**Hope in Crocuses**

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I buried his body in the backyard at night next to my mother’s. The digging was somehow easier this time. Because I knew now what I had to do.

It was no longer safe in my house. My mother’s rocking chair, empty in the living room where she would page through gardening magazines—my stepfather’s worktable in the garage, tools still laid out. These were my ghosts. A reminder of hopes we'd had. Shadows of what could have been.

By the time my mother died bodies had to be buried at night. You couldn't trust anyone by then.  Not the nice family across the street with the little girl I'd helped to ride her first bicycle.  Not the newlyweds with a blush on their cheeks.  The virus was just a virus. But it made people into animals.

It was difficult to know if they still watched from behind closed curtains, listening in the night for your weakness. Or if they, like so many others, were already dead—rotting corpses draped on Lazi-Boy couches or sprawled on plush Oriental rugs.

Panic had come first. Hoarding food and supplies. Hoarding and holding onto the last strings of hope and life. Hoarding guns.

Because I guess if the virus didn’t kill us, we were going to kill each other. *And what a world that would be to live in.*

That’s what my stepfather had said. He was an ex-Green Beret who never talked about the service. He rode a Harley and had so many tattoos I was already beginning to forget them even as they disappeared beneath clods of dirt.

He was my real father. I had realized that as I threw the last shovel of dirt over his corpse and patted it down, pulling sheets of dry grass back over the turned earth to hide it. No grave markers in this backyard cemetery. I knew where they were just the same.

My mother, beautiful and an artist, who’d died first. Then the boy from down the road who’d been my childhood friend. His family was already gone when the looters came. At first, they’d raided only the houses of the dead. Then the houses of the weak. *Natural Selection* I’d heard it called when the radio still had a signal. We’d buried him quickly as the tendrils of night had curled around us into the morning.

I shouldn’t call him a boy. He was my age—nineteen. He cried endlessly for his family and waited to join them. He’d been so fragile in those last weeks I’d felt that if I had touched him, he might shatter.

Maybe we all felt like that. Though not at first. At first people said, “If I die, I die.” Because we all die. It’s easy to die. But not the way I’ve seen it. I wasn’t frightened of death. Instead, I was terrified of living long enough to see the aftermath. Of being around to watch the world lose its grip on itself. I’d thought of the Hollow Men. And the world ending. Not with a bang but…you know the rest.

And here I am.

When it started, we planned like it was a game. An Apocalypse Game. We’d say things like, “They’re not going to make it,” as we skirted around people pushing shopping carts aimlessly. At the liquor store a burly, long-haired man rung us up. He had a bounce in his step that made his earring sway. “He,” I’d said, “Is going to make it.” We’d laughed. The world took a nosedive for the worst.

Which had left me digging a grave in the still cool dirt of another spring and reaching for my stepfather’s shotgun. I grabbed the 20-gauge from the gun cabinet. If I was going to hunt squirrels by winter, I wanted something that might not blow them into oblivion. I pulled ammunition from the shelves. I started to leave when—

“Shit,” I said, “I’m a cotton-headed-ninny-muggings.”

The ammunition I’d grabbed was for the 12.

“I’m not going to make it,” I whispered ruefully.

In the still twilight of the half-moon night, I started making my way down backstreets and behind houses in silence and shadow. Even *before* I’d sometimes thought about how useful it might be—knowing the secret places of the world.

My stepfather had taken me hiking since I was small, pulling leave from plants, whispering their properties, or crouching to hover of a game trail. Because of him I knew the silent back ways of the woods. I knew where clear creeks ran over cool stones. I knew where there were ruins and where there were places to hide.

We had found the abandoned house alongside the river three years ago. I would wait there for the world to work out its anxiety and hate.

I marched through underbrush and needles that pulled at my skin. As I walked, I cast aside parts of myself that I couldn’t bear anymore. I became only who I needed to be. By next evening I could see the unmistakable line of the ruin in the dim shadow of the dying day.

The abandoned house gazed at me with shafts of sunlit windows. Even in darkness it looked alive. In what had once been the front yard I saw a scattering of late blooming Crocuses.

Shaded in the tree-cast shadows they had finally clawed their way toward the light. They looked startling there, perfect among pine needles and moss, soaked in the hatched and fading rays of the sinking sun through the trees. I climbed the stone steps to the door of the house. I thought about how nature’s roots run deep. And that by next spring, whether I was alive or not, those roots would bury themselves again into the earth and allow life to climb upwards to what was left in the world. And they at least would bloom. Despite us all.