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Problem Dog

Joseph Vainisi

"I'm the king, man. I run the underworld. I decide who does what and where they do it at... I make the money man. I roll the nickels. The game is mine. I deal the cards." - Charles Manson

"I am the beast I worship." - MC Ride

A mess of colors flooded the room. Red, green, blue, white, orange. Lights flashing left and right, flooding my mind with rancid imagery. Between the intermittent flashes, complete and total darkness. Flood of light. Flash of dark. There was something comforting about the suffocating darkness. Peace of mind, if only for a fraction of a second. When I was blind, I wouldn't have to see the pistol in my hand. I wouldn't have to see his face forever burned in my mind. Wouldn't have the cold sneer of Mr. White's command repeat over and over in my head. Wouldn't have to justify my actions. Wouldn't have to answer to anybody. In the darkness, there was nothing. And right now, that is just how I want it.

I can't do it now. It's gonna have to be you... Do it, Jesse. Do it.

Mr. White's words. My actions.

The writing on the walls spelled out exactly what was on my mind. Painted on almost perfectly like the hell I was living in. Faces. Evil faces. Uncertain faces. Demons? Probably not. I've never had any interest in angles or demons. My arm was pointing up, wielding the pistol. Ready to hurt. Ready to kill. The more mutants that fall, the more his face begins to take shape in front of me. Each pull of the trigger became heavier than the last. Bullets of sweat whizzing down my head. I wipe it away, regaining my composure. There are more coming, and I have to stay focused. Eyes forward. Aim steady. Mind true to the task at hand. The screen conjuring images of madness and violence. Two more of them came from around the corner.

Flash. Bang. Scream. Death. Flash. Bang. Scream. Death. Easy pickings. Except this time I swear I saw him, but another glance revealed

again that it was only a mutant. I'm not out of the frying pan yet, there is still more dungeon to fight my way through. I make my way down a set of stairs.

"Look at all this damn water," the television speakers blaring. "Don't drink that. No telling if it's poisoned."

My mind? Yup. Definitely poisoned. Was the television speaking to me? Doubtful. The commentary seemed painfully relevant though. I keep moving. Have to, if I want to stay alive. I move further down the hallway. I pass a skull graffitied on the wall. Double take. I've seen this before. I glance over my shoulder. Sure enough, there it is. The exact same skull caked onto my wall. Did I really see that? Am I losing sense of reality? Get a grip. But what is real? The mutants aren't. Gale is.

Was.

Here we go again. Thoughts. Evil things. Refocus. My mind's in pieces. The only thing important right now is the screen in front of me. That's it. I put my mind back into the character I'm playing. Toxic waste splashes underneath me as my boots march through the horror. Blood too, mixing in with the runoff, creating a dark, dirty sludge. My next move is to climb a ladder, elevating my position in the dungeon. Closer to escaping. Closer to finally leaving this hell. I have no idea what is to come though. More mutants? Perhaps, but maybe something worse. These days, nothing is ever really as it seems. Life has begun taking joy at my misfortunes. Laughing at me. Realistically? Probably not. Certainly seems that way though. Thinking again. Unhealthy. So are bullets. Bullets. Reminder of the game. Reminder of the pistol in my hand. Just in time. More mutants began to flood the screen. I'm overwhelmed. Too many faces. Too many weapons. All charging at me. Out for my blood. They want to hurt me. I want to stay alive. They're standing in the way of that. They have got to go. Frantically pulling the trigger as fast as I can. Darkness retreating behind the muzzle flashes. Repeated over and over and over. Bodies piling up on the floor in front of me. Blood pooling together, until the floor was red. Each body indistinguishable from the next. Panic begins to set in as more and more mutants keep pouring in, coming from everywhere. Fear comes next. Everywhere is a trap. Death hidden behind every corner of every room. All eager to bash my brains in or shoot me to a pulp.

Breathe. Calm. I aim true and keep firing. Something's changing though. The green pistol, looking black. The plastic texture morphed into a cold metallic frame. The weight felt familiar. Comfortable yet unbearable. Burning my hand. Burning my mind. The explosion of flame at the end of the barrel was almost too much for me to witness. Had to keep firing though.

Flash. Bang. Scream. Death.

There were too many of them. I've been hit. Each shot I fired was answered by three right back at me. I grit my teeth and keep going. Hit again. Things weren't looking good. I've passed the point of no return.

Once again, I see him in front of me. However, there is no mistaking it this time. There he was. His face, the same desperate expression he had given me. I could hear his words. Ringing in my ears. Screaming, rather. The same shaking, cracked pleas. Begging for life.

You don't have to do this.

Did that come from the screen or my head? Voices, nevertheless. Tears, the hardest part of it all. Sadness. He was so sad. So scared. Now he's not sad. Now I'm sad. Now I'm scared. No tears here though. Sweat instead.

If I don't shoot, I'll die. Mr. White will die. Mr. White said so. He's a contamination, and so he must be cleansed. That's what I was taught. Doesn't make it any easier. But I did it. Squeezed the trigger. Put him down. Like a dog.

Flash. Bang. Whimper. Death.

His head kicked back at sickening speed. The moment between the trigger pull and the crumpling of the body seemed to last forever. Graceful almost, the way he hit the ground. Like a dance. His final dance. Gale did seem to have an affinity for dancing. On screen, this familiar scene played out. The same scene that had been plaguing me. That won't leave me. It's taken too much from me. It won't go away. Why can't it leave me be? Why can't it go torture someone else's head? Mr. White won't have to be tormented by this. It's easy to tell someone else to pull the trigger. Well, it's easy to pull the trigger as well. Too easy. It's what comes after that isn't so easy.

Another mutant. When will this end? Will it ever end? Well, it will when I die. Death seems closer than ever before. Maybe it will all end soon. That wouldn't be too bad, I suppose. Not suicidal, just not too fond of living right now. I've seen death. I don't want that. It's what keeps me going. It's why I did what I had to do. It's why I pulled the trigger. But it's hard to keep doing it. I don't want to keep doing it. I aimed my pistol at the creature rushing me. There he is. The problem dog. Again. I've already done this. I'll do it again. There is the same voice. Here is the same gun.

Do it Jesse. Do It.

I hesitated. The mutant didn't. Why would he. Before I knew it, dead. Game over. Mission failed. I couldn't go through with it this time, and so I had to pay the price. But I am alive. Me. Not the video game character. Me. Because I did do it. Because I did not hesitate. Because I did want to live. On the screen I see one word. Rage. Painfully accurate. The screen then asks me a question. Begs for an answer. Restart or quit. Go back to my sad excuse for a life and wallow in my own misery, or distraction. I'm a tramp. A bum. A junkie degenerate who has thrown away his life so I can cook meth and hire prostitutes with my burnout buddies. But a straight razor, if you come too close. I don't want to think of that. I don't want to go back to that life. Restart or quit. The answer was pretty easy.

About a week later I find myself hanging around outside of the community center, where they host those hokey addicts' anonymous meetings. Where I only started going to deal meth. Know the customer, right? Fiddling now with my pack of cigarettes. The ricin cigarette. The poison. The capsule that I would use to kill the great Gustavo Fring. Why? Because Mr. White told me to? Just like he did with Gale? Because I needed to do it to survive? Was my life really worth more than his? No. It was because he was just another dog. Another problem dog, and he needed to be put down. Just like the last. I've been thinking lately, about that. Problem dog. What happens when I'm someone else's problem dog? I've already faced down the barrel of a gun more times than I can count. Too many times for one lifetime. More times than most other people would be able to. Just for a little money. Cheddar. Fat stacks. Dead presidents. Cash money. Everything I've ever wanted. I've become the beast I worship.

I debate whether or not to go in. Whether to head home, or chew bullshit for an hour. Hear the same stories. See the same faces. I put out my cigarette. I get up to leave.

I have nothing to say anyways.