

WHAT IF...

AN ANTHOLOGY OF SPECULATIVE FICTION

EDITED BY BEN WEBER



Short Story 2009

FEATURING STORIES BY: ALEX CHASIN, ANNA GOODRIDGE,
JESSICA LI, AMANDA LIEFELD, JENETTE SCHIOPUCIE, AND BEN
WEBER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DISARMAMENT BY ALEX CHASIN	3
A SAILOR'S SONG BY ANNA GOODRIDGE	7
THE DAY THE SUN DIED BY JESSICA LI	10
FALLOUT BY AMANDA LIEFELD	14
THE TIME MERCHANTS BY BEN WEBER	18
JULY 4, 2015. BY JENETTE SCHIOPUCCI	21

DISARMAMENT

by Alex Chasin

It was July 4th, and the president of the United States should have been happy. Instead, he was sitting in his study, moodily munching on oysters. His wife had told him the day before that he was paying too much attention to his work, and complained that he never talked to her any more. She had sighed, turned away, and told him that she was leaving him, before walking out the door, escorted by Nixon's male secretary, Eduardo. No, things were not going well at all for President Nixon II.

Suddenly, he choked. His face slowly turning purple, he toppled off of his swiveling chair and hit the ground with a hollow *thump*, flailing wildly. The expensive porcelain dish fell from his desk and crashed to the floor, shattering and sending bits of oyster all over his feet. Always quick to respond, the two Secret Service men guarding him leapt into action, running around his desk in an attempt to save the life of the most important man in the nation. Mike, who was new in the Secret Service, swore silently and asked himself why this had happened on his first day. John Dover, the more experienced of the two, immediately hoisted up the president and started to perform the Heimlich maneuver. Mike could only stand by and watch helplessly as his partner tried futilely to save President Nixon II.

Fully aware of his impending death, the president grew angry. He had always been a vindictive man, but had hidden it ten months ago, when he was running for the highest office in the land. And he had done it well, too, judging by where he was now lying on the floor, choking to death. The anger at the way he was being allowed to die bubbled through him, making his head pound and his eyes bulge. With a Herculean effort, he managed to control one of his wildly flailing arms long enough to slap it against his desk and flick open a plastic cap – long enough for it to press the tiny, fingerprint-sensitive button hidden under that cap. The tiny red button that read **DEMILITARIZE**.

Far away, in North Carolina, Joe Delgado sat behind the counter at the gun shop where he worked, wiping away the sweat that always seemed to be on his forehead. To his left, guns echoed loudly on the shooting range. He sighed and leaned back in the hard, wooden chair he was forced to sit in. "One of these days," he thought to himself, "I'm gonna get out of here. One of these days, I'll make myself some money and build a nice, big house. One of these days, I'm gonna go somewhere my head doesn't feel like it's gonna split in half. And I'd like to do it," he mused, "*before* I lose my hearing." But it was good money, after all. The military base down the road, Fort Jackson, always needed guns and ammunition, and they usually came to him. He had a good reputation for fair prices, and word traveled fast.

He came back to himself abruptly, realizing something was wrong. He checked over the store that was his responsibility with a quick glance, and everything seemed to be in order. The rifles were neatly lined up in their glass cases, the pistols hung from the wall pegs, the shotguns stood like soldiers in their wooden racks. Then, staring at his guns, he realized what was missing.

It was quiet. None of the usual gunshots he was so accustomed to hearing were ringing out. Only futile clicks were heard as the angry men in the shooting range tried to force their guns to work. Swears, louder than the guns could ever be, rang through the small, cramped store. A man

named Randy, one of his worst customers and an annoying, spendthrift man, walked up to Joe and prodded him in the chest.

“See here, Joe, what’s this all about? I bought this here gun from you not even a week ago, and it just gave a hiss and stopped workin’ all of a sudden. I bought a guarantee with this thing, and I want it fixed, or you better give me my damn money back.” Randy shoved Joe backwards, a threatening finger pointed at him.

“In case you didn’t notice, Randy, none of the other guns in my store are working either. We might’ve gotten a bad shipment from my supplier. Maybe the humidity jammed the guns up. Maybe it was a freak accident that they all broke at once. I dunno yet, gimme a minute to check the other guns before you annoy me about it.” So saying, Joe wound his way through the cluttered room until he reached one of his good rifle cases. He retrieved a key from his inside pocket and slid it into the lock, turning it until he heard the *click* that signaled the door was unlocked. He pocketed the key again, slid the door open, and was about to reach for one of the guns when a violent quake shook the ground, throwing him to the side and knocking over the gun rack in front of him. The rack fell on top of him with a sickening crack, guns spilling out around him.

A massive concussive blast smashed into him, going on and on for what felt like hours. The ground opened up underneath him, swallowing him and the guns and cases into a massive grave. Another huge series of concussions shattered the glass all over the store, causing it to cascade around him with a tinkling sound. More concussions rocked the ground, and a wave of superheated air rolled over him. He heard Randy scream, abruptly cut off with a boiling sound. Other screams and shrieks reached his ears, making him shiver. A fourth series of concussions reached him, caving in the hole and covering him with dirt, as he heard the explosions. Hundreds, thousands of them, massive sounds that shook his heart in his chest, heard even through yards of rock and tightly packed earth. There was one final, massive explosion, and a sudden, eerie quiet descended over the ground, disrupted only by the echoes of the disaster.

Joe clawed his way out of his earthen grave, desperately trying to get air into his parched lungs. His fingers broke through the blackened, burnt crust of the earth, and he scrambled to get at least his head out above the ground. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally broke free, and was able to see the wreckage that surrounded him. Pulling his bruised and battered body out of the earth, he glanced around and stopped dead.

His beloved shop was gone. Nothing was left of it – or of the people inside it. Only a few bits of blackened bone attested to the fact that they had even existed, and a burnt wasteland stretched all around him. What had used to be his home, his country, was gone. The buildings were demolished. Not even the skeleton of a tree had escaped the fury of the explosions. Joe sat down suddenly, as what had just happened hit him. This has to be a dream, he thought. This can’t be happening. There was nothing but a barren desert left. Joe cradled his head in his hands as he thought about what to do next. And then he felt it.

Radiation rolled over the land in waves. He’d never had personal experience with it, but he knew what happened to people who had. He needed to get some sort of protective suit, but there was nothing left. Or was there? Didn’t that military base down the road have some sort of secret underground complex? If you listened to the conspiracy theorists, every military base did, but it was worth a try.

Joe stood up, glanced around, and set off in the direction of what he thought had to be the

base, but with no landmarks or signs left, it was slow and uncertain going. His feet crunched through the blackened crust that was good, damp, arable soil less than an hour ago. As he trudged along, he wondered exactly what had happened to transform the greatest country on the planet, a veritable paradise on Earth, into this wilderness. Had a nuclear power plant exploded, or something? And why had the guns stopped working?

He stumbled over a bit of charred metal lying across what used to be, he supposed, a road. The base – what was left of it – was in front of him. There wasn't a lot to recognize; mostly everything had been burnt away or melted into a sodden mass. Fort Jackson had been almost entirely destroyed; but a door sunken into the ground had survived the blasts mostly intact. Joe walked over to it and tried to pry it open. As he did, the door groaned and collapsed, the inside melted away by the superheated air.

Joe stepped back as the stench of burnt flesh wafted up out of the hole, but moved forward and lowered himself inside after only slight hesitation. Surprisingly, despite the awful smell, there weren't many corpses inside the tunnel. A few technicians still sat, smoking, at their consoles, but it was eerily empty and quiet. He walked slowly down the corridor, glancing left and right for a HazMat suit. Even now, he could feel the deadly radiation seeping into him, eating away at his body.

Joe saw a door to his left and staggered to it, opening it and nearly falling inside. He stared around at the shelves, filled with useless jars of chemicals. This was obviously a lab of some sort, and yet it didn't have a single protective suit of any kind. Joe swore to himself, and stumbled back out, feeling the radiation eating into him. He started to run unsteadily down the corridor, becoming more and more desperate as he looked into one room after another – and one room after another was either empty, or didn't have what he needed. He even found a room full of radios, televisions, and banks of computers and keyboards, but they were useless to him. He was beginning to think that he would die before he found the suit! They had to be in here somewhere. He stumbled into the last room in the hallway, gasping for breath, and saw a neat row of suits, hanging on racks on the far wall. He lunged towards them, slipping quickly into one.

As soon as he put it on, he instantly felt the deadly pull of the radiation leave his body. Finally thinking clearly, he tried to remember if he had seen anything useful in any of the room she had passed through. The radio! There were a few wireless radios in that room. He jogged back down the hallway, stopping to grab a few radios, and went looking for the cafeteria. He walked back down the tunnel, his new suit squeaking as it rubbed his skin.

He had found the cafeteria – without food, unfortunately – and was fiddling with the radio. He had never used one himself; after all, this was 2015, not 1945. He used computers and the television to keep in touch. Suddenly, as he pressed a button, the radio crackled to life. Nothing came out except static, but it was a start. He turned one of the knobs, and the radio channels changed. Joe kept turning until he heard, with a great deal of relief, human voices.

“...Large explosion on the shore and the American shield is up. We're coming back to England, should be there in about a week, and hope to God that everyone's shields are up.” Joe started talking into the radio:

“Hello? Is anyone there? Hello?” He realized they couldn't hear him. Joe fiddled with the knobs and smacked the radio against the table.

“What? Who's there?” A crackle of static burst from the radio.

“Can you hear me now?” asked Joe.

“Yes, I can hear you. Stop speaking so damn loud, you’re giving me a headache,” replied the voice irritably. “Who are you, anyway, and why are you on our radio channel?”

“I’m a survivor, from...whatever happened...in America,” he replied, with a touch of confusion. There was another burst of static from the radio on the table, and it went quiet for a minute.

“You don’t know what happened either, then? We just saw the shield up and turned back,” said the voice.

“Shield? What’s this shield?” asked Joe, still confused.

“The radiation shield. They’ve gone up all over the world now, and everyone’s supposed to get their asses inside of one.”

“But what are the radiation shields for? What happened?”

“I was hoping you could tell me that, bud. I want to know what happened to my country on Independence Day as much as you. I’ll be one sec, I need to tell my captain this.” There was the sound of a headset being taken off, and then distant shouts and a loud commotion. Suddenly, the radio in Joe’s hand stopped crackling, and fell dead. He tried to turn the channels, but to no avail – he couldn’t get the radio to work. Joe swore and threw it away from him, stood up, and walked back through the corridor to the tunnel entrance.

As he came back above ground, a wave of hot air hit him, instantly drenching him in sweat. The radiation didn’t affect him as long as he had the suit on, but the heat and lack of water most certainly did. He walked forward for a few minutes, then stopped. Where was he going to go? Presumably, all of America had been destroyed by the blast – and possibly Canada, but nobody cared about Canada. Where was he supposed to go from here? Anywhere he went in the U.S. would be as barren as where he was right now. Mexico and Canada were the closest countries; maybe one of them had escaped the blast. He had to think for a moment; they hadn’t taught a lot of geography in the school he had gone to, but he was fairly sure that Mexico was closer than Canada. Maybe the Mexicans set up some sort of shelter for surviving Americans? It was worth a try, anyway. With this fortifying thought in mind, he stamped through the blackened, burnt crust of the earth, heading west.

After about an hour, the wreckage started to lessen a little bit. There was a modern steel that hadn’t been entirely vaporized, and was only sagging a little bit, and a little further on, the brittle hulk of a tree. It was like in one of those old archaeology movies that used to be on TV; everywhere he went he found evidence of a now vanquished civilization. Directly in front of him, looming out of the fog that now covered everything, Joe saw part of a brick wall that was still standing after the explosions. He walked around it, and stopped dead at what he saw behind the wall. A family of four was huddling together behind the wall, embracing even in death. The flesh had been seared off of their skeletons in the direction opposite from the wall, black bone showing through. But on the other side, the flesh was still attached – and still dripping blood into a growing pool on the ground. Joe, horrified, stumbled away from them, then turn and ran, trying to get away as fast as he could.

He could feel the half-burnt corpses following him, reaching out their hands to seize him. Suddenly, he tripped and fell, hitting the ground hard and scrabbling in the dirt, sure that they were almost on top of him. He turned around slowly, expecting to see them, and say – nothing.

The corpses were still at the wall, now so far away he could barely see them. Joe breathed a sigh of relief and slowly stood up, wiping the sweat off of his forehead. He slowly started to walk again, back towards the west. To where he hoped salvation lay.

After another few hours, the sun was almost below the horizon. Darkness was settling across the land, and there was nowhere for Joe to sleep except right out in the open, in the midst of the heat and burnt land surrounding him.

He woke up the next morning feeling everything but refreshed. Hurt, in pain, achy, hot, sweaty, like his insides were liquefied – all of those, but not refreshed. Groaning, he pulled himself up. The suit seemed heavier on him than before, as if his muscles were withering away, and the ground seemed to have degraded even further, sagging into itself. He kept walking, day after day, and each day the ground seemed to fall in on itself a little bit more. He nearly fell through a hole of melted soil – and he didn't even know soil could melt in the first place.

After a while, when he was walking in what he thought should be the beginning of Mississippi, the ground firmed up a little bit. Could it be that not all of America had been destroyed? Maybe North Korea had launched those missiles, but only at the southeastern corner! Of course, that was still horrible for the people in the Carolinas and Florida. He sped up his pace a little bit, breaking into a sort of lumbering trot. The ground hardened more as he went along, and Joe began to feel uneasy. The earth that he was walking on now was as hard as rock, and it had a sort of slippery, glazed quality, like pottery after it comes out of the kiln, and the ground had taken on an almost shiny quality.

He hurried onward, and after several hours more of walking, the ground started to soften again. “What could have done that?” he wondered aloud. He knew from 8th grade Earth Science that most topsoil had some clay in it, and from his 6th grade camp that clay hardened into pottery when exposed to low temperatures for a long time. So didn't it make sense that if this ground had been very hot for a short amount of time, the same thing would happen? Maybe North Korea *had* launched their rockets.

Time merged into a blur. Each day Joe woke and stood up, stretching, the suit seemed a little heavier, and he felt a little bit worse. It became more and more difficult to relieve himself. He had crossed Louisiana about a week ago – the battered sign reading **WELCOME TO LOUISIANA!** was still there. At the rate he was going, he supposed he must be halfway through Texas now. It was time to start heading south. He turned around and realized; he didn't know which way was south. But his father had always told him that if he were ever lost, the North Star, the brightest star in the night sky, would guide him. Well, he supposed, he would just go the opposite direction of that North Star.

He lay down and prepared to wait, curling up to try to fall asleep. Joe thought he might have fallen asleep one or two times, if only for a few minutes. Most of the day was passed in tossing and turning, trying to make himself comfortable while the sky slowly – very, very slowly – darkened. Finally, the twinkle of stars appearing reached Joe's eyes. One star, as his dad had promised, stood out from the others. The huge star was directly to his right side. Joe thought for a second and then turned to his left, stumbling forward. After only a few steps, though, he sprawled to the ground, writhing in pain. He vomited inside his visor headpiece, and then again, blood spewing out. He coughed loudly, his entrails coming up through his esophagus, coming loose from their moorings, and he fell back to the ground.

A SAILOR'S SONG

by Anna Goodridge

It was the morning of July 4, 2015, Independence Day, and the corks were already flying. Noah reached up to wipe away the mass of sweat condensing on his forehead, but he didn't mind. He was a sailor, trained for this kind of weather. He and the other eleven sailors aboard the *Sasha* were celebrating. Noah fired another champagne cork letting out a whoop as the others drunkenly shouted along with him. The sounds of the ocean were usually quite peaceful, but today everyone was shouting and laughing, disrupting the calm setting. The sweet sound of chords being played on an acoustic guitar cut through the buzz of Noah's thudding headache. He winced as the incorrect lyrics registered in his brain, hoping that soon they would reach their destination in Washington D.C. Noah looked up to measure the sun's position when he saw something odd. Directly above him was the normal, pale blue sky, but in the west was something he had never seen before. The blue had collided with a faint red and gray hue that lit up the entire western portion of the sky, right above their destination, right above America.

A blur of sun-bleached white trousers and matching shirt whipped past him screaming, but it was not the joyous, excited screaming that had penetrated the air only moments before. Instead, it was the captain shouting, "Turn around immediately. That is an order!" His deep voice was filled with a fear that Noah had never heard before.

"Captain," Noah whispered over the now deathly silent crew. "What the hell is going on? Why have you ordered us to turn around?"

"It's the nuke shield Noah. Every bomb in the U.S. is about to blow and the only thing protecting us from a death filled with gushing blood and excruciating pain is that shield. The fact that we can see it means we're only about fifty miles off the coast," he replied, choking back the fear that penetrated his usually melodic voice. Noah lost his sea legs for a moment and stumbled backwards into a fellow crew member, crushed by the terror of his impending death. Before he had a chance to ask any more questions or even react properly to this news, the bombs went off. For two seconds it was the loudest sound in the world. It was louder than anything anyone had ever heard before, even though the barrier the shield created muffled the sound slightly. The echoes of the explosion reverberated inside Noah's skull, threatening to shatter it into hundreds of miniscule pieces.

As the sound died away, a cloud of warm, sticky moisture erupted all around them as if being pushed by the winds. It enveloped Noah in its uncomfortable heat and pushed its way into his tanned, leathery skin. An awkward prickly sensation followed, that very suddenly turned into what felt like a sunburn that covered every inch of his body. He shakily turned to look at his other sea-mates but was met by a burning pain that shot up his left leg from the act of moving. He saw the rest of the crew slowly moving around the deck penguin-style to minimize the sting that they also felt. It was a terribly sad sight; everyone on board was walking around as if they were one hundred two. But even so, Noah couldn't help but feel relieved that he had escaped his inevitable death. The sailor didn't have much to worry about other than himself. He had no family, and the only reason he took this job was to make some money to buy a house. He slowly turned to the captain, wincing with every move he made. Noah hardly

knew what to say, but managed to spit out a scratchy, "Now what?"

"Well," the captain said, cautiously exercising his jaw to relieve some of the pain. "Well, I suppose we'll have to go back to our port at Southampton. England also has a shield that will keep the debris and radiation out. We can stay there until..." He let the word hang in the air, unable to finish his sentence.

Noah looked and saw the faces of the others around him. They had just lost everything. Their homes, their families, even their country. Noah had always been an optimist but he could not control the overwhelming sense of grief that was intruding upon his once carefree soul. Out of force of habit, Noah started whistling an upbeat tune about sunny days and happiness that had once made him smile with delight. About five steps away, the captain was limping to the helm of the ship to tell the others what had happened when he caught wind of Noah's song. Jerkily, the captain started to dance to the music. He was grooving to the beat, swaying with the rhythm, and stomping his feet as if all of his pain had evaporated in an instant and nothing devastating had just happened. Noah continued whistling, enjoying the change in attitude that his music had brought. He noticed the rest of the crew that were within earshot was also acting in this same fashion. Noah stopped whistling for a moment to laugh at how ridiculous this all was, when everyone stopped dancing and went back to their depressed state of only moments before. Staring, Noah started to whistle, saw dancing, and stopped with the same reaction as before. "What the hell?" Noah thought to himself.



Six months later

Noah was tired. His songs always seemed to drain him of energy, but this song had been especially exhausting.

"You see, Benji," Noah explained to his new recruit. "The music that you used to play on the streets only gave people emotion, but the song that I and now you produce gives people actions, actions that they won't remember."

It had taken Noah a while to discover this for himself. After the initial radiation had hit him, the sailor had convinced the others onboard and they spent the rest of the journey practicing their talent on one-another. One sailor would create a song about how hungry he was and while he was singing the tune, anyone who heard the melody would bring him food. This went on for a while, creating problems when hoards of items were found stored inside a mate's cabin and no one could remember how they got there. When the sailors had arrived back in England they quickly discovered that they were the only people with this talent. It seemed as if only the people who were exposed to the radiation from the nuclear explosion were gifted with this ability. The only reason that England wasn't affected was that they too had a shield that kept out unusually high quantities of radiation in the air.

"At first," Noah explained to Benji, "we all wanted to stick together. This was our captain's idea, to be conservative with playing the music. Later it became apparent that some of us had other ideas of how we should use our craft. They went off and did some stupid things that some people didn't like and we never heard from them again.

"Benji, I have just sung the song that was playing during the seconds when the bombs went off. This song, since it too was infected with the power, now resides inside of you, giving you the ability to make people act the way you sing."

The boy was young, but Noah had chosen him for a reason. When Noah saw him while walking on the street one day, he was playing an old beat-up guitar with two broken strings. Noah had instinctively covered his ears upon hearing the music but quickly replaced his hands at his sides when he realized nothing was happening. Noah found out that the boy, Benji, was a runaway orphan and played music on the streets to make money for food. Noah took pity on the boy and looked after him, finding the boy clever and trustworthy enough to handle the gift.

Noah, although gifted with this talent, was not much of a songwriter himself. He could play any music he heard or saw on paper, but couldn't play what was in his head. That was his main reason for choosing Benji. The songs that the boy played were all of his own creation. Noah needed this special ability to have perfect control. You see, when Noah was trying out his power, he noticed that in all of the tunes, one verse or even a lyric would throw off what he was trying to accomplish. This made it almost impossible to find the perfect song for exactly what he needed. That was where Benji came into play.

Noah was devising a plan. Greed had seeped into his mind and tainted his judgment long before he had met Benji, but he needed someone to help carry out his scheme. America and part of Canada had just blown up and the rest of the world was devastated. But besides this, it was also in complete chaos. There was no more world leader and many smaller countries were trying to rise to power. Noah, one of the many with the same dream, had the idea, and now the means to carry out his plan.

For days the two sat writing and rewriting the brand new song. Benji would write while Noah edited, taking out the lyrics that were unnecessary and might cause confusion later on. A week later, the song had been tested and every lyric was flawless. Noah's plan was ready.



Noah smiled to himself. Now looking back on it, it had been so easy. Convincing the boy to help him, running off the rest of his shipmates, all so easy. And now, here he was, sitting in front of the microphone, guitar in hand, with the finished music ready and waiting to be played. The security guards on watch duty for the radio station were long gone by this point, probably off in London after being forced by song to walk a thousand miles. A frown passed over Noah's clean features as he saw a shadow on the wall outside of the recording booth.

"It was just my imagination," Noah reassured himself. He sat back in the plush blue chair and waited. Only five minutes until prime time when all of London would be listening. Noah turned again in his chair, disturbed by the lack of noise inside the station. He heard a soft footstep on the carpet. He whirled around towards the noise, his eyes seeing nothing but the poster-covered wall in front of him.

"Show yourself!" Noah demanded, now becoming panicked. He was not worried that he would be caught; he had a way around that. Noah was anxious that he wouldn't get to the song in time to be played over the radio. 6:27, three minutes left.

C72 had recognized the command and stepped out of the shadows into the radio station's recording booth. The man who sat in the chair looked anxious. His chin was coated in dark stubble and his eyes were bloodshot as if he hadn't slept in days.

"Who are you?" Noah shouted. She didn't reply, not identifying the man as one of her superiors. Noah sang a fast song that he had had Benji make for just this occasion, but nothing

happened. The girl stood there, unmoving. C72 tilted her head pondering this strange display. She watched as the man continued to play, becoming more and more anxious as the time went by.

Noah stopped playing, worn out and defeated by this creature, for it was most definitely not human. It had not run away like the rest of the security guards that were posted here. He glanced at the clock hanging on the wall behind its head. 6:29, he had 30 seconds.

C72 had instructions to restrain anyone who wasn't supposed to be here tonight. She didn't know why: UNITS didn't ask questions. C72 slowly approached Noah, her long brown hair swaying in her wake. As she took a step forward, the lights in the booth dimmed and the sign that said RECORDING in bold letters lit up in an eerie red glow. Noah, left with no more options, began to sing.

THE DAY THE SUN DIED

by Jessica Li

There were a few things of which I was certain: the year was 2015; the sky was dark; and everyone around me was confused. Everything else was a blur. As for me, I felt as if I were a new person. Not in a refreshing way, but in a sick nauseating way. All of the night and most of the day, I hid behind a thicket of brambles. The thicket was behind one of France's old churches. It had overgrown itself in the past many years, possibly a century, because no one had bothered to help cut it. So that way it remained. The city that I had resided in for over 14 years was now deserted. The only people who were left were the sick and the elderly who didn't have the strength to flee. And as for me? I was the forgotten orphan.

I was barely two when my father abandoned my mother, my sister, Anastasia, and me. A year and a half later my mother passed away. And that left Anastasia and me orphans since none of our relatives had offered to take us in. Anastasia had died along with the other orphanage children. That was mostly the reason why I was left here to shrivel and die out just like the elders.

"This is a punishment from God," a desperate old woman cried.

"What have we done?" another voice wailed.

But the answer was clear as day to me. Nothing. We had done nothing. Of course each and every one of us had had our own fair share of sins, but this great chaos was not caused by bad deeds. It was far worse.

When I was younger, while attending the orphanage, I would sneak out late at night and creep into the library. It was a huge study with shelves upon shelves of books. There were at least 1000, I had once imagined. Huge, leather bound books covered the walls while small pocket books were stacked neatly upon each other. I would read and read and then at the crack of dawn, I would sneak back to my room and get some sleep. From all those years of devouring books, I had amassed tons and tons of knowledge. I think I devoured almost every readable book in the library.

That was the reason I wasn't completely lost like the others of the deserted village. Unlike them, I knew what this was. I knew why it was constantly so ominously dark. I knew why everyone had fled. I knew why people were all so horribly sick. I knew why this all had happened. It could be explained in one word, radiation. And because of this little piece of knowledge, I was able to survive.

There were two reasons why I had to flee: first, I wanted to live. Second, I needed to find Patricia and Florence. Patricia and Florence were my two younger cousins, my aunt's daughters. It had been in my mother's will that Anastasia or I take care of the two girls. Patricia and Florence were at an orphanage in Northern England. My aunt had been in France at the time and had died instantaneously from the radiation. My uncle, well, he never showed up.

Seeing that no one else could have helped, it was my duty to flee to a new country and possibly a new home. There were two reasons why I did not want to flee: first, I had

no plan of escape. Second, I would be leaving behind the village I had spent my entire childhood at.

After weighing my options for a couple of seconds, I decided to flee to England. But first, I needed a plan. The next day, I decided that I should go to the harbor. My friends and I had often gone here before the radiation and everything horrid occurred. It was a long walk from the bramble bush to the harbor and it wore out my muscles. But it was for the better, I decided.

Maybe some boats would still dock here, I figured. Maybe this place still hadn't changed. If only one boat would be there so I might find a way to flee. These were the thoughts that had entered my head throughout the entire walk. When I arrived at the harbor, everything was the same. The seashells clotting up the shore, the sand. But the water had an eerie look as if you could tell that it was polluted from radiation. There was even a boat docked in the harbor, just as I had hoped. A pit formed in my stomach as I realized that I had not yet thought of a plan to get on the boat.

There was a man standing at the head of the deck looking out. I supposed he was the captain because he was dressed the best. You could always tell by that. When he saw me walking over to the boat he called out.

"Do you know where this is, girl?" he asked with a strong British accent.

"Normandy, France, sir," I answered, "Might I come aboard your ship?" I asked, not really conscious of what I was saying.

He chuckled and answered, "You got money, girl?"

I shook my head no and stared down at my empty hands.

"Well it costs money to come aboard this boat," he answered grimly.

"But sir-" I began.

"Tell you what. If you can't get enough money in three days, this boat is going to head to England without you," he answered with a cruel smirk on his face.

I nodded. I had to get to England. It wasn't safe here. I had to find Patrícia and Florence before the radiation did. It had killed dozens of men and women here, no doubt it could do the same there. But for now, I had to find a safe place to stay and I needed to find a way to get enough money for the boat trip. A lot can happen in three days. A lot would have to.

The second I got back to the bramble bush, I went in search of a new place where I could stay safely. I finally decided on a little village north of Normandy. The radiation hadn't completely covered this village yet, but I knew it would soon. I just hoped none of that would happen before 3 days were up. There were still a couple of people left in the village. Most were pretty much evacuated by the imminent danger but some stayed. After a day of searching for a way of getting money, I was unsuccessful.

The next day- nothing.

Midday on the third day I figured that I would have to do the unthinkable- steal. I figured it wasn't exactly stealing that I had to do. It was more sneaking. I knew stealing wasn't possible since there was not much money here. So sneaking on the boat was my only option. But how? I had never really been a bad kid. Not in the orphanage and not during the little time I had spent with my parents. Even more so, I had never done any-

thing criminal. So this was a big first. I didn't have much practice with sneaking. Actually I had no practice. But it wouldn't be too much of a problem. Would it? At around midnight, I readied myself for the journey. I couldn't change since I did not have a change of clothes, but I managed to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. This would take some skill and a lot of luck. Since I had no skill, I was counting on luck.

I walked back to the harbor and found the boat still docked in the harbor. I breathed a sigh of relief. I had passed the first obstacle. I checked around to see if anyone else was there and watching. No one was. Everything was silent. There was no commotion aboard the boat, and all of the windows were dark. No one would see me. After a couple of deep breaths, I headed forward.

I wasn't sure how to reach the storage center. I found it, but the door was stuck. The lock was wide open, but the door still wouldn't budge. I pulled a little harder trying not to lose my grip on the ledge I had been holding on to. The door swung open with a clang. I somehow managed to get my two feet inside of the cabinet and then ducked inside. It was clammy. It smelt as if it hadn't been washed in years, which it probably hadn't. There were boxes upon boxes of cargo. Some were heavily shoved in the corner while others were neatly stacked in the middle. I moved a few aside to make room for my body. I sat down on a crate and gently closed the door halfway so as not to be locked in.

That was when my stomach began to grumble. And that was when I realized how hungry I was. It had been days since I had last eaten. My head felt dizzy and I rested. Then I felt the nausea creep up on me once more. I felt just as I had felt the past few days from the radiation. As I glanced down at the floor, my eyelids drooping, I noticed that some of the crates were balanced upon a low beam above my head. At first, I figured that they were harmless empty light-weight crates. But I soon found out how wrong I was. A crate above me wobbled and I was about to get up and steady it so as not to make a loud noise certainly someone would find out then. But instead it fell. And I fell. It fell on top of my head. There was no pain, just a sickening crack, and then everything went dark.

When I finally awoke, the first thing I felt was a stinging pain inside my head. At first, I couldn't remember anything that had happened and I was confused. Then the memories came flooding back. I expected to be lying down in the storage cabinet, but instead I was lying down in a warm comfortable bed with a cold compress pressed against my throbbing forehead. A smiling, young lady was leaning against the bedpost carrying a steaming bowl of rich soup in one hand and a pitcher of ice cold water in the other.

My first instinct was to scream, but my voice caught in my throat. The lady's smile seemed genuine, I thought. My heart skipped a beat and my palms grew clammy in anticipation.

"It's alright," the lady said, "It can just be our little secret. No worries." No worries? How on earth could there be no worries? That was as possible to be as flying humans. When she saw that I was still shocked, she patted me comfortingly on the arm, "Look, I'm the nurse onboard this ship. I was going to go and get some medicine

from the storage cabinet. And when I stepped out from the elevator, you were sprawled on the floor. I wasn't following you or anything. It was an accident." I assured myself that what she had said was true; there really was nothing to worry about. The captain wouldn't know that I was onboard. He would figure out that I hadn't gotten the money and maybe had left aboard some other ship or found my parents or something.

"You- you won't tell? I was just trying to get on board....." I trailed off.

"Of course I won't tell. No one would believe me anyhow," she added.

But I doubted that. The captain knew who I was. After all, he had seen me the other day. He knew that I had wanted to come aboard.

"Well, lie here and enjoy the soup," she said setting the steaming soup bowl on the bedside table. I nodded and began to spoon the liquid around to try and make it cooler. "I have to go now, important meeting," she added with a curtsy.

What? Important meeting? Why was it right after our talk about sneaking on board ships? Was it a meeting with the captain or someone important? What was it about? Evacuating all stowaways who hide in the storage departments? The nurse lifted her plaid skirt and drifted out of the room. The door shut behind her with a clang.

I lay there on the bed, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. I knew I had to hide somewhere before she came back. If she came back, I told myself. But where to hide? The storage cabinet was obviously not a choice. But where else was there? But what if the nurse really was going to a meeting and really wouldn't let anything spill?

A few moments later I heard footsteps down the hall. I listened and held my breath not letting myself move. The sounds of the footsteps were familiar. There were two sets of footsteps. One was the nurse's, I recognized. The other was not familiar. Suddenly I heard a voice. It wasn't the nurse's voice that was for sure. It was a gruff, deep man's voice. Where had I heard that voice before? Was it long ago? But then it hit me. It was the captain's voice. I had heard it the other day when he had talked to me.

I jumped out of bed trying my hardest not to make a sound or cry out in pain. I stood in the middle of the room panicking. Where could I hide? The only door was the one that the nurse and the captain were coming through, what other way was there to escape? Then I realized: the window. It was my only hope of escape, as foolish as it sounded. Would I land in the water? I took a quick peek out the window and noticed, thank God, that if I landed I would land on the ship's flat deck which was only a few feet below. From there, I would plan where to hide.

I quickly spread the curtains and opened the window. My hands were shaking with anticipation. I had never jumped out of a window, nor anywhere for the matter. What if I was hurt? What if I had misheard the voices and the footsteps? What if I was caught?

I pinched myself on the arm to calm down. There was no time for pretending now. I had to jump. I heard the two sets of footsteps coming closer now. They were so close that any moment they would bust in through the door. I took in a deep breath of fresh air and leaped off the windowsill.

I landed with a thud on something hard. It wasn't a long jump so I wasn't too hurt. I could still walk or run. As soon as I landed and made sure that I really was out of the room and on the deck I headed straight for a barrel lying on its side. I checked and found that

it was clean and empty. I wouldn't fit through it so I decided to hide behind a few barrels and a few cartons and bags. This would do just fine, for now. When evening came, I would have to find myself a new place to stay. The English Channel wasn't a particularly wide body of water; so I knew I would not be have to hide for long.

I took in a deep breath and let it out a fully and as quietly as I could. I hugged my knees against my chest and rested my burning forehead against them. Up above, the sky was a pretty light blue, much different from the color in France. There were a few silver white gulls flying ahead. The water swished against the sides of the boat creating a rhythmic clang. Far away voices rang out: some calling, some talking, some were even whispering. Footsteps patted up and down the deck. Some bird called off in the distance. Sitting here behind about 4 barrels and some more ship cargo wasn't really the best way to be crossing the English Channel, probably not the most ideal way anyhow. But it was the only way that would do, and to think about it, it wasn't really that bad. Because every step was a closer to England, a step closer to a new life.

FALLOUT

by Amanda Liefeld

L11 awoke for the very first time, bright lights dazzling her new eyes. Her brain was completely empty and she simply took in all that she saw. She lay atop a hard metal table surrounded by scientists who prodded her and mumbled softly to each other.

"Blood pressure stabilizing...140 over 90...110 over 70...121 over 80..."

"Heart rate's a little fast...coming down..."

"No signs of rejection...the chip is integrating..."

She blinked her eyes, overwhelmed by this wide new world. All she had known before this was her twisting world of chemically induced dreams; dreams of fighting and winning, dreams of taking down anything that stood in her way, dreams of glory for Switzerland.

"She's awake...are we all finished here?"

One of the white coats looked down at his clipboard, running his fingers down a checklist.

"Yes...Wait! Was the thought process control unit implanted properly?" The other scientist looked at him, bored.

"Mmm-hmm."

"What about the emotional inhibitor?" His colleague gave him a withering look.

"Do I look like a complete idiot?"

One of the scientists grabbed her arm roughly, forcing her into an upright position.

"Get down. Stand up." She simply stared at him, drinking in the strange sounds that he made.

"God I hate these things." He grabbed her roughly and forced her off the table and onto her feet.

"Activate the chip."

Another scientist grabbed what looked like a small cell phone and put in a short code before pressing it to the base of her neck. It beeped and instantly her mind was flooded with a stream of information. Every imaginable fact flew past. She was entranced and did not feel herself being dragged along down the dim hallway. As she walked she absorbed, taking in all she could. Within moments she had learned how photosynthesis works on a cellular level, she had absorbed the complete history of the Shoshone Indian Tribe, and she knew how to build a barricade that could withstand a tank. It was hours before she gained any semblance of control over the influx of information. Eventually it got so that the information came only if she reached for it and she was able to turn her attention to her surroundings. She was in a small, dark cell just barely big enough to contain her small frame. A normal person would have been anxious, terrified even, but she felt no emotional response and simply shut herself down into a dreamless sleep, awaiting instruction. Soon her mind was flooded once again with unstoppable information and she knew everything she needed to know about herself.

She was UNIT L11, created by the Swiss government in order to stabilize and protect Switzerland and, in time, to create the great and bountiful Swiss Empire. It was her duty to serve and protect human beings. She was both inferior and expendable. Moments later she was hooked into the network and her mind connected to all the others like her. As they collected sensory feedback her databank was updated so that all that they knew was shared. Moments

later she received her orders. Along with one hundred others she would be heading to France to take the country. They would begin in Normandy, which was weakened after the Swiss had sabotaged its shielding during the fall of America. With America out of the way, the Swiss were free to begin their plan to take Europe and then the world, a few years ahead of schedule, without fear of retribution from the massive world power.

The door to her cell sprung open and she marched, along with the others, down the hallway to the trucks. She was jostled about in the crowded hall as she focused on compiling maps of Normandy, acquiring strategic information, and formulating a plan in conjunction with her comrades. She was so deeply involved in this process that it took her a moment to realize that she had been bumped off course through a doorway that spilled eerie light into the hall. When she finally looked up, what she saw filled her with a deep, unrestrainable sadness, which her emotional inhibitor failed to quell.

She was in a vast room filled with row of large, glass cylinders extending for what seemed like miles. At the base of each cylinder was a machine closely monitoring the contents. She stepped up to the nearest cylinder, reaching out to place her hand against the cold glass. Within each tube, suspended in a light green liquid, was a human being. Tears prickled L11's eyes and eventually spilled down her cheeks as her emotional inhibitor overloaded and seized up, allowing her emotions to bubble over and run wild. She closed her eyes, trying to block out the memory of the delicate young infant suspended in the viscous solution.

"What are you doing here?"

L11 jumped and whirled to find a woman in a white lab coat glaring at her in anger and confusion. L11 knew that she should answer but couldn't find the words within herself. The woman grew impatient.

"UNIT. Identify yourself and state your purpose!"

For a moment L11 was caught in an internal battle between the innate instinct to obey orders and the burning desire to have her questions answered. After a seemingly endless moment her emotional side won over and her questions bubbled out of her.

"What is this? Who are these people? Why are they here? Why are you doing this?" She hesitated before the last question, stung by the pain of it.

"Is this where I came from?"

The scientist just stared at her, shocked. Never before had she come across an UNIT that refused to follow orders, that asked such bold questions, that showed such deep emotions. She stepped back cautiously, keeping a watchful eye on L11 as she pulled out a small cell phone and dialed security.

"Hello, this is Dr. Emerson from Production Room 17. We have a malfunctioning UNIT. It is most definitely carrying a damaged emotional inhibitor; In addition, the thought process control unit may be damaged. I recommend immediate chip removal and extermination."

L11 looked at the woman for a second more, dazed. Then she glanced back to the tube, running her fingers down the glass, mourning for the little child who couldn't ever know true life. Then she bolted.

She took off, running through the long rows of glass cylinders. The scientist tried to run after her, but L11's body was designed to be superior, faster and stronger, and the woman had no chance. L11 had disappeared into the maze of tubes before the woman had even gotten up

to speed.

She kept running long after. Emerson's footsteps had faded into the distance, despite the sick feeling that stemmed from ignoring her thought process control unit. She kept running, tears streaming down her cheeks, her head reeling, until she came to the far wall and slammed open a heavy, metal door to fly out into the bright sun. She had known what to expect, she had seen the outside world in her mind, but the beauty of it sounded deep emotions within her and she paused. For a moment she forgot everything, even the resistance sickness that raged within her.

Then she ran on. She ran until her lungs were screaming for air, her heart was pounding violently against her rib cage and her legs and feet begged for rest. Only then did she collapse, miserable, in the deep shadows of a dingy alleyway. Within the lab, now miles away, a scientist activated a tracking device.

"Wow...She really booked it..."

"Run a diagnostic..." The first scientist hit a few buttons and then waited for the results.

"Hmmm...it appears as though only her emotional inhibitor is non-functional...I don't know how she managed to ignore the TPCU."

"She's not really much of a security risk with the TPCU still intact. We should just leave her. Resistance sickness will prevent her from directly opposing us. If we terminate her remotely we'll lose the whole batch, and we can't afford that type of setback."

L11 slept for hours and her body slowly recovered. When she woke up for the third time in her short life she was once again surrounded. Luckily, this time it was not scientists that surrounded her. It was a young group of bedraggled children.

The closest child, a young girl with a pale face splattered with freckles, soft black hair, and bright emerald green eyes, leaned close and poked her. She sat up, leaping into a defensive crouch and startling the children with the speed and ease of her movements. Another girl, older than the first, with cold blue eyes and dark brown hair, leaned over and whispered something in the oldest boy's ear, pointing to the back of L11's neck. L11 reached up self-consciously and felt a raised line along her spine. It was the scar from her surgery. For a moment she was surprised that it had already healed to just a scar, but then she recalled how quickly her body could heal. The older grabbed the young girl's arm and pulled her back.

"Stay away from it, Kimmy. It's not safe." The older girl glared angrily down at L11 and L11 stared back, matching her ferocity. The older boy spoke and the others turned to look at him.

"Maybe she's different. It looks like she's been crying, but they don't usually have emotions. Anyways, she could help us. There's always room for one more."

He paused for a moment, deliberating, before reaching out a hand to help L11 up.

"Let's bring her with us."

As soon as he said this the young girl with the bright green eyes ran forward and grabbed her hand.

As she walked with the unkempt group the garrulous young girl chatted away, beaming. "My name is Kimmy! I'm eight years old." She then pointed to a tan young boy with sandy blond hair and dark smudges of mud across his face and hands.

"That's Logan. He's ten and he's my best friend ever. That's his twin sister Olivia." She

pointed at the short girl who hovered close to Logan, hiding her face behind long unruly waves of curly blond hair. Then she pointed to the older girl, who did not even turn to look back.

"That's Lily. Sometimes she's kind of mean. Well, always..." Lastly, she pointed towards the tall dark haired boy who led them.

"That's Chase."

L11 stumbled along, dragged by the bubbly girl, overwhelmed, dazed and confused. Her head still reeled and was occasionally split by piercing pain and she fought to overcome deep waves of nausea. At first she did not even hear the girl's question.

"Hey!" Kimmy shook L11's arm, trying to get her attention. "I said what's your name?" L11 stared down at her unsure of how to answer.

"I am UNIT L11." Kimmy stared up at her shocked.

"What kind of name is L11? That's not even a real name! That's stupid! Are you lying to me?"

"No..."

"Fine." Kimmy's tone was marked with disbelief and she stalked away to grab Logan and Olivia's hands and walked between them. L11 was left to walk behind the group contemplating these strange creatures called children.

They wandered down a twisting maze of dark alleyways, foraging in dumpsters and trash cans, until they came to a rickety and clearly abandoned building. Chase threw open the doors and the small group of children poured in to sprawl on the dusty floor and torn couches, a moment Olivia looked up from the tattered book she had found earlier. She spoke softly, a dark blush burning across her cheeks.

"We could call you Lexi." She suggested, looking L11 in the eyes for a split second before she looked away, embarrassed. Her brother laughed at her, bumping her lightly with his shoulder, but L11 made the connection instantaneously.

"L11...LXI...Lexi." She smiled, repeating the name softly under her breath.

"Lexi..." She was interrupted from pondering this by a hiss from Lily.

"It doesn't need a name. It's not staying here." The girl practically growled the words, and her pretty face was distorted with rage. L11 turned to face the young woman, whose eyes dared L11 to fight back. L11 stepped forward, perfectly prepared to take on this angry young woman, but taken aback by the strength of the anger that flooded through her own body. But before anything could come of it, Chase, who was sitting off to the side, began to hum under his breath. Instantly Lily's face relaxed and she turned to curl up in a nearby armchair. The rest of the children relaxed as well, all anxiety over the almost fight gone.

Chase regarded L11 curiously for a moment wondering why she remained tense and on guard despite his influence.

"Please forgive Lily, Lexi. She lost her family to the UNIT's and those wounds haven't quite healed"

Lily was stunned. In the entire vast store of knowledge she had regarding the UNIT's and the Organization, there was nothing about the tearing apart of families, the destruction of young girls' lives. She lowered her eyes, embarrassed, and turned to wedge herself in a dark corner and sleep.

For the first time in her life she dreamed real dreams, not dreams induced by a cocktail of

chemicals and meant to control her, but a dream stemming from the depths of her emotions. She dreamed of children suspended in pale fluid, their hands reaching out to hers, their eyes blinded to the world. She dreamed of innocent people running in terror, driven to hysteria by the sight of her. She dreamed of a massive explosion, blazing across thousands of miles and burning up millions of people in the space of a heartbeat, and one man who survived, standing alone in a vast wasteland. But mostly she dreamed of dying, slipping away from this bright new world into the darkness that awaited her.

Someone shook her roughly and she woke abruptly, gasping for air. Kimmy and Logan stood over her, peering down, concerned. Kimmy reached down to wipe a stream of tears off of Lexi's cheeks.

"You were screaming..." Lexi shook her head, trying to clear her mind.

"It was just a dream." She grabbed the young girl's hand reassuringly and stood up, walking across the room to look out the window on the far wall. As she reached the smudged window she saw a girl standing on the other side, looking in. The girl had stormy gray eyes and windblown brown hair that fell past her shoulders. Her face was stained with mud and tears and her expression was wary and guarded, as though she bore a terrible secret that no one could ever know. Lexi reached up and pressed her hand to the glass and the girl did the same, pressing her hand against Lexi's.

"Who is this?" Lexi spoke softly. Olivia giggled lightly, looking up.

"That's you, silly. That's not a window. It's a mirror." Lexi turned back to the mirror, astonished. The girl reflected there bore a puzzled and still vaguely suspicious look. Behind her Chase stood up.

"We have to move on today, guys. You know the drill." Lexi whirled around, surprised.

"Why?" It was Lily who answered her, her eyes still bitter, but her voice soft.

"We are witnesses to the crimes of the Swiss governments. We have UNITs after us almost all the time. If we don't move on they'll find and kill us."

Lexi looked at the disheveled group of children, bright specks of hope for this failing world, and knew instantly what she needed to do. She strode towards the door, purpose fueling her steps.

"Hey!" Kimmy yelled. "Where are you going?" Lexi only smiled. She couldn't give them the world. She couldn't bring back their families. She couldn't even promise that they'd live to see better days. But she could give them a little more time.

She strode out into the alley. No one followed her, but that was fine. She hadn't expected them to. She remembered the way they had come perfectly. As she made her way back towards the Lab her head began to hurt. With each step the pain intensified and as she drew closer she was immersed in waves of nausea. By the time the massive building came into sight it was becoming difficult for her to walk. But she pressed on, pushing through the pain.

She came to the gate of the heavily guarded facility and stepped into the automated scanner, standing perfectly still. After a few seconds a door on the other side of the scanner slid open and she was in. She walked with purpose, standing tall and looking forward despite the waves of pain that radiated through her small frame. Everybody was rushing about working to actualize the plan and nobody noticed anything suspicious about her.

She made her way into the building and stepped into another scanner to make her way

down to the basement where the main power and overrides were housed. Only UNITS were allowed into this section of the building as they lacked the motive or willpower to damage these machines. The scanner let her through after a moment and she sealed the door behind her, giving herself the time she needed.

She moved quickly, first approaching the main power. She switched around cords and hit buttons, sending a fatal pulse of energy through the computer systems and erasing all information, including the crucial blueprints for UNIT and chip production. A wave of pain raced through her and she had to pause before move on to the console that controlled the production rooms' power supply. She didn't hesitate in flipping off the power to the seventeen massive rooms. To be safe, she also ripped apart the backup generators that were just beginning to stutter to life.

Intense pain radiated through her and she felt as through her head might split as she moved on to the panel labeled emergency shutdown. By now, they knew what she was up to but it was too late. She flipped the first switch. *Click*. Her heart began to race. She flipped the second switch. *Click*. Her hands began to tremble and fear drove everything else out of her mind, even the acute pain of resistance sickness. She continued on the emergency shutdown until her hand rested on the twelfth switch, the very last one. Her hands trembled violently and tears flowed freely down her cheeks. Her heart pounded so violently that it drowned out the slamming of UNITS trying to break down the door. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and flipped the switch.

Instantly the pain in her head stopped. The waves of nausea slowly faded as the chip in her brain slowly died along with those of the rest of her generation. As the chip shut down it released a store of pentobarbital into her system, and she braced herself for death. She fell to the floor, slipping into inky unconsciousness. The chemical flooded through her and her lungs shut down, her last breath expelled in a sigh. Her brain screamed out, unheard even by her, desperate for oxygen. And then it was done. Her heart slowed to a weak crawl and then stooped as her brain gave up and died. There she lay, having died with the entirety of her species for the sake of five, young children.

THE TIME MERCHANTS

by Ben Weber

I have no memory of the last ten years of my life. A few vague impressions—tubes filled with thick, bubbling liquid; needles stabbing into my forehead; and the clocks. Clocks fill my dreams, gears exposed, ticking away the precious seconds of my life. If I try, I can remember the way it felt to have those seconds sucked out of me. It didn't hurt, I don't think. But it was terrifying. I could actually feel myself growing older, my hair thinning and turning brittle, my skin drying up and wrinkling, my bones turning fragile and frail. More than that, though, I remember panic pressing on my chest like a great weight, threatening to overwhelm me as I watched my own death in agonizing slow motion. Sometimes it did overwhelm me—I'm sure I had at least one fit, thrashing and foaming at the mouth, my mind no longer able to tolerate the sheer wrongness of it all, unable to comprehend how I could lose days I had never lived. I never hurt myself, though—they made sure of that.

To tell my story properly, I should start at the beginning. Honestly, I'm not sure what that means anymore. Things like beginnings and endings, months and years, all the little ways we measure out our lives, no longer have quite the same meaning for me. So forgive me for starting the only way I know how: there was a man, and a watch.

He had been watching me for a while; I ignored him. I took him for a beggar, or something near enough. He wore brown—a tattered coat, torn pants, no shoes. He stood before a table covered with clocks, an endless variety. Pocket watches, alarm clocks, wristwatches, cuckoo clocks, even an enormous grandfather clock which occasionally chimed, adding to the noise and confusion of the open-air market. I glanced at a few. This was Switzerland—clocks were our passion, and our pride. Whoever this man was, though, he was crazy. All of his clocks ran at different speeds; some had too many hands, or too few. As my eyes wandered past his display, he smiled.

"Buy a clock?"

"No, thanks."

"Why not? Who couldn't use a little extra time?" Something in the way he said it made me start. I hurried off, pursued by his faint, mocking laughter.

My apartment was small, but it was home. I lived with my wife and children on the outskirts of Zurich. When I got home,

I saw my wife had been crying again. She tried hard to hide it from the kids, keeping her blond hair down to cover her red, puffy eyes.

"How is she?" I asked.

"The same. Maybe worse. The doctor says she doesn't have much time." Time. There was that word again. I looked at my watch. 7:22. Still time to see my daughter before she went to sleep.

When I went into her room, I almost wished I hadn't. She had once been a vibrant little girl, blond like her mother, with sparkling blue eyes. Happiness followed her like the tail on a shooting star. That girl was gone, and the happiness with her. Now, I saw a skeleton wearing my daughter's skin.

I doubt anyone really knew what was wrong. She was sick, that much was clear. The doctors told me lots of things—what it was, how it would progress, how much time she had. I listened very carefully for a while, until I realized none of it mattered. None of it except the time. And very soon, that wouldn't matter, either. I shut the door and left the house without looking at my wife.

"Buy a clock?"

I looked up to find myself back in the market. It was empty now, and dark. The old man was still there with his clocks. He smiled knowingly.

"Who couldn't use a little extra time?" His eyes were blue, shockingly so, and his gaze held something electric. I was rooted to the spot as I looked at him.

"Can you give it to me?"

"What?"

"Time."

"Yes."

"My daughter..." he cut me off.

"I know. She needs more time. I can give it to you."

"How?" He just smiled and pointed to an antique pocket watch. It glittered like gold in the dim light of the street lamps—I could hear it ticking.

"Take it."

"How much?"

"A few moments of your time." I grabbed the watch from his hands as soon as he had finished winding it.

"I don't care. As long as it works." His blue eyes sparkled as he smiled. His grandfather clock chimed once—a dull, hollow sound. It hung in the air as I walked away.

The house was dark when I arrived. I felt my way up the narrow staircase to my daughter's room. My wife was asleep next to her. The last hour had not improved either one of them. I checked the pocket watch; it was running. I kissed my daughter's forehead and set the watch down next to her. "A little more time." I murmured. "It's the best I can do. I love you."

She held on for a month. More time than the doctor had given her. More time than anyone had, except for me. I think it helped. Letting go takes time. The next day, I was back in the market. I found the old man with the blue eyes.

"I've been waiting for you."

"How long?"

"Not very. I keep a close eye on my time." I gave him the watch. He nodded, and walked away. I followed, deep into one of Zurich's mazy alleyways. He paused at random, staring at a blank wall. Then it opened. He turned his blue eyes on me; I walked down into the darkness. Moments later, I heard his voice behind me. "This won't hurt a bit." I felt something prick at the back of my neck.

From that point on, it's only vague impressions, just like I told you at the beginning. One day I woke up in that same alley, wearing almost nothing. The light hurt my eyes—it had been a while since I had been in the sun. I didn't realize how long. I went home. Just walking was a chore—my feet were swollen and tender, my balance bad. The world kept lurching around me as I walked, as if time herself, having let me go once, was reluctant to take me back. Even so, she was more forgiving than my wife. My apartment was dark and empty. The room where my daughter had died was bare—only the bed remained. I suppose my wife could not bear to take it.

The world lurched again, and I found myself on the floor. I had meant to sit down; time disagreed. I picked myself up. Life had passed me by—I had no family, no job, no friends, and no idea how long I had been gone. I could only think of one place to go?

"Buy a clock? Who couldn't use a little extra time?" I could hear laughter in the man's voice. Anger filled me—more emotion than I had felt in a long time. It threatened to drown me, and then I met his eyes. All of a sudden, I was empty again. It wasn't the same man. I turned away.

"I know you." I turned. He was a different man, but his eyes were the same: electric blue, with all the depth of the ocean. I stared so long I could almost see the tides.

"You made a great sacrifice. Nothing is more valuable than time."

"I know."

"You do now." I shut my eyes. After a moment, I could speak again.

"Who are you?"

"No one who matters."

"That's not good enough."

"It's the truth." I thought for a moment.

"What are you?" He smiled.

"Just a merchant. Like everyone here." He gestured to the market. I shook my head.

"No. Not like everyone else." His smile faded and his eyes dimmed; I thought it might be compassion.

"More than you might think. Time is the most valuable commodity of all."

"How—" I began.

"Don't ask. It's better not to know. You already know too much. Most people don't remember. It would be better if you didn't tell anyone."

"Why?"

"No one would believe you. You have plenty of time left; get on with your life. The stigma will fade, after a while."

"The stigma?"

"You have been living apart from time. She needs to get to know you again. Until then, you may feel...out of phase. It is rarely dangerous. But it can be disturbing, for you and for others." The world lurched again; I found myself looking at the stars, which blazed phosphorescent trails across the night sky. After a moment they stopped, twinkling serenely as if nothing had happened. He frowned. "You have been away a long time. The world is desperate; interest rates are high. But you have more time; not like those poor souls in America."

"What happened to America?"

"What happens to us all? They ran out of time." I shook my head.

"Where was I?"

"Where you needed to be to pay your debt."

"My debt?"

"We gave you time; you repaid us in kind. As I said, interest rates are high."

"What—" He interrupted me, his blue eyes flashing.

"Our time is up. Remember my advice." He wound the watch

on his wrist. The air around him seemed to bulge, then snap back into place. It was as if he had never been. I had no idea how long our conversation had taken. I clenched my fists to stop my hands from shaking, and then let them hang at my sides. I had no place to go, no one to go to. All I had was time. I looked at the clock on the bell tower of a nearby church, ticking away the last few seconds until midnight. The peals of the bell echoed in my bones. The end of another day, or the beginning. As I said, the meanings of those words escape me sometimes. Either way, my supply of time was dwindling, and it was all I had left. I had better spend it wisely.

JULY 4, 2015.
by Jenette Schiopucie

" Maggie, can we pay attention please! Thank you. Now continuing on -

1. You should probably run to the explosion not away from it. Its really better off if you just died right away instead of facing the horrible aftermath of the explosion. If you are caught up in the explosion you will experience, a semi-painful death that will last for around 5 minutes. Organ failure, incineration; and disintegration. Also, the flash will blind you so you wouldn't be able to see what was happening around you, and maybe slight hearing loss.

2. After the explosion, if you didn't run into it like I just told you, you will experience hair loss, the next day or even a few days after that. You will also find, that you will be very lonely because everyone around you is dying." She paused for effect. "Okay class, that's all for today; you will be having a test tomorrow on what we just went over. And remember: Bright light + Death = End. Bye now, have a lovely day! Maggie, I need you to stay after class." She waited for everyone else to leave, and then glowered at me. " Now I need you to tell me why you weren't paying attention or taking notes during today's class. This is going to be on your test you know. It just doesn't make sense these days, its like your in your own little world. In order for you to learn this information you are to stay after for detention, however long it takes you to copy a whole class worth of notes, is how long you stay my dear. Go to room 72 and I will send the notes to the detention teacher."

" But Mrs. Tale, I copied the notes, just a little after everyone else did. I will get the notes from someone in the class."

"No need—they will be waiting for you in detention. Goodbye."

Detention sucks, it really does. I mean sure its not my first time in detention but it was always the same. A semi-lighted room; with 4 rows, 4 desks in each row. The desks were so old they had dates carved into them from the 1980's. Of course the school wouldn't think of getting new desks for this classroom because they feel like the kids in detention shouldn't be privileged enough to get brand new desks, for they will just ruin them again. And they are right, most people in detention probably would. While copying down the notes, which were about 4 pages long I kept thinking about Science class and how every day for the past 2 weeks has been about the same topic nuclear explosions. Nobody really knows why, but all of the teachers have just been crazy about the topic. I guess they're really afraid that it might actually happen one of these days, the news has been talking about it for the longest time, because of these supposed weapons in the Middle East and over in Europe. But I don't really care about these bombs, because there most likely aren't any, and if there was they probably won't go off.

Copying the notes only took about 25 minutes because I, as I had said before copied a few notes before the class ended. After bringing the notes back to Mrs. Tale, and showing her I copied the notes correctly I started walking home. I started thinking, about how this was probably one of the worst Fourth of July's I had ever had.

When I reached my house, I found my mom outside decorating the house for the annual neighborhood party my mother hosts every year. My mom hosts all of the holidays even if they are minor. I walked by her and she didn't even acknowledge me, she was too busy putting up the American Flag lights to notice her semi-depressed daughter walking past her into the loneliness of her house.

My basement was always kept clean, mainly because I don't like messes. Well I don't mind them, but I do mind cleaning them up. So I never make a mess. But when I got down the 15 stairs and turned the light on, it was like a tornado whipped right through it. I looked around rummaging through the mess. All the pictures were off the wall some pictures were missing. The couch was torn up, the TV was unplugged and the cords were ripped apart. I thought about how my mother could have done this when she was taking the decorations out for the party, but she wouldn't have made a mess this big and she certainly wouldn't have torn apart the couch and the TV. But who did?

I ran upstairs to get my mother and found her in the kitchen. The kitchen was tiny, but big enough to fit the two of us. She was baking a cake for the party. She makes the best cakes. But of course she should because she does that for a living.

"Mom, what happened in the basement."

Looking confused she responded,

" I have no idea. What did you do now?" I was puzzled, learning she thought that I had done this.

" Mom, the basement is completely wrecked. The couch is torn up, there's even a picture missing." She responded,

"okay, lets go take a look."

Walking down to the destroyed basement with my mom felt weird. We never did anything together and after my dad died, she kind of separated me from her life. I mean not completely, but enough. Enough to not know anything about me; I'm surprised she even remembers my birthday.

When we got down to the basement it looked like nothing had ever happened to it. Which was weird because a few minutes ago, the place was torn apart and practically unlivable. A concerned look was on my mothers face now. A look I haven't seen since I was a little girl.

" Maggie, this basement looks fine to me. Are you feeling okay?"

This was another thing that I haven't heard since I was a little girl.

- Mag-

gie are you feeling okay? -. I wanted to yell at her, and make her feel guilty about her not being there for me all these years, even though she lives in the same house as me. She never did anything for me, to show her love, never came to a school concert, never congratulated a straight " A " report card. But instead of yelling I said, with a bit of hurt in my voice,

" I'm fine mom, but I swear to you this basement was completely torn up a minute ago. I don't know what happened." In a calm voice she said,

" well everything looks fine here, so I'm going to go upstairs and finish getting ready for the party now." And up the stairs she went.

Still so confused, I sat on the couch and started my homework. While doing my Science, I fell asleep. The dream I had, was all too real.

A man, he called himself a "Time Merchant" had come up to me with a piece of paper and handed it to me. It was the picture in the frame that had gone missing. I started asking questions, but he silenced me and he started to talk. In a deep and calm voice.

" I am a Time Merchant, I have come to you in your dream because it is unsafe for me to come to you in person now. Something big is about to happen on your planet earth and you have been chosen Maggie, chosen to have more time. This will all be explained later on, but now you must go and attend your party but you must come back into your basement before the fireworks start. You will see me again soon enough and when you do I will explain everything and give you further instructions and you must follow exactly as I tell you, or I will be unable to provide the time you need. Now wake up and go Maggie." I woke up as I fell off the couch. I had no idea of what just happened, I have never had a dream like this before, what did it all mean? 'Maggie I cannot come to you now, you will see me later.'

Knowing a dream couldn't hurt me, I went up to the party. Couldn't hurt to follow a dream, right? Fireworks started when the sun went down, so I would have to be back in my basement by 8:00 pm sharp.

The party was actually fun this year. We had rented a DJ so there were little kids, and a few teens dancing up on the fake floor that the DJ rolled out to protect the grass from his huge equipment. Which is a good idea on his part, not ruining someone else's grass.

The food was finally ready and my mom and her friend brought it out, and placed it on the long stretched table we had. There was macaroni and cheese, chicken, and of course some stuff from the grill hot dogs, hamburgers. I sat away from people, to think about what had happened in my dream. Thinking about what the man had said, and why I had the dream. What was going to happen to Earth? Why did I have to be in my basement for 8:00pm?

Looking around at the people in my yard, I noticed my mother. Talking and laughing with her friends. Something she has never done with me. A little after we finished eating, everybody and got up to dance the last slow song the DJ was going to play before he got into some musical games. He told everyone to grab a partner. I of course didn't get up from where I was sitting. I was never into dancing, mainly because of school dances. No one ever wanted to dance with me so I don't bother anymore.

Then Dan, a boy whom I go to school with came up and asked to dance. Not wanting to deny him, for the fear of feeling guilty when I rejected him I just said yes. While we were dancing he started to talk.

" So Maggie, are you having fun at the party?" he said nervously. Wanting to laugh a little for him trying to create small talk I responded,

"It's okay, but I guess it could have been better." With a questionable look in his eye he said,

" what do you mean?" Not wanting to say too much about my dream I thought

a little bit on how to respond then proceeded to say

“ I just have a lot of things on my mind right now.” I figured that would be enough to make him stop asking questions. All too quickly he responded,

“ I see, being secretive; that’s cool. But you can trust me with anything, if you ever feel like telling me.”

“ yeah, thanks.” Which may have been a little too rude, but I didn’t care he was asking too many questions, and we were supposed to be dancing anyway.

After the last dance, I unhooked myself from Dan’s grasp. It was about 7:30pm at that point. The half-hour went by quick.

The DJ started playing some games I participated in only the games I was good at. The Limbo, and The Chicken Dance. But playing these games took up all of my time. It was 8:00pm.

I ran into the basement as fast as possible. I heard the first of the fireworks go off. Then there was a bright light, too bright to be a firework and then I felt someone grab me.

It was like I was sucked out of the time when it happened. That’s why I wasn’t affected by whatever had gone off. Or was just knocked out.

I woke up with destruction all around me. Looking around all the chaos of falling walls, and broken furniture I realized that nothing was intact. What had happened?

It was difficult to get up the stairs because there was only a small pieces left to them. Pieces, that could collapse any minute. I took my chances. Making it up the stairs alive was tough. I ran outside, not even inspecting the rest of the damage to the house. It was like a nightmare, but one you couldn’t wake up from. Blood was everywhere. People were strewn across the yard. They were lying lifeless on the grass; some on the porch, skin melted off, but their mouths were wide open as I in shock, or screaming in pain. I started to cry. I just couldn’t hold it in. I was seeing the people I have known for my whole life just laying there. And it looked like they suffered.

Then there was a slight moaning sound coming from by the swing set. It was Dan. He had survived. But, how had he? He was lying on the ground, bloody but not too bad. He also had some burn marks. I lifted up his head and placed it on my lap. I thought about asking him questions but I knew he probably wouldn’t answer. Not wanting to leave him to die, I lifted Dan up with whatever strength I had left in me. He could walk a little bit but he still needed help. I had to get him somewhere not destroyed, so we could both rest.

Walking down the broken up the road was difficult. I saw more damage there then anywhere else. Houses were destroyed and falling apart. Kids were in the grasps of their parents, with a sad and scared look on their faces. Their mothers, trying to calm them down. There were more then a few survivors, but they were all dazed and confused. Some just looked straight up terrified.

At the end of the road we took a right. Headed for the center of town. We had to find a hotel, and a health clinic that wasn’t destroyed for Dan’s sake. As we got to the center of town I found a hotel that looked like it was just built yesterday. The hotel’s name was: The Time Hotel Resort. It was a weird name for a hotel, and I have never

seen it before today. With tears still rolling down my face we walked up to the front desk. There was a little man wearing a tuxedo and he had a chauffeur hat on his head. His name was Kirk. Not noticing we were standing there I rang the bell. He came up the stepladder that was behind the desk and looked me directly in the eyes. A little too happily, he said,

“Why, hello what can I do for you today?” Still crying, I said

“ I need a room for my friend and me. He’s really hurt and he just needs to rest...” He cut me off.

“ Darling I do not care to know your personal life. I just need to know how many rooms you need.” Angrily I replied, with more tears coming down,

“ We only need one room.” Happy again he said,

“ O.K. just hold on and I will see what we have available for you. Ahh, yes room 258. It’s on the 7th floor, so I suggest you take the elevator. Plus that extra baggage on your shoulder there might cause for some troubles on the stairs. Te- hee I just crack myself up.” Wanting to slap him I just asked,

“ don’t we have to pay you?”

“ no money, I’ll come later.” Trying to get rid of us.

With that I just left to the elevator. After the elevator brought us to the 7th floor we looked for our room. It was all the way at the end of a dark hall. This made me a little nervous. We went into the room, and it was surprisingly nice. There were 2 Queen sized beds, pictures all over the walls and a huge bathroom. A flat screen TV, which could also use as a computer. This was going to be one expensive hotel. I brought Dan to the closest bed, and then went into the bathroom to take a shower. Although I had no change of clothes I took one anyway.

The shower made me feel more relaxed and calmed down. When I got out, and went into the room Dan was fast asleep. Something I wanted to be. I lay down on the bed and as soon as my head hit the pillow I fell asleep. I had the same dream, that I had in my basement. There was more to it this time.

The Time Merchant came to me again. He was just standing there, winding up what looked like to be a watch. And then he said only a few words,

“ You only have a little time left. Use it wisely. Family is always important no matter what.” I woke up with a jolt. Still sitting on top of the bed, the room started to spin. Faster and faster until it stopped. Then I was in my bedroom again. The sun was just coming up and it was 6:30am. The day had started over. What was going on?

I ran downstairs to talk to my mom, but she had already left for work. I ran as fast as I could to the bakery where she works. I knew she wouldn’t believe me but I had to try to tell her. I finally reached the bakery. When I got inside my mother wasn’t there, from what I could see. Then she came out of the back room.

“ What do you want?” She looked angry that I hadn’t gone to school, I forgot all about it. A little hurt I responded,

“ Mom, something weird just happened. It’s like the day just started over again.” Kind of freaked out by this reply, she said,

“ What are you talking about? Are you going crazy?”

“ Mom seriously, I’m not lying to you. We need to talk.” Annoyed now,

“ Okay we’ll talk when I get home.” Feeling like I had gotten nowhere with her, I left the bakery feeling disappointed.

I knew what the time merchant had meant. I just didn’t know how to accomplish it. I couldn’t help but wonder why he had chose my family and me for this, and not some other broken family.

I didn’t even bother going to school, there was no point if I was really re-living the day over I would only end up getting a detention anyway. Getting home and seeing it in one piece was different, only because of how I remembered it from yesterday. Or would that be today?

I ran around my house just like I was a little kid again, carefree and not trying to save lives.

My mom got home around 2:30pm. The car pulled up in the driveway and the car door shut. I ran out to the car to greet her. She looked at me like she couldn’t believe how I was acting. We walked into the house together and I sat her down on the couch. I told her about the dream and what had happened and then Dan. Then thinking about Dan, I realized he could still be hurt and at the hotel. I got into the car, my mom driving and we went to the hotel that I had gone to last night with Dan.

It was strange because my mother was actually starting to listen to me. When we got to the hotel, there was nothing there. No hotel, not even a building. Then I thought that if time had reversed itself then Dan could have gone back in time too. He would be fine, and probably in school.

On our way home, I finished telling her everything. She looked at me in disbelief. I also told her, that I didn’t know how to save us even if there would be a way to escape this. Then I fell into a deep sleep again, my head smashed against the car window.

The Time Merchant was again the main theme of my dream. Though realizing now he’s the one that makes me fall asleep.

He was holding the watch in his hand again, but this time he said, “ At 7:00pm you will find a boat on the Rhode Island Shore. The captain will not ask you for money. But you will get on the boat. And never look back. You are one of the few we are able to save at this time, take our offer.”

I woke up in the hospital with a pounding headache. I guess I hit my head pretty hard, on the window. I knew what I had to do now—I just had to get my mother to believe me again.

When she came into the room, I told her we had to be at the Rhode Island Shore for 7:00pm. And she immediately got the doctors to release me, and we flew out of the hospital.

It takes about an hour to get to the Rhode Island Shore, and it was 6:00 now. We didn’t have much time. We didn’t stop at home to get anything. Wherever we ended up, we could buy new things and start over. And my mom agreed. In the hour-long car ride we did a lot of talking and discussing of what she’s missed over the years. And we got a lot closer in just a car ride.

We got to the dock, and took one last look around. Then proceeded to get on the boat. The boat left at exactly at 7:00pm just like the time merchant said it would.

I sat at the very back of the boat watching the country I lived in fade away. Sitting next to me was my mom with her arm around me. Then not even 10 minutes into the boat ride, it happened. Everything exploded and a shield went up. I started to cry, and it was then the boat started speeding up to get away from the explosions. Floating away I felt so guilty, for leaving all the people behind. But the Time Merchants chose me to live this disaster. I will have my time.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

ALEX CHASIN celebrated his one hundred and twenty six birthday two months ago. He has written over eight hundred books to date, the foremost of them being the Holy Bible. He is fluent in thirty five known languages, and two unknown ones. He has no children, and eighteen wives.

ANNA GOODRIDGE resides in a manor in the countryside of Italy, but does her work at her vacation home on the Moon. In her free time she enjoys driving her Ferrari on the Autobahn, reaching speeds that astronauts can only dream of. She was inspired to create this story by Stephen King who is one of her best friends.

AMANDA LIEFELD lives on Saturn with her family, whose plan for the destruction of Earth has, unfortunately, been postponed indefinitely. She dislikes coming up with titles and enjoys lying outrageously in Bios.

JESSICA LI is 12 years old and lives in Singapore with her younger brother and parents. She is currently staying in her summerhouse in New Jersey.

JENETTE SCHIOPUCIE is an awesome person who is a great writer. She spends her time tanning, and shopping for the newest hottest items that Italy's stores have. She drives a lime green mustang, which she got at her 16th birthday. In the Summer she lives in Paris right by the Eifel Tower, which by the way is beautiful at night just like her. :)

BEN WEBER is many things to many people, and when he gets hungry he will kung fu you for your hamburger.

PRAISE FOR WHAT IF...

“Terrifyingly epic.”

-Stephen King, famous author

“Visually and emotionally descriptive...clearly speaking of the overwhelming power and impact of human emotion...”

-Robyn Lapenta, expert Band-Aid applier and moral compass

“Draws you into [the characters’] minds and feelings from the first sentence.”

-Sal Basile, Godfather and music man

“An eerie, radiating tale of [the near future]. A swimming good tale.”

-Jeff Ostroff, YPI mastermind and part-time Evil Genius

IF YOU LIKE WHAT IF..., YOU’LL LOVE OUR NEWEST NOVEL, CALVES OF JUSTICE!

“A thrilling Space Opera in the style of Robert Heinlein and David Weber. Hold onto your hats; this is one wild ride!”

-the New York Times Review of Books

“This newest installment in the Michael John Dion series has all the elements of a Sci-Fi classic: swashbuckling star pilots, exotic alien princesses, and calf muscles of galactic proportions!”

-The Christian Science Monitor

