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Sunflowers Should Be Just as Proud When They Wilt

There is a volley of gunfire, a series of distant screams, but still, the tan grass blanketing the windless terrain remains tall and motionless. The caravan, a 1955 teardrop trailer, is now covered with corpses and dark blood that obscures its metallic surface. Such a surface normally only reflects the malice of the sun and the nomads who slave under its wraith, but now a new power has taken authority over the trailer using brute, man-made force to silence and control. They are clothed in grey, masked by black goggles and dull green respirators, wielding guns of varying brands and editions. But, such aspects of a weapon didn't matter as much anymore. It didn't matter how old a gun was, what types of projectiles it shot, or where it was from. It was an instrument of death, and ultimately the only source of law in the world now. But, aside from the anchored caravan and the platoon of soldiers, it is unwise to forget the three bodies, two men and one woman, scattered around the caravan. They did not yield weapons, and therefore, were required by fate to accept the new order in the world. Yet, such an order was something that she still refused to accept.

She is running and now the grass is flowing. A path becomes distinguishable behind her as she sweeps through the windless plains. There are no trees, only grass, because that's all that's left. The sun has claimed most of the earth's surface, and the night's reign is barely long enough to allow earth to recover from the scorching heat of the day. There is no wind, because the air is too thick near the ground. It has become bogged down by toxins and pollution. Anything that

could not adapt has perished, and the only humans to persist are those who cling to respirators, oxygen tanks, and sheltered dwellings. However, while the majority of the animals on earth have become extinct, the plants that manage to endure the sun's strength still survive. They gather from the soil what they cannot obtain from the air, and they continue to thrive without the need for artificial devices to maintain their presence on earth. She also does not require a ventilator or mask to continue breathing.

The next moment three of the men are down on the ground, and the remaining two are searching for their target, they are aiming to kill. But she is not there, not in front of them, because all that they can see is grass, and it is swaying. One of the men fires anyways, he has some type of automatic pistol, but those details do not matter anymore, since just like every other weapon the men harness, it will kill if it hits its target. The bullets may have disappeared into the plains, since they could not reach their target. The sun and earth are unaffected, and the grass continues moving, and she is beside them now. She readies the slingshot attached to her right arm and fires a pellet at each of their shoulders. They shout profanity and attempt to fire, but she evades them until they all drop to the ground like the rest of their squad. All five are scattered on the ground now, like the corpses. However, they are not dead; they are under a different set of laws, one that they may never be able to fully comprehend.

The grass has finished its dance, and she now stands tall before the trailer. It is a small trailer, one that could barely shelter one human being. There is no car, no bicycle, only the dead who may have once pulled their only home underneath the jurisdiction of the sun. Her first objective is to limit their authority by disabling their instruments of death. She removes the ammunition clips and she empties what she can and then she scatters it into the plains. It would take some time for them to recover the ammunition in the grass. She is very much like the grass.

She is tall, her skin is tan, and she is motionless with only her hazel eyes actively scanning the downed men for signs of consciousness. They are not dead, only lulled by the poison injected by her projectiles. A tightly fitted wooden slingshot is attached to her arm, and a leather brown belt around her waist stores the most of the pellets. Unlike the men in grey, she is clothed in light green and black, and her short hair is almost the same shade of brown as her eyes. But, above all her strange traits is the simple fact that she does not wear a mask since, unlike the others, she is somehow unaffected by the toxic and hostile environment.

She is now aware of movement, its source is emitting from inside the caravan. She readies her slingshot in anticipation and slides herself towards the side door. Her slingshot is ready, but she knows that it is not required; they just need time to adjust to the scenery. She swings open the metallic door; the squeaking hinges are accompanied by two subtle gasps. A silence follows, and she remains tall beside the door, waiting for them to make the first move. However, after several seconds she taps upon the metallic door, a simple rhythm from the music of the old world. She didn't expect any reply, as the method was just a step in taming the survivors. They had no way of knowing the events that had occurred outside their shelter. They had no way of knowing about the brutality of the new world order that had occurred.

However, she raised her neck back when a series of tapping followed her own rhythm. It didn't quite match her tempo, but it was a strong effort to imitate her form of communication. She is now disposing of most of her precautions, and she is now tilting her head around the door in order to examine the interior of the trailer. There is darkness and there are eyes, but that is all that she can see. Her body obstructs some of the sun's light, and therefore even its strength cannot touch the trailer's residents. There are two sets of eyes, they are frightened, they are huddled together, they do not know of the events that have passed. They know only sounds.

They know only blaring gunfire, inhumane screaming, and excessive cursing. But, they also know a soft, reassuring, tapping. She stares at them, expecting aggression, but they remain still, watching her for the same reasons. But, unlike her, they are not ready to defend themselves; they are just ready to accept their fate.

So, she beckons them, extending her hand forward like an offering while the sun still tries to penetrate the trailer's metallic defenses. A small sweaty hand grabs her wrist, and with a slight tug the being wrestles free of the cramped quarters and exits into the sunlight. A small boy emerges from the trailer, clothed in brown garbs and wearing a brown respirator. He lets go of the girl and begins to watch the story around him as an older man, dressed in similar clothing and also wearing a black respirator, exits the trailer and stands upright before the girl. Both of the survivors see the soldiers, the blood, and the dead. Both of them seem to want to cry, but they exhibit nothing more than watery eyes that could have easily been viewed as normal reactions to the bright sunlight and the heavy air. Like most nomads, they had already lived under the new world order for some time now, they had seen similar circumstances, and they had already spent most of their tears long beforehand.

While they are still gaining a hold on their situation, suppressing their fears and the reality of the dead surrounding the trailer, she is already at work to alleviate their situation. She is at the head of the trailer, fastening the rope tied to the peg of the trailer over her shoulder and around her chest. She begins drumming softly on the metallic surface of the trailer, catching the attention of the two survivors long enough for her to point to the unconscious soldiers and indicate the necessity for them to act with haste. The older man and the boy move to assist her. Their bodies allow their hands to firmly grasp loose pieces of the rope, but their heads remain trained on the corpses, their eyes remain unmoving from the sight of death until the three of them

drag the trailer away from the scene and over a hill. They are attempting to leave the dead behind, but at the back of their thoughts they still remember the blood remaining on the trailer.

The older man speaks finally, his voice is slightly muffled through the breathing device, and he only seems to address her as if the distance between the three wanderers and the scene was enough to place the event in the past. The past was never a thing to dwell upon anymore, all that was there was violence, death, and a paradise now lost. He and the boy watch the girl, she keeps her eyes focused onward towards the horizon, and then he says the only phrase that can follow such a scenario, "Thank you." But, the boy has much more to say to the girl, a multitude of curious questions and remarks that could not be satisfied by silence during their escape. He is also muffled, but his question is still clearly distinguishable by his soft tone of voice, "How can you breathe like that?" They are still in transit, but she glances down to her left at him and clamps her hand around her neck. She then removes her hand and then tilts it sideways, letting her four fingers continuously touch down upon her thumb. The sun seems to assist by casting their shadows next to the trailer; her shadow puppet hand is viewable on the ground. It is talking as they walk, but just like her, it is silent.

The boy still has more questions, but the older man interjects by asking, "Is that related to your ability to breathe the air?" She now glances at the man, shrugs, and returns her focus forward; she is the only one who knows where they should go. The grass seems to bow down before them as the trailer passes over the dry terrain. The grass remains bent down towards the ground even after the group has passed; only unfolding itself after they have gone a considerable distance away. As far as they can see, there is nothing but hills and grass, but she is still directing them, still exerting most of the force required to drag the rusty wheels of the trailer along the unstable ground. The boy still has more questions, and the man has also become curious too.

“How did you get the bad guys?” the boy would ask. “Why didn’t you kill them, they’ll be up soon” the older man asserts. She no longer has her attention trained on the two; they had almost reached their destination. They were just overturning a large hill and what would follow would only cause more questions to form in the minds of the two survivors. At the bottom of the hill rested a small cabin built from wood. The pale grass transitioned into a lush green that surrounded the small home, accompanied by several short trees and occasional brush. In front of the house existed what appeared to be a garden, complete with clovers, sunflowers, tulips, and lilies. The clovers decorated the surface of the garden in a shade of purple. The sunflowers stood proudly, dispersed throughout the interior like nature’s guard towers. The tulips and lilies made up the most of the garden’s front display, as they were the most welcoming sight for travelers to view. There may have been more flowers, but as far as the two could see, it was actually a sea of colors. Purple into yellow, orange mixed with brilliant red, a border of peach blossoms, like a painting done with watercolors. This was her garden, her home, their hope.

As they approach the garden she motions for them to let go of the ropes, to leave their trailer in front of her home, almost as if she was hesitant to let the trailer’s man-made design near her shelter of flowers and colors. Still in awe of the scenery, the boy and the man drop the ropes without question and follow her down the path that leads to the small house. The plants are reaching out towards the two, but they do not harm, they only wish to examine the strangers. Even the plants with thorns only lightly scratch them as they pass, they dig into the garments of the visitors, they want the visitors to slow down and stay longer. As they continue down the path the entangling of plants becomes more chaotic, and as they approach the door to the cabin the three must avoid the many extended greetings of the flowers by ducking down below the wall of

vines and leaves. She lets them inside the cabin, staring out at the garden and the hills before quietly closing the door.

There is not much more than a table made from small blocks of wood and a cot formed from broken vines and a rugged old blanket. The two awkwardly sit themselves around the chairless table, unsure of how to act in front of their host. But, she doesn't seem to be aware of their discomfort, and proceeds to begin digging through a pile of foreign objects in one of the corners of the room. Before the older man can propose another question, she swiftly kneels down at the table, smiling, holding up a plaque for both of them to view. The boy and the man examine the sign, a flat wooden piece that has the word "TANSY" carved into its center with a couple colorless flowers surrounding the "A" and "S". Although the flowers are colorless, the occasional spot of yellow, brown, and black suggested some of the original colors of paint for the various aspects of the plaque. She continued to smile at them, pointing to the sign, and then to herself. The man nodded and went along with her game of charades, "So, you're Tansy I presume?" She nodded excitedly and dropped the sign on the table, returning to the pile to dig for some other item of interest.

"What's a Tansy?" the boy asked the man as they both watched the girl energetically search her room for something to display for her guests. "A flower, I think. But, that's odd because I thought they were supposed to be tox--" She returned and dropped eight small capsules in the middle of the table. Kneeling down once more, she smiled and split the pile up, distributing an equal amount to the older man and the boy. The boy reached out for one of the capsules, shaking it slightly and noting the shuffling sound from within. Most of the capsules were stickered with simple sayings such as, 'Gardening is good for the soul' or 'Taking care of your flowers is taking care of your health'. Furthermore, below each of the statements was

another sticker that dictated what types of seeds were held inside. Lilacs, clovers, holly, sunflowers, tulips, and all the other flowers and plants in her garden were described on all of the capsules. “I guess this is for us then?” the older man asked, still not quite sure why they would need the seeds. She nodded happily, and in order to appeal to her generosity he responded with a simple, “Well, thanks again then.” The boy, much more fascinated at the capsules also thanked the girl, but in a much more realistic manner. She also smiled at the boy’s remark, content with herself and her ability to attend to her guests.

“So, I’m still curious, why didn’t you finish them off?” the man asked, abruptly changing the topic of the ‘conversation’ from flowers to reality. She frowned and stared at the table, making no motions to respond, but still, the man pressed onward for an answer. “I don’t know what you did, but, but if you had managed that then couldn’t you kill them? They’ll just be back, if not for us, then... We could’ve used their weapons, don’t you see!? We lost too many, not just today, but beforehand too. All because we have nothing, and they have everything!” For a moment she still does not respond and continues to stare down at the wooden table. But then she began to break up into tears, slamming her elbows onto the table, and digging her face into her arms in shame. The creed that she lived by now seemed to be crumbling upon confronting the man’s logic and reasons. The older man, now slightly distraught at the situation he caused, remained silent as he searched for words; words that he hoped could alleviate her mood without taking back his questions. But, once again, it is the boy who speaks up first and proposed a thought for the group, “But, I don’t think we want to be like them...”

After a moment she raised her head from its nested location in her arms, she straightens her back and nods to herself, as if she were having a conversation with herself in her mind. She then wipes her eyes and tightens her face, looking across the center of the table and avoiding eye

contact with both of her guests. Still kneeling, she remains resolute in her gaze and somewhat proud of the stance she has taken. The man sighs and mutters, "I guess that's true, and I guess that's why we've always traveled without weapons. Because those groups that do usually end up like them, gathering food and supplies like that, because they can." She lifted her hands up and crossed her arms around her chest, leaving them there until both the man and the boy witnessed her formation. She then points towards both groups of capsules, smiles, and nods at them. "I, I don't get it" the boy mutters, looking down at his group of seeds without touching them. She sighed, and began to motion down towards the seeds again, but a sudden outburst of shouting and gunfire from outside interrupted her communication.

They were here, they were yelling, they were shooting, and everything that the older man had feared was now converging with reality. The two do not have time to panic, because she is already acting out of instinct, out of determination, out of pride for what she still upholds. She pushes the capsules of seeds toward the two once more, indicating that they should carry them with them. She then rushes for the door, thrusting it open and motioning for the two of them to follow. A burst of gunfire and yelling follows the opening of the door, but most of the projectiles are lost in the entanglement of the garden that separates the hill from the cabin. They follow her outside of the building, to the side of the cabin where their view of the hill and the soldiers is further obscured by the plant growth and vegetation. She rapidly points behind the house, toward another hill, the location at which they should continue fleeing, leaving the metallic trailer behind and taking only the capsules with them. The older man and the boy respond, rushing off in the general direction she indicated and giving little thought about her own plan of action.

But even when they do briefly turn around and realize that she is not with them, she is gone, and the sight behind them only further motivates them to continue pressing onward and

distance themselves from the past once again. The gunshots still ring through the air, but the smell of smoke has risen in order to further weight down the air quality. From their position they could see the garden alit, a hellish blur overtaking the sea of colors, gradually approaching the small cabin with its unyielding force. The sun does not approve of the flames, and it has already begun ducking down below the horizon in embarrassment. The moon will take its place, but even it does not want to claim responsibility for the event, so it will also hide behind the smoke and let the soldiers trample over nature.

But, what the two could not have seen as they fled the cabin, was the girl who proceeded to run to the front of the burning garden. Upon reaching the front of the path one of the soldiers fired with his handgun, its details are irrelevant in comparison to the destruction that it would cause. But, for now, she still stood at the front of the garden's path, her arms extended outwards in front of her flowers. The peach blossoms have already been reduced to ashes, and only a few of the clovers remain. The fire had begun breaching the interior of the garden, and soon the tulips and lilies would succumb to the flames. But, the sunflowers still remained tall and proud, even if their stems had begun to droop downwards and their petals wilted away under the stress of the fire. And, she also remained tall and proud at the entrance of the path. The soldiers had ceased firing at her, and now all five had gathered together to watch the bizarre sight that stood before them. Blood dripped down from locations where the bullets had seared her flesh; she had soaked up the shots as if she was the garden's last defense. In a few more seconds she will collapse, she will crumble to the ground as the soldiers break from their awed states and continue pillaging the cabin, but for now she remains tall and motionless, still smiling with pride.