

JESS LEONARD SCHENK

Mexico

*D*raw the curtains.

“It was dark back then. Right when the open burns started, I mean.” Dannigan scratches at the scraggly hair on his chin and peers at Yvonne from across the table.

“Yeah, but what was it like?” Yvonne is impatient. She keeps flipping a card, the three of clubs, between her fingers. Dannigan thinks that if she sped it up just a little, it would sound like an airplane propeller when it starts to move. *Thhhhhhhfffffp.*

“There’s not a whole lot more to say, kid. Right before the open burns, during the change-over, you saw a lot of weird shit. Weird headlines, mostly. ‘Hi, neighbor!’ and ‘Area church welcomes you,’ that kind of stuff. They weren’t weird all by themselves. They were weird because they were so different than everything that was coming out before. It was enough to make your skin crawl.” Dannigan hopes that’ll be enough to keep her satisfied for a while, but of course she wants to hear more, know more. Some days, he swears she wants to crawl inside his head and watch it all playing on the backs of his eyes like a movie. But hey, if he doesn’t have to watch it himself...

Yvonne yawns, her jaw cracking loudly. She twirls a strand of dirty hair around her finger. Dannigan hopes that means she’ll fall asleep soon and leave him alone. He has guns to clean. Besides, she shouldn’t even be awake right now. It’s not even her shift.

Outside, the old cypress tree adjusts itself, stretching out its branches hung with broken necklaces and old clothing. Shoes, mostly. Dannigan wonders how in the hell so many pairs of shoes got up in that tree. He thinks it’s like a tribe of shoe-people came

stomping through here one night and left their clothes behind in the morning when they left. *Except that there were no shoe people*, he reminds himself. *Just a growing-old man sitting here telling stories to himself to pass the time.*

It was different when Desiree was still hanging around, before she left to go off to God-knows-where. He hopes she’s doing well, but he can’t help but hate her a little bit sometimes for not saying goodbye. When the hate comes on, it’s strong like dark coffee boiled over a low fire, and he wishes all sorts of horrible things on her. Desiree laying at the bottom of a pit with her legs broken. Desiree hanged from a tree. Desiree falling on her own metaphorical sword.

Dannigan sat by himself in that house for a long time before Yvonne came along. Poor kid was delirious, running a fever of a hundred and three and barely able to speak. He took her in, patched her up. Now, as much as he likes to pretend she’s a pain in the ass—and truthfully, she is often a pain in his ass—she’s his. He bundled her up like a stray kitten and made sure she had everything she needed. It’s nice to be able to sleep sometimes, too, though most of the time it’s not good sleep.

He hates it when Yvonne asks what it was like before the open burns because he has a hard time remembering how it started. When there’s no clear starting or ending point, the chronology gets a little bit fucked up and, well, he’s just too old to get creative and cute with it anymore. If he thinks hard enough, Dannigan can be pretty sure that it started the day the teenage girl died in that horrible accident. It was either a car crash, back when people still drove cars, or something with farming equipment, before all the fields were dark and blistered. At any rate, the world had already ended, had already been dead for a couple of weeks, but the people in this part of the country didn’t care until things got personal. Once that happened, there was no going back. *In a lot of ways*, he thinks, *it was like an orgasm or the killing blow. You can try your damndest, but most of the time you can’t pull yourself back from the brink.*

About a week later, the newspapers started to change, and there weren’t as many people on the streets. *But nobody really paid attention to any of that because you can count on that sort of weirdness once a decade or so, anyway.* Dannigan’s doing it again, putting the pieces together in some kind of logical order, trying to reason with himself.

Ah, hell, he thinks, resting his head against a rotting wooden beam. *Too old to remember what happened.* But he knows that’s just a cop-out, like when something hurts or embarrasses Yvonne and, instead of facing it, dealing with it, she’ll say “I’m tired.” The

first time she did it, Dannigan had asked her a question, and she'd stumbled over her words for a moment. It wasn't a big deal, just a momentary lapse. *I'm tired. Wow, I'm tired.* When he said she could lie down for a little bit, really, it was okay, she shook her head and went about her business. But for the rest of the day, he'd watched her get lost in thought for a minute or two, then hang her head and mutter those two maddening words: *I'm tired.* It took him awhile to figure out what it meant before he started to notice a pattern.

Like when the open burns first started. It wasn't just the newspaper headlines that tipped him off, other things did, too. These made it seem like the whole world had been knocked slightly off-kilter. The dead girl's funeral was pretty weird all by itself, even if you ignored everything else that was going on at the time. Dannigan had gone to the funeral home a couple of hours before her wake to deliver a wreath and had seen the shrouded mirrors, the body stretched out on a table and covered with a plain white sheet instead of in its coffin, where it belonged. The candles and the smoke and the thunderstorm outside. Rain came in through the open windows and soaked the dead girl's body. For five days, this went on, until everyone either got tired of it and left or decided that five days was long enough.

He didn't start to put the pieces together until much later, like with Yvonne and "I'm-Tired."

Stop all clocks.

There had been an article in the paper several weeks before the teenager died, something about civil unrest in a faraway city to the east. Nobody paid much attention to it; it was much too far away from their safe little nest to even bother worrying about. The mayor, a man who favored a worn tailcoat, stood on a stage in the center of town and addressed the crowd on a windy afternoon.

Dannigan thought he looked awfully familiar, but he couldn't place where he'd seen the man before. A red balloon floated against the grey sky before tangling itself in a power line and bursting. No one seemed to notice.

"Things are going to be wonderful," the man said. "Pay no attention to the news from other towns; all resistance has been successfully suppressed, and the General is firmly in control of this fine nation and its fine people. The world is safe again." And for a while, nothing seemed to change. News of the trouble spreading to a neighboring city began to wind its way through the town, but few people paid attention to it. There were minor disturbances;

a few blocks on the north end experienced minor power surges over the next few days, and some homes lost power altogether. But most people, knowing that the north end was where the *poor* people lived, simply assumed they'd forgotten to pay the electric bill again.

The next day, the north end was a dead zone from Melrose Avenue down to Mansford Street, and the loss of power began to creep slowly uptown. The man in the tailcoat returned to the makeshift stage in the center of town and told the people not to worry. A momentary lapse, but certainly no cause for any real concern. That night, six storefronts in the area between the north end and "uptown" were boarded up and abandoned by their owners. A pack of boys wandered through the midtown with two-by-fours, smashing in car windows and terrorizing stray animals.

Dannigan had lived on the north end of town his entire life, in a small shotgun-style house near the docks. The people there stayed inside all day after the loss of power, but by night, they poured into the streets, human scabs dressed in black and gray and brown. They stole from their neighbors and threw good-intentioned gawkers from uptown into the murky waters of the nearby river.

Before it happened, he and Desiree had taken a certain pleasure in looking through outdated travel brochures from the rest stop where she worked. One day, they agreed, they would go down to Tijuana and laze in the sun and eat tequila worms all day. Desiree said the first thing she wanted to do was see a donkey show, and Dannigan had laughed, explaining that it wasn't anything like the circuses she had been to as a child. In the early days, Desiree could still smile.

On the seventh evening after the grid failure, a pack of boys rediscovered fire and incinerated a tall stack of newspapers and assorted Tupperware (gathered from the offerings of the uptown citizens) in the streets: the first open burn. One boy, the biggest one, had slit his palm with a rusted tack and poured a bit of blood into the fire—not enough to complete any misguided ritual or do any permanent damage to his own body, but enough to prove to the others that he was, indeed, swinging the biggest stick. They threw batteries and soda cans and anything else they could find into the flames, and though city ordinance prohibited any sort of ruckus past ten o'clock, no policemen came.

Uptown, Dannigan heard, was not much better. There wasn't the wholesale chaos of the north end, but the newspapers were slowly going to hell. Most of the staff lived on the north end and hadn't been to work in over a week. In their absence, common uptown rabble drifted into the newspaper headquarters and began

to print word-salad bulletins and leave them on street corners, in vacant convenience store bathrooms and shopping malls: "Area church welcomes you!" and "Why no one shakes hands anymore."

The national government had fallen curiously silent. There were whispers on the streets that the man in the tailcoat had been seized and burned alive by north end thugs, and the rest of the local authorities were too frightened to leave the relative comfort and safety of their homes. Out of their silence, family members of the teenager who had died in the car accident formed their own version of government, cobbled together from various religious texts, children's storybooks, and their own rudimentary understanding of government. They called themselves the Church of Amy, after the dead girl, and they absorbed the packs of boys that roamed the streets at night.

The open burns continued to spread. On the rare days when there were no burns, the entire city loomed dark and expressionless below a thick layer of piss-colored clouds. Desiree stopped leaving the house. She hung pots and pans around the outside of their house, claiming that they'd make noise and wake her up if anyone came too close in the night. After a while, Dannigan stopped leaving the house, too.

Meanwhile, people continued to vanish, as if snatched from their own homes in the middle of the night. There were more rumors, ones that suggested that the man in the tailcoat had either become a part of the Church or that the Church had arranged his disappearance because he was to blame for Amy's death, that it was all a big conspiracy and that the failure of the grid was part of the reason she died. The more likely explanation, Dannigan thought, was that he'd just left town before things really went to hell.

On the eighteenth day, when the entire city had fallen dark, Desiree had packed her bags and left in the middle of the night. She took most of her jewelry, half their food, and all but one gun. When Dannigan awoke in the cold grey hours of the early morning, the bed beside him was bare and cold. He howled into the thin air until he realized it wasn't going to bring her back. Then, ashamed, he had slunk back into the remains of their house.

Allow three to four days for distant relatives to arrive.

Yvonne has awoken and wandered through the bombed-out shell of the house, calling for Dannigan. When she gets close enough, he grabs her by the forearms and scolds her for making too much noise. Her chin wobbles, and she mumbles, "I'm tired," and in that moment, she looks so much like a lost five-year-old

that Dannigan hates-her-hates-her-hates-her. Then, he sends her back to bed, drinks the rest of a beer he found resting inside a blown tire the other day, and resigns himself to staring into the distance.

Quiet night. No rabble. No burning in the street, which is a rarity. Most of the city's population either left or died within the first few weeks, but still, he watches. Even the Church hasn't been much of a problem, and this makes Dannigan feel weary. The old calendar he'd kept for so long no longer makes any sense, and the thickening scruff on his chin is the only way he can tell one day from the next.

Weak, Dannigan thinks. *Clinging to something, anything, because they don't know how to live on their own.* But he can't blame them, not really, because he knows he would do the exact same thing. And he almost had. A few days after Desiree left, one of the women from the Church had come by with a stack of pamphlets. "The Church welcomes you!" He looked into her face, covered with scabs and bruises and shut the door.

That night, a group of them had come round the house, howling like a pack of dogs. They set fire to his old car and covered a child in pitch. Before Dannigan could stop them, they'd thrown the child and a cluster of radishes and a stack of books on top of the blazing heap.

Dannigan had shaken his head and put a few extra boards across the door before going to bed and dreaming of warm beaches and sunburns. Sand in his hair, in his mouth, in his eyes, and still he was alone.

Hang a wreath of laurels on the door.

Dannigan had met Desiree when they were barely out of their teens. She'd been raising hell in a dive bar and he'd been out for a walk, minding his own business, when she grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and pulled him into an alley.

"You!" she said. "You're coming with me. I just started a fight, and I don't know how to finish it." Then, she shoved him into the smoky pit of the bar, where he fought a man twice his size, and afterward, Desiree pulled him back into the alley and admitted she'd been watching, and then she kissed him. And then, Dannigan thought his broken nose and black eye were worth it. Desiree and her bony shoulders and chapped lips were worth it.

Place photographs of loved ones face-down.

Dannigan creeps into the room where Yvonne is sleeping and places a battered postcard next to her head. *Tijuana*. He doesn't know if he'll be able to find Desiree again, but he wants to try.

Maybe Yvonne will find them one day. Maybe she'll stay in the house forever. Maybe she'll join the Church. Dannigan doesn't think it matters all that much. *Yes*, he thinks. He'll go to Mexico, and then nothing will matter at all.

CARRIE PIEPER

Poem 35

Stinging laughter
after I finish
the half full bottle
warmed by
time. Opened by
the side of an
old red trailer,
a childhood relic.
Visions of
neighborhood heroes
and passing parades
still cling to my mind
like chipping paint to
dew-covered hands.

Summer was over
following youth
out the door as we
sat like children,
toasting to the
early morning moon.
Our farewell
cut short by the
silhouette of a
man in pajamas
clinging to the stair rail
as he called out
to the night.

A shortened walk,
or lengthened legs,
brought me back
to a yard illuminated
with the yellow glow
of street lights.
I turned around
to see a restless
porch lamp finally
retire, giving in to
the approaching
morning.