

# 1

The siblings had been trudging through the unending sand storm for at least forty minutes, when they found a building they had not searched before. They wore gas masks that covered their face, large wrapping coats, ski pants, long socks, and ski masks to protect themselves from the sand, alongside large backpacks that they had stolen from a hospital some months back.

The sand raged through the sky for many years now, but at this point, they had lost track of time. What used to be a city area was now leveled by years of the sand's unrelenting force; what remains are abandoned buildings in every direction, some with roofs and most without. Packed down sand covered every inch of the landscape, as if the infrastructure was being consumed into the soil. The sky was a permanent orange hue, as sand constantly whipped by and skyscrapers had fallen over to block roads; the siblings were lucky to make it into the city.

This was a typical procedure for the siblings; the older one (the sister, 20 years old) would go in first with a flashlight, then the younger one (the brother, 13 years old) would follow her inside. From there, they'd split up, looting the building, opening drawers, finding the kitchen, and taking all of the cans they could. They moved quickly, making short gestures to communicate with each other, as the sound of the sand, combined with their gas masks, made it impossible to verbally communicate. They picked up a map and a wide candle but the sister had found something more important. She pointed the flashlight at her brother. The brother jogged to her, and they entered through an old wooden door. Inside, was a large stash of cans ranging from nearly every food group. The siblings rejoiced, the brother made a little hop in excitement, they quickly hugged each other, and began collecting the cans. The sister placed each can in her backpack with a swift finesse; the brother placed his bag on the ground and shoveled them in with little care. Their bags had nearly gotten full, but there were five cans left. The sister made a two with her fingers, and the siblings picked up two of the cans each, one in each hand, leaving the can of fermented cheese behind.

The siblings walked through the sandstorm with expressive joy. They made it home safely and entered their dimly-lit suburban home. The home was desolate, the paint from the living room had nearly fallen off, the kitchen was filled to the brim with sand

from the central window, and the chandelier in the dining room had collapsed into the large round wooden table. The children paid no mind though, as they made their way downstairs. A large metal door with concrete walls around it lay at the bottom of the staircase. The sister enters a 6-digit code, making sure her little brother sees her type it in. And the door unlocks.

The room was a rectangle made of cold concrete on all sides with large, but dim overhead lights that always left the shower in the shade. The right corner of the room contained the shower with solid plastic walls around it, a toilet under the shower head, and a sliding plastic door heading into the shower basin. Next to the shower was a marble-top counter with an old sink and a nearly rotten wooden base with some cabinets. On the opposite side of the room, there are two twin-sized beds bolted to the wall and connected to the ground with metal legs. Next to the beds was a large, stand-up wooden closet with an old Victorian design and painted a dark brown. In the center of the room, a wooden beam, looking somewhat out of place with its yellowish color, and a red, soft carpet with floral patterns, and the middle cut out to accommodate the beam.

“We’re home,” the sister exclaimed to her mother sitting on the bed mounted onto the wall.

“How was it? You find some cans?” The mother asked. She was a mixed skin woman of native american origin in her late forties, but she seemed older with wrinkles around her eyes and graying hair, and she was also a bit skinny for her age. A patch of skin on her lower left leg seemed discolored, almost grayish, and saggy.

The sister replied as the two siblings took their heavy gear and clothing off, “Yes, we found a bunch!”

The little brother chimed in, “A whole entire stash of ‘em!”

The younger sibling looked the most like his mother if she were younger, fair-skinned, with jet black hair, pebble black eyes, and short for his age.

The older sister was average height and slightly muscular. She too had black hair, but it was slightly curly and medium length, almost reaching to her shoulders, and her hair was bushy and uncombed.

Once the siblings had gotten their gear off, they placed their backpacks on the carpet and began unpacking. Each can, placed one by one onto the carpet. The sister looked over at her brother and realized he wasn't taking his cans out. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"There's nothing in mine," the brother spoke softly.

"Oh..." The sister grabbed two of her brother's cans and weighed them, they were like feathers. It seems like someone had resealed the cans before they got to them. "Well, at least we have my cans!..."

The mother leaned in to assure the brother, "It's no worry Beto, your sister has taken care of it." She rested her hand on Beto's back.

The sister chimed in, presenting the cans she collected in her hand, "Yeah, it's alright, I've got canned tomatoes, corn, some soup- I've got tons! We'll be fine." But Beto felt defeated.

"I don't like that broccoli soup." He murmured

"Of course, I know you don't, that's why I've got other things-"

The mother broke up the moment, "You know what, let's just eat some food now!"

"Yeah, come on Beto, let's eat!"

The brother slowly got up from the carpet floor. As a family, they walked over to the large closet and took out three metal fold-out chairs and a plastic fold-out table, leaving one extra chair in the closet. The sister walked over to the counter on the other side of the room, bent down to grab a microwave from the cabinet, and plugged it into a wall outlet above the sink. "Ma? I never got why we unplug the microwave after we are done," the sister, turning her head backwards towards the mother, asked.

"It's to save power, Lily."

Beto, sitting in his chair, chimes in, "I don't know why we need to save when the government keeps it on."

"Didn't I teach you about that? The government only has so much power they can give to us."

"But aren't we the only survivors in the area? I mean it's what you said."

"We are but we shouldn't be greedy, the government needs to supply others--"

"So there are people?"

"Not that they'd be of any help."

"I say they could help, imagine how much quicker we could scavenge--"

The table creaked as the mother leaned into it with her eyebrow raised, "Well, have you **ever** seen another living soul out there?"

"No..." Beto backed off from the argument. A few minutes later, dinner was ready.

"I've got dinner, it's the soup du jour" Lily placed bowls of tomato basil soup in front of each chair and then grabbed her bowl from the counter. She sat next to Beto and they ate with plastic spoons. Lily spoke first, "Do you know what day it is?"

The mother turned her attention to Lily, "Well, since the cell towers fell over, my phone stopped telling the time correctly."

"Wasn't that like a few years ago?"

The mother chuckled, "A few years or a few weeks, it all feels the same now don't it."

Beto asked, "It's been so long since somebody's used your real name, it might be slipping my mind."

"Oh, boy, I couldn't care less if you forgot my name, I'll always be Ma to you," Ma smiled.

Dinner had come to a close, the family decided it was time to sleep. Ma stood up from her chair, "You should brush your teeth, kids. It's great you found that toothpaste Lily." The kids got up from the table and went to the sink to grab their toothbrushes. The bristles on the brushes spread out in a wild pattern; Lily's brush was slightly bent. The siblings turned the water on and Lily squeezed out a small drop of toothpaste onto her and Beto's toothbrush. Once they were done, they washed their toothbrushes. Lily turned towards Ma, who was sitting on her bed, "Has your leg gotten better, Ma?"

"Slowly, I think it's getting better," Ma said, as she looked down at her left leg.

"Remind me, how long were you in the sand?"

"Not long, not long at all."

Lily turned towards Beto, "That's why you make sure not to scratch your clothes on anything, Beto; you don't want the sand getting to you."

Beto replied not looking at her, "Yeah, I know, I'm getting used to it."

Lily headed to bed. The mattress was old but well kept; some of the springs were sunken in, but the family slept well regardless. The heavy quilts on the bed and puffy pillows helped. Lily had to sleep next to her brother each and every night, they both got tucked in and turned away from each other, with Lily always facing the wall.

"Good night, my children." Ma sat up in her bed and switched the lights off.

## 2

The family slept for an unknown amount of time. By now, they were used to this incoherent sleep pattern: Ma would always wake up before them and she'd turn on the light to signal the morning, or whenever the morning happened to happen. "Good

morning, children.” The light was on, but she spoke a bit softly so as not to immediately wake them up. She noticed that Lily’s arms were around Beto and smiled.

Five minutes later, Lily woke up. Her getting out of bed naturally woke up Beto, too. The both of them stumbled out of bed, unmaking it in the process. They groaned and stretched out of bed whilst their eyes adjusted to the light. “I prepared some food, come eat,” Ma said to the children.

The family sat around the table, same seating as last time, and ate relatively quickly. Lily sparked up the conversation first, “So we gotta go out again?”

Ma responded, “Yes, you must go out again.”

“Your leg, is it better now?”

“I can’t come with you if that’s what you’re asking, plus it’s good that you and your brother get out some more.”

Beto tuned into the conversation, “Isn’t it boring in here though?”

“Well, I asked if you’d get a knitting kit for me-”

Lily replied graciously and in a mildly sarcastic tone, “We can’t make miracles happen if you don’t help us make them happen, Ma.”

“Ah, yes, I know dear. You know, I think it’ll be better tomorrow, then we can go looking for that candy Beto’s been wanting since his birthday.”

Beto grew excited, “Ooh! Yes! Please, it’s been like two weeks since!” He settled down a bit, preparing for his next sentence, “But, you know... if we found some other people, maybe they’d give us cand-.”

Lily interrupted, “Hey... hey, what’d mom say about that?”

“Hey, but what if mom is wrong?”

Ma spoke up but spoke slowly, “People are dangerous beings, no one outside is going to give you candy.”

“But-”

“If someone hurt you, I’d lose myself. Just stay safe for your Ma, ok?”

“Yes, Ma.”

They finished eating and prepared to head outside. The siblings put on their heavy clothes to protect against the sand, put on their backpacks, and packed the map and the candle they had found yesterday into Lily’s bag. “Have fun.” Ma waved as they exited out the door.

When they had gotten outside, the sky was dim, and Lily recognized that it was a sunset. They’d be forced to move quickly. Lily pulled out the map and attempted to decipher it as the siblings walked towards the city. The map was a visitor’s guide to the city, Lily just had to figure out where they were on it.

They walked through their dilapidated neighborhood, crossed the highway bridge to the city, and entered through where they came last time: the side of a skyscraper that had fallen over, somehow still structurally intact, at least enough to give the siblings an opening through it.

When they made it into the city, Lily was able to make out where they were on the map. She closely showed Beto the map, pointing to their location. Beto guided his finger along a path, a straight line path. Lily made a thumbs-up towards Beto, and they followed the path.

The siblings have been to the city so much that they recognized the map’s contents rather quickly; they scanned all of the paths they had already been through, but they had never taken a straight path through the city, as they’d typically opt to loot each building in order from the start to the end.

They walked for what seemed like 2 hours. Soon, the sun would no longer peer through the sandstorm, and the siblings would be left in a dark fog. They found a building they hadn’t seen before, an old building with twin doors boarded up, which

looked to be a museum constructed with Victorian style architecture. Lily began prying at the boards with her hands, making sure to carefully grab the boards to avoid the nails sticking out from each board. She gestured for Beto to lend a hand; together they pulled with their entire body weight, grunting and wincing through their gas masks. One board flew off, as the siblings stumbled backwards, there were seven more boards left; Lily stuck her arms behind the boards to try the handle and found that it was a pull door: to open it, they'd have to pull off every single board. Just before they began pulling the rest of the boards off, they stopped.

Through their gas masks, it sounded distant, but they recognized what it was. An approaching cloud of dense sand, coming from what sounded like miles away in the direction they started, and they had no business being near that cloud. Dense sand was like boulders from the sky, and the sound of sand spikes and sand rocks hitting the ground could be heard for miles.

They began frantically ripping off the boards. Six left, then five left, then four. With each board removed, the sound of sand boulders hitting the road grew nearer; the clouds were known to whip through cities with a frightening pace, so the siblings were lucky to have only heard them in the past.

As the siblings reached only three of the boards left, something odd happened: Through the fog of the sand storm, a bright flood light appeared. It searched around before landing on the siblings; it was almost blinding to them. Shortly after, an alarm began to siren towards them as they looked towards the light's origin. The sound echoed through the land, drowning out all noise besides it. Beto let go of the boards, but Lily continued to pull. He was in amazement at the light, but Lily was focused on the boards. Beto began rushing towards the light. Lily noticed Beto's leave, "No! No, Beto! Come back!" She wailed through her gas mask towards Beto, but his figure was nearly absorbed by the light. Lily turned to look down the street. She could now see the sand cloud approaching from a few blocks down. She turned back at the light; Beto was nowhere to be seen. She let out a quick, annoyed groan and focused everything on the boards and began desperately pulling away at them. Two left, one left.

She made it in, slamming the doors behind her. She rested her back against the door, making sure it didn't budge. She looked down at her left arm; her sleeve was cut open, revealing the skin of her wrist. She lifted up her gas mask, and attempted to control her panicked breath. She wiped the face around her eyes repeatedly as if drying up a sob.



Her hands shook. She flexed her fingers back and forth haphazardly, looking around in every direction into the dark museum hall. As the sound of the sand cloud grew nearer, she got up quickly and sped-walked a great distance away from the door. She placed her gas mask back over her face, and the twin doors crashed open with sand leaking in. A large rock made a dent in the wood of the doors at their joining point.

Sometime after the cloud passed, Lily took a deep breath in and out and headed outside. It was nearly dark now, the flood light had gone away, and the alarm was silent. Compared to the chaos of what had happened, Lily's surroundings were nearly silent. Lily placed her right glove over her open sleeve and clutched it tightly. She walked towards where the floodlight came from, but what Lily found was profound. She was both confused and disappointed at what she looked at. She was sure that this was the origin of the floodlight, but what she saw was emptiness.

An out-of-place, large but flat square that seemed to span over a mile. Unlike everything else in the surroundings, the symmetrical plot was barely coated in sand; a thin layer of it was all that lay. It was a perplexing sight to Lily. She looked around the land, and sand was piled up many inches in every direction, except for on the square.

Lily looked up at the sky, it was nearly pitch black. She navigated back to the museum, stepping over the rock in the doorway. The museum was shrouded in blackness. She searched around the reception desk and found a drawer with a lighter in it. She flicked the striker on the lighter and it formed a small flame. Her eyes grew wide in elation. She turned the flame off and swiftly removed the straps of her backpack from her shoulders. She pulled out a wide-based candle from her backpack. She lit the candle with the lighter and it provided her with a comforting light. With the candle in her hand, she decided to explore the main exhibit of the museum, entering through old heavy doors. They swung open and closed slowly and with a loud creaking sound, but once they were closed, the sound of sand whipping through the front door was silenced.

### 3

Lily stood in the center of the hall, the ceiling was higher than what she could see with the measly candle, a flat itchy carpet covered every floor, and shattered glass exhibits lined the walls beside her; the museum was horribly quiet, only the muffled sound of Lily's shoes on the carpet pierced the silence. She moved the candle towards an exhibit, inside was a faded mannequin, resembling George Washington, next to an American flag, but the flag was nearly ripped in two.

Lily went through the small metal door entrance beside the display. She found gigantic water jugs, dented, and kicked onto the ground and stretcher beds without their cloth layer placed next to exhibits of American Indians. Lily reached behind an exhibit, searching her arm around for something useful. She found a can of black beans and let out a resting sigh.

Continuing her search, she found an intercom room adjacent to the American Indian exhibit. Soundproofing panels remained somewhat intact on the wall, a microphone mount was cracked in half, leaving the microphone dangling from it, and a sticky note on the desk with faded ink. Lily searched the drawers for anything, the only thing she found was a clipboard with sentences written on it. The front side of the paper was printed lines relating to a museum tour, but the backside was handwriting. It read, *"David, if you're in the mic room, could you intercom that lieutenant that's been coming in from the outside? He's been bugging nearly every resident about this new 'move', and we can't have him endangering our people. Refer him to the museum counsel and we'll hear him. Thanks."*

Lily took a pencil from off the clipboard. She pulled out the map from her backpack and located the museum on it. She circled the museum and placed the pencil and map back in her pack. She placed the clipboard back in the drawer and returned to the heavy museum doors. She peered through them for a moment. The twin doors across the front hall, leading outside, of casted no light, Lily planned to stay here for the night.

She entered the American Indian exhibit, searching for a cozy place to rest, her candle wasn't ready to dim, she had ample time. She scoured exhibit after exhibit, each one with broken stretcher beds, massive water jugs, torn down exhibits. She explored nearly half the museum and was growing increasingly tired, her eyes nearly refusing to stay open, her sense of time was nonexistent.

She made it to the gift shop, climbed over the desk and found a sleeping bag under it. With her candle almost dim. She crawled onto the sleeping bag, not even resting in it, and dozed off.

She slept for an unknown number of hours. She woke up slowly, noticing a ray of light coming from over the desk. When she got up, she saw a light peering through the exit of the gift shop. She grabbed her pack, put on her gas mask, and headed through.

It was bright enough now to see through the sandstorm. Lily navigated her way back home: through the skyscraper, over the bridge, and into the neighborhood. Lily arrived at the house, it was in the same destroyed condition as last time. When she got to the stairs down to the bunker, she stopped. She sat on the top step and looked down into the stairwell. She looked down at her hands as if she was staring into an abyss. She counted aloud and on her hands, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight." Again, she counted, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight." Again, she counted, this time, counting slowly, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine." She took a deep breath and headed down the stairs. She entered in a code to the bunker door, accidentally typing in numerical order, she deleted the attempt. She entered the correct code, and placed her hand on the handle.

"Lily! Oh praise the earth, you're alive!" Ma jumped up from her seat in the bed and gave Lily a warm hug, while taking off her gas mask.

"Hi, Ma," Lily did not hug back.

"My child, what is wrong- oh no, where is Beto?"

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, he was my responsibility, I lost him, I don't know where he went." Lily broke, her words scrambled, her expression soured.

“Shh, shh, be calm, be calm.” Ma hugged Lily even tighter, but Ma was the first to tear up.

That dinner was a quiet one. Unseasoned black beans did not support the occasion either. Lily finished her food first, instead of standing up, she asked, “Ma?”

“Yes, Lily?”

“I think he’s still out there-”

“No, just no, I don’t want to hear it.” Ma responded weepfully.

“It’s my responsibility to find him.”

“I *cannot*, in good conscience, let you leave this house. *Do you understand?*”

“Ma-”

“What I say is the law of the land.”

“Ma-”

“I *don’t* want to hear it right now.” Ma could not look Lily in the eye.

“Mom. I’m an adult. Beto is my brother. I’m finding him.”

Ma let out an exasperated sigh, the water in her eyes boiled up, “You’ll just end up like father, and I cannot-”

“Papa, didn’t have eye witness proof of a living person, he just followed what he heard on the radio.”

“You’re telling me, you have first-hand, *absolute* proof, that people were out there?”

“Yes, Ma. Before I lost him, there was this giant light beaming down on us, they played a siren directly into my ears. Beto ran towards it, and I didn’t see him after that.”

“Oh no, didn’t I teach him better than that!” Ma grew aggravated, she nearly slammed her fist on the table, just before stopping her arm.

“Somebody took him in, I presume-”

“Oh god!” Ma responded abruptly and anguishedly, “We are *not* having this conversation, ok?”

“Ok, Ma.”

Both sat up from the table and placed their dishes in the sink. An invisible tension grew around the two, they could not stand within two feet of each other without one of them moving over. They decided to sleep early. For this one day, Beto was no longer in Lily’s arms. She still slept close to the wall, as if the empty space remained a phantom of Beto.

In the morning, Ma had a chair in front of the door, which she sat with her arms crossed, and her head down. When Lily’s bed creaked as she woke up, Ma’s head tilted up.

“Good morning, Ma.” Lily looked towards Ma, with her eyes half open.

“Morning, Lily.” Ma responded with a serious look on her face.

“We have to go outside, you have to go outside, Ma.”

“Maybe tomorrow; look at your wrist, Lily.”

Lily looked at her left wrist, a pocket of discolored skin, slightly sagged from her wrist. “Ma, it’s nothing, I can still move my hand, see?” Lily shows the blotch on her wrist, while twisting her hand around.

“Still, might not be safe to go out, young lady.”

“Ma, *you* need to go outside, when was the last time you had a sliver of vitamin D?”

“Lily, that was only because my leg got sand in it.”

“And now it’s healed, come on, you need to leave the house.”

“Fine then.”

Ma sat up from her chair, walked up to the kitchen cabinet, and pulled out a stash of clothes and a gas mask. Lily prepared too, “We’re going to head to the city.”

“Isn’t that-” Ma raised her eyebrow.

“You know what, we won’t, we’ll go elsewhere.”

Once they had everything on they headed outside.

It was early morning as they could tell from the sun’s position, they had an overwhelming amount of time. The two walked through the neighborhood, it was unlikely that they would find much, Lily knew that the people of the neighborhood all left with their stuff after the storm hit, but Ma would not head to the city.

They walked and walked, in search of a single house that appeared to be untouched. Every inch of land around them was covered in at least a few inches of sand, the fences that once surrounded the backyards were destroyed or buried under the dirt, and every house had broken windows and doors.

The sun had moved to the middle of the sky, but finally, they found a house. It looked almost haunted: a three-story layout but the third story hung over the second, the door was locked shut, and the windows were somewhat intact on the first floor.

Lily walked up to one of the first floor windows, gesturing Ma to follow by. She readied herself, and with a quick motion, smashed the glass with her elbow. Ma stood in confusion and awe. Lily climbed through the window carefully, and gestured Ma to come inside.

The two found themselves in the living room, unrecognizable family photos lined the fireplace, springy, colored chairs were placed in every corner of the room, the floors were all shag carpet laced with bits of sand between the bristles, and the walls seemed unusually sturdy.

They navigated to the kitchen and rummaged through the cabinets, avoiding vintage cooking wares, and metal bowls. They searched the entire kitchen, every cabinet door was flayed open, yet nothing useful turned up. The only thing they found: a bag of overly sweet candy corn labeled, *"For Denis"*.

The two exited the house, Lily went through the window first. She waved her hand towards Ma, who was still inside the house. Ma put her palm out, signalling a pause. Lily shrugged her shoulders in annoyance. As Lily turned around, Ma finally exited through the window; as she climbed through, she stuck her right leg towards the edges of the glass, making a medium cut through the fabric on her leg.

The two made the trek home, unconsciously, keeping five feet away from each other as they walked.

