

Faceless

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I remember when the portals opened near Abbotsville. My parents woke my brothers and I with shakes and firm, controlled statements: We're going to the church. That was what the radio said to do. We packed bags for you, boys, don't worry about changing. Go in your pajamas. Now. Confused and obedient, I remember stepping out, though the back door, and looking up at a big moon, bright red, burning on the horizon. It shimmered a little. The red light shone on the long grass that stretched out to the farm fields. It made everything flatter, and put a strange tint into the headlights when Dad started the car.

We almost hit a deer, driving down the road with our red headlights. It burst out of the corn field and dashed in front of us, moving as fast as I had ever seen a deer move, making the sort of crying, whining wail they make when they're injured.

We made it to the church just in time. I remember sitting in the church listening to the priest pray as he knelt in the center of us. His head was down; he was murmuring just below what I could hear. The pews were pushed to the sides, and up against the door. My dad knelt next to me, in the red flannel jacket I always remembered from hunting trips, holding the family rifle, stock resting on the ground. He stared at the door of the small sanctuary, the one that led outside.

Let us in, people were crying on the other side of the door.

Swarming masses of something were storming past the windows; we could hear impacts on the roof like heavy rain, they shuffled drily down the sides. It sounded like sandpaper on dry wood. I was 17, and my dad put his arm around me and pulled me close to his chest. I hugged him back, and closed my eyes, and listened to the preacher's murmurs.

When I think about those memories, I can't see anyone's face. I know that my father is my father because of clues like the jacket, and because his deodorant smells like the deodorant in a memory of me, as a child, watching a man in a white tank top get ready in front of the mirror in the house I grew up in.

But I need those links--there's no intuitive connection. It's simply the logical result. I used to try and keep track of the people in my life with big notebooks. I wrote down the features that distinguished them in my memories, and day-to-day. But the process was exhausting. I memorized a few--the important ones-- and keep them in my mind. It means I reflect on certain things a lot more than others.

I wasn't born like that. It happened about a year ago--we were sent to an isolated farmhouse a few kilometers away from base to clear out some cultists that had apparently taken up residence. That sort of a thing generally isn't a high priority. Ordinary people that get turned like that usually wind up killing themselves before they can do any real harm. But the house was in a specially designated clean zone. People were supposed to be evacuating in, and we were supposed to be keeping them safe. We needed to stop any sort of corruption moving into the area.

The morning of the raid we pulled up to an old two-story building, with peeling white paint and neglected siding. A few men were wandering around the yard, and, when they heard the Jeep, they charged towards us. One of the men was wearing overalls, with one of the buttons undone, and someone made a joke about it. We shouldered our rifles, and put several rounds into each of them.

We stood by the Jeep and waited for a few minutes in silence. Someone fired off a few more rounds into the side of the house, hoping to draw a few more out. It was easier if they came to you. After a while, our lieutenant sighed, and ordered us in.

We walked up to the porch, past tangled windchimes, and peered in the screen door. The lieutenant ordered us to clear the house.

It was as straightforward as it could be. We moved through it, room-by-room. The interior had been ruined. Books laid on the ground with torn out pages scattered around the room. Pictures had been thrown or torn to shreds, leaving shards of glass from the frames scattered around. There were candles everywhere, and runes painted or carved into floors and ceilings. As we moved through the building, we'd find cultists absorbed in something: whispering to themselves, carving things into the walls or their bodies, praying. Sometimes they'd be alert and charge us, enraged, screaming obscenities. Either way, we would kill them.

We cleared the house, and went back into the overgrown grass in the yard. Then someone noticed there was a cellar.

We opened the door, and a gust of warm, rotting air rushed out. Wooden stairs dropped into a room that glowed with red light.

We went down the stairs, heavily. There was blood everywhere. It was smeared across the walls and the floors and used for grisly crude drawings. What were presumably the original inhabitants lay gutted in the center of the room, faces pained and organs spilling out into the center of an enormous pentagram. Scent from candles and incense filled the room, mixing with the smell of blood and viscera into a thick, overpowering odor that had weight to it and oozed into your nose and mouth. At the opposite end of the room, on the other side of the pentagram, there was an altar set up on an old crate. A book lay open next to four hearts that had been roughly hacked out of the family on the ground. The Lieutenant closed his eyes. Go check out the altar, he said, pointing to three men. Don't step into the pentagram.

The men moved slowly, trying to avoid looking at the family in the center of the room, picking their way along the perimeter of the pentagram. One of them was muttering to himself.

When they had made it halfway across the room, they were inching against the wall, avoiding the pentagram that stretched almost to the edge of the room. There were only a few inches of clearance. Someone's foot slid on a patch of blood, and scuffed the edge of the circle, just a bit. That was it. The altar exploded in a burst of red light, and a roar like wind gusting through a canyon. It rushed towards us in a wave and filled the room, forcing itself into our eyes, making it impossible to see anything else. The Lieutenant tried to scream something, but the wind blocked it out. In the red, I lost consciousness, and woke up on the ground, ears ringing, red slowly fading from my eyes. Slowly, the ringing cleared. I looked around at the rest of my squad, knocked onto the bloody wood.

The three men closest to the explosion were writhing around, laughing and gibbering to themselves. We shot two of them immediately, as their dog-tags instructed, and strait-jacketed the third, so he could be blessed before he was euthanized.

One of the men's arms had turned blood red and hugely muscular. His hands looked more like talons, fingers tipped in sharp, black nails. This was to be amputated back at base.

Someone else had The Sign burned into his forehead, and shot himself when we told him.

Someone stood, and asked us to please stop talking to him.

Three of us, including the Lieutenant, were simply dead.

And I couldn't see faces anymore.

The man with no arms and the man who couldn't hear were discharged. We all pitched in to give them something to go home with: a rifle each, some ammunition, enough food to get them there.

I was eligible for a discharge, if I had wanted it. But no one took voluntary discharges. Few places were safer than the army.

Medic tells me my condition has a real-life equivalent. But it's not as bad: you can't see faces, but you can still recognize voices, personalities. You can remember who people are without having to work it out every time. I can't.

But all things considered, I think I'm pretty lucky.

One morning in July, Captain sent a squad of us to push some cultists out of the town that bordered our farm. He wanted a buffer between us and the rest of the world. We drove out in the Jeep through fields full of potatoes, carrots, spinach, onions, and through the perimeter of barbed wire and makeshift tank traps, the two privates on guard duty opening and closing the gate. We drove down the thin dirt road until we reached pavement, home receding behind us, sun shining in a blue sky, wind ruffling our fatigues. I enjoyed the ride.

We started passing some of the houses on the outside of town, decaying after two years of abandonment. The road widened, and our driver slipped around stalled pickups and potholes. We could see smoke coming from the center of town, and the five of us in the Jeep fidgeted with our rifles.

We pattered into town, through streets surrounded by burned out buildings and shattered windows. There were signs painted everywhere, bodies and debris littering the streets. We were crawling through the town, rifles pointed at the rooftops and blackened buildings, squinting for any signs of movement in the chaos.

As soon as we hit Main Street, a molotov cocktail shattered in front of us. Cultists emerged from rooftops and began attacking us with a melange of weapons: beat-up old hunting rifles, homemade grenades, spears with tips of rusty scrap, sometimes bricks or whatever else was close at hand. Shots whizzed past, and projectiles exploded and clattered around us and off the Jeep. We returned fire, bracing ourselves against our seats as the driver accelerated and swerved around trash and debris. A garbage truck pulled out of a garage and accelerated towards us, men with tattoos and burns hanging to the sides, raving at us. We shot the driver, and the truck smashed into a squat brick building, collapsing the roof onto its cab, and sending bricks skittering across the street. The men riding the truck tumbled off and frantically ran after us, waving their arms and howling.

A shirtless man wearing welding goggles jumped in front of the Jeep and managed to hang onto the hood after we slammed into him. He scrabbled at the driver with a hunting knife, scraping it across the hood and stabbing futilely at the windscreen and howling gibberish. We swerved, throwing him off, but sending us screeching into a pile of garbage that had been pushed aside some time ago to clear the road. Red slop splattered against the hood and windshield.

The driver, emphatically cursing, put us in reverse, sending trash tumbling out of the pile we had embedded in. Wheeling around, we sped off back down the road.

Ahead, some sort of ogre blocked the road, hulking and squat, as tall as the two-story buildings

on either side of it. It was the color of dirty bubblegum, and raised its four arms towards us and shuffled its feet as it braced for impact. We screeched to a halt, and spun into the the only alley around us that hadn't been barricaded. It was full of traps, and as the driver picked up speed and the Jeep bounced across bricks strewn about we ducked under crude spikes jabbing out of the walls, drunkenly strung barbed wire, and a few handsaws dangling on fishing line from the roofs above.

The end of the alley was blocked by barbed wire, spiderwebbed across the opening. "Fuck," the driver said, and jammed his foot down on the accelerator. We crammed ourselves as low as we could get in the Jeep, worming our bodies into cramped spaces behind the front seats. The driver ducked down and winced, one hand steadying the wheel, legs contorted to maintain weight on the gas.

We hit the wire. A line of it scraped across the hood and shattered the windshield, sending shards of glass flying into the two men in the front seats, and shredding the drivers hand. The wire stretched over the windshield frame and thwapped down onto the three of us in the back seat, digging furrows down my back. I screamed, and felt blood soaking into my shredded fatigues. The Jeep strained against the wire on the bottom, driver still mashing the accelerator, wire digging into my back, until it broke, and we spun drunkenly out into the street.

There was a moment of quiet. Blood was pouring from the driver's hand over the steering wheel and instrument panel, and I was writhing in the back seat. My back felt like it was on fire. We could hear cultists running towards us. The driver, growling in pain, got us turned around, and we made it home. No one was dead.

Later that week, we moved through the town in force, sweeping the streets and houses step by step. We put bullets and bullets into cultist heads, tore demons apart, burned down houses covered in strange sigils and glyphs. There were hours and hours of killing. When it was done, the town was a smoldering wreck, and sweating, covered in soot and grime, we drove home, watching an orange sunset.

One day, Captain stood up in the middle of the mess hall, and told us we were going to Europe. There was a general lack of reaction. We were once again cooperating with the governments overseas. They were our brothers in arms, our friends and compatriots in this struggle. But they needed help. If we thought things were bad in America, we were delusional. They had it much worse. Later, down the line, they would help us. We would be stronger together in the long run. But, right now, they needed our help.

That was fine. With the endless reshuffling of refugees from camp to camp, "clean zone" to "safe zone" to "area of refuge" to "sanctioned habitation area," there were few of us who still had contact with our families. Even the officially reported numbers on civilian deaths had reached the tipping point that mean they were more likely dead than alive, all things being equal.

The army, at this point, was a way to survive. There was little belief that any strategic objectives were going to be met. But the army had food, and shelter, and stability, and equipment. All of us recognized that.

A month later, we were on a transport over the Atlantic, flying through a storm. Around us, onyx

clouds sparked with red lighting. We could see, in the light from the tracers, red winged things diving at the ship, and we watched as their leathery skin was ripped apart by the booming ball turret, and they fell, shredded, into the ocean.

Our pilot made it over land before he went insane. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m taking you somewhere safe.” I watched the coordinates of the landing strip flash blink past on the GPS. We had been trained to handle this situation. Captain picked me and another man, and opened the door so we could empty our sidearms into the cockpit. Through the cracked door, in the instant before it was slammed shut again, I caught a glimpse of sigils filling the sky behind the windscreen. Their afterimages were burned into my eyes as we strapped ourselves back in, and sat rigid as the plane’s nose edged downward.

The impact knocks the wind out of me, and my head slams into my neighbor’s rifle. Rain beats down on the plane, wet “thwaps” echoing throughout the body. The door is stuck.

Something scratches the bottom of the plane, a long, thin, rasp along the floor. I can feel when it passes under my feet. A smooth alto hum vibrates the walls.

Captain splits us into teams. Most of us begin opening boxes, stuffing magazines and grenades into pouches and packs. The remainder apply a charge to the plane’s roof.

The roof of the plane explodes, deafening us. Rain pours through the ragged gash. All of us, staggering from the explosion, clamber up through the hole, into the storm. Someone hoists me up and through, their blank face illuminated in a flash of lighting.

On top of the transport, the rain soaks me in seconds. Drops run down my nose. We are sinking into a field of mud. The plane is half submerged already.

Captain tells us to get moving, and points to a line of trees across the mud field. Men drop down, immediately sinking thigh deep into the muck when they land. There’s a thin layer of rainwater on the surface, the ground too saturated to accept it.

I lower myself to the ground and move as fast as I can towards the trees. The mud is sucking men under. I see people submerged to their waists, flailing their arms, panicking. I breathe in, and out, and in, and out, and ease my leg from the cloying muck, working it free gently, wincing, then working the other one, gently, wincing, trying always to shuffle up and forward, without getting too unbalanced, without sinking too far. The mud forces itself into my boots and it slithers into the soles and coats my fatigues. I push towards the trees.

When I am close, I feel the sludge around me vibrating. There is the sound of a titanic mud bubble bursting behind me, and I glance back to see a skeletal figure, towering over the doomed plane, caught in the flash of a lightning strike. Mud streams down from thin, twiggy arms and vicious fingers clawing at the air. The thing looms over the plane, swollen head slowly cocking, mud pouring out of empty eyepits and mud streaming off of its chin as it considers the men still struggling towards the woods.

I turn around and force myself towards the trees. My squadmates are all behind me. Finally, I feel the mud relenting. When I step, it only comes to my knees, then calves, then ankles, until it’s only a few centimeters deep, and I am in the trees. I crouch behind one, and close my eyes, and try not to hear the screaming over the downpour and the thunder.

When we regroup, someone tells me Captain was killed. There is someone new in charge, but I can’t tell him apart from any of the other Lieutenants. He yells instructions over the thunder.

Lighting flashes into his blank face. We are going to continue to the target. Other friendly forces

are advancing. We will group with them and continue the mission. We shrug. There is little else to do.

We walk for days in the rain. Roiling thunder clouds fill the sky. Red lightning strikes illuminate men in columns ahead and behind me, rain streaming off of helmets and sodden clothes. My hands prune up, and my boots are mush. Each step squelches water into my socks. When the Lieutenant leading us has decided it is nighttime, we pitch tents. The water soaks through the tarps, and men pile into the shelters in packs to conserve heat. We lay together in our dogpiles, water seeping in, shivering in clammy heat, and try to sleep. I wake up often, shaking with cold.

It gets colder. At first I think its my imagination, attributable to the mental strain of days of rain and night. But one day it starts sleeting. Clumps of runny snow plat into our helmets. The thunder and lightning let up, and we walk on under dark clouds, silently trudging through sludge. The routine continues. Eventually, the sleet hardens into snow. Our soaked uniforms freeze and become hard canvas shells around clammy, humid, interiors. The clouds lighten a little, and some daylight comes in: a flat, monotonous light grey.

A fog rolls in. I can see the two men in front of me, and no more. Skinny pine trees float through my vision, in and out of the mist, white drifts piling against them. Our column snakes through France, freezing men puffing cloudy breath in front of them.

The snow brings with it days and nights again, at least. We march through the world in a flat grey light, until the the skies turn darker, then black, and we switch on headlamps and see columns of light dancing around us, moving through the fog.

One morning we wake up and someone has frozen to death. We bless him, and say prayers over his body, and place his cross on his forehead. We dig a shallow grave with our camp shovels, working four men at a time. We dig through the snow drifts, and then the frozen ground. The dirt is a black spot in the sea of white, mixing with the snow and creating muddy slurrys. We mill around when we're not digging, looking around in silence at the grey light and fog and trees. The shovels clink and rasp.

We place the body in the shallow hole, and cover it again. We spread out and rummage through the drifts until we find two straight branches, and we place them in a cross over the dirty snow that marks the dead man's grave.

After that, someone dies almost every night. Morning burials become a routine. We leave a trail of muddy graves sprinkled across the country, and every day the rest of us have darker circles around our eyes, and our faces sag lower in exhaustion.

We walk on. From time to time I see the Lieutenant pull his hand, clawed around a GPS, from his pocket, and examine it. We never change direction, marching onward towards the blip on his screen.

There are only ten or fifteen of us left. When we walk, the wind shakes our frozen fatigues

around our shrunken bodies. There are nights we do not have the energy to pitch a tent. We collapse in a rough pile of men and doze fitfully until the morning or the cold wakes us. On one of these nights, we awake to growls and screams. The man next to me is being dragged off by a wolf. He is moaning and feebly kicking at the creature, its teeth sunk deep into his calf, shaking its head and growling as it drags him backward. Further back, its fellows stand watching, red eyes pricking through the morning haze. Someone finds their rifle and fires several times into the wolf's chest, and it collapses into the snow with blood leaking out of its chest and onto the soldier's filthy fatigues. Over the course of several seconds, it dies, wheezing. The other red eyes in the mist slowly wink out. The bitten man lays there, crying, sobbing every few seconds, hands over his face. The wolf's mouth is still attached to his leg. Those of us in the pile watch dully.

We continue to die. Every morning, I wake up, and stare out at the forest around us. Every morning I absorb the frozen trees, and drifts, and endless fog. I lay motionless, and watch my shallow breaths freeze on the way out of my mouth while my brain pulls itself into the world. Someone will stand, and begin moving about the men, shaking their arms or their heads until they wake or it is clear they are not going to. We do not have the strength to bury the bodies any longer, and we leave the dead in shallow piles of snow, placing twig crosses over their chests.

Occasionally, the ranking soldier will be one of the dead, and we will gather the pouch of dog tags from his belt, and fish the GPS from his pocket. We will pull pine needles from branches and draw straws to determine which man takes command.

One morning, I am awake, and everyone else is dead. I lay motionless for a long time, and tears come down my eyes, and my body heaves, and I lay for hours on my dead friends, crying.

I am staggering forward with the GPS in my hand. Something is wrong with it. It has been damaged by the crash or the cold, and the screen is fading and barely readable. A black slick with islands of dead bright pixels oozes out from the bottom right corner, obscuring the distance to the destination. The rest of the screen is barely legible, with only the faintest suggestion of a path against the grey backing.

I stumble forward through the endless grey fog. Time passes. I walk forever. My fatigues are loose around me, and my boots tear apart. Little by little, snow forces itself in and melts into my feet, soaking my socks and pulling the sensation from my feet. They are blocks at the end of my legs. My hair under my cap is shaggy around my ears, and my beard is huge and coated with ice from my breath. I lurch and I sometimes fall in the snow, landing with a soft crunch and feeling the cold against my face. I stand up, and keep walking, peering at the GPS in my shaking hands. I must be getting close.