

HEATHER WHITED

Speakers of Dead Languages

At nights, I lie awake, astounded at my luck.

Arthur sleeps beside me, close enough to touch, close enough for me to use my feet to warm his after he is asleep. There isn't room for a hand's length of space between us in the small bed and sometimes his curls tickle my nose if he turns the right way.

He sleeps lightly, so I'm careful not to wake him, to wait until his body is relaxed and his breathing is even. Then, I move closer, counting to myself between the inches (move an inch, count to ten, move an inch, count to ten) to make sure I move slowly, that he stays asleep. I can take him into my arms without him waking now.

I have found that I don't need much sleep for myself any more. I would rather be awake, knowing I am here, with him.

For a lot of people, the world ended six months ago. For me, that's when it began.



According to the calendar, the one kept and synchronized by all of the settlements, it's June now. A Thursday. But the days simply copy one another, one gray day bleeding into another and another. May was the same and July will be too.

I wake up when Arthur begins to stir. I can see nothing because the lights haven't been turned on yet, but I know he's awake. I know the gasp of his first startled breath when he opens his eyes to the dark, the twitch before his last seconds of sleep shake off. Whatever happens while he's asleep, he has to remember that he's still here when he wakes and for him, it is not easy.

He finds his glasses and sits up. Even in the dark, this darkness that is deeper than any of us knew before, Arthur turns from me as he begins to dress. I sit up and light one of the candles that we have for before the electricity comes on in the morning and after it goes off at night. The match is the first light, then the candle brightens the room enough for us to see. I glimpse Arthur's back, his thighs as he quickly pulls his clothes on.

He isn't fast enough to keep out the cold and he shivers. I have memorized how he looks doing all of these things: his hands appearing at the ends of his

sleeves when he pulls on his shirt, the twist of his stomach when he reaches behind him for another layer of clothes. I could time to the second how his body moves when the cold hits it.

I know his body now, in small ways and in large. I once could only guess, but now I am a woman who knows for sure, who will forever know how his spine is built, the slope of his hip bones.

Arthur has stopped losing weight. I'm relieved every day to see that there is just as much of him as there has been for a month now. But I try not to stare.

While I dress, Arthur wets and combs his hair at the sink. The men are all growing beards as we haven't salvaged many razors. I like his face like this. I like watching how his new beard thickens each day, the way it changes his features. The rest of his face has grown pale. Mine has too. The consequence of a world with no real sun.

7:00. The world inside these walls brightens and the electricity comes on. The alarm sounds. Report to work in half an hour.



Arthur makes breakfast over our burner and I set the table. In the evenings, the conversation is easy because we can talk about what we've done during the day, but mornings are harder. Sometimes I talk about dreams; sometimes I make one up to have something to say. Sometimes, he smiles at the stories, real smiles, glad of the distraction. I know I have done well then.

Arthur brings the oatmeal to the table and spoons some into each of our bowls. Then he sits across from me, like he has for so many mornings now.

"We're going out this morning to try and find the people who radioed yesterday," he says.

I'm grateful of the effort he makes in that moment. Arthur knows I would be happy with silence, with just having him here. He stares out the window, which is covered with frost in a pattern that catches the electric light, and he scratches his new beard.

"Good thing the snow has stopped," I say.

Arthur yawns.

"For now."

I wish him luck, tell him I'll be thinking of him. Rescue missions are dangerous. I have only just gotten him and to think that he might not come back one day is too much to bear, so I do not. Arthur will come back. His snowy boots will melt a puddle onto the floor tonight. He will not leave me here with her picture.

My work isn't as interesting as his and I have nothing to say about it, so I let the silence grow and we eat a few bites of the food, drink the weak coffee. When we're done, we clean.

He has layers to put on before he leaves, thick boots. Last thing before he leaves, he covers his curls with a hat.

Arthur gives me a hug before he goes to join the rescue team. Again, I am grateful. I am better than nothing, better than a room with just his thoughts and a view of the new, cold world. I am better than living, or dying, alone.

After he leaves, I still have five minutes before work. I go to the drawer where he keeps her picture, the one he doesn't think I know about.

It doesn't bother me that he keeps it. I think I would have done the same if our situations were reversed. This, the loss of the love of my life, is something I have never dealt with before and will not have to for a long time, because Arthur is the only person I have ever loved and he is here with me.

His wife didn't make it. She only exists in this picture, this one picture that will get old and crumble one day. His memories of her will lose their brightness too, especially once there is no picture for him to go to. Soon, he will only remember her in the flimsiest of wisps. He will have to wonder if her hair was really that shade of brown, what her smile looked like. He won't be able to recall the sound of her voice. And I will still be here, warm, alive, talking and holding him when he sleeps. My voice will be the one he hears, the one he knows with no doubt. He keeps some of her clothes too, but he's already starting to forget how she looked in them, I'm sure.

I'm not happy that Joanne is dead, but she is. She is and I am not.



It's only because of the rain that I get a ride home.

I'm alone in the classroom when Arthur arrives. He's dripping wet, his glasses slid down his nose and their lenses mostly steamed up. I think briefly that I don't know how he can see at all like that. He takes them off and tries to wipe them on his shirt, but it's too wet to do any good and he sticks them back on his face as they are. Rain dribbles down his smooth cheek and into the collar of his shirt.

"Class is cancelled," I tell him. "The university sent out an email. There's a flood. Something really terrible's happened."

He curses, dropping his mangled umbrella on the floor. He squints looking around the room through his streaky glasses.

"What are you still doing here?"

“No buses either. I can’t get home.”

He knows it’s not a good idea. I can see it on his face, but he offers anyway. He was never going to leave me here alone, leave me to die.

“Come on, Imogene. I’ll take you.”

I stand up and follow him from the classroom, smiling to myself.



I meet with Joe and Delia in the library. The other groups are assembling too, arranging their papers and books, warming their hands with mugs of hot water.

We are copying as many of the books as we can, as fast as we can. When we’re done, we send them away to other settlements. They send us back the things they have. It’s one of the benefits of being in a school. At least we have books to read.

Some of the people, those who speak other languages, work to make dictionaries. It’s a fear of all ours now, that we’re the last of our people or might one day be; that one day maybe there will be no one else to understand our words because everyone else who spoke like us is gone. It’s not a thing I have to fear quite yet, but nothing is certain.

I have seen them, the people in that predicament but lucky enough to have someone else to talk about it with, whispering and bickering about definitions with each other. Others sit alone, the last of their kind. One woman, Jillian, has drawn pictures to go with the words she writes. She spends hours on them, sometimes taking two or three days to finish even one. Everyone but me looks like they cry sometimes and I see Jillian, bent over a picture, wipe away tears from time to time. She works in silence, leaves in silence, and hopes, I suppose, that her work is enough.

When they’re done with their dictionaries, we’ll copy those too. We all do our part.

“Did you hear?” asks Delia. She looks up from the book she is copying. “Two babies are on the way. Mandy and Liz are both pregnant.”

It’s another thing people are trying to do as fast as they can. The radio has not said how many of us are left, but all of us know that the world must be a very empty place now.

“What about you and Arthur?” Joe asks. He is one of the luckiest ones. He is here with his family, his wife and four boys.

I think of the polite nights beside Arthur, the few kisses we’ve shared, his hand on mine at the table to show that he’s trying. We have come together twice since we arrived, and Arthur does not like to talk about it. Soon, he’ll

have no choice but to admit his wife gone. When the rescue missions stop, he'll let himself know that he is free. Until then, Arthur does not think of himself as a widower, but as a man waiting for his wife, and what we have done is as wrong as it ever was.

"No news on that front yet," I say.

"They're brave," says Delia. "It's going to be so different, giving birth here, raising children here."

"There's another settlement, at the hospital in Nashville. I hear they're working out a trade," says Joe. "Medical supplies for food."

I wonder if he's thinking of his sons. There are no other children here, no one for them to grow up with, to fall in love with one day. No one for them to marry and start a little life in one of the tiny apartments with. Maybe we will trade them too, or someone will trade to us.

Even good news is quickly extinguished.

We copy our books without speaking for the rest of the morning, we eat our lunches alone, and when the alarms tell us it's time to stop working, we go back to our rooms, to our new homes.



It takes us two hours to go even a few miles. Everyone has the same idea as we do and the water is already thick on the road.

"Where do you live again?" Arthur asks. He drums on the steering wheel.

I tell him.

A sea of headlights and honking horns. Arthur flinches with each over-loud noise. I draw in the steam on the window. It's gotten so cold. I blow on my hands to warm them.

"We're not going to make it that far."

We sit in silence for another ten minutes. The car inches forward. The woman in the car next to Arthur's has her music up so loud that I can hear it. I look over and she's crying.

"You can wait it out with me and Joanne. If you want. We're close to our place."

I draw a second stick figure on the window.

"That sounds great. Thanks."

It takes us another hour to get the few blocks to his house. We don't say anything during the drive.

Soon, I am standing in Arthur's living room, dripping water onto his carpet.



Arthur and I have stacks of canned food on a shelf. I pick a few to open for dinner and watch out the window for the van to return. The snow is back. It isn't heavy yet, though, so I know he will make it home safe.

I wanted to make dinner for him. It was something I used to dream about as I watched him lecture. I imagined all the meals, all the smiles he would give me, his arms around my waist as I stirred something on the stove. I used to practice recipes at home, plotting in my mind each of our movements as I cooked.

Now, I almost have it, everything I imagined then, if not quite how I thought I would get it. It feels like so long ago, probably because the world where I went to college and took Arthur's summer class no longer exists. It has only been a year, though, chopped in half around the day we came here.

Our apartment used to be a French classroom and the posters—the Eiffel Tower, a sparkling Parisian night, verb conjugations—are frozen to the wall. Even if I could take them down, I wouldn't. I have never been to France and never will be now and I like knowing that I have a piece of that place here.

I study the verbs on the poster from time to time, whisper them to myself. I've looked at the textbooks, too, during these hours between when my work ends and Arthur comes home. I think of France and wonder there is anyone left there, if French is a dead language and there will never be anyone to understand this poster on the wall of my home with Arthur. Maybe I will teach myself. Maybe I will do the lessons in these frozen books and one day, teach any children that Arthur and I might have. What will it matter if we don't pronounce something correctly? No one will know any better. Books can thaw and I am a fast learner.



I need a change of clothes. Arthur gives me his and not his wife's, and a towel to dry off with. I get to change in a guest bathroom. There are soft yellow hand towels on a shelf, a small bowl of potpourri on the sink.

A flannel shirt. Corduroy pants rolled up. The chipped purple nail polish on my toes.

I wait downstairs in the living room when I'm dressed. Arthur comes back downstairs, changed out of his work clothes. He wears a faded sweat-shirt and jeans. Both of us still have wet hair. Arthur makes us sandwiches and tea, tries to call Joanne.

“No signal.”

“Huh.”

Arthur puts on a movie. We start a game of cards, sitting on either side of his coffee table.

“You cold, Imo?”

It’s not a nickname I have. I don’t have any. But I like it. I lay down a losing hand.

“A bit.”

He turns up the heat, grabs me a pair of thick gray socks.

Before long, hours have passed and Arthur invites me to dinner.



Two specks of brightness break through the dark. The van pulls up and two figures hidden under layers of clothes come out of the front. The headlights shine off a pair of glasses and I know one of them is Arthur. Three more people come out the back door. The last of the rescue crew emerges, holding in his arms a smaller person, a woman with long hair hanging down, a woman that I can see has a round, pregnant stomach.

I close the curtains and start to warm our food.

Arthur comes in and hangs his coat, discards the extra layers until he is in a sweater and jeans. He puts his boots by the door. He sits and lets his hands and feet get warm. The snow and ice melt into his hair and beard. When he’s ready, he opens his eyes and walks to the table.



We kiss in his kitchen while he cooks dinner.

Arthur reaches to touch the small of my back under my soft flannel shirt. His soft flannel shirt.

The garlic burns in the pan on the stove. The oil smokes. When we break apart, he moves the pan from the eye and then we kiss again.

Sirens fill the air.

“What the hell?” he asks.

We turn on the news and hear the order to evacuate. Arthur fills a bag with clothes, his and Joanne’s, and we go to the car together. He tries again to call her but there is no answer.



The closest evacuation point is a high school a few miles from Arthur’s house. After three hours, we leave his car and walk the last three quarters of a mile.

It’s crowded, but there’s room for us. We get cots side by side. I go to the bathroom to change into another pair of Arthur’s clothes.

Children cry. A few dogs run around. There’s coffee and hot food. I take

two plates, one for me and one for Arthur and go back to our cots.

He eats in silence. His phone is dead and he never reached his wife.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” I tell him. “Probably some place like this, just as worried as you are. You’ll see her when the rain stops.”

But I don’t think it’s true.

There’s an announcement that the lights will go off in ten minutes. Arthur and I lie down, side by side. In the night, I try to take his hand, but he moves it away.



The first morning, there’s hot breakfast.

I go to the bathroom, wash my face, and put on some more of Arthur’s clothes.

There’s not much to do. We sit on our cots for most of the day. Arthur looks at his dead phone for a while and then goes back to sleep. I find someone with a charger and charge Arthur’s phone for him. The rain doesn’t let go.



We spend the first week in the gym. The days are long and cold. Most people sleep a lot. There’s always the sound of crying. No one dies, though.

The radio goes out for a few days but when it comes back, we hear from another group of survivors. The next day, another. The groups are small like ours. They don’t have any good news but for their own existence. Everyone asks about someone they know, but no one ever hears anything comforting.

At the end of the first week, we start to prepare for a long stay. A permanent stay. We have a meeting and decide to make apartments of the old classrooms.

When Arthur is asked if he wants an apartment for himself, he takes a few seconds to answer before saying no.



It will be a quiet night.

We read together when our meal is done. Arthur stares at the same page in his book for an hour and then closes it.

“I’m going to bed.”

This is our life. One day, he will love it as much as I do, will think of this room as our home. He will forget Joanne, how we came to be here together the day the world ended while she was far away, at work, unaware that he was at their home with me. He’ll only remember the time, our time, that started the afternoon we rushed together to his car at the first warning and

made our way here. Arthur will be able to look back and clearly remember the first night, the one in the crowded gym where we lay on those adjoining cots, as our first night as us. It will make him happy, in time.

I am more than happy to wait.

He turns his back to me and dresses for bed. He gets under the blankets and covers his head. I change too and get in beside him.

There is a warning alarm and the world goes dark again.

When he's asleep, I move closer. One day, he will hold me. I will fold into his lanky body and fall asleep. For now, I take my time, as it's the only resource we seem to have accumulated.

Some hours later, I am woken by the sound of a baby crying.

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