

Cloud

‘It’s about to start!’

‘Calm your trousers! I’ll be done in a minute!’

I whispered, ‘Daddy’s *always* late, isn’t he?’

‘Not always,’ Megan replied and snuggled in close to me. I felt her tiny heart beating against my ribs, her hands kneading the hem of my skirt. She was frightened, but that’s her nature: a worrier, even at six years-old.

‘It’s going to be alright, lovey,’ I said, and selfishly wondered if she’d let me call her ‘lovey’ for very much longer.

The Prime Minister will now address the nation ...

‘Doug, come on!’

He came hurrying through with a tray carrying a bowl of cashew nuts, a carton of orange squash, a large glass of wine and a Guinness. He put the tray down on the coffee table and slumped on the sofa next to me. Megan huffed and climbed across my lap to sit between us. She wasn’t one to play favourites. I blew a soft raspberry against her neck, and when the three of us had finished laughing and tickling each other, we hunkered in together to watch the Prime Minister.

‘Simultaneous broadcast,’ Doug said. ‘Every world leader, all at once. When does that ever happen?’

I nodded and felt a pang of excitement. Margaret Bishop had been a quiet and compliant deputy to William Faulkner for six years: never standing up, never rocking the boat. And now, after Faulkner’s suicide, she was saddled with the responsibility the whole country knew she didn’t want.

Doug handed me the Guinness, as Bishop stepped up to the podium and took a deep breath.

‘She was named after Margaret Thatcher,’ Doug whispered.

‘Yes, I know,’ I whispered back.

Six years ago, NASA and the European Space Agency launched a probe to gather data on the Minerva Cloud drifting through our solar system on a trajectory towards Earth.

Doug said, ‘I don’t remember that.’

‘You must do! We had nothing but “Minerva this” and “cloud that” for ages.’

‘I remember the cloud, I just don’t remember the probe.’

I had to admit, the press hadn’t said much about it following the launch. In fact, aside from a few fringe science blogs predicting the end of the world, no one had said much about it at all.

The probe returned with a sample, which allowed us to analyse the cloud’s structure.

The screen froze; we’d been warned about this. A global broadcast in hundreds of languages: there were bound to be hiccups. I swallowed a mouthful of Guinness, and the Prime Minister jerked back into life.

... a space-borne virus, something we’d never imagined in our worst nightmares, and before we realised what we were dealing with, it had killed twelve scientists.

And that’s when the world stripped its gears and came crashing to a halt. I could hear her, but it sounded like she was talking from inside a glass box:

... absorbed through the skin ...

... airborne ...

... no vaccine ...

... no cure ...

Did she say it was airborne? How the hell are we supposed to—?

Eighty per cent of the population will die within fifteen minutes of contact.

‘They’ll have a plan.’ Doug’s eyes had glazed over; his jaw was rigid and his wine glass was lying on the floor. ‘They wouldn’t tell us if they didn’t have a plan. They’d just let us—’

‘Doug!’

He glanced at Megan, then sank back into the sofa, staring at the screen.

‘They’d just let us what, Daddy?’ Megan asked.

‘They just wouldn’t tell us,’ he said, chewing fitfully at his thumbnail, ‘not without a plan.’

I stroked Megan’s hair, my mouth dry, my heart beating in my throat. ‘Let’s just listen, darling.’

On screen, the Prime Minister drained a glass of water before pressing on:

But exhaustive testing has yielded hope: we believe that up to twenty per cent of the population is immune. We have already initiated a world-wide screening programme to find out who can withstand the pathogen, because these fortunate few will be key to the survival of us all.

‘Hah! There you go! A plan!’ Doug said, jumping up from his seat. ‘I told you they’d have a plan.’

He was grinning, almost insanelly, and I was thinking there’s no way they can save us, not all of us.

Four years ago, the government of each country began an initiative to seal as many houses and apartment buildings as we could against the Minerva Pathogen. That scheme will continue, up until the day the Cloud arrives.

We all looked at each other, then at the bay windows.

Doug wiped his hand down his face. ‘They said it was for energy conservation.’

They’d said a lot of things. They said it was also part of a global automated security network. And the new porch: fitted with an outer door that looked like it could stop a tank; they said that was just another measure to combat crime.

‘Daddy, are you all right?’ Megan asked.

‘Daddy’s fine,’ I replied. ‘Aren’t you.’

He looked at me, and for a moment it was as if he couldn’t remember who I was. ‘Yeah,’ he said finally. ‘Yes, I’m fine, Pumpkin.’ He sat down and kissed her on the forehead.

The Prime Minister said it was imperative we stayed in our homes while the earth passed through the Cloud.

‘Oh, thank fuck!’

‘Doug!’

‘Sorry, I’m sorry.’ He swept a trembling hand in the direction of the television. ‘It’s just a lockdown. Thank Christ. It’s just another bloody lockdown. Like that COVID thing. Remember that?’

‘What’s a lockdown?’ said Megan.

‘Before your time, lovey,’ I replied.

Those of us who are inside will rely on supplies being brought to us by those who are immune.

‘Sounds like she knows she’s not immune.’ Doug brought his hand to his mouth and realised he’d dropped his glass. ‘Bollocks.’

One of the journalists shouted a question, and Bishop tried gamely to stick to the script, but the reporter called out the same question again. She bit her lip, stalling to keep the broadcast in sync. I could see her hands were shaking.

How long, Prime Minister?

What?

How long will it take for the pathogen to clear the atmosphere?

But I knew she’d stick to the plan, walk the line, keep the lifeboat steady. She would never—

Thirty-eight years.

And once again, the world disappeared from under me.

Doug blinked and squinted at the television. ‘What did ... what did she say?’

‘I ... I don’t know.’

On screen, reporters had rushed the podium and were being forced back by the police. Shots were fired into the air. I could hear screaming. The Prime Minister was being manhandled back inside Number Ten.

Megan sat bolt upright. ‘We can’t leave the house for thirty-eight years?’

‘No lovey, that’s not right. It can’t be right.’ I craned my neck to look around the living room; our small living room, joined to our small kitchen in our small two-bedroom house. ‘We can’t—’

The Prime Minister was still yelling as she was dragged away:

You have to make choices right now! We all have to make choices!

Choices. Yes. We’d have to move. ‘Doug, listen.’

He was still staring at the screen. I wasn’t even sure he was breathing.

‘Listen to me. We need to sit down and think this through.’

‘We are sitting down,’ he whispered.

‘We have to get a bigger house. Somewhere nice, maybe with a view of the countryside, or the sea.’

I heard an explosion, from the High Street, I think. Doug didn’t even register. He turned his head to stare at me – no, not at me: he was staring beyond me, far into the future when our middle-aged daughter wheels the two of us out of the house we’d all been trapped in for forty

years. It was the same expression I'd seen on Bishop's face when she'd stepped in front of the podium: *I shouldn't be here.*

He cupped his hands over his mouth, trying to smother his words as they escaped him.

'Harriet ...'

And then I just knew. 'Doug, no – not in front of—'

'I'm sorry.'

'You can't just—'

'I can't be with you any more. I've met someone. Someone else.'

He said it. He actually said it ...

Megan slid down from the sofa, snatched up her teddy bear and ran upstairs to her room.

He couldn't even look at me.

'You selfish ... *cunt.*'

'I'll pack some things,' he said, getting to his feet. His eyes were stained red. In the years I've known him, I've never seen him cry. I wanted to hit him, and Doug, being Doug, being the weak, quivering amoeba of a man I now knew him to be, he would've let me.

But then we heard the clicks, one after the other, coming from the living room windows. We looked to the ceiling: the same clicks echoed from upstairs. And then from the hallway, the sound of heavy bolts slamming into place.

We have to make choices, Bishop had said.

We have to make them now.

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