

A person with long hair, wearing a dark hooded coat, stands with their back to the camera in a dense forest. The trees are tall and thin, and the ground is covered in green and brown foliage. The lighting is soft, creating a moody atmosphere.

SWEET, ROTTEN TALK

SONYA FROSSINE

*W*e lived, surrounded by the unending grass that needled its way through our floorboards, bursting out of the ground in small, wickedly green bouquets, to where we thought we could hide. It was inescapable, stretching out to reach the edges of our earth, folding away just as the night was felled. And, yet we kept doing just what God intended for us to do. We ate and we fed and we said our prayers every night. Somehow, we lived.

My mother said that God was in everything: in the ground that we pulled out, in the seeds that we put back in; in the soot-stained marks on the stove, in the rain of the evenings. Though sometimes, it wasn't so simple – she told us that He was never in the dark, damp patches growing on our cotton plants, never in the knotted words sewn into the pages of certain books.

One of my mother's obsessions was her ceramic, intricately designed china plates. They were often painted in red or orange ink, with crude drawings of fruits and flowers overlapping each other, coloured with soft shades of fairytale pink and peach. But we could never eat on those – it was always from white, faceless plates where we would have breakfast, eyes still clouded and dewy from the slowly rising sun.

She would make breakfast out of meat, potatoes – whatever was on hand. Sometimes, it wasn't enough, so I'd have to share a meal with my younger brother, Matthew. Our misshapen metal spoons would scrape against the one plate, the only noise in the room, as we sat, staring at the gleaming glass cage the special china was trapped in. The short, stubby legs of the cabinet had been discreetly moved over an inch to cover a particularly bad patch of greenery coming through the floor, though its shadow was always visible in the mornings.

We'd always wake up in time to watch the slowly turning body in the sky as she pulled her bedcovers away, taking back the hazy slashes of pink and tangerine, leaving nothing but an expanse of sickly blue skin behind.

It happened once – the disease. In the dead of one tangled-tree winter, Matthew's right arm turned whiter and whiter until it looked blue, like ice. I had seen pictures - it looked same as the pages in the glossy Atlas I once found, when my dad was throwing out old things from the basement. The inside seam of his forearm bulged blue, and even after our parents had warned him over and over again, he scratched it. It split just like I imagined the wet, slick surface of an iceberg would.

No blue would spill from the bump - just a dark red splash, half-solid, like melting ice. I didn't think I could ever forget such a sharp, ugly thing, dripping down the side of his juvenile arm - not with all the glossiest pages of the whitest cotton or clouds or icebergs in the world.

In the mornings, after we had eaten, we all did what needed doing. We pulled the grass out in long gashes against the hillside, patting the umber wounds down with smooth, snowy cotton seeds. I would usually neaten up the barn, hanging up the sharp, rusted tools on the hooks, while Matthew would help mother in the house, wiping down the tabletops and polishing the plates.

But that afternoon, there was something else that needed to be done. Three of our cows had escaped, leaving nothing behind but the agape mouth of a gate and a trail of wide, dewy hoofprints that had pressed the grass into the mud in dead, wet patches.

Everyone was occupied. Father had to plow the next row of cotton. Matthew was too young to go out on his own. And of course, mother could hardly bring herself to go outside, much less step past the porch, every crevice of which was threaded with grass. It was something I had to do. If I didn't, the cows could have run to the lake, stepping onto the rapidly thinning ice, breaking the surface and falling through, swallowed whole by the deep, blue mouth.

I took off not long after breakfast, walking, as the tractor was still in several rusted, frozen pieces since last winter. Father was reluctant to even go near the thing, much less spend a precious afternoon repairing it.

Wearing an old honey-coloured sweater of my mother's, I followed the wilting patches of limp grass the herd had left in their wake. Clouds gathered to spectate above me as the hours fell away. They circled in white, puffy rings, gazing down at the stranger wandering away from home; and yet, that morning chill never quite cleared away.

I must've been walking until midday, the hoofprints having long since been lost in the springy, dry weeds, when I found the garden, perched precisely on the horizon. I stopped, speechless at the strange conclave of trees and flowers. I thought I was in the middle of nowhere – not where things couldn't live, but where nothing ever wanted to.

Ambling closer in slow, unsure footsteps, I approached with wide eyes, my body brought to an acute awareness by a rush of adrenaline. The front of the garden was framed by several unmoving umbrella trees, pale green threads of leaves hanging over the front like an alien curtain. As I came closer, staring at the blood-red droplets of flowers just beginning to bloom at the trunks of the trees, I realised there was a boy standing in the knee-high, silvery grass in the center of the oasis, drinking from a teacup, his body turned away from me. With another soft step, muffled by the thick grass now crawling over the ground, my shaky shadow accidentally

brushed against his body, making him whip his head around, electric eyes hitting mine through the drooping vines.

I didn't understand what it meant at the time – the icy coating. I could only tell he that didn't possess a human glance – but rather eyes clouded in a cracked, pale blue film, which stretched past what should've been white. For a minute, we stared at each other, blinking, our breathing the only sound in the surreal half-silence.

"Hello?" he asked, both hands still cradling the teacup. He wore a flowing sky-stained shirt and shorts, at first surprising when I thought about the cold of the day, but completely appropriate for the mild heat of the enclosed garden. I brushed the day's dirt off my sweater, shifting from one foot to the other, still behind the curtain.

"Oh," I said, slipping unexpectedly over the words, voice soaked in sweat, trying again, "oh, hey there."

He gasped, crookedly raising his eyebrows for a moment, head not quite turned in my direction, before speaking, a semblance of an amused smile curving his words. "Are you lost?"

"Sorta," I replied, noticing his foreign, elegant pronunciation. I thought back to the time my mother had given me a talk about manners and how important it was to use them around strangers, struggling to remember what she had told me to say before the tail-end of a forgotten phrase reappeared in my head. "'Scuse me, but was there ever a lake 'round here?"

He screwed up his mouth, lifting a hand to wipe at a bead of sweat that had welled up at his temple. "Sorry, that I can't say." He paused, broken eyes rolling aimlessly in their sockets. "But you must be so tired. Please, would you like to take a seat?"

I came forward, the pale, leafy limbs of the umbrella trees brushing past me, cooing as I stepped into the garden. He gestured listlessly at the small, round table and two deck chairs off to the side as I sat in one of them, mesmerised by the scenery around us. There were the buds from before, each red droplet surrounded by a ring of white, juvenile sprouts, whose sweet scent mingled with the bunches of ripe fruit hanging just above us. Amongst round pairs of gleaming cherries and blushing apples were heavy, lumpy crimson globes – something I hadn't seen before.

He sank into the chair next to me, his hair curling like unruly, uncut grass, a shade lighter than his skin. I tucked my legs up onto my chair, trying to avoid the long grass that tickled my knees as he stretched over, placing his now-empty teacup on the table with a clink of glass. A smile sprouted on his face, strange through the haze of alien-blue eyes.

"They're called pomegranates," he said, one finger languidly extending to a point just above my head. As I stared up to glance at the large fruit hanging over me, the branch cracked, dropping the oddity into my lap. I jumped as he leaned towards me, snatching the fruit from between my legs.

A second later, he had suddenly hit the fruit over his knee, breaking the two halves away from each other with a bony crack. Dark, red pinpricks stabbed his pale clothes, staining his fair hair, a droplet even hitting his eye. A grin crept over his face, now satisfied, unblinking, as he hummed the remnant of some saccharine song.

"Here," he said, offering me one of the pieces. The wet, bloody mouth made me reel back, its strong, sugary smell burning in the air.

"I – I'm sorry," I stammered, beginning to stand up, "I have to go."

He furrowed his brows, silent for a moment, glassy eyes shaking in their pale sockets, mouth unsure. And then a second later he had reached out for me, hands at first grabbing my stomach, then clumsily spidering closer to clutch my arm. A droplet of rain fell from the trees above, hitting my nose, warm.

"Don't," he begged, face falling into a thousand pleading pieces.

"I have to go," I echoed, offering him a lame smile as blood rushed past my ears. He growled, digging harder into my arm as I tried to escape before letting go, turning away from me, mumbling to himself.

"Doesn't matter. You can't escape me."

My stomach lurched at the sound of his newly sharpened voice as I took a step forward, fighting against a long knot of grass which had wrapped around my leg, tripping me over. I brushed past the curtain of jeering umbrella trees, not daring to turn back as I ran against the storm that had suddenly broken out.

I could finally see home on the horizon. In my haste, I had stumbled over masses of knotted, uprooted cotton, their soft, white heads now shattered skulls, floating in darkened puddles. I bolted past the front porch and grappled with the door, struggling against the long green fingers twisted in the doorframe until it broke open, revealing my mother in the kitchen.

"Oh, honey," she said, putting her cup on the table, walking over to wrap an arm around me as I wept. "It's alright, don't get scared," she said, smoothing my hair. I wiped at my face to look up at her, watching as she stared absentmindedly at her plates, displayed in the dust-covered cage behind my head. The hollow-eyed patch under the cabinet quivered, listening. "It's just the rain."

A long-exposure photograph of a starry night sky, showing a dense field of stars that have formed into a large, swirling, spiral pattern. The stars are captured as streaks of light, creating a sense of motion and depth. In the foreground, the dark silhouette of a person stands with their back to the camera, looking up at the sky. The overall color palette is dark blue and black, with the white light of the stars providing a stark contrast. The text 'TOWN' is printed in a clean, white, sans-serif font in the upper left quadrant, and 'JUANITA MAY HARDWICK' is printed in the same font at the bottom of the image.

TOWN

JUANITA MAY HARDWICK

The town is small, surrounded by a ring of forest. It is sliced into segments by various streets- Lilydale, Northcote, Clifton; soft blue, smooth, without markings. The power lines rope each house together and link the streetlights into a wiry web of low-lying stars. The town is situated in the Hills, but curves only in gentle slopes- so we pedal stronger up one road, rest on the next. No house exactly resembles another. There are old cottages and shacks, some hiding coyly amongst roses, delicately pretty though flaking pallid paint; some crouching in overgrown grasses and rotting wood, hoarding past moments. There are modern constructions, gleaming yellow or blockaded by tall cream-coloured bricks, a dozen rooms stacked on top of each other, holding space. On each block the houses complement one another, the way we sometimes do as people.

The trees then, swaying, leaning on one another sleepily. The birds laugh and cluck their tongues. The sun and moon take turns manipulating the light, blooming new colours.

The town has always looked so and completely *comfortable*. Unlike the city, with its concrete and scathing clouds, its farting, prowling cars. Unlike the suburbs, with their compact, pressed ground like the earth sucking in its stomach, with their people, soggy cardboard cut-outs- even the leaves of grass flattened one less dimension. Unlike this, unlike you and I, the town has the air of someone who is content to be quiet and still.

It does not sleep, it contemplates, when the children play hopscotch on its belly, when the whizzing tires burn tracks down its cheeks. It does not sleep, it stares dreamily up at the sky, when the school siren carves through its breath, when the dew whitens to frost and girls shiver together in bed, whispering, *truth or dare*. It does not sleep, it weeps rivers down ditches and gullies, when voices and hands are raised in the night, when alcohol is thrown up on its gravel, when smoke unfurls from lungs to the heavens. It does not sleep, it is too sensitive. This is not a town to be stomped on.

“Can you see? What I’ve derived, from the countless times I’ve tried to change you- I can’t. And I can’t change me. Can you see?” says Lucky to the friend she’s been in love with since the day they met. They face

each other, sitting cross-legged on the cracked basketball court.

“Am I not too young for this heaviness, and time so cruelly slow? Why must the heart fall out, before teeth and hair go?” says John to the night when it falls too dark, too hard.

“You are standing on my chest. You are standing on our chests. You do not belong on me. How could you ever belong on us?!” says Sara to the stereo, which always plays the saddest songs when it’s put on shuffle. She skips, and curses, and tattoos secret messages on her wrists.

“Lights off, doors shut, I’m alone again... Undo your belt, skin, time, sex and brain.” Says Billy to the man standing lathered with shadow, in the barren room with the smell of fresh paint and taste of dust.

“All of the stars, and all I could drink, yet at once I’d start to pack. Anywhere I could go- if only this house with no one home, had no one coming back.” Says Kai to the floorboards upon which he sways, to the walls upon which he leans, to the toilet bowl into which he heaves.

The town is quite comfortable. It listens vaguely, snuggled beneath its bedtime stories. It does not go to sleep, it smiles, when the litter is ushered up by the wind to be deposited somewhere less beautiful. It does not sleep, it counts the stars, when the hours glitch in the very early morn and the world is forced briefly to stop its turning. It does not sleep, it just thinks, it is content to be quiet and still.

“Will you go out in silence or with a bang?” says Terry to her children as they hold one hand of hers each on the way to Mass. Later, to her husband at the dinner table, “Shall I lay down or shall I hang?”

“There’s a little death, somewhere,” says Matthew to the girl knelt at his feet, looking up at him in adoration as he continues, “is that alright?”

“I wish a million wishes, but above all, I wish for the sun,” says Alicia to the little blue-eyed doll, as they play dress-ups together on the dry carpet of her bedroom, “in all its glorious sky-stealing heresy, to never rise!”

“I’m no good, I’m no good, I’m no good,” says Christopher to his aging father, as they stroll through the paddock golden with a million stalks of wheat. “I’m no good.”

The clouds then, descending upon the town, resting on autumn leaves without the slightest crackle. The seasons wheel, the grey cities expand and the green ring retreats, the sun’s honey limbs stretch further, retract less. The town could not possibly sleep. It is listening.

The town never has cared too much for its individual inhabitants. It likes the magpies, with their funny way of singing ‘*coodle oodoo looo*’, and the small mammals- numbats and echidnas and possums -with their tiny paws tickling as they pad and scurry. It likes all this well enough, but has become drunk on its view of the sky, and dumb from its hundred-year thoughts. It likes to hear the talk, but it doesn’t really listen. Except, one day, as simple as this: it begins to, in small snippets like newspaper clippings, like the occasional *pop!* amongst a bundle of silent balloons- on occasion, it listens, entirely. And it begins to realise that the people are not going anywhere.

The town is content to be quiet and still. Unlike you, unlike me. People grow ever restless.

Perhaps ventures must be made.

What is to be done then? It is not a prison; the curtain of trees is parted by a road- narrow, but it is enough that traffic should flow in and out. Exit is not the problem- but entry, continual returns that are not linear but cyclical, people thinking the same thoughts as yesterday, the same thoughts as last week. How unhappy, and ungrateful, and afraid.

“How come no moments are marked in my mind?” says Ben to his pot plants, a mug of coffee in his hand, bare feet freezing on unswept floors. “I have lost all sense of time- this past year is nothing of my life.”

“Listen I am worried tonight for the world screeches and I can understand the language it teaches- on this metamorphic spinning wheel we are dust-specks Time is wool!-” says Henry to his wife, itching under

his skin, standing in the middle of the lovely illuminated street. "Life is a circle forget all else I've told you the world has malfunctioned the World!" And he grips his skull, saddened.

"Oh Krista, oh tell me," says Krista to the open window, "how is it? Raped inside a hundred heads, wondering where all your friends went, all your friends."

Rosy light hovers pink in the beginning and end of the day, the roads then a subtle grey-blue, the soil a vibrant orange as the pastel sky rises and falls, shining its yellow eye.

The town could be content to be quiet forever, but instead it rumbles low through molten bones, the sound expanding up through the earth until the trees and streets and houses are vibrating in one great harmonious groan, the sound huge and powerful and everywhere, like a God snoring in His sleep. But the town does not sleep, it trembles, when the high school students hang around after-hours in the park waiting for their dealer, when the mothers dressing their sobbing children in hand-me-downs say, *'don't worry about them baby, they're just jealous'*. It does not sleep, it shifts, when the windows glow and flicker colourless figures, when the wind wafts aromas of takeaway pizza and snatches of laughter and shouts. It does not sleep, it does not stay still. It summons all remnants of strength to raise itself, edges cracking thunderously as they break off from its earthen bed, loose ground a rocky waterfall at its rim; rising until at last the town is fully detached- a rough area of land jutting out above the forested hills surrounding, enormous clouds of caramel dirt billowing up from beneath. Impressive to all but the night- a deep indigo -and its waning moon, glowing gently on the scene.

Very, very slowly, exhausted but inching on, the town chooses a direction, any direction.

"Let us go, then," says the town to its people, who have fallen to the depths of the midnight hour and lie safe in their beds, on their ceilings, on each other, on the ocean floors of dimly-lit heads. "While the Earth weeps away its glaciers, and its people are looking down. Let us go, for

you shall not be like them, for you will learn to love the sky, for you there is everywhere and anywhere. We must find some place to better rest, you and I, you and I.”

The town holds this promise tightly to its paved breast. It does not sleep, it searches, for some greater access to Heaven, for some softer soil, for some colourful, comfortable city of promised riches. It searches, for a place where the talk is calm; for a hill, valley, sea, desert plain, wherever the people will be content.

Let us go then, endlessly on.



Bright

2

PING YAP

The varnished surface of the vanity which her husband has built for her is covered in memories. She picks them up one by one like a collector of antiques might do. She handles them with the utmost respect as she feels their weights in her palm. They are precious, after all. Perhaps they would look like cheap trinkets to others, but to an old woman with an Alzheimer's diagnosis, they mean the world.

A string of beads. Lava red, grass clippings, the Atlantic, sunshine, and beetroot line a plastic thread in some haphazard pattern that only a six-year-old mind could conjure up. As she grasps the coloured orbs between her fingers, she finds herself staring at a little girl with midnight for hair and cinnamon for eyes, smiling and holding out a bead. The woman looks down to find that her hands are now smooth, small, unmarked by time and hard work. Her dress is made out of rose checkered gingham and her companion's, out of white cotton. As she reaches forward to grab her friend's offering, the string of beads slips out of her hand and clatters to the wood floor beneath her.

The old woman blinks, her mind still drinking in the colours. She picks up the beads from the floor and places them gently on the vanity table.

A piece of folded lined paper, aged yellow. The old woman unfolds it and dimmed eyes skim the words scrawled in a concentrated hand with black ink. The note is addressed to a boy. A boy that appears before her, dressed in flannel, leather shoes scuffed. The new student from far away. Although they were only thirteen, her female classmates already knew what they liked, and they liked *him*.

But then, so did she.

He is the only thing keeping her awake during arithmetic class, and his blond hair, when hit at a certain angle by the light, gives him an angelic glow. She scribbles out a simple *what's your name* before folding the scrap of paper edge to edge, corner to corner, and tosses it onto his desk before her will betrays her. The boy, almost too bright to look at, gives her a smile (which is even brighter), and opens the note.

She doesn't dare look. But when she finally opens her eyes, she sees the note returned, with the addition of *Elliot* written at the bottom.

The old woman lets the note flutter down to the table before picking up the next item.

a pot of rouge. She swipes a trembling finger across the red before applying it to her lips, making them as crimson as they were in the golden days. The days when the dresses were sequined fringe, as loose as their morals, showing off collarbones and clavicles. The reflection of light off the spangles dangling on her wrists. When pearls wrapped themselves around slender necks and feathers mingled with hair. When her friends helped her line her eyes with kohl, smudged and smoky like the faces around her. The rouge was left on uncountable belongings in the form of a lip print, from the rims of glasses to the starched collars of boys with hungry gazes. When the jazz band played all night long and the air smelled like a good time. There was champagne that never stopped coming, and the sun never seemed to rise. She could dance for hours, twirling around like a music box ballerina.

But the party had to end eventually.

Next, a piece of white lace. A sample from the haberdashery, the potential trim for her wedding dress. Her mother cried when she wore it for the first time, her waist swathed in silk, arms covered in satin. The young bride's curls were carefully arranged into a twist, a Celtic knot of chestnut. The church was lit by sunrays bursting through the stained glass windows, dappling the ancient brick walls. Her walk down the aisle lasted for an eternity, but when she finally reached the altar, it seemed like a mere second had passed before she was saying 'I do', and her ring finger was circled permanently with gold.

The wedding dress had to be sold a few years after the wedding. But she kept a piece of what it could've been.

She last item was a little baby shoe. Pink, with a little flower pinned to the top of the laces. Perfect for a little girl with her mother's chocolate locks and her father's meadow-like gaze. A quaint, charming creature, a little doll of perfect proportions and a total of five freckles on her nose. Lashes that cast long shadows on her cheeks, a smile that could bring boys to their knees. She would be given ballet classes, tea parties, art lessons, private education. She would win every competition, go from remembering her twelve times tables to calculus differentiation with a snap of her fingers. She would discover the cure for cancer, come up for a solution for global poverty. She would do the greatest of things.

But then there was red. So much so that it stained the old woman's rose-tinted lenses, ruined the bathroom tiles, painted the white ceramic sink so that it was an indissoluble rust. Her hopes and dreams got washed away into the drain, wiped up with a towel dipped in citrus, mixed in with crimson and tainted with pain. Her hands have smelled metallic ever since, and no amount of water could ever wash the scent away.

She had weighed so little. But the smallest coffins are always the heaviest.

As the old woman placed the shoe down, unworn, as new as the day it was bought, she blinked. All of a sudden, the odd assortment of knick-knacks in front of her had no meaning. She stared at them in confusion, trying to figure out why they were there, who they belonged to, trying to remember, trying to *remember-*

'Honey?'

She turned at the sound of a gravelly voice, searching wildly for the source. At the door of her bedroom stood a man, dressed in flannel, leather shoes scuffed. He looked so familiar that she didn't move away as he approached, and her hand stayed in his when he took it.

'Who are you?' She felt horrible as soon as the words left her lips. But his shoulders didn't slump, his grip didn't loosen. She looked at the ring he wore on his fourth finger, on his left hand. So similar to hers.

'Elliot.' He smiled.

And he was suddenly so, so bright.

Almost too bright to look at.



THE RAILERS



ELLA GRASS

15 . 2513 ~ COSIMA

Breathing in the fresh scent of synthetic air, and reminiscing the sweet taste of this morning's breakfast injection – life's definitely great.

The 2455 Bottleneck Crisis changed the world for the better. There were way too many people making the world conflicted and overpopulated. There was too large a population and consumption of resources for the Earth to withstand. So, it deteriorated past the point of saving.

Trees crippled, diseases spread like wildfire, oxygen levels dropped to dangerous levels and blah-blah-blah.

With the constant retelling of our history, I wouldn't be surprised if the Supreme thought we were as stupid as Rainers. It's their own fault they couldn't afford a place in the Melbournia Dome.

They're lucky the Supreme even bothers to give them food.

Anyway, our home systems were all upgraded today. I must say that for the time we waited in utter suspense, the update was pretty pathetic. They added in some ancient movies, like *The Hunger Games*, on the pods (who the hell is going to watch a movie from centuries ago), and added new snack injection – which left a sour and unpleasant aftertaste.

Hopefully next time they release an update worth my time. Idiots.

15 . 2513 ~ LEO

Sky sent two crates of bread down the line today. Burnt, stale and probably on-the-verge-of-mould, but *food*. Two crates of food to feed over ten thousand, starved Rainers.

When the familiar ring of the delivery bell echoed through the Underground, everybody froze; looks of hunger and determination mirrored in the eyes of the dirt-smudged people around me.

I bolted, not caring that abandoning the pipes could earn me hours in a chamber. I hadn't eaten in three days, and I wasn't going to miss out again. So, I sprinted down the maze-like tunnels, trying hard to get a head start.

I lasted maybe two minutes before the floor beneath my feet began to vibrate, shaking loose small rocks from the ceiling; the wall-mounted

torches flickered. An army of blackened, food-deprived Railers pushed their way towards me; trampling over anyone not strong enough to hold their place. I've never run so fast in my life – which is holding my place was difficult, considering the dangerously low oxygen levels make you feel exhausted just by walking mere meters. I entered the Checkpoint; squinting my eyes at the sudden brightness emanating from the large, circular skylight built into the ground above. At the centre, like angels from Heaven, were two crates filled with bread. The rich aroma was enough to send me into a drooling mess on the floor.

I ran faster, my lungs threatening to break out of my chest – and was yanked to the floor by someone behind me. One less person to compete with, and one more cycle of missed food.

I've seen people walk away with missing fingers and ears. I remember Old Man Clint, who lost an eye trying to get a bottle of filtered water when I was younger. He used to tell the best stories of the world pre-Bottleneck – before he was hanged.

It's frustrating that people are reduced to biting/harming other people, in order to obtain even a crumb of food, which is like a million dollar prize in a place where food is so scarce. The supreme thinks that because they're higher up, that they can treat us Railers like shit.

At least the Metro's throw us what little scraps they have.

15 . 2513 ~ CERES

Sky, Metro, Railer. Luxury, Limbo, Labour.

Since I can remember, the Supreme has conditioned us to believe that this life was something to be grateful for. They solved the Bottleneck Crisis and provided us with a way of living – without suffocating on the harsh air, or becoming victims of the cruel environment that had turned against us. For people who could afford it, the Dome became a safe haven – a beautiful, green-filled glass sphere, suspended above what used to be Flinders Street Station – a constant reminder of to whom we should be thankful for. We Metros receive breathers, relatively fresh produce from the Dome's nursery, and pre-assigned work.

“In between Heaven and Hell,” my mother always says to me.

I've always believed in the Supreme's system; my parents are practically its preachers.

But now, I'm starting to question the Supreme – are they helping us, or making life worse?

My classmates used to spread rumours of chambers, where bad people were sent for punishment. Some kids said the Watchers sealed you in a glass capsule; others said they attached probes to you that made emanated an unspeakable pain. My teachers and parents always denied this.

The other day, I was walking past the Dome to go and pick up some more injections for mum's migraines. I was paying at the counter when a grey blur whistled past within inches of my head, and stuck into the wall behind the holographic cashier. It was a small, silver knife. Violence isn't something you see on a daily basis – the Metros are usually relatively peaceful – so it took me a good couple of seconds to process what had just happened.

I turned around and a dirt-covered and rancid-smelling vagabond was being tackled to the ground by Watchers. One of the Watches smashed his knee into the man's head, catching the him off guard. His hands were put in metal restraints, preventing any possibility of further retaliation. The Watches roughly pulled him upright.

He was a mess. As I processed the disarray of his torn, holey clothes and mangled hair, I saw the distinct, circular branding that belonged to the people of the Underground.

He was a Railer.

His cold eyes met mine, and he began shouting about how the Supreme had damned us all and treated any non-Sky's like animals. He didn't get much else out before the Watchers muzzled him and threw him into a black hover stationed outside the store's entrance.

His crazy comment was enough to get me asking myself about the Supreme and the 'life' I'm living.

I'd never seen a Railer until then, and they are not health, happy workers the Sky would have us believe.

I'm not so sure what I believe any more.

God they're so ungrateful.

For the past Cycle there have been several incidents in which a Railer or Metro has stepped out of line and done something stupid. The Supreme is trying to keep it quiet, but everyone knows something's up.

It's so simple; follow the rules. Do your job. It's like their bloody animals.

127 . 2513 ~ CERES

The curiosity is eating away at me.

Now, when I look around, I'm seeing more things that don't seem right. Watchers using brute force against Metros, when *Watchers* are supposed to *watch*. People at work vanishing. Railers out of the Underground. Railers looking dishevelled, frightened and on the brink of death.

There's something the Supreme isn't telling us.

127 . 2513 ~ LEO

There's a group of Railers calling themselves the 'Guerilla'. I'm not sure how long they've been around, but by now, every Railer's heard the rumours.

They've been attacking Watchers, destroying chambers and claiming sections of the Underground. There's whispers that some of them have managed to make it to the Metroground.

Some Railers are scared of possible consequences – probably worried that we'll collectively be punished for the Guerilla's actions.

Honest, it's about time someone stood against the Supreme.

134 . 2513 ~ CERES

Metroground streets are normally kept insanely clean; especially now with everyone being so cautious, given the strange occurrences of the last few Cycles. So, I frowned when I almost tripped over a bundle of dirty, red clothes on my way

home from work.

Wary, I walked towards the bundle. The closer I got, the more the bundle took the shape of a small child surrounded by a dark, red circle – blood. It was a young boy; his skin stretched thinly over his prominent bones. One of his eyes was angrily swollen shut and there must've been a gash somewhere on his head, as trails of blood dripped down his neck. His right leg was badly broken, with the jagged end of bone puncturing through his lower leg. He couldn't have been more than five or six.

He didn't respond when I knelt down and moved around his oversized shirt to check his monitor band. When I finally found his arm, his frail wrist had no monitor. My frown deepened.

I moved the rags to get to his shoulder – and there, clearly visible, was the circle that identified him as a Railer. I fell backwards in shock. One of the rules engrained into us was that, under no circumstances, were we to come into contact with a Railer.

Part of me was urging myself to run as far away from the boy as I could. But a larger part of me was curious, and could see that the boy obviously needed help.

I gently picked the boy up, covering his frail limbs with his shirt, in case another Metro happened to walk past, and carried him the rest of the way to my house.

I had no idea what to do and the kid was unconscious – so I did my best to stop any bleeding and let him sleep. I noticed that underneath the Railer branding was a scraggly tattoo that read 'Guerilla.'

This morning, my apartment had been turned upside down, and the boy was gone. The only sign left of the previous night's events was a bloody hand print on my front door. By then, I had already see the gruesome photos broadcasted on my pod.

134 . 2513 ~ LEO

This morning's sleep was interrupted by screams.

I originally thought I was dreaming. But the screaming continued. As I got up, Rainers around me were waking, and were just as wary and curious as I was. Some just went back to sleep, probably thinking it was a Railer caught off-guard by the pain of a chamber. But

there was something about the scream that make my skin prickle. Ignoring my instincts, I went to see what was going on.

I leerily walked through the tunnels, following the awful screaming. The closer I got, the louder the screams – all coming from the Checkpoint. People were dashing out of its entrance, making it difficult to get close.

When I finally got in, nearly every Railer stood around the room's edges, crying and screaming with terror. It was absolute chaos. Little puddles of blood covered the concrete floor, surrounded by sharp fragments of glass. I wish I hadn't looked up.

The whole skylight had been shattered and its framework removed. A thick metal bar ran across the gaping hole's diameter; perfectly centered like someone had taken the time and effort in its placement. The sudden brightness made it hard to see, but there were little heads bobbing in and out of sight around the hole from the Metroground. I'm assuming those were Metros – and they looked just as shocked as us. Hanging from the pole by thick ropes, were the lifeless bodies of what looked like sever Railers.

Men, women and children alike hung bloodied, beaten and mutilated from the metal bar; their necks twisted at impossible angles. Their clothes were ripped and torn to shreds, and what fabric was left was drenched in blood. Worst of all was the boy and infant hanging from the centre. The boy had an eye swollen shut and trails of blood that streamed down his neck. His right leg was twisted at an awkward angle, a splinter of bone showing from the side. His left arm, suspended by a rope, displayed a 'Guerilla' tattoo beneath his Railer branding. The unclothed infant hung from her tiny foot, her stomach covered in blood. If you looked closer, you could make out the words, "*Remember who you are.*" A human mobile to put us in our places.

Horrified and overwhelmed, I decided it's time to do something about the Sky and the Supreme.