

Beneath the Surface

The year was 1961; the Cold War had reached its peak, as the USSR sent nuclear weapons to Cuba. President Kennedy tried to stop them from launching, but it was useless. Within hours, the continental U.S. was wiped out. All, except for an insignificant group of people: the Undergrounders. They maintained their bunkers from the Great Wars, always ready to scurry beneath the surface at a moment's notice. When the explosions came, they took nothing but the clothes on their back and went below. Everything they needed was there, from books to water recyclers to farming facilities. In their tunnels, far removed from the nuclear waste on the surface, was where the last humans of America spent the next century.

All of her life, Beatrice Thomas lived in the tunnels. This existence was the only thing she knew. The elders still remembered a time with a bright sun hanging overhead, wind blowing through the trees, and rain falling on rooftops. Beatrice had no recollection of such a time. She knew of fluorescent bulbs and crumbling sediment. Dirt defined her existence, as it did for everyone else, and she hated it. She hated everything about the tunnels, from the dust and sediment that covered every inch of her clothing, to the filthy rodents that darted about attempting to steal meager food.

When she was younger, Beatrice hadn't minded a life of darkness. It was simpler then, for she was able to ignore the reality that the tunnels were a prison. Everyone trapped like rodents underground, never venturing too close to the surface for fear of radioactivity. As she grew older, she longed for the surface. Surely time had healed the wounds of war. Surely the sky was still as blue as they said, the sun as bright, and the trees as green. Surely.

But these kinds of thoughts were not allowed. A life of dim light and dusty, never-ending halls was the only feasible reality. Suggesting a return to the surface was on par with treason. Beatrice knew this, but still, she dreamed.

Dreaming is a dangerous thing. Dreaming leads to hope, hope leads to desire, and desire leads to action. Beatrice went down this spiral. Her far-off wishes turned into fleshed-out ideas. If she just figured out that the surface was safe, then everyone could return to the surface. She could see the sun.

Plans began to form. She knew where the science sector of the tunnels was, as her parents worked there, and she knew the password for the restricted research areas. She just needed to get in during curfew, when the labs were empty, and she could rifle through the papers without fear of being caught.

This proved to be harder than expected. Initially, Beatrice was going to simply sneak out of her room and walk down the hall. However, the moment she set foot in a tunnel, a guard hurried over.

“You, child. Stop right there,” he said. Beatrice immediately stopped moving, her hands slowly raising up into the air. Yes, her plan had seemed simple when she was concocting it, but had it truly been terrible enough to justify such a quick usurping? It seemed so.

Thankfully, the guard seemed eager to end their encounter and send Beatrice back home. After a few curt questions about why she was out, and what her backpack contained, he backed down. After returning Beatrice to her home, he quickly retreated down the tunnels, disappearing just as quickly as he had appeared.

Beatrice got no sleep that night. Her mind was awake, racing with other possible plans to discover the truth. Finally, after hours of pondering, she had an epiphany. There were two things

every room was connected to: the halls and the airway system. If the tunnel hallways had failed, that left her with one other option to get into the science laboratory; she had to climb through the ventilation system.

Every room had at least two vents, one which released breathable air, and the other which took in the gasses exhaled. Theoretically, she could use the ventilation to go directly from her room to the laboratory, avoiding the curfew guards.

The next night, she set her second plan into motion. Propping the old bookshelf up beneath the vent cover, she climbed up, utilizing the shelves as a makeshift ladder. Quickly, Beatrice unscrewed the bolts and dropped the cover silently onto her mattress.

With one small push, she brought herself into the vent system. Beatrice never thought of herself as a claustrophobic person; after all, she'd spent her entire life in the tunnels. This was so much worse. She was trapped in a maze of endless metal tubes. Despite the terror mounting inside her, Beatrice pushed onward through the ventilation, one crawl forward at a time. Each wrong move, each accidental noise, would have spelled disaster for her. Yet, this time, luck was on her side. She arrived to the research labs after forty painstaking minutes in the ventilation system.

Quickly typing in the keycode, Beatrice slipped into the laboratory. However, no amount of time could prepare her for the reality she uncovered. As she rifled through paper after paper, a glaring truth began to form in front of her eyes, if she dared believe it: her whole life was a lie. In the 1960s, the U.S. had been on the brink of mutually assured destruction with Cuba and the USSR. But, it had never gone beyond that. The founder of the Undergrounders, Janet Janice, just claimed that the Soviet Union was sending nuclear weapons. Everyone in the community blindly trusted her, scurrying away to their subterranean tunnels. The tunnels were never intended to

keep them safe; they were there to keep everyone trapped. The leaders were never going to admit that the surface was free of nuclear radiation. This was just another twisted way of staying in power.

Beatrice was left reeling. The next ten minutes felt like a blur. She stumbled down the halls, ignoring the yells of the curfew monitors to stop. They threatened her with citations, service requirements, detention. Beatrice could not care less. Everything she knew, her whole life, her whole world, was built on one enormous facade. She was trapped. Unless... No. It would be impossible. Not impossible, *nearly* impossible. But that 0.1% chance that she might succeed was all Beatrice needed to start planning.

Her whole life she had hoped and dreamed that one day she might see the surface. Back then, it had felt like a distant and hopeless dream: the world was permanently damaged, and it was safer to stay beneath the surface of the Earth. Now, she knew the truth. The surface was safe and waiting for her to reach it. All she had to do was get up to it.

Each day, she attended school, performed her required community service at the greenhouse, spent time with her family. But at night, Beatrice was solely focused on her one goal. She was escaping, one spoonful of dirt at a time. As the weeks went on, her tunnel got taller and taller, and her hopes began to grow with it. The soil turned from the hard, packed, rich-brown soil of the deep underground, to looser dirt. Beatrice was nearly free.

On the final day, she was filled with joy. While digging the night before, Beatrice had seen roots in the soil. She was finally there. She packed her bag full of essentials: clothing, food, water. She had no idea how long she would need to survive on her own before she reached civilization. As she climbed higher and higher up the tunnel, her excitement skyrocketed. She would experience the surface, something she had dreamed about for years. At the top of the

tunnel, she once again encountered the roots and began to dig. As she reached her hand up to scoop another bit of dirt away, Beatrice's hand encountered zero resistance. Instead, her hand broke the surface. For just a moment, she could feel the warm rays of the sun on her hand, the sweet smell of the earth entered the tunnel, and she could faintly hear a stream bubbling. Then, everything was ripped away from her.

Someone yanked her down, down, down back to the tunnels and away from the sun. Beatrice screamed blindly, for that was all she could do. Her brain simply couldn't process how everything had been going so perfectly until suddenly it hadn't.

Only a few minutes passed, but it felt like forever. Beatrice was thrown over someone's shoulder and carried through the tunnels. With each twist and turn of the tunnel, Beatrice was brought further and further underground. Until, finally, the walking ended.

She had never seen this space before. Something felt different, sinister, about this place. Her tears had long since dried, and her screams since subsided, but her feeling of terror had only grown. Deep down, she knew that she was never escaping. Never leaving the depths. No, she was being trapped within them.

With a creak, the man holding her opened a hatch in the ground. Inside the hole was a blank abyss, gaping back at her. Beatrice began to thrash. No, she would not go down there. Could not go down there. But that choice was not up to her.

He dropped her down into the pit, closing the hatch behind her. *There will be no escape for me*, she dully realized. As the light from the man's lantern slowly faded away, the isolation of her tomb set in. From the darkness emerged pairs of eyes. Hundreds of rats lined the wall of her pit, staring back at her with a sinister glare. With a start, she realized they were one and the same. She was a rat, the scum of society, forever trapped under the foot of the oppressors.

Into the darkness, she screamed.