

## Chalice Hold

By Andrew Sweeney

Two wide ditches ran along either side of the highway. It had rained so much in the previous three days that both were nearly overflowing, and I could see the moving water's surface reflect the light blue-gray of the cloud scattered sky from any point on the abandoned pavement. It was almost seven AM on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of April. The first part of the morning had been dark with the slow, heavy rain that characterized the past month, but the last hour had broken up the clouds and the sun now shone between them. I walked along the asphalt in search of a single exit ramp. Every other step knocked loose some piece of concrete and sent it flying. The road was in pathetic condition; there probably hadn't been anyone on it in several years. Congress had long since declared these old roads condemned and made their use a crime, but they never thought it useful to send someone to patrol them. I had encountered no one since leaving Pittsburgh, a full two days before. The wind pushed against me, and the seventy degree weather seemed a bit cooler.

I eventually came to the exit ramp I had been searching for: a single green sign, leaning at a forty-five degree angle with its lettering masked by black spray paint. I turned to the right and headed up the slight incline. At the top of the hill I turned to my left to cross an overpass which lay above the highway. After almost a hundred feet, I was between the abandoned buildings of a small town. I knew its name. Very few who were still alive did. Among the first structures I came across was a brick convenience store with an unlocked door. It was dark inside,

but light still entered between the planks of wood that barred the windows. Bare metal shelves with old coats of off-white paint stood at odd angles. Wires hung from what had been a drop ceiling, the tiles now ripped and rotting. I took a seat on the top of a long counter that stretched in front of the door. I inhaled and closed my eyes. Breathing out, I placed my face in my hands and leaned forward, resting my elbows just above my knees. A few minutes passed and the door opened again.

I raised my head. In front of the door way stood a tall black man with shallow cheeks and long limbs. It appeared as though it was my turn to speak. “Did you come alone, Anderson?”

He smiled. “Do you think I did?”

I dismounted the counter and approached him. “I hope you did.”

He chuckled and relaxed his posture. “So, why am I here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Anderson turned his head from side to side, looking at the bare shelves and cracked walls. “So we’re ghost hunting?”

I glanced towards the decaying ceiling, then towards a boarded window beside Anderson. I was eye level with a single rectangle of light filtering through the space between boards. It was a thin strip of blue interrupted only by the dark green of a far off tree. “You could certainly say that.”

“That’s good, because ghosts are the only goddamn thing you’re gonna find here.”

We left the store and continued down the road. We were on the southern edge of what had been a town of 4000. The southern half had mostly been residences, with a few service stations scattered near the outskirts. The north half was mostly businesses. Now they were all decrepit buildings. The neglected structures were in various states of collapse, some just piles and others

still livable. They were all empty, though. We stayed on the street that the convenience store had been on and headed north, away from the highway. Anderson walked with his hands stuffed in his jacket and let his eyes shift warily back and forth. His right hand left his pocket, and in it was a crumpled piece of pink paper. He stared at it for a moment.

“So, you go to all the trouble of getting an untraceable, non-electronic message to me from the other side of this dead-ass country... and all you wanted to do was trek through a ghost town?” The pink paper was still in his hand, pressed between his finger and thumb.

“Mostly. Speaking of,” I nodded towards his hand and the paper it held. “Did Terry get that to you on time?”

He scoffed and leaned his head back, looking towards the sky in mock exasperation. “Hell no he didn’t, got it to me three days late. Which means I had to get here three days quicker.” Holding the note in front of his eyes, he read aloud “I-80 east to 219, 219 north to 6, 6 east to the land between the pines. Exit ramp, north, Sinclair.”

I was never convinced that Anderson would see the note, much less understand it. I hadn’t even been sure that there was anything left to indicate that the old convenience store was once a Sinclair station. “I’m surprised you ever got it. And I’m surprised that you... got it.”

Anderson’s mouth was pulled up at the corners by a momentary smile, but it quickly dissolved. “Yeah, I got it, and I even managed to get it. Now, where the hell are we going?”

“Hospital.”

Anderson’s face betrayed a moment of surprise. “Now, when you say hospital, I assume you mean a big empty building with some old medical waste and skeletal corpses inside, right?”

I smiled, it was hard not to.

“So tell me, what inside this hospital do you find so interesting?”

“If everything goes to plan, my medical record.”

Anderson stopped walking, and looked at me with raised eye brows. Pointing emphatically at the ground, he said, “So this is it. THIS-” he threw his arms out as if to encompass the whole town- “is Chalice Hold, Pennsylvania. Population zero, unless you count the two idiots strolling in. This is the place you told me about in prison?” He stared at me with wide eyes and let his arms hang straight out on either side.

“Yeah, this is it.” He looked around as we walked, mostly speechless. I couldn’t tell if he was impressed or disappointed.

The sun was now higher in the sky and the clouds had further dissipated. The weather was beautiful, but without a single pair of living eyes to reflect the sunlight, the surrounding buildings were only ruins. We had made our way into the residential neighborhood and were now surrounded by crumbling houses with dusty, usually broken into SUVs and sedans in front and along the street.

Anderson had been silently scratching his head for a few minutes. He finally spoke, “So, let’s just say, for the sake of your stupid argument, that you do find your medical records.”

“Ok. We can say that.”

He sighed. “Alright... so, you find your medical records, and you’re ecstatic that they weren’t destroyed in a fire or confiscated by the government and incinerated or found by a bunch of marines during the Purge and used to start a fire... basically, you’re motherfuckin’ glad this thing isn’t carbon.”

“Uh... ok.” I was still following him, although I wasn’t sure how important the fire thing was. I tried not to focus on it.

“So, you find your records and your parents’ records, too. You find out that your dad

couldn't eat fish and your mom was at risk for type-two diabetes. Your birth took 27 hours. Oh, and there's a detail somewhere on the sheet that reveals why you were immune to the Purge. Is that more or less what you're expecting?" His voice was not malevolent, nor was it condescending. It was merely tinged with the gentle sarcasm reserved for those that must be told what they should already know.

"No, not quite."

"Let's just say, then, that your whole DNA sequence is mapped out on a sheet of paper in your record. You and I aren't scientists, Brett. Eighty percent of the population is gone, and that means that eighty percent of anyone who could've read a DNA sequence is gone. And all the poor people who could have determined anything about the Purge are gone. And you already know that."

I shrugged and looked down the narrow street of houses because I didn't want to look at him. "You're right, I do know that."

"So why are we here? Or at least, why am I here?"

I stopped walking. "I used to have an uncle, his name was Peter. He was my dad's brother, 'died before the Purge.'"

"Lucky."

"Yeah... anyways, he used to tell me the most important answers were found in hospitals. And he always told me that my answers would always be in Chalice Hold." I had said that only to myself, and it sounded pretty stupid out loud. "I've been thinking about it a lot, and I decided that I needed to find out what he meant."

Anderson stared blankly and started walking again. "Brett, I'll be honest with you. I'm pretty sure 'the most important answers are in hospitals...' just sounds like some practical-ass

advice someone may give their nephew. And ‘your answer is always gonna be in Chalice Hold’? Of course it is; it’s your hometown. You don’t really think your uncle had some precognitive episode that inspired him to offer two pieces of cryptic advice that would help you fix the future, do you?”

“No, I don’t think that.” I really didn’t. “But I think he meant something. I don’t expect to fix all this, or bring any of the dead back... we’ve all given up on that. But I want to do this. There’s something in that hospital.”

Anderson shrugged and sighed. “Alright, I’m here now, so let’s do this.”

We were less than half a mile from the hospital. We had been in the north business district for several minutes before it came into view, a large complex of smaller buildings, most of them brick. Although we hadn’t spoken since my explanation, we sensed one another’s apprehension. The northern half of town was more haggard than the residential sections. There were countless vehicles that appeared to have run into buildings. More than one huge sign lay across the streets and on top of crashed cars.

“Most everywhere is pretty messed up these days,” said Anderson, startling me, “But this place is a special kind of messed up.”

“Yeah... Chalice Hold got hit pretty hard and pretty early by the Purge. People were dropping in the streets, dying in cars and driving into shit. It all happened right before I got arrested the first time.” We had stopped on the street, staring at two cars that appeared to have crashed into each other and then into a store front.

“For stealing that gun?” His voice rang slightly of the urge to provoke a familiar reaction.

“I didn’t steal a gun, I got set up.”

“Yeah, I didn’t rob that woman in Montreal, I got set up too. Good thing you and I got set

up and met each other in prison, huh?”

I looked at Anderson beside me and turned away from our distraction. “Yep.” I started walking, and I heard my companion’s steps following mine.

His voice called out from somewhere behind me. “Of course, when you got there, the Purge really hit the institutionalized population. Two days after you showed up, three hundred were already dead. You barely even got to see what prison life is really like.”

We had reached the hospital. The front lobby’s glass doors were smashed out, so we stepped through and walked towards the main desk. It was dark inside, despite the sun and the mostly shattered windows. The building smelt like mold. Behind the front counter were three closed doors. The first one we tried led to a small bathroom, the second led to a hallway connected to several exam rooms. The third was locked, but the wood around the knob was peeling and rotting. One good shove and the door swung open, bits of wooden fragments and dust falling from around the frame. I walked in quickly, Anderson followed. We found ourselves surrounded on four sides by shelves stacked with yellow paper folders.

“Well,” started Anderson, “help yourself.”

I found my mother’s record first. Veronica Nunez, age 58 as of her last appointment. Nothing unusual, a few operations I vaguely remember her undergoing. Nothing about my birth. She had one appointment in 2001 and one in 2003, nothing for 2002, the year I was born. I found my file next to hers. Along the side of the upper tab, it read “Robert B. Nunez.” I tore open the thin folder. I was silent for several minutes.

Anderson soon poked his head back into the tiny room. “Are you alright? Found the secrets of the universe yet? Find anything yet?”

“Well...” my voice was shaky, although I didn’t notice at the time. “As it turns out, I’m

adopted.”

Anderson, unimpressed, stared. “So I came all this way just to find out that you’re adopted? And that’s the answer your uncle hid for ya at the hospital?”

“I... I guess.”

“Who are your real parents?”

“Doesn’t say.”

“Well, shit. What’s your real name?”

“Purge Initiation Prospect number 216.”

“...Oh.”