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Content warning: These stories have some pretty intense violence, language, and themes in them, if that is something that might upset you, please give this one a miss.

-Max

PART ONE: DENIAL

When I think back now I think I was isolated long before I became a prepper. I was from a pretty small town and I didn't have many close friends.

Everyone I grew up with, well they left for the cities years ago.

I found social media made me feel more alone too, everyone I enjoyed talking to lived on the other side of the world, we had instantaneous communications But latitudes and longitudes separated us all, right?

I wasn't particularly happy at my work, the job was ok enough and I made more than enough to get by. My life was just stagnant, I gave up on the rat race long before that point. I gave up on all of it to be honest. It was all so soulless and directionless. I felt like I was in prison, just the walls were a bit bigger, out of sight, but I always felt they were there.

Even at home I felt isolated. Everyone on my street had a big house, and they left for work in their cars straight from their underground garages. I never even really saw any of my neighbours, and I certainly didn't know any of their names. doubt they knew mine neither.

I couldn't tell you the exact moment that I broke completely. But I can tell you how it manifested itself.

One day, out of the blue, I took a redundancy from work. I just...left.

I didn't even go to my own farewell party. I just packed my stuff, I walked out the door and I never looked back.

I sold my house, I sold everything I didn't need and trashed the rest, and I took all that mattered to me out of town, I bought a little farmhouse on a hill that overlooked the highway. It was far away enough that you could see the cars clearly but not really hear them, except for the occasional gutter roar of some truck's compression brakes. I grew to like that sound. I don't really know why.

And truth be told, I liked it out here, right from the start. I didn't need anyone. I just became self-sufficient. I'd spend my days managing the farm. I only had vegetables and fruits, but far more than I needed for myself, I built rain tanks, my own solar and wind power grid. It was a good feeling.

And it felt all the more apt as I spent the nights reading the news, watching the fights on social media, the world was going to Hell and I was relieved I was no longer a part of it.

But then I started to worry about those people coming from their collapsing world into my newly built one. It was an odd feeling, it wasn't rooted in anything specific, it was more like a sense of dread. I think it was that feeling more than anything logic or practical that made me become a prepper. I started to stockpile everything. Any food I didn't eat I canned; Any excess water I bottled. My shelves, basement and even the roof became crammed with goods I collected. Eventually, I even bought a few shipping containers and buried them into the hill to start storing it all. It was more than I would ever need.

Not long after that I began to buy alcohol and add it to the storage, I believe that when the shit hit the fan, alcohol would be a prime currency after the gold standard collapsed. Everyone always wants to get drunk right? I became obsessed, eventually I even started fermenting vegetables and making my own moonshine.

And then there were the guns. The more I had stored, the more valuable it became to me, so I knew I had to protect it. I bought my first gun, and had it in my bedroom, but then I worried if I was suddenly attacked how would I reach it in time if I was in another room. So I bought another gun, and another, and another. I had one hidden in every room, a few in the garden, and ammo everywhere.

I spent years prepping, but never felt prepared. I just knew, that in my mind I was ready for the shit to hit the fan.

But then it actually did.

It was one of those moments in life where you don't just remember where you were at the time but you remember every little detail. I had some vegetarian lasagne I had made for dinner in the oven, that delicious smell was hovering over the house. It was a dark night and I

only had my reading lamp on next to my couch. I was ready for another quiet night, just myself and the crickets.

And then a second later, it was like daytime. Imagine the brightest and hottest summer day you have ever felt but turn it up to eleven. It was so bright I had to close my eyes, but even then I could still see. I could see the bones of my hands as I tried to cover my face. And then it was black again. My eyes took a while to readjust to the darkness. Finally I managed to look around, nothing seemed broken was my first thought.

I went outside to look around. I saw the glow behind the mountains, the silhouette of the trees shaking in front of the burning smoke behind. The nearest city to me was about fifty kilometres past those mountains. It didn't take me very long to figure out what had happened to it.

I just sat there on the grass, watching that glow. Half of me was screaming to find a way to help, or to call someone, or do anything really, and the other half of me... just sat there. Finally the smoke alarm in my house went off and shook me into action. It was my lasagne, it was burning. Huh.

I remember the next few days as a bit of a blur. I couldn't bring myself to turn on the TV or my computer, I couldn't even unlock my phone. I guess the idea that there wouldn't be anyone on the other end was something too hard to know for sure.

So I just went about my daily routine, working the farm, like nothing had happened. Just ignoring the smoke over the mountains. I found life easier that way, just, pretending the world outside my view didn't exist. But of course it did, and eventually, it came to me.

Like everything else, I ignored the flow of refugees coming down the highway. There were a lot at first. Dozens at a time, spread out into various size groups, one day I counted over a hundred as I cowered below my window. They kept passing though and none of them seemed to even notice the farm, maybe they just didn't care. I don't know, I'll never know now I guess. This went on for, I don't know, maybe a week? But eventually there were less and less every day and then eventually none at all.

And that's when I came out. And that's when my routine finally broke. I'd spend whole days just sitting on that porch. Waiting for them to come back. But no one did. Not for weeks, not

for months. And that is when it finally got to me, that I was alone, and that old world was gone.

I don't know what you call that emotion. Depression doesn't seem to do it justice. It's like time had no purpose anymore. It was all just hollow.

I just sat there day after day. The morning light would shine on one half of my face, and the evening moonlight would shine on the other. At some point I started to bring my shotgun with me, it would just sit against one of the porch roof columns and I'd give it a glance occasionally.

Funny thing is, when you stay in one particular spot long enough, you start to notice everything, like the fact it was always so quiet now. Birds were gone, so were the bugs for what I could tell, it even felt like the wind was quieter. Yeah, you notice everything.

Which is why the day they came, I spotted them the moment they broke the horizon. A group of people, four of them. Two big ones and two little ones. They came down the highway and at some point they saw me and they froze. And I did the only thing I could think of, I waved to them of course.

They stood there for a long time, talking, arguing it looked like, a lot of hand waving at each other. Then they all hugged and one of the big ones began walking up my drive way.

I glanced for a moment at my shotgun, an old world habit I suppose, I never for a second considered picking it up.

The man looked as worn out as anyone I had ever seen. Dusty torn old clothes, what looked like permanent tears in his eyes. He came up to me and he fell to his knees and he started begging for help for his family.

I got out of my seat, and I walked up to him, and I picked him up, and I hugged that man, like I had never hugged anyone before. And he broke down.

And so did I.

Sorry, that memory is still... tender.

Well all of that was about eight years ago now, and the five of us are all still here.

We turned this place into something else, I guess you could call it a motel, for those that pass by the highway. They are few but we trade with people who can spare, and we help those that can't.

The thing is, in recent years the flow of traffic has picked up again, I guess we all started to come out of shock from the war, and now there is only rebuilding to be done. and this is our little part in the new world.

Since things have been getting busier, I decided to take on a little project of my own. I run the bar here now, that's my job, all that stockpiled alcohol came in handy after all, you see! We named this bar Latitude Zero, because to us, this was the centre of our new world.

And I hear a lot of wild stories from those that pass through here. It occurred to me that the history of this era will likely be lost, like some modern dark age. That pretty much can't be helped I suppose, but, well I decided to do whatever I can to save my little part of it.

So I started taking notes when people talk about their experiences and I record their tales when they permit me. That's how I began composing the works you are now hearing. I hope it doesn't fall on deaf ears, because the survivors of this world? They have so much to teach us.

PART TWO: ANGER

Michelle was a university student and activist before the war. She stayed with us one night about six months ago. She spent most of that night at the bar talking and drinking with me. This is her story, quoted verbatim

I just didn't understand how they didn't see the warning signs. They were everywhere, it was so obvious.

It started with this weird hypocritical propaganda, It was slow at first but eventually it was everywhere. The government would do something outrageous like single out a group in society and tell everyone they were responsible for all the crime in the area, and the media would jump all over it, but when the same politicians started stealing public money and funnelling it into fake companies. No one mentioned that! The media sure as Hell didn't.

It was like a ratchet, any time any minority group slipped up in anyway, like some immigrant kid shoplifted from a store or something, then the government would make these laws prohibiting them from speaking again, and then those laws would become the new benchmark, the new baseline of freedom. All the national security nonsense, all the invasive laws, they told us they were there to keep us safe, but when the 'danger' past, the laws were never rescinded. Yeah, it was like a ratchet, it just twisted those laws firmer, but it never eased off.

They were so obviously corrupt too, anyone who spent half a day investigating them would have seen that. But no one did. We watched as all our media was privatised and then sold to the same media oligarch who just so happened to also be the biggest donor to all the political parties. I mean!

At first, we thought the media was just becoming complacent. But it was much worse than that. They were directly involved. So of course, there was no investigation. Why would they investigate the people who pay their cheques?

There were a few honest journalists left of course, but they got drowned out under the sheer volume and capacity of those in power. And we found the honest Journalist were always getting bans from social media because they 'broke the terms and conditions of use'

scoff

But then it started to change, what used to be suggestive terms about minorities turned into direct accusations against them, they weren't dog-whistles or winks anymore, it was overt hard-line propaganda. The media and the politicians seemed to be fully coordinated. They used words like vermin, and rats, and invasion, and infestation, then of course, they started saying extermination. They just fed off each other. The media would quote politicians to make their position seem reputable and the politicians would quote the journalists to sound reputable, it was just a circle of hate speech and propaganda, no one ever really saying anything, just lies and accusations and scapegoating.

This went on for years, it was so gradual then by the time we had concentration camps and started filling them up, we had all become numb to it, the average person on the street was so normalised to it, that to oppose any of this made you a de-facto enemy of the government, even to your friends and neighbours, the conditioning was that deep, and by that point, they weren't too picky about who got sent to the camps.

We used to read about all the fascism in the 1930's and wonder how they people ever let their governments get that out of control. I always believed it was oppression that made it possible, but that's not true at all. Fascism happens because most people can just live their lives around it, and by the time it comes for you, it is too powerful to resist.

By the time they started justifying the war, honestly by that point, it didn't matter. They could have said anything, and the people would have agreed with it, half of the people so brainwashed they would go along with anything and the other half just trying to keep their head down and ride out the storm.

That's what I did. I was a very vocal activist once, I had been opposing every evil thing that government did, but I realised then that we had already lost, so I started being quiet too. But I was so angry inside. I still get angry whenever I think back on it. We had been telling people for years to wake up, but they just wouldn't.

I still think about that a lot. I wonder why everyone was so complacent at the start. I guess, unless something is happening to you it truly is easy to ignore, especially if it is something awful.

Or maybe there is just something relieving when you stop caring about anyone but yourself. I mean I get that, at some level. It must be wonderful to not care about other people.

I don't know, doesn't matter anymore, right?

But I do remember hating them, hating everyone, they wanted to be blind to the horror around them. The camps were offshore so they were easy to ignore, and that government had had so many scandals and gaffes, and pointless exaggerated non-existent triumphs, not to mention the propaganda was endless, I think even the people who truly bought into it all had switched off at some point.

So by the time they were talking about nuclear war, I think most of us wrote it off as sensationalist bullshit like always, Or maybe we were just too exhausted to care anymore.

It's kind of funny though, when the war started, a part of me was glad, I wanted all these warmongers to fuck off and die, I hoped the bombs landed on their homes, I hoped their whole lives would be destroyed.

Well... I got my wish, right?

It still kind of shocks me how nonchalant it all happened. Yeah, nonchalant is the right word. It's like we just bumbled our way into annihilation. I always thought there would be some big dramatic build up, or it would be this big culminative event. But it was neither, it was nothing really. I was just at home streaming some show and then it felt like a flood light was coming through my window.

I was lying down on the couch when it happened, but my legs were hanging over the edge. And then that blinding flash bulb light blinked for a second, and then that light disappeared, and everything was black and the exposed skin between my pants and socks just... melted.

I couldn't even describe to you what emotion I was feeling then. Somewhere between panic, and numbness. It was impossible to focus on anything; it was just brain overload. I remember my first coherent thought after though. I thought I was horrifically injured, and had it been a normal day, everyone else probably would have too.

When the shock started to calm a bit, I knew I needed to seek help, I reached for it but my phone was already dead, as was the computer, and the lights, that's when I noticed all the electricity was gone. It was like a blackout, but this stopped everything, even the clock on the wall. Like the world had stopped moving. I learned later that was the electro-magnetic pulse.

I made my way to the bathroom, moving somewhere between a limp and bounce to keep the pressure off my burned leg. There was practically no light at all, just the moonlight bouncing off the metal and glass buildings outside. I reached the sink and turned the water on. I splashed my face first and saw my face in the mirror. You know those times when you catch yourself in a mirror when you aren't expecting it and you catch a glimpse of the real you?

I had never seen... fear on my face before. I splashed my face again and caught my breath. Then opened the cupboard underneath the sink and pulled out my small first aid kit which I had never raided anything more than a band-aid from before. I got the bandage out, soaked it under the tap and wrapped it around the burned part of my leg. It was really only a small area, that bit between the pant cuff and the top of my socks, I remember at the time thinking how weird that was but also kind of thankful it was so small, not that it made it hurt any less. It's impossible to describe what having your flesh melt feels like. I think it is just one of those things you must experience to understand. Pain like that, your body breaking apart at the cellular level. I still have nightmares.

So, I was about halfway through the bandage when the fires started. Just a light orange glow reflecting from the bathroom tiles, but then it was bright enough to illuminate the whole apartment. I finished my bandage and I limped to the big glass door in my living room, I opened it and stepped onto my balcony.

The whole city seemed to be on fire, but I couldn't even tell what was burning, everything just looked like a Dali painting or something, melted, fused, on fire. It was so surreal it took me out of my body. I was mesmerised. I don't know how long I was in that daze, but I remember seeing a fireball shoot up from the street a few blocks away, and it took the booming sound a few seconds more to reach me. That shook me, it was so loud it shook me. I blinked and came back to my senses.

I looked down at the street below and I could see figures moving. I didn't know where I needed to go, but I knew I had to get there. Find some help, find someone else to help? I

don't know, I just couldn't be alone up there. That panic instinct I suppose. That gut dread feeling that just makes you want to seek other people.

As soon as I left my apartment it was pitch black again. There were no windows on my floor. So, I hugged the wall as I hobbled my way to the fire escape door. And followed the rail down, as I counted the floors to the ground. I finally managed to step outside

Once I opened that final door it was just devastation, and fire. So much fire, it felt like everything was burning or already melted.

There were people everywhere, but the streets felt silent. Everyone was stunned. The occasional call for help but mostly just people shuffling past, no one was really helping anyone else, we were all just too overwhelmed, there were bodies everywhere, some were alive, some had their legs fused to the ground, some were just ash. It was... overwhelmed. You couldn't stop to help anyone because then you would start helping everyone and even though you knew they needed it, how could you? How could you help them all?

So I joined everyone else just shuffling down the street, Seeing all the people with melted hands and melted faces... melted any part that was exposed to that flash... well my ankle didn't seem so bad after that.

That's when...

That's when I found my neighbour. one half of her face was burned, just one half, the half that had been facing the flash, the skin hanging down from the muscle and bone, one of her eyes was just gone. Her hand was the same. It looked like she was holding a blob of that slime kids play with, except she wasn't holding anything, it was her skin. I watched her for a minute, it was just, I don't even have the words for it, you just don't ever see things like that. only the areas that were exposed to the flash. One of her feet had been crushed by bricks from a blown apart wall. She begged me to help her.

I looked at her, and she just kept begging me. Staring at me with that one eye of hers.

At first my instinct kicked in to help, to get the debris off her and find some help. But about a second later another emotion swept over me. I remember her handing out fliers during the election, telling people to vote for the government that caused our city to burn. I remember

the way she used to post on social media, telling all the immigrants to go home, how she believed and supported every belligerent and hateful thing ‘they’ did. I remembered how smug she was.

Now here she was before me, trapped, injured and begged me to help her.

Goddamn it.

Do you know what I did? I spat on her, and I told her I hoped she would die slow, and as the fires reached her, she did.

And I listened to her screams until the smoke and fire destroyed her throat, and then I walked away and joined the columns of people fleeing the city.

All these years later, that’s the one image, I can never shake, that image, that one never leaves me.

That’s how angry I was, at all of them, the world, all of it.

That haunts me more than anything, I had a chance to save her, whether she was a good or bad person, who cares?

All the rest of it, you know, we could argue forever about where all the blame should be, who caused it, why we grew to hate each other so much, I’m sure future generations will debate that forever.

But that woman? That one was all me.

End of recording

The next day, a sober Michelle meekly told me she was heading north, I told her she was welcome to stop by the bar on her return trip, she nodded without a word, before she walked to the highway. I haven’t seen her since.

PART THREE: BARGAINING

***John is well known around these parts for his charity work. He helped found a town not far from here and takes in everyone he can. He is a well-regarded and liked man. He came to me when he heard I was recording recent history. I offered him a drink to help his nerves, but he declined, he stated that he wanted a clear head for the story he was going to tell. This is his story, quoted verbatim ***

The fact I have a reputation for the good I have done in this new world is not an accident. It's what I want my legacy to be, I will continue to do it until the day I die.

Because if there is a God and a Heaven, the only chance I have of getting there is to make amends in this new world for what I did in the old one. Before I talk about everything back then, I really need to stress that I am a different person now, that I have helped people, a lot of people.

That is very important.

How many years has it been now? I lose track, enough that we should all really be at peace with how things are, right? We all went through Hell to get here, but things are getting better now, right? And we all helped make that happened.

I believe that.

I have to believe that.

***John gave out a long sigh and his incredibly tense shoulders began to sink. ***

I'm sure I am not alone on this, but I still dream of the old world, every single night. I dream about the things I did.

When you think back on it with a clear head, well as clear as your head can get on that, you realise that the whole thing played out over years, even though it felt like moments. You look back and it is so obvious that it was going to end the way it ended. But when the moment

came, I mean the exact moment, when we crossed the line and we knew there was no way back, it happened in the blink of an eye. At least, it felt like it did.

Years and years of build up to get to us to the Rubicon, but it only took us one afternoon to cross it.

John took in several deep breathes before nodding his head

Ok. I'm ready.

You must understand that I didn't know where all of this was going when I started working for the government. I spent my twenties working shit job to shit job, always just hoping for a break, I took a few security courses hoping it would just get me somewhere a little better. And it did. I got my first role as a security guard at a government facility. I did well there and eventually I got a job working for Customs. That was the first time in my life that I started making real money. Plus, we got that uniform and I felt powerful. I liked it.

I was in it for years, and the change in directives was so slow none of us really noticed the direction we were heading until we got there. At first, they told us the refugees coming to our country might be harbouring terrorists, then after a while the rhetoric simply changed to the refugees *were* terrorists. I'm still amazed how few people had questions, even those of us on the frontline who interacted with them.

We knew better than anyone how desperate these refugees were. But there was a culture in that place, the orders from the top were always so dramatic, like we were the frontline of protection for the country, shit like that, but it was endless, every morning briefing, every email, it always told us we were heroes holding back the tide of danger and terror from our communities.

And we started to believe it, or at least, we made ourselves believe it.

When I joined that place the most important part of our job was stopping dangerous goods from being imported, you know large quantities of heroin or illegal weapons, that sort of thing. Within a few years we were mandated to treat human beings as effectively illegal. At the time I was so proud of how good I was at it. Eventually I got another promotion.

I became one of the directors of the newly created IIA. The Illegal Immigrant Agency.

I ran one of the camps.

John took in another deep breath

We all had to undergo top secret security clearances and sign non-disclosure agreements. We all gleefully did so, we had been in this organisation for years, we bought it all by that point, believed in what we were doing. That's how propaganda works you know. It doesn't matter if the narrative of the brainwasher makes sense, you just need to hear it for long enough and be isolated from any conflicting viewpoint, and that is exactly what had happened to us. Before we were flown out to an island hundreds of kilometres from the mainland.

When we landed, we got new uniforms and a belt full of non-lethal weapons, we looked like riot cops more than Customs officials, we started to get a little bit nervous then. We were there to guard and administer a new super maximum-security detention centre. The place was impressive. Looked like a fortress. We all wondered how dangerous these terrorist refugees would be.

A few days after we set up, the first plane came in and we drove to the airfield in our armoured buses to get them. We all surrounded the plane and the ramp went up to the door.

We all held our breath; we were tense and ready.

And then they appeared.

Children. Handcuffed.

The handcuffs barely even fit them; they had this chain that went from their hands to their shackled feet.

They cried, they screamed, they were terrified.

I remember, at that moment, I audibly gasped, I vividly remember that moment, when my humanity so desperately tried to escape. But it only lasted a second our training had been thorough, and we knew we had to do our job to protect our country.

It was all so full of shit.

I witnessed every manner of cruelty you can imagine, I signed the orders, I did it myself. And no, I won't go into specifics.

I can't.

Not even for history.

I'll just say this, whatever horrible things you can imagine a bunch of angry, indoctrinated heavily armed guards, with zero liability, and no witnesses would do, we did.

There were lots of moments where I questioned what I was doing. But after a while it just took on a momentum of its own. You could feel how much power and money was behind it all, you knew that if you spoke up, you wouldn't be heard. And you certainly knew it wouldn't make a difference.

One of the guards did snap, once. He was quiet and dejected in the locker room, he got into his uniform and put on his weapons particularly slow that day. His feet were shuffling as he began his shift. He took one look at the cages with all the broken little faces in them, and he just ripped that weapons belt off, threw it down and crumpled to the floor sobbing.

We got him out of there, quick. First flight back to the mainland. We didn't do that for his sake, we did it for ours. A lot of us felt that way inside, but you couldn't let yourself think about it. Not if you wanted to stay sane.

So the days went on, the weeks, the months. The longer we stayed there the less reason there appeared to be for us doing so. And everyone started to show their true colours. After a while it became clear which guards tortured those kids because they were ordered to and which ones enjoyed it.

Fuck.

So many of them enjoyed it.

And then the day came.

On the island we had no idea the bombs had dropped except for the frantic radio traffic in those first few orders.

It was just panic on the airwaves, and we found it impossible to get any concrete news or updates. Then it just stopped altogether, we couldn't reach anyone on the mainland. No internet connection, nothing.

At first everyone was calm, our training kicked in and we put the whole island on lock down, we had no idea what was happening, so we prepared for the worst.

That keep people calm for about half a day.

I say we prepared for the worst-case scenario but that's not true. We considered the worst-case scenario to be something like a large-scale prison riot that managed to take over the island.

scoff

Like a bunch of kids were ever going to overpower heavily armed guards.

Well the worst-case scenario did happen, and I was not ready for it at all.

Enough of the radio traffic had managed to get through that we understood some sort of attack had happened. That scared us, but the lack of contact is what drove us mad.

We all started to drown in panic, and it spread to everyone. We knew we had been attacked, and we wanted to get home immediately, all of us, but we couldn't just abandon our post, especially since the attacks seemed to confirm everything we had been taught to fear about our detainees. Our imaginations went wild, and fear turned to hate.

And of course, we had been on this island so long, our attention naturally turned to the children, the rumour and then perceived truth that somehow these children were a part of our enemy's plan.

God help me.

John began to hyperventilate and broke down sobbing at this point in his story

I didn't know what else to do.

My office was filled with panicked guards. They were all screaming different things at me, some wanted to just leave, others said it was their duty to stay, but there was a third group that slowly got louder until it drowned out the others.

They told me to unlock the armoury and they would solve the problem.

You must understand.

I was panicked too, I wanted to go home and find my family, I wanted to leave, I felt like I couldn't breathe.

I don't even remember doing it, it was more like I just watched myself do it.

My hand unclipped the keys from my belt and dropped them on the floor.

God help me.

Everything after that is a blur, no linear time to the events. I just remember moments.

It was fucking pandemonium. I saw guards dragging kids into rooms. I remember yells of terror and howls of pleasure. I remember how unbelievably loud automatic fire sounds in a closed corridor. I remember the smell of gunpowder and blood; I remember a guard running around naked laughing with giddy excitement.

I remember their screams. God help me. I remember their little screams

John went silent for nearly a minute before wiping away his tears and composing himself

A few of us loaded the emergency boat with supplies and we just left for the mainland. We knew it would be days or even weeks before we got there. We didn't care. We just had to leave.

We got on the boat sometime around midnight I think, and we took off. We could see the silhouette of the camp glowing around the fires, the gunshots still echoing across the water.

I never did find my family.

I ended up joining one of the waves of refugees flee the city. That seemed fitting to me.

We didn't make it far out of the city before some of the sicker people started to fall behind. Radiation sickness and burns, eventually they couldn't go on. They begged for help from the column of people that streamed past, no one stopped, and I understood that, everyone was desperate then. There is no right or wrong way to act in a situation like that.

But I stopped, I didn't have any destination anyway. I set up a makeshift aid-station and helped where I could as the column went by, people would give us bits and pieces, some cloth here, a bottle of water there. After a while the station was semi-permanent, and we stayed there long after the column had finished.

And here we remain today.

***John looked up at me through teary eyes and forced a smile he hoped I would return. ***

I hope, over these past years, I have done enough good in this world to earn my soul back, or at least, maybe God will have some mercy on me. Maybe.

But I know one thing for sure.

I'll never forgive myself.

End of recording

John left the bar without another word. He went straight back to work tending to the sick in town. Two weeks later, we found him dead. After his funeral, I released his recording to the community. I assume that was why he came to me. I hope he found peace

PART FOUR: DEPRESSION

***They told me their name was Roamer. They definitely weren't from around here. They spoke with a thick accent I found unfamiliar, and other than their name (that sounded like a call sign) I had no other information about them. They wore a head scarf and heavy clothing that covered every inch of their skin. All I knew about this person was they were passing through, they wanted a drink, and it was the only request for a straw I ever had. This is their story, quoted verbatim ***

I wonder if every revolutionary has a point where they know they are a revolutionary. As in, a specific moment where they transition from peaceful protester to violent insurgent. I wonder if it is something that sticks to your memory, like remembering where you were when the bombs dropped. Or if it is just a feeling that slowly overtakes you until you forget who you used to be.

I often think about this, maybe because there is no one left to ask about it. I can only speak for myself and personally I can't say it was any one thing that made we dedicate myself to fighting them. I was mad about a lot of things. The corruption, the injustice, the fact they just didn't seem to care about anyone but themselves. And I knew enough about history to see down the road we were travelling.

The moment they started making discriminatory laws against certain people, that's when I knew, that no matter what, this was going to end in blood.

Either theirs or mine.

I chose theirs.

I gathered what I thought I would need and left my life behind. I didn't tell anyone, I just packed up my bag and I didn't show up to work the next day. I never saw my family again.

I joined the resistance. It's actually kind of funny to think back on it now but joining groups like that was easy. We even had a club at the university I was at, which incidentally is how I joined up. It wasn't violent at first, it wasn't even radical. All we cared about was standing up for our rights and protesting injustice. Our radicalisation only came as a response to the

radicalisation of the government. I mean you could argue we were both radicalised by the division in our society over issues that social discourse was itself radicalising...

But whatever.

Doesn't matter anymore, right?

Anyway, I joined the cause because I liked it, I loved the lifestyle, it was freedom.

It brought us together, we all loved the camaraderie, we loved the sense of belonging, we loved being outside of society, with our own mores and culture and sense of purpose. That period, just before the violence, was one of the best of my life. I felt important then, I felt like I mattered. I never got that feeling ever again.

We slowly transformed into a militia group this was long before the war mind you, I don't know if any of us actually ever imagined we would do any real fighting. We trained for it alright, on every level we thought we were ready, but then it's easy to feel that, when no one in your group had ever seen combat before.

I guess you could say we were emotionally ready for what we thought the war would be. Very romantic, very brave and dashing, we knew there would be horror, we weren't naïve... But it was like, all the romance made that part a blur, an afterthought, just some unpleasantness we would just have to endure on our path to victory.

At the same time, I don't think any of us actually believe there would even be a war, yes we hated the government and yes we would never re-enter society while the injustice and fascism endured, but...

But we always kind of believed it would just sort itself out. It seemed just as likely that sanity would return, as we would face a full blown war.

Maybe in another time and place, some other timeline, it did.

sigh

When we made the decision to commit to violence you could tell immediately how ready everyone had been for it. And not just us, there were militia groups everywhere with flags

from every affiliation you can image. This was the start of the uprising. Do you remember that? I feel like most people forget that part of the story, I guess our war was just got overshadowed by THE war.

In any case OUR war became a reality for us when some black-ops guys contacted our militia and offered support. They weren't from our country but the deal they offered was too good to pass on. Guns, radios, drones, you name it they gave it to us, they encouraged us to fight our government. We didn't need much encouraging.

It was one thing to run drills and practice, but a real gun fight is something else entirely. For our first engagement we decided to go for an easy target, just something to give us some experience against real people, nothing too dangerous but enough to give us all a taste of combat. We sneaked through a forest on the edge of a small town, and scouted out the streets just after dusk.

We found the shift change of the local police force as they got coffee together, two police cars with four cops between them. We sneaked into the building across the street that had just locked up for the night. They were completely exposed walking out of the shop together and we were behind cover in the dark. They never stood a chance.

There were six of us and four of them, and we all wanted to get a kill.

We were so excited.

Sigh

We watched our leader's fingers count down to zero and we all pulled our triggers.

All of us were trained but, in that moment, when we finally had a chance to shoot at something alive, none of us really kept discipline, we fired on full-auto until our guns were dry.

It was loud, I remember that, and there was broken glass, and bullet impacts everywhere. It looked like the bullets were missing them and just hitting the wall and pavement behind them.

But we weren't missing.

They just crumpled, I don't think any of them even had time to know we were there.

We ran over to assess the damage and grab their equipment. I can tell you that entrance wounds don't look like much, but exit wounds...

I was never excited to shot at a human being ever again. Especially when I looked up and saw the staff in the coffee shop were crawling on the ground in muted pain.

We just grabbed what we could and ran.

The second time we did it, was much neater, no innocent bystanders that time, and the shots I took were careful and precise, no suffering. That had become important to me.

None of this was mindless by the way, we had a plan and it was around this point that it started to work. We needed to lure the army into this town so we could ambush them.

After a few more easy ambushes of local police, we got our wish.

The army came through and we ambushed them and it was a slaughter.

But not of them.

We were so fucking stupid.

I mean our first shots did great, we killed maybe dozen of them before they figured out where we were. But once they did, they returned fired a hell of a lot better than the cops ever did.

I still remember up to that point thinking we were heroes and destined to win the war.

Everything I believed in disappeared the moment I saw a heavy machine gun cut my friends in half in less than a few seconds. One of the armoured vehicles had an automatic grenade launcher mounted on top of it. It had this slow rhythmic cadence to its shots, and it just shredded the shop we were taking cover in. I didn't even know human bodies could fall apart in the ways that fucking gun chewed us up.

Myself and four others just laid flat on the floor, I pressed myself so hard into that floor I could taste the ammonia someone had cleaned it with that afternoon. I was so fucking scared.

Finally it stopped firing and shredded clothes and bits of wooden table and blood and flesh and bone were everywhere, some of it still falling to the ground when I looked up.

Our morale just shattered, and we all just ran for our lives in the lull. A group of us went for the back door, my friend reached it first and kicked it wide open, he immediately crumbled and rolled down the top stair as all the soldiers outside opened up on the door. The person behind him hid behind the wall next to the door but the bullets ripped through the wall just as easily as they ripped through her.

In mid-run I grabbed my friend's hand and veered for a side door, the last thing I saw before we got through was the person in front of us collapse after their shoulder exploded. I hope they died instantly.

We looked for anywhere we could escape to, but every door and window had soldiers watching it. There was no basement, but there was a shop counter we took shelter behind, it was paper-thin, mostly made of glass too.

That's when we finally decided to whisper about surrender to each other.

I felt the relief wash over me. For all my talk about fighting to my last breath, I had seen death now, I knew what it looked like, and I was terrified.

I nodded in agreement with her and we threw our weapons over the counter and we put our hands up high and we slowly stood up, I know we were both yelling something about surrender and not shooting, but that memory is all but gone now.

Before we had even fully stood up, I saw her hair fly up and she collapsed, I instinctively fell down too, I grabbed her and held her close, as the bullets cracked and flew above the counter. She fell into my lap and I saw the hole through her shattered nose and I felt my hand sink into the back of her head.

I just sat there and I didn't move or think about anything, I just shut down.

The arrest was a blur.

There was no trial.

The hood came off my head after what must have been several days. It was dark, but then I realised the bus had no windows. I stood up with the other prisoners, our hands zip tied behind our backs. We stepped off the bus and into the courtyard of Howard prison.

I know you think you know what Hell is. But you are wrong.

Nothing...

Nothing compares to Howard.

We stepped into that yard and the flood lights from the perimeter towers blinded us, it was dark but we were awash with light, it burned and it exposed us entirely.

As we were marched in almost cadence towered the enormous iron doors. I tried to look around but couldn't see anything but layers of razor wire surrounding our path, as I passed through the doors, I caught a glimpse of the night sky, it was the last time I saw it for nearly eight years.

We were taken to a large concrete room, they stripped us naked and all of our belongings were thrown into a pile in the centre of the room, we were told everything we owned was now in that pile, and we were to watch it all be incinerated.

We knew we were never leaving that place, and the remainder of our lives was to be spent in pain.

That was the whole purpose of Howard, it was once a refugee detention centre but over the years it became a general purpose concentration camp, and only the most savage, sadistic people could stand working there and not go mad.

Or maybe they already were.

We were marched naked one by one to our cells. They were tiny, just big enough to stuff a mattress on the floor and a drain next to it which served as both toilet and shower drain. The shower itself was installed high in the roof, you couldn't reach it and there was no handle for it. It would turn on at a random point in the day and soak the whole room, you had about a minute to clean yourself, and drink as much water as you could. It was always the highlight of the day.

All the cells were back to back, and faced the wall of a narrow walk way, which in turn was the back of another cell.

There was always a cold blue light on at all times. The prisoners couldn't see or speak to each other. There was always a patrolling guard, but they were covered head to toe with riot gear at all times, so you never saw their faces. They also always had a large dog with them, if you talked in their presence you either got the shower turned on again or if it was a particularly sadistic guard, they would beat you until they broke something.

There was only one meal a day, and it always came at 2am, that was when the full lights came on, our doors opened and we stepped out, they ticked off our names in silence and we were marched to the large, windowless mess hall. We had to stay silent at all times, if anyone tried to speak to the prisoner in front of them, the guards would beat them both to within an inch of their lives. So we would eat our porridge and look at each other in silence.

I spent eight years without saying a word out loud.

The worst thing of all was the walk back to our cells after the meal, they took us the long way, they mockingly called it 'exercise time' it was only about an extra hundred metres, but it took us past the execution block.

It was a big wooden platform in the middle of the giant concrete room that housed our cells. In the middle of the platform, there was a giant replica wagon wheel, that's how sick these fucks were.

If they broke someone on it, they would thread and tie their shattered limbs through the spokes, sometimes they would still be alive for days after they did it.

The body would stay there until the next execution. That could sometimes be weeks. I still dream of that smell every fucking night.

8 years I was there. 8 years, with nothing to even kill myself with.

Roamer went silent for a few minutes as they fought back tears, they ordered another drink with their hands

The war was the best thing that ever happened to me.

We didn't even know there was a war at first. One day the patrol guards disappeared, and the showers failed to turn on, and dinner time came and went.

It still took days before finally someone had the courage to talk, they asked if anyone had seen a guard, if anyone knew where they were or what was happening.

The voices got louder and bolder as the realisation we were alone became clear.

But the joy was short lived. It soon turned to panic when we realised we were trapped without food or water.

Another whole day past, and then another. We were weak, hot and thirsty, so thirsty. We began trying to suck the moisture out of the drains but it was futile.

We were done and we knew it. There wasn't as much panic as you would imagine, there was a calm over the whole place, the suffering was bad, but suffering is all we knew, and at least it would be over soon.

Then I woke to the screaming and crying, and the smoke and the flames.

I had no idea what had happened, I felt like I had just woken up from getting knocked out from a punch to the head. The wall that held my door was destroyed and there was enough room to crawl through. I entered the corridor and saw only smashed concrete and steel re-bar, and beyond it, endless desert through the blinding light.

My ears were ringing but the screams came through, I looked down the half of the corridor that remained and it was just red mush from splattered human and concrete dust.

I ran the other direction, found some keys in an open office and tried to open as many cell doors as I could, some I could open, others were damaged and I was too weak to open them. They begged me not to leave them.

Roamer took another minute

I eventually made it based the wheel, I kept my eyes on the floor.

The mess hall was already open when I got there, people were grabbing everything they could before running away in all directions with their arms full. I did the same, got as much water and food as I could stuff into one of the delivery bags and ran back to the hole in the perimeter wall.

We stepped into the court yard. We began hacking and sawing through the fence with knives and scissor we found in the kitchen. It was not a fast process, but we had learned patience. At least we knew we were alone, and no one was coming to stop us.

The hot winds blew sand from the desert into our faces. We turned to face the building and shield our eyes, that was the first time we got a clear view of the damage to the prison and what had caused it. There was no mistake that a rocket had hit the prison. No idea if it was intentional or just a stray shot but it had blown half the complex to pieces, the rest looked like it could collapse at any moment. I think back on it now, if that had been any other point in my life I probably would have stopped to help anyone I could, but those of us that had survived this far, knew how close we were to making it out alive, a chance of escape none of us ever thought was possible. No one who could walk was going to stop. Not for anything.

As we hacked through the fence we pieced it together that there must be some sort of war going on, but we had no phones or radios or any way to communicate with the outside world.

We had no real information until we found the cars on the highway. That was ominous to say the least, but when we reached the city...

The dead city.

It is impossible to describe that emotion accurately. On one hand we knew we were free, truly free. No one was looking for us anymore. We knew that for sure now.

But then the other half of that emotion sunk in, that no one was looking for *anything* anymore.

Everything we did, everything we fought for, all our principles and values... these silent, ash covered streets were all that was left.

All of it was for nothing, all the pain, all the killing, all the suffering, the wind slowing burying the world in sand was all it amounted to.

Now here we are.

The few of us the Gods decided to spare.

Roamer scoffed loudly

I notice the little councils, and the little towns, starting to pop up and rebuild civilisation, but I also notice they are *already* talking about borders and territories, and possession, and resources and blah blah blah...

sigh

Do you think there is any hope for us?

I remained silent

Yeah, me too.

End of recording

Roamer barely said another word all night, but they did proceed to drink through their straw until they got blackout drunk. We put them onto the recovery bed once they passed out. In the morning they asked if they could stay on for a while, then asked if we needed any help around the bar. We didn't, but I made up some small tasks anyway. I had a feeling they needed it

PART FIVE: ACCEPTANCE

***No one is entirely sure how old Ewa is, not even Ewa, we estimate she is about 15. Her parents died in the war when she was still young. She has no memory of the old world. She joined our community a few years back when the people she was travelling with left her with us, she asked if she could be a part of my project, I assured her that her story was just as important as anyone else's.**

This is Ewa story, told verbatim*

Thing that really strikes me about all these tapes you have, and well, the way all you adults talk, you complain a lot.

Like *a lot* a lot!

Don't get me wrong you all had it rough, but Jesus, so what?

You all complain about the lives that you lost and how the world that you knew is gone, but I don't know, man, from the sounds of it, you all didn't lose that much. The old world sounded depressing as shit. What is there really to miss?

The way I see it, you all got a fresh start, well radioactive wasteland fresh start, but fresh start nonetheless.

You are all living in the past and I have a feeling none of you even realise it. So let me ask *you* a question

ok

How many of your recordings lament losing the old world?

All of them, I tell her

Ok. And how many of them complain about the new world?

I struggle to give her an answer

Exactly my point. You all think that what you are upset about is the fact the old world is gone, that somehow this world is unliveable. But from everything I have heard there is no way this world is worse than the old one.

Do you know what I think? I think you are all projecting.

All of you sounded miserable back then and even though the old world died your hang ups lived on.

Look around you, man.

she insists both myself and the recorder be moved to the window

Look at this community. Look how busy everyone is, look at the life literally growing in that garden, look how everything is always under construction, even after a project is finished.

Look at the colour on these buildings, the bright paint on everything. Look at the fire pit, that thing is always alight or smouldering, the seats and stools around it are worn out, how many nights of laughter have we all had around that fire?

This...THIS is the new world.

There is love here, there is community here, we wake up every day and we are free and the world is unexplored, and so what if it is dangerous? We survived nuclear fucking war, what the hell do we have to fear anymore?

I saw a bunch of kids playing with a giant snake the other day, all of them were cautious but utterly fearless, they giggled, they had fun and all of them came home safe.

That's what all you old survivor's don't understand yet. You guys got caught unprepared for catastrophe, the society you lived in never imagined an end was possible, and because you believed that, you never got over the shock of it happening. I see you guys, all of you, up here each night drinking and complaining.

Did you ever notice that all the drunks in this community are old people?

Ever notice who isn't drinking? All the people like me. Ever wonder why that is? Because we all grew up *after* the war, we grew up in the new world and we don't live in fear that the

world might end, we are *ready* for it. We were born survivors and survival is all we know. We aren't scared of anything because we are ready for everything.

And if it sounds like I am angry it's because I am. You fuckers are so hung up on the past that you refuse to make yourselves a future.

I'm sorry horrible things happened to you, I really am. But you can't let it control your life anymore.

It's in our nature to fight. Every book I have read about the old world seems to be about that in one way or another. The whole history of the world is about people fighting over things, either wars or politics, or monarchies, or whatever. It's always fighting. It seems to me that this is something that has always existed.

And perhaps always will. Maybe we can't stop the fighting, but maybe we can channel it.

I might be wrong on this but it feels like all the fighting in the world is about possession, someone wants something someone else has, so they fight them for it.

But what if neither of you wanted it? Maybe that's the real fight. Not over some physical ownership of something but your emotions towards it. What if it doesn't have to be yours? What if it doesn't have to be anyone's? Why can't that possession just be free of possession altogether. What is there left to fight over then?

You need to stop worrying about the world you lost and start worrying about the one you need to create.

You don't need to shield us from the horror, we have seen it all, we remember the early days just as well as you do. We grew up in the violence and chaos, and maybe when we get older we will all be a mess like you. All of us are created from the old world in one way or another, the choice is what world are we going to leave to the children of the new world?

Are we going to make the same mistakes and end up in the same place we did before? Or are we going to finally learn the lesson that all of history has been trying to teach us?

I read something in one of the old books I found, a character made a funny remark, she said "when the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."

That's funny. I like that.

It's also very true. The old world was ruled by violence or at least the threat of violence. Ancient Assyrians were flaying people alive in ancient times and 10,000 years later the whole world was destroyed in nuclear fire. And not one fucking lesson was learned.

Are we ready to learn it now?

It's crazy that you guys try to shelter us from the reality of the world, when we are the only one's who see it for what it really is, while you all hide and try and barricade yourselves from it.

Look, here's the deal...

We don't know how we need to change yet, we don't know what the answers to all these problems will be.

But I can tell you one thing.

This is the only world we got.

And there is no way on Earth, that we will ever let fear destroy it again.

Fear died with the old world, my friend, and it has no place in our future.

End of recording

Ewa then asked for some water, she drank the whole glass quickly, then tapped her hands on the bar before telling me to get back to work. She put her hat back on and went to chop wood for the night's fire

The End

I hope you enjoyed this series, as much as I did writing it
If you feel it is worth a dollar
Please consider heading over to my webpage

maxblackhole.com

And making a small donation to help support my writing.

Thank you

Max Black

July 2020



