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Before the Wind

By Devin Poore

The newscaster's voice came faint and agitated from the speaker above the water fountain, going through the motions, repeating it all over again. It was the same news I had been hearing for days from different sources, but maybe this time I would pick up something missed before. Something to point me to the north or south. Something to give me a hint of those I'd left behind.

I surveyed the vacant parking lot, the empty interstate beyond that stretched off to the north and south. Nothing and no one for as far as I could see. Only the squat brick structure of the rest area building before me gave my eyes something to fix upon.

The water from the fountain was warm and tasted faintly of sulfur, but I drank deeply, washing the grit and

stale ashy taste from my mouth. If my stomach clenched on me later, I'd know that it had been a bad decision. It wouldn't be the first one. But it had been four days, just outside of Memphis, since I had last found water. I filled my bottles as well, relieved that the grit covered faucet's pressure held until I finished.

I peered inside the long window, my hand on the glass next to my face to kill the glare. Nothing but dark stillness. I found myself wondering how long it had been since the area had evacuated and why no one had looted this place. It had been maybe two days since I had seen others on the roads, walking or driving. Everyone else who could move had passed onto the north. Things weren't as bad here yet -- the electricity to run the speaker and fountain proved it -- but how long before that was gone? My eyes went back to the highway. Was everyone south of here gone? My Rebecca and Shelly?

I flinched at a blur of movement out of the corner of my eye. My heart hammered, and my mind seized momentarily. How long had she been standing there? She bowed towards me, smiling apologetically. Older and Asian, her black hair stirred in the rising breeze. She tacked several sheets of paper to the outdoor bulletin board, the ash smudged sleeve of her jacket hung torn and flapping. No words passed

between us. She hurried off to a waiting pickup truck that had likewise materialized in the otherwise deserted parking lot.

A breeze still clear but starting to carry the stern promise of smoke rustled the sheets she had left. They told of safe havens, lists of local known dead and missing, tales of the carnage south of here. A little praying hands icon and the legend "Rejoice! He has come" sat at the bottom of each page. I turned my back on the lists that rattled in the wind, and on the images that clashed in my mind.

The truck with the woman pulled away, the bed packed with trash bags of clothing, cardboard boxes of canned food, and a few pieces of furniture. From its rear window, faces peered back at me like I was the last of a vanishing species in a zoo exhibit. Or maybe I reminded them of someone they'd left behind.

How had it happened? Had Rebecca made it to the school to find Shelly? Surely they had stayed and used the fallout shelter. Shelly would have been scared, but at least she had her mother. Her favorite stuffed cow, Butch, was missing, though. Yet another of my failings.

The pickup truck pulled onto the interstate heading north, the only thing moving in either direction from

horizon to horizon. It shrank into a tiny black dot that was swallowed by a distant hill. Between me and that hill, an abandoned motor home sat motionless, its owners out of fuel or out of hope.

The breeze rose to a gust, heat and ash upon it. I turned around and knew what I was going to see, but was still not prepared for it; no more than when I had seen it the first time. Obscuring the city, my daughter's school, my life.

To the south, moving slowly, swallowing the four lanes of interstate. The black clouds. A single copse of trees, and whatever else had existed from horizon to horizon, disappeared. Large banks of clouds, hugging the ground and boiling upwards. They eclipsed everything behind them. My vision shimmered and breath caught. The words of the newscaster -- communications lost south of the Ohio River, D.C. evacuated, reports from Europe and Asia sporadic and bleak -- echoed in my mind and pushed me forward.

Smothering the desire to run, I hurried to the parking lot. I paused before my car, keys in hand. Through the windshield the black and white stuffed toy cow sat. One of the few things I'd grabbed in my rush from the house a lifetime ago. The cow's lifeless glass eyes seemed to stare through me. South? Even if they were past hope? Just

to know. Were the roads even passable? The car sat silent, and I stood likewise, head down, while gray ash fell about me like old overused snow.

The car started on the second try, and I watched the gas gauge tensely, a flurry of relief passing over me as it just cleared half of a tank. Three-quarters would have been better, but I had to take what I could get.

With the window rolled down, the sound of the tires on the asphalt was hard and clear. I paused at the entrance to the interstate, and made my decision.

I flicked on my turn signal, checked my empty side mirrors out of habit and reverence for the old days, then pulled out onto the desolate stretch of road. The clouds closer now, roiling and black, red flames visible at times. The winds that accompanied pushed debris and a few fluttering and struggling birds before them.

And my vision went to a tunnel. All in my periphery blurred to nothing, as the clouds stayed ever present in the rearview mirror, and the highway before stretched out to my forever.

North to Chicago, and then beyond. As far as necessary, as long as possible.

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