

About 3,300 words

TRANSITORY

by Degen Hill

The days were getting longer. Or at least they felt that way. Dust flew into the air as Karl Neesham's tattered boots plodded through the streets. Cars with broken windows were strewn about, and the houses that still remained had metal blockades over the doors. The sound of gunshots ripped through the silence of the deserted streets. Karl pulled his black trench coat a little tighter as the wind whipped dust against him, as if trying to permeate the already dirty clothes he was wearing. The cans of soup and assortment of electrical parts in his cracked leather bag weighed heavily upon his back. Scavenging was now a necessity, but each outing carried risks. Risks that Karl had deemed worth taking.

He walked on, taking in the quiet around him. The perpetual moving, shifting, and aggravating momentum of society had come to a grinding halt in 2043. People around the world had become unsatisfied with all the rules and regulations and societal norms and everyone just stopped. They quit working, they stopped contributing, and as a result, society, as it had come to be known, now ceased to exist.

Karl looked over and saw a broken microwave on the side of the road. His thoughts shifted to when he was young and how he would take apart his mother's kitchen appliances, ever curious about the inner workings. Later in life, he became an engineer, working on tech for the military. Despite his early ambitions, he, like billions of others around the world, had grown tired of the hierarchical structure of not only their jobs, but of the social class system that had divided society so aggressively.

For Karl, the long hours, the low pay, the glass ceilings, and soul-crushing day-to-day duties had finally proved to be too much. Monotony and tediousness had eaten away at him until there was no other choice. Around the world, humans unequivocally and resoundingly stopped working. Naturally, society descended into chaos, a world where rapacity ran rampant, and survival became paramount. The individual overcame the collective in the most barbaric way; apathy had overcome empathy. A year after The Stop took place, there was no region left on Earth that could be classified as a functioning society.

As Karl walked on, he passed a green military jacket strewn in the street and thought of the day he had quit, unaware of what the future would hold, but convinced he was making the right choice. Now, seven years later, Karl was beginning to have his doubts. Be loyal to what matters, he would tell himself, uncertain if he was reminding himself of his values or trying to justify the irreversible situation he was part of.

Making his way around the back of a worn-down house, he dropped his utility bag to the ground and looked around before rapping three times against the cellar door. The rusted joints creaked, and the doors popped open, revealing a young face smudged with grease and soot. Karl handed the young man the bag, looked around once again, and then entered the cellar, quickly closing the doors behind him.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” asked Lew.

“Let’s hope so,” said Karl while hanging up his dusty black coat.

Lew walked towards the metal table in the middle of the room and turned the bag upside down, dumping out the contents. Along with the soup cans were various cables, assorted engine parts, and odd bits of machinery that Karl had thought might be of some use in the future.

“More soup?” asked Lew, picking up a dented can of beef stew.

“Sorry, they were all out of caviar.”

“Well, at least you got the cables. You think we’ll be able to finish it?” asked Lew, glancing at the supplies. At twenty-five, he was just as curious as he’d been as a child, back when he’d first moved in next door to Karl and spent afternoons pulling apart old radios to see what was inside. His parents had pushed him toward philosophy at university — a discipline suited to his intellect, they’d said, as though engineering were somehow beneath him. He’d resented that. After losing them both to marauders in the first months of The Stop, he’d moved in with Karl and never looked back. Everything else had changed, but the curiosity had stayed. So had the question.

Karl thought about how many times he had been asked it over the years. You reckon it will work? It never failed to get both men thinking about what the future held in store.

“With some luck, we just might have what we need,” said Karl, looking at the blueprints he had painstakingly drawn up. For years, Karl had designed and built advanced radars for the military. The authority on micro-radar systems, he had written several articles on the subject. Despite his interest in the work, the monotonous years spent grinding away had finally pushed him to his breaking point.

After soldering one of the recently acquired wires into place, Karl pushed the welding goggles up his forehead and looked at Lew. “Ready.”

Lew flipped a switch on the side of the machine and the green screen lit up, emitting a quiet hum throughout the sparse room. He looked up at the ceiling, hoping the jerry-rigged antenna on the roof would work this time. The beam on the screen’s surface quickly moved around in a circle as both Karl and Lew looked at it, quiet, but hopeful. A faint pulse flashed on the screen. Again, the beam circled around, and this time the pulse was stronger.

Karl grabbed a map and began calculating the distance to the blip. He set the pen down and turned to look at Lew.

“Beyond the city. Less than six hours by foot.”

“What is it?”

“I,” he began, unsure of how to answer. “I don’t know.” The darkness in the room made the light from the screen feel brighter as both men stared at the pulsing dot.

“You think someone’s out there?” asked Lew.

“Looks that way. Could be a broken piece of tech, but maybe it’s something else. Something valuable.” Karl couldn’t be sure what the blip was, but like Lew, he was eager to find out. Supplies in the city were running low, and if there was a chance of finding something useful beyond the city limits, the risk could be worth the reward.

“I’ll check it out tomorrow,” he said.

Before Lew could protest, he continued, “It would be foolish for both of us to go. Someone has to stay here and man the fort; keep an eye on all our precious items.”

“Precious,” Lew muttered with a smile, picking up a spark plug from the table. “How silly of me to forget.”

Karl smiled and then looked back at the pulsating light. He closed his eyes. The most important step a man can take is the next one. Tomorrow he would head out, and for better or for worse, find out what exactly was causing the blip.

* * *

Karl woke before dawn and quietly got dressed. He grabbed his utility bag, checked to make sure his knife was strapped to his belt, opened the cellar door, and headed out into the early morning hours.

The minutes turned into hours, and hours turned into discomfort as Karl made his way through the forest. Step over step of rubble, broken glass, and rugged terrain had begun to take its toll on Karl’s worn boots. He had been walking since four in the morning, hoping to avoid the ever-watchful thugs who didn’t believe in the notion of

individual property. The outskirts of town posed the most risk, so Karl twisted his route to ensure his trip out of the city remained unharried. Now, walking through the forest, amidst green trees, wild bushes, and most noticeably, a cleaner sort of quiet, Karl took a deep breath.

He had never gotten out much into nature as an engineer. Projects and deadlines and meetings and drawing boards and bosses in decorated uniforms had kept him busy. He stopped walking and pulled out a map and a compass. The sun was overhead, and from his position on the map, he knew he was close. To what, he wasn't sure, but he felt it. The wind played with his light brown hair and blew across his face.

“State your name and business,” a voice called out. Karl turned toward where it had come from but saw nothing but trees. His hand moved down towards his waist, ready to draw his knife if need be.

“I'm not gonna ask twice!”

“Karl,” he responded. “Saw the blip.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a woman in a white robe and a broad-shouldered man in a black jacket emerge from the surrounding trees. As the woman got closer, Karl noticed her long blonde hair and the way she moved — unhurried, unguarded, nothing like the coiled pace of people in the city.

Standing about a meter from him, her blue eyes fixed on his.

“Why are you here?”

Karl could feel his heart beating but held her gaze. “Saw a blip on my radar. Figured it would be worth checking out. Due diligence and all that.”

The woman stared back with a hint of a smile. How is she so clean? thought Karl. Everyone in the city had a certain grime to them, himself included, but this woman, in her white clothing, was immaculate. He glanced over at the man and saw a gun holstered at his waist.

“And who might you be?” he asked, turning back to her.

Without answering, she said, “What did you do before The Stop?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“You came to us,” she said. “Answer the question.”

“I was a weapons and technical engineer for the military. Missiles, sensors, radar, those sorts of things. And you are?”

“You can call me Arella. Please, follow me.”

“Follow you where exactly?”

“You’re here because of the blip. So let me show you.”

The woman turned and walked back the way she had come. Karl, looking around the forest as if searching for some confirmation that any of this made sense, followed her, with the man falling in behind.

“So, you were part of The Stop?” she asked.

“Well, me and the rest of the world.”

“Not everyone,” she said. “Why did you stop?”

“I don’t think society was happy with where it was going or what it had become. So we took the next step forward. Technologically backward, perhaps, but ideologically forward. Sometimes you have to knock out the wall of your house to get a better view.”

“Yes, but you, Karl — why did you stop?”

He walked for a moment before answering. “I’d spent years building weapons for people I didn’t respect toward ends I didn’t believe in. And outside of work, it wasn’t much better — caught up in the consumption, the class performance, the sense that life was just a series of boxes you ticked for someone else’s benefit. No one is meant to rule over others. People work best when they cooperate freely, not because they’ve been arranged into a hierarchy and told to be grateful for it. I’d become a cog. I wanted

to be a person again.”

“And are you a person again now, Karl?”

“I’m free from the constraints of what society was before The Stop. I took control of my own narrative — freed myself from the version of me that had been built up by years of other people’s expectations. I’m living on my own terms now.”

“Life is transitory.”

He turned to respond but wasn’t sure how. As he hesitated, she stopped walking and gestured ahead. A huge valley unfolded below as the tree line thinned. Green, lush grass with trees that seemed to form a wall around the valley below. In front of them, the scenery appeared to flicker, like a television trying to hold a signal. Arella reached out and grabbed something almost out of mid-air, sliding it to the left. A three-meter hexagonal panel swung open, and then, for the first time since The Stop, Karl heard sounds from a life long ago — sounds he thought he’d never hear again. Cars, people talking on the street, laughter, music. Arella guided him around the panel and through the opening. Karl’s eyes widened.

“What is this?”

“It’s life.”

“It’s a functioning society,” he said, staring at what lay before him. Nothing like the city he had left that morning. Below, a city breathed — clean, moving, almost alive. Huge buildings reached toward the sky, small shops flashed their neon signs, and both people and white tram cars were moving about freely, something that seemed to belong to another world entirely.

“Lost, but not forgotten,” Arella said, looking down at the sprawling city. “Karl, I’d like to ask you a favor, and perhaps I could do you one in return. This panel,” she said, pointing at the hexagon, “is part of a system of sensors that have allowed us to sustain our way of life. But like all things, they need maintenance. Otherwise, our way

of life might be vitiated.”

“What is it you’re asking?”

“Our society has needs. What we’ve created — or rather, continued to maintain — requires constant effort. For some time, we’ve needed a qualified engineer to help keep the shield intact.” She gestured to the giant panels of hexagons that, from the inside, gave a view of the outside world while maintaining their geometric outline.

“You’re offering me a job.”

The phrase landed the same way it had the first time, in a conference room at the Army’s Robotics Division — a salary sheet across the table, someone in a decorated uniform telling him he’d be part of something bigger than himself.

“A few weeks ago we put out the signal, and you’re the only one who had the means to respond. So to answer your question — I’m offering you a chance to be part of something bigger than yourself.”

Karl went still for a moment. Then: “Running water, electricity, transportation, rule of law — I’m guessing those are the selling points?”

“Our society has everything you could want.”

“At what cost?”

Arella smiled. “There will be responsibilities and an agreement to abide by our society’s laws, our system of governance, and our way of life. I understand that choosing The Stop must have felt liberating, even cathartic. But look at your life out there now,” she said, gesturing toward one of the transparent panels. “Is it how you imagined? It all seems a bit futile to me.”

He thought of his small workshop, foraging for food among broken-down buildings, the amenities of life stripped back to almost nothing. He also thought of the feeling of stability he’d had before The Stop — everything locked in place, secure, stable, and suffocating.

“There’s a kind of hope in futility.”

“But is it fulfilling?”

“I’m living the life I want, with no strings attached, no deadlines, no one to answer to but myself.”

“Are you living or surviving?” She knew he had thought about this before, just as many others now “free” on this Earth had thought about it. “I’m offering you an opportunity. You can go back to wherever you came from and continue doing whatever it is you do out there. But if you want something more — a purpose, a life — you can come back here and live under our rules as a member of our society.”

“I could just help you fix the panels and go about my business,” suggested Karl.

“Working with our technology and familiarizing yourself with our first line of protection is too great a risk. You come back to stay, or you don’t come back.”

“Well, I appreciate the offer. It’s a lot to take in. I’d always wondered if there were people who had carried on with the old way of life, but I never thought I’d see it for myself.” He looked at her. “If I ever return, you’ll have my answer.”

Arella nodded. “I know you think of it as sacrificing your values. Think about what you’d be gaining.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Karl as the man in black gestured toward the open hexagonal panel.

“One last thing,” said Arella. “If you ever come back here without intending to stay, life as you know it will cease to exist. We must preserve our way of life and will go to great lengths to do so.”

“Understood.”

“And remember — our history is not our destiny.” Karl nodded once, turned his back on the thriving city, and stepped back into the forest.

* * *

The walk back seemed quicker than the journey out, Karl lost in his thoughts the whole way. What he had seen. What had been offered. What he'd tell Lew. Arella's words kept surfacing: our history is not our destiny.

When he arrived back at the house, he went around back and found Lew crouched over a mess of wires leading into the cellar.

"So, what's out there?" he asked, looking up.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Karl said.

"Let's hear it."

"A job offer."

"A what?"

"I couldn't believe it either. There's a city out there, insulated behind some kind of holo-dome that needs a repairman. A whole functioning society — electricity, cars, money, everything we used to have. Some people, it turns out, never made peace with what happened. Or maybe they're happy with what they've built. Either way, what's out there is nothing more than an idealized version of the life we had before, full of constraints and expectations and statutes."

"I don't want any part of whatever's out there," Lew said.

"I expected as much," said Karl. He looked at the younger man for a moment — the same kid who'd been told his whole life what he was suited for, what path made sense for someone of his abilities. Karl had always thought Lew had made his peace with rejecting all of that. Maybe that was why the answer had come so quickly.

The wind kicked dust up from the street. Karl looked back toward the tree line, thinking about the society under the dome that had refused to stop. Our complete ignorance of what the future held in store might have caught us off guard, he thought,

but at least the choice had been ours.

Be loyal to what matters. He was still working out exactly what that was.

END