At The End of the Road

By Hannah Dreesbach

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They put the cemetery right where Fort Hill used to be, but no one would have known the difference if the road hadn’t been called Fort Hill Road. There wasn’t a fort there anymore. There wasn’t even a hill. Not

for miles. There was only a faded cemetery at the end of a dirt lane.

Her foot sought out the brake pedal and she flashed her blinker as she came upon the road. The old 4-

Runner grumbled as it turned onto the gravel. It was clunky, and its red paint was chipping, but it ran. Old

Faithful, they had called it. She didn’t call it anything anymore.

The radio was on, blaring Dave Mathew’s and static, but mostly just static. She flipped through the other stations. There were none. Just Dave, singing:

“…Oh there’s an emptiness inside her and she’d do anything to …”

She dialed back the volume with a flick of her wrist. Glared at the sun slanting through her windshield.

Flipped the visor down. It didn’t help.

At the cemetery, the road widened into a lopsided circle of sunbaked earth. Some people might call it a

parking lot, but truth be told, the cemetery wasn’t important enough to have a real parking lot. Hardly

anyone ever got buried there these days. Still frowning, she turned the wheel and coaxed the Runner over

the deep ruts that had dried in the mud and killed the engine.

Mottled sound still issued from the speakers.

“– and all the colors mix together – to grey, and it breaks her heart –”

Static.

She yanked the key from the ignition, killing the radio. Stuffing the keys in her pocket, she popped the

door open and slid from her seat, slamming it closed behind her. The sound seemed to ring in her ears for a short eternity. Then there was silence. Stifling and hot and overwhelming. Even the wind was still, and

the wind was never still in those parts.

But the cemetery demanded stillness. And so it was. She walked toward it – the dilapidated gate hanging from one hinge in the dust. She pushed it aside and entered, boots flattening the shriveled yellow grasses growing on the gravel path.

It didn’t take long to get there. To the grave marker, that is. It was nothing fancy. Just a grey slab of

granite. A name. Some numbers chiseled in. For a long while, she simply stood there and stared at the

smooth grey stone. Finally, she buckled. Like a marionette whose master has faltered at the strings. Knees

hit the ground. Arms hung loose by her sides. She couldn’t stand beneath the weight of all that silence.

Minutes passed.

Somewhere miles away, clocks were striking five o’clock.

She continued staring.

“I helped set up the exhibit on this place, you know. It’s still up in the old Abbotville Museum, though I

never did find out why it was called Fort Hill. Someone’s feeble attempt at humor, I suppose.&quot;

Both she and the silence jumped at the unexpected voice. Boots crunched softly on the gravel path behind

her, but she did not look back. She did not need to. She would never forget that voice.

“Wasn’t very large, For Hill. About the size of this cemetery, with a few out buildings. But it saw its share

of action back in the early 1800’s. Chief Little Elk died here after beheading the outlaw Joe Regen not ten

steps from the gate. The first mayor of Abbotville was a captain here before it got shut down. Guess he

was tired of soldiering. Wanted to try his hand at just living for a while. Course all that doesn’t interest

you much, does it?”;

She made no sign that she was listening, but he carried on nonetheless.

“Anyhow. It’s a pretty place now adays, don’t you think? Your grandmother and I always knew we’d want to get buried here. We bought two plots at fifteen dollars apiece. That was before they started burying

people in the place on Calverton Lane.&quot; There was a pause, followed by a throaty chuckle.

” I remember...Your grandmother and I took bets on who’d go first a few years back. It was all a game then. We laughed at ourselves. Never would have thought that…&quot; He trailed off slowly. She could sense the bitter-sweet smile peeking out from his wrinkled visage - picture his frosty white hair waving in the timid breeze that had sprung up between the gravestones. “I… I’m sorry,” he began again, “I shouldn’t have brought that up, but… Well, you know.”

She didn’t. But she nodded anyways, still staring straight ahead, knees ground into the dirt. The silence

began to settle once more, like the silt that slowly sinks to a pristine lake bottom.

“We had some good times though,” he remarked, stirring the air once more with his voice. “You

remember when your dad and mum left you with us for Christmas? Your grandmother was so excited.

Spent all day in the kitchen, cooked a ham big enough to feed the town. And there was only the three of

us –” another chuckle – “We played cards in the sunroom and listened to your grandmother cursing. You

gave me a picture that read ‘best Grandpa award’ for Christmas. That drawing stayed on my bedside table

for years.”

Clenched fists hung at her sides, nails biting into the soft flesh of her palms. She opened her mouth,

words teetering on the tip of her tongue, but none came. Her eyes were wet.

“You’re crying,” he noted gently. “You shouldn’t cry. Not on such a beautiful day. Just look at that sky.

You know, I never used to appreciate the sky until I met your grandmother. She would sit on the porch for hours and just stare at the sky. She told me once – she said, ‘Life is funny, dear. You think it’s about one

thing, only to find it’s really about the color of an evening sky.’ She was wearing a yellow dress that

night. Frilly thing with white lace. Her bun was lopsided. Funny the things you remember.”

She was shaking now. Just a slight tremor in the hands, the shoulders, a lock of her loose bronze hair. His boots crunched softly and a warm hand settled on her shoulder. The sun flashed on the horizon, brushing

the clouds with pastel hues of orange and violet. The golden prairie rippled against a sighing breath of

Wind.

And as she stared at the smooth granite of the headstone, a yellow butterfly alighted there for a heartbeat, flashing its fragile wings before fluttering away again.

“I always did love butterflies,” he commented softly as the sky swallowed the tiny creature. “They live

such short, brilliant lives.” She felt a hand squeeze her shoulder lightly, reassuring and warm and strong.

And then the pressure lifted. She choked back a sob. When she finally looked up, he was gone.

Wiping the salty tracks from her face, she took one last look at the headstone and the blocky inscription

carved into its perfect face. Abernathy Gilmore Wass. She could still feel the ghost of his hand squeezing

her shoulder.

“I miss you,” she whispered.

And then she stood and walked away. Passed through the decrepit gate. Slid back behind the wheel of her trusty Runner. Shoved the key into place. The radio blared to life – Tom Petty singing:

“…can’t you see… breakdown, it’s all right…”

The static faded in and out. For a moment, she only sat there, fingers idly tapping out the beat against the warm rubber steering wheel. Outside, the clouds stretched across the great bowl of the sky and the sun

sank deeper into the arms of the Earth.

The engine roared to life and she urged the Runner down the dirt lane.

And as she turned back out onto the empty highway, she smiled. A somber little smile – touched by

heartache and weariness – but that was okay.