

Son of the Apocalypse

The sun through the glass felt like a flame on my pale face. I could not help but wonder where the memories had gone, and where the winters in the mountains had escaped to. Like fireflies scattering in the fall, the fleeting memories were no more than unconscious dreams. My mind, a mass of thoughts untold and impossible to interpret, took its vacation at the most unpleasant times.

Miss Johnson, we have your son here.

If it weren't for the rays beaming down upon my head, there would have been a better explanation for these events, but I must shamefully confess that nothing in the world could have stopped me at that moment from falling into a deep trance beneath layer upon layer of coats, Mylar vests, and the hefty bike helmet, that with its weight of several pounds made my tired head swivel on my neck and my entire body swim in a sea of warmth. The room was hot as hell.

Your son, he is not improving.

We loved the city, even though the streets were crowded as ever, and the death rate had soared since we were children. No matter what, the constant reminder of the protection of all that was around us became more comforting than silence on a summer's day. The park was littered with people, seeming to dance around you as you walk. There was never a dearth of people, not even years ago when we first moved here. Now, the ever-present cameras could be there too, watching, if there was ever need for help. They are here to help.

Ma'am, you can go see him now, if that's what you want.

Technology, the king. It was what made this place, New York City. From humble beginnings, to today's teeming metropolis of beauty and life. Life...

...He's alive ma'am.

It was only a few years ago that things began to go sour, when my son was born. It was an August afternoon, and I was the happiest mother at St. Mary's Hospital, where my parents and grandparents and my own self had been born years ago. I took him in my arms for the first time, and named him Caesar. His middle name, Augustus, after the sweltering hot month. That day, the twentieth of the month, was when the city closed as well, the gates shut upon the very hour of his birth, with the tolling of the mid-day bells. In his year, there had been famine outside, disease, and all other sorts of atrocities. If I had known much of the world, I would have left that day, with my child in hand; however, in these circumstances, I was such a young thing, and the city seemed a perfect place to raise a child. There was the

park, the careful security in our building, and the plethora of jobs and schools to pass the time. If I had known of the corruption that bred within our majestic home, I would have walked out of the hospital at first notice. I never had the chance. Winter never came that year.

He's burning up, though, a fever of 103. It's the drugs we've given him to calm down I suppose, perhaps you could lend us some advice...

It was during the cycle of the Sturgeon moon, and it was very full in the sky. I remember the moon, ballooning outside the gates the years before, soaring with happiness above all of us, smiling down upon all who revered its blessed beams. It seemed larger than ever before those days. Since that day, I have not seen the moon hung above the city like a Christmas ornament as it always did. Through the smog, there was always a hint of light, but the lights of the city, pumping on and off like a giant machine all night, did not permit my eyes the sight. The smokestacks, I shamefully admit, pumped out the musty cloud, and I do believe now it was my fault, for I did allow them to do their job as long as they had been there.

*...what type of blood, ma'am? Miss Johnson, please pick up. We need your blood. Excuse my intrusion into your household. **Please** telephone immediately. The number is 111-199-3657.*

The sharp demand of the beeping message machine awoke me from my sleep.

“In trouble again,” I grinned to myself, blissfully ignorant. The message played over in my head, and I, without absorbing a word, grabbed several coins of spare change from the counter top, fashioned of recycled things, as much of our home was. It must have been the school calling. The bus was the best way to get there.

My son was not the angel the teacher expected him to be. After having taught me for all twelve years, Mrs. Mulberry was quite used to well-behaved children, clean and well-groomed, and ready for a day of learning. Upon meeting the young Caesar, her assumptions quickly dissolved; her opinion of myself and my family named was dissolved from the day he entered her class, and horrible marks in spelling ensued for the little boy. I can not truly say it was his fault. He only had an open mind. It was not all about the computers, he used to say, musing out loud at his mother, myself, trying to listen and catch our stop on the bus at the same time. He said that with each class he spent on the computer, his eyes were melting. With great expression and enthusiasm, he described the horrors of a boring day of school, and the entire bus would laugh under their breath. He said he could better his time by finding a new way to power the computers for the world. To spread out of the city. His favorite subject was history.

My sister always said he was born in the wrong time, she said he should have been born fifty years before, and grown up in an age when the city was only the beginning. When he could have migrated to the city and fell in love with everything that it was made of. He would have wanted freedom, but there was simply no space for his ideas in the vast mass that

was our little city. If there had been energy enough for all of the world, the city would have been open to communication, and open for citizens to come and go as they pleased, which, in times such as those, was a luxury that no one could afford. The walls that held us in, arms that hoarded all they could consume. Gasoline, oil, electricity, all pushed into the few miles we claimed as the civilized world. I could not even fathom how I lost the outside world at the time. Now, in remembering, I do believe that all of us, all citizens would have wanted to leave the iron gate stationary and open, where we could feast our eyes upon the earth, and the Hudson river that rushed just outside the massive metallic guard. That was all he had wanted to see.

Joanne also mentioned that once, when she had been watching him, on a day when I can say that I was working in a factory of which I will not speak the name, for it is a shame for me to mention such a place where our energy was used in such amounts. She had taken a walk with the boy, lead him around the city, and shown him what he should have known his whole life. At nine years old, he was smart, and strong in his convictions. He tried to convince me of Martians living among us. We all knew that was untrue, but a child that he was, stayed by his story, until I promised to believe him when he cried that they were surrounding the city. Joanne lead him above the tallest skyscraper, and showed him the minuscule Empire State building, where his fathers before him had worked. In the window's glass so often shined by city employees, he saw his own reflection against the backdrop of sky, clear and blue on a spring morning. Tears surely came to his eyes, and my sister came to console him, and brought him to the factory. He told me that night that he wanted to go outside the city, and see the sky for real, the whole thing. He asked me where it all ended. I spoke the words that we were supposed to say: "Where the buildings end."

"Joanne," I mumbled into the receiver of my cell phone, "I think Caesar is in trouble at school again. Can you watch the house for me?"

"Sure thing," she agreed. It was at such a time that, indeed, it was necessary to keep one's house clear of robbers and such. The oil that lit our lamps and energy that powered the iron was so precious we could have been robbed at any time of the day, and been left with nothing. Our home ran on oil, and for the time being, the liquid ran through the veins of the city, and pumped it up with such life that all could run smoothly, dug from some ancient well in another country and another time. It did not matter where it came from, only that we had it here and now.

I donned my outer jacket. It was radiation safe, for it was not so cold outside any more, even in the winter when the regular lamps were replaced with feeble Christmas lights and a tree of tinsel in the square. No, the sun would beat down upon our heads, and before we knew it, we were all dying from the heat, from the exposure, and from sheer exasperation. Although the jacket was just a precaution now, one day not too far off, we would all wear

them, or die outdoors. Everything would be alright, is what the mayor told us, for we would all persevere and keep our city from loss of power. The helmets served the same purpose as the coats, and each one was branded with a code: the government had to keep all of us safe, and at any cost. I stood and swayed under the immense weight of all my garments, but stumbling to the door, I made my way from the simplistic apartment to the crowded street. Eyelids drooping, nearly every passenger on the elevator suffered from a severe lack of ambition on a day such as today. I, assuming the least bit of trouble, lingered for a moment in the elevator before making my way to the lobby.

Our complex had suffered many losses over the years, in the years before that day the wind farm powering our building was tore down when the government found cause to believe that the spinning beacons of energy would interfere with signals of air planes, helicopters, television. Not many transports exited the city, only to find oil wells, and to bring back the sweet juice of life they supplied.

I flipped my portable phone from my side pocket, impossibly small and louder than ever. It glowed in the daylight, and my garments began to weigh me down as I stepped outside. The number was stuck in my mind, my sleep had glued it in place. *111-199-3657*. It was not familiar to me, but knowing my son, some remote teacher or professor had given me their number to call, so as to immediately reach my juvenile delinquent and bring him away as soon as possible. I dialed in lethargy, as the bus swept into view on the non-existent horizon, beckoning me to step into the most air-conditioned place on the planet, it seemed. The cool air pumped onto my face, as I was dying to pull all my garments off and cool down outdoors. This was quite impossible. I would have to be cold in the bus that would shuttle me, for it served its purpose well.

“Hello, this is Caesar's mother, I'm on my way to pick up my son,” I said without hesitation upon hearing a click of the receiver on the other end.

“Ma'am, we have been calling for hours,” the voice stated angrily, breathing the words heavily through a thick English accent, “Your son is in a great deal of trouble.”

“I know, I know, I'll be there soon,” I replied, not detecting the hint of fear that lingered in his voice.

“I don't think you understand ma'am. Your son, Caesar, is in the hospital.”

My eyes must have been shocked into place, and at that moment all I could see was the little boy I once knew, lying asleep in the hospital. Light flashed before my eyes, and if the bus hadn't driven past a mirrored sky scraper, I would have sworn it was God coming down to tell me to get my sorry self out of there and to my son, where I could be of use.

“What happened?” I rasped, my voice wavering as strongly as possible, for fear of

attracting attention on the bus.

“He broke into a building ma'am, he was breaking a fifth story window when we got to him. He managed to make it to the ground, but it doesn't look good,” the man hesitated, although his tone was severe before comforting, “It was the old state building.”

“What hospital?” I choked through a tongue tied at the throat. *The old state building.*

“St. Mary's on Park Street. Be at the front Emergency entrance. That's where I will be. He is asleep now, but it's not looking good at all ma'am. Very bad cuts in his arms, bruised head, and it looks like...”

“No more. I'll be there.”

The bus jolted to a stop before Saint Mary's Hospital. I thanked the driver and he, in quiet sympathy, gave me a hesitant smile that spread across his face, accentuating the wrinkles that were splattered about his eyes. The building was white, so as not to attract so much heat. If that was a true method of prevention of fire and whatnot, I am not sure. One thing was for sure: our mayor proclaimed the terrors of using solar power as immoral, using the sun for our benefit. It must be oil, he said on the news, shrugging when there was hardly enough to survive. The sun, he said, could only be the life source of plants, and we humans are far above that source. Far above living free.

The statuesque complex, towering above it's neighbors, stuck out like a sore thumb. Rather, a very fine thumb, erect in a square of mangled and deformed fingers, all twisted and modern buildings, encroaching upon the one holy thumb that was St. Mary's.

At the front door, a man with dark brown hair, a cool expression of boredom and annoyance on his face, and a nose quite slightly sinister in a way that suited his young face well. I decided he must have been the man I spoke with on the phone, for his expression told all.

“Ma'am, right this way,” he spoke clearly and in a way that showed it was as respectful as he could muster.

The white corridors were overly sterile, with a smell of something, oddly like the museums I used to bring Caesar to when he was small, full of dead animals and old bones and things. I used to love visiting those places. Now the smell filled my nostrils with an undying hate and bitter taste in the back of my throat. Utterly misplaced in the building full of officials in white, I followed the man close behind, in a shroud of oddity, disguised as the insane patient, still wearing all required outdoor clothing that made me clearly lacking in experience at the hospital.

“Here he is, ma'am.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled, taking off my helmet to reveal a matted layer of hair that made the man glare in shock, and then leave with an expression of disgust on his lips and wrinkled nose.

In the bed across the room, my son lay, staring above him into a dark ceiling that did not smile back in the slightest.

“Caesar. It's Mom,” I began to fumble over my words, “I want to...could you tell me...w-what did you do?”

He was unresponsive, and I could not understand his stillness, the look on his face, so white and blank, like he had done nothing at all. His arms were, indeed cut, as if he had been impaled with a multitude of thorns that had no mercy for the boy. Beside the bed there were shards of glass, bloodied, and threatening in a tray next to some complicated-looking tools. Upon his gentle forehead, I did observe the largest bruise on his body, to my understanding, that encroached upon his swollen eyes, wet with the salt of tears. I wiped his eyes for him.

“Baby, what happened?”

A nurse in white entered the room, making sure the IV was working correctly.

“Do you need my blood for anything, anything at all? I'll give it,” I said.

“We are doing alright now ma'am, there's not much we can do.”

I sat with him for hours, thinking of the days when he was small, a boy of nine with an imagination a million times his size, and constantly wondering things that only the most entitled minds took time to ponder. A spark, the light of my life, just flickering on a hard mattress, losing some brilliance every second. We could have been a family, he and I, together, somewhere safe and free. The city was no place for us, and I will forever regret the days we spent, his father and I, looking for housing in the city, looking at apartments and condos and two-family houses that would all lead up to this very moment. The bells would toll in an unhallowed and empty chorus several times before I spoke again.

“We are very alone, without a friend in the world, you and I.”

He looked up, eyes in constant motion, never tedious, never tiring. His had was like marble, cold in mine, breathing the heat away with every minute.

“It's over, Mom. I'm sorry,” he gasped.

I knew what he wanted to see, just once. I knew the life he led inside his little head and I knew that every day in this place had been a curse upon his head, and today it had left its mark.

“Mom, I just wanted you to know,” he mumbled, below the echoes in the hall, “that the world could have been better... but they screwed up. Making it, I mean they put us in the wrong place. That's why we are...dying.”

I began to release tears, trying not to let him see. We were all dying. He realized, and he accepted our fate, our doom before any of us. What better way to die, with the sky in view for the last time? The doctors, nurses, the men who worked outside in the day's sun didn't know any more than I had. He, that child I had raised, was the harbinger of what was to come, and the story of what had past. A little burst of energy, soon to be lost to the world. And I, for the first time that day, had to accept that horrible fact. Here and now was not enough, for our city, our beautiful city, would one day die as we all do. Tears steaming down my face, like a long lost waterfall beyond the ocean, fell upon his face and dripped off and disappeared. I bent down to let him kiss my cheek. His lips were cold.

Caesar Augustus Johnson, aged sixteen, died yesterday at St. Mary's Hospital downtown. Funeral to be announced. Cause of death unknown. Found by police early morning yesterday in critical condition. Leaves surviving mother and aunt. May he rest in peace.

Afterword

The background for this story, some fifty years in the future, was inspired by our increasing dependence on oil. In 2001, it was reported that imported or foreign oil accounted for 55% of United States consumption. This figure is supposed to increase by 70% by the year 2020.¹ Imagining the future in fifty years, I can see that we will not have enough oil to run our entire country. After all, we are now fighting a war simply because it is taking place in an oil-rich country. My question is: what next?

In a world of increasing globalization, we have less and less connection with people around the world, in my opinion. With e-mail and instant messaging, there is no reason to leave your computer, for you can talk to people from around the world. The walled-in city is a metaphor for our more and more private society, and the loneliness of our world today.

As for cities shutting down, it is plausible that in the future (or the future of this story) that one day the entire city of New York could lose power. With air-conditioning running every day, and global warming heating up the earth, there are multitudes of power outages across the nation. The temperature average has risen from 1 to 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit over the last century. It has progressed more quickly over the past years, being 1.36 degrees above average in 2005, and 1.28 degrees above average in 1998.²

The world is heading somewhere unpleasant, and it is up to us to fix that. I believe that the basis of my story is the reality of today, and predictions of tomorrow.

1 <http://www.hybridcars.com/oil.html>

2 <http://www.washingtonpost.com>, *World Temperatures Keep Rising with a Hot 2005*; Eilperin, Juliet; October 13, 2005