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The Last

Mardelle Fortier

The morning sky shone blood red as he walked down the silent city street in the campus ghetto. He walked at a slow pace, weary from swinging the riot baton repeatedly through the night. His shoulder hurt where a perp swung a golf club at him, and the broken shaft tore into his arm. He wore a black police cap, large raid shirt, blue jeans, and his badge swung on a chain from his neck. His name was Ronald Brown, but everyone called him “Ron-Ron” from his cage fighting days. Now, as a cop, he was Ron-Ron with a Gun. Last night’s riot took place as fans poured out of the campus cage fight at about 10:00 p.m. An hour later, the medic wagons were picking up the bodies of the most seriously wounded for the ER; the city didn’t have money to treat the rest.

Ron crossed the street and wondered if Candy was home yet. He heard a screech and two crashes behind him. A car whipped up the street, brakes squealing, and deliberately smashed into a mailbox, knocking it onto the sidewalk, then roared across the center line, plowing into a trash can. The auto slowed as it approached the cop, and two punks began to catcall.

“Ho, pig. Oink, oink.”

“What’s up, copper?”

Ron-Ron pulled up his raid shirt so the punks could see tucked into his pants, the handle of his .45 cal. Eagle automatic. The two gunned their engine and sped down the street.

University kids, Ron thought, probably employed by a megacorp. Not many others could afford the \$50 a gallon gas for the car.

The policeman stopped at a corner grocer, and bought instant coffee, bread, and quick dinners for later. By now, he thought, Candy would be back from the Crazy Babe Lounge, the strip club where she danced. Their apartment was not in bad shape, run down, but with most windows unbroken, and doors with locks that worked.

Ron crossed the street and a girl emerged from an open door at the corner. She was tall, a redhead, and wore a university sweatshirt and white boots. Long bare legs emerged from the shirt. As he approached, she lifted her sweatshirt to reveal black thong panties.

“I got what you need, I got what you want; I make it hot. You got a ten-ner. Maybe ciggies. I got the time!”

She repeated her sing song as the cop passed, grinding her hips and moaning loudly. He thought her pimp must have taught her this speech.

One more block and he reached his apartment. Ron noticed the debris from the porch collapse that took place last week was still in the next door yard. There it will stay, he thought. No one knew how to repair the structure. Only five killed in that incident. Four men and a girl, drinking beer when it fell.

Ron opened the door and placed the groceries on the table. He could hear the shower going, and the TV flashing images of the news. He started to boil water for instant coffee and turned to watch the set. An announcer blared: intense

fighting in both the Mexican and Canadian wars; U.S. troops deployed in both countries. Most young men signed into the global U.S. forces. There were few real jobs. Most were overseas, as robots eliminated the last domestic labor. After Ron Brown's teaching job ended in the massive closings of colleges, he worked for the CIA for awhile, learned cage fighting in Bangkok. Then, after four brutal years of cage fighting in the States, he joined the city's police force. In the city, far from the gated communities of the suburbs, riots exploded most every night. At least, he was armored from head to toe, and carried a high-tech baton that delivered 50,000 volt charges as it cracked bone. Most colleges were bought by megacorps that funded the science labs and athletic programs. It was the local "college" that sponsored last night's cage fight.

A frizzy blonde in white terrycloth robe strolled into the kitchen and they briefly kissed. He winced as she hugged him. Lifting his shirt gently she ran a finger slowly over the long cut from his shoulder down. "Broken golf shaft," he said, "tore right through a gap in my body armor."

"Sometimes," she said, "you'd be safer back in the cage."

"How'd it go last night?" he asked.

She laughed. "Some boy tried to make a grab for me. Zig broke his arm right across his knee." Ziggy, Ron knew, was the 275-pound bouncer, and at least no one else messed with the club's girls.

"I'll fix a sam-wich for ya, hon, and then put something on the scratch."

"Okay." Ron wandered off into the living room and glanced at his bookcase. It was filled with old books from his days teaching English and American literature. There, at the college, he'd met and married his first wife, also a literature professor. She had died a few years before the new treatments of preventative genetics - treatments that had extended his life. She had been more perceptive than he in predicting the collapse of all education, as young people refused to read, refused to work, refused to think. He was glad she was not alive to see the world she had predicted.

Candy brought him a steaming cup of coffee and sat beside him on the sofa. She noticed him glance at the books. "Will you teach me?" she asked. "Teach me the thing you do?" Her eyes implored him.

He would have to, although he knew she would suffer, first from the frustration of learning, then the alienation of being so different. There had been others who couldn't take it. They had left. They fit it, conformed to a world without words.

"Yeah," he replied, "sure."

"Can we now?" she pleaded.

Ron opened a drawer at a table and removed a thin book.

"This is how we start," he said, sitting beside her. "This is Dick. See Dick run. Here is Jane..."

She listened in awe and fascination.