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Scorched Earth:
Stories from the
Post Apocalypse (sample)

By

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4500 Words

II: Slave Girl

1. The Trader

All my life I wanted to travel. There was a world out there. It was a dead world, but pockets of life still survived. I wanted to see the dead cities. I wanted to see the marvels of the past. There was an urge in me. My mother said all young boys get it, the need to explore, to find their own way in the world. Like so many others before me, I was stuck.

I was the son of a trader. As such, I saw the leavings of the outside world. Bit of tech, food or sometimes even guns, all of these wonderful things passed through my father's hands, none to keep, only to pass on to others in need.

We lived in our shop. We were in a small community, in a dusty corner of the world. A river bed lined the town. I guess the original builders moved here because of the water. Now it had dried up. The machines used to capture the water and store it were dry. The town's water reserves were low. Hell, everyone's water reserves were low. If you didn't want to dig a well, a feat that few were able to accomplish with broken equipment, you had to travel to the frozen water for a resupply. A mountain range to the east would become snowcapped in the winter, a winter that only blew cold air. By summer, the white capped mountains were barren again. The riverbed

sometimes had a little water, but it never filled the banks. I guess it all dried up in the arid desert heat.

It would be nice to see the snow. I know what cold is, but know nothing of frozen. Water so cold it became hard. I wonder if it was like rocks, maybe wet pebbles that you could chew and not be thirsty. I asked the water traders this once and they laughed. They said it was more like cotton or heavy clouds. I couldn't understand, they told me. You had to see it to believe it. They used shovels, and scooped the snow into large plastic barrels. They said the snow melted and became water as they came down the mountains, their horses or oxen heavy with the liquid.

I never want to be a rich man. The water traders certainly had it well off. They never went cold or hungry. They could afford un-patched clothes and plenty of food. Everyone needed water. They said it came with a price though: long trips, lonely trips. A line of men and women would ride or walk long dust buried roads, up the sides of mountains, their packs laden with food for their animals. The animals, they said, were almost more important than the water. If one got sick or couldn't haul its load, it would become trade food for the next stop. Food traded for another animal, a younger, stronger animal.

A large caravan moved through the town today. They didn't

stop. They had horses pulling carts of different shapes and sizes. A few old cars, hacked for their scrap metal and rebuilt with wood or plastics, none of them working. A working car was a marvel indeed. Being a trader's son was informative. There were still working cars in the world, but they couldn't ride out into the country, the wild lands. They were beasts of the city. They needed roads to function. Out here, they were wheels. Wheels with homes or carts built upon them, pulled by the country beasts. We received word from a trader on horseback that another caravan was a day away. This trader had only canned goods.

He jumped from his horse at the front of our shop and tied the tired animal there. We had a meager hitching post, scrap metal mostly. A dry trough was at the base. A single weed grew from it. He came into our place with a slam of the door. We were behind a mesh screen. Old fence and scrap bolted and hammered together to form a protective screen, we couldn't be too careful. It wouldn't save us from gunshot, but most bandits out here couldn't afford guns anyway. There was a wooden shelf waist high that had a small hole in the screen above it. This was a common setup. You placed your wares on the shelf. A price was haggled, and the shopkeeper got his wares through the hole. And funny business and you wouldn't get your trade back. You had to trust the shopkeeper. That was

a hard thing to do in this world.

"I have food. You tradin' food?"

"Canned? Fresh?"

"Ah, well, it's uh, canned." The trader pulled a silver tarnished can from his bag. My father nodded and gestured to the meager shelf. The trader started talking. Information trade was useful to bargain with. The new caravan was said to be 5 times the size of the one that passed by today. Guns. They were said to have guns.

"Yeah mate, there were carts and such, but there were guns too. 5 people at least. They had some pistols and a shotgun. I even saw one guy with a rifle." The trader spoke as he emptied his horses pack. None of the cans had labels. Not worth much. Worth much more if the labels were still intact.

"Yeah? How many men? Were there women too? How many carts. Did they have a working car? Any tech?" I was eager for more information.

"Son, leave the man alone, let him trade in peace. That's 10 shiners. You have anything papered?" My dad was a gruff man, always business. I suppose that's the way it had to be to survive here.

"No, nothing papered. What's this worth?"

"You want water or coin?"

"How much water is this worth?"

"A canteen or so."

"Aw shit. Gimme the coin." The trader gave my dad a sour face, and took his bag back to his horse. I reached through the hole and took the cans to our side of the screen and placed them in a bin. The trader came back with a canteen in his hands, and drank a little from it. My father went into the back room and reappeared with four coins in his hand. He dropped them through the hole on the shelf.

"What? Four coins? That's it? Come on mate, that loads gotta be worth at least five, maybe six."

"No labels. That makes them worth less. You know that. Where'd you get them from? Maybe if I knew that they'd be worth more." My father squinted at the trader through the screen.

"Nowhere. I just, um, inherited them." The trader grabbed the coins and turned to leave.

"Wait!" I said. "What about the caravan? At least tell us how many men. Are there women too?"

"Well, aren't you full of questions? Questions are free; answers are going to cost you. The guns were only fair, but the rest of that is privileged." The trader tipped his hat to me, jingled the coins in his palm, and left.

I grabbed my own bag of coins and left the shop. I pulled out two and caught up to the trader. "Hey, how many? Where are

they headed?" The trader turned back to me and looked at the coins in my hand.

"That real money?"

"Of course it is."

"Why do you want to know so bad?" The trader started untying his horse. He put the canteen back in a saddlebag, swung his foot into the stirrup and rose swiftly onto the back of the animal.

"I just do. Does it look like they need men?" I stretched my fist up to him, the coins clinked softly together.

The trader reached down for the coin. I pulled my hand away. "Tell me first. Then the coin is yours."

The trader straightened up in the saddle. "Three coins and I tell you everything."

"Two coins and you tell me the number of men and women, and if it looks like they're collecting more," I stood my ground. In another day I'd know for sure regardless, and this man knew it.

He sighed. "I dunno kid, twenty or twenty-five men and women. More men than women. A few kids. Five hired guns. I don't know where they were going. Good bet they're headed to the Farms. Doesn't look like they're collecting." The man leaned over again for the coin. I handed it over.

"Thanks." I turned back to the store.

"It's not worth it kid. I know that for sure. You have a good thing here. A roof over your head, a nice business. Hell, you even get to cheat honest people like me outta goods. Just stay put and live out the rest of your god-forsaken life."

"There's something better out there," I yelled back to him, "I just gotta find it."

2. Caravan

Two days later, the caravan arrived. It was a spectacular thing. I climbed onto the shop roof to see it. Dust climbed the sky in its wake. The trader had been right. There were about thirty or forty people. Some were riding horses, but most were on carts. There were no cars, no running cars. Some were being pulled by oxen. There was a large box-like car that had doors like a house. It was being pulled by six oxen itself. This was the cart the guns were guarding.

The caravan passed through town, but stopped on the outskirts and set up camp. People came in to trade all day. There were papered cans, some water. There was even a man who had building tools, hammers and nails. They all wanted coin. My father almost ran out. He had to borrow some from my own stash. That bothered me, but not enough to say much about it. I was quietly saving up to leave, and I'm sure he knew it.

Anything to make me stay a little longer, I suppose.

Night was falling when she came in. I had been on the roof looking in amazement at the electric lights on the outskirts of town. She came to the front of the shop with a large pack on her back. I came down and was inside next to my father when she had already emptied the pack.

"There are a lot of mechanical things here, darling." My father said. Her face fell. Tech this far out wasn't worth much. You had to haul it back to the cities to fetch a fair price.

"Yeah, I know," she said "but it's good stuff. Car parts, yeah? I'm not sure what they all do, but this one," she picked up a cylindrical part that had eight wires coming off of the top of it. I could see a small gear at the base. It looked in good enough condition, I supposed. "This one is a, um, ah, distributional." She said hopefully. "My brother, he's a mechanic in the city. This is a hard part to find, he told me. It's worth maybe fifty, maybe sixty coins," she said, hope and tears in her eyes.

"Listen darlin', your friends took all my-"

"They're not my friends." The tears in her eyes changed from sad to vicious in an instant. "They tricked me, they stole from me, they, they-" her voice trailed off, and she wiped her nose on the arm of her shirt. "How much? How much

can you give me?"

"Sweetheart, look: I don't have any coin left. I've traded it all away. I have supplies. I can trade you for supplies, but I don't think I can give you fifty coins worth, maybe thirty or thirty-five." My father looked like this made him sad, but I knew different. Once a month, there was a trader named Sal, who came from the city. He was always looking for tech parts. I'm pretty sure we'd be able to get seventy-five or eighty coin out of him.

"Dad, give it to her. I can cover it. Supplies and coin, I have twenty-five left." I took out my coin purse and started counting coins out.

"Hold on a minute son," he glanced at the girl, who was silent "that's your money, and you don't need to be throwing it away like this. What do you think you'll get in return? Have I taught you nothing? Put your money away. And you, girl, what do you want for this junk? Huh? I've got no coin; I can give you cans of food, papered and shiny. I have some water, but it's expensive, clothes, leathers. What do you want?"

I stopped counting and looked at her. Her eyes were fixed on my hands, on the coin. My father was not a patient man. He was a business man. Time and money, those old bitches.

"I guess I'll just take this elsewhere." She picked up her things, and started shoving them back in her bag. I

watched her face twist while she did it. She was crying again.

"Hey come on. Just trade, will you? The farther north you go, the less likely you'll be able to sell that stuff. The closest city is south. There isn't one north that I know of--"

"Enough son, if she doesn't want to trade, that's her business." He walked out of the trade room and into the back. I kept watching the girl. Behind her tears she was very pretty.

"Do you want to talk or, I dunno, trade something. You should at least trade something." I pleaded with her. She looked up.

"I don't have anything else. You saw the junk. I know it's junk. The distribu-whatever is the only thing worth coin."

"Yeah, but, let me see that other stuff. Maybe you can afford some canned food, or clothes. We have some good gloves that just came in, some jeans?"

"No, I need coin. I need coin to- never mind. I just need it okay? I need it, and you can't give it to me, so, that's it." She turned and walked out of the shop. I watched her go. I went into the backroom, which served as part of our living space. It's where I slept. My mother was sewing something out of some tanned rabbit furs. My father was bent over an old book ledger. A treasure of his that he kept numbers in.

"Why didn't you let me help?" I asked him. He looked up at me, smiled, and looked back down.

"Not a good business decision. You'll understand one day son. She was trouble. It doesn't matter what she was selling, I don't think I would have bought it." He looked at my mother. She just kept sewing.

"What does that mean? What-"

"She was a slave son. A slave. She was trying to barter for her freedom. Slavery isn't something spoken about, you know that. She was working off a debt. She probably stole that distributor, and she was trying to get coin. The hardest form of money we have. No doubt her 'employers' will only accept coin as payment. A young girl like that, she's worth a lot." My father closed his book and bent down to the floor. He peeled back the ancient rug to a safe that had been buried in the ground. He opened it and put the book inside.

"A slave? Like, to buy? Why don't we buy her then, and let her go, I'm sure she has family somewhere."

"A girl like that is trouble, son. Trouble. Her employers don't want her to be free. No doubt she's making them too much money." He grinned, but stopped when my mother gave him a sharp look.

"What do you mean?" I think I understood, but the thought was monstrous.

"Heaven help you son, don't you get it? Sex. She fucks for money!" My mother got up and left the room. I watched her go.

"What?" My voice was soft and innocent. I cleared my throat.

"Yeah, that's right. You pay her coin, she does whatever you want. It's called whoring, boy, and in the big cities, it's a ludicrous business. She's worth, I dunno, maybe ten or fifteen coin a night. That means to buy her freedom, she either needs to supply that in return or be unable to work. Scarred up face or broken leg. Her employer keeps her safe, keeps her fed and in return, she sells her body."

"Why would anyone do that?"

"She's trouble kid. Stay away."

3. Stupid Questions

The next morning I walked to the caravan, I wanted to see if what my father told me was true. Were there really women who would sell their bodies like that? Was I just naïve to think the world could be an interesting and wondrous place?

By the time I made it to the campsite, the electric lights were off and being packed away. Large men were rolling up thick wires, and boxes of batteries were being loaded in a

cart. The morning fires were still going, but there was no food in sight.

A man with a pistol strapped to his thigh walked up to me. "What are you lookin' for kid? We don't do business until nightfall."

"What kind of business?" I asked, trying to look innocent.

"What kind- how old are you kid?" The gunman put his hand on the butt of his pistol. "Answer me."

"Old enough," I told him. I didn't see the slap until I was on the ground.

"Listen to me you little shit. You come back at nightfall and you'll see what we do. You bring some coin and you can even join in on the fun. Until then, get your scrawny ass back to your shithole town. We don't need you poking your nose where it don't belong."

I didn't tell my father what happened. I was embarrassed, and I didn't know what to think. The girl was seemed nice, she needed help and nobody was doing anything but using her.

That day was rough. We didn't have any coin left, and people were still coming in from the caravan. We traded what we could, but had to turn away some good wares because all they wanted was coin. Some people left angry, which was never

good. We were secure. The trading house, our house, was sturdy, reinforced with bits of scrap metal and heavy wood. The roof was all metal, a point of pride with my father. Nobody could easily set fire to the building, which was good. It was better to let a building burn then waste the water putting it out. A trader told me a tale once. He was the one that came once a month looking for car tech. He told me about city blocks, places where buildings were so numerous that the sides touched, and went as far you could see. The roads were dirt of course, but if you had a strong shovel and too much time on your hands, you could dig down half a foot and find man made rock, asphalt. The roads that were meant to last forever.

There was a fire on one of these blocks. The buildings were tall, too tall to be fully shielded. The first few floors were protected by scrap metals, but anything over the 3rd floor was unsafe. People who lived up there were desperate. Someone's cooking fire got out of hand. The trader told me the whole city block, which was larger than our small town, burned for 3 days. The dirt roads were enough to keep it contained to a single city block, but the ash and debris covered another 3 blocks. Some people made it out alive, some people didn't.

Fire was dangerous, a well placed torch could bring a

city to its knees. Businesses kept themselves protected, and we were no different. It took many years for my father and his father to build this shop. Pieces of scrap metal hammered together, large rivets for the heaviest pieces.

We had been attacked before. Someone had traded for unpapered cans and wasn't happy with the contents, he wanted his money back. When we refused, he tried to torch the building. We just closed the door, went on the roof and drew our arrows and spears on him. We couldn't afford a gun, though secretly I thought my father wanted one above all else. A gun was just another status symbol in a world that only cared about survival. Impressive, sure, but a sharp stick was just as deadly in the right hands. That particular disgruntled customer never came back.

Night fall came quicker than I wanted it to. I was eager to see what the caravan had to offer, but I was also a little afraid. Maybe my father was right, and all I'd see was another desperate act for survival.

4. Inside the Walls

I packed a small bag for the night. Traveling from home wasn't something I did often, but when I did, I always had to be prepared for the worst. A wind storm could whip down our

valley with little to no notice, and you didn't want to be caught in them. I still have a scar across my back from one such occasion. I was out on the outskirts of our little town. There was some brush in a ditch next to the road into town from the south. As a child, when I wasn't working, I'd go there to hunt the lizards. They could sometimes be traded as pets, or, for the desperate, as scraps of food. A storm snuck up on me and I tried to hunker down in the bushes with the lizards. The wind and dust howled for nearly an hour, a dark swarm of dirt and scrap. A tree branch flew through the wind and struck my back. I didn't know how bad it was until the wind finally died down and I got home, hours later. My whole body ached, and I was covered from head to toe in dust, dirt and brush. My parents used a little bit of our water reserve to clean the wound. The branch had struck me and the wind drew it across my back, scraping and cutting my flesh. My mother later told me that I could have died from an infection. I'm not sure what that means, and I'm not sure she entirely knows either, but I do know I was lucky. The scars on my back are a little point of pride, a badge of survival.

I arrived at the caravan well after nightfall. There was a different guard at the entrance and he did nothing but point at a sign made out of a rusted sheet of tin hammered onto a wood pole. It looked like a menu.

ENTER - 5C

BOOZE - 10C / GLASS

SMOKE - 15C / ROLL

GIRL - 20C / 20 MIN.

I paid my admission, 5 coin, and wandered around. There were people everywhere. I could hear the sounds of laughter coming from many of the tents. I recognized people from town, but there were a lot of new faces. There were tents with large barrels full of beer, or ale or some other sour smelling liquid, these were the loudest tents. I heard men shout and cheer, and I heard the high pitched squeals of women's laughter. I looked for the girl from earlier, but found only BBQs with foul smelling meats, a man selling sharpened shards of rusted metal as weapons, and drunk people. Many, many drunk people.

I was propositioned that night. Girls came up to me, sweet looks on their faces and desperation in their eyes. Embarrassed, I could only smile at them and walk away. Some came after, most just moved on. A part of me just wanted to give them my clothes, something to ward against the chill night air. The little they were wearing didn't give much warmth, but maybe, that was the point.

I had given up my search when I heard an urgent voice from behind a tent.

"Hey you, boy! The trader's son! Come here!" It was her, the girl I was looking for. She had changed clothes since I last saw her. I thought she'd be dressed like the other women, but she wore grease stained overalls. Her hair, which had been combed and straight earlier was in a nasty ball on the top of her head, a nest held in place by a smoothed piece of wood.

She was crouched, half hiding behind an empty barrel. Her eyes were wide and shifted from me to the crowd behind me. She held a tattered piece of paper in her hand.

"Here, take this. Follow its instructions." She handed me the rumpled paper. I started to unfold it when she slapped me on the shoulder. "Listen to me, boy! Don't read it here. Go to the High Class tent. Ask for Troy. The handlers will try to throw you out, just tell them you need to talk to Troy. Don't mention me. I'll see you later." She took another look behind me and dashed behind the tents. I rounded the corner and tried to see where she was going, but lost her in the trash heaps, electric generators and what appeared to be a sexual transaction. I turned and hurried back to the main strip of tents and looked for the one she directed me to. I saw a group men and women stumbling out of a tent, no, being thrown out of a tent. There was a banner over the entrance that said "HIGH

CLASS BOOZE, 20C AND UP".

That must be it, I thought, and started towards the tent through the crowd. I looked down at the crumpled paper in my hand, what am I doing? I thought to myself she's nothing but trouble, dad nailed it. I can't get involved in this. It's not, I just can't, I- I couldn't finish the thought. I saw her again. She was moving through the crowd, with a small group of people. They all had stained overall on. What's she up to? Why did she ask me to do, well, whatever it is I'm doing? I kept walking towards the High Class tent, but unwrinkled the paper and read:

"See TROY. Tell him the mechanics are in. Tell him the shepherd has the cargo. Destroy this note. Burn it.
--Ferrovia"

I stopped. What is this about? I thought, Shepherds? Cargo? It had to be code, but for what? Was something stolen? That part she was trying to sell! It must be stolen! I reasoned to myself, I can't get involved with this. This is the type of thing that gets people killed! I looked up into the eyes of a very large man. He smiled at me, his teeth caving to the massive grip of his jaw.