

A Book Called Death

I

Fuck. She had fallen asleep with a cigarette in her hand, which had fallen on the carpet and started a small fire. She rubbed her eyes and sleepily tried to assess the damage. Not too bad. The carpet was ruined, of course, and the couch would need to be reupholstered for sure.

She sat up and cursed out loud.

“Fuck.”

She grabbed the bottle of cheap whiskey from the table and had a swig. It was a bad idea and she regretted it instantly. She looked at the charred circle on the carpet once more, and cursed again.

“Fuck.”

“What’s with the language?” The voice, coming from the direction of the kitchen, was hoarse and drowsy.

“I started a fire.”

A head popped up from behind the kitchen counter. Ghostly white hair stood on end above a thin face with razor sharp features only barely softened by the smudged makeup around the eyes and lips.

“Again? Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

The thin face was followed by a thin, lanky body in a striped white and blue button up shirt and black, skin tight jeans. They walked a kind of half walk half stumble across the room and sat down on the couch. They turned their eyes towards the burnt spot.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, fuck Liz, your carpet is fucked.” Liz scratched the back of her head and sighed.

“That it is, Artemis. That it is.”

Instead of dealing with what would undoubtedly be an exhausting operation to get the carpet out of the apartment, they decided to go get coffee. Liz of course had coffee at home. But she also had a burnt carpet at home, so franchise coffee shop coffee won out.

It wasn’t raining outside, but it was the type of weather where the ground is constantly wet anyways.

Liz stepped out on the sidewalk and was instantly bumped by a man wearing an expensive looking suit and walking with an open book in his hand.

“Hey!” Liz threw her hands up indignantly, not quite knowing who’s fault it was but deciding to act as if it was definitely not hers. The man looked back at her briefly, shrugged, and continued walking and reading.

“What an asshole.” Artemis came out after Liz and hadn’t really seen what happened, but knew to root for the home team.

“Tell me about it.” Liz spat demonstratively on the ground and pulled up a mangled pack of smokes from her jacket pocket. They set off in the opposite direction from the man, heading for the closest available coffee vendor.

About a block away they passed Bob sitting in his regular spot, mumbling to himself. They weren’t sure if Bob was his actual name as he was almost impossible to have a conversation with, but he was homeless and harmless and Liz made a point of always saying “hello” and putting any spare change she had on her in his paper cup.

Today she managed at least a few coins, but Bob seemed extra preoccupied this morning and didn’t take notice. Liz and Artemis said “hi” and “bye” with no response, and kept walking.

Having walked the same path many times Liz timed her cigarette smoking perfectly and flicked the butt in the direction of a trash can as they entered the coffee shop. It didn’t go in but she still commended herself for making an effort.

The coffee place was surprisingly quiet. It was one of those modern places that didn’t believe in things like soft fabrics, and so every whisper would resonate until it formed a droning hum throughout the shop. With the ten or so people seated it therefore should be reaching about 150 decibels. But today it was silent, except for the occasional cough or sound of a teaspoon scraping against the inside of a cup.

Liz felt a little like she was committing a crime when she broke the silence to order them two large cups of black coffee and two grilled sandwiches. She looked around, half expecting to have drawn every pair of eyes in the place, just to realize that nobody seemed to have even noticed them entering.

Every single person in the coffee shop was reading a book. And from the looks of it, they were all the same book.

“What’s with the book circle?” Liz whispered to Artemis. Artemis, who was in the midst of getting them a robust supply of napkins, tiny milk cartons and sugar packets looked around the place, as if noticing the other people for the first time. They then made a noise that was almost but not quite words, indicating that they didn’t know.

The barista called Liz’s name, they picked up their orders and sat down at an empty table.

“Oh!” Artemis exclaimed suddenly.

“Hm?”

“The book! It’s that, uhm, the new one, the one everyone is talking about!” A memory seemed to half-stir in the back of Liz’s brain.

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, I think I remember something about that. What’s it called?”

“I don’t remember, something fantasy sounding I think. So I gather you haven’t read it?” Artemis asked, and took a large sip of their coffee, looking pained as they realized it was still scalding hot.

“No. No I haven’t. You neither?”

“Nah. I did look for it though, but it was sold out.”

“Jesus, what is it with this book?” Liz stared at her sandwich. The oozing cheese that would normally be intensely inviting now made her stomach churn and protest. Artemis did not seem to have the same issue.

“Apparently it’s scary as all hell. Like, not normal horror scary, but like... you know, dreadful.”

“Dreadful?” Liz gave Artemis a bemused look.

“Yeah, dreadful. Like, that’s the way people are describing it. Like, some Eldritch horror shit.”

“Huh. Doesn’t really sound like something for me. I’ll stick to chill books about hot boys and sexy ladies. And aliens.”

“You,” Artemis leaned forward with a smile, “my dear Liz, are a philistine and a degenerate.”

“Don’t I know it.” Liz pushed the sandwich away from herself and after exchanging a quick glance Artemis finished their own sandwich and picked up Liz’s. “Hey, you want a piece of cake for dessert?” Artemis looked as if they had just been given a pony.

“Yes ma’am!” Liz just hoped sweet would agree with her better than savory.

Liz got up and walked to the counter again, ordering them each a piece of chocolate cake with whipped cream. When she turned around she could see Artemis leaning over the back of their seat, talking with a chubby, blond guy at the table next to them. They turned back again as Liz sat down.

“Death.”

“Gesundheit?” Artemis snatched one of the plates before Liz had time to set it down, and shoveled a big piece into her mouth, which did not stop her from talking.

“The book is called ‘Death’.”

“Terrible title.” Liz put a spoonful of cake and cream in her mouth and almost let out a very inappropriate sigh as she chewed it.

“Told you it was some fantasy shit.”

“Death.” Liz said it with a mock serious voice, trying to sound something like a wise wizard, but sounding more like she was constipated.

“Death!” Artemis tried the same, and had a bit more success as their voice was naturally half an octave lower than Liz’s.

“DEATH!” Liz bellowed, before realizing the loudness of her exclamation.

Now she really did draw every pair of eyes in the place.

Liz and Artemis said their goodbyes outside the coffee shop and headed in different directions. Artemis had politely asked if they could help clean up Liz’s apartment, but after seeing the deep pain in their eyes Liz gave them permission to go home and sleep.

Arriving back home, she immediately regretted this decision.

The apartment truly looked like shit. Bottles, cans and plastic mugs covered just about any flat surface in view, and about 15% of them seemed to have fallen over with liquid still inside them.

Liz made her way through the living room, slowly assessing the damages, and then fell heavily onto the couch.

She dug up the remote from between the cushions and started the TV. After flicking through a dozen or so channels she settled on some sort of nature documentary.

It was about jellyfish.

She immediately tuned it out and kept looking at all of the things she needed to clean. Hosting an impromptu after party had seemed like such a good idea at the time. Less so at this time.

As a particularly gross looking jellyfish came up on the screen Liz managed to finally pull herself to a standing position again. She dragged her feet to the kitchen and pulled out a roll of garbage bags from under the sink. She was already exhausted.

She pulled a bag from the roll and with one swift motion of the arm she swept all of the bottles and cans on the counter into the bag. Well, three fourths of it. The rest spilled out over the sides and onto the floor.

Groaning angrily as if she didn't have herself to blame, she bent down and picked up the rest. There was a sizable puddle of beer on the floor now, which she skipped over and decided to put off wiping up until a later time.

She walked around the apartment in a wide semicircle shoving as much junk as she could into the bag as she went. As she reached the hallway, the bag was filled to the brim and she decided that this was good enough for now. She put the bag by the door and as she turned back a figure suddenly appeared in front of her.

She let out a short, high pitched scream before realizing that the figure was in fact her own reflection in the hallway mirror.

"Fuck me!" She snort-laughed at herself and then took a step towards the mirror to take a closer look at what horrors the night had inflicted on her face.

Far from Artemis' knife sharp features, Liz's face consisted almost entirely of soft, round shapes. Her cheeks were round, her nose was round and as she inspected herself her lips also formed an almost perfect circle.

The bags below her eyes were a deep purple, and the eyes themselves were a light shade of red.

"Fuck me." She turned away from the mirror to head straight for bed and again screamed at the sight of an unexpected figure, one much larger and more real than her own reflection.

"Sorry, sorry! I didn't mean to scare you." When the shock again subsided Liz recognized the tall, tan, shorts wearing man as a colleague whose name she didn't know, as well as a guest of yesterday's festivities. "I uh, seem to have fallen asleep in the bathtub."

"Oh." Liz didn't know how else to respond and the two stood for a few seconds in silence.

"I think someone set your carpet on fire."

"You don't say."

||

BZZZT

An attack. Liz jolted awake and waved her arms around her blindly. Who or what was attacking her? *BZZZT!*

Oh. It was her phone. Someone was calling her. She looked at the small digital clock on her night stand. Someone was calling her at four in the morning. She picked up the phone.

Artemis was calling her at four in the morning. This had better be a god damn emergency.

“Artemis, I swear to god this has better be a god damn emergency.”

“Liz.” Artemis sounded at the same time tense and excited. As if on the verge of sharing a mind shattering secret. “You have got to read this book.”

“What?”

“My old roommate had managed to get a hold of a copy and let me read it after her. You have to read it.”

“You’re calling me at four in the fucking morning to tell me to read a book?” Liz fell back down into bed with the phone still against her ear.

“I just finished it. I couldn’t put it down. It’s... god it’s... dreadful.”

“Dreadful, yeah, right, got it. Good night.”

“No! You have to read it.” Liz was getting more than a little annoyed.

“Fine, sure, I will. Maybe I can borrow your *old roommate’s copy* after you.”

“I’m outside.”

“You’re what?” Liz sat back up.

“I’m outside. With the book.”

“Outside where?”

“Outside your door. Come let me in.”

With her every fiber screaming for her to go back to sleep, Liz slowly stood up from the bed. She grabbed a big t-shirt hanging from a chair and pulled it over her head, then walked sleepily out to her front door. Looking out the peephole she could see Artemis’ distorted face looking back. Their eyes looked wilder than normal.

Liz unlocked the door and let them in.

“I hate you.”

“You love me.” Artemis quickly jumped out of their untied boots and threw their leather jacket on the floor.

“I hate you.” Liz started walking back towards the bedroom.

“You love me.” Artemis ran past her, turned around and placed themselves right in front of Liz.

“I hate you.”

Artemis pushed a small, ink black book, with thin white letters on the cover into Liz’s hands.

“You love me. And you’re gonna love this book. Or, maybe love is the wrong word. But you have to read it.”

“Love *is* the wrong word.” Liz pushed past them and continued towards the bedroom.

She threw the book on her nightstand and face-planted onto her pillow. She was not going to read a word until she had gotten her full night's sleep.

"Aren't you gonna read it?" Artemis stood in the doorway looking very disappointed.

"Artemis. I need sleep. You need sleep. Get over here."

Artemis grunted a little before demonstratively dragging their feet across the bedroom floor and getting into bed.

"No jeans in the bed." Artemis blew a raspberry towards Liz but then wiggled out of their jeans and snuggled up behind her.

"I hate you."

"You love me."

"LIZ!"

Once again, Liz jolted awake. And once again the one responsible was an overly excited Artemis.

"WHAT!?" Liz yelled towards the living room from where the scream had come.

"GET OUT HERE. NOW."

Liz unleashed every curse word she knew in a muttered barrage as she got out of bed once more and moved towards the living room.

Artemis was sitting on the couch, by the burnt hole in the carpet, looking at the TV. It was the 8 AM news, which Liz couldn't remember when she had last been awake for.

"I couldn't sleep" Artemis said, "so I got up and started watching TV."

"The news?"

"Yes! I mean, no, I wanted to watch cartoons, but then this came on." They pointed towards the TV. Liz looked over at the screen and tried to parse the information it was conveying.

"It happened. It really happened." Artemis' voice was almost a whisper.

"What happened?" Artemis looked up at Liz, with their eyes wide.

"Someone died."

Liz had asked Artemis to shut up while she made them coffee. It looked as if it was causing physical pain not to keep speaking, but Artemis did as told, and quietly by the kitchen island until the second they got a cup of coffee in their hands.

"It'slikeinthebooksomeonedieddoyouunderstandtheydiedDIED."

"Okay, take it easy. And start from the top." Artemis opened their mouth, and breathed in to start speaking, but then closed it again. They set the cup on the counter, stood up and walked towards the bedroom. Seconds later they returned with the book in hand.

"Read."

Liz looked at them sceptically.

"I was gonna read it, you don't need to put on a show."

"Read." Artemis was rarely stern, so when they were, Liz knew to take them seriously. Liz grabbed the book, sat down on one of the kitchen barstools and opened to the first page.

Death: a permanent cessation of all vital
functions : the end of life

"I don't get it." Liz turned to Artemis again, but the look on their face made her turn back to the book and keep reading.

The book was told from the perspective of a scientist, and written in the form of a diary. The scientist, or maybe alchemist, chronicled his research into strang and horrific things that were befalling people around the town he lived in. Though she hated to admit it, Liz was pretty soon completely hooked.

She flipped through page after page, while Artemis sat patiently by, sipping their coffee.

The title of the book referred to an unending state people would fall into, where, as the book described it, they stopped... being. As if asleep, but never to wake up. Dreamless. Cold and unbreathing, until their very bodies started to dissolve.

She also hated admitting that Artemis had been right when they described it. The book really was dreadful. That was the only word for it. The descriptions were vivid and raw in a way that was hard to describe. And not just the descriptions of the awful things that happened to people, but also of the anguish and grief of the people close to them. People whose loved ones in some cases would just be gone.

Forever.

After a while she needed a break. It was true that the book was hard to stop reading, but it also took its toll. And Liz apparently didn't have the same emotional stamina as Artemis.

"Okay. Tell me about the news." She put the book down on the counter, face down without closing it.

"It happened. Someone died. For real." Artemis' eyes were wide and seemed to almost sparkle. They seemed excited, but there was also another feeling hiding underneath. Fear?

"But what does that mean? Who? How? It's fiction."

"I kinda... didn't watch the news story all the way through." Artemis gave a smile meant to be disarming, with some success.

"Shit, Artemis, I-"

"Not a lot is known at this time anyways! They're just saying they found a man, dead."

"They actually said that word?" Liz was beginning to suspect Artemis was full of shit.

"Well, no, not exactly." Artemis was beginning to suspect that Liz was beginning to suspect that they were full of shit.

"There's no such thing as death. It's fiction. Made up."

"I'm not an idiot, Liz." Artemis' voice turned sharp.

"No, that's not what-"

"They found a man with no pulse. Not breathing. Cold." Liz felt as if the temperature in the apartment had dropped several degrees.

"But that's..." It was something alright, but she was unsure how to finish the sentence.

"I know!" Artemis threw out their arms, happy Liz was finally starting to get it.

The two of them had moved from the kitchen to the couch and put on the TV, waiting for the next round of news. Nightmares becoming real apparently hadn't been enough to interrupt the regularly scheduled programming.

Liz continued reading through Death, equally horrified and fascinated. Artemis absentmindedly flipped through the channels and occasionally scolded Liz for not having paid for any of the 24 hour news channels.

For Artemis, time crept, for Liz it was running full speed ahead, but regardless of perception they eventually arrived at the next newscast. A man appeared on the screen, looking solemnly at them.

“As we have previously reported, earlier today several independent witnesses came forward and told Channel 5 News that a man had been discovered in a strange, arrested state. The man, according to the witnesses, was not breathing and had no heartbeat.

Since then, it appears that government officials have recovered the man, and they have now called for a press conference where hopefully we will learn more about this bizarre story. Our reporter Anne Hoss is coming to us live from City Hall. What’s the energy like in the room, Anne?”

“Thank you, James. The energy here is tense as we are waiting for...”

The reporter’s voice faded from Liz’s mind as she instead watched the crowd around her. She was standing with her back to the small podium where Liz assumed the minor government official would soon take place, and behind her Liz could see other reporters from other networks either doing their own pre-conference reporting, or setting up for the actual thing.

The word “tense” didn’t seem like a completely apt description of the room’s energy. No, from Liz’s position at home in her smoke damaged couch the energy she felt radiating from the TV could be best described as “ominous”.

When big news stories broke, even the bad ones, you could almost always pick out at least a few journalists in the bunch reveling in the opportunity to report an exciting story. Now even those people seemed eerily dimmed.

The reporter ended her ad lib about what was expected from the conference, and the camera focused instead on the podium. A short man with black hair stepped up, lowered the microphone somewhat so that he could talk directly into it, and cleared his throat.

“As you are all surely aware, earlier today a man was discovered in his residence in an unusual, arrested state. There has been much speculation about what has caused this and on behalf of the government I would like to put as much of that as possible to rest.”

The short man, whose name and title were both so deeply bland that Liz immediately forgot them, was possibly the only person in the room who seemed wholly unaffected by the event he was describing.

“Though we are at this time unsure what exactly caused this state, experts looking into it assure us that the man is completely harmless to others around him.”

Liz wondered if the government man had been chosen specifically for how boring he was, in an attempt to make people lose interest that way.

“They are also confident that this state is fully reversible, and that they will be able to do so as soon as they have had enough time to study the phenomenon. Finally I have been asked to address one rumor in particular, though I personally find it utterly ridiculous to do so.”

The man bent the corners of his lips upwards in what seemed to be an attempt at a humorous smile.

“Whatever has befallen this poor man, we want to make absolutely clear that he has not ‘died’.” The last word was drawn out and surrounded by air quotes made with short, stumpy fingers.

“That will be all, no furt-”

Artemis turned the TV off.

“See?”

“See what? They just said he didn’t die and that it will be fixable.” Liz wasn’t sure how much she herself believed that.

“Oh fuck that noise, you know as well as I do that they were talking out of their ass trying to avoid a panic.” Liz did know that as well as Artemis.

“Well, even if they don’t know what it is, there is nothing saying it’s death.”

“Except it literally being described the exact same way as it is in the book.”

“But it’s a book.” Liz stood up, frustrated by the entire conversation. She didn’t know what was happening, but it wasn’t that. It wasn’t “death”.

That was impossible.

“I am aware that it is a book, Liz, I’m just stating the facts.” Artemis looked up at her, seeming equally annoyed.

“Okay, let’s be rational here.” Liz tried to ignore the fact that rationality had never really been her strong suit. “What’s more likely, that a completely new and unique phenomenon presents itself just after a book describing said phenomenon is released, or that this is something entirely natural that we are just interpreting as something else because of that book?”

“But what natural explanation could this have?”

“I don’t know, I’m not a fucking scientist!” Their voices had been growing increasingly loud during the conversation, but now they both went silent and the contrast was stark. Liz was angrily staring at nothing, feeling a bit awkward for standing up, but not as awkward as she thought it would feel to sit back down.

Artemis also stared at nothing, with a facial expression reminiscent of a pouting child. They remained like that for another few seconds before Artemis broke the silence with a laugh.

“No, you are certainly not a fucking scientist.” They nudged Liz’s leg playfully, and despite her best efforts, a smile crept up on Liz’s face. She fell down dramatically on the couch next to Artemis, who caught her in a hug.

“You know I’m not gonna let you die right?” Artemis whispered mockingly in her ear as she rocked her back and forth.

“Fuck you, Artemis!”

“Fuck you right back, Lizzie.”

III

Liz couldn't sleep. This was unusual as her ability to fall asleep under almost any circumstances was somewhat renowned among the people who knew her.

After trying and failing for about an hour, she sat up and turned on the lights. She slid out of bed and tiptoed quickly out to the living room, where the book was still lying open on the table. She snatched it up and ran back to bed.

The book wasn't very long, and she had managed to get through about a third earlier in the day.

The shock of the early chapters waned somewhat as the book went on, as it moved from grotesque horror to a more contemplative sadness. The chapters skipped through time faster and faster and the initial disgust gave way to a feeling of emptiness.

As Liz reached the middle of the book, she was no less ready for sleep. She picked up a stray piece of paper from her bedside table and used it as a bookmark, turned off the light and remained sitting in the dark.

The book contained gruesome descriptions of bodily harm, and strange physiological effects all but completely destroying those affected, but in the end this wasn't what really stuck in Liz's brain.

It was the notion that people could be, in lack of a better word, *unmade*. Going from a something, a someone, to a nothing. From being to not. Memories, dreams, thoughts, all gone. Erased and never coming back.

She couldn't even imagine the constant fear one would feel if that was even a possibility.

The thoughts churned round and round in her head, not really reaching any conclusion, or really making any progress at all. Just round and round. She sat like that for what felt like hours, until she, without even noticing, drifted into sleep.

Her alarm screamed at her. It was probably the loudest sound she, or anyone, had ever heard.

Her approximately four hours of sleep had not been nearly enough for her to be able to accept having to wake up.

But acceptance or not, she was awake. At first she got a little confused about why she was sitting up in bed, but looking around she glimpsed the book on her bedside table and the memories came back to her.

"Fuck me." Her voice was hoarse and raspy. She threw her legs out over the side of the bed, but remained sitting on the edge, stretching her arms into the air and letting out a yawn that was halfway to a full-bellied scream.

Her morning routine wasn't lengthy. Over the years she had whittled it down as far as humanly possible in order to not have to get out of bed one second earlier than necessary.

With her eyes half-closed she opened her closet and pulled out underwear and a shirt at random. She didn't bother unbuttoning the shirt before pulling it over her head. It wasn't graceful, but she'd be damned if she'd spend time on trying to fit those round little fuckers through their tiny holes.

Her pants were still in a pile on the floor since yesterday. She pulled them on and picked up the socks that had fallen out of them as she did. She figured they could make it another day, not like anyone was going to smell her feet.

In a bit under three minutes she was fully dressed, another three minutes later she was done with her bathroom routine, and after three more she was out the door.

She checked the time on her phone as she walked, noticing it was about ten minutes past the time her work day officially started. She congratulated herself for getting out of the apartment early, as she rarely reached work until about two hours later. Now she'd be there within the first hour of work, which was a true achievement, especially for a monday.

She was even out before Bob, whose sitting pad and cup was yet to appear at the regular spot.

Her office was just two short walks divided by a short subway ride away, and the traffic gods seemed to be on her side this morning, meaning no delays and no waits.

She proudly stepped in through the doors and walked with her back straight and head held high through the open office landscape, as if expecting a standing ovation from the colleagues who had gotten in before her. She walked to the very far end of the office and sat down before her three mismatched computer monitors.

Liz worked in IT and had the kind of job where when asked to elaborate on what it was she did, she pretty much just threw her hands out and said "computers". It wasn't that she believed the people asking were too dumb to understand (though that had been the case on more than a few occasions), but that she herself didn't really know what it was she did.

She sat by a computer, moved some files around, sent some emails and occasionally wrote some code. Mostly though, she did very little. It helped that most of her bosses didn't seem to really know what she did either. And of course that she had managed to win the fight for the corner desk, which meant her screens were facing the back wall, and not out towards where colleagues and superiors could see them.

On this particular day her inbox gaped mercifully empty. It seemed no one was in need of her ill-defined services yet this week. So instead she leaned back in her chair and pulled up as many social media feeds as she could fit on the three screens. She replied to some messages, wrote some snarky posts and got into a fight with someone she didn't know about something she didn't really care about.

About an hour passed like this, before she started feeling slightly guilty for not actually doing any work, and pulled up one of the projects she had going on unrelated to her daily tasks. It was a simple application that when finished would allow her to automate parts of her work load, meaning she would have to work even less than she already did.

Liz wasn't what one would describe as a great coder. She very well might have been one, had she actually bothered to properly learn the basics, but every time she attempted she only ended up supremely bored and gave up. Instead her coding consisted almost entirely of a patchwork of internet searches and hotfixes.

Even though Liz did just about anything she could to avoid working, when she did work, she mostly enjoyed it. She liked coding, for the most part, and today she was really getting into it. So into it in fact she didn't notice the large person awkwardly moving towards her until he was right next to her desk and said

"Uh, hi."

Liz looked up from her screen and met a pair of piercing blue eyes looking back at her.

"Hi?" Liz was just barely able to recognize the tall, slightly nervous-looking man in a dress shirt and tie as the same person who had scared her shitless yesterday emerging from her bathtub.

"I'm Jens."

"I'm Liz."

"Oh, I know. You don't miss the name of the girl who agrees to bring a small battalion of drunk idiots into her apartment at 2 AM." Just hearing the words made Liz's hangover flare up again something fierce.

"Great, finally I've made my mark on this town." He chuckled slightly at this, and the conversation then fell silent. This was normally the cue for people to return to work, as to not remind everyone involved that Colleagues Are Not Real Friends, but Jens lingered.

Liz thought that maybe he was some sort of idiot and needed a prompt, so she started turning towards her screens again. But just as she did,

"Sorry. For Saturday I mean." Liz looked back up at him and from what she could see on his face, he really was sorry. "I didn't mean to pass out in the bath tub, obviously. And I didn't mean to scare you."

Liz had all but entirely forgotten about the encounter, and so thought it only right that she'd forgive the boy.

"No worries, James."

"It's Jens." Oh fuck. She had just assumed his speech was a bit slurred from violently passing out in some tub somewhere.

"Oh, I'm sorry that's--"

"It's Danish."

"Ah, like the, what's it called," Liz was doing her best to patch up Jens' ego, which she assumed she must have bruised. "MacBeth?"

"No, I think that's Scotland." Rather than smoothing the situation out Liz had apparently managed to make this chronically confused boy even more confused.

"Well, close enough."

Silence fell again, until Jens caught a glimpse of the book sticking out of Liz's bag.

"You reading Death?" Liz really wanted to get back to what she had been doing, but also didn't want to seem rude.

"Yeah, I'm about halfway through."

"Cool, I just--" before Jens could finish the sentence, he turned his head away and let out a series of deep coughs. "Oh, sorry, must have something stuck in my throat. It's been like this all morning."

"No worries dude." Liz's eyes were again starting to drift back to the code on her screen.

"Yeah, uh, I was just saying I finished it just the other day." Jens suppressed another round of coughs. Liz was ready for the conversation to end, but was far too polite not to ask

"Did you like it?"

"I mean, 'like' feels like the wrong word, you know?" Liz did know.

"Yeah, I guess." The two of them made eye contact for a brief moment before Liz looked down again.

"Did you hear that the 'dead' guy worked for the publisher of the book?"

"He did?" This, finally, got Liz's entire focus.

"Well," Jens immediately looked a bit uncomfortable, as if regretting having mentioned it at all. "I read about it online." His voice started to trail off as the sentence ran on.

"Read it *online*, huh?" Liz all but physically rolled her eyes at him.

"Yeah, I guess it's one of those things that sound real convincing when you read about it, and people are piling on a shitload of what is probably really dubious evidence." Jens smiled what some might consider a disarming smile. Liz tried her best not to fall into that category.

“So, what are ‘people’ saying about it then?” Feeling a conversation had now been fully struck, Jens pulled up a chair belonging to an absent colleague and placed himself at a still respectable distance from her.

She deemed it an acceptable maneuver.

“There are two main theories out there. The first one is that this is just one big publicity stunt. It’s all fake to sell more copies of the book.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Liz had now swiveled her chair around and had her back towards her computer. “What’s the other theory?”

“That one’s... a little bit more out there. You know how the book has no author’s name on it right?” Liz hadn’t really thought about it, but now that she did, she realized the front of the book was solid black, except for the title.

“Yeah?”

“Well, some say that’s because the book doesn’t have an author per se.” Jens paused dramatically and leaned in closer. “It was created by the government in order to cover up whatever they did to that guy.”

“I have so many questions.”

“You don’t find the theory rock solid?” Jens smiled.

“It’s just, as far as cover ups go, it’s pretty shit isn’t it? It’s the biggest story of at least the year and it’s not like the book makes it any less so?”

“You’re not wrong, but don’t tell the people pushing that theory, they’ll lose their shit.” What Jens didn’t know was that picking fights online was a favorite pastime of hers.

“Where are all these people hanging out?” Liz turned back to her computer and opened up a new tab in the browser. “My feeds seem way too well-curated to pick them up.” As she finished her sentence, her voice grew quieter and quieter until the last word was just a whisper. New tabs automatically opened up to a news site and she had just noticed the latest headline.

Breaking: Two more cases of “death”

“Holy shit.” Jens stood up and looked over her shoulder. He then quickly turned away, to spare her another violent series of coughs.

“I guess they’re gonna have to revise their theories.”

IV

Liz was just about to enter her building when her phone vibrated with a text from Artemis.

Roof 🦊

While walking up the stairs Liz typed in “omw”, just to have the phone autocorrect it to “On my way!”, meaning she had to stop midway up just to correct it back. She realized the irony of spending the extra effort just to seem effortless, but she was fine with that.

Just outside of Liz’s door, there was another door, this one much older and in much worse condition. It led to a narrow staircase, which led to the roof, and it was supposed to always be locked. Which, technically, it mostly was. However, if you gave it a push just the right way while yanking the door handle with just a little bit of finesse, it would give off a loud CLICK and swing open.

How exactly they had first discovered this, none of them could really remember, but knowing it had made the roof one of their regular hang spots.

Liz easily got the door opened and closed it again behind her, then got up the staircase two steps at a time. The door at the other end wasn’t locked, as nobody was supposed to get past the first one. She threw it open and was met by an Artemis almost vibrating with excitement.

“Did you see the news?”

“Yes, I saw the news.” Liz peeked behind Artemis and caught a glimpse of the telltale plastic bag standing by the raised edge of the roof. Before Artemis could continue the conversation, Liz gracefully dodged around them and snatched a can of cheap beer from the bag.

Artemis spun around and made a grabbing motion in the air, until Liz handed them the beer and grabbed a new one for herself.

“Something is up!” In her head Liz decided to name Artemis’ current mood “fearcitement”.

“Yes, I cannot deny that something is indeed up.” Liz cracked her beer and looked at Artemis, feeling what she too herself named “annoymused”. She should probably get a thesaurus.

“I think it is all true. The book? It’s all true, or coming true at least.” Artemis waved their arms about, shaking their still unopened beer.

“Artemis-”

“No, I know, all right? I know. But just, you know, play with me in this space? Suppose it is for a few minutes, for me.” Artemis pouted. And Liz folded.

“Fine, fine, but sit down and open your damn beer before you shake it into a bomb.”

“Did you hear how the new people died?” Artemis sat down and opened the can, spraying them both with a misty shower of beer.

“Some sort of accident?” Liz knew very well what had happened, but didn’t really want to admit that she had spent all afternoon reading about it.

“Their car crashed into a tree. And their bodies, they just broke, and didn’t start healing again.” Gruesome descriptions from the book forced their way into Liz’s mind.

“They didn’t start healing yet.”

“Liz, you promised you would play with me in this space.” Artemis flicked Liz on the ear.

“Ow! Okay, sorry.” Artemis got quiet for a while, then, just before Liz suspected they wouldn’t give any follow up, they said in a voice that sounded far away.

”If it is true, I don’t know what would be the scariest part. That you could just be gone at any time, or that you knew that eventually you would be gone. Imagine just having like an expiration date, and knowing everyone around you had it too.” Artemis shuddered.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, living in a world where everyone will eventually just... stop existing.” Liz gave Artemis a look signaling that the previous question still stood.

“Oh fuck, spoilers? Guess you haven’t gotten that far.” Liz apparently hadn’t.

“I apparently haven’t. What do you mean?”

“You’ll understand when you keep reading.”

Age. That was what Artemis had been talking about. In the book people aged, until, at some point, their bodies just gave up. And they died. All of them.

The book had this far spoken of death only as an extreme outcome of unforeseen circumstances, but as it went on the main character started to... age. He described his skin loosening, joints stiffening and eyes growing cloudier. And he spoke of it as if it were the most natural process in the world.

It happened to everyone. They would all just slowly start to fall apart, until finally they died. And they could do nothing about it.

Liz closed the book. She had still not finished it and wouldn’t do so tonight. She put it down on her bedside table with the piece of scrap paper between the pages. Her head was still a bit swimmy from the beers she had downed on the roof and she felt pretty thankful for that.

She was starting to seriously dislike this book.

Before going to bed she had taken a quick look at the news, only to be met by another apparent death. In her head the quotation marks surrounding the word had started to fade away and she didn’t like it.

The people weren’t dead. That was ridiculous. The news people even said so, the government had stated that they were getting closer to figuring it out.

And yet.

She needed a smoke.

With a dramatically loud grunt she sat up on the edge of the bed. She picked up some stray clothes strewn about the floor and made herself a makeshift outfit. Then she went over to the kitchen and started rummaging through the drawers of undefined content, where she believed she had put the pack from this friday.

She wasn’t an everyday smoker, she couldn’t afford that, but she did like to occasionally indulge. And for her “occasionally” meant “pretty much whenever she drank”.

She found the pack of cigarettes, grabbed the single remaining cigarette in it and a lighter that worked, and placed herself under the kitchen fan. Then she turned her head and looked into the living room, where the angry burnt spot on the carpet looked back.

“Fine, FINE.” Liz got back up and moved towards the door, muttering at nobody. Smoking inside was a bad habit, and now was as good a time as any to try to break it.

She considered getting a jacket, but decided not to out of sheer laziness. For the same reason she also decided to go down to the street instead of up to the roof, as “down” felt like much less work.

She stepped out the door and down onto the first step of the staircase, and her foot lost all traction. It careened off of the step and barely made contact on the next one before continuing downwards. She was going down, fast.

Her brain filled up with images from the book. Broken bodies. Broken body. Her broken body. Insides jutting out. Pain, and then darkness. Forever. Or, not darkness. Darkness was something. This would be nothing.

Not even darkness.

Then her left hand grabbed on to the railing and her ass made violent contact with the third step.

Her heart raced, her stomach was doing full rotations inside of her. A quick assessment told her that the impact hadn't been that bad. She probably wouldn't even bruise. But she still couldn't stop shaking.

This wasn't the first or even worst fall she had had, not even in this staircase. But this time was different, this time she couldn't just laugh at her own clumsiness and keep going. Instead she just sat there, breathing unevenly, trying and failing to calm down.

It wasn't until she noticed some sort of leafy flakes in her right hand she snapped out of it. She had used her right hand to help break the fall, and in the process she had obliterated the cigarette she had been planning on smoking.

"Goddamnit."

V

The next morning she was not doing as well at getting to work in time. She wasn't out of bed until almost nine, and then lost another ten minutes attempting to find a pair of headphones that seemed to have ceased to exist during the night.

After a fair amount of cursing and tossing of things, she found them at the bottom of the pile of clothes she had been wearing the night before. She tried her best to find someone beside herself to blame for this, but pretty soon gave up and hurried towards the train.

With music in her ears and eyes steadily focused on the concrete in front of her, it took her until she actually sat down on the train to notice the severely below average amount of people out that morning. Sure, she had missed the real morning rush, but even now there should have been people filling up every seat and much of the standing room in the train. Today there was a good fifth of the seats unsat.

Her not yet fully awake brain took a bit longer than it should have to figure out why there were fewer people out, and not until she saw the headline on the front of a newspaper someone was reading the little bell rang in her head.

Are there more 'deaths' to come?

Memories of falling on her ass the day before popped into her head. She felt a little dramatic for it, after all it hadn't even been hard enough to impede her ability to sit, but she couldn't help it. It had scared her. And she could imagine other people feeling similarly, and choosing to remain at home.

When she reached her office, she did a quick headcount, and estimated about a fourth of people missing.

"Damn, I could've stayed in bed today." she mumbled to herself, and then nearly screamed out loud when a voice came up from behind her asking

"Who are you talking to?"

"Fuck me, please stop scaring the shit out of me, Jens." The tall, Danish oaf looked sheepishly at her.

"Sorry, didn't mean to sneak up on you." He followed the apology with a series of deep coughs, then apologised for them as well. She gave him a look meant to convey some version of "don't worry about it" and then continued walking towards her desk, oaf in tow.

"Not exactly brimming with people at work today."

"I know!" Jens seemed ever excited about everything that was going on. "Do you think people are, you know, scared?"

"I guess?" Liz shrugged as she sat down in her chair and fired up her computer monitors. She opened up her email and started looking through them for any information from corporate about what was going on. And just as she had suspected, there it was.

Hello,

We hope that you are all doing well and having a good week, despite the recent unpleasantness. We have received several questions about how this will all affect work going forward, and thought it pertinent to make the company policy clear.

In short, our policy regarding this matter is that it should not and will not change how we do our jobs. Barring extenuating circumstances, work will continue on as usual, and we expect everyone to keep coming to the office, if you do not have another agreement with your closest superior.

We hope that this clears up any further questions.

Regards

Andrea Wilcox, Head of Human Resources

Liz looked up at Jens, who had been peeking over her shoulder.

“Doesn’t seem people read her email.” he said as he stifled another bout of coughing.

“Doesn’t seem people cared about her email. How are you doing by the way?” Liz looked at him with concern hidden behind slight mockery.

“It’s weird. It won’t stop, it’s getting really annoying.” He cleared his throat loudly to chase off further coughs.

“Maybe you’re dying?” Even joking about it felt weirdly ominous.

“Yeah, maybe.”

The day passed in a particularly sluggish tempo. Liz peeked over the top of her monitors from time to time to gauge how everyone else was doing, and everytime she did so there seemed to be fewer people left.

She was considering ditching herself, not so much out of fear as because she felt that if everyone else was doing it, she could probably get away with it without reprimand. And, she argued to herself, it wasn’t as if she was getting much work done. Instead she was going back and forth between the peeking, staring blankly at nothing, and flipping through news websites.

New cases kept appearing in a slow trickle, some confirmed, others less so, and it had reached the point where not every new case got its own story. Instead they were being tallied together, put into timelines and graphs.

It was hard to process. Liz didn’t doubt that it was all real, though what exactly it was remained unclear, but it didn’t *feel* real. It seemed like something far away, something that would end at any time and let normalcy back in.

She lasted until three in the afternoon, when she noticed that not even people working above her were still in the office. She quickly gathered her things and moved towards the exit, but decided to take a quick detour past Jens’ desk.

He was sitting there obediently, and even seemed to be doing actual work.

“Sup nerd, you wanna cut class?” He looked up at her with surprise, seemingly a bit out of it. “You okay there?”

“Oh, uh, yeah, definitely. I was just really into the work I guess.”

“Uh-huh, sure. You ready to not be really into the work?” Liz leaned on the side of the cubicle wall, careful not to put too much weight on it and accidentally tipping it all over. Jens took a few breaths and seemed to get clearer, though Liz still thought he looked a bit paler than usual.

“I still have two more hours of work.” He really was a big dork of a man, Liz thought to herself.

“Yeah, that’s why we’re cutting. Look around, there’s nobody even here.” Liz gestured to the mostly empty desks around, drawing sour glances from some of the people who *were* still there.

“I don’t know, I have a bunch of stuff I need to get done.” He squirmed a bit in his chair, torn between not wanting to break the rules and not wanting to seem like he didn’t want to break the rules.

“Suit yourself dork, I’m gonna head out.” Liz stood up from the wall getting ready to leave.

“Wait, do you want to hear the latest in conspiracies before you go?” Jens smiled, feeling he had kind of found a good middle ground.

“Hit me!” Liz went back into leaning position.

“Electricity.” Jens waved dramatically in the air as he said it and had a voice that conveyed grave importance.

“Electricity?”

“Electricity.” Again Jens waved his hands in the air.

“You’ve got to give me more than that, buddy.”

“Okay, so the new theory that’s got the most traction is that the book is part of a coverup-”

“Just like before?”

“Yeah, but this time they’ve specified that what it’s covering up is that this is all caused by the new power plant outside of town.” Liz noted that Jens seemed to be enjoying these conspiracy theories a bit much.

“So, what’s the power plant doing?”

Jens gave a small shrug. “This is as of yet unclear, but it is so bad that the government” there was another hand gesture as he said “government”, “will do anything for people not to realize it’s their fault.”

“Wow, that is just an amazingly well thought out and plausible story.” Liz said in a completely monotone voice.

“Online sleuths gonna online sleuth.” Jens leaned back in his chair trying to look what Liz assumed was his approximation of cool, but almost tipped over when he was hit by another fit of coughing.

“Smooth.” Liz couldn’t help but again let a little bit of worry slip into her mocking.

Liz walked up the stairs to her apartment, absentmindedly sorting through her mail, and didn’t notice Artemis sitting by her door until she almost tripped over them.

“Artemis, fuck! What are you doing here?” Liz heard herself being more harsh than she had intended, but when Artemis looked up at her it was clear they hadn’t noticed.

“Why do we eat?” Their voice was almost a whisper.

”What do you mean?”

“Food. Why do we eat food?” Artemis’s voice got steadier and they didn’t take their eyes off Liz.

“We eat because we’re hungry.” Liz was used to Artemis being somewhat of a weirdo, but this felt like something else.

She held her hand out towards them. Artemis looked at it for a few seconds before grabbing it and getting helped up on their feet.

“That’s it?” They stepped out of the way to allow Liz to unlock the door.

“I mean, isn’t that enough?” Liz signaled for Artemis to go on in.

“In the book-“

"The book is fiction." The harshness came back in Liz's voice, but Artemis just raised their voice in response.

"In the book we have to eat not to die."

Liz threw her jacket in the general direction of the coat hangers, turned towards the living room and didn't look back as it predictably fell to the ground.

"Death isn't real. It's just a book." Liz slumped down on the couch, by the burnt spot in the carpet, and looked at Artemis who hung their jacket on one of the hooks, and then picked up Liz's jacket and did the same with it.

"But people are dying." Their voice was again almost a whisper. They moved slowly across the room, towards the couch.

"They're saying on the news not to panic. It's under control. They will get those people back." Liz heard the words coming out of her mouth, now pretty sure she didn't believe them herself.

Artemis looked her in the eyes.

"People are dying, Liz."

"No it's just—"

"PEOPLE ARE DYING." The words seemed to echo between the walls long after they could actually be heard. Liz and Artemis just looked at each other, both recognizing the other's fear in themselves.

Liz was the first to look away. She got up and walked quickly over to the kitchen and started to pull out drawers and open cabinets. She knew that her last cigarette had met its fate when she assplanted on the stairs the night before, but she hoped against hope that there would be a lost, forgotten cigarette somewhere in her kitchen waiting to be found.

Artemis walked over and sat down by the kitchen island, watching wordlessly as Liz finished rummaging through the last drawer, and began the whole process anew. There were no cigarettes, she knew that, but she wanted one and maybe, just maybe.

"Are you looking for smokes?" When Liz looked over at Artemis, they were looking at their hands.

"Yeah." Liz sighed, and felt a twinge of annoyance towards Artemis. Their question had highlighted the futility of the search, and now Liz couldn't bring herself to keep searching. Had Artemis not spoken maybe Liz could have kept searching until a cigarette materialized out of thin air.

"I've got a pack." Artemis got up and went for their jacket by the door. Liz waited in the kitchen for them to come back, but instead they opened the door and walked out. Liz quickly went after them, worried that they would leave before things felt okay between them again.

As she stepped out in the stairwell it became clear that Artemis did not intend to leave. Instead they had opened the door to the roof and stood there waiting for her.

The two walked up the stairs silently, Liz gripping the railing a little more tightly than she usually did. When they got up, Artemis fished out a packet of smokes and handed it to her. Then they crossed over the roof and jumped up so that they were sitting on the raised ledge, back against the city, which was slowly starting to light up for the evening.

"You really think it's just fiction?" They followed Liz with their eyes, as she lit the cigarette and started pacing back and forth on the tar papered roof.

"Of course it is. Or, I mean, it has to be." Liz spoke quietly, almost muttering under her breath.

"Why can't it be real?" Liz stopped in her tracks and for a moment she just stood there. Then she turned to Artemis.

"Because if it's real then... Then what's the point? What's the point of any of this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if death is real that means we will all one day just stop existing. Forever. And we won't even get to remember the things we did before then. It's like it retroactively goes back and wipes it all out." Artemis looked at Liz with something that wasn't quite confusion.

"Even if we were to die, we are still alive now."

"So?" Liz threw her arms out, but let them fall down to her sides again when she realized her reply again had sounded more aggressive than she had intended. "I mean, yeah, sure, it matters now, at this moment, but this moment won't matter in the future. Because it will be gone with the rest of them."

Artemis was moving their head back and forth, as if to music. Liz recognized it from the many times they talked about things where Artemis had a hard time understanding Liz's perspective.

"But if we do die, we won't be there to know that this moment no longer matters. When it's over we won't feel that it didn't matter." They spoke slowly, thinking about each word.

"But that doesn't matter. I feel the meaninglessness of it *now*. The idea of death is reaching back through time and wringing the meaning right out of everything." Liz spoke quickly, trying to get the words out before they were overtaken by the tears she could feel burning behind her eyelids and in the back of her throat.

"I- Hm." Artemis pressed their lips together into a thin line. Liz took deep, long drags from the cigarette, which was rapidly getting shorter.

"What's the reason for building anything if it will just be torn down and erased from history? What's the point of fucking anything then?" The tears had begun pooling in her eyes as she spoke.

"A thing isn't meaningless because it ends."

"A *thing* isn't, because things still exist as memories and experiences. But if we die, we won't remember shit. It will all just be... fuck all. Nothing. Pointless. Shit." Liz threw the butt of the cigarette on the ground and crushed it beneath her heel.

"You can't really mean that." Artemis' voice remained soft even as Liz's got sharper.

"The fuck I can't!" Liz was screaming now, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Of course I fucking mean it, and I don't hear you giving me any convincing counter-arguments." She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself, wiping the tears on the sleeve of her jacket. "Death can't be real because if it is all of this is fucking pointless."

Artemis said nothing, looking away to the side rather than at Liz, who was looking at them with an angry and pained expression on her face.

"Fuck this, let's get some pizza." Liz finally half-sighed, half-snarled, and turned away from Artemis.

"No." Artemis' voice was low but sharp. Liz didn't turn around, instead continuing towards the staircase leading down from the roof.

"Okay, we'll get something else, whatever."

"No." Artemis spoke louder now.

"What do you mean 'no'?" Liz spun around in place, but all anger drained from her face as she saw them sitting there. Liz wasn't the only one who was scared.

"I'm not going to eat."

"Why?" Artemis stood up, put their hands in the pockets of their jacket and faux-nonchalantly shrugged.

"I guess, if death isn't real, there's no real point to it, is there?" They walked past Liz, who was struggling to think of something to say in response, and continued towards the staircase.

"That's... *ridiculous*." Liz raised her hands in exasperation and followed Artemis down the stairs. "You get that right? That it's certifiably insane?"

"Yup." Artemis didn't turn around as they responded, continuing down the stairs. "Crazy world makes crazy people."

Instead of walking back towards Liz's apartment when they reached the stairwell, Artemis continued down towards the building exit. Liz followed after quickly locking her door as they passed it.

"How long are you not going to eat for?" she panted as she caught up with Artemis just outside the building.

"As long as it takes." Artemis still wasn't looking at her.

"As long as it takes for what?"

Artemis shrugged.

"As long as it takes for something to happen."

Sleep didn't come. The second she had finally decided on sleeping, sleep was as far away as it had ever been.

Twice within a week was making this an uncomfortable new trend.

This time was distinctively worse than the last, though. She was taken over by a feeling that was not quite nausea, her body freezing yet quickly becoming drenched in sweat.

Her mouth was dry. Her ears rang deafeningly.

She had walked beside Artemis all the way to their place, mostly in silence.

Artemis had lost their mind. Completely. Fuck. But then again, Liz was currently in the midst of a full on panic attack.

It was just a book. Just fiction, make belief. She knew this. At least she kept telling herself she did. Her body was not convinced. It was getting ready to run, but where and from what she wasn't sure.

It wasn't the first time her head started playing back every mistake she'd ever made when she least wanted it to, but this time was different. The past had of course always been unchangeable, but put against the possibility of a definite end to everything, this seemed frightening in a way it hadn't been before.

If things just ended, would she feel good about how she had spent her time? Her thoughts drifted for a second to the big, burnt spot in her carpet and suddenly, from nowhere, she started laughing.

If she died, would people remember her as the woman who kept setting occasional fires in her apartment? That would be a terrific way to be remembered.

It was all ridiculous. Absolutely goddamn ridiculous.

"*Death!*" she wheezed between laughs. Fucking fantasy shit, she thought to herself. It was a fucking book and now Artemis was refusing pizza.

It was hilarious, just objectively.

Liz did her best to ignore the tears streaming down her face as she kept lying there in her bed, laughing.

And eventually, she fell asleep.

VI

The next few days passed in a haze. Liz kept going to work, not so much to stay compliant with Corporate Policy as to just keep some sense of normalcy. Going to work felt like a tether to a reality that was drifting ever farther away.

Though even that was probably implying there was more thought behind the decision than there was. If she had spent any time at all thinking about it, she probably would have stopped going to work.

But she didn't spend any time thinking about it. Instead she got ready and left her apartment on autopilot. She walked down the stairs on autopilot, and walked the path to the subway on autopilot.

This morning Bob was up early, already sitting in his usual spot, and as she passed Liz dug out a handful of change to put in his cup. She bent down and dropped it in as she had done without further thought hundreds of times, but this time, as their eyes met, she was struck by something she had never thought of before.

Bob did not look like her. On its face that was an obvious and banal observation. They were different people, they looked different. His skin was light, even covered in dirt and tanned from spending all day outdoors, where hers was several shades darker. His eyes were blue, hers dark brown. But there was something more than that.

His skin was furrowed. It seemed to hang loose off of his bones, and formed branching wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. He looked... old. In his face she saw the aging described on the pages of the black book. The symptoms of aging. The precursor to death.

She jerked back to an upright position, slightly startling Bob, who looked at her with a mix of confusion and annoyance. The motion caused her headphones to slide out of place, so she could clearly hear him tell her off.

"Take it easy there lady!" He snatched the cup as if half expecting her to take the money back.

"Sorry, I didn't-" Liz tried to shake the shock out of her system and started backing away.

"Scaring me half to death." Bob was by this point talking more to himself than to her, most words too mumbled to be heard or understood. But that sentence came through clear as day.

Liz kept walking backwards until she almost tripped over a garbage can. She took a few deep breaths, her eyes still on Bob. Then she corrected her headphones, raised the volume on the music and continued walking to work.

Bob started to move the money from the cup to his pocket, leaving just a few coins in the bottom to act as inspiration for other givers, and didn't look up again until Liz was out of view.

Still deeply uneasy, and still with the music blaring at near painful volume in her ears, Liz walked into the office. Even more desks were empty today, partly because even fewer people had bothered to come to work, and partly because those who had stood huddled around something in the kitchen.

Liz continued past, assuming she'd be better off hearing about whatever got them so excited from Jens later than to try and make her way to the middle. She continued to her

desk, sat down and removed her headphones, so that she could transition to the headphones plugged into her computer. But she didn't get that far, as without the music she could hear the voices coming from the huddle.

They weren't excited. They were panicked.

Liz got up again and started walking over, trying to make out what people were saying.

"...see what happened?"

"...just collapsed..."

Then she heard the coughing coming from the center of the group. Her insides turned to ice as she recognized the sound.

She walked up to the group and got the attention of one of the ladies from the economy department who she had talked to a few times during lunch.

"What is happening?" she whispered, trying to not sound overly worried. The economy lady looked at her blankly for a moment before snapping back to reality from wherever her mind had floated off to.

"The uh-" she blinked slowly a few times "That guy, um, Jens? He was coughing and then just fell down."

Her first instinct to push her way through the crowd. It felt wrong to stand on the outside while all of these people were gathering around him. But the fact that it was someone she knew didn't change the fact that she had nothing to contribute if she did get to the center.

And if she was completely honest, she didn't really *know* him either. They'd talked a few times over the last week, but they weren't really friends. There was probably a whole bunch of people who knew him better than she did, who was hit a lot harder by this.

So instead what she did was run away.

She tore out of the building and headed down the street. Her ears rang and eyes burned and she could feel the beating of her heart in every cell of her body. She turned the corner two blocks down and crossed the road without looking, causing a taxi to honk angrily at her. She extended a middle finger and kept walking with her eyes fixed on the ground in front of her.

She reached the small bodega she had been headed for and walked straight to the register.

"A pack of whatever cigarettes are the cheapest. And a lighter." The cashier looked at her with a slight annoyance on their face and turned towards the shelf behind them, obviously not sure which brand was cheapest at the moment.

"...It's the power plant, I swear dude!" A couple of guys in their early twenties joined the line behind Liz. Liz couldn't help but eavesdrop as she was handed a pack of cheap cigarettes and paid.

"How the fuck would you know?" The taller of the two was looking over the shelves of candy, only half-interested in the conversation, while the shorter one was gesturing wildly.

"I read about it, man. Everyone online is talking about it?"

"Everyone online?" The tall one picked out a chocolate bar and turned to the short one with demonstratively raised eyebrows.

"You know what I mean." The short one looked annoyed, first at his tall friend, and then at Liz, who realized she had finished her transaction and was now just staring at them.

"What?" The short one got an aggressive edge to his voice and Liz immediately started to apologize and walk out of the store.

She hadn't talked to Artemis since they had decided to stop eating. Liz tried to stay firmly attached to reality, Artemis seemed to have given that up completely, and talking to them had felt for lack of better words *hazardous*. Like they would infect her with whatever madness had befallen the world.

But right now there was only one thought in her head: she *needed* Artemis.

She picked up her phone to make a call, but then decided against it. Artemis' apartment was closer than her own, and they were almost always at home during the day, a perk of working freelance.

She put her headphones on, held down the button to raise the volume until she heard the beeping indicating she had reached max, and pressed play on her heaviest, electroniest playlist. Then she unwrapped her new pack of cigarettes, lit one with her new lighter, and started walking.

The door to Artemis' building was propped up by a cobblestone someone had dug out of the sidewalk. It had been like that for about two months now, following a party by one of Artemis' neighbors. After the party everyone living there seemed to agree that it was actually pretty convenient to just keep it like that.

It for sure was for Liz, who could just enter without having to ask Artemis to come down and let her in.

Artemis' building actually had an elevator, as opposed to her own, but for some reason it always smelled like fresh urine, so everytime Liz was there she had to have an inner debate about whether to use it or not. Today tiredness won out, and she marinated in the smell of piss for the seconds it took to reach Artemis' floor.

As she banged on the door of the apartment, the very real possibility that Artemis wasn't actually home entered her mind. She felt stupid for not just writing to ask. Fortunately it didn't take long before she heard someone stirring inside.

After a few more seconds the lock rattled, and the door opened, and whatever Liz had been meaning to say vanished from her mind.

Artemis' eyes looked back at Liz from the bottom of deep, dark cavities. Their skin looked as if it was stretched thin over the bones in their face. Their features had always been sharp, now they seemed on the verge of slicing them open.

Starving.

"Hi." Artemis said, their voice sounding as if it was coming from somewhere far away. Liz didn't return the greeting, instead saying the first thing popping into her head.

"What the fuck, Artemis?"

Artemis laughed, which seemed to Liz a wholly inappropriate response, and then stepped out of the way to let Liz pass. She entered, but wasn't going to let her question go unanswered.

"No seriously, what the actual fuck?"

"I told you." Artemis responded with a shrug and closed the door behind them.

Liz's shock gave way fully to anger. This, whatever this was, was not okay.

"So you have seriously stopped fucking eating?" Her voice trembled as she did all in her power not to yell.

"I have." Artemis responded calmly and walked past Liz back into the apartment. "I need to see what happens."

The anger inside of Liz kept mounting, building exponentially. It wasn't the right response, not the way to help Artemis, but honestly, fuck Artemis. The world was coming undone and Artemis was coming undone with it. Fuck the world, and fuck Artemis.

“No.” she said, her voice low but roiling as if just about to boil. “No, fuck you.” She started pacing around the apartment, Artemis just standing there looking tired and empty. Her anger built and built, anger begetting anger, feeling both horrible and in a disgusting way almost pleasurable. Like scratching an itch that got itchier the more you scratched it, making scratching it feel even better. And then she screamed.

“FUCK YOU ARTEMIS.” Tears broke through and seemed to burn her skin as they rolled down her cheeks. “Everything is fucking... fucked. Every god damned thing. And I need you. I fucking... I NEED YOU.” Her cursing felt limp and childish, but she couldn’t help herself. She felt like breaking something. She felt like an animal trapped in a cage. She felt like she was going to break herself.

Then, suddenly, Artemis’ legs seemed to fully give out below them. As if hit by some invisible force, they wobbled where they stood, eyes falling closed, body falling down.

Liz noticed just in time, stepping in to catch Artemis’ collapsing body. The anger drained from her almost immediately, leaving behind just lingering adrenaline and shame.

She was by no means the strongest of people, but catching her friend required almost no effort. They weighed close to nothing.

As suddenly as the lights had gone out, Artemis’ brain seemed to turn back on again. Their eyes met Liz’, with an expression of utter confusion. Liz led them over to their couch and Artemis didn’t try to struggle against it.

For a little while none of them spoke. Then Liz took a deep breath, and pleaded with a voice she tried and failed to keep steady.

“Please, Artemis. You have to eat.”

Artemis took three long, labored breaths before responding.

“Why?”

“Because you’ll...” Liz’s eyes were tearing up again but she couldn’t get herself to say the word. And somewhere behind it all, the anger was lying in wait.

“I’ll what?”

Liz stood up and backed away. Artemis reached out their hand towards her, but Liz jerked back violently, and screamed at them. The anger returned in full force.

“NO! FUCK YOU!” She screamed so loud it tore at her throat, and the it made the white hot anger flame up even further. This was so fucking stupid. She didn’t come here for this. This was all Artemis’ fucking fault. All of it. If they hadn’t read that fucking book, if they hadn’t gotten so obsessed like they always did, if—

She knew she was being unfair, but the thought of having to be fair added to the anger. The anger seemed endless, like it would keep growing forever, and soon it would devour her. It would devour them.

So for the second time that day, she ran away.

VII

She burst into her apartment, almost breaking her key in the lock as she did. She threw her bag and jacket on the floor, and fell down with her back against the closed door.

She hadn't cried on the ride home, but only because she couldn't take crying in front of strangers today. She had held it in, and seemingly pushed it down and away to where it couldn't reach back out now that she was alone again. She felt empty, the anger long since having turned into rancid vapor.

She took out her phone to write a message, but then just held it in her hands and looked at her own reflection in the dark screen. Write a message to who? Artemis was the one she talked to when she felt like this. Sure she had other friends, but if she was being honest they were all pretty much glorified acquaintances. Not people you would talk to about your emotional breakdowns.

Jens had felt like someone who could have become a real friend, mostly because he had been so insistent to ignore all of her efforts to keep him at arm's length. "Too dumb for her defense mechanisms" she found herself thinking, before realizing that was probably a bit mean.

Whatever the reason, he was now the second person she thought to write, before realizing that was not really an option either. If he wasn't dead, he was at least not in a state where he could use a phone.

The word "dead" had entered her thoughts with such ease that it took her a moment to realize the absurd gravity of it. Jens might be dead. The person she'd seen and talked to just a day ago. Gone.

The urge to write someone, anyone, drained out of her, the very idea suddenly seeming almost impossible. The thought of any human contact at all filled her with a deep unyielding fatigue.

Instead she put the phone down, stretched her hand up above her head and locked and latched the door. Then she picked the phone back up and turned it off.

Just putting it away didn't feel definitive enough, messages would still be able to reach it, be able to *get inside* her apartment. And if they could get to her, they could hurt her. Whatever that meant.

She wanted to build an impenetrable barrier between herself and everyone else.

She got back up on her feet and just stood there for a moment, swaying slightly as if rocked by a mild breeze. She turned to look at herself in the mirror. Her face was ashen, her eyes dark. It was all just too much.

Jens was dying of some unknown "disease". Artemis would "starve". Bob would die of "old age". No, she thought, he'd probably die from cold weather, or some other malady.

What would she herself die from? Probably an accident, a result of her own clumsiness or stupidity. Probably horribly, as if there were any other way. The book had talked about relatively pleasant ways to die, also, but what difference did it make? Death was death, and dead was dead. Never to be not dead again. Either she would lose everyone, or everyone would lose her.

Again she corrected herself. There was no or. She would lose everybody, and everybody would lose her. And then they would all be lost.

Liz rammed her fist as hard as she could into the hallway mirror. An intricate pattern of cracks spread out from the point of impact, before the entire mirror collapsed into shards all over her hand and arm.

One of the large pieces hit her straight across the back of her wrist and she felt a stinging feeling as it sliced into her flesh.

For a moment, she just stood there, watching the blood seep out onto the skin, pool together and then fall in big drops to the ground.

She thought about the veins and the flesh, all of that soft and warm and wet and disgusting matter that made up her body, her fragile, awful fucking body, she looked at the cut and imagined cutting even deeper. Slicing, destroying. Unmaking herself.

Death, the deep and dark abyss of nothingness which scared her more than anything had ever scared her before, suddenly felt like a black hole, pulling her in. The idea was simultaneously terrifying and titillating, how unimaginably awful it would be to end it all, how perfectly wonderful. No more noise. Not even silence, as silence is still *perceived*. No perception. Nothing, just endless fucking nothing. It pulled her in, or maybe she threw herself in. What if she just—

“Shit.” She snapped out of it and put her other hand over the cut. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” she mumbled as she ran to the kitchen to find a way to stop the bleeding. She had bandaids and bandages, but they wouldn’t do much good with her arm covered in blood. She grabbed a dish towel and held it against the wound for a moment, trying to build courage to take a closer look.

She took a few deep breaths, and then started running the faucet as cold as it would go. She put the towel down and put the arm under the water.

It stung, but with the stinging came clarity, and soon the cold numbed the pain all together. It wasn’t actually that bad of a cut. For her it was not even top ten cuts she thought, and the thought actually made her smile to herself. Damn she was clumsy.

From there she could continue on autopilot, using the routine learned from many years of being a dumbass to dress the wound. She did her best to ignore where her mind had gone just moments ago, deciding to purge it from her memory altogether. Temporary insanity, your honor. Strike it from the record.

When the wound was dressed, the tiredness returned, only ten times stronger. If she had ever been this tired before, she couldn’t remember it. She thought about going to get her phone, but the phone still felt like a danger, a way for the bad to seep in, a kink in the armor. So she left it on the floor in the hall, along with the shattered mirror, and went to bed.

For every step she walked towards the bedroom, for every foot she put between herself and the world, she started to feel calmer, and when she reached the bed she allowed herself to just fall in. The bed was good. Probably the only good thing in the world.

Without taking her clothes off she crawled under the covers. Already half asleep, she looked over at the bedside table. At the book she hadn’t even finished. And with every last ounce of energy she could muster, she picked it up, and threw it across the room.

VIII

The entire world shook. As Liz was ripped from sleep she couldn't tell if she heard it or just felt it. Something somewhere had exploded.

It was still dark outside, and as she turned to look at the digital clock on her night stand, it too was dark. In fact everything was.

The power was out.

She looked around in the dark for her phone, before remembering leaving it on the floor in the hall.

"Fuck."

Doing her best not to trip over the assorted piles of shit on her floor she made her way to the hall, and did her best to search for it without getting ripped to shreds by the broken mirror. She managed surprisingly well, and picked it up with only a tiny cut on her thumb. And as she did, she discovered that it too was out of power, greeting her with a blinking red lightning bolt when she tried turning it on.

For a moment she just sat there among the glass, unsure what to do with herself. No phone, no power. This was not her forte.

After a few moments and some deep breaths, she stood up again and walked towards the front door. The explosion had been big, maybe big enough to wake someone else, someone she could talk to. She put on a pair of ugly sneakers, and walked out the door.

Her eyes had adjusted as much as they could to the darkness, but she could still only make out the broadest of outlines. What she did notice however, was that the door to the roof was left open. Maybe someone else in the building knew the trick, and had gone up to survey the surroundings. She pushed the door aside, and walked up the stairs.

There was no moon out today, and the stars did little to help the darkness. But she didn't need light to notice what was in front of her.

The entire city was dark. No lights in any of the windows. But one light remained. A huge, blazing fire in the far distance, just at the city limits.

It was too far away to really gauge its size, but it was clear it was bigger than any fire Liz has ever seen before. It was the size of a house. Maybe many houses. Breathless Liz walked across the roof towards it.

"Sup?" Liz almost fell backwards. She turned her head in the general direction of the sound and after fixing her eyes on a particularly dark patch of darkness, the thin, sharp silhouette of Artemis started to appear. They were sitting on the raised edge of the roof, feet dangling out and their body semi-turned to look at Liz.

"Sup?" Liz's response was considerably less confident in tone.

"Are you okay?" Liz wasn't sure she knew what okay meant in this context.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Are you?" She moved over towards the Artemis shaped shape, careful not to trip over anything.

"Yup." Liz waited for an elaboration on the answer as she sat down beside Artemis in the ledge, but none came.

"What happened?"

"Someone blew up the power plant. Took out the entire grid I reckon." Artemis said it almost nonchalantly. As if this was just an everyday occurrence.

“And why are you on my roof?” Liz regretted the words as she said them. She did wonder, but she worried that it might come off as if she didn’t want her there. And she desperately wanted her there.

“I was coming to see you.” Liz couldn’t see the little smile Artemis was giving her, but she felt it. “I sent you a text.”

“Oh.” Liz held up the phone and pressed the button to make the little red lightning bolt reappear.

“Ah.” Artemis nodded in the dark. “Well, anyway, I was on my way when shit exploded, so I went up here to check it out.” That all made sense, Liz thought. As much as any of this made sense.

“You want some pizza?” Artemis asked after a short pause. “I got it on the way.”

“Sure.” Liz felt a slight whiplash, but never turned down pizza. “Is it good?”

“Yeah, it’s got pineapple.” They held out the pizza carton to Liz in the dark, and she managed to fumble herself a slice. Artemis took a bite out of the slice already in their hand and let out a groan of pleasure.

“God I love pizza. And man was I starving.”

Liz looked at the extra dark part of the darkness that was her friend. Then she turned her eyes towards the fire in the distance. They could see the blinking lights of emergency vehicles starting to make their way there to try and quell the inferno.

“We should probably throw out your carpet today.” Artemis said with a mouth full of pizza.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

And before long the sun started its way over the horizon.