

ZERO

Two months after the apocalypse, Lily started wearing ear plugs to negotiate the surrounding almost-silence: the sweep of the wind sounding like someone cheering for someone else in a breezy voice. For one thing, it was stressful. The whoosh, whoosh continually obliged her to perform, Lily felt—it assigned her the task of reassembling the left-over pieces of a world shot to shit. She had no idea how to reverse the all-encompassing post-apocalyptic decay, not when there seemed to be no one else around to spitball with, to ask: “How about that apocalypse? What was that all about, and what on earth do we do now?” Instead, she started wearing ear plugs. It shut the wind’s patronizing and commanding cheer out; also, and more importantly, it let her hone in on the task of trying to stay sane, composed, and proactive.

Now, six months down the road from Seattle to St. Louis, Lily no longer wore ear plugs. Sanity or not, composure or not—all those demarcations of proper and less proper or constructive behavior had turned into a non-issue.

Why care?

Lily closed the door to her car. She surveyed the Kmart parking lot. Cars were parked in orderly rows, and human beings were scattered

in disorderly gray-brown-green pools of decayed matter on the lukewarm concrete. The pools smelled like seafood-trash. There were no skeletal remains: no ribs and no skulls. There were no flies or birds or homeless dogs or stray cats around; however, there was the wind rolling an empty soda can toward the tire of a school bus outside the parking lot—its windows caked with dirt—and there was the barely audible rustle of a shopping cart.

Lily sidestepped a pool.

“It’s just a pool,” she said under her breath. She couldn’t and she wouldn’t allow herself to see the pools as anything but nondescript pools. She skipped past another pool. “It’s just a pool,” she repeated. “They’re all just pools.”

She entered Kmart, the doors gliding open with a sigh. Her aim was to get drunk. And she did get drunk; she’d been getting drunk on a daily basis for a month, maybe more—the get-drunk-routine, sometimes involving prescription pills (Zolpidem, Dilaudid, Xanax), had turned the passage of time into an undifferentiated buzz. Now, while whistling the melody to some half-remembered song, she wiped the store floor free from pools using a mop. Now, using the mop as a microphone, she sang the same half-remembered song out of tune in front of an audience of moldy loaves of bread. Now, she and the mop waltzed across the floor, and now she felt something in her back snap: crack! She unceremoniously dropped the mop and started massaging her back. The pain subsided, was replaced, instead, by the pain of a bladder ready to burst. She went to the toilet, sighed with relief and

flushed, following the downward whirlpool with amazement: it's a wonder one can still flush toilets. After flushing, though, she accidentally caught sight of the mirror's reflection: right, apocalypse chic.

In an instant, she was thrown back into sad self-awareness. Her once lustrous hair, now past her shoulders, had turned into a scraggly mop, not wholly unlike her dancing partner. Her once radiant complexion—rosy cheeks, blooming—had turned a lighter shade of gray, and her formerly green eyes were black hollows. This, she thought, is the one human being still alive: a fine example, indeed.

She punched the mirror. It didn't break.

She'd lost weight, too, too much weight: cheekbones, collarbones, and hipbones protruded; they seemed about ready to burst out of her gray hued skin.

She punched the mirror, this time harder. It broke, but it didn't fall apart.

She left the toilet, a small cut on her right hand.

Oh, Lily. Why care about any of it?

While inflating her portable home base, a ribbed air mattress, she thought: I need to bulk up with protein, to not fall apart; I need to cut out the booze, to gain clarity of mind; I need to take care of my body, to outrun—

What does any of that matter!

With her back to the portable air mattress, she thought: I'd probably be better off turning into a proper alcoholic. She chuckled, a

soothing wheeze, and the chuckle drifted through the store. She fell asleep.

The apocalypse, Lily called it. She'd needed a name for what had happened—the sound, the lazy color display, and the ensuing rot of mankind, but the word apocalypse hadn't come easy. At first, she'd called it all a dream. Following that, she'd called it a hyper-dream: long and vivid but still not real. On the seventh day, ironically, while huddled up in bed next to the cold, stiff body of little Art, she'd owned up to what had happened as a secular version of the apocalypse. There was no way around it. She'd found the word eerie. It'd incrementally slipped through her lips, a po ca lyp s (e), and she'd received the seven day lag of the realization as a fist to the throat. And the sensation of a fist to the throat was how all her dreams were punctuated these days, with her waking up gasping for air.

And when she woke up at the break of dawn, gasping for air, her head throbbed. She blinked. The upside to binge drinking was that the edges of the recurring dreams of rot, and of Art, were somewhat dulled. The downside was near fatal hangovers.

She stood up, swaying, and ambled off to grab a bottle of painkillers. She stopped mid step. In front of her, on the floor, was a rat. Patches of white fur had fallen off its body, which, in conjunction with its intense, red eyes, made it look rabid, even for a rat. Its thick tail, however, was sweeping the floor, projecting the friendly eagerness of a

pup. It didn't scurry away; it kept its red eyes focused on Lily, its head tilted upward.

So this, Lily thought, is the first sign of life I'm to encounter. She was conflicted. On the one hand, she was thrilled. On the other hand, it was a rat, and what good are rats?

She got down on her knees.

The rat moved toward her, its pink feet soft against the floor, its tail still sweeping.

She stretched out her hand. The rat continued forward, sniffed her palm. It crept into her palm and curled up.

Lily sat down on the floor with the rat curled up in her hand. She thought of Art. She thought of how she'd carried his slender body from her two-bedroom apartment to her car; she thought of how she'd driven him to her parents' garden in the Seattle suburbs, an hour's drive away: "It's okay; it's okay." That's what she'd said, touching his small, cold cheek. His body had been propped up on the passenger seat, the seat belt hugging his no longer beating heart. She'd dug a hole for him in her parent's garden and rolled him into it. She'd placed Mom, Dad, her ex-husband, James, and her colleague and close friend, Martha, in holes next to his. Sweaty and soiled, she'd covered them all up, and she'd placed makeshift crosses at the head's end of each grave.

Those days—the weeks immediately following Day Zero—were The Days of Disintegration. What followed were The Days of Clouds of Stench. What followed were The Days of Search and You Shall Find.

What followed were The Days of Slow Realization of Complete Solitude.
What followed were The Days of Alcohol and Pills.

And now there was the rat. Relatively speaking, this was a win: maybe The Day of the Rat signaled a break from the monotony of solitude and alcohol-induced denial. Maybe The Day of the Rat was soon to be replaced by The Day of the Other Human Being.

One can only hope.

Lily looked at the rat. It had closed its eyes. It was snoring, sounding like the little engine that could: chug, chug, chug. Lily smiled, put the rat in her jacket pocket and ambled to the medical isle. She popped the lid of a bottle and swallowed three pills with a mouthful of wine. She downed four more mouthfuls for good measure, patted the pocket holding the snoring rat and said, “I’ll call you rat-Art.” She sat down on the floor, said, “So, rat-Art, let me tell you about Day Zero.”

Six months earlier, Lily had gone to the gas station close to her apartment to buy milk. It’d been a Saturday, and it’d been summer. The sun had spread its thin blanket over the urban landscape of Fremont. On her way back, she’d stopped. She’d closed her eyes and angled her face upward to let the sun play on her face. With eyes closed, she’d heard a strange sound, a distant and warped explosion of fireworks. She’d opened her eyes. On the clear blue sky, Elliot Bay glittering down below in the distance, there’d been waves of turquoise and purple color. The waves had swayed, shuddered, grown transparent and disappeared. It’d been fleeting, lasting less than a minute, and it’d been eerie, sending shivers through Lily.

She'd hurried home.

When she'd come home, she'd found Art in the kitchen; he'd been sitting on a chair by the kitchen isle, a bowl of Cheerios in front of him, and a spoon in his left hand.

Lily had called out to him.

He hadn't moved a muscle; he'd been still, so still, as was his heart: a flat line. His eyes, blue, had been glazed over by a thin milky-white film. Lily had shaken him. No response.

"My little boy was dead," Lily said, and she banged her forehead with the palm of her hand to suppress the flat lined thread spool of Art's life from spooling inside of her: his first steps (those pink feet tip-toeing like a ballerina's, heels up), his first word: ohn, as in no. No! Lily swiped a mouthful of wine, continued, "He died waiting for milk, only four years old. And that was Day Zero, a big non-event—a little color and a little sound—that somehow killed Art; that somehow wiped out mankind. Can you believe it?"

Rat-Art still snored: chug, chug, chug, fucking fucker.

Lily grabbed rat-Art and hauled him from the pocket. She flicked his pink nose. He woke, pissed off by the rude wake up call, or not—it was hard to tell with those eyes and those whiskers. "Listen," Lily said and stared into rat-Art's tiny, red eyes. "It's up to us now, to right some wrong, to set the record straight, to make meaning where meaning is, well, void, at least seemingly. Do you understand?" She put him down on her thigh.

Rat-Art climbed up Lily's arm, sniffed her ear. He curled up on her shoulder.

"How?" Lily said. "That's one question: how could those waves of color freeze mankind? Because that's what happened, Art. Those waves froze mankind. After I'd buried my boy and the rest, I found man after man, woman after woman, child after child—they'd all been frozen stuck, like statues, forever in their last moment of intent or action or inaction. Until they started rotting, that is. I found a young man on a toilet in Starbucks; he'd frozen stuck while masturbating, I think. He was partly decomposed, so there's that," she said and chuckled. "The consequences of masturbating, you know. And then there was this little girl, cute, not much older than my boy—she was on a swing, her tiny hands holding the chains."

The overhead halogen tubes buzzed. Oh, so you're alive and well. Lily downed the last mouthful of wine and threw the bottle on the floor. It clunked and rolled away. Rat-Art climbed down Lily's arm and followed the bottle.

"Yes," Lily said. "More wine!"

"Indubitably," rat-Art said.

"What?" asked Lily, and as the question dissolved in the air between her and rat-Art, she shook her head and banged her forehead hard, harder. "Focus," she said, but that wasn't what she'd planned to say. "Are you talking?" she asked.

"Indubitably," said rat-Art, and his little voice, Lily thought, what did it sound like? She imagined a microphone with a mile long cord

plugged in to a giant white speaker housed in a gargantuan country church somewhere tranquil, and she imagined this microphone floating above an ant's nest, burrowing down, further down. Such a microphone, and such a set-up, she decided, would let the gargantuan country church's giant speaker sound out a wave of Scratch–Scratch–Scratch. And it would raise the roof off of the church; it would burst eardrums, and it would cause the skulls' deltas of blood to run dry and bare their spider webbed floors; it would make stomachs centrifuge and spew acid, and it would make eyes lose their shit. Now, wasn't that the sound rat-Art was producing? Or was he really saying "indubitably" in a soft timbre, like a syllabic creek?

Oh, Lily—a syllabic creek?

"Indubitably," said rat-Art.

Lily once more shook her head. She banged her forehead: one, two, three powerful bangs. She felt something come loose. There was, she tasted, salt and iron on her lips, and she found herself laughing, a set of violent coughs.

Rat-Art backed off, seemingly displeased with the spread of a fine mist of saliva and blood.

"In-dew-bi-tab-lee," Lily managed to say in between bloody coughs of laughter. She slumped to her side on the floor, clutching her stomach.

Rat-Art turned away from her. He scurried through a small hole in the wall next to the entrance's sliding and sighing doors; he scurried past the scattered remains of human matter on the parking lot. By the

empty school bus he stopped, stretched his nose up, and twitched his pink ears as if sensing something in the wind. But there was nothing. The soda can rested against the tire of the school bus, and such was the world that a rat could scurry in the middle of a road without getting flatlined by a tire.