

## Pocket Mice:

### A Post Apocalyptic Love Story

Lichen, moss, and trees start to come back first, crawling like a baby left to roam. It finds a hold in some concrete, in a crack in what was once a road. Things start to become overgrown: flipped cars charred by riots, broken glass from storefronts blown away by wind or washed into old sewers by rains.

So, it was there, deep in an overgrown city with trees and bushes climbing the skyscrapers, with moss hugging the sides of buildings, and the slow return of animals, that the thing sat. It was a polished thing. Uncanny in the lush greens, muddied browns, and specks of color from flowers just starting to bloom. A layer of dew sat on the metal surface, bouncing rays of light in every direction. The thing moved, rumbling to life with a mechanical whir. Then it sputtered. The sputtering machine was like a cough: raspy and drawn out as it tried to brace against the ground.

Two long legs sprouted from its boxy body. They spun around in their sockets then broke into the dirt. Its thick legs were coated with metal hiding wires and scaffolding hidden below. Small dents, scrapes, and burns snaked across its body.

The machine's arms stretched out from small compartments on its side. With a sprout of steam bursting from the joints, hands and fingers separated from the metal arms. They wiggled before gripping onto a log. Underneath its fingers, the wood crackled and crunched, splitting against the force of the machine. It propped itself up and its singular eye came to life. A warm, red glow radiated from the lens. The thing purred, rumbling like a cat. The dirt below its feet shook just enough to make small critters freeze and send insects scampering. Everything that was left in the city turned to the vibrating earth. Like a newborn deer, it hesitated before taking its first steps. Rust and lubricants ran down the thing's legs, oozing from its joints as it tried to gain confidence in its footing. After a moment, machine no longer needed to look down toward the ground while it walked or keep its arms ready to catch the mix of concrete and dirt.

The thing lumbered down a wide avenue. What had been perfectly manicured strips of grass and glorious palms was now a rat's nest of ivy and brush. The thing felt a drive. Off in the distance there was a pull. Voices that were too quiet to make out urged it to move. They called for it. *Help.*

As the sun broke through some thin wisps of clouds, the thing stopped. It leaned forward, slouching almost perpendicular to the cracked pavement. Its back opened up, two metal flaps creaked and moaned as they scraped against thin layers of rust. Two large solar panels began to unfold themselves, splaying out like a pair of wings.

The thing stared at the ground. Unable to move or turn as it charged in the sunlight. Its arms lengthened out and dug into the pavement, sending bits of tar flinging around it.

A twig broke off to its side. It was a thin snap: a clear pop that echoed off of the buildings. The thing began to shudder like an old car as the solar panels closed back into its torso. Its arms shifted and broke from the ground. The machine stood up straight and turned to the side, shaking with each rotation. It lifted an arm to its eyeline and pointed out into the street.

There was nothing there. Silence. The thing began to scan, its head rotated back and forth as it flipped through every view it could. Ultraviolet light, infra-red, one by one it looked and saw nothing.

Then, a metal clink bounced up from the thing's feet. With a sharp movement, the thing stepped back and pointed its arm down, whirring up a gun in its wrist.

At the thing's feet sat a mouse: small, round, and brown. It looked soft. With large, beady black eyes it stared up at the thing before scratching again at the machine's foot. The thing froze, processing and watching the mouse. The mouse dropped to all fours and crawled to the other foot. It sniffed at the thin layer of moss that was starting to climb up the thing's body.

A dark shadow climbed over the mouse, soon covering its tiny body completely with a foot shaped shadow. The thing sent its foot down like a rocket. It smashed into the ground with a crunch. Dirt and pavement flew every which way and rained back down like the pitter-patter

of a summer drizzle. The mouse scampered across the avenue, jumping from side to side, winding in and out of debris. The thing's arm snapped up and began to whirl. *Chuk. Chuk. Chuk.* It fired off a round of bullets at the mouse. Each shot reverberated throughout the city like a lone trumpet call.

As the smoke cleared, the mouse was gone. Nothing came up as the thing scanned the avenue.

Without a thought, the machine turned back down the road and continued to march on.

The road began to grow as the median of brush and old palm trees vanished, replaced with more and more abandoned lanes of rusted, flipped over cars. Mixed in with the cars were bleached bones. Bodies were piled haphazardly like they were trying to crawl over one another. Some were trapped under cars; others were burned to a crisp. The thing kept walking, glancing down to observe but never to stop. It stepped over the cars or pushed them, rotating them with metal screeches and the cries of shattering glass. The machine just looked forward, continuing down the road.

The road took a sudden dip into a tunnel. The bodies were becoming thicker and the cars were more and more scorched. Fire had licked the top of the tunnel. A bright flame had burned the outlines of bodies into the floor, walls, and sides of cars. They were melted and fused to anything around them.

Deep in the tunnel something glittered. More than a few things did. A whole pile of something blinked red and reflected the light this way and that. The thing was drawn to it. The red light called for the thing.

They told the thing to help them. The machine began to run, smashing through cars and crushing the charred remains that became multiple feet thick. They begged the thing to help them, to run, to save them.

The pile of blinking lights grew. It was a pile of metal, oddly shaped and strewn together.

The thing stopped at the foot of the pile.

Reaching out a metal hand, it gripped onto a body. Metal limbs tumbled down the pile as the thing pulled the body free. A face like its own looked up into the thing's lens. A singular red eye blinked with a faded red glow.

Some of their lights were almost faded, clinging onto life and what little sunlight they could absorb. Some were already dead. Their lights permanently out.

The thing held onto the body before letting it drop, clattering to the ground in a deafening crash.

Screams echoed in the tunnel. Real screams. Screams that shook the thing's entire body. Creatures ran out in its peripheral, scattering around and hurling themselves at the thing. Jumbled voices cried out and rocks struck the thing's metal body. Metal pipes and rope wrapped around the thing as arms hugged the machine in a death squeeze. They clamored for any sort of grip, shoving and grabbing against the metal to get the thing to the ground.

The thing scanned them. Fourteen people, makeshift weapons in their hands. The thing thought for a moment, unsure what to do, then it sliced its limbs back into its body. The screams turned shrill and high pitched. Severed arms, legs, and fingers splattered to the ground around the thing.

The people scrambled away as the thing raised both arms. *Chukchuckchukchukchuk.* Steam rose from the gun barrels as the tunnel became silent. The thing let its arms come down to its sides with a soft mechanical whir.

The people were scattered around it in a bloody arc.

A gurgle came from one of the people. The machine turned to it and stomped over, squishing its feet into the bodies with a squelch. It looked down at the person while their eyes twitched and shuttered back and forth. The person tried to speak, raising a hand out with an outstretched palm.

The thing raised its own arm and pointed it at the person's head. They pleaded. *Chukchuk.* The thing turned back to the pile of bodies. To the pile of its own body.

They wouldn't stop crying for help, yelling for anything.

A squeak echoed off the walls of the tunnel. The thing whirled around and raised its arm, immediately locking onto a small creature sitting on a car. The mouse.

The mouse sat on its back legs, sniffing up at the air.

The thing kept its arm raised. Its eye scanned the mouse over and over. The mouse fell to its front legs and climbed down the car. Expertly hopping from roof to hood then climbing down a tire onto the ground. It weaved in and out of the charred bodies until it came to one of the people. The mouse looked up at the thing then down to the person. It sniffed the body, studying the gaping wound.

The mouse stuck its face into the hole and began to eat, cleaning along the exposed spine and ribcage.

The machine lowered its arm then stuttered forward to the mouse. Each step made the mouse jump slightly in the air. It kept its face in the body but one eye tracked as the thing approached. The thing knelt down and held out a hand toward the mouse. The mouse turned from its meal and brushed off its face with its paws.

The two stared at each other for a moment. Then, with a hesitant reach, the mouse stuck out its paw onto the thing's hand. It climbed into the cupped hand of the metal thing. The mouse shuddered at the cold for a moment. It scampered up the thing's arm, feeling the warmth off the thing's torso. It wiggled its way into a crevice in the thing's body, curling up deep inside its protected compartments. The metal thing chugged on, its core heating the mouse.

The thing took one last look at the screaming bodies. They had gotten quieter. Fading as it pushed away from them. As it came to the other side of the tunnel, the thing looked out beyond the highway. The road gave way to rolling hills, dotted with thick trees that had snaked their way across roads and through houses. Soft clicks from the mouse's claws echoed in the its head. With the screams faded into nothing, the machine took its first step out of the city.