

A Long Good Sleep

by Joseph G. Peterson

God talks to me. May as well. Nobody else does. Nobody saying anything friendly at least. I keep saying: maybe it's because I'm lonely. But who isn't. Maybe it's just me talking to myself. But the voice is unmistakable. I hear it here, in my head. It has nothing to do with me; it talks outside myself. I used to say, maybe I'm just imagining all of this, hold tight, it will quiet down. It's been a long time now. A couple of months. Maybe I should start taking responsibility for this thing. The voice keeps speaking: go into the wilderness, it says, and do it. I don't quite know what it means about wilderness. I do know, however, about the other thing, about doing it. I don't know, though, if I want to do it. If I can do it. He keeps speaking, urging me on, letting me know things even angels shouldn't find out.

"Take this broom," my boss says. "Take this shovel. Go into the parking lot and clean it."

The place is Wonder Foods. My boss is Feral. But the way he says it, like he's some sort of prophet: *Take this, take that, go into the wilderness and do it.* I grab the broom, a shovel, step outside and somehow I can't believe it but I remember thinking how tonight might be it. Tonight's the night I'm crossing over.

When I get down to cleaning, the parking lot is desolate. I pick up every cigarette butt. I pull out every weed. I find a *Playboy* buried in the bush. I unfold it, look at the pictures, then throw it into the dumpster with the rest of the trash.

It's 3 a.m. when I'm finished. "All right," I say to the voice. "Speak your last words." I'm leaning against the dumpster staring at the night sky which tries to be dark even though it's polluted orange by the streetlights. I feel empty and alone. There's nobody to say goodbye to, nobody to ask forgiveness

from. In the end, I suppose, this is how it should be. I didn't ask to be brought into this world. I'm not going to ask to leave it.

I stand there. I hear a sound I've never heard before. Out of nowhere comes this screeching sound. It's hollow and empty. It must come from god. As the noise rushes closer, pinpointing me in the scope of it's decibels, I realize that this sound, so terrible and menacing is meant for me.

Don't move you son of a fucking bitch or I'm going to kill myself. If it was the devil himself raised from hell, I couldn't have been more terrified. There before me, in what seems slow motion, an old beat up car glides in off Milwaukee Avenue and skids to a halt in the gravel. The door flings open and like dreaming destiny, this huge man jumps out of the car with a gun pressed to his temple. I whirl around and run. Instinct.

The voice screeches: **Don't move!**

I stop moving. Instinct again.

You're it motherfucker.

I turn.

The large man's vocal cords are straining. Blood vessels rise like a road map of bad emotions to the surface of his face. He starts jabbing himself

with the gun. I stand for a long moment watching him. I can't believe what I'm seeing. I almost start laughing, but

don't. I'm not sure whether this man is going to kill himself, or if in a fit of derangement he's going to turn and blow me away.

"All right," I say calmly. "This is your pal Henry talking to you. Put the gun down."

He doesn't move. He stands there motionless, flabbergasted, as if trying to digest my words, trying to figure out how to react. He's so still, sweat running down his cheeks, I wonder if I'm not



dreaming him, and if in the shock of it my brain hasn't shut down, mid-hallucination.

"Hey," I yell. "Put the gun down!"

His lips curl beneath a pair of nostrils that look as if they've both been slit open.

"Fuck you!" he screams. "I said I'm blowing my head off."

His knuckle grows white as it wraps around the trigger. I close my eyes expecting the flash of his gun, followed by the brains, the skull, and the hair of this man flying across the parking lot.

"Hey," he bellows. "That was the name of my dog. I don't have a dog no more. Used to have one though. Used to call him Hank." He lowers his eyes a little then lifts them to look at me. "That's what I'll call you. Okay Hank?"

"Give me the gun," I say.

"Shit Hank. Things are really bad now. I need your help. Don't you see? I mean I should kill myself." He rubs the scar between his eyes with the barrel of the gun and gives me this crazy smile. "Know what I mean?"

"The gun," I say.

"Thought so Hank!"

I step into the shadow of the dumpster to avoid his eyes.

"Know how I can tell Hank? Because the moment before you pull the trigger you're more alive than ever. That's the miracle of this situation. Things start coming clear. I can look at you and see you're suicidal, just like me. Whereas an hour ago, two hours ago, before I ever got this fucking Colt in my hand I would have never known you were thinking the same thoughts as me. Only you lack guts Hank. Bet you never screwed a virgin. Have you Hank?"

I don't answer.

"Have you Hank?" He starts waving the gun over his head trying to force an answer.

"Tell me goddamn it!"

"No."

"Didn't think so Hank. But that's okay."

"Put the gun down," I tell him as calmly as possible. "And bring it here."

"Listen to you Hank! You ain't got no guts

hiding by that garbage can whispering to me like that. Step out here like a man; take some heat. You won't be a good point man otherwise."

I step out.

"Takes guts to screw a virgin, Hank. Yesiree. You screw a virgin you can blow your brains out. Same difference." He starts to get hysterical. "I never knew that till now Hank. World's full of surprises."

"Listen," I say carefully. "Hand over the gun before you harm one of us."

"Once fucked a girl in Niagara, Hank, if you can believe it. Fucked her in the waterfall spray. She was a virgin, Hank. Hopped the fence with her in the middle of the night. Guards were up and down that place like mosquitoes after nightfall. At first she didn't know what she wanted, but I showed her. Once we were down there, maybe it was after midnight, she was so excited she jumped me, tore the clothes off my back. She turned out to be a blonde nympho. Couldn't get enough either. A young one too. Only seventeen. When we got back to the hotel I locked her up in the room for three days and shared her with my friends. What do you think about that chief? How'd you like to have done something like that once in your life? But you ain't got no guts Hank!"

He starts laughing and as he laughs I watch the gun barrel swing slowly away from his temple and rock around so that it's pointing at me. Suddenly he drops to firing position and fires two bullets directly at me. They whack into the steel side of the dumpster. I collapse to the ground. He puts the smoking gun back to his head.

"I did that for your sake, Hank. You won't pass up a virgin next time. Because now you got guts. Don't forget that. I just gave you guts."

I don't move. I don't open my mouth. I'm staring straight down the barrel of his gun, right into his eyes. His lips are spread apart and he's grinding his teeth.

"Get up Hank."

I don't move.



"Get up Hank, son of a bitch, or I'll blast both our heads to hell."

I don't know what to do. I can't think straight. I get to my knees and that's as far as I get.

"The gun," I croak. "Give me the gun."

Suddenly though, he starts speaking in a rational voice. "You want to kneel there like an alter boy, suit yourself." He starts pacing back and forth. His elongated shadow stretches to the base of my feet. He keeps jerking the gun to his head, dropping it to his side, jerking it back to his head. The shadow makes it look as if I'm every bit in line with his sights.

"Jesus, Hank, things are bad."

He stops pacing and collapses to his knees. We're looking eye to eye. We're more than twenty feet apart, yet I can see the powder marks from the gun barrel form a black **O** against his temple. It looks like a target.

"Things are bad, Hank. I traveled all over the countryside tonight. Through so many small fuck towns. There's folks after me. I have ideas in my head only a good long sleep can kill."

He smiles at me and pokes himself in the head with the gun, then lowers it.

"I drove till I found you Hank, standing by that dumpster." He smiles at me again. "That's right, you Hank. You're the one I chose tonight, because you understand, don't you?"

I don't move.

"But you got to help me, Hank. These things can't wait for you to get brave. You got to come here, get in my car and go for a ride."

I don't say anything. I close my eyes and try to imagine myself suddenly, exiting this world through a tiny bullet hole in my chest or my head.

"Well Hank," he yells. "You going to help, or do I have to blow my brains all over the goddamned parking lot in order to prove a point?"

"The gun," I say, one last time. "If you

would just set the gun between us, or throw it over your shoulder into those bushes I might feel more in a position to want to help you."

We don't move. We're staring eye to eye. Suddenly he breaks out laughing real hard.

"Shit Hank! You got more guts than I gave you credit for." He lowers the pistol, spins it in his hand like they do in the old westerns. He gets to his feet and says: "okay, Hank, between us." He walks off ten paces, sets the gun on the pavement, walks back to his position. He gets down on his knees.

Suddenly there we are, two desperate men in the empty parking lot. We're kneeling twenty feet apart, there's that simple weapon of human destruction lying harmlessly between us. I spend a long time looking at the gun. The handle of the gun is lost in darkness and only the very tip of it, jutting into a cone of light from the parking bulb above, is visible. I stare at it, wondering if I can do it. If I can

run over there, snatch the gun up, and somehow find the courage to pull the trigger. I try to imagine what would happen in that last moment: the final life pictures flickering through my mind, a brief moment of pain, or non pain, and then perhaps a weightless sensation as I drift quickly away from this troubled world and high into the stratosphere where the air is thin and moves very fast and where but for the

whisper of a star I'll be gone forever. The gun is between us. It's as if he can read every thought that crosses my mind.

"We ain't going to race for it, Hank, because you ain't going to win. And if you want to run from here, you still ain't going to win, because I'll fucking steam roll you with my fucking car. But if you want to save both our lives, Hank, come and do what I ask."

I keep my eyes on the gun.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Come with me for a ride, so you can hear what's on my mind."

"Tell me here. I can listen." I don't make a



move to get off my knees. Neither does he. It's dark as hell but for the parking light above. Both our eyes are focused on the gun. He starts talking and because he's kneeling, it's almost as if he were in a confessional booth.

"Hank, Jesus, I'm a sinner. My whole fucking life is a sin. It was a sin from the day I was born, and it's been a sin ever since. And I'm tired of this sinful life. Tired so I feel as if I've got to offer an apology. Like I've got to be sorry for one damned thing or another."

"Like any of us do," I say, not taking my eyes from the gun.

"I mean . . ." He struggles to regain composure and lights a cigarette. "Want one Hank?" His voice is trembling with emotion.

I don't answer.

"They're L&M's," he says, smoke drifting my way. "Started smoking them in Fallujah off some skinny little black dude named Roy. He always had a pack with him and he always kept me by his side. He said he had a vested interest in protecting me. He's the one who got me smoking these. One day we heard a noise. 'Go check that noise, Sir Roy'—that's what I called him—Sir Roy. He was the only black guy who ever liked me. 'Al,' he says. 'Give me some cover.' 'It's nothing Sir Roy. Just a noise. Check it out.' So off he runs, his thin little black back disappearing into the weeds, his legs already invisible in camy. He never came back. Shit Hank that black dude fucked me up. But shit Hank, war is war, right?"

I don't move, and he can't provoke me. He no longer has the gun.

"Right, Hank?" he yells. "Jesus I got problems. The cops are after me. Everyone's out to get me. There's this guy, Billy Anderson, I swindled him for ten thousand dollars. There's this woman friend of mine, Alice, who I just beat the hell out of and almost shot. Then there's Sir

Roy. He keeps coming after me, haunting me. I see him every night in my dreams. I swear, Hank, he's after me and one day, he's going to get me. Shit, look I got the shakes."

I'm on my knees. I don't know what to do. But as if an invisible hand were guiding me, I rise up and walk to the gun. He doesn't move. His face is all busted up like he's about to cry. I grab the gun; check the magazine. There's one bullet left. I replace the clip,

and put the gun to my head. *Take this, take that, go off into the wilderness and do it.* I start to squeeze the trigger. I let my mind wander wherever it pleases. But it doesn't go anywhere. It stopped moving. It's stuck in place. I wait another moment to see if there'll be a feeling of peace. But there isn't. I feel nothing. I concentrate on the weight of the gun, which is heavy and solid in my hand. The handle seems hot, as if it's been heated by a lifetime of suicidal thoughts. So this is my gun, I tell myself. And this is how I take my life: in a parking lot with some lunatic breaking down in front of me. Strange that it should happen this way, with the sunrise just coming up. I hear a bird chirping. I pull the trigger.

The End

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