

Not With A Bang, But A Whimper

Deep within a sea of velvet black, a sphere pirouettes in a slow-twisting ballet. Its surface is smooth cobalt intertwined with sandy beige hues and corkscrew whirls of wispy white. Life seems to gush from this orb at every crevice, like a tightly gripped sponge. Too, like a sponge, it absorbs every available resource, recycling and reusing in a perpetual cycle. This sphere, which orbits the sun at 66,700 miles per hour, is the Earth, and right now, 300 miles in, Alice Richards sits on her front porch.

Alice leans against the mouth of the front door as she watches her son Joey gambol in their cramped lawn, his thin brown hair swelling in the hazy autumn breeze. He looks so solitary in the yard, like the last butterfly left on earth, flitting about from flower to flower, uneasy but unaware. The schools, along with nearly every other establishment, have closed their doors for this last week; teachers not having their hearts in their lessons and parents demanding time to spend with their children. Alice has packed her refrigerator with all Joey's favorite foods, and her last few days have been a whirlwind of Dr. Seuss books and toy cars. It has been almost enjoyable for her. It has let her revert to childhood, to a time when nothing mattered more in the world than fitting together the last piece of the dinosaur puzzle. Only now, Joey wants to play outside, by himself, and Alice has been reduced back to an adult, standing by the door and watching to make certain he doesn't get hurt. It's been the first time this week that she's had time to herself to think and reflect—something she has been desperately trying to avoid.

Her eyes flicker to where her own hand rests on the door, nearly trembling. Her mind desperately scrambles for something else to think of, to grasp onto and finally rests on the door itself, a door that leads to her meager, but incredibly compact home. Every home on Strandside North Terrace is like this, each a carbon copy of the next right down to the number of nails hammered into the concrete/straw composite walls. Even the furniture inside is likely to be identical, on account of the latest policy congress passed promoting the ownership of recyclable-friendly materials. It's not as if any of these last-chance scrabbles at order are likely to make a difference anyhow, but most people still feel the need to *do* something. *There must be something we can do*, is the resounding hymn that reverberates through every mind.

Alice doesn't want to grumble over her house, however. It is a home she is acutely fortunate to have, even when she looks up at it disdainfully, hating every concrete wedge slid in. Alice is a single-mother, and chores around the house are far less of a hassle than her Grandparents had to suffer through. The home is computer-operated and has been for the last fifteen years. Voice-recognition nodes are dispersed at periodic intervals, so that the house can "hear" her from any room. All Alice needs to do is say the word, literally, and she can switch on her washing machine while sitting on the couch surfing the web. Of course, she still has to stuff her clothes into the bin herself, Alice notes with the ghost of a smile. However,

despite these modern-day miracles, the houses in Alice's neighborhood are still cramped and the yards are postage stamps. It troubles Alice that Joey can't enjoy any of the more traditional miracles of life--the beauty of nature, or perhaps the thrill of visiting another country.

Her son has only ever seen a picture of the ocean, and the strict laws on gasoline make using a car only prudent for emergencies. Joey has seen only one forest in his six-years of life—three years ago when there were still birds to dot the trees. Alice knows that the closest forest now is miles away, but even if it were right across the street, she wouldn't want him to see it. She wants him to remember the woodlands that he reads about in his books instead of the ones that exist today.

There are hardly any trees left that aren't dead or decaying and it is unlikely that Joey would hear the single chirrup of a bird. It would be so silent—so deathly still—that Alice doubts either of them could bear it. Joey is a bright boy, if she took him to a forest, he would fit together the pieces as easily as his puzzles.

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Her eyes sweep from her son to the small suburban neighborhood, which she scrutinizes with a mixture of sadness and distaste. Despite their best efforts, the occupants of Strandside North Terrace have been unable to restore life into any of the withered Beech trees lining their road. The trees' bony grey branches poke at the sky like fingers, as if accusing the heavens for what they have come to. It's heart wrenching for Alice to see the empty skeletons of these trees every time she gazes over at the road at Strandside North Terrace. Sometimes she wishes she could take out a box of matches just to watch them smolder away.

It's ironic, Alice realizes with a small smile. Despite all the media hype and all the new purportless laws passed, little real progress has been made to stop what is happening. Every time she catches a clip of the news on her computer or prints out a newspaper to read, she unearths a new installment in the crisis.

“Cod, Salmon, and Other Fish Are Now Endangered,” One headline blares.

“There are Less Forests Than Ever Before,” another one wails.

“Can Americans Cut Down on Consumption?”

“Congress Approves a New Bill to Avoid Depletion of Resources.”

“More than Two-Thirds of the Natural World has been Destroyed.”

“95% of Coral in the Great Barrier Reef Gone.”

“Water Wars—Polluted Waters More Common Than Ever.”

“Population Out of Control.”

It's little wonder that the civilians in Alice's town have either fallen into a silent uneasiness, or have taken to an almost eerie calmness, declaring their undying faith in the scientists and politicians to work the problem out.

But so far, no one has. It's frightening to think that nothing has been changed around and made right again, other than a few half-hearted laws and policies pleading citizens to kindly recycle and choose more environmentally-friendly products. Sure, the government leaders have sworn to stop this "Biological Disaster", as they call it, but what progress have any of them made? Time is ticking with each breath Alice takes, and no miracle has been performed. Every time she blinks, the same world is stares back at her.

She glances up at the sky--such a brilliant and elaborate crisscross of sapphire blues and silver whites. She longs to grab Joey's small hand and leap up into the imaginary world that exists with every castle-like cloud cap. But she knows that it is as impossible as what the scientists are attempting to do. Too much damage has been done already, and no one can turn back the sun and make the days flit the other way.

The problem began with something that was inherently good. The bark of a tree discovered on a south pacific island of New Guinea found to have remedial properties that were able to prevent and treat numerous diseases, especially ones effecting developing countries. It was a miracle — fewer and fewer people were dying of diseases that now could be prevented. It was said that human beings had actually conquered death. Perhaps this was an overstatement, but they had certainly prolonged its effects.

However, this panacea led to something that hadn't been considered. Within the next ten years, the world population swelled to almost incomprehensible terms. With the decrease of deaths per year came an increase in births and an increase in people. No one bargained on a domino effect.

Nevertheless, it is possible that none of this would have caused such a catastrophic dilemma if not for another piece of the domino line that had been developing slowly for the last few decades. Twenty-five years ago, just about everyone owned a TV. Even when a family in an underdeveloped nation couldn't afford to put food on the table, television sets were often donated when it came time for richer families to upgrade. In much this same way, cars quickly found their way into the hands of those who previously couldn't afford one. An automobile's parts were bulky and difficult to reuse, and it seemed highly more ethical to donate a cars with working engines to the less fortunate—especially when there were so many-- than to leave them in junkyards to rust. But this also led to trouble. When a good portion of the world started filling up their tanks with gas each week, one can only imagine the amount of fossil fuels emitted into the air.

Americans used to be main cause for biological trouble on the earth due to over-consumption, but when the rest of the world begins to live like the Americans, there is real trouble.

Alice slowly shifts her weight and begins to move, stepping down the three small stairs and onto the grassy lawn. The grass is sparse—riddled in with dead leaves and dirt—but she doesn't care. Her clean white sneakers crunch the blades of grass, and soon her knees come down with them as she sinks down to the earth, to the soil packed in there so tightly. Alice finds it strange how *alive* the earth feels under her knees and hands, when everything else around her is dying. No more fish with glinting scales to crowd the ocean, no more birds with their clipped chirps to resonate through Strandside North Terrace, but the world's heart keeps on beating, weak but alive.

Alice suddenly sees her planet, her home, what it really has become; a diseased patient betrayed by its own organs. She closes her eyes, sinking her fingers into the grass; getting fresh dirt trapped under nails.

Joey hops over to her, winds his arms around her shoulders as far as they can go, asking what is wrong. She lifts her eyes up and forces a smile, his huge brown eyes questioning. And she can't tell him because she doesn't want him to worry over things he can't control. Even though they're saying it will only be a few days now—maybe four, maybe five—she can't tell him. He deserves to enjoy the rest his life, even if that rest is just a few more days before the world comes crashing down. Tears prick from behind her eyes as she looks at his round, six-year-old face—a fact she'll never see grown up.

This is her fault. Alice blames herself and she blames everyone else on this planet for keeping a bright boy from a life he deserves. But she pats Joey gently on the back and tells him she is fine, tells him to back to his game, that she is okay. She hastily wipes away the tears, her vision no longer blurred so that she can see every painfully clear detail of 148 Strandside North Terrace, the decaying grey beech trees tattooed into her sight, a reminder of what lays in store for her.

Afterward:

The inspiration for my story came from a poem written by T.S. Eliot, called Hollow Men. This poem ends with the prophetic and ominous lines, “This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.” These lines not only were what inspired the title of my story; they were also what fueled my thought-process and ignited my imagination to wonder how such a world could be. Most people picture an apocalyptic ending to be something like an enormous explosion—a last fit of fireworks at the end the day. However, I began to imagine a different sort of end. After searching online, I found a thought-provoking article that seemed to tie in perfectly with the concept of the world withering slowly away as opposed to a “grand finale” explosion. The article, called “Earth Will Expire by 2050”, was published four years ago and was written by Mark Townsend and Jason Burke. This news article warns readers “the human race is plundering the planet at a pace that outstrips its capacity to support life.” By fusing these two concepts in my mind, I was left with the bare skeleton of my story to start to build on. I knew that if the rest of the world lived as Americans did, consuming more resources than the earth can sustain, the result would be a slow but certain finish.

I chose to give my short story a personal twist by letting this “end of the world” scenario to be viewed by my protagonist, Alice, who is simply an average American helpless to what is going on her around her. I wanted to give her a life that both mirrors problems that are common to today and problems that could arise in the future. Additionally, while writing my story I posed the question that if the world ran out of resources and/or energy, how would governments react? I decided that a government would impose multiple laws to regulate oil consumption, but also decided that these laws would most likely make little difference since they would be imposed only after the world began to realize that it was necessary. In addition, I came the conclusion that if forests were destroyed and other resources were becoming increasingly scarce, homes would be made of cheaper and more plentiful materials such as concrete and plant fibers, as opposed to wood or plastic. With all of these ideas in my mind, I set about writing “Not with a Bang but a Whimper”—my interpretation of how the world could be fifty years from now.