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Iron Stream

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Rapture

A dark-haired boy darted to a white kitchen. He greeted a tall woman at the stove with a smile, "Good morning, mom!"

"Good morning, Johnny!" replied a tall woman with long brown hair. She bent down, gave the boy a warm hug, and gestured toward the stack of pancakes awaiting him. She clicked a glass of orange juice on the smooth white dotted platform where Johnny's meal rested. On his way to the dinner table, he looked at his father, who sat on a wooly recliner, and turned away. After seeing him stifle his salutation, his father frowned and jerked his head back into the holographic news article he read. He kicked his foot down when he heard about the dip in Zip-Zap Motors' sales.

Errr, a high-pitched noise impaled everyone's ears.

Mom dropped her spatula. Father squinted above the article, which was dated October 13, 2040, at the top. With his eyes glued to the holographic pop-up, Johnny dowsed his meal in maple syrup.

Errrrrrrrrrr

Much to everyone's relief, the noise ceased as abruptly as it began. This tranquility was interrupted, however, when the projector on the living room wall manifested into a translucent hologram of a man with a stack of papers. He straightened out the stack and exclaimed, *Breaking news, B.U.S.A! We have just received word that Brussia's bomb threat is official.*

Father scoffed, "The B.U.S. thought they were heroes intervening in the Brusso-Bukrainian war back in '32. Everyone knew they just wanted dibs on the metal exports. Should've stayed minding their business after Poutine told them to back off the 20s."

President Louie Hopeman urges everyone to evacuate to as low an elevation as possible.

A new alarm sound came. This time, it whined and repeated in longer spurts.

Are the firefighters here?

Johnny looked out the window. There were no firefighters, let alone anyone outside.

What is this alarm? Why are mom and dad in a frenzy? He noticed the sky was no longer blue. Rather, the sky rotted to orange. Before Johnny heard a *Boom*, a sun appeared and morphed into a mushroom cloud, devouring everything in sight. The enraged bomb shockwaves shattered the windows and launched the furniture like popcorn in a microwave.

With a ringing in her ears, Mom pulled Johnny to the basement and shut the door behind her. She pushed against the ground with all her might, blocking the pleading cries of a dying soul behind the door.

Johnny's heart was a drum solo that grew faster and faster with every *bang*. His tears came gushing out, and he started hyperventilating.

"*Shh*, it's okay," Mom hushed with a smile. After Johnny had calmed down, she collapsed. The leg of what was once a dinner table pierced her thigh. "It looks like I won't get to see you go to college," she whispered. "Take that gas mask to your right and do me a favor."

Johnny struggled to reply through the stream of tears on his face, "What is it?"

"*Live.*"

Smoke shielded the sky from the sun, and lightning strikes threatened from a distance. The wind gashed with its freezing touch while snow trickled down. Nuclear winter was settling in.

Johnny's stomach beat with hunger. His head shrieked with pain. He salivated at the thought of pancakes, and his chest yearned for a hug to outdo the cold.

I could eat anything.

He crept through the debris of what once was his neighborhood. Mutants scavenged the trash cans and ran away when spotted. Johnny dug in his neighbor's trash can for half-eaten apples. Despite the nose hair disintegrating ooze, Johnny devoured them.

Johnny peered in the distance. He saw a tall hotel building with its top half missing. A sign dangling above its two front doors spelled out *Night-Night Delight*.

A pale man huddled in front of the entrance. Johnny approached him, but the man did not acknowledge him until he put his hand on the doorknob. Instantly the middle-aged man jerked up and looked at Johnny. He yelled and threw himself at him trying to kill two birds with one stone: Johnny and his lungs. Johnny, who knew he did not have enough time to dodge, decided to drop on top of him. They wrestled and the man squeezed Johnny's neck. However, Johnny's strength even before the advantage of gravity was superior to his. He ripped the man's arm off his throat, palmed his head, and bashed his head against the ground. Again. Again. And again.

For a moment, Johnny shivered. He was reminded of his father, Andrew Krueger. Before the bombs, he was often fired from his jobs. When this occurred, he would go to his son's room, jump at him, and pelt him with fists until Johnny stopped crying. Any attempt at resistance was met with a bottle of Jack Daniels to his temple. Throughout his fifteen years of life, Johnny grew accustomed to this.

Johnny could not help but get the last laugh seeing his father's lifeless body as he walked out the door earlier today.

Men in blue raced out of the alleyway, raised their assault rifles, and ordered "Freeze!" Their eyes were tucked under their helmets. Strangely, they were strapped with syringes across their torsos. Before Johnny knew it, a soldier came from behind and knocked him out cold with a kick.

Everything faded to black.

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A man turned around in his chair and folded his hands over a mahogany desk. "It looks like we've got a troublemaker," he said, smiling. He made up for the lack of a reply with "Not much for talk, eh?"

Johnny, who was asleep in a chair for some time, was interested in the view from the glass wall behind the man. He noticed men in blue uniforms, similar to the one that had attacked him, tranquilizing people with syringes. One moment they would be killing each other, and next, they would walk away as if nothing happened.

"Welcome to Rapture. My name's Richard Morrison. I run things here."

"What is happening to those people?" Johnny finally spoke.

Morrison pointed to a pendulum swinging to and fro. Three metal balls hung from a string. The outermost balls took turns pushing the center one left and right. Occasionally, one of two toy monkeys positioned at both ends pushed one of the balls and instigated the contraption's perpetual cycle.

Under no circumstances did the monkeys ever confront each other. They merely settled their disputes through the motion of the balls.

“Look at it. You hate it as much as I do, don’t you? However, let me answer your question. I am liberating them.”

"From what?"

Richard picked up the pendulum and threw it in the fireplace. After a brief silence, he answered, "Hate. Those wise enough to hate nothing but hate itself must cope with a world fueled by it. It perpetuates the cycle of violence. We must detach ourselves from this cycle to avoid making another mistake like we all witnessed last week."

"What? What does it matter if these people end up being walking zombies?"

"Of course, having choices is ideal, but stifling the burning pot until it explodes is not a solution. Anyway, from what you have done to that poor man, you will be punished."

Blue men begin to walk in, smiling. Johnny tried to sprint away but was pinned against the wall. The man holding him took a syringe from his waist and inched it toward Johnny's arm.

Suddenly, Green men charged into the room with the blue men and Morrison in their crosshairs.

The cacophony of bullets made Johnny's ears ring. Blue and green men tackled each other and struggled to choke, strike, and blast the other. Men who had never known each other slaying one another left and right.

One of the green men threw a molotov cocktail with their last spurt of life. The office was in flames. On top of a pile of corpses, two soldiers brawled for a revolver on the ground.

Ignorant of their surroundings, the weapon slid in front of Johnny.

"Kill this son of a gun!" yelled the Rapt soldier.

"Come on, that guy is being brainwashed like the rest of his dead allies. Blow his brains off and come with us. I'll make sure you're an honorary member of our future nation!"

Johnny looked back and forth between the two. He squinted his eyes through the optic and pressed the trigger.

Boom!

Johnny knelt and cried in pain. Blood came surging out of his foot. He pulled the gun down before he could shoot anyone.

The blue army's reinforcements stormed up the hotel building. The Pangean soldiers started to fall back, leaving Johnny in the blaze.

He laid down and accepted his fate. Johnny realized he was a fool for trying to break the cycle of hatred, humanity's greatest strength, and the catalyst of its extinction.

Johnny sobbed his final tears, amidst the chaos. *Mom, I'm sorry. I couldn't even do the one thing you told me to do. I'm so, so sorry.*