

## ***How to Go About the End of the World***

by Kellan MacKenzie

When the End of the World comes, they send Sarah and me to collect the food. The parking lot is empty, space filled by our footfalls that crash across the pavement. The foggy night amplifies the sound. Each step a wave breaking. My mind breaking.

Sarah rattles the door of the grocery store with no results. She tries again because she's that type of person.

Sarah's got paint strokes of exhaustion smeared under her eyes. There's a lively feeling to her, always glancing around and fidgeting, swaying to imaginary music. Look closer and there's movement behind her eyes. Life. Something beyond this world has transformed her into a creature doomed to die. Next to her, I'm hollow. I avoid looking closer.

She's trying to jiggle the door again.

"You've got a brick, moron," I snap (because I am going to die, and I don't like her very much).

She responds with a motion that brushes my impudence aside and unzips her patchwork backpack.

Now, we're stepping over the newly-broken glass into the storefront. Fluorescent lights scatter across Sarah's sea-dark skin.

We both linger for a second and gaze at the vast shelves of slowly decaying food. The store is a long-buried remnant of last week, void of the life that once warmed it.

"I came here for groceries on Thursday," she whispers.

"I worked here."

I whisper too because it feels right to whisper around dead things. I am the first to approach the shelves. I do it gently.

Sarah's filling her backpack with bright cans of non-perishable items that will be gone in days.

Some part of me wants to help. The other part of me is a hospital overflowing. The sick thoughts start to leak out.

It's the labels, all colourful and cheery. It's the way Sarah's humming to herself as she works. It's the idea of *tomorrow*, taken away in seconds. I splinter.

"Hey Sarah, it's the End of the World, capital e, capital w, and you think gathering your artificial long-lasting food is gonna help at all?"

Sarah blinks her stupid (alive) eyes at me as I continue.

"You think we're gonna be here next week, Sarah? You think there's gonna be a 'here' left?"

She might cry. I hope she cries. She's staring back and forth between me and the cans, and I can't help but notice the dark circles crowding her eyes. I've got the sudden urge to wipe them off like they're grease stains. She's so *whole* it hurts to see her weighed down. Hurts to see her existing. Hurts when she doesn't cry and instead stands and dusts off her worn leggings.

"Let's go then. Produce section?"

Unaffected. Why should she get to be so candid when I feel so much pain?

"You're dying, Sarah! We're dead." My voice catches, and I watch her digest my words, as if the thorns aren't tearing at her throat. After a moment, she puts her hand on my shoulder.

"Time's running away," she says slowly, fierce. "Let's throw her a party before she leaves. The Earth is still spinning and our legs can still dance. Don't just let the seconds tick away."

And then she's off, bouncing slightly with each step. The seconds tick away. I stare at a can of black beans. I'm going to die. I want to die dancing. I follow Sarah.

A neon sign proclaiming the health benefits of tofu lights our path. Sarah's whistling a distant song about living forever and the irony is so thick that I burst out laughing. A pause, then she joins in.

I'd like to keep her laugh in a jar.

We link arms and skip to the tropical fruits, collect things that are raw and real. Sarah says something honey-smooth that sticks in my mind like the bite of fresh air. I reply clumsily. Repeat.

She likes strawberries, she says. *Tell me why*. She used to play in the strawberry shoots growing behind her house. *I like strawberries too*.

I hold up a wilted piece of lettuce. *Look. It's us*.

"No," she replies, placing a strawberry in my hand instead.

I think her spark is catching.

My fingers bump the bottom of the orange crate, which means we're done, so we walk leisurely, arms linked, to the storefront. I don't know when I saw the fire, only that I've been aware of its presence for longer than I'd like to admit. Really, it's always been there in my rib cage. Flames like a deep sleep are coming to pull the city under. The End of The World.

"Burning city," remarks Sarah. I turn away while she wipes her eyes.

She is everything, dying. A galaxy being extinguished.

Sarah and I sit together on the concrete curb watching the flames approach. There's a rhythm to them, forward, back, forward, forward, the beat of a distorted song. We are still dancing. We are both alive.

Sarah pops open a ginger ale and offers me one.

"Thank you," I say. I'm not talking about the ginger ale.

The fire is snapping at the air around us so we lie back and watch the sky bleed.

Sarah's eyes are still. "You know, the stars used to be so good. Bright enough for launching entire ships."

Smoke catches at my skin. "Do you think anyone cried when they went away?"

"No." She considers for a second. "I think we all felt it, though."

We don't speak again. I take her hand, and she gives me a strawberry because we both love strawberries.

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