



Clementine's Prize
& other micro-stories

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*A*fter the end of the war, Timothy knew he could never return home. He had accepted this as the price for redemption; Deschamps was dead - nothing else mattered.

Raphael inhaled deeply, letting his cigarette turn to ash as smoke caressed his lungs in a cancerogenous embrace. He was always skirting the edges of a death wish. “Why not? We’re all going to Hell anyway.”, he would always muse to his old photo camera, Clementine. The room was barely lit and abandoned, a greasy film covered the walls, just the way he liked it.

Except this time he had a guest.

A fascist sat in front of him, holding his chest, breathing in ragged gasps of air. A trail of blood stained his shirt.

The war had left a gaping wound in the heart of the country: millions dead, the economy ruined, cities turned to rubble. Clementine’s lens had captured the bloody, smoking horror of it all.

He had cried on the night they buried the corpses of 100 children killed in an air raid.

The last time Raphael shed a tear in his life was when he was a boy after his father died from tuberculosis.

The fascist in front of him was silent, defiant. He was a saboteur that he had manage to stop before he bombed a cafe. He knew what the score was. Very slowly, almost with apathy, Raphael picked up Clementine and framed the face of a man facing death.

Click. Saved for posterity.

He pulled out his gun with no hurry, the fascist wasn’t going anywhere. They exchanged looks for a moment, both tired from the war, from the fighting. One about to die, yet still defiant: he respected that.

Fishing inside his brown jacket’s pockets he fished out the last of his cigarettes, offering it to the man and lightning it with his zippo. One last drag before midnight, he thought bitterly as the man thanked him and puffed away, some relief in his place.

Raphael nodded and walked a few paces away before turning back, gun drawn, and shooting the man square in the face. The shot rang like thunder in the greasy room.

After the ringing in his ears ceased, he considered the fascist’s corpse for a moment while grabbing Clementine. He walked away. Too many dead inside her lens already.

It was Deschamps who gave me the original idea. To cover the development of the new space ports in Brazil, check out the finances behind it, go to the source. Who was really there behind the faceless corps, China? the US, Russia? Big story to be sure, maybe a Pulitzer, maybe fame, who knows... Big contracts. Bear with me, it was 2023 and I was 23. Babyface in a den of wolves.

Then Prague happened, and it all went downhill pronto.

It's March 2024 and I'm in a nice '73 Centurion convertible. Lots of firsts that year. First car to my name, carefully chosen, first holiday back home, and road-tripping through the US like I'm the first one who ever thought of it. Picked up the car in Chicago, drove to Madison, then Pierre, then all the way to Rapid City and the Badlands. That's where the news hit. Pink mushroom over the snow, no more honeymoons on the Danube. And everyone, of course, is innocent.

First days of the war.

First cover photos on TIME.

Dusty taste in my mind as I travel across a ragged landscape in search of my next subjects. I become an expert at recognizing death. I become a drone spotter and start following them like a shadow. Drones are juicy stories for hungry eyes back home. Clean, pretty, reliable kills sanitized for your pleasure. Not so much on the ground, but nobody cares about the actual consequences. It's all storyboarded like a Hollywood movie. PG-13 as they say.

First freelance gigs for "alternative" news channels. First thrills of clandestine ops.

First turn of the tide, the vast electronic takeover of the defense networks that leave us completely exposed. Fleets of drones crossing the pond, hitting the homeland. Infrastructures crumbling. Anarchy. Another couple pink mushrooms sealing the deal over a grey, lifeless sky. Another juicy story captured by my lenses.

Some still think we were defeated, but the bitter truth is, we simply imploded.

First kill, because shit happens. The next ones, because once you start... We're all going to Hell anyway. Sometimes you've just got to admit you're in a dead-end street. Right now, that's what I see through my windshield.

It's March 2031 and I'm in a nice '73 Centurion convertible. An oldie, weathered but not too much. A connoisseur would probably say she's got character. Deep inside, I guess I still appreciate that, but the truth is, it's just a car to me now. I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere I guess. I thought I was on Main Street, but now I'm just facing a wall. The engine rattles, then dies. I try to turn the ignition but no luck.

Last ride. Gas tank's empty.

I put my hat on, light up a cig and get out of the car to stretch my legs. It's been a long drive. Town looks deserted. Lotsa folks got displaced during the troubles. I realize I don't know where I am. Sometown, USA, right? Could be Mexico for all I know. As if it made any difference. I take a last look at the worn leather seats. Time to call it quits. Deschamps is dead, and my war is over.

I walk away.

The Kaiju was standing above me, looking fierce and menacing in the haze of the ruined city. But I had no fear. I knew what it wanted, for I had drifted in its mind and unveiled its deepest secrets. Animals can be very simple, you know? Sometimes, they just want to play.

I looked at the map and set a course for the next city, then picked up the ball at my feet and put it in my pocket.

Time to go play fetch again.

We hung out in Narragansett in the late 1980s, cuz Jimbo had a rented house there, and an education start-up, and because it's nice at the shore. We took Doyle's boat to go fish and occasionally dive in a cage to taunt the sharks. Jimbo used to jump in without the gear, taking just a harpoon to go fish in the rocks below. The guy was gifted, he could hold it for close to three and a half minutes underwater and come back with with a 30-pounder striped bass that would last us two whole days. One summer, Doyle took us farther than usual to a new spot he thought looked promising. Lobsters and fishes a-plenty, he'd say. We suited up and entered the cold waters, and when we reached the bottom, all we could see was this lone lobster, swimming amongst mounts of old timber and cannon-shaped rocks, all tinted in an eerie green light. Fortune blessed the fools that day, and every year since then we stand on the rocky shore with a bottle of blackberry brandy for our great old companion Poseidon, and thank him for the ancient galleon's emeralds.

Keep your eyes on the road, Luigi boy...

The long, flat strip of dirt vanishes in front of the headlights a couple dozen meters out, under a thick blanket of fog. It's only three but already it feels like dusk. Behind the wheel, Luigi fights to keep focused, trying to peer through the dirty windshield to avoid potholes, succeeding half the time.

The last road sign he's seen was a dilapidated billboard two hours back, a chance really that he smashed into the remnants of that 6ft tall wooden horse without a rider, advertising god knows what forgotten brand of liquor... Without that he would have continued into the wild none the wiser, and gotten himself killed probably.

He had stopped the truck and gotten out to inspect the damage but to his relief it had been negligible. A few scratches on the front winch, not even a dent of the bumper. New dents that is. He kicked the old planks out of the way and glanced around, alert, listening for any sign of unwelcome wildlife. Nothing of course. There seldom were any this high in the Circle.

A lucky strike, or lack thereof, as it were, he thought, lighting a cigarette. He was overdue for a break. Five days on the road, two since this dense fog had set in. They're waiting for him in Inuvik but hell, they could wait five more minutes.

He walked back on his tracks to try and find the road and found that he had actually left it about twenty minutes earlier after taking a wrong turn. By pure coincidence, the winding road had crossed his path again next to the old billboard and that's how he had gotten back onto it... That was an unsettling find. He'd better be careful not to repeat the mistake that had condemned him to leave the skies and find a living on the ground. Life can give second chances but thirds are seldom gifted to repeat offenders...

He's back in the truck, back on the road, back in the fugue state that is long distance driving, following the marks, listening to the laments of the old diesel engine as it sends the Deuce and a half through the puddles, pondering life and deciding the road, for all that matters, is all there is to it. Tomorrow he'll be in Inuvik, in two days he'll get a new load to carry back to Dawson City.

In a couple of weeks, maybe he'll find the time to take a day out and go fishing again. The thought brings a smile to his face.

He fancies some salmon.

