

# Solitude

By Brogan Downey

I sat alone in the dining room, picking at the porridge on my platter and staring at the television screen on the opposite wall. I barely registered the weather report. "...heavy rain in the southern region—wear acid proof clothes. Sunshine in the North—stay inside. Ozone Hole 32 is passing right over the Dakotas and moving into Montana and Wyoming. As we progress into summer the CDC recommends that we minimize our time outdoors and always, *always*, wear our radiation suits. In other news, a major wi—"

I switched off the TV and sighed. I stood up. Walking over to a mirror, I examined myself. I was a ghost. But, alas, we were all ghosts nowadays.

The telephone rang, and I answered it.

"Hey, it's me."

"Hello, me."

"You know who I am. Can I come down from Billings?"

"Sure."

"Can I bring my sister? I don't think you've met her yet."

"Why not. The more the merrier."

"All right. I'll be there in an hour."

I hung up, and after clearing the table and taking my vitamin D supplements, I checked the status of the roof. The lead sheeting was in prime condition. The weatherman hadn't said anything about wind, so I'd be fine.

I paced over to one of my porthole windows. Peering through the inch-thick glass, I brooded over the barren landscape. I thought of my father's time and his father's time, when these fields were burgeoning with wheat and barley and corn, teeming with insects and herds of cattle, alive with vivacious dogs and flocks of geese, and walked by men. Now there was nothing but dead grass, and even the soil was almost bereft of bacteria.

Sometime later the sensors picked up a disturbance at the drive. I hurried to the porthole window beside the vestibule. A familiar red and white Air-tight Radiation-resistant Civilian (ARC) vehicle rolled to a stop, and the doors swung open. Out stepped two figures in red and white ARC suits. Like astronauts, they approached my abode.

I unlocked the first door remotely and they entered the vestibule. Red lights flashed as the decontamination gases sprayed into the chamber. The lights turned green, and they removed their suits. I peered at them through the second door. There was Tom—blond hair, blue eyes—and beside him a woman who obviously shared his blood. But despite her blond hair and blue eyes, she had a surprisingly unique trait. Her skin... her skin was dark. Yes, her skin was several shades darker than Tom's—she had a tan. I stared for a while, but soon told myself that she probably used an artificial tanner.

“Hey, there he is!” Tom clapped me on the back. “It's been too long.”

“It's only been two weeks.”

“Well, for you I'm sure it's been too long.”

I couldn't argue with that. We both knew he was my only visitor.

“Peter, this is Catherine. Catherine, this is Peter.”

I smiled and shook her hand. “It's a pleasure to meet you.”

She, too, smiled. “The pleasure is all mine.”

I directed them to the parlor and we sat and talked about the random things that good friends with nothing to say talk about. “You hear about Los Angeles?” asked Tom.

“A whole neighborhood underwater. The second this month.”

“It's getting worse.”

“There's still hope,” said Catherine.

“Hope?” Tom laughed. “Hope is as cheap as sand and twice as useless.”

“Sand has its uses,” protested Catherine. “And the hope is not unfounded. People are trying to fix things, and succeeding.”

“There is change?” I inquired.

Tom snorted. “There is always change, just not the good kind.”

Catherine directed her gaze at me. “This is the good kind. A group called the Children of the Jungle have restored the ozone layer above a portion of the Amazon basin. The trees make some of the air breathable.”

“Imagine that,” I muttered. “Breathable air and trees.”

“Here.” Catherine reached into her purse and handed me something. It was a little planter, filled with dirt. “I want you to have this.”

To my surprise I found a little green stem poking out of the dirt. “It's a plant.”

“Yes. I don't know what plant it is; you'll have to discover that for yourself.”

“Maybe it's a carrot, and you can eat something other than the synthesized gruel they send us every month,” jeered Tom.

I looked at Catherine. “Where did you get this?”

For some reason a flash of guilt crossed her face. “From the Children of the Jungle. I've been living in the Amazon for the past two months.”

That's why she was so tan. Then Tom cleared his throat, and I saw guilt on his face as well. “That brings us to the reason for this visit. You see, Peter, we're leaving.”

“Oh.” I did not know what to say. “To where?”

“To the Amazon,” said Catherine. “I've convinced my brother to move to someplace with more promise than Billings.”

“You should, too. You've been living alone on this farmstead for too long, my friend. It's destroying you on the inside. If not the Amazon, then somewhere populated.”

I said nothing. Tom's wrist watch beeped, and he glanced at it. “Huh. Windstorm warning. We best be off, sister.”

They stood and I went in a daze through the motions of a final goodbye. From the window I watched the red and white ARC vehicle vanish on the highway.

A terrible crash woke me suddenly. I leapt out of bed to red flashing lights and a blaring alarm. I ran into the main hallway just in time to see the emergency blast doors of the parlor come crashing down.

I cautiously approached. Peering through the tiny blast door window, I saw that the wind had ripped off a section of the parlor roof. The room had been flooded with radiation and CO<sub>2</sub> and all the poison of the outside world. For a long time I gazed at the blackened stem of the dead, unknown plant.