

Flowers of Sulphur:

Notes from the field

EXCERPT #1 DAPHNE

1st April 2038 Exeter, St David's Train Station, South Sector ENTRY #1

When I arrived at Exeter St David's Train Station with Eric, he could not contain his surprise at the condition of the space. It was impeccable, so clean. All the walkways speck free. Not a cigarette butt, sweet wrapper or coffee lid in sight. The #plasticisnotfantastic campaign of 2018 put pay to plastics in the South sector years ago. The same campaign had little impact in the North sector but plastic became a commodity on the black market up there. They were selling the South sector's plastic waste back to them in imaginative ways.

Eric wandered on ahead along the platform as I scanned for further signs of life. There were no cobwebs to trap leaves, stray sycamore helicopters, aluminium ring pulls or the dust of life. A profound sense of mourning washed over me as our footsteps echoed along the platform of the empty station. It was the dust of life I mourned for. I missed it. Eric didn't understand really. He liked cleanliness, and order.

'I'm a little OCDC Daphne,' he would chirp. It always made me laugh although I knew it was his attempt to distract me.

I tried to explain to him that the dust of life was our memories, tugging at our consciousness. Flashes of what once was. That dust of life, suspended in the light, finding cracks in our darkness. A reminder of our passion to exist and how important it was to seek out the light. And that we shouldn't sweep away that dust so easily. When I brought it up on our many visits, he rolled his eyes at me.

'It does no good to remember what once was, Daphne. You know that.' His tone was always grave as he peered at me from behind his glasses.

His work in those sterile labs had left him desensitized, but I knew deep down he missed the dust too. I was so relieved that he opposed the Management of Pests Act 2020 after the Homelessness Reduction Bill's catastrophic failure in the summer of 2018. He even went on the marches with me, what little good they did. Despite the rise in homelessness, people's empathy declined. Fear set in. We bared our denial through gritted teeth. I'd liked to say I acted, but I didn't. I watched. In disbelief. In despair. And I did nothing.

I watched him wandering along the platform, eyes downcast, examining the cleanliness, the tread compliance on stairwells and the colour constant on walls and handrails. He scratched notes into that memo pad he carried everywhere.

'I must report back,' he'd say, pointing to the occasional damaged skirting board.

I wondered why he bothered. The stations were always spotless and well maintained. What was he looking for? Honestly? Something bothered him today though. He was worrying his lip. But there it was again. That black mourning veil hanging heavy over me as I grieved for them; those specks of dust. He did too. I was sure. Such profound loss. That quick and that brutal? It was bound to take its toll. But we never showed it. Like the facades of the buildings we inhabited; such tasteful fascia hiding our poorly connected wiring. Our collective grief - we hid it - like we hid them. We swept away our grief with those tiny specks of dust. That's what kept Eric looking, and kept me following. But truly? I feared all we'd find was a mass grave of our collective guilt.

My mourning veil firmly fixed, I studied the floor following his trail of inspection. Tiled floors swept, mopped, buffed and polished. All paint work had such vibrancy of colour; royal green with gold leaf finishing touches on the curlicues. Old fashioned fire place grilles in the restrooms were spick and span, free of charred remains. All brass decorations on display were glinting in the light. I couldn't be sure if they were an original feature or reproductions; either way it worked. A well cultivated nostalgic reminder of rail travel chic circa 1950 that was supposed to keep them coming and consuming.

Platform benches had the standard issue bars to prevent over resting. The establishment said over resting gave out the wrong message. I shuddered. The bars were a stark reminder of the early days. I froze for a moment staring at my angled reflection framed in the hard lines of the brushed stainless steel bars that divided up the bench. They were incongruous with the rest of the station's nostalgic chic. I held my breath for a few seconds. There was the evidence of our collective guilt. Eric beckoned me on.

He examined the bins. They were well disguised behind fake walls that lined the platforms. They were emptied every two hours to prevent over spilling. The Station Master informed us at the start of our visit that it was critical in minimising the attraction of pests. I knew that Eric was watching me when the Station Master trotted out that rehearsed statement. Eyes wide and mouth agog, I managed to ask how they achieved this given everything that had happened. Before the Station Master trotted out his next rehearsed statement, Eric intervened.

‘That’s why we’re here, darling, to learn,’ he turned to the Station Master avoiding eye contact with me, ‘Station Master, this is quite an impressive set up you have here. You must show me your goods shed at the Riverside Yard. I have a love of freights you see.’

He never meant to patronise me. He had to play the game; a diversionary tactic deployed adeptly. In 2027, gender impact assessments conducted by the establishment resulted in a need to redefine gender roles. It was widely documented that women had been ‘emotionally connected’ to the plight of the homeless during the displacement era. Any women unwilling to disconnect, and return to the role originally assigned them at birth, risked being containerised.

I looked up to take my mind elsewhere and lift that mourning veil. The sky looked so blue against the drab grey of the station building. Not a cloud or a bird visible. My eyes settled just below the roof’s fascia board. There, daubed in red paint, were the words ‘**WHY LOOK UP?**’ Heart pounding, I considered the question. Inside of me, something stirred. I stifled a smile. It was a sign. Of hope. Of life.

I resisted calling out to Eric. I’d attract the attention of the Station Master. Eric was fumbling in his briefcase. He took out one of those brown packages of his. Flowers of sulphur, or Derris Powder, for the birds. He rarely used the lab these days other than to make those funny powders. We never saw a single bird but he brought them to every visit. He crouched down. I assumed he was examining a grate but a small hand reached out to take the package. It was a child’s hand. Dressed in that standard issue red clothing. I gasped loudly and then immediately covered my mouth.

My mourning veil lifted a little. I didn’t stifle my smile this time but I calmly made my way down the platform towards Eric. Walking past the restroom, I noticed fingerprint smudges on the windows. On one of the glass panels, scrawled in childlike writing, were the words ‘**We exist**’. I resisted the urge to break into a run although my pace quickened with my

heartbeat. As I reached Eric, he was fumbling about with his briefcase. He turned to me and smiled.

‘Why look up?’ I asked. He furrowed his brow.

‘What?’

‘Why look up? There’s nothing to see right?’

He turned his gaze back to his briefcase and fumbled with the lock.

‘I don’t know what you mean?’ I stopped his fumbling and rested my hand on his.

‘How long?’ Our eyes met. We stood silent for a few moments. I asked again. ‘How long?’

He whispered ‘Since the sector divide.’ He shook his head ‘I didn’t want to keep it from you.’

‘What’s in it? The powder?’

‘Flowers of sulphur.’

I shook my head in disbelief.

‘Flowers of sulphur? Really?’

‘Yes. Good old fashioned Derris powder. It’s antiseptic. And anti-fungal. And I can get it past infection control. Nobody questions me. You gave me the idea actually. It was an article you wrote. About birds. I call it my cosmic dust.’ I let out a hoot of nervous laughter. He continued.

‘And why look up?’ I shook my head. ‘We all need a reason to look up Daphne. You taught me that.’ He pointed to a tiny speck against the blue sky. It was a bird. First bird I’d seen in years.

‘I wondered what you were looking for Daphne. But I know now. It was a sign. Of hope. The dust of life.’
