

Windblown

Tangles of barbed wire ran between the handicapped parking signs and the downspouts of the rain gutters, flecked with bits of plastic and white fluff. A wall of sandbags covered the front entrance, but Susan threaded her way to the bell rope and speaking tube. After two tugs on the rope she leaned towards the funnel of the tube, bolted to the wall at ground level.

“Two to return.”

A clattering sounded overhead, and Susan stepped back away from the library. The basket descended from the second-floor window.

Already in the basket, they had the usual pamphlets and coloring books. “Fun with Water Sanitation” and “Improvised Weapons for the Whole Family!” Susan put the two last Narnia books in the basket and rang the bell. The basket swept up and away.

“Any requests or holds?” asked a friendly voice from the tube.

“No. . . Any recommendations?”

A faint rustling came from around the corner. Susan covered the speaking tube with her hand and eyed the bulletin board where “for trade” and wanted ads fluttered in the breeze.

A block away, a dark lump bowled across the street and disappeared into a gutter. The brown ones, just about anything with four legs, always seemed to serve as their scouts, but the herd wouldn't be far behind.

“They're coming,” Susan shouted, pulling a lawnmower blade from her pack. Starting toward the wire, she turned back to the tube. “Actually, please put me on the wait list for *The Hobbit* again.”

“Certainly. Have a great day!”

Glancing from one storm drain to the next, Susan crossed the wire. When a fluffy blur lunged out from behind a tree, she decapitated the plush bear with a single swing.

After surviving six months of the Velveteen Purge, Susan knew how to protect her ankles.

Scanning the curbs and gutters, she rolled the head further away from the twitching paws. It wasn't Ruxpin, not this time. It probably wasn't even one of Susan's, but you couldn't be sure. How many stuffed animals had she loved intensely from Christmas until her birthday and then forgotten? Even a few seconds in a gift shop might have planted that seed of life, that unquenchable thirst for either affection or its opposite.

Susan tugged her sleeves against the chill, covering the fuzz that prickled along her wrist. Turning toward home, she stopped.

A jingling woosh descended behind her, ending with a light thud. Susan turned to find a librarian armed with a sword. The silver badge said "Deputy Director." Another one, with the shoulder stripes of an Archivist, rappelled down from the second floor with a giant pair of ribbon-cutting scissors strapped to her back. Up to the knees, their legs were thickly wrapped and taped with dogeared copies of *Southern Living* and *Time Magazine*.

"Can I help you?" Susan asked, catching her own reflection in the Deputy Director's asterisk-shaped badge.

"Hey, that's my line." The librarian smiled, winding her ponytail into a bun. "We've always got jobs and projects on the trade board."

The gardening and reclamation details provided plenty of exercise as long as you weren't stuck working with a weirdo. After months of isolation and uncertainty, just about everyone seemed to be a weirdo. Alongside the community bulletin board, a new photograph had been added to the memorial wall.

"They got James?" Susan asked.

The deputy shook her head, "Never had a chance. Turns out, he had a whole storage unit full of beanie babies."

"Camouflage poncho James? With all the military surplus gear?" Susan looked at the picture again. Same bearded grin.

"Some of his investments turned out better than others." The archivist reached back over her shoulder and pulled out the scissors, checking the sharpness. Text on the handle said *Chamber of Commerce*.

"Actually, have you seen a Ninja Turtle around here recently?" asked the librarian. "A Leonardo?"

"The blue one? No, sorry. Could he have joined the herd?"

The librarian shrugged. "We're going to check. Probably take out a few stragglers." The sword had a wolf's head on the end of the pommel.

"That looks like one of the swords on *Game of Thrones*," said Susan. It felt like years had passed since the last time she binge watched a television series.

"Longclaw?" She nodded. "It's an interlibrary loan from the Cushing. After the drop in demand for DVD's, you could say we've diversified our holdings. Can you make it home okay? We can escort you a couple of blocks."

"I'm just over on Main, thanks. I'll be fine." Susan raised her mower blade in a salute, the handle wrapped in strips of rubber. It deserved a name, too. "Mine's not as pretty, but Lawn Claw gets the job done."

Both librarians saluted. "To Be Continued."

"To Be Continued," Susan replied, heading back to her place.

One of the unexpected perks of the apocalypse was that she could finally afford to live downtown. Climbing to the top of the The Queen movie theater, she kept her sleeping bag and little horde of canned goods inside the rotating crown.

"Did they have it?"

"No, still checked out." With the toe of her sneaker on the lower rim, she slowed the crown's rotation enough to jump inside. Thanks to the wind scoops Susan had added, the lightest breeze kept the crown and its defensive blades spinning constantly.

"Oh, no! Did you tell them about our idea? How we agreed they should order more copies?"

Opening a dented can without a label, Susan avoided looking at glossy plastic eyes of the tattered grey dog.

"Did you tell them, Susan?"

"What?" She coughed dryly. "Oh, I was just playing Mystery Can in my head. Maybe it's ravioli... or juicy peaches!"

"I hope it's peaches, too," said Lucky, nuzzling alongside her. "Almost as sweet as puppy dog kisses, your favorite."

The can sliced open. "Navy beans again." Susan fired up the camping stove.

After dinner, she rinsed the can and cut it into long, spiral strips. Sharpened on both sides, it made a couple feet of razor wire. Every two inches, she snipped, folded, and sharpened little barbs. Left right left.

While her hands worked and the light faded, she recited *The Poky Little Puppy* from memory. When Lucky's whole butt wagged along with his tail, Susan knew he was dreaming of her. The snoring annoyed her more than it should have. You couldn't kill them with smothering or strangling, not that she had ever tried with Lucky, but the fact that they didn't need to breathe made the snoring snuffles seem particularly fake.

Back when there was Internet and BuzzFeed, Susan had read articles about "cute aggression," the uncontrollable urge to pinch and squeeze human babies and fluffy animals. Susan didn't feel that kind of aggression toward Lucky, not exactly. Besides, negative thoughts or feelings would be dangerous. Lucky would know.

Scratching Lucky behind the ear, her fingers got that tingling, cottony feeling inside, like when poor circulation makes your leg go to sleep. She always knew that Lucky was one of the good ones, even if 'the change' freaked her out sometimes. Massaging her hand, the pins-and-needles faded and the unsettling fluffiness hardened back into flesh and bone.

On a clear night, there was no need for the rain tarp, so Susan could look up through the rotating slats of the crown, watching the stars wink and reappear. Cozy in her sleeping bag, listening to the snuffling, it was hard to wax nostalgic about the minimum-wage dystopia she had already survived, the broken world that somehow revolved around social media jealousy and political anger and "reality" television.

Over the years, Susan had friends and roommates and boyfriends, but none of them got as close to her as Lucky. Even when everything was "normal," none of the humans stuck around, and everyone dissolved back into the less-than-real collection of social media friends and connections. Lucky certainly wasn't perfect, and he wasn't flesh and blood, but he was still here. He would always be here.

Under her pinwheel of shadow and starlight, Susan pulled Lucky into the sleeping bag, holding him tight against her chest.

"Be careful, Susan. Remember?" Lucky turned in her arms and pushed against her.

"I know."

The crown turned faster and faster in the night breeze, blurring the constellations into throbbing tufts of white. Too many, too far away, and never enough.