

Snowfall

It was a cold day, like all of the days since the world had ended, and Karl Anderson had just buried the last member of his family. It was a pauper's grave really, nothing more than a pile of rubble with a makeshift cross fashioned out of sticks and twine, but in this harsh new age it might almost be considered a luxury. Many of the dead now lay rotting at roadsides or in fetid mass graves while the bodies of others were burned up to prevent the flesh being used by scavengers, human as well as animal. Karl tried not to think of the fate of those bodies; food was scarce since the Fall but hunger could not excuse the actions of those who resorted to *that* to survive.

Perhaps it was starvation, combined with sheer exhaustion and any one of a number of other factors, which had led to the death of his sister earlier that day. Karl could not say for sure, all that he knew was that Elizabeth had been getting weaker for several days now and it had perhaps only been her will to live, for him as much as for herself, that had allowed her to last as long as she had. When that will had expired, her end had been inevitable. It could hardly have been called a good way to die but, compared with the deaths that many others had suffered since the Fall, it had almost seemed merciful. A number of Karl's friends and relatives had died of frostbite, exposure or a myriad other cold-related diseases and hazards in the months since the ice had come, and he had come across the bodies of others who had clearly suffered far worse fates. In a world that no longer had medicine, or doctors and hospitals for that matter, Karl had learned that the only sure way to survive was not to get sick. Elizabeth had known that too, although it had made no difference in the end.

As he stood there by Elizabeth's last resting place he tried to dredge up a memory of her that was not touched by the darkness of her last days. It was an effort to dispel the raw grief that had settled on him since her death and, worse, the deep despair that lurked behind that and which threatened to overwhelm him if he let it. It was a despair born out of the hopelessness of life since the Fall, which had become a daily struggle for survival with no promise of respite, but instead only the certainty of an even bleaker future. And it was a future that Karl now had to face alone.

He remembered a summer day not long ago, when he had visited his sister in her new home, a charming terrace in the garden of England. She had only recently moved to Kent with her boyfriend but had seemed full of joy, almost radiant with the promise of what the future held for both of them. She had whispered that Nathan would not be her boyfriend for much longer but her husband and, before Karl could congratulate her on the news of her engagement, she had touched her belly to indicate that she had even better news to tell. Karl smiled and closed his eyes at the memory, trying without success to recapture the sense of the sun on his skin that day. Heat of that kind, heat that you did not have to create for yourself and which gave lasting pleasure rather than merely fleeting comfort from the everlasting cold that now embraced the world perpetually, was almost as precious a memory as the thought of Elizabeth. His smile soon faded, however, as the reality of the present dispelled the memory of the past – Elizabeth had lost the baby during the upheaval of the Fall and Nathan had died soon afterwards at the hands of scavengers, along with Karl's wife Jane.

Raising his eyes from Elizabeth's grave at last, Karl looked beyond the cliffside that he stood upon to gaze out across the sea, which stretched out as clear and still as glass as far as the eye could see. It was, he supposed, the English Channel, not that names meant much these days. The nearest town, Dover, was a near-abandoned

ruin, its only inhabitants lawless gangs who lived from one day to the next making no plans other than how they would survive to see another one. Ice and snow covered everything and, without light or electricity, most life existed beneath the surface, where humans and animals alike crowded for warmth and comfort. The picture was much the same across the country and there was no reason to believe that it was not the case all over the world. The modern age was dead; a new ice age had come.

“Are you going to throw yourself off the edge sir?”

Karl spun around, surprised to hear another human voice in this, the most isolated of places, to see two children, a girl and a boy, standing behind him. They were both very young, he judged, not yet teenagers, and there was at most a couple of years between them, with the girl, who had been the one that had spoken, being the elder. They were well covered up to protect them from the biting cold but Karl was shocked to see that their faces and hands, which were the only parts of them that were not concealed, seemed hideously pale and malnourished. From the look of them the children had not eaten anything for at least a couple of days.

“Are you going to jump sir?” the girl said, re-phrasing her earlier question, when Karl did not answer straight away.

“No,” Karl said slowly, “why would you ask a question like that?”

“That’s what they all did in the first days after the storms hit. All the men who used to live on the coast came down here, stood at the edge of the cliff where you’re standing now for a few days and then they just weren’t there anymore. They said that the women tried to stop them at first but then they just threw themselves off as well,” said the girl then paused and shuddered before going on, “I didn’t see it happen but I heard them... their screams.”

Karl shook his head in disbelief. He knew that the first days and weeks after the Fall had been the hardest. When, almost without warning, the earthquakes, floods and storms had hit every corner of the earth with all of nature’s fury the fabric of civilization had collapsed alarmingly quickly. Cities had been levelled, roads and train lines pulled apart and people had died on a scale that was almost biblical. This was what had earned the disaster its name – everyone thought that the Fall foretold in the bible had finally come to pass and that a higher power had delivered its final judgement on humanity.

They had certainly had enough warnings, Karl had often thought since the world had changed. The devastation caused by the South Asian tsunami in 2004 had been bad enough, with its death toll verging into millions. Doom had then struck a further warning blow two years later, and much closer to home as far as the western world was concerned, with the hurricane that had all but destroyed New Orleans. Of course, the politicians had paid lip service to the environment and the cause that they labelled ‘green’ with a series of debates and high-profile meetings that fooled only the most naïve. Self-interest had carried the day in the end, despite the countless dead, and the great powers had secretly agreed to go on as they always had, stripping the Earth’s resources bare and leaving the fallout for future generations to bear.

Only the Earth had beaten them to it this time, Karl thought grimly, and mankind had been forced to face up to its mistakes rather sooner than it might have hoped. Nature’s revenge had been swift and terrible, exposing just how fragile the creations of man were in the face of the savage fury of a tornado, tremor or tsunami. The most frightening aspect of the Fall was the change that resulted in the climate of the planet. The average worldwide temperature had plummeted to several degrees below freezing and what people called the new ice age had dawned. However many the Fall had killed, many more had died afterwards from the cold and its effects. With

fuel and electricity in dangerously short supply, heat had suddenly become a precious commodity, a close second to food in terms of importance. In the post-Fall world those who controlled either of these resources possessed wealth greater than all the money in the old world could ever have bought.

Karl frowned then as he remembered other stories that he had heard since the Fall, strange tales of changes brought about by the new ice age. Some said that the ice had brought with it creatures from the past. Sabre toothed tigers were rumoured to stalk the wilds once more and there had been sightings of herds of gigantic beasts that were said to be woolly mammoths. Those were the more believable reports – others spoke of tribes of Neanderthals living in the mountains or of creatures that had only ever existed in myths, like giants and dragons, at loose in the world. Karl tended to treat such stories with the scepticism that they deserved but he was conscious of the fact that all of the old certainties had disappeared in this new age. The old world had died – anything was possible in this strange new one in which he found himself.

A sudden wave of grief threatened to overwhelm him then as he thought of Elizabeth again, and of how she would see no more of this world, bad as it had become. The new grief, still raw, was given an even more bitter edge by the fact that it carried with it the memory of an older sorrow – Jane – coupled with a deep sense of loss that had been ever present, sometimes buried deep, often near the surface, since the world had changed.

“Please don’t jump.” said one of the children. Karl looked up, almost surprised to find that they were still there, so completely immersed had he been in his thoughts, and saw that it was the girl that had spoken.

“What’s your name child?”

The girl looked at her brother (Karl assumed them to be related given their physical similarity, although that may just have been their shared under nourishment) before she answered, as if seeking permission. Karl was not sure whether the boy gave his consent or not, for he gave no outward sign, but in any case he was rewarded by his sister’s name.

“It’s Rose.”

Karl did not ask for a second name – he himself barely remembered his own surname.

“Why do you care if I live or die Rose?”

“You’re the only adult we’ve seen that can take us away from here.”

Karl felt despair fill him as his final hope, inspired by the rumours that he had heard of there being some outpost of civilization on the South Coast, was dashed by Rose’s words. The long and difficult journey from London – which had in the end cost Elizabeth her life – had been in vain.

“So there are no other people here apart from you two?” Karl asked with a heavy heart, but the girl’s response was surprising.

“No normal people.”

“What do you mean?” said Karl, suddenly confused.

Rose squirmed at the question, dropping her eyes so that they did not have to meet Karl’s questioning gaze. He sensed that there was something that she was afraid to say and that there was nothing to be gained by pressing the point. He looked at the boy in exasperation, hoping that he could provide some explanation of his sister’s cryptic words.

“When the food ran out, and there were no animals to hunt, some of the survivors started... hunting each other.” The boy’s words were made all the more

chilling by the fact that he also failed to meet Karl's eyes, as if he was afraid that the horrors that he had seen would be revealed in his own gaze.

Not for the first time Karl contemplated whether the Fall had been a test for humanity rather than a final judgement by the Divine, as so many others thought it. If that was the case then it was a test that many had failed, for from what Karl had seen adversity had brought out the worst in his fellow man far more readily than it demonstrated his better nature.