

Zombie

By Seth Russell

Ting, ting, ting. My finger strikes against the alcohol-filled glass set out for my consumption. This one I paid for. I didn't have to. I've downed many which were stolen, stolen by me. I could have leaned on the bar attendant, whipping out my .45 semi-auto. But I slapped a couple of money bills on the counter instead of my Glock. I was in a mood.

Ting, ting, ting. The noise resembles the sharp, high pitched ricochet of bullets as they bounced off steel plates on cars or reinforced bar shutters, burrowing into awaiting skin and muscle, into dads and husbands – purposeless casualties. Yesterday, during a raid at The Leper's Yard, a bar in downtown Reglic, a break-in, to get the free booze. The shutters close as the owner responds with a shotgun. Rinaldo gives us cover fire, not seeing, not caring, for the family trapped in the middle. Ting, ting, ting. Collateral, that's what they were. That's what they need to be. As I sit back, I see the difference. They are collateral only because we declared it. There's a multitude of other titles – unlucky, unfortunate, innocent. But they need to be collateral. I take a sip of my drink to make it make sense.

I glance around the bar. Pitted wood, rusting gold gilding greeting my eyes. The bar divided, thin trenches cut into the once solid, once glamorous marble countertop. An appropriate metaphor for the chaos outside. A city, a nation, ravaged by fighting. They call it a war. I shake my head. War has a beginning. War has an end. War is linear. This is violence. The gun-loving paramilitaries, my own included, the hyper aggressive police acting as judge, jury, and executioners in the streets, all exchanging bullets and knife-thrusts. This is circular. This is cyclical. This is something not even the alcohol can take away.

A rumble in the distance, but not distant enough to keep glasses and bottles from wobbling and shattering. “What was that?” The bartender, crinkled hand running through his wispy ashen hair, revealing a black scar pasted on his scalp, whips his head back and forth.

“Car bomb on 12th street. Belinino’s Book Store.”

“What?”

“Mirkil Volunteer Force,” I clarify, naming the paramilitary organization responsible. “Belinino’s was a known hangout joint for anti-nationalists.”

“It’s a bookstore!” The bartender pauses. “It is. It is a hangout joint for whoever. Not was...”

I look out the glass windows, a luxury as most have been shattered, turned into shrapnel. I can’t see the smoke as the scarred brick sides of the surrounding buildings obscure my view of the opposite side of the city. “Was.”

The bartender swears. “Those monsters. It was a bookstore! Families go there.”

I nod, taking another sip. Families, with fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters, they all visited Belinino’s.

“What monsters target places like that?”

“Not monsters. People.”

The bartender gives me a look. A singular eyebrow is raised while one cheek bunches up. “You’re one of them, aren’t you.”

I take another sip, set my glass down, and respond with a nod. I’m not going to lie. I’ve lied before, lied many times, but I’m not going to today. Maybe it’s booze, maybe it’s weariness, maybe it’s conscience.

“Who you with?”

“To whom have I pledged my allegiance?” I question, and a smirk steals across my complexion. “Mirkil Volunteer Force.”

The old man’s eyes widen. “How can you condone such senseless violence? The targeting of families-”

“We didn’t target them. Our strife is with the anti-nationalistic forces that convene there regularly.”

“But, still, there are innocents in the crossfire.”

“Yeeeah.” My drink is down to half as I take a long swig.

The bartender grunts and begins wiping down the counter, brushing my bills off onto the floor. When I reach down to pick them up, I hear his gruff voice, “Don’t bother son. I don’t want your filthy money.”

“Maybe I don’t either.” Straightening myself, I stretch my neck. Sirens drift through the quiet, an audible reminder of the atrocity downtown.

“Bloody beasts.”

I take another drink. I’m not going to give him the reaction he wants. Instead, I run a finger on the marble. “You mind if I ask a personal question.”

“What is it?”

“How’d you get your scar?” I look up as he rubs the wound.

“These here windows,” he gestures at the glass panes, “weren’t the originals.”

I give a half-smile and finish my beverage. “Who broke them?”

His slumped shoulders heave upwards in a shrug. “How would I know? They’re so many of you.”

I couldn't help but agree. Sure, there are generally two sides, the nationalists and the anti-nationalists, but the number of paramilitary groups along with the police, national militia, and army, make the conflict all the more confusing – twenty-plus voices, all shouting, all killing, trying to win the attention of a city, a nation.

“They broke my windows,” the old man continues, “and smashed my door. Then they stole. They stole everything. And when they left, they said they would leave me alive just so when I built my place back up, they could steal from me again.” He crosses his arm and narrows his eyes at me. I ponder asking him for a refill but decide against it.

“Sounds like a bunch of bullies.”

“I'm looking at one of them.”

I meet the eyes of the bartender. “Yeah.”

“Do you want me to throw you out of here?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want, son?”

I glance at my empty glass, a mirror of myself.

“I ain't giving you anymore.”

I shake my head, eyes closed.

“You lucky I don't kick you out of here.”

“Why don't you?”

His face scrunches, a snarl forming.

I scratch a scar of my own, a line under my chin, an unwanted keepsake from a police baton. “Is it because I've got a Glock .45 in my back pocket?”

The man's stare does not alter. I nod and push my glass away. "I'm not going to pull it out. Go ahead, kick me out. I won't be any trouble."

"Yeah?" He doesn't move. "And why wouldn't you?"

"I don't know. But I won't."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

He leans over, halfway across the divided marble. "What's your play, son?"

"I don't have any. I'm tired. I want a drink but shouldn't."

He nods. "You've got something on your chest?"

I turn to look out the window again. Smoke, fire, and death propel their scent into my nostrils as I imagine the stench smothering the city several blocks away. "There's just so much. It's so loud."

My peripheral vision detects the bartender stroking his wispy mustache. "The killin'?"

"The violence," I clarify. "Broken bones, broken hearts... all of it swirling in the drainage of this city."

"The whole cursed country," he adds.

"Does it make a sound," I ask, still peering into the outside.

"What?"

"When the violence rips your soul away?"

The man stands back up, cricking his back. "Son, I'm an old man. You're going to have to do better than riddles for me to catch on."

I wave towards the windows. "Out there, it's called a war. A religious war or a patriots war, it doesn't matter. When did it become sentient? When did it become alive?" No comment

from the other, so I continue. "Thirty years its been. And its been feeding on souls ever since. Belinino's just fed it five more. Two more will probably follow from hospital beds. Forty more are scarred for life."

"You know these numbers are fact?"

I shake my head. "I'm twenty-six. I'm young. I shouldn't have enough experience to estimate pretty well. But I do."

More silence.

"For thirty years it's been feasting on us, stealing away childhoods, desecrating sacred constructs of nature, of God. And it might as well go on for another thirty. Heh, just go on for another sixty!" I turn back to the bartender. "I'd like that drink now."

His countenance is fallen, cheeks sagging off their bones. "You've go no fight in you, do'ya son?"

"There's plenty more to go around. I quit, a hundred young punks will pick up the gun where I drop it."

"What about those families caught in the midst of it?"

"Collateral." I wince as I say the word. "And I'd like a drink please."

He picks up the glass, looking at the crystalline pattern on the bottom. "Maybe. But you ever wonder who fights for them?"

"Fights for who?"

"The collateral."

"I'd really like that drink now."

"I know. But give an old fool his turn. Ever wonder if in all the sects goin' at it, why isn't there a crusader looking out for them?"

I shrug my shoulders. “There’s plenty who have tried. They’ve all fallen away, taken up some sort of agenda. It never stays pure.”

“Right. But they’ve been all eager to fight. What about someone like you?”

I itch my neck. “What about me?”

“You’re tired of fighting. Those “collateral” are too.”

“What, so I go gung-ho on suicide mission? I go against the system and the system puts me down and watches as everybody else clambers on top of my remains to scavenge my gear to further fuel the violence?” I look out to the outside. “It won’t make a difference. It would be my suicide, which I guess is something for me, but it wouldn’t do anything for anyone else. It’s all too big.”

“You don’t get it do’ya.” The old man wags his finger at me. “It’s not about you. It’s not even about them. It’s about showing the next guy what can happen. It’s about showing those braindead zombies that there’s another option to eating each other. All you’re trying to do is to motivate another guy to start lookin’ out for the little people. Then he does what you did, just to show the next guy. Then, like you say, this all goes on for thirty years, all bunching up, the number of tired people growing and seeing the third option. Soon, it snowballs into something that really can make an impact.” He jabs his crooked and crinkled finger at me. “But it starts with you. What are you going to do?”

A snort explodes from my nostrils. “That’s it, huh. Go out and show everybody, get filled with lead so somebody looking on will be motivated do be like me? Nah, all he’ll see is a bloody corpse, a lunatic with a death wish. Not exactly charismatic material.”

“But you tried something. And it’ll linger in his mind, gnawing at him.” The old man smirks, lifting his hands up. “What, you think you’re the only one thinking like this, hearing crazy stuff like this?”

Ting, ting, ting. He taps the empty glass. My gaze darts to its shimmering body, sparkling in the sunlight. Reflected beams spill across the broken marble. A little light in the madness. A little light in the dark. A breath of life among the zombies. A worthy life; a worthy death.