

Tempest

Story 1

The bustling sounds of the airport are almost cathartic. People come and go as if nothing is wrong. As if there aren't soldiers stationed at every terminal, that there aren't dogs sniffing your luggage every time you round a corner. I wish I didn't have to come back to this awful country.

Outside the automatic doors at baggage claim, helicopters roar above me as I wait for a cab. The rotten fumes of the city waft into my nostrils; the air is so thick that I struggle to take a breath. I tug at my collar while avoiding the wandering eyes of men passing by me. I know it's too low to be wearing out of the house. I just pray that someone doesn't dress-code me.

I feel the eyes of my cab driver on me as I watch the buildings pass. I shouldn't have given him my real address. I'd be lucky if he didn't do something now, but he could come back later and try something then. I clutched my swiss army knife, knowing I'd be in real danger if I ever did use it against a man.

The silence of my house is deafening. The dim blue light of dusk seeps into the cracks on the floorboards, and the wall clock chimes rhythmically signaling the turn of the hour. I close my front door as I hear a click next to my ear. My heart skips a beat.

The cold barrel of a gun rubs against the side of my neck as a deep voice echoes the words "under arrest." My world turns dark as a pillowcase is placed over my head and my wrists are cuffed. I stumble over my feet as they lead me out of my house and throw me in

the back of a van. I can feel the worried and helpless eyes of my neighbors as they watch from their windows.

I do not know what they are arresting me for. Even if someone had reported me for my shirt, being dress-coded never results in arrests like this.

The floor rumbles beneath me as the van begins to move. It feels like we are driving for days. My lips crack from dehydration and my clothes reek of my urine. My stomach is past the feeling of hunger.

Eventually the van stops, and light floods my pathetic little mobile cell. Even through the pillowcase that covers my eyes, I still wince at the sudden brightness. Pain shoots up my legs as they drag me out and force me to stand.

We begin to walk, and soon we approach more people. I hear someone say “murder,” and call me by a name that isn’t mine. They uncover my head, and I see that we’re not outside anymore. They bring me down eerily empty hallways brightly lit by artificial light. At the end of one is a door, which opens into a cave of darkness. They shove me into this unknown room, and I hear a lock click from behind me.

It is in this cell that I stay, occasionally being taken to a soapless shower to clean myself. I get fed once a day, and the lights never go off. I do not know what will happen of me. I do not know why they think I am some other woman— a murderous monster. I do not know that tomorrow they will take me out of my cell at an unusual time and bring me to see a man.

I do not know that this man will give me an offer. That I can either remain in my cell for the rest of my days, not knowing when it is day or night, or that I can put my trust in

him. I do not know that I will choose to risk my life and let this man bring me to a new home. A home full of women just like me, who were given a choice to either live their lives in mere existence, or give up their purity in exchange for decent food and consistent comfort. I do not know that I will end up living a life I will learn to enjoy, trading my virtues for self-expression and female companionship.

Story 2

“Can’t you go any faster?” Violet urged.

“If we’re going to make it out of here, we can’t get pulled over for *speeding*. I’m going as fast as we can go without being noticed.”

Violet looked out the window. Behind her, the smoke and light of her burning city polluted the dark sky. She and her brother had been preparing for weeks for this to happen. They knew that once the attack happened, those who survived would be living completely different lives. They knew that they would be found out if they stayed.

“Do you think we can make it to the border by midnight?”

“I don’t know, Violet,” her brother sighed, “I’m doing the best I can under the circumstances.”

“I’m sorry.” She didn’t know why she apologized. They were both in this together, it wasn’t just her fault. She sat in silence as they passed the edge of the city. Abandoned houses dotted the streets— some scorched, some fully intact, some completely gone.

Up ahead, Violet noticed some movement on a balcony. As they got closer, she noticed a person flailing their arms.

“Wait, slow down.” She said to her brother.

“What is it?”

“See that person? They look like they need help.” The car came to a slow stop in front of the house. “I think we should go see what’s going on.”

“It could be dangerous. We need to just keep going.”

“But they could be seriously hurt! What if we just leave them there and they die?”

“Better them than us.”

“I’m going in.” Violet’s brother grabbed her wrist.

“No, Violet!”

“Let me go! I’ll holler if I need you.” She wriggled free, quickly got out of the car, and ran up the walkway to the house. The inside was dark and musty, and the covered furniture looked like misshapen ghosts in the dim twilight. Violet wondered why there would be anyone here.

“Hello?” She heard a thud from above. Peering around the corner, she spotted a set of rickety stairs leading up to dusty darkness. Having cleared the first floor, she slowly began to climb the stairs.

“Hello?” Violet called out again.

“Hi.” Violet whipped around to see a tall man looming in one of the doorways.

“I saw you from outside. Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I know exactly what I need,” he said as his silhouette moved closer.

“And that is...?” Violet said cautiously.

“Women always want to be a savior,” he chuckled, “it’s almost too easy.” He lunged for her but missed. Violet stumbled backwards and fell. Taking the chance he threw himself on her and held her down. She pushed against him but he had an iron grip.

She could feel his touch moving around her body as she screamed and spat in his face. With another push of adrenaline she managed to knee him in the groin.

“You stupid bitch!” He screeched, recoiling. During that time, she managed to get to her feet and run into the room behind her. Violet’s heart raced as she scanned the room for a weapon. From out in the hall, the man’s loud footsteps thumped closer.

“Get back here,” he growled from the doorway. He lunged toward her again and, in almost an instant, Violet had grabbed a dip pen from the desk and stabbed him in the eye. Blood soaked the floor as the loud thud from the man echoed throughout the house.

Violet ran out of the room and down the stairs where her brother stood.

“What the hell is going on?”

“We need to go now. NOW!” Violet shouted as she ran past him.

They ran out of the house, down the walkway, back to the car. Violet’s brother fumbled with the keys as Violet tried to catch her breath.

“There... was a... man. He attacked me... I... killed him.”

“What the FUCK, Violet?! Are you kidding me? What’s going to happen if they find out it was you? I could get in so much trouble... YOU could DIE!” The car started.

“I’m... sorry...”

“I told you not to go in there. But you couldn’t listen, could you? What’s going to happen to you, huh? You’re lucky you have me.”

“He was going to... hurt me.”

“Well, maybe you should make better choices next time. What do you think would happen if you went into an abandoned house alone?” Violet didn’t respond.

She just looked out the window, at the passing horizon, until all the houses were gone and it was just flatland.

Story 3

The only thing that keeps me going now is my garden. It is a little wall of plants that I have in my bunker with me. Once the economy crashed and security got tighter around the country, I turned into a bit of a doomsday prepper. My wife insisted on starting a garden down here when we got it. The first thing she planted were the cucumbers. They were her favorite.

I barely think of what the outside world was like before. I don't think there's anyone else left out there. I can't imagine there are, the radiation seemed too strong for anyone to survive. Sometimes I think I hear someone— or thing— at the port, but whatever monster is up there, I don't want to meet it.

That was how I lost my wife.

It wasn't soon after the disaster that we heard the first noise. It was a rattling at the port handle— my wife thought it was someone who needed help. I told her it was best to stay inside, to not open the door. We didn't know what was out there, and it could be extremely dangerous to expose ourselves to the air.

The noise came back the next day, and then the next. I could tell that the idea of someone in peril was eating away at my wife. Every time it struck, she grimaced and looked at her feet. In the end, she buckled under the pressure.

The noise had begun coming back at night, but every time it happened I just went back to sleep. One night, I woke up alone in the bed. I crept out into the main room, wondering— hoping— my wife had just gone to get a drink of water. But she wasn't in the kitchen.

I looked up the entrance stairs to find the door swung open, and my wife gone. I stuck my head outside and screamed her name, over and over again. That was the first and only time I had seen what the outside world looked like since the disaster. It was a horrid sight. The sky was brown, like rusty water. The earth was black and barren, charred and decaying bodies littered the landscape. The thick, toxic air poisoned my lungs and eyes. I had to close the door. I had to leave my wife— if she was alive— out there.

That night still haunts me. I go through weeks where all I dream of are those charred bodies and the nightmarish landscape. Sometimes I dream that my wife came back to me, unphased. Sometimes I pray that I go to sleep and don't wake up. But then I remember my plants. I remember that I could be caring for the only vegetation left.

Still, the thoughts of there being life beyond what I see swarm around my brain like locusts. Every day I have to fight the urge to swing open that port door and just check in on the world around me. When I run the tap in the morning for my breakfast, I can almost hear my wife whispering to me to go look for her.

The cucumbers died. I can't stay here any longer. I have to leave, I have to find other life or face death. I'm going to die down here anyway. What's the point of keeping these plants alive? I have no plans, I have no reason to stay down here any longer. I am not living, I am just existing.

I'm going to the door.

I'm leaving this place.