

THE KNEW CITY

“He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.”

- Dr. S. Johnson

The thunder of gunfire in the defining dark hauled him from his sleep. He sat up in his vagabond rags and silently woke his rawboned family. They sat up and listened to the pandemonium outside the windowless skyscraper. The light from the fire they lay around danced demonic shadows across their gaunt faces, but gave off scant warmth. The man held his wife's hand. They rolled and went to sleep.

Lemon-soured light penetrated the city and it rested like some gargantuan beast, overpowering the distant horizon.

Dilapidated buildings, a dilapidated city, a dilapidated world...

Once again he was the first to wake. Untangling himself from sheets he stood, staring out over the city.

Ever since the event, and the rise of the Knew World Order, the city was lost to the dogs and the filth that contaminated the streets. There were great walls that surrounded the city. The Knew World Order had erected them for fear that animals from the world outside would get in...or perhaps the animals from the inside would get out.

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The tremors had worsened. They had already evacuated the upper city, and now they, and the people around them, were all that was left. He had known it was coming for some time. Before the event, like some medieval god-spoken man, he would preach to the masses.

“This isn't our spot, our planet. It's OUR spot, OUR planet.”

The automaton crowds did not register him.

One day a longhaired man, in remnants of clothes came up to him. The stranger put his hand on the speaker's shoulder.

“There's no point, son,” he said. “Humanity is wasted on humans.” With that, the stranger moved on.

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Death's rank odour had become as much a part of the building as the foundation upon which it stood. The staleness of it lingered in, and between, and under everything. The event had extracted all the goodness from the world and left a venomous hollow casket.

The family had been trying for some time to leave the city. Crime was worsening and it was only a matter of time until it affected them personally.

They had no choice but to leave the inner city and seek refuge in the outer parts. Through their travels they had come across many people; some spoke of a utopia that resided beyond the walls. And so they bundled their scarce belongings of a now-alien world and continued on their quest.

It was hard going and dangerous, especially with a child, but to stop was to die. A few times they had to run from haggards, harridans and crooks, but at the hint of gangs they would vanish.

The gangs roamed the claustrophobic streets of the city: a pack of dogs. The gangs had no blood feud between one another; no street wars. Instead they raped, killed and ate anyone who was left on the street.

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"Do Not Leave The City. It Is For Your Own Safety. The Knew World Order Wishes The Health And Happiness Of Everyone." The crowd clamored around the grey megaphone.

"For Your Own Safety And The Safety Of Others, Do Not Leave The City Walls."

People thrashed against the recently constructed walls. Like encaged apes, their screams of pain and anger momentarily enlivened the air. Fear constricted life from the city. Fear led to riots. Riots led to death. Death led to fear.

"Why didn't we get out when we had the chance?" the woman whispered. Her baby cried.

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They continued walking to the edge of the city. Silent.

“What do we do when we get there?” the woman said.

“Get over”, he intoned.

“How?”

The man had no answer and allowed silence to rejoin the conversation.

He was wrestled from his thoughts by the shattering of the silence. A loud growl came from behind them. A beast crawled from around the corner of the street. Men were shouting loud and delirious sounds, like some strange, new language. They saw the family.

“Run,” the man gasped. “RUN!”

They turned and fled like rats. Their derelict shoes beat against harsh grey, but they were no match for the beast that roared after them.

The women’s legs, carrying both her and the young child, began to slow. The man watched as she started to fall behind.

Fear struck. He could not watch the two things that he loved most in the world killed. He turned. Facing the beast.

“Run,” he said in a calm voice.

He ran at the beast. It roared at him. Fear led to death. His greatest compassion was death.

That was the last she saw of her love.

She ran, child in hand, hatred in heart. She ran.

The last words meant nothing now, yet she followed them. They joined the void of nothingness. The void of all things said by dead men. The word echoed in her ears. Run.

She did not know for how long she ran. There was no need, or measure for time in a world like this. It did not slow or speed up, it just went. And so did she. Each footstep like a metronomic tick.

She continued, afraid of what might become of her if she did not reach the wall. Scared of being raped, of being eaten. Or even worse, becoming the animal that would do that to people.

She staggered on like some old beggar with the slight dilution of something better.

Finally she reached the wall. It towered over her. Impenetrable, impassable, impossible.

She held her child close to her chest and wept. Tears ran her face like a demented watercolour. Some deranged masterpiece lost in time.

“Come.”

She looked around to see where the voice came from.

“Come. Quick, before they see you.”

“Who?” replied the woman.

“The Knew World Order.”

The woman once again clutched her daughter close to her heart.

The woman walked towards where the voice came from. It was a decrepit pile of rubble with a small hole to the rear.

“It’s okay,” the voice said.

She continued. A path seemed to drop out from underneath her as she made her way down the small tunnel.

A spec of light gradually grew as she ascended from the tunnel. It was the outside world.

She looked around.