

FADING MAN

Jeffrey Aaron Miller





Joe Mund has memories of a place he's never been, a beautiful city called Verum set against the backdrop of a lush green forest. For years, he has sought this place, his troubled wife, Eleanor, at his side. At last, his journey has brought him to Tockland, the ruins of a once-great empire where dangerous, plague-ridden scadglings roam the dusty landscape. Joe is closer to his destination than ever, but unwittingly finds himself caught up in a long-simmering conflict between scadglings and the human scavengers who call the ruins home. The last miles of his journey are filled with peril for, in Tockland, there are many secrets beneath the earth, waiting to be revealed...

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Dedication

For Mr. Perry, who kept the legend alive.

Chapter One

Admiral Vinegaroon

“THERE’S NOTHING YOU CAN DO for her,” Eleanor said, bent over, her hand resting on his shoulder. “It’s the water. The sickness is in the ground water, that’s what they told us. She must’ve gotten into a puddle along the way.”

Joe ran his hand along the dog’s side, feeling ribs through paper-thin flesh and muddy fur.

“No, I was careful,” he said. “I only let her drink from the canteen. I had my eye on her the whole time.”

“Well, then she ate something rotten or...I don’t know. Look around. There must be a thousand things that can kill an animal in this place.”

He felt the dog’s chest rise and fall one last time, the breath entering her lungs like water forced through coarse cloth. Her left eye opened briefly, moved around a bit, and closed again. The last breath came out like a sigh.

“I was so careful.”

He rose, forcing Eleanor back. The dog was lying in a shallow ditch beside the highway, a bit of foamy saliva caught between her lips. Joe gave the animal one last look.

“I never even gave her a name,” he said. “I should have given her a name. She was the best dog we ever had, and she deserved to be called something.”

“She was cared for,” Eleanor said. “That’s enough. It’s better than a name.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right.”

He gazed east, watching a small dust devil move down the highway. Endless hills stretched out to the horizon on either side of the road, hills covered in patchy yellow weeds. He saw buildings nestled beside a very large and very old concrete wall in the distance, a thin trail of black smoke rising into the sky from their midst. Another rundown, ramshackle town.

Eleanor stepped in his way and forced eye contact. Her short black hair blew across her face like a tattered veil, hiding sunburned cheeks and pale eyes, a forehead lined with worry. Her gray shirt, salvaged from some old warehouse, was coated with dirt and threadbare at the elbows. Joe forced a

smile, trying to be reassuring, trying not to infect her with the anxiety gnawing at his guts, but she didn't return it.

"Maybe it's best if we avoid picking up any more strays," she said.

"Why?"

"Because no good comes of it. They only make you sad in the end."

"Some of them are abandoned pets," he said. "They don't know how to be on their own."

"It's not your job to fix it," she said. "It's your job to keep marching down the road until we get to the next safe place."

He opened his mouth to protest then thought better of it. He forced his lips together, nodded, and stooped down to retrieve his backpack.

"Best get going so we can reach the town before sunset," he said softly, sliding the straps over his shoulders.

She nodded, adjusted the single strap of her satchel and turned, stepping out of the ditch. The road was hard-packed dirt speckled with bits of old asphalt, deep ruts carved down the middle of the lanes by wagon wheels. At the moment, there was no other traffic on the road. Joe cursed himself one last time for his carelessness and started after Eleanor. As they resumed their endless slog down the broken highway, stumbling in pits and cracks, he felt an oppressive gloom gathering in his mind. Secret memories struggled to rise from the deep places where he'd buried them.

He saw a cabin set against a wooded backdrop, heavy black curtains drawn over small windows, a fat silver car parked at an angle across the driveway. He saw an old woman, hair as white as cotton, seated at a big chair in the kitchen, her forearms resting on the shiny tabletop. She had tired eyes, and she was watching him, coolly watching him.

"What are you thinking about?"

Eleanor's voice broke him out of the fog of memory. He blinked, sniffed and shook his head to dislodge the last vestiges of that other place.

"Doesn't matter," he said.

"Not the dog," she said.

"No. But it doesn't matter."

She narrowed her eyes, appraising him, then pursed her lips and looked away. He rarely spoke to her about the secret memories and even when he did, he said very little. She knew about them, of course, and she knew the name of their destination, but not much more. It felt awkward to describe them out loud, embarrassing, like stripping off his clothes and even his own skin, so he kept them buried in safe places deep in his mind. First there was the cabin and the white-haired woman. Beneath that was the big house with

the marble stairs, the man in the black suit on the landing. And beneath that—ah, something was beneath that, but he hadn't dug deep enough to find out what it was. He didn't even know how to get down there.

"Everything will be better when we get to Verum?" Eleanor said, a question she had asked a thousand times. The question, his answer, and her response were rote.

"Yes."

"You promise?"

"As much as I can."

She gave him a sideways glance, considering his answer, considering his sincerity perhaps, and dared a smile. "If it has one real bed with real blankets, *clean* blankets, it'll be enough for me. I don't need nice food or air conditioning, reliable electricity or insulated walls. All I need from Verum is a comfortable bed. No more sleeping on cots, hard floors, or the dirt."

"I'm sure there will be comfortable beds," he said. "Beds and couches and plush carpets. Just wait and see."

Of course, he didn't know what Verum would have, not really. He didn't know which of his memories connected to the name. He only had a sense of it. Saying the name in his mind eased the constant anxiety that rested between his heart and stomach like an exposed wire. Yes, it was something good. That much he knew. That much and little else.

They walked for a while, passing little clusters of rubble here and there. Ahead, on the left, a large intact brick wall sat on the edge of a cracked concrete foundation. A sign that might once have hung above the door rested on the ground beneath the wall, but the paint had so faded that only fragments of a couple of letters were discernible.

"This part of the world must have been full of cities before it all went to hell," Eleanor said. "There's no end to broken buildings in every direction."

"Yeah." He was half-listening, still lingering in wordless memories of another life.

"Was it the fall of Tockland?" she said. "Is that what brought it all about? Or was it the plague before that?"

"Not sure," Joe replied. "Maybe both."

"Or maybe there never was a Tockland, and maybe there never was a plague. I have no memories of either one. Maybe they are all lies people made up because nobody really knows why the world is like this."

"I suppose it's possible. Anything is possible." But he felt a twinge of terror at the thought. Somebody had to know something about the nature of the world. He couldn't carry these memories around forever unexplained. He

had to understand the cabin, the old woman, the sweep of the grand stairs, lush red carpet and flickering golden light. He couldn't imagine a future where those things didn't finally make sense, where his life, his memories, his own being didn't finally make sense.

As they passed alongside the brick wall, Joe caught a hint of some sound, whispers swept over the road by the wind. Eleanor seemed to have heard it as well, for she took a stumbling step and glanced at the wall. Where an old window had crumbled out of its place, a large opening remained, elongated and crooked like a gaping mouth. A shadow passed by, and Eleanor, startled, lurched to the side and bumped into Joe.

"Gun," she muttered. "Gun."

Joe just started to slide the backpack off his shoulders when the first man appeared. He was tall and thin, long black dreadlocks spilling out from under a loose knit cap. He wore what appeared to be a very crude attempt at a uniform, a green suit jacket with scraps of metal pinned to the breast, ribbons stitched on top of the shoulders, copper wire wrapped around the ends of the sleeves. His pants were frayed corduroy, over which he had on a long pair of scuffed leather boots.

"Greetings, my good travelers," he said in a voice that was surprisingly soft and even musical. But one hand was in his pocket, and the other was tucked behind his back. "Headed east, I see, and along my very own highway."

As he was speaking, the second man appeared, fat and pink-cheeked and sweating, a baseball cap on his head. He, too, wore a crude uniform, a blue jacket with cheap pseudo-medals, though he'd had to leave it unbuttoned to give his prodigious gut room to distend.

On his heels came a third man, hunched, hulking, a heavy brow shading dark eyes, a nose like a mutilated turnip over thick lips and a scruffy, leathery chin. Greasy tangles of reddish hair hung in his eyes, but his uniform was an old tuxedo jacket, shirtless underneath, the sleeves rolled up past his elbows, with a bright four-pointed silver star pinned to the collar.

"Allow me to introduce myself and my compatriots here," the first man said. He brought his hand out from behind his back, revealing a large rusted machete. He used it to gesture down the line. "As for me, I call myself Admiral Vinegaroon, and I collect the tolls on this here road. No one passes by without my express permission, you see, because it's my road and my land and my everything."

As he spoke, he stepped over the ditch onto the highway. Joe's backpack finally slipped off his shoulders and landed on the road behind him. Eleanor

was breathing heavily, still leaning against him, her cheek pressed to his shoulder.

“This portly fellow beside me is the one we call Captain Budgie,” Vinegaroon continued, gesturing with the machete. “He’s my second-in-command, if you will. And beside him is none other than Lieutenant Greem. Or, at least, that’s what we call him now. He never laid claim to a name, to be honest, so he never had to throw one away like the rest of us.”

When the Admiral finally paused for a few seconds, Joe cleared his throat and tried to respond. “Look, gentlemen, we’re just passing by. In a hurry, actually. We don’t have time to sort out local...”

Lieutenant Greem now brought his hands out from behind him, and Joe saw that he had a bright red crowbar clutched in one fist. He flashed yellow teeth and brandished the crowbar in front of him. At this, fat Captain Budgie laughed and pulled a hand out of his jacket pocket, revealing a long black blade.

“I just told you, sir,” the Admiral said. “We collect the toll on the highway. Now, we would be remiss in our duties if we let you just pass on by.”

Eleanor’s breathing was getting louder in his ear, becoming a kind of animal growl. He recognized it as the sound of mounting panic, and he knew he had to defuse the situation quickly.

“Very well,” he said. “We’ll pay the toll. Name your price. We don’t have a lot of money, but we’ve got some food, some tools, extra clothes, that sort of thing. Let’s be quick about it, please, so we can be on our way.”

Admiral Vinegaroon tossed his head back and laughed at the sky, but it was a laugh half-forced. For some reason that sparked a fire in Joe’s belly. “*Name the price*, he says. The price is all of your worldly possessions, but we’ll let you keep the clothes on your backs as an act of civility. Now, just you toss those packs over here, both of you.”

Eleanor took a long shaky breath and held it a moment. Then she let it out in a rush right in Joe’s ear, causing him to flinch. At this, Lieutenant Greem raised the crowbar and hopped the ditch, landing on the road.

“You see, my faithful lieutenant here doesn’t like tricks,” the Admiral said, resting the machete on its side over his shoulder. “Just toss the packs here at my feet, and we’ll let you keep on walking. Otherwise, there are penalties to pay, strangers.”

“They got no intention of paying,” Greem said. “Look at that dame there. I’m thinking they must be carrying something real nice, and they don’t want

us to know about it. Maybe medicines. Maybe weapons. One way to find out.”

“No, sir,” Joe said. “Just ordinary stuff. Supplies for the road. I’ll hand it over, and you can see for yourself. Hold on.”

He started to stoop down to get his backpack, but Eleanor’s fingers clamped down on his shoulder. She leaned in close and whispered in his ear.

“They won’t let us pass and you know it,” she said. “They’ll try to take me. I can see it in their eyes. I don’t like these kind of men, rough men. Kill them quick.”

Greem took another step toward them. “Here now, what’s she saying? Admiral, let me have ‘em.”

“You two are making my good lieutenant here awfully twitchy,” the Admiral said. “I don’t know how long I can hold him back. Now you quit your whispering and hand over the packs.”

Joe pulled Eleanor’s hand off his shoulder and grabbed his backpack off the ground. She pulled the strap of her satchel over her head, gathered it up in her hands and thrust it out in front of her.

“Here you go,” Joe said, standing up and holding his pack out. “Take them. Just let us go.”

Greem glanced at the Admiral, and the Admiral nodded. Greem ran his forearm across his nose, sniffed, and came toward them. As he approached, Joe looked at Eleanor. She had a steely expression on her face, a dullness in her eyes, as if the whole affair had suddenly bored her. But her satchel was shaking in her grasp.

Greem approached her first, held the crowbar in one hand and reached out with the other. In the last quiet moment, Joe realized one of Eleanor’s hands was not visible. Her left hand was clutching the shoulder strap of her satchel, but the right hand had slipped inside a small pocket.

“Pretty lady,” Greem said. “Give it here.”

And he took hold of the satchel.

At the moment his fumbling fingers grabbed the strap, there was a violent and thunderous boom. The satchel lurched, and Greem spun to one side, his face contorting in surprise and pain. The crowbar dropped from his hand and clattered on broken pieces of asphalt, and Eleanor stumbled backward, her pistol revealed. It was a snub-nosed .38, ancient and coated in grime.

“She got me,” Greem said, his left hand fumbling at his arm. “She got me good.”

Joe saw blood spilling through Greem's fingers as he stumbled away. The Admiral bared his teeth, took the machete in both hands and sprinted toward them. Captain Budgie was a step behind, smashing his hat against his head and raising the black knife above his shoulder.

"Get the gun," Admiral Vinegaroon shouted. "We need the gun."

Joe heard the click of Eleanor's pistol as she tried to fire again. She was out of bullets. Frantic, shaking, Joe yanked open a pocket on his backpack and shoved his hand inside. He felt the cold metal of his own gun, but he struggled to take hold of it.

The Admiral shoved Greem aside, and Greem went down on his hands and knees. Blood ran freely down his forearm and dripped onto the broken highway. Joe saw swaying dreadlocks out of the corner of his eye, the swish-swish of a large, rusty machete blade moving back and forth.

"I'm gonna cut their heads off, that's what I'm gonna do," the Admiral said. "Put 'em on spikes to warn any other upworlders who try to defy us."

Joe let go of his backpack and let it fall, the gun slipping out of the pocket. It was a sleek, black pistol, a modified Beretta 92 with a full 17-round magazine. It was old, but he kept it in good shape. However, it had never been fired outside of a shooting range. He pulled the trigger, but the slide-mounted safety was on. He fumbled with his thumb, trying to find it. He knew damn well where it was, but in his panicked state everything had become confusing.

Vinegaroon was only two strides away, and the machete was within striking distance. Eleanor had disappeared somewhere behind Joe. But the Admiral spotted the Beretta, and he came to a sudden stop, flailing his arms as if to fly away.

"Another gun," he said. "Surprise, surprise! No, not like this. Not today."

And with that, the Admiral spun around and ran away. He slammed right into Captain Budgie but managed to catch the shorter man by the shoulders and forcibly turn him. Greem was on his knees, clutching his arm just above the elbow and rocking from side to side.

"Get them," Eleanor shouted from somewhere out of sight. "Get them all, Joe. Quick. Quick!"

He finally got the safety off, and the gun immediately went off. The bang was deafening, and the gun jumped in his hand. Vinegaroon and Budgie leapt the ditch and dashed toward the wall. Joe couldn't tell if either of them had been hit.

"Again," Eleanor shouted. "Don't let them get away. They'll come back."

But Joe was struggling not to drop the gun. He got both hands on it and pointed it at the wall, just as Vinegaroon and Budgie disappeared around the corner. Joe pulled the trigger, and the crack of the report deafened him even further. Eleanor continued shouting, but her voice was muffled, a hint of sound coming from very far away. The bullet pinged off a broken edge of the wall, shattering an old brick into powder.

Greem gave a loud cry and turned, grabbing the crowbar. Then he lunged to his feet and came at Joe. His left arm hung, limp and useless, at his side, long rivulets of blood winding down the forearm and pooling in his fist. The button holding his tuxedo jacket snapped off and went spinning across the road, and the jacket flapped open. Joe caught a glimpse of a deformed stomach covered in strange warty growths.

“Pigs and dogs,” Greem shouted. “Pigs and dogs. Put ‘em all down.”

He brought the crowbar up, but Joe leveled the pistol at him, shut his eyes and pulled the trigger. He anticipated the moment of impact, tensing, but it never came. When he opened his eyes, Greem was on the ground at his feet, bent over as if he were paying homage to a king, his forehead pressed into a crevice between two lumps of asphalt.

Joe backed away, feeling the warm steel against his palm and smelling gunpowder in his nostrils. Slowly, Greem tipped to one side and fell over, his eyes open but glassy, a pool of blood spreading beneath him from a very small hole on the left side of his chest.

Feeling sick to his stomach, Joe stooped down and retrieved his backpack.

“I didn’t want to do it,” he said, his own voice muffled by the ringing in his ears. “They forced me to do it. I tried to resolve things peacefully. I tried.”

Eleanor stepped up beside him, wide-eyed and panting. When Joe started to put his gun back into the pocket, she shook her head and laid a hand on his wrist.

“The others are behind the wall,” she said. “Have to go after them, or they’ll follow us, wait until nightfall and get their revenge.”

With a sigh, Joe nodded and passed the backpack to her. He stepped around the body of Greem, thrust the gun out in front of him, and dashed across the road, hopping over the shallow ditch. He pressed himself up against the wall, waiting for some of his hearing to return, but the only sounds that came to him were the sigh of wind through rubble and the loud, panicked breathing of Eleanor. Finally, he swung around the edge of the wall, raising the pistol.

He saw no sign of Vinegaroon or Budgie. On the other side of the wall sat the old, cracked foundation slab. Beyond it, a sea of weedy wasteland stretching out to the horizon.

“Gone,” he said. “They’re gone.”

“Gone? How is that possible?”

“Not sure. It’s like they vanished into thin air.”

But a gust of wind caused motion near the wall, and it drew his eye. What had appeared to be a large crack was actually an opening in the foundation, a thin door raised and propped against the wall. He crept up close and dared to peek over the edge. The hole had been crudely chiseled into the concrete, the door affixed to one side by salvaged rust-speckled hinges. The hole was deep and dark, dropping beneath the foundation seemingly forever. A knotted rope hung from an iron hook, and he thought he saw it shake, as if someone were still climbing down.

He reached out and grabbed the edge of the door, tipping it over until it fell shut with a bang. When he turned around, Eleanor was standing at the broken edge of the wall, her pistol in one hand, his pack in the other.

“They went down into some kind of tunnel,” he said.

“We have to go after them,” she said. “They won’t forget. If we let them escape, they’ll come back. Rough men like that, you know what they’re like as much as I do.”

“I’m not climbing down there,” he said. “It’s completely dark. There’s no telling how far down it goes, or what I might run into.”

“Those kind of men are all the same,” she said. “You know they won’t let it go.” And he saw by the look on her face, the distance in her eyes, that her mind was drifting away, falling into bad places.

“We’ll cover the door with heavy stones,” he said.

But she didn’t seem to hear him. Some bad place in a corner of her mind had taken hold of her. He took the backpack from her hand, slid his pistol into its pocket, and went to look for stones. She would just have to come back out of the darkness in her own good time. That’s how it always went.



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