

## Pillow War

They would call it a catastrophe, the end in a sequence of dominoes which set in motion the countdown of humanity.

But briefly the sky shone bright white, the epitome of heaven, and for a butterfly moment they thought that angels had descended from the skies into their weeping, thrice-tossed world.

For one beautiful, impossible second.

*They're coming.*

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In one hand she held a baby swaddled in a man's winter jacket. In the other, a stick of graphite, poised against a yellow scrap of paper. The candle burned low and red.

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*Photo: The woman's brown hair was scraggly, her skeletal frame dwarfed by a patchy jacket. She wore a white scarf.*

To my little angel:

Asha. When you read this, will you still go by that? I'm the woman in this image—your mother. I can't stay long, but maybe *you* can. You, who'll grow up without roses, without laws, without the sky.

I wish it weren't this way. But without me holding you to the past, perhaps you'll see it all more clearly. Perhaps you'll teach us what it meant to be human, to be happy.

Love you.

#

This is called a moth.

*Photo: The moths lay open, white wings stiff in death. Some were partly blackened, held together by atomic threads. A fluffy ivory coat warmed their tiny corpses.*

The second night the jets were gone, we lit a candle and watched the moths burn. When my mother smelled it, she yelled at us—your uncle and I—to throw them out. With all that ash in the air, I don't know how her nose was so sharp.

She never did adjust.

I sometimes dream of moths, ivory alight with fire, like falling feathers. By then, they were one of the only ones left. The birds had long since gone—hunted to death, probably. And the last time I saw a deer was a day after the blast, turning on a spit.

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My father never returned. January 8, 2187, a week after it happened, he didn't come home with the rest.

If not for us, I think my mom would've walked out that very day. She didn't cry, not that we saw. But I hope you never see someone like that—so hopeless, so broken, she could barely speak.

That night, the food turned cold on the table. And for once, she didn't rebuke us. Yet she was still stronger than me, you know—she *stayed*. Stayed until I was old enough, until she thought I could bear her passing.

I'm weak. Here I am, ready to go, and you can't even say my name yet. Sometimes I think I had my father's genes, mutated by our sins to self-destruct. Why am I still here?

I'm sorry, dear. I shouldn't write such things for you. Already, you'll grow up without a mother. You don't need my complaining on top of that.

Asha, I *do* want to stay. In part, at least. But when I stop to think: fighting once-friends for food, scavenging tarps for rainwater, waking up to grey skies... it gets worse every morning. I've *cried*, dearest. *Cried* that I'm still here, still alive.

#

We held a neighborhood candle vigil in what used to be an underground storage facility. We brought a single candle, but many had two: one for each child in their four-person American dream. I am thankful every day we were too young, your uncle and I.

...no. I take that back. If I hadn't lived, I wouldn't have to leave either of you.

*Photo: A squat red candle, safely nestled in a plastic tomb. On the surface was a tan label, which read: CHRISTMAS SPICE.*

For many, we only knew that they weren't here.

Why?

When they realized how long the war would go on, the generals cracked down on wireless services. Think of it as telepathy between machines.

*Photo: A sleek silver rectangle with rounded edges and an apple logo.*

Support national security, they told us, by isolating yourselves from the rest of the world. From the rest of the nation, too.

But it was too late. Some martyr had already leaked their plans.

So when we cried, we cried as much for the past—for the lives we had lost—as for the years to come.

We set the candles in a circle and then lit them all. There must've been a hundred of them, so tiny in the shadows, the burning scent of Christmas floating into the air.

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Our grandma made these scarves. She loved us so much.

*Two scarves lay atop a wooden table. One was white, the other brown. Both were lined with neon feathers.*

She loved collecting things. In the first few weeks of the aftermath, before we all thought of it as tinder, my grandma would walk up to people roasting parrots and ask for unwanted feathers. For a price, of course; even in those earliest days, we knew not to give away too much. Later, they became more expensive—until, one day, she traded away her wedding ring.

She loved us too much.

So these scarves I leave you--they're from before, the world as it once was. Close enough, anyways.

Take good care of them. Don't let them catch on fire.

#

My grandma and I took walks every week, just she and I, and we'd come home with a charcoal skin. In that ashy air, she had it worse: coughs one day, watering eyes the next—yet she'd never complain.

Three weeks in, she went out for a walk in the ashen rubble. Naturally, I wanted to go, but my mom was adamant that I did not. So when I cried, she let me make pumpkin pie.

Sugar, wheat, lard, and pumpkin in a can. It was the last time I saw sugar.

You know, I thought we'd run out a week ago. And I was right, but at the time I didn't care; I was so hungry I would've sold a dog.

Well, I wouldn't have been alone.

Think of mulberries, if those trees are still around by then, and imagine a basket full of them—sweet ripeness every time you stuff your cheeks, with little chunks of cracker. That was our pumpkin pie.

*Photo: A black tablecloth with frayed edges. An ivory cascade of sugar, frozen in time, gleaming like blood in the crimson candlelight. Beneath was a glinting silver pan, filled to the brim with pie.*

We had dessert for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Your uncle was five. I can still see his grin, his dented spoon hovering over a too-generous slice of burnt-orange pie. The crust was flaky, like delicate butterflies, and several days later I could still smell the pumpkin woven into my shirt.

At the time, it was worth it. We tried to save some for grandma, but our mother told us not to worry. Our grandma would want you two to eat it, she said. She loves you too much.

To think, what we'd do for those we love. I'd later learn she ate nothing that day.

Our mother, that is. Our grandma never came back.

#

One month. That was how long our mothers told us to wait, before the neighborhood kids could all play pillow war together. Your uncle threw a fit—it had been so long since we'd last had one. Board games could only last so long. But our mothers were worried.

*Photo: A spinning top sat tilted, its rainbow paint chipped, revealing the soft cream of frayed wood.*

Cancer, cannibals, you name it. Even so, we were lucky at the time. We were on the outer edge.

But as for the jets? We needn't have worried. Once the first was released, all the nations would follow. And when it ended, there was no one left to order the troops to war.

#

Five years in, my mother chose to leave. And this time, we got no sugar.

I never realized, you know. Not until the day she left, when she told me, did I realize where we'd gotten the sugar.

Then, one month later, I met your father. We were twenty. It wasn't a relationship so much as mutual desperation; I had your uncle, but we were still so lonely.

Look—your father carved this for me.

*Photo: The wooden dove sat in dusty grey hands, holding an olive branch between oaken claws.*

We came to love each other. Surviving the apocalypse breeds a certain romance; I'm sure Shakespeare would've loved it.

You know, I never learned my mother's lesson. Because here I am, ready to go, after seeing her awful grief.

But I can't go on.

I think, somewhere, that she didn't want to go. It was why she stayed to talk with me, that last time, in the hopes that I'd convince her otherwise. I failed.

She told me—

“What's the purpose of delaying death? This is how we imagined hell, and now we're living it.”

#

My father never came home. Yet your uncle is still here.

Is it genetics that drags some of us beneath the waves? And lifts the flailing rest to barren shores?

Is it genetics that pulled me here today, prattling through a pen, words you'll only ever see with a voice left to your dreams?

Call me selfish--but still I hope you will remember. And I hope, one day, that you'll be able to read; that you'll look up and see blue skies brighter than the seas, that when you look back down you'll find jays and sweet honeysuckles and know, beyond inked paper, this snapshot of spring.

*Photo: Spring. Flowers, green leaves, blue sky chased with clouds.*

Maybe it's something else genetic, something in our humanity. Something in the silent birds and hidden sun and the desperation—our hungry betrayals. Maybe that's why we couldn't go on.

At least you'll see my photos. But if you live long enough to learn to read, then know this: I love you so much and I'm sorry I couldn't stay.

#

“One, two, three, four, I declare a pillow war! Five, six, seven, eight, open up the war gates!”

Dust-streaked pillows flew through the air. Peals of laughter rang across the rubble, where skeletal structures swam in timber beams and scraps of steel. As the children ran across a cleared street, pillows in their hands, the clicks of skittering screws became the backdrop for their screams.

“Got you!”

“No you didn't!”

“Well, I did now!”

“Ha! Come get it!”

“My pillow!” As her punctured pillow flew through the air, dropping feathers like a *piñata*, a girl with a white scarf clambered atop a dusty sofa. Feathers swirled in the air. The others joined her, mouths open in laughter, a sea of cherubic hands reaching for the ashen skies.