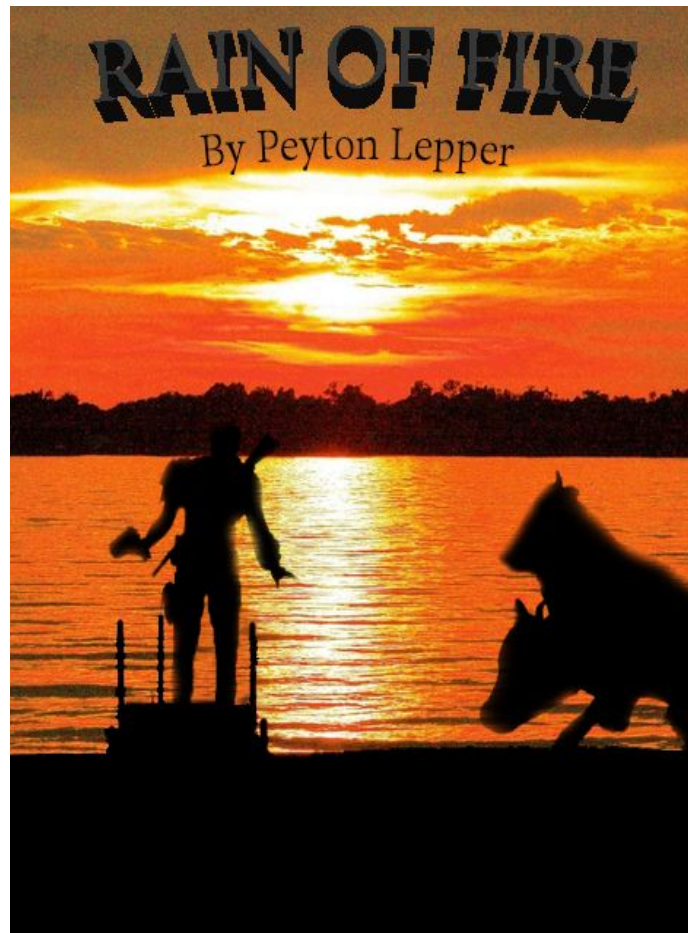


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Mrs. Rutan

Creative Writing

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Rain of Fire

By Peyton Lepper

Chapter 1

When he awoke, nothing in the room seemed familiar to him. Beams of light shone through the dust covered blinds on the window. The smell and taste of the air could only be described as death--and decay. Rick Jameson (or Rick Jäger, as he was sometimes called) sat up on the dirty beat-to-hell mattress and looked at the spinning room around him. Scattered on

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the floor were empty bottles, some whiskey, some rum, and some vodka. They helped him come to the conclusion that this was the reason the room felt so new.

Once out of bed, Rick looked through the gaps in the window shades. He winced in agony as the light penetrated his pupils, and the hangover revealed itself. A splitting headache attacked his forehead, and he decided to check his bag for a commodity, iBuprofen.

He picked his heavy knapsack off of the ground, and spilled its contents onto the mattress. A plethora of ten millimeter rounds, and a ten millimeter pistol to match, a few .308 rounds that he had been collecting for no apparent reason, some cans of beans, some water bottles, and of course, a white pill bottle he had picked up a few days prior. He hadn't read the label until now.

"Flintstones... Vitamins... *God dammit.*"

He scratched his beard, and rubbed his eyes again before putting his things back into his bag, and slinging it onto his back. He took a last glance around the room. In the corner there was a 308. caliber hunting rifle, fit with a scope, silencer, and even a strap; he slung it over his shoulder. Bottles clanked together as he made his way to the door of the room. He pushed it open. Or at least he tried, but it was a pull door.

He trudged down the stairs, a head-splitting pain overcoming him with each step. Finally he reached the lobby. Through the window, he could see the world he called home. The sky was a dark blue-ish gray. He walked to the door and pulled it open, unprepared for the grim scene in the parking lot.

When he walked outside, a gentle breeze rustled his wiry black hair. The stench of iron and the sound of flies overtook his senses. Right in front of him lay a body with three holes in it, and what appeared to be many fractures from a long fall. Two bodies lay throughout the parking lot, dried pools of blood surrounding their heads. To his left, he could see char marks on the ground, indicating that something had exploded here. There was also more blood spattered onto nearby cars and the ground. The events of the previous day began to flood Rick's mind.

"They're at the Holiday Inn, just south of here," the old and frail man told Rick, "There's probably around ten of'em. Not sure what they got as far as firepower, but they was takin' pot shots at me an muh travel cow here." The cow was mutated and had two heads, something

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Rick saw relatively often. "There'll be a good pay for yuh when you come back if you kill'em dead."

"500 caps," Rick bartered in a gritty voice.

"Tad steep friend. How bout 450?" The man bartered back.

"550 and I don't blow your brains all over your cow." A grin crept across his beard.

"Yeah, okay, okay. But only after the job is done. Bring me back somethin' tuh prove you done it."

Alone, Rick trudged south along US 131 for nearly 45 minutes when he spotted a line of cars forever stuck on an off ramp. He made his way closer, pistol in hand. Beside the ramp was a bright blue sign, rusted and decrepit, just like every other man-made structure in the Great Lakes Wasteland. However, this sign was just clean enough for him to make out a symbol on it. It was a yellow box with rounded edges, and in the middle of it lied the number eight.

He worked his way towards the top of the exit, and looked left first. There was a gas station, and two fast-food restaurants.

"I'll scavenge those tomorrow," he said to himself, scratching his beard.

Then he looked right. Another gas station, another fast-food restaurant, and finally, a large rectangular building with a tall sign out front, and on the sign, the symbol he had seen moments ago.

Rick had a routine when it came to bounty hunting, and it was one of the few things he did that the word routine is even applicable to. He'd set himself up in the nearest building, pull out his binoculars, and scope out the surrounding area. He'd get a grasp on where everyone (and everything) was that he needed to be concerned about, so that he could either avoid the threats, or take them out meticulously one-by-one. He decided to go to the gas station across from the hotel.

He carefully snuck his way down the street, gun in hand, being sure to make the minimum amount of noise he could in the event one of these buildings housed feral ghouls. He had only met a non-feral one time, a man by the name of Gob. He worked in a bar, in a small shanty town outside of the Washington D.C. ruins known as Megaton. Gob was pleasantly surprised when Rick didn't hit him at first sight, and happily gave him some free drinks.

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Once on top of the gas station, Rick lied down on his stomach and pulled out his binoculars. He held them still against his cold blue eyes, taking mental note of where everyone was. There was one man on a balcony (the one who must've been taking potshots at travelers), and there were four men in the parking lot sitting around a campfire, roasting what looked like a Deathclaw hand. Beside them were boxes. These men were for sure raiders, as they were wearing armor that looked like it was constructed out of rebar and metal signs pulled from the ground.

It'll be best to go for a stealthy approach, Rick thought.

He climbed down from the roof and snuck his way towards the hotel's parking lot, taking extra care to not be seen by the man on the balcony. He used the few cars that were to his advantage. Once close to the men roasting the deathclaw hand, he picked up a piece of pavement and cracked it against the aluminum of the car.

"Aye Dime, you hear that?" said one man in a thick southern drawl.

"I ain't hear nothin," said the man assumed to be Dime.

"It came from over there," the man said pointing, "go check'er out.

"Why do I have to check it out?" Dime asked, "Why can't none of these other sons'o'bitches check it out?"

"Cause I asked you to do it. So please, get off your LAZY ASS, and go do it!"

Reluctantly, Dime worked his way towards the cause of the noise. Unfortunately for him, Rick was prepared, and Dime was not. When Dime arrived, Rick came up behind him and used the one of the straps on his knapsack to strangle him. Tears flooded his eyes as his face turned purple as he gasped for air. But the air just wouldn't reach his lungs. His legs kicked violently, almost as if he were having some sort of seizure. Just as all was about to go silent, chaos erupted. One of the kicks just so happened to hit the same car Rick had hit with a rock. It was a hard enough hit to make the car bounce on its suspension a bit, and then the miraculously still working alarm went off.

The other five men came rushing towards the scene of the struggle, crude, handmade blunt weapons in hand. But when they got there, all they could find was Dime, lying there with a blue face and unblinking bloodshot eyes.

“FIND THE SON OF A BITCH WHO DONE THIS. RIGHT GODDAMN NOW!” Shouted the man who ordered Dime to investigate.

Ring leader, thought Rick, who was now hiding under a car.

The men fanned out, each searching a different part of the parking lot. Rick carefully crawled out from under the car, and listened for footsteps. To his right, he heard what he decided was two men, searching together. He was unsure where the other three were, and was also unsure if the man on the balcony had heard the commotion that was occurring down here. He hoped not.

He worked his way towards the two men. When he finally was close enough, he reached into his knapsack and pulled out a homemade grenade he had been saving for just such an occasion. He waited the men to stop walking, and snuck up behind one of them while they were talking about what to do next. Carefully, he pulled the makeshift pin made of a paperclip out of the explosive, and then set the grenade between the two men's feet. Quickly he crawled away, and took cover behind a van.

A combination of shrapnel and blood shot out from the other side. The sound of the explosive was enough to draw the other three men near. Rick pulled out his pistol once more, and waited for them to approach.

Two down, two to go, Rick thought to himself.

“What in the hell happened?” one man asked.

“I ain't real sure,” said the ring leader, “but if we find this guy we'll skin'em alive!”

Rick rolled his eyes, as he had heard this line many times from many raiders, and so he realized these men weren't a threat. He crouch-walked his way a bit further from the men, stood up, and whistled loudly. The men turned to look at him.

“Well well. What you want scabber? Lookin' for free scraps, caps, or you here for another reason?” The ring leader asked, a smile creeping over his dirty face.

“I reckoned I'd kill all of you, see what you got, then get out of here if that's alright,” Rick said coldly.

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“Ain’t really sure I can let you do that. See, this here hotel? It’s cleaner than the whole rest of the wasteland. Got everything a man needs to live. Lots of beds. A roof. You name it. Tell you what. I’ll let you in on it,” he said, his eyes avoiding Rick’s.

“Hmmm. Well, that sounds pretty damn good,” Rick said, “but I thought you were going to skin me alive?”

“Uhhhhh. Well. That there was a scare tactic. Yup. That’s what that was.”

“Know what. I’ll take you up on this. I’ll live here. There’s just one more question I have,” Rick said.

“Sure, what is it?” said the ring leader, with a smile on his face.

“Where do you want me to put these bullets?” Rick said, drawing his pistol.

“Uhh well--” BAM! Rick fired a bullet between the ring leader’s eyes. He dropped like a rock.

“Hey man you don’t... you don’t have to do this,” said the other man, “you can just...just uh, let me go? I’ll never run with raiders again, I promise!”

“Well, actually I kind of do,” Rick said, firing another beautifully precise shot between the eyes. The man dropped.

After wiring the shouting car alarm to stop, the parking lot was quiet. Rick let out a breath of air, and put his pistol back into his knapsack. Next on the agenda was looting. He went to each of the raiders, searching through their pockets, and then rummaging around in the boxes they had by the fire. Once done, Rick had successfully found ten .308 caliber rounds, six 10 millimeter rounds, a bottle of Flintstone Vitamins, and a full pack of well-preserved cigarettes.

He sat by the fire and smoked one, looking into the flames. He wondered how life would be different had the bombs not fallen a century ago. He wondered how his life would be had he been born into pre-war America, rather than a world ravaged by hellfire. He imagined green grass, and large, leaf covered trees. He imagined bright blue skies, and houses that had roofs that weren’t caved in. Rotten and rusted billboards showed happy families, enjoying a picnics on green hills, surrounded by green trees.

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Disrupting the serenity of the silence, a shot rang out, and the ground sparked. Rick dove to the ground. The commotion in the parking lot had helped him to forget about the man on the balcony.

“Dammit!” Rick shouted. He then got up and started sprinting towards the door of the hotel. Another shot, and another dive. Once out of sight of the sniper, he made his way to the door, and charged through. He sprinted up to the sixth floor quickly as possible, pistol now in hand. The front of the hotel faced west, and so Rick slowly went through each room on the west side of the hotel.

In room 501, he found the burnt skeleton of a man and a woman who appeared to be cuddling for one last time.

In room 502, he found nothing of interest.

In room 503, his jaw dropped.

On the TV stand in front of the bed lay bottle after bottle of liquor. There was rum, there was vodka, and there was whiskey (Rick’s personal favorite). He decided he’d have to come back later.

In room 504, he found a bullet whizzing past him, causing him to dive behind the doorframe. The man was kneeling on the balcony, aiming straight for the door. It was smart of him to do really, but unfortunately, he miscalculated Rick’s accuracy. After another shot whizzed by, Rick waited to hear the sound of a bolt action reloading. With his left hand (his non-dominant), he stuck his pistol into the doorway, aiming straight towards the balcony. He fired three shots, and heard the thump of the body. The man lied there, dark red fluid leaking out of three holes in his body.

Rick stood up and walked over to the collapsed body. He bent down and began to take the rifle from the man’s grasp; but he heard breathing.

“Please... Kill me--one in the head--quick--please,” he begged.

“Yeah, nope. You can sit there and bleed for all I care... Actually, I have an idea.”

Rick picked the man up as if he were a damsel in distress, and he screamed in intense pain.

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“Quick and painless right?” Rick asked.

“Please...” the man said.

Rick then proceeded to drop him over the railing on the balcony. The man fell silently, but the silence was disrupted by the sound of bones snapping, similar to the sound of breaking a piece of celery in half. He then trudged back into the hotel and found himself again in room 503. A smile crept over his face. The rest of Rick’s evening can be described as the following:

- Conquering bottle after bottle.
- Firing random ten millimeter rounds into the air.
- Smoking a whole pack of cigarettes.
- Pissing on the ring leader’s body while laughing hysterically.
- Putting a .308 caliber hunting rifle into his mouth and frantically crying.
- Not firing said .308 caliber hunting rifle and passing out on a dirty beat-to-hell mattress.

After leaving the hotel the next morning, he didn’t remember to scavenge in the surrounding buildings. The mornings after long nights of drinking is when Rick cared the least about his survival. He wandered his way back north up US 131, and eventually found himself back in the small settlement in which the old man resided. When he arrived, he found the place had been ransacked, more likely than not, by raiders. It was a brutal scene, but nothing Rick wasn’t used to. He scoured the settlement, looking for survivors of the attack. There was only one. He found the old man lying dead with his throat slit next to the still standing, living cow. Rick bent down to take the caps he was owed off of the man, but instead found a blood stained note, and not a single cap to be found. The note read:

I.O.U

He looked up from the note with fire in his eyes. The cow looked at Rick, and mooed. A smile crept over Rick’s face, and he began laughing, and sat next to the cow for a long time. A gentle wind blew.

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Eventually, he mustered up the strength to stand, and began to rub one of the cow's faces. It mooed again.

"Suppose I'll take care of you now," he said, petting one of the cow's heads. "You got a name? You probably did, but I guess I'll have to rename you." He took the large leash that was wrapped around the cow's necks. "And considering you got an udder, I'll name you... I'll name you Rachel... Rachel... after my daughter."

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Chapter 2

Days had passed as they always had--slowly. Rick and Rachel made their way north via I-75 towards Michigan's upper peninsula, on their way to a city once called Marquette. Rumor had it that Marquette in its entirety had been turned into the largest raider camp in the United States, and he had hoped that maybe, just maybe... he'd find what he was looking for.

It was a bright, sunny afternoon when they finally reached a gigantic bridge. Rick inferred that it had been turquoise and white at one point in its lifetime, but like nearly everything else nowadays, it was rusted, and beat-to-shit. He pulled out an atlas that he'd found a few days earlier to be sure that this was what he thought it was.

Placing his finger on the map, he spoke to himself.

"Mack-I-Nack...bridge. Well, I'll be damned."

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Grabbing the rope around Rachel's necks, he continued to trudge on towards the bridge. He wondered what it must've been like to see cars, people, and bicycles cross this in its heyday, what it would be like to cross with your family, and look at the sparkling blue water beneath you, with not a care in the world. As he made his way closer, it became apparent that it would not be an easy task to cross. He made a list of problems in his head:

- It's incredibly windy, and the entire bridge is swaying and bouncing.
- There are a plethora of feral ghouls on the bridge.
- I somehow have to get Rachel across.
- I'm afraid of water.

Once finally close enough to the bridge, Rick devised a plan. He made his way to a brick building that had a small tower sticking out of it, and the atlas told him the name; the Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse. First, he left Rachel outside, tied to a sad, dead tree. She moaned, and he caressed one of her heads.

Next was to scout the place out. He couldn't see very well into the red roofed building, and so he had to go inside. The windows were shattered, and he hoped that they would allow for enough light for him to be able to see what he was doing. He crept slowly through the front door of the building, pistol in hand.

Rick's eyes darted back and forth, taking in his surroundings. Dust seemed to rise up off the floor, highlighting the rays of light shining through the hole in the ceiling, and the windows. The building was surprisingly well preserved. Furniture still stood, mostly untouched by the hellfire that rained down nearly a century ago, minus a few wooden chairs with sharp backrests on them. He walked lightly on his toes, as to not disturb the floorboards beneath him. He made his way to what was once a kitchen. He checked the pantries, the cabinets, and the fridge, finding some pots, pans, forks, spoons, plates, well preserved mac and cheese, and instant mashed potatoes. For him, this was a score. It meant food for Rachel, and food for him. He stuck them in his knapsack.

He made his way into the tower to reach the second floor, or in this case, it'd be an attic. The smell of decay flooded his nostrils, like it had so many times before, but this... was a different smell. Decayed, but not fully. In front of him lied two mattresses, with bodies sprawled out on them. Again, he walked on his toes to not disturb the floor beneath him. At first, he was silent as a mouse. But then a creak. And then another.

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Creak.

Creak.

Each step made the floorboards cry. And with one more, at the edge of one of the beds; a body began to move. The body's mouth moved, releasing a long gargle, one the signaled an endless hunger.

Feral Ghouls, Rick thought to himself, readying his pistol. As the ghoul first stood up, Rick aimed, and swiftly shot it in the head. The noise from the shot was enough to wake the second, and it quickly began running at him, it's decaying arms shedding skin onto the floor. It seemed to make sort of a gargled-scream at him. He aimed. Moving targets were much harder than stationary or slow moving ones.

Finally he reached a clear shot. The back sights on the pistol were blurred and the front sight was clear. And then the floor let out a final wail, and collapsed. Rick and the ghoul plummeted to the floor below them, and things went black for Rick.

When he awoke, he rubbed the dust out of his eyes, only to find he was under a chair. At first he was confused, but then realized that the ghoul was on top of it. It had been impaled on the sharp edge of the backrest, and the chair was now preventing it from reaching him. He let out a sigh and released a hearty laugh. He rolled onto his stomach, and took his bag off. Inside was a nearly new looking kitchen knife he had bought from a man for 150 caps a few days prior.

The ghoul was still letting out screeches and moans, and Rick promptly shoved the knife through its eye. Blood fell onto his face, and the screeches and moans stopped. The house fell silent, and he lied there and caught his breath for awhile.

When the sun set on Lake Huron, Rick was sitting inside the house with Rachel. He had made a makeshift campfire to cook on, and hung a large pot on two pieces of wire he had found in a drawer. Inside of it were instant potatoes and mac and cheese, both cooking with the little bit of water they had left. The flames danced in Rick's eyes, and he thought about what to do next. He thought about his daughter, and how far away she could potentially be. Most importantly he wondered if she was even still alive. It had been ten years since he'd seen her last, and here he was chasing after her. She was the only thing that remained constant in his life, and now she was gone.

"Mmmmmmmooooooooooooo," Rachel said, breaking the silence.

“Alright, alright, I’ll check the food. Are cows even supposed to eat this kind of thing?”

Rachel responded by mooing again, her big black eyes staring at Rick. He scratched his beard, and lifted the top of the pot. The mixture looked cooked enough, and so he carefully poured the remaining water back into a bottle to drink. Next he opened the cheese packet with a hunting knife, and smelled it. The smell told him not to use it, so he tossed it aside.

He ate very quickly with the silverware he had found, as the day’s events had made him very hungry. He then set the pot underneath Rachel’s left head, and she ate what was left. After mooing, she lied down, and quickly went to sleep. Rick lugged one of the mattresses from upstairs down beside Rachel, and proceeded to lie down on it.

My life is filled with dirty, beat-to-shit mattresses, he thought.

He closed his eyes. When they reopened, he was in a home. No home he had been in before though. The ceiling was a bright white, and the walls a bright, baby-blue. Light shined through white curtains that hung over the windows. It wasn’t the color of the room that surprised him through, it was that it was fully intact, and cleaner than anything he had ever seen. He flung his legs over the side of the bed, stood up and stretched. He felt well rested. He glanced down at his body, and realized he was wearing the cleanest pair of khakis he had ever seen. He donned a white t-shirt, and white socks, and after looking at his hands, he noticed his fingernails were clean. He reached up to scratch his beard in confusion, but realized it was no longer there, only a sandpaper five o’clock shadow.

Where in the hell am I? He thought. *This is so-* his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a girl wailing. He made his way to the window and opened up the bright white curtains. Outside was a sight Rick had never thought he’d see; green grass spanned the front yards of houses that looked untouched by hellfire. Tall, leafy trees rose from the ground. Grey sidewalks lined the black asphalt of untouched roads, and bright, shiny cars were parked along it. The sky was a beautiful shade of royal blue, and white clouds rolled gingerly across it. He made his way through the familiar but not-so-familiar house and eventually found the front door, and made his way outside.

Eventually he found the source of the crying. Long black hair covered the face of a little girl who sat on the sidewalk, clutching her knee. He jogged over to her.

“Oh honey, what happened?” He asked.

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"I..." she sniffled, "I scraped my knee." Rick picked her up. She couldn't have been older than five. She looked up at him with bright blue eyes.

"Let *daddy* get you a band aid." The words flowed naturally from his mouth. As he turned to bring the girl into the house, something... something had changed.

The house was now gone. What remained was rubble that only resembled a house. The green grass of the lawn had turned a bright brown. Sirens blared in his ears. As he began to look around him, everything else was changing too. Rubble lie where houses once were, and charred skeletons where people once walked. The sky had become a dark grey, and planes flew overhead. He looked down into his arms.

"Daddy?" said the little girl, "I have to go now."

"What do you mean *Rachel*?"

"Goodbye daddy," she said, her blue eyes staring up at him.

"No...no no no," Rick said to himself. She then began to turn to the color of ash.

"No... please. Stay," he said, his eyes moistening. She continued to turn the dark grey, and eventually, a gust of wind came, and she crumbled to dust and drifted away. Rick fell to his knees, looking at the world around him. After a few sniffles, he looked down at the ground beneath him. There lied a ten millimeter pistol, the same one he had taken with him on all of his travels.

He picked it up.

He put the barrel against his right temple.

Tears ran down his face.

He pulled the trigger.