

Damaged World

The sunlight hit his eyes, glaring him awake. Scratching at his stubble and slowly opening his eyes, Mason felt like he barely slept. With the sun as it was he might have been lucky if he got more than a couple hours of sleep. He slowly let consciousness fill him before sitting up in his bed. He got a hold of the surroundings, reaffirming everything.

The sun lanced through what used to be the fourth wall of his daughter's bedroom. The unicorn bedspread was still soft in Mason's hands, matching the border along the pastel pink wall. He strained and could hear the dripping of the bathroom sink across what was left of the hallway. He could picture the rustic old bathtub, the toilet, and the blue linoleum. He double-checked his thoughts as he finally got out of the bed and walked over to the bathroom to relieve himself. He paused for a moment in the U of a hallway, the left wall held the photo of the family. He could remember when they took it. The frame no longer existed; his wife had picked that out. But the picture sat there happily. The right wall was the glorious outdoors with the deceptively high sun.

The bathroom fortunately had kept all its walls. They were easy to remember. Sink and shower along one, the toilet, and then the two towel racked walls. Also, fortunately, they still worked. Mason ran the sink, splashing his face with the cold water. Looking up at the bare wall where the mirror used to be. Drying his hands on a Him, he left the bathroom and cheated through the lacking hallway to outside his home.

Ha, home. A bedroom and a bathroom. A walkway, some patches of grass and a lawn chair. His home. He forced himself to consider himself lucky. Early after, he'd seen some of the wandering people and all they could manage to keep. It wasn't a pretty sight when some of them staggered by his home. Most seemed completely lost. Rambling about ends times and demons, UFOs or the death of God. Their body thin and their eyes starving mad. They seemed to cling to existence out of sheer will. Mason would've traded his home to a wanderer in a second if it could've helped.

The thought panged him as he began picking up spare chunks of wood from what used to be his living room. He always depressed himself when he woke up. Maybe that's what kept him alive so far. After how many days? Mason couldn't tell anymore. Time had lost most of its meanings. All of his clocks were gone, and the sun was too fickle to be reliable. He sat down on a lawn chair that fate had left him, probably only because the hinge was sticky, and he always remembered that fact about the old thing. Setting up the wood in front of him on a well-burnt patch of dirt, Mason closed his eyes and concentrated.

He pictured the fire in his mind, starting small. He used the thought of his scout days, feeding the fire kindling gently, carefully. Going from a single, red lick of flame to three to many. He imagined the warmth as the fire picked up steam, catching the dry twigs and slightly larger chunks. The fire now a good blaze in his mind, Mason held up his hands and felt the warmth from in front of him.

Opening his eyes quickly, the fire stood there, licking at the pieces of wood. He had learned the trick from Selene. She always had an active imagination. His first attempts at fire making had failed. He had doubted himself. Logic made him open his eyes slowly, cautiously. He could feel the heat, but lost the picture of the fire in his mind

and in front of him. He remembered how she had giggled at him when he had failed. He could do it now, but it still took much longer than it had for Selene.

He felt his stomach begin to growl, it was time for breakfast. Sliding out of his lawn chair, Mason walked over to a scraggly portion of his lawn and picked up a handful pebbles. Placing most of his ammunition in his right hand, his left hand held one in his fingertips. Countless drinking games had earned him quite a throw. He could fling the pebbles with enough speed and accuracy to stun a small animal. Slowly moving around the partial house, Mason knew he heard a bird fluttering just under his daughter's window. It was a dark gray pigeon, feeding off something on the ground, bobbing its head kind of funny. Mason peeked around the corner, and sure enough, there was the bird. It couldn't see him, wouldn't see him, as he pelted it with his left hand flick. The pebble hit square and the pigeon stumbled enough for Mason to quickly rush to it and snap its neck.

The stripped carcass sat skewered over the fire. Mason turned it occasionally. Throwing a few more pieces of wood on the fire, Mason stared at it.

He whispered in his mind, nothing more than a hush, less it echo.

Logically, that fire shouldn't exist. Technically, there should be no wooden debris from his house. Even though he hadn't seen a bird in the sky in days, every morning, there was a conveniently, helpless bird, behind his house. Running water should have stopped long ago. Life should not be like this. Half a house, a sun that leapt from morning to noon and back again, depending who was looking, and a knowledge that any moment it could blink away.

The quiet thoughts drowned away as Mason tore a wing off the cooking bird. Letting it cool in his hands, Mason took a bite and let the juices flow over his teeth. Selene never ate. Maybe he should have made her eat. She always humored him when he was hungry. It was her that first took him hunting, telling him how the bird looked and where it was. How it bobbed its head funny and how it would stumble when it was stunned. After having seen what Selene could do, he knew not to doubt her.

He should have made her eat. Maybe then, she would still be here with him.

The bird eaten, its bones sizzled in the fire. Mason slouched in his lawn chair and let fatigue wash over him. It wasn't too long before he was dreaming.

Selene was there. Dressed in a flowing black skirt that matched her hair, she had on her favorite red sweater. She was sitting in the scoop of a tree. An impossibly giant tree, its trunk a large wall stretching upward. Seemingly in a vacuum, nothing on it moved. This tree was ancient, grown and gnarled. It seemed to hold billions of leaves on its gargantuan branches. The lower half of them was a mosaic pattering of bright yellow and orange, the upper half a vibrant green. It had a dark tinge to its wood and completely dwarfed Mason's daughter below. There was no sun, but light shone everywhere. It was a mid-day gold and it highlighted the tree and the gorgeous sight of Selene.

Mason wanted to run to her, to hold her in his arms again, but his legs were stuck. He could only apparently watch. Even dreams were cruel.

Selene noticed him and stood from her spot under the tree. She pointed to herself, and then above her. Following her hand, one leaf in particular seemed to catch Mason's

eye amongst the thousands. It was extremely high up, but Mason saw it in perfect focus. It was young, little past a bud. When Mason nodded, Selene smiled and disappeared.

The scene before him suddenly animated as a wind seemed to pass by the tree, rustling every single one of its countless leaves. To Mason, it felt like someone was blowing on his brain. It was an experience he remembered. Something seemed to be carried on the wind, nothing more than a speck, but it landed near the base of the tree. A dark red rash began to suddenly spread from the speck. Growing upward rapidly along the huge trunk, sliding down and around the massive girth of the tree. The rash seemed to slow as the tree fought it. It laced up the branches and with each leaf it touched withered and fell. The lower branches were hit hard and fast, a rain of dead leaves, light at first quickly turning into a downpour of darkness. As the rash spread higher, Mason could notice a few leaves still clinging to the lower branches, although darkened and discolored.

Mason's eyes raced up the tree, finding Selene's leaf once again. She was safe. The leaf was so far up. Looking back down, the spread of the rash was slowing, but still causing a cascade of dead leaves.

But Mason knew how this ended. He watched tortured as the evil red lines continued upwards. He could almost feel the amount of days as finally the rash, barely advancing now touched the blooming leaf to which Selene had pointed. It quickly withered and fell, painfully joining the sparse rain and landing on the top of the gigantic pile that had formed.

Mason fell to his knees, his grief renewed. Tears flowed from his eyes as he blinked.

Time seemed to speed up as the parts of the tree that held the awful rash died and decayed. The pile of leaves quickly composted back into the ground. Mason half expected mushrooms to take their place like he's seen in countless time-lapsed videos.

The gigantic tree looked meager now, only its far side completely unaffected. It held onto the ground with one, lean root and about one third the trunk of its former self. It was a sad remainder. Less than a quarter of its once grand showing of leaves still stood. Many of the green were now a dull yellow. The once intimidating tree now an awkward looking slice of its past.

Mason's tears flowed as the scene returned to its motionless vacuum.

The tears didn't stop as Mason awoke. He expected the dream to flutter away as most of his dreams did; he almost wanted it to. But, this one stuck, as if it was a memory.

As real as any other memory.

It was as real as the first time the wave of air that had blown across his mind. As real as the phone call with his wife of thirteen years that abruptly ended with her mid-thought and mid-breath. As real as his daughter's bedroom where he had held her as their house faded around them with the rest of the neighborhood. As real as the memory of Selene making fire out of nothing. Her devilish green eyes blinking a blaze into existence or creating rainbows that encircled our meager home. It was as real as the memory of Mason holding his daughter, wrapped in her unicorn bed spread as she faded away just like everything else had. He remembered her warmth, the sound of her breathing. The cold hard reality of it as gravity caught his hand and silence stole her breath from him.

Mason cried until the sky grew dark above him. He cried until his fire finally died. Mason cried until he had no tears left then laughed sadly as he realized he could create more.

It began to rain.