

I have found the perfect reading spot: the enclosed entry room my grandparents call the porch is a beautiful little place wreathed in windows and painted in warm, earthy tones. With the early winter night already fallen outside, the porch is lit with only the light from the hallway and the solitary lamp on the side table next to the basket of jewel-like balls of yarn. The porch has the same golden glow the rest of the house adopts in the winter when the Christmas tree grows up out of the white, living room carpet I bled all over when I cracked my head on the coffee table seven years ago. The light and the dark are soft on my eyes just like how the quiet is gentle on my ears. My grandfather snores on the duvet twenty feet away, but it's not a bother: no one wants to bother him, so no one bothers me either.

I only just slipped away. Christmas with my family is always a fun yet hectic affair; with sixteen cousins running around, there's always some mischief underway. I spent the last few days having lots of fun catching up with everyone and playing Fanger (a treacherous game involving pool balls, fingers, and glory) when the parents weren't around and listening to stacks of old Christmas vinyls. We demolished my grandmother's buffet of sausage casserole, French toast casserole, Hungarian and German and pumpkin coffee cakes, German baked eggs, ham, turkey, donuts, walnut salad, fruit salad, venison, and goetta (they do live in Kentucky after all). After which we opened gifts and tried not to slip away into a blissful food coma.

But after the festivities are done, mass attended, the beautiful mess of paper and bows seen to, and *Star Wars VII* watched for the second time, I quietly retreat to the porch. The week before any school break, but especially winter break, is brutal and my friends and I feel like we are about to crack under the strain of all the internal assessments, tests, quizzes, and projects that are due before Christmas Eve. In the rush to complete courses before everyone dashes out the door, assessments are scheduled at every available moment. Glancing at an agenda almost makes

one wish she was going farther than Cincinnati for Christmas, like Jakarta. It's enough to fray anyone's nerves.

Escaping to the porch to read is my self-prescribed remedy for a long few weeks. The room is steps away from the laundry room where all the boxes of leftover chocolate chip cookies, peanut butter blossoms, walnut fudge, peppermint bark, and baklava are stored. The chair is made comfortable by its four previous occupants, teddy bears wearing handmade knitted hats. And everyone who is staying during Boxing Day is off somewhere else. Here I can recuperate.

People talk about the magic "armchair travelling" aspect of books, but I believe they also have healing powers. During crazy periods of work, taking time to pursue my own passion, reading, is my final defense. In that armchair I finish three books, about 1,200 pages total, in approximately four or five days. Exploring the Amsterdam-esque city of Ketterdam with its charismatic thieves prowling the dark streets of the pleasure district or delving into the lives of settlers in the North Woods trying to survive winter in log cabins or experiencing the dystopian uprisings led by students with guns hidden in their school satchels is the best medicine in the world. When my obligations overwhelm me, my passions are what save me. This was my own Christmas gift, one I gave to myself: I forgot about wave oscillations, the Irish Potato Famine, sine graphs, midterms, college applications, ACT prep, volleyball and just read. It was not a gift you could wrap; how do you swathe peace in tissue paper? Can you put a bow on bliss? But it was the best one I can give myself.

### **The Flood**

I sprint through the trees with the last burst of energy that my body must have reserved over the past few weeks. The sun is hot over the evergreens, and the ground cracked and browned like Codger's skin. The trees extend sharp fingers to scratch at my face and tear at my clothes, but I don't dare stop or look back. I can hear Codger's labored breath a few feet behind me, but beyond that I can also hear the two men crashing through the undergrowth after us.

We were so thirsty. My muscles ached and the blood cushioning my brain felt like sludge. Seeing the brook felt like extraordinary luck, like we were being rewarded for having survived thus far. My lips are still wet, my collar too. The knees of my pants are caked in mud. I wonder if they catch us if that sip of water was worth it. I can't convince myself it wasn't.

I am, was, a finance major at the University of Pittsburgh. Economics was what we all lived by, and in the end, economics is what killed us. The market peppered holes through our national borders until the money flowed like water through a sieve. The small, sunny-weather-only, farmers markets disappeared, swallowed by the intangible networks of buying and selling. Then the tide rose, and the countries themselves were washed away. Lines on a map weren't necessary anymore. Could lines drawn in the sand stop the water from rushing in? Information was free, and money flowed freer. Paper currency was replaced with a fluctuating number telling us what we could afford to eat one day, or where we could go to school the next, or how large was the factory one could buy.

Then the plug was pulled. The market drowned, and now I float somewhere in the upper half of North America, buoyed aloft by my determination to find my way in a world where the words on all the signposts have washed off.

I am not alone. The Codger or just Codger is with me. He observed me with his pale blue eyes as we walked, instead of looking for the signs of water we set out to find. It's almost funny. The Flood happens and there's a drought. If only I had been an English major and could appreciate irony. I'm content with my choice of major though. English is not as useful as Mandarin or Arabic or some language the rest of the world is actually using.

"Do you see anything, Charlie?" Codger asked in his rough, hack of a voice. He is shorter than me, which is saying something, but he is strong and stocky for an old man. The silvery white scars on his head are nearly obscured by his light blonde, close-shaven hair.

"Not a drop, Codger." I do not know if he chose the name or if it's something others pinned on him. It's just the name he told me when circumstance and mutual need pushed us together a few weeks ago. Regardless, it suits him, contrary pain that he is. I would have been happy to leave him, but he stayed anyway, asking my name, too. My name, Charlie, doesn't suit me. I have shortish, dark curly hair and curves that are quickly disappearing with the lack of food. My proper name is Charlotte, but my friends and family started calling me Charlie when I went through the hoodie phase of middle school. I wondered where my family is. I hadn't seen them since last September when I left for college.

Codger grunted and twisted open the bottle we carried with us. He held it out to me, and I accepted it, painfully aware of how little we have left. That small amount was nowhere near enough to stop our heads aching or make our tongues feel less like old leather.

"Maybe we'll find someone else who will know where it is," I said flatly.

Codger looked at me with those eyes that are always watching for a twitch or a glance. "You think so, tough, little girl?" he asked expressionlessly in a way that reminded me I was being an idiot.

I knew what he was telling me. Every man for himself. I looked down at the thermos I held in my freckle-backed hands. I didn't think he would poison me, as he had told me has happened elsewhere in competition for resources. With the drought, resultant lack of food, and obliteration of formal government, who among us isn't short of something? More importantly, who is left who isn't willing to kill for what they need?

I need Codger because he knows more about survival than anyone I've ever met, and he needs me because he has a bad back and "that dog won't hunt" as he says. I don't know why he's alone. He has a deep Southern accent, and I placed us somewhere near the border of where Maryland and Pennsylvania used to be, so that might have had something to do with it.

Even our mutual need might not be enough to make me stay, except he said something the night we ran into each other when I tried to tell him I'd rather go it alone until I found my family.

His legs are short so we look almost eye to eye when standing, but when we sat, and he bore down on me with his vigilant gaze. His white teeth, scars, and eyeballs stood out against his tanned brown skin like they glowed.

"God gave Noah an ark," he said. "It saved him from the flood. Have you got an ark, tough, little girl? Who are you going to save?" He shook his head at me. "You don't have one. Maybe you're looking for one, 'cause God didn't provide it. But I'll tell you something." I'm trapped in his gaze. "God also made Noah a promise. He promised the flood would never happen again. I give you a promise: help me here and I'll make sure you're never swept away again."

That was weeks ago. I still felt like I had water in my lungs.

We walked quickly through the trees. My long, dark green pants were stuffy, but I didn't dare take them off while we hiked through wilted underbrush. Same with my cream-colored,

crocheted sweater-jacket. Of all the things to be wearing on the rough. Like my clothes weren't already full of holes. The only other things I had apart from my boots and a t-shirt were in my college backpack which held the essentials and also spearmint gum and some physics homework I haven't discarded. Who knew when you'll need kindling?

"Charlie." My name in Codger's mouth with his white, teeth bared sounded fierce; he barked it like a dog.

"What is it?" I asked, waking up from my reverie.

"Water."

I saw what he saw: a particularly green patch of vegetation several feet in the distance. And there was an undercurrent to the sounds of the woods. Maybe, just maybe, it was the quiet slopping of water over stones.

We fought through the underbrush that only got thicker as we got nearer. I helped Codger get through so he can get water first. Even in the absence of civilization, I could be that civilized. And Codger is like a grandfather.

The stones were mossy and the brook hidden behind trees and plants was tiny, but what the hell did I care? It seemed like we will finally outrun death by dehydration.

The water was wonderfully cold. I felt rejuvenated, full of something almost like hope, something I hadn't felt much of since the market crashed and hell descended. Maybe this was it, the turning point of all our misfortune. I looked up to smile at Codger, wondering if he felt this sense of good fortune, too, but then I saw the eyes looking at me through the underbrush. Muddy brown ones. I picked out the rest of the face: a big nose, prominent bones ringing the eyes. I saw what we wouldn't be able to outrun.

I hear a crash and a yell. Codger has tripped right behind me. Before I can consider the implications of my doing so, I stop running and turn to help him up. His face is red with the exertion. I wonder how old he is. As he struggles to get back on his feet, I see the man in the bush and his friend through the trees. Do they really mean to kill us or just drive us far enough away from their water source and let nature decide for them whether we live or die? I won't wait around to find out.

I grab Codger roughly by his jacket, and we keep running. I try to both hang on to him and keep an eye out for where we are going. The woods aren't flat but full of surprise hills, valleys, and fallen trees. I am pushing him to the right as we run around the edge of a steep slope when I hear a loud crack and Codger slumps against me. Not anticipating the sudden weight, I fall over the side and he comes with me.

We roll down the hill, but it feels more like falling through a tangle of rocks, roots, sticks, and branches to the center of the earth. I lose my grip on Codger's jacket as the world refuses to make sense: first brown earth, dark green plants, sharp rocks, a chink of painfully blue sky, a pop of red flash before my eyes. I close them before I puke.

I know we've reached the bottom of the slope when I roll a few more times and then stop. Gravity has relinquished control of my body back to me. I look up the slope, but we have either rolled so far or the foliage is so thick that I can't see the men who pursued us. I hope the same is true for them in reverse. I am bruised and battered but my bones are whole. My few cuts are nothing major, so I will be fine. But one look tells me Codger will not be fine.

When I was nine, we were driving on the freeway when we passed a white van from the Central Blood Bank. It had been clipped by a four-wheeler and spun. Pint-sized packets of blood spewed out on the road like red fish spilled on the deck of a ship. The packets burst and bled all

over the pavement, coating the passing tires. The pool of blood was a morass of red, but the dozens of burst packets do not compare to this. So small compared to the blood pouring out of Codger's body from a gunshot wound in his back.

He cannot speak. His breathing is still labored but quieter than before. That is almost worse. I press my bare hands to the darkest part of the wound, but I do not know what I can do.

"Tough, little girl."

It occurred to me that it doesn't matter if you have an ark if there is no fucking water.

"Charlie."

"What is it, Codger?" I don't tell him to save his strength. I don't know if he needs it anymore. I do, though.

He doesn't respond. I look at his eyes, the ones that were always watching, looking for something only he expected to see. They are distant and glassy, gazing up through the trees.

I look up, trying to see what he saw. In the future. In me.

The sky opens up, and rain begins to fall.