

The Watchman

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Why?

Now that is a question for which many good men and women have died. *Why* has brought us to the stars and it has fueled holocausts. *Why* has raised the greatest religions of humanity, and toppled them again. Never forget that, boy.

To give a short to answer to this particular why, I needed the money and it was a job to be had. To give you a long answer, I need you to imagine yourself where I was at the end of the war. Things then... ahh, things then were very different than they are now. We'd bombed each other halfway back into the stone age and there was absolutely nothing - no jobs, no health care, no electricity or clean water - to be had at almost any cost. We used paper bank notes to pad our clothes in winter. And in the middle of all this Bonnie was six months along with your father. You can't imagine what it was like, boy, at the very end. For seventy years, by Christ, we had been trying to kill each other over what? Land. A whole virgin planet for the taking and sixty million of us couldn't even manage to share that. The generals told us this war was "our manifest destiny, but for most of us our manifest destiny was to have our sons and daughters marched off to kill or be killed by another poor bastard. How *could* we hate them? We have the same skin, the same language. Even the same damned names. Bonnie's cousins were on the other side, did you know that? Aye, they're out there still, if you want to find them.

But to get back to it, everyone was disillusioned. The war had gone in cycles. First we had the great land rushes, teenagers too young to even vote being sent to die along a front that stretched halfway across the continent. That ended when we started running out of children to throw into the meat grinders. But the generals learned, or thought they had, from their failures.

Tit for tat came next. Bombers striking out from half the planet away to kill people in their sleep, until we'd bombed each other so thoroughly that we couldn't even maintain the planes we had, let alone build new ones. At about the time I arrived onto this mortal coil, infiltrators were the vogue. Radioactive dust spread in the playground, chemical sterilizers in your water. Cheaper than bombers. It worked, too, when we took to shooting strangers on sight. It's how my brother went - some idiot put a bullet through his head because he was fumbling with his block pass after a night's drinking. "Sorry," they told my parents, "but there was a reasonable suspicion."

"But what about peace?" we asked our leaders. "Peace? No, too much has passed between us," we were told. "The enemy have broken all of their promises. This war is the only way, you'll see, because if we ever stopped going after them, then they would just come here after us." I know that those on top believed this argument, even if no one else really did. I think myself that the generals were just afraid they'd be put out to graze if the war ended. Thirty more years of all of us being afraid because someone up there was.

And finally, finally, at the end, the politicians remembered their roots. Smart weapons with their smart payloads came down from above by the crate, because the lack of people left for them to kill forced them to pick and choose who would be next. Right up to the arms dealers came down and repossessed everyone's toys because we couldn't afford to pay the instalments.

You can't imagine what that is like. The war was our mother and our father. Our wife and our lover. And our day and night. And someone, somewhere took all of that with the push of a button because we couldn't pay for our guns or bullets. We simply got out of bed one morning and realised that there wouldn't be more bombs in the night, or the dreaded blue letters. . . and then we stopped. As a whole people, we stopped. People who are brighter than me have said that it was just a natural reaction to extended periods of intense stress. We sat down and took a break because we didn't have to worry anymore. Soldiers out in the field set down their guns where they stood, embraced their old enemy and started towns. The junctos ceased to exist between one day and the next because no one cared about them anymore. . . . yeah, it was during the summer. The days were long and warm and everyone was optimistic. We had nothing left to us but the clothes on our back and a shining future! But what a future it was, boy!

Then came the Long Winter. The two years without summer that nearly ended all of us. It turns out that for a couple of years scientists had been trying to get out a warning that a dust cloud was going to pass between us and the star, but those on high just hushed them up, of course, because we were too busy trying to keep our heads on our shoulders. The dust cloud did something to the air, stripped out a lot of the ozone and then just hung up there, blocking out the starlight. Stockpiles of everything ran out, our crops died, babies were born with no limbs and four meter snow drifts fell and as a people we turned into little more than savages fighting for a spot around

the fire. The corporations saved us all, never mistake that. I'll never forgive the other things they did here, but right then they were the ones distributing hot soup and winter clothing and setting up free clinics. Not a one of the civil governments would touch us. Their millatries stole away a few of the brighter minds to fight their own wars, and the civilians disowned us after we started plugging paraplegics into cruise missiles. Absolutely, they did. I worked for a respite home for veterans, until they came and took all of the cripples away. I don't think they were shot. A year after they were taken, the newspapers were filled with hype about our new "intelligently guided munitions."

So after they started feeding people, the corporations gathered up what was left of the governments here and told them, "hi y'all! You may have noticed us recently. Yeah, that's us. We've been the ones handing out hot soup and winter clothing to the starving people who live in that burnt-out building yonder. Tell you what, we can do more than that for you. We can rebuild your economy, give you all of these wonderful technological toys that we use, give you all some respectability up above. Put you back on your feet, really. All we ask in return is that you let us set up a few research laboratories, oh, over here and over there."

"But why (remember what I said about this question?)?" we asked them, suspicious.

"Well it's *research*," they said. "Everyone will benefit in the end."

"Of course it's research," we replied. "But why *here and now*?"

"Ah," they told us, "that's a good question. You see, there are certain kinds of research that's easier to do when there are fewer rules to work by, and we feel that your, umm, benighted world's... unique frontier environment would be amenable to this research. Really, absolutely, the work is boring and the details are tedious. Not a hair on the smallest baby's head will be hurt, on my honour. Now if you can just sign here please."

And Mother Mary forgive us, we signed. Everything changed in that instant. They sent down their factories and their disaster teams, cleared the roads, erected power lines, gave a lot of people jobs, put money in hand and food in stomachs. Our saviours. And that's how I got my job. The companies had put up big billboards all of the squares with job postings. They'd want construction workers for up in the north, or experienced line workers for their new factories out in the suburbs. I found one that suited me perfectly. "Night time caretaker needed for startup medical clinic in Central," I think

it read. I walked ten kilos... heh, yes, uphill in the snow, and applied that same day.

"Discretion," they told me, "is one of the key requirements to that position."
"That won't be a problem," I answered, "to work at a veteran's respite you needed a security clearance."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, you see some of them were just fine, physically, but they still weren't all there, if you follow my meaning."

"We do, we do. Go on."

"Well some of them spoke about things they shouldn't, either awake or in their sleep, and the military wanted to be sure that the carers wouldn't repeat them.

Here, have a look at my old badge."

"Perfect! Can you start tonight?"

It was a shock to walk into that old stone building... it was over there. See the trees? It was a single story, grey stone and completely unremarkable. Not even the mobs knew which one it was so they ended up burning half the street down before they found it. ... it was a shock to see things like working autoclaves, stocked antibiotics, warm running water and lights that didn't flicker. My recruiter, some silver tounge offworlder whose name I forget, gave me a brief tour of the clinic. It was a little frightening to see everything so spotlessly *new*, when I stilled showered in ice water! During the war, you see, the building had housed a veterinary clinic, at least up until people started eating their pets. Don't look at me like that. Eat the *nutritious* family dog, or what passes for rats here? Right. All the corporation really did was refurbish the building, replace some fittings and stock the sheleves. The cages and runs were still there. The only real change was an abundance of imaging equipment. X-rays, ultrasounds, electron microscopes. Even a HASA, taken from a starship and refitted for the clinic that showed just how much money they had to throw away for this. After taking it in, my recruiter, some pale-skinned off-worlder, sat me down and started it all off:

"So tell me what know about cyborgs," she asked me.

"Cyborgs? Just ghost stories, I guess. Uh, clunking metal monsters who want to make everyone else like them."

"Okay, that's a good start. The real truth to cyborgs is that much as we'd love to, we just can't stick bits and pieces of metal and plastic into someone's

body without the body eventually starting to reject them. We have to pump the host body full of immune suppressors just to stop it shutting down, which in turn leaves the host so weakened that a common cold or even a cut finger can kill. Are you with me? ”

”Yeah, I think I see where you’re going.”

”Great. Medically speaking, it’s a frustrating situation. We can travel faster than light, we’ve cured hunger and we’ve even met an alien race, but we still can’t put an artificial heart into a man without it eventually killing him. So what we’re looking at here is an alternate path: We take the own body’s immune system and use it to build our implants for us. Synthetic components arising from the body’s own natural processes. To that end this clinic is looking into the development of cancer, ever hear of it? cancer through the human body and seeing if we can’t create a new cancer that might grow a new kidney or a cornea. Think about the benefits! In future no one will need surgery and years of crippling drugs to get a transplant. We simply will create some stem cells from your DNA and inject them along with some worker cells wherever we need them.

”Beginning tomorrow we will be bringing in test subjects and inducing various forms of cancer in them, both natural and weaponized strains, under intense monitoring, to identify potentially useful vectors. We don’t expect major breakthroughs to occur at this clinic, as the real research work will be carried out at our head office, but we *do* expect to collect large volumes of useful raw data over the coming months. Do you follow me so far?”

”Oh aye.”

”This work is secret within our company, and as such your utmost discretion is of top priority, for two reasons: First and most importantly, our methods of information gathering and dissemination are proprietary and subject to competitor scrutiny. Heads might literally roll if six months from now if it is discovered that they are suddenly using our own methods. Second, the work we will be carrying out is. . . ethically sensitive, and the less information that is spread, the better. Zero information is our goal, because this form of research has been subject to legal restrictions in other jurisdictions for some time, but yours offers abundant freedoms for our work. For these reasons you will be periodically monitored outside of the workplace at random times to ensure confidentiality and loyalty. You are to discuss this work with no one, not even your wife. If you do, you will be. . . I mean that your *employment* will be terminated and you will be sanctioned by our legal department for breach of contract. Am I absolutely clear?”

”Like a window, ma’am. Where do I sign?”

Who said I do remember it exactly? Legal speech is legal speech, and please let an old man embellish his tale, it’s one of the few pleasures I have left. Black with two sugars, please. Thank you. When I started the following night I learned what she meant by ”ethically sensitive.”

There were three subjects on that first night. . . where? Off the streets probably. Channel a few into clinics from street pickups, as who would ever miss them? I can’t see how it would’ve been hard to pull off. Three of ’em, strapped to tables and being pumped full of some horrible devil’s brew of sedatives and weaponized cancers. My job was to clean them up after the doctors left, put the test subjects back in their kennels and make sure they had clean bedding and water. Do the laundry, clean the tables. A week went by, then two. Sleep during the day, have dinner with Bonnie, go to work at night. The very image of mediocrity. It’s mediocrity that makes a man evil, lad, not the extremes. Extremes only bring out the wickedness in a soul, but mediocrity can breed it into the gentlest of persons. The doctors, I think, lived in a closed little world; wreaking one horror after another and telling each other it was okay just as long they continued to believe that it was okay. Maybe I did it too. I tried not to think of the test subjects as beings of flesh and blood, but as One, Two and Three instead. And even that took its toll. I dreamt about your father being born with the same horrible tumour that was bursting out One’s side and Three’s whine seemed to follow me all the way home. I avoided reflecting too long about what I was doing; I just did it. Your father was due in four months and this clinic was the only way that I’d get Bonnie a bed in an actual hospital when the time came.

No, there was no blood. The clinic has been made out to sound like a slaughterhouse, but truth be told, it was all shining and antiseptic. Oh there was always *some* blood; cuts and abrasions where they rubbed against the gates of their runs, and there were biopsies, but everything that mattered happened all the way down on an incomprehensible scale inside their bodies. After the first week, it was mostly leash the test subjects, take them out to be examined and then put them back. They’d have never understood if we told them, but those three seemed to know what we’d put in them and it was like they died weeks before their tiny frames could no longer hold the huge tumours. I thought for the longest while that after the those three,

that'd be it. The end. No more experiments. But it wasn't to be. I came in one night to find that the first three had been euthanized, and, pleased with their successes, those monsters had ten more subjects were brought in. Ten! This was next stage, I was proudly told. Inject the experimental constructors into them just to see what happened. They were such small bodies, to have such burdens. Christ be with me. They all died screaming, boy. One died when her *constructors* ate her stomach. Another's eyes burst. . . What could I have done? They were feral, years gone from being something that might have had meaning to anyone. I couldn't take them home. Two mouths were almost more than I could afford to feed and like as not they'd try to bite my throat out as soon as I let them go free.

But that changed, boy, at the moment when I first held your father. When I looked into those brown eyes, I stopped running from myself. Your father was a child just like the ones we'd been killing for four months.