

~ NEWS FLASH ~

I

“Righto Maggie, you’re on in five.”

Frick. I claw at the turquoise pulp caught between my teeth. So much for ‘pulp-free’ juice.

I can’t get mad now; I’m about to go live. It’s not easy faking that bright-white-Channel-Zero-yours-truly-tonight’s-top-story-stay-classy-Planet-Smolen smile.

Hot air flushes my cheeks, the dirt beneath my runners pink with the heat. “I miss purple soil. This Hot Time has been a long one.”

Geoff gives a muffled laugh from inside the equipment van. “Yeah, today’s a scorcher.”

Kicking the dust with my shoe, I scuff my feet in a circle, scanning the orchard as Geoff sets up the tripod. The oranges look washed out today, pale and plump against the pink sand. They’re as indistinct as faded mosquito bites on pasty skin. I pluck one off a nearby tree and dig my nails into it, the rind thicker and tougher to peel than dried paint on timber.

“On Earth, they actually use this material called ‘grass’, which helps to prevent erosion from wind and water,” Geoff explains, crawling out from inside the van.

“Cool story. Why do they need this ‘grash’ shit anyway?”

“It’s pronounced ‘grass’, and I literally just told you why they need it.”

“Why they *think* they need it,” I correct.

“Anyway,” Geoff sighs, “if you lie in it for too long, you start to feel itchy. It looks nice though—”

“Well, you’d hope so, if the soil underneath is brown.”

Silence by the van. I turn to Geoff, who is punching a couple of buttons and twisting the camera lens into focus, tongue poking from the corner of his mouth. He looks up at me, brows furrowed.

“Righto, Maggie,” snapping his fingers and pointing to the shallow pit he made in the sand with the heel of his shoe. I take my place and twist my fly-aways behind my ears, sliding my tongue along my teeth. Geoff holds up one hand and folds his fingers into his palm, pointing his thumb in my direction.

“Good evening Planet Smolen,” I grin, “I’m Maggie Surf, your friendly Channel Zero reporter, delivering *your* news every night, at six o’clock—”

“Mags,” Geoff interjects from the camera, “tonight is the first night in two weeks you’ve had a story. Also...it’s six thirty. Try again.”

The smile drops from my face; I picture it splattering onto the ground.

“Uh—right—delivering *your* news...on the nights when there’s a story worth delivering...at either six, or after six...depending on how long it takes to get our shit together.”

Geoff nods once and lifts his thumb.

“Tonight, I’m reporting live from the orange orchard, where our neighbouring planet can be seen.” In the reflection of the camera lens, I watch my eyebrows escape beneath the mass of black curls dancing across my forehead. I grin at Geoff, his face half-hidden behind the camera. “Was that good?”

He rotates his free hand frantically, and I wait for him to bend into a bow. When he doesn’t, I continue.

“Planet Earth, practising similar culture to Smolen but housing almost 3,500,000 times the population, has been confirmed by their own astrophysicists to be—”

I stop short, leaning forward onto the balls of my feet to squint at my reflection: is that really what my hair looks like after an hour in the sun?

Geoff pokes his head out from behind the camera, expression panicked. I swallow.

“Sorry—” My eyes flick back to the camera. “It’s just that, I’ve been introduced to this new shampoo by my hairdresser, but it’s dried out my ends, and I know it’s noticeable—is it noticeable?”

Geoff’s doing that hand thing again. What does he think I think that means? My hands go all clammy and hot, my feet sweating in my socks.

“Also, you can’t see them, but I’m actually wearing odd socks. I’ve had this pair of socks separated for weeks, where one goes through the wash but the other one doesn’t because I’ve lost it, but then it turns up, but—”

“Mags!” Geoff spits, “what are you *doing*?”

Entertaining. Duh.

“—*Mags*?”

What now. “*Yes*?”

“—You’re supposed to be enforcing the potential need for a *survival plan*—”

“Hang on, I’ve got notes!”

Geoff smacks his forehead hard, the resonating *phwack* so loud I’ll be surprised if it isn’t heard through the television.

“Smolen,” I continue, “was discovered thirty-six thousand, five hundred days ago by a human itself, acknowledging our land as a nutrient-rich foundation on which to farm oranges.”

“Maggie, this is irreleva—”

“Over the years, humans began to benefit from the excess shelter and space on Smolen too, recognising it as not only an orange farm but another planet on which to build life.” Smile, keep up the facts. “Since life evolved here, our bond with Earth has been strong and civil.” Fake-smile, try and hide how much you think humans are a bunch of twats.

“Stop,” Geoff calls, waving his hand.

“What—?”

Geoff mutters, his flushed forehead blending with the fat oranges blotted on branches behind him. “Maggie, that was—”

A distant shout travels through the trees. I glance at Geoff, who snaps his head in the direction of the main street.

“Geoff,” I begin, and he raises his hand to silence me. We listen, unsure of what we’re listening for. Another panicked cry echoes through to the middle of the orchard, followed by a chorus of squeals.

“*Geoff*—” I press, as he squints at the treetops ahead. I follow his eye line; bushy branches jostle and sway, stirring the birds that inhabit them. Then comes the thudding of a thousand oranges dropping on hard ground. Peering through the trees, I swallow.

Double the number of people are spilling from their homes and tearing through the orchard towards us. Some push and shove into branches, others curl into bundles, head between their knees.

“Geoff, what’s *happening?*” I shout over the confused havoc. Geoff rips his fingers through his mass of knotted curls before throwing out his arms.

“Stop!” he calls, grasping at limbs in attempt to slow the mayhem. People shrug past in hurried frenzies, arms flailed, knocking shoulders and tripping over feet.

“*Stop!*” More earnest this time. I gawk as oranges drop from hassled branches, rolling along the cracked soil. Some bounce and split open to ooze a syrupy turquoise.

“*STOP!*” Geoff commands for a third time, his boom bouncing off the trunks. Silence as all eyes flick to him, wide and staring.

“Everybody calm *down.*” He soothes.

“Calm *down?*” calls Jim, an orange farmer.

“Yes. Nothing is certain, yet.”

“*Yet?*”

“*No.* Not yet.”

Jim makes a noise like a broken whine and falls in a heap at the base of a tree trunk. A handful of middle-aged women patter over to him in a huddle, and Geoff’s eyes flick to me.

“Maggie,” stern, serious, scary, “I’m not going to orange-coat it. That was *terrible.*”

I pop my hip and start picking at my cuticles. “OK.” Woe is fucking me.

“That was supposed to be tonight’s top story,” Geoff finishes.

“Why, though?”

His face partially hardens like a fresh clay pot that has only surface-dried. “Maggie. You can’t control what the top story is, when it’s undoubtedly the most ‘top story’ top story, of all top stories. You can’t really get more ‘top story’ than this.”

“*Pfft,* Earth is lame.”

Geoff cocks his head and glares. Unnerving; I traditionally picture The Head-Cock with a cheeky grin.

“Your report was *lame*.” He scuffs back towards the van, leaving magenta tracks in the dirt.

“I’m the *only* news anchor on this goddamn planet, what else is there to make a fair comparison to?”

“You’re right. Nothing will *ever* compare to that *lame* report.”

I fall silent. After a moment, Geoff stops packing down the camera to look at me.

“C’mon, Mags...” His frustration with me rarely lasts long. That’s because without me, no-one would know if a looming planet was about to smack us square in the nose, until it smacked us square in the nose.

“Did I at least address the elephant in the room?” I press, “*Did I address the fucking planet in the sky?*”

“*Addressed* it? You relayed its fucking *history* –”

“– *Smolen*’s history.” I glare at the back of his neck as he turns again to pack down the film equipment. The shorter of his sandy curls knot at the nape of his neck, the rest fall onto his face like a mop. His navy polo stretches over his broad shoulders, knee-length shorts patched with pockets. Skinny brown legs protrude from thick padded socks and clunky work boots caked with old, pink mud. I hate how capable he looks. I need a drink.

It’s usually right about now when I ask Geoff if he’d like one too, but I’ll pretend it’s not ‘right-about-now’ right now. I step back.

Snap. Fuck you, twig.

“Where are you going?” Geoff calls without looking up.

Shit. “Not to grab a juice, that’s for sure.”

“I’ll grab mine with pulp, please. Extra blue.”

II

Evening sun melts through cotton clouds, stippling off the textured skin of oranges drooping from spindly branches. They glow like lamps, glittering throughout the orchard. It’s quiet as Geoff and I sit in weathered chairs on his balcony, ice tinkering in our glasses.

“You know you’re one of the only Smolenites who hasn’t actually been to Earth yet?”

“Not *again*, Geoffy.” I spit out a pip and take another swig of blue juice.

“Just saying. You should probably visit while you can. You know, before it gets too dangerous.”

I cough mid-slurp, drops of blue spattering Geoff. “Dangerous?”

“Yeah...” He covers his hand with his sleeve and wipes his face. “We may be safe now, but until we receive a concrete update, we can’t be sure about the distant future.” His tone is both matter-of-fact and downright annoying.

“Of course,” I nod.

“Also, the humans are actually really cool over there. Really chilled.”

I roll my eyes so far towards the back of my head that I start to feel nauseous. “*Cool? Chilled?* All I’m picturing is a fridge.”

Geoff gulps down his drink as though it’s the only thing stopping him from throwing it in my face. I groan.

“What’s your problem with me? You’re so hard to read.”

Geoff stares. “I ain’t hard to read, Maggie.”

“Well, I’m finding you are.” I lean back in my chair. Geoff shakes his head.

“You need to prioritise your *stupid fucking thoughts*. If that’s not clear, you’re just a shit reader.”

I choke on an orange seed. “What are you trying to tell me?” My eyes water; I hope they look like tears. Geoff looks at me through narrowed eyes and shrugs.

“Admitting you have a problem is the first step, and Earth is just the place that’ll fix—”

“I *do not* need *fixing*—”

“I didn’t say that—”

“You were thinking it, *take it back*.”

Geoff grins and leans back in his chair. Chewing on an orange pip, he watches me. I feel my expressions construct, deconstruct and reconstruct, like a fold-up deck chair, until I’m staring into his face.

“OK. What is it about me that I need to improve on, or get rid of?”

“You can’t improve on it, because you don’t have it, and you can’t possibly get rid of something you don’t have.”

I let my head fall back, the chair cradling my neck. Riddles.

“It’s something you need to *gain*.” Geoff urges.

“What?”

He smiles. “*Perspective*.”

“*What?*” I never would have guessed that. Bastard.

“You need it, Mags.”

I fall silent. *Perspective*, he calls it. I will find it on Earth, he claims.

“Hi, I’m Earth,” I mock into my glass, *“come live here, I can offer so much, everything’s big, and complicated, and unnecessary, and we eat more than just oranges, and brown dirt is great, and grass is the real MVP, and we’re just fancy-fucking-free.”*

Geoff smirks. “Earth is looking pretty good right now, huh?”

“Maybe.”

“You’ll get to see where we get all our sugar and flour from. You can’t deny that Earth does a lot for us, Surf.”

“Can’t I?”

“Might give you the chance to double-check they aren’t about to send over salt instead. It’s happened before.”

“Airheads.”

“Stop it, Mags.”

“OK.” A pause, then, “what if I can’t find an Earth Communication Device to get hold of you?”

Geoff scoffs, “they’re *everywhere* Mags, and just as easy to use.”

“Round, like the SCD at your place?”

“Square-shaped.”

“Lame.”

“Stop it, Mags.”

Orange sunlight drips richly on the horizon, the deep purple of night time dabbing the bulbous clouds. I focus on Geoff’s fingers, pressed white against his glass.

“You’ll love it,” he says finally, calm yet resolute. “I mean it.”

Ice jostles in our glasses.

“OK.”

III

I’m not sure about the oranges over here. They’re orange—all over, inside and out, flesh and all—and I dunno how I feel about that.

I pick one out of one of the black plastic crates, tessellated around the little fruit shed I’m standing in. Outside are more tents, stalls and huts, stocked with oddly shaped fruits in various colours and sizes. Reds, yellows, and greens, mostly. The reds are colour-graded, from one end of the wall to the other: blush pink, bright scarlet, deep maroon. Still, it is the oranges that interest me most.

The rind is brighter than what I’m used to; I think it makes the flesh seem less exciting. Where’s the suspense? The excitement? Gone. Actually, never there in the first place. But hey, at least they’re *actually* orange.

There are also ‘le-moulds’: weirdly similar, but a crazy-bright yellow colour and more oblong. They taste vaguely like oranges, but more like the regurgitated kind. Also, the correct name is ‘lemon’, but ‘le-moulds’ was very deliberate; just making it clear that they’re utterly foul.

Humans bustle from one side of the stall to the other, carrying colourful goods in red plastic baskets. There’s the beeping of tiny little cash machines, clanging of tills, and tinkering of coinage from hand to hand. A market, bigger and more colourful than what I’m used to. Australian, too; no language barrier. The first human to become a Smolenite was initially an Australian. It’s for this reason that I have a soft spot for the ‘Aussies’, but I’ll never repeat that.

On a lighter note, the exchange rate over here is pretty low, so my Smolen bucks won't last me much longer than a couple of days. Thank *fuck* for that.

Meanwhile, everyone back home is being lame.

'*Survival planning,*' Geoff stated, when I asked what cool stuff he'd get up to when I'm gone.

'*Survival planning? Come on, Geoff.*'

Squeezing my way out of the bustling market place, I pace down the gravelled footpath lined with flowerbeds popping with flurries of greens and pinks. The soil is just as ugly as I pictured; I'll never warm to the idea of brown. It's cool to finally see what 'grass' is, though.

I shrug my puffer up around my ears and wrap my arms around myself. The soles of my feet, numb with cold, prickle with the pressure of the pavement. It's winter now, the equivalent of our Cold Time. Geoff insists the seasons on Earth are different from one another, but I don't understand the need to call 'hot' and 'cold' four different names.

Where I am now is entangled with concrete footpaths, bitumen roads, skyscrapers, apartment buildings, cafes, supermarkets, and stores, stretching for kilometres in every direction; the pretty city of Adelaide. Roads are splashed with white markings that busy the streets. Cars slip between them seamlessly, obeying road signals accordingly. They're busier than what I'm used to; roads at home are half as wide and only veer off into three different directions: the orchid (to farm oranges), the markets (to sell oranges) and the township (to eat oranges).

The cold nips at my cheeks and bites the tip of my nose as I pace against the wind circling the streets. I look up for the first time in a few hundred metres to see a

red light shaped as a man. Peering out of the side of my jacket hood, I notice other humans have stopped with me. Part of me is nervous. Why are they following my lead? Is this some kind of joke? Am I under some sort of surveillance? Part of me feels comforted, as I recall Geoff's parting words:

'Remember Maggie, try the lamingtons. They're awesome.'

Hold up, wrong parting words.

'Remember Maggie, when on Earth, do as the humans do.'

That rings a bell. I rock casually on the balls of my feet, hands in pockets. Car after car races past at enormous speed. Do they always go this fast over here? I notice a signpost across the road, red and white. *Fifty kilometres an hour?* Why is everyone in such a rush?

I walk when the little green man tells me too. Actually, I follow the dude ahead of me. After he gives me a funny look, I inform him I'm from the planet next door.

"Oh you're *not*, are you?" His tone a blend of pity and disgust.

"Yep," I nod once. "I like it there. Just so you know."

The man seems surprised, dark eyebrows reaching for his hairline. "Oh, well," he nods, "if you're happy—"

"I am."

"OK." He smiles, flashing annoyingly white teeth. A news anchor, for sure. His face drops. "I hear you're in for a nasty one soon."

"A nasty one...?"

"Smolen and Earth." Matter-of-factly. "They're getting dangerously close. Don't you know?"

I don't know if I'm enjoying this guy's arrogance. I smile, "Oh, *that*. Yeah, I know about that. The whole *Earth is approaching* thing, sure."

"*Approaching*." He chuckles. "That's cute. Wouldn't sugar-coat it, if I were you."

I reckon I've given more blank stares to this dude than I ever have to Geoff.

"Anyway, lovely to meet you—uh—Girl Next Door." He flops his hand in a half-wave—the sort of wave you give when waving whole-heartedly would be coming on too strong—and turns down another street.

Cute? Sugar-coat? Firstly, the phrase is *orange-coat*. Secondly, *what?*

Since the little green man, I've walked for a few hundred meters in one direction. Lost, in a foreign place; is this the part where Perspective jumps out from behind a bush and kidnaps me?

I scan the streets, hoping to recognise something like a pink sand pit, or an orange tree. My eyes rest on a familiar tableau in the park across the road: a tripod; a camera light; a wireless microphone.

I duck across the quiet road and make for the green area. Keeping a respectable distance, I position myself against a giant tree trunk sprouting thick, knobbly branches. They arch at an enormous height before curving towards the ground, fat leaves brushing the tips of the grass. Maybe I'll learn a thing or two more about reporting live.

Good one, me; I'd rather die than admit I'm learning stuff over here.

"...Smolen is in sight," I hear the news lady announce, her male counterpart nodding away beside her as if he actually gives a fuck. "In less than twenty-two days, Earth and Smolen are expected to collide. Wouldn't like to be a Smolenite in this situation, would ya, John?"

“Haha, no I wouldn’t, Sal,”

There’s *bound* to be an invisible script hovering in front of their faces, Earth is weird enough for that to be likely. Also, did that chick just say *collide*?

“...Humans and Smolenites are urged to remain where they are, and cancel all vacations to respective planets; Space is said to be so turbulent, due to the amalgamation of our two atmospheres, that it is no longer safe to travel between planets.”

“Wow, Sal, do you think the Smolenites on holiday here will last much longer without their blue oranges?”

“I don’t know John, *orange* ya glad we have more than *oranges* here on Earth?”

The two of them laugh robotically. I throw up in my own mouth.

My heart knocks on my sternum like a persistent little shit at my front door. *Collide? No longer safe? Cancel all vacations?* My feet are unmoving, as though blades of grass have spindled from the soil and roped around them. I shuffle from the scene and shove my hands deep into my pockets. Head bowed, I power back down the street.

Earth Communication Device.

I scan the streets for a large white box about my height, typically an appendage to either a café or a public bathroom. I spot one across the road, glowing as if summoning me, poking out from the side of a small dimly lit café like a giant sugar cube. Making for the pedestrian crossing, I stop at the red man and walk at the green (like a pro), pacing towards the ECD.

Stepping inside, it is warm despite the harsh white light. Shit, is it five-six-one or five-one-six to get hold of Geoff?

'Remember Maggie, it's five-blah-blah to get hold of me in the ECD.'

Fuck. Guess I'll try both.

I hold the white cone-shaped receiver to my ear and punch five-one-six into the small red keypad, displayed alongside the doorway. There is a loud crackle, followed by a shrill ring lasting four very long seconds. Finally, a woman answers.

"Hello?" Her familiar voice is nasally, with a note of panic.

"...Geoff?" I ask stupidly.

"Uh—no, it's Maria,"

"Maria, the hairdresser?" Blood hot.

"...Maggie?"

"*Fuck you and your hair products,*" I spit, "also, my new fringe *sucks.*" I slam the receiver back onto its cradle. After a short pause I dial five-six-one and wait, the ring not so shrill this time.

"Yyyello."

"*Geoff,*"

"Maggie? Hey! What's up, how's Earth?"

"Earth—Smolen—"

"Tell me something I don't know."

"No—Geoff, you're not hearing me—I'm stuck here. I can't get back."

A pause. "What are you saying?" He knows the answer, but searches for another.

"It's too dangerous, Geoff. Just like you said."

IV

Knees folded into my chest and chin on my knees, I clamp down on my toenail between the blunt blades of the clipper. It's hard when my feet are numb with cold; I can't feel whether it's nails I'm cutting, or callused skin.

I shuffle, initiating blood flow in my ass; the mattress beneath me is as firm as the face Geoff gives me sometimes when I'm talking shit. Everything in my room is off-white, pointy and cold; moving around, I'm cautious not to bump anything for fear it'll hurt. Another white bed sticks out of the wall opposite me like a wart. No one sleeps there; a thin white sheet is tucked into each side, with a hard lump for a pillow. A toilet, also white, hides behind a plaster wall on the other side of the room. The first time I used it, it seemed so camouflaged that I missed the bowl.

News since five days ago: still stranded with red apples, orange oranges, brown dirt, grass, and coffee (which seems to be doing wonders for me during the day, but not so much when I want to sleep. Reckon I should cut back).

On a lighter note, I was right: Smolen bucks didn't last me much more than a couple of days after the news broke out.

On a darker note, I was right: Smolen bucks didn't last me much longer than a couple of days after the news broke out.

I'm in the cheapest hostel in Adelaide for the time being, thanks to the asylum seeker centre. There's coffee and toast in the morning, and always an abundance of fruit. No blue-fleshed oranges, but their sort are fine for now. No television either, but I suppose I'm used to that; since being a news anchor, I'm kinda over watching the box. There was never anything much to watch back at home anyway, except for my

news reports and a couple of dry sitcoms on Channel Earth. It also stinks outside my room; did I mention my window looks out to the bins?

The best and worst part about being here is that I'm only a little way down from *Pot Crumble*; the café with the ECD. Pretty little spot, but torturous if I don't want to be around the ECD; the connection between here and Smolen is now gone, so I have no way of contacting Geoff. I never thought I'd admit this (like, ever), but I miss him. It could just be the coffee, but I'm more hyperaware than usual; Geoff usually soothes that, in his arrogant way.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and yank on a pair of Geoff's thick socks; he stuffed them in the front pocket of my suitcase the day I left. *You'll forget you have feet in that weather, if you don't wear these*, he noted, un-jamming the zip and pulling it closed.

Shrugging on my puffer, I slot my room key into the front pocket and pull the bedroom door closed behind me. I trot down the staircase. The building is quiet; the wooden steps under my feet as loud as a stump splintering under an axe. I often wander the streets alone during the day; those in the hostel with me don't like to talk much. I find myself at *Pot Crumble* almost every time, enjoying Earth's bold, winter scents of fresh food and coffee toasting and brewing inside. Approaching the café, I make to huddle against the red brick. Edging around the corner to escape the cold, I crouch to sit, sliding a flattened cardboard box underneath me to cushion the concrete. I shrink into my coat, collar turned up around my ears, and push myself against the warm brick. Every now and again, something wriggles underneath me and I hoist myself up to let a rat scuttle into the drain. They're everywhere here; I'd hate to think how many have scuttled across my face at night, back in the hostel.

The back door swings open and someone from Pot Crumble hobbles out to dispose of rubbish. I breathe in the glorious scents that waft over to where I sit. I'm used to poached oranges in Cold Time, but I could get used to the food here.

A lady shuffles towards the bins opposite me, unaware of my presence. Hoisting the giant black garbage bag over her head she grunts with difficulty, before spotting me huddled at the wall.

“How long ‘ave ya been sittin’ out ‘ere love?” The twang in her words is like an elastic strum. Her white hair is yanked back into a tight bun, a small flour-dusted apron wrapped around her padded middle. On her feet she wears small black slippers, globbed with dry, crusty food stains.

“Thirty seconds,” I shrug.

The lady cocks her head and smiles. “What's ya name?”

“Maggie.”

“Sue,” She sticks out a bony hand, scribbled with purple veins. I reach up and take it, grateful for the interaction. “Come inside, ya silly galah,” she chuckles, “you’ll catch ya death.”

Relieved, I scramble stiffly to my feet and brush myself down, following as she hobbles back through the screen door.

“Short for Margaret?” she calls over her shoulder.

“No way.” Too quickly. “Just Maggie.”

Sue leads me to a small round table with three red stools tucked underneath. The set up is hidden from the larger seating area, where laughter hoots above the soft buzz of Sunday customers. The walls are red brick, lashings of white paint only part way up; a half-finished, rustic look. I feel a smile spread across my face like the pat of soft butter I watch run down the side of a scone, its plate whizzing past me on the

inner forearm of a waitress. If Geoff were here, he'd order every dish that doesn't contain oranges, position them on the table in front of him, marvel at how wonderful it'd be to finally taste different flavours and textures, then take double the time eating, savouring every last bit.

Pulling out a stool, the lady turns to me. "Sit," she orders. Then, "do ya like hot chocolate?"

I stare. "Beg your pardon?"

Sue narrows her eyes for a long moment, before her face falls. "Oh, darlin'" she begins. The folds of her wrinkly skin cast shadows across her face in the dim lighting; I wait to hear the horror story her expression promises to divulge. "Tell me yer not a *Smolenite*?"

We have lift-off. "Er...yes," I nod, uncomfortable. "Yes, I'm a Smolenite."

Sue nods in pity, and I'm reminded of the attractive, sure-to-be-news-anchor bloke from last week. "S'pose ya had friends there, didn't ya."

I study her. "Of course I *have* friends there. *Friend*; singular. He's still there."

The pity leaves her face like a damp towel from a rack, her mouth curving downward. "Maybe, Love."

A thudding in my chest hammers against the buzz of the lunch goes. "What does that mean?"

Sue stares with a crinkled forehead and pursed lips.

"*What does that mean?*" I push, "you're not saying that—"

"Yes, Love."

I'm all for reading minds and shit, but I'd appreciate if this woman let me finish my damn sentence. "Yes *what?*"

Sue sighs. "It's already happened."

“*What’s* happened?”

“Have ya not bin watchin’ the news?”

I stare, waiting; Sue bows her head apologetically, glancing in the direction of the screen door and my cardboard cushion beyond. Turning back to me, she swallows.

“It happened yesterday.”

Sunday chatter fizzles to a hum, her heavy words tugging at my thoughts. My stomach bundles into knots. A hot flush travels through my body and spills in my chest.

“H–how,” I stammer, words catching in my throat, “how is everyone still here? W–was there survival planning?”

Sue frowns, “survival planning–?”

“Geoff said everyone at home was survival planning, you must have done that here, right? Which means Geoff would still be–”

“There was none of that here in Adelaide, Love.”

My tongue feels like dry leather. “*Why not?* Why didn’t anyone say something?”

“What was there to say? Nobody knew. Nobody felt it.”

My jaw drops; I picture it clattering onto the floor. “Nobody *felt it?*”

“How *could* we?” Her voice is louder now. “We approached Smolen from the other side of the world. We heard the news from Scotland.”

“*Where?*”

“There was an Earthquake. It was all over after that.”

“A *what?*”

“Smolen is merely a drop in the ocean, Darlin’,” her tone firm. I want to look away, but her grey-blue eyes freeze my gaze. “A speck in Space.”

Her voice trails off and I stare, unblinking. White paint climbs the wall, red bricks stretching to the dimly lit ceiling. I wish it wasn't half-finished; an incomplete story, an interrupted conversation. I wish I liked Geoff's stories,

grass pads the soil, the humans here are chilled, lamingtons are awesome.

I wish I listened to him,

history is irrelevant when the future is unpredictable.

I wish I heard him,

five-six-one, in the ECD.

I wish I understood him,

don't forget your feet.

I wish he knew I liked his stories; I wish he knew I listened; I wish he knew I understood; I wish he could hear that from me now.

A cold finger strokes beneath my eye. I look up at Sue, who holds my teardrop on the tip of her finger. She smiles with warmth that spreads to her eyes.

"How 'bout I fix ya up a *Jaffa* hot chocolate then?"

I blink. "A what?"

"It'll taste just like home."

I look away. "No thanks." So mutedly, I'm unsure as to whether or not I said it aloud. I watch her waddle into the kitchen where crockery chinks and cutlery clangs. Another waitress passes with two coffees, and two orange juices with ice. I watch as she waltzes to a round wooden table in the corner of the room and places the tray of drinks in front of a family of four. The children, a boy with a blonde mop and a girl with dark braids, pounce on their juices and slurp. Watching them drink, I remember Smolen's plump oranges hanging on bushy branches; when sun melting through

cotton clouds glitters off their dimpled skin; at night when they're lamps, Geoff and me in weathered chairs; as liquid in glasses, when they're blue.

I shuffle my stool against the wall, resting my head on the brick. Sue returns with a mug and a sheepish smile. The dark brown foam smells bold and bitter-sweet, kissed by zesty orange.

“Thanks, Sue.”

She puts a knobbly hand on my shoulder and smiles. “You’ll be OK here, dear. OK?” She locks my gaze again, before hobbling back to the kitchen.

Lifting the mug to my lips, I listen as the front door tinkles and a man scuffs his way in from the cold. The shorter of his sandy curls knot at the nape of his neck, the rest fall onto his face like a mop. His navy polo stretches over his broad shoulders, knee-length shorts patched with pockets. Skinny brown legs protrude from padded socks and clunky work boots caked with brown mud.

Shifting my eyes back to the children, I watch ice jostle in their glasses.

“OK.”

~ END ~