

## The Calm Before the Storm

My dreams were ended by the echoes of the racking dry coughs that reverberated from two rooms over. I awoke and followed the rotting floorboards to the small room in which my brother lay, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. The sound of painful wheezing emanating from behind the cracked wooden door only grew as the distance between the door and myself shrunk. By the time I was at the door, the coughing was all I could hear, entirely overpowering the creaks of the house as well as the hollow wind usually audible from the outdoors.

A sense of guilt overcame me as I felt a sudden urge to enter the room so violently the door would fly off his hinges and hit the ground with a deafening slam, with the hopes of somehow helping him breathe. I quickly jerked my arm toward the handle, then apprehensively pulled it away. I turned my back, put on my coat, gas mask, and shoes. Then, I left.

I opened the front door to reveal the glaring sun, which only a few months ago had both leaves and crops absorbing and storing its sunlight forever and always. Now, all that was present in the inert, seemingly infinite space between the horizon and I were leafless, lifeless trees and husks of grey, withering crops blowing lightly in the wind. The decaying stench radiating from them had found a way to slither through the filters of my gas mask.

Then an unfamiliar sound - an almost unrecognizable sound - startled me. I whipped around in the direction of my front door once again to be met with a crow, perched on the new metal roof. I made eye contact with it in disbelief - I hadn't seen one in months. It squawked and immediately departed from the steel panelling.

Images of the time when the panelling was being installed invaded my consciousness, serotonin following in suit. I specifically remembered lounging on my couch with a yellowed, wrinkled book from years of use on my lap. The pages were lit plentifully by a streak of sunlight, the colour of beige, from passing through the weathered curtains. A knock came from the ceiling. I looked up from my page, thinking I'd heard something, and proceeded to fade into fiction again. I heard it again, so I left my book open on the couch, walked out of the house, and turned around to be greeted by my father, wearing a hardhat and nailing steel sheet onto the tile roof.

He explained that the brick tile, which had previously been the only line of defence against the elements just a few months prior, had been starting to disintegrate during the storms in the rainy season. The tile the steel was laying upon, was supposedly invincible from being impugned by droplets of rain, thereby safe from penetration every time a storm steamrolled through our slice of rotten earth. My father explained the steel could theoretically dissolve, but

the water falling from the cursed heavens would never be acidic enough to do *that* to the metal panelling.

The arid earth's heat invaded my gas mask, causing me to sweat incessantly as I skipped towards the market with a leather rucksack seated comfortably upon my back. A dark, empty cave came into view just past the end of the road, so deep there was a mere iota of light reflecting off the damp rocks that laid beyond the threshold of visage. One thought came into my mind: one of safety. I wished I had the time to treat it as my refuge and read a chapter or two of a musty book.

I turned a corner and was greeted with a sorrowful sight. A gaunt man sat uncomfortably on the left side of the worn dirt road. He wasn't moving.

I approached him cautiously, afraid of what might have come of the situation if he had gotten up, however, he remained unmoving. The man's gas mask laid haphazardly on the floor next to him as if it was thrown aside in a hurry. I could see the skin on the back of his neck. Or what was left of it. The surface of his neck was riddled with holes so deep that flecks of bone were visible through the lacerated skin and flesh from whatever did this to him. The skin itself was paper-thin, able to be torn with the strain of my eyes alone. My blood turned cold. Twitching, I raised my arm shakily and pulled back my sleeve. The scar tattooed into my skin now rested there dully, as a dreadful reminder from when my younger self yearned to feel the rain for the first time in years. Just one drop managed to drive into my flesh before I cried in pain and retreated my arm back into the safety of my home.

I gasped in horror. My wounds and his were caused by one and the same things. For him, though, it was worse. A lot worse. Each individual raindrop excavated a track past capillaries and veins from where it had bored a hole into the skin; visible deep flesh or bone at the bottom of each hole. On the other hand, my scar was caused by not cleansing the rainwater from my skin immediately. Only then I noticed the severe lack of flies and stench around a body I now knew to be dead.

This corpse was new. It had only drizzled for two minutes that morning.

A shanty town greeted me. It was somehow even more filthy than when I visited the market inside of it two weeks prior. The air grasped a stench that instantly made the name 'Bubonic Plague' claw to the forefront of my brain. Dark smog encapsulated me - blanketed me - in a metaphoric rusty sheet of metal, able to infect me with tetanus by its mere presence. It's almost as if the diseased air that caused the mass distribution of gas masks in the first place

originated in this very location. Where limestone statues once stood proudly, there now laid nothing more than spots of beige on the pavement, presumably where the concrete had been weathered less.

Between the wooden stalls with steel roofs in nearly single file, laid men and women coughing, scalded and wincing in pain. Some of them were even unmoving, similar to the man who had been lying dead at the side of the country road earlier that day.

Cautiously, I trudged to one side of the paved road, towards one of the many rickety wooden stalls. An older woman's gaze met mine as she impatiently waited on the other side of the wooden counter, tapping her small shoes impatiently against the dense, tepid ground as if she had to fill an endlessly long 'day's final customer' quota. I began examining her stall.

There were very few 'fresh' foods remaining on the countertop. Where there used to be dozens of rows of fresh, ripe fruits and vegetables, there now laid enough produce on a film of grime to be able to be counted on both hands. That's not to mention that most of those remaining were so rotten that even the thought of consuming them with a starved body would be an impossible stretch of the imagination.

"Why is it always you?" she asked out of the blue as I was examining a rotting pear.

"What do you mean?"

"Why is it always you? You clearly have a family because of how much grub you buy. You don't even look that strong. Why not another member of your family?"

An image of my brother in bed and slowly suffocating flooded my mind. In my mindless daze, a tear escaped my eye. I broke my thousand-yard stare as soon as I realised and tried to wipe it away in a desperate effort to show strength. The woman saw this and her eyes met with mine. We finished our transaction sharing a solemn silence.

I was halfway home when I heard thunder. I hadn't even seen the clouds ominously creeping across the sky towards the barren forest that surrounded my home because of the perpetual smog that blanketed the sky in and around the market.

I lifted my head and squinted past the smog in an attempt to see the encroaching terror that would ravage this land once more. Instead, a crow, eerily similar in appearance to the crow from that morning, flew overhead, leaving a trail of mythic energy in its wake. It landed gracefully on one of the branches of a lifeless tree and perched there the exact manner the crow from earlier had perched on my roof. Then it started squawking directly at me, as if it was yelling at me - Warning me. A few moments later, it stopped and heaved itself off the branch.

The crow made it less ten meters away from the tree when a raindrop pierced through the smog and went directly through the gizzard of the winged creature. I didn't see blood. I didn't hear a screech. I didn't smell the rain. It just fell. I didn't even see it hit the ground.

My brisk walk broke into a dead sprint. My brain flashed images to me of anywhere I could hide in a woeful attempt to keep its body alive. The ground underneath me seared in pain. The smell of burning and the sound of sizzling quickly drowned my senses.

Then, a raindrop burrowed into my arm. I screamed in pain until the adrenaline kicked in and it didn't hurt anymore. I cradled it, hopelessly, in the misconception that the sizzling emanating from my arm would subside. Despite this, I kept running. I kept running when a droplet drove directly through my foot. And I ran when the grocery bag I received from the woman at the stall dissolved to ash and dust. In the distance, I noticed a dent in the rock of a familiar hill.

### *The Cave.*

Then I ran with more vigour and fury than I had ever in my life. I couldn't stop screaming in pain every time my f\*cked up foot hit the pained pavement, but I couldn't stop running either. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see myself die when I was so close to safety. The spattering and searing of the raindrops muffled and echoed. My vision went dark.

I thought I was dead. So, hesitantly, I opened my eyes.

Light flooded in from behind, illuminating the caverns I stared at as they met with even deeper ones. It was a beautiful sight to behold - nature untouched by the rain which annihilated the world above. I dropped to my knees. The crow, probably the last one left, had blessed me with its holy energy. There was no other explanation as to how I survived. Lightning struck nearby, causing me to whip around in the direction of the deafening noise. From the inside of the cave, I viewed a storm of apocalyptic proportions rage outside. Wind vehemently blew the rain sideways, as if it was mimicking a change in the direction of gravity. I would have surely been disintegrated if I had lifted a finger in the direction of the mouth of the cave. I exhaled a sigh that turned into a laugh. I was finally safe.

I watched as the rain tapered, slowing its attack on my soil. It left no trace of moisture where it burned into the land which once lived and breathed. I was roaring in laughter to the point at which I was rolling on the floor trying to catch my breath with tears of joy rolling down my face.

I couldn't stop laughing.

I laughed for hours. I laughed as the rain slowed to a trickle, and I continued when it stopped. I laughed as I left the cave in my state of disrepair, and I continued when I limped past

the skeleton at the corner of the road. I laughed as I arrived at my driveway, noting nearly microscopic holes in the pavement. And I laughed as I opened the front door to my house and saw the corpses of my family, lying dead underneath the collapsed roof of my home.