

## Finalist

### Wasteland

#### Ella Speden, Wellington Girls' College

The plaza is scattered with crystals of broken glass that crunch satisfyingly under Grey's boots as he walks across it. Each step seems unimaginably loud in the heavy silence of the empty city. As he picks his way towards his destination, he keeps an alert eye on the timer on his wrist, at the red numbers that indicate how long he has before the radiation penetrates his protective gear and begins to destroy his body's cells. *3 hours, 46 minutes, 20 seconds.* Plenty of time.

His destination is a hotel, half-gutted by the bombs and subsequent fires, but still intact and hopefully not completely looted. He enters the building through a shattered window, carefully easing his way through to avoid the ugly jagged edges of glass still clinging to the frame. Inside, all is darkness, his headlamp illuminating only his immediate surroundings. The once-plush carpet has been partially eaten away by rot and squishes unpleasantly under his feet, soaked through by the recent rain. He surveys the shadows as he makes his way towards the front desk, watching for any movement. He's never seen a person on one of his trips, but he's seen some damn weird animals, most of which weren't particularly friendly. But the place seems empty. Reaching the desk, he begins to search systematically through the drawers, hoping to get lucky and find a master pass key – he'd like to avoid breaking down hotel room doors. But the drawers hold only pens and paperwork. He sighs, reaching into his bag to grab a torch and a crowbar. He just hopes this hotel has weak doors. *3 hours, 35 minutes, 12 seconds.* He'd better get to work.

The elevator isn't working, so Grey heads for the stairs, maneuvering between the slot machines on the ground floor. An explosion has destroyed part of the room, turning a portion of the machines into mangled metal. Coins glint half-buried in the ash, but he ignores them; they're of no value anymore. He heads up the white staircase to the first floor. There are no hotel rooms there, but there are food joints and gift shops, and Grey knows from experience not to miss those out. Hotels this large relied largely on packaged and frozen products to feed their guests, so if Grey's lucky he'll find some food that's not rotted. Sure enough, as he searches methodically through each restaurant, his bags slowly fill with non-perishables; rice, pasta, canned food, flour. One prized find is maple syrup and powdered pancake mix from a breakfast diner. Weighed down with his spoils, Grey makes his way back to the stairs, stopping briefly to grab a couple of I HEART VEGAS shirts from a gift shop. As he heads to the next floor, he checks his wrist. *2 hours, 45 minutes, 34 seconds.* He takes the steps two at a time.

The lock on the door of Room 001 shatters under the blow from Grey's crowbar, and the door swings open. He steps inside cautiously, aiming his headlamp to reveal the dark corners of the room. As he expected, it's uninhabited, and he lets out the breath he was holding. He scans the room efficiently – his system of searching is almost second nature after all this time. The bathroom is first, for the complimentary toiletries, then the linen cupboard for the towels, then the kitchenette for bottled water and the packets of tea, coffee and creamer. There are variations sometimes, but Grey's found that most hotels follow the same blueprint. He's in and out of the room in less than five minutes and moves on to Room 002, then 003, then 004, his bags steadily getting heavier. Each time he leaves a room, he marks it with a large cross of white chalk. It'll take him many more trips into the city to search the whole hotel, so he needs to keep a record of where he's already been. After half a dozen rooms he stops, pausing briefly to take stock. He's got enough to last him for the next few months; now he just needs fuel, which he can drain from any of the hundreds of vehicles abandoned in the city's streets. He slings his heavy bags over his shoulders, grunting with the effort, and makes his way towards the stairs. *2 hours, 3 minutes, 52 seconds.*

Once outside again, he surveys the street for a car. Some that had been caught in the blasts are partially or entirely destroyed, reduced to twisted metal frames, but some are relatively unscathed. Grey picks one at random, a red Ford that looks fine except for a shattered window. Prising open the hatch to the fuel tank, he attaches a pump into it and inserts the other end into an empty gas container he's brought with him. Leaving it to siphon what gas is left in the car's tank, he moves on to another car and does the same thing, then sits on its hood to wait.

The windshield is covered with a fine film of red dust, and he absently draws patterns through it with a finger. The hood is sun-warmed, and Grey can feel the heat even through the protective material of his suit. It's comforting, like he's sitting with his back to a lit hearth. All of a sudden, he's hit with a wave of tiredness, as if in this moment the years of non-stop fighting for survival have finally caught up to him. He desperately wants to close his eyes, wants to forget the desolation surrounding him, if only for a moment. How could a moment hurt? Ignoring the protesting creak of the metal under him, he lies back, heavy lids drifting shut, and lets the warmth soak into his bones. He won't fall asleep, he promises himself; he's just relaxing for a few minutes.

Grey awakes with a start. The sudden movement dislodges him from his makeshift bed, and he slides off the hood to land in an ungraceful heap on the pavement. He sits disorientated, post-sleep haze for a moment, blinded by the sun that beats down from overhead. Once he regains his senses, fear shoots through his veins, ice-cold, and he shakily lifts his wrist to read the blinking red numbers: *1 hour, 2 minutes, 46 seconds.*

Grey's safehouse is 85 miles away, outside the city limits and the radiation zone. He's never made the trip in less than an hour.

Grey curses and struggles to his feet, fumbling in his pocket for his knife. Moving on autopilot, he hastily scores a large cross of the hood of each car he was draining so he can get the gas when he comes back. If he comes back. Throwing his bags over his shoulders once more, he heads back the way he came across the plaza as fast as he can. His motorbike is parked outside a half-destroyed ramen shop, its sidecar empty and ready to be stocked with supplies. Grey doesn't have the time to be neat, just secures everything as fast as he can and hopes for the best. He'd rather be home safe and alive with no food than dead on the desert road surrounded by bags of rice. The second he's satisfied with it, he takes his seat and revs the engine. *47 minutes, 29 seconds.* Jaw set in determination, he kicks back the stand keeping his bike upright, guns the engine and speeds off down the street, a cloud of dust blowing up behind him.

Once he's on the desert road he accelerates, leaving the skeletal buildings of the city behind him. He focuses on the horizon, red desert meeting cloudless blue sky, warped and distorted from the heat waves coming off the sand. The desert surrounds him endlessly, spotted only with the occasional tree, rot-black and twisted. Grey watches his speedometer climb upwards, as high as it can go, and he watches the red numbers on his wrist drop. *40 minutes, 53 seconds.*

Grey skids to a stop and leaps off his bike, letting it drop to the ground with a thud. He races towards the house, stumbling slightly on his shaking legs, and launches himself at the door handle. He slams the door shut behind him, making the house shake, and falls to his knees, ripping his mask off to take great gulping breaths of air. The red numbers on his wrist blink down: *3 seconds, 2 seconds, 1 second, zero.*