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Pausing briefly- my breath turns to fog. A visible testament to the crisp air that scalds my lungs. Crouching below the reeds I can see the green silos reflect perfectly on the water's glass surface and the early morning world is still. *Too still.*

At the beginning of the year the Marina was still active, houseboats alive with wispy smoke halos and pleasure crafts skimming the water, their muffled engines humming above the traffic noise from the bridge half a mile east. 'Stay home' they had told us- and we had. *Gladly.* I shudder at the memory or perhaps the icy November air. Now what remains of the boats lay empty, some partially submerged from a forgotten summer storm and some obscured from the world entirely, belonging to the depths. The frayed mooring lines noosed to the towpath. The only evidence they were ever there.

When the lockdown began the official advice was to make only essential journeys and cancel all social engagements.

We were permitted to leave our houses: only to work, purchase necessities and exercise alone for a maximum of an hour a day. Whilst we cowered in our homes like animals, they got to work leaving theirs. One morning we got up to find the municipal buildings locked and the phonelines down, Government websites returned 404 codes - society had been switched off overnight. We kept going for a while. The 'keep calm and carry on' inertia meant the shops remained open and the transport system functioned temporarily. *But then the banks closed.* The news channels reported that the police were no longer attending incidents and the hospitals began to turn people away. Chaos ensued.

Then came the quiet.

The television and radio stations stopped broadcasting and eventually the infrastructure failed. It became dark. Most of the elderly died in the first few weeks, those entrusted to care for them stopped attending when their pay ceased. The children were next, thousands of babies reared on powder formula fell asleep hungry when their mothers could not sustain them. The others made easy pickings for the worst of us who preyed first on them, then the sick, then the weak.

So here we are at the edge of humanity

winter draws in and what remains of the population hide in their homes *delaying the inevitable.* Armed militia circle the streets looking for survivors. It did not take long for the stronger and more vicious to take over, our innate cavemen clawed through millennia of refinement and rampaged across the cities and towns levelling civilisation.

A siren pierces the stillness and there is movement in the distance- *raiders.* From here I can see the watch tower and although the guards inside are obscured, I know they are there. The night frost glistens only at the edges of the roof, the encircled wet centre betrays its warm hosts. I am one of whom they seek and must remain out of sight, just beyond the water and the rusting razor wire fence that edges the compound. He is in there, for now, so in the midst of the commotion I make my way towards the tower.

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Herrenvolk scratches his arse and looks at his watch for the hundredth time that hour. He has forty minutes before the changeover, and he is restless to escape the damp confines of the tower - unlike the guard on the alternate shift he has better things to be doing. What remains of the family across the street from his fetid home are starving and he has clutched the mother and tonight plans to demand the daughter too. She will agree as the baby is half starved already and her son's cheeks hollow more with each week that passes. Last week he pissed on her after he had finished, she just laid there, her pale tits stretched over sharp ribs looking dead-eyed at the photo on her bedside. *Stupid cunt*. Aroused by his contempt he checks the time again, before settling back to his post and loosening his trousers. Hearing the siren in B Quadrant he takes a tertiary glance across the

compound but can see the quad bikes already cornering the intruders. Hocking his throat loudly he smirks at the viscous trail on the wall. Something catches his eye at the far end of his ward. Squinting against the winter sun he can make out a lone figure weaving through the scrub line, unlike the usual robbers this one is alone

dummy

The tower door opens in direction of the runner and his exit would be in full view, so leaning out of the pane-less window opposite he heaves himself onto the outer edge of the hut before dropping down behind the bushes.

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RUN FASTER! FASTER ELLIE! FASTER! My whole body is on fire as I throw myself towards the gap in

the fence, where is he? He's going to catch up. *WHERE IS HE?!!* *

Thrilled by his ingenuity Herrenvolk heads down to intercept the runner. He knows who this imposter is now. Summoned from his fantasy, she is here in the compound, running as fast as her scrawny little legs will carry her. She has seen him circling the perimeter and has double-backed to escape. *Stupid slut*. He has covered twice her distance now and although obscured from her sight he can hear her frantic gasps as she heads blindly towards him.

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The brightness eclipses and there is only him, I am going too fast to stop and he is too close to outrun. Flinging myself forward I pray hatred and momentum will galvanise my body into a juggernaut of rage.

They do not.

My head swims from another blow and for a while I am in the muted upside-down realm where the boats now live. Then I feel hands gripping the back of my head again, dragging me back to this world, his broken fingernails snag my hair and pierce my scalp. I break the surface and gasp for air. His weight is suffocating and he presses his face against mine, pushing my head against the filthy floor of the watchtower. The stench of him is horrendous, his foul breath fills my nostrils until I wretch, vomit splashes across my arm and the floor and he laughs.

"Wake up" he says in a musical tone that belies his coarse voice.

The dirty hands release my head and begin to pull at my clothes but the thick overalls won't give.

I know he will have to turn me to get the clasps open on my chest.

"Little bitch," he spits grabbing my throat and wrenching my neck around to face him. Lifting the weight from his hips he uses his knee to force my body to twist. I scream out as his knee crushes the scant flesh on my inner thigh. His huge hand spans my face as he tugs at the straps with the other and the world transitions in slow motion. Prone, legs splayed and terrified, this is the moment. Slowly, so he does not see, *he must not see!* my left-hand slides inside the back of my boot to retrieve the thin boning knife from Ma's kitchen. Cracking the clasp on my overalls he sneers at me, his predatory eyes gleaming now – relishing my fear, they are fixed on mine peering back through the gaps in his fingers. The air is thick with resistance and my heavy arm's motion is impossibly slow, like a punch thrown in dream. Turning his head, he sees my intent a fraction too late. The slender blade meets his right eye and the heel of my hand smacks into his temple. Time stands still and we are lapidified until his body slumps and its huge mass envelops me. A ribbon of blood slowly overcoats the vomit on my wrist and

deep inside my caveman roars.

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"Ma, will he back the night? The Mister?" Hmm?

The Mister?

"I don't know son, he didn't say"

"What d'ya think he'll bring? Will it be chocolate? It's been ages since we had chocolate. Are the shops opening again soon? Its bee..."

"There's no chocolate anymore Stevie or shops as you well mind, stop asking stupid questions."

He jumps at my arrival and scowls, "Well there's nothin' to eat, so I hope he comes right now and brings chocolate."

Ma passes me to leave the room and heads up the stairs.

"Moron! Can't you see it upsets her."

But he can't and I shouldn't blame him, *he's still so small*. I had seen the mess after the last visit, she had locked her door whilst she scrubbed him away and when she came out again, she was different. Her mouth still smiled but something had switched off in her eyes and her sadness was palpable.

Sitting quietly on the edge of her bed she cuts a small silhouette in the early dusk. "Ma?"
She glances up in response.

"He's not coming back."

"Hmm?" Her eyes fixed on an unperceivable space on the wall.

“He’s not coming back. I killed him.”

After an eternity she finally looks at me and sighs, her ‘Derry accent always more pronounced in anger betrays the soft tone “You naïve child, you’ve killed us all.”

“What? He’s dead Ma, I killed him and now he won’t hurt you anymore, we’re safe.”

“Safe? Safe!! We’re not fucking safe El, for all his foulness he was the only thing keeping the others at bay. Do you think I let that creature fuck me for the scraps from his table?”

Her question hangs in the air, suspended on the metre-thick wall of silence. “What now Ma?”

Pulling a large pillow from her bed, she says softly, ‘It’s time we tuck in the bairns.’