

Aftermath: Wanderer

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Aftermath: Wanderer

The first few days on the road with Asshole were harsh and it wasn't because I had trouble getting used to his demanding personality. Ironically that was the easy part. It was the silence that irritated me like a paper cut on the heel of your foot. The irritation coupled with loud thumping bass for hours every day blurred together until I could feel my mental stability slipping away. I was alone in a sea of that Asshole's distant personality and it was infuriating. Notwithstanding, He kept me safe and he was constantly checking on me and making sure the armored truck was always well supplied. I was secure in his dispassionate company. The only time I considered him a danger was when we stopped, because

that was when the drinking, if he had it, started. Sadly, it was the only way he could get some rest.

It wasn't because I thought he would do anything to me, hell by this time I wasn't completely sure I didn't want him to. It was because I could tell he was brooding over his loss and I wanted him to open up to me. I couldn't blame him though. We'd all lost something important. We'd lost our humanity at the very least. It's something I never thought about when I was rolling down the highway after a shitty day at work talking to one of my friends, all of whom were probably dead now, and venting while we planned on which bar we would go to.

I'd have given anything to go back to that shitty job now, if only to feel the sense of dignity, and even though my job was shitty, I missed the notion that everything would eventually work out. I was obsessed with that desire when Asshole began to slow the truck down. I'd been so buried in my own thoughts I didn't realize I'd been staring at my feet the whole time.

“Why are we stopping?”

“Drug store,” he nodded his head in one of his pedantic one word answers.

It wasn't unusual for him to start looking for a place to pull over around this time. I'd asked him to stop so I could pick up a few items a couple of days ago. I thought he'd dismissed it long ago. He didn't seem very enthused about driving without his music. I watched him force himself to stay awake by silently bobbing his head in time with the beat. Yet, a drug store in this location went against most of his standard operating procedures or at least as far I could tell it did.

Although I detested the silence, I learned how to read what his intentions were by his body language. In his own way he was very expressive. I realized, after he bluntly told me he didn't like talking, that he spoke with with his heart through his actions. As I became accustomed to his non-verbal queues I began to suspect, no I knew, there was more to him than he was telling me. I threw my boots over my feet.

Asshole didn't wait for me to grab my bow and arrows, something that irritated me because in all honesty I never wanted to deal with the dead. They scared me. Not the fear you feel when you're in a horror movie. It was the anxiety and desperation of someone holding your closest loved one or a child at gun point. The mixed and confused sensation of cold sweat and heightened sensory that only the threat of loss and having to live through it or dying without being able to prevent it could evoke. I justified my fear by remembering that people throughout the centuries have thrown their very lives at trying to prevent the death of their civilizations. Unfortunately, our civilization had been destroyed. I felt that as long as this Asshole and I were alive, then there was the possibility that things would be able to start over again. It was a belief I held in as I grew closer to him but I found the thought foolish because there was no mutual attraction.

The stench of death hit me before I entered. Asshole didn't risk a look back as I gagged into my hand. By the smell alone I could tell there was nothing fresh inside, that alluded no runners at least, which meant I'd have the time to aim. We stalked inside and Asshole signaled for me to wait to sweep left into a large aisle that would give me a lot of clearance for a shot. Then he made other hand gestures. He held up a finger, then moved his hand from side to side in a beauty pageant wave, and held up two fingers. He pointed two fingers down and wiggled them back and forth. His sign language indicated that he thought there was one or two that were still moving but that he was unsure where they were. If he'd seen them he would point to his eyes and then point in their direction. His other gesture also indicated what I initially thought from the stench which was that they were walkers.

He crept forward looking through the aisles that branched off the main walkway searching for any sign of movement. When he got to the last broad aisle he signaled for me to move forward. I couldn't see what he observed but if the aisle I was in was any indication, there'd been a mass exodus. This store probably hadn't been visited since the initial outbreak. Items lay strewn on the floor and I picked through them making sure not to trip or cause a racket. I caught sight of him through another branching aisle that split the rows. He shook his head telling me he still hadn't found anything.

It bothered me. Nothing in the main aisles, so far, and nothing in the rows between, not even a body. Yet, there was blood smeared on the floor that trailed into one of the rows and blood at the front door. That meant that the living dead or rotting carcass was probably in a back area. If they were zombies in a back area, there could be more than one or two. I could tell by the way Asshole was hunched over that he might as well have sent that notion to me telepathically. The next mental thoughts he transmitted were stay cool, stay frosty, and we can handle this if we keep level heads. If we have to we can make a break for it. I let out a long noiseless breath and listened to his words of wisdom.

Asshole was a survivor. I respected, and even felt some sense of... well, I respected him. I thought that if someone who was so cool, if not apathetic, about dealing with surviving the apocalypse didn't make it, what chance did I have? So when I reached the end of my aisle first and didn't see him, I felt my lungs sink into my lower intestines. I replayed the sounds I hadn't heard in my head. Was there a whacking sound I'd missed? No. Was there a thunk of metal biting into flesh? No again. Was there a stabbing gurgling sound and metal grating against bone? No I hadn't heard that either. What I did hear almost made me void my bladder adding to the rotten stench in the store.

There was a shuffling sound and then, "What's crackin?" boomed throughout the store. I hissed and moved forward still scanning through the aisles.

"Just chillin, supwhichu?" Asshole replied coolly but assertively. I could hear him to clearly for his gas mask to still be on.

“Chillin too. That’s cool you know? We both just chillin,” the voice came again. I could see the barrel of a shotgun pointed out of the pharmacy window and a dark hand underneath it. I prayed I’d find what I wanted to as I eased through the back aisle and almost cried out in joy as I moved forward. However, I was on a mission so I bit my lip. I looked through the side window at the other end of the pharmacy and checked the aisles of medicine inside. There were two rows in there that were hard to see through, but I couldn’t see anything moving so I slid my butt onto the ledge and began creeping through.

“Yeah, you know, cuz somebody could get hurt up in here,” Asshole answered keeping him distracted as I made my way in.

“Yeah tru dat, but I got a shotgun, and you ain’t got shit cept a butter knife.” Came the reply. I could see him now, in baggy pants that had been pulled up but were still baggy somehow.

“Yeah, I see that, so that puts us at some choices.”

“What choices you thinkin?”

“I’m thinkin we got three choices. We could both back away, you could roll with me, or you could get that damn shotgun out of my face before I come over there and gut you with this butter knife.”

“What makes you think I’d let you get that close?”

“Cuz you ain’t got no bullets.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“Cuz if you did you would have shot her,” Asshole nodded with his head.

“I ain’t fallin...” the patron with a keen sense of AAVE started before turning to the right and howling, “OH SHIT!!!”

He didn’t have time to move though. The pharmacist, or more likely one of the assistants, who had been most likely been laying down in one of the back rows and gotten up when she heard the commotion, lunged toward him. Her blood stained front was almost on top of him. Judging from the lack of bodies present, the blood was either from her when she first began to turn and vomited the deteriorated acidic remains of her stomach down the front of her cloak or a hapless victim she’d bitten who’d probably wandered out of the store long ago. Perhaps she’d been bitten along with another customer by the same zombie and just couldn’t find her way out as the assailant found another meal. It didn’t matter either way. I had another arrow notched before our guest could get his shotgun back up.

“Damn, you bad and fine too,” he recovered quickly ogling me from head to toe, “Which her you talkin about cuz I would never shoot nothing so fine as that, least not with *this* shotgun. You a good shot!”

His boisterous mentality made me want to shoot him in the eyeball but I wasn’t sure if I’d hit him

and I didn't want to give away my lack of skill.

"I'm with him," I retorted reminding him of Asshole, "and I was aiming for you."

"Oh my bad, look man for real it's empty," he put his fingers up in the air and laid his shotgun down the counter.

"I been known that," Asshole pulled his gas mask off, picked up the shotgun, and racked it a few times ensuring it was empty while I checked the last aisles to make sure there were no other unwanted guests.

"So you mind if I roll with you?"

"We cool," Asshole replied offhandedly.

"Good, so what's it like bein' with a white girl?"

"Ain't no difference. No matter what color they are, they always ridin you,"

"Straight," the stranger nodded as if he knew me.

"Really? Asshole..." I huffed and walked from behind the counter and grabbed a derelict shopping cart, "I'm going shopping. A woman has needs."

"You just gonna let her call you that?" I heard the new guy ask.

"That's my name. She's Ghost." I heard Asshole reply. I rolled my eyes at my given name but I was curious about what he'd call the new comer. I dawdled waiting for him to drop the bomb.

"Ah, my name is..."

"Darkness."

"Naw man," Darkness started half amused and almost sounding offended that he'd been dubbed with an insult.

"It is now. He says it makes it easier," I called over my shoulder as I headed toward the make up aisle.

"Easier for what?" Darkness yelled after me as Asshole strolled into the first aid aisle.

"When he has to kill you!" I yelled back.

"Ain't this some shit! You are an Asshole!" he shouted after Asshole and stuffed some items into a bag he was carrying.

We finished up quick and Asshole started running Darkness through the routine.

"You ain't interested in men is ya?" he asked as he stripped.

"Nope it's standard," I smiled soaking it all in. When darkness thought I was watching, he undressed a little quicker.

"You break her in yet?"

"What the hell? Are we really taking this guy? He's always talking and never says shit! That other

guy seemed like he was okay.”

“He’s black...” Asshole shrugged.

“Yeah, I’m black!” Darkness called over the door between us as he bathed.

“So you didn’t pick up the other guy because he was white?”

“He had the shakes,” Asshole replied nonchalantly as he handed the foul smelling can to Darkness.

“What the hell is this?”

“Keeps the zombies from tracking us,” I spat at Darkness and then I spat at Asshole, “I can’t believe this shit!”

“Too many white people means the brotha dies first, ain’t you seen the movies?” Darkness retorted as we loaded the back of the truck and before I could get in, he called shotgun and ran to the passenger side. Asshole shrugged again and went to the driver’s side. I stood in disbelief as he started the truck.

“What took you so long?” Darkness asked, grinding on my last nerve as I got in and closed the doors.

“I wasn’t sure if I could deal with two bigoted assholes.”

“Naw, he’s Asshole; I’m Darkness. What we all look the same to you?” I threw something at the inner window. To my chagrin the object smacked hard and instead of making them flinch, they both laughed. I sat in the back pissed at my predicament and painted my toes as they drove. I thought about things. I wanted to sit in the front again. I’d gotten used to that Asshole. Listening to them chat back and forth as they drove antagonized me. It was like scrubbing your face with sandpaper to get rid of bad acne. I’d known that Asshole way longer and he was really getting under my skin by pulling this shit. I considered my options. Asshole was good at getting us what we needed, but he didn’t know anything about dealing with people. I knew I had the advantage.

I made dinner for all of us and handed it through the glass window. They ate greedily thinking I was over my anger but right before we pulled over, I put a towel up in the back. When Darkness got out I already had the door open. Asshole’s and my sleeping bags were zipped together.

“This ain’t a gang bang,” I told him casually and just to drive him like he’d been messing with me, I handed him a blanket and said, “You have shotgun.”

Amazingly, he didn’t say anything but his face twisted in a smug incredulous look as he went back to the front. I closed the door and saw Asshole was already in back putting up his gear.

“Where’s Darkness?” he asked and I could tell he was suspicious, but too tired to argue much.

“He’s up front,” I replied yawning, “Thanks for stopping for me.”

“What’s this?” he asked taking his boots off dismissing my gratitude. I smiled to myself inside. I’d never seen this side of Asshole. He was actually squirming like a worm on a hook. I couldn’t

remember a time he'd talked to me as much.

"It's our bed, like my toes?"

"Yeah, nice..." he started and I cut him off there with a finger to the lips.

"Can you just," I glanced to the side as if I was checking to make sure Darkness wasn't looking, "Just do this for me okay? Just this once so he thinks we're together or you know, he'll be all over me and I don't want to have to always fight him off. We aren't going to do anything, I just want it to look like we do."

I almost burst out laughing when he gave me a sideways look. Luckily, my giddiness came out more as a pleading smile and he gave in with a nod and got in the modified sleeping arrangements. I slid in next to him and waited nervously. First, I twiddled my thumbs. Then, I rolled around trying to get comfortable. When that didn't get his attention, I waited till he got comfortable and began rubbing his stomach. That did the job.

"Um, what are you doing?" he whispered and I knew it was time to go for it or go bust.

I got as close to him as I could and whispered, "A woman has needs."

The next morning actually felt normal. The stale breeze didn't discourage me because it was like life was starting over again. I almost forgot about the walking dead. I made breakfast and pretended like we were all on an extend camping trip. It was the first time Asshole didn't fit his personality. Granted not as much as usual, but sometimes you have to take what you can get. His body language seemed a little loser as if to imply that he was appreciative and he smiled a brief smile that seemed to hurt his unused smile muscles in thanks for a pleasant new beginning. Darkness, in sharp contrast, didn't have much to say. Despite all of his mocking, his square, sour attitude didn't quite fit the round, morning person peg.

"Are you okay?" I asked with genuine concern.

"Naw, that seat is uncomfortable I barely got any sleep," he frowned rubbing his back and this time I couldn't hide my smile of revenge. When were about to hit the road, I grabbed my finger nail polish. As Darkness opened the door I scooted in and sang, "Shotgun! You're such a gentleman," and hopped in. Darkness looked over my legs at Asshole with a sardonic expression. Asshole shrugged as if to say, "What am I supposed to say? We *are* together."

I lifted up my leg blocking their view from each other.

"Good, maybe I can get some sleep," Darkness snarled in a weary somber tone.

After everything I'd done, despite how rewarding last night had been, I began to feel a little sorry for Darkness. He closed the door firmly but without malice.

When the Asshole turned on his music I turned it down and made sure the bass wasn't too loud.

“Thanks,” Darkness called, and snuggled inside of his blanket.

Asshole had been very adamant that I never turn his music down. He'd quoted some unwritten law about how I shouldn't touch a black man's radio. As he reached forward to turn it back up I slapped his hand. He paused and looked like he was about to physically kick me out of the truck.

“You know how to survive; I know people. If you think you're going to make it through this by playing black Rambo, you're wrong. You're going to need him and you're going to need me,” I referred to myself alluringly and continued, “So you're just going to have to learn how to play nice.”

He slowly withdrew his hand obviously perturbed by my little speech. I exhaled silently to myself as I filed my nails thankful that he hadn't kicked me out. Asshole didn't appear to be the type of man you would arbitrarily slap, but I'd gambled he wasn't the type of man to be abusive either. I'd rolled the dice and I'd won. He was still an Asshole, without fail; however, as the days went by at least he talked to me a little more. It wasn't that he didn't care, I knew it was because he was afraid to lose me.

It didn't take long for me to adjust to the new setting. I could see Darkness bonding with Asshole like they were brothers. For the first time in a long time, I wasn't lonely anymore. I was part of a close personal group and I could feel that our trio had meaning. It's hard to feel alone when you have people close to you even if it was because I was now a part of my own mismatched dysfunctional family.

THE END

Richard Schwarz has been sharing his imagination and writings for several years. He puts thought into each fictional work as if it was a real life situation. One of his prime motivations is the positive interactions he receives from readers of his work and he has found that writing gives each reader the opportunity to find out a little bit about themselves.

Thank you for reading this ebook by Richard Schwarz and I hope you enjoyed it. You can find this and other books, for free and to purchase, at Richard Schwarz's website. Hope to see you soon.

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