

Our parents were gone.

Oliver and I couldn't acknowledge our parents' death the first day they went missing, when our mom left a note saying they went to the store and would return shortly. My brother and I had expected our parents to leave, because the store is only open one day a week, and we were very low on food. They always returned within an hour; it was too dangerous to stay outside any later. Still, Oliver and I tried to convince ourselves that our parents were still alive and hiding somewhere. We didn't concede their death the second day when they still hadn't returned. We tried to stay calm and think they had simply been delayed and they would be home soon. When a week had passed, and our parents were still missing, we knew there was no hope of their return.

Prior to our parents' disappearance, sleep seldom came to Oliver and I, due to the stress of the war. We relied on our parents for protection, but there was no way for them to assure our safety. For months all we could do was wait in misery. The week of our parents' disappearance was agonizing. Oliver and I mourned our parents and old memories of a safe, happy family we could never have again. Our parents never lost hope that the war would end and things would get better, but I knew even if Oliver and I could have recovered after the war ended, we would never have our family back. I spent most days laying down and crying, hoping I could stop my racing, fearful thoughts enough to fall asleep, and praying I wouldn't wake. I always did. I felt like a zombie, emaciated and slow. I was weak, with no sense of ambition, no hope left for the world or myself.

We also had no food. For a week we lived off two packets of dehydrated milk we rationed into four bottles of water. On the seventh day, it was gone. I thought we would simply surrender to death by starvation, adding two more meaningless deaths to the 3.24 billion casualties. My brother thought otherwise.

I lay on the cold tile floor next to the small window in the kitchen. A flood of memories came rushing back...doing my homework on the kitchen table, asking my father questions as he cooked dinner. I could hear myself singing with my mom as we made waffles, her voice cracking as she tried to hit the high notes. I thought of all the nights before the war, when it was safe to leave the window open. I loved smelling the crisp evening air and glancing over at our magnolia tree, which died a few months after the war begun. My head ached from misery and loss while

my stomach pleaded for food, angrily churning. I hugged my knees to my chest, trying to find a position where my stomach wouldn't twist into knots. I had cramps so sharp that I couldn't get off the floor. There was no escaping this graveyard of memories. I made myself even smaller, grabbing the soles of my feet with my hands and tucking my head down. There was so little substance to my body that I felt I was nothing but a pile of bones, barely held together by skin. The war robbed me of my freedom, it took away my parents, and it made me lose who I thought I was. I was nothing, no life, no dreams, no aspirations. I had nothing left to give the world, and there was nothing else for me to take.

I was shaking, aching, sobbing. I thought, surely this was the end. I tried to will myself to fall asleep and drift away... To fall asleep one last time...

"Clare," a man's voice said. I lifted my head up, and slowly opened my eyes at the sound of my name. I felt dizzy. The room around me swirled and I could only see a hazy gray punctured by twinkling white dots. I could make out a pair of eyes above me in my static surroundings. They were hazel eyes, with dark circles underneath, dulled by melancholy, and yet still loving.

"Dad?" I said. I cried softly, pained but relieved. He was taking me to the afterlife; he would help me leave this world...

"Clare, it's me, it's Oliver, it's your brother," His voice grew more frantic, desperate for a sign I was still present. I realized I wasn't as close to dying as I thought.

"Oliver?"

"I'm hungry," he said. I buried my head in my knees.

"I'm waiting for my body to give up."

"Mom and Dad didn't give up." I felt his cold, frail fingers lift my face up. After blinking a few times, I could finally decipher the outlines of his face and curly brown hair, which was almost identical to mine, although his was much shorter. "If we die, we're going to die together." Oliver tried to get me up. I couldn't stand without bending over. He lifted me, but I could feel him stumbling under my weight.

“Don’t try to carry me,” I said, feeling my mouth go dry. “Our only chance is to walk as quickly as I can, and hope we reach a store before...” I trailed off, but Oliver understood. He put his hand around my waist and helped me stay upright. After a few minutes I became accustomed to the rhythmic, slow pace.

The journey was an endless venture which lasted for eons. My body hurt all over but didn’t surrender. I kept my head down for the most part, watching the cracks in the concrete move under my feet. It was the first time I had been out of the house in almost a year. The outside was chillier than our house, but I relished in the brush of the wind against my skin. If I died then—shivering and cramping in a desolate street without cars, in a town with no sign of human life beyond the identical, monotonous houses—I would have been grateful to spend my last day with clouds above me. Before the war, I preferred to stay inside. People made me uncomfortable, and I enjoyed the familiarity and safety of my room. During the war, the house became a prison. I never imagined how much I would crave something as ordinary as fresh air, or the way my bare feet felt dirty after trudging along the road.

My legs strained. I knew I couldn’t walk much longer.

“Oliver,” I said, “Keep going. I love you, I’m going to lie down here... it’s time.”

“I love you. Hold on a little bit longer, Clare. I see something—it looks like a tent—it’s not far.” Wincing, Oliver bent down. “Hold onto my neck.”

I didn’t want to cause him any pain, but I felt more lifeless by the second. I wrapped my arms around his neck. As we came closer to the tent, I recognized the Storekeeper symbol, which was a can with an eagle on the label.

“Do you think the tent is for people who want to become Storekeepers?” Oliver asked.

“Maybe...” I said. “I’m hoping it’s for emergency food supply, but that seems unlikely when there must be a store a mile or two from here.”

“Well, whatever it is, there should be someone there who can help us.”

I saw a man and a woman approach from the other side of the road. They stood up straight, maintaining a brisk, even pace. They seemed like the kind of people who would

volunteer to be Storekeepers, but I still feared that they would try to harm us when Oliver was trying so hard to keep us alive.

When we reached the tent, the man and the woman were already inside, gathering food and water to buy. Three Storekeepers stood behind a counter in the back of the tent. Stacks of canned food lined the massive tent, as well as can openers, water bottles, first aid kits, and medicines. The man and the woman moved about swiftly, filling a large box with food and water. Oliver set me down on the floor, where I curled up into the fetal position. I hoped the Storekeepers would take pity on us and let us have some food even though we had no money.

Oliver grabbed a can and a bottle of water as he approached the counter. The three Storekeepers in the tent were armed with rifles. They were covered head to toe in protective gear. Their suits were a dark green with steel pads at the knees and elbows. The Storekeepers' faces were completely concealed in dull gray masks. There were two layers of metal around the mouth and nose area, with holes poked in the lower green layer and in the upper steel layer, allowing them to breathe. Over their eyes, there were iridescent blue circles. The Storekeeper logo was displayed on the chest of the suit, which reminded me of a superhero costume. And indeed, being a Storekeeper was considered a dangerous and heroic job. Being in public was no longer safe since there were many random shootings and bombings from other countries. People only went out during the days the stores were open, and only if their food supply was greatly diminishing. It was the Storekeepers' job to protect people in case of an attack, as well as to make sure none of the customers ended up maiming each other out of desperation for supplies.

I knew the Storekeepers were there to keep us safe, but I felt so vulnerable with my gaunt body lying on the floor, knowing they were our last chance at staying alive. Oliver looked fearful too, staring up at the ominous Storekeeper masks. He struggled to make eye contact with them.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Our parents have been missing for a week. They went to the store and never came back, and my sister and I weren't left with much food, and I don't know how much longer we can last, if there's any way we can make it up to you we will, but—”

“You can take plenty of food,” one of the Storekeepers said. It was alarming how gentle and human his voice sounded, not at all corresponding with his intimidating uniform. “I suspect

we won't get many people here for another six weeks at least. Everyone is too afraid to buy food due to last week's store bombing."

I felt all the blood drain from my face. *Store bombing*. That's how my parents died. I knew the words sank into Oliver's mind, because his previously jittery disposition became solemn. "Thank you," he said quietly, bringing the can and water bottle to me. I was still in shock over the fact our parents died in a bombing, but as soon as Oliver opened the can and handed it to me, I put it up to my lips. I wasn't sure how to eat it at first because I didn't check what it was, but as soon as I tasted it I recognized the vegetable soup. After a few gulps, I started crying out of exhaustion and relief, but kept drinking, not pausing until the soup was finished. Even though it was cold I finished it in less than two minutes, and reached for my second can immediately after.

"Be careful," Oliver said, setting down his can of soup for a moment. "You'll get sick if you eat too much so quickly."

"Worth it," I said. I soon finished the next can of soup and a can of corn. I started another can of corn, but could only eat half of it before I began feeling nauseous. I stopped immediately, lying down once again, but the feeling of being sick due to an overconsumption of food was so unheard of that I couldn't help but feel blissful in my nausea.

The woman in the tent stalked up to me, carrying a box of food under her arm. "You eat like you're starved, child." Although she originally struck me as being stoic and strong, I saw gentleness in her light green eyes, and her thin blonde hair that delicately framed her face. When she spoke she sounded serious and concerned.

"Our parents died in the store bombing last week," I said. "We haven't had much to eat since then."

The woman nodded her head sympathetically. The man, overhearing what I said, walked up to us. "Do you know if any of your other relatives are alive?" The man was a few inches shorter than the woman and very slender, with auburn hair and deep brown eyes.

Oliver and I looked at each other briefly. "No sir," Oliver said. "My mom was an only child, and our uncle on our father's side died in March."

“You two should come live with us,” the woman said. “We built a bomb shelter,” she lowered her voice. “With luck we’ll be able to avoid future store bombings, and hopefully survive the war.”

I looked at Oliver, giving a small nod. We would have a better chance of staying alive with them, and I knew Oliver felt responsible for ensuring our safety through the war.

“That is incredibly generous of you,” Oliver said. “Thank you very much.”

“We really appreciate it,” I said, standing up. The man extended his hand to help me to my feet. “I’m Erich, by the way,” he said. Once I was stable I shook his hand. “I’m Clare.”

“My name is Veronica,” the woman said, shaking my hand. Oliver introduced himself to Erich and Veronica, and the four of us walked to their car. On the ride to the bomb shelter, we remained mostly silent. I knew they didn’t want to bring up sensitive subjects, like our parents or the war, but there wasn’t much else to talk about. The war consumed everyone in our country, even though most people weren’t directly involved in it.

After a few minutes, Erich pressed a button on his keys. I gasped as we were lowered underground into a gray, dimly lit chamber. Once we reached the bottom, Erich drove the car off the platform we descended from. With the press of the same button, the platform rose back up, settling into the ground above us. Erich left the keys in the car and we all stepped out. Veronica unlocked a door on the other side of the chamber.

The next room was crammed, as if Erich and Veronica had tried to fit as much of the old world in it as possible. The room had eight tall bookshelves, filled with books, movies, photographs, and the kind of trinkets people used to buy back when people went on vacations.

There wasn’t much else left to their shelter—one bathroom, a kitchen, and a bedroom. The bookshelf room had a sofa, a reclining chair, and a small television with a DVD player. The whole setup was comforting, but I feared Erich and Veronica would soon reach the same fate my parents did. It reminded me of life before the war in a way that was almost eerie, as if the room itself was trying to deceive us. I wondered if I could ever become caught up in the pleasant, nostalgic room and forget the realities of war outside.

The rest of the day passed somewhat awkwardly. Oliver and I were unable to talk in private and unsure how to communicate with these strangers. After a soup dinner, comforted by food and a newfound sense of security, I felt sleepy. I lay down on the couch, glancing over the photographs of vacations, parties, and people. It was as if the lifetimes of Erich and Veronica were captured in those images. For once, sleep came to me easily.

I dreamed of family trips to places I had never been. I was aware that I was dreaming, so I tried to travel everywhere I yearned to go, but would never have the opportunity to see in real life. At last, I walked up to a tall mountain alone, reflecting on my life. When I reached the top, I saw the sun begin to peek above the ocean, which was murky and contaminated by pollution even in my dream.

“If there was any way I could still die in my sleep,” I whispered. “Please let me do so now. I want to die outside. I don’t want to live inside for so long only to die inside...”

My eyes snapped open, and I was aware of my surroundings in the bookshelf room. Oliver was asleep on the recliner next to me.

“Goodbye,” I whispered. There was nothing left for me there, a life of confinement, without adding anything to the world, without purpose. I stood up and walked toward the elevator, opening the door and closing my life behind me.

“Clare?”

The sound of the door shutting must have woken Oliver, who was standing right behind me. He looked at me in horror, realizing I was attempting to leave. I could see the sadness in his eyes, his only sister willingly walking toward her death, leaving him alone with strangers...

My heart sank as I realized I would leave Oliver the last surviving member of his family, after he tried so hard to keep us alive. Our parents never gave up, and although they died, they demised doing everything they could to keep our family safe. I felt selfish for being hopeless because of the state of the world and all I had lost. Maybe I could no longer make a big impact on the world, but I was all Oliver had left. My life was useless, but perhaps it held more meaning than my death.

“It’s been so long since I saw the stars,” I said. “Will you come outside with me, one last time?” I could feel my heart racing as I looked at him with desperation in my eyes.

“We are in a secluded area...” Oliver said, staring up at the ceiling. “But don’t think of it as the last time, Clare, because I’ll do everything in my power to make sure we survive the war, and then we can spend many more nights outside.”

Oliver opened the car door, took the key out, and pressed the button that made the platform descend. I could already see the sky, so dark it was almost black. We stepped on the platform and Oliver pressed the button again. As we rose up toward the ground, the sky seemed to grow larger and larger, until it was so encompassing that I felt like we were ascending into space.

There weren’t many stars to be seen in the cloudy sky, but the moon was visible. I could see Oliver, illuminated in the moonlight, and felt grateful that I still had part of my family left. It was so peaceful that I normally would have hoped to die there, with clouds above me. Instead, I looked up at the moon, and wished silently that Oliver and I would live through the war. I wished that someday we would spend more nights together, free and unafraid to be outside.