

Cold Turkey

Sweat accumulates on his brows. Not from heat, for night has already fallen and the lifeless sand holds no warmth. No, it is all from stress. Sanity is slipping from his fingers with every minute that passes. A narcotic drug holds him in its talons, numbing his senses and forcing him to crave for more each and every day. He had become a slave to the pills over long years, acting out deeds his former self would spit upon. The dealers abused the rarity of these pills to set outrageous prices. They used him for their dirty work.

No more, he thought. No more.

With that in mind he had thrown out every pill he owned and would lock himself in his room until a full day had passed. While his will was the strongest at the beginning, it is his body to push the boundaries while he nears the end. His resolve had weakened by time but he could not allow himself to falter. Feeling restless, unable to sleep. His thoughts jumped back and forth.

What if they come, he asked himself. They will never approve of this, they have become too used to my... weakness. They will kill me. They will surely kill me without a second thought.

Pacing back and forth in his small apartment he passed by the window and flinched as something moved in the corner of his eye. Spooked, he hid behind the windowsill. Slowly he took a closer look, but there was nothing.

Something moved. Someone was out there. A paranoia that had settled in the corner of his mind stood up to take control. They are watching. They will come.

Staring outside, his arm rested on the windowsill. His hand was shaking, the ring on his finger ticking against the surface.

Tick tick tick, the ring went. Tick tick tick.

The suspense was killing him, slowly driving him mad. Like a mad dog searching its prey he scouted the neighbourhood. It is a depressing sight to witness. A land torn apart by years of constant warfare. Though major battles had become a rarity in recent years there remained a constant threat from the resistance forces which kept the population in dread. No day would pass without reports of some skirmish fought here and there, destroying parts of nearby towns. The sound of gunfire reached the ear far too often.

The wall of one of the houses across the street was riddled with bullet holes. Four men had died there trying to nurse an injured soldier back to health last Thursday. The fence next door was torn apart by a warmachine that had driven through it two weeks prior. The family that lived there would not be able to repair it, as they had died when a missile had hit their home a week

before that. Streets that used to brim with life had turned dead silent. It had been an easy getaway to flee into the arms of narcotics.

Tick tick tick, his ring still went. *Tick tick tick*.

His own spastic movements increased how nervous he was. He pulled on a sweater too warm for the current time of year over his head and, without a second thought, left the apartment. Some fresh air would surely do him some good.

Once outside he turned left and walked. There was no plan on where to go, as long as it was away from that nerve wracking apartment. Street by street went by, each as empty of life as the previous one. It didn't take long until he lost himself in the maze of the city. If by chance some other individual would cross his path they both avoided eye contact and moved hastily onwards. A cold breeze sent a shiver down his spine. Old propaganda rustled over the ground, followed by sand and grit.

Every now and then he jerked his head to a side, occasionally even stopping to look behind him. It felt as if eyes pierced into the back of his skull. Yet when he did turn, there was no one. A gunshot miles away made him stagger momentarily. The saddened howl of a hound followed soon after.

Instantly he took a turn away from the origin of the shot, certainly not wanting to come across those who fired it. If it was the resistance it would mean his death; with the military a life of imprisonment. Just the thought of either made his heart race.

Minutes that felt like hours passed by. His anxious stroll bringing him from one dark alley to another. With his thoughts occupied by the retreat he did not notice his path took him straight towards the main market streets. Wide open areas, often patrolled and surveyed by both forces. Instead, he kept his sight on all behind, hoping to find a possible pursuer.

A gunshot abruptly woke him from his trance. This one was close. Too close. Panic overtook paranoia as he froze in place. He damned his mind, his addiction, and his weakness.

Where did the gunshot come from? Where do I go? Is someone behind me? Can I still get away? Questions that would remain unanswered.

A quick decision had to be made. He went left. His feet raced, nearly tripping over each other as they felt as heavy as lead. Another turn, and another, and another. He passed streets abandoned by all. Streets where he was certain families still lived but none seemed to dare to turn on a light. Streets that he hoped would be ignored and which he did not enter to ensure that safety.

A force smacked against his side, throwing him off balance. He hit the ground hard on his arm, scraping it across the gravel. Before he could even look up, or let alone think about what happened, two hands grabbed him by his sweater and pulled him upwards. Once on his feet, the same hands pushed him towards an alley.

‘Go, run,’ a feminine voice whispered hastily near his ear. ‘They’re almost upon us.’

Without a second thought he strides into the alley. While he could not see her, as she was always a step behind him, her voice carried much information. She gave firm and clear commands, guiding him in a direction she had planned ahead. Voices shouted not far behind them. Feet trampled the ground in quick pursuit. Her voice did not confess if panic or fear grasped her as much as him.

With a firm grip she hurled him into a rubbish filled alley, sliding towards some discarded junk herself, and pushed him into a heap.

Their pursuers did not notice them as they ran straight past them. Together, they waited several long and tedious minutes. His heart beats fiercely, too afraid to settle for a more calmer beat. After what felt like an eternity, she carefully got up and sneaked to the edge of the alley to peek around the corners. In weak illumination he could see her fully for the first time.

Her torn clothes seemed familiar to him, as did her dark hair which fell straight and just shy of her shoulders. He squints his eyes as he tries to focus on her, trying to figure out who this person is who had just saved his life. When she turned around, gun in hand, terror grasped his heart.

‘Your dealer sends his regards,’ she says.

His eyes fell shut after a gunshot reached his ears for the final time.