

Four Skies

My Dig ID is CT3760. I was born 783 floors down, but I currently live 2,506 floors down. The mornings are usually the same when you're this far down. I wake up and pull off my blanket which is brown as soil. I always sleep naked since it's very hot down here; luckily, I live alone. It's common for people to just never wear clothes due to the heat, but I lack that level of confidence. I, along with most other women, usually wear a short and loose black dress, thin as paper. They rip often, but it's not a big problem: they only cost a few grams. Before I get dressed, I always pray. I remove the rugs from the corner which I use to pray, then I lay flat on the soil and close my eyes, my naked skin, which is so dirty that I can hardly believe it was once called pale, pressed tightly against the Mother. I confess my love and I beg for forgiveness for our sins and trauma: our abuse, our selfishness and, of course, our digging. I reach my hand into the Mother's flesh and pull out a handful of soft and light soil. I rub the soil through my long blond hair, around my dirty skin and over my virgin vagina. Once I finish my prayer I cover the exposed soil with the rugs, put on my dress and leave my apartment.

We currently work 2,673 floors down, so the commute only takes a couple of hours. I'm a digger, just like my mother and father were, and I work for AF13, who once worked alongside my father. My father hated her, he called her stupid, ignorant and uptight. It's true that she's strict, but I've always found her to be quite kind to me. In fact, today she gave me access to the spiral drill, which is one of our newest and most expensive tools. We work hard for three hours, eat, work hard for another three hours, eat, and then work hard for four more hours. At this point, just like the rest of the diggers, I'm a sweaty dirty mess.

On my way home, I hit the communal bath on 2,600. The water is warm and full of soap, chlorine and urine. I clean my hair, but since it would take hours to thoroughly clean my skin I leave it be. When I get home I usually go straight to bed. If I have trouble getting to sleep, tonight for example, I drink red wine until I pass out. I'm a bit embarrassed to admit it, but I think I spend more on wine than I do on rent. I don't own a television, but I know what would be on if I had one. The emperor would be there, with his big fake smile on his big bald head, and he'd tell me that we're getting close, that we'll soon hit the surface. He's been saying that since my parents were my age, since he still had hair, but for some reason I still believe him. I close my eyes and dream of the yellow sky which the emperor tells us we'll soon see, the yellow sky which my mother read stories of to me when I was a child, the yellow sky which I've waited for all my life.

My name is Elizabeth Parker, I'm 20 years old and I live in Unified America. Currently I'm four months pregnant, so, of course, that means that I don't have anything to do for the next two months. Well, that's not completely true. I usually spend a couple of hours a day on the treadmill, more so to kill time than to stay fit. I spend most of the other hours of the day reading. Since I can't go outside and bathe in the orange sky's radiated light, I can't acquire any new books, so I'm forced to only read the few books that I own. I read the same books over and over, but to keep them interesting I like to make minor edits with a pen. Just today I made it so Joseph Peterson, the wealthy middle-aged architect who is the protagonist of Patricia Goodrich's *Life on Wheels*, is now a young cross-dressing Warzolian!

The other breeders don't like to talk to me. I think they're jealous of my fit young body and long blond hair, the second youngest breeder being 32. Jaclyn will soon be of age and become a breeder, she's 12, so maybe they'll be kinder to me then. Perhaps they're just turned off by my shy and sarcastic demeanor, I suppose that's something I could work on. I get to talk to my mother sometimes. She's very busy, as all retired breeders are, so I only get to see her every few months. I currently have an appointment to talk with her on the 27th. I've never met my father. He fled as soon as I took my first breath. I have no respect for him or interest in ever meeting him. I was raised by an official who was kind to me, but busy due to the nature of his work. I never see him either.

Luckily, I'm pregnant with a boy. This will be my seventh boy. I've also birthed five girls who all passed away on first breath due to the radiation. That's always painful for a breeder, so that's why I'm grateful for it being a boy. The father is a very handsome young man, a successful entrepreneur. We had sex seven times before I became pregnant with his child. I look forward to seeing him again when I have the child removed. I still think of him often, especially when I masturbate. I'd like nothing more than to marry him, but I know that'll never happen. I'm far too young to retire, and the only woman who isn't forced to breed is Queen, who's always been my role model.

A thought that often crosses my mind is self-mutilation. I've thought of doing it with knives, forks and spoons, or with fire and hot iron, or by convincing a man to do it. I'm not sure which method I'd choose, but either way it'd force me into early retirement. Then I could get married and finally live a life. I'm not nearly brave enough to do something like that though, so I guess it's the breeder's life for me.

As I wake up, I gaze upon the blue LED clock which states that it's 15:30. I sleep in late often, but this is exceptionally late. That being said, it's not quite late enough for it to be worrying. I get up, shower, fix my hair, do my makeup and get dressed: I decide to wear a slim black dress which my husband had recently purchased for me. At this point it's 16:30, so there's still half an hour until apart which I was asked to attend. My husband, Edward, has expressed his disinterest in these parties many times, so he won't be making an appearance. In truth, I'm not interested in these parties either, but I do enjoy the warmth of the fire. As I still have some time, I decide to walk downstairs to my studio. Maybe this dress, and the confidence that it brings, will provide me with some inspiration.

In my studio, I have paintings of several shapes and sizes lying around, all unfinished, all of housecats. There are paintings of Shorthairs, Siamese and Scottish Folds, Thai, Sphynx and Ragamuffins, Persians, Korats and Bengals, all alone. I once tried painting a tiger, but the head ended up being far too small. In my paintings, I utilize the Stacking Method: this is a method where the palettes limited to four sequenced computer-generated colors, and the painter paints using blocks which stack upon each other, opposed to the traditional stroke method. Once the painter decides to be finished with a color in the sequence they will move on to the next, without the opportunity of moving back. My style has gained a level of success and respect throughout the post-contemporary artistic community that I'd find unimaginable just last year; New York Magazine even ran a cover story on my, what they called, Cat Art. When I first started doing this, just three years ago when I was 17 and painting my first cat, I had no aspirations for this level of fame or respect, but one simple fact is undeniable: Cat Art is paintings of cats, not humans, and I was the first to ever paint something that was not a human.

After looking over my unfinished works, no inspirations coming to me, I pack my pistol into my book bag and head out. The party wasn't far away; the ride on the sky tram only took me ten minutes. I greet the host and reluctantly greet myself to those who she wishes for me to meet; I have said "Hi, I'm Liz" far too many times in my lifetime. After the formalities are finished, I can comfortably head to their backyard: this is where the bonfire is. I take a seat on a large flat rock which I find to be surprisingly comfortable. I gaze into the massive fire which is far larger than I am. I follow it from the bottom, where playful children run in and dance, burning off their clothes and hair, to the top, where the fire's illuminated sparks fade into the cloudless brown sky. I take a book from my bag: True Love & True Sex by a philosopher only known as New King June. I've never met New King June, although I had the chance to just last week. I suppose it could be called introverted to sit around and read at a party, maybe even rude, but I really don't mind those words. In True Love & True Sex, New King June writes about the differences between True Love, the unbreakable bond between two lovers which is carved into the metaphorical stone which we call fate, and True Sex, the perfect expression of unadulterated desire that can only be felt between a man and a woman who are destined to never experience True Love. The book, a recent bestseller, has caused lots of debate from both daytime talk shows and the artistic and philosophical communities. These pseudo-scientific post-new-age philosophical bestsellers rarely interest me, but for some reason I couldn't turn this one down. After reading beside the roaring flame for a couple of hours, I decide to head home. I leave through the side door in hopes that nobody will notice my escape: it's a success.

When I arrive at home Edward is in our bed, reading a novel. Edward is an older man, 25 years older than me, but I still find him quite handsome. He's infertile as well, but due to my lack of interest in children or motherhood I can only see this as a benefit. I pour myself a glass of wine, undress and climb in next to him. We make love every night, well, most nights. As we do, tonight, I can't help but think of the writings of the great fraud known as New King June. Our romantic passion burns hotter than the bonfire I saw just a half hour earlier, there's no doubt that this is True Love. Our bodies, souls, hearts and minds merge into a screaming icon of sex, just like they do every night, so fuck New King June, this must be True Sex.

Every morning at 8AM my alarm clock screams my name through profane beeps. If I could translate it to English I'd imagine it would sound something like, "Elizabeth Parker, get your fucking ass out of bed". I have no choice but to obey the alarm's command and get out of bed, as if I were its slave girl. I pull down the thick metal curtains which protect my sleeping self from the morning sun's bright light that now burns into my mostly naked skin. It goes like this every morning: I forget to cover myself, and then I must scramble to find my jacket before my flesh burns away. I'm just lucky that I'm not sensitive. Breakfast is an important meal for me, and what I choose to eat varies based on how I feel that morning. Today's victim is two large eggs. Before I eat, however, I always pray. I get on my knees, press my hands together and thank the Lord for my food and my home. Due to the fluctuation in the power that I need to fry my eggs, I have plenty of time to pray.

Wearing my white dress and whiter shoes, I begin my walk to work. It isn't a long walk, but it still frightens me every time. My father fell through a hole in the clouds when I was 15, so now I always watch my feet very carefully. It's true that nobody has fallen all year and that most of the holes have been patched, but I'm still cautious; or as my friends say, paranoid. I work in a small building, one floor

and three small rooms, as a massage therapist. After a few customers who were kind but uninteresting, one customer comes in not long after noon. During the massage, he tells me to give him a handjob, and I tell him that I'm not interested. I've heard that this type of thing happens on the ground quite often, but it's rare up here. The man rolls over, exposing his erection which sticks up towards the roof. This isn't what offends me, but instead it's the expression that his face wears. It says that I should be impressed. It says that the image of his erect penis should make me change my mind. Politely, professionally, I decline. I want to yell at him, I want to kick his erection from his body and let his blood cover my roof, but I also want a tip. He doesn't tip.

After several pleasant massages which aren't the slightest bit noteworthy I leave the building. Instead of heading straight home, I go by a rally outside of the Office which I heard was happening tonight. There are already hundreds of protesters there. We are protesting the Mayor, who's the cutting image of the classic corrupt politician. Most recently there was an embezzlement scandal, but he's seen every type of scandal within his time in the Office. We're screaming for his resignation, which I personally don't think will ever happen. The truth of the matter is that I don't care very much about the Mayor or the Office. The truth is that I just like the people who show up to these events and that I hope to make a friend. Sadly, I don't make any. Perhaps they noticed my lack of passion. On my way home, I go by an Italian restaurant that I frequent. None of their employees have ever shown me any judgement for eating alone.

On my way home, I stop by the pit where my boyfriend works as a bird-fisherman. He sits quietly with his fishing rod hanging into the purple sky along with his co-workers, and I sit by his side just as quietly. I come by here often; everyone knows me by name and is kind to me. We discuss our days and popular art and culture, and I head home once I get tired. Due to our conflicting work schedules, this is our only time to meet during the week. Bird-fishermen must work during the night, since our night is the birds' day. During the weekends, I usually spend my time at his home where we can talk and make love, but this is the best we can get during the week. We often reminisce over our high school days when we could spend every second next to each other, but we're careful not to complain.

When I get home, I raise my heavy curtains, completely exhausting myself. I'd like to buy lighter curtains, but they're far too expensive for me. I undress, step into my cold porcelain shower and turn on the valve. I let the pouring soft acid burn off the sweat and dirt, originating from both myself and my customers. Once I feel clean and as if I was born anew, I prepare myself for bed. I reset that awful alarm which will again scream at me in nine short hours, and then tuck myself into my cold bed of flowers. As I drift off to sleep, I close my eyes and pray for tomorrow to have completely forgettable customers.