded. Whistling was one of but a few ways we communicated in our travels. We developed several hand signals in case either one of us was in sort some of danger where we couldn't speak. We even developed eye movement signals in case our hands were bound or restricted. I was a planner, always have been, and one of the main reasons we were both still alive was because of my planning and

preparation. I've been teaching Avella the importance of planning and preparation and hope that someday, when I am no longer around, she will have adopted those skills and will use them daily.

With Avella close, I began walking slowly toward the open doorway at the other end of the room. Avella clutched my hand calmly, assuring me that we were safe and she wasn't scared. She trusted my instincts and trusted my intuition even when I didn't trust myself. We walked together toward the doorway and crossed into what looked to be a pizza kitchen. This was an old pizza shop. The first thing that stood out was the gigantic steel, pizza oven to the right. It even had stacks of cardboard, pizza boxes on top of it, already put together and ready to be used.

Avella knew about pizza, even though she had never tasted it. She had seen the half-standing billboards and torn advertisements scattered on the streets. I had even once described to her the sensation one gets when biting into a hot, right out of the oven, slice of cheese pizza. That night she wasn't as hungry as she was now and much more curious.

I acted out the feeling of the steam hitting your face and the cheese dripping off the sides and onto your shirt. I made the sounds of popping a can of Coke and listening to the fizz bubbles bump off and into one another. I mimicked the satisfaction of that first, cold refreshing sip, her eyes fixated on me and drool seeping from her mouth.

We split up, sensing we were no longer in any danger, and began scavenging through the cabinets and trash. First, I went over to the warm and damp walk-in cooler and found nothing but moldy balls of what probably used to be dough and shelves of rotten, decaying vegetables. Nothing canned and nothing boxed. Leaving the cooler, I noticed Avella had stopped pillaging the cabinets and was now standing straight up looking at something on the wall. Her movement signaled confusion and shock, so I walked over and peered over her head. It was a calendar. It displayed the 30 days in April of 2018. It was untouched except for the 23rd block, a note was written there that read, "the end." It had been circled with a red marker and was, at least to me, the most noticeable thing on the calendar. That was not what caught her attention though. Avella was looking below the calendar at a bullet hole surrounded by blood. "Do you think he killed himself or got killed by someone else?" Avella asked, already knowing the answer.

What was left of the body wasn't much to look at. Rats probably got to him a while back, I thought. Some of the skull was visible through the remaining hair and skin on the back of this man's head. The hole wasn't as big as I thought it would be, but still recognizable. Avella looked for a moment and then looked up at me. "Any luck finding something to eat?" she asked optimistically.

"Not yet, let's keep looking," I replied, "there are two more rooms to explore. I was starting to lose hope. Many people killed themselves when they ran out of food and had been starving to the point of death anyway. It was easier to end their lives earlier. I was assuming the same happened to this man. The body didn't bother us because he had been used to things like that - things involving death and despair.

We continued to open drawers and did our best to scavenge the rest of the shop and cabinets. Each time we opened the drawers we held our breath for a quick second and closed our eyes in hopes that that pure act of hopefulness would put something edible inside. But with each drawer that we opened we found nothing but waste paper and a few used and rusted tools. This time that bright light, that I could have sworn would lead us to food or grace, did not bring us anything but a decrease in hope and determination.

I looked over to Avella who was standing near the dead man, still and quiet. She looked back to me and did that thing that she usually does when she knows that I'm upset or let down. She smiles. She lets me know that it wasn't my fault and that she knew we'd be OK. She turns and gestures toward the back door. I look at her and nod my head. We head out.

There isn't much to be happy about in the world today. Sometimes, finding or discovering that a small weed or dandelion survived the devastation, is about the only thing that brings a smirk to my face. I guess that and also finding and eventually opening a can of peas and carrots. That has made me happy before. Avella's jokes and wit also tend to lighten my mood in those grim and hopeless situations. I was hoping to find something significant and special at that pizza shop, but it was merely another reminder of the current state of things, gloomy and depressing all of the time. A miserable and despairing world.

My stomach grumbled and made a loud, worrying sound. It continued to shake and mumble as I lifted Avella back onto my shoulders and looked toward the sky. A drop of rain fell on my face and dripped slowly toward my lips. It felt good. Rain

## Somewhere in the Distant Future - Tim Patterson

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never really bothered me, except when it was pouring and causing us to slow our pace and ruin our journey.