

Chapter 1

They fell, in their millions, cascading from above like the ash of some dying deity. They tumbled from the sky with gray sorrow, suspended in a curious departure away from the creator unto lands infected with the living. It was an abnormal attraction for those in the area, rain was what hailed over the moist evergreens aging in silence, but this day blew about the mystery of snow along a slow sleepy wind.

John outstretched his arm, revealing the rawness of a cold hand to the biting wind dancing on his fingertips. One fell into the folds of his palm, shimmering against the bleakness, holding its frozen geometry before melting away.

“Just our luck, huh? When the hell does it ever snow here?”

“I dunno, man.”

“It rains on our asses for weeks, wetting our goddamn undies, soaking our socks and shoes, and now all of the sudden we get to freeze. Some fuckin’ luck.”

“What should we do?”

“What we always do. Try and find a damn rat hole to survive the night.”

“You ever been in cold like this Maco?”

“Shit, probably.”

“You think we can go back to that bridge for one more night?”

“Let’s hope. You know they’ll get us if we stay too long.”

“What do we have to lose?”

“Our faith in God.”

“Boy, wouldn’t that be the damndest.”

The two chuckled against the chatter of their teeth.

“C’mon man, it’s cold out here.”

They galloped away in their frigid shags, slogging along the soupy slush of street corners. The night continued to shower them with an abundance of frost, collecting in their refuge, holding a promise of frozen dreams within the night's darkness. The place they resided was on the outskirts of the city, where apparitions of the damned hung low between empty alleyways, and the multitudes of the misfortuneds lived transiently.

The bridge was all but forgotten, sitting between a small neighborhood and a park now overrun by the shrubbery of an active forest. Under it incubated the rags of men.

A rusted steel drum sat between the two, it contained a fire that flickered to the song of the wind. A dim orange light came from it, painting the two men in a dusky state. They watched the fire as it shifted inside the drum, creating obscure shadows that ran into the darkness beyond. It was cold, the kind of cold that preys on the meager and snatches the soul from the body. They sat clutching their chests, holding on dearly.

“You think it will last?”

“Not hardly. Knowing this city it’ll be more rain tomorrow, washing all this winter wonderland away.”

John looked out into the darkness that sat just before them. It was immense and deep like the depths of the ocean. He could not tell if it was still snowing, but it was cold, and that held a grim promise. He put his hands to the fire, feeling the tingles of warmth thaw the ice within his bones.

“We got anything else to put on this fire?”

Maco turned from the flames to John. Half his face was hidden in a pastel shadow, and the other was glowing with red aura, giving him the look of an uncanny creature.

“Everything else is wet. We gotta hope what we have lasts.”

“And if it doesn't?”

“Then we’ll be cuddling tonight.”

Maco grinned at his own words, making his face look even more sinister.

“You know what we do have though? All the warmth we need right here.”

Maco reached his hand toward John. It held a small bottle with several blue pills inside. He opened the lid and pulled out two pills.

“This is all we need in life, John.”

John took one from his hand and began crushing it in his palm. He placed the granulated contents on a section of foil and held it over the fire. It began to smoke, then bubble, smoldering into a small puddle of chemical delight. He sucked in hard, letting smoke roll past his lips, between his teeth, and down into his lungs where it would brood a sleepy high. It tasted rancid, bitter in the moments after taste, but it was warm, and therefore delicious. He held his breath for some time, letting hidden veins pronounce themselves as his cheeks turned red, then he exhaled a stream of smoke that trailed high, disappearing into the vacant darkness. He looked to Maco who was doing the same, hunched in a primal stance, chuffing as a steam engine would. Soon, the lines of symmetry that made up the world began to bend in strange ways. The light of the fire grew brighter, and its flames reached from the drum with fury. The ground seemed to take slow breaths while the harrowing murk whispered its unknowns. His body became a weightless vessel, transcending from the ground he sat into that open night, becoming a part of the sky, drifting silently among the stars.

He dreamt that night, an abstract horror, aroused from the recesses of his mind.

He was running. A blood moon rose in the sky and its cratered face grinned at his misfortune. A woman and a boy chased after him, frothing at the mouth like rabid beasts, lusting for his heart. They ran along a road that never ended, a desolate concrete that only multiplied the more you looked to the horizon.

Soon, his legs began to fail, growing hot and heavy with fatigue, denying him an escape. Their grotesque huffs neared, their feet stomping wildly as they crept closer. They were on him, breathing on the back of his neck, whispering death into his ear, reaching their ragged hands out to snatch him into oblivion.

Then he woke.

His eyes opened to a feathery gray sky, incandescent with melancholy, looking as it did the day before. It no longer snowed, but it was very cold, turning their exposed skins past a peachy red, to the blue hue of ice. The drum held no fire, not even the shy smolders of a distant fire, only a black blunder of charred bits. John stood to his feet, cracking dormant joints into action. He shivered intensely as he scanned the slate dawn that was painted over everything. Maco laid out across from him, sprawled like the carcass of something long deceased. John staggered toward him, imitating the steps of an infant. He knelt down to his unconscious friend

and shook him aggressively. He was limp and cold as a forgotten body, hollow and hungry as a forgotten human.

His eyes opened and blinked repeatedly. They were bright red, with the whites holding a bit of discoloration. He lay looking around for a minute, remembering the place he laid his head, recounting the journey he took with the smoke of a forbidden pill.

“Get up.”

The words groaned from the back of John’s throat like they didn’t want to emerge.

Maco’s bones seemed to clatter among themselves as he stood. He was nothing but flesh and bone, some emaciated form of man evoked from a dying society.

“Ya think we can start another fire?”

“I dunno, everything is frozen.”

“What are we doin’ then, John? It’s cold as a bitch.”

“You got any more left from last night?”

“Only a couple.”

“That’ll get us through till we find somethin’. Gimme one.”

Maco retrieved the bottle from the night before and produced two pills. They crushed them, refining the contents to granules, then snorted them.

“Damn! I hate doing it this way.”

“Well, we ain’t got no more foil, we gotta do what we gotta do.”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you. So where’re we goin’?”

“Let’s try the inner city. I know the camps there are big, like small villages. We’re bound to find somethin’.”

“But they push the fuckers out like rats there too.”

“Think about it Maco, we’ve been hoppin’ from place to place trying to escape the rain and everytime we end up wet. One of these days we’re gonna freeze to death and that’ll be the end of it.”

Maco stopped and thought. He tried to rebuttal, but he knew the rain all too well. It would soak their souls in a somber death, and take them from this life on a quiet, artless night.

“Alright. Let’s get going, I need this shit to kick in.”

They emerged from the bridge birthed from poverty, flogged in an accumulated filth. Their skin clung to their bodies, exposing the knuckles of ribs through torn clothing. An apocalyptic step possessed the two, roaming streets of desolation bathed in silver light.

The bitter cold within them slowly left as the high set in. Blankets of warmth covered their extremities in their delusion, the symmetry of the world began to bend again, and the malady of life was soon forgotten.

Trees of aged amber stood glistening in the heavy moisture, the streets possessed an empty whistle of wind, the sky seemed to kiss the ground in small off road puddles.

John reminisced on the dream he had that night. He could not reason why it was so bizarre, let alone the meaning of the woman and child. He tried to remember their faces, but his brain was too foggy. All he could envision was their rabid breath and the feeling of impending doom.

“You think dreams mean anything, Maco?”

“Huh?”

“Dreams, man. What do you think of them?”

“What? Dreams? You had a dream?”

“Ya, it was strange.”

“Strange? What’s that mean?”

“Crazy. It was crazy. I was gettin’ chased by a woman and a little boy, both of them out their minds.”

“A woman and a little boy? Why?”

“I can’t really remember. I was just running on this road, and it just kept going and going. They ran me down and that’s when I woke up.”

“That stuffs all in your head, our minds always create things to scare us.”

“I guess. It just felt so... real.”

“It’s nothing, man. I got something that will get your mind off things for a while.”

Maco extended his hand, showing a blue pill inside.

“Round two.”

They wandered about with noses full of foreign substance, and minds churning with ecstasy as the day bled on. Their destination was found along a trail of drug smoke, where the decrepit roamed just as they did.

It was a sort of dystopia that they had come to. Busy boulevards held a musk of filth, an arid stench that seethed in the nostrils, and passerbys held no color, seeming to be devoid of life as they meandered from place to place. Enormous buildings bloomed into the air like concrete daisies, stretching past the sky to get a taste of the clouds. Homeless lined the sidewalks draped in swaths of muck, they appeared as strange effigies, mongrels of the modern time. Tents and makeshift shelters made communities of these street refugees, they occupied corners in abundance, plastering the metropolis with garbage.

They had arrived at the Mecca of derelicts, the people who only knew a reality so cold.

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Days passed within the city. It rained rivers on their heads, a relentless onslaught from the heavens that warded them like vermin. The two fell on hard luck finding an escape from the weather. Water flowed through everything, leaving a trail of soaked outcasts begging for a drought. The primitive structures of these communities offered little resistance in the downpour, they began to deteriorate and leave the unfortunate exposed in the elements. They sat hopelessly naked, drowning in the unforgiving rain that fell on them merciless.

A day came where the rain let up, and the clouds parted, showing that the sky was truly blue. John and Maco were a mess of drenched garments, carrying a desperate hunger that made them walk with an awkward lean.

They lurched into the arteries of the city, where the destitute shimmered in refuse, basking in a godless misery. They came upon an empty lot hidden between a cluster of buildings. It was the grave of a past structure, the ghost of its former, only remembered by the dirt square left in its place. A make-shift hut stood at the far end of the lot, heaps of garbage and paraphernalia accompanied it, looking to be abandoned for sometime. There was no hesitation in scoping the place, they began to rummage through the muddle, looking for anything salvageable.

“Well hell, look at this fine architecture, Maco.”

“Smells like shit.”

“Beats gettin’ wet. How come we ain’t make something like this?”

“Because we don’t have anything. Look at us, we’re practically naked.”

Those were true words, their clothes looked like rags strung together. Their bodies were pink and fleshy from constantly being wet, and it was visible through the tattered shreds that hung on them.

Inside the hut was surprisingly clean. The floor had a layer of cardboard covering the ground and the walls were covered with clean tarp that didn’t leak through. There was a section of mattress set in the middle, and a couple of bed sheets covered it. Few lanterns clung to the sides, blackened from flames burned in days past. Rusted pots sat at the foot of the mattress, containing a range of unknown foul smelling liquids; one held a satchel inside. They ripped it open and poured its contents out on the ground. There was a variety of items piled before them: a toothbrush, a comb, a small baggie containing pills, two empty bottles, a tattered magazine, a small flask of whiskey, and a couple bags of chips.

“Finally.”

“John, you think them blues is the real thing? You know that synthetic stuff kills.”

“I ain’t seen a bad batch in the entire city. I’m sure these are fine.”

“Well, it's your ass if I die.”

“Ya ok loud mouth, shut up and take a drink with me.”

John cracked the cap of the whiskey bottle letting its aroma escape. It was an amber color with faint red contours, it swirled inside the bottle like a heavy pulp and held a pungent smell of

aged hickory. First, John held his chin high and poured into his mouth, letting it pool inside before taking it down. It tasted just as it smelled, leaving vapors rising from his breath, igniting a contained fire in his chest. Maco did the same, taking a rather large drink, shortly followed by another. They drank hand in hand until the small bottle contained nothing but a tasteful memory. Belches erupted from their stomachs, leaving them with a buzz of satisfaction.

“You think one of them pots got more whiskey?”

“Naw, prolly just piss.”

“Ima try one.”

“Maco look at em’, you really want to try that?”

“It looks like whi—”

Maco’s voice was cut short by a violent blow to the head, his body dropped limp to the ground without another word. An angry fist materialized from the opening of the hut, soaring toward John with fury. He ducked, barely evading the mystery jab. He plowed forward, bulldozing the man in his way, falling out onto the fresh mud of the lot. John mounted the assailant, raising his fist to the sky bearing white knuckles, intent on putting a crater in the man's skull. A rattling strike ricocheted off his head coming from a place unknown, he stumbled from the mount and was struck once more into the mud. John’s world spun uncontrolled, the ground and sky meshed into a blob of abstract creation, muck spread cold and wet across his body, the shadows of unknown figures crowded around him.

Stooped backs bent over his frail body, beating bare flesh until the warmth of blood emerged. Grinding jabs landed merciless, connecting from all directions. Rugged soles stomped him into oblivion. The group grunted as mindless brutes, hooting indiscernible profanities as they bludgeoned tirelessly.

“Come around here again and we’ll kill you.” Echoed into the air as the onslaught ceased. The ground surrounding was stained with a crimson splatter; blood trickled slowly from his body, collecting in streams that pooled around him.

John could only see the light of day from one eye, his vision was fixed to the clouds above that began to grow thick in the sky. They held with them an ambient darkness, a solemn gray that hid the sun from sinners seeking solace.

His body felt eroded, too broken to move anything. He attempted to stand, staggering like a newborn foal, shaking with instability. He toppled back into the mud, bathing deeper in the sludge, looking as an ungodly sewage creation. In a second attempt John was able to reach his

feet, he stood like a man that had been reborn without pride, appearing more animal than human, more wild than tame. A thin line of blood fell from his face, coursing into his mouth and off his chin. The taste was metallic, thick and pulpy, with a hint of misery lingering at the end. He ran his hands across his head, feeling the bulges that formed painfully, fingering the deep gashes that burned as he passed over them.

Maco was still face down in the hut, strewn corpse-like, immobile in an unconscious nightmare. He did not wake to see a sky that churned rain bearing clouds, or John standing over him. But, he was breathing, in heavy slurps of cool air, indicating that life lived somewhere inside him.

Thunder buckled in the distance, vibrating in the air before trailing into silence. The clouds swelled and the skies opened up once more. Mud clapped to the rhythm of the rain as it fell, creating a sound that resonated in the ear, sweet and somber. They were once again at the will of the rain, it cleansed them from their filth, and filled their hearts with despair. It was relentless and unforgiving, hitting them while they were down, making their situation more dire. John grabbed the mess of Maco by the arms, and drug him away from that lot, back into the streets that would swallow them alive.

They were now the living dead, making it by on a wish, and the dreams of an empty stomach.

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Weeks fell together into a collection of fragmented moments, the sun chased the moon chased the sun until it all was the same. The two were nomads of civilized privation, showing their defined ribs as prisoners of hunger. They labored along hopeless streets that stole the warmth from their bodies, they followed ghosts of hope to places providing nothing but corroded smut and the living abomination of man. They withered in the light of each new dawn, and their ventures became less and less. Sickly frames sat wiry on walls of buildings that lurched into the sky infinitely, death filled their lungs with each trembled breath, concocting a sulfurous brine of demise that collected in their chests.

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There was a convenience store that sat in the midst of the city, it was small and pale, bathed in a coat of smog. It was on the corner of an intersection that was less traveled, absent from even the transient communities that infested most roadways. On that corner existed John and Maco. They were shriveled compositions of skin and bone, cadaverous, waiting for the reaper's arrival. John held a cup that collected more rain than donations, while Maco held a sign that was legible only to those who could not read.

“Do you think there is a God?”

“If there is, he's been pissing on us for days.”

“I hope there is no God.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because if there is a God, he created all this. He watches the world in silence, as forests burn and children die. He lets good people live with nothing while the corrupt live spoiled lives. If there is a God he is evil. He has the power to end it all, but he just watches as it all goes to hell.”

Maco said nothing for many moments. He stared into the road with lead eyes, his mind studying the words of his partner.

“God or no God we're all in this shit.”

“Ya, i gu—,” John began to cough incessantly, grunting in great heaves.

“Hey, pick yourself up. Someone's coming.”

A man crossed the vacant intersection to their side of the street. The man was rugged looking, weathered about the face from age, and his eyes sat black behind the heavy bags of his brow. He walked rigidly, not swaying in the least, and his steps were heavy, thumping the ground as he neared. The man locked eyes with them as he passed, staring stone faced, harboring not a single drop of empathy. John held out the cup with a feeble arm, trembling as if the cup's weight was too much to bear.

The man stopped walking. He examined John like a speck of insignificance, like it was an inconvenience to look at him. He bent over the cup outstretched toward him and spat, a long stringy phlegm that plopped firmly inside. He rose and whipped his mouth with the back of his hand, revealing a grin of satisfaction spread across his face.

John was speechless. He could not believe someone could be so heinous, he just watched in shock as the man continued to thump away. Maco erupted, screaming at the man, pursuing him with unhinged passion. The man stopped and turned, his grin still full across his lips. Maco came face to face with him, fuming with an uncaged rage.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?”