WITHOUT A PAST, THERE IS ONLY THE

AFTER

PÁDRAIG KENNY

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WALKER
BOOKS

"WOULD YOU NOT WRITE SOMETHING NORMAL FOR A CHANGE?"

THIS ONE IS FOR YOU, MA. WE MISS YOU.

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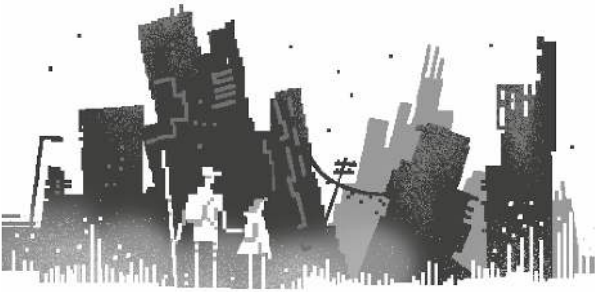
"The primary duty of a parent is to look after their child, and to teach them what it means to be a good person."

— DR BENJAMIN GELLER,

FROM *DR GELLER'S COMPLETE GUIDE TO PARENTING*

"And having made it he divided the whole mixture into souls equal in number to the stars, and assigned each soul to a star…"

— PLATO



CHAPTER 1

"Tell me again how the world ended."

They were standing on a ridge overlooking the dead city. Even from this distance, Jen could see the roads gnarled and choked by rusted hulks of cars and trucks, and the gradual advance of decades-old vegetation. The sky was a dull grey, but just for a moment the sun shone through, and she saw the quick glint of orange on a window high up on a tall building.

A *skyscraper*. They were called that because they used to scrape the sky. That's what Father had told her.

Father had one foot on the lip of the ridge and was gripping his wooden staff. He scanned the horizon.

"I've told you before. Many times," he said.

"Tell me again."

He turned and looked at her, his forehead lined in curiosity. "Why?"

"Because it's a story and I like stories."

He picked up his backpack and shouldered it. It was only a small thing, but Jen always marvelled at how graceful he was, even when he did small things. And when he was still he was graceful also, which probably wouldn't make sense to anyone else, but it made sense to her. Still and graceful, like nothing she'd ever seen. The only thing she could compare him to was a series of pictures she'd once found in a book. They were pictures of a man dancing. He was wearing dark skin-tight clothes and in some pictures he was pirouetting through the air. In others he crouched, a look of fierce concentration on his face.

Father nodded. "Of course, how it ended. I suppose the world ended slowly at first, then gradually, then all at once."

Jen glared at him. "Tell me properly. That was the condensed version."

"It was, yes, but I told it well, don't you think?"

Jen rolled her eyes.

"You don't agree, Jen?"

Jen sighed as she picked up her own backpack. "Do you think there'll be food down there?"

"Most likely."

She tapped her forehead as a sign. Father nodded in understanding. His face relaxed and his worry lines disappeared.

"Excellent expression. It almost looks natural," said Jen.

"Do you think so?"

Father looked pleased, and Jen was even more impressed.

"First, people destroyed their own habitat and the habitat of other animals," said Father. "This was the slow method, a method so gradual that humanity as a whole didn't notice at first, and when they eventually did notice they chose to ignore it."

They were walking in the city now. The skyscrapers loomed over them as they passed beneath their vast cool shadows. They picked their way through the

wreckage. Jen noticed the usual crazy zigzag pattern of the vehicles that clogged the road. Some were piled one on top of the other, their metal shells burst and buckled, doors hanging off, windows shattered.

"So, they just let it happen?" said Jen.

Father nodded. "Despite the protests of some."

"That makes no sense," said Jen.

"Humans make no sense," said Father.

Jen narrowed her eyes at him. "I make sense."

"Sometimes," said Father. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then he smiled. "That was a joke."

"I know."

"Was it good?"

Jen looked at him with mock pity.

Father smiled more broadly. "I shall make more."

"Make sure they're better than that one."

Jen spotted something on the ground. It was a soft toy, a pink and white animal. It looked like a rabbit. Thinking about rabbits made her stomach rumble. They hadn't caught any in a while. She liked rabbit. She picked up the toy and dusted it off. *This used to belong to someone*, she thought. *A child perhaps*. Thinking about it made her feel uneasy. Suddenly

she didn't want to look at the wreckage any more. She put the rabbit in her backpack.

"And then?" she asked.

"The Singularity," said Father. "Mankind had evolved to a state where integration with machine systems became an accepted part of life. This integration meant a melding of the mechanical with the biological. From birth, people had microchips implanted that allowed them to access a vast information and living system."

Jen nodded. "They called it the Hive."

Father stopped and looked at her. "You've heard all this before, Jen. Why do you need to hear it again?"

"You know me, I like stories."

"Why?"

"They help make sense of things."

"And this one does exactly that?" asked Father mildly.

No, Jen wanted to say. *No, it makes no sense at all, but maybe one day it will. Maybe one day after you've told it to me often enough, I'll begin to understand it, but for now I don't. I don't understand this story at all, but* I *know it terrifies me.*

"And then?" she said.

Father always seemed to hesitate a second before this part of the story.

"And then the Flood," he said matter-of-factly. "A cataclysmic short circuit of the Hive that destroyed all systems connected to it, both inorganic and organic."

"So, machines failed and people with microchips in their heads had their brains fried."

"In essence, yes."

"And what was left of humanity was sent back to the Dark Ages."

Father looked at her.

"I read about the Dark Ages in a book." She gestured around her. "This seems like the Dark Ages."

"One could say that, I suppose. You are very perceptive, Jen."

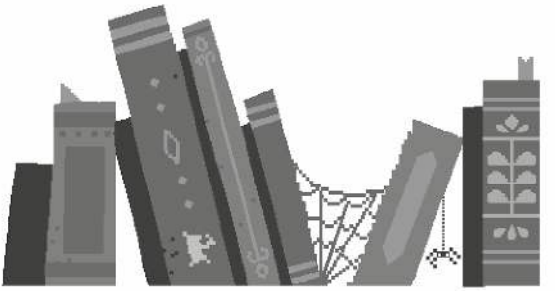
Jen tapped the side of her head. "Book learning."

"Indeed."

"Do you think there'll be a library?"

"It is a city, Jen. There is always a library. But food first."

And, right on cue, Jen's belly grumbled again.



CHAPTER 2

The first supermarket they found was like all the supermarkets they'd ever found. Old and empty, filled with upended shopping trolleys and bare white shelves greying with dust. What were once buzzing fluorescent lights dangled from the ceiling, connected by wires that hadn't seen electricity pass through them in years. The ceiling was mottled with patches of brown, the floor covered in pools of stagnant water. Even so, they managed to find some tins in an office at the back, although going by the corrosion and staining, Jen didn't hold out much hope for their contents.

Half an hour later, they turned the corner on another silent street and Jen's heart leapt.

"Look!"

She pointed at a building with imposing stone steps and columns. It was a library. Before Father could say anything, she was already running up the steps. One of the large double doors was hanging from its hinges. She stepped past it and into a marbled atrium that echoed at the sound of her voice:

"Wow."

Father followed her in. "Yes, wow," he said flatly.

Jen noticed how the air was different in here. Cool, almost scented. She closed her eyes and breathed it in, imagining hundreds of footsteps around her, wondering what it was like when this place was filled with people. How warm it might have sounded, how alive.

She opened her eyes. "Can I?"

Father nodded. "Do not go too far."

Jen was already running into the unexplored depths of the library.

This is the biggest one yet, she thought, her heart pounding with excitement.

She stepped through another set of doors into a large area filled with bookcases and books. Shafts

of light shone through some of the windows despite their grime. She found a desk with a sign that said "Issue Desk". There was a glassed-off area that said "Reference Library", where books were piled up against one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. She went straight to a book trolley and flipped through some of the books. Children's books, history books, puzzle books. She riffled their pages and sniffed them. There was a freshness to some of them even after all these years. A children's book was stained by something orange. She tried to sniff it but the smell was gone. She wondered what it could have been, who the child was, where they were now.

She moved on, and as she rounded a corner she made the most exciting find of all.

In the centre of the library was a stubby circular pillar about four foot high. Age had smeared its once polished metallic sheen, but there was no mistaking what it was. It was an information node, and plugged into the receiver on top was a small electronic tablet.

Jen's old battered tablet had given out months ago. Father had been collecting them for her since she was a toddler. He said they were an old technology

used for storing information. They had their own internal power source, so they weren't connected to the Hive and had continued to work after the Flood. He used them as an educational tool to complement her reading. Jen gobbled them up like food, learning as much as she could about the world before the Flood. As she got older, she picked up random ones in libraries. Some worked, some didn't. It was pot luck as to what might be stored on them. Dry old science videos usually, or things that people used to watch for entertainment before the Flood.

One of Jen's favourites when she was younger was an old video about people who lived on a street with puppets. Another was a story in several parts about a bunch of friends in a city. These people had adventures, while people off-screen laughed at the mishaps they encountered. It was strange, and Jen only understood some of the jokes, but she couldn't stop watching.

She walked up to the pillar and took the tablet from its setting. The screen was cracked and dusty. She wiped it with her sleeve, noting the watermark that said "Seacroft Technologies". She said a silent

prayer and pressed a button. The screen fizzled into life.

Now there was the problem of her mind going blank with excitement as she navigated the fuzzy menu screen. Worrying about how much battery life was left, she pressed an icon without thinking. A woman's voice crackled from the speakers.

"Welcome to this Seacroft Technologies information tablet."

Jen stabbed at another icon and an old video sputtered into life. Her heart leapt when she realized what she was seeing.

A city. A living, breathing city.

Drones flew overhead. Cars, trucks, buses and bikes made their way through the streets. People walked and talked and ate and drank and there were more of them than she had ever seen in her life. A man was speaking, and the sound wasn't clear, but it didn't matter to her. Every one of Jen's nerve endings jangled with excitement as she tried to drink it all in.

The image stuttered and hopped, and now she was looking at two men talking to each other in what looked like a large room. Behind them, a crowd of

people were laughing. One of the men had a device in his hand and was holding it out towards the other man. Even through the frosted grime of the screen, she could see that the other man was young and twinkly-eyed. There was something familiar about him. He was wearing a dark suit, a white shirt and a tie. He had a tall glass in one hand. Jen had to strain to hear what was being said, and occasionally there was dropout as the screen crackled.

"So tell me, Mr Seacroft, about your new direction for Seacroft Technologies," said the older man. "Is *zzzz*it something *ffffzzzzt* and would *ffffzzzzt*…"

Seacroft! He was the man who'd created information nodes and so much more. She'd read about him in old books and magazines. He was a famous inventor. She tried to remember exactly what else he'd invented, but she was wary of missing what he was saying.

"…new step forward, Matt, *fzzzt* which I think everyone will be excited about. It harnesses my new *ppp*zzzpatented *fzzzzt*light technology."

The man called Matt chuckled. "Not everyone is excited."

Seacroft shrugged and laughed. “Well, you can’t please everyone.” He took a sip from his glass and someone off-screen patted him on the shoulder. He turned to whoever it was and said, “Thanks, Jim.” Someone else cheered and he waved at them. He seemed to be enjoying the attention.

“And tell me, Mr Seacroft, with your *fffzzzt*chievements in AI, your advances in computer software, with all that you’ve *zzzz*chieved, what is your ultimate ambition?”

Seacroft threw his hands up. “Simply to make life better for all of humanity. Technological improvement is human improvement.”

Someone cheered in the background and Seacroft turned and raised his glass.

“But some of your critics say that you’re depriving people of jobs and ways to live,” continued the interviewer. “Is that a concern for you?”

“Look, Matt, I’m all about improving our lot. I’m a humanitarian first and foremost.”

A chant rose up from the crowd, almost drowning him out. “Seacroft! Seacroft!”

In return, he grinned broadly. Then, he leaned

forward and shouted, "I mean, human beings are useful." He took a sip of his drink. "Up to a point."

He spluttered with laughter for some reason. Jen didn't understand what was so funny. Matt tried to say something else, but the chants were too loud now. Seacroft came closer to the screen and shouted, "Here's to the fut*yyyazzzzzzzz*…"

The screen froze, filled with Seacroft's smiling face. Jen saw the battery icon flash red in the top right corner. Seacroft's face blinked, wobbled, then vanished.

Jen sighed as she put the tablet back on the node.

A rasping voice behind her said, "You got food."

She steadied herself against the node, her heart pumping hard. She remembered the books stacked up against the window of the reference section. They hadn't been put there at random, she realized now. They were there as cover. She cursed herself for not paying attention and turned slowly.

There was a bearded man crouched a few feet from her. He was holding a makeshift spear with two hands, thrusting it in her direction. Jen sensed movement to her left. She glanced over and saw a teenage boy,

perhaps just a couple of years older than her. He was wielding an iron bar. Both of them were pale and skinny, both looked wild-eyed and desperate.

Jen tried to sound calm. "Look…" was all she could manage.

"Your bag, give us your bag. You got food. Give it," the man growled.

"OK, OK," she said, holding a hand out. "I'll move slow."

She unhooked her backpack from her shoulders. She knelt down and started to unbuckle the straps, thinking about the hunting knife inside. Her palms were sweating, she was trembling. The man moved closer.

"Slow now, slow," he rasped.

Jen looked up at him and he lunged at her with a roar. Jen reacted instinctively. She grabbed her backpack and whirled it round, hitting him in the head. He fell backwards, dropping his spear.

The boy shrieked and sprang at her. Jen tried to stand, but swinging the backpack had knocked her off balance. The boy raised the iron bar and started to bring it down.

There was a blur of movement and suddenly the boy was gone. Jen barely had time to react before the bearded man was up on his feet. She swung at him again but this time she missed. He ran past her to where Father now stood over the boy. The bearded man picked up the boy's iron bar without breaking his run. Father turned just as the man swung the iron bar with all his might and hit Father right across the face.

The clang of metal against metal echoed through the library.

Everything stopped. The only sounds now were of three people panting. The man dropped the bar on the floor and backed away from Father with a mournful "No, please. Please don't hurt us."

Father touched his own cheek where the skin was now hanging loose, revealing the shining silver metal underneath. Despite his injury, he regarded the terrified man with his usual eerie calm. The man kept retreating, almost tripping over his own feet. The boy was shaking his head and crying. The man made to grab Jen, possibly to use her as a shield, but Father was too quick. He leapt towards him, eyes blazing a vivid fiery red. He knocked the man to the

floor. The man feebly raised his arms, wheezing now as Father towered over him. Father considered the prostrate man for a moment then raised his wooden staff with both hands.

Jen screamed, “Father! No!”

Father turned to look at her, eyes still blazing.

Jen shook her head at him. “No.”

Father’s eyes returned to their regular blue. He lowered his staff and stepped away.

The boy ran towards the man and held him tight. Both of them looked up fearfully at Father.

“He won’t hurt you,” said Jen, retrieving her backpack.

She nodded at Father. He leaned his staff against a desk.

Then from the reference library there came a loud moan.

The man and his son jumped to their feet and ran towards the sound, Jen and Father following behind. The room was muggy and warm. Books and clothes and sleeping bags were strewn around the floor. There were rusted cans, empty plastic bottles, shreds of paper towelling.

A woman lay in the far corner under a pile of dirty blankets. She moaned again. There was a little girl sitting by the woman, gently stroking her forehead. She looked about four years old. “Mama,” said the boy, running to the woman.

“What’s wrong with her?” asked Jen.

“Broken leg,” said the man.

Jen turned to Father. “Your face.”

Father nodded. He removed his backpack and took out a can of synth sealant. He held his skin in place and applied the spray. Within seconds, his wound had disappeared.

“Now we help,” said Jen.

Despite the family’s protests she eventually managed to cajole them into letting her look at the woman’s leg. The splint they’d made was crude. She got Father to make a better one from some splints and bandages in his backpack. The boy held on tight to his mother while Father fixed the new splint in place.

Father was oblivious to the boy’s expression of terror and rage as he glared at Father. The little girl looked at Jen and Father in wide-eyed wonder.

Realizing that the woman had a fever and was slightly delirious, Jen gave her two pills from her backpack. After a while she seemed to calm a little.

"We need food," said the man as Jen and Father prepared to go.

Jen took the cans they'd scavenged earlier and laid them on the floor. She looked at Father. "Give them everything."

"Everything?" he said.

"Everything."

Father laid more food on the floor. Jen gave the man some bandages and pills. The only thing she had left was the fluffy toy rabbit. She took one look at it and gave it to the girl, who accepted it warily. As the two of them left, Jen looked back to see the girl clutching the toy to her chest while the boy held his mother's hand.

CHAPTER 3

"We should look for somewhere to bed down for the night," said Father.

Jen stormed on ahead, keeping as much distance between herself and Father as she could. The sun was going down. Shadows were lengthening along the street.

"Somewhere above ground would be best," Father continued. "Perhaps we should look to reconstitute our supplies, both medicines and food. You have not eaten a full meal in over twelve hours. With that in mind. you should be conserving energy by slowing your pace."

Jen's head was pounding. She was thirsty and hungry, but she was angry too.

"You have not spoken to me in one hour, fifteen minutes and thirty-five seconds. If you stopped for a moment, I could check your vitals. You do not want to become dehydrated or fatigued. Maybe you could rest and I could hunt outside the confines of the city."

Jen spun round.

"You were going to kill that man, weren't you?"

Father tilted his head. "You are angry. I can tell from your tone and the expression on your face."

"You were going to kill him!"

Father looked thoughtful. "Not necessarily. I had made a calculation in point zero zero zero two seconds. I estimated an appropriate advantage and had gained that advantage, in another point zero—"

"Stop it!"

"Very well, but your statement necessitated an explanation. I was providing that explanation. Are you sure you would like me to discontinue?"

"Yes. No. I…" Jen spluttered. "Were you going to kill him or not?"

Father's head twitched like a bird's. Both that and his infuriatingly mild tone enraged Jen even more.

"Yes and no. These are contradictory statements.

You will have to clarify your request so that I may continue."

"Clarify? You want *me* to clarify? I'm asking *you*!"

Father nodded. "I understand now. You are presenting conflicting signals and signs of distress. I will consult the book."

Jen shook her throbbing head. "Do not. Do not take that book out!"

But Father was already taking the book out of his bag. The battered and faded cover had pictures of children, ranging in age from babies to teenagers. The title read, *Dr Geller's Complete Guide to Parenting.* Father flicked through the pages, then nodded.

"Ah, you are having a tantrum."

Jen stamped her foot. "I am not having a tantrum."

"You are now exhibiting one of Dr Geller's five classic signs of a tantrum. It says here that the best way to respond to a tantrum is to limit one's responses to the child having the tantrum so that they will eventually stop."

"I am not having…"

Father dropped his hands by his sides and looked blankly off into the distance.

Jen stomped towards him. “Look, all I…”

He continued to stare ahead.

Jen sighed and sat cross-legged on the cracked pavement, holding her head in her hands. Eventually, Father came and sat beside her.

“Were you going to kill him?” she said quietly.

“Looking back on the variables involved in the situation, I can quite confidently say that would not have been necessary. I was simply protecting you, Jen.”

Jen squinted at him. It was all she could manage through her headache. “Thank you, Father.”

“But you should not have given them all our medicines and food. To have done so puts us at a disadvantage.”

“We’ll find more,” said Jen, standing up.

She was pleased to see him put the book away. They walked on, but something niggled at her.

“Us, you said it puts *us* at a disadvantage.”

“Yes.”

“But I’m the only one who requires food and medicine.”

“You forget, Jen, we are a family. We are only

as strong as the ties that bind us."

"I swear, if that's a Dr Geller quote I'm burning that book."

The hotel was Jen's idea.

It was called something like The Grand, although it was hard to be sure because some of the letters on the sign overhanging the main door had been ripped off, and now all it said was "HE GRAN". The N was tilted at a precarious angle.

Jen ran up as many flights of stairs as she could before Father insisted on carrying her. He gave her a piggyback, and they eventually found a room on the tenth floor that overlooked the street. Father checked the room before he was happy that it was safe. It had a large double bed and a single bed. The wallpaper was blue with gold hexagons and the dusty bedspreads were a similar colour combination.

They put their backpacks down and Father leaned his staff in a corner. Jen threw herself on the double bed and picked up the phone on the bedside table.

"Yes, I'd like room service please. A roast dinner to room 535. Make it snappy." She hung up and beamed at Father.

"Jen, what are you doing?"

"I'm pretending. You should try it. It's fun."

"I fail to see how something like this might be in any way efficient."

"Not everything has to be efficient."

"Efficiency is good for optimum functioning and survival. Fun and pretending would seem to run counter to this."

"You're no fun, that's for sure."

"Define fun."

Jen thought about it and made a face. "I don't know, it's something you do to stop yourself from becoming bored."

"You mean play."

"Exactly. Play. Pretending."

Jen thought about the hotel. It was like the hotels in books she'd read except it was empty now, devoid of life. This made her sad.

"People used to come here to relax and enjoy themselves."

"Did they come here for fun?" asked Father, looking around.

"Now you're getting it!"

Father took a nutrient bar from his backpack and held it out to her.

Jen looked at him in horror. "I told you to give those people everything."

"Yes, you did, but I held this back knowing that you would be hungry and we did not have time to hunt."

"Why did you hide it?"

"I based my decision on a narrow set of parameters – your hunger, our lack of hunting and foraging time before sunset. And the fact that you would have argued with me if you had known I was keeping the bar for your sustenance."

Jen grinned. "See? You do know how to pretend!" She signalled for him to throw it. She caught it and ripped open the wrapper, gobbling down the vile dark substance. It was allegedly one of humanity's proudest achievements in the face of the late twenty-first-century food crisis. Her mouth being full didn't stop her teasing Father. "Also, I don't appreciate the

fact that you made such a cynical judgement about my character."

"Which was?"

"That I'd argue with you."

"I make my calculations based on factors of relative consistency."

"Are you calling me argumentative?"

"Yes. It is one of your more predictable character traits."

Jen scrunched up the wrapper and threw it at him. It hit him on the arm. Father looked at the spot it had hit.

"Pretending. Is it like lying?" he said, still looking at his arm.

Jen lay back on the bed, put her hands behind her head and looked up at the ceiling. "Yes, in a way."

Father nodded. "I see. And stories too – sometimes they can be lies."

"I suppose. The ones that aren't true but someone might be pretending they're true."

Father mused on this. "Lies, stories – both have their own functions. They are similar in some way."

Jen sat up and looked at him, wondering what had brought on this philosophizing.

She suddenly felt very tired, as if all the nervous excitement of the day had finally caught up with her. She started thinking about the family in the library again.

"Those people were terrified of you."

Father had gone to stand by the window and was looking down into the street.

"As I always remind you on the rare occasions we meet someone, people do not trust machines. Which is why it is best not to draw attention to my own status unless absolutely necessary."

"Because people blame machines for the Flood."

"Mr Candles being a case in point."

When she was really young they'd once met an old man living in a shack who'd refused to use battery-powered lights, preferring candles instead. Jen had christened him Mr Candles.

"Mr Candles *really* didn't like machines," said Jen.

"Indeed. There is a certain amount of lingering resentment among survivors."

"But why do you think that family were so scared?"

Father kept his eyes on the street below. “I am not sure. Perhaps they were surprised by confronting a superior adversary, and in their weakened state their anxiety was heightened. An excess of adrenaline, perhaps.”

Jen could still see the terror on the faces of the boy and his father. She moved onto her side and cupped her hands under her cheek. The sun was almost gone. The outlines of the furniture began to melt as the room took on a grey ghostly look. Her eyelids felt heavy.

“Tell me again,” she said.

“How the world ended?”

“No. The other one.”

Father kept looking out the window. “I found you all alone in a house.”

“A home.”

“Yes. Someone had made a home.”

“Even after everything that had happened,” said Jen sleepily.

“Even after everything that had happened.”

Her eyes started to close. Her voice was listless, the words leaden, but she got them out.

“And you never met them. My parents.”

“No,” said Father.

“I wish you had. I wish…”

Jen felt herself drifting. Her voice sounded distant now, like it belonged to someone else.

“…wish you could … tell me what they were like…”

“We should leave in the morning,” said Father.

“…leave in morning,” she said.

“Yes, but we will be careful.”

“Uznt matter … everypoddy’s dead,” sighed Jen.

She felt herself sinking into the soft embrace of sleep. It seemed Father took a long time to answer.

“Not everybody.”

CHAPTER 4

Jen woke just as the sun was rising. Father was still standing by the window. Early morning light seeped into the room. Jen sat up and rubbed her hands over her face and yawned.

"Nothing?" she said.

"Nothing," Father replied.

Jen climbed off the bed and looked at herself in the mirror above the dressing table. Her olive-green coat was clearly too big for her wiry frame; her brown hair was even more straggly than usual. She leaned towards the mirror, examining the freckles on her nose, her brown eyes. Did she have her father's eyes and her mother's nose, or vice versa?

"I wonder which one of them I look like the most,"

she said. “I mean, my parents,” she added, noticing Father’s curious look.

“Perhaps you are an amalgam of the two. In chapter five Dr Geller details how—”

“I don’t want to know what Dr Geller has to say. Thanks, but no thanks.”

Jen was about to add that maybe Father should take a long break from reading Dr Geller, but Father put a finger to his lips. Jen went to join him at the window.

The window was slightly open so she heard the rumble of engines just before the vehicles came into view. There was an open flatbed truck followed by a car. The truck carried eight men, all of them armed with guns. Their faces were covered in black inky swirls, their clothes a patchwork of animal skins and old military fatigues.

“Scavengers,” said Jen.

They hadn’t seen a band like this in years. Not since the lake. These people weren’t anything like the family in the library; they weren’t driven by desperation and fear. These men took from others and pillaged any settlements they could find. Jen hated them!

She had a sudden memory of black smoke, a flicker of flame, the sharp crackle of burning tree branches. She clenched her fists.

"We should wait a while before leaving," said Father.

He was right, and yet Jen thrummed with rage. Part of her wanted to run out onto the street and face these men.

But they waited, and as they waited Jen allowed her anger to dissipate. She thought about a green place beside a blue lake, a place of peace.

They watched the vehicles round a corner at the end of the street. The growl of engines eventually faded. When they were sure the scavengers were long gone, they gathered their belongings and made their way down the stairs and out of the hotel. The sky was white, and despite the lack of sunshine it gave off a light that made Jen squint. They found another supermarket, and Jen was both relieved and disappointed to find a big stash of nutrient bars. She gobbled down two and regretted it straight away, but she reasoned that at least it would give her some energy.

They walked on for most of the day, and it was well after noon when they came across the chaotic remnants of military vehicles clogging a wide street.

There were burnt-out tanks and jeeps, all of them painted a drab camouflage green. Jen's eyes flitted over the bones and tattered uniforms of the dead soldiers. Discarded helmets littered the ground. She spotted some old guns, but their barrels had melted and fused, as if they'd been subjected to incredible heat. There were Spindle Bots too.

Spindle Bots was the name Jen had given to the remains of the strange skeletal creatures that she and Father occasionally came across in their travels. They were metallic silver robots with smooth faceless heads. Jen had never found any information about them in any of the libraries she'd visited. Father didn't know anything about them except that presumably the Flood had taken them out, along with every other mechanical device linked to the Hive. Apart from Father himself.

"I came online afterwards," he'd said when she asked him, years before.

"How?"

"I do not know."

Father's activation and survival was one of many mysteries in Jen's world. But it was one she wanted to get to the root of, much like the subject of the Flood.

They made their way through the wreckage. With each step, they came across more Spindle Bots than Jen had ever seen before.

"Their function was to serve," said Jen. She guessed this from her reading. People in the time before the Flood had liked to mechanize things to make life easier. She squinted at Father. "I wonder what your function was supposed to be."

"No doubt to serve also," said Father, after a moment's pause.

Jen laughed. "I can see you now. Father, robot butler."

Her laughter petered out as she stepped around some wreckage.

In front of her lay a ruined military van, toppled over on its side. Standing over it was a large six-legged machine. Jen had only ever seen one like it before. This was twice the size. Jen had no idea what these machines were called in the past, but she'd

christened them *scorpions*, after creatures she'd seen in an old wildlife video. The machine had a long tail ending in a pincer. It had no head to speak of but it had ant-like mandibles at the front. Its six legs were sharpened to points, and each of these seemed to be embedded in the van as if it had punched its way through the vehicle.

"Why's it positioned like that?" she asked.

"I do not know."

Father took just the briefest look at the scorpion before turning back to scan the area. "We should keep moving."

Jen moved closer to the scorpion.

"This looks really weird. It looks like it attacked the van. Why would it do that?"

"We should go," said Father, ignoring her question.

Jen pointed at the scorpion. "Don't you think it's kind of odd?"

Father was still looking in the opposite direction. "An obvious malfunction. A consequence of the Flood, perhaps. The electromagnetic surge would have overloaded the positronic brain of this machine,

leading to a catastrophic loss of control of its neural and motor functions."

"So, it spasmed and ended up embedded in that truck?"

"A logical assumption. Your reasoning faculties are most impressive, Jen. It is very likely a large construction droid that malfunctioned."

They moved on, but Jen couldn't help looking back at the scorpion.

By early evening, they'd reached the treeline of a nearby forest. Jen took a moment to have one last look at the city. She thought about the people in the library. She hoped they were OK.

Jen sat bolt upright, breathing hard.

It took her a moment to take in her surroundings. It was night, and they were in a forest. A campfire was burning. Jen felt the bumpy ground beneath her sleeping bag digging into her hips. Father was sitting by the fire. A panel in his chest was open and the small blue ball of energy that rotated inside his chest cavity was spinning and throwing off tiny sparks. He had

to cycle his power source once every thirty days to ensure what he called "optimum performance".

"Was it the dream again?" he asked.

Jen nodded. She had a memory of fire, flames reflected on a blue lake and scavengers cheering.

"Yep."

"Bad dreams can very often function as a means of processing trauma."

Jen winced. "Thanks, Father, but that's no real comfort."

Father's chest cavity closed with a gentle *shush* and *click*. They sat in silence for a moment. Jen listened to the crackle of the campfire as she slowed her breathing.

"Anyway, it's gone now," she said. She looked into the fire, twigs sending orange sparks into the night air. Suddenly, she remembered something.

"The brochure," she said.

"Are you sure, Jen? You only looked at it four days ago. Remember the rule?"

Jen snapped her fingers. "The rule is I get to look at it once a week or so, emphasis on the *or so*."

Father reached into his backpack and took out an

old holiday brochure, handing it over. Jen turned the creased and wrinkled pages to her favourite part, the two pages advertising a resort called "Tranquillity Lake". She read by the light of the fire. There were pictures of log cabins illuminated by sunlight near a glittering lake. Smiling people were carrying kayaks down to the shoreline. A small girl played with a dog while her parents looked on. Trees hugged the shining lake.

"Is it better than where we were, do you think?" Jen asked.

"You always ask me that, Jen. My answer is still the same. I do not know. I will perhaps know when we get there."

Jen stroked the pages. "I liked where we were. It was nice. I think Tranquillity Lake will be just as nice. Maybe nicer. How long until we get there?"

"By my calculations it will be another two weeks."

Jen sighed. She closed the brochure and handed it back to Father.

"Do you miss the lake?"

Father put the brochure in his backpack. "I do not know."

"I miss it," said Jen. "It was home."

She thought about the house they'd found by the lake all those years ago. She thought about how peaceful it was, away from what was left of the world. She'd been happy there. She was only eight years old when the scavengers came and they were forced to leave. She remembered it all as vividly as if it were yesterday.

"We were happy there, weren't we?" Jen said, settling back into her sleeping bag.

"I know you were happy because you say so. I cannot speak for myself," said Father.

"You were happy; you just didn't know it yet," said Jen.

Something caught her eye through a gap in the trees. She sat up with such suddenness that Father immediately took up a defensive posture.

"Did you see that?" she said, pointing.

Father walked a few feet away from the fire, towards the trees. Jen scrambled out of her sleeping bag and followed him. They stood side by side. Between the branches, Jen saw it again.

Something was flickering in the dark.

"Lights."

"Yes," said Father, sounding almost intrigued.

"And not campfires either. It's different. It's…"

"From an artificial source," said Father.

Jen nodded at the distant glow. "Mark it for distance and direction, then log it."

"Understood." There was a tiny click as Father blinked.

Jen felt a tickle of excitement. "How far off course would it take us if we went and had a look?"

"By my calculations, this light source is a mere quarter-mile off the main route to Tranquillity Lake."

"In the morning, we can head towards it," said Jen. "We can investigate just for a bit, and then get back on track."

Father looked concerned. "I do not know if that is wise."

"Why not?"

"There might be people there. They may be dangerous."

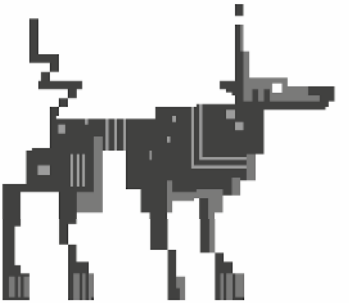
Jen smiled. "You can be dangerous."

Father turned away from her, his face hidden. Jen had the peculiar feeling that she'd said the wrong thing.

“Father?”

“Very well. Tomorrow then. All the more reason for you to get back to sleep.”

Jen bedded down. Father stayed where he was, watching the lights in the distance. His face remained hidden beneath the shadow of the trees.



CHAPTER 5

"I don't know, Jen, why did the chicken cross the road?"

"To get to the other side."

Jen grinned at Father as they trudged down the street of a small town. It was another grey, muggy day. The air was sticky and hot, the tarmac under their feet felt like it was oozing.

"And the answer is supposed to be humorous?"

"Yes."

Father frowned. "And yet the chicken's need to cross the road appears to me to be a logical one. The chicken wanted to get to the other side. This would seem quite a reasonable objective on the part of the chicken."

"Are you saying it's not funny?"