

Nobody Here

by Christopher Gesualdi

"Nobody here... nobody living anyhow" Zach says sullenly, kicking at a blackened figure in the corner to emphasize his point. Rifle in hand I survey the room, checking for anything resembling a threat. But there's nothing. Just a half-eaten television dinner rotting next to the sofa and the booming sound of the never-ending shelling in the distance.

"Power's out, all the food's rotten" A.J. shouts from the kitchen.

"Great" Zach mutters. I shrug.

"Same as everywhere else. We need to find a store or something, with canned goods, that sort of thing."

"And some fucking smokes!" A.J. demands, loudly stepping back into the sitting room. He's wearing the heavy black boots he pilfered from the army surplus store a few days ago, barely aware of the corpse lying in the doorway that he treads over. "You think somebody in this goddamn city would have a carton lying around somewhere."

"Yeah, it's a real shame you can't fill your lungs up with Cancer "" I remark perhaps too harshly. Zach sighs at this.

"Loosen up."

"We need food" I emphasize, "not cigarettes."

"I know that, I know... but still it's not anything worth fighting over." He says this with a smile, patting me on the shoulder as he makes towards the exit. He stops momentarily in the burning doorway, gazing up at the burnt sky before turning his back to me with a shrug. "I mean, it's the apocalypse. Right?"

He's right of course. He always is. I owed a great debt to Zach. After the collapse I'd become pinned in the rubble of the high school, trapped there for several days in a room filled with the corpses of my classmates. It was a stroke of luck that Zach had happened across me in his search for supplies, pulling me from the rubble and saving me from the ironic fate of dying in a cafeteria. He did this even knowing that I'd only be a burden, another tax on his already limited resources, just another useless kid to worry about. But despite all this he never mentioned it.

"C'mon" A.J. says, slinging our sack of gathered supplies over his shoulder. "Let's head back to camp."

Camp was an old homeless shelter which thankfully had plenty of cots, an old gas stove, and enough miscellaneous supplies to keep us complacent. In the kitchen we connect up with the other scavenger teams we've sent out, who've had roughly the same amount of success as us. Three cans of

baked beans, one can of refried beans, two cans of cranberry sauce, several 2-liter bottles of RC Cola, the list went on. None of it really comprised a meal, though it would get us through the next day or so.

“This is all you guys got? I thought I told you to hit the supermarket on Johnson” Zach says disdainfully as he surveys the meager bounty scattered about the countertop.

“We did” one of the scavengers offers, an African-American man with a sullen look. He’s quiet, looking around at his teammates who all bare the same expression. “Another... some other guys showed up to loot the place and saw us... they shot Jeremy, we had to drop everything and run.”

Zach takes the news hard. Outside we sit on the stairs in silence, surveying the wreckage. The sky was a dirty yellow, same color it had been since the day everything fell. None of us really know what’s happened. Maybe some disgruntled middle-eastern terrorist detonated a nuclear warhead in the middle of the city and right now our bodies were slowly succumbing to the deadly radiation building up inside of them. Maybe asteroids traveling at hundreds of times the speed of light had struck the earth, creating massive tidal waves that had flooded 60% of the earth’s land mass in water and kicked up the cloud of dust that coated the sky and blocked out the sun. Or maybe it was just World War III, and eventually the Russians or the Cubans or the Iranians or whoever would show up and graciously put bullets in the back of our heads. Point is, all we really knew was that we were alive, and that was enough. At least for now.

“That supermarket... I was really hoping on that one.”

“There’s other supermarkets Zach, little Bodega’s and stuff.”

“There’s not, they’ve all been looted already.” He’s right again, and my hopeful optimism is silent. “The food’s going to start running out Mark.”

“I know.”

“The food’s going to start running out and people are going to start getting crazy about it.”

“I know” he says again, not looking up. It’s times like these I wish I smoked. Something to fill my lungs other than the dirty air. Something to sate me.

That night, after a dinner of beans and flat biscuits, Zach lays out the bare and honest truth.

“We have guns” Zach declares. “And we can get more.”

“I don’t know man... this doesn’t seem right” one of our group says. There’s about fifteen or so of us gathered around. I’d take the time to learn people’s names but most don’t stay around for too long. Deserters mostly, though some we assume to be casualties. At night we take shifts, watching for any intruders who might try and raid our camp, take our supplies. We’ve been lucky so far.

“I know, I don’t like it much either, but we’ve got to come to terms with the fact that things are different now. If we want to survive we’re going to have to fight.”

A month or so later and I'm huddled against a metal store shelving unit, occasionally peeking around the corner to take shots at the Hispanic man crouched low behind the produce counter. He misjudges his cover, and I catch him in the head with a shot, sending blood spattering against the white tile wall behind him as he sinks to the ground.

"Nice shot" A.J. remarks from next to me, re-holstering his pistol. I don't respond. This is the fifth man I've killed so far, my second in two days. I'm trying not to lose count. I want to remember every kill; to never reach the point where the killing seems normal. But I'm already losing sight of that goal a little bit. Even now I feel a bit of a thrill as Zach appears from around the corner and gives me a breathless thumbs up for taking the guy down. Outside we've got two grocery carts filled with every manner of canned good, and A.J. takes a cigarette from one of the several cartons he's got loaded in a grocery bag, lighting it with a cheap plastic lighter, taking a long slow drag before sighing in ecstasy.

"Heaven" he murmurs. I'm not so sure. But for awhile, things were alright. We had food, we had water, hell we even had cigarettes and alcohol and a little portable cassette player that ran off double-A batteries. And we were alive. I had lost count, something I didn't forgive myself for. But I put it out of my mind, bigger things to worry about. Zach is still nursing his leg, now seemingly left with a limp after catching an errant bullet a few weeks ago. But we were still alive, even now. And though the dirty sky still loomed overhead like a never-ending reminder of the fall of civilization, we were content to ignore it.

It's late as we drag ourselves to outskirts of the city, where the destruction was the worst. The fires had never really gone out completely, even now continuing to burn below us. Against any real common sense Zach and I have climbed our way to the top of one of the skyscrapers that still stands, sixty or so stories worth of stairs before finally reaching the top. I thought to reason with him that it was useless, that with his leg he was in no condition to make the climb. After all, I owed a great deal to this man. The one who'd led me shell-shocked through the rooms of my dead family. Made me peer into the black eyes of my sister's corpse and come to terms with the new world I'd been reborn into. And I would follow him to the ends of the earth if I had to.

"There's nothing left... there's... there's nothing here..." Zach had said this as he surveyed the smoldering crater that was our home. Inside we found only the horrific remains of our comrades, A.J. splayed out on the floor, his face an unrecognizable bloody mess. Without thinking I had checked his front vest pocket, finding the cheap lighter and half-empty pack of cigarettes he always carried around.

"What a fucking world..." Zach says, gazing out over the black skyline. He's sweating, panting, obvious exhausted from having limped his way up here. I don't have anything to say, all I can do is stare across at the blood red horizon, the sun assumedly setting beyond the veil of dust. "You know what I did before all this?" He asks rhetorically, cracking as he does. "I was a goddamned graphic designer!" Zach is growling, dragging himself across the rubble as he curses himself. "I spent my time figuring out new ways to sell fucking energy drinks to people! Airbrushing celebrities to make them look more fitting to our ridiculous standards of beauty! My life was worthless! Meaningless!" I reach out to try and calm him but he slaps my hand away. "Our grandfathers fought wars!" Zach yells from his perch atop the

burning ruins. "Our grandfathers coated the German countryside in the blood of their enemies!" He laughs as he stumbles across the wreckage, taking half-hearted swigs from the near empty bottle of liquor he's carrying. "And us! What did we do?!"

"Zach..." I say softly, trying to bring him back to reality. But he's already gone.

"We bought plasma-screen televisions! We bought mp3 players and laptop computers and watched as the world ended before our eyes! As the black tanks rolled through our cities we watched with static disinterest and wondered what was on television that night!" Zach screams this into the empty night air, to an audience of corpses and burning buildings. "I am the voice of a dead generation!" He declares. "I am the unsung hero of your forgotten war! And now..." He stops, half-aware of his hubris, as he spits on the ground – disgusted with it all. There's a dead look in his eye, one I remember. I'm back in my house, in my sister's room, peering into those empty black eyes and seeing nothing but the cold dark abyss that awaited us all. And slowly the words fall from his lips and hang listlessly in the dusty air.

"I'm all that's left."

As we peer from our perch atop the world into off into the endless red horizon, we're silent. There are no words, not now, not ever again. And all I can think to do is take a thin white cigarette from the package in my pocket and light it silently, watching as the cherry red ember burns itself into nothingness, as the smoke drifts endlessly towards the dead sky. In the distance the endless shelling continues on, shaking the ground and trying to stir the dead back to life. But the dead were dead. There was nobody here.