

Running

A short story by
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Chapter 1

He was out of breath and none of the buildings looked familiar.

Stopping to rest for a moment, John leaned against an old, rusty dumpster and the waft of rotted garbage flowed into his heaving lungs. He spun away and nearly vomited, but somehow controlled his lurching stomach. John lifted his head and tried to squint through the dark to see anything. He had no idea where he was or how he got here.

The alleyway was faintly lit from the moonlight above, but it felt damp and muggy from humid air. Steam, or maybe something worse, floated by him in clouds of pale gray. The moon itself looked sickly and was shielded by a thin layer of haze. The air had a metallic smell to it and burned his eyes. A crash came from somewhere down the alley and his head spun around, searching for the origin, but he heard nothing except for the pattering of tiny feet. A mouse maybe, or rat judging by the loudness of the noise created. Turning back to the dumpster he spotted a cave between it and some old, stacked crates and boxes. The cave was nothing more than a cavity snuggled up to a brick building, but it was like a hidden shelter to John.

He crawled into the cave and huddled against the wall.

The moon disappeared completely and it started to rain. Dying of thirst, he looked up and opened his dry mouth to allow the water to fall inside. It has a bitter taste, but seemed to quench his desire for the time being.

Looking around, John knew he was lost. This alley was just another place he didn't recognize. Nothing he had come across in the last few hours was the slightest bit familiar. Ever since he crashed into an abandoned building off the highway, reality seemed to have flown out the door.

Cold rain bouncing off his cheeks, John thought to himself, "Lost...I don't even know if I am lost...I'm just....nowhere..."

The voice in his head trailed off as his mind wandered. He started shivering. Constantly tilting his ears listening for sounds, and looking up and down the alley with wild eyes, John was starting to feel like he was going mad. The rain was running down his face now in a constant stream. He searched around his surroundings and found a few empty boxes lying around. He pulled a couple of them on top of his head and upper body. Some pieces of dry newspaper that he discovered under the dumpster became a blanket for his legs. He tried to slide his body as much as he could under the dumpster but it wasn't high enough to allow for his large frame. Grabbing more of the boxes and yanking them down from the stacks, he buried himself away.

He grew quiet and in a few minutes, a stranger walking by would never have known John was lying there. Who knows, he thought, perhaps strangers were indeed walking by. He didn't care, and in fact, would have welcomed them. Something was wrong with this place. It looked like a real town. It smelled like one as well. The trash and garbage seemed to be signs that people had been here once.

But it was empty. Deserted. Dead. He could feel it in his bones. And it was dark.

Darkness had been with him ever since he plowed through the wall of that building. It was dark before, because he'd been driving at night...but this was different. It was the absence of true light...the absence of life.

In fact, the last time he had seen light had been right before the crash when he—

Terror leaped into his veins and interrupted his thoughts. It is amazing how quickly adrenaline and fear can take over a person. John had this revelation a nanosecond before his entire body froze in a state of

utter panic.

It was coming. He felt it.

The darkness around him was suddenly ripping apart like torn paper. Despite being buried completely under a mountain of cardboard, he could still feel the thing coming. From beneath the dumpster and into his cave, a ray of light started sliding in across the asphalt floor. Then another. He looked up as a box fell off his head and saw light crawling along the walls of the building across from him.

Suddenly in control of his body again, he burst out of the cave, sending boxes flying, and stood in the alley facing the source of his terror. The rain had stopped, but the haze was lingering above the pavement. The thing coming for him wasn't even fully visible yet. The alley in that direction split off into two directions and the right branch was lit up like nuclear blast. As if the very essence of the Sun was coming his way. He could see it growing brighter, the walls and street around him slowly illuminating. The misty haze from the rain seemed to vanish completely as the light hit more and more particles of moisture. Where the ground had been soaked from the downpour, the creeping light had dried it completely.

Stuck in place by the awe of what he was seeing, but horrified by the growing terror inside him, his fear won over his mind and John turned and ran the opposite direction.

Chapter 2

Five hours earlier

John raced down the interstate in his hard-top jeep, the wind whistling through the cracks of the removable ceiling. It was a long drive to California and he had just entered the long expanse of desert between Phoenix and Yuma. The setting sun could barely be seen in his rear view mirror. A crimson shade with crisscrossing clouds adorned the western skies. The sunset was one of those amazing ones that made you wish that you had a camera nearby.

The beauty of the moment was lost on John. A million miles from the desert, from the highway, from the cars passing him by, John was in agony. He probably wouldn't even remember the miles and miles he traversed if quizzed on it later. The saguaro cactus, blooming yucca plants and the occasional coyote were invisible objects blurring by his windows.

John's lips were moving feverishly but no words were heard, only the sound of his whispering breaths escaping. His bloodshot eyes were desperate, their pain fully visible, and his gaze locked firmly on something ahead of him on the road. Or perhaps not on the road, but on some unseen menace in his mind's eye.

The sun disappeared completely behind the mountains he had crossed earlier and instinctively John turned on the headlights. Despite the trance he was in, the jeep hugged the bends and curves in the road as if guided by a high performance driver. The reflectors in the highway must have been like little beacons he was following on some subconscious level. They almost mirrored the tiny lights littering the evening sky all around him. The heavens flickered and cast a strange but faint luminous glow over the desert. Behind him, one of the stars grew brighter.

It was hardly noticeable at first, but it steadily intensified. The bends in the road would hide it at times, the mountains and hills blocking the light out, but it would appear again a short while later... bolder and stronger than before. At first, John's self-loathing and internal battle kept his eyes from seeing the enlarging glow in his rear-view mirror. It was only when the piercing light flashed off the mirror and

blinded him did he wake up out of his stupor.

The star was now on the road. And following him.

“What the heck....?” he muttered to himself.

Straining his eyes, he tried to maneuver his line of sight to find out what the thing was. What at first looked like a star going supernova was now following close behind on the highway itself. Shaking off the sudden fear in his mind, he tried to force a laugh.

“Probably just a motorcycle... calm down John.”

He realized he was in the left lane and figured the guy behind him just wanted to pass. He flipped on his turn signal and scooted over to the right side of the highway.

The star matched his lane change.

John stared into his mirror. Who was this whack job? Why on earth was his headlight so bright? He flipped up the mirror into night driving mode, but the glare was still strong. John slapped his hand across it and sent it flying into the passenger seat, broken clean off the windshield. Putting on the sunglasses resting in his cup-holder, John stepped on the gas and the jeep's engine roared. Watching the speedometer approach 100 miles per hour, he turned back to see if the supposed motorcycle had been lost.

He cursed when he saw it was even closer than before and gaining on him quickly. He swerved back to the left lane and then returned to the right, but the headlight followed him as if connected like a trailer to his tow hitch.

A green road sign flashed by on the right, barely visible at the breakneck speed the jeep was traveling. Still, he was able to see that an exit was just up a mile down the road. There was something about his pursuer that filled John with familiar dread. Fear coursing through his veins, a plan ripped through his head and he got ready to execute it. He had little time to prepare as fast as he was moving.

The exit was coming up on the right and John waited until the last moment and then yanked his steering wheel to the right. The jeep went cutting through the gore lane and narrowly missed the sign indicating this was the Hollow Road turnoff. John turned back hard to the left, trying to keep the vehicle on the off-ramp and in control. The jeep almost tipped over off the right side of the exit, but somehow landed back on four wheels. The road curved downward towards a barely visible stop light that at this moment was blinking red. Outlines of buildings appeared in the darkness, the beginning of some barely populated desert town.

John didn't care about the red light in front of him, it was the white one behind him he was worried about. He turned back to look out his rear window and saw the light had vanished. Oddly enough, the absence of the light gave John a brief feeling of emptiness before he turned back around and saw that he had made a big mistake.

The stop light had come quicker than he realized and even when he slammed on the breaks, the downward slope of the road did little to slow him down. John braced himself as he saw there was no on-ramp leading back up to the freeway. Where a ramp should have been instead loomed a large, black building. The jeep smashed through the walls of a huge warehouse and then blasted out the other side of it, into a dark alleyway where it came to rest impaled against a brick wall. Windshield smashed, John slumped over in his seat, alive, luckily unhurt, but completely unconscious.

When he awoke moments later, the light was descending from above and he ran.

Chapter 3

The light had faded a bit behind him, but still John ran.

He didn't know what else to do.

The alleyways he was fleeing down never ended. He was positive he wasn't going in circles, but they all appeared to be the same. Black asphalt, brown walls, bricks, dumpsters with endless piles of trash surrounding them, empty crates, torn boxes and puddles of murky water.

The light was ever behind him, pursuing him relentlessly, untiring. John on the other hand was losing strength. Cracks and gashes in the pavement were stumbling blocks to his faltering gait. His hands had bloodied from a few of his falls, along with a gashed knee clearly visible through a fresh rip in his jeans.

Soon the pursuit was going to end. John would trip, land on the ground and not be able to get up this time. His hunter would approach and the chase would be over.

It ended sooner than he thought. The unending maze of alleys suddenly stopped. A dead end, with a brown brick wall towering above him until it faded into the haze from the storm. Stark with fear, John reached out to touch the wall, as if in disbelief that he was trapped. He slid his hand down the cold, slimy bricks. He pulled it back, stared at the oily residue on his fingers and went to sniff it when the wall lit up with a blaze of light.

He didn't turn at first. Shock and denial were there, along with fear of facing the unknown.

Then the most extraordinary thing happened, which was an understatement considering the events since the star descended behind his jeep. As he slowly spun to accept his fate, a doorway opened along the wall to his right. Where bricks had been before, suddenly a gap appeared. Light flowed from it, even though it was eaten by the rays of the thing chasing John.

The sight of an old man standing just inside made the revelation of a door seem unimportant.

"Quick, follow me!" came a shockingly clear voice from the gap in the wall.

John just stared, mouth open. The man wore nothing but an old burlap sack, somehow formed into a long overcoat. His mouth was missing teeth, and the yellow ones remaining looked as if they'd soon follow. Balding in the front and some on top, the old man had white hair down to his shoulders, long and stringy. He appeared to be nothing more than a old, dirty transient. Yet John felt there was something strange about him when he spoke.

"You don't have much time if you want to escape...follow me," he gestured to John.

The voice was what stopped John cold. Convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that he'd never met this old hobo, the tone behind his speech seemed oddly familiar. It had a strange, comforting feel to it, yet it also filled John with a sense of...

The old man was reaching his hand out now. "Take it!" he said. From the opening in the wall John felt warmth seeping out. He was sure he heard the sounds of laughter through the door. A smell of something cooking filled his nostrils. He longed to take hold of the old guy's hand and embrace the warmth and safety behind that door.

"It's safe in here, let's go. Don't be a fool!" cried the silver-haired bum. Despite the determination and worry on the old man's face, John saw something else. Something that filled him with uneasiness.

John looked back towards the light approaching for a second and suddenly a bear trap closed around

his arm. At least he imagined that's what it felt like. The old man had grabbed him and was trying to pull him through the door. John was surprised at his strength, which quickly turned painful. Long nails, almost claws, from months of neglect were tearing into his flesh. He could feel his skin being peeled off his muscles as he struggled to free himself.

Pulled up to the doorway, John used his feet to brace himself from being yanked all the way inside. The pain was overbearing and he almost gave in to the power of this little hobo when he spotted a bottle sticking out from under some boxes. He snatched it up, smashed the bottom against the wall and slammed the sharp blades of the broken glass deep into the arm of the old man.

Screams of anguish from the assailant exploded into the night and the skies boomed with thunder. His grip was weakened and John was able to yank the shredded arm away from the old man. He tried to stumble away from the door but the hobo sprang for him like a lion, eyes blazing red.

A blast of light hit the old man square in the side and slammed him into the wall. Bricks crumbled where his body hit and the ground cracked when he landed on the pavement. Like a cat he was back on his feet, dirty hair blowing in the sudden storm. Instead of charging John again or assaulting the light, he just stood there, eyes glaring at the luminous being approaching.

The light stopped its advance. John cradled his arm against his body, looking from the old man to the glowing star, suddenly unclear who the enemy was.

Chapter 4

Rain began to fall again.

The old man turned away from the light and looked at John once more.

"Come with me son, you will find what you are looking for through that door."

Somehow, John felt he should know what the old man was talking about. It was on the edge of his mind, the answer just out of reach. He peered into the doorway and once again felt the warmth overtake him, the smells of comfort just inside.

"Many have found their way here and have saved themselves from the hideousness that pursued you to me," said the hobo, in a voice more pleasant by the minute. "Come, take my hand and let's escape that foul thing together.

"You don't have much time."

John took a step towards the old man. "What's in there?"

"Only what brought you here, what you were longing to find."

The source of the light stood silently waiting, something John slowly realized, apparently unable to travel further into the dead end of this alleyway. Or else it was recharging for another blast.

Perhaps this was the only way he could escape it, by trusting this old man's words. He looked into the room and felt relief coming from it. An end to his agony.

John just had to step over the threshold.

Yet as he lifted another foot to move it closer to the door, the warmth from the light grew more intense and unsteady. The constant stream of light was suddenly fluctuating. John peered sideways at the miniature sun that seemed to hover in the alleyway and he sensed something he hadn't noticed before.

The light was flickering more now and John's eyes were finally opened. He realized for the first time since he crashed his truck that he knew what was happening. He became calm, his head cleared of all worry and fear.

There was weeping coming from the light. A sorrowful weeping, meant only for him. His own eyes became filled as he stared at the glowing orb before him.

John looked back to his left, spotting the old man creeping towards him slowly and suddenly a brief cloud of shadow passed over the bum's face like a flash of lightning. But it wasn't quick enough for John to miss what was there.

Darkness. Death. Evil.

The man lunged again but this time John knew he could do him no harm. He raised up his bloody arm, which had become strong once more and extended his palm outward.

"Stop."

John's words halted the hobo in midair. He hovered there, inches from John's face and suddenly transformed. Claws had exploded from his fingertips, his teeth suddenly yellow and long, eyes blazing with black and slimy scales covering his skin.

"I will not give in to your kind words old man, for they are filled with nothing but lies."

Pulling his hand back towards his body and then thrusting it forward as strong as he could, John's newfound power flung the evil one back through the door, blood curdling screams from the dark creature echoing down the alleyway and filling John's ears with intense pain.

The door slammed shut and disappeared from the wall entirely. It was as if it had never been there. It was as if he had never been there.

John turned and walked towards the light, which had stopped throbbing and was steady once more. The phenomenon was more clear to him now. The unbearable glare that had scared John before was now inviting and comforting. He could see the sphere floating inside the light, hovering just above the ground by some supernatural means.

John fell to his knees in front of the light and cried. He cried like he never had before, emptying all his sorrow and pain in the form of tears that splashed on the ground and were dried up by the light.

"Forgive me, please...I will never run from you again."

The light grew brighter and enveloped John until there was nothing left of the ugly street, of the alley way or the town. He was encompassed in pure brilliance and his pain drifted away...

John was driving down the road again, his agony gone and strength filling his soul.

He had been running before, running from his life, from his problems, from his responsibilities. Instead of relief, he found pain and angst in his escape, but no other choice was evident to him. To continue his old life would have been too hard. He was giving up, tucking tail, running.

The tears that had been running down his face before the crash were results of the fierce battle inside of him, one that spurred him forward even though he wished he could return from where he was escaping. He was a weak man though and kept the direction of his jeep pointed west.

Yet even in his utter dark moments, where the highway and the desert had raced past him in the twilight shadows of evening, he somehow reached out with a final hope, that something or someone could help him go back. He had no idea where it came from, but out of the depths of his soul the plea had escaped him.

“Please...I need you,” he mouthed the words, which came out as almost silent whispers.

And then the light had appeared.

John rolled the windows down in his jeep and took in the brisk, early morning desert air. The wind blowing through his hair lessened as he slowed the vehicle down and pulled off the side of the road.

He checked the traffic both ways and then hit the gas as he turned the keep around and headed back home.

The end.