

Wasteland Survivors

by Kevin Novalina

The daddy spits on the whetstone and grinds the blade up its surface. He flips the Buck knife over and scrapes it back down, the steel over silicon carbide rasping like slow-peeled duct tape. Sitting at the kitchen table, he thumbs the blade's edge and sets it down. He twists his whiskey glass back and forth in the water lipped around the bottom, then drains it to the ice and pours another. The son sits beside him eating a butter and syrup sandwich. Whenever the daddy nudges the glass of rye toward him, he takes a sip to wash it down, his face contorting as he swallows back the gag. He's buzzing, though he doesn't know what buzzing is. The small wastebasket on the table is still smoldering, the room shrouded in a dark haze that smells of burnt hair and old cigarettes. Outside, lightning fractures the night sky as wind rocks the trailer on its blocks and rain begins clicking on the tin roof. The daddy grabs the knife and grates the edge over the grit again, his eyes bubbled slits. "Don't go repeating this," he says, "but your mother sure cunted us over." Spread over the wall behind him is a large map of the United States thumbtacked to the faux wood paneling. On it, the geography's been reduced to rubble: different cities and states demolished by deep gashes and wide gapes. Cross-cuts in bridges and highways. Mountain topography sheared away, paper rippled over various waterways. There's a big tear through Texas. A break in the Mississippi River. Every time the daddy wipes a new location off the map, he has the son repeat the name aloud. There's Manhattan laid to waste, Michigan in ruins. California's broken away from the mainland. The daddy finishes honing the knife and shaves a smooth strip down his hairy forearm. "She's keen enough to carve a heart out," he says, then slams it on the table and spins it blade—handle, blade—handle, blade—handle, the light and their reflections slashing in the steel with each rotation.

The daddy downs another glass and moves before the kitchen sink, each heavy step shifting the single-wide and tinkling the dishware. His back to the son, he stabs the blade into the countertop beside the mommy's crumpled note. The son sees the daddy's reflection in the window over the faucet. Since he can remember, he's seen his reverse face in that same pane, but the mommy's had always been beside it. Eating butter and syrup sandwiches at the table, he'd watch them wash dishes, splashing water and blowing soap bubbles in each other's hair. Then their images would pause and smile, their mirrored eyes closing as they smeared in a kiss. "Takes a real bitch to do this," he says, thick raindrops popping the glass and sliding down his replica cheeks in clear streaks. Lightning whitens the window, erasing his face, and when it reappears, the backward daddy's head is down. The son speaks his name with no voice. Swallows and says: "She's really gone?" The daddy looks up at the low ceiling and chuffs a long breath. Swiping a cheek with his forearm, he nods, drinks. "But it's none of it

your fault," he says. "Remember that." At length, he turns to the map and studies the mess of a land. Pops his jaw and rolls his neck. Prying the knife from the counter, he flips it in the air and catches it by the bolster. He flicks it up again, snagging it by the handle. The son rises, backing hard as he can against the refrigerator door, turning his head with clenched eyes and seized breath. Rearing the knife like a tomahawk, the daddy steps forward firing, and the son jumps when it slams into the wall. After a second, one eye unfolds, then the other. "We stripped Vegas," the daddy says, head cocked at the map. The son traces his gaze to where the blade's buried to the hilt. "Vegas." "Las Vegas," the daddy says, and the son repeats it. In the Mojave Desert, the daddy tells him. Sounding it out, the son steps before the map. Wrapping hand over hand over handle, he braces a foot against the baseboard, tugs, and torques. The knife whines, lifting the paneling with it before ripping free, splintered dust swirling around the new hole in the Mojave Desert. Snapping his fingers, the daddy says, "Let's go." The son hands him the knife and backs against the fridge again. Looks away tensed as the daddy throws, growling: "Heartless—" It was a day ago the mommy left, and though he hadn't realized it, the son had been watching her leave for months. Starting back when the mommy and daddy stopped smiling, then speaking. When their reflections no longer smeared together in the glass. When they stopped being in the window at the same time altogether. After the silence came the yelling, and it never stopped. One night, she slapped his head and clawed at his face. Another morning, he dragged her down the hall, throwing her on the couch. Both screaming curses and curse words as they broke furniture and lamps. The TV and fish tank. Then yesterday, the son came home from school to find the mommy gone and the daddy at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. Propped against his whiskey bottle, a note and her ring. The note said: I TRIED. The ring engraved: Ever & Ever . . . The son jumps at the knife's impact. "Just murdered Mickey Mouse," the daddy says. "Disney World, Florida." The son repeats him, digging the blade from the large chunk of Florida sunk into the insulation. Eyes crazed with raw blood vessels, the daddy squats on his haunches. "Think it's your turn," he says, passing the knife. "Bitch left you too." The son closes his fingers around the warm handle as the daddy faces him toward the target, saying this distance is perfect for non-instinctive full spin throwing. Since the edge is sharp, he says to hold it by the spine, and that the key here's optimal balance, grip, and wrist-flick. "Then any rage you have," he says, nods at the map. "Just take it out on the world." The son rolls his wrist, frail as a wren's wing. He wants to make the daddy proud, but he's almost certain that drink's making him sick. Leaning against the counter, the daddy downs a shot and says: "Now flip it." The son's arm jellies, the knife going tons heavier. "I can't." "Try," the daddy says. "Can't never could kick ass." "Please, you do it." The daddy shakes his head. "This is your anger." His insides light as helium balloons, the son sees his eyes in the blade, bleared by his quaking grip. "Flip the fucking thing," the daddy says. "Get pissed!"

The son bites his jaw square and hefts its weight a couple times, then lobs the knife in the air. Dropping tip-first, he shies away, and it hits the floor as he hops astride its carom. The daddy toes it toward him and says: "Catch it." Jouncing it in his grip, the son captures his breath and slings the knife high, wheeling blade— handle, blade—handle, in what seems like slow- motion. It drops and he catches it along the edge, flailing his hand back as if burned, the tip lodg- ing in the floor at his feet. He stares cross-eyed at the rent meat along his thumbpad going white to pink to crimson, then veining down his wrist. "Had worse than that in my eye," the daddy says, wets a paper towel, and presses it to the son's thumb, blood soaking through in a puck- ered bloom. He pulls it away and the cut goes white, then pink, then crimson again and he lifts the wound to the son's mouth and says, "Taste." Swallowing the nausea, the son tries to back away but he's stopped. "To take pain," the daddy tells him, "you gotta beat it." The son looks at the gash, closes his eyes, slides his thumb in his mouth. It tastes how the blade looks, and pulling it out, blood strings like stretched Hubba Bubba from his lips. "Now, back to my fury," the daddy says, twist- ing the knife-tip from the floorboard. "You still got a lot more hate to grow."

Though she's gone, the mommy left pieces of herself all around the trailer. Just small rem- nants of the whole her, scattered and lifeless. Her smell and long strands of flaxen hair in the fur- niture. Fingernail parings and lipstick-stained Virginia Slims in the ashtrays. A bra in the dryer. An earring in the carpet. A two-word goodbye letter and her wedding ring on the counter. The only real proof she was ever there. Swilling hooch and weeping, the daddy went around gathering up every piece he could find, then threw it in a tin wastebasket and tossed a lit match inside. He hit it with a spit of lighter fluid, and they stood watching as all the mommy's abandoned waste went up in flames, dark smoke curling across the ceiling. Everything save the note and several strands of her hair the son'd snuck and bound with string. Now, his wrapped thumb touches the frizzy lock in the shirt pocket over his heart. The daddy chunks the whiskey tumbler in the sink, bubbles straight from the bottle several times, and lowers it with teeth bared, hissing. He smooths the note flat on the counter, shakes his head. "Know she's your mother and all," he says, sniffing. "But I pray she gets cancer of the fuck- ing face." He runs the blade through the center of the page, then winds up and fires, snarling: "Tried my ass!" The momentum hops him for- ward, the whole trailer shunting as the paneling explodes leaving the note pinned over a razed Oregon. I TRIED. He snaps his fingers. "Again," he says, and keeps throwing. There's a gorge in the Grand Canyon. The Atlantic curled back from the Eastern Seaboard. Grunting harder with each throw, he takes snaps of whiskey while the son retrieves the knife one-handed, the walls shuddering with thunder the while. Then Yellowstone's cratered. The Mexican Border's obliterated to the tan- gled white and green electrical wiring. The daddy chokes the bottle and stumbles to the map. Large sleeveings of paper coiled on the floor, dusted with shredded kindling. "All's left," he says, voiced croaked. The son takes his side, and both study the one state still untouched. A bullseye somehow clinging to the laminate panel marred around it. "Toto," the daddy says, "we ain't in Kansas anymore."

"Kansas," the son says, tranced on Dorothy's home. The daddy staggers toward the sink singing "Over the Rainbow" before slurring into "This Land Is Your Land." His image forming in the window, he spins and hurls the knife, the son dropping from danger just before the burst of shrapnel. "Good instinct," the daddy says, resumes singing. "Again." Still cowering on the floor, the son looks up. "Now goddammit." The son rises on newborn foal's legs. Shimmies the blade free, hands it over. Another throw misses high. Another, a hair to the right. He fires again. And again. Then again. Overhand, sidearm, before he even takes a firm grip. Kansas never grazed as each throw grows wilder and harder, the son trying to retrieve the knife, then clear its path quick as he can. A shot misses low, then wide left. Another clips the baseboard molding. Eight throws. Fifteen, twenty. "Motherfuck!" he yells, and shatters the whiskey bottle over the floor as the son scampers away. He swats a chair across the kitchen, then flings the knife blind and the butt ricochets off an exposed wall stud, the spine cracking the son over one eye. He drops limp and balls fetal as the daddy flips the table, the wastebasket spilling smoke and the mommy's charred remnants along the dry-rotted linoleum. He slips kicking the icebox and crashes down, the trailer wrenching under the violence, picture frames flipping from the shelves. The daddy pushes against the cabinet beneath the sink. Wrists draping his knees, his forearms flaked with bloody glass. "Why'd she?" he slurs, shoulders trembling. "Tell me." Outside, the storm sweeps hard over the corrugated tin. Heart booming in his wounds, the son crawls and hugs the daddy's arm at the muscle. He kisses his raw knuckles, his dropped head. Then he rises. With the ridge over his socket knotting the shape of a chimp's brow, he wants to cry but doesn't. To take pain, he thinks, you gotta beat it. He stands before what's left of the map, the country, the world. A ravaged wasteland from Redwood Forest to Gulfstream Waters, Sea to Shining Sea. All save one place. "Kansas," he whispers, and peels it from the mangled flinders, the paper foxed and delicate as goldfish flakes. He eases it into the pocket with the mommy's lock of hair and presses a hand over his heart. Protecting the only survivors left to brave the new world.

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