

Mourning Dove

By Josh Raphael Gonda Espiritu Santo

“-|-|-|” is a change in p.o.v
“**” is a time jump**

The coldest and deadliest snowstorm slithered toward this godless city: Los Angeles (climate change had done a number), the city with the second highest rate of homelessness in America. Tomorrow evening, it'd land like troops at Normandy. We weren't the only homeless people who'd heard the news.

To sleep in the park, we had to clear away used needles—fresh from druggie veins—and human feces. The sidewalks were tent neighbourhoods, the parks infested as much. We made do. In the tent next to us, a woman with fingerless gloves and a dirty trench coat laid back and read. Next to her

tent, a man made love to his pillows.

While I slept, I held close a photo of my daughter — Cassidy — and I—a lumbering lumberjack with slicked back brown hair and a chiseled beard on a just as handsome jawline—on her first day of school. These gleeful memories softened every night’s horror.

I hoped her new parents did better than I.

You could say Mara was to make up for Cass, and you’d be half right.

She was a genius. I couldn’t leave her to her own devices. Even then, she disagrees with my hate for this city. “It’s not godless, just lost. Have faith.” She stayed with that, even when it’s wronged her in every way.

Tomorrow I’ll have to tell her my decision, but she won’t understand one bit. She was a child after all.

Tree branches molested the blackened sky above, suffocating the stars. A belt unbuckled. Rapid panting disturbed my sleep. I shocked myself awake. Seventeen-year-old Mara was pinned down, a palm covering her mouth. She flailed about.

I ran over and booted the man’s stomach. He fell to his side, Mara scurrying away. I kicked his crotch, took his belt and whipped him with the metal end. I sat atop him and barraged his face. His pulse stopped.

No ID in his pockets. Another ghost like us.

“**Bobby!**” someone yelled in horror, hands on their face.

A bystander was on the phone. “*Someone’s got murdered at the park in-*”

I grabbed Mara’s wrist. “Run.” We ran for the alleyways, catching a whiff of mankind at its worst. Police sirens blared by us, heading for the park. The woman had looked at us long enough to ID us. We’d have company soon.

Having been let in by a generous buzz, we took the elevator to the roof of an apartment building. Most of our stuff was still in that public park, so we made do with found rags.

My dreams had only crept in for a second when despair dropped me back in reality. Mara spoke through snot and quivering teeth. "Harvey, we're going to die, aren't we?"

"I won't let that happen," I said. "Get some shut eye, alright?"

Her sobs woke me up four times that night.

The morning slunk in, the heavens flicking on their lights. We needed food. On ground level, I found a fresh enough chicken in the trash. We cleared a spot on the curb and took our seats, watching the cars crunch snow.

I took a bite, breaking pieces off chicken for Mara. She closed her grade twelve calculus textbook and dined.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Her eyes watered, last night unbuckling its belt. "Not your fault." A storm laid under the surface, but articulation meant putting herself well within the storm's kill-zone. A well-placed distraction arose. She pointed, chewing her food: **"They finally released the sequel to ZSJL!"**

ZJSL (*Zack Snyder's Justice League*) came out a decade ago. Her parents must've had good taste in movies, but not in morality. "We got the money to watch it, if you want."

She wrinkled her nose. "You know what, it's alright. Just a movie."

Dreams were a perfect escape and so were movies. "C'mon, survival can wait four hours."

She repressed her joy, remaining stoic. "Okay fine. Tomorrow night." Her eyes sparkled. "It'll be *awesome*." She tossed the bones in the garbage, then put her hand out to me.

“Can I see the picture?”

I first handed over my handkerchief. Oil on a memory was the last thing I wanted. *Then*, I handed it over. She’d been asking a while now. We spent ten minutes talking about what Cassidy was like. “DC fan too?” Mara verified.

“Of course, just, when you’re done, hand it back.”

“**Maybe never.** It’s like I’m staring into a book.”

Temperature was dropping, the storm arriving tonight. Mara sat closer, shivering with the photo in her hands. Now would be a good time to tell her-

Luke—clad in a thick gray cotton jacket, jeans, glasses, and a weak hanging jaw—sat next to us. He was a good man amongst the wicked. Had this dream of saving LA: making enough roofs for all and a company to supply more jobs. I thought of him as a mourning dove. Not as pure and positive as a white dove, but still remaining a messenger of love and faith. Even then, something ate away at him. He’d lost weight, his posture sagged, and he looked like he just got out of bed. And it was noon.

When I looked him in the eyes, hidden was a **tortured soul doing its best to survive itself.**

He handed over ten dollars. Everyday we’ve been saving the tens he’s been giving to, at least, rent an apartment. The cash stayed on Mara; my backpack far too full to take the wads. The job search would follow. That was the plan, but rarely did things go to such.

Luke nodded up to her. “Quick. 36.7 divided by 0.67 multiplied by 747.47 .”

“ 4943.5 . Gotta try harder.”

“First line of page forty three of *1984*.”

“ ‘In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place.’ ”

Luke high-fived her. "An extra five?"

Mara looked to me. Luke's desperate search for a meaning to life forced me to accept his charity long ago. First, one dollar a day. Then two. Three. And so on.

I shrugged, nodding. "Movie money."

Mara took the five, smiling. "Damn straight!" She added it to the wad of cash. **A druggie wearing a red beanie caught sight of it from a block away.**

I cleared my throat. I had to tell her now. "Mara, you're...you're gonna go with Luke tonight. I can't have you at the--"

"Shut the hell up." Mara stuffed the cash in the bag.

I stood. Told you she wouldn't understand. "Don't talk to me like that--"

"I can and *I will*. What if *I* told you I'm sleeping in someone else's tent? Wouldn't be the same would it?"

"I'll *survive*--"

She looked me dead in the eye. "No you won't, Harvey."

I paced around, fury boiling. I jabbed a finger at her. "*This isn't the time to be stubborn.*" She wouldn't understand why I do this. I didn't get this far because of extensive help. *I* got myself here. Luke's hasn't been any help, not until the apartment is ours, but daily survival? All me. All Mara. I'm not going to soften. I've never felt more alive than when death came to reap.

How am I supposed to explain that to her? "I won't have you at the shelter, Mara."

She stared at the floor, wind ruffling her hair. "Fine. I'll go with Luke."

"Don't lie to me."

She looked me straight in the eye. "I'll. Go. With. Luke."

I was still unsure, but I was too impatient to push further.

Looking back on it, I should have.

“Good,” I said. I looked at Luke, remembering he’d been dating someone. “Where’s Diana? I haven’t seen her in a while.”

Luke stared at me, but he wasn’t looking at me. Memories blitzed across his face. “She’s...” He sniffled and wiped her eyes. Instead, Mara got his divided attention. “How’s calculus? You understanding it well?” He scratched at his sleeve.

It revealed newer cuts along his wrist.

“Yeah...” Mara glanced at his wrist. “Going well...”

“Ah, good to hear.”

Mara stared at his wrist.

Luke sighed, eyes darting about. “It’s fine, don’t worry.”

“We’re the last people you want to lie to,” Mara said. “We’ll sort this shit out when we get to your apartment, alright?”

Luke stared, not knowing how to respond.

“Say okay.”

He swallowed. “Okay.”

The wind howled, tearing through us. My skin cracked along my hand. It was time to go. “Get home safely,” I said.

“You better be at the front of the line,” Mara said, walking away with Luke. I waved goodbye, parting ways. It was two o’clock. Shelter doors opened at five. I looked over my shoulder to check if-

I forgot she wasn’t there. Alone for the first time in a while. Eh. I’m used to it.

I took out my smartphone (yes I have one, I just keep it powered off) and texted Luke: “She all settled in?” He affirmed. **I powered my phone off again.**

The Catholic-run shelter bore a cross across its rooftop. A

little tent extension offered free food. A long line-up stretched from its entrance. The actual shelter entrance had about thirty. I lined up.

Someone nudged me. "Harv, long time no see!" It was Andy—wearing a red beanie—a hyena-like druggie who's appetite for the next fix like a predator's for prey. Sweat glistened his face. He covered his stomach, hurting.

Withdrawal symptoms.

"How's the girl, Mara? She's getting all smartsy for school, right?"

I skipped the back-and-forth-until-we-beat-the-actual-bush. "You're not getting shit."

His guise faltered. "A little." He held me by the collar. "Just a *ten* man—"

I broke his nose. "Don't touch me."

He backed away, covering his face. "Asshole." He muttered to himself, "Money's in *her* bag, not his."

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I texted Harvey back, asking about the line up.

Mara was taking forever. I knocked on the bathroom door. "Mara? You done?"

Today *had* to be the coldest night. I had already tied the noose—and hid it well—it was just a matter of timing. I needed to know they were safe first.

I knocked again.

No response.

I wandered around. The calculus textbook was no longer on the table. Nor was her purple bag. I burst into the washroom, the guest room, my room. The living room...

I went limp and caught myself against a chair.

Wet footprints led out the unlocked door.

I dialed Harvey. No answer.

A post-it note stuck to the door, reading: "Gotta return something to Harv! I'll be back."

I punched myself. *You moron.* I took the elevator down and drove after her.

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Brown luminescence and falsely-joyous neon signs graced these sorry streets. Ominous gray doused the once bleak white skies. The crowd grew. Order collapsed. Humanity was long gone. This was a pack of animals puppeteered by *fight or flight*. Both were in effect.

No wonder. The storm brewed. Snow whipped by, gathering by the inches at my feet. Snot dripped to icicles above my lip. Breathing was like taking in rusted blades. I took my scarf out and wrapped it about my head.

Two cop cars parked, uniforms joining the masses. Homeless people muttered curses, their blood boiling. On all sides, they readied for casualties. The cops had no clue what they just walked into.

A white-tall skinhead officer read out from a pad. "We're looking for a late-forties, white male, dark hair, looks like a lumberjack, travels with a teenage girl."

Andy approached them with a smile on his broken face. "He's..."—like it was a joke, he pointed over the crowd right at me—"...can I sue him for—" The cops didn't stay to hear the rest of his business negotiation.

"Goddamn pigs!" The crowd attacked the cops. Nails scratched skin. Knuckles knocked teeth. Boots broke limbs. The cops shoved back. A gun went in the air.

Mourning Dove

"BACK UP!" The homeless people stepped back.

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I was close to the shelter now. Gunshots echoed. Homeless came out from hiding like zombies: Dragging their feet and hunkering forward, moving for the shelter. I yelled at myself, slamming the wheel. *"HARVEY LEAVES YOU ONE JOB AND YOU CAN'T EVEN DO THAT YOU DUMB PIECE OF-"*

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There was nowhere to go. More and more homeless people congested, meagerly dispersing at cop orders. The squad knocked down and cuffed those who disobeyed. Only then did the crowd disperse enough.

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I'm too late. I parked and sprinted, icy winds ripping through me. Snow obscured my vision; A frozen fog piling at my feet. The dim shelter lights cleared up with each step, my lungs: a cave in the Arctic.

I took off my glasses. The moisture had froze on them.

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A person shifted through the crowd. She had purple backpack straps, auburn hair crossing her chest. Andy saw her in the same second. She rose a photo up in the air. My photo. *"Harv! I got your-"*

The crowd surged forward, squishing me against the

backs of two others. I shoved back and got on my toes. "Mara!" I couldn't see her, nor could I see Andy. I pushed through the crowd. "Mara!"

The cops forced their way in and tried pinning me down.

Ten seconds until doors opened.

Andy was pulling at her bag.

I knocked a tooth off an officer and advanced through the crowd.

The doors opened.

The crowd surged forward. Mara tried moving with it. Andy pulled her bag back and tore it off, rifling through her hard-earned stuff. Mara threw punches at him. He kicked her in the stomach. She fell to the ground. The horde charged forth.

Pain flared in my chest and all my muscles contracted; fried from within. I jittered and spazzed, the whole world flipping upside down. Cuffs entangled my wrists. "Suspect in custody."

"HARVEY-" Her voice cut off.

"She-she-she-" I couldn't speak to save her life, electricity robbing me of my little girl.

Boots shattered bones. Clothes tore. Blood splattered.

Between the myriad of legs, Mara was kicked around.

"You are under arrest for the murder of Bobby Fincher. You have the right to remain silent," the cop said. "Anything you say can and will be used-"

I forced through the pain. "CALL-CALL-AN-AN-AN-AM-AM-AM-" *Just say it!* "AMBULANCE!"

"...against you in a court of law, you have the right to..."

Mara laid there, **eternally cloud gazing**.

"NO!" I screamed, squirming. I headbutted the ground. "GOD-GOD-GODDAMN IT NO!" Tears froze upon my

cheeks, screaming incomprehensible noises.

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I pushed up my glasses and drove back to my apartment. Hollowness filled my insides. An emptiness only to dissipate with my sad life's end. It was righteous justice for my stupidity.

But, what of her? Some Jane Doe's passing in the night? I'm the only other person who knew her.

I imagined a building named after Mara Jones dedicated to providing shelter (with addresses) for those without one so they *can* get a job and *can* get their life back in shape. I imagined a company providing living wages.

How many lives I could save?

How many lives could *begin* better?

I hesitated tossing the noose away.

The sun shines bright. The summer breeze massages me. I strut the golden dirt road to the prison gates, finally getting parole after a decade of being unusually polite. The gate rattles open, Luke standing on the other side with his black muscle car.

We clap hands and hug. There weren't any new cuts on his forearms. And he looks the same as he did ten years ago.

In the car, we spend an hour in silence before I said, "How many employees now?"

"A hundred thousand at Mara Inc."

"Kids?"

"Two, named after the people who changed my life."

"Look at you." I laugh, jabbing his shoulder. "A grown man."

He snorts. "I wish."

I realize he hadn't aged a bit this whole decade because-

I wished things were like that.

Rain drenches me. I slush through the muddy road to the prison gates. The summer breeze lacerates me. I finally got parole after a decade of being unusually polite. The gates screech open. I wander to the city, thumbs up to the side; a picture of Cassidy and I in the other hand.

I make the whole trip on foot, getting to Luke's apartment; knowing his address by heart. I knock on the door. "Yo--"

A stranger opens the door. "Yeah?"

"Er...do you know Luke Margrave? The previous tenant."

"Nope. Talk to the landlord. Top floor, room seventeen-oh-three."

I knock on the landlord's door. "Do you know where a Luke Margrave is?"

Confusion struck him. "Luke Margrave?"

"Glasses? Slack-jaw?"

The landlord hesitates to speak. "You're better off not knowing, man."

For a second my soul parts ways from my body.

The landlord catches me before I fracture my skull. "You a friend?" I nod. "I'm sorry. World's cruel, more so nowadays. It's just too much for some people. Keep on keeping on, yeah?"

"I'll try." I leave and wander the sidewalk.

I'm alone. I have no one. Where do I go from here?

A breeze embraces me. A mourning dove swoops low, banks right and flies up, perching on Luke's windowsill. The sun reaches through the rainclouds and lights up an aged ZSJL2 poster, the summer breeze whispering.

Mourning Dove

You're still with me? Well, *Luke*, better not be mad when I manifest *your* dream. I'll credit you though. And Mara? One day, I'll have the money to buy a projector. It won't be too late to watch it on the big screen with you.

I kiss the photo. *I wonder if you've gotten any smarter than your pops, Cassy.*

This city is indeed godless, but I'm not. God's sending me your messages and I *can* receive them.

I'm not alone. If I fail, you'll be there to help me up.

I won't stop until you're immortal.