

Onset

Written by Emily McCann

The thunder that night starts off rumbling ominously in the distance and ends furiously, exploding above him with live energy that crackles and echoes across the world. The silences between are filled with the pound of rain against canvas, the rhythm always that one jarring step from steady. The weather puts him on edge, makes him certain that he cannot survive the fury of this storm, vulnerable and powerless. He should have chosen the first campsite, further back and sheltered. He should have taken five minutes to set out that damn tarp - if he packs it right, it'll take twice as long to leave tomorrow now that his gear's all wet. Assuming he lives, of course.

Vaguely he remembers marked-up desks and three-legged chairs, the musty classroom where he had learned that English was not so frightening after all. He thinks about Shakespeare, how in *King Lear* a storm raged overhead that was more than a storm, that meant nature itself was angry at the world. He thinks there was something in there about political turmoil, too, and grins to himself, making a mental note to include that in his next column.

In the morning he wakes to a misting rain that belies the anger of the night. He says a silent thanks to a God he only half believes in and packs his gear in record time. It's haphazard and messy but everything fits in the boat, and he hops in and paddles like a man possessed as the first rumbles of a re-forming storm sound in the distance.

He leaves the canoe empty at the dock, painters' rope looped into a long daisy chain that sags into the water below. There's nobody to be found in the small, one-room store, though it's lit and the shelves are stocked. Shrugging, he leaves the rental money and permits on the desk, secretly relieved he doesn't have to interact with anyone quite yet. Being out in the wilderness for a month makes it difficult, at first, to deal with people; makes you take for granted slow days full of crystal-clear lakes and towering pines. It makes you used to living on instinct rather than schedule; it makes you used to being joyfully and utterly alone. He needs time to transition, to forget the slow murmur of tranquility and accept the chaos of the world, the bills and the deadlines and the women who never call back. He leans back in the drivers seat of his beat-up Ford Escort and sighs. *Well*, he thinks as the engine coughs to life, *I have the drive left at least.*

It's been a couple hours now, but still the highway stretches out in front of him, long and straight and blissfully empty. He feels as if he is static and unmoving, the world rolling away underneath his wheels to the low thrum of tire on asphalt. The radio's broken - he's met with an angry hiss of static when he turns it on, and no amount of gentle coaxing can make it find a working station. He contemplates having it fixed when he gets home, and the remembers he's a mediocre freelance writer who needs to save money for things like food and not spend it on things like car radios. Not that he's complaining. His job is what gives him the freedom to hide away, to forgo social expectations and niceties and still be considered a responsible adult. It's not that he hates *everyone*, exactly; he's just found that, generally, people suck.

It's night by the time he reaches the city, streetlights flickering in their vain attempt to fight off the encroaching darkness. The streets are as quiet as the highway was, almost eerily bereft of human life. It's still raining, though, and the first chill of winter is in the air, so he figures anyone outside right now would probably be pretty damp and miserable. He passes the old racetrack and its aged grandstand, a shadowed, battleship-sized monument to a bygone era, and considers visiting the neon-green casino next door, tacky flashing sign promising greasy food and greasier company. He's not quite ready for that, though, not ready to be faced with reality, with somewhere so full of desperation and dreams. He takes the final three turns with practiced apathy and shuts off the rumbling engine, sinking into the muffled sound of rain on concrete.

He spends the next three days settling into the routine of warm meals and warm showers and warm beds, aching muscles thankful for a reprieve from a month of walking and carrying and paddling. He boots up his computer and tries to send out a half-hearted attempt at an editorial to a newspaper he knows will never publish him, but the network is down and it won't go through so he shrugs and makes grilled cheese instead. He checks his phone but it's been dead for at least a couple days and the charger is lost somewhere in piles of paper and dirty clothing. He checks his TV and it won't work, either, and now he's frustrated with technology as a whole. He goes to make breakfast and, as the toast pops up blackened and charred, sheepishly remembers that everything had been broken before he left. He remembers he had meant to fix them, all of them, and then invite people over, re-connect with his family, write for a real newspaper. He remembers he ran out of time all the time and that eventually he just gave up and grabbed his pack and drove up north, angry and anxious and ready to escape.

He decides the phone needs to come first. Julie from the coffee shop said she'd give him a call when he got back, and he doesn't want her to hear his fumbling attempt at setting up an answering machine, embarrassingly incompetent for a grown man. He grabs his phone and his coat and steps outside into blinding sunlight, oddly juxtaposed against an empty street. He starts to wonder if he missed some sort of memo, if some volcano or earthquake or tsunami is scheduled to come through town today and he just isn't aware. He shrugs the thought off with a chuckle that sounds too loud in the still air, and, hands in his pockets for warmth, strolls off at an easy pace.

In the distance now he can see a woman with her child, and noisily he exhales a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. She almost looks like his neighbour, the one who likes to bake cherry pies and listen to Frank Sinatra at three in the morning, but his neighbour doesn't have a kid and would definitely not be awake before noon on a Sunday. She has the same hair and the same bowlegged walk, but she's different, somehow, and that's when he realizes she's missing half her face and her skin is sloughing off, like she's slowly shedding a too-pale jacket. That's when he realizes the kid beside her is not really a kid, and is instead her boyfriend staggering along on the stumps where his knees used to be, bone grinding into the frost-covered asphalt. That's when he realizes the low, terrified keening ringing in his ears is coming from him,

that the only reason he isn't screaming is because his throat is sore from that cold he picked up on the last leg of his trip and hadn't been able to shake.

They see him, now, and they're running towards him making greedy noises, and he's pretty sure that's not even *allowed*, pretty sure that zombies aren't supposed to be able to run, especially when one of them basically has no legs. He knows he should move, should turn and sprint off, but he's rooted to the ground and his mind won't work and he's pretty sure that he's going to die, right here and right now, alone and confused and afraid. Hazily he realizes that he hears gunshots ringing like thunder in his ears, the whine of bullets cut through by a deep voice yelling commands edged with panic. A hand grabs his arm and yanks him backwards, and as he falls into the bliss of unconsciousness all he can seem to think is *well, that's good then*.

Someone once pointed out that everyone has their own stories to tell and their own battles to fight. That is certainly still true. Your own stories, though, matter less when you go from arguing over who takes out the trash to deciding who takes out the bodies. Still, every writer needs a story, and every story needs a beginning; and for Jon, that was how the end began.