

Sole

The doll was sprawled out on the asphalt. Left to rot. Its eyes, glossed over, had caught hers in the morning sun. They reflected the deserted destruction around the woman back to her with a blank smile, despite the things that doll had seen. The woman stopped when she noticed the doll was part of a story. A hairbrush. A bracelet. A ballet shoe. These things led the way from the doll to a half-open, deep purple rucksack, underneath which the ground had been turned black.

But this woman, she didn't need to see the clues to know what had happened here. This doll's story is one many share; one the woman knows too well. There aren't many things she knew of with a different story to tell.

'Hey, you! How ar— ...What are you doing out in the open?'

The woman reeled back. This story was one which was new to her. The noise—the *voice*—had come from the overgrown treeline next to her. The woman stared in silence, unsure whether to trust her head or her heart, until her mind was made up for her.

It began with the screaming. It always does. They always scream as though they are cleaving the sky itself in two.

Twigs and leaves were catching in the woman's hair as she disappeared into the trees. From her cover, she felt the scream more and more frantically tear itself into her ears, until it was both a bellow and a wail that she felt rather than heard. The sound often became a tangible wave of air at this point, like it was then—that was now the only time the wind would blow. The woman watched the sky turn black. The ground became smothered in death's cold shadow. Time may as well have frozen. But, before long, light began to return and the scream reduced itself to a whisper. The woman cautiously wandered further into the trees' embrace, her staff finding its way into her hand.

'That was pretty close, sweet'heart. Thought for sure that there Screamer was going to get you. Say, what was you doing out there alone?'

That same voice interrupted the newly-settled silence from behind the woman, with a flurry of gruff grumbles and spittle. She turned to face its owner, and was met by a pair of beady eyes haphazardly stuck between dirt and stubble onto a short, raspy man.

The woman glared.

The man blinked.

'You got a name, sweet'heart?'

'I do. It's not sweetheart.'

'Right, of course, of course. My apologies, ma'am. Anywho, I'm Griff. Pleased to meet you. It sure feels good to see another face around here.'

The woman smiled.

‘And I can see you’re happy too, ma’am. I’m sure...’

The man trailed off as he noticed the woman was looking past him. He slowly looked around to meet the object of her gaze.

‘Ah, yes. Not much, but it’s my very own piece of the apocalypse. Care to come inside, ma’am?’

She continued to look past him.

‘Is that an AN/VRC-12 in your front window?’

The man’s eyes flitted between his house and the woman’s face.

‘What now?’ Words formed and died silently on his lips a few times before he spoke. ‘You mean the talkbox? I’m surprised you can make it out from here. It may well be, ma’am. Haven’t got much out of it, mind you. You’re more than welcome to try yourself, if you’d want.’

‘I would, yes.’

‘I’ll lead the way, Ma’am. It’s not as far as it looks’

‘Thank you.’

Waddling out in front of her, the man began to struggle up the gentle hill in front of the woman, upon which a crumbling cabin squatted. She walked carefully, if not awkwardly, behind him.

Eventually, the man stumbled through his own door. The woman sidestepped around him, and softly marched into the cabin. Most surfaces inside were bare, aged wood, without many furnishings. Sunlight poked through the walls in places. It was dirty.

‘Please, make yourself at home.’

He did not get a reply from the woman. Instead, he was answered by the dead thump of metal on wood. The man rushed over. He found the woman kneeling over his radio system, which she had moved from the windowsill to the floor. Her staff was strapped to her backpack, which was now unzipped on the floor. A toolbox sat alongside a car battery, open and waiting. It was full of tools the man did not recognise.

‘Say, ma’am, what’re you doing to my talkbox?’

She replied without looking up or stopping. ‘I need a replacement tube. One of mine is broken.’

‘Is that why you was all the way out here alone?’

‘One of the reasons, yes.’

‘You know ma’am, when I saw you, I couldn’t believe it. I can’t remember the last time I saw another person after them Screamers came.’

‘I wasn’t expecting you either.’

The man smiled, before looking at the ground. His expression changed.

‘Ma’am, I’ve been more or less alone since the Screamers. I’m only here because I don’t leave the trees. I stay hidden. You can’t just be here for, er, tubes.’

‘I am looking for something.’

The man waited for the woman to elaborate. She didn’t.

‘I see, ma’am. You don’t have to tell me nothing. I imagine anyone left around here has got something they wanna find.’

‘Do you?’

‘Me? I want to find my pup again. She was all I had left before they scared her off. Been real quiets since, but I’m no shape ta go a-looking for her.’

‘I see. I am sorry.’

‘No, don’t be. Ain’t nothing any of us left can do. Besides, I’m sure you’ve had no easy time out there alone, ma’am.’

‘You could say that. Could you pass me a screwdriver? The flathead, please.’

The woman had pulled a second, smaller radio set out of her backpack during the conversation, which the man had only just noticed. He approached the toolbox, and found the comforting, familiar tool among the strange shapes it contained. When the woman passed it back, the man absentmindedly pocketed it—an old habit. She did not seem to notice. The woman opened the smaller radio’s casing, before picking out a component from the man’s set for a transplant. She then began to fumble inside her own radio equipment again.

‘So, ma’am, what are you planning to do with them talkboxes any—’

The man was cut off by a burst of static. It seemed to have an effect on the woman, and she soon spoke under her breath. The man looked at her.

‘I thought you wanted it to work, ma’am?’

‘I did. But not yet. The Screamers, they—’

This time the woman was cut off, but by a familiar, distant shriek that forced itself into the man and the woman’s ears, growing louder and louder. The sunlight that had been streaming through the small, dirty windows and walls grew weaker. It then disappeared altogether. The man began to panic. The woman calmly packed up her equipment and donned her backpack. Her staff found its way into her hand.

The woman met the man’s stare. The way his eyes looked at her made her feel uneasy. He opened his mouth, despite the noise, to speak. The woman, however, did not hear anything the man had said, as the shriek had become a reverberating scream around them. Dust began

to drizzle from above, betraying the cabin to also be suffering from the sound. Shortly after, the cabin gave in. Its roof collapsed onto the man and woman below.

When the woman woke up, she was somewhere different, and she was not alone.

The man was sat across the room, breathing softly. The way he was laying made the woman grimace when she looked at him. She looked around, and found herself to be without her backpack, or her staff. The woman woke up the man with haste. He looked around, and found himself in a room like nothing he had ever seen. The walls were curved yet angular, their colours matt yet glossy. Everything gently vibrated. The man opened his mouth to speak, but the woman's face gave him the answer he searched for. She knew exactly where she was. And soon, he did too. The man prepared to shout, but the woman raised a finger to her lips and he complied.

The woman gestured to one of the walls. The man stared blankly at the illogical surface, before he noticed the faint lines running across this particular one. He looked back at her, unsure of whether he was correct in his deductions. The woman put her hands in her pockets, took them out, and then pointed them both at the wall. Perplexed, the man placed his own hands in his pockets. His left hand returned with a flathead screwdriver in its palm.

The man teetered over to the seams in the wall, and forced the screwdriver's tip into one. The wall cracked in a dozen or so seemingly random places. The man pushed on the tool's handle, and the wall retracted into a doorway.

In front of the man now was another thing which defied his concepts of reality. It had taken a step back as the wall had receded. The creature was cinched and bloated in strange places which made the man feel ill, but yet it stood before him alive. A fabric was stretched over its body which matched the impossible walls.

The man found the screwdriver to still be raised in his hands as the creature he was facing began to expand. A blur moved over his head. The creature fell to the floor. Turning, he saw the woman behind him, her staff in her hand. She stepped around the man and out of the door, slow but deliberate. The woman shortly returned to the man holding another, larger tool he did not recognise. The man chose this time to speak.

'Ma'am, are we really where I think we are?'

'Yes.'

'Can we make it out?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know the way?'

'Yes.'

'Would it help if I stopped talking?'

‘Yes.’

‘Of course. I’ll do that now.’

The woman walked out in front, never going back on herself. The man waddled behind. His shoulders loosened as the woman navigated them both through the intertwined rooms, corridors and doors.

Left.

Straight.

Left.

Right.

Right.

Left.

Straight.

Right.

Straight.

Stop.

The woman began to turn right, but backed into the corridor almost immediately. The man would have waddled straight into her, had he not waddled so slowly. The woman put her finger to her lips, motioned to the man, and then pointed directly down to the floor. He nodded, and she turned the corner, holding herself differently to the way she had before. The man waited. He began to fidget. Soon, he followed. Looking around the corner before he turned it, the man saw the woman’s strange tool on the floor. Looking up, he was faced with the back of another creature. It was struggling to hold the woman, its limbs around her throat.

Everything was silent.

The man pulled the screwdriver out of his pocket, and wobbled towards the creature. Holding it by the shaft, he hit the creature with the tool’s handle. It fell to the floor, revealing the woman beneath. The man looked from the screwdriver to the creature with wide eyes. The woman looked at him.

‘I asked you not to move.’

‘Well ma’am, seems it’s a good thing I don’t follow instructions too good.’

‘Noted.’

Between them, the man and the woman moved the creature out of the corridor. The woman retrieved her tool, and began to walk again. The man followed her through the corridors. After a while, she matched his pace.

‘Thank you. For earlier.’

‘For what, ma’am? I wasn’t going to leave you like that.’

‘We are almost out. There is not much further to go now.’

‘I’ll be following you, ma’am.’

The woman sped up to get back in front again. The man followed still. Until, from the corridor next to him, came sounds the man thought he would never hear again.

Wind in the trees.

Birds in the sky.

The man stopped, and gaped into the depths of the corridor. A gentle summer’s breeze wafted out, thick with the scent of a forest in full bloom. He breathed out a long breath, took a deep one in, and turned to the woman. But she had continued on. The man stared at her as she walked away. He caught up to her before she seemed to notice.

The woman continued to lead the man, turning left and right in a pattern the man could not work out. Eventually, the man again heard the same sounds—felt the same breeze—from a corridor in front of him. The woman walked past, and the man trudged behind. They continued through the corridors.

On the third time the man heard the sounds, the woman stopped. The man watched intently as she too stared at the corridor. She turned towards the corridor they were coming from. He then watched as she decided to turn the other way, and eventually followed.

The man matched her quickened pace with a wobble. The woman’s shoulders were tense. He opened his mouth to speak, but the end of her tool hit him in the face. The tool flashed. The man fell to the ground, smoking and still.

When the man managed to look up, he saw the woman kneeling over him. He recoiled.

‘Get away from me!’

The woman’s mouth moved, but no sound came out. She moved toward the man.

‘I said get away from me!’

She froze. The man backed away from her.

‘Why would you do that?’

The woman’s gaze was heavy. So was the man’s, in a different way.

‘Why would you hit me?’

It took the woman a while to answer.

‘I... There was... I thought you were one of them.’

The man flinched.

‘You thought I was one of *them*?’

‘There... I... We were being followed. They were going to ambush us. When you came up beside me, I... I thought you were one.’

The man looked at the floor around them. ‘I see a surprising lack of them things for that.’

‘Once I dealt with them, I moved you somewhere I could keep you safe until you woke up.’

‘Safe? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but ain’t one part of this place fuckin’ safe!’

The woman stared, freshly silenced, as the man stood up to face her.

‘You were meant to be getting us out alive! But we’ve seemed to hit every damn creature in this place! What’re you looking for?’

‘The exit. I am taking us there as fast as I am able to.’

‘No. You’re not. We’ve passed three already, hasn’t we?’

Her face became pale.

‘I... I ha—’

‘Hasn’t we?’

The woman’s eyes fell to the floor. ‘Yes.’

‘I don’t care whatever you want to do in here, but it’s not your choice whether I stay a second longer than I need to. That choice is *mine*.’

‘I’m sorry. But I—’

‘You know, I was *excited* that someone else made it too. Now, I wish I’d never found you, *sweetheart*. Don’t follow me.’

The man looked at her again, then strode out of the room. The woman eyes did not come up, even when she later walked out the room. She left a small puddle of tears behind her.

The woman walked through the corridors of impossible angles on her invisible path.

She turned left.

Continued straight.

Turned left.

Took a right.

There was a strange echo in the corridors.

The woman continued straight.

Turned left.

Avoided the creature in the hallway in front of her.

Turned right.

Took a left.

She passed many entrances and side-doors on either side of her each time she moved through a corridor. The woman knew where she was going.

She continued right.

Went straight.

The echo continued.

The woman carried on left.

Circled around the creature moving out of the side-way next to her.

Took a left.

Took a left.

Carried on with a sharp right.

The woman turned into the side-door next to her.

Inside the room she had entered, everything was made of the same impossible material as everything else. A curved table flowed out of the flooring, and on its rounded yet flat top sat the only things made of something different: the woman's rucksack and staff, among a collection of other backpacks and bags.

The woman opened her rucksack and removed her radio set. She turned it in her hand, running her fingers over every scratch and dent.

There was a series of loud sounds from outside the room. The woman continued to examine her radio set. The sounds eventually ended with a deafening, reverberating noise. The woman packed the radio back into her rucksack with care, closed it, and picked it up in one hand. Her staff found its way into her other.

When the woman reached the doorway, she dropped the contents of both.

The man was in the corridor, opposite the doorway. He was lying against the wall. Both he and the corridor had been splashed with various shades of red and blue, which caused the material's impossible sheen to create colours the woman had never seen. The red collected around the man. The blue trailed off down the corridor, further than the woman could see.

The woman rushed forward, knelt down, and cradled the man in her arms, painting herself with the corridor's colours. The man was still. The rucksack and staff sat in the doorway. The woman soaked both the man and herself with tears. The colours did not run, but the tears continued to fall until the woman had no more.

Standing up, she ran her hand over the man's eyes to close them, and then dried her own. The woman began to walk away, but stopped. She turned, and instead walked to the rucksack. She kicked it. Hard. She kicked it again and again and again and again and froze.

The woman tore the rucksack open and held each module again individually, running her fingers over new dents and scratches. The third module she picked up hissed and crackled. The woman turned all its knobs and pressed all its buttons. She then placed it underneath the rucksack and straddled it. The crackling continued, becoming louder. Shaking, the woman's staff found its way into her hand.

The corridor filled with creatures from every entrance. The staff swung. Blue flew through the air. Creatures fell. Soon, the staff stopped swinging. The woman was grabbed and raised. As she was carried away by inhuman limbs, the hissing changed.

Barely cutting through the creatures' chatter, a different sound came through the woman's radio set. A different story. An old story.

'Mummy?'

Tears on the floor were all the woman could leave in reply.