THE CARETAKERS (3445 words)

Koa could have used the knife that glistened on the table to fight off the pursuer but chose to leap from the balcony. During the four story drop he lost his grip on the grocery bag. He ignored it and grabbed his legs to keep his body balled up. His side struck the ground, somewhere between his hip and his shoulder. The impact sprawled him on the sidewalk. His ribs cracked, his arm dislocated, and his organs jolted from the sudden change in velocity. He knew he needed to move, but his willpower couldn’t overcome the searing, throbbing, and piercing; all the pain that would have been nullified were he able to die.

His urge to move strengthened when his attacker splatted next to him. She was a child, barely half Koa’s age, and had not positioned her body strategically as she fell. A jagged piece of her tibia jutted out below her knee. She laughed as she held her leg, either to dull the pain, or out of genuine joy. “I’ll get you,” she promised as she rolled toward Koa.

He spotted the grocery bag and tried to lunge for it. His arm and back protested. Like the girl, he rolled. Each part of his body flared as it touched the ground, but it was more manageable than the pain that came with making sudden movements. When he reached the grocery bag and grabbed it he was accustomed enough to the aches to slowly stand and limp away. The girl managed to stand on one foot and hop after him. She had no chance of catching him, but that didn’t stop her from trying, or laughing.

The ongoing pain from the fall made him hunch, which at least forced him to stay close to the ground. He crouched behind rubble and looked around before he lugged himself to a new hiding spot. The city had quieted over the last few months but being outside was still the equivalent of paining a target on his back. Rabid dogs, feral cats, and an occasional clatter in a dark alley made him take a winding route. None of the noises were nearby, but he still let them guide him to the East part of the city. Whenever he went out, he always found an excuse to pass by his old house.

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The new way of living had infected the world so quietly that it was impossible to pinpoint when it began. Koa had been an ordinary kid. He was an only child born in Hawaii. His parents were Nitti and Connor. When he was six Connor accepted a job that brought them to Kansas. The three of them shared an apartment. The first one to wake up made breakfast; Nitti always made oatmeal, and Connor made pancakes. Koa’s specialty was hard boiled eggs. He always meant to learn to cook something more extravagant but never got around to it. His parents promised to move once they found the perfect house, but they remained in the apartment until Koa was almost done with high school.

They probably would have stayed in the apartment until Koa left for college, but he never completed junior year. There were rumors earlier, but Koa considered his junior year, specifically October 12th, as the first sign of the disaster. There was a public shooting that day. It wasn’t in Koa’s neighborhood, not even in Kansas, but it was national news. Over 80 shots were fired. Nearly two dozen were injured. There were no casualties.

Later a case of gang violence made headlines. A man had been walking his dog at night and witnessed a drug deal. Instead of calling the police, the man confronted the buyer and sellers. The words grew heated until the seller discharged a firearm. The man survived and had been able to testify in court, despite having been shot eight times.

After that story Koa turned away from the television and toward the computer. The nightly news captured a few anomalies but the true path to humanity’s downfall was documented online. People all over the world heard similar stories, and many were eager to make their own. Videos of self-mutilation surged. Some people jammed knives into outlets, others ran in front of moving cars. One person became famous by posting videos of himself eating poisonous plants and describing how it felt. Those harmed in the videos faced various recovery times depending on the method. Some were damaged beyond repair and Koa assumed they were still in pain, but in the videos, none of them ever lost consciousness.

Nobody knew when it started or how it happened, but the effect was clear: people had stopped dying. It wasn’t limited to humans. Flies twitched and buzzed after being crushed. Flowers didn’t wilt after being plucked. It was proclaimed a miracle, but nobody rejoiced for very long.

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Traversing the secret entrance was an agonizing chore. Instead of vaulting through the window, Koa leaned over the sill and let gravity do the rest. He put the strings of the grocery bag between his teeth when he climbed the elevator shaft and reminded himself that his muscles would not give out, no matter how badly they stung. His pride would not allow him to fall again; he refused to have the same would-be fatal experience twice in one day. By the fifth floor his muscles burned, and he felt like his torso was painted with his organs instead of containing them, but he’d made it. Koa staggered to a room where five people sat on the floor, conversing quietly.

Amelia and Josh, siblings and the youngest in the group, rushed toward him. “What’d you bring?” they shouted several times in unison.

“Stop that,” Patrick scolded. “It’s not your birthday.”

“That’s right,” said Koa, “listen to your father.” Sometimes Koa thought Patrick worked too hard to keep Amelia and Josh under control, but he didn’t feel it was his place to tell anyone how to raise their kids, particularly in these strange times. Their mother had been missing for a while which made Patrick work twice as hard to be the parental figure in the children’s lives.

“But I’m hungry,” Amelia whined. Although young and innocent she realized the state the world was in. She knew she wouldn’t perish no matter how long she went without food, but the children were the least experience in dealing with the pains of starvation.

Koa sinched the bag closed. “Tell you what, we’ll wait for the Scallywags to get back and then we’ll have a big feast.”

Josh put his hands on her stomach. “I’m hungry now.”

Katrina shuffled a deck of cards. “Why don’t we play another game while we wait for the rest of our team?”

 “No,” Amelia and Josh groaned together. They continued to express how hungry they were.

 Koa’s shattered stomach twisted as the kids threw a tantrum. He tried not to recall the girl who’d attacked him as Amelia grew more aggressive. “Alright,” he opened the bag, “but it’s nothing to be excited about. Just a few cucumbers this time.”

“Whole ones?” said Amelia.

“Yeah,” Koa took one out of the bag, “but they’re not ripe.” The one he showed them was free of mold but like the others was shriveled from dehydration. “Hey, that means they’ll be soft. Put some salt on them and it’ll be like a pickle.”

“I hate pickles,” Josh pouted.

“You were just bitching about how hungry you are,” Clive piped in from the shadows. As usual, he sat in the corner and only spoke up to vent his frustration.

Koa handed the least mushy of the cucumbers to Amelia. “It’s alright. The Scallywags will be back soon with a bunch of yummy stuff. This’ll hold you off until then. And whatever they bring back, you won’t have to share it with me.” He lifted his shirt. Bruises stretched across his stomach. “My gut hurts too much for me to eat, probably will for a while.”

Katrina asked him what happened. Patrick wanted to know how badly it hurt. Amelia took the cucumber to the shelves and sprinkled salt on it, while Josh followed her and told her that she should share. Clive was able to sit quietly in the corner a moment, but then he also questioned Koa.

A part of Koa wanted to be irritated at the questions, but he couldn’t be mad at anyone in the room. He dropped his shirt and felt the hole in the side of his head where his ear used to be. The five people in front of him were the only ones he knew who’d lasted this long without suffering scars or deformities. He respected them too much to see them in a negative light, although he was saddened that they were about to rid the world of a few more palatable vegetables.

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Food had the most bizarre method of immortality. All fruits and vegetables became seedless. People returned to stores with produce and asked the cashiers and store managers if there was something wrong with them. The effects on food after consumption were slower to surface. Koa noticed, but it was too personal for him to talk about, and he imagined everyone else felt the same way. When he excreted waste, it wasn’t normal. Everything he ate exited his body covered in bite marks, but it retained the same color and texture it had when he’d swallowed it. Everything he ate passed through him, undigested.

Eating meat became a haunting experience. Animals were shot or stabbed, but none died. Attempts were made to process animals alive, but they struggled too much and crippled many slaughterhouse workers. Packing plants decided it was best to simply shut down.

Koa heard rumors of people who refused to stop eating meat. One story told of a group that had hunted a wild hog and managed to impale it with a long spit. The pig squealed and thrashed the whole time it was over the fire, but the group managed to cook it. They tore into the animal’s hide and devoured it. Later, when they excreted the waste, it came out at still-tender flesh that writhed on the ground and crawled toward the hunters like inchworms. The hunters stomped on the chunks of muscle and skin, but it was no use. The meat followed them relentlessly and when it caught them it slapped and constricted them. It was as if the meat was aware it had once been part of an animal and was seeking revenge. Koa didn’t believe the stories until he spotted people in his neighborhood being followed by chunks of beef, slices of ham, and cubes of chicken.

Too late it was discovered that the problem was worse than immortality; the population of every living thing on earth was fixed. Females of every species stopped becoming pregnant. Reptiles, fish, and insects stopped laying eggs. Not only was produce seedless but the parent plants no longer developed flowers. Species were rendered useless: every fly in the world was crushed; no spiders remained to spin webs. Any food that had not already been chewed was a delicacy.

Within a year of the disaster Koa’s parents became overprotective. They didn’t let him leave the house. Nitti and Connor took turns venturing outside. They’d return with handfuls of slimy, masticated scraps of which they’d either scooped off the street or fished out of a sewer. Koa’s face scrunched as he re-consumed them, but he wasn’t driven by hunger. He wanted to show his parents that he’d adapted to eternal life, to show them he was prepared to venture outside. Nitti and Connor refused, so Koa’s world was the apartment. He spent months hoping the source of the crisis would be uncovered and a solution developed before cabin fever overtook him.

Perhaps a solution would’ve been discovered. At first the only explanations came from religious fanatics who claimed the almighty was enacting a form of punishment. Their rants took a back seat to a conspiracy theory that caught on like wildfire and involved a cell phone signal that altered biology. The theorists were overridden by facts when scientists extracted a protein from several different species. It enabled muscle contractions in an anaerobic environment without the aid of ATP. The origin of the protein was anyone’s guess because the scientific community was silenced as well, drowned out by the uproar of a million sadomasochists.

While perusing the internet for news, Koa noticed the uptick in videos of people reveling in their resistance to death by harming themselves. The self-mutilation became worse, as every videographer tried to outdo all the others. A few vloggers decided to change the game by recording themselves committing assaults. This paved the way for mobs that took to the streets and disemboweled people.

The mob craze spread, until it was in Koa’s backyard. His parents kept him inside as long as possible, but eventually they had to flee. The three of them found shelter. Connor still went out to find food. He seemed to have a difficult time grasping that it wasn’t about survival anymore. The best they could hope for was avoiding getting hurt.

They couldn’t avoid it forever. Mobs found them and scarred them. Koa didn’t believe Nitti blamed Connor for it, but there was nobody else to curse for their predicament. Connor absorbed the criticism for a while, and then, for the first time in their marriage, struck Nitti. The first time he hit her the three of them stared at each other. Then Connor looked at his fist.

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” He’d said.

Nitti struck him back. “No, it doesn’t.”

Abuse became normal. They fled mobs together, but Connor and Nitti were quick to anger and willing to fight. They hit Koa, but he never raised a hand to them in return, no matter how brutal their attacks were. They threw him out windows, fractured his skull with pipes, and even cut him, all the while shouting, “It doesn’t matter!”

Every strike mattered to Koa, and the last straw was when Connor pinned him down and sliced off his ear with a piece of glass. Once Connor’s grip eased Koa fled from them. He hid from mobs on his own, and eventually found a dark room where five people dwelled. They were quiet, timid, and famished, but none took part in the violence that had ensnared the rest of the world.

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Koa watched his new family devour dinner. Josh had taken Koa’s advice and salted his. He said it wasn’t exactly like a pickle, so he liked it. Koa would’ve preferred to wait for the duo who preferred to be called the Scallywags, but they never returned. As the group ate, he peeked out the window. There were no mobs about, but one person stood under a streetlamp. Koa couldn’t see their face, but recognized the black cloth tied around their head.

“Be right back,” Koa said as he went to the hidden exit. Even if they were curious, they wouldn’t follow him. They’d been too afraid to leave their sanctuary for a while. The climb down the elevator shaft was just as painful as the ascent. His limp was even worse as he joined the lone Scallywag in the street.

Normally the two were inseparable. Slightly older than Koa but children at heart, they spent their nights gleefully plundering the city in their pirate outfits. The one person’s body language showed only remorse. “What happened?” Koa said to their back. “Did something go wrong?”

“Everything went wrong.” It was Ringo. He turned to Koa as he pulled something long and hard away from his lips.

Koa thought Ringo had a cigarette. A tendril of smoke drifted up from the tip. Upon closer inspection he saw it was a stick with an ember at one end. “You can smoke that?”

“I can light it up and breathe the smoke.” Ringo’s words were laced with anger and sarcasm.

“Where’s Ace?”

“Mob. Thirteen people. Stabbed him in the heart.” Ringo slapped his chest.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon,” Koa eyed the bag. “Did you find any food?”

Ringo dropped the stick, kept his eyes on it as the lit end broke on the asphalt. “Yeah.”

He usually responded with Aye or Arr. Koa extended his hand toward the bag. “Are you alright? Why haven’t you brought it upstairs? We’ve been waiting for you.”

Ringo used his toe to toy with the stick. “Ace laughed. Some people grabbed his arms. Pinned him to the ground. Another dove on him and plunged a knife into his chest. He fought back but couldn’t break free. Then he laughed. He broke free and fought back, more brutal than usual, smiled while he did it.”

“It was just the heat of the moment,” Koa offered. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means he’s started to enjoy the pain. If he comes back, I wouldn’t trust him.” He gestured to the building. “They should find a new hiding place.”

Koa looked at the building and then back to Ringo. “I think that’s a little extreme. They’re attached to this place. The room’s starting to feel like a home to me, too. Let’s wait for Ace to get back, talk to him.”

“No,” Ringo said a bit louder than before. “Anyone could slip into the bloodlust craze next. I think we should all split up.”

Koa put a hand on Ringo’s shoulder. “We’ve been together for a while, and we’ve been fine.”

Ringo shrugged off Koa’s arm and backed away. “I was with Ace longer than any of you. He never laughed when he got hurt.” He patted his torn blouse. “This pirate thing helped us cope, made us feel like we were honoring an old culture. It was never for fun.”

Koa’s eyes widened and he nodded. “I’m glad to hear that. I was worried you were finding this fun.”

“We weren’t, but Ace is now, just like your mom and dad.”

Koa put a hand to his ear, which he did whenever he thought about his parents. “What do you mean?”

“You said they didn’t always hurt you. They protected you for a while, but then they changed. Everyone else was hurting, being hurt, and enjoying it. Eventually, your parents hopped on the bandwagon.”

“Yeah,” said Koa, “but we haven’t. The three of us have sheltered the five of them for so long.” Ringo didn’t seem comforted. “What’s been driving you to do it?”

“I did it because they’re my treasure, the last unscarred people left in the world.”

“We don’t know if every place in the world is like this.”

Ringo shook his head. “I bet it is. I think what’s going on here is human nature. This pirate act, seeing them as treasures, it won’t last. Someday I’ll be consumed by sadomasochism, just like everyone else.”

“You’re wrong. The pirate act gives you a unique way of looking at things. That’s what makes you stronger than everyone else, it enables you to resist your primal nature.”

“It didn’t help Ace. If we can’t trust him, how can you trust me, how can I trust you?”

“I said your act makes you stronger, not invulnerable. But I still trust you, and you can trust me.”

“Why? You’re not a pirate.”

Koa took a deep breath. “I hate myself. I should’ve spoken to my parents more when they became unhinged. Instead, after my dad cut off my ear, I ran.”

“It was the best thing you could’ve done.”

“No, the best thing would’ve been to show them that I still loved them, that I didn’t want to hurt them, no matter how much they hurt me. I should’ve tried harder to get through to them, before abandoning them.” Koa pointed to the building. “Someday, I’ll find them again, and when that time comes, I’ll be able to get through to them. I’ll prove to them that I’m strong enough to care about them, because I care about others. Specifically, the people in that room. That’s what makes me stronger than Ace, and my parents. That’s how you know you can trust me.” He placed a hand on his chest. “Because I care. Let’s take this one day at a time. If you ever think I don’t care as much and lose trust in me, let me know and I’ll leave. But I’ll bet both of our motivators will keep us going for a long time.”

Koa extended his hand. Ringo shook it and they went into the building together.