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opening extract from

Home

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The flower-fed buffaloes of the spring,
In the days of long ago,
Ranged where the locomotives sing
And the prairie flowers lie low;
The tossing, blooming, perfumed grass
Is swept away by wheat,
Wheels and wheels and wheels spin by
In the spring that still is sweet.
But the flower-fed buffaloes of the spring
Left us long ago.
They gore no more, they bellow no more,
They trundle round the hills no more,
With the Blackfeet lying low,
With the Pawnees lying low.

"The Flower-Fed Buffaloes" by Vachel Lindsay

prologue

3 August 2067

The Manhattan Announcer

Supa Group to Save Lives

A group of powerful businessmen nicknamed the Supas met at a secret location in Manhattan today to discuss the growing environmental crisis. It was a meeting that will decide the fate of the millions of Americans who have so far survived the effects of catastrophic environmental pollution.

The group, composed of leaders of the biggest companies in the country, is the only organization with the resources to stop the mounting death toll from widespread starvation and poisoning. Seventy per cent of the eastern seaboard's water sources are now officially designated as toxic and reserves of grain and other food sources are running low. With the continuing drought in the grain belt, following the acidification of soil, there is little

prospect of a change in this situation.

Spokesman for the Supas Darrell Nabisco said in a preliminary statement, "We have to face the fact that it is no longer possible for any form of life to survive outside the protection of a building. Over the next two years the Supa companies will undertake a building programme to protect major cities from the effects of toxic rain and smog. We will also provide indoor food-producing facilities and safe accommodation for crop workers outside the cities. We have to face the fact that the number of workers that can be accommodated in these facilities is extremely limited." Mr Nabisco added, "To safeguard security of food supplies, it will be necessary for workers in these new facilities to agree to a strict code of conduct..."

sacks

HUMANS didn't belong on Earth, that's what TV always said. We'd come from somewhere else – from Planet Home. That's why things on Earth were toxic and alien. Inside our buildings was the only place we were safe.

So the first time I lay down Outside, on the Earth, I was afraid. I shut my lips tight so that the spiky green stuff Mott called "grass" wouldn't poke in. I closed my eyes too. I didn't want the rain getting in. But the wetness was in my face and the smell of the Earth filled my head up. I didn't like like it. *I don't belong here,* I thought. *No one does.*

Mott had me pressed flat, belly down, so it was hard to talk without letting grass and water into my mouth. But I managed it anyway because I was so angry with him.

"Wanna go back!" I hissed, "I *am* goin' back!" But Mott's old fingers were like metal, his arm like a machine clamping on my spine, holding me still.

"Shuddup, Sacks," he said.

So I shut up and thought how soon I'd be big enough to stop doing what Mott said. He was a freak to come Outside all the time, not caring about getting poisoned. *You're a freak Mott*, I told him in my head.

The wet cold of the ground began to spread up through me. I kept it back with thoughts of Station 27, where we lived, warm and dry under the big dome roof. Everything there was always comfortable and safe. No wind, no rain or cold, or anything toxic. And never a thing you didn't expect. All days there, inside, had the same pattern. In the mornings Mott and I worked on the weed tanks. The weed was grown for food. Every month we cut it all and put it in a big masher so it could be taken away and made into stuff fit to eat. I liked that part of the day, plunging my arms into the warm water, full of blue lights, and stroking the silky green strands. I even liked the way the water left a salty taste on my arms when it dried, a little crust to scratch off.

But I didn't like the afternoons, when we checked the Unit sheds. Units made my skin crawl, and there were hundreds of them in the sheds. They sat on shelves, row upon row of them; pink wrinkly blobs, the size of your head. They weren't really alive, or so we were always told, but they flinched when you touched them and their little wet input holes sucked at the pipes, like mouths. But Units were important, or at least what came out of them was important: a kind of clear goo with yellow blobs in, called "Product", that our bosses, the Supas, set

great store by. Every bit of Product coming from the Units' output tubes had to be weighed and measured before the Supas took it away in tanks, along with the weed, in their big aero-crafts. If any Product went astray, there was trouble.

TV said that Units were from Planet Home and had been brought all the way to Earth to make Product for us Workers. It was a special kind of food to help keep us strong. All the same, I didn't like Units. They were smelly, and I hated having to push pipes back into their nasty gooey little openings. I didn't mind it so much when I was small, because of Mott; him teaching me how to do the work; making me laugh and telling tales of how the Station was years ago. But Mott didn't make me laugh any more. Nothing seemed to please him, and all he thought about now was his trips Outside. So it was all fight and bad feeling between us, and there were no jokes and stories to help take away the sadness and the stink in the Unit sheds.

The cold had got right through from my belly to my back now, but still Mott held me. "You awake?" His voice was in my ear, raspy and whispering.

"'Course I'm awake. 'Tis too cold 'ere for dozing!"

"Hush then," he said. "They're coming! Look!" And now Mott's voice was soft; kind, like it hadn't been in a long time. So I forgot how angry I was with him for bringing me Outside, and I lifted my face out of the wet grass to look.

We were a long way from the Station. Much further than I'd thought. All the way out I'd looked at my boots and cursed

Mott, not thinking of the distance. Now the Station was just a grey shape, so small, and all around it was the Outside, big and empty. Outside went everywhere, in every direction, flat and green, with the grey sky over it. There was patch of dirty brown water stretching before us in the green. But I knew Mott wasn't interested in any of that. I saw right away what he wanted me to look at: two white shapes coming through the air towards us. Closer and closer they came. It was wings that moved them, but not wings like on human aero-craft. These wings moved up and down, slow, struggling through the air like it was thick .

Aliens, that's what they were. Creatures that *belonged* here on Earth, where humans never did. I was so, so frightened. All my life I'd heard TV say that there were still Aliens Outside, and Aliens were dangerous. They could attack you, kill you straight off, or just give you some disease that'd finish you. I wanted to get up and run, but old Mott fired up was really strong. I was pinned, flat as a nail head, while the white beings flew on. They got so close, so big, they were all I could see; and the whoosh of their wings was all I could hear. I was sure it was my last moment. I was going to be killed by Aliens, just like TV always said you could be. I shut my eyes again. I would have screamed, but I had no breath.

And then... Nothing. A splash. Another splash. All quiet. The wind blowing over my ears and Mott's wheezy breathing. I slowly opened my eyes, just a crack, enough to look out.

There, beside the muddy patch of water, they had landed. Their long wings had disappeared somewhere, and their shape was smooth again. They looked whiter somehow, like a light bulb growing brighter when the power comes up. Their bodies were streamlined, *perfect* – better than anything we humans could make, I thought – but too big for the legs. Those were as thin as wire and looked ready to snap. Even in my fear I was wondering about them, wanting to know how they were made, how they flew like that, so strangely.

At one end their bodies had a long tube, or arm, that ended in a dark point. The tube waved, bent and twisted. Then I saw that the "tube" was a neck with a small head on the tip. The "point" was a mouth-thing that stuck out, and there were two dark shiny eyes. I was frightened again when I saw those. I'd been seen by an Alien! That made me want to run all over again.

Mott breathed words into my ear. "They're *birds*," he said. "That's what they called, birds."

He didn't need to speak so low, I thought. They didn't care about me and Mott, lying in the grass; we didn't seem to "be" for them at all. They coiled and uncoiled their necks, over their bodies and then up into the air. They ruffled their strange skin, so that one moment it was broken into fragments and the next, whole and smooth again.

I watched them ignoring us, and I stopped being frightened. I felt odd. My heart beat in my throat and I was hot, and then cold. I couldn't take my eyes off the two long-necked

white "birds", and I didn't notice the grass spiking, or the rain falling any more.

The birds were making noises at each other. I didn't have words for those sounds then, and I don't now. I could say they screeched like brakes or creaked like hinges. I could say they shouted out like a person saying "Hey!" across a big room, or that they cried like a person with a hurt. But none of that would be right. They weren't human and they weren't machine, so I'd never heard anything like them before. They threw their heads around and opened their pointed mouths to make more and more sounds. At first they took turns, and then they did it together. Louder and louder, faster and faster; joyful seeming; full of life, as I'd never seen anything so full before. Their wings unfolded from wherever they'd been, and they stepped about on their spindly legs. And the thought rose in me like a bright bubble bursting to the top of a tank: *They're speaking*, I thought. *Speaking to each other!* But the weird part was that I felt it was a language I *knew*. Almost like I'd just forgotten it, and in a minute I'd remember it again and understand what they were saying.

I'd never felt such as I felt then, looking at those dancing, talking beings, so beautiful and alive, and *belonging* there in the flat green of Outside. I thought my blood would pop out of my fingertips, that my head would open to the wide sky. I was smiling and crying, and the wind and rain blowing into my open mouth tasted too fresh and sweet to be bad!

The bird on the left was hit first. A great stain of red sprang onto its smooth whiteness from where the blade had stuck. The colour shook me. It was the red of my own blood. How could Aliens have the same blood as us humans from Planet Home, far away in the sky? But it seemed they did. There was no mistaking something so familiar, and showing so brightly there, against the white breast.

The bird fell, its legs bending and its coiling neck arching slowly away from the body. It seemed like a long time before the head hit the water and made the surface crease and wobble. I turned, and there was Mott half standing, with a second blade in his hand, his arm bent ready for another throw. The live bird just stood, tilting its head to look at its friend with one dark eye and then the other.

I was on Mott in one move. Up, jump, kick. The blade went flying into the green. I began to yell, and ran to where the last white bird still stood, amazed. I was almost close enough to touch it when it got the message, and began to run away. But now it didn't look so good, so well made. It was all flop and mess. It staggered into a run, high-stepping along the edge of the water, wings spreading as it went. I was afraid that Mott had somehow thrown another blade and hit it, and broken something inside. Then its legs and wings took on the same beat – one-two, one-two – and it was in the air and getting away from Mott, and from his killing blade.

I stopped running and watched the bird working its wings

up and down, scooping itself up into the sky. I watched until it was gone into the grey distance and I was left behind. I looked down to where the bird had taken off and saw that a tiny shaving of its skin was floating on the water. It was pale and curved, soft as hair. I scooped it up and tucked it inside my clothes.

Mott grabbed my shoulder and spun me round to yell in my face. "Could've got both of they! Both!"

He shook me hard, but I didn't bend my face away like usual. I was flamed up with anger like I'd never felt. I looked into Mott's little eyes in a dip of wrinkles, and shouted right into his face. "Why d'you kill it? The one good thing in all this cold Outside and you killed it! I hate you, Mott."

I threw his hands off me and walked away. He didn't try and follow but just stood at the pond's edge, like the white bird when its friend had fallen, and shouted, "Get findin' that blade."

Of course, I didn't need to be told *that*. Only Supas were meant to have weapons – guns, blades and such. They said Workers like us were too stupid to use 'em right. Not like the clever Supas. Mott said it was nothing to do with cleverness and all to do with fear. Supas were afraid: feared that Workers would turn weapons on them that were always telling us what to do. I wasn't sure if he was right or not, but I knew blades were precious and that Mott would pay me back hard if I didn't find his. So I began to search, and as I did I thought of what TV said about Outside: the deadly Aliens; the poisoned ground that oozed invisible toxins; the pockets of air and showers of

rain that could get inside your body and kill you slowly. Mott said that was all lies, but I'd never believed him; seemed quite right to me that a planet where humans weren't meant to be should be poisonous. But now, scrabbling for the blade in the wet grass, I thought, *I've been out here for hours and I've seen Aliens, and none of it's killed me. Leastways not yet.*

I didn't look at Mott while I searched. I didn't want to see what he was doing with the dead bird. I looked up once and saw him bent over its body, pulling wisps of whiteness from its skin in handfuls. They caught in the wind and blew off over the green in sad little trails. I didn't want to think of Mott taking the bird to bits, so I stood away and looked hard in the grass.

I'd kicked the blade a very long way. Strong legs, you see. By the time I found it, it was late and hunger was reaching up from my belly to grab my brains. Much more than hunger it was. The hunger for Station food – Meal One and Meal Two we called them – was like a sickness. If you missed your Meal time, the longing for it came and took you over, until all you felt was the need to get that food, that little foil package of pap.

Thick shadow had gathered at the edges of Outside, but Mott was still messing with the dead bird and wasn't ready to go back. I'd have to go alone. I'd never walked alone Outside in the dark and I was afraid. TV said Aliens moved about more at night. Then I thought of the birds, who were Aliens but seemed no danger to anyone. I yelled to Mott, waving the blade for him to see, and set off. I kept the Station lights in my

eye, to guide me, and at every step the hunger got worse. When I thought of what TV said – Meals! You're never hungry with Meals! – I whimpered to myself.

Mott caught up with me just outside the Station walls, and I was so hungry that I didn't notice him till he clamped my arm in his hand. My whole body was screaming now so I didn't care if he shouted, just as long as I could go inside and get my Meal. But he didn't shout. Instead he raised a bag, weighted with the dead bird, and said, "You got to see."

"No! Meal, Meal now!" I tried to pull from him, but I was weak.

"Yes. You got to, Sacks," he said. "So you know to do the same when you need it. So you can live Outside."

I didn't understand why Mott wanted me to be able to live Outside, when all I needed was in the Station. And I didn't want to see what he'd made of that beautiful white bird. So I just shut my eyes and wouldn't look. Mott kept on. "I'll hold you," he threatened, "I'll hold you 'ere all night."

I knew Mott could wait for Meals – he didn't get desperate the way I did. But all I could think of was the food on my tongue, the hit of it in my blood, so I gave in to him.

"All right," I said, "I'll look."

Mott shook the bag upside down, until something slithered out onto the ground. It wasn't at all like the body of the bird: there was no long neck, no wiry legs, no sleek whiteness. Just a pinkish shape smeared with blood.

"They got blood like ours, Sacks," Mott said. "Blood just like ours."

"I know. I saw when you killed it."

"You gotta kill things Outside to stay alive."

"Where's the white?"

"That's feathers," said Mott, excited. "Feathers they're called. Pulled 'em off. You saw." Yes, those wisps in the wind, the little shaving I'd saved inside my jacket. "And the neck too and the legs. You got to cut all them off. Then you puts it on a *fire* and eats the body."

Mott was always having fires. I'd seen the smoke through the portholes of the Station and thought how one day the Supas would see his smoke and catch him at it. And I'd seen fire on the TV, so I knew what it did. I could imagine the bird's body spitting and crackling. It made me feel sick.

"It keeps you alive. Better than Meals, much better." Mott loosed his grip on my arm and spoke softly again. He looked into my face, the way he had when I was small and he had stuff to teach me. "I can show you, Sacks, if you'd let me."

But the thought of the white bird being made into this bloody lump made me shudder, and all I wanted was my Meal. "No. I don't want to know."

"I'll give you some of this bird to eat?"

"No! I want my *Meal*!"

Mott put the pinkish shape back in the bag. "All right. But remember, you'll eat this one day," he said. Then he let me