

EVE OF EARTH

01

You are pouring a cup of coffee when it happens. When all of the lights go out in the city. It happens at 07:52 PM and you will figure that out later because that's the time that your classic black Casio watch freezes on. You can't see your watch when the lights go out, but you will notice it later, stuck on that time. You will wonder then how a digital watch with a battery stops working.

In your left hand is the cardboard cup onto which you had written the name of the customer standing on the other side of the counter, waiting for her drink. In your right hand is the glass carafe full of the most recent batch of cold brew. As your arms hold the cup and the carafe hovering over the counter, the ceiling lights in the cafe shut off. Next, the refrigerators and cash register power down. The festive string of lights lining the windows flicker, trying to hold on. They're the lights that always get put up at the beginning of December. The faces of the people in the cafe, all turned towards the windows, are illuminated, dark, illuminated, dark, illuminated--until the lights succumb and you are all plunged into the darkness.

At first you think it's just your café, like that time you were blowdrying your long hair with the TV and the space heater on, and the power in your apartment cut out. But then you hear the screams outside on the street. You realize you are still holding the cup and the carafe and you set them down. The carafe ends up back on the counter, but you can't see anything and you feel the half-filled cup of coffee drop onto your boot and you hear a splash. The people in the café start to snap out of their stunned silence, and you hear couples and families reaching out for one

another. Slowly, your eyes start to adjust and you can barely make out shadows and shapes in shades of black from the dim light of the single moon.

You start to inch your way to the end of the counter, where the cash register is. You reach inside your apron and pull out your phone by reflex, but stow it again when you see that it's dead, too. You continue to hold out your arms as antennae and move towards the exit; you want to know what's going on. You move from table four to six to eight until you are almost at the door.

You feel for the handle and you push. The door opens onto a frigid, winter evening. You think about your green puffy coat left hanging on your hook in the small back hallway. The screams become more distinct now that you are outside. You will realize later that the only noises come from humans--no sirens, no honking, no urban cacophony. Despite the cries of injured and scared people, New York City sounds eerily quiet.

**02**

You are walking down the street in the direction of the loudest sounds. Most people are running the opposite way, but your curiosity draws you in and you don't know why. You round the corner and then you see it.

There is a colossal orange orb in the middle of the square, and you approach it. You have never seen anything like it, and you don't know what it is. The orb turns on a spotlight, and orients it right at you. You are blinded. And, an instant later, you are gone.

**03**

You wake up in a bed, under the covers. You are in a bedroom. It is a regular bedroom, but it is not your bedroom. The sheets are lilac and the quilt is white. Rubbing your eyes, you sit up in the bed. You don't know where you are but it feels wrong and safe at the same time. Getting out of the bed, you stand up on the plush grey carpet. Your boots are beside the bed, but you realize that you are still wearing your apron. Your phone is missing from the apron pocket. You remember last night, up until it went dark. You swap your apron for your boots and exit the bedroom.

You emerge onto the second floor landing of a small house. There are other rooms on this floor, but you descend the stairs to the lower level. You are in a living room with couches, a coffee table, and no TV. This seems like a normal house, but you have never been here before. You sit on a couch and have a breakdown.

When you are done crying, you get up, open the front door, and exit the house. Blinking into the sunlight, you come out onto a suburban street. There is a house on either side, and across the street is a municipal-looking building. The scene feels quaint, but strange. You see no other people, nor--you will note this later--evidence of people. You turn right and walk down the street, passing by the municipal building on your left and another house on your right. There is a classic, American diner across from this house. You can't see what's further down the road, but suddenly you can go no further. The town ends.

You turn around and walk back up the street. Pausing, you notice that there are two moons in the sky--a full moon and a waning crescent. You continue and pass the municipal building on your right, the other house on your left, and then your house. In all, four houses on one side of the street. On the other side, the three buildings.

Again, you can go no further. You walk to the nearest house and try the front door. Locked. You try to walk around to the back of the house, but you cannot. You try the doors of all of the houses and you can open none but your house, and the three establishments.

The diner is empty, except for the furnishings. The booths, chairs, and stools are upholstered in shiny red plastic, and the tables and counters are covered in blue marbled laminate trimmed with thick, ridged chrome.

The bowling alley is also empty, but one alley has lights on with pins at the end of the lane. Semicircles of deep, blue fiberglass chairs open onto each of the lanes. The carpet is itchy and purple with orange stripes. You pick up a ball and roll it down the lit lane. You hit some, but not all pins. After you try a second ball, the machine hums and resets the pins for you. None of the other lanes will turn on.

The municipal building is a library. It is one large room, with bookshelves along the walls and in three rows in the middle. Brown leather armchairs with brass upholstery tacks are scattered throughout. The library is full of books written in English. When you will comb through the collection later, you will find nothing that explains where you are, and nothing written after 1963.

Back in the kitchen of your house, you look for some food. The fridge is off, and there's nothing inside. The entire space feels like an IKEA showroom. You head back to the diner, but this time it's different. This time there is food on the counter. There will be food on the counter for you three times a day, but you will never see who prepares it.

Looking down at the plate on the counter, your body starts to shake. The plate is thick, off-white ceramic, and it's filled with a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and two links of sausage. The smell of the sausage repulses you; you haven't eaten meat since sophomore year in

college. You are enraged--with your confinement, with your captors, with this breakfast. Screaming, you pick up the plate and throw it against the wall behind the counter. The plate breaks into several large pieces, and the eggs glide down the wall. You have another breakdown, crouched under the counter between two shiny red plastic-capped stools.

You live in your house, and sleep in the bed with the lilac sheets and the white quilt. Sometimes the sheets smell like they've been cleaned, and sometimes a white T-shirt and blue jeans are on the chair beside the bed when you wake up. The other rooms on the second floor are locked. You have your Casio watch on even though it's stuck, and you learn how to tell time using the moons.

The library is where you feel the most comfortable, and you spend most of your days reading books in here, or in the bowling alley. You do not read in the park. There are no children playing, no insects buzzing. The lack of sounds and seasons in this place particularly frightens you when you are in the park. You search for a way out, but you can find none. Eventually, your breakdowns relent and your homesickness fades.

You live here for three months until he arrives.

**04**

After waking up, you put on your jeans and T-shirt, use the bathroom, and head out to the diner. You're following the routine you've settled into in your new life. You feel that you're the only person who exists.

But when you enter the diner this time, you are not alone. There is a man sitting at one of the booths, watching as you enter. You are frightened, and step back towards the door. But then he smiles and gestures and your need for human contact takes over.

After your months of isolation, you can't help but notice how attractive he is as you walk towards the booth. He has brown hair and a full beard, an athletic build and perfect teeth. He introduces himself to you and asks you to join him. Your breakfast is sitting on the table--he must have brought it over from the counter where it usually is at this time. Your eggs and bagel with no meat, somehow fine-tuned to your preferences over the months.

Sinking into the booth opposite the man, you stare at him. He keeps smiling at you despite your silence. He describes his experience arriving here, which parallels yours. The world went dark, and he woke up in a house. Later, you'll explore his house, which is a mirror image of your house, but with darker wood furniture and less pastel. It's two doors down from you, unlocked upon his arrival. He's in much better spirits than you remember being when you first arrived.

The man asks you your name. You are ready to speak, but when you say your name your voice cracks. You are overwhelmed by the social interaction and you start crying. He moves over to sit next to you, and puts his arm around your shoulders. At first, your body tenses at the physical contact but you breathe in his smell of pine and sweat and relax in his hold. You are no longer alone.





**05**

Your life here is better now, with the man. You spend a lot of time together, and you feel less alone. Sometimes your conversations feel forced, but you blame your own awkwardness and lack of practice. A second lane turned on in the bowling alley once the man arrived. He started bowling in the lane next to yours your first time there together, but you asked if he would instead like to play against you, in the same lane.

It feels as if you've fallen into a romantic comedy with two actors. You spend less time in the library, and more time at his house. Some nights, you don't even make it back to your house. You still avoid the park, and you do not go to the edges of this place. You take your meals together, in the diner. He doesn't ask you much about yourself, about your life before. He doesn't tell you about his life. You talk about the present and about your short-term plans and you are happier than you were before he came.

You do not love him, but you do not think about that. There is no point, and you are glad to be with another person. Getting used to your life together, you think less about home, about going back there, about escape. You find comfort in your new routines, the rhythm of living with another person.

After three months, you get sick. You throw up when you wake up, for several days in a row. You have never felt this way before and you realize that you are pregnant.

06

Judging by the moons, you've been living here for almost a year, and your belly is large. As your pregnancy progressed, you moved back to your house. You have been going back to the library to read, and you have been thinking about home. When you found out you were pregnant, you were so scared. The man was very excited when you told him, and that made you angry. He didn't know you well enough to know that you never wanted kids.

He does not seem worried that there are no doctors around, but this makes you panic. There are no books on the topic in the library. Avoiding the man as much as possible, you become consumed with preparing for the baby. The food that is served to you in the diner seems greener and you begin stretching and exercising twice a day in your living room.

With this obsession, an urge to find a way home comes back. The lack of interest the man has in leaving this place alarms you. You wonder if he chose to come here, or if he's never even been anywhere else. Picking it up from where it's sat forgotten for the past few months, you put back on your black Casio watch. When you look down at the face, which still reads 07:52 PM, you are reminded of New York. When you try to tell the man about New York, about college, about the time you studied abroad in Copenhagen, he changes the subject. One time, you yelled at him. You asked why he doesn't care about you and your life. He calmly replied, saying he does care about you, and that your life is here now. He is always calm, and that frustrates you. He also said that your life before doesn't matter, that your home doesn't exist. You note that he refers to Earth as your home, not his.

Combing through all of the books in the library, you learn nothing except this place was built in 1963. You try exploring again. The doors to the other rooms on the second floor of your house are still locked. You pound on the doors until you fear the man will hear, or you'll harm

the baby. You are still unable to open the doors of the other homes on the street. You peer through the windows but it's black inside. You want to break the glass, but you can't find a brick, a pipe, or any suitable piece of refuse in the yard. You walk down to the end of the street on either side, where the town ends. You hadn't been back this far until your first day because it feels so wrong and it bothers you. Sitting cross-legged on the edge of the pavement, you stare for hours at the nothingness, until the man takes your hand and leads you back to your house.

**07**

One evening, while stretching, your water breaks. The liquid rolls down your leg and sends dread up your spine. You are not ready for this. You have not figured out how to get home, or what's beyond the nothingness. The man comes running in when you shout for him, since you don't know what else to do. You do not know what he is, but you have no one else here. He puts your arm around his shoulders, and guides you up the staircase. But instead of taking you to your bedroom, he leads you to one of the other doors. As you begin to say that it's locked, it opens for him and he leads you inside. A contraction seizes your body as you stumble across the threshold, and when you look up you see that you are in a hospital room.

This room in your house is ready for you to give birth in. You are confused and scared and want to leave, but your body won't let you. You double over with the pain of the next contraction, and the man picks you up and gently lays you down in the cot, on top of the stiff, white sheets. He holds your hand and tells you to breathe. With your contractions getting stronger and closer together, you have no choice but to listen to his voice and squeeze his hand.

He lets go of you and moves down to the end of the bed to deliver the baby. You are screaming and he is reassuring, telling you that he's been programmed for this. Sweat drips into your eyes and you look up at the flat, white ceiling and pretend that it's the flat, white ceiling of a more real place.

Eventually, you hear the cries of a third person. The man tell you that it's a girl, that he was hoping it would be girl. He places her into your arms and as you lower your gaze from the ceiling you are confused because the baby has impossibly dark skin.

**08**

You hold the child close to you, and you are frightened. The man says that he was hoping the baby would look more like his own physical appearance but that this was always a risk. You don't know what he's talking about, and you don't know who he is. Trying to act normally, you smile and ask him to give you some time alone. He leaves the room and shuts the door behind him, but you hear no footsteps.

Holding your daughter in your arms, you hyperventilate. You feel trapped and helpless. You hate yourself for having become too complacent, for not trying hard enough to get back home before the baby came, before you got pregnant. You do not understand why the baby does not look like the man, but you need to find a way out of this place. You look down at the girl in your arms. She is beautiful, she is dark, and she is wholly human. She is not his daughter. She came from him but you can see that she is not his, genetically. Gingerly setting her down, you pull yourself out of the cot. You feel sore and wretched and you pull on your jeans and T-shirt, pick up the child and, barefooted, you open the door and run out of the room.

He was waiting for you on the landing and pursues you. Catching him by surprise, you manage to get a head start down the stairs. You run out of the house and down the street until the pavement ends. You run and you run but you can go no further than where the road ends; you cannot go into the nothingness.

He catches up to you, but doesn't get too close. He wants you to give him the baby. He says that they thought it would be better for you if you didn't know. He says that within him are many men, from many regions of the former world, as if it's a good thing. You realize that your child's biological father is a man who ceased to be along with Earth.

Danielle Raad

You understand now why he wanted the baby to be a girl, and why you were taken. You understand so many things, but not everything, and you see your life here unfold before you.

END