

—A SEASON OF SLEEP

by John Rector

Mattie watched from the porch as the fat man lurched up the dirt road. His left leg, twisted at the knee, dragged and buckled with each step. Behind him, a thin trail of dust drifted white in the breeze before dissolving over the cornfields that lined the road. He moved slow, keeping his head down, and when he reached the driveway he stopped and stared at the house.

Mattie walked to the edge of the porch and squinted against the setting sun. The fat man didn't move. She raised the rifle to her shoulder and studied him down the length of the barrel. He stood for a moment, looking from the road to the house and then back again, before stepping onto the driveway.

Mattie took a deep breath and began to count. "One... Two... Three..." She squeezed the trigger and the back of the man's head opened onto the road. A second later his body dropped hard into the dirt.

A scatter of crows rose from the cornfield then drifted down again like ash.

The fat man didn't move.

"Did you recognize him?" The voice came from the upstairs window. Mattie didn't turn around.

"I think it was Mr. Cavender," she said. "I'm not sure."

She was sure.

Mr. Cavender had been her Freshman Lit teacher the year before. There were rumors that the district had to widen the restroom doors by the teacher's lounge to accommodate his girth. Mattie didn't know if this was true, but it wouldn't have surprised her.

"So, they got to the school?"

Mattie didn't answer. She stared at the body at the foot of the driveway and searched for movement. There was none.

"Mattie?"

"Close the window, Nathan. Get some rest."

They were quiet for a moment, and then Nathan spoke. "Have you seen him?"

Mattie turned toward the window. She saw a flash of blond hair and felt her stomach sink. "No," she said, turning back to the road. "Not yet."

Nathan closed the window.

Mattie sat back on the porch. She laid the gun across her lap and ran her hand along the barrel, feeling the heat of the metal against her skin. She took a cartridge from the box on the porch and replaced the empty shell. Her shoulder ached, and she

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massaged the muscle with her hand.

"It'll get easier the more you do it." Her father reloaded the rifle and held it out to her. *"Remember, take a deep breath, count to three, and squeeze the trigger, don't pull."*

Mattie took the gun.

The keys in her front pocket dug against her hip, and she thought about the Jeep in the garage. Tomorrow would be day three, and they would have to leave. She'd promised. Three days. No more.

Mattie looked down the road that led to town and wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. The road was empty, the sky was red and heavy, and all around her the cornfields swayed green and endless in the breeze.

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There had been rumors. News reports, incomplete and vague. Something bad happening in the city. Soon after, the TV and radio went out completely and that was it. The next day Mattie's father drove into town and came back with the guns.

"I think it's time you learned how to shoot." He handed her the rifle. It was heavy, and she almost dropped it in the dirt. Nathan laughed behind her. Mattie turned toward him and wrinkled her nose, then smiled.

"Don't worry," her father said. "You'll get used to it."

* * *

Mattie was upstairs when the first one came.

Nathan was alone. He was on the tire swing, when the man came out of the corn.

Mattie heard her father yell, and she ran to the front of the house. There were shots, and she saw Nathan on the ground, pushing himself across the grass and away from the oak tree. The tire swing spun in circles on the branch.

Nathan was crying, and there was blood on his arm. Her father reached down, lifted him to his feet, and pointed to the house. Nathan ran to the porch and stood behind her. He held his hand over his arm and blood seeped between his fingers.

Her father walked to the man under the tree. He was twitching and trying to stand, and as the man got to his feet her father shot him again, spraying his chest, wet and black, over the tree trunk. The man fell, and her father turned back to the house. He'd only gone a few steps before the man stood up, bracing himself against the tree.

Mattie couldn't speak. She watched the man take a few steps before she raised her arm and pointed. Her father turned around and lifted the gun to his shoulder. This time the bullet took off the top of the man's skull, and he didn't get up.

By nightfall, Nathan developed a fever. He was cold to the touch and sweat poured off him in rivers of sickness. The scratch on his arm was bruised and black.

The next day they lost power to the house.

"I'll go to Gretna. If there's not a doctor there, I'll drive to Fremont." He handed her the keys to the Jeep and pointed at her. "Three days Mattie, I mean it. You don't see me by then? You and Nathan head north to Uncle John's." He nodded toward the house. "Maybe in a couple days he'll be in better shape to travel."