

The Sovereignty of the Faithful

By Katherine B. Kinkel

"Destruction cometh; and they shall seek peace, and there shall be none." Ezekiel, 7:25

The water is rising.

A spiteful rain whispers over the mouth of the seas of New York, falling in heavy torrents and icy rivulets upon the watery grave of a free people. Everywhere seems to be lost; the once vibrant rhythm of urbanity now tucked away in a gaseous orb. It is covered now in a sea of blue, and all who had once inhabited the world's great metropolis were now residents of the great underwater Oceanic Republik. There is no life, not a single sparrow, above the glittering gray-blue waters; all is engulfed in a gossamer bubble insufficient to insulate the aching emptiness that had long since buried our homes.

The crowds were dark, and we moved together, like a great and terrible beast in the murky depths of the City, where lights glittered like blinking eyes in the darkness. The halls of stone wept with the slime of humanity, and the stagnant air hummed with the fear and the presence of its inhabitants. We moved as one, blind, led only by a faint glimmer from above. Hidden beneath dark robes like the rest, I shook with fear but said nothing. It was an unspoken agreement among us that our words would be left at the mouth of the cavern. A boy took my hand. His was soft and damp like the halls of the great city. Together we trembled, but I felt the remedial power of the multitudes; like a great family of strangers, of knowing faces. The city knelt and in silence we bowed our heads, the same words fluttering, uncertain, from a thousand trembling lips:

"Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.

Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.

Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen."

The crowds receded like an ebbing tide as the Hail Mary faded from pious lips. I knelt with the masses as he rose before us: our leader, my grandfather, a weathered hand lifted in welcome and a vacant, sad smile hanging absently upon his aging face. I had asked him once, long ago, why he always did the service in Latin. Only Catholic priests did that, I thought.

"Everyone can hear Latin," he'd replied, smiling, younger then. I remembered how the sunlight had dripped like honey over his aging face, when we could still feel the sunlight. When we could admire the pale blue of sky.

"Yes Papa," I'd argued, young and ruthless, "But hardly anyone understands Latin. I don't. You do, but you're smarter than most anyone." He'd merely smiled. I understood now; how the words touched everyone, those who spoke English and those who didn't. Everyone congregated here, because everyone knew this. Not the words, not those archaic, beautiful words. The kind you could drink, like tea, too sugary sweet to last on the tongue. They understood the power, the healing, a vertical connection between heaven and earth when he raised his hand; how mountains tumbled when he spoke His words. Every sinner and Christian, every Jew, every Muslim in the Republik of New York gathered to be in His presence. Though we may once have been divided in belief, there was no cause for division now. There were those who had faith and those who didn't, and then those too afraid to gather here, in the murky depths, to hear my grandfather speak the words so forbidden, so dangerous, while boots of the Troopers clacked overhead and their gunfire shattered the unquiet darkness.

"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen" .

He put a finger to his wrinkled brow and across his breast.

"Amen", they echoed, reverberating fear from every stone wall. I trembled. Every week we gathered here murmuring illegal thoughts and hopes, sending forgotten dreams like smoke to a forbidden God. We risked our lives, by the thousands, and it was my dear grandfather, my only remaining relative, who would be held responsible for them all. I felt something warm welling familiarly behind my eyes and blinked it away, though a few unheard tears stained my freckled cheek that evening, papery in the lamplight. I bowed my head and felt with one hand for that of my unidentified friend, with the other for a silvery cross about my neck. He spoke to us, a great calm above the storm.

"My children, brothers and sisters, thank you for joining me in prayer tonight." His words were slow; his voice like loving fingers over an ancient text. People listened when he spoke; they always had. He had a presence, like a prayer, that made all want to know him, to feel his embrace; to be saved by what he had to teach. "I know that you are troubled; I know that recent inquisition has taken place. Do not be afraid; I have never thought that we could exist perpetually, without the knowledge of the outside world. You do no wrong by coming here, and yet God will understand when you cannot. We have been banned from worshipping our God; and yet Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Catholics, Presbyterians . . . they gather united beneath the streets of our fraudulent world by the desire to hold faith . . . any faith.

The government fears what we believe because it cannot be explained. It will never be explained. I cannot explain faith, nor can any man or woman. They fear the bloodshed and the wars that faith has caused. My children, I fear the life that we live, in this world warmed and ravaged by industrialization, stripped of morality and human connection. A world where we live in fear. Day by day, the sea rises, and nothing is done to get us out. Troopers gun us down in the middle of the streets, only to make room for more. We have lost our democracy and all that brings us joy. We hear nothing of our government, and yet we are on the brink of world war. Yes, this is a treacherous time, for us all. So, I'm asking you to decide what you believe".

* * *

It was dark on Madison Avenue. One could glance into the oblivion above and hear the whispering gossamer strands of the synthetic bubble separating them from the great sea above; where the last desperate strands of sunlight had long trickled through the depths, feebly lighting the desolate streets. The water had risen. I could see the Troopers measuring it, in their glossy black helmets. A woman lay dead beneath the pooling light of a streetlamp but I did not turn my eyes. I had seen too many of the dead to be afraid anymore.

I made my way slowly between tables in the darkened restaurant, weaving between officials and members of the Association of Faith alike, my heart pounding like a stretched drum. He was waiting for me at the bar on a sleek red velvet banquette, sipping plain water and fumbling with an odd-looking wristwatch. That curly black hair was unmistakable. My grandfather often sent me on his errands; these I didn't mind so much. There was too much room for mishap to be afraid.

"Hello Kinne," he murmured without looking up. I slid in beside him, the velvet brushing on the bare skin beneath my dress. "How's the weather in Barbados today?"

"Cloudy," I whispered nonchalantly, waving off a suited waiter. I wouldn't be long enough to stay for a drink. "Chance of snowfall in the middle of the week." He smiled, piercing me with emerald eyes.

"I'm glad to hear he's well."

"Oh . . . we're very well. We've moved apartments only three times in the past month, which is somewhat of an improvement." He smiled sympathetically. There was a heavy silence.

"The water's rising," he said slowly, taking a sip of water without lifting his heavy eyes. "And today was the first day of sunlight. It hadn't stopped raining for six weeks". I said nothing to this. The water was always rising.

"Do you...have you brought..?" He put a finger to his lips. The old leather book brushed my thigh under the table; I slid it immediately into my purse. Our eyes locked for a moment; his hand brushed mine. His sleeve had slid up, and I saw the cross etched onto his wrist.

"You should go," he whispered. "Curfew is in 20 minutes." I looked around the restaurant; it had cleared significantly since I had entered. Had it really been that long? I couldn't have told; I had left my watch at home.

"See you around, Seth" I whispered, rising hurriedly. The golden crucifix slid uneasily from beneath my dress as I stood; hastily, I hid it, and made for the door without a backward glance. Outside the sirens wailed as I ran down 54th—ten minutes until curfew. Searchlights swam over the streets; a pair of uniformed troopers ran by. I ran faster, and finally, out of breath, collapsed onto my knees six blocks before our little apartment. There was a shadow in my peripheral vision; he slid behind a doorway as I spun around, knowing he'd seen me in the windowpane of a storefront. My heart pounded; I walked slowly, then faster...Yes, he was following me. Perhaps he'd seen the book under the table, back in the Riviera? There was no way to know. I darted onto the main street, under flashing searchlights, into the shadows of a bank. He stood at the crosswalk, searching; eyes beady over the collar of a dark coat. I'd lost him, and heaved a sigh of relief, waited until he'd disappeared into the shadows, and stepped into the light once more, nearly home. And then there was a soft hand on my elbow. I spun around to face a dark shadow of a man, his coat pulled up to his chin, hat askew atop silvery gray hair.

"Who are you?" he asked darkly. I remained silent, heart pounding so hard within my chest I was surprised it didn't burst forth. He shook me gently. "I asked you your name, please tell me. I'm working for the government." The man flashed a silvery Secret Police badge under the searchlights. He spoke softly; his words were not vitriolic, as expected.

"My name..." I began slowly, tasting the effect of my words before giving them, "is Alice Merriman. Please, I'm just trying to get home. I live just down the block; my mother will worry for me. I've been out with my friends, you see..." He released me. I dared not meet his eye; I was the master of deception, if only I could avoid eye contact.

"What's that you've got around your neck?" he asked after a few moments. The searchlights illuminated a graying face.

"My...neck, sir? I've got...nothing around my neck." I stole a glance at my collar; the golden crucifix was neatly tucked out of sight.

"Well then, what's that book you've got in your bag? You know all books have to be approved by the chief of police."

"Of course, sir...I...have no book." He sighed, then took my arm slowly and led me into a deserted café; the tables were up, and a single man swept the dust of the afternoon from the floors. I followed; there was no other choice.

"May I have a moment alone, Jose?" he asked politely.

"Ah, of course Jimmy; anything for you!" The man abandoned his mop, wiping his hands on a soiled apron and retreating into the kitchen. I sat, trembling, and the man sat across from me, not before switching off the lights. He removed his hat; I could make out his face in the darkness, lined and aged; he might have been handsome in youth. He had deep black eyes that twinkled warmly, with salt-and-pepper hair that receded around the edges of his wrinkled forehead. He crossed weathered hands atop

the table, gazing at me curiously. I averted my eyes from him and sat uncomfortably, emaciated shoulders folded inward.

"When was the last time you had something to eat...Alice?" he asked finally. I glanced up in surprise.

"I don't, I mean we haven't...we do what we can, sir. My mother and I live alone together, you see. And food these days has been so hard to come by, with the shortages...and the inflation." I trailed off; he knew that I was lying, I could feel it. The man removed his hat and called for Jose, who brought me a tray of little tea cakes and a piping mug of black coffee. Though famished, I wouldn't touch them. I'd learned better than to trust these government men. "Please eat, Kinne. I know you and your grandfather haven't eaten in two days." I nearly upset the coffee cup.

"What did you call me?" He smiled in the darkness, warmly. There was something about his presence that eased my fear, like a genial uncle, but also a haggardness about him, a look that I had seen on the faces of many men before. It was as if he never slept, never lived, without fear. It was a terrible thing to behold.

"Kinne, my name is James Dale..." He glanced nervously about, though the streets were deserted and the darkness so great that I could barely make out his figure across the café table. Slowly, he slid his hand across the table and pulled up his sleeve, revealing the mark of the Association of Faith etched clearly onto the pale skin of his wrist. I nodded, indicating that he had my trust. He leaned in.

"I'm a special investigator for the Association; I renounced my post years ago, and remain affiliated with the police of the Republik so that I might access information from within. I've been sent to speak exclusively with your grandfather, but the apartment is being guarded by the Republik Troopers and I couldn't very easily enter on the grounds of investigation without a warrant—or direct order to do so—in their presence. I'm very sorry to have frightened you and to burden you with my knowledge, but I feel it is critical that your grandfather be informed as soon as possible." I remained silent, motionless, waiting for him to continue. I knew few authorities and trusted even less, but there was something calm about his aging face, and utterly truthful in the way he spoke. He took a reverent pause before continuing.

"I am entrusting you with this information because it must reach your grandfather—that is all. I am not able to tell you how I know this information or anything about my profession...only that all of what I tell you is true. You are to tell no one else of what you know, not anyone. Am I quite clear?" I nodded slowly.

"This afternoon..." His voice grew shaky, unsteady; I had the vaguest and most unsettling sensation that he had begun to cry, until I realized that he had. I did not know what to say and thus made no sound, but listened to his muffled weeping in the darkness. "Forgive me, Kinne," he murmured finally. "This afternoon, the last advocate for democracy within the United States has been assassinated. We have officially been declared the United Communist Republik of America...the citizens of underwater New York are to be informed of this within the week." He paused and removed a cloth handkerchief from his coat pocket. I didn't know that men carried those anymore. "The water is rising," he said slowly, glancing into the darkened streets.

"The water is rising," I echoed, "and no one is leaving. There have been no hydroplanes, as they've promised, not even for the workers."

"Capitalists," he replied simply, lighting a cigarette with shaking hands that glowed ruby red in the unquiet darkness. "Wall Street, what have you; they are to be... eliminated".

"Kinne," he leaned across the table with shaking hands and the wild eyes of a dying man. "They're not going to let us out. The water rises, every day it rises... outside storms rage; Indonesia has disappeared, so has Hawaii; hurricanes plague Great Britain. I've been informed...the government is leaving us here,

beneath the water. Only the Troopers and U.C.R.A. Party members will be saved. And someday, the great shield will collapse, and the City of New York will be washed into the sea". I wept for a moment, tears like liquid glass that frosted my eyeglasses and my perspective. He did not disturb me, and was so quiet that for a moment I thought he had gone. I did not know what to say, there was nothing to say to death.

He was trembling now. "There is ... one plane. One helicopter, with room enough for ten, only ten. You, your grandfather, and eight disciples of your choice. The Association wishes Reverend O'Connor to carry on his religious practices on the mainland ... where all faith remains banned and seems everywhere ... lost".

"And you?" I asked nervously.

"I ... I will perish beneath the sea, with all that I have ever known." I wept and he stood to go, before turning. "The plane is scheduled to leave ... tomorrow. You must be at loading dock 12A in Queens by two in the morning. Come by shade of night, dress in black. There will be no mercy if you are caught."

When I glanced upwards again, he had vanished, though the café door stood ajar to the darkened streets, glinting ominously under the searchlights. A single card floated to the floor, blank, except for a name—his—and an address. I gathered my tears among my book and the little card and fled home ... amid the wail of the silence and the terrible pressure of the thousand tons of seawater above, the endless impending death of all that was pure.

My grandfather was asleep at his desk when I returned, a tattered copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* spread across his slowly rising and falling chest. It was one of the many volumes usually hidden in the trapdoor beneath the carpet in the sitting room, and I quickly concealed it once more, only to rudely revive him, though he would have awoken anyway. My grandfather had the uncanny ability to read fear and necessity, despite the dormant state in which I found him that evening. He sat bolt upright, fumbled for his glasses, and rose immediately to the window.

"The water is rising."

Outside there was the wailing of a siren, a cry, a gunshot ... and silence.

"Papa," I whispered after a few moments, "I have something terrible to tell you." He closed the shade and dimmed the lights and I told him all that I had been told. I could feel him tremble in the darkness.

"Only ten ..." He whispered softly, "Only ... ten ..." I said nothing, though he reached out for me in the darkness, and we wept together for what seemed like an eternity. "There are so many things I should have done," he whispered, "So many ... good things." I did not know what he meant but I wept in silence.

"There was once a time, Kinne, when we lived in a beautiful world. There was warm sunlight, soft clouds, and blue sky; rain fell soft and light upon the grassy earth, and the people of New York could breathe the fresh air, we could see the light of day. I wish you had been a child in that world. When love was pure, and young children were happy; when we were the people of a democracy, the most powerful nation in the world. We have done this; all of us have done this ... to ourselves. Every day they destroyed our earth ... our cars, our factories. Those who made them refused to acknowledge truth, yes. But we refused to push for change. And now there is nothing ... nothing left anymore."

"How did it happen, Papa? How could they let it happen?"

"They told us ... for years they told us. Your parents fought for what was true; they were global change scientists for Greenpeace, an environmental organization closed by the government about five years ago ... in 2027. They were shot by the early Republik party, I never told you that. I should have told you

that, Kinne ... I'm so, so sorry. I didn't think it was fair ... to tell a little girl ..." I wept but I was not angry. I had never known a kinder person.

"And they started building the walls ... we had weeks, months of ceaseless rain, black skies and hurricanes with eyes bigger than Kansas in the south. We lost Louisiana, Florida; the coast of Mexico. There was water ... water everywhere. Entire countries in Africa and South America were wiped out by malaria. It was the first time I was in a true panic in my life ... was—I am—truly afraid. We did nothing, nothing to help them. Our government slid; our president assassinated; a coup d'état by the Republik. And we heard nothing. Only rain and silence. And those walls, levees, built all over; first in Queens, then the Bronx; until New York was surrounded."

"I remember," I said slowly, "I remember the walls, from years ago. Before the shield ... and the censorship. I remember. They grew higher and higher as the water rose; then science produced the bubble technology ... and we were locked in... they wouldn't let us out. And now they never will." It had been horrible; I couldn't have been more than six when I stood on Fifth Avenue as they covered the sky in that gossamer fabric, designed to hold out the sea. It was as if, after that, we had become as one nation under anarchy; the Republik Troopers took control of the city by terror and their secret police; and the National Guard could not penetrate the shield. They censored us, everything we knew ... our books and journals, our music turned into ashes ... when religion was banned, men and women wept in the streets, and the churches and synagogues and mosques were pillaged ... and burned. I thought of Seth, of all of our friends; they would all be gone. It was maddening. And we had so little time left.

"What was his name?" he asked suddenly, "The man who told you this?"

"James Dale", I whispered quietly, and he sighed.

"I knew Jimmy at Columbia," he murmured. "He was a great man—a Latin scholar, later a nuclear physicist. He was solicited by the Republik to develop military technology and declined ... they've been hunting him ever since." He paused momentarily. "Will he be with us?"

"I ... don't think so." We shared a reverent silence. "I'm afraid, Papa," I whispered. He glanced up, round eyeglasses magnifying wet eyelashes. "Of what we'll find ... on the mainland. And I'm afraid for you. Always, I am afraid for you. They want to kill you Papa. This moment Troopers stand guard outside our door. One day, I'm afraid..."

"Kinne," he whispered softly, taking my little hand in his wrinkled one, "There are things more important to me... than my life. You are one of them. I'm sorry to have put you through so much pain. You are only sixteen; you have seen too much, and I am sorry for that. You live in a world that is the consequence of what others failed to do—for you. Our earth is crumbling. This isn't a place for us ... anymore."

"What can I do?" he begged of no one, for he wept and knelt upon the floor. "Do I address the Association, only to cause terror and fear? Or do I leave hundreds of friends and followers—innocent people—alone, unaware that they will die?" He bowed his head and knelt to the floor. "How does one choose? Good God, how does one choose? Lord, give me strength..."

The minutes pass like small eternities tonight. Every breath reverberates in the pressing silence. I cannot speak, I cannot think. I slept for a few moments, and I dreamt of a day long ago when I walked with my parents in the tall grasses, we waved at the sun and we chased the clouds, and I awoke only to weep and to cry out in pain and in fear. Global warming, what does it mean? Can those words express this pain, this fear and this hatred? It is something else entirely, without words and without voice, and it has consumed all that I know. I open my mouth, dry like cotton, and I whisper to the chill night air. "*Ave Maria, gratia plena...* But He has turned a deaf ear to the people of our Earth, He is gone, separated by miles of water.

Tomorrow I will leave all that I love and everything that I know, and there will be nothing good, nothing beautiful left in this world.

The End

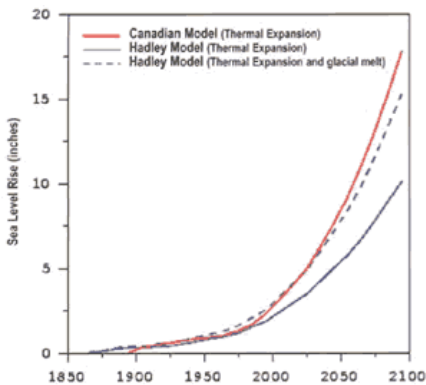
Afterword

The inspiration for my story originally came from a speech given to my ninth-grade earth-science class by Professor Daniel P. Schrag of Harvard University. Mr. Schrag is a climatologist whose focus is primarily the impact of global warming on sea level rise and hurricane intensity. His research was interesting to me because at that time, I knew very little about the logistics of climate change, and it opened a whole new possibility of climate-induced disasters: the storm. As Schrag himself wrote in an article, “We are performing an experiment on a planetary scale that hasn’t been done for millions of years... nobody knows what’s going to happen and there will be surprises”.

This excited me because it allowed me to exercise some poetic license in writing near-future fiction. I had decided to focus primarily on sea-level rise when I found a political cartoon, a satire on the current political administration’s response to warming which exaggerated the magnitude of “water pressing in from all sides”, which became a recurrent theme in my story. (Cartoon, used by permission, from *The Australian*)



Sea-level rise is, in fact, a very severe problem in correlation with the current upward trend in earth’s climate. Sea level has risen about 400 feet (130 meters) since the end of the last ice age, around 18,000 years ago. Since 1900, sea level has risen 1-3 millimeters per year, and a trend of about 3-4 mm/year has been projected by global-change scientists. Its primary causes are the melting ice caps and expansion of ocean water as the oceans grow warmer, in direct correlation with global warming. It is not at all improbable that areas such as Florida, New York, Indonesia, and other coastal areas could be severely impacted by the effects of a rising sea level.



The graph shows some projected models for sea level rise within the next century.

Although over-dramatized for the sake of fiction, my story examines a disturbing reality that could—and will—have a serious effect on the lives of millions if global warming is not reduced dramatically within a relatively short time frame. While the idea of a “bubble” over the city of New York is implausible and quite nearly impossible (its inspiration came from a science-fiction film about an underwater city I saw when I

was little), it represents the alarming isolation and confusion that will ensue in the event of such a tragedy. It is not meant so much to be a possible mechanism that will come into use in the next 50 years, but a means to exhibit the dramatic phenomenon that is global warming.

I also chose to include a changing (and corrupt) government in my story, and certain religious aspects. We have been studying the rise of communism in my history class, which used violence, terrorism, and censorship as a means to maintain power. I wanted to really show the loss of innocence in the midst of fear and tragedy, to put a global energy issue on an emotional level, and, to use human (mis)conduct to show how a lack of action will not only effect our generation but generations to come... and that the result may be more devastating than ever imaginable.

