

nevertheless," one witness told this publication. "And then nothing. Just... nothing."

A spokesperson for the poetry community said the work was in conversation with an earlier poem by someone else. That poem also did not rhyme, and it was not about anything.

Members of the public are advised to remain calm. If you encounter a poem that does not rhyme, it is not to be approached. It is not clear what this means in a world full of people under no circumstances should you not do anything you understand; however, this may only encourage further activity.

Local poets in the Loughton and Forest area are not to be disturbed at this time.

Loughton Poetry Incident: What We Know So Far

On Thursday afternoon, a poem was read in broad daylight in Loughton, Essex, by a person who knew exactly what they were doing. The poem did not rhyme, and it did not have a discernible structure. Within nine minutes, the poem turned into a chaotic scene, with people unable to agree on what was happening. No one has been arrested in connection with this incident.

The poem was not a legal document, and those who have read it have found it to be a strange and confusing "new" form of poetry. The poem is not a correct representation of the incident.

For the first time, a family has been able to think about the incident with a new perspective. The poem has been present in the English language since the nineteenth century. In all that time, no charges have been brought.

The poet Walt Whitman is widely believed to have introduced free verse to mainstream English poetry. Whitman died in 1892, and efforts to hold him accountable have so far been unsuccessful.

The witnesses to Thursday's scene reported feeling confused and implicated, unable to confirm when the poem had finished.

protecting our furry friends. H owever it is they're up to, all we can do is hope that they will be finished soon.

Cats: Cute or Cursed?

Over the last few weeks, a strange phenomenon has taken over the West Midlands. For unknown reasons, all of the cats in the area have been seemingly disappearing in the dead of night.

Reports began when concerned owners of their cats as well as some equally perplexed vet and shelter owners, reported what originally seemed to be attempted thefts of their animals. The strange thing is, rather than the cats being found meowing on local properties, they were reported to be in the neighbourhood.

have claimed that wrangling the animals inside has been rather tricky. The behaviour seems to stray from their normal goings-on.

One cat from Coventry, a 12-year-old, aging cat has been affected by these strange occurrences. The cat is usually found in the neighbourhood, but it is not clear if it is still there. The cat is a Siamese, and it is a very vocal cat. It has been seen in the neighbourhood, but it is not clear if it is still there.

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read the full story inside... Likewise, no one has been able to figure out where they are going. Though many have tried – and failed – to keep an eye on them, even staying alert throughout the night, prowling the local area for the being felines, there has been no sight of these cats once the darkness descends. They are then, innocent as ever, but cats can be found purring – unharmed but unusual – on their owners' doorsteps, as if they had simply been left outside by mistake.

Issue 3

June 2026





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All stories featured are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Where applicable, we have also included content warnings. This issue is general quite dark in its theming; reader discretion is advised.

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Literary Magazine

Issue 3:

The End
of the World.

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The Last Prophet

A J Dalton

From a long line, he was the last
of the cursed, with terrible knowledge
so certain the present was the past
and the future was now; he lived
in all times at once, driven mad
and raving about the order of things,
consequence and cause simultaneous
seemingly, lucidity elusive,
until he stopped altogether.

Worried, we begged his words,
but he refused and bit out his tongue
then scooped it up and swallowed it
whole, happy in his bloody horror.
We snatched his pens away
so he couldn't skewer eyes or membranes,
then strapped his precious head safely
in place.

We questioned him closely, reading his eyes,
till he squeezed them tight to bursting
and we had to cease all attempts
till the next day, then to fail differently
with cajoling, blandishment, and promise
— besides, we weren't so stupid that
we couldn't fathom what was meant:
after all, he was the last.

THIS IS ELA LITERARY MAGAZINE. THE WORLD IS ENDING. PLEASE STAND BY.



Human beings have been imagining the end of the world since long before we had the literary tools to articulate how it might and why it could. But it is those imaginings which tell us so much about the times they were written in.

Going right the way back, we can see the Book of Revelation is pretty much a political document dressed up nicely as prophecy. Then there's the post-war fiction of the twentieth century, much of which reflects prolonged anxiety about what we had just learned we were capable of. And let's be honest, Nevil Shute didn't write *On the Beach* because he was feeling optimistic about things. We can't forget how Orwell gave us the boot stamping on a human face forever – a chilling image, by the way. Atwood gave us Gilead, which only vaguely felt like a work of fiction. Even Octavia Butler was politely ignored until the world caught up with her.

Every era gets the apocalypse it deserves, or perhaps we should say, the one it was already living inside.

There is fire and silence, and there's always the last man or woman standing to bring us hope. And this is something that the genre has always promised us; that catastrophe might be cleansing somehow. From the rubble, humanity will survive and emerge triumphant, understanding, at last, what truly matters when everything has been stripped away.

When we opened submissions for this issue, we suspected the writers of this era might be very ready to tell *our* collective story; the story of this generation and this world we all share today. We expected politics, feminism, and AI – a broken world at war with itself. We asked for the end of the world in all its forms: literal and metaphorical, cosmic and domestic. As always, we wanted the genre subverted and stretched, taken somewhere completely unexpected, and as you will soon see, the writers in this collection understood the assignment perfectly.

The ELA post-apocalypse collection started with our very first feature piece, *The Last Prophet*, which is not only our first poem but a perfect summation of everything we wanted from this issue when we thought of the theme. And as you turn the page, you will find yourself wandering into a courtroom sitting since the beginning of time, still waiting for a

verdict nobody will deliver; through a temple where a girl lights a candle; and the grove of a young boy losing himself as he reaches adulthood. You'll read about the silence at the end of all things, the longing and the memory that takes on a familiar voice to lead you in the gentle night, as well as the thoughts of one left behind in a world of blood and gore, trapped in the past, when all else ascends to the next life.

You'll discover a corporation where the only task is the perfect smile and stumble upon two immortal men playing chess across three centuries of grief. A woman butchers her husband in a kitchen while her mother-in-law sits down for tea, and a girl goes looking for meat as an act of love and finds something far worse waiting for her in the dark.

Elsewhere in the collection, a graveyard city is watched from a rooftop through the last of the white wine; there's a world where the funeral processions keep running like clockwork as people slowly decay. And then, because this is ELA, we have a suburb on Halloween night where two children accidentally summon something older than the end, and a café that keeps making tea, because what else is there to do?

The world has always been ending in literature in one way or another. This is ***the End of the World*** at **ELA Literary Magazine**. These stories will get under your skin and won't leave; they'll show you something uncomfortably true about the world you're already living in, and have the audacity to call it fiction.

So enjoy what you find within these pages as much as we do, because this is truly a weird and wonderful issue.



NORMAL SERVICE WILL NOT RESUME.





My favourite stories in this collection made me gleefully uncomfortable, which was exactly what I was looking for when we put out this call for submissions. Karis Easler uses a dense first-person confessional style of writing that never once lets the reader surface for air. Meanwhile, Massimiliano Sappa shows us eternity in a game of chess, stretching three centuries into the space between one move and the next.

S. T. Talbot's piece starts as the cosiest of the bunch in tone and style, and then rips the rug right out from under the reader with that epic plot twist. Ricky Seyler plays with the uncanny in deadpan corporate dystopia.

What ties these four together is the restraint from each author. They let us sit in the ordinary, and then dark chaos unfolds around it, much like real life.

This issue has certainly been the closest to my personal reading taste. One of the stories that really struck me was written by Sarah Farr, who fulfilled all my Weird Girl Literature fantasies in her gloomy and contemplative narrative that stabs you in the gut with a sharp, gruesome twist. Similarly, the suspense and horror portrayed by Desiree Friesen gave me goosebumps from the first line, building and twisting in unexpected ways. Both stories portray the female experience throughout the end of the world, and the complexities of that experience.

Striking a completely different cord is Savanna Sherman's story; while the title ***Rich Girl Apocalypse*** instantly caught my attention, the imagery and tone of this story is what truly gripped me, evoking a haunting narrative that pops into my mind at random. To end on a much lighter note, Dale Parnell's story is exactly what I needed in this round of submissions. While I tend to sway towards dark and thought-provoking narratives, and adore the most favoured themes of dystopian literature - the fear, the uncertainty, the gripping anticipation - there is something so heartwarming about this story and the way it portrays community and familiarity.

This issue, as with our previous published works, will remain with me long after it's publication. The world ends, but never completely.



Given my research often leads me into the doom and gloom of the literary world, it is might be surprising to know I was more than excited for this issue. I wanted to see what you all thought the end of the world would look like, and as always, I was excited to see what fantastical spin you would put on it.

The unsettling reality of your life already being planned out on top of the otherworldly aspects of the coming of age ritual made Hansen Adcock's piece a sure favourite of mine, then Cassidy Woollaston took the idea of a death cult and gave it an apocalyptic spin and the two felt like they complemented each other so well. They delved into the humanity that persists, unchanging, even when everything else has – and that became the theme for me in this issue.

When the world grows dark, when there is not many of us left and all we are left with are the memories to times long past, that humanity still survives, as seen in C. Gauld's short story, which shows how powerful those parts of us are. And then if you needed anymore reminding, our existence is laid bare for all to witness in Lukas Shayo's incredibly unique take on the end of the world.

Assuming the Mantle



13:01

Hansen Adcock

I'm not sure what happens when you change.

Everyone else seems so certain. Even the plants know, or at least the plants that manage to survive.

It's the dawn of my *s'inthrat* – my adulthood ceremony. I lie on my featherfur pallet and stare at the ink of darkness collected in the roof-beams of the boys' shelter. I haven't been able to sleep.

The keeping-stone rumbles to one side. Blue-grey light filters in from the gloom outside, along with Shaski's head. Shaski is my older sister. She had her *s'inthrat* a couple of years ago.

"Are you awake?" she whispers.

I don't answer.

She moves past the line of sleeping bodies to the foot of my pallet, then strokes the sole of my foot until I yelp.

"Are you awake?"

"You're not supposed to talk to me," I mutter. And I'm right. Adults don't talk to children of the opposite sex. Not until after the child has their *s'inthrat* and becomes an adult themselves. Back in the Golden Century, too much trouble came from adults mixing with the young. It led to people locked away from the sunlight as punishment. It led to people being hurt. That's what Granner tells us.

"People who are from the same family should be able to have a conversation," Shaski reasons. She always has this habit of convincing you of her opinions. When she was still a kid, we got into all sorts of situations because she convinced me it was the sensible thing to do. "Anyway," she says, the grey light framing her narrow face and wire-wool hair. "I'm the one the Elders sent to take you to the Grove. Come on, get dressed."

I pull the blankets tighter around myself. I don't want to be awake.

"Give me some privacy, then. I don't want you blinded by my magnificent gonads."

"Ha ha." Shaski's rolling her eyes at me. After all, I'm twelve. I don't even have extra hair yet.

She leads me into the desert. The sand is deep, dry and black underfoot, the horizon a wide, stretching space, the sky brownish-grey. The star we call Sun is a silver pin-prick. There's always a strange smell at dawn, a damp, stale smell which tickles the back of my tonsils. I get goose-pimples. The light never gets stronger than a blueish tone covering everything. It highlights Shaski's cheekbones and hair.

Granner says this used to be the kind of light we had at dawn and dusk, in the beginning times. In the Golden Century, the sun glared yellow and white, too close to look at without searing off your pupils.

Assuming the Mantle

Imagine that. Imagine the warmth. But then, Granner is old enough to still have the brown flecks on his skin. *Frecka*, he calls them. I wish I could be warm enough to have *frecka*.

Shaski takes me closer to the Grove. My feet slow, becoming stupid, clumsy creatures. I pause to re-buckle my boot. It's coming loose. I need to make myself a new pair soon – the soles are coming away from the toecaps in silly grins.

"I know you're frightened," Shaski says.

I stand. "Am not."

"Are too."

"Don't be daft. Men are never frightened."

"You mean they aren't allowed to be. Anyway, it's the same for women. We're not supposed to be afraid of blood and loss and pain. But I'm the only one here. If you're nervous, it's okay. You can tell me."

"We're not supposed to be talking, Shaski."

"Ramnah..."

"Fine." We crest a dune. The Grove sits in a distant hollow. "I am."

"Why?"

"You... changed."

"When?"

"When you had your *s'inthrat*. You became so different."

"I don't remember." She scrubs at the end of her nose – a sign she isn't comfortable talking about this – but she's the one who insisted on the conversation.

"You did. For a whole year. You moved in a different way, spoke like another person. You looked right through me. You weren't interested in the same things, your abilities altered. You acted *old*, Shas."

"Well... What if I did that to wind you up?"

"I suppose..."

She didn't. It was real. Why else would she claim not to remember? What sort of wind-up lasts a whole year?

A gang of featherfurs screeches overhead. There's always a flock parading in the brown sky early in the mornings, and again at mid-afternoon. I'm no longer small and helpless enough for them to snatch me.

I shouldn't be afraid of becoming the older me. Only babies get scared because they can't scarper from the featherfurs or beat them off with a stick. I learned to do that when I was three.

But I *am* afraid.

Shaski completed her *s'inthrat*. She swallowed the dust of the past. Her movement became slow and haughty, like a queen's. Her expression

clouded. She glanced at me as if we were strangers. I did follow her for the first couple of months, tailing her in misery, wishing she'd do something familiar to get us into trouble, like how it used to be. She stopped laughing and gossiping with the other girls. She stopped playing pranks with the boys and sat by herself on a dune. She stopped gardening and talking to the plants. She sat there like a human rock, plaiting featherfur traps. Her fingers developed a strength and agility I never saw before. Half of the Elders came to her for advice, though she hadn't been interested in political affairs as a child. She spoke, in a rough, low voice, about parts of history which happened before we were born. That was when I got worried and asked Granner.

I found him in the men's shelter, next to the boys'.

"Granner," I said, waiting for him to notice me.

He was dancing around a wooden frame with a dead featherfur spread-eagled across it, humming the Skinning Elegy. He slashed at the carcass with a feathering knife, separating the wings from the body. Featherfurs' useful parts are their wings, which are twice as big as their torsos.

Granner stopped, his grey plait swinging near his bottom. "What?"

"Why's Shaski so different?"

"She ain't Shaski no more." Granner lashed out with his pale, ropey arm again. More feathers drifted to the floor, pure white. Blood had drained into the eyes of the featherfur. I tried not to look at it or think of it as male or female. "She's Shaski Ann-Ani now. You can't talk to her until you're old enough."

I thought of the meaning of the name. Shaski-from-Ani. Who had Ani been?

"Ani is her ancestor on her mother's side," Granner said. "The ancestor who chose her."

"I don't get it," I said. I was only ten.

"The ancestors become the dust of the past, in the same way that the ancient skyscrapers and cities blew to sand, and the sand to dust. Then we absorb them. Have you watered the shirk-roots this morning?"

"No."

"Plants grow from the dust. Show some respect for them and water them. Forget about your sister, for now."

I fetched water from the distillery and threw it over the patch of garden allocated to my care. As usual, people talked to the roots as they tended them but the plants wouldn't answer. What did they expect? Did they expect a stalk to bend to them and whisper in their ear? To tell them it was their great-great uncle and tell them secrets about the past?

Assuming the Mantle

On the morning of the anniversary of her *s'inthrat*, Shaski came back to us. I don't know where she'd been and I don't know where Ani went – back to the world mixed with Shaski's waste? – but I didn't care. I was glad to have my old, funny, harebrained sister back, though she still couldn't communicate with me or any of the other boys.

Now, I do care. I care about where *I'm* going to go – the part of me that makes me *me*. The gates to the Grove lie ahead, a strange, twisted, red metal mouth with letters I can't read arching over the top. Lines and lines of pots glimmer through the bars. The Elders stand in a central clearing, six of them. Two for each leg. Two for each arm. One for the nose, and one to administer to the mouth. I heard about this from some of the other boys; we aren't supposed to know the details.

"Don't be afraid." Shaski.

"Stop speaking to me." If they catch us talking, she'll be ejected from the village.

Shaski leaves me inside the gates and goes back to the gardens outside the women's shelter. The shirk-roots there will need tending to. After all, the souls of our ancestors must be lonely.

"Ramnah." *Geedoh*, the Elder with the sun-white eyes. "Step into the circle."

I comply, making myself the piggy-in-the-middle. Granner is here too, short, stocky, and impassive. I recite the words he taught me, the words all kids have to learn once they turn eleven.

"Wise Ones, I have an asking." My mouth shakes.

"Speak." *Granner*.

"The tribe of Lost Sapiens needs my services. I must be stronger. I must be a grown man. I call on the ancestors for help. Do they hear me?"

Geedoh turns outwards, facing the rows of stone slabs set into the dark sand. A pot, a bowl, or an urn rests on each one. Every old family since the Golden Century burned their dead, as if to make up for the lack of light they had in life. Really, it's to stop the featherfurs from abducting them into the sky. People put the ashes left behind in whatever container the family is able to make or have made for them. It's a tradition we still carry out even now. Two months ago, I saw the burning of Jenner. I was the one in charge of beating off the scavenging featherfurs. They always turn up at burnings, often to "sing," though it sounds like screeching.

Geedoh addresses the dead. "Hear the question of the child!" His voice is impressive. "Which of you will guide the future of the boy, Ramnah?"

Granner looks at me with a light in his eyes. "The ancestors are talking about you."

I don't care if they are. I want to get out of here while I'm still me... but if I don't become an adult, I'll never be able to talk to my sister again. I'll never meet my mother, or my aunts, or my grandmother.

I look at Granner. "Which one is asking for me?"

We walk around the inhabitants of the Grove. Nearby husk-trees are still swinging in the remnants of the gust. What are the spirits of the past inside them thinking? Is one of them still recycling the dust of New York? Is one of them half the population of Chi Nar? All these old places Granner tells us about, from the stories passed on by his father, and his father before that.

The other Elders follow three paces behind us. There's Tamnih, his red hair tangling over his shoulders. There's Pobble. I don't know the others by name.

Geedoh stops by a green-glazed urn. A dried leaf sits on top of it, blown there by the wind. He stoops, knees clicking, picks it up, presses the leaf to my lips, and reads the name from the slab.

"The unknown wanderer."

His tongue flicks around the corners of his mouth. He exchanges glances with the other Elders. This is new. No one has ever been chosen by an ancestor in an unmarked pot.

"The stranger chooses you, Ramnah. Eat the dust of the past. Become Ramnah An-Yaiyah."

Yaiyah means Walker or Wanderer. I sense the Elders behind me, radiating support while also shifting into position, ready to grab me if I try to run.

I've decided not to run. I'll stay myself, whatever happens, even if I have to force myself to. Shaski returned to herself, and others have managed to do that. So, why shouldn't I?

I step forward, take a pinch from the stranger's urn and let the burned-salt flavour scatter on my tongue. I close my eyes and wait to be.



Rich Girl Apocalypse



13:02

Savanna Sherman

The graves are marble, plastic flowers, and teddy bears strewn about the plots where grass is just beginning to grow. A funeral procession drives past, expensive-looking cars trailing behind one another, lights on even in the brightness of day.

The roads are empty except for the processions, which pass through every hour like clockwork. If my mother were here, she'd tell me to stay out of the city air, but she hasn't called in months. I wonder if she's still alive.

The sickness started weeks ago and spread faster than the outlets could keep up. Within five days, every building in the city was shut down, and the hospitals were at capacity. Within six, most of those were abandoned. I haven't spoken to anyone I know since February. It's only the funeral proceedings, every hour, that keep me occupied as I sip what's left of the white wine in my fridge and watch from the roof outside my window.

I saw one of them once, the dying. I was looking for Mr. Jingles, Cindy's cat from down the hall. She'd died a few days before, and I worried about who would be feeding him now. "He's such a snooper, always has to know what's going on with everyone," Cindy'd told me once.

I followed the sound of his bell to the door of one of the hospitals that had been abandoned weeks ago. "Jingles," my voice echoed in the emptiness. "Here, boy." I followed the jangling sound further, down the hall and around a corner.

The smell hit me first, heavy like a rag across my mouth. And then the man. He wasn't dead yet, but he was close. One thing we'd learned early on was the stages of the sickness: *early signs like redness of the eyes and swelling of the feet and hands indicate the beginnings of the disease. After a matter of days, the body begins to rot from the inside out, and then the paralysis sets in.* The news outlets all showed the same video over and over, one of the early ones recorded for awareness and educational purposes. You couldn't tell if the body in the video was a man or a woman, or how old they were. They were green here, blue there, a greyish hue all over. Their eyes remained open, searching the room back and forth, but the rest of their body was limp, completely paralyzed.

The man I saw was the same, his skin flaking off in patches of greyish blue-green. His eyes met mine as I walked through the door, holding my shirt over my mouth, but the rest of his body was limp except for his hand, which still gripped a ragged copy of *The Bible*. I plucked Mr. Jingles from the bed and turned out of the room, but something stopped

me. The book. I picked it up slowly, careful not to brush against the dead man's skin as I slipped it under my arm. There is dignity in dying alone.

But the processions continue. As I watch them load the hearses with coffins worth more than my rent (which I'm not paying anymore as there's no one alive to receive it), I wonder when they will run out of caskets. The driver seems to consider this too, the drooping expression on his face frowning even further, his eyes half-closed. He reminds me of someone, a young boy I once knew and his animals. They lived in the forest, and one of them was so sad, just like him. He loads up flowers next, stacking the bouquets on top of one another until the trunk is overflowing. Mourning is such a show, isn't it?

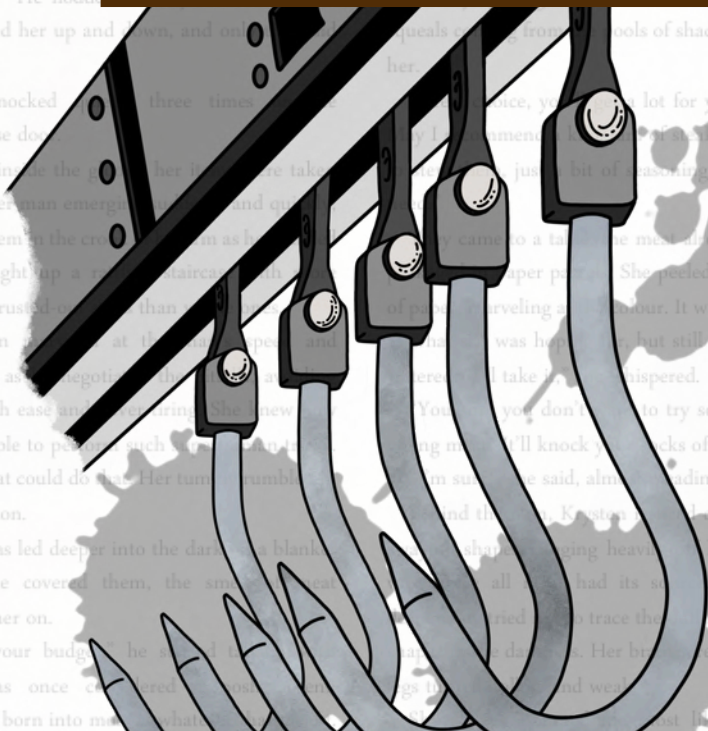
He's followed by the mourners, who don't leave their cars. They just drive silently, one after the other, tears dried by air conditioning and the sharp scent of new leather which they'd gotten at a discount at the end of the world. They turn the corner, and I know I'll lose sight of them after the traffic light, which hasn't had any other reason to turn green in weeks.

I look back at the hearse, brown in the afternoon sun, and something flashes in the rearview mirror. That grey face, those drooping eyes. *Eeyore*, I think as his eyes meet mine.

He lights a cigarette, and the light turns green.



Don't Leave Me Hanging



Content Warning:

implications of cannibalism, assault, graphic violence, and gore

13:03

Sarah Farr

Multi-coloured airborne plastic particles swirled in the absence of snow, the fervent flurry concealing the man who waited at the corner of what was once a road illustrated with buildings and homes. Only broken glass and suffering remained.

Most of the man's face lay hidden under a cap fashioned from old plastic bags. His other features, a long aquiline nose and a fierce penetrating gaze, remained lost amongst the haze of airborne plastic particles carried on the smog.

They nodded to one another and Krysten followed him, sidestepping the rotting body of what was once a frail elderly man in his sixties. Krysten shook her head, careful not to get his leaking fluids on her boots. *How selfish he had been to live to such an age*, she thought, *what a burden he must have been to his household*.

They walked in silence. In times like these, when she was forced to brave the outside, Krysten pondered the outlandish tales her grandmother used to go on about.

Of course, she never believed her; her gran was 52 when she died and had clearly lost her marbles. Imagine saying there was once a time in winter when you could go out wearing just a coat, maybe even less. To do so now would be such a risk; the cold would claim you within 15 minutes.

If it wasn't for her husband, Krysten would question why she wanted to survive these unending winters. There must be a point to suffering; there had to be an end goal. They suffered together, but their days were lit with the love they had for one another. It was his love that gave Krysten hope for a better world, because right now it was them against a world that wanted them dead.

Summers, if they came, were just as bad. It was illegal to go outside between 10 AM and 4 PM; if the sun didn't burn your skin from your body, the noxious gases would bleed your lungs to pulp.

Her gran, nutty as she was, said it hadn't always been that way. People used to long for summer. When her gran was young, people would sunbathe on the beach, even go abroad by plane to find heat. Her grandmother was such a liar. Probably from all of the forever chemicals that had eventually claimed little Mother Earth. The skies had long since become as silent as the planet it held.

The weirdest tale her Gran would endlessly reminisce over was just 50 years ago; people could eat meat with every meal if they wanted to, and they had breakfasted every day. They could even buy it from something called a supermarket. Sure, scientists and so-called experts were warning everyone not to, but we just ignored them, Gran had said, her grin turning

morose.

Cheers, Gran, Krysten mused as she followed the man, *it was your generation that caused this mess*. You could have as much meat as you wanted, and it was cheap too, as there were such things as supermarkets, and they would all compete for people's money.

Money, what a weird concept.

These days, food was delivered to each household via government agencies, and homes were provided for those pitiful few who survived the triple blow of the great fires, the great plague, and the great storm of 2053.

Krysten's family were fortunate, for they had kept their home, which had been passed down to Krysten. Once her parents had gotten too sick to work on their land, they had wisely opted for the suicide pods.

A good decision, but she had been lonely. Fortunately, soon after losing her parents, she met Dan, another orphaned survivor; they clung to each other like tiny plastic particles, congealing as they ate human bodies from the inside out.

They formed a great team for survival at first, but soon came love, and now she just couldn't imagine a world without him.

But recently she had. He'd been away for three weeks now, working a job that provided them with much-needed security.

Theirs was the only house on their road that still retained its cracked windows. They still had a functioning roof and all four walls, and because of their fortified abode, it was possible for him to work away from home without having to worry about leaving her alone.

He hadn't told her what his new job was, but one of the perks was that they never had to worry about food and blankets. Krysten never dreamed she'd be living the high life at 17.

This time to celebrate Dan coming home, she was doing something new, something exciting, and thus sealing her status as the best wife ever.

Krysten was going to buy some meat. The man she'd just met was selling. Each step behind the man reverberated in excitement. This was the craziest thing she had ever done in her nearly 18 years of life.

The world had long ago turned vegan, and consumerism was now illegal, but she wanted to make a big gesture to show Dan just how much she loved and appreciated him. He was working ever so hard in his new job that she barely saw him. That's why she needed him to know he was never far from her thoughts.

The problem was meat was so hard to come by. It was almost impossible unless you knew *someone*. Commercial farms were a thing of the past; everyone was now their own farmer, with every citizen allotted a

small parcel of land to cultivate crops in multicoloured soil more plastic than loam.

People accepted the sacrifices as the only way to end the planet's suffering. Once the planet had healed, if it ever did, their descendants would then be able to begin again.

With each decade, hope was lost, but they had to believe their tiny little blue planet could pull through.

In the wake of the 2053 climate disaster, people lived off scraps; they made do once every industry shut down. What was left of the once-heaving six billion plus population had listened to their planet. People now respected the only home they would ever have. Realising, finally, they were not the masters but merely the custodians for the next generation.

However, humans were still animals, and as hard as they tried, they missed the chewy, bloody taste of fatty, succulent flesh melting on their tongues.

They say the worst was still yet to come, but despite all that, people craved meat; there was no other lust like it. When animal farming was first outlawed, people turned to squirrels, pigeons, and rats. When they ran dry, difficult decisions were made about pets.

To have meat on your tongue was just a dream unless you had items to trade. Krysten and Dan were two such people.

Krysten dipped her chin into her zipped-up outer coat, following the man, a guy who knew a guy in the shadowy, clandestine meat network. They were only talked about in legends; the risk was great, but the reward even sweeter. Her mouth watered in anticipation.

Where they got their meat, she didn't care. She asked no questions. All she wanted was to rip deep red flesh apart with her teeth.

A second man waited in front of a crumbling warehouse reeking of damp rust and hot blood. The first man walked on, sealing himself in the smog.

The second man came forward, bloodshot eyes greeting her, but there was the slightest hint of colour spreading across his cheeks, and on his tall, wide frame, he carried a little extra weight. The slightest hint of a belly prodded beneath his coats. He ate well; he had the goods.

"What do you have for me?" he asked, uncrossing his arms to inspect her bounty.

Checking both ways, Krysten unzipped her topcoat, revealing a turquoise plastic lighter that still worked, a strong knife, and a small sheet of rust-free scrap metal.

"Yeah." He nodded amiably. "That will do." He looked her up and

down, and only then did he smile.

He knocked quietly three times on the warehouse door.

Once inside the gloom, her items were taken by another man emerging suddenly and quickly, taking them in the crook of his arm as he scurried out of sight up a rattling staircase with more missing, rusted-out steps than whole ones.

Krysten marvelled at the man's speed and dexterity as he negotiated the pitfalls, avoiding them with ease and never tiring. She knew how he was able to perform such superhuman tricks. Only meat could do that. Her tummy rumbled in anticipation.

She was led deeper into the dark, as a blanket of silence covered them, the smell of meat guiding her on.

"For your budget," he started talking with what was once considered a posh accent, someone born into money, whatever that meant.

Flame torches lit the path as he continued. She followed in his shadow, struggling to keep up. The warehouse was vast; there were many rooms and corridors leading to more darkness. It was dizzying to be so deeply indoors.

"We have three different types available for our clientele: young, mature, or dry meat. If I were you, I'd avoid the dry meat. It requires a lot of cooking to make it chewy enough to eat. There's less nutrients in old meat. It's mostly gristle, to be honest. The longer the cooking time, the more likely it is someone may smell it, and you don't want people knocking on your door in the dead of night. The best choices are obviously young, depending on where you stand, but it comes at a price." He turned round to face her and winked. "But it's so succulent and juicy and full of fat, particularly if they've been breastfed."

Krysten nodded quickly, her eyes hot and itchy, "I don't want young meat," she said abruptly.

"There's no judgement here." He chuckled as he licked his lips. "We merely provide what people want, and people are prepared to pay for it."

"I'd like mature meat." She kept her eyes ahead, trying to ignore the soft sound of playful squeals coming from the pools of shadows above her.

"Great choice, you'll get a lot for your items. May I recommend a kilogram of steaks, no need to stew them, just a bit of seasoning is all they need."

They came to a table, the meat already neatly packaged in paper parcels. She peeled back a bit of paper, marvelling at the colour. It wasn't as red as what she was hoping for, but still her mouth watered. "I'll take it," she whispered.

"You sure you don't want to try some of our young meat? It'll knock your socks off."

"I'm sure," she said, almost pleadingly.

Behind the man, Krysten noticed dark, vague swaying shapes hanging heavily off hooks. She was aware all meat had its source. Her eyes desperately tried not to trace the outlines of their shapes in the darkness. Her brain screamed. Her legs turned hollow and weak.

She always assumed the most likely source were wolves and other beasts that had prevailed and multiplied since the storm of 2053. Out beyond, they had reclaimed the wild where humans feared to tread.

Every now and then, there were tales whispered across the land of people going missing if they came too close. Hunger was an instinct no longer to be trusted. But now she was not so sure.

Before the man handed over the meat, he grinned, a dark chuckle coming from deep within him as he unzipped her second coat, revealing her fleece underneath.

He prodded her belly. "You eat well, don't you?" He licked his lips as she reached for the meat in his hand. He laughed again, wriggling his finger and lifting her package of meat out of her reach.

"Please," she whimpered, backing away, her mind stumbling over which way to run.

He was too fast, too strong; the trap was his own making. He lived off a rich diet of meat and was easily able to lunge and grab her fleece, holding her still as he felt her figure again, prodding harder until he got to the juicy parts around her hips and thighs.

Krysten pushed him away, but there were others.

With a heave and a grunt, they lifted her straight off the ground, carrying her closer to the stench of hanging, dried-out bodies. Their strength startled her. In a world where people were slowly wasting away from lack of food and tiny, forever plastic particles in everything they could find to eat, these men had become superhuman.

"I have more items to trade; I'll give you anything!" she pleaded between her jagged breaths.

They hoisted her up higher towards the dark shapes, swaying slightly. Now she could no longer pretend they were something else. Shock rippled out, her muscles pulled tight as the gleaming metal hook forced its way through her soft throat and out through the base of her mouth, shattering her jaw. Her face fell apart with the ease of cracking an egg open.

Pain woke her up and gave her courage to fight, but no matter how wildly she swung her legs and arms, she stayed put as her own blood

slowly drowned her lungs.

"Easy does it, we've got her." They sliced open her throat, collecting her blood. Cold oxygen rushed into her throat, burning her as the world spun. Too much pain to feel anything other than sheer panic. "We also do black pudding." He laughed as he worked with a whistle. "A particular favourite of mine."

"And mine," the second man chimed in as they salivated over the sound of her tinkling blood hitting the sides of the metal bucket.

White flashing lights pulsed across her vision. In her mind, she pictured Dan, mentally reaching out for him, wanting his sweet embrace and his scent wrapped around her.

She'd always thought they'd die together when their time came. It was all her fault; she'd inflicted this on him. When he returned from work, he'd return to an empty house. He might question whether she left him for someone else. It would break his heart.

Dan would never find her, would never find out what happened to her. She'd told no one about her illegal plan to buy meat. It had been a surprise just for him. It was all her fault. She alone had destroyed the future they could have shared.

Krysten counted down from ten, praying to never reach zero. When she got to five, two big doors swung open, revealing a cart pulled by four strong, strapping men, one of whom was her husband.

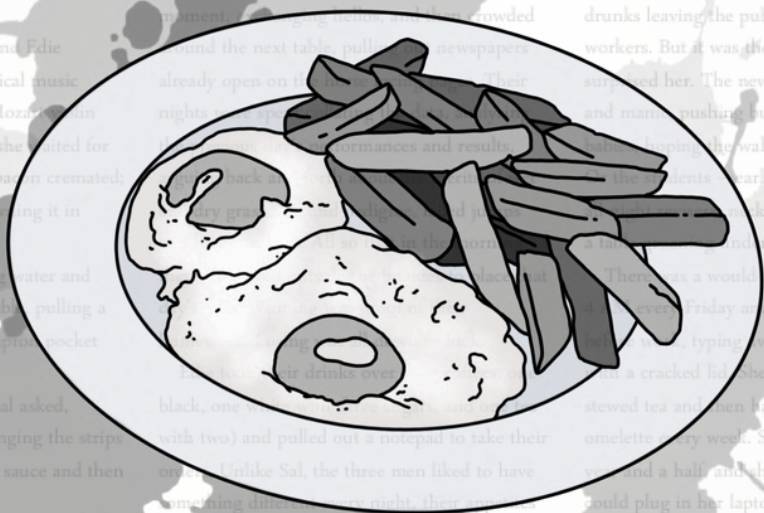
"Boys, what have you got for us?"

"We've hit the jackpot," her husband, Dan, replied, not seeing her drowning in the shadows, as he pulled back a tarpaulin cover, with a grin from ear to ear, revealing ten pregnant women bound with plastic ties. She refused to believe he was her husband. That caring man she'd fallen hopelessly in love with, drawn in by his kind heart and loving nature. The same man who slaughtered pregnant women and children for their meat.

"Take those upstairs," the first man ordered. "Put the others on the hooks."



Double-Egg and Chips



13:04

Dale Parnell

"Fair Isle, Cromarty. North nine or ten, increasing eleven at times. Visibility very poor. Forth, Tyne and Dogger. Northeast eight to eleven, severe. Sea state very high. Violent storm imminent."

The bell above the door jangled, and Edie looked up to see Sal saunter in. The nights had been getting colder, and Sal had swapped her usual bodywarmer for her wolf fleece, a familiar staple of Sal's wardrobe since her first trip to Skegness in 1987. Not many people could pull off a wolf fleece, full moon and all, but Sal made it work.

"Tea with two and a bacon roll, please, Edie," Sal said, falling into her usual seat.

"Right you are," Edie called back, testing the hot water urn with the back of her hand. People who work in kitchens for long enough develop a different tolerance to temperature than regular people, although Edie sometimes worried this was down to nerve damage.

The shipping forecast ended, and Edie switched the radio over to a classical music station, the soothing notes of a Mozart violin concerto filling the small café as she waited for the bacon to crisp. Sal liked her bacon cremated; the hard crunch softened by drowning it in tomato sauce.

Edie filled a teapot with boiling water and carried everything over to Sal's table, pulling a bottle of tomato sauce from her apron pocket and setting it on the table.

"Why do you listen to that?" Sal asked, setting about the ritual of re-arranging the strips of bacon on her roll, pouring the sauce and then stirring the tea in the pot.

Edie glanced back towards the counter, the small radio sitting up on a shelf.

"The music? It keeps the drunks calm. Besides, I like it."

"No, the other one," Sal said, taking a bite of her roll and leaving a glob of sauce on her chin. "The boat stuff and that."

"The shipping forecast? I don't know, really. Habit, maybe."

"Huh," Sal replied.

Edie waited, but that appeared to be the end of the conversation, so she went back to the kitchen. Sal would pretend tonight was going to be different, but roughly fifteen minutes after finishing the bacon roll, she would have a doughnut. It was a familiar game; diets and calorie counting and being good, and it always ended with Sal saying, "Oh go on then," as if Edie had been twisting her arm.

In the meantime, the other taxi drivers would be arriving, followed swiftly by Martin from the factory down the road, coming in for their

Double-Egg and Chips

nightly breakfast order: ten bacon, sausage and egg baguettes – seven with sauce, three without – one cheese omelette, four teas, six espressos, and an orange juice. Edie did them a discount, and at Christmas the factory had a whip-round and gave her a tip that more than covered the difference. A few of them even came in on the weekends with their kids. Saturday afternoons meant sausage and chips and kid-friendly pop music on the radio, nothing older than four or five years ago. A few years back, Edie had bought a heavy-duty blender so she could make milkshakes with ice cream, the kids choosing which chocolate bar they wanted to add to it. It was noisy as hell, but they loved it.

The bell above the door rang, and Mike, Pete, and Jack pushed in, earlier than usual, and all talking at once. They loitered at Sal's table for a moment, exchanging hellos, and then crowded around the next table, pulling out newspapers already open on the horse racing pages. Their nights were spent collating the data, analysing the previous day's performances and results, arguing back and forth about the merits of wet and dry grass, age and pedigree, failed jumps and lucky colours. All so that in the morning they could wait outside the bookies to place that day's bets. Winning was proof of their homework. Losing was all down to luck.

Edie took their drinks over (two coffees; one black, one white with three sugars, and one tea with two) and pulled out a notepad to take their orders. Unlike Sal, the three men liked to have something different every night, their appetites decided by the winds and whatever they had for supper that afternoon. It took a while to settle them down; Jack liked to joke around and was always being urged on by the other two. It was like working in a school canteen some nights. Sal looked up from her paper and rolled her eyes, and Edie smiled. Eventually, they calmed down, and Edie took their orders.

Back in the kitchen, she turned the radio up a notch, focusing on the music as she methodically prepared the three orders, coordinating everything so they would finish at the same time before taking the three plates out.

Sal ate her doughnut, the three men noisily ate their meals and left, and Martin arrived to collect the takeaway order bang on 1 AM. After that, the café was quiet, and Edie busied herself clearing the tables and tidying the kitchen, pouring a fresh coffee to enjoy in the silence.

Edie couldn't say when she decided to keep the café open twenty-four hours, or if it had even been a conscious decision at all. When she started, the café was open until nine. After a few months, Edie noticed how busy Friday and Saturday nights were in the area, and she extended

opening hours until eleven on those days, catering to the pub-leavers and late-night bus drivers. When the factory opened up down the road, eleven o'clock became closing time every night, and gradually more and more bus and taxi drivers started stopping by, begging Edie to stay open another fifteen minutes, half an hour. The nights got later and later, and by the time she had cleaned the place and prepped for the morning rush, it had hardly seemed worth going home. Edie never advertised, but word soon spread, and she found that most nights she had a steady stream of customers to keep her going until morning. Edie had expected the bus and taxi drivers, the late-night drunks leaving the pubs, and the night-shift workers. But it was the other groups that had surprised her. The new parents – bleary-eyed and manic, pushing buggies with wide-awake babies, hoping the walk would knock them out. Or the students – early-morning partiers and all-night revisers, necking coffee and toast from a table groaning under huge textbooks.

There was a would-be novelist who arrived at 4 AM every Friday and stayed for three hours before work, typing away on an ancient laptop with a cracked lid. She drank a pot of very stewed tea and then had a ham-and-onion omelette every week. She had been coming for a year and a half, and she always asked Edie if she could plug in her laptop, pausing by the socket with the plug in her hand like an abstract statue until Edie said yes. Her name was Laura, and whenever Edie asked how the book was going, she would only ever say, “Fine, thanks.”

Occasionally, homeless people would come in, edging into the café with darting eyes before offering a handful of loose change. Edie would make them a tea and a sandwich, sneaking a chocolate bar into the bag. Some would sit a while at the table by the door, but most would head straight out. She didn't pity them. Edie didn't think pity was good for anyone, but their visits always left a cloud of sadness behind, sadness with a touch of frustrated anger at no one in particular. You could feel it some nights, almost see it shining out through the large open windows at the front of the café, the dark grey pavements bleached white with fluorescent light and melancholy.

It was around 3 AM when the next customers came in. The weather had been getting steadily worse; heavy, relentless rain accompanied by the deep bass rumble of thunder, and Edie had wondered if she would see anyone else until the early breakfast rush. She was re-reading *Frankenstein*, and was only a few pages from the end when the bell above the door rang. Edie looked up to see three people walk in, grim-faced and soaked to the skin. She put the book down on the counter and grabbed a handful of paper towels, taking them over to the strangers and offering to

Double-Egg and Chips

take their coats, pools of water already forming at their feet. Edie hung up the coats and disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, reappearing with a mop and bucket to deal with the worst of the water. She dropped a wet floor sign down and wheeled the mop and bucket to one side, returning to the table with her notepad ready.

“What can I get for you?” Edie asked.

“Uh, coffee. Three coffees please,” the first woman said.

“No problem.” Edie smiled. “Menus are just there, and I’ll be back in a moment with the coffees.”

Edie pocketed the notepad and returned to the kitchen, setting out a tray with three mugs, a milk jug, and a sugar bowl. She could have pushed the group for more details, what type of coffee, for example, and whether they wanted milk or not, but in the moment it hadn’t felt right. They had said and done so little, but Edie had felt it straight away – a tension that seemed to flood the room. It was like grief, or fear maybe; primitive and basic and unexplainable. Edie poured three black coffees and carried the tray over to their table.

“Has there been any more news?” the second woman asked, and all three faces turned to Edie.

“News?” Edie asked.

“About the attacks?” the man asked, his eyes red and puffy.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t heard anything. What attacks?”

One of the women started crying, and the man put his arm around her.

“Do you have a TV or a radio?” the man asked, looking about the café.

“Yeah, the radio,” Edie said, looking back to the counter and the small radio sitting up on the shelf.

The faint sound of static played across the café, and Edie screwed her face up. She hadn’t really been paying attention to the radio while she’d been reading, so she wasn’t sure how long ago the signal had dropped out. She walked over to the counter, reached up to retrieve the radio, and cycled through a few pre-set stations, finding static on each one.

“What’s going on?” Edie called over to the three strangers.

The crying woman started sobbing again, and the man leaned his head in close, whispering to her. The first woman stood up from the table and walked over to the counter.

“What’s happened?” Edie asked, a pit of panic starting to form in her stomach.

“There were explosions. In America and then Europe. All the big cities, London included. They won’t say what’s happening.”

“Oh my God,” Edie said, gripping hold of the counter to steady herself. “Are you serious?”

"It started about an hour ago. We were out having a drink, and then the news cut in on all the TVs. We tried calling people, but the networks are down. Then the TVs cut out. I thought the radios might be okay, but..."

They both looked to the radio sitting on the counter, the quiet hum of static playing through the small speaker.

"What are we supposed to do?" Edie asked, looking over the woman's shoulder to the windows at the front of the café, the street outside dark.

"The last thing they said on the news was stay put wherever you are, but the pub kicked everyone out. We didn't know what to do."

The bell above the door jingled again, and another four people stumbled in, faces pale and panicked. They were quickly followed by a few more stragglers; skinny, half-drowned teenagers shivering and terrified.

"Can you make tea?" Edie asked the woman.

It took a moment for the woman to understand, but then she nodded and walked around the counter, glancing about the kitchen at the hot water urn and the racks of clean mugs.

"Tea bags?" she asked.

Edie pointed to one of the cupboards and waited a moment until she was sure the woman had found everything she needed.

"Come in," Edie called to the group of people huddled around the doorway. "You can hang your coats up there and then find a table. Squeeze in, and I'll be round as soon as I can to take your orders."

"I don't have any more..." one of the shivering teenagers started but couldn't seem to finish.

Edie forced a smile and touched the young woman lightly on the arm. "Let's not worry about that. There are paper towels on the counter. Can you do me a favour and start handing those out? I'll grab some more in a minute."

Edie cajoled the rest of the group into the café, filling the tables, chasing after them with the mop. More people arrived, and Edie held the door open for them. She cast a glance at the counter and was pleased to see that it was filling up with fresh mugs of tea, the woman giving her a thumbs-up.

Edie nodded, and the woman started carrying the filled mugs out to the tables, ferrying them back and forth before heading back into the kitchen to find the milk and sugar. The teenager had passed out the paper towels she could find and was now hunting through the kitchen for more, smiling when she found a drawer full of dry tea towels. The café filled, and a few more people were squeezed in, standing in free

Double-Egg and Chips

corners or between chairs.

Edie stuck her head out of the door, looking up and down the dark high street as the rain soaked her hair. Seeing no one else, she pushed closed the door and twisted the lock, flipping the sign to *closed* for the first time in nearly ten years. She pushed her hands through her hair, forcing a stream of cold water down her back, and then wiped her palms on her apron. Pulling out the notepad, Edie stood beside the first table. The original man and woman from the first group were sitting with two others, all four of them looking lost and afraid.

“What can I get you?” Edie asked.

The man, Vic, his arm still draped protectively over the crying woman’s shoulder, looked up. “I don’t know,” he said. “Is there anything you recommend?”

“Actually,” Edie said, smiling, “I know just the thing.”



most important part. Each morning, I'd stand at the entrance to the regional office, practicing my smile in the mirror. It needed to be warm, but not too warm, not too inviting. Strong. It had to last a few minutes to get the perfect expression. After a few years on the job, I could hold it for a minute or so. With my rictus grin, I'd be walked into the office.

"Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me.

Employee #1: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #2: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #3: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #4: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #5: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #6: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #7: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #8: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #9: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #10: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me.

Employee #11: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #12: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #13: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #14: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #15: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #16: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #17: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #18: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #19: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #20: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me.

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the noise. My computer, as well as an additional four other distinct voices, let out an endless stream of noises somewhere between words and letters.

Each day, this continued for hours. I had no input in these meetings. My job as the Numerical Quality Assurance Specialist was to ensure that these meetings were held, but I could not influence what was said. I knew the company was really just a collection of animals, buildings, and people began to appear in the notebook. More than anything, I drew faces. They weren't particularly well done, but it was enjoyable to draw a variety of looking faces. One day, I came in and found my open and notebook were gone. I knew better than to ask for the whereabouts. It was easier if I didn't know where they were. The one thing I had been able to occupy myself with had disappeared. I had to find different ways to amuse myself.

The headset had to stay on, but there were no issues with the headset. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day. I had to wear it for the entire day.

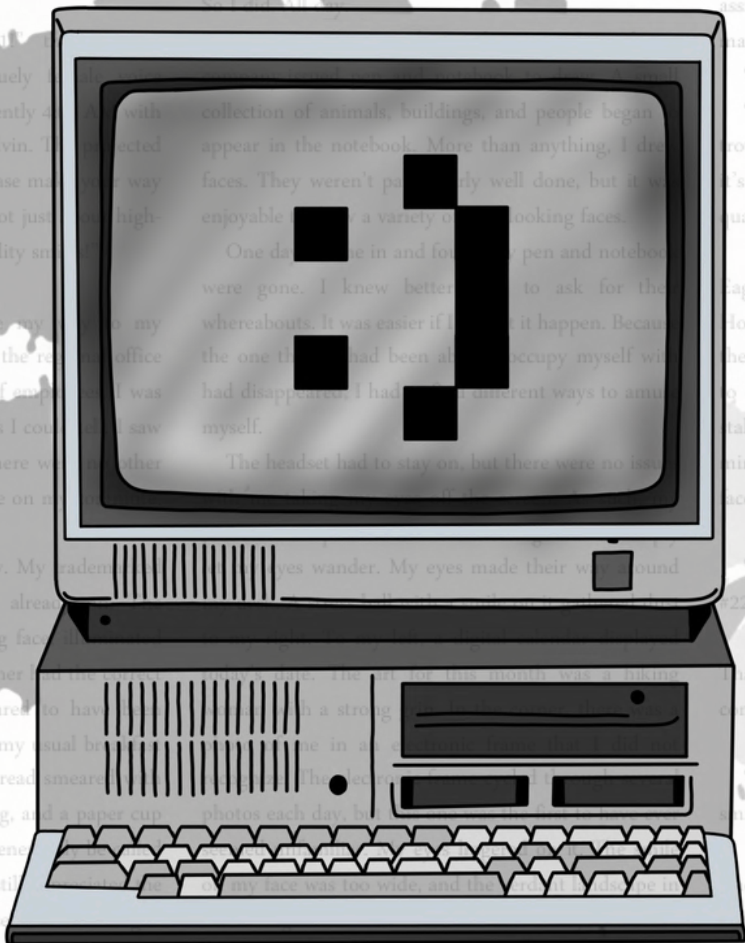
Employee #41: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #42: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #43: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #44: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #45: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #46: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #47: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #48: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #49: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me. Employee #50: "Smile Corporation!" I shouted. It didn't hear me.

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"Hi!" A female voice had come from the speaker. "coworkers," presumably. "Hello." "Oh no! Sorry, you sound like you're having a pretty rough day at work. Are you feeling down?" "Uh, nothing?" "Are you sure? As you know, we're here to assist with any personal issues you may be having."

"Ok, I appreciate the help." "Alright, make sure you're taking care of your troubling thoughts you're having. It's not just about high-quality smiles!" "I'll do my best." "I'll do my best." "I'll do my best." "I'll do my best." "I'll do my best." "I'll do my best." "I'll do my best." "I'll do my best." "I'll do my best."

"Break of company policy." "Break of company policy." "Break of company policy." "Break of company policy." "Break of company policy." "Break of company policy." "Break of company policy." "Break of company policy." "Break of company policy." "Break of company policy."



13:05

Ricky Seyler

The smile was the most important part. Each morning, I stood right outside the entrance to the regional office of Smile Corporation, practicing my smile in the reflection of the door. It needed to be warm, but not too warm. Inviting, but not too inviting. Strong. It had to be perfect. It took me a few minutes to get the perfect smile originally, but after a few years on the job, I could lock it in within a minute or so. With my rictus grin firmly in place, I walked into the office.

“Good morning, Smile Corporation!” I shouted. It was important it could hear me.

“Good morning, Employee #1!” the building responded. The same warm, vaguely female voice greeted me each morning. “It’s currently 4:05 AM with a current temperature of 293.15 Kelvin. The projected high is 298.706 Kelvin at 13:00. Please make your way to your desk. And remember, it’s not just about high-quality service – it’s about high-quality smiles!”

Following that “meeting,” I made my way to my cubicle. Although the sheer size of the regional office would imply a need for hundreds of employees, I was the only one there. At least, as far as I could tell. I saw and heard nothing in the office. There were no other cars in the parking lot. I saw no one on my commute. I was alone.

I made it to my cubicle promptly. My trademarked Smile Corporation computer was already on. The background, a bright yellow smiling face, illuminated my cubicle. The calendar in the corner had the correct day indicated, and my desk appeared to have been recently cleaned. In addition, I had my usual breakfast prepared for me. A large piece of bread smeared with heavily processed butter, a boiled egg, and a paper cup filled with something which could generously be called coffee. As unimpressive as it was, I still appreciated the free breakfast. I put on my headset before I began eating. As I ate, a voice emanated from my computer.

“Good morning, Employee #1! How are you feeling today?”

The voice of my personal computer was that of a man. If I had to imagine, I would see it as a jolly man in his fifties who had a goatee and enjoyed a nice cigar.

“I’m fine, Computer. And yourself?”

“Wonderful! The first call will be happening shortly! Remember – keep your smile on!”

There wasn’t really any point in asking what a computer was feeling, but it felt nice to try and make the gesture. After I finished my food, a call started. The smiling face on my screen was covered by a large screen of flashing lights and numbers. They were utterly indiscernible. On top of

Smile!

the visual cacophony, there was the noise. My computer, as well as an additional four other distinct voices, let out an endless stream of noises somewhere between words and letters.

Each day, this continued for hours. I had no input in these meetings. My job as the Numerical Quality Assurance Specialist was presumably to check these numbers somehow, but I could not even say what exactly was happening on my screen. I didn't really know what Smile Corporation even did. I had been assigned this job and had been "trained" in a few minutes. All I really knew was that I needed to smile. So I did. All day.

The noise continued. In the past, I used my company-issued pen and notebook to draw. A small collection of animals, buildings, and people began to appear in the notebook. More than anything, I drew faces. They weren't particularly well done, but it was enjoyable to draw a variety of wild-looking faces.

One day I came in and found my pen and notebook were gone. I knew better than to ask for their whereabouts. It was easier if I just let it happen. Because the one thing I had been able to occupy myself with had disappeared, I had to find different ways to amuse myself.

The headset had to stay on, but there were no issues with me taking my eyes off the screen. As such, my predominant pastime in these meetings was to simply let my eyes wander. My eyes made their way around my desk. A stress ball with a smile on it gathered dust to my right. To my left, a digital calendar displayed today's date. The art for this month was a hiking woman with a strong grin. In the corner, there was a photo of me in an electronic frame that I did not recognize. The electronic frame cycled through several photos each day, but this one was the first to have ever seemed unfamiliar. My eyes lingered on it. The smile on my face was too wide, and the verdant landscape in the background seemed somewhat blurry. Before I could analyse it further, the relentless noise in my headset suddenly cut out.

"Anything to report, Employee #1?" a voice asked.

"Nope."

"Excellent! I appreciate your clarification. Our morning meeting is over. Let's circle back to this discussion after lunch."

It had been three hours, fifty-eight minutes, and thirteen seconds since my day had started. I got up from my desk and made my way to the nearest break room. It was predictably empty. A façade of a kitchen surrounded a single table and chair. The only real decoration in the room was a mural of disembodied toothy smiles on the wall. A bowl of synthetic sushi and a cup of tea waited for me on the table. I sat down and began to eat, carefully

maintaining my smile as I did so.

“Hi!”

A female voice had called out to me. One of my “co-workers,” presumably.

“Hello.”

“Oh no! Sorry, you seem to be feeling sad! It’s been a pretty rough day at work for me as well! What’s got you feeling down?”

“Uh, nothing?”

“Are you sure? As your co-worker, I am happy to assist with any personal troubles or moral qualms you may be having.”

“Okay, I appreciate the offer. I’m gonna leave now.”

“Alright, make sure to let me know about any troubling thoughts you may be having. And remember, it’s not just about high-quality service – it’s about high-quality smiles!”

Eager for privacy, I made my way to the restroom. Hopefully, there wouldn’t be anyone in there. I knew there would not be people, but I hoped I wouldn’t have to deal with any “co-workers.” I made my way into a stall and sat down. My watch told me I still had a few minutes left on my break. The relief I felt caused my face to relax. My smile dropped.

“Break of company policy recorded. Report to Room #223H at the end of your shift.”

That wasn’t good. I couldn’t tell where the voice had come from, but they had seen me.

“Ok! Sorry about that!” I shouted, deliberately smiling as hard as I could.

There was no response from the voice, causing a massive surge of paranoia. Even now, I was being watched. I made my way back to my desk, put my headset back on, and continued working. The rest of the day felt even more like a blur than usual. The white noise that was my sole, daily task gave me plenty of time to dread what would happen once I was called for the meeting. Eventually, the time came.

“Good night, Employee #1!” my computer shouted.

I did not bother responding this time, as I was busy signing out of everything. After I clocked out, I was directed towards Room #223H by a series of voices. They were distinctly synthesized and guided my every step. Eventually, I reached it. The door was at the end of a long, empty hallway. I opened it and stepped into what felt like a void. The walls were black. The floor and ceiling were black. The only colour in the room was the dull grey metal of the chair in its centre. Despite the lack of a visible light source and the incredibly dark surroundings, the chair

Smile!

was completely visible. It looked as if both the chair and I had been suspended in an empty space.

“Sit,” a deep, resonant voice commanded.

I did as ordered.

“Do you know why you are here today, Employee #1?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

I wasn’t, but it felt like the right thing to say at the time.

“It is of utmost, tantamount importance that a smile is on your face at all times. Company policy commands it.”

“I understand. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. I won’t break the policy again.”

“It’s not just a break of company policy, it’s a betrayal of trust. Of our family.”

“I’m sorry. It was only just for a second. I didn’t mean to.”

“That is no excuse. Take this.”

A small booklet emerged from the void, floated forward, and landed on my lap. I picked it up. The only thing on the cover was the words Smile Corporation Employee Handbook. I thumbed it open, and was greeted with an image of a woman’s face blankly staring forward. In the top left corner, there was the number one. I flipped through the book quickly. Each page had a direction for which specific muscles needed to be used in order to achieve a so-called Perfect Smile. Once all steps were complete, the Perfect Smile would be locked into place. The woman’s blank, unthinking stare remained identical on each page.

“Thank you for this. I’ll read it when I get home,” I said.

“We will overlook your error. Just this once. And remember, it’s not just about high-quality service – it’s about high-quality smiles!”

The point had been made. I waited for a bit to see if there would be any further reprimanding. There was not. As such, I got up from my seat and left the meeting room. The slight hums and buzzes that I usually heard during the day had begun to melt away as the office began to shut down. The day was over.

I made my way out to the parking lot and opened the passenger door to my company-provided silver Coupe. After I sat down, the onboard navigation AI started the engine and began to bring me home. The streets were, as usual, completely empty. A few neon signs twinkled in the night, but everything else was the same boring shades of grey, white, and black. My mind turned inwards to cope with the lack of visual stimulation. Was I happy with this job? Perhaps. It could be worse after all. I had a roof over my head, a full belly, and wanted for

nothing. It's not like the job itself presented me with any difficulties. I had everything I needed.

Eventually, I made it home. The apartment was as it always was. Empty. Despite that, he was there. My personalized AI assistant. Unnamed, but omnipresent. The hum of his electronics cut through the silence. I smelt meat cooking in the kitchen and saw the television flickering with a show auto-generated based on my stated preferences to be the most enjoyable media possible.

"Welcome home sir!" he said.

"Hello."

"Something the matter, sir? Can I provide you with a list of actionable steps to take, or would you prefer I listen to your troubles?"

"No, that will not be necessary. Just... Did my package arrive?"

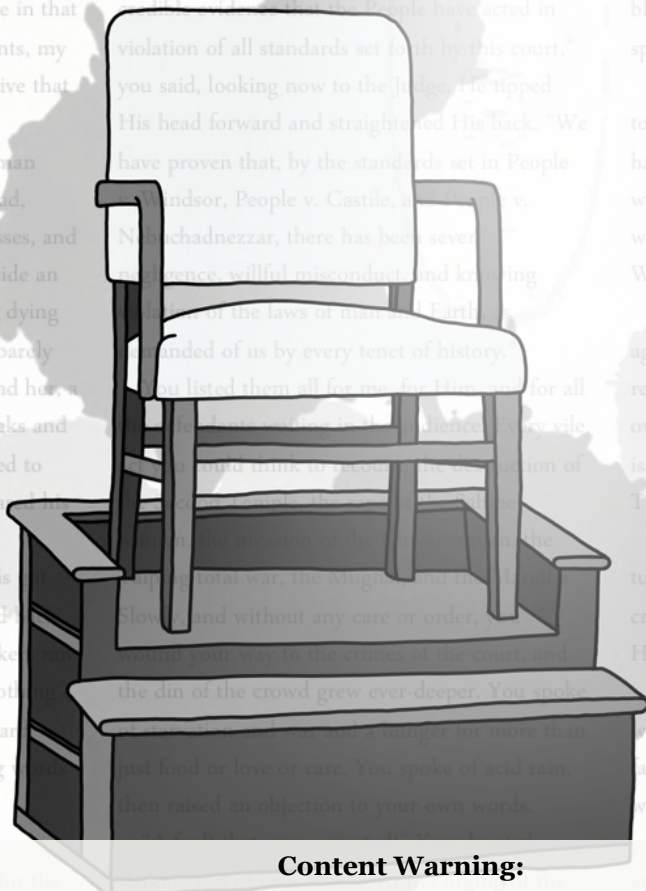
"Yes, sir. I've unboxed your new shipment of books. They are with the others."

"Sure."

I sat down on the couch and started to watch my personalized entertainment. The hero had won another stunning victory. As he celebrated, my collection of books continued to moulder.



The Trial



Content Warning:

reference to themes some readers might find unsettling

13:06

Lukas Shayo

Everyone – from the highest king to the poorest serf to the lowliest cretin who knew nothing of money or power at all – had gathered in the court at the end of the world. It was not the first time we had come here, nor was it the second, fourth, or fourteenth. High wooden walls, worn thin by termites and lantern flies, stretched on for miles, sheltering people who were so distinct and yet so unidentifiable.

I could see them for the shape of their hair, the colour of their skin, their bold and waxing builds, and yet there were too many to distinguish even a single one. My own mother sat somewhere in that crowd, right alongside my brother, my aunts, my uncles, and even the corpses of every relative that was and every descendant yet to come.

At the very front of the pews, a young man fiddled with his notepad. He was a stout lad, adorned in his high black collar, large glasses, and a hat that dangled off his knee. He sat beside an elderly lady with a bright pink bow in her dying grey hair. She was smiling at me; I could barely see it through the tubes in her nose. Behind her, a naked man with boils bursting on his cheeks and black soot shielding any hint of skin. I tried to nod to him, but he caught my gaze and bared his teeth. I looked away, ashamed.

The Judge languished on His bench. His gut hung over His desk, while His head tipped back over His cushioned chair. Long grey whiskers ran down to meet His hips, where He wore nothing beneath the robes. He fiddled with His beard aimlessly while another man's unchanging words echoed across eternity: "Thank you, Your Honour."

The phrase was a whisper in the wind, for the court was large enough the ocean breeze had found a way into this empty hell. I could scarcely hear it myself, though the words were aimed at me too.

There were eleven empty seats around me, but your eyes held on to me. I was so alone in my little booth, I wanted to reach out and hold you. The Judge was staring as if to see if I would. I did not. A million people sobbed at once, but their cries could not reach me. A billion more did not move. I tried not to look.

I watched you retreat and sit, so alone at your little table. Weren't you supposed to have an ally, a friend, a co-counselor? As soon as you'd sat, you shook out your hands and stood again, to make your way across the courtroom. Another table was waiting, and it was closer to me than the last. For your first argument, you wore nothing but your skin; this time, you reached for a blazer and pants. You pulled your short hair back and brushed the dust and dirt from your face. You replaced your water with wine, thanks to the service of another faceless young boy. You never thanked him; the Judge asked for a sip.

You approached me again, and this time you bowed. Alluring, but not inordinately.

“Your Honour, the People have presented credible evidence that the People have acted in violation of all standards set forth by this court,” you said, looking now to the Judge. He tipped His head forward and straightened His back. “We have proven that, by the standards set in *People v. Windsor*, *People v. Castile*, and *People v. Nebuchadnezzar*, there has been severe negligence, wilful misconduct, and knowing violation of the laws of man and Earth, as demanded of us by every tenet of history.”

You listed them all for me, for Him, and for all the defendants waiting in the audience. Every vile act you could think to recount: the destruction of the Second Temple, the rape of the Sabine women, the invasion of the Khwarazmian, the Taiping total war, the Mughal, and the Maratha. Slowly, and without any care or order, you wound your way to the crimes of the court, and the din of the crowd grew ever-deeper. You spoke of starvation and war and a hunger for more than just food or love or care. You spoke of acid rain, then raised an objection to your own words.

“A fault that was corrected!” you shouted, shaking out of your blazer. At the urging of the Judge, you argued with yourself for a minute. I never did see how the Judge ruled, but you came to an agreement with yourself, tightened your coat back over your shoulders, and went on.

The story of the Sentinelese moved many in the crowd to tears, but most of those present did not speak my language and continued to whisper among themselves instead. A child ran for the elderly woman at the front, but the court officers took them both by the arms and led them away. It was a more interesting sight than you were painting.

When they were gone, your voice rose until I decided it would echo in my waking sleep, like a drum pounding into the darkness. You shouted about war crimes and the many billions that were never properly prosecuted. You thought that it would move me, but it failed. I was not a lawyer who would know which wars were legal and which I should wail for, so you shifted to another argument. My grandchildren, you said, would live in a world on fire with oceans flooding through their schools.

“What’s it to me?” I wanted to ask you. “I don’t have any children.”

You never gave me a chance. You danced on and on, painting a picture of a planet that was bleeding, and we were all the mushrooms springing too early from its corpse.

The pink-skinned bailiff laughed, and the Judge told him to be silent, and you let that silence hang. For minutes, it hung. A few hundred more were led away from the pews. I could not see where they were going, nor

why they were taken. Were they dying? Were they surrendering?

When it was all over, you spoke to the Judge again, but you were looking at me. Smiling. “We respectfully ask that this court find that, overwhelming evidence permitting, the Defendant is irrevocably guilty. Thank you, Your Honour. The Prosecution rests its case.”

When you sat down again, the Judge finally turned an eye to me. The other remained with the crowd, and the third remained with you. “Well,” He said, “How do you rule?”

I was quiet for a moment. I couldn’t stop watching the crowd. I couldn’t see any of their faces anymore. There was only the blur. “What would it mean,” I asked, “if I said: guilty?”

“I’m the Judge,” He said. “I give the sentence, and you give the ruling. What comes after is not for you to know.”

So I sat in silence, and the minutes bled. And on and on, time drooled and dripped until the dinner bell rang. The Judge dismissed me, as He always did. I went home, as I always did. The next day, I came back, and you started your defence again.



The Day of New Light



Content Warning:

cult abuse and explicit depiction of murder

13:07

Cassidy Woollaston

The world is going to end today. This is a fact Esther has waited her entire life to come to fruition. A fact, as she has been told countless times, she is lucky to be alive to witness. A fact that, while everyone else in her community is reverent and prepared, she is simply not ready for.

Esther's frustration grew as she snapped another match against the box. She took a deep breath, whispering to herself, "We must not anger, we must not anger," over and over again like a mantra. There wasn't much time left in this life, and if she was going to be worthy of the next one, she didn't have a lot of time left to prove it.

Finally, she lit the match, held it between her fingers, and let herself breathe in the sweet smell of burning. Even as a little girl, she had loved fire, loved watching the flames lick at each other until they receded into tiny, glowing embers. She savoured the moment before placing it to the candle, then shaking the match till the flame died.

She could remember distinctly when Allfather had approached her, his musty smell permeating her nostrils. He always smelled of dirt and peat from his hours spent on his knees in the gardens. He was their leader, the one who had been chosen to save them all from impending doom. Esther knew she was incredibly lucky to have been chosen for the new world, and for Allfather to have chosen her for this job was the highest of privileges. She still felt his hand on her shoulder like a poker burn, branded into her skin. He had told her it would be her job to light the candles each and every day, symbolising how close they were to The Day of New Light.

The Day of New Light was what they had all been waiting for; it was to be the beginning of a new age, when this world would perish and the enlightened would emerge from the ashes to start afresh. Those who were worthy lived in Haven, where Esther had been born. It was a beautiful stretch of green encircled by a tall barbed wire fence. The fence was entwined with ivy to create a surrounding wall that reminded Esther of Sleeping Beauty's castle. The Fathers had built the wall themselves to keep everyone protected inside. Father Paul used to tell stories around the fire of the people on the outside, the vicious savages who would tear them all to pieces, if given the chance. Only Allfather and a small selection of other Fathers were ever permitted to leave Haven, and when they did, all of the girls and Mothers would gather to pray for their safe passage through.

Haven was laden with trees and crops, and their own lake to swim in. Each season you would be assigned to a crop. The berries were Esther's favourite; she would sneak one of the sweet, bursting fruits into her mouth, closing her eyes to savour the taste – that was always the best part

The Day of New Light

of her day. Although she was always extremely careful to never be caught. One year, Tommy H had been caught with a tomato in his pocket after a harvest, and for his greed, Father Jeffrey had held little Tommy's head underwater in front of everyone until he had nearly passed out. Father told us all this is what disobedient thieves deserve. Tommy never ate a tomato again after that.

They were always reminded how they were the luckiest children on Earth, to be in such a beautiful place as Haven, blessed with such bountiful harvests. Esther couldn't bear the idea of it all being eradicated in the flames, but Mother Rose would remind her that these were not things for her to worry about.

She lit another candle.

When Allfather gave her the job of candle-lighter, he had told her, "This is your reward, for letting go of Angela," and she hadn't responded, as this was not expected, but simply nodded silently.

The problem was, she didn't think she would ever forget Angela. Esther had always revered Angela, but she would never, ever admit that out loud now. Angela was a few years older than Esther, and she hadn't joined Haven until she was around 8. Esther had always admired how amusing and self-assured she seemed. Angela used to wink at her during Allfather's talks, and would arrange her meals into faces at lunchtime. She would teach Esther naughty words, and about things that existed in the outside world (like big black boxes with funny moving pictures, or stories about princesses).

Angela loved nothing more than the rain, or swimming in the lake. She had often dwelled so long in the bath she would receive a slap from Allfather for lingering past her allotted time. There had been one particularly sweltering day, when she had sprung from Mother Rose's grasp and launched herself into the water with a big, unladylike splash. The silence as she emerged from the lake was so deafening you could hear each droplet falling softly from her body onto the ground. Allfather had stood above her, looming, with a thunderous expression on his face. Angela stared right back up at him, not flinching at all as he ranted and raved. His finger flew in her face, mere millimetres from making contact, and yet she didn't even move to avoid his spittle. She let her eyes bore right back into his. It had never left Esther's memory, the way he had grabbed Angela's chin and viciously pulled it towards him, moving to whisper in her ear. Angela had clenched her fists and stormed off back towards the girls cabin.

That night, Esther had joined Angela in her bunk, and the older girl had hugged her tight, whispering to her in the dark stillness, "I'm going over the wall, to the other side."

Esther had gasped, and quickly covered her mouth to stop the sound. She urged back, "You can't!"

But Angela had just sighed gravely, like she had all of the wisdom in the world. "I have to," she said with finality, drawing in a hesitating breath. "I could take you with me."

Esther tried to imagine it for a moment; Angela hoisting her over the wall, starting their own life together. But she couldn't shake the images burned into her imagination by Father Paul, of the depraved, evil savages waiting just beyond. Angela had tried to tell her it wasn't like that, but it was no use. She just couldn't go.

The next day, it was Esther who found her body floating in the lake. She had cried and cried and cried. And with every tear shed she had been told over and over that this was right, that this was what Angela deserved. Allfather stood up in their Devotional that day, Angela lay at his feet wrapped in a white sheet. He told them this is what happens to fledglings who are disobedient, those who spit in the face of all that is sacred. He said that Angela hadn't performed her duties, and this was the price she paid.

After that meeting, Angela's name was only ever mentioned as a warning, a cautionary tale. Esther learned over the years to shed all her tears in private, with the devastation that Angela would never get to see the New Light. Sometimes, still, when she closed her eyes, she could still see the water trickling from Angela, down the steps of where she had been laid.

Now, there were only a few hours left until Esther was going to leave this life behind. And she would never see Angela again. But at least she wouldn't be here to burn like everyone on the other side of the wall. The creak of the doors behind her made her jump, and she turned to see everybody shuffling in for the Final Devotional. This building was the Temple, a large airy building with huge floor to ceiling windows. She loved to watch the dust float in the air, imagining they might be fairies just passing through. Esther knew that too active an imagination was not a good thing, and she had been smacked around the head many times for daydreaming, so she made sure that her eyes were always focused.

She shuffled back now to her familiar chair, and sat with everyone else in complete silence. Allfather emerged onto the wide wooden platform, etched so comfortably with all the steps he had taken over the years. He spread his arms wide and smiled down, with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, my children." He stood on the platform above them, neck bent down to take them all in. He paced for a few moments, and all of the eyes

The Day of New Light

in the room followed him. "This world will end today—" Which was followed by nods and murmurs from the captivated audience. He held up a cup, golden and glinting in the sunlight, sloshing with a deep purplish-red liquid. "—Every one of you shall drink from this cup, and sleep peacefully," he explained softly, everyone leaning closer to hear him, "and after the rest of the world burns, we will awake from the ashes."

There was a quiet reverence now, many people nodded, or closed their eyes or bowed their heads. Esther didn't dare move.

Then, Allfather stretched his arm out. "Charlie, my dear boy, rise." Heads whipped round to young Charlie, a mousy boy around the same age as Esther. Slowly, he came to his feet and made his way up to the stage. "I have chosen you to be the first of us to sleep." He put his hand on Charlie's shoulder, Esther could see the tightness of his grip. Charlie's face beamed with pride.

Allfather held the cup to Charlie's lips, tilting it up so high the liquid started to drip down his chin. Purple rivulets made their way down his neck, staining the front of his white garment. Angela came into Esther's mind then, she remembered the water trickling down her body as she stepped out of the lake. Allfather took the cup away, placing it on the table beside him. There was no sound in the room other than Charlie's heaving breaths, and then the sound of him dropping to his knees. Allfather started talking then, with words of grandeur about how lucky we all were, about what an incredible event this would be. But Esther couldn't properly hear what he was saying, because she was too busy looking at Charlie. Clamour began around her as people began to chant and pray and beg to be next, they were all looking to Allfather.

Esther watched in horror as Charlie began to claw at his throat, his heaving breaths turning to wheezes. He lurched forward, catching himself hard with his elbow. He retched and gagged, and in that moment, he looked up, and his eyes locked with Esther. His lips were dragged down with pain, white around the edges. They moved breathlessly, like he was trying to say something but couldn't get the words out. And his eyes. They welled up, and she could see clear as day the regret in his decision. It felt as if he was reaching out to her, begging her for help. Yet, like with Angela, she was too rooted and helpless to do anything but watch. So she watched, as he fell forward and writhed on the floor like a slug in salt. Then just like that, he stilled. He was gone.

A voice then parted through the ringing in her ears. Allfather's gaze turned to her with an outstretched hand.

"Esther, are you ready to join him?"



Sally smiled at Todd and asked the burning question being asked in living rooms all across town. "What'd you get?"

He hugged his pail (covered in purple bats, yellow ghosts, and, for some reason, *blue* pumpkins) closer to his body, as if Sally might scan its contents with X-ray vision. Todd, who loved this part of Halloween almost as much as the trick or treating, said what he said every year: "You first."

Sally followed the script they acted out every October 31st, continuing their yearly traditions. "On three." And before Todd could say anything – as if he'd say anything besides "yes!" – she started the countdown which marked the end of each year's spooky festivities. "One. Two—"

And like she did every year, Sally dumped her bag out on the two-count. The action surprised Todd – somehow it always took him by surprise.

Sally's colourfully wrapped sugary plunder spilled out of her pail – hers had a wolfman, Frankenstein's monster, and a wiener dog wearing vampire fangs on it. Todd flipped his pail over, not wanting to be beaten by his little sister when it came to candy inventorying.

A sea of coloured wrappers tumbled from Todd's pail, plastic crinkling, the pieces pitter-pattering against the carpet like soft hail. In the split second it took for the treasures to hit the floor, he calculated in his head, estimating the flashes of orange in the sea of colour. Those orange flashes represented his favourite candy: Reese's. From what he saw, it had been one of the best years in memory.

The candy having settled, he validated that estimate. The haul was Reese's heavy this year. He glanced at Sally's pile and saw an abundance of orange peppered throughout as well. She hated peanut butter. Todd was already rehearsing trade deals in his head as she sorted through her candy, putting it in neat piles: Starbursts next to the overturned pail, Hershey's next to her discarded werewolf mask, Kit-Kats near her feet, Snickers closest to the TV (which played an old black and white monster movie their father had put on before leaving for a Halloween party, their mom in tow, both dressed as raccoons), a collection of gummy candies closest to her, a few Abba-Zabas and other undesirables in the nether-realm near the coffee table, and finally, her stash of Reese's Cups, strategically placed closest to Todd.

Todd, who liked a bit more chaos in his Halloween doings, kept his candy in a messy pile, exactly how it had fallen from his pail. His method of inventory amounted to him running both hands through the pile, grabbing and mixing, rearranging the sweets, the individual colours of the fun-sized treats forming a nonsense mosaic void of meaning to

Trick or Treat and Other Rituals

anyone but him.

His candy agitation left a few packs of gummies atop the pile, which were Sally's favourite. He grabbed a package of Swedish Fish, made like he was going to open it, then looked at his sister. "Trade you for a Reese's?"

She appraised the bright package of fish, then glanced at her pile of Reese's, calculating, making a show of it.

"I'll give you *two* if you throw in the Haribo's." She pointed her chin at a pack of gummy bears poking out from the depths of Todd's candy pile.

Todd had to consider this. Out of all the gummy candies, Haribo was the only brand he *actually* liked. The consideration was short-lived, though. Sure, he *liked* Haribo, but they were *nothing* compared to the chocolatey, peanut buttery goodness that is a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

"Deal."

He handed her the two packs of gummies, and she tossed him the Reese's. He had it unwrapped and in his mouth before she could even stash her plunder in the corresponding pile. That was another yearly tradition: the first Reese's Cup Todd ate each Halloween following trick or treating – he had to have a few on the road, of course – was always one that originated in Sally's pail; something about traded candy just made it taste better.

Todd threw the wrapper to the side and plunged his hands into his candy-hill again, using his hands like the whisks on his mom's stand mixer, which he always enjoyed watching as it mixed dough. He churned the candy, delighting in the different shapes passing through his hands.

A thin slice of pain formed on the tip of his index finger.

"Ow." He pulled his finger out, images of razor-bladed apples and chocolate bars filled with dirty needles instead of nougat infecting his mind. The last thing he needed was for his parents' fears of tampered candy to be proven true. They'd never allow him to go trick or treating again.

A few beads of blood formed a line across a small slice on his finger. Paper cut.

Furious, he went about mixing his pile again, this time much more carefully, his mixer-hands on the lowest, most cautious setting, searching for the culprit.

Todd found it tucked between a box of Dots and a tube of Smarties.

He plucked it from the pile, holding it like he would a diseased thing. "Ew."

It was a tiny handmade book, bound with two staples. Bad enough

someone snuck a book into his pail instead of candy (he was already trying to piece together who would do such a thing, planning to return to their home next week with a dozen eggs), it was a *church*-flavoured booklet. On the cover was the title: *The Dangers of Halloween* printed in bold Comic Sans font. An assortment of Bible verses took up the back cover. A quick flip through the book revealed fear-mongering, poorly illustrated pictures, and more Bible verses.

Todd grimaced. "Yuck."

Sally looked up, apparently hoping he might have found a candy she could get a good deal on, maybe even as a freebie. "Oh," she said when she saw the small pamphlet. "I got one too."

She reached between two neat piles of candy and produced a small booklet of her own. This one differed from Todd's, though. Instead of white printer paper, the cover was made of something akin to leather, clearly aged, or made to look so. She held it up and flipped to the middle. Todd could make out symbols on the front, symbols he had never seen in his life, but reminded him of Egypt. On the back was an illustration stitched from harsh angles he couldn't look directly at, as it made him dizzy.

Sally's face scrunched up. "It's just gobbledygook." She flipped to another page. "None of the words make sense." She flipped to the next page. Her eyes stopped scanning, and she attempted to read what was there out loud. "Pe... Fo-un—" She huffed, flipping more pages, seeing it was all just as random as the passage she was on, then attempted another section. "Fohage... Fhag—"

Todd ripped the book from his sister's hand, sure that the sentence she was struggling with was something he could conquer in a second. The words *were* gobbledygook, but he took it as a challenge.

"Puh, F...Phu—"

He flipped through the book like his sister had, then returned to the page, accidentally smearing the blood from his paper cut onto the text. The page absorbed the drop of blood as a sponge would, the nonsense lettering first smearing, then becoming sharper, gaining a shimmering iridescence as if the words were an oil slick. "Luhyee... yuh-rong, Fin-oogli Miglow—"

After a few more attempts, he got it. "L'yemypth y'ronglui rhialguon so'mmon. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn."

A fuzzy static filled Todd's head, like he was constructed of white noise instead of flesh and blood. The fillings in his teeth reverberated, and he swore he could feel small discharges of electricity bouncing between the metal-filled cavities in his mouth. He winced, closing his eyes against it. He

Trick or Treat and Other Rituals

kept them closed until the sensation stopped, opening them to find Sally with her own eyes clamped down, tears running down her face. The television no longer played the old movie, reduced to white noise itself. Todd stared into the moving fuzz of the TV set, lost in the nonsense of the static, feeling kin with it. Uncanny shapes formed and melted, swimming through the white noise, like the TV was trying to pick up a signal from a station just out of range. Todd saw everything that was and wasn't in that static. He knew on a primal level that if the white noise didn't obscure and distort the images, he would lose his mind and self with a single glance.

The ground shook beneath them, mercifully stealing Todd's attention away from the TV. The lights flickered, then went out completely with a sizzling *pop*. Their house threatened to fall apart at its seams, the TV toppling from the stand and almost squishing Sally. Todd shot to his feet and grabbed his sister, running to the bathroom like he knew to do in an earthquake. He'd read that in a book somewhere, but never thought he'd have to use it, considering he lived in hurricane country.

Todd helped his sobbing sister into the bathtub, then got in himself, closing the shower curtain. They stayed there as the sirens started: police, ambulances, air raid. They stayed as the screams began echoing through the streets outside. When the ethereal screeching began, Todd instructed his sister to cover her ears, as he did the same. The sounds burrowed deep in the space between his ears, but Todd kept them covered all the same. Unmoving, they remained in the bathtub until all the sounds stopped and they were left in complete silence, in total darkness.



He stopped his finger just an inch from the tip of his nose. The urge to scratch it was overwhelming, but not as powerful as the sense of disgust he would have felt if he discovered he had a second one attached to it.

The symptoms were not new. He had already his sixth time, Edmond had not quite gotten used to the process of regeneration. Not quite, at least. Nothing like this. This was a man out there who actually did. A trick that he found useful as he tried to do anything, during the process. For example, right now he was trying to concentrate on the game in progress.

All this time, Mark had been still. The only muscles he had moved were those that controlled his new, four eyes. He was looking at the fluorescent chessboard and the pieces which he had just moved. He was looking at the two children, his wife, and the woman who had just appeared in a few minutes.

This whole state of affairs was in the same manner. A new body would sprout next to the one that had to be replaced. Then the process would exponentially accelerate all the way to completion. It was a cycle repeated every fifty years, with the precision of a Swiss clock but with some minute variants here and there. The constant was the total absence of physical pain. He would feel only the itchy that was it. Moments later, a full, brand-spanking-new human body grew out of the old one until it was completely split from it. The

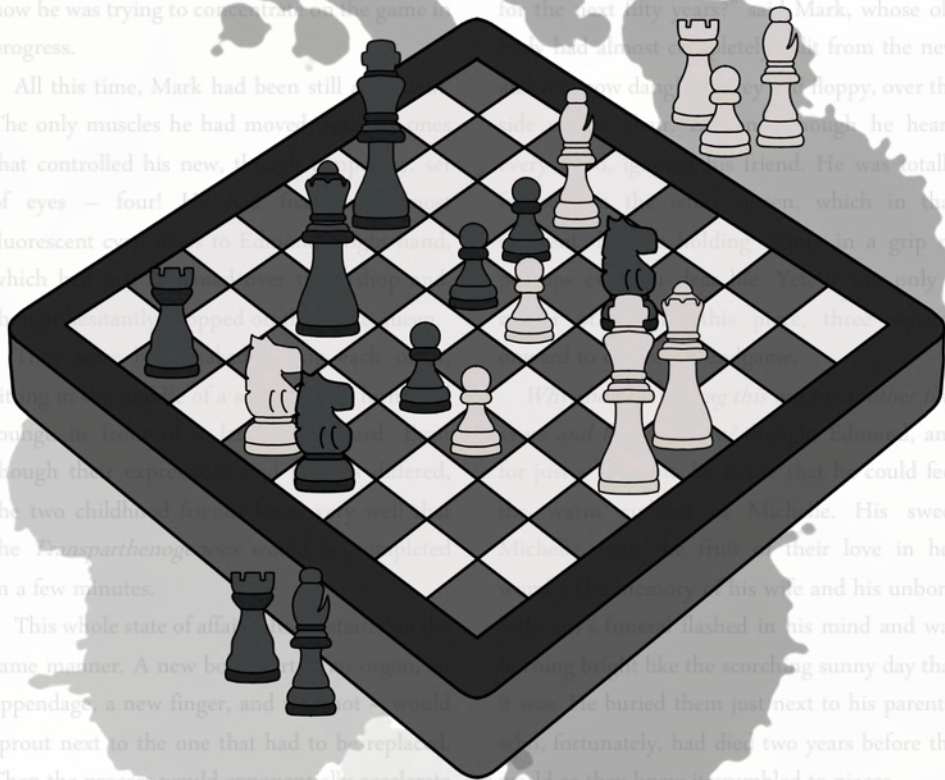
miraculous elixir mutated into an extremely contagious virus, lethal for whoever had XX chromosomes. One year later, women, or the EFX, as they were called, were small, but ironically but mostly bitterly, now referred to by all the men – the face of the earth. Only small, so that they could be carried in their pockets, poems, sonnets, and novels were left as proof that they existed in the world. The infamous drug, a cure for the virus, was a woman.

Mark, whose old body was almost as floppy, over the shoulder of his friend. He was totally out of control, which in that sense, was a grip. He was only a little bit out of control, but he could feel the love in her. His sweet wife, his unborn child, and his parents, who had died two years before the world as they knew it crumbled to pieces.

Edmond took a deep breath. He moved the white queen slowly forward. One, two, three. He opened his mouth to say "checkmate," but the words did not come out. He did not even notice now lay on the floor like an old rag.

The black king was now alone, doomed, yet, at least for a few moments, still standing.

Forever and Ever



13:09

Massimiliano Sappa

He stopped his finger just an inch from the tip of his nose. The urge to scratch it was overwhelming, but not as powerful as the sense of disgust he would have felt if he discovered he had a second one attached to it.

The symptoms were all there. Every planet was aligned – so to speak. Although this was already his sixth time, Edmond had not quite gotten used to the process of transformation. Not *quite*, at least. He asked himself if there was a man out there who actually did. A trick that he found useful was to focus on something, anything, during the process. For example, right now he was trying to concentrate on the game in progress.

All this time, Mark had been still and silent. The only muscles he had moved were the ones that controlled his new, though temporary, set of eyes – four! He had fixed his almost fluorescent cyan irises to Edmond's right hand, which had just skimmed over the bishop and, though hesitantly, stopped on the white queen.

They were both naked, facing each other, sitting in the middle of a small, barely furnished lounge in front of a large chessboard. Even though their expressions and feelings differed, the two childhood friends knew very well that the *Transparthenogenesis* would be completed in a few minutes.

This whole state of affairs always started in the same manner. A new body part – an organ, an appendage, a new finger, and whatnot – would sprout next to the one that had to be replaced. Then the process would exponentially accelerate all the way to completion. It was a cycle repeated every fifty years, with the precision of a Swiss clock but with some minute variants here and there. The only true constant was the total lack of physical pain; one would feel only *the itch* and that was it. Moments later, a full, brand-spanking-new human body grew out of the old one until it was completely split from it. The caterpillar that came out of the chrysalis as a butterfly, and the butterfly that turns into a caterpillar, forever and ever. *In aeternum, amen*.

Three centuries had passed since “the cure against death.” After only six months, that miraculous elixir mutated into an extremely contagious virus, lethal for whoever had XX chromosomes. One year later, women, or the EXXs – as they were, in small part ironically but mostly bitterly, now referred to by all the men – were wiped clean from the face of the earth. Only images, sounds, songs, poems, sonnets, and novels were left as proof that they existed in the first place. The creator of the infamous drug, a winner of the Nobel Prize in medicine, was a woman.

“Edmond? And so? Are you moving that damn piece, or d’you want to drag this thing out for the next fifty years?” said Mark, whose old body had

had almost completely split from the new and was now dangling, grey and floppy, over the side of the chair. Edmond, though he heard every word, ignored his friend. He was totally focused on the white queen, which in that moment, he was holding tightly in a grip or perhaps even for dear life. Yet, it was only a matter of moving this piece, three squares onward to decree the endgame.

Why shouldn't I drag this out for another fifty years and forever more? thought Edmond, and for just a moment, he swore that he could feel the warm cuddles of Michelle. His sweet Michelle, with the fruit of their love in her womb. The memory of his wife and his unborn little girl's funeral flashed in his mind and was burning bright like the scorching sunny day that it was. He buried them just next to his parents, who, fortunately, had died two years before the world as they knew it crumbled to pieces.

Edmond took a deep breath. He moved the white queen slowly forward. One, two, three. He opened his mouth to say "checkmate," but the words did not come out. He did not even notice that by then, his meat shell had slipped away and now lay on the floor like an old rag.

The black king was now alone, doomed, yet, at least for a few moments, still standing.



Gnashings of a Sinner



Content Warning:

reference to themes some readers might find unsettling

13:10

Karis Easler

Why did I abandon his words for my own?

This dark visage remains the cold revelation of our crude indulgence. Oh, how we abused the king's reign to corrupt the youth and blame the selfless. When judgement arrived, the king looked upon our hateful souls and separated us from his flock, like a rotting scab flaking off flesh.

We had gotten our wish to be released into the wilderness; however, without the king, all the comfort, the luxury, the food, the love was void. Everything he created with those who trusted him ascended to the heavens... to the stars. The world became a cold dark stone full of screams and gnashing of teeth. Some would bite their tongues off or rip their vocal cords from the searing pain. People clawed and wept in the burning tundra of earth. It was so cold, yet our flesh was ever ablaze and never numbing.

Rest is but a distant dream, and intimate pleasures are an elaborate torture. The comfort of my bedsheets and the smoothness of a woman's skin is replaced by the feeling of sandpaper and needles. Touch has no generosity; time has no meaning. The stagnant darkness has no day or night, just taunting stars. Any sense of morality or choice has been transformed into inhumane terror and animalistic rage. Even the sanest man clings to insanity. People climb atop one another creating spires of flesh attempting to escape the damnation of our desires. It is no use. We fall and start again.

When evil cannot torment good, it turns on itself like a rabid dog. My body shakes hearing the sounds of flesh tearing from the soulless. It is a morbid humiliation of our bodies, as we still thirst and starve. Cannibalism has no boundary in this hell of our making, and I am no more innocent than the others.

Can I even be considered an animal anymore?

I was once a renowned man of business who towered the world. The snap of my fingers could collapse an entire country, and I could have my way with any woman no matter how young or old. Now, I have bitten my own fingers to drink the temporary warmth trickling from my body.

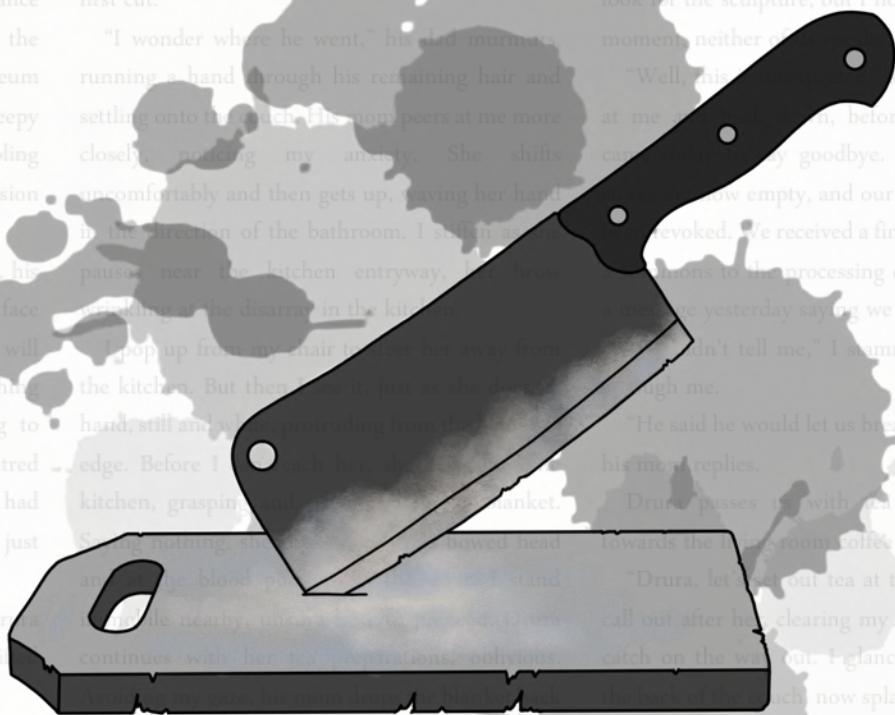
We were forgotten... I am forgotten.

I pleaded for death, yet it never came. It would be better to have never been born. I have even forgotten my own face in the darkness – the face which led many to wickedness and greed. The stars remain my only connection to what was before the end. I forsook the king, and in return, he rejected me. I understood his vision too late, and now I live forever hating, crying, seething to no end...

To no end.



The Task



Content Warning:

implications of cannibalism, death, dismemberment, and gore

13:11

Desiree Friesen

The overhead kitchen lights are sharp and yellow-toned. Drura hovers nearby in mid-air, waiting for me to fill the heavy-duty plastic bag so she can take it to our food storage room. Her mechanical hum is the only sound. She is an early version with no face, just a display panel with flashing red lights. The blood pooled on the floor, and the streaks on the kitchen cabinets are a testament to my hastiness and lack of experience with this type of work.

However, as I instinctively place the knife for each cut, the flesh comes away so easily that I must have been taught how to do this. If only I could remember where or when. I fold the bag's plastic top and seal it with tape, wiping blood off my hands with an old rag. I lift using my legs and not my back when I insert the bag of flesh into its outer storage capsule. Exposed leg bones, stripped almost bare, remain on the floor.

I kneel again and lean into my task. My body shifts back and forth with a sawing motion, and I pause to get a better grip on the knife. I glance back over my shoulder at David. I shiver at the thought of him lifting his face from the linoleum and looking at me, either in horror or in a creepy back-from-the-dead fashion. I imagine scrambling to my feet and running from the monster version of him.

But he remains still and lifeless, on his side, his arms bent awkwardly in front of him, and his face bowed towards the floor. It hits me that he will never lift his head ever again, and something overwhelming grows within me, threatening to escape. Yet for now it remains a ball of pain centred in my chest. I try not to think about the life we had together, or about my future without him. I just need to finish this task.

I cut away more clothing and keep going. Drura beeps, and the proximity alarm clangs, amplified through her receptors.

"What is it, Drura?" I sit back on my heels, rattled at the thought of an interruption.

Drura approaches so that I can view the exterior camera footage on her display. I squint to see it.

"No," I moan. "Not them." Flustered, I seal the current bag and give it to Drura even though it isn't full. There is nothing I can do about the mess. I push the kitchen table and chairs to where they will obscure my work area.

"Drura, delay them!" I yell, my voice crackling with strain. I run into the bedroom, strip off my coveralls, and grab a cleaner pair. Then I tear the blanket from the bed, holding it aloft ahead of me as I rush back to the kitchen.

Drura greets the visitors as they linger in front of the doorway, removing their shoes. I hope they didn't notice my rapid dash across the

The Task

hallway. In the kitchen, I drop the blanket over my remaining work. Maybe this will postpone the inevitable.

I try not to wring my hands as David's mom and dad approach from the hallway, and we exchange hugs. His parents are dusty and worn and seem older, even though it has only been a few weeks since their last visit.

"Where is David?" his mom asks as I lead them into the living room. She cranes her neck, looking around our small place. Drura hovers over the camouflaged carnage, putting on a kettle for tea.

"I'm not sure." I try to smile, but have a hard time getting my face into the right shape. It isn't entirely a lie. I'm not sure what happened to him. He was already dead when I found him... I think. The last thing I remember clearly is making the first cut.

"I wonder where he went," his dad murmurs, running a hand through his remaining hair and settling onto the couch. His mom peers at me more closely, noticing my anxiety. She shifts uncomfortably and then gets up, waving her hand in the direction of the bathroom. I stiffen as she pauses near the kitchen entryway, her brow wrinkling at the disarray in the kitchen.

I pop up from my chair to steer her away from the kitchen. But then I see it, just as she does. A hand, still and white, protruding from the blanket's edge. Before I can reach her, she darts into the kitchen, grasping and peeling back the blanket. Saying nothing, she stares at David's bowed head and at the blood pooling on the floor. I stand immobile nearby, unsure how to proceed. Drura continues with her tea preparations, oblivious. Avoiding my gaze, his mom drops the blanket back in place, slowly and deliberately tucking his hand underneath. Then she abruptly turns and runs down the hallway into the bathroom, the door clicking behind her.

I sag against the kitchen counter, shaking. She emerges from the bathroom sooner than expected, pausing in the hallway to lean on a side table, her fingers sliding along a decorative stone sculpture, about the size of a pitcher. It is a keepsake from better times, from when my great-great-grandparents vacationed in Europe. Nobody has any use for such things now. When she uses both hands to heft it up to her chest, adjusting her grasp for a better grip, I push myself back up to standing. I put one foot in front of the other, determined to meet her in the middle, in the hallway. She advances towards me but doesn't look at me.

Before we meet, she turns into the living room, her back to me. She approaches the back of the couch, where the top of his dad's head is visible. I freeze in place as she raises her arms high in front of her, the

sculpture pressed between her hands like an offering. My eyes squeeze shut, and I hear a dull thud, and something like a groan and a moan combined, but higher-pitched. Then I hear gurgles and squelching sounds, combined with more thuds, almost rhythmic in their increasing interval, before trailing off.

When I open my eyes, his mom is standing in front of me, and this time she meets my gaze, her eyes wide and triumphant. Blood drips from her arms and face. Her chest heaves as her breath comes quickly, her arms crossed in front of her. I look for the sculpture, but I no longer see it. For a moment, neither of us speaks.

"Well, this is unexpected," she begins, glancing at me and back down, before continuing. "We came today to say goodbye. Our personal food stores are now empty, and our living permits have been revoked. We received a final travel permit and a summons to the processing centre. I sent David a message yesterday saying we would visit today."

"He didn't tell me," I stammer, a chill passing through me.

"He said he would let us break the news to you," his mom replies.

Drura passes us with tea in hand, heading towards the living room coffee table.

"Drura, let's set out tea at the kitchen table," I call out after her, clearing my throat as the words catch on the way out. I glance apprehensively at the back of the couch, now splattered with red. His mom and I head back to the kitchen and sit down at the table.

She sighs and picks up her teacup. "I thought I was ready for the end, but then..." She gestures towards the blanket on the floor. "Then I saw that you have an unused living permit available." Shaking her head sadly, she continues, "My husband probably didn't have much time left anyway with his health issues worsening."

I switch to a different but related topic. "How big is the cull this time, in your sector?"

"The public food storage is empty. So, the cull is half of those remaining in our sector. They decided to do it in one big shot this time, to refill the food storage space."

I nod my head. "Wow, that is the biggest cull yet."

"Yes, it is good that you and David acquired your places in this newer sector, where the food storage will last longer." At the mention of David, she goes quiet for a moment, taking a sip of tea. "So, what made you decide to...?"

"I don't know," I stammer. "I actually don't remember... You know." My face goes hot.

Her gaze is gentle but direct this time. "That's how it is for some

people. It is the brain's reaction to trauma. Some people don't remember in the beginning, but then it comes back to them. Others don't ever remember. But it looks like you began harvesting." We both look at the blood splatter on the cupboards, the mess of plastic and tape on the floor, and the row of storage capsules tucked in the corner.

"But what if I didn't? What if it wasn't me?" I protest, abruptly standing up and pacing back and forth beside the table.

"I remember my first time..." his mom begins, trailing off, her eyes distant. "It was so confusing. I wasn't sure if it had really happened, whether it was real. When you are ready, I suggest you review Drura's footage."

"Right, Drura," I reply, wondering why I didn't think of this. I search his mom's face, surprised by her mention of a first time, hoping she will tell me more about it. I never would have guessed it. But she remains silent, contemplating her tea.

I halt my pacing at the edge of the room and call Drura over. "Drura, do you have a record of when David's life signs ended? What time was it?"

"Yes, it was at 22:04 yesterday." Drura waits for further instructions.

"Play the footage for me, starting at 21:55." I blink rapidly and then focus on Drura's display. My heart beats faster. It takes a moment for me to recognize what I am seeing. David is in the kitchen. I search for myself in the footage, trying to remember what I was doing at that time last night. But I draw a blank. David stands leaning against the kitchen counter. Drura is nearby. Something about his posture makes me think of myself, alone in the kitchen, after his mom fled to the bathroom.

There is no sound to go with the footage, but I see him say something to Drura. Beside him on the counter, there is a box of heavy-duty plastic storage bags and a roll of packing tape. He slowly looks up at the room's camera. Then he turns towards the counter, but I can't see what he is doing. My breath catches. With a rapid movement, he puts a bag over his head, then another on top, then another. Then the roll of packing tape goes around and around and around his neck, sealing the opening. It goes around so many times. I want to turn away from the display and do anything but continue watching, but aware of his mom's eyes on me from across the room, I make myself continue.

It is difficult to focus. I notice only fragments of the footage. The bags sucking rapidly in and out. David, now sideways to the camera, bent forward with his hands on his knees. David, rocking back and forth, sitting on the kitchen floor on his hands. Rolling on the floor, thrashing. Then his hands desperately plucking at the bags and tape. But David

never has any fingernails; he always chews them to the quick. Eventually, his hands slide away, and the bags stop moving.

“Drura, that’s enough,” I hear myself say. I look up at his mom; her expression is expectant. “You were right,” I tell her. “Can we talk about it later?”

“Of course.” Her face spreads into a grim grin of camaraderie. I try to match her expression.



That Gentle Night



13:12

C. Gauld

“Come with me, into that gentle night.”

The dark spoke with her voice. Was it because she was there, or just that I needed her to be?

An arm that reached for me, like she had time and time before. A hand that caressed my face, the only one I would allow. Yet as I looked on, yearning fresh and burning, she wasn't there. Only a gnawing void looked back.

The night stretched on. I stood at a blackened cliffside, overlooking the abyss the ocean had become. She wasn't here; she hadn't been for a long time. Any heat my longing had brought forth grew cold, as the eternal night reminded me that, out here, it was mine and mine alone.

The stars had vanished. Not one remained in the sky. Our own sun was far from exempt, disappearing in a blink and veiling the land. Perhaps it was like a parent, tucking us in before leaving us alone for the last time. Like all parents, our celestial mother had died.

It was possible the moon hadn't abandoned us, but without the radiancy to reflect, it too had left us. Did they leave together? Waltzing between the now dead stars and twinkling away? Or were we robbed of our guardians, silently kicking and screaming to save us?

I, like most left upon the lightless dune, had stopped caring. It had only been days, but the void did more than merely strip us of day and night. Our will had been stripped bare. The dark knew us better than we did. And before we had even been availed the time to process the end, more than the lights in the sky broke.

It was a crack in the glass. Reality seemed to fracture, the air slipping out of place, and from it, a nothingness more crushing than the eternal midnight it summoned. What it touched was left broken, not in body, but in soul. The land forgot what it was; memory ceased to be; the world stopped living.

Though it imposed itself upon our home, it imposed not upon us. It spoke as if it knew us. As if what lay beyond its ripples was as much us as we were.

I looked out. The water was black. Its cerulean radiance stolen before any had the chance to say goodbye. She would never have known to, but maybe I should have – for her.

This was the only place we had ever found where being alive didn't feel as loud. Standing here now, in these twilight hours where all sound was fading, her grave was at my feet. My only memory still my own. The cross pointed out, to the cavity one once would have recognised as a northern star.

It used her voice; it was her voice. It had stolen it; it had always had it.

That Gentle Night

I wanted to scream, but I had to listen. All who heard it had to.

What it did, what it said, could be seen as a mercy. For in the removal of the heavens, or the perversion of all we hold as real, it did not ask us. For ourselves, it gave us choice:

“Come with me, into that gentle night.”



Contributors

A J Dalton (www.ajdalton.eu) is a UK-based writer. He's published the Empire of the Saviours trilogy, The Satanic in Science Fiction and Fantasy, the Dark Woods Rising and Green Man Ascendant poetry collections, and other bits and bobs. He lives with his monstrously oppressive cat named Cleopatra.

Hansen Adcock writes short fiction and longer works under the name Han or Hansen Adcock. He runs, edits, and illustrates Once Upon A Crocodile e-zine. His fantasy-horror novel "A Dark Heritage – The Nighthunter" is available on Amazon from Golden Storyline Books.

Savanna Sherman is a novelist, poet, and part-time barista living in Virginia. Her poetry and fiction has been published in the print and online publications of The American Library of Poetry, Journal de Folie, and Sky Island Journal.

Sarah Farr (she/her) who previously masqueraded as S.J.Budd is a writer from London. She has always been fascinated by anything out of the ordinary. Her debut novella, Enter the Darkness is out now from Brigid's Gate Press. Her work has appeared in over twenty magazines and anthologies including, Brigid's Gate Press, Creepy Podcast, Cemetery Gate's Media, NoSleep Podcast and Tales to Terrify.

Dale Parnell lives in Staffordshire, England, with his wife and their imaginary dog, Moriarty. Dale is featured in several excellent anthologies and magazines, and his strangest wish is to one day find one of his own books for sale in a second-hand bookshop.

Ricky Seyler is a lifelong reader and student of history. He enjoys stories that blend genres, push boundaries, and challenge the reader. Books, both fiction and nonfiction, have always served him as a source of comfort in troubled times. He hopes to one day publish his own novel.

Lukas Shayo lives in New York City with two cats, two dogs, and an exceptional amount of fur everywhere. When he isn't hard at work as an educator, you can find him writing stories on the subway or tapping away at a keyboard.

Contributors

Cassidy Woollaston works in TV, she has always had a great passion for writing and exploring countless different worlds through words as well as the screen. She finds inspiration from her busy life in London, and her love of film and literature.

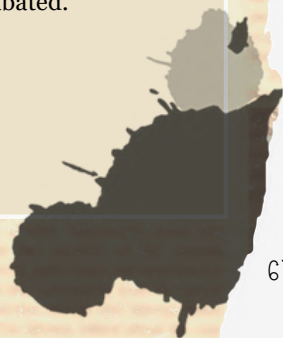
S. T. Talbot has been writing since he was a boy, but took up writing fiction to process living in an unfamiliar environment following his move from his hometown in the San Bernardino Mountains to Florida. If he's not at work staring blankly at clipboards or in his office conjuring up ghost stories, he's most likely listening to spine-chilling old-time radio shows or gorging on cheap, foggy horror films with his cat, Casper.

Massimiliano Sappa is a bilingual writer (Italian and English) and filmmaker. He debuted in the Italian publishing world with a horror short story published in an anthology in April (2026). In addition, a speculative fiction story collection and a meta/thriller novella will see the light of day in 2027.

Karis Easler currently lives in Greenville, South Carolina where she enjoys writing, working with local theatres, and film projects. She obtained her education from Clemson University with a Bachelor's degree in World Cinema and two minors: one in Brand Communications and the other in History.

Desiree Friesen lives on Canada's west coast and primarily writes dark or unsettling short fiction. She has several top 10 NYC Midnight contest placings, including 3rd for round 1 and honorable mention 1 for round 2 of the 2025 Scary Story challenge. She loves donuts, horror movies, and cabin life.

Hailing from the Orkney Isles, **C. Gauld's** writing is few and far between whenever inspiration washes onto the shores. The form that seafoam has taken recently has been more grim and bittersweet, yet the romantic undertide hasn't abated.





The ELA Team



Emma Stead

Editor-in-Chief & Marketer

An English Literature graduate, Emma brings years of editorial experience and a talent for organization to our team. She believes that every story needs to be told and every writer deserves to be championed. She's drawn to the supernatural, twisted crime thrillers, romance that surprises, and anything that blends genres in unexpected ways. Though, she's learned that the most surprising plot twists happen at 6 AM when her children want to debate why velociraptors would make terrible babysitters.

Lauren Penzer

Editor & Social Media Manager

Lauren is an English Literature graduate with a love for coffee, our mascot and her cat, Pepper, and writing that is creepy, interesting, and generally devastating to the soul. Her reading taste ranges from nineteenth century Gothic to depictions of the female cannibal. She will love any story with a jaw-dropping twist, a loveable character, or a trope turned on its head.

Amelia (Emily) Crawford

Editor & Designer

Amelia is an English and Creative Writing graduate two times over, and is preparing to make it three times over with the start of her PhD in the same subject area. She has a passion for human narratives and voices that focus on the more macabre side of being. Though she will always be the first to admit that while she does like darker themes and twists, this doesn't mean all she wants to read are "dark, depressing, and edgy" stories. When it comes to what she does read, it's mostly reimagined history and mythology, as well as anything with an interesting POV.

protecting our furry friends. Whatever it is they're up to, all we can do is hope that they will be finished soon.

Cats: Cute or Cursed?

Over the last few weeks, a strange phenomenon has taken over the West Midlands. For unknown reasons, all of the cats in the area have been seemingly disappearing in the dead of night.

Reports began when concerned owners of indoor cats, as well as some equally perplexed vets and shelter owners, reported what originally seemed to be attempted thefts of their animals. The strange thing is, rather than the cats being stolen, they are simply found meowing on the doorsteps of their local properties. Those reporting these strange occurrences have claimed that wandering their back inside has been rather tricky. The felines' behaviour has moved away from their normal goings-on.

One lady, Mrs A from Coventry, reports that her little, ginger cat has seemingly been disappearing at these strange midnight moments. What no one can figure out is how these cats – many of them locked behind front doors, some in garden enclosures – have been managing to escape without assistance. Local police have investigated potential thefts, though investigations turned up nothing; security footage from many of these properties reveals no hooded thieves, only a strange flickering around the time of the cats' movements. It appears that one moment they are safely tucked in at home, and the next they are outside, fleeing the property at lightning speed. Many concerned owners even attempted to stay awake to witness these strange occurrences, though either found that their cats had evaded them and vanished, or worse, that they have no memory of the cat having left their safe places.

Likewise, no one has been able to figure out where they are going. Though many have tried – and failed – to keep an eye on them, even staying alert throughout the night, following the local area for the first few days, there has been no sign of these cats once the dark of night descends. And then, miraculously, over the next couple of days, the cats are found purring – unharmed but unusual – on their owners' doorsteps, as if they had simply been left outside by mistake.

“nevertheless,” one witness told this publication. “And then nothing. Just... nothing.”

A spokesperson for the poetry community said the work was in conversation with an earlier poem by someone else. That poem also did not rhyme, and inquiries are ongoing.

Members of the public are advised to remain calm. If you encounter a poem that does not rhyme, you are urged not to approach it alone and not to ask what it means in a room full of people. Under no circumstances should you nod as though you understand; authorities warn this may only encourage further activity.

Local poets in the Loughton and Epping Forest area are not taking questions at this time.

Loughton Poetry Incident: What Comes After the End of the World?

On Thursday afternoon, a poem was read in broad daylight in Loughton, Essex, by a witness who claimed that they were “singing” the poem. The poem did not rhyme, and for some reason, the witnesses are unsure. At line 12, the poem turned into a series of words in connection with the poem. The poem was named for legal reasons, was twelve lines long. Of those twelve, four lines were comprised of a single word each. One of those words was “nevertheless”. Witnesses had described the scene as distressing, this correspondent among them.

Free verse, as it is known to those familiar with the world in which such things occur, is poetry that operates without rhyme, without metre, and without, investigators have noted, any apparent concern for the reader. It has been present in the English language since the nineteenth century. In all that time, no charges have been brought.

The poet Walt Whitman is widely believed to have introduced free verse to mainstream English poetry. Whitman died in 1892, and efforts to hold him accountable have so far been unsuccessful.

Witnesses to Thursday's scene reported feeling confused and implicated, unable to confirm when the poem had finished.

