

## HUBBERT'S PEAK SNEAK PEEK

Dark clouds covered the skies the next morning but they did not appear to hold any rain. Occasionally a light mist would fall but nothing that would keep James and the boy from reaching Chicago today. He figured their journey would take them most of the day but James again had to remind himself that they were in no hurry. They had nothing but time, especially when he was sure all they would find was a dead and mostly empty city.

After packing up camp and pushing the HC outside, James stood silently and scanned the area. He always liked to do this before starting the bike. The noise from the engine drowned out any other sounds he would have heard otherwise and James liked to know if there were other people nearby.

When he was about to turn and saddle up on the HC, he thought he heard a sound other than the wind. It could be his mind playing tricks on him but the noise sounded a lot like the roar of a crowd. Like at a football game when the home team scores a touchdown, thousands of voices yelling in unison make a distinct sound. James was sure that was what he heard.

After a few more minutes of intent listening, the sound came again. James was sure it was a large crowd of people cheering. He stood looking to the west, where the sound appeared to emanate from, as the mist continued to fall. The low clouds and moisture in the air seemed to muffle the noise somewhat, but James felt confident that what he had heard was people.

"We're going to make a detour." James told the boy as he mounted the bike. "Let's go."

The boy got on behind James and the two sped down the deserted neighborhood street toward the west. The leaves on the trees were beginning to turn colors and many blew along the gray concrete as they drove past. Dark and empty windows of deserted homes flicked by on both sides; neglected and overgrown yards lined the streets reminding James of a time when things like crowds of people were normal, not something quite the opposite.

They came to an intersection where the neighborhood ended and a large commercial property began. Enormous, abandoned shopping centers, strip malls, food plazas and a movie theatre made up the majority of buildings they passed. Most were run down and dirty looking. Many had the windows broken and most had been looted for any type of valuable items. The term "valuable" had taken on a new meaning in the time since James was young. Valuable used to mean something you could sell for a lot of money. Now valuable meant something you could eat or drink without getting sick or dying.

They eventually came upon another major intersection that used to conduct traffic for hundreds of thousands of vehicles each day. Now it sat empty and James brought the HC to a stop and killed the engine. He waited for the crowd to cheer once more so he could get a bearing on their direction. He was not disappointed. After only a minute or two of waiting, the roar came again, this time much closer. It sounded as if the congregation were taking place on just the other side of the shopping center which was north east of their position.

James got off the bike and had the boy do the same. He then pushed the HC into the parking lot. Not wanting to make any more noise with the engine, James coasted the HC into the open doors of a deserted pet store. The smell hit him immediately. James looked around at the cages which held the bones and carcasses of deserted animals, left to starve. Dogs, cats, birds, guinea pigs, hamsters and fish

had all been left to fend for themselves. James thought the smell was enough to deter anyone from entering the pet store and felt that this was an acceptable place to leave the HC. He removed the keys and grabbed his rifle, then set out on foot toward the source of the noise with the boy close behind.

The two walked along the deserted store fronts stepping through trash and broken glass as they went. The crowd had not roared again but James soon realized he could hear the sound a man shouting out, apparently the one responsible for exciting the people who gathered. They reached the end of the stores and crossed the empty street that stood between them and shopping center. The parking lot was half filled with abandoned and rusty vehicles which they weaved through to reach the building.

Now James could hear the voice of the speaker more clearly. It sounded as if he were berating someone in front of the congregation. James heard the man call someone a thief and murderer then said something unintelligible as the crowd roared once more.

James and the boy had now reached the front of the shopping center. They walked on an access road between two stores to reach the crowd. A large concrete pad which allowed semi-trucks to pull in and back up to the loading docks was surrounded by the empty stores. The enclosed area was now filled with hundreds of people. Most of them were adults but James saw an occasional child. All were bony and malnourished looking. Most wore dirty and tattered clothing and some had old shopping carts or wagons which appeared to hold their belongings.

No one paid James and the boy any attention as they joined the crowd and stood listening the speaker. A man dressed in a black business suit which was torn and dirty addressed the crowd from the top of one of the loading docks. He wore a green tie with what appeared to be pineapples scattered across it and a Richard Nixon mask covered his face. His voice echoed off the walls of the surrounding buildings as the man paced and shouted.

On either side of the man in the Nixon mask were two other men. They were bound with rope to support beams which held up a sheet metal roof above the loading dock. Gray tape covered their mouths preventing them from speaking. Both were dressed similar to each other with dirty jeans, tennis shoes and torn and filthy shirts. The men looked as if they had been beaten and both looked terrified. Nixon paced back and forth between the two and talked as if he knew the men personally.

"Is that what you want?" Nixon hollered.

"NO!" replied the crowd.

Nixon walked to his right and pointed at the man who was bound there.

"This man murdered the constable in Evansville and stole all his food."

Nixon then walked to his left and pointed toward the other man.

"And this fine gentleman killed his brother just so he could have more food on his plate each day."

The crowd mumbled words under their breath.

"What's going on here?" James asked a woman who stood nearby.

"It's election day." she told him.

"Election day?" James questioned. What use were elections?

Nixon continued his rant as James and the boy stood in the crowd and looked on.

“The time had come to cast your ballot!” He moved toward the man on his right. Those of you in favor of the Evansville Slayer say aye!”

Many in the crowd shouted their response. James looked around at the people who surrounded him. The looks they held in their eyes were maniacal. Soon the uneasy feeling he was accustomed to returned. Nixon moved to his left and stood near the other man.

“Those in favor of the scum who commits fratricide say aye!”

This time many more spoke up and the response of “AYE!” was much louder.

Nixon raised both arms to the sky and shouted. “Then let it be so!”

The crowd erupted. Men, women and children screamed at the top of their lungs. James and the boy stood silently and watched as Nixon produced a large machete from underneath his jacket. He walked to the captive on his right and cut the ropes free, releasing the Evansville Slayer who scurried off the loading dock and pushed through the crowd, disappearing into one of the buildings. He then walked back to his remaining prisoner and stood behind him. He raised his arms to quiet the crowd. Once they were silent, the man cocked his right arm behind him and swung the machete with full force into the man’s neck, cleanly removing his head from the rest of his torso.

Again the crowd erupted as the man’s head dropped to the ground and rolled a few feet. His torso spit blood into the air then went limp as the man’s heart stopped beating. James stood and looked on in horror as the crowd continued celebrating. Then he remembered the boy. James looked down at him as he stared at the decapitated man. His expression still did not change, even after witnessing a murder.

“Let’s go.” James said as he took the boy’s arm and started walking back the way they had come. The crowd was slowly dispersing and James watched the faces of the people he walked among. They looked as if they had just seen a comedy at a movie theater. People smiled and laughed and joked with each other. He was amazed at what people thought of as entertainment. James could not believe he had just witnessed a murder for the amusement of others.

Rage started to build in James’ gut as he briskly walked across the parking lot toward the pet store where he had stashed his bike. He realized he was gripping the boy’s arm very tight and let go of it without looking at him.

James entered the store and pushed the HC out into the parking lot and started it up, revving the engine loudly. He did not care who heard him and hoped someone would come to investigate and try to take the bike from him. He wanted an excuse to release some of his rage on someone. He motioned for the boy to get on and then tore out of the parking lot, tire squealing and motor roaring. James drove north on the highway for about five minutes while he stewed. Soon he could take it no longer. He exited on an off-ramp and pulled into a long abandoned gas station, shutting the bike off and leaning it on its kickstand before storming over to an open garage door.

James entered the dirty garage bay and kicked over a trash can then picked up a tireless rim and threw it through the plate glass window that separated the shop from the office. He then punched a hole in the in the dry wall with his fist and let out a scream of pent up rage that sounded like a lion’s roar. With his anger spent, he put his back up against the wall and slid down onto his backside, breathing heavily and feeling empty inside.

“What has happened to this world?” James thought as he tried to hold back tears. He dropped his head into his hands desperate to hold on to what was left of his sanity.

“Brendan.” A voice barely louder than a whisper spoke.

James lifted his head from his hands and looked around the dark garage through wet and blurry eyes. He quickly realized it was the boy who had spoken.

“What did you say?” James asked.

“Brendan.” the boy said. “My name is Brendan.”

“Nice to meet you Brendan. I’m James.” he said as he sat on the filthy garage floor amazed that the boy was finally speaking. The boy nodded to James and sat down on the ground across from him then started talking.

“My dad and I lived in Pine Bluff. The food ran out and people started leaving. My dad heard there was food and maybe work in Memphis so we went there a couple months ago. When we couldn’t find food or work Elijah took us in. He fed us just enough to keep us alive. As long as we brought tires to burn. People who had been there awhile told us that he had been making them bring dead bodies to burn. When there were no more corpses he started having people bring tires. Every time you brought in a tire you got a little bowl of food. That’s all we did all day long. Walk and look for tires.”

“Why tires?” James interrupted.

Brendan just shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe he had something against rubber?”

James smile a little at the joke. Then Brendan continued, clearly wanting to get through his story.

“Soon it was almost impossible to find a tire in Memphis. We had to walk to the surrounding towns and haul them back to the city. Sometimes we would bring in three or four and hide them so we could have food for a couple days. If you didn’t hide them well enough someone would steal them.”

He stopped, unsure if he wanted to continue then pushed on.

“One day me and my dad found a car that someone had driven into the river. My dad had a tire iron and he was diving down to the car and trying to get the lug nuts off so he could pull the tire up. He would go down for about a minute then come back up for air, rest a few minutes then do it again.”

Brendan’s eyes started to tear up. James knew what was coming and decided to stay silent and let him finish.

“The current wasn’t that strong and it was only eight or ten feet deep. The water was too murky. I couldn’t see him when he went down. Only when he came back up near the surface.”

Again a pause as Brendan started to cry. Tears rolled down his dirty face as he fought through the emotion. The words were being forced out now but they needed to come out one way or another.

“He just went down and didn’t come back up.” Brendan could hold it no longer and the tears became deep sobs.

“I wanted to go in but I was afraid.....I didn’t know what to do...I waited there for an hour...I’m sorry daddy.”

Now Brendan wept uncontrollably. James was crying now too. He scooted over and put his arms around the boy, trying his best to console him.

“It wasn’t your fault.” James said as he rocked the boy gently.

James held the boy as they both wept for lost loved ones. Outside the garage the wind picked up and drowned out the sounds of their mourning and loss.