

## We're Not Dead

There's a dense weight on my chest. I breathe in, and the air tastes thick and warm, like it's straight from a sauna. My shirt is wet, sweaty, sticking to me. I look; there's a face above me. Her eyelids tremble as if her retinas are boiling behind them.

In a spark of both realization and adrenalin, I shove the stranger off of me; she rolls off the mattress and tumbles to the floor, dead weight. I turn to face her and hold my breath. The girl pushes herself up, arms shaking. I glance around; she's closer to the door than I am.

"Who the hell are you?" I ask, scooting back against my headboard.

She looks up, her long, dark hair covering most of her face. Her eyes somehow find clearings and meet my own. She leans backwards to sit on her butt and pushes the mask of hair behind her ears like curtains. Without breaking our shared gaze, she points to her lips, mouths a few words, then shakes her head.

"You... you can't talk?"

She nods.

"Why... were you on top of me?"

She cups a hand around her ear, as if listening for something, points to me, then taps a finger over her heart.

"You were listening for a heartbeat?"

She nods again.

"But... why? Could you not tell if I was alive from the doorway or literally anywhere else in the room? Also, why would I be dead?" I let go of the sheets and fan myself. "Why is it so hot in here?"

The girl looks down and stands. She walks over to the window across from me and opens the blinds. I blink a few times; the bright spots dissipate, and my stomach twists. The sky is maroon with puffs of brown gas—almost like clouds of dust—scattered about. I'm able to look directly at the sun; it's a bright magenta and it's dripping, crying, like a thick, wet glob of paint. I breathe again when my feet touch the carpet. I inch my way to the window. My hand rises and covers my mouth. People are collapsed on the sidewalk below. Someone was in the midst of walking their dog; they're curled in a fetal position, the leash still wrapped around their wrist with the other end attached to an equally dead poodle. Another must have been a child on their way to school; their foot is caught in their bike's chain. Cars are stopped, but the engines are still running. Many had collided, as if the drivers had suddenly passed out at the wheel.

The girl closes the blinds. I close my eyes and stammer, "W-what the hell?" I look at her. "What happened?"

She shrugs.

"Do you know if anyone else is still... alive?"

She frowns and shakes her head.

"Um... well..." I swallow more air. "I'm Alexandria. What's..."

The girl rubs her finger on her lips, transferring lipstick. She scribbles on her forearm, going back to her mouth whenever she runs out of "ink."

"Hey, you don't have to do that!" I sputter, but she finishes anyway. She turns the inside of her arm towards me. In pink, streaky letters, she wrote, "ZORA." "Zora," I say, "Your name's Zora?"

She nods. It's a little strange, I think, but at least her name's interesting. Alexandria is as basic as you can get, though I'm probably a bit biased.

"Okay, Zora," I start, "Well, you don't have to use your lipstick to communicate. I probably have a notebook and pen around here somewhere."

I sit down at my desk and open its drawers; I dig through food wrappers, envelopes, and documents. Zora waits patiently, shuffling her feet into the carpet. I find an old notebook with coffee stains and half the pages ripped out. The first writing utensil I fish out is a strawberry-scented marker.

"Here," I say, spinning around in my chair and handing my findings to Zora. She beams, yanks the gift from my hands, hunches over the desk, and immediately begins scrawling. I belly flop back onto my bed and breathe. I close my eyes and listen to Zora's dominant hand push the air around the area above the desk; the marker squeaks; the sickeningly sweet scent of strawberry lollipops drifts over to me.

There's the click of the marker's cap being put on. Zora sets her work on the back of my head. I shake it off of me, sit up, grab the notebook, and read:

*I live in this apartment complex a few floors below you. I woke up and found my cat, Suede, dead. I was devastated, so I immediately tried to call my family. Nobody answered. I needed comfort, so I went to my friend's; they lived a few doors down from me. They didn't answer, either. I then looked outside and saw, well, what you just saw. I started breaking into apartments to see if anyone was alive, and you're the only one I've found. I've tried turning on the TV and browsing the internet, but everything's come to a screeching halt.*

I blurt, "Shouldn't we keep searching, then?"

She nods.

I put on a clean shirt, splash my face with cold water, put my hair up, and dig my backpack out of the abyss that is my closet. Zora follows me into the kitchen. I stuff the backpack with as many bottles of water that I can fit inside it.

“It’s sweltering. Are you thirsty?” I hold a bottle out to Zora and she takes it. “Are you hungry?” I ask, finding a box of granola bars further in the cabinet. She grabs that from me mid-sip. I wiggle the rest of the box into the backpack and zip up the whole affair. “We’re starting with the rest of the building, right?”

Zora shows me her notebook, on which there’s a crudely drawn thumbs-up.

When we leave my apartment, Zora reveals a crowbar she had left outside. We dash up and down stairs, cracking every door open like walnuts. I grimace at the fact that we’re able to open these locked doors so easily and there’s a prickly feeling in my stomach, like I’d swallowed a cactus or something, every time we discover another corpse; I don’t recognize the majority of these people, even in an “off the street” kind of sense, even though we lived in the same building for up to two years.

Our efforts prove fruitless, so we collapse on the complex’s front steps. We chug a bottle of water each. Zora writes, *Now what?* I suggest that we should walk along the street and maybe check other buildings. She nods slowly; her expression doesn’t change.

We stroll side-by-side, scanning our surroundings for any sign of life. There are other apartment complexes, but searching every window feels exhausting, even from a distance, with the fog of death invading our every orifice. We can’t walk freely, as we constantly have to step

over corpses; we manage to trip and stumble on them, even when keeping our focus solely on the sidewalk in front of us.

“I think I give up,” I say, freezing up after an encounter with a woman sprawled over a stroller. Zora stares at me. “Everyone’s dead. *Everything* is dead.”

She puts her hands on her cheeks, looking up to the sky. By the time she tilts her head back downwards, she’s smiling. She writes, *We’re not dead. Fuck it.* A smiley face accompanies the message.

She grabs my wrist and we’re bolting back towards our apartment building. We’re leaping haphazardly over dead people; all care is out the window. I protest, but her grip on me is strong and her laser focus is stronger.

She takes us to the parking lot. She pulls car keys out of her pocket and approaches a jalopy with patches of red that I can only hope are rust at this point.

“You have a car?”

She sticks her tongue out, shakes her head, rolls her eyes, and laughs. We climb into the car and she floors the gas pedal before I have a chance to get settled, let alone buckle my seatbelt. She maneuvers around the parked cars in the lot, but from that point forward she’s acting more like we’re in a video game than a real city street. She drives over curbs at top speed to drive through grass or over sidewalks when there are too many cars to advance normally. The entire vehicle is shaking violently, like it could fall apart at any second; I wrap myself in my arms and hold my breath.

When the car stops, I will myself to open my eyes. We’re at a huge shopping center with at least five floors. Even from the back of the parking lot, the corpses here are congested. Zora

doesn't seem to mind; when we exit the vehicle, we're back to her dragging me along as if my arm were a string. "Where are we going? Why did you take us here?" I ask, knowing damn well that she both can't and won't answer. I start to forget that the dead bodies exist.

We end up in some designer store that I can't pronounce the name of. Zora shoves me into a dressing room and tosses dresses over the door. I check the price tags and go pale when I realize that they cost several months of my pay. I put on a dress that I like. I open the door.

Zora is in front of a mirror, looking at home in a form-fitting, teal evening gown. She wears it so effortlessly, leaning against the wall and having her legs positioned to show off the dress' intricately placed miniature jewels; I wonder if she was a model before this, whatever this is, happened.

"Who are you?" I ask. She giggles and turns her forearm towards me. The "ZORA" she'd written earlier is still there, albeit smudged and flaky.

I follow her to a department store where she sits me down at one of the abandoned makeup kiosks. She uses one of the other chairs to break the display glass. She takes the fresh lipsticks, eyeliners, and mascaras out of their boxes and throws the cardboard in the air like confetti. She does my makeup and her intensity makes my arms tingle.

When she's done with me, she goes to work on her own face. I ask her why we're dressing up, but she doesn't even look at me; I don't know whether it's because she's mid-eyebrow.

I wander around, browsing the clothing racks and fiddling with the sample lipsticks. I write, "ALEXANDRIA" on my forearm with a glittery, red one because I think it's funny.

I go to return to Zora, but I find her far before I get back to the kiosk. She's on an advertisement for some perfume called "American Honey," naked with conveniently placed bees.

I hear a sharp gasp and I'm grabbed from behind. Cold hands are flat over my eyes and I'm being dragged backwards. I scream and yell, but I'm not released until I'm out of the store. Zora stands in front of me, crying.

"Why are you crying?" I ask. She makes no move to communicate and she apparently left her notebook at the makeup kiosk. "I don't care that you're a model. It's not a big deal," I try, though being a model hardly seems like something to cry about. She wipes her eyes; wet eyeliner and mascara smear. She gestures for me to follow her. I oblige.

Zora stalks over to the elevator. We go inside and she sets our route for the rooftop food court. She leans against the elevator rails in the same pose as the dressing room. The jewels on her dress are constellations on the outside of her thigh. She picks at them; the makeup residue on her fingers turns the stars into tiny black holes.

We reach the top. There are no bodies; the food court must not have been open when all of this started. Zora walks us to the railing around the rooftop's perimeter; we have a great view of the dead city, and there's actually a cool breeze up here to combat the heat. She presses her body against the fence, pressing a pattern into her dress, and starts crying again. I, again, ask what's wrong and slowly reach to touch her shoulder, but there's a stabbing pain in my skull. I yelp and stumble backwards. Zora catches me by my arms. Once I'm stable on my feet, she rushes me, trying to cover my eyes again. She jumps on me like a rabid monkey, but I see what she didn't want me to see, regardless.

I can't breathe. Everything is normal again. The sky is blue. People are alive, walking in the parking lot and on the sidewalks below. Even the temperature is reasonable. I smell food cooking in the food court behind me. I hear people.

But then I blink. I spin around, but the food court is empty. I look up. The sky is maroon with the dusty, brown clouds. The sun isn't just dripping, now; it's pouring like a faucet. I inhale, but choke on the humidity. Zora is on the ground, on her knees, sobbing into her hands. I grab her by the shoulders and force her to her feet.

"What the hell? What the hell is going on here?" I shout at her, droplets of my spit flying onto her face. She shakes her head frantically. Even if she could speak, I doubt she'd be able to say anything through her sobs. She runs away, following the perimeter of the roof. I chase after her. My vision grows blurry, like I'm looking at everything through water.

Once we're on the other side of the building, she flings her torso over the railing, clinging to it, gasping for air. I yell her name and she collapses, pressing her face into the fence.

"Zora!" I crouch to the ground and shake her. Her eyes flutter open, similarly to before. I stand and give her my hand. She pulls herself up, legs shaking like Jell-O. "What's happening?" I whisper.

Her eyes are cloudy, like she's high or something. She gives my arm two small tugs then jumps up to sit on the fence. My stomach twists.

"What the hell are you doing? That's dangerous!"

Zora stares at me, tears rolling down her cheeks, expressionless. She mouths, very slowly, *We have to go.*

"W-what are you saying?"



She mouths, *Everything is dead. Nothing is going to change.*

“Are you saying we... don’t have a choice?”

Zora looks down and shrugs. I sit next to her. She looks at me again, sad, so sad that I use my thumb to wipe away her tears and take her hands in mine.

I decide that I trust her enough to project myself forward, whether that means falling to my death or waking up in my bed.