

THE SUN ROSE SLOWLY OVER THE PORT OF BRISBANE, 143 G4.

It was a dull, grey ball of light diffused by the morning's heavy smog.

Smog – a mixture of smoke and fog

Son wasn't sure where all the smoke came from, but Father called the dank mist that filled the morning skies 'smog' so smog it was. Father knew all and was never wrong, could never be wrong, because he had created it all.

"I've got a bite. Come help me, Son."

Father stood in the shallow waters with his navy blue pants rolled up to his knees. The fishing rod in his hands quivered with the tension of the heavy line that pulled towards, and disappeared within, the murky waters. Son put his dictionary carefully down on top of his pack, being sure not to get it wet. He rolled his own pant legs up and joined Father in the shallows. Father passed him the rod. The shoreline where they fished should have sat at 143 J3, but all along the Port the waters encroached on the land.

"It's a big barramundi."

Son looked over to where the fishing line vanished into the depths and then looked at Father – his eyes were the same dull grey as the sky. Son didn't know how Father could see anything, let alone the fish beneath the water, but he had learned long ago not to question the old man.

Father – 1. a male parent. 2. any male ancestor, esp. the founder of a race, family or line. 5. a title of respect for an old man. 6. the oldest or sometimes chief member of a society, profession, etc. 9. (cap.) Theol. The Supreme Being and Creator; God.

It took Son a few minutes to land the barramundi while Father stood staring out towards the horizon. It was a short but stocky black fish and Son guessed it was a juvenile, for it bore little resemblance to the other barramundi they had caught earlier that morning.

Son built a small fire while Father scaled and gutted the two fish. Son watched Father work, his eyes constantly fixed to the horizon as his hands toiled unattended. They cooked both fish, ate one and wrapped the other for lunch.

"We'll have to pack and get moving if we want to get to the Valley orchards before the bats come out."

"Yes, Father."

Son carefully loaded all their things back into his pack and then helped Father to his feet.

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When Father first saw her, Mother was just a teenage girl. She was blonde and petite, but with thick thighs and child-bearing hips. She looked completely exhausted; covered in a thin layer of grime that she was simply too tired to fight off.

She had fortified the city hall building on King George Square to a surprising degree considering her size. The building was huge, yet she had managed to drag desks and bookshelves across each of the exterior doors and many of the windows. It must have taken her weeks of work.

It seemed an unnecessary precaution though – Father hadn't seen anyone else for months.

He saw how fatigued she was and he knew he could help. Without the toddler she had to fend for she could relax, she could look after herself properly. Father also knew that he was slowly going blind as each day looked slightly murkier and less detailed than the last; he could train the child to be his eyes and hands. By the time he was completely blind, the child would be old enough to be of great assistance.

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The route they were taking to Fortitude Valley didn't look like the quickest way, not according to the refidex, but Son knew the city now differed greatly to those original designs.

Father said he drew the maps while he could still see, but by the time he started building the city his sight had left him.

The gardens and parks had broken out of their boundaries – dark green bushes, vines and weeds spreading out far beyond their predefined borders.

The waters had similarly disregarded the maps, wrapping around buildings so the currents and tides slowly corroded the foundations. With each crumbled building more grey dust was thrown into the monochrome waters.

In his dreams these waters were dense enough for Son to walk over.

The dream was always the same; he would be standing at Queens Wharf Road 22 K5 where the black asphalt faded into water, and he would start walking. Moving slowly, he would cross over the expanse called the Brisbane River and keep walking, his feet hovering over the aquatic graveyard of South Bank at 22 L11. Below, the waters swam with thousands of books from the State Library – swollen, bloated volumes of now-hidden knowledge. He would keep walking until he reached the dry hills of West End 22 A11, and its walls of short, squat shopfronts.

Shopfront 1. that part of a shop which fronts the street. 2. that part of an organization which deals directly with the public.

There was no public left, just the small, furry animals that chewed on the flora that broke through the cracked pavement, and the larger dogs that hunted these. In his waking life it was a much longer walk to find a dry route to West End, but he and Father still went there occasionally to hunt.

Son never voiced his protestations, but he hated the hunting – the squealing of the mammals and the blood that would pump violently out of the freshly made wounds. Son found the silent gaping deaths of the barramundi and brim far more palatable, but even so he was glad that Father took care of the gutting.

To reach the Valley orchards from the Port of Brisbane they crossed bridges, roads and parks, all surrounded by the omnipresent waters of the city. At times they ascended to the rooftops, crossing over the wooden platforms that Father – in his infinite wisdom – had used to stitch them together.

Brunswick Street, from the now-flooded train station to the edge of New Farm, was one long, thin apple orchard. The trees had miraculously grown through the mall and the road, cracking the surface in parts and extending their canopies until they

reached to both sides of the street, providing food and shelter for countless birds, bats and small mammals.

Father called it Holy Land, the Garden of Eden, but Son couldn't find either location mentioned in the refidex.

They gathered a sackful of fruit, Father guiding from the ground while Son climbed, being careful to leave the ones that had already been dined on by insects and animals because, as Father liked to say, "They might be back for seconds."

Once they had finished their harvest Father tied the sack closed and handed it to Son.

"Let's go home."

Home 1. a house, or other shelter that is the fixed residence of a person, a family, or a household. 2. a place of one's domestic affections. 6. any place of existence or refuge.

Home was what they called the few different places they had to sleep in at night. Home in the Valley was a decaying apartment block just to the side of the orchard at 19 E13. The roof had collapsed, or been built to look collapsed, over one third of the apartments. They set up in one of the open-air units and used the scattered debris to build a fire.

The shadows on the walls danced and swayed as the flames licked at the broken pieces of timber. In the dark patch of sky that was visible, Son could see the black-brown silhouettes of bats passing.

As if seeing them also, Father asked "Do you know what the biggest difference is between birds and bats?"

"Uhh," Son stumbled for an answer.

"Break out your dictionary if you have to."

Son already had it and the refidex sitting on his lap, so he opened the dictionary to B. He studied the two entries multiple times before fashioning his answer.

"Bats are nocturnal flying mammals and birds are warm-blooded vertebrates covered in feathers."

Father pondered this for a moment.

"Is that it?"

"Those are the important parts."

Father nodded. "Then it's lucky I'm still around to fill in the gaps in your education. The biggest difference between bats and birds is that birds have particularly acute eyesight, whereas bats are basically blind. They find their way around using sonar."

"Is that how you find your way around too?"

Father chuckled.

"Something like that, Son, something like that."

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Father had always been a patient man, so he was happy to wait and watch. For weeks he watched her to piece together her routine. She left the fortress once every two days, always using the one rear

entrance that she seemed to have a key for, locking it behind her. She would carry her child in a backpack that had been converted into a sort of harness, and she would return after a few hours.

On the sixth day she would leave without her child – the hunting or gathering on those days seemingly being too dangerous. She would only stay away for an hour or two, but the child would cry the whole time.

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Son awoke to the sounds of the birds in the trees, having retaken the perches from their nocturnal cousins.

He left Father to his slumber and took the dictionary and refidex from his pack.

The dictionary was a thick, hard-covered tome, green and yellow on the cover, and pages turned brown on the edges from age. The dust jacket was torn and tattered but Son kept it in place, not willing to part with a single piece of the book. Inside the pages were still white, but they were also powdery to the touch – slowly disintegrating until the day the book would be nothing more than a hollow shell.

The refidex looked better at first glance, its cover protected by a thick plastic wrapping, but inside it was deteriorating even more rapidly.

Gingerly, Son opened the book to study its pages. It had been a very long time since they had gone out to the Northern Suburbs, but Son hoped they would make the journey again soon; he still held it to be their best chance of finding more people.

In another dream he often had, they found both a Mother and a Daughter. The initial elation he felt upon finding them soon turned to terror when he realised they had no faces.

Flicking pages to and fro, using his fingers as bookmarks, he slowly built in his mind a number of routes they could use.

Father stirred.

"Still studying those crumbling maps of our crumbling city?"

"Yes, Father. I'm planning a way north, to the suburbs."

Father nodded, but didn't reply.

The following day they made their way into the city proper; silent ghosts reflected in the glass of the buildings that still stood, haunting the city as amiably as they were able.

They refilled their canteens from a recess that captured rainwater and searched for oysters in the flooded depths of Central Station. They found a few and stowed them carefully in their pack. Son wanted to open one right away, to hear that satisfying crack, but Father insisted the oysters be kept closed and fresh until dinner time.

As the two men plodded up the stalled, moss-covered escalator, Father spoke.

"Oysters used to cost a lot of money in restaurants and the like, back before all this decay set in."

Son thought about that for a moment.

"I still don't understand how there was a 'before' when you made everything exactly how it is."

"There was a different world before this one, but I stopped enjoying it. Most people were selfish, killing the world for a little money or comfort, so I remade things without so many of them."

"Their bones are still around."

"But soon even those will be turned to dust like so much of my precious city."

Along with the bats, dusk brought a swarm of mosquitoes with it. Son wasn't sure where they hid during the day, but dusk's twilight always danced with the floating ballet of a thousand hungry mozzies.

Mozzie Colloq. a mosquito.

Father never killed the insects, even when they swarmed about his ankles.

"Even mozzies need to eat," he would say, though he didn't protest when Son slapped at his own assailants, leaving broken bodies and blood spatters haphazardly over his exposed skin.

It was of no use – all this death – the mosquitoes seemed to endlessly spawn from the stagnant waters that were trapped in hundreds of streets throughout the city.

In their home in the CBD they made a stew for the oysters – Father producing from their shared pack a handful of rice and some spices.

Son knew little of these except how they tasted and how the dictionary defined them, but he hoped that Father would one day tell him where they come from and how to prepare them. Son had many questions, but knowledge was something that Father was very peculiar about.

Father let Son crack open the oysters and scrape the contents of the shells into the steaming pot, but Father himself saw to the rest of the preparations. They ate slowly. They always ate slowly, the less food they had the longer they took to eat it.

When they had finished and packed the cooking gear away Son once again studied his two books while Father stared at nothing with his colourless eyes.

Son opened the refidex to the page that had long intrigued him – 326. It was the southernmost map of Brisbane, his world, yet at N20 there was a road that seemed to continue into the beyond.

"Father," he paused, uncertain if he should ask the question. "What is south of 326 N20?"

He silently waited for a reply, listening to the soft cracks of the embers of their cooking fire.

"Father?"

"I heard you."

Father sighed. He once again fell silent, but Son could see by the contortions of his face that he was carefully thinking over his response.

"There is nothing for you there. There is nothing worth knowing, nowhere worth going. This," he motioned around the room and towards the city, "is where you belong. You're a Brisbanite."

Father lay down and rolled over so his back was facing Son.

Son closed the refidex quietly, trying to put both his question and Father's answer out of his mind.

He opened the dictionary and flicked through its pages to the entry he wanted.

Brisbanite 1. one who was born in Brisbane, the Capital City of Queensland, or one who has come to regard it as his home town.

* * *

She left on one of her child-less trips, just as Father knew she would. He had to act quickly.

Without a key to open her door, and without the time to get through a barricaded door, Father had to use a window to gain entrance. The barricading on the second floor was far less thorough, so Father climbed up to a window that looked clear, scraping the skin off his hands in the process.

He tried the window, but it was either locked or jammed with years of grime. He took his crowbar from his belt and swung it through the glass pane. The noise startled him so much he almost let go of the ledge with his other hand. It echoed out through the silent city, bouncing off sheer facades and reverberating into the distance.

The child had stopped crying at this new sound, but once Father had climbed inside the screaming continued.

He followed the noise and found the child standing in a makeshift pen. There were a few related items nearby like cotton nappies, safety pins, jars of baby food from the before, so he gathered these up and shoved them into his canvas backpack.

The harness wasn't there, so he picked up the child and held it against his shoulder. For a moment the crying stopped, which Father took as a sign that he was doing the right thing, but a moment was all the sweet silence lasted.

Father started down to the first floor. He found another rear door that was locked but not barricaded and got to work at prying it open with his crowbar.

"What are you doing with my son?"

Father swung around with the crowbar outstretched. It was intended as a defensive manoeuvre, but she ran into its arc and her skull collided with the cold iron. It made a wet cracking sound and she collapsed as though her bones had all been removed.

Father stepped over her inert body, careful not to step in the pool of blood that blurred into the burgundy coloured carpet.

He went out the door she had used to come back inside, leaving it wide open to the city.

"Son?" He said, to the small boy that was now his charge. "I guess that means you can call me Father."