

The Long Road

By Aimee Hart

(A post-apocalyptic story about a man, a boy, and the dog they save from a cannibalistic cult).

The journey throughout the wilderness of was the only place the Rover didn't feel out of place. It spluttered and struggled to get through the mud at times but when the Traveller put his foot down, *really* put his foot down, it roared to life and carried on as though it had never faltered in the first place. It was an old thing that had been around before the World had died but it more than that – it would take them to the Sanctuary. Away from the gangs, away from everything that wanted to put them into the ground along with the world.

The Traveller moved his arm out of the driver's window and patted the rusted metal. "That's my good girl."

Beside him the boy rolled his eyes. "It's a car."

"Prick."

The boy looked at him sharply, his small hands looking even tinier against the heavy shotgun that rested on his lap. The Traveller remembered when he had been his age – he had collected marbles rather than guns, but this was a different world.

He looked out of the window at the thick, sequoia trees. Sometimes he could spot thin bushes nestled at the bottom of the thinner yews where dead roses and tulips turned downwards like a frown, as though they had forgotten or given up on the forest and the park it had been a part of. Even he had forgot where they were until they roved over the bridge, the signpost of Sequoia National Park there to greet them when they passed.

"Wish we had picked them," he muttered.

"Picked what?"

"The roses," the Traveller said to the boy as if it was obvious. He pointed at the dead daffodils littered into the mud around them as he drove the Rover. "You see them? Apparently they attract bobcats."

The boy snorted. "Maybe they'll do us a favour and rip us a new one."

"You need to lighten up kid," the Traveller sighed.

"I'm not a kid anymore. I don't want to look at the stupid flowers or the trees or... I don't *even* want to be here!"

"C'mon, it's not like we can go back Jake."

Before the boy could respond a loud, pained howl came from the back of the Rover. The Traveller jumped and swerved to miss one of the trees he could barely see in the dwindling light of the Sequoia forest while the boy yelled. It felt like centuries before the car righted itself, and when it did the Traveller grabbed the boy by the shoulder and shook him.

"What did I tell you? I told you the damn thing would lead them to us!"

"If you hadn't of grabbed him without the kit like I told you not he wouldn't be howling, prick!" The boy swore. "His hurt!"

"Hey! Watch your language!"

"Really? You've been swearing since we ditched that place!"

"Would you hush up?" The Traveller asked. "You're gonna fucking wake up every bobcat up at this rate! You want that?"

The boy glared. "I *want* to go back."

The Traveller rolled his eyes and his fingers on the wheel noticeably tightened. "Tough tits, Jake. We ain't going back." He looked up at the rear view mirror and watched as brown eyes refused to look away from his own. That image had been the one to make him grab Jake and the mutt and run, those big brown eyes and the thought that if there was one thing he could do right it would be this.

Turned out he wasn't any good at that either.

"Go see to him," he said with a push to the boy's shoulder. "Maybe if you're there he'll stop whining and let every fucking predator in this area know where we are."

"You're a jerk."

"Yeah, what of it?" The Traveller retorted, eyes still on the wilderness ahead. Soon he would be getting close to a turning that would lead away from the wilderness and up to the mountains that the Sequoia National Park was known for. There the Traveller knew he would find the large, rocky dome of Moro Rock just at the head of the Moro Creek and there...

There they would find the Sanctuary.

The boy had climbed into the back of the Rover by the time the Traveller looked back and saw him wound around the short-haired mutt, cooing and running his fingers through his thick fur.

He smiled and looked away.

"Finished sulking about going back, have ya?"

"Didn't sulk, man."

"Alright then, whatever you say."

"I just...I miss Rolf."

In reply the Traveller beeped his horn at a passing deer and watched as it bleated and fled further down into the forest. He almost felt the need to stop the car and watch as nature moved on but that would have been foolish in itself, in this new world the use of patience was a death sentence. There was only moving forward. No looking back. Forward.

He saw the turning just behind two trees pressed together like dominos and with ease he turned into it, ready to scale up the rocky mountain path towards the dome.

"You just gonna ignore me then?" The boy interrupted his thoughts with the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

"Ignore your blabbering about a boy who was alright with killing some mutt? Yeah, kid, I am."

"He was just thinking of supplies..."

"Yeah? You feel like that then..." The Traveller jerked his thumb over his shoulder, indicating towards the weapon sprawled on the boy's lap. "Why don't you just go finish the job, eh? You do that, I'll drop you off here and—"

"I don't want to kill him! I'm just saying!"

"Saying what? That a life that's having difficulty living ain't a life at all? Fuck you Jake, your mom would be ashamed of you."

The mutt, as if he had understood, let out a long whine that made the Traveller shake his head. It was getting too dark, if he paid attention to the mutt then it would be too late to find the dome, and without that dome there was no way of getting to the Sanctuary and without the Sanctuary...

He looked back into his side mirror and saw the blackness of the muddy wilderness they had left behind. Nobody was following them. Not yet.

Behind him the boy whispered "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, sure."

"I just want to go home."

"For god's sake!" The Traveller cursed, hitting at the wheel. "We ain't got one! We were fuckin' suckers to think we did!"

"If we just explain to them that we would go out and find some more bandages and meds! That we would take the blame if something went wrong...We could go back to them. It'd be alright!"

"The hell it would," The Traveller spat, "you think they would forgive us for running off with their meal *and* medication, in this world we live in? I've seen men die for less, Jake."

"Rolf wouldn't do that. He liked the dog! He didn't want to—"

"Rolf is a piece of fucking shit, just like his daddy."

"Yeah? How would you know?"

"I know, trust me." He insisted.

"That's what you always say," the boy retorted, "trust you. Look where it gets us."

The Traveller didn't reply. He only stared into the rear view mirror and watched as the white bandage wrapped around the mutt's leg started to dampen red and its tail, a thin little thing, started to wag when the mutt's eyes caught sight of him. It was skeletal at best, hardly a day's worth of food in him and yet there he was, happy and ignorant about the jaws of the beast he had just been pulled from.

He sighed.

"Make sure you change the mutt's bandages." He said, paused and then started again. "Might think about naming him."

"Naming what?" The boy asked.

"The mutt of course. You've already got a damn name, though if you want a new one I was thinking Oliver, you know, like the orphan—"

"Yeah, real funny asshole."

"Maybe we'll call him Hannibal."

The boy scoffed and shook his head. "That's real sick."

"What? Would be a funny story to tell to those at the Sanctuary."

"Yeah if we even get there. If it's even real—"

"Course it is!" The Traveller interrupted. He could already see the dome from here, sure the drive up the mountain was tricky but he could see the dome and that was enough. They were so close, he could taste it.

"I just want to go home, to Rolf."

"What is it with you and that fucking boy?"

"What is it with you and this fucking dog?"

The Traveller, against his better judgement, pulled to a stop. The Rover groaned at being forced to remain still on such a steep climb but was soon silenced, the tension between boy and man full enough to make the whole world around them fall silent.

The Traveller unbuckled his seatbelt and watched as the boy watched him with wide, nervous eyes. He had seen those eyes before every meal with those they now ran from, before every morsel that was put in front of him in the name of survival.

"We've done too many fucked up things in this new world." The Traveller said and watched as the boy stroked the metal of the gun in his lap. "Nowadays you see men and women cradling a gun more than a newborn. It just, it just...It ain't right Jake."

"But if we go back..."

"We'll just be shot, you know that really, don't you?"

The boy was silent as his hand moved from the shotgun's trigger to caress the bitten ear of the mutt beside him, now as silent as the oncoming night that chased after them.

The Traveller looked away and swallowed deeply. He could just make out the moon appearing over the sequoia trees to the east of the mountain, a field as dark as sin spread out below where little black specks could be seen if a person squinted. Black bears most likely.

"Do you think the Sanctuary will be home to us?" The boy said behind him. The Traveller turned fully to see that the boy now stood, the gun nowhere to be seen by his side. "I mean, do you really think it's legit?"

The Traveller didn't answer.

He started the Rover's engine, patted the metal of the door and sighed wistfully.

"Its gotta be, kid."

The boy's gangly legs pushed through from the back and soon enough he sat beside him, his small thumbs twiddled together. The gun still absent.

They remained silent for a long time and it was only when the Traveller saw the dome just in front of the Rover did he turn and glanced at the boy.

"What you thinking about?" He asked.

The boy looked down at his bloodied shoes.

"Rolf," he said like it was the simplest thing in the world.

