

The Disappearance of People

6-8

Sitting here still feels so weird. I've been sitting here all my life, but it's strangely empty. It has been for the last few days. Emptiness is a strange feeling. Well, so are all feelings. In all truthfulness, everything is strange for me. Though it's quite nice living in a strange world. You never know what's next. But I miss my one rock. Always there. Connected to me. Sometimes weighing me down. Sometimes keeping me grounded. Doing the job gravity had failed to do.

"Sarah." a British accent asks.

I look up and question with my face.

"Stop staring at the window and eat."

I take a bite. One of her better meals. I down it and soon finish the whole plate.

I look up at her, questioning. I want to ask her a question but I'm not in a very talky mood. I sigh and see no other choice.

"Where is everybody?" I ask.

"What do you mean Sarah? That's an absurd question."

"Absurd yes, but it's a quality question."

"Sarah, I have told time and time again, there is no such thing as a bad question. Now the people are a long story we should save until later."

I barely remember other people. I was little when they disappeared. Or did they simply just walk away? The ones left were too little to remember. Miss Rachael refuses to tell me anything.

Miss Rachael gets up and serves dessert. Apple Pie, a recipe she found in my mother's old recipe box. As usual it is great. I swallow the last scrap.

"It's later." I say looking up at Rachael.

She sighs, clearly annoyed by all my questions. "Alright if you must know, not even I know what happened to everybody else."

“But what do you remember Rachael?”

“Hush, I’m getting there, child. It was ten years ago. You were little, two or three, I was thirteen...”

I had just moved from London .I hated it here. So open and so much air! I missed my old home and the pavement, but I knew we had to go. The city wasn’t working. Society was about to collapse. They all said the country was the right place to be. Truly, in the long run, they were right. Uprisings, riots, so much more, so much worse. It happened in the cities, as expected; it happened in the suburbs, it happened to any place with any kind of government. It happened where people were. It was a disease that spread. It took you and enveloped you, made you crazy and insane, those were the first symptoms, blabbering on and on in gibberish. Then they disappeared. Poof! Gone .It was the weirdest thing to witness. One minute they’re fine, walking down the street, minding their own business, and then they pass an infected and...

Not everybody was infected right away. Some could carry it for days, weeks, months and have nothing show up. Others, it showed up in a snap. We all saw them. Their eyes got wide. Their mouths gaped open. Those who were smart ducked inside their homes. Those who were not, well let’s just say they went with the others. Then the weirdest would thing happen. They would stop, wide and panicked eyes, and run. Into their homes, pack a bag and leave. People tried to follow them of course, but after a while they vanished. Just vanished, into thin air.

It was a scary time. That’s why I was moved to the country. My mum and I wanted to be as far away from people as possible so we moved into an abandoned barn. It was senescent, paint peeling off the walls, totally clamped-out. One night part of the roof caved in while we were sleeping. Then we met you and your family. It was you and your older sister. They day you two came was also the day my mum disappeared. She was out getting some food and you two showed up. I was told not to leave the barn and to not let in anyone but her. Something about you guys, though, I had an instinct to let you in. It had been a year since I had moved. In all that time I was in isolation. In that year I had almost adjusted to being alone, but when you came, I was reminded about people. I was reminded how enjoyable people could be when you weren’t worried about disappearing.

Mum disappeared and I now had two younger kids I was determined to take care of. I loved you two, I really did, but I will not lie, it was hard. I didn’t know how to cook or find food or anything.

Then your sister disappeared. It wasn't the virus. There were no more people around to carry it. But she never came back. And so, I ended up having to take care of you. At least you were six or seven and could come out and help me get supplies.

And that Sarah is the story of the people. And the story of you. And the story of me. And the story of everyone else.

I think for a minute and say, "Why do you say stories? I thought stories were just stories."

Rachael chuckles. "No Sarah, *tales* are just tales, but stories... Stories can be as real as the atmosphere. Or as real as unicorns. It all depends on what story you're telling."

"Oh." I said, but I still didn't get it.

One year passed since Rachael told me the story. Then two.

"Come on Sarah!" Rachael calls holding cooking pots and cooking spoons.

"Rachael!" I call back, "Why do you have the cookware? We need that so we can cook and you know eat!"

Rachael trots over to me smiling. "If I'm correct," she says in a matter of fact way, "today is New Years."

I look at her and blink one slow blink.

"New Years was the start of a *new year*."

I shake my head.

"Well in celebration we bang pots and pans together to ring in the new start!"

I give her an apologetic look.

"Oh just come on," she says and thrusts a pan to me, "it's tradition. Bang on it and make as much noise as possible. Me and my dad used to do this every year."

I sigh and join in with Rachael. As silly as it is, I had fun.

The night comes and goes. Rachael and I are lying down on the floor of an abandoned row home in an empty city. Once we realized the supplies were gone from our home area, we became nomads. Wandering around and living off the land and the cities. Once we started moving, the sense of emptiness I felt that one day came back to me. Over and over again. At that moment it came back.

I stood up abruptly. The feeling was starting to hurt. Rachael doesn't even glance up. She's become used to it. I start wandering around the house. The people who used to live here were very interesting people. I saw pictures of so many different places. Places I couldn't name. Places Rachael couldn't even name. Such beautiful places.

I enter a room probably belonging to a tweenaged girl. Papers are attached to the wall. So many papers! I've never seen so many papers with words and pictures in one place. All the colors in the room swirled around me making me dizzy. I tripped and stuck out my hand. My hand struck a box with a black circle inside it. The box whizzed and wurred. I jumped surprised. The circle starts spinning and a sound comes out. Sounds with words.

Oh! Darling, please believe me, I'll never do you no harm.

Rachael steps in and starts humming along. "What is that? That sound?" I ask.

"That's music, Sarah." She says, swaying to this new music, "The Beatles."

"What?" I ask.

"The people sing and playing the music, they're called The Beatles. They were a band. they wrote songs and played them."

"I think I like it." I say half smiling.

"Of course you do. You'd be insane not to like music." Rachael says as she's inspecting the walls. She humphs. "This kid was a old soul. The Beatles, BB King, Chuck Berry, The Eagles, Jimi Hendrix."

I look at one of the papers. "One Direction." I read.

"Ok," Rachael says, "maybe not a whole old soul."

Rachael goes around the whole room. She stops at the box with the turning circle.

“A record player. That was in my parents time.” She touches it gently, “I always wanted a record player. They were so cool.” She gives a small laugh clearly immersed in nostalgia.

I wander to the next room. There are no papers attached to the wall. A huge four poster bed sits in the middle. Sad and threadbare. A small folded note sits on one of the pillows. My curiosity wins.

Dear Sarah,

I have no idea if you will ever get this, but I asked Rachael to watch you and when all the salvageables run out, to come here.

This was your home Sarah. I know you were only 2 ½ when we left, but I hope there is some remembrance. I am your sister Sarah. I am Klara. Do you remember?

I ask you a favor. I am in search of the people. Please come with me. I must find our parents and everyone else. I am heading out of Philly into Pennsylvania. I will leave more letters and signs for you to point you in my direction. I will continue on, but I will always be waiting for you.

Take your time thinking about it.

With all love,

Klara

Rachael is standing over my shoulder. “What are you going to do?” she asks. In the twelve years since she moved, she seems to be losing her accent. Slowly diminishing.

“I don’t know.” I say, my voice breaking.

Rachael hugs me. “Take your time.” She says, “Even if it takes a decade.”

I nod and sit down.

Another year passes. We stay in my old house in a city that was named Philadelphia.

“Rachael?” I ask during breakfast.

“Yes Sarah?”

“I want to go help Klara. I have to leave.”

Rachael smiles sadly and nods.

“Will you stay here? So when I come back I will be able to find you easily?”

“Of course Sarah. I have become quite fond of this empty city actually.”

“Rachael?”

“Yes?”

“Where do I start?”

“How about we start with packing.”

I nod and we get up, abandoning our breakfasts.

I am ready to face the unknown and rid the emptiness.