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## Beyond Tomorrow's Sun

By

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I spent a lot of time on the part of the ancient road close to Greenfield. I would ride for hours, weaving between the broken places, jumping over the smaller gaps, burning daylight in the hope my uncle would be out of the house or passed out cold by the time I got home. I would peddle myself to exhaustion, then coast on the batteries for the long ride home, a ride I had no intention of ever taking again.

I made my escape from the ruins through the dry rocky hills and didn't look back until I saw the broken old road in the distance. When I was certain no one was following, I rode down to the plain, across a cracked and blistered lakebed, and started my journey east. I didn't know where the road would take me, other than east. I knew it led away from home, away from my uncle, and

away from the two men who had killed Mrs. Carter and tried to kill me. Everything bad was behind, and what lay ahead, whatever it was, had to be better.

My vision was blurry, and I tasted salt on my lips, but I pushed on. I couldn't stop myself from crying. I rode as far as I had ever ridden before, driven forward by my anger. When my legs began to burn and cramp, and my back started to ache, I let the batteries take over for a while. I coasted on the bike's energy and felt the hot wind for the first time, gradually coming back to my senses after losing myself in pain and fear. When the batteries died, I peddled again, keeping up a punishing pace, my exertion rebuilding the charge in the lithium-polymer bricks inside the bike's frame. I knew the longer I could peddle, the longer I could coast. I was exhausted but I kept going, leaning into the effort of guiding the bike across the uneven remnants of pavement.

Dust and rocks gave way to low brush and the occasional gnarled tree. When I spotted a stand of small trees I could use as a hideaway for my camp, with the sun casting shadows along the mountains in the distance behind me, I decided it was time to stop for the night. I checked my GPS and was surprised to find I'd traveled over eighty kilometers. I'd never traveled so far from town. Despite my circumstances, I was relieved by the realization no one would have any idea where I was.

I'd slept outdoors before, and I'd left home more than once. This time things were different. This time I was prepared for a long journey, with food and proper equipment. I was never going back. I was certain Mrs. Carter was dead, as I would have been if I hadn't gotten away. I couldn't understand her sacrifice. She made a choice and paid for it with her life. I couldn't help wonder if it was for me or for the money she stood to make. Either way, I made a promise to myself I would never forget what she did for me, whether she meant to or not.

I set up my insta-tent, the spring-loaded set of hoops and rods popping into shape at the push of a button, then gathered up dried scrub and dead wood for a fire. I dropped a thermtab into the pile and it took light, pushing away the shadows growing around me. I sat down by the fire and all the anguish of the day and all the days before it rolled at me like a giant wave. I started to cry again, until the wave crested, then crashed down on me. I don't know how long I sat there, oblivious to everything around me, reliving my last fight with my uncle, hearing Mrs. Carter scream, seeing the look on Figgins' face; all of it took me out of myself for a time. When it finally passed, I knew I needed to take stock of my situation.

I wasn't worried about animals. The big carnivores had been extinct since before I was born. The remaining scavengers would keep their distance, there were easier meals to be found. But people were a concern, for obvious reasons. I set up my perimeter alarm, then returned to the fire to eat.

I boiled water and poured it into a foil pouch of freeze-dried pseudo-beef stew and started eating, enveloped by the warmth of my fire. I could get used to living on the road, I thought, but when I was old enough to join the military, I would do it. Space Force would punch my ticket off Earth and I'd never have to see my drunken fool of an uncle again. If anyone did try to kill me again, by then it would be a fair fight.

I used to enjoy seeing my Uncle Geo during the holidays, or when he would stop by to visit with my mother, his sister. He also dropped by, if my dad was gone, when he needed money. My mother was an easy mark. Then my parents died, and Geo became my guardian. Things weren't too bad the first few months, better than an orphanage. Losing his job changed my uncle. He

never recovered from the shame of it, or maybe he'd always been looking for an excuse to drink his life away.

I knew the road lead east. I hoped it ran all the way to the ocean. I imagined swimming in clear cold water, wave after wave of rolling surf. I remembered a seaside harbor, the coming and going of ships, people on vacation or earning their living from the sea. I imagined the sounds and the smells and wanted to experience it again, to make new memories.

I woke up to the soft bleeping sound of my perimeter alarm. I had no idea how long I'd been asleep. It must have been a couple of hours because the fire had burned down to a glowing pile of embers. I tossed a handful of sticks onto the coals, then ducked behind my tent, crouching in the darkness. I retrieved my knife from its hiding place and slipped it from its sheath. The fresh wood took flame, expanding the circle of light. I couldn't turn the alarm off without exposing myself to the light, so it continued bleating softly overhead. I turned my head and listened intently, seeking the source of the noise, waiting for whoever was out there to show themselves.

I didn't have to wait long.

A pair of green eyes, low to the ground, peered out from the shadows on the other side of the fire. The eyes moved closer, and a dog stepped into the light. It was big, shoulders as high as my hip, with a deep chest and a short brindle coat stretched tight over long curved ribs, outlined by the firelight. It was plain to see it hadn't been on a steady diet. It moved tentatively, its legs like coiled springs, ready at a moment's notice to bolt back into the shadows. It sniffed the air, searching out what was left of my meal. It moved with an impressive stealth for such a large animal, closing in on its prize.

I could see a collar around its neck. I'd always wanted a dog, but pets were never a possibility in my uncle's house. I would never subject a dog to that life. I stepped out of the shadows to greet it, but in a flash the dog spun around and disappeared back into the night.

The dog was afraid of me, but I wasn't afraid of the dog. Its fear of me made me sad, but I could relate to how it felt. I picked up the remainder of my dinner and tossed it into the darkness in the direction it had run. I reset the alarm and when I didn't hear anything else for several minutes, I turned in for the night.

I woke up at dawn and got underway with the rising sun warming my face. The landscape continued to change as I rode. Low scrub and bent broken trees began to give way to healthier vegetation. Late on the second day I paused to check my GPS against my surroundings. I had come to a place where I once again had long unobstructed views to the north and south. A line of low hills far to the north I originally thought ran parallel to the road was growing closer. When I stopped, the low buzz from the bike's motor stopped too. While I tried to work out where the hills and the road might merge, a noise coming from somewhere off the road caught my attention. I laid my bike down and went to investigate. I pushed through low brambles laced with thorns and was thinking of backtracking and trying a different approach when I saw the source of the sound through the brush. I couldn't believe my luck. Before me, sparkling in the sun, was the first natural flowing stream I'd seen since arriving in Greenfield. The stream ran clear and cool. I filled my water bags and added sanitizer tabs. "I hope the dog finds this, too," I thought.

Each night, I left food out for the dog beyond the range of the proximity alarm. Each morning, I checked and found the food had been eaten, but after four nights with no other sign of the dog I decided to leave the food close to the fire. If it wasn't the dog eating the food, I didn't

want to keep wasting it on whatever else was out there. I set the alarm as usual and crawled into my tent. It seemed like only seconds passed before the alarm tripped. But the early dawn sky told me I'd slept soundly through the night for the first time. The weather was turning cooler, a light dew had settled on the earth, adding a hush to the already quiet world.

I peeked out from under the tent's flap and saw the dog eating. I moved in slow motion, gradually pulling the flap aside so the dog could see me. The dog stopped eating, but it didn't run away. Instead, it stared at me for a moment then went back to eating. When it finished, it curled up near the ashes of the fire. I climbed out of the tent and the dog stayed put, but it watched my every move.

I stretched and yawned, then reached back inside the tent for my canteen. The dog's head rose and it watched me drink, licking its lips to let me know it was thirsty. I filled a collapsible bowl with water, placed it on the ground a short distance from the dog, then walked back to the tent. The dog went to the bowl and lapped up the water, licking away long after the final drop was gone. I could see a name woven into the dog's collar.

"Hello Katie. Think you and me can be friends?"

At the sound of her name, the dog's ears pointed up like arrows and her tail began to wag, slowly at first, then with an increasing rhythm. Her light brown brows formed little arches, and she cocked her head to one side, listening. "Katie, Katie, Katie," I said, which sent the dog into a frenzy of jumping, spinning and barking. The ice was broken. She ran toward me, fell to the ground at my feet, and rolled onto her back.

I knelt down and touched her chest, rubbing her brindle coat, feeling the dust and grime of the world embedded in her fur. I felt her heart pounding, keeping time with her panting, her tongue hanging out to one side. She stretched her head out so I could scratch her long neck.

“All right Katie,” I said, smiling, “looks like it’s you and me against the world.”

The next morning, Katie decided to travel with me. She couldn’t travel as fast as I could ride, and her slower pace allowed my sense of urgency to fade. Aside from keeping me company, she found lots of ways to be useful. Her nose and ears were more sensitive than the perimeter alarm, and they didn’t need to be switched on. She was always on alert, even when she slept.

For our first few days together, she slept outside between the tent and the fire. Then it rained one night, something I hadn’t experienced since before my parents died. Rain was rare in the reclaimed zone. Some people measured their lives against its falling. I used to imagine what it would be like. When the sky opened up, I got out of the tent, undressed, and enjoyed the downpour. I loved the feeling of the cold drops pelting my face, the water flowing across my chest and back. I stretched out my arms and let the water wash the collected filth away from my body, rivers of grime washing back down to the earth. I spun around in the rain, a song in my head. I couldn’t remember all the words, but the beat was there. Something about the rain and the dirt and the flashes of lighting in the distance, all of it came together in a single feeling. For the first time in my life, I felt free. I stopped moving and stood in the rain with my eyes closed, smiling up at the downpour.

I stayed there for a several minutes while Katie stared at me with her ears tucked down and eyes narrowed. She looked miserable. I grabbed a tube of soap and managed to get her to be still long enough to give her a decent bath.

Afterwards, we mutually decided it was okay to sleep in the tent together. I was happy to have her with me, comforted by her closeness. I didn't mind it when she snored, her deep chest rumbling against me. A dog curled up next to you was the best heater you could get on a cold night. I woke up laughing when she got too warm and stretched out, pushing her legs against me, shoving me to the side of the tent.

The further we traveled, the closer the hills to the north came to the road, and the more alive the land became. Tall trees lined the road for long stretches, marching off into the distance. Occasionally Katie would disappear for the day and return when I made camp, bringing with her a rabbit or other animal she'd manage to catch. Her hunting helped us extend our food supply, but it wouldn't be enough to keep us both going for the long haul.

There were crumbling ruins at irregular intervals along the road, usually at points where other roads intersected the road we were following. I stayed away from the buildings, assuming they'd been picked over years earlier, or were inhabited by who-knew-what. They weren't worth the risk, until our food supply ran low enough to worry me.

One morning, we came to a place where the road passed over another running north-south. The overpass was broken apart, there wasn't enough of it left for us to cross. I scanned the area below the embankment and saw a structure less than a kilometer up the northbound road. A one-story building, with remnants of a large sign clinging to the side. Through my binoculars I could see the front of the building was all windows, with some of the glass still in place, except for the doors, which were missing. I could see booths and tables inside, a restaurant.

"We gotta check this one out Katie, there might be something left in there, you never know."

Katie let out a low grumble, not quite a growl.

“Yeah, I know, rule number one, stick to the road. But if we gotta leave it anyway, might as well do some scavenging. Come on, let’s go have a look.”

We backtracked to a point where we could make our way down, then headed to the building. I set my bike against a rusty metal column out front. I didn’t lock it up, in case we needed to make a fast exit.

“Stay here Katie, you gotta keep watch.”

Katie sat down and let out a short whine.

“Yes,” I said, “it’s a bad idea, but we’re gettin’ low on food and I don’t plan for us to starve. Stay here.”

I kept my pack on and drew my knife, then entered through the front of the building. Everything inside was covered in a layer of dust. I looked over the floor for any signs of recent disturbance. All I saw was a flat expanse of grime with bits of broken glass and a few shards of ceramic scattered around. There was a long counter fronted by a row of stools, fixed in place by bolts into the floor. Out of habit I calculated how much the metal posts would be worth at the reclamation center, then pushed the thought from my mind. That was the past, I had to stay in the present. I stepped further into the building and could see empty space behind the counter. The sinks, grill tops, and other implements of a restaurant were gone. Someone had picked the place over but left a lot of material behind. It didn’t make sense but I was encouraged by what I saw. If valuable recyclables remained, some food or other useful items might remain as well. There was a set of doors behind the counter, each with a small window. I approached the doors, trying not to make any noise, and looked through one of the windows.

What I saw inside made my heart race. Along the back wall, two sets of shelves bordered two more doors held shut by a handle and lock mechanism I'd never seen before. One of the shelves was empty, and there was a broken-out window in the top of the wall next to it. The other shelf was loaded with canned goods. I couldn't read the labels from my position, but if half the cans contained edible food, we would eat well for several days, longer if we stretched it. I knelt down and looked around the dining room, then out at Katie still seated next to the bike. She was focused on me like a laser. I peeked through the window again. "It's now or never," I said, and eased the door open. I winced when it made a soft creaking sound as the hinges rubbed against the dust. The hinges were spring-loaded, and when I stepped inside, I had to hold the door to keep it from swinging back on its own. I guided it back to the closed position, again wincing at the creaking sound it made.

When it was closed, I looked around for any signs of recent disturbance or anything suspicious. It was like the rest of the place, covered in undisturbed dust. I went to the shelf and picked up a can labeled "Peaches." I slipped off my pack and placed the can inside and started reading the other labels. I couldn't believe my luck, everything from beans, to corn, even cans of real meat stew. I couldn't take it all, so I selected the best of what was there and hoped it was still good.

I was loading cans into my bag, thinking of the meal we would have later, when Katie started barking. It wasn't her usual sound. I could tell it was an alarm. I slung my pack onto my back and heard a loud thud as one of the doors impacted the wall. I spun around, thrusting my knife out toward the person who had entered the kitchen behind me.

The man was thin, his clothes not more than rags, his face unshaven with a straggling beard, his leering grin revealed dark gaps between his crusty teeth. I could smell the stench of him from across the room. I would have known he was coming if the door had been open.

“Stay away from me!” I shouted, “Katie!”

“Boy, your dog ain’t gonna be no help to you. Matter fact, she gonna be some fine eatin’ once you and me settle our differences.”

“I got no fight with you mister, you get outta my way and me an her will move along, no harm done.”

“Oh, but you’s trespassin’ here boy, you done snuck up into my place and tried to steal from me, ain’t it a fact?”

“This ain’t your place, that much I know. You come up on it like me. Makes it mine by right, but I’m leavin’, and you’re not gonna stop me. You can have the rest, but you hurt my dog and you and me, we got us a fight.”

“Look at you, little boy, all tough with your knife, all alone out here in the wastes. You even know where you are, boy?”

The man began moving forward and to one side. I took a step back then realized his intent, to drive me further into the room. I remembered what I’d read once, about being ambushed. The best hope for survival was to attack the ambush, fight your way through it. I stopped backing up, then heard Katie’s bark change. Her deep throated growls and barking became high-pitched, interspersed with yelps and whines. That was enough for me. I glanced over my shoulder at the empty shelf and up at the open window, pretending I wanted to climb my way out.

When the man lunged forward, thinking I was distracted, I dropped to one knee, gripped the knife with both hands, and thrust forward and up, closing my eyes when I felt the knife strike home. The man screamed and fell back, tugging at the knife, threatening to dislodge it from my grip. I opened my eyes and leaned forward, driving the knife deeper into his thigh, and turned the blade. Blood pulsed out over my hands in hot jets. He grabbed at my hands, trying to pull the knife away. I heard Katie yelp again, and my adrenalin surged. I pushed up from the floor, then pulled back on the knife, twisting it on the way out. The man screamed in agony again and fell to the floor, blood pouring out across the dusty tile. He tried to shout, "Kill the dog, kill the dog," but his strength was already leaving him. I looked at the blood-drenched knife and my soaked hands, then looked in the man's eyes and said, "It didn't have to be this way."

I ran from the room, through the dining area and back toward Katie and my bike. What I saw brought me up short. A girl, not much older than me, clothed in filthy rags, like the man who had attacked me. She had a rope wrapped around Katie's neck and the pole. She was pulling it hard, pinning Katie against the bike. Katie struggled, but she couldn't break free. She panted and yelped, fighting against the rope. I held the knife out toward the girl, blood dripping from the blade and my hand, and shouted, "Let her go!"

The girl took a long look at the knife but didn't let up on the tension.

"Is he dead," she asked, "did you kill him?"

"He's as good as dead. He ain't got much time left. You wanna say your goodbyes, now's your chance."

"Will it hurt me?"

"No, if you let her go, neither of us will."

The girl looked at Katie, then at the knife, then back at Katie. "I'm sorry," she said, then dropped the rope and ran away. Not into the building, but north, toward the hills, never looking back.

I jammed the knife into the sheath strapped to my calf and unwrapped the rope from the pole. I slipped the loop from Katie's neck. She licked my face as I checked her for injuries. She had abrasions around her neck, but they weren't deep. I could treat them later, after we put some distance between us and the dying man. I mounted the e-bike, and Katie ran back the way we'd come, faster than I'd seen her run before. I called out to her, "No Katie, this way!" and pointed east, toward the opposite side of the damaged overpass, "Let's go!"

I opened the accelerator and Katie turned to run where I pointed. We were back on the road within minutes. When I noticed Katie was tiring, I stopped and called her to me. I took out the first aid kit and a water bag, washed my hands, then started to treat her wounds. My hands were shaking, and I struggled to make them stop. My skin was stained a dark red and black from the blood, some dried and crusted under my fingernails. I was about to cry but I pushed back against my emotions until the fear turned to anger. "Never again, Katie, never again. We stick to the road and we stick together, you and me against the world."

From then on, we stuck to the easterly course and stayed on the road. The cans of food I'd manage to collect wouldn't last forever. I had to hope we would find something akin to civilization before we starved.

### About the Author

Ronald McGuire is a multi-genre writer, known for his work as a novelist, essayist, scriptwriter, and journalist. His work has appeared in various outlets including Flash Fiction Magazine, Drunk Monkeys, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Winning Writers, and CNN.com. McGuire's work has earned recognition in several writing competitions, including being a finalist in the ScreenCraft Cinematic Short Story Competition, The Launch Pad Prose Competition, the Writer's Digest Short-Short Story Competition, and the Tom Howard/John H. Reid Fiction & Essay Contest. You can find out more about Ronald and his writing at [ronaldmcguire.com](http://ronaldmcguire.com), or visit [beachbookpress.com](http://beachbookpress.com).

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