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Opening Extract from...

The Veil

Written by Joseph D'Lacey

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TESTAMENT I



THE KILL CREW

CHAPTER ONE



Night falls like a hammer-blow because we dread it. What you wish for is delayed, what you fear is swiftly delivered.

It begins with the sound of people crying. Hundreds, maybe more. They've lost something treasured and they want it back. Now the first gunshots; a few singles, the sound of booted feet running on cold sidewalks and empty streets. Then volleys of gunfire, coordinated and precise. More running, faint shouts of caution or command. Nearby the shots sound like firecrackers, farther away they're just popguns, hardly real. We all listen to the night sounds because it would be wrong, disrespectful somehow, to ignore them. Each of us waits for screams and prays we never hear them.

If I try really hard, I can remember the true sound of the city at night. Cars and sirens and a million tires breathing over tar-bound stones. Jets and choppers sparkling and slicing up the air above us. People yelling, music passing by.

All we retain now are the gunshots. Once they were the sound of anger snapping and of private wars. Now, against the silence of the city, they are the sounds of survival.

"Crewing tonight, Sherri?" asks Ike.

"No. You?"

"What do you think?"

Ike Delgado never crews if he can help it. Doesn't have the belly for it. He's only asking so he knows if he's getting laid or not. Now he thinks he is.

He isn't.

"I'm doing spam and beans Delgado, accompanied by a '98 Beaujolais. Want to join me?"

"I've got my period."

Ike hates blood. Especially from what he calls the axe-wound.

He tries to hide his squirming and does a pretty good job. "Doesn't mean we can't have dinner together."

"It does if I'm not hungry."

He shrugs, smiles. Somehow it's not nasty.

"More for me."

My turn to shrug. Then he says, "Want to sleep at my place tonight?"

And suddenly we're in new territory. I don't like the look of it.

"Maybe tomorrow, Ike." He shrugs again, then leaves.

Now I'm alone, sitting on an upturned soda crate in Sally Alley cleaning and oiling my guns. My period is actually a couple of days late. Been irregular ever since the Long Silence began. I'm crabby as hell because I haven't crewed for almost a week. The gun barrels are pleading for heat. Or maybe it's PMS.

Either way, Ike Delgado sleeps alone tonight. Sherri Foley needs space.

It doesn't take much discipline, but it takes guts. If there'd been any soldiers who'd survived, maybe they could have taught us more about maintaining order amid the chaos. Keeping our boots shiny and guns lubed while the body count rises. Marching and singing to keep our spirits up. But no soldiers made it, or if they did, they don't live in the Station. It doesn't matter. We've learned how to do the

necessary. It's probably not quite enough knowledge to stay alive.

The crew goes out every night. It's a lottery. Anyone can volunteer but only seven take the shift. If something goes wrong, we only lose a few. We keep a tally of the numbers – how many of them we stop, how many of us are left.

What we got:

A city block of shops, apartments and alleyways. Two gun stores. Three mini markets, two restaurants, and a wholesale warehouse. One pharmacy. A few years' supply of LPG in portable tanks. Rainwater catchments on every roof. Some grow bags and a few seeds. A wall at the end of each alley made of demolition leftovers and other salvage. More living space than we can use. About two hundred souls. I don't know how many we started out with, but we're counting down to zero as the months go by.

What they got:

Disposable numbers. Unpredictable requirements. Insomnia.

I just want to put you in the picture. There's more to it – a lot more – but now I've laid the groundwork the rest'll make more sense.

You must have had one of those relationships you know isn't right and won't last. When you know darn fine there's a better one out there but you just haven't found it yet. I used to think of those relationships as stops on a train journey. I might get out, wander around, see the local sights. Soon enough I'd be back on that train, going somewhere more important. I always believed I'd reach that special destination; find that other person out there who was travelling from afar to meet me.

Right now I'm seeing Ike Delgado. And because I've run out of track – because the whole world's run out of track – I'm going to be seeing him a lot longer than I'd planned to. For the moment, as far as I can tell, my train ain't leaving

this station.

By a coincidence of some kind, someone coined the name the ‘Nielsen and McKinley Station’ for this hastily cordoned-off ghetto of ours, this last stop on the line. The block is sandwiched between 33rd and 34th streets going north-south and Nielsen and McKinley going the other way. Mostly, we just call it the Station. I believe we do this in the hope that one day there will be some other place to go, a recommencing of all our broken journeys.

This thing that happened, the day the Long Silence began, we don’t know if it was a bomb, something in the water, something they sprayed on us from jets, or if it was nature’s answer to the craziness of the world. The strange thing was it didn’t affect everyone in the city. It was more prevalent among the office workers, pen-pushers and keyboard-punchers - the white-collar drones. Or maybe it was where they were on the day it happened, high up in their office blocks. Whatever the case might be, they’re out there, outside our wall, all over this city in their thousands. In their hundreds of thousands. You know them as soon as you see them. We’ve come to know them as the Commuters because they still get around.

And we’re the Stoppers. Because we live in a Station. Because we’re going nowhere.

Because we put an end to Commuters.

True, we’re not real soldiers but we keep our equipment clean and in good working order nevertheless. Only a suicide wants a gun to jam or misfire when they’re crewing. It’s best to get outside while it’s still light, before the Commuters arrive. Otherwise, they’ll be ready for us. About the time the sun gets blocked by the tallest buildings in the city is when we get ready.

To be safe.

It’s what we do.

Before we climb the ladder we test our gear one last

time. Everyone flicks the miner's lights on their heads to check the batteries. Everyone carries a spare in their pack. We ensure our weapons are fully loaded, safeties on until we get outside. I carry two pump-action shotguns. Each holds eight rounds. The stocks are plastic so they're lighter for me to carry. Cain is loaded with ordinary scattershot cartridges. I have him handy as I exit the cellar. Abel contains cartridges with single slugs. On the rare occasions I draw Abel it's for heavy work. His recoil is so fierce it hurts my shoulder to fire him. In case of emergencies, I carry the Paramedic – a .38 snub I use on fellow Stoppers for total anaesthesia. Got snacks and water for later in the shift and a first-aid kit, which if you ask me is a waste of space. Get hurt on the other side of the wall and the chances are you're not coming back to the Station for a change of dressings.

What's a hairdresser doing carrying guns and making out like she's a militiaman?

Surviving.

Just like everyone else.

TESTAMENT II



THE FAILING FLESH

The tendrils cradle us, suspended upright high above the floor of the cavern. Occasional evanescent flashes from above light up the surroundings for a few moments. The rest of the time it's utterly black. I don't know what's worse: seeing our situation as it is or replaying it in the dying afterglow of those purple and green strobes.

No one speaks.

We communicate only in whispers or screams – whispers to share stories or words of comfort, screams when someone is drawn upwards. If we cough, as many often do because of the dust at the surface, we stifle it into a shoulder or the crook of an elbow.

Dangling like this, it gives you vertigo. No one knows exactly how high we are but it's higher than anyone wants to be. If the tendrils released, we'd plummet into the void, rupturing our legs like sacks of mince and gristle on the cavern floor. Hanging here in the dark, it's easy to believe that slip, that drop, could come at any time.

Terrified we might fall at any instant, we neither rest nor sleep longer than a few minutes at a time. And yet, the more likely outcome is that we'll rise, propelled upwards in the darkness by the thick, serpentine tendrils.

I decided hours ago that falling would be better.

***

I remember the last 'normal' thing we did together as a family; our Sunday evening ritual.

Two large, stone-baked pizzas from a tiny local Italian restaurant. Jake chose toppings for 'his' pizza and Tara chose something less extreme for her and I to share. Jake never finished, of course, but that wasn't the point. It was our sacred night of the week. If he wanted triple pepperoni and extra cheese, that's what he got. When he was done, Tara and I finished up what was left. We took this meal on the sofa, Jake sitting between us in his PJs, our pizza boxes

before us on the split-log coffee table. Sunday night was movie night and, again, the choice was Jake's. It didn't matter that we'd seen Ice Age thirty times or more. That almost made it better. More familiar. More reliable.

We laughed at the familiar gags, especially Scrat and his doomed love affair with the acorn. We gorged ourselves on pizza. We cuddled up, close and comfortable. A Neolithic family might have done something similar, aeons before, huddled around the fire in their cave, eating deer off the bone. Over the next few days, I thought about that night a lot. It wasn't the togetherness I missed; we still had that. Sort of. It was the pizza. For a few days, I kept believing there was still a chance for special family time, even without the home-delivered junk food and funny movies.

On that last night, Jake fell asleep before the end of the movie, as he usually did. I lifted him up, ragdoll-slack, and took him to his bed. Tara followed, standing a little too far away as I tucked his duvet tightly around him – he was a thrasher and within an hour would be uncovered. You did what you could. One at a time, we knelt to lay a kiss on his forehead and retreated. Even that gesture was ritualistic, as though we were lighting candles in a silent church.

Back on the sofa, it was quiet and chilly. Without Jake between us, the hole in our marriage was a ragged tear. We touched feet across the cushions but it was a sticking plaster on a bullet wound. Without Jake and the movie and pizza, there were only threads left holding us together.

I think if the world had continued, if we'd had more time in that context we might have worked it out. Jake might have been spared losing both the world and his family. But that's a pointless observation now, isn't it? No one had that luxury. All of us were out of time. The new context was upon us and it was unrecognisable.

Tara went to bed soon after Jake. I spent the last night of civilisation masturbating over fetishist internet porn, knowing it was only love I needed to fill me up. Long after midnight, I went to bed wondering how I'd managed to end

up in the wrong life. Only a few years before, everything had seemed so perfect. As I fell asleep it occurred to me that it was safety and familiarity, not perfection, I had pursued.

Pursued? I'd cornered it, roped it and slung it over my shoulders. I wore blandness as my yoke.

***

The Hush – that's what Tara and I called it – began at the end of the summer.

Rumours were that a massive solar ejection had spiked our atmosphere. Whatever it was affected everything with an electrical circuit in it. Just like that, every iPod, TV, computer and phone died. Vehicles, too. On Friday the third of September, planes, helicopters and microlights dropped out of the sky in a hail of steel. No one searched for survivors. No one came to assist a population suddenly severed from itself. If I was a religious man I'd have said it was as though God had hung up on his creation. Slammed the phone down and left the room.

After that, things got very quiet.

But it wasn't all silence. At night, gangs – of individuals somehow changed – roamed the streets and conurbations, snatching people from their homes. Snatching them and dragging them away. There was something driving the gangs; a sickness of some kind. They were stricken.

We heard about people 'getting organised' and 'making a stand' but I wanted nothing to do with it. It was the cities that were hit first, the places where people had already chosen to congregate. It struck me that we'd have a better chance if we stayed away from everyone. Even Norton-on-the-Marsh got dangerous after dark. Each morning there were fewer people looting the abandoned shops for food and water; each night the weeping of the Stricken grew louder as their numbers multiplied. Sooner or later they were going to find us in the cellar and break in. I couldn't

allow that.

I’ve been an estate agent for one small company, Forbes Foster, ever since I left school. I’m a house-hawker, spilling the same half-truths to the same kinds of ladder-climbers day in and day out. The only time I didn’t hate the job was the day I moved Tara and Jake out of Norton and into the nearby countryside. There was a house in the hills to the east that had been on the market for almost three years. It was beautiful and relatively new, made of Cotswold stone in the traditional way, but the location was awful. It rested about a third of the way up a shallow hill and faced north. To its left was a dense pine wood. Even in summer, the house only sat in direct sunlight for a few hours. It was robust, roomy and beautiful, but it was a dungeon.

At first light, when the wailing stopped and the Stricken retreated to wherever it was they hid during daylight hours, the three of us hefted our packs and hiked the seven miles to Compton House. If it hadn’t been for my career, we probably wouldn’t have lasted another forty-eight hours in Norton. Compton House extended our lives for three weeks.