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Stepping Into the Light

By Marlana B. Fireman

Gerda leans in close. Her lips are slightly sparkling in the dim light that casts horizontal beams through the air vent. The tip of her nose almost brushes mine. I consider the distance, how her nose is wider and more snug against her face. It doesn't create a barrier between us. Mine does. It protrudes into space. It casts shadows, it is prominent. It keeps us apart.

Gerda tilts her head, and then my nose fits right next to hers. It is that easy, just with the tilt of her head. Her bouncy brown curls tumble over her shoulder and brush against mine. Goosebumps trickle from my collarbone to the tips of my fingers. Her lips are so close to mine, not touching, but so close. Her lips smell like mint lip balm, and her breath smells like warm, fresh coffee. Her perfectly shaped Cupid's bow traces where my top lip ends.

"Are you afraid?" she asks. Her lips brush against mine with this question. I breathe in through my mouth, filling myself up with whatever comes out of her.

"What is there to be afraid of?" It sounds like a quip, but it is not. In our situation, some feel overwhelmingly terrified. I can understand where they are coming from. We might all die very soon. But we might also live and die naturally, and our next generation will inherit the knowledge that the world will in fact end with a fortuitous crash. We inherited it from our parents, who inherited it from our grandparents, who inherited it from their grandparents. Those people, our great-great-grandparents, were the ones who learned of this impending death. Not the death of humans. The death of all things. Their clergyman saw it in a vision; the sun dancing closer and closer to him and his people until they all burned alive, scorching from the outside in.

They believed they could outrun it. I believe we cannot. But since I am young and the people in charge are old, I am stuck here. We are stuck here, underground, existing within the confines of strictness. Protection, as they call it.

That is why I shimmied into this air vent. Because outside of this air vent, everything is beige and smells like surgical gowns. Because in exactly 59 minutes, Gerda and I will need to say our prayers and be accounted for in our respective blocs.

"This was all created by fear," I say, "and it doesn't seem to serve us very well."

“Do you hate it?” Gerda asks. She shifts her body against mine, and there is electricity in my guts.

“I’d like to burn it all down,” I say. And then I tilt my head and press my lips to hers. I can feel her smile. She smiles so big she has to stop kissing me back, like when you cry so hard you just can’t close your mouth.

Inevitably the conversation turns to the death of all things. We cannot avoid it, no one can. There is no self-actualization in this situation. Not when we are all waiting to die at any moment. Not when we are reminded all the time that everything we know was built as a response to fear. I kiss her. My nose is cold, and I shift away with the thought of what it might feel like to have the sun touch my skin. I lean in and our noses squish together.

“Sorry,” I say, feeling my cheeks flush. Instinctively I try to shield my nose with my fingers. I can’t because we’re in an air vent, and one of my arms is pinned beneath my body, asleep. And the other is resting on the small of Gerda’s back. Moving it would be self-flagellation.

“I like your nose,” Gerda says, tapping it with her finger. I gently lead her hand back to my shoulder because the spot where her hand had been is freezing cold now.

“I like yours,” I tell her. “But I can see you’re spending too much time in the imitation sun room.” Gerda just smiles and taps her finger to her own nose, which is so red it makes her look like a nymph who fell asleep in the light.

“I don’t know why you’re so self-conscious about your nose.” Gerda runs her finger from the space between my eyebrows down to my Cupid’s bow. I can feel where her nail trails and trips up at the bridge of my nose.

“It makes me stand out,” I say. A troubled look sprouts on Gerda’s face, and she leans in, pressing her lips to the tip of my nose.

Ah! A Roman nose! My history teacher had proclaimed when I came into the classroom on the first day. *Like King David. Like Josephus!* Every pair of eyes in the room twisted toward me, pointed, narrow. I’d put my fingers up to my face, like I’d done a thousand times before, to avoid further embarrassment. I kept my hand there until everyone was finished craning their necks to look at me. My fingers smelled like graphite, and then I was equally worried about having graphite on my face. The teacher had lifted his finger, as if to touch my face, and then recoiled at the last moment.

“That’s why I like you,” Gerda says. And her smile makes me wish I didn’t feel so terrible, because I want to love it, if not for her.

Attention. Evening roll call will commence in fifteen minutes. Please be in your designated blocs. Thank you.

“We never get enough time.” I push my face toward the grate and peek out of the air vent. People are milling up and down the halls, bidding each other good night and moving with intention toward the sleeping quarters, scriptures in hand.

“What if we went somewhere else next time?” Gerda asks, beginning to shimmy herself out of the vent. “Like outside.”

“*Outside* outside?” I ask, astonished. No one in this shelter has ever been outside. The last of those that had died years ago, and now we only have stories. I’ve never seen a tree before. “I might know a way,” Gerda says, holding her hand out to help me climb down the rungs of the ladder that lead up to our vent. I can’t say anything, I just stare at her. “I thought you weren’t afraid.” She says it with a teasing tone, but she is not smiling. She is backed against the door, looking up at me, her eyes stony and determined. She is so still; her beautiful wide-set eyes are dark, squinting, unflinching.

“I’m not. If you know a way... okay.” I resign. I trust Gerda with my life, despite the chaos.

“Okay,” she says, her mischievous grin blooming. I love the gap between her bottom teeth. It can only be seen when she smiles in the biggest way; when she’s elated, or laughing loud and hard. I bend down, and she takes a moment to run her fingers through my very straight, very black hair that always finds a way to tangle itself in my necklace. Then she kisses me quickly and says,

“I love you.” Before exiting and shutting the door behind her, she leaves room for me to breathlessly climb all the way down and count to the predetermined 72 seconds before going my own way.

Tucked into my bed, wrapped in a beige blanket and feeling like a pea in a pod, I stare up at the ceiling. I am unlucky enough to sleep right below one of the status lights. It blinks, green, green, green, green, forever, until we die. *If the light turns red, they tell us, it’s happening. You know what to do.* We’ve done it a thousand times before, drills, for when the light is yellow. *It’s happening* echoes in my head. I’m not so sure I know what *it* is anymore. They say we might never feel it, we might not know when it happens, but the light will always know. Sometimes I look up at the light for hours, willing it to stop blinking or even turn red, just to know that maybe all of this hasn’t been in vain. It never changes though. It just blinks green forever.

Often I will drift off to sleep and then wake up again, still on my back. My eyes find the light immediately, and it starts all over again. I watch it until I can’t keep my eyes open, and then I watch the imprint of it on the inside of my eyelids.

Tonight, I don't will it to change. I just accept that this is it, green until I'm dead. Green until the last thought I ever might think about Gerda, how she somehow creates her own internal light in this place. Maybe I'll be dead at 100 years old but hopefully more like 80 or 85. My mind begins to spiral about my future. Thinking about if I'll have to marry a man, if I ever want to be married at all. Gerda is really all I want, but it's not allowed. Even though I think we would be great at raising a kid, if they'd ever assign us one. And if I don't marry but I'm good enough to raise someone, which I'm sure I'm not, I could be like Alison. Just raising someone on my own, meeting Gerda in the air vent until one of us dies. No, no, no, they just keep having us all procreate so there are people to take care of us when we get old, if we get old, while we all wait to die. We could just die off. It wouldn't be so bad, if they're so sure *it's* happening.

Red.

I lay even more still and hold my breath. Is that what I thought it was? My eyes search the ceiling frantically, but it's all black. And then I see it flash again, red. The three of us, together, in silence. There is a moment of absolute stillness, like what I imagine a black hole to be, between me and the red light and whatever is coming toward us.

What happens next is nothing short of chaos. Sirens blare, forcing my ears into pulsating pain. The room is quickly bathed in a spinning red light. Everyone is flipping their blankets back, slipping their feet into shoes, hustling children down the hall. The sirens cry and cry, and then the children start too.

"Alison? Alison?" I call. Alison is my FPF—female parental figure. Everyone's faces are black and then bright red, black, then bright red. The air has been sucked from the room while I try to search the faces for Alison's beauty mark. It sets her apart, high on her cheekbone. Whenever I see a face, the room goes dark again and when the red returns the face is gone. Replaced by the side of someone else's head, someone's arm reaching for another's hand or nothing at all.

"Let's go!" someone says, slamming a hand against the doorframe.

"Alison?" I call again. "Is this real?" I ask no one and everyone. In perfect time, an automated voice booms above the chaos.

This is not a drill. This is not a drill. Move to the nearest perma-shelter. This is not a drill.

"Eiza!" she calls back. I reach through the dark for her and she finds my sleeve, pulling me through the crowd. Everyone is rushing, like a river swelling in a thunderstorm. Children wail on the hips of their parental fig-

ures, clutching at tiny fistfuls of fabric. We all fall into the crowd. The main hallway is filled with people. I've never seen so many people in one place, everyone jogging and breathing shallow, terrified breaths. I whip my head around desperately searching the crowd from face to face to find Gerda. Her sleeping quarters run perpendicular to mine and so I did what I would do if I was unafraid.

"I love you!" I shout to Alison. I squeeze her hand and look her in the eyes. And then I let go and turn away. The crowd begins to carry her with them down the stairways that lead deep into the bowels of the shelter.

"Eiza!" She shouts, I can see her round, moony face popping up through the crowd, eyes huge and shocked and deceived, until she is ushered down the stairs.

I sidestep down a narrow service hallway and find the entrance to Gerda's family quarters.

"Gerda! Gerda?" I say into the blackness. Whatever happens, I want to be with her. The room looks empty in between flashes of darkness and red. "Gerda?" I call again. I am stricken with dread. Perhaps she abandoned everything and went down with the crowds, or maybe she went without me. I wonder which one is her bed. If I could just find it, I could smell her hair one more time. Just as I begin to kick myself for risking it, wondering if I can make it down the stairways before we're all burnt to a terrible crisp, a hand wraps tightly around my wrist.

"Oh my—Eiza!" Gerda almost smashed her face into mine, our noses pushing against each other and our lips parted in shock. "Let's go."

I follow her down another service hallway where we see a young man ushering people through an inconspicuous door marked *Cleaners' Closet*. Gerda runs toward the man and grins at him.

"Gerda," he says with a smile.

"This is my girlfriend, Eiza," she says. She swoops her arm through the air like I am a fancy gold trophy on a stand. I try to smile, but I'm afraid I might vomit.

"Hello," he says with shocking ease. We follow the others into the closet and down a dusty cellar hatch that looks as if it had never been opened.

"Down?" I yell over the continuing sirens. "Is out down?"

"No!" Gerda says, laughing. "But we have to go down to go up!"

At this point, nothing makes sense. I follow her, almost tumbling down the stairs, fast with buckling knees. I hear the cellar door shut above us. We are in absolute darkness. The only thing keeping me from falling

down the stairs is the repetitive tapping of everyone else's feet and pure adrenaline.

"That's everyone!" The man calls.

"Heard that," the others echo. We all end up in a cluster at the bottom of the steps. In front of us is a heavy vault door with a circular knob. A couple of the men pull at the knob until the door creaks open, revealing another set of steps.

"Let's go!" The man calls. We begin to ascend, many of us taking the stairs two at a time, yearning toward whatever is at the top. I've pulled ahead of Gerda, and I look back. She is right behind me, leaping up the steps with a luminous grin. She has tears running down her face.

"Are you okay?" I ask over my shoulder, terrified to break our stride.

"I'm so happy," she says, her voice breaking.

Those in front of me begin to slow, and soon we're grouped at the top of the steps. It's almost completely dark, except for a lighted square above us.

"Is this—are you sure? Is this real?" I ask Gerda. Her face flushes. She reaches around and grabs onto my hip.

"What does it matter?" she asks, grinning. "We could die either way..."

"Who's the tallest?" someone calls.

"Eiza," Gerda whispers. "It's you."

"It's me!" I say, emboldened by the thought of choosing death for myself. I throw myself up the remainder of the stairs and see the man gesturing to a lever. I pull on it hard and the square of light breaks open, showering us in gold. We help one another up, grasping at wrists and elbows. Last, they pull me up, and my feet leave the dusty ground for the last time. The outside is incomparable to anything I'd ever seen. It glistens, it's gold. Gerda takes my hand. The sky is not a ceiling, it's endless, and it's blue. Just then, water begins to fall from it. From nowhere, from everywhere, like magic. It feels icy cold and magical on my skin. I've never felt something so exhilarating.

"This is amazing," I say, beginning to choke on my words. To my right there is this thing, absolutely gigantic, so high up in the air my eyes cannot focus on the top of it. Nothing has ever been that big, nothing can be... But, it's there. Right there, luscious and stretching and a green I could never describe, a green that moves. Tears begin to fall from my eyes. I squeeze Gerda's hand even harder to remind her that I'm here. To remind myself that she's here, next to me, because I can't take my eyes off the sky. This place, a vast kaleidoscope of color. Colors I'd never seen before, only heard

of. Colors sort of like what we had before, but so much richer and brighter. So bright, they must taste like candy. I look at her for just a moment, and she glows in the sunshine. Her sunburned nose makes her look perfectly at home with her face stretched upward. She opens her eyes and looks at me in a way I'd never seen. Like there is no way that anyone else could feel love right now because I have it all. She gestures up again, and I turn my face back toward the sapphire blue beyond.

“Hey,” she says. “Don’t blink.”