

Nora Garg

Copper Stream

*Final Hour*

They're banging on the door, and I can hear their footsteps as they barge in. I'm hiding in my sister's closet, trying to cradle myself. I see her little pink teddy bear staring at me almost mockingly. As they rampage through the house, I clamp a hand over my mouth. I can't let out a sound. I can't breathe. I start to hear the screams and yells of my parents and sister. My heart drops. I rock back and forth, silently pleading to myself. My sister's only six. I can hear the desperateness in their voices. I can't tell if the thumping in my ears is my heartbeat or them pounding on the walls of my house as they tear the art down. I stifle a sob as I cease to hear my family scream anymore. I know what the silence signifies. I'm paralyzed. I don't know what to think or do.

I sit in my closet unmovingly still. I feel this painful pressure on my chest because I know, *I know*, that my family is gone, but I can't seem to comprehend it. I do not want to comprehend it. I know more of them are coming to get me; I can hear the rustle of their hazmat suits shuffling next to each other as if they were sitting right next to me. I don't want to move on from here. The only thing I can think to do right now is to keep going, no matter how badly I want to give up. My eyes dart around in the dark as my mind races and I try to find some way to escape. Suddenly, it hits me. My sister's loft bed. I crack open the closet door to see if they're in my room yet. I need to escape through the window, but my life depends on not making a sound. I steady myself as I straighten my legs, feeling around the closet. I see my sister's pink teddy bear

yet again, staring at me with its shiny beaded eyes. Despite myself, I quickly grab it and stuff it in my tote bag. I'm not quite sure why. I push open the closet door, ready to make a run for it. I sprint to the ladder, my clammy hands slipping and sliding on the metal bars. There's a window up here, I just have to wedge it open and jump out. I look around one last time. I can smell my sister's favorite perfume on her bed as I stare down at the room we used to share. I feel like I'm leaving behind a part of me as I jump out. I feel my bones collide as my body hits the ground.

I run. I run as fast as my legs can carry me, the yelling voices of the people behind me slowly drifting away. I ran down to the beach, to the sand. My legs sink into the ground, unnoticed glass shards cutting my feet. I keep running. I get to the dock, and I see a hazmat boat preparing to leave. I beg the workers, sobbing and unable to form words to ask them to let me on, but all they give me are stares and dirty looks. I feel my heart sink to the bottom of my stomach. I'm tired. So tired.

I watch them sail away, using their screeners to scan the water for any malignant waste. I use my hands to slowly settle myself beneath the dock, unable to stop shaking. I look out at the sky. I haven't been to the beach since I was so little. I don't remember when it turned gray; when the water got too toxic to swim in. I feel my eyes start to close as I replay memories in my head like a loop of a time before this. A time before rule B12. It's been five years since it was imposed. It was in the year 2070, I think. I was only 11.

I come from a family of artists and activists. My parents, they started a non-profit organization together in my name. It was called *Zoya*. For life and vitality. My father would organize the protests and the meetings, while my mother would support his political discourse with her artwork. They were incredible. Fighting for change was their entire life. But once rule B12 was set in motion, our family was in shambles. Rule B12 is a rule against expressing any

political opinions. Five years ago, we were on the very brink of WWIV. There was nowhere you could go that was safe. Riots were constantly out of hand - protesters were burning buildings down and raiding stores. You couldn't walk outside without the fear of getting killed. Law enforcement was basically non-existent no matter where you were on the planet, because all the officers had turned against each other. They all wanted to protect their own families, which in turn led to them only fighting for themselves. They all disagreed with one another, and just like that, there was no more unity. Rule B12 was inflicted when the death toll reached two billion. No one was allowed to express any political opinion anymore. At first, we were relieved. We simply thought this meant no more violence, but it was so much more than that.

Whether it was art, music, literature, news outlets, or even social media posts - all of it was gone. We couldn't bring up political opinions in conversations. If you made a social media post even slightly controversial, it would be taken down immediately and your account would be suspended. Peaceful protesting was out of the question. Any political art, any way that you could fight for what you think is right, was completely banned. If you broke the rules, you would be taken away to a facility called ICS (Independent Compliance System), where you would be kept until you learn to oblige. That's only if you aren't shot on the spot. People never come back from ICS.

Our society has turned into plastic. It doesn't feel like anyone is real. There's all these thoughts and feelings that they have to say but they keep sealed behind their lips to the point where every conversation is fake and goes the exact same way.

“Hello, how are you doing today?”

“Fine, thank you. And you?”

“Same here. The sun is out this morning.”

“It is. We’ll catch up later. Goodbye.”

You feel like you’re talking to someone programmed by a computer. Our lives were destroyed. My parents entire career was built off of fighting for change, and I knew that they wouldn’t stop. No matter what, they would fight for what they thought was right. I knew that everything would change. Sometimes I feel like I’m going crazy, because the most atrocious things will happen across the globe, and everyone will forget about it in an hour - or at least they’ll pretend they did - while when I hear of it, it feels like I’m starting to suffocate.

Suddenly, I hear a wave crash on the sand, and I’m yanked out of my thoughts. I glance around, scared of what might be creeping around the corner while my head’s been up in the clouds. I start to drift in and out of nightmarish hallucinations and cold sweats, finding myself trembling every time I wake up.

It’s been three weeks, and I keep running. More of the soldiers from ICS came to look for me, but I kept barely slipping out of their hands. Somehow, against all odds, I’m still here. Today, I’m in New York. I spent the day scrounging around for food and trying to meld into the shadows. It’s evening now, and I’ve been sitting against a brick wall for hours, deep in contemplation.

My teeth chatter and my hands have gone numb. I lost sensation in both my legs about 20 minutes ago? My body feels frozen, and my clothes feel damp. Snow in the middle of summer? It feels like a “one in a million” just there to punish me. Or maybe it’s just global warming here at long last to take us all with one final, icy breath. I laugh at the thought, despite there being a very clear lack of humor.

I look around the corner, and I see a billboard playing today's news on a large building. One million people were slaughtered in Croatia. The reporter's voice has no tone, no expression.

His face shows not a hint of empathy, and his voice is completely monotone. But as soon as he stops talking about it, it's as if a switch was flipped. The corners of his mouth pull into a tight smile, uncannily robotic, as he advertises the newest handheld mixer. This is insanity. I see more of the soldiers from ICS maybe a hundred yards away from me. They see murals that read, *'There Is No Must In Art, Because Art Is Free. You Have Taken Away Our Liberty.'* They instantly erase the artwork with their erasers, as if it was never there. As if the people who spent days putting it up never had anything to say at all. They let out loud, hearty laughs, but they're hollow.

"They're complaining about not being able to *draw*. What are they, children?" I hear the patter of their feet as they walk away. I let myself breathe, for a bit. I'm not sure how long. My eyes feel dry and tired, and I fight to keep them from closing.

I look at my little sister's teddy bear. It looks so worn, the blue bowtie around its neck starting to fray. It's my only reminder of how my life used to be. It's pink and colorful and soft. I squeeze it tighter to my chest.

I think for most people the fear of stepping outside the box and being noticed by the authorities is enough to scare them into submission. But for me, politics, art, and literature are everything that I've grown up with. Everything that I am. Before they were murdered, my family never stopped fighting. For five years, they never once gave up. I can only do the same. I start to feel the barbed wire creep around my throat yet again. Humankind is a mess. Everything is black, or white, or some shade of gray. The probability of me still being here was so slim, but I am. I don't know if I have hope for our future, but I have determination. As I nod off, I dream about others having that determination too. In that fantasy world, maybe there's a chance we could be okay.

